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Critical Race Examination of Educator Perceptions of Discipline and School-Wide Positive  
Behavior Interventions and Supports

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

## CRITICAL RACE EXAMINATION OF EDUCATOR PERCEPTIONS OF DISCIPLINE AND SCHOOL-WIDE POSITIVE BEHAVIOR INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

By: Michael Massey, MEd, MSW

This dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

Chair: Matthew Bogenschutz, PhD  
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School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is a school disciplinary framework seen as an effective tool to replace school disciplinary practices that contribute to the school to prison pipeline (STPP). While evidence suggests that SWPBIS can help improve school discipline and lower suspension/expulsion rates, it has not been shown to consistently decrease racial disciplinary disparities. This study thematically analyzed semi-structured interviews of educational staff at one high school at the outset of SWPBIS implementation to understand their perceptions of school discipline and the potential for SWPBIS to address root causes of racial disciplinary disproportionality. Using a critical race theory analytical lens to center issues of race and racism, the findings revealed a school that is deeply structured in Whiteness. Participants described the school as “two schools in one”—one that is largely White, affluent, and high-achieving and another that is predominantly Black, economically disadvantaged, and achieving at lower levels. Educators were open to key elements of SWPBIS, such as positive discipline and school-wide consistency in disciplinary practices. And while

many participants identified systemic barriers to achieving equity, they simultaneously relied on discursive strategies that upheld Whiteness. These findings suggest that SWPBIS has the potential to be an alternative to punitive school discipline, but faces multiple barriers in addressing disciplinary disproportionality. The segregated and stratified school structure raises questions about whom SWPBIS is for and who will bear the burden of implementation.

*Keywords:* school to prison pipeline, positive behavior interventions and supports, critical race theory, disciplinary disproportionality

## Chapter 1: Overview of the Problem

### Introduction

#### School Discipline

School discipline is, to put it simply, complicated. It embodies a vast matrix of relationships, structural conditions, and social and historical processes that play out in both small, individual interactions and in large systemic patterns. School discipline can rightly be called its own “social ecology” (Laura, 2014, p. 14). When we think about school discipline, images of “bad kids”—the fighters, the back-talkers, the disrupters, the sneaks, the do-nothings—often come to mind. We think about how to get control, how to rein them in. For educators working with students that possess a dizzying range of skills and needs, effective discipline and classroom management are also seen as key components of good teaching. However, discipline is not simply a set of techniques to keep students in line or promote academic success. Since the earliest incarnations of public schooling in the U.S., discipline has been seen as a tool through which we imbue our sense of morality and behavioral norms to our children; to teach them how to be better citizens (Bear, 1998). As such, it is more than a simple mechanism for learning; it is an expression of a broader set of societal expectations and beliefs. The way we discipline our kids tells us a lot about who we are as a society and opens us up to several questions, including, “What is the best way to enforce our disciplinary standards?” and “Who defines the expectations and norms upon which those standards are developed?” Through an examination of public high school educator attitudes and beliefs concerning the implementation of a whole-school disciplinary framework, this dissertation will attempt to explore these questions. In chapters 1 and 2, I will first provide the context for the specific problem regarding school discipline that I will be addressing and then describe the theoretical



lenses that guide my research design and analytical methods, which will be discussed in chapter 3.

### **School to Prison Pipeline**

The concept of the School to Prison Pipeline (STPP) draws the connection between school factors and practices, such as school discipline, that increase the risk of student contact with the criminal justice system, effectively making schools a significant component of the mass incarceration phenomenon (see Bryant, 2013; Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011; Hirschfield, 2008; Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeier, & Valentine, 2009a; R. J. Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2003; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Mass incarceration is the common term to describe the enormous surge in U.S. jail and prison population that started in the last quarter of the twentieth century and continued well into the twenty-first (Lyons & Pettit, 2011; Pettit & Western, 2004; Western, 2007). From 1980 until 2015, the number of people incarcerated in the United States increased from nearly 500,000 to over 2.2 million (NAACP, 2017), bringing incarceration rates to an unprecedented level and nearly seven times higher than any country in Western Europe (National Research Council, 2014). In 2012, almost 3% of all U.S. adults were on probation, parole, or in jail (Glaze & Herberman, 2013). The effects of mass incarceration have disproportionately impacted minority populations, especially Black males (Alexander, 2010). Currently, Black males are incarcerated at six times the rate of White males (Carson, 2014) and nearly one in six Black adults have been incarcerated at some point in their lives (NAACP, 2009). There is ample evidence that Black males are more punitively policed, adjudicated, and sentenced than any other demographic group (Pettit & Western, 2004).

Research on the school side of the STPP has primarily focused on two interrelated components. The first is the growth of punitive and exclusionary disciplinary policies, typically

referred to as “zero tolerance,” and related practices, such as office disciplinary referrals (ODRs), in-school suspensions (ISS), out of school suspensions (OSS), and expulsions (see, for example, Darensbourg, Perez, & Blake, 2010; Losen, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Throughout the country, the use of such practices has increased dramatically over the last twenty-five years in an apparent attempt to make schools safer and improve student achievement (American Psychological Association (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Losen & Skiba, 2013). The second component is the racially inequitable implementation and impact of zero tolerance. Its practices have been used to punish students of color, particularly Black students, at disproportionately high rates (Fabelo et al., 2011, Kang-Brown, Trone, Fratello, & Daftary-Kapur, 2013; Skiba, et al., 2014). Research has shown that punitive and exclusionary school discipline exacerbates already existing educational disparities (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010) and substantially increases the risk that students caught in this disciplinary web become engaged with the criminal justice system (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008, Fabelo et al., 2011; Kang-Brown et al., 2013). More alarmingly, research has also shown that racial disciplinary disparities exist even when controlling for type of behavior, family characteristics, socioeconomic status, and other factors, indicating that race is, by itself, a critical factor in this process (Skiba et al, 2014).

In the following sections, I will provide information on the context and scope of both components, including a brief history of the rise of zero tolerance school discipline, an examination of the extent to which zero tolerance has achieved its intended goals, a summary of research that lays bare the devastating impacts of exclusionary school discipline, and an exploration of disciplinary disproportionality. Next, I will describe School Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), which is in the pre-implementation stage at

my research site, and has become the most prominent educational policy response to the problems that have arisen out of over twenty years of zero tolerance. I will end Chapter 1 by describing the goals of this research and providing my research questions.

## **Zero Tolerance**

### **History**

Growth in popularity of exclusionary discipline and its disproportionate use on Black students can be traced back to the 1950s and the era of desegregation (Arnez, 1978; Kafka, 2011; Thornton & Trent, 1988). For decades following the Supreme Court's *Brown vs. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 that outlawed school segregation, states and school districts across the country, and especially in the South, engaged in what was called Massive Resistance—the employment of legislative practices to preserve segregation (Epps-Robertson, 2016; Golub, 2013; Noblit & Mendez, 2008). Attempts at desegregation during those years were often one-way processes. Black students were made to attend formerly White schools with overwhelmingly White faculties who had very little experience working with Black students (Arnez, 1978, Noblit & Mendez, 2008). Schools that did desegregate—often after protracted legal battles—responded to the process, intentionally and unintentionally, by increasing the use of exclusionary practices that disproportionately affected Black students (Arnez, 1978; Thornton & Trent, 1988). Nationally, the use of these practices increased steadily from the early 1970s into the 2000s (Losen et al., 2015), as segregation resistance was reshaped into federal school reform and accountability efforts (Noblit & Mendez, 2008).

The Guns Free School Act of 1994 (GFSA) is generally acknowledged to be the key piece of legislation in the nationwide expansion of a zero tolerance movement in school discipline (Cerrone, 1999; Hanson, 2005; Mongan & Walker, 2012). Passed only two months

after Clinton's Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act (VCCLEA), which expanded the death penalty and included a "three strikes and you're out" provision, the GFSA borrowed the "tough on crime" rhetoric of the VCCLEA and previous crime laws and applied them to educational discipline. Specifically, it authorized the Department of Education to withhold federal education funding from states unless they enacted laws requiring that schools expel "for a period of not less than one year a student who is determined to have brought a weapon to school under the jurisdiction of local and educational authorities in that State . . ." (Gun Free Schools Act of 1994). In addition to automatic expulsion, students who brought weapons to school were to be referred to the juvenile justice system. Newspaper reports at the time indicate that the GFSA's marriage of educational and criminal justice policy was clear and purposeful:

"Borrowing a phrase that President Ronald Reagan used in his war on drugs, Clinton said that the "zero tolerance" policy on guns would help create safe learning environments in schools" (Cooper, 1994). It established a new, national "get tough" mindset in the arena of school discipline.

The GFSA was passed in a climate in which fears about youth violence were high and heavy-handed and punitive crime policies were politically expedient (Skiba et al., 2003; Skiba, 2014). In the mid-1990s, being seen as tough on crime was almost mandatory for any politician (Poveda, 1994). Since the 1960s, criminal justice policies emphasizing crime-control and punishment had so monopolized the debate that "advocates of policy measures that fall outside this limited range of policy options are effectively silenced or closed out of the policy-making loop" (Poveda, 1994, p. 74). Facing difficult mid-term elections in 1994, the unpopular Clinton administration used the VCCLEA and GFSA to bolster its crime and educational policy credentials to an electorate that was preoccupied by issues of crime and safety (Seelye, 1994).

During the 1980s and into the 1990s, there was growing public concern that schools were losing control of their students and that gang-violence and guns were becoming part of the normal school experience. By 1994, the public ranked violence and discipline as the top two problems facing public schools (Elam & Rose, 1995). These fears were partially stoked by an increase in school-associated violent deaths during the 1992-1993 and 1993-1994 school years. According to the National School Safety Center (2010), there were 44 homicides and 55 deaths in schools in the 1992-1993 school year and 42 homicides and 51 deaths in the following year. While these events were worthy of real concern, it was increased media coverage focused on youth violence, especially that of Black and Latino gangs, that catalyzed public fears and created a moral panic, with race as its subtext (Aitken, 2001; Burns & Crawford, 1999; Heitzeg, 2009). The racially coded depiction of a rising generation of “super-predators,” most notably perpetuated by Hillary Clinton, intensified public perception of the need to crack down on aberrant youth behavior (Alexander, 2016; Heitzeg 2009). It is within this context that the criminalization of school behavior, first encoded in the GFSA, became the default position of local and federal educational policy.

The GFSA can be seen as an accelerant of a trend that was already in progress. Starting in the 1970s, schools were relying more heavily on suspensions and expulsions (Wald & Losen, 2003; Losen et al., 2015) and by the early 1990s many school districts had already installed zero tolerance policies (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). However, the GFSA marked the beginning of a period where zero tolerance became the national norm, resulting in even larger increases in exclusionary discipline across the country (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Losen et al., 2015; Potts, Njie, Detch, & Walton, 2003; Wald & Losen, 2003) and a widening of racial disciplinary gaps (Losen et al., 2015). For instance, on a national level, 10% of Black students

were suspended in the 1988-1989 school year. By the 2005-06 school year, it was up to 16%. By comparison, for Whites students the rates were 4% and 5% respectively. The rates went up for everyone, but especially so for Black students.

Within a few years of the GFSA's passage, almost every state created policies to comply with the mandate and many school districts went beyond federal mandates to create policies that required school exclusion for several kinds of offenses, such as drug possession, fighting, truancy, and disrespect (Harvard Civil Rights Project & Advancement Project, 2000; Kang-Brown et al., 2013; Majd, 2011; Wallace et al., 2008). Zero tolerance policies are based on the premise that non-discretionary discipline is less arbitrary and more fair than putting decisions in the hands of individual teachers and administrators (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). However, the data suggest that, by and large, discipline is not an objective process—the vast majority of disciplinary decisions pertain to offenses that are subjective and discretionary in nature, such as disrespect, defiance, and insubordination (McCarter, 2017). In fact, Fabelo et al. (2011) found that about 97% of all school-based offenses are discretionary in nature, as opposed to cut and dry offenses like smoking or carrying weapons. As a result, zero tolerance policies may provide a pretense of objectivity and fairness to decisions that are highly subjective and interpretive.

### **Zero Tolerance Research**

Zero Tolerance discipline relies on a very simple logic based on three fundamental assumptions (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Curtis, 2014; Teske, 2011). One, a “get tough” disciplinary mindset will act as a deterrent to student misbehavior. Two, excluding misbehaving students from class and/or school will create a better and safer overall learning environment for those students who “want to learn.” Three, by reducing the amount of

disciplinary discretion for teachers and administrators, policies will be implemented more consistently and fairly. In this section, I will review the research on whether or not zero tolerance policies and practices have satisfied its own ostensive logic (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). This is important for two reasons. One, if the answer is no—that is, zero tolerance has not achieved what it was apparently intended to do—then we are forced to wonder why it remains the dominant disciplinary paradigm. Additionally, it opens the door to explore a new set of policies that might be more effective and learn from previous failures. If zero tolerance has not worked, we are obligated to understand why it has not worked and try to avoid similar mistakes in implementing replacement strategies.

In brief, after over 20 years of zero tolerance as the dominant disciplinary paradigm, ample evidence suggests that it does not deter negative behavior (Balfanz, byrnes & Fox, 2014; Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Fabelo et al., 2011; Raffael Mendez, 2003; Skiba et al., 2014), make schools safer (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Mallett, 2016), or lead to higher levels of consistency and fairness (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Shollenberger, 2013; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2014). In fact, the research indicates that not only does zero tolerance not improve student and school outcomes, it makes them worse and places more burden on students from marginalized populations (Balfanz, byrnes, & Fox, 2014; Mendez, 2003; Noltmeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015). I will summarize the research pertaining the first two assumptions here. Further, I will elaborate on the numerous direct and indirect negative outcomes that have been exacerbated by the criminalization of school behavior. Next, in the section on disproportionality, I will explore assumption three in detail.

**Is zero tolerance a deterrent?** There is very little evidence that zero tolerance school discipline acts as a deterrent for future disruptive or violent behavior (Skiba et al., 2014). On the contrary, the longitudinal evidence strongly suggests that punitive and exclusionary discipline has little impact, or worse, may actually reinforce such behavior. In a prospective study of over 8,000 Florida students, Mendez (2003) found that the most reliable predictor of suspensions for students is the presence of prior suspensions. In Fabelo et al.'s (2011) famous Texas study of all 2000, 2001, and 2002 seventh-graders over a six-year period, over half were excluded from school (ISS, OSS, expulsion) at least once. Of those, the majority were excluded more than once, with an average of over eight. Similarly, in a longitudinal cohort study of data on over 180,000 Florida students, Balfanz, byrnes, & Fox (2014) found that one 9<sup>th</sup> grade suspension strongly predicted future suspensions, attendance problems, and dropout. It may even be that school exclusion promotes future problematic behavior. In a longitudinal study that tracked students for ten years after leaving school, Shollenberger (2013) found that nearly sixty-five percent of boys who were suspended at least once were arrested as a young adult, nearly double the rate of non-suspended boys. However, a substantial number of these boys were not on a clear trajectory towards criminal behavior before school removal. Around forty percent of Black and Hispanic boys and twenty percent of White boys had not participated in serious delinquent behavior until after their first suspension. Overall, the research tells us that, at best, zero tolerance does not act as a deterrent and, at worst, may actually put kids at greater risk for future discipline problems.

**Does zero tolerance improve school climate and school performance?** While it seems clear that exclusionary discipline does not prevent students from getting into more trouble, it is possible to see it as a utilitarian approach. From this standpoint, the exclusion of the “problem” students from school will allow other students to feel safer and create a stronger school climate.



Again, there is a paucity of evidence to support this perspective (Mongan & Walker, 2012). Instead, zero tolerance appears to decrease student school connection, which relates to students' sense of belonging in the school environment and closeness to school adults and peers (Anyon, Zhang, & Hazel, 2016; McNeely, Nonnemaker, & Blum, 2002), negatively impact school climate (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; McCarter, 2017), which encompasses norms, practices, and structures within a school that promote student wellness and security (Thapa, Cohen, Guffey, & D' Alessandro, 2013), increase overall dropout rates (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011), create more classroom disorder (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013), and result in decreases in overall instructional time (McCarter, 2017, Scott & Barrett, 2004). Further, research suggests that more proactive, positive, and preventative approaches tend to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline and improve school safety and climate (APA Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005, Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013; Osher, Bear, Sprague, & Doyle, 2011)

**What does zero tolerance actually do?** Beyond being ineffective, research suggests that zero tolerance discipline—especially the increased use of suspensions and expulsions—is associated with greater risk of future harm to students. To understand how, it is helpful to return to the concept of the STPP. The STPP serves as an effective metaphor that underscores the uncanny parallels in the educational and criminal justice systems' trajectory toward a punishment and control paradigm and the racially disparate impact of its policies. However, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that it is “more than a metaphor” (Skiba, Arredono, & Williams, 2014, p. 546). In a survey of empirical literature, Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams (2014) found strong evidence to show that school exclusion practices are widespread and increasing in use, are directly and indirectly associated with increased student chances of criminal justice system

involvement, and that there is growing evidence to suggest that this association is causal and directional. In other words, “suspension and expulsion are in and of themselves a developmental risk factor, above and beyond any behavioral or demographic risks students bring with them” (p. 558).

**Direct association.** A large body of evidence shows that simply being suspended or expelled is directly linked to criminal justice involvement. It should be stipulated, however, that many of the studies in this body of evidence are correlational and did not explore potential mediators or moderators between school exclusion and criminal justice involvement. It is likely that the effects of school exclusion, such as student disengagement, higher levels of school absence, poorer school climate, etc., may increase chances of criminalized behaviors and/or opportunities for contact with the justice system (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014). What is revealing about many of these studies, though, is the clear association between school exclusion and later criminal justice contact, even when controlling for behavior type, socio-economic status, academic performance, and other such variables (Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, & Legters, 2003; Carmichael, Whitten, & Voloudakis, 2005; Fabelo et al., 2011; Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014; Wof & Kupchik, 2017). For some students, the path from school exclusion and justice involvement is almost immediate. Fabelo et al. (2011) found that a suspension or expulsion for a discretionary school violation tripled the risk of juvenile justice contact within the subsequent year, controlling for other variables. Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, and Cauffman (2104) looked at the impact of missing school on the risk of juvenile justice contact. In a longitudinal study of 1,354 adolescent serious juvenile offenders, they found that if a student is suspended or expelled from school, the odds of being arrested in the same month were higher than in a month when the student was not excluded from school. Further, this effect was

increased for the least at-risk kids—those without previous problem behavior. In other words, being removed from school posed an immediate increased risk for juvenile justice involvement, even for students who do not have serious discipline problems. This school exclusion/justice involvement connection appears to extend beyond the individual level to the systems level. For example, Nicholson-Crotty, Birchmeire, and Valentine (2009), in a study of school discipline and juvenile justice data for African-American and White Missouri youth in 53 counties found school racial disproportionality in suspensions to be strongly predictive of similar levels of racial disproportionality in juvenile court referrals, controlling for several variables such as type of behavior and poverty.

***Indirect association.*** We also know that exclusionary discipline leads to other negative outcomes that are closely associated with later incarceration, making it an important distal predictor of criminal justice contact. One of the most important future risks of school exclusion is school failure and dropout, which present clear risks for future incarceration. Sum et al.'s (2009) research indicated that 1 out of 100 young adult dropouts had experiences with incarceration and 1 out 10 male dropouts had been incarcerated. To put these findings in perspective, the chances of incarceration are over 60 times higher for young adult high school dropouts than young adults with a bachelor's degree (Sum et al., 2009). Of course, school failure is associated with other harmful outcomes as well, such as higher unemployment rates, higher poverty rates, and poorer health (Burruss & Roberts, 2012). While it is impossible to put a price on the toll that school dropout has on individual lives and society as a whole, the economic impact alone is astronomical. There are estimates that one young dropout who gets caught up in the criminal justice system costs the nation over \$2,000,000 over his/her lifetime, based on costs to the victim, criminal justice expenses, and loss in productivity (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999).

Given the high risks and costs of dropping out of school, any educational policy must be judged on whether or not it promotes school completion. As the following research shows, zero tolerance leads to dropout risk. In a meta-analysis of studies between 1986-2012, Noltmeyer & Ward (2015) found a significant inverse relationship between suspensions (both in and out of school) and achievement, along with a significant positive relationship between OSS and dropout. Mendez's (2003) longitudinal study of over 8,000 Florida youth illustrates this relationship quite clearly. She found that earlier suspensions predicted later suspensions, which predicted later school academic struggle and increased chance for dropout. It also seems that additional suspensions increase dropout risk. In an eight-year prospective study, Balfanz, Byrnes, and Fox (2014) found that, compared to zero suspensions, one ninth grade suspension increased the risk of a student dropping out from 16% to 32%, while an additional suspension increased the risk to 42%. Of course, the relationship between school discipline and dropout is complicated. Suh & Suh's (2007) study of the National Longitudinal Survey Youth shows that the risk of dropout is almost always caused by a combination of risk factors, such as academic achievement or poverty. Even so, they found that suspension was a greater predictor of dropout than low academic achievement or SES, when examined independent from each other.

### **Disproportionality**

The last major assumption of zero tolerance is that by removing discretionary power from teachers and administrators, disciplinary decisions will be more fair and consistent. This assumption implicitly presumes that student behavior and responses to it can somehow be liberated from the contexts in which they occur. It denies school behavior its enormous complexity and turns it into a list of objective categories and corresponding disciplinary responses. If this assumption were true, then the result of implementing zero tolerance policies

would be a more equitable distribution of disciplinary actions in which all student, regardless of differences in identities and cultural backgrounds, would get the same treatment for the same actions. However, the reality does not bear this out. In this section, I will discuss disciplinary disproportionality, which is the inequitable distribution of disciplinary responses (Skiba, Arredondo, Gray, & Rausch, 2016). In short, disproportionality has been present and acknowledged in school discipline for decades (Children's Defense Fund, 1975; Skiba et al., 2016; Taylor & Foster, 1985) and has been exacerbated by the advent of the zero tolerance paradigm (Losen, 2011). Since this topic is a major focus of this research, I will go into it in detail.

To start, it must be acknowledged that while I will focus on racial disproportionality, and specifically the disproportionate punishment of Black students compared to Whites, other forms of disproportionality exist and deserve great attention. For example, males are suspended at higher rates than females and LGBTQ students are more at risk for discipline than their non-LGBTQ peers (Skiba et al., 2016). It is also important to understand the ways that different identities and disproportionalities intersect and interact, such as race and disability. Twelve percent of students with disabilities were suspended nationally in the 2013-14 school year, compared to 5% of those without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2016). However, if you look at the combination of race and disability, the numbers are eye-popping. In 2013-14, about quarter of students with disabilities who were American Indian or Alaskan Native (23%), Black (25%), and multiracial (27%) were suspended compared to 10% of White students with disabilities. The relationship between race and disability is not mere happenstance. As Artiles (2011) makes clear, ability is a highly racialized concept in schools. Black students are much more likely to receive a learning disability diagnosis, especially for

intellectual and emotional disabilities. Being designated with a disability is associated with higher risk for school disciplinary problems, lower academic achievement, and juvenile justice contact (Artiles, 2011). According to Artiles (2011), the intersection of disability and race amplifies narratives based on deficits and pathologies, which lead to systems of lowered expectations, segregation, stigma, and inequity. This brief example highlights the complex, overlapping, and multifaceted nature of identity and how it relates to school discipline. However, because I am centering race in my analysis, this discussion of disproportionality will focus predominantly on inequitable disciplinary processes and outcomes for Black students.

Racial disproportionality in the use of punitive school discipline was reported as early as 1975 by the Children's Defense Fund (Children's Defense Fund, 1975). However, it has gained more attention since the 1990s, when STPP scholars began to make clear conceptual and empirical connections between the use of increasingly punitive crime policies that were contributing to mass incarceration and the entrenchment of zero tolerance discipline. One striking connection was that both sets of policies, though apparently race-neutral, have been applied in ways that disproportionately punish people of color.

Just as Black men have been most burdened by the harsh sentencing policies of the War on Drugs (Alexander, 2011), so too have Black students by zero tolerance policies and practices in school. When schools "get tough," they typically get tougher on students of color, and particularly Black boys. National data show that during the 1972-73 school year, 6% of the total Black student population had been suspended out of school for at least one day, compared to 3% of the White population. By the early 1990s, just preceding the passage of the GFSAs, those numbers had increased to about 10% and 4% respectively. And by the 2011-12 school year, the rates had risen to 16% and 5% (Losen et al., 2015). The most recent national statistics released

by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (2016) shows that for the 2013-14 school year, Black K-12 students are 3.8 times as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as White students. Specifically, the percentage of those suspended one or more times is 18% for Black boys; 10% for Black girls; 5% for White boys; and 2% for White girls. Black students are also 1.9 times as likely to be expelled from school without educational services as White students. Given the strong association between school exclusion and school failure, dropout, criminal justice involvement, poverty, and other outcomes described above, the persistence and growth of school disciplinary disproportionality constitutes a social, economic, and moral crisis.

It is true, however, that the presence of disproportionality is “not a certain indicator of discrimination or bias” (Skiba et al., 2002, p. 320). If, for instance, Black students are misbehaving and/or breaking rules at higher rates than other students, then disciplinary disproportionality may be justifiable, even if the methods of discipline are of debatable utility. Russell Skiba and his colleagues (2002) suggest the need to explore possible reasons for disproportionality before making any conclusions about racial discrimination and bias:

Demonstrating that disproportionality represents discrimination or bias is highly complex. A direct survey of racial attitudes will probably fail to capture bias, since self-reports about disciplinary practices involving race or gender would likely be highly influenced by social acceptability. Thus, determining whether a finding of disproportionality constitutes bias is likely a matter of ruling out alternative hypotheses that might account for overrepresentation. (p. 321)

Following this suggestion, I will summarize research pertaining to two alternative explanations—the poverty explanation and the differential involvement hypothesis (DIH).

**The poverty explanation.** When examining the intersection of class and disciplinary disproportionality, it is clear that poverty and lower SES play a role. Certainly, higher rates of poverty for many minority groups can complicate the picture. For instance, the U.S. poverty rate for non-Hispanic Whites in 2016 was 8.8%, while the poverty rate for Blacks was 22% (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017). Due to the strong relationship between poverty and race, it can be difficult to discern the specific impact of either in disciplinary disproportionality. Research indicates that poverty and lower SES are associated with higher rates of punitive school discipline (Balfanz, byrnes, & Fox, 2014; Hinajosa, 2008; Skiba et al., 2014). However, several multivariate studies controlling for socioeconomic status have found that racial disparities remain with SES held constant (Anyon et al., 2014; Balfanz, byrnes, & Fox, 2014, Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Skiba et al., 2014, Wallace et al., 2008). These studies show that while Black students in poverty have the highest risk of punitive discipline, when compared with White students across the spectrum of SES, being Black remains a significant risk factor in and of itself. Given that almost 1 in 5 children under the age of 18 live in poverty in the U.S. (Semega, Fontenot, & Kollar, 2017), economic disparities in school discipline represent a major concern. However, research strongly suggests that the influence of SES does not explain away the salient role that race alone plays in disproportionality.

**Differential involvement.** The differential involvement hypothesis (DIH) suggests that disproportionality is the result of differential involvement of Black student in misbehavior (Huang, 2016; Wright et al., 2014). There is a simple and clear logic to this, and yet there have been few studies that specifically look at differential patterns in behavior and attitudes of Black children (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Skiba et al., 2002; Wright et al., 2014). However, there is a large body of evidence that suggest that even if behavior and attitudes have a role in predicting



school exclusion (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982), they are not the only determinants (Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf, 2010; Curran, 2016; Hoffman, 2014;) and do not adequately explain racial disparities (Huang & Cornell, 2017; Losen, 2012; Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Schollenberger, 2013; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba et al., 2014).

Several studies have used statistical methods to control for behavior type in analyses of disproportion. Huang (2016) specifically tested the DIH by examining behavior type and student attitudes towards deviant behavior. She found that disproportionality could not be explained by differences in behavior or attitudes. In fact, White students reported higher levels of substance abuse and had higher mean scores supporting deviant behaviors. While she found that Black students did get involved in school fights more often than White students, the disparities in suspension rates were not commensurate with differential rates of fighting. Huang and Cornell (2017) surveyed a statewide sample of over 38,000 students regarding suspension history, engagement in risk behaviors, and aggressive attitudes. They did find some small difference in risky behavior and aggressive attitudes between Whites and Blacks, but these differences did not account for racial differences in OSS, even after controlling for variables like gender, socioeconomic status (SES), grade-point average (GPA), and grade level.

Other studies, while not specifically focused on the DIH, found that behavior alone did not account for racial disciplinary gaps. In a study of over 22,000 students from forty-five elementary schools in a large mid-Atlantic school district, Rocque and Paternoster (2011) found that, even when controlling for differences in behavior, student demeanor, grades and other factors, Black students were significantly more likely to be disciplined and have more discipline reports than other students. Schollenberger (2013), using data from the National Longitudinal

Survey of Youth 1997, looked at suspensions during secondary school and followed student educational and criminal outcomes for nearly ten years after leaving school. Racial suspension gaps persisted after controlling for serious behaviors like vandalism and violence. Bradshaw, Mitchell, O'Brennan, & Leaf (2010) examined classroom-level factors contributing to disciplinary referrals in 21 elementary schools. Even when controlling for teacher ratings of student misbehavior and other classroom factors, Black students were more likely to be sent to the office for disciplinary reasons. Controlling for all other studied variables, Black students had a 24%-80% increase in the odds of receiving a referral. All of these studies point to the fact that the DIH is, at best, overly simplistic.

Some studies whose results contradict the DIH have also provided interesting insights into the complicated and subjective nature of discipline in schools. Skiba et al. (2014) used multi-level modeling to look at the contributions of individual student factors and school characteristics in out-of-school suspensions and expulsions in all schools of a Mid-western state over one school year. The results suggest that school policies and practices may have more influence on disproportionality than individual student behavior. While individual student factors like behavior type and SES contributed to the likelihood of being suspended, they could not account for the contribution of race to suspension. Rather, school-level characteristics appeared to better explain racial disparities. For instance, schools with higher percentages of Black enrollment tended to have higher suspension rates, even after controlling for student demographics or behavior. Additionally, in schools where surveyed principals expressed a primary concern with issues of school equity and prevention, there were lower rates of suspension and expulsion.

In Skiba et al.'s (2002) study of over 50,000 middle school students in a large Midwestern urban school district, they found that racial disciplinary disparities could not be explained by higher rates of Black student misbehavior. Additionally, they found that in comparing consequences for types of behavior, Black students were more likely to be referred for offenses such as disrespect, excessive noise, and loitering, whereas White students were more likely to be referred for more concrete actions like smoking, leaving the room without permission, and vandalism. Disparities in discipline, therefore, were caused by different teacher reactions to types of behavior that require subjective interpretation. Similarly, Gregory and Weinstein (2008) found that referrals for defiance were a primary driver of disproportion between Black and White students.

Not only is discretion used in deciding what and who deserves discipline, it also influences the nature and severity of the discipline. There is evidence that Black students are more severely punished than White students for similar behaviors. As early as 1990, Shaw and Braden (1990) found racial and gender bias in the use of corporal punishment. Black students and male students were more likely to receive corporal punishment, controlling for behavioral infraction. McFadden, Marsh, Price, and Hwang (1992) also found higher rates of corporal punishment and suspension for Black students. More recently, Hoffman (2014) found that within a year of one school district's expansion of zero tolerance policies, the use of exclusionary discipline increased, as did racial disparities in discipline. Additionally, there was an increase in the amount of time that Black students were suspended and no such increase for White students. Losen (2011) cites a study in North Carolina showing that first time offending Black students were suspended more often than first time White offenders for minor offenses like disruption, cell-phone use, and violations of the dress code.

This research underscores the discretionary nature of the vast majority of disciplinary decisions that are made in schools and the need to look at school policies and practices when examining disproportionality. All of this evidence refutes the explanation that Black students are simply acting out more often. More than that, it exposes major concerns about zero tolerance discipline and fairness. It suggests that rather than limiting discretion in disciplinary decisions, it actually raises the stakes of those decisions. If, as much research shows, Black students are punished more often and more harshly for similar behaviors, then a paradigm that relies on increasing amounts of punishment and exclusion can only do more harm.

**Relationship between academic and disciplinary gaps.** Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) asked the question of whether racial achievement gaps and discipline gaps should be considered “two sides of the same coin” (p. 59). In this article, they suggest that given the clear connections between exclusionary school discipline, school failure, and dropout, the racial discipline gap deserves further inquiry as one important element in contributing to and sustaining persistent achievement gaps. This question has become increasingly important in the era of high stakes testing and school accountability ushered in by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). Scholars have posited a connection between the rise of zero tolerance policies and the increasing pressure felt by schools to meet the standards of NCLB (for example, Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Klehr, 2009). The stakes are, indeed, high for schools:

These tests must be used to evaluate schools, and in the case of the many schools receiving federal Title I aid, aggregate student performance on these examinations will be associated with substantial rewards and sanctions, including redirection of funding to provide for school choice and privately-provided supplemental services, and ultimately

potential replacement of school leadership and staff or state takeover of operations (Figlio, 2005, p. 1).

Given these stakes, some scholars suggest that schools may be using exclusionary discipline as a way to “push out” low achievers and inflate test scores (Cousineau, 2010; Giroux & Schmidt, 2004; Klehr, 2009; Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Cousineau (2010) indicated three ways schools may do this—they retain students who appear not to be ready to pass the standardized tests, they suspend students during testing periods, and they expel low-achieving students or place them in alternative settings. Figlio’s (2005) study of several Florida school districts supports the second claim. He found that during school testing windows, the gap in school suspensions between low-achieving and high-achieving students increased and that this increase was only present for students in testing grades. Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004) provided further support for this phenomenon by profiling students from several states who reported being pushed out of school for low test scores.

There is little empirical research that explores the direct relationship between disciplinary gaps and achievement gaps. One exception is Morris and Perry’s (2016) study of over 16,000 sixth through tenth grade students, nested in 17 Kentucky schools in a large urban district. Like many previous studies, they found that racial disparities in suspension were present and remained after controlling for relevant individual level factors. Additionally, they found that suspension was related to lower achievement rates over time. More importantly, they also found that school suspensions accounted for close to one-fifth of Black-White differences in school performance. While more studies like this are needed, the results suggest that while school exclusion may be useful for schools in the short term by inflating test scores, it is likely contributing to long term academic inequity.

**Disciplinary disproportionality as part of a racialized school experience.** The research on disproportionality makes it clear that the issue of race cannot be ignored when exploring school disciplinary policies and processes. The evidence, over decades of research, shows that racial disproportionality cannot be explained away by other factors such as SES and gender and it does not appear to be the result of higher rates of Black student misbehavior. As a result, it is important to more closely examine how issues of race are embedded into and impact disciplinary process. Additionally, given that disproportionality is an issue whose history intersects with school desegregation and that there are clear connections between discipline and overall academic success, we must see disproportionality as one aspect of a complicated web of racialized school processes rather than an isolated phenomenon. Skiba et al. (2002) explain:

Racial bias in the practice of school discipline is also part of a broader discourse concerning the continuing presence of institutional racism (Hannssen, 1998) or structural inequity (Nieto, 2000) in education. Racial and socioeconomic inequality in educational opportunity have been extensively documented in areas as diverse as tracking (Alexander, Cook, and McDill, 1978; Oakes, 1982), representation in curriculum (Anyon, 1981; Sleeter and Grant, 1991), quality of instruction (Greenwood, Hart, Walker, and Risley, 1994), physical resources (Kozol, 1991; Oakes, Ormseth, Bell, and Camp, 1990), and school funding (Rebell, 1999; Singer, 1999). Thus, the discriminatory treatment of African-American students in school discipline is not an isolated phenomenon, but appears to be part of a complex of inequity that appears to be associated with both special-education overrepresentation and school dropout (Gordon, Della Piana, and Keleher, 2000; Gregory, 1997). These sources of institutional inequity persisting throughout public education may not rise to a conscious level among school personnel,

yet they have the effect of reinforcing and perpetuating racial and socioeconomic disadvantage (pps. 322-323).

In chapter 2, I will explore the many ways that Critical Race Theory (CRT), the primary theoretical lens for this dissertation, has contributed to this broader discourse.

### **Intervention and Policy Responses to Zero Tolerance**

In light of the large body of research showing the harmful effects of zero tolerance, along with an abundance of news stories illustrating outsized consequences for what appear to be relatively harmless behavioral infractions, the U.S. Department of Education and many school districts around the country have begun to push for discipline policy reform and the introduction of programs to improve school climate and reduce suspensions and expulsions (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). In 2011, the Department of Education and Department of Justice announced a joint effort to “address the school-to-prison pipeline” and the disciplinary policies and practices that can push students out of school and into the justice system” (U.S. Department of Education Website, 2011). Federally and within the STPP literature, the two most common school-based interventions are Restorative Practices (RP) and School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). In what follows, I will briefly describe RP and some of the research associated with it. Then, since this is a study of faculty perceptions of SWPBIS at one school in pre-implementation stage, I will describe SWPBIS in detail, outline current research on the impact of SWPBIS on school and student outcomes, and discuss the research on school faculty perceptions of SWPBIS.

**Restorative justice and restorative practices.** While some confusion exists around the terminology, I will use the International Institute for Restorative Practices’ (IIRP) definitions of restorative justice (RJ) and restorative practices (RP). According to IIRP, RJ is “reactive,

consisting of formal or informal responses to crime and other wrongdoing after it occurs” (Wachtel, 2013, p. 1). RJ is centered on the principals of forgiveness and restoration in response to potentially harmful or negative behaviors, as opposed to punishment and retribution. Its ideas come from native and humanist traditions that believe in dignity of the person(s) that engaged in wrongful behavior, while not condoning the behavior itself (Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Rietsenberg, 2006). It encourages communication between the victim and the perpetrator so that they can all more fully understand what happened, come to some agreement about a consequence, and move toward forgiveness. Many of its practices have been used in the criminal justice system, especially outside of the U.S. (Fornius et al., 2016). The most common RJ practice in school is the use of restorative circles, in which perpetrators, victims, and other relevant stakeholders engage in conversation to reach some intersubjective understanding of what happened and agreement about how to move forward.

RP is a broader, programmatic and preventative approach to school discipline that has its roots in and is inclusive of RJ (Wachtel, 2013). RP “includes the use of informal and formal processes that precede wrongdoing, those that proactively build relationships and a sense of community to prevent conflict and wrongdoing” (Wachtel, 2013, p. 1). It broadly aims to transform the ways the students and adults interact with one another and provide a respectful, participatory, and democratic school climate (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, & Gerewitz, 2014).

Research indicates that the practices and strategies of RJ and RP may be effective at decreasing violence, decreasing the use of exclusionary discipline, and improving school climate (Fronius et al., 2016, Stewart Kline, 2016). Less is known about the whole-school RP approach, though some case studies indicate that it can provide an effective alternative to reactive and punitive practices and improve teacher/student relationships (Gregory, Clawson, Davis, &



Gerewitz, 2014). There is a wider research base supporting the efficacy of various RJ practices, where the focus is responding to student misbehavior in ways that facilitate growth and change (Schiff, 2013; Simson, 2012). Schiff (2013) describes several studies from Canada, the U.S., and Australia demonstrating that RJ practices can lead to reduced recidivism rates, more positive relationships, and decreased ODRs. Simson (2012) conducted a comparison study of RJ and non-RJ schools in two states. He found that RJ schools had a sharper decrease in suspensions and a reduced Black-White suspension gap compared with non-RJ schools. However, RP and RJ do not have the breadth of empirical evidence behind it that SWPBIS does, as I will discuss in the following sections. It is also unclear to this point whether they can make a significant impact on racial disproportionality (Fronius et al., 2016).

### **School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS)**

#### **Introduction**

Due to its apparent success in changing school climate and reducing disciplinary problems while decreasing the use of punitive discipline, School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS) is seen by many as a potentially effective school-based response to the STPP (Bornstein, 2017; Cobb, 2010; Fabelo et al., 2011; Kang-Brown, Trone, Fratello, & Daftary-Kapur, 2013; Huang & Cornell, 2017; Losen, 2011). Developed from research on interventions for students with behavior disorders in the 1980s, SWPBIS is a “framework for enhancing the adoption and implementation of a continuum of evidence-based interventions to achieve academically and behaviorally important outcomes for all students” (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012, p. 2). Established as part of the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1997 and funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), the Technical Assistance Center (TAC) on PBIS

provides highly detailed information and support for implementation and evaluation of SWPBIS. Congress approved funding for the TAC in 1997 for two fundamental reasons: “a) the historic exclusion of individuals with disabilities based on unaddressed behavior and (b) the strong evidence base supporting the use of PBIS” (OSEP, 2017). While the clear initial focus was on student with behavior disorders, the TAC has since shifted its focus to the “school-wide behavior support of all students, and an emphasis on implementation practices and systems” (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012, p. 2). The result is that SWPBIS has become far and away the most popular approach to changing the zero tolerance paradigm, and is now being implemented in more than 23,000 schools nationwide (Mercer, McIntosh, & Hoselton, 2017), which is nearly three times the number of schools implementing PBIS in 2008 (Spalding, Horner, May, & Vincent, 2008)

SWPBIS is implemented at the whole-school level and promotes a systems change process with the goal of “enhancing the capacity of schools to adopt and sustain the use of effective practices for all students” (Lewis & Sugai, 1999). It aims to improve school climate and student academic and behavior outcomes by promoting prosocial student behaviors through modeling and encouragement at the individual, classroom, and school level (Bradshaw, Waadsdorf, & Leaf, 2015). It is based on a three-tier model that initially targets the entire school population in the first tier and increases the intensity and specificity of interventions at tiers two and three to meet the needs of students who continue to have behavioral problems.

### **SWPBIS Core Elements**

The SWPBIS framework applies principles of Applied Behavioral Analysis (ABA) at the whole school level (Lewis & Sugai, 1999; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). In brief, some of the most important ABA assumptions in SWPBIS are that a) behavior is functional and effected by one's social environment; b) the environment can be altered in ways that promote positive

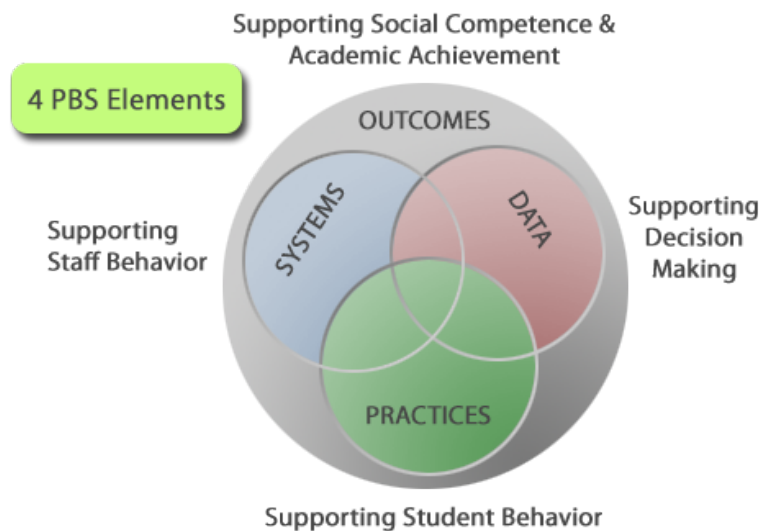
behavior; c) positive behavior can and should be taught and reinforced; and d) fidelity of implementation of evidence-based practices and measurement of outcomes are essential to good practice (Horner & Sugai, 2015). While its theoretical foundation is predominantly behaviorist, there are also humanist dimensions to SWPBIS. A core SWPBIS belief is that all students have the capacity to become more fully realized and achieve a higher quality of life given a conducive school environment (Carr, 2007; Marchant, Allen Heath, & Miramontes, 2012). As a result, the target of intervention in the SWPBIS model is the whole school, not individual students.

SWPBIS emphasizes organizational change as a way to create a safer, more predictable environment for students and sustainable structures and supports for educators. Thus, while student outcomes are the ultimate variables of concern, successful SWPBIS implementation depends upon significant changes in adult behavior, both in terms of instructional practices and the provision of structural supports that allow for those practices to be implemented with fidelity (Sugai & Horner, 2006).

The SWPBIS model (Figure 1) includes four essential and integrated elements that are applied to each specific school context (OSEP, 2017). These elements are:

1. **Outcomes:** academic and behavior targets that are endorsed and emphasized by students, families, and educators. (What is important to each particular learning community?)
2. **Practices:** interventions and strategies that are evidence based. (How will you reach the goals?)
3. **Data:** information that is used to identify status, need for change, and effects of interventions. (What data will you use to support your success or barriers?)

4. **Systems:** supports that are needed to enable the accurate and durable implementation of the practices of SWPBIS. (What durable systems can be implemented that will sustain this over the long haul?)



*Figure 1.* Four Essential and Integrated Elements of SWPBIS. From “What is school-wide PBIS?,” OSEP Technical Assistance Center on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2017.

In the SWPBIS model, student outcomes are the basis around which practices are selected, data is collected and interventions are evaluated. The outcomes are chosen by each school according to the specific contextual academic, social, and behavioral needs of the students (Sugai & Simonsen, 2012). This contextual flexibility is an important facet of SWPBIS and means that while the basic implementation principles are the same from school to school, areas of emphasis and interventions chosen can vary widely. What is most crucial for program sustainability is that schools effectively align their chosen practices with the identified needs and culture of the school (McIntosh et al., 2016).

## **SWPBIS Implementation**

Full implementation of SWPBIS is a long-term, five-stage process that usually takes 3-5 years or longer (McIntosh et al., 2016). The five stages consist of two pre-implementation stages called Exploration and Adoption and Installation. The final three stages are Initial Implementation, Full Implementation, and Innovation and Sustainability (Lewis, Barrett, Sugai, & Horner, 2010). The research site for this dissertation is currently in the pre-implementation phase, so I will briefly describe its two stages.

The Exploration and Adoptions stage focuses on establishing agreement within the school to take part in a change process and assessing the school's implementation capacity. In this stage, school and district SWPBIS teams seek to answer questions such as "Is there a need for change?", "What current practices and initiatives exist that are facilitators or barriers?", and "What is innovation and does it address our problem?" (Lewis et al., 2010, p. 10). This stage requires a thorough assessment of needs, which includes getting input from key stakeholders, including faculty and staff.

The Installation stage focuses on the development of initial systems of support for data-based decision making and selection of practices. Guiding questions for this stage are related to the logistic nuts and bolts of implementation, such as "Who will guide the implementation?" and "What does implementation of the innovation involve?" (Lewis et al., 2010, p. 11). At the end of this phase, schools should have clearly defined roles for implementation leaders, a well-developed implementation plan, and access to necessary resources from the district.

Like most of SWPBIS research, implementation studies at the high school level are limited, and there is a need to better understand how high schools may differ from other levels in moving through the implementation stages (Flannery et al., 2013; Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, &

Flannery, 2015). The current research suggests that while high schools can implement SWPBIS with fidelity, it may take longer than at elementary and middle schools (up to 8 years) and may require more effort to engage the school faculty and develop buy-in supporting school change (Flannery et al., 2013; Freeman et al., 2016; McIntosh et al., 2016). Due to its particular significance at the high school level, faculty buy-in will be discussed further in later sections of this chapter.

### **SWPBIS Outcomes**

A large body of research has found that SWPBIS, particularly at the whole-school, tier 1 level and when implemented with fidelity, can help schools reduce disciplinary problems and improve student behavior (Barrett, Bradshaw, Lewis-Palmer, 2008; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2015; Eversten, 2012; Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014; Freeman et al., 2016; Luiselli, Putnam, & Sunderland, 2002; Mass-Galloway, Panyan, Smith, & Wessendorf, 2008; Mccurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003; Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, 2008; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002; Scott & Barrett, 2004; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012) , improve school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Calderell et al., 2011), and promote academic achievement (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002; Sadler & Sugai, 2009). However, evidence that SWPBIS can reduce racial disciplinary disproportionality is inconsistent, at best (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Eversten, 2012; Skiba et al., 2011; Vincent & Tobin, 2011; Vincent, Swain-Bradaway, Tobin, & May, 2011)

**Student discipline and behavior.** The reduction of school disciplinary problems, most often measured by ODR and suspension rates, is a major selling point of SWPBIS and is supported by a broad range of research evidence. Evaluations of statewide initiatives, such as in

Maryland (Barrett, Bradshaw, & Lewis-Palmer, 2008; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2015), New Hampshire (Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, 2008), and Wisconsin (Eversten, 2012) have shown positive progress. For instance, Barrett, Bradshaw, & Lewis-Palmer (2008) found that overall ODR rates for the 467 SWPBIS implementing schools in Maryland were well below the national level and that suspension rates had decreased substantially in the first year of implementation compared to the previous year. In a 5-year longitudinal randomized controlled trial of SWPBIS in 37 Maryland elementary schools, Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf (2010) found that the 21 schools trained in SWPBIS implemented with high fidelity. These schools showed significant comparable reductions in children receiving ODRs and ODR events. Additionally, SWPBIS schools showed significant reductions in suspensions while the non-trained schools showed no reductions. Based on the same study, Bradshaw, Waasdorf, & Leaf (2015) also found that at-risk students—defined by teacher ratings of disruptive behavior and emotional regulation—at SWPBIS schools were less likely than at-risk students at non-SWPBIS schools to get an ODR and to be referred for special education. Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun conducted a 3-year evaluation of a cohort of New Hampshire schools implementing SWPBIS. The cohort consisted of 1 Head Start program, 13 elementary schools, 6 middle schools, and 4 high schools. The 22 schools that had usable discipline data saw a 28% decrease in ODRs between years 1 and 2 of implementation, with the highest decreasing taking place in the middle and high schools. Similarly, in-school suspensions were reduced by 31% and OSS by 19%, with greater reductions in the middle and high schools. In Wisconsin, Eversten (2012) examined suspension data in 2,123 schools. All schools saw reductions in suspensions from 2010 to 2012, but schools implementing SWPBIS with fidelity saw far larger reductions.

Case study research has had similar results. Scott & Barrett (2004), evaluated a Maryland elementary school implementing SWPBIS by measuring the amount of staff and student time saved by the by a reduction in time spend on disciplinary procedures. Using the year prior to implementation as a baseline, the authors found that the number of ODRs decreased from 608 in the baseline year to 46 in year 2 of implementation. Student suspensions went from 77 to 22. According the authors' calculations, the reductions of ODRs accounted for a net gain of 10,620 minutes of instructional time over two years. Reduction of suspensions produced a net gain of 600 hours of instructional time. In a case study of one diverse, urban elementary school in the northeastern U.S., Mccurdy, Mannella, and Eldridge (2003) found a 46% reduction of ODRs by the end of the second year of SWPBIS, compared to the year prior to implementation. Specifically, school disruption referrals decreased over 46% and fighting referrals decreased by 55%. Luiselli, Putnam, & Sutherland (2002) conducted a four-year longitudinal evaluation of school discipline practices in public middle school in western Massachusetts made up of mostly White students. The number of detentions for disruptive behavior decreased each year and was cut in half from the first to the fourth year. Similar decreases were also found for number of detentions for substance use and vandalism.

These types of results have also been supported by larger, multi-state studies. For example, in a three-year effectiveness trial, involving over 36,000 students at 12 high schools in the Pacific Northwest and the Midwest, Flannery et al. (2014) compared 8 SWPBIS implementing schools with four non-implementing schools. They found a significant decrease in student problem behavior, represented by ODRs, in implementing schools compared to a steady increase of problem behavior in the other schools. They also found a significant inverse relationship between implementation fidelity and problem behaviors. Additionally, in a study of



883 high school from 37 states, Freeman et al. (2016) found that SWPBIS implementation was associated with a decrease in ODRs. Most of these schools were in early implementation phases, so these were short-term positive results.

Beyond ODRs and suspensions, there is some evidence suggesting that other types of behaviors, like bullying and attendance, may be improved with SWPBIS. For instance, Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf (2012) conducted a randomized controlled effectiveness trial of SWPBIS in 37 Maryland elementary schools over 4 school years and found that children in schools that implemented SWPBIS had lower rates of teacher-reported bullying and peer rejection than those in schools without SWPBIS. Also, Ross and Horner's (2009) study of six students in three schools that implemented SWPBIS that included anti-bullying curriculum found that the students bullying behaviors decreased significantly after the program was put in place and that bystanders to bullying incidents responded in more positive ways. Two of the studies described above (Freeman et al., 2016; Luiselli, Putnam, & Sunderland, 2002) found a modest positive association between SWPBIS implementation and student attendance.

In summary, the evidence strongly suggests that SWPBIS can have a positive impact on student behavior and school discipline rates. This seems to be true at all school levels, though research at the high school level is still relatively scant and generally points to short-term impact.

**School climate.** While school climate is multi-dimensional and not easily defined, it has been recognized as an important aspect of schools that can promote student safety, achievement, and healthy relationship skills (Thapa et al., 2013). The National School Climate Council asserts that school climate “is based on patterns of people’s experiences of school life and reflects norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (quoted in Thapa et al., 2013, p. 2). As a whole-school intervention,

SWPBIS is a direct attempt to improve school climate. While more research is needed in this area, there is some evidence that suggests that SWPBIS promotes improvement in school climate. In their 5-year group-randomized effectiveness trial of SWPBIS in 37 Maryland elementary schools, Bradshaw et al. (2009) specifically focused organizational health, which is an “important aspect of school climate, which includes an emphasis on academic achievement, friendly and collegial relationships among staff, respect for all members of the school community, supportive administrative leadership, consistent discipline policies, attention to safety issues, and family and community involvement” (p. 102). They found that high fidelity of SWPBIS implementation was associated with increased organizational health. The increases were greatest among schools with lower starting values. Caldrella et al. (2011) found significant improvements of teacher ratings of school climate in a middle school after four years of SWPBIS compared to a similar non-SWPBIS school.

**Student achievement.** There is modest evidence showing positive links between SWPBIS and student academic achievement. For example, Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf (2010) found student state standardized test scores in SWPBIS schools improved slightly more than those in non-SWPBIS schools, but not at a statistically significant level. Two other studies (Nelson, Martella, & Martchand-Martella, 2002; Sadler & Sugai, 2009) found significant increases in student academic performance after SWPBIS implementation, but in both cases the implementation included specific interventions at all three levels of SWPBIS, some of which were academically focused. In other words, these studies are encouraging for schools that have more thoroughly implemented all phases of SWPBIS and integrated academics into the tiered intervention framework. On the other hand, Freeman et al. (2016) found no academic effects in their study of 883 high schools. They suggest the academic gains are not likely to be a short-

term effect of SWPBIS and that other factors, like effective classroom instruction, must also be examined.

### **SWPBIS and Disproportionality**

**Outcomes.** While SWPBIS has been shown to effectively reduce the use of punitive discipline in schools, there is strong evidence that it has little impact on disciplinary disproportionality (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Kaufman et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011; Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011; Vincent & Tobin, 2010). In Vincent et al.'s (2011) comparison study of three years of office discipline referral data from 153 U.S. elementary schools (72 using SWPBIS and 81 not using SWPBIS), they found that a discipline gap between White and Black students was present in both sets of schools, though it was smaller at the SWPBIS schools. While smaller, the gap at the SWPBIS schools stayed fairly constant over three years. Similarly, Vincent & Tobin (2010) examined exclusion data from 77 (38 elementary, 23 middle, 7 high, 4 K-8/12, and 5 alternative) schools implementing SWPBIS. Comparing OSS rates over two years, they found that while there was some indication that SWPBIS was associated with lower overall suspensions, White students appeared to get the most benefit from the decrease and Black students continued to be suspended more often than Whites and for longer periods of time. As part of a pilot project to assess SWPBIS within an urban and very diverse Northeastern school district, Kaufman et al. (2010) examined disciplinary patterns of three elementary (K-8) schools and one high school for one school year. Across all levels, Black students had more total referrals than any other ethnic or racial group. Referrals for delinquency, aggressive behavior, and disrespectful behavior were particularly high for Black students. The only exception was in 7-8 grades, where Black students had fewer referrals for delinquency and attendance.

These findings suggest that SWPBIS may represent a positive shift in educational practices, but does not bring fundamental change that is needed to dismantle the root causes of racial gaps in school outcomes. While this may not be surprising—after all, SWPBIS did not take race and racism into account when originally designed—it is an important problem to consider, particularly as schools and school divisions continue to adopt SWPBIS as a way to interrupt the STPP. As Catrer, Skiba, Arredondo, and Pollock (2017) pithily assert, “You can’t fix what you don’t look at” (p. 207).

**Addressing disproportionality with SWPBIS.** Proponents of SWPBIS contend that using data systems that are able to disaggregate data to examine differences in outcomes for distinct racial and ethnic groups can help schools focus efforts on specific areas of need (Boneshefski & Runge, 2014; McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, Smolkowski, and Sugai, 2014). These data systems can calculate indices of disproportionality, which allow schools to target interventions to reduce racial and ethnic gaps and hold schools and teachers accountable for practices that lead to inequity.

Looking beyond the use of data, there are ongoing efforts to explore ways in which SWPBIS can be utilized or reshaped to address issues of culture and race in schools. In a review of research-based studies that considered culture in their assessment of classroom and/or school-wide behavior management practices, Fallon, O’Keeffe, and Sugai (2012) concluded that SWPBIS has promise as an educational approach for diverse school populations, particularly if chosen strategies are informed by cultural factors and learning history, and if teachers are given adequate training in such strategies. In Sugai, O’Keeffe, and Fallon (2012), the authors provide specific guidelines for “enhancing contextual and cultural relevance” (p. 205) of SWPBIS. These recommendations stem from a definition of culture rooted in a behavioral analytic

perspective, consistent with SWPBIS’s theoretical foundation—“culture is a reflection of a collection of common verbal and overt behaviors that are learned and maintained by a set of similar social and environmental contingences (i.e., learning history), and are occasioned (or not) by actions and objects (i.e., stimuli) that define a given setting or context” (p. 204). They further explain that race is one of many demographic variables, such as ethnicity, economic status, age, disability, oral language, sexual orientation, and geographic location that contribute to a student’s cultural identity.

Some scholars and practitioners are advocating for an expansion of the SWPBIS model to specifically include elements that might attend to issues of race, culture, and ethnicity. Vincent et al., 2011 integrated a culturally responsive educational perspective with core SWPBIS components to develop three recommendations for schools: 1) systematically promote staff cultural awareness, knowledge, and commitment to equity, 2) commit to culturally relevant and validation educational and disciplinary practices, and 3) utilize data that validates different cultural identities and promote equitable outcomes. This approach, according to the authors, would guard against the implementation of a “colorblind” framework and create systems that are validating and relevant to the diversity of populations within a school.

The most comprehensive attempt to address the problem of SWPBIS neutrality has been initiated by Aydin Bal and his research team. Bal’s model, called Culturally Responsive Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (CRPBIS), goes further than Vincent et al.’s (2011) expansion of SWPBIS to include culturally responsive features. Rather, it infuses the basic PBIS model with a commitment to social justice and a democratic systems change process that pushes school communities to interrogate normalized cultural definitions and expectations that are

embedded in its educational processes and contribute to systems of oppression and “social opportunity gaps” (Bal, 2015, p. 11).

Bal contends that current conceptualizations of culture in PBIS literature, such as that of Sugai, O’Keefe, and Fallon (2012) described above, are overly deterministic and essentializing, assuming that all students from a particular cultural category share similar beliefs, norms, and thinking patterns and, thus, we can predict behavioral responses and adjust our practices accordingly. CRPBIS uses a “cultural-instrumentalist” (Bal, 2015) view, which emphasizes a process in which educators collaborate with previously marginalized families to create ecologically valid and sustainable changes within local school contexts. Culture, as seen in CRPBIS, is a behavioral mediator rather than an isolated variable (Bal, Thorius & Kozleski, 2012). As such, consideration of cultural processes must be central to every aspect of the framework. One important step that CRPBIS takes is offering a specifically defined process for creating culturally responsive behavioral support systems (Bal, Schrader, Afacan, & Mawene, 2016) using a methodology called learning labs.

Despite recent efforts to alter SWPBIS to specifically address issues of disproportionality and equity, and the insistence by the TAC that “SWPBIS is not fully implemented until it is culturally responsive” (Leverson et al., 2016), there are few examples of schools that have effectively moved from the original, “colorblind” approach to a fully culturally responsive model. While it may be that more time is needed for recent research to find its way into the practice world, it is also worth wondering whether or not schools and districts have the desire, will, and/or capacity to take on these difficult issues. After all, comprehensive implementation of SWPBIS already represents a major paradigm shift in terms of discipline, classroom management, and whole-school functioning. If resistance and lack of buy-in from school staff is

already an obstacle in successfully implementing SWPBIS—a topic I explore in the next section—to what extent would more culturally responsive models that ask staff to interrogate and alter deeply held beliefs and assumptions make buy-in more difficult?

### **Faculty Perceptions of SWPBIS**

Because SWPBIS is a broad implementation framework that provides schools with flexibility in choosing strategies and practices based on contextual needs, it looks different at each school. As such, the actual practice of SWPBIS depends on what aspects of the model are emphasized within a school and who in the school community is making decisions about what practices are used and how they are executed. For instance, a school that focuses on the behaviorist theoretical components of SWPBIS is likely to look very different from one that focuses on the humanist components. In the former, strategies might be employed to assess the stimuli causing a student to behave in certain ways and then to manipulate these stimuli through rewards and punishments thereby focusing less on student development and more on behavioral control. A humanist approach would focus more on the students and their specific emotional, social, and learning needs. Schools with a humanist approach might consider culturally responsive PBIS models or introduce restorative practices, both of which seek to promote a more democratic, inclusive, and equitable community, and help students become more self-aware, responsible, and empathetic. Of course, most schools likely fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum.

The question of who has input into implementation decisions is equally important in determining how SWPBIS is practiced within a school. The SWPBIS model encourages schools to get feedback from all stakeholders in order to assess needs and increase the social validity of practices. However, the SWPBIS implementation process often requires massive changes in the

operations of multiple aspects of the school—changes that demand large amounts of time and energy. SWPBIS teams are under pressure to make major decisions with limited planning time and competing responsibilities. It is easy to see how even teams with the best intentions to be inclusive of multiple stakeholder perspectives may find it difficult to add more to what is already a full plate. Evaluation research has often found that schools and divisions that have implemented PBIS have limited community involvement (Barrett, Bradshaw, & Lewis-Palmer, 2008; Merchant et al., 2012; Upreti, Liaupsin, & Koonce, 2010). Logically, without diverse community perspectives, SWPBIS can easily become a top-down approach, the practices of which are dictated by those in power—administrators and counselors at the school and division level, and teachers and teacher aides at the classroom level. Because of this, a deep understanding of the perspectives of educational staff can provide crucial insights into the limits and/or potentialities of SWPBIS within a particular school context.

Research suggests that staff perceptions and buy-in of SWPBIS have a significant effect on the quality of implementation and program sustainability (Coffey & Horner, 2012; Flannery et al., 2013; Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009; McIntosh et al., 2014). Studies of SWPBIS district and school team leaders indicate that teacher commitment promotes sustainability (Coffey & Horner, 2012; McIntosh et al., 2014), whereas philosophical differences with the SWPBIS create barriers to sustainability (McIntosh et al., 2014). At the high school level, SWPBIS may be a harder sell (Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009; Vancel, Missall, & Bruhn, 2016). There could be many reasons for this. For one, high schools tend to be bigger and more complex organizations, making broad-based organizational change more challenging (Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, & Flannery, 2015). Secondly, teachers and staff at the high school level have more individual autonomy and often operate in silos based on subject matter expertise (Bohanon,



Fenning, Borgmeier, Flannery, & Malloy, 2009). Thirdly, it may be that SWPBIS, given its attention to teaching and rewarding specific behaviors, is perceived as not appropriate or potentially ineffective for high school students (Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009). Feuerborn and Tyre (2016) found that high school staff provided less favorable ratings than primary teachers on a survey measuring several key dimensions of SWPBIS.

**Social validity.** The concept of social validity highlights the importance of stakeholder buy-in and implementation fidelity in the success of an intervention. Simply put, social validity “is a measure of how well a social program is embraced by those who are targeted to benefit from it” (Marchant, Allen Heath, & Miramontes, 2013, p. 223). School staff represent a crucial stakeholder constituency, as they not only stand to benefit from SWPBIS, they are also responsible for carrying it out on a day to day basis. In adopting and educational innovation, particularly one on the scale of SWPBIS, it is not enough that it be theoretically sound and well-designed. Effective implementation requires that school leaders consider the needs and perceptions of the stakeholders who are responsible for the change (Marchant, Allen Heath, & Miramontes, 2013). To be truly effective, any change process must be implemented with fidelity. While the TAC provides several fidelity measures such as the School-Wide Evaluation Tool (SET, Horner et al., 2004) and the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI, Algozzine et al., 2014), social validity is often lacking in evaluations of SWPBIS (Lane, Kalberg, Bruhn, et al., 2009; Miramontes, Marchant, Allen Heath, & Fischer, 2011).

Failing to consider staff buy-in, particularly at early stages of innovation adoption, may result in superficial and unsustainable implementation (Lane et al., 2009). Additionally, there are multiple advantages in gaining an early understanding of social validity—“In preliminary stages of implementing SWPBS, polling stakeholder opinion offers particular benefits.

Stakeholder opinion and feedback are critical in establishing an information baseline for future analytical comparisons, as well as informing current program implementation. In addition, social validity data offer feedback on which to base suggestions for future improvements” (Marchant, Allen Heath, & Miramontes, 2013, p. 223).

More recent literature has started to specifically examine school staff perceptions of SWPBIS. In Tyre and Feuerborn’s (2017) qualitative study of elementary, middle, and high school staff perceptions, they found that most school staff report overall support for SWPBIS. For those that did not, the most common concerns related to misperceptions of SWPBIS, philosophical differences, doubts about consistency of implementation by other staff members, lack of student buy-in, lack of administrator support, and resistance to or skepticism regarding organizational change. At the tier 1 level of SWPBIS, school staff are asked to engage in a preventative, whole-school approach, undergirded by the assumption that student behavior is a function of the environment rather than individual student characteristics. In in-depth qualitative interviews with elementary teachers, Dutton Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, & Smith Collins (2010) found that teachers had limited behavior management training and that most of their strategies were focused on the individual rather than group level, both of which represent barriers to successful implementation of SWPBIS. Similarly, Feuerborn and Chinn (2012) found that elementary, middle, and high school teachers “attributed student behavior to unalterable variables such as internal student characteristics and family dynamics. These attributions of student behavior appeared to affect teachers’ decision-making processes and thereby their daily practice” (p. 227). If teachers see student behavior as related to factors outside of their control, they may be resistant to the work it takes to implement preventative classroom and school strategies.

**Educator buy-in and disproportionality.** While the research strongly suggests that educator buy-in and social validity are keys to more successful implementation of SWPBIS, there is still very little research that directly asks school faculty about their perceptions and attitudes regarding SWPBIS, and even less at the high school level. One missing element of SWPBIS faculty perception research is the examination of how school staff view the role of SWPBIS in dealing with racial disproportionality in discipline. As noted earlier, SWPBIS has been identified as a potential bulwark against the STPP and disciplinary disproportionality. The OSEP TAC dedicates a whole page of their website to the issue of equity, cultural responsiveness, and disproportionality. Assuming that schools and school districts are adopting SWPBIS to address disproportionality, it is important to understand the ways that school staff members perceive the importance of addressing disproportionality, causes of disproportionality within their schools, and the school's ability to deal effectively with issues of race and discipline. So far, the research on SWPBIS provides little evidence that it reduces disproportionality in discipline. Because SWPBIS is not specifically designed to deal with issues of racial disproportionality, it is entirely up to individual schools or school districts to prioritize issues of race and racism in its implementation. As a result, more research is needed to understand the extent to which educators see SWPBIS as a potential framework for increased racial equity in discipline. This research seeks to begin to fill this gap by examining a high school's faculty perceptions of SWPBIS at the pre-implementation stage.

### **Research Questions**

In summary, zero tolerance research has made at least two things abundantly clear: 1) Punitive and exclusionary discipline does not work. While it may momentarily relieve teachers and the school from dealing with challenging students, in the long run it does not make schools

safer. It does not improve student academic outcomes. It does not help students “learn their lesson.” Instead, it creates an environment of distrust and fear while removing from school the very kids who need it the most. 2) While the putative reason for implementing zero tolerance policies in schools was to increase fairness and “objectivity” into disciplinary processes, the opposite is true. Since schools were integrated in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Black students have been punished more often and more harshly than White students. Not only did this trend not change with the onset of zero tolerance, it was exacerbated, with devastating consequences for Black students, their families, and their communities.

Based on these two conclusions, this study sought to understand SWPBIS as a possible policy solution to school disciplinary disproportionality and an important tool to plug the STPP. Because SWPBIS is by far the most popular school response to zero tolerance and its use is increasing rapidly, it is crucial to fully understand how it is viewed and practiced within school settings. As the zero tolerance example illustrates, we cannot assume that apparent good intentions lead to positive outcomes. Policies, as benign as they may seem in theory, can never be separated from the social, political, historical, and cultural contexts in which they are practiced. If we know that race plays a significant factor in disciplinary disproportionality and we understand that the processes that lead to differential disciplinary paths are derived from racialized assumptions, understandings, discourses, and structures in schools and exacerbated by “race-neutral” zero tolerance policies, then we have to be skeptical about the efficacy of a “race-neutral” policy framework to address the roots of the problem. One way to gain insight into how SWPBIS plays out in school contexts is to understand the perspectives of those expected to implement it. School educational staff are the filters through which SWPBIS is delivered. Therefore, their attitudes, assumptions, and perspectives provide critical insight into the ability of

SWPBIS to help schools make the fundamental organizational changes necessary to move away from the exclusionary, zero tolerance paradigm and address racial disproportionality in school discipline.

Broadly, I am interested in ways of answering the following question:

- **What are the affordances and constraints of SWPBIS in addressing racial disproportionality in school discipline?**

In this study, I attempted to approach this question through the examination of the attitudes and perceptions of educational staff at one high school at the pre-implementation stage of SWPBIS regarding the organizational change process, school disciplinary procedures, and racial disproportionality in discipline. The specific questions addressed in this study are:

- **How do educational staff at this high school perceive the current disciplinary procedures and practices of their school?**
- **What do educational staff prioritize in terms of need for change in school disciplinary practices?**
- **How do the educational staff understand disciplinary racial disproportionality at their school?**
- **What can be revealed through the attitudes and beliefs of educational staff about the potential of SWPBIS to address issues related to disciplinary disproportionality?**

## **Chapter 2: Theoretical Orientation**

### **Introduction**

For this dissertation, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is my primary guiding theoretical framework. CRT scholarship has influenced the way we conceptualize and theorize school discipline, disciplinary disproportionality, and race and racism's role in educational systems, practices, and outcomes. However, CRT is more than just a way to think about these issues. Because racial and social justice are at its core and because its ontological and epistemological assumptions are at odds with many traditional, positivist forms of social science research, CRT is also a methodological lens (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). From a CRT perspective, much of modern social science research is based in normative, White-centered, assumptions that produce faulty, and often, destructive causal claims. Additionally, according to CRT, the overreliance on quantitative analysis is limiting. It has made us overly focused on what is happening and not about how and why. Based on these methodological perspectives, CRT researchers have produced several qualitative studies that enhance our understanding of what is behind the alarming discipline and disproportionality statistics. In this section, I will outline CRT's major assumptions and tenets, detail the key theoretical concepts that will guide this research, and provide examples of CRT research—particularly research focused on educator attitudes and perceptions—that have provided empirical weight behind the theory.

### **Critical Race Theory**

#### **CRT Tenets and Aims**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began as a theory of law focused on the ways social constructions of race become part of the hegemonic discourse in a way that makes them seem objectively true and unquestioned. Since its inception in the field of law in the 1980s, its ideas

have been applied to a number of disciplines, including education (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Central tenets of CRT include: a) Race and racism are central and endemic factors in the individual experiences of American life; b) Race and races are social constructions, not objective or fixed biological categories; c) Claims of neutrality and objectivity in law and other policies are covering up the privileging of dominant groups; d) Racism provides material benefits for White elites and psychic benefits to working class Whites; e) An interdisciplinary perspective of analysis allows for a historical and contemporary critique of racist laws and policies (DeCuir & Dixon, 2004; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solorzano, 1997).

From an ontological and epistemological standpoint, CRT encompasses a wide range of viewpoints that lack perfect cohesion (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). To some extent, this tension is what gives CRT much of its power as a theoretical lens and an alternative to traditional ways of thinking. Two of CRT's central tenets—that racism is endemic to all aspects of our life and that race is a social construction—are at the core of its ontological and epistemological uncertainty and will guide this analysis. The former, which is the core idea behind what CRT scholars call racial realism (Bell, 1992), asserts that racism is fundamentally not about overt acts of hate or intolerance, rather “it is an endemic part of American life, deeply ingrained through historical consciousness and ideological choices about race, which in turn has directly shaped” our most foundational systems and structures (Parker & Lynn, 2002). As such, racism is, for all intents and purposes, an objective reality that touches all aspects of our lives, subordinates people of color, and places limits on their life choices and opportunities. An important aspect of racial realism is that it suggests that because racism already exists within our social structures, it does not require racial animus or collusion on the part of White people to continue. As a result, “doing nothing affirmative against racism is a default action contributing to its survival, just as a

moving object in space moves in the same direction without a deliberate force to counter it” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 17).

While racism is real and ever-present, how it presents itself is ever changing and socially, historically, politically, economically, and geographically contingent. The social construction argument forces us to see that race, rather than some fixed, biological trait, “has fluid, decentered social meanings that are continually shaped by political pressure,” which must therefore be continuously reexamined and uncovered (Parker & Lynn, p. 11). This is particularly important in our current, post-civil rights world, in which overt racism is generally frowned upon and racist assumptions and processes are often hidden in seemingly benign and/or colorblind discourses, policies, practices, and ways of being. Taken together, racial realism and the social construction of race may seem like ontologically odd bedfellows, but this tension serves the purpose of underscoring the complexities behind race and racism and pointing the way towards liberatory forms of research and praxis. It also provides hope: If our racial reality—as deeply entrenched as it is—is ultimately socially constructed, then it is possible that it can be socially reconstructed.

One starting point for social reconstruction is social deconstruction. One of CRT’s most important projects is constantly examining and challenging popularly held beliefs and discourses that are guided by hegemonic ways of thinking (Ladson-Billings, 1998), which is a key aspect of this study. In many ways, the assumptions behind these ways of thinking have been encoded in our brains through centuries of reinforcement and reification. CRT aims to problematize what to many people seem like “obvious”, “natural”, and “normal” ways of doing things. The unmasking of privileged and unquestioned narratives does more than simply dispossesses people from their faulty notions. Instead, it helps illuminate the ways in which “attitudes make up the cognitive component of material racism” such that we see the clear relationship between the



psychological and the structural (Leonardo, 2013, p. 25). It is this reciprocal relationship between micro-level interactions and attitudes and macro-level structures that enact and reinforce them that CRT aims to address.

In reevaluating dominant and commonsense narratives and the way they are presented to us, CRT attempts to replace dominant historical interpretations—which often serve to comfort the dominant group and implicitly or explicitly reinforce racial hierarchies—with ones that are more congruent with minorities’ experiences, and offers evidence to support these new narratives (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). From a CRT perspective, this revision is necessary because racism and ideologies rooted in racism are often hard to see. In a post-civil rights world, where explicit racist rhetoric is unacceptable to the vast majority of people, constructions of race are often embedded in new forms of discourse. So much so that “conceptual categories like ‘school achievement,’ ‘middle class,’ ‘maleness,’ ‘beauty,’ ‘intelligence,’ and ‘science’ become normative categories of Whiteness, while ‘gangs,’ ‘welfare recipients,’ ‘basketball players,’ and ‘the underclass’ become the marginalized and de-legitimated categories of Blackness” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9). A CRT lens can help us uncover these new forms of discourse and put them into historical perspective. In relation to this study, CRT provided a framework that allowed me to look critically beneath the surface narratives of educators in order to better understand the potential of SWPBIS to reinforce or subvert racial inequity.

### **Criticism of CRT**

CRT is not without its critics. There are those who suggest that CRT is narcissistic, overly dependent on emotional claims, and theoretically inconsistent (Litowitz, 2016). Subotnik (1998) argues that CRT is long on criticism and short on solutions. He asserts that many CRT scholars offer provocative stories that illustrate the pain and struggle that Black people face in

America. However, he argues, they often offer no substantive solutions to the problems and, in some cases, “take the slightest opportunity to find a slight” (p. 690). He also finds CRT’s emphasis on narratives and personal stories troubling. He suggests that while CRT stories may make good emotional arguments, there may be other stories that make similarly emotional arguments for an opposite viewpoints. In this sense, a narrative’s appeal is not based on its intellectual merit but on how deeply it manipulates the reader. Farber and Sherry (1993) echo this concern, asserting that while some narratives may be useful for highlighting underrepresented voices and perspectives, they need to be judged on their truthfulness and typicality in order to be widely applicable. Furthermore, they say that stories lack scientific credibility without rigorous analysis attached to them.

While these criticisms may resonate with some, CRT scholars would generally see them as misrepresentative or grounded in opposing epistemologies (Delgado, 1993). Perhaps the most cogent criticisms of CRT come from CRT scholars themselves. One major concern for CRT scholars is whether or not CRT research and scholarship goes beyond the expression of ideas and social critiques to actually change conditions on the ground (Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). For instance, Howard and Navarro (2016) suggest that CRT has deepened our understanding of how racism functions in our educational system to undermine opportunities for marginalized students. However, they do not see evidence that this understanding has translated into concrete action at a meaningful level. As a result, they suggest that CRT scholarship focus on student outcomes and the implementation of school policies and practices that is “are mindful of larger social discourses around race” (p. 268). In keeping with this suggestion, this dissertation sought to understand SWPBIS in relation to the discursive context in which it is being implemented and make sure race and racism are central to the discussion.

## **CRT in Education**

CRT has been highly influential in educational scholarship since 1995, when Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) called for CRT legal concepts to be applied to educational practices and policies. They argued that in the U.S., society is based on property rights rather than on human rights. From this perspective, the right to an equal education granted in *Brown v. Board* did very little to change the material reality for Black people and other racial minorities. Schools are still largely segregated and many students of color are “expected to learn in schools where content, instruction, school culture, and assessment are often racially hostile, exclusive, and serve as impediments for school success” (Howard & Navarro, 2016, p. 255). Later, Ladson-Billings (2006) would famously describe this material reality as an “education debt,” which is a historically-based and ongoing accumulation of multiple forms of inequitable treatment and outcomes.

Since the 1990s, CRT has utilized evolving methods and concepts to disrupt racism in educational theory and practice (Howard & Navarro, 2016). These methods and concepts have been employed to challenge commonsense notions of meritocracy, neutrality, and equality that are embedded in policies and discourse and to deepen our understanding of educational inequity (Dumas, Dixon, & Mayorga, 2016). This project is specifically informed by three important CRT concerns—the social construction of race, the relationship between micro and macro level racism, and colorblind ideology. Below, I will discuss each in detail and provide examples of CRT educational research that illustrates how they manifest in educator attitudes and school practices.

## **Race as a Social Construction**

CRT asserts that race is not a fixed or biological concept. Rather, it is a social and legal construction. Further, in the U.S., “race has not been socially and legally constructed neutrally, but instead it has operated as a powerful coercive and ideological tool used to privilege Whiteness and subordinate people of color” (Simson, 2014, p. 527). In this sense, race and power are inextricably linked. Additionally, because racial constructions are largely created and structured by those in power, Whiteness has become the default standard against which all other races are measured. In this way, Whiteness becomes normalized and rendered almost invisible. Race, from the earliest moments of the colonization of America, has been constructed to justify and maintain power relations that benefit Whites (Haney-Lopez, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Despite the fact that it lacks any grounding in real, innate, or biological difference, the hierarchical nature of race is so embedded in every structure of our society it has become a reality, whether or not it is explicitly acknowledged. One of CRT’s projects is grappling with the contradictions that accompany the dual nature of race and racism as a social construction and a lived reality.

One of the difficulties of doing so is that because race is socially constructed, it is not a static concept and is hard to define. CRT can be criticized because there is no consensus about how to define race and the particular ways that race is distinct from ethnicity and culture (Leonardo, 2013). To some degree, these concepts are so intertwined that making a clear distinction is impossible. But, as Leonardo (2013) points out, not being able to do so makes centering race within a social science analysis a challenge, and can make it look more like “folk theory or common sense” (p. 28) to skeptics.

One counter to this criticism is that any attempt to create hard and enduring definitions of race, ethnicity, and culture denies the contextually-based, contingent nature of these concepts as social constructions. Race can be constructed and reconstructed at any time. And the racialization process occurs, according to Haney-Lopez (1994), within the “context of a dominant ideology, perceived economic interests, and psychological necessity” (p. 29). Haney-Lopez (1994) provides numerous examples of how, over the course of U.S. history, certain populations became racialized. For instance, Mexican-Americans were at one time thought of as members of a nationality with no specific racial designation. However, as Anglo-Mexican conflicts based on territorial disputes escalated in Texas and California in the mid-1800s, Mexican nationality and race started to become conflated and quickly became reified in laws, such as the “Greaser Act” in California.

### **Social Construction of School Discipline**

CRT theorists have pointed to several outcomes of the social construction of race, such as racial stereotypes, racial stigma, and implicit bias, as significant contributors to racial disproportionality in school discipline. I will rely most heavily on the work of David Simson (2014) to explore these ideas and guide my analysis. Simson’s conceptualization of the relationship between race as a social construction and differential disciplinary processes is a particularly useful heuristic. In short, he argues that:

stereotyping and implicit biases arising from a long history of racial prejudice and dominance continue to infuse seemingly objective standards of what is considered appropriate behavior as well as the practices—such as punitive school discipline—that are used to enforce such standards. These practices, again, lead to disproportionate disciplining of minority students, especially for low-level behavioral offenses. (p. 514)

Simson provides a schematic depiction (Figure 2) of how hierarchical constructions of race turn into lived experiences that end up privileging and empowering Whites, normalizing Whiteness, and creating barriers for Blacks and other people of color. In this process, individuals are given racial assignments based on a number of factors, which include phenotype, geography, ancestry, and more performative traits such as dress, demeanor, culture, accent, and practices. These racial assignments are turned into social meanings that are acted upon and create racial experiences, which then confirm initial social meanings.

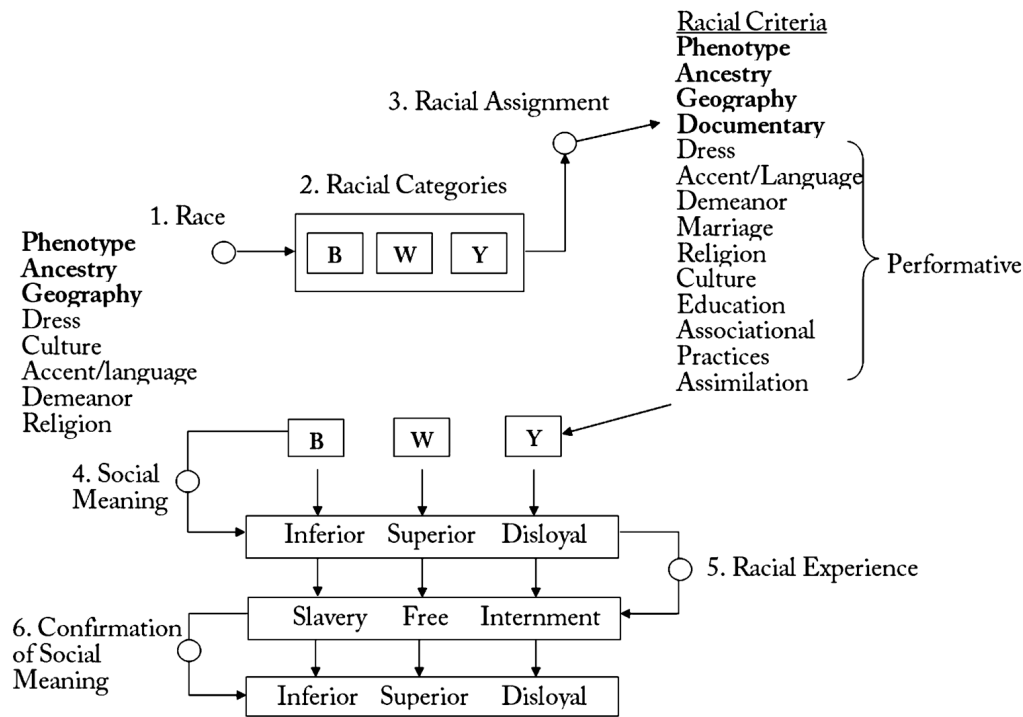


Figure 2. Social Construction of Race. From “Exclusion, Punishment, Racism and Our Schools: A Critical Race Theory Perspective on School Discipline,” by D. Simson, 2014, *UCLA Law Review*, 506, p. 528.

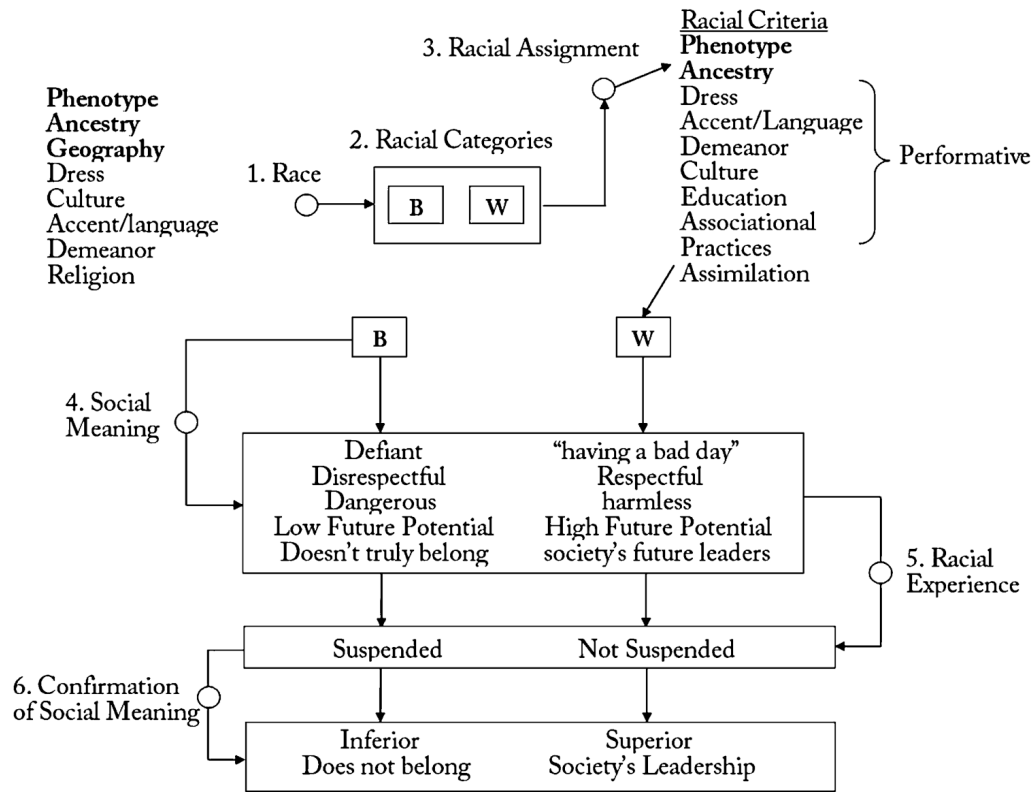


Figure 3. Social Construction of Race in the Context of School Discipline. From “Exclusion, Punishment, Racism and Our Schools: A Critical Race Theory Perspective on School Discipline,” by D. Simson, 2014, *UCLA Law Review*, 506, p. 532.

In the specific case of school discipline, the process (Figure 3) involves educators assigning racial categories to students. Within the school context, where disciplinary incidents are happening in classrooms and hallways, phenotype and certain performative criteria like dress, demeanor, and language are particularly influential. Then, in a complex process “influenced by longstanding notions of racial stigma, societal stereotypes and implicit bias derived in part from such stigma, differential perception and evaluation of the same event when engaged in by members of the racial majority and minority, and normative baselines regarding what constitutes appropriate behavior” (p. 533), the educator imputes meaning on student behavior and then determines a disciplinary action based on that evaluation. For example, when a White student

acts out, the educator may see the action as harmless or just a sign that the student is having a bad day. However, the social meaning of a Black student acting out is often evaluated differently. The behavior may be seen as dangerous and defiant. In the unfortunate last step, the fact that more students of color are given more severe punishments for similar actions confirms the notion that they are inferior and do not belong in the school context, which turns this process into a vicious cycle.

**Relevant research.** Research, like Anne Ferguson's (2000) influential ethnographic field study of an urban elementary school, illustrates how "racial myths frame how we see ourselves and others in a racial hierarchy" and how such a frame contributes to the institutionalization of Simson's schematic (Ferguson, 2000, p. 19). In Ferguson's book, *Bad Boys*, she describes the multiple and interrelated processes that disproportionately pushed Black boys into the school's "punishment room" and led to school suspensions. In fact, she found that discipline was but one of many mechanisms of racial segregation and categorization. One of her earliest observations was that Black students were separated from White students through ability tracking and "pull-out programs." These programs, according to Ferguson, are oriented in deficit ideology. This orientation, based on long-held stereotypes and the normative power of Whiteness, holds that Black students arrive at school already behind the curve due to cultural disadvantage. The programs are slated for "poor and minority children to compensate from the "deprivation" in their home environments that they bring into school" (p. 55). This kind of cultural deficit narrative alleviates the need for educators to critically assess how school structures and practices may be contributing to racially disparate outcomes. Instead racial gaps are seen as a natural byproduct of inherent cultural differences. In this way, the social construction of race becomes a more deeply entrenched racial reality.



The deficit orientation that partitions students in school is not the only racial stereotype that makes school discipline a minefield for many Black students. Ferguson (2000) observed that Black boys, in particular, are doubly displaced within the disciplinary arena: “As Black children, they are not seen as childlike but adultified; as Black males, they are denied the masculine dispensation constituting White males as being “naturally naughty” and are discerned as willfully bad” (p. 80). In their analysis, Allen and White-Smith (2014) utilized the CRT tool of counter-storytelling to relay instances in which educators’ attitudes and practices can contribute to unfair and racialized outcomes. One counter-story highlights the discursive practices of some educators that reveal what they call “Black male ontology” (p. 450), which sees Black boys as deviant, hypersexualized, and less innocent than others. In the story, a teacher disciplines a large 5 year-old Black boy for approaching a beautiful, Swiss, White girl and asking her to play. The teacher, who was recounting the story to other teachers in their work room, instinctively saw the Black boy’s approach as threatening and inappropriate. In another story, a well-meaning school counselor advises the mother of a relatively high achieving Black boy to look at technical colleges rather than a four-year college. This example illustrates the way the educators can become gatekeepers, despite benign intentions.

*Implicit bias.* The stereotypes that Simson (2104), Ferguson (2000), and Allen and White-Smith (2014) refer to are so deeply entrenched in our culture and our history that they seem to be coded into our brains. Research on implicit bias has consistently shown that most people, White and non-White, hold unconscious anti-Black prejudice. Implicit bias relates to the cognition that takes place outside of our conscious awareness. Research has shown that there are several conditions in which people are more likely to rely on their unconscious cognitive associations, including situations that contain unclear or incomplete information, time

constraints, or when someone is fatigued or preoccupied (Staats, 2016). This describes the daily existence of a K-12 educator, so “it is unsurprising that implicit biases may be contributing to teachers’ actions and decisions” (Staats, 2016, p. 30). This kind of bias has the potential to lower expectations for Black students and produce interpretive racial differences of White students and Black students for similar behaviors.

For instance, Black children, and Black boys in particular, are often implicitly seen as more threatening, more aggressive, and more likely to be criminals, even when stated beliefs contradict these views (Staats, 2016). Additionally, educators have been shown to see Black students as less capable of school achievement (Jacoby-Senghor, Sinclair, & Shelton, 2016; Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). In a recent study looking specifically about how race may impact teacher responses to behavior, Okonufua & Eberhardt (2015) found that after two identical minor infractions, teachers found the behavior of Black students more concerning than that of White students and were more likely to take disciplinary action for the Black students. In a second study, the same authors found that not only were teachers more troubled by Black student misbehavior, they were also more likely to see it as indicative of a pattern, requiring more serious disciplinary action. Not only does the research on implicit bias indicate that Black students are under a different disciplinary microscope than White students, it also suggests that even educators that hold racially progressive views can unintentionally contribute to disproportionate outcomes.

## **Social Construction of Race in Micro and Macro School Contexts**

Solorzano (1997) asserts that social construction of race and resultant enduring stereotypes have become normalized in educational discourse and play out in both micro and macro contexts in ways that are demeaning and harmful to people of color. At the individual level, Black students may commonly experience subtle microaggressions that reinforce their subjugated positions in schools. These microaggressions, often unnoticed or unintended by White people, can take the form of insulting non-verbal exchanges or phrases like “You’re not like the rest of them.” Delgado and Stefancic (1992) describe microaggressions as a process in which:

Racism’s victims become sensitized to its subtle nuances and code-words—the body language, the averted gazes, exasperated looks, terms such as “you people,” “innocent Whites,” “highly qualified Black,” “articulate” and so on—that, whether intended or not, convey racially charged meanings. (p. 1238, quoted in Solorzano, 1997).

At the macro level, stereotypes become the foundation of policies and practices that maintain racial hierarchies that subsequently reinforce the stereotypes. As Simson (2014) suggests, exclusionary discipline practices are a prime example. Other examples include placing students of color in less rigorous, largely segregated classes and expecting students of color to go into certain occupations or types of post-secondary education. By looking for ways that educators construct race in a high school setting, this study may attempted to detect ways in which harmful racial constructions may become woven into SWPBIS implementation.

### **Micro/Macro Racism**

Solorzano’s (1997) argument is illustrative of CRT’s emphasis on the interaction of individual/institutional processes that give racism its potent personal sting and persistent societal

salience. While some CRT scholars emphasize the material and structural nature of racism, others focus on how racism is practiced and reproduced in daily interpersonal interactions (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). This attention to the varied manifestations of racism keep CRT from being simply an intellectual exercise and keep it grounded in the “brutal reality” that impacts people’s lived experiences (Leonardo, 2013, p. 24). Regardless of the specific point of emphasis, all CRT scholars acknowledge the important and inextricable link between the micro and the macro in maintaining racial inequity—“Without a psychological component, CRT fails to capture the personal assaults against which people of color defend daily; without a structural component, CRT forgoes analysis of the extra-mental process that is institutionalized in policies, laws, and state governance. In effect, CRT integrates the two levels of racism: the individual and institutional” (Leonardo, 2013, p. 25).

The connection between the institutional and personal is fundamental to CRT’s rejection of any definition of racism that reduces it to overt acts of individuals with a racial ax to grind (Bonilla-Silva, 1997; Collins, 2009; Leonard, 2013). Bonilla-Silva (1997) asserts that understanding racism as an ideology, even one that influences structural arrangements, is limiting:

Although “racism” has a definite ideological component, reducing racial phenomena to ideas limits the possibility of understanding how it shapes a race’s life chances. Rather than viewing racism as an all-powerful ideology that explain all racial phenomena in a society, I see the term *racism* only to describe the racial ideology of a racialized social system” (p. 467, emphasis included)

This view on racism has important implications for how we understand its social reproduction.

By seeing racism as not merely an ideology, but something that is fundamentally embedded into

the structure of society, it becomes clear that racism does not require overt racial animus to persist (Gillborn, 2014; Leonardo, 2013; Young, 2011). In the specific case of education, this suggests that even if educators do not hold explicitly racist views and have positive relationships with students of color (Castagno, 2014; Lewis & Diamond, 2015), if their understanding of racism is limited to the realm of personal ideology, they “have the ability to institutionalize a color-blind orientation” that ignores the material impact of racist structures (Leonardo, 2013, p. 25).

### **Policy and Practice**

CRT’s micro/macro perspective is relevant to this study in at least two ways. First, one of the major assumptions of this study is that educator attitudes and perceptions are filters through which school policy is implemented. Policy cannot be separated from the context in which it is enacted and, as such, it is crucial to understand the points of view of those who will carry out policies on the ground level. David Gillborn (2016), a prominent CRT policy analyst, uses CRT as a tool to “go beyond the expressed intent of policy-makers and practitioners to examine how policy works in the real world” (p. 49). Gillborn is influenced by the work of critical policy analyst, Stephen Ball, who insists that policy analysis has to go beyond the words or intent of policy and delve into the informal institutional practices that shape and are shaped by practitioner beliefs:

. . . we need to remain aware that policies are made and remade in many sites, and there are many little-p policies that are formed and enacted within localities and institutions ... policy that is “announced” through legislation is also reproduced and reworked over time through reports, speeches, “moves,” “agendas” and so on. ... Policies are contested, interpreted and enacted in a variety of arenas of practice and the rhetorics, texts and

meanings of policy makers do not always translate directly and obviously into institutional practices. (Ball, 2008, p. 7, quoted in Gillborn, 2014, p. 28)

These observations are particularly important in education, Gillborn asserts, where the approval of certain policies is “neither the start nor the end of the process by which policy influences the everyday experiences and life outcomes of racially minoritized students and their families” (2014, p. 28). This dissertation is grounded in the assumption that the examination of educator perspectives early in the process of policy implementation can aid our understanding of how that policy may be enacted and impact student lives.

### **Relevant Research**

Second, some CRT research has indicated that when educators fail to acknowledge the structural component of racism, it can impact the way they approach their practice. Young (2011) used a CRT lens to do a critical case study of a group of educators engaged in anti-racism training. Her findings indicated that very few educators were what she called “conscious perpetrators” (p. 1443), who intentionally commit acts of racism. Instead, most educators are either “unconscious perpetrators” (p. 1443), those who act or speak with racial hostility without realizing it, or “deceived perpetrators/activists” (p. 1443), who are devoted to anti-racist causes but are unable to locate themselves as contributors to a broader, racialized system. Her findings underscore that idea that by seeing racism as rooted in the individual, even well-intentioned teachers might see social justice practice as “more about embracing the students’ individuality and their diversity rather than addressing issues of social and racial equality” (Young, 2011, p. 1454). According to her, only teachers in the fourth category, “enlightened perpetrators/activists” (p. 1443), who seek to examine their own accountability within a racialized system, can effectively challenge racism at the micro and macro levels.

Vaught and Castagno (2008) utilized the CRT construct of Whiteness as property as an analytical tool to examine teacher attitudes towards racism and White privilege in response to anti-bias trainings at two urban school districts. Like Young's (2011) findings, their examination revealed that teachers viewed racism and White privilege as situated within individuals as opposed to structures that reproduce inequity. Whiteness as property is a "concept that reflects the conflation of Whiteness with the exclusive rights to freedom, to the enjoyment of privileges, and to the ability to draw advantage from these rights" (Vaught & Castagno, 2008, p. 96). Harris (1993) asserts that Whiteness is more than just a racial identity. Instead, it is a form property that is protected by law and public policy. Starting with slavery and the conquest of the Native Americans, Whiteness became the basis for the accrual of public and private benefits. The conversion of Whiteness from identity into a form of property helped to create a society in which "individual White persons came to exercise, benefit from, and mutually create and recreate a larger structural system of collective, institutional White privilege" (Vaught & Castagno, 2008, p. 96).

In their study, Vaught & Castagno (2008) found that even after training on bias and White privilege, teachers failed to engage with Whiteness as a structural phenomenon. Instead, they saw racism as an aspect of personal relationships. For most of the teachers, the concept of White privilege became a tool for understanding how to be more racially sensitive with students rather than seeing how White people benefit, often unknowingly, from a system that is centered in Whiteness. Without a structural understanding, teachers were not able to consider their own roles in sustaining imbalanced power structures in order to change them. The authors saw this lack of structural understanding as a manifestation of the "propertied right to determine meaning" that allowed teachers to "deny their individual participation in the collective, structural

racism that perpetuates racialized student failure” (p. 103). From these findings, they draw the conclusion that teacher training is insufficient to promote educational equity. Rather, it must be accompanied by institutional change.

### **Colorblind Racism**

Colorblindness is the ideology of not seeing or acknowledging race and racial distinctions. Based on the notion that noticing race and accounting for racialized processes is unfair or even racist, it is the pervasive ideology that guides much of our current legal and policy discussions (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Gillborn, 2016). Colorblindness emerged in the post-Jim Crow era, when explicit expressions of bigotry and racial animus became taboo (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Collins, 2009). A colorblind system of racism is characterized by more covert racial discourses and practices, avoidance of race in conversation, policies that avoid direct racial preferences even in race-salient issues, and the reproduction of racial privilege via subtle and often hidden processes (Bonilla-Silva, 2015).

Colorblindness ignores the reality that we all are guided by visual and social cues. It also “erases individuals’ and groups of people’s social and political histories and contemporary identities, practices, and everyday experiences that are linked to their racialized realities because as a strategy it must ignore that these social artifacts and experiences exist” (Mckinney de Royston & Suad Nasir, 2017, p. 263). As a result, policies and practices that adhere to a colorblind ideology serve to reinforce racial hierarchies and racially disparate outcomes (Bonilla Silva, 2006). Below, I will describe two conceptions of colorblindness that helped shape this dissertation’s analytical lens—Bonilla-Silva’s (2006) four fundamental frames of colorblind racism and Patricia Hill Collin’s (2009) framework of colorblind racism as a system of power consisting of four interrelated domains.



## Frames of Colorblind Racism

In the book *Racism without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2006) conceptualizes colorblind racism as having four fundamental frames, based on his analysis of surveys of 627 college students, 451 of whom were White, and 323 White and 67 Black Detroit metropolitan area residents. The first and most important frame is abstract liberalism. Abstract liberalism is based on the “superficial extension of the principles of liberalism to racial matters that results in “raceless” explanations for all sort of race-related affairs” (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 1364). Using ideas of liberalism in an abstract or decontextualized way, according Bonilla-Silva, helps “Whites appear “reasonable” and “moral” while opposing all kinds of interventions to deal with racial inequality” (Bonilla-Silva, 2015, p. 1364). For instance, they may argue against affirmative action as a violation of equal opportunity, based on abstract concepts of free-market ideology. Gillborn (2014, 2016) has described how this ideology has informed multiple current policies in education, including banning ethnic studies classes in high schools and ability tracking. He documents that policies like these have been shown to have detrimental impacts on certain racial and ethnic groups, but are generally seen as “best practices” and fair because they do not overtly favor one group over another (Gillborn, 2016).

The second frame, cultural racism, justifies racial inequality with cultural explanations. This kind of racial ideology does not use antiquated notions of the biological inferiority of minorities. Instead it “biologizes their presumed cultural practices (i.e., presents them as fixed features) and uses that as a rationale for justifying racial inequality” (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011, p. 193). This is a “blame the victim” perspective, which argues that lack of racial progress is a product of poor effort, lack of traditional family values or self-indulgence by certain minority

groups. For example, during the writing of this chapter, the director of Homeland Security Department's (HSD) office of faith-based partnerships, Rev. Jamie Johnson, was fired for remarks he made before his HSD appointment. On a radio show, he said "America's Black community . . . has turned America's major cities into slums because of laziness, drug use and sexual promiscuity" (Associated Press, 2017). As is obvious from Johnson's statement, these views shift the focus of analysis from inequitable systems and policies to the supposed inherent deficiencies of people of color.

The third frame, minimization of racism, is characterized by the "use of any other explanation than racism to explain minorities' social standing" (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011, p. 193). This frame argues that instead of racism, minorities remain in subjugated positions due to culture, class, historical legacies of slavery, lack of social capital, etc. Within this frame, talk of racial discrimination is often responded to with accusations of using the "race card."

The fourth frame, naturalization, permits White people to explain race-related phenomena away as naturally occurring and normal. These explanations reinforce the idea that race is no longer relevant in current society and that events that seem influenced by race are driven by other forces. For instance, the suggestion that people innately "gravitate toward likeness" (Bonilla-Silva, 2006, p. 28) may be used to explain our highly segregated society. In education, this frame is used to rationalize segregated social and educational arrangements (Tatum, 1997).

Subsequent research has supported Bonilla-Silva's conception of colorblind racism, including Moore's (2008) examination of two elite American law schools, Shelton and Coleman's (2009) study of Houstonian's perceptions of Hurricane Katrina evacuees, and Bimper's (2014) study of Black student-athletes experiences with colorblind racism. These frames are not used individually, but are combined to create a subtle and elusive narrative that

downplays racism while serving “as the collective expression of Whites’ racial dominance” (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011, p. 192). It is important to point out that colorblind ideologies are not limited to White people. People of color can also express these ideas. Bonilla-Silva (2006) suggests that elite members of the Black community may be more likely to subscribe to colorblind views. Because individual and institutional expressions of racism have become so difficult to see, it is crucial to examine how these ideologies may be being expressed and reinforced in schools.

Stoll’s (2014) study of three different elementary schools in one district illustrates how Bonilla-Silva’s frames of colorblind racism can influence educator attitudes and practices. Using interview and observational data of 18 teachers, she found that while the teachers acknowledged racial inequality in education, they relied on colorblind narratives to explain and address it. Specifically, the teachers, regardless of race, heavily depended on three of Bonilla-Silva’s frames of colorblind ideology—minimization of racism, cultural racism, and abstract liberalism—to explain or justify the creation of colorblind classrooms. Many of the teachers explained educational inequalities through a lens of class rather than race. By doing so, they are able to minimize the need to address issues of race in their classrooms and ignoring the strong connection between race and poverty in our society. Other teachers blamed the struggles of Black students on unsupportive family structures or culturally-based behaviors that were not aligned with school expectations. These explanations imply that, to increase educational equality, Black culture must more successfully assimilate to White cultural expectations.

Finally, abstract liberalism was reflected in teachers’ beliefs that policies intended to address racial inequality were okay as long as no specific groups were singled out or given special treatment. In essence, they endorsed race-neutral solutions to race-based problems. In

doing so, Stoll suggests, they are not acknowledging the privileging of Whiteness that is inherent “race-neutral” policies. Importantly, Stoll asserts that her findings do not present “a simple tale of ‘culturally insensitive’ teachers in need of ‘diversity training’” (p. 702). Rather, the teachers’ colorblind narratives reflect the larger institutional ideologies that pervade our educational system. She suggests that systems must change to support teachers who are willing to directly confront issues of race and racism in schools.

Bonilla-Silva’s frames were used in this study to focus the analysis of educator attitudes regarding SWPBIS. Like they did in Stoll’s (2014) study, the frames will provide an important lens through which to see how educators may be perpetuating a colorblind ideology.

Specifically, I used them to develop provisional analytical codes. While they were not all equally relevant to this study, they served as an important starting point to analyze educator discourse.

### **Colorblind Racism as a System of Power**

Like Bonilla-Silva, Patricia Hill Collins’ conception of colorblind racism was used to guide this analysis. Collins (2009) suggests that we need new ways of thinking about race and racism in our modern post-Civil Rights world. After the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision in 1954, the U.S. quickly moved from a color-conscious system of racism to a color-blind system. In the previous era, it was much easier to see how racial hierarchies were created. Our public and private institutions were openly built to advantage Whites and disadvantage people of color. In our current era, this kind of transparent color consciousness has been eliminated and replaced by a legal colorblindness intended to give everyone, regardless of skin color, equal opportunity. While Collins acknowledges the progress that has been made in this era—the emergence of a Black middle class, increased access to better schools and jobs, and the election

of a Black president—she points to persistent racial gaps in such areas as education, health care, employment, and incarceration as evidence that while much has changed, much remains the same:

To be brown is far more acceptable than it once was, yet to many of us, it feels uncomfortably like we've gone from politics that protects racial privilege through maintaining all-White spaces to a multicultural, colorful politics that relies on allegedly color-blind mechanisms to reproduce the very same racial privilege. Whites may less frequently find themselves in all-White spaces these days, but the existence of seemingly racially integrated settings (especially in the media) does not mean that White privilege has been dismantled (Collins, 2009, p. 47).

In response to the increased complexity of our current colorblind world, Collins created an analytical framework that conceptualizes racism as a system of power. Instead of seeing racism as either institutional or personal, Collins sees it as encapsulated within four domains of power (Figure 4). The structural domain of power is how “racism as system of power is set up, and how it is organized without anyone doing anything” (p. 53) through social institutions like school, banks, hospitals, etc. The disciplinary domain is “where people use the rules and regulations of everyday life to uphold the racial hierarchy or to challenge it” (p. 53). The cultural domain “manufactures the ideas that justify racial hierarchy” (p. 53). It is “where we see the color-blind story play out” (p. 53). Finally, the interpersonal domain involves “ordinary social interactions where people accept and/or resist racial inequality in their everyday lives” (p. 54). Racism is “produced and resisted within each domain of power as well as across all four domains” (p. 55).

<p>STRUCTURAL DOMAIN Institutional structures</p>	<p>CULTURAL DOMAIN Ideas and ideologies</p>
<p>DISCIPLINARY DOMAIN Organizational practices</p>	<p>INTERPERSONAL DOMAIN Relationships and communities</p>

Figure 4. Colorblind Racism's Domains of Power Framework. From "Another Kind of Public Education: Race, the Media, Schools, and Democratic Possibilities," by P.H. Collins, p. 54. Beacon Press.

The racialized processes related to disciplinary disproportionality are found within each domain. In the structural domain, schools can be seen as one system within an interrelated and interacting set of systems that create racially disparate outcomes. Funding for schools is often determined by the local tax base, so schools in high minority and high-poverty-concentrated areas are often underfunded and cannot pay for a highly qualified workforce. This may lead to poor student performance, high rates of exclusionary discipline, and higher dropout rates, which results in incarceration. In other words, policies outside of education can "catalyze racial inequalities" (Collins, 2009, p. 62) in schools and vice versa. In the disciplinary domain, social institutions in color-blind contexts "need ways to move people to their assigned places (discipline them) using rules that are racially neutral but that produce racially disparate effects" (p. 66). In the cultural domain, educators and policy-makers avoid racial analysis and justify racially disparate outcomes with hegemonic narratives of color-blind meritocracy and cultural deficits. In the interpersonal domain, we make decisions about how to interact with one another based on our social conditioning and cultural assumptions. In this sense, according to Collins,

this is where we can either maintain our current social arrangements or question and challenge them.

Collin's framework was useful for this study for a number of reasons. First, it challenges us to see racism as a highly complex set of processes at multiple levels. Any examination of race and racism that focuses solely on one dimension risks oversimplifying the nature of the problem. While this study may emphasize the disciplinary domain, it will also be looking at ways that educators understand and describe discipline within a broader set of structural, cultural, and interpersonal phenomena. Second, it recognizes that power and racism are inextricably linked and that manifestations of racism within all of the domains must be interpreted within the context of power relations. Third, by emphasizing the color-blind nature of all of these domains, it asks us to look beyond surface or common sense narratives for what is being hidden or avoided. Lastly, Collins conceptualizes these domains as places where racism is reinforced, but also where it is challenged. In this sense, it is just as important to look for covert and overt ways that educators may be subverting racialized power structures and dynamics.

**Relevant research.** Some CRT research has examined the presence and consequences of colorblind ideology in educator perspectives. Blaisdell (2005) drew on quotes from a qualitative research project with high school teachers to illustrate issues of colorblindness in teaching and schools. In his conversations, he found that colorblindness expressed itself in a variety of ways. While teachers in his study did not subscribe to a completely colorblind ideology, they still enacted colorblindness. Most of the teachers acknowledged, for example, that some students are faced with barriers due to issues of race, but they insisted that they must treat all students equally regardless of race. In doing so, Blaisdell suggests, "teachers may fail to acknowledge the Whiteness of their curriculum, pedagogy, and discourse. Thus colorblindness prevents teachers

from seeing their complicity in the marginalization of students of color” (p. 36). Blaisdell’s observation highlights the two-way nature of colorblindness. Colorblindness can apply to how one sees others and how one sees oneself. As a result, even if educators see students as having racial identities, if they do not grapple with how their own racialized identities and assumptions impact their work, they may be complicit in reinforcing racial hierarchies.

Deckman’s (2017) narrative study of novice teachers’ on-line accounts of classroom management stories helps explain how colorblind ideology can contribute to a racialized disciplinary process. Deckman discovered two patterns of storytelling around the subject of classroom management—stories of managing race and stories of race-ing management. In the former category, teachers relied on the colorblind perspective that “commenting on racial difference is inherently conflictual or has the high potential to cause conflict—conflict that may challenge a teachers’ classroom management capacity and escalate into a disciplinary moment (p. 11). In these stories, teachers identified racial aspects of classroom conflict, but tried to downplay those aspects to maintain order in the classroom. In this way, “colorblindness and compliance with classroom rules were intertwined in the narratives’ resolutions” (p. 15). This refusal to engage with issues of race in the classroom combined with a need to keep order may help explain racial disproportion for issues like defiance and disrespect (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Skiba et al., 2002). If, as CRT asserts, racism is endemic in all aspects of our culture, students of color may be seen as more threatening if normative (read White) standards of compliance and order are prioritized (Vavrus & Cole, 2002). When educators adopt colorblind approaches, according to Allen and White-Smith (2014), they “not only exonerate themselves in the maintenance of racial hegemony, but also miss out on understanding how social and institutional racism pervade the lived experiences of students of color” (p. 447). In the race-ing



management narratives, teachers took a more race-conscious stance in attending to classroom conflict. Like the former group, these teachers recognized issues of race at the center of certain classroom management situations. Unlike the former group, they identified issues of systemic racism as a factor in these situations and turned to tactics such as racial consciousness raising and educating about difference as resolutions. Interestingly, the teachers in this study who were in the latter group tended to possess a strong minority racial identity as opposed to the first group, who were White or “expressed a more tenuous racial identity” (p. 24), suggesting that teachers who are more able to critically think about their own positionality within a larger racialized system might engage in more nuanced and change-oriented practice. This finding also reinforces the need for a more diverse educator workforce (Allen & White-Smith, 2014).

### **Other Theoretical Influences**

#### **Foucault**

Foucault, whose work is evident in much CRT thinking (Leonardo, 2013), rejected the idea that a model, theory, or framework—even one that is well-thought and well-intentioned—is enough to guarantee positive outcomes for all parties. Instead, he insisted that because all ideas, theories, and frameworks are implemented within historical and social contexts, the only way to understand them is to study how they are practiced within those contexts (Flyvberg, 2001). In other words, Foucault’s work encourages us to look beyond the conventional wisdom or accepted logics of theory and policy “in order to investigate the everyday functioning and effects of relations of power, forms of knowledge and ways of relating ethically to oneself and others” (Deacon, 2006, p. 177). Following from Foucault, one assumption of this study is that we can better understand the possibilities and constraints of SWPBIS as a framework for educational equity only by examining its implementation within a variety of contexts.

Additionally, Foucault sees an inextricable link between discourse and practice, both of which can become controlling mechanisms for those in power within social institutions (Ball, 1990; Best and Kellner). According to Ball (1990), “Discourses are about what can be said and thought, but also about who can speak, when and with what authority. Discourses embody meaning and social relationship, they constitute both subjectivity and power relations” (p. 2). Foucault saw discourse as a product of institutional practices, constraints, and power relations. Thus, any analysis of discourse must account for the context in which it occurs and must attempt to examine what is said and what remains unsaid. For Foucault, discourse can also represent a contested terrain, in which alternate and competing positions are expressed: “We must make allowance for the complex and unstable powers whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a hindrance, a stumbling Black, a point of resistance and a starting point for an opposing strategy” (Foucault, 1982, quoted in Ball, 1990, p. 2).

Digging into the ways in which practices become discursively established and normalized can help to uncover subtle forms of domination and problematize taken for granted assumptions. It was my intent to do this kind of digging. By critically analyzing the perspectives of school educational staff, I hoped to bring light to the discursive universe in which SWPBIS is being introduced. I was not interested, however, in doing so to undermine the validity of SWPBIS or to call educators on the carpet. Rather, I worked under the premise that the contours of SWPBIS within a given school environment are shaped by the competing socially constructed discourses within that environment, and that a better understanding of those discourses can inform a more just implementation process.

## **Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM)**

The Concerns Based Adoptions Model (CBAM) clarifies the importance of understanding staff perceptions of the organizational change process. Hall and Hord (2001) developed the CBAM to increase understanding of and facilitate innovation in organizational and school settings. In the development of this model, Hall and Hord observed that during the adoption of an educational innovation, some staff are open and ready for implementation and others are resistant. This kind of resistance is normal and can only be changed through direct intervention. A key aspect of CBAM is that staff concerns about an innovation change over time, so it is crucial to understand concerns at multiple points throughout implementation. By doing so, the school leadership team can target staff development and provide appropriate supports (Tyre & Feuerborn, 2017).

CBAM includes both a quantitative and qualitative approach for assessing staff concerns. This dissertation will employ the qualitative perspective. Additionally, CBAM offers twelve principles of change that apply to all major school change processes. Three of these principles are most relevant to this study's focus on the perceptions of SWPBIS at its pre-implementation stage by one high school's educational staff. The first is that change is a process, not an event. In other words, "change is not accomplished by having a one-time announcement by an executive leader" (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 4). Instead, it is a process in which both the individuals and the organization as a whole come to new understandings and gain skills in facilitating the change. At the pre-implementation stage of SWPBIS, CBAM would predict that there would be some uncertainty and resistance from some educators due to an incomplete understanding of what will be required of them. This study helped uncover some areas of uncertainty or resistance.

The second principle is that an organization does not change until the individuals within it change. This principle aligns with CRT's emphasis on the interaction between the personal and institutional. According to CBAM, individuals that are resistant to change can significantly effect and delay implementation. Over the course of the change, if the resistance is addressed through effective leadership and training, implementation can be more effective and sustainable. This project was intended to help the school get a sense of where to focus training and development efforts during the initial phase of implementation.

Finally, the third principle is that the context of the school influences the change process. CBAM posits that there are two important contextual dimensions to consider, the physical context and the people factors. This study is concerned with the people factors, which include "the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the individuals involved as well as the relationships and norms that guide the individuals' behavior" (Hall & Hord, 2001, p. 15).

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have attempted to provide insight into how my theoretical lenses informed the analysis of this study. As the primary lens, CRT centers race and racism, which is essential for understanding the problem of disciplinary disproportionality and its possible solutions. My choice of CRT as the primary lens aligns with my values as researcher, educator, and social worker committed to social justice. In the next chapter, I will explain in detail how my methodological choices are consistent with this theoretical perspective and how my methodological approach helped to address my research questions.

## Chapter 3: Design, Context, and Methods

### Introduction

This study used a combination of theory-driven and inductive thematic analysis to examine interview data taken from an evaluative case study of a high school in the pre-implementation stages of SWPBIS. Data collection included 23 semi-structured interviews of educational staff members of Virginia High School (pseudonym, VHS), the research site for this study, which will be described later in this chapter. This research sought to gain a greater understanding of the potentialities and limitations of SWPBIS in addressing racial disproportionality in discipline. While SWPBIS has been shown to result in positive improvements in student outcomes and represents a positive shift away from zero tolerance discipline, results of several studies have raised concerns about whether or not SWPBIS can effectively address issues of race and racism that contribute to disproportionality. These concerns are consistent with CRT's perspective that policies that are "race-neutral" are not actually neutral at all (Gillborn, 2014; Skiba et al, 2011). Instead, they serve to reinforce pre-existing White-centered norms and racialized patterns that are endemic in all of our systems and social structures. As previous CRT research examining educator and educator-in-training attitudes suggests, teachers and other school staff may be intentionally or unintentionally contributing to bias in school processes through the endorsement of colorblind ideology and predominant racial stereotypes that obscure historical and ongoing structural realities. Using CRT as my critical lens to analyze educational staff's perceptions of school discipline, disciplinary disproportionality, and SWPBIS, this dissertation offers insight into how educators may become barriers to or promoters of social and racial justice during the SWPBIS school change process. Specifically, I explored the following questions:

- How do educational staff at this high school perceive the current disciplinary procedures and practices of their school?
- What do educational staff prioritize in terms of need for change in school disciplinary practices?
- How do the educational staff understand disciplinary racial disproportionality at their school?
- What can be revealed through the attitudes and beliefs of educational staff about the potential of SWPBIS to address issues related to disciplinary disproportionality?

This study seeks to respond to several extent gaps in the literature. First, while research on SWPBIS in high school has increased recently, the vast majority of SWPBIS research has focused on the elementary school level. Based on the many unique characteristics of high school and the specific developmental needs of adolescents, it is important to understand more about SWPBIS at this level. Second, there are still very few studies of educator attitudes and perceptions of SWPBIS. As educators are the primary implementers of the framework, more needs to be known about their concerns and how to address them. Lastly, there are no studies that I could find that specifically examine educator attitudes towards SWPBIS as it relates to disciplinary disproportionality. Because SWPBIS is seen by many as a viable policy response to the STPP, more needs to be known about how to make it more responsive to questions of racial equity that have been raised by STPP scholarship.

### **Qualitative Methods**

Qualitative research is essential when we want to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon within a given context (Creswell, 2013; Padgett, 2012). My choice of a qualitative approach for this study is grounded in the assumption that no policy, theory, or framework can truly be understood independent of where it is being implemented and who is implementing it. I am interested in opening the “Black box” of policy and practice (Padgett, 2012, p. 16). As

SWPBIS continues to grow as a policy response to the zero tolerance era and the STPP, it is essential to examine—with a critical lens—the contours within which it is being used. Without such a critical and deep focus, it is impossible to know whether SWPBIS can truly transform schools and disrupt racialized processes that continue to restrict the life chances of our children of color.

Qualitative research involves the “collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes” (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). It is an inherently interpretive approach, which seeks to understand a phenomenon by making sense of the meanings that people bring to them (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research attempts to describe “lifeworlds ‘from the inside out’, from the point of view of the people who participate” in order to “contribute to a better understanding of social realities and draw attention to processes, meaning patterns, and structural features” (Flick, von Kardoff, & Steinke, 2004, p. 3). Because the researcher is a key element of the interpretive process, he or she is not simply an objective or impartial conveyer of facts. Rather, from an interpretive or constructionist perspective, research is a reflexive process in which the researcher co-constructs meanings along with the participants. As a result, it is important for the researcher—to the extent that is possible—to be aware of and open about how his or her assumptions, biases, identities, and social position(s) influence each stage of the research.

**CRT and qualitative methods.** CRT scholars view qualitative methodologies as essential to “address the particular historical, legal, and contemporary social context of persons of color” and inform criticisms of Whiteness (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 7). The link between CRT and qualitative methods stems from an epistemological distrust of more traditional,

positivist, and mostly quantitative approaches that CRT scholars argue has been used to justify and reify racial differences and hierarchies (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). Additionally, CRT seeks to prioritize the stories and experiential knowledge of people of color, which have been historically undervalued (Howard, 2008). Finally, the critical and postmodern aspects of CRT emphasize the importance of deconstructing common forms of discourse that tend to reinforce “White, European American hegemonic control of the social and structural arrangements in U.S. society (Parker & Lynn, 2002, p. 9), which will be the focus of this analysis.

### **Thematic Analysis**

While approaches to qualitative inquiry vary greatly, thematic analysis is a “foundational method for qualitative analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 78). Thematic analysis is a form of pattern recognition and reporting that allows the researcher to provide a rich description and analysis of the data (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). These patterns are called themes, which “at a minimum describes and organizes the possible observations and at maximum interprets aspects of the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 4). Themes can either be generated inductively directly from the data or deductively from theory (Boyatzis, 1998; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

Braun and Clarke (2006) suggest that one of thematic analysis’ great strengths is its flexibility. It can be applied in a number of ways and within many different theoretical frameworks. While this makes thematic analysis more accessible than some other qualitative approaches, it also make it susceptible to questions of rigor, especially if the researcher(s) are not transparent about their analysis procedures and their philosophical and theoretical assumptions. To address procedural clarity and rigor, Braun and Clarke (2006) developed a straightforward six-phase analysis plan and a fifteen-point checklist of criteria for high quality thematic analysis,



both of which I used and are detailed in the data analysis section. To address the philosophical and theoretical perspectives guiding this study, I will discuss my position related to the four philosophical assumptions laid out by Creswell (2013)—ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological—and how they align with CRT, the primary theoretical framework for this study.

**Ontology.** Ontology relates “to the nature of reality and its characteristics” (Creswell, 2013, p. 20). Assumptions of ontology are strongly linked to our understanding of what constitutes truth and knowledge. The ontology of CRT is influenced by critical theory, which sees a reality that was perhaps at one point fluid and contextually-based but has, over time, hardened through a process of reification, whereby societal structures that constrain people due to race, class, gender, and other characteristics are so entrenched that they have become practically real (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 1998). CRT’s “racial realism” places race at the center of its analysis. One of its primary interests is exposing discourse and narratives that reify false notions of equality, meritocracy, and neutrality for they ways that they cover up and maintain oppressive power structures. It would be overly simplistic, however, to suggest that CRT scholars have a uniform ontological orientation. Some, like CRT pioneer Derrick Bell, are more “realist” in nature and are less concerned with social construction than with the economic and material deprivation that has resulted from racism (Delgado & Sefancic, 2012; Lazos Vargas, 2003). While others, the “idealists,” see racism and discrimination as “matters of thinking, mental categorization, attitude, and discourse” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 21). Most CRT scholars meet somewhere in the middle of these two poles, which is where this study sits. I see racism as pervasive in every facet of our society, including our educational system and its educators. However, influenced by the perspectives of social constructionism and Foucault, I

believe that the way that racial realities present themselves and are contested is highly contingent on context and local factors. Therefore, while the presence of racism is predictable, how it manifests can be highly variable. Leonardo (2013a) sums it up this way:

Schoolteachers and students mediate structures, interpret them and create meaning out of them. Understanding this subjective reality is important because ‘reality’ does not merely come to us in the form of unadulterated experiences, and all we have to do is reflect them, even in an imperfect manner, usually through language. Reality does not make immediate sense to people; it has to be filtered through interpretive frameworks (p. 600)

The use of a hybrid thematic analysis is a useful sense-making tool that can help provide insight into how VHS staff members understand the need for and goals of SWPBIS as their school prepares for implementation. The combination of inductive and deductive coding seeks out the particularities of the specific context while acknowledging that all local “realities” exist within and are shaped by broader, and very real, racially unjust structures.

**Epistemology.** Epistemology relates to what counts as knowledge and how claims of knowledge are justified (Creswell, 2013). This study is deeply informed by the epistemology of social constructionism. Social constructionism suggests that all “knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (Crotty, 1998, p. 42). Further, the subjective meanings that humans create are “negotiated socially and historically” and are formed both by social interactions and “through historical and cultural norms that operate in individuals’ lives” (Creswell, 2013, p. 25). From this point of view, the distinction between ontology and epistemology is almost invisible (Guba & Lincoln, 1998).

The social constructionist idea that human interaction is at the center of knowledge construction is central to CRT's interpretivist perspective and alignment with qualitative research. Qualitative research tends to rely as much as possible on the participants' perspectives (Creswell, 2013). However, because human interaction leads to knowledge, "what can be known is inextricably intertwined with the interaction between a particular investigator and a particular object or group" (Guba & Lincoln, 1998). As a result, positivist ideas of objectivity and neutrality are rejected. This is particularly important from a CRT perspective, where the concepts of objectivity and neutrality are seen as covers for "majoritarian stories" rooted in deficit ideologies and stereotypes (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 30).

The latter point highlights the critical nature of CRT epistemology, rooted in racial realism, that is also central to this study. This perspective assumes that most White people, and many people of color for that matter, are complicit—often unknowingly—in the construction and reconstruction of "false" knowledge rooted in historically mediated racial hierarchies (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, Leonardo, 2013a; Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). The project of much CRT research, then, is to look beneath the surface of everyday discourse to dismantle the structures it upholds. Cynthia Tyson (2003) asserts that to "enact racial realism" and "move race from the margin to the center of our research paradigms, entails a deconstruction of the White racial ideology as the normative stance" (p. 22). This dissertation, based in social constructionist and critical race epistemology, seeks to understand the way that educators make meaning from their experiences, but also examine how "the broader social context impinges on those meanings" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 81) in ways that create barriers to or promote racial equity.

**Axiology.** In presenting one's axiological assumptions, the researcher is acknowledging that "research is value-laden and that biases are present" (Creswell, 2013, p. 21). I have arrived

at my axiological position after seventeen years as an educator, fifteen of those as a school counselor. Particularly during my last years, I came to see myself as stuck in a bind. On one hand, I worked hard for my students and had great respect for the dedication and passion of my colleagues. On the other hand, I came to see the school as a massive hamster wheel—all of us running furiously and going nowhere. Every individual student success, while worthy of celebration, was overwhelmed by broader patterns that reoccurred annually, with little serious acknowledgement. Topics like the achievement gap and racial equity were spoken of often, but proposed solutions were Band-Aids that focused on symptoms rather than causes. The opportunity to jump off the wheel and pursue my doctoral degree in social work has allowed me to rigorously reflect on my own work and find theoretical perspectives that shed light on what I was seeing in our educational system.

Based on these experiences, my axiological position is consistent with the values of CRT and social work. CRT is “is committed to social justice and offers a liberatory or transformative response to racial, gender, and class oppression” (Solorzano & Yasso, 2002, p. 26). Solorzano & Yasso (2002) call for a CRT social justice research agenda committed to the elimination of racism, sexism, and poverty and the empowerment of subordinated minority groups. The social justice value position in CRT insists that researchers avoid the intellectualization of oppression and instead use CRT analysis as a tool for “deconstruction, reconstruction, and construction: deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 9).

Similarly, social workers are explicitly asked in their code of ethics to “promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients” and to pay “particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty”

(National Association of Social Workers, 2017). From a social justice perspective, my aim in this dissertation is to critically examine the perceptions and attitudes of the primary implementers of SWPBIS in order to understand the extent to which it can promote meaningful change towards social justice.

**Methodology.** Methodological assumptions have to do with the process and language of research (Creswell, 2013). Consistent with the social constructionist perspective, this study used a qualitative methodology, which focuses on the topic within its context, utilizes primarily inductive reasoning, and maintains an emergent design (Creswell, 2013). The particulars of the methodology will be detailed later in this chapter.

Consistent with the racial realism perspective, this study also included a deductive element. In order to transparently account for reflexivity and bias in the analytical process, what Braun and Clark (2006) call “theoretical” thematic analysis (p. 12) and what Boyatzis (1998) calls theory-driven thematic analysis was utilized in conjunction with an inductive, data-driven approach. This kind of “hybrid” analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Loeliger et al., 2016) aligns with my theoretical interest in how educators reflect, reinforce, or complicate the race-centered constructs of CRT while allowing me to remain open to the specific and unique aspects of the research context and surprising findings. Additionally, given my deep engagement with the literature regarding this topic, a hybrid approach was more appropriate and transparent than a purely inductive one (Boyatzis, 1998).

### **Research Context**

Virginia High School (pseudonym, VHS) serves a suburban/urban population of a little over 1000 students. Demographically, VHS is made up of approximately 40-45% White students, 30-35% Black students, 10-15% Hispanic/Latino students, 5-10% Asian/Pacific

Islander/Hawaiian students, and 5-10% listed as “other.” Male and female students each make up about half of the student body. It is known as a relatively high-achieving school, is fully accredited by the state, has higher mean SAT scores compared to the national average, and provides several opportunities for students to take college preparation courses such as Advanced Placement and Dual Enrollment. The reported on-time graduation rate for the class that started as ninth graders in 2013-2014 was equal with the state average, about 90%. The school division is well funded, with a higher than state average per pupil expense rate and competitive teacher salaries. When you enter VHS, you find a calm and friendly environment. In general, VHS is doing well.

However, both the school the surrounding community have struggled—like many American towns and cities—with issues of racism and racial equity. As a member of the community for the last 12 years, I have heard several people, including local educators, describe the high school as “two schools in one” or a “school within a school,” meaning that students who are White and financially well-off are doing very well, but many Black and Latino students, a large portion of whom are from poorer communities, are not doing as well. Some of the numbers bear this out. For the class that started as 9<sup>th</sup> graders in 2013-14, the on-time graduation rate for Black students and Hispanic/Latino students was about ten percentage points lower than that of White students (Virginia Department of Education, 2017). The gap between White and Black students was larger than over 90% of the Virginia districts that reported data for each group. Additionally, the most current accessible state disciplinary data, broken down by school division, shows that while VHS’s school division had a relatively low overall suspension rate for the 2015-16 school year, it had one of the largest gaps in suspensions between White and Black students (Woolard, 2017). Close to ten percent of Black students were suspended compared to

less than two percent of White students.

Similarly, the community, while thriving by many measures, remains highly segregated and marked by a persistent undercurrent of racial tension. The largely Black neighborhoods tend to have high concentrations of poverty. Median household income for predominantly Black households is about two-thirds that of White households and there is a wide gap in educational attainment between Black and White adults ([www.statisticalatlas.com](http://www.statisticalatlas.com), 2018). In several public forums, Black community members have expressed distrust in local government based on experiences of displacement and discrimination. Urban renewal projects and gentrification processes that have marginalized Black communities going back to the 1960s are often cited as unresolved sources of conflict.

Like many Southern cities and towns, the VHS community is experiencing rising tensions around issues of race and racism following unrest spurred by the debate over the removal of confederate statues. The tragic killing of a counter protester at a White nationalist rally in Charlottesville, VA in August—immediately preceding the opening of the 2017-18 school year—is still fresh in the minds of many in the community.

### **Methods**

This study was approved by the Virginia Commonwealth University's Institutional Review Board as exempt from review because it presented no more than minimal risk to participants. It did not involve the participation of vulnerable populations as defined by the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). The study was also approved by the VHS school district review board. To protect the identity of the participants, no names were used in the report. Nor were potentially identifiable demographic characteristics, such as race and gender identification. Findings are reported as overall themes to avoid singling

out specific participants. Any quotations used in the report do not include identifying information.

### **Sample and Sample Selection**

This study utilized a combination of purposive and convenience sampling (Drake & Jonson-Reid, 2008), which led to a sample size of 23. The sampling frame for this study was the educational staff at VHS. For the purposes of this study, educational staff included teachers, instructional assistants, school counselors, administrators, and other staff that work directly with students, such as social workers and librarians. While several related studies have specifically focused on classroom teachers due to the significant amount of time they spend with students, I wanted to include a variety of educators in the school for a couple of key reasons. First, as described in chapter 1, school discipline is a multi-faceted process that involves many adults in the school beyond the classroom teacher. Second, SWPBIS is a whole-school framework that relies on its entire staff for successful implementation. This study was concerned with broad context in which SWPBIS is being implemented and the possible range of perceptions and competing narratives that exist within the school.

**Recruitment.** To recruit participants for the semi-structured interviews, a variety of purposive and convenience sampling techniques were used. A recruitment script was created (Appendix A) and was delivered to all educational staff via in-person school announcements and emails. I made the announcements in person during two monthly faculty meetings and at several department meetings. The announcements consisted of a brief description of the study and its purpose followed by an oral and written invitation to contact me via email, phone, or in person to express interest in participating or ask follow-up questions. During each announcement, I made sure that staff members knew that participation was voluntary and could be ended at any time. In



order to achieve maximum variation in the sample, and with the permission of department chairpersons, I made additional in-person announcements to a variety of departments in the school, including subject matter departments, school counselors, administrators, and other student services departments, in which I also handed out paper copies of the email announcement. Patton (1999) suggests that maximum variation is a method of triangulation that enhances the trustworthiness of the analysis by comparing perspectives of people from different points of view. The department announcements allowed me to reach a broad range of educators at VHS, which contributed to a more varied sample. In addition to the in-person announcements, one email was written by me and sent through the school principal. Similar to the announcements, the email provided a description of the study, my phone number and email address, and a statement about voluntary participation. It was sent through the principal because he has access to the staff mailing list. Additionally, it was important for the staff to know that the project is supported by their administration. By forwarding my email written by me, the principal showed his support of the project without being coercive (Padgett, 2012).

After conducting my first round of interviews (about 15 participants), I utilized snowball sampling to recruit a final round of participants. To do so, I emailed staff members that had participated in interviews to encourage their colleagues to contact me.

**Sample size and description.** The sample for this study included 23 participants (Table 1). There is no standard answer to the question of how many interview participants are needed in a qualitative study (Baker & Edwards, 2012; Padgett, 2012). According to many experts surveyed by Baker and Edwards (2012), the ideal sample size ultimately depends on methodological and epistemological concerns as well as practical ones. For instance, some narrative and phenomenological approaches or case studies of highly specific or rare phenomena

may require the deep analysis of data from just one or very few interviews. Other approaches, like grounded theory and thematic analysis may need more participants to find patterns. For this study, like many thematic analyses, I wanted to look beyond individual perspectives based on the assumption that there is some sort of “common social world” in which themes “manifest and make sense” (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006, p. 490). As such, I wanted enough interviews to come to credible conclusions about the common social world of VHS. Because this study was not interested in comparing perceptions of educators based on particular demographic characteristics and to preserve the confidentiality of participants, information on race and gender was not collected. Instead, to increase credibility, I interviewed people in a variety of positions within the school to add multiple perspectives (Patton, 1990). Based on methodological and practical considerations, the 23 participants were sufficient to be practically feasible for this study and to achieve trustworthiness in my thematic analysis. In total, 14 of the 23 participants were classroom teachers. The other 9 occupied a variety of non-classroom positions (due to confidentiality requirements, specific positions of non-teachers cannot be revealed).

Table 1

*Sample Characteristics*

Category	Total (N=23)
Position	
Teacher	14
Non-teacher	9
Years in Education	
0-2	2
3-5	2
5 or more	19
Years at VHS	
0-2	12
3-5	5
5 or more	6
Familiarity with SWPBIS	
None	2
Low	10
Moderate	9
High	2

Given that teachers make up the majority of educational staff at VHS, the ratio of teachers to non-teachers was appropriate. In addition to variation in terms of staff position, the sample also varied in terms of educational experience and years at VHS. Participant educational experience ranged from 1 year to over 20 years. Most participants had at least 5 years of total experience in education. In terms of years at VHS, the majority of participants had been there 5 or less years, but several had been at VHS over 5 years. This reflects the high number of young teachers at VHS, but also may indicate that newer teachers may be more interested in and open to SWPBIS or other forms of organizational change. Most of the participants had some familiarity with SWPBIS. Only two reported having no familiarity and another two reported being very familiar, based on experiences at prior schools. As expected based on the fact that implementation has not been initiated, almost all participants reported low or moderate levels of familiarity. By the time I had reached the 20<sup>th</sup> or 21<sup>st</sup> interview, I was feeling very close to data saturation, which is when the evidence becomes so repetitive that there is no need to increase the sample (Baker & Edwards, 2012). Overall, the size and make-up of the sample allowed for a high level of variation and data saturation.

### **Data Collection**

**Semi-Structured interviews.** The VHS school district granted permission for me to do this dissertation as part of a larger evaluation. The data for this dissertation came from in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol (Appendix B) was designed to elicit staff perceptions regarding key issues connected to SWPBIS, which include the need for organizational change, VHS's capacity to implement a change process (SWPBIS), and attitudes regarding punitive discipline and disciplinary disproportionality.

The questions in the protocol were developed based on SWPBIS literature and in

conjunction with school personnel. Specifically, I was an intern with the district-level SWPBIS coordinator. In my discussions with him and other school personnel, I was able to gain some background information about why the district was implementing SWPBIS and some of the major concerns that have come up during implementation in other schools. I learned that the district sees SWPBIS as a comprehensive framework that will help create a healthier climate within the schools, lower exclusionary discipline rates, and address disciplinary disproportionality. Additionally, staff buy-in has been a consistent struggle for school implementation teams, which is supported by the literature. As a result, the focus of the interview questions was around whole-school organizational change, discipline, and disproportionality.

**Interview procedures.** Once members of the staff expressed interest in being interviewed via email or in person, I emailed them to review the project and schedule the interview. Before each meeting, I sent the participant a consent form (Appendix C), which included a summary of the study, for review. Upon meeting, I reviewed the consent document answered any questions that the participants had. Once questions were answered, the participant was verbally asked if she/he was willing to participate in the interview. All interviews took place in empty, private rooms (classrooms with doors closed or private offices) to protect participant privacy and confidentiality.

Following verbal consent, the interview protocol was administered. The semi-structured interview format was designed to allow for in-depth exploration of the topics, perceptions, and experiences (Piercy, 2015). While I consistently asked the main questions in the written protocol, I added probes and/or follow-up questions in order to add nuance and specificity to the responses (Charmaz, 2006). All participants, with the exception of Participant 13, gave consent for

interviews to be digitally audio recorded. For Participant 13's interview, I took detailed notes during and directly after the interview, which were coded along with the other transcripts. Immediately following interviews, recordings were transferred from the recording device to a secured, password protected computer. One interview, number 14, was accidentally deleted from the recording device before being saved to the computer. Therefore, it was not coded for the analysis. However, my post-interview notes suggest that the content was generally consistent with other interviews. Once the other audio files were securely saved to the computer, they were permanently deleted from the recording device. Participants were given a random code number in order to protect their identities. Recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim using a professional transcription service. All attempts were made to avoid using potentially identifying data in Chapters 4 and 5. Interviews were planned for 45 minutes to an hour, but it was explained to participants that the length may vary depending on how the conversation transpires. Participants guided the length of interviews, which ranged from 27 to 65 minutes, averaging about 50 minutes.

### **Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive thematic analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Loeliger et al., 2016). The analysis followed the six-phase process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the addition of a preliminary step composed of creating theory-driven "provisional" codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 77). To assist in organizing and coding the data, I used Dedoose, a web-based, data management and analysis application.

**Provisional codes.** The provisional codes (Table 2) were developed using key concepts of CRT. Specifically, codes were created under the broad categories of Race as a Social

Construction, Micro/Macro Racism, and Colorblind Racism, based on findings from prior research on educator or educator-in-training perspectives and CRT theorizing described in Chapter 2.

Table 2

*Provisional, Theory-Driven Codes*

Code Label	Code Definition
Stereotyping (STER)	Discussion of students as more threatening, hostile, or deserving of punishment based on biological or performative aspects of race (dress, culture, language, demeanor, etc.)
Individual Deficit Orientation (IDO)	Racially differentiated expectations or rationalizations based on individual readiness, capability, or motivation
Cultural Deficit Orientation (CDO)	Racially differentiated expectations or rationalizations based on perceived cultural disadvantages or home/family environments
Practice versus Policy (PVP)	Tension or contradiction between stated policies and everyday practices of school staff
Personal Relationship (PR)	Locating racism or racial outcome gaps in personal relationships without acknowledging structural conditions
Structural Relationship (SR)	Locating racism or racial outcome gaps in structures and policies without acknowledging personal accountability
Personal White Privilege (PWP)	Understanding of White privilege as situated in interpersonal interactions rather than structural processes
Enlightened Perpetrators/Activists (EPA, Young, 2011)	Acknowledgement of individual accountability within an inequitable structure
Abstract Liberalism (AL, Bonilla-Siva, 2006)	Abstract or decontextualized discussion of liberal principles of equality or equal opportunity. Seeing policies or practices that take race into account as unfair

Minimization of Racism (MR, Bonilla-Silva, 2006)	Avoidance of race and racism as contributors to inequitable outcomes. Reliance on alternative explanations like poverty, historical conditions, or lack of social capital
Naturalization (NAT, Bonilla-Silva, 2006)	Explanations of race-related phenomena as natural and normal
Avoiding Race (AR, Bonilla-Silva, 2006)	Avoidance of acknowledging and/or dealing with issues of race in order to preserve order or control
Invisible Whiteness (IW)	Unseen norms of Whiteness in student/staff interactions, curriculum, pedagogy, or discourse.

According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), the list of provisional codes can come from “the conceptual framework, list of research questions, hypotheses, problem areas, and/or key variables that the researcher brings to the study” (p. 81). In order to be true to the data, these codes can be “held lightly” (p. 81), applied to the first set of data, and then examined for fit and utility. In other words, even though codes are created before the data is seen, they remain part of the iterative and emergent process that is crucial to the qualitative (Creswell, 2013) and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) process. This is consistent with Boyatzis’ (1998) hybrid approach to thematic analysis, in which the process for applying and determining the reliability of codes is the same once the a priori codes are deemed a good fit for the data. It is also similar to the approach used by Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) in their analysis of performance feedback in nursing. For them, creating a priori, theory-based codes helped organize and add transparency to their analysis, which “was guided, but not confined, by the preliminary codes” (p. 88). Boyatzis (1998) suggests that theory-driven codes are useful when the researcher has a clear theoretical framework through which to examine the data. On the other hand, he warns that

pre-determined codes may limit the researcher's openness to novel findings or may not be a good fit for a particular set of data. To guard against these dangers, I examined the deductive codes throughout the analytic process and revised or discarded them as appropriate (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Also, throughout the process, I attempted to stay open to unexpected and contextually-specific findings by engaging in an inductive coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014) state that "most field researchers, no matter how conceptually oriented, will recognize when an a priori coding system is ill molded to the data or when a rival perspective looks more promising" (p. 81). For this study, I found that many of the provisional codes were highly relevant to the data. Others, such as Avoiding Race, were not coded at all.

The creation of provisional codes helped maintain the critical focus and inform the thematic conceptualization of the analysis. Throughout the analysis, the theory-driven codes helped clarify the interpretation of the inductive codes and emerging themes. For instance, by helping to center race and racism in the analysis, the provisional codes helped uncover racialized meanings of discourse that was not explicitly about race.

**Six phases of analysis.** Once provisional codes were created and initial interview data was collected and transcribed, I began engaging in Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process of thematic analysis (see Table 3). Braun and Clarke emphasize that, even though the phases are listed as a step by step process, "analysis is not a *linear* process where simply move from one phase to the next. Instead, it is more recursive process, where you move back and forth as needed throughout the phases" (p. 86). Therefore, even though I describe the analysis process by stage, it is important to note that I recursively engaged in all phases of the process throughout the data collection and analysis period.



*Phase 1.* Phase 1 involves getting familiarized with the data through repeated, active reading, searching for patterns and themes as you read. During this phase, it is recommended that the researcher take notes and write down ideas for coding that will be revisited during later phases. I engaged in this phase throughout and after data collection. During data collection, I made either recorded or written notes after each interview. These notes were both analytical and reflexive. Analytically, I considered possible important ideas that emerged in each interview and, as I conducted more interviews, I made note of possible emerging themes or possible areas of tension. These notes aided later analytical phases and helped inform probes in subsequent interviews. Additionally, as I engaged in this process, I considered the fit and salience of my provisional themes. Reflexively, I considered the ways in which my positionality and assumptions (and those of the participants) influenced the interview process and creation of knowledge. These reflexive memos will be detailed more fully in a following section.

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), an important aspect of this phase is the transcription of the data. While seemingly simple, this process can be a very important aspect of the analysis, as it requires the researcher to come in close contact with the data, which often leads to the development of interpretive ideas. While I did not personally transcribe the interviews, in order to immerse myself in the data I reviewed each transcription word for word while listening to the interviews. This process not only assured the accuracy of the transcription, it also brought me closer to the data and helped inform decisions in later phases of the analysis.

*Phase 2.* Phase 2 is the production of initial codes from the data. Coding involves recognizing an important moment in the data and labeling it (Boyatzis, 1998). Boyatzis (1998) calls the unit of coding “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information that can be assessed in a meaningful way regarding the phenomenon” (p. 63). Coding is a process of

organizing your data in a meaningful way. While Boyatzis (1998) sees coding as a precursor to interpretive analysis, Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) assert that coding is an important element of the interpretive process.

The key suggestions for this phase are to code for as many potential themes as possible, to keep enough surrounding data in a code in order to stay as true as possible to the context, and that the same data extract can be included in multiple codes. In this stage, it is important to code anything that might be relevant. Decisions as to whether to change or discard a code can be made later. Finally, and very importantly, it is alright if data patterns appear to be in tension with one another. A good thematic analysis “does not have to smooth over or ignore the tensions and inconsistencies with and across data items. It is important to retain accounts which depart from the dominant story in the analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89).

In keeping with the inductive element of this analysis, I approached this phase as openly as possible. Coding can be done by word, line, or paragraph (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006; Charmaz, 2006). I chose to code both line-by-line and paragraph-by-paragraph, depending on how ideas were expressed in the data. I primarily used In Vivo coding and process coding. In Vivo codes honor the participants’ voice and stay as close as possible to their intended meanings (Saldaña, 2016). Process codes help focus the analysis on routine, ritual, and process (Saldaña, 2016). In a few cases, when participants clearly expressed ideas that fit the literature, I used concept coding. For instance, as I reviewed the interview transcripts, several participants described ways in which White students and their families had resources at their disposal that allowed them to avoid the same kinds of disciplinary scrutiny or consequences that were often applied to Black students and students of color. These descriptions fit very closely with the way Lewis & Diamond (2015) described cultural capital in their case study of a Midwestern school.

As a result, I used the code “cultural capital” for such descriptions.

Additionally, where appropriate, I applied the provisional codes. At this point in the process, I applied the provisional codes to excerpts at both the latent and semantic level without actually accounting for the latent/semantic distinction. For example, the following statement by Participant 9, responding to a question about why Black students were more often disciplined than White students, was coded with Cultural Deficit Orientation (CDO):

Participant 9: I don't know. Home life, not a lot of structure, not a lot of rules to follow, a lot of freedom. And they come into school and there's four walls and a teacher, and a whiteboard and things to do, and they don't wanna do it.

This is an example of a latent expression of CDO, in which the participant was unwittingly using racist frames to justify disparities. There were also several instances in which participants were very aware of the racialized nature of school practices and explained them on a semantic level. For instance, in the following excerpt, Participant 15 explains how educators can unconsciously lower expectations for students of color:

Participant 15: Like sometimes I think we convey low expectations for kids of color, like we'll say... I'll hear things like, "We're gonna do this thing, you guys can do it, it's easy," stuff like that. Whereas I think saying like, "This is gonna be hard, we're gonna work towards it, you guys can do it," is conveying higher expectations for academics. So I hear a lot of that in language.

This was coded as Invisible Whiteness. In later phases of the analysis, I realized that I would need to differentiate between latent forms and semantic forms discourse in order to more fully tease apart the ways that participants were understanding and explaining racially disparate outcomes and processes at VHS.

As coding progressed, the process became more deductive as I applied codes from previous transcripts into new ones. However, I stayed open to the data throughout, focusing on what each participant said. As a result, initial coding resulted in over 300 codes.

*Phase 3.* Phase 3 involves searching for themes. Within this phase, different codes are sorted into potential themes and coded extracts are placed within the themes. This is the beginning of organizing data into more abstract categories and seeing how the codes map onto them. It also may be a time to create overarching themes and sub-themes. The phase ends with the collection of themes, sub-themes, and related data extracts.

I started phase 3 by attempting to use the initial codes to look for patterns, but I quickly realized that I had too many codes and many were similar or redundant. I decided to thoroughly review the initial codes and look for redundancies in order to make this phase more manageable. For this process, I printed out each code and their respective excerpts. When I found that different codes were linked to very similar excerpts, I collapsed the codes, keeping the most evocative code names. Also, in cases where a code was only used once, I deleted it if there were no clearly related codes or I collapsed it into a similar code. The codes deleted in this part of phase 3 included several provisional codes that clearly did not fit the data or were coded so few times that they were not adequately relevant to the analysis. Immediately, three of the codes, Practice versus Policy, Personal White Privilege, Avoiding Race, were deleted because they were not coded at all. Another, Enlightened Perpetrators/Activists, was coded four times, but was ultimately let go in a later phase because it did not fit into the larger thematic structure that developed and could not reasonably be collapsed into another code.

After this process, I was down to 130 codes. This still seemed a bit unruly, but it was few enough to start looking for broader thematic categories. One strategy I used was to arrange the

codes under categories suggested by my four study questions to see how well they held together. Additionally, I added a “miscellaneous” category for codes that did not map well to any specific question. This organization of the data helped me to list some initial ideas about themes and sub-themes. Another helpful strategy in this phase, suggested by Boyatzis (1998), was to go back to each transcript and create summaries for each of them, read through each summary and note any recurring ideas and themes. This process helped clarify themes that were most salient throughout the interviews. Important to Braun & Clarke’s process, I did not abandon any ideas or identified themes at this point, even if they did not fit neatly. This was done in later phases as data abstraction progressed.

*Phase 4.* In phase 4, the themes determined in phase 3 are refined. It is during this phase that some initial themes found in phase 3 and theory-driven provisional themes may be discarded, collapsed into other themes, or separated into multiple themes. Review and revision of themes takes place at two levels—at the level of the coded data extracts and at the level of the entire data set. At the coded extract level the researcher reads all of the extracts related to a certain theme to see if they form a coherent pattern. If not, then it will be necessary to revise a theme, create new themes, or discard codes extracts that still do not fit. Once a coherent pattern seems to be established, then it is time to examine the themes in relation to the entire data set. This involves rereading the data set to make sure that the themes are accurately representing the data and to code additional data as needed.

Phase 4 allows the researcher to zoom into the data at the granular level and then zoom back out to make sure that developing themes and categories make sense in relation to the entire data set. In this phase, it was helpful for me to consider Patton’s (1990) suggestion of looking at both the internal homogeneity and external heterogeneity of established categories, making sure

that the data within themes cohere meaningfully, while there are clear and identifiable distinctions between the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These criteria were helpful throughout phases 5 and 6 as well. During phase 4, I realized that the four thematic categories pertaining to the four research questions were useful but not sufficient in telling the story of the data. It was at this point that I developed the two meta-themes of Two Schools in One and Whiteness, which are present throughout the data and allow for a deeper analysis of the findings directly related to the research questions. It was also here that I created a coding strategy to differentiate between latent forms of racialized discourse and semantic racial analysis in the provisional codes that remained in the analysis. By the end of phase 4, I had developed the first iteration of my conceptual map of the themes, which provided a clearer idea about how the data fit together and the thematic story that had emerged.

*Phase 5.* Once the themes are well-organized and map together coherently, phase 5 entails defining and refining the themes. For each theme, this requires conducting and writing a detailed analysis that tells the story of each theme and narrows in on what makes them interesting and important and how they relate to each other. It is here where sub-themes may be identified and detailed.

In this phase, I carefully considered what each theme contributed to the broader “story” of the data and how they fit together (Braun & Clarke, 2006). I also examined more closely at the thematic hierarchy and if any themes contained sub-themes. By the end of phase 5, I reached a satisfactory abstraction of the data and organized the themes and codes in such a way that I could clearly write the report. As I began the writing process in phase 6, I had a little over 60 codes nested and sub-nested within two meta-thematic categories and four lower-order thematic categories (Appendix D).

*Phase 6.* The last phase involves the final analysis and write-up of the report. The goal of the write-up is “to tell the complicated story of your data in a way that convinces the reader of the merit and validity of your analysis” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 93). The report should include data extracts that vividly capture the points being articulated. More than that, though, the write-up must go beyond description and include a compelling and clear analytical narrative.

For this dissertation, phase 6 was a key part of the analytical process. The writing process included elements of several previous phase of the analysis, including clarifying relationships between codes and themes, themes and other themes, and making decisions about how to logically organize the analysis to best fit the data and tell a coherent story.

Table 3

*Phases of Thematic Analysis (adapted from Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87)*

Phase #	Phase Name	Description of the Process
0	Creation of provisional, theory-driven codes	Drafting of code names and definitions from CRT concepts
1	Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
2	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
4	Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic ‘map’ of the analysis.
5	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.

6	Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis.
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## Rigor

Rigor in qualitative analysis is defined by the trustworthiness of the analytic process and product (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The following is a list of strategies from a variety of sources that I used to increase the trustworthiness of this study.

**Criteria checklist.** Braun and Clarke (2006) warn that because thematic analysis is a flexible method, it is open to the perception that “anything goes” (p. 95). To guard against this, they suggest that you “need to be clear and explicit about what you are doing, and what you say you are doing needs to match up with what you actually do” (p. 96). To assist in this process, they created a set of criteria for good thematic analysis (Table 4). The criteria apply to the entire analytic process, including transcription, coding, analysis, and the written report. Throughout the analysis, I checked my process against these criteria.

Table 4

*A 15-point checklist of criteria for good thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 96)*

Process	No.	Criteria
Transcription	1	The data have been transcribed to an appropriate level of detail, and the transcripts have been checked against the tapes for ‘accuracy’.
Coding	2	Each data item has been given equal attention in the coding process.
	3	Themes have not been generated from a few vivid examples (an anecdotal approach), but instead the coding process has been thorough, inclusive and comprehensive.
	4	All relevant extracts for all each theme have been collated.
	5	Themes have been checked against each other and back to the original data set.
	6	Themes are internally coherent, consistent, and distinctive.
Analysis	7	Data have been analyzed—interpreted, made sense of—rather than just



		paraphrased or described.
	8	Analysis and data match each other—the extracts illustrate the analytic claims.
	9	Analysis tells a convincing and well-organized story about the data and topic.
	10	A good balance between analytic narrative and illustrative extracts is provided.
Overall	11	Enough time has been allocated to complete all phases of the analysis adequately, without rushing a phase or giving it a once-over-lightly.
Written report	12	The assumptions about, and specific approach to, thematic analysis are very clearly explicated.
	13	There is a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done—i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent.
	14	The language and concepts used in the report are consistent with the epistemological position of the analysis
	15	The researcher is positioned as active in the research process; themes do not just ‘emerge.’

In addition to Braun & Clarke’s list, I was guided by Brantlinger et al.’s (2005) list of five quality indicators for interview studies, which include the selection of appropriate participants, the choice of appropriate interview questions, the use of adequate mechanisms for recording and transcribing interviews, careful attention to fair and sensitive representation of participants in the report, and the use of sound confidentiality procedures.

**Triangulation.** Triangulation involves the use of “multiple and different sources, methods, investigators, and theories to provide corroborating evidence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Patton (1990) suggests several triangulation strategies, including the comparison of information across different sources. For this study, I attempted to interview educational staff from a range of different positions (teacher, administrator, counselor, teacher aide, etc.) in order to compare perspectives. One point of this strategy was to see where perspectives appear to converge to increase the credibility of certain findings. However, it was also useful in order to find and explore differences, which added complexity, depth, and credibility to the analysis as a whole (Patton, 1990).

**Prolonged Engagement.** Prolonged engagement relates to the researcher spending sufficient amount of time in the field in order to have a reasonable understanding of the context and make sound decisions about what is relevant to the focus of the study (Creswell, 2013). Prolonged engagement also helps the researcher build trust with the participants, which may lead to richer and more open interview responses (Padgett, 2012). My engagement began last year, during my internship, during which I was able to meet with several members of the school and district staff and continued throughout the interviews. To capture the level and quality of my continued engagement, I recorded research memos and kept a reflexive journal throughout the process. The former detailed decisions and actions along the way as well as included “jottings” that reflected analytical thoughts and ideas that emerged throughout the process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014) call memoing “one of the most useful and powerful sense-making tools at hand” (p. 96). This example is an entry I made after an early interview:

This is a teacher who has some skepticism about PBIS and about her school's discipline practices in general. They also have a complicated view on racialized student experiences in the school. On one hand, they seem open to the possibility of racialized practices or structures contributing to disproportionality, but also speaks in ways that show a strong deficit orientation. Students of color (or students in academic classes or students of lower SES--these terms tend to be used interchangeably at this school) do act out more because they lack parental support, or parental modeling, or academic skills, or ability to "play school." This idea of "playing school" is interesting. The suggestion seems to be that White, academically advanced, upper class kids "play school" better. They know how to conform to expectations or get away with things. There does not

seem to be a deeper level of analysis in which there is an understanding that, to some extent, "playing school" means acting white, following white normative baseline expectations. In this interview, it was really interesting to hear the participant talk about how defiance or disrespect is harder to detect in mostly white, honors students. For them, it is much more straightforward for mostly black, academic students. In other words, the actions of black (academic) students are what we define as disrespect or defiance. The actions of white (honors) students defy such clear definitions. That being said, this participant seemed willing to wrestle with the topic and open to new ideas. This is something I've noticed overall. These interviews give participants a welcome chance to grapple with these ideas and attempt to articulate their feelings about them. This is not an opportunity that educators get very often at this level. Could this kind of open, non-judgmental exploration be a part of the implementation process?

As the interviews progressed, subsequent memoing helped me figure out that it was helpful to code my deductive codes at both the surface and latent level in order to distinguish between the moments when participants articulated a racial analysis of their school and when they unknowingly relied on racist discursive strategies (in the above case, cultural deficit narratives).

A reflexive journal is not meant to ensure objectivity, as that is not the goal of qualitative inquiry (Angen, 2000). Rather, my journal entries were intended to help me reflect on my own positionality, assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs throughout the study and how they may be influencing the meaning-making process. For instance, in this entry I considered how my former role as a school counselor might impact the way I viewed the responses of participants and interpreted the findings:

I've been thinking about how impressed I have been with the faculty members in general. What I witnessed was a willingness to grapple with difficult and complex issues in real time. I also have seen what I've known to be true from my experiences--that educators sincerely are interested in helping kids and facilitating positive outcomes. And while I think that this is something that should be acknowledged within the analysis, I also want to be careful not to allow my good will towards them (basically, my colleagues) to cloud my critical lens. I know, from my studies and experience, that good intentions can not only be unhelpful but can stall the kind of difficult self-reflection and social awareness that will lead to change. A well-intentioned person who is willing to simply rely on his/her good will can be blinded by the ways he/she is contributing to or exacerbating inequity. I know that my good intentions as a school counselor did very little to spur me to challenge the system in meaningful ways. I'm sure that there were many instances in which I thought I was helping a student but was actually reinforcing hierarchies and deficit thinking.

It is entries such as this that helped me maintain my analytical focus while honoring the perspectives and experiences of the participants.

**Member checking.** Member checking involves seeking verification from participants regarding accuracy of analysis. This process “represents a logical extension of the close relationship between the researcher and the respondent” (Padgett, 2012, p. 212) and honors the shared meaning-making process. To elicit participant feedback, I provided each with a summary of preliminary findings and offered the opportunity to provide analytical feedback (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Several participants responded, expressing that the analysis was consistent with what they were seeing at VHS and helpful in aiding their understanding of the

broader context of their school as it prepares to implement SWPBIS. Feedback from the member check offers strong evidence to support the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings

**Peer debriefing.** I was aided by two peer debriefers during the course of this study. The role of a peer debriefer is to “facilitate the researcher's consideration of methodological activities and provide feedback concerning the accuracy and completeness of the researcher's data collection and data analysis procedures” (Spillet, 2003, p. 1). At two critical times during the analysis, I discussed my process and tentative findings with Dr. Andrew Shoeneman, a recent graduate of the VCU School of Social Work. Dr. Schoeneman has extensive experience with qualitative research and the coding process. His input was especially helpful in moving from initial coding to the creation of thematic categories.

Important feedback was also provided by Kenya Minott, a doctoral student in the Graduate College of Social Work at the University of Houston. Ms. Minott’s scholarship is focused on educational disparities and racial disproportionality in school discipline. She provided feedback on the design of the study and on the preliminary findings. Specifically, after I had completed phase 5 of the analysis, I sent Ms. Minott a summary of my findings, my conceptual framework, and a detailed description of each theme. After giving me feedback on the summary, I sent her two randomly chosen de-identified transcripts to review and check whether they appeared to fit with the themes and the overall thematic framework.

This peer feedback supported the rigor of this study by providing a platform for me to process my findings and progress as well as an external perspective on the credibility and trustworthiness of the analysis.

## **Study Limitations.**

While this study offers insights for the fields of education and social work, there are several limitations regarding the interpretation and transferability of the findings. In particular, limitations result from the study sample and myself as the sole researcher.

The focus on educators as my sampling frame presents limitations, as does the sample itself. While educator perspectives are vital and often underrepresented in the literature, they also present a limited view of the school context. Particularly from a CRT perspective, the study would have been enhanced with the inclusion of student and family perspectives, especially those of students and families of color. More importantly for this study, though, because this was a convenience sample based on staff volunteers, it is possible that this study missed VHS educator perspectives that would have added more depth and complexity to the findings. One example is that the sample consisted of mostly educators that had less than five years of experience at VHS. While this is reflective of recent issues of staff turnover, it could also suggest that I was not as successful in recruiting VHS veterans. It is also possible that the participants in this study were those most interested in SWPBIS and issues of racial disproportionality, meaning that I was not able to get a complete picture of potential tension or resistance.

Perhaps the biggest limitation for this study was the use of a single coder and analyst. Without the ability to establish inter-coder agreement, the report may be perceived as biased (Creswell, 2013). To address this concern, I asked one of my peer debriefers to review some coded data for me and provide feedback. Additionally, the use of a methodological and reflexive journals provided structured documentation of the analytic process and my own position(s) in relation to it. Additionally, the member-checking process allowed me to receive feedback from

several participants, who felt that my analysis accurately reflected the school environment and key issues. However, even inclusive of these strategies, I have a significant role in shaping the findings of this study. My closeness to the topic, choice of theoretical lenses, biases, and assumptions all impacted every aspect of this study, from start to finish. Ideally, all research would be more of a team approach in order to bring in multiple perspectives and more thorough consideration of analytical decisions and conclusions.

## Chapter 4: Findings

### Introduction and Explanation of Conceptual Framework

Through 23 interviews with educational staff members at VHS, I have developed a tentative understanding of how educators at VHS perceive school discipline, racial disproportionality in school discipline, and how SWPBIS may or may not attend to the roots of disciplinary disproportionality and other issues of school equity. Filtered through a CRT lens—which centers racism and interrogates narratives, discourse, and practices that may appear colorblind but are, in reality, upholding deeply entrenched patterns of racial stratification—a picture of a highly racialized school experience has emerged.

The interviews revealed a school in which White students and students of color come through the same doors every morning but experience school in very different ways. Briefly, my analysis determined two related meta-themes that could be found throughout every interview. The first meta-theme is Whiteness, which can be defined as an ideology and concomitant set of tools that “secure the power and privilege of White people” (Shome, 1996, p. 503) and create an institutionalized system of racial stratification. Whiteness was expressed by the participants in two forms. One is Visible Whiteness, which are the clear and observable manifestations of a differentiated and hierarchical racial order. The other is Invisible Whiteness, which is defined as the less overt, often apparently non-racial mechanisms that assert and/or reinforce Whiteness as the institutional norm and maintains racial hierarchies. In many cases, participants described ways in which they believed Invisible Whiteness plays out at VHS. Other times, interviews were coded with Invisible Whiteness when participants unconsciously engaged in racialized discourse, such as deficit narratives, minimization of race, and naturalization of racial hierarchies.



The other meta-theme is Two Schools in One, which represents the way that staff members saw the school as really being two different schools in one building—one school that serves a largely White and affluent population that is generally achieving at high levels and another that serves students of color (mostly Black students) from more disadvantaged economic backgrounds who are generally achieving at lower levels or underachieving.

I found four lower-order themes that corresponded to my research questions. These lower-order themes provide a detailed picture of how educators at VHS feel about school discipline, disciplinary processes at VHS, disciplinary disproportionality and the coming implementation of SWBPIS. While these themes are important and deepen the understanding of the specific VHS context, they cannot tell the full story without seeing them as structured by and within the meta-themes. Table 5 provides a simple list of the themes. Below the table, I will explain further how these themes have been conceptualized for this analysis.

Table 5

Meta and Lower-order Themes

Meta-Themes	
Name	Description
Whiteness	Ideology and concomitant set of tools that “secure the power and privilege of White people” (Shome, 1996, p. 503) and create an institutionalized system of racial stratification
Visible Whiteness (VW)	Clear and observable manifestations of differentiated and hierarchical racial order
Invisible Whiteness (IW)	Subtle, often apparently non-racial mechanisms and discourse that assert and/or reinforce Whiteness as institutional norm and maintains racial hierarchies
Two Schools in One	The school as really being two different schools in one building

Lower Order Themes	
“Suspension is Stupid”	Perceptions that undesirable student behavior is often an expression of unmet needs and rejection of punitive and exclusionary forms of discipline, such as suspension
Looking for Consistency	Perceptions that fragmented systems and a highly variable disciplinary process were presenting barriers to more effective school operation and improved disciplinary outcomes
Disciplinary Disproportionality: “A Tsunami of Variables”	Varied staff explanations of racial disproportionality in school discipline and recognition of the complexity of the issue
Implementing SWPBIS	Attitudes and expectations regarding SWPBIS implementation and the ability of SWPBIS to address racial disproportionality

### **The Base (Whiteness) and the Superstructure (Two Schools in One):**

The metaphor of the base and superstructure, famously used by Marx to explain how society is structured to fit and reinforce the logics of the economic base of capitalism, is useful in this analysis as a way of illustrating the relationship between Whiteness—the ideological organizing principle that is the foundation of educational structures and forms of discourse—and Two Schools in One—the defining structural feature of VHS. However, it should be stipulated that the use of the base/superstructure metaphor here is not an attempt at Marxian analysis. Rather, it is a heuristic device that helps clarify the racialized nature of every aspect of this school’s operations, even ones that are seemingly race-neutral.

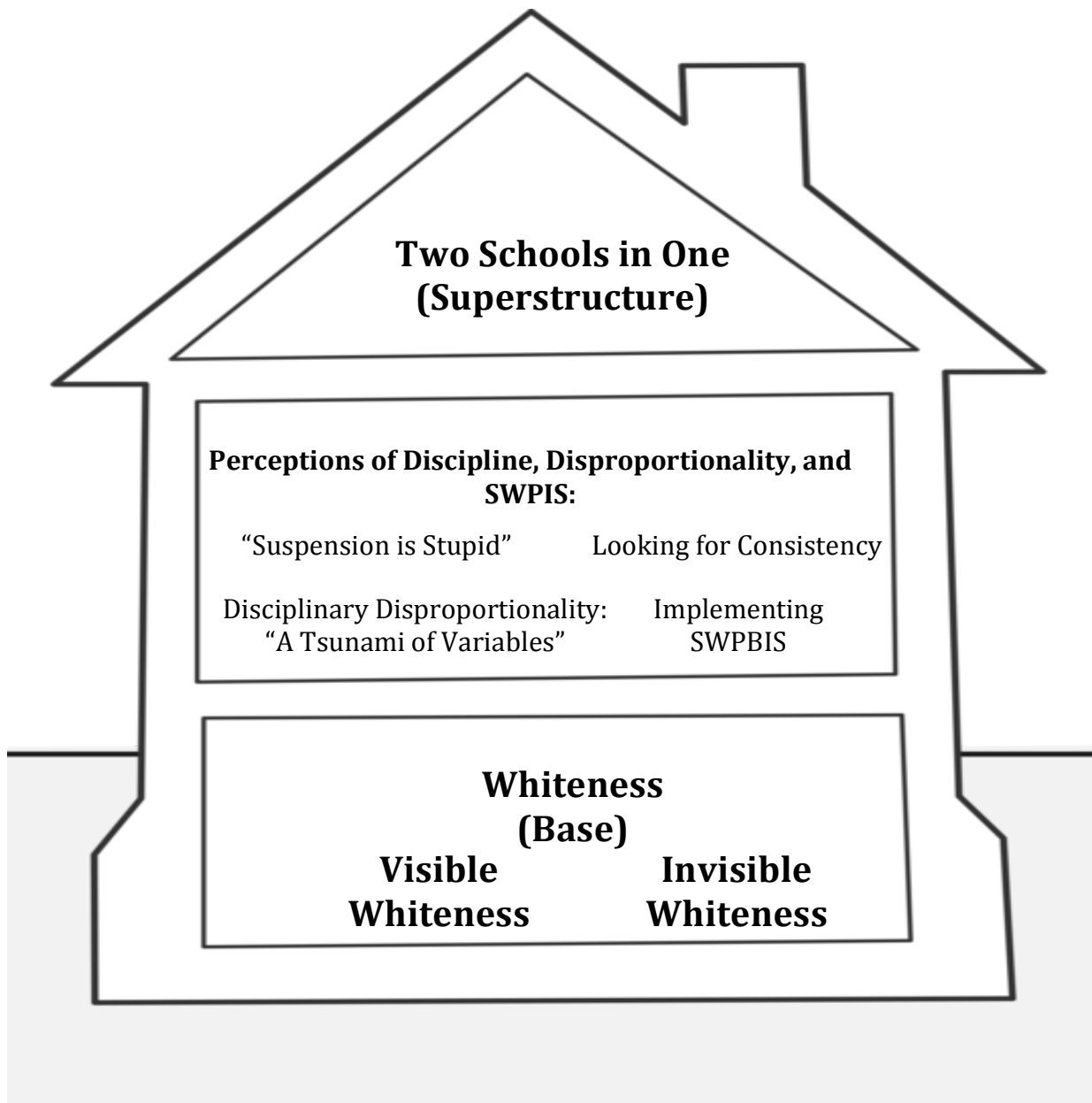
In Marx’s conceptualization, the economic base—or the logic of capital, in the case of capitalism—served as the foundation that determined the boundaries of the legal, political, and social superstructure, which patterns the ways that individuals and societies understand and talk about their worlds. In this view, human consciousness is determined and limited by the way society is structured, not the other way around. Society’s superstructure—its institutions, laws, and cultural norms—are governed by and reinforce the base (Thompson, 2014).

Adapted for this analysis, as illustrated in Figure 5 below, Whiteness is the base around which the school's practices, culture, rules, discourses, and norms—its superstructure—are created and maintained. Whiteness undergirds the VHS community, setting up the rules of the game that regulate and shape the life processes of its students, their families, and staff. Whiteness determines the shape of institutional forms, such as the bifurcated school structure, and forms of consciousness, practices, and culture, such as school discipline, academic tracking, and educator attitudes and perceptions. In other words, the broad organization of the school and the attitudes and practices that are contained within it are adaptations to the “imperatives of the valorization” (Thomson, 2014, p. 170) of Whiteness. And because Whiteness is often subtle, shape-shifting, and unseen (particularly by White people), outcomes like racial disproportionality in discipline or de facto segregation via academic tracking come to be seen as “normal” and “natural.”

As such, the relationship between the base of Whiteness and the superstructure of Two Schools in One is critical to this analysis because it informs the understanding of findings that may appear to be unrelated to race. For instance, when participants talk about the importance of consistency in the school discipline process or the personal baggage that students carry to school with them that impacts the way they behave and learn, they may be speaking in general, non-racial terms. However, since issues of school discipline and underachievement are so concentrated in the one school that largely serves Black students and other students of color, many of whom come from financially struggling households, it is impossible to separate race from these conversations.

Avoiding race is also not useful in thinking about ways to tackle school problems and implement new initiatives. Especially in the case of SWPBIS, which is a whole-school framework, the bifurcated and stratified structure of the school raises questions about who

SWPBIS is really for and who is asked to bear the burden of implementation. In other words, if educators, students, and families who primarily exist in the school that serves a predominantly White and upper class population and is flourishing academically and rarely involved in school discipline, what investment would they have in SWPBIS? For them, school is serving its purpose quite well. Why change?



*Figure 5.* The meta-themes of Whiteness and Two Schools in One serve as the base and superstructure of VHS respectively. The meta-themes provide the ideological and structural context for participant perceptions of discipline, disproportionality, and SWPBIS, represented in four lower-order themes.

These are issues that will be explored in more detail throughout the analysis and discussion. In the following presentation of the findings, I will provide a more comprehensive description of the base (Whiteness) and the superstructure (Two Schools in One) that serve as the meta-themes in this analysis, during which I will illustrate the ways in which participants expressed these themes and explained their centrality to school functioning and student outcomes. After that, I will describe the lower-order themes that are organized around this study's guiding questions and help illuminate VHS educator perceptions of school discipline, priorities for change around school discipline, racial disciplinary disproportionality, and their hopes for and concerns about SWPBIS. Where appropriate, the lower order themes will be presented at two levels, first at the semantic level and then at the latent level (Boyatzis, 1998). At the semantic level, the focus will be on the explicit or surface meanings of the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). At the latent level, the focus will be on the underlying ideas and ideologies that inform the semantic-level findings. In presenting the data this way, the intention is to highlight the ways that Whiteness manifests itself, sometimes subtly and sometimes not, in school discourse, practices, and structures. True to the inductive/deductive nature of the analysis, this presentation of the data honors the perspectives and insights of the participants while also applying a critical lens to illustrate the pervasiveness and insidiousness of Whiteness as it applies to every day life at VHS and the potentialities of SWPBIS in addressing the roots of disciplinary disproportionality.

One more note before I report the research findings. To protect the identity of the participants, each individual was given a number that does not reflect the order of the interview.

Also, I use “he” and “she” to refer to participants at various times throughout the chapter. These are used interchangeably and do not identify the gender identity of any participant. I chose to use gendered pronouns rather than they or other neutral pronouns simply out of grammatical comfort and familiarity. Finally, all excerpts are reported verbatim unless small changes were required to conceal the identity of the participant or the research site.

### **Whiteness**

Throughout the interviews, participants expressed the ways in which Whiteness pervades almost every aspect of the school’s functioning, from the leveling of classes to the subtle ways that White norms are applied to disciplinary and academic interactions that result in the subordination of students of color. For the purposes of this study, Whiteness can be defined as an ideology and concomitant set of tools that “secure the power and privilege of White people” (Shome, 1996, p. 503) and create an institutionalized system of stratification.

Participant 18 suggested that VHS is one part of a larger society that privileges Whiteness:

**Participant 18:** I think there's just lots at play and part of it is the kind of cultural stew that we're all in that still has a lot of systems of oppression that school can be a part of.

We are a system in a much bigger society, where that hasn't been built to benefit anybody but White folks.

Participant 1 elaborated on this point in the context of VHS, indicating that success at VHS is based on a narrow picture of the White college prep student and that educational practices at VHS are designed around that expectation:

**Participant 1:** Yeah the expectation of what you're gonna get out of this experience as a student and what we need you to do in order to achieve that. I think for... If you're within

the group that those two things are designed for, if... The schools are putting under the norm of we're gonna get these White kids to college, we're gonna get these kids to college, and the picture of how we're gonna do that is what is best for getting the White kids to college. If you're one of those White kids, it's gonna be great for you. You're gonna be fine with it. But, somebody that does not belong to that group of affluent White student, that end result of high school could be totally meaningless. What kind of buy-in do they have if that's the case? They're here just killing time. Doing something that they have to do because they're being forced to. The end result of which has been tailored for somebody that is not at all like them, has entirely different life goals than they do.

Participant 1 went on to add that many adults in the building endorse this picture of success, and the result is stratified system that valorizes Whiteness and subordinates students that do not fit the picture:

**Participant 1:** One of the things I hear a lot of adults in this building express is that, the way that they think of success it's very much shaped around what we want our "best and brightest" doing. That's the picture of success. And then everybody else is sort of occupying a rung on the ladder that approximates that in one way or another. And we seem to be accepting that arrangement. The rich White kids, they're getting the high grades, the high GPAs, they're going to college. And that's our picture of success. And then this group of students, they can almost get there. And this group of students, they can almost get there too, but it's more like here on the ladder. And then this group of students... We expect them to get this much of that privileged White kid picture of success.

Not all participants articulated a broad, structural understanding of Whiteness so clearly, but almost all of them provided examples of Whiteness that supports Participant 1's analysis.

Whiteness as an ideology has created a broad structural arrangement that benefits Whites both materially and psychologically and often appears to Whites to have nothing to do with race (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Leonardo, 2009; Picower, 2009). This arrangement is protected by Whites in a number of ways, one of which is through a set of discursive tools that avoid racial explanations to racialized problems, known as colorblind discourse (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Leonardo, 2009). While colorblind discursive strategies were commonly used by participants and will be explained more fully in the following section on invisible Whiteness, it is also true that many participants did not avoid race and were aware of the many of the ways Whiteness was manifesting itself in school practices and structures. As a result, Whiteness was coded at both the semantic and latent levels. At the semantic level, participants provided insights into the overt and subtle ways that Whiteness presented itself in the school. At the latent level, participants engaged in discourses that either minimized issues of race and racism in the school or utilized narratives that reinforce a racially hierarchical system. In some cases, individual participants did both simultaneously.

Whiteness, in some form, was coded in every interview. For the majority of interviews, Whiteness was coded at both the latent and semantic level, meaning that participants were often able to provide examples of school-wide racial stratification, but while doing so, they were also unknowingly propagating Whiteness through colorblind and deficit narratives. Even certain participants who articulated a sophisticated racial analysis were not immune to expressions of Whiteness in their own discourse. This highlights the fact that Whiteness is not simply an



extension of crude racial prejudice. Instead, as Leonardo (2009) puts it, it “is rather the domain of average, tolerant people, of lovers of diversity, and of believers in justice” (pg. 82).

It was also clear from the interviews that some forms of Whiteness at VHS are highly observable and visibly obvious and other forms are subtler and often invisible, and that these two forms of Whiteness are interrelated and reinforcing. For that reason, Whiteness is separated into two categories for this study—Visible Whiteness and Invisible Whiteness—both of which will be defined below and illustrated with participant excerpts.

### Visible Whiteness

Visible Whiteness (VW) was coded when participants described the clear and observable manifestations of a differentiated and hierarchical racial order. All but one participant described some form of VW, the most common of which was the presence of school spaces that appear to be shaped along racial lines. According to VHS educators, this is not a neutral process. In almost every example, White spaces tended to be more desirable and celebrated, whereas Black spaces were less desirable. In fact, based on these interviews, a trajectory of success for Black students seemed to constitute movement away from predominantly Black spaces and into predominantly White spaces. Table 6 illustrates the racialized school spaces that were discussed in these interviews:

Table 6

Visible Whiteness at VHS: Racialized School Spaces

White Spaces	Non-White Spaces
AP Classes	Academic Classes
Honors Classes	Special Education Classes (Collab, Self-Contained)
STEM Lab	Alternative School
Orchestra	AVID
	In School Suspension (ISS)

The most frequently discussed White spaces were AP/Honors classes. Participant 17 put it bluntly, “And when you go into an AP classroom. Yeah, it is like a White space, there's like maybe two people who aren't White and that's not cool.” Participant 13 similarly reported that “You can tell the level of the classes just by looking at the racial make-up of the classes” (quoted from my interview notes). Many educators, such as Participant 12, saw this racialized leveling as a result of a tracking process that began before high school: “my honors classes are probably 80% White kids and my academic kids are probably 90% Black kids, so I think that is a problem that stems from when you were little. I think.” Participant 12 later described how Black students who try to enter White spaces are put in a precarious situation:

**Participant 12:** I think that is. And I think automatically when you walk by an AP classroom and you see a bunch of White kids, I think a Black kid looks and is like, you know, "That's not what I'm going to class for. Those aren't my, you know, those aren't my people, that's not what I'm doing."

**Interviewer:** Mm-hmm.

**Participant 12:** And I think you know there's a couple of my kids that were in AP classes at the beginning of this school year that have dropped out and I don't know, I don't know why, I mean I think I know why but I don't, I don't know, it just makes me frustrated thinking about it.

The issue of segregated spaces was not limited to class levels. Participants named several other spaces that suggested a highly segregated educational experience for students. For instance, the school recently put a large investment in building a Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) lab. While this space is ostensibly for all students, participants said that the reality is far different:

**Participant 4:** . . . they spent a ton of money on a STEM lab that's supposed to be there for everyone, but is it? No, not really. [chuckle] It's a certain group of students that are always there using that space, I don't think it probably doesn't feel accessible to a large portion of our students.

Similarly, participants described several components of the fine arts program, most predominantly the highly acclaimed orchestra program, as predominantly White spaces.

According to Participant 1: “Yeah, yeah. Well, extracurricular programs that the school support, I know here at the high school, our arts programs, our music programs, certain clubs, student involvement, that's segregated too, sadly.” Participant 23 said, “It looks like the orchestra is all White. It looks like AP Psychology is all White. It looks like AVID is more students of color.”

At best, such as in the case of the Advancement Via Individual Determination program (AVID), Black spaces suggested an aspiration for access into the more successful White spaces. For the most part, though, predominantly White spaces were associated with achievement and success, and predominantly Black spaces were associated with struggle and risk. For instance, aside from Academic level courses, Black students were associated with special education spaces, such as collaborative (one mainstream teacher and one special education teacher) or self-contained courses. In this example, Participant 2 explained that while not all of the students in collaborative classes are diagnosed with a disability, almost all are struggling academically:

**Participant 2:** So yeah, I would say that half of those students do have disabilities, and half are just lower achieving. I would say that, and thinking about even just other students that I know that are identified as having disabilities, I do feel like more students who are Black pop to mind when I run through a list than students who are White.

Participant 8, in discussing special education spaces, pointed out the students were clearly aware of the issue:

**Participant 8:** I've heard them (students) say the very issue in terms of the collab, the academic and honors—Why? Why do all the collab class got a lot of Black people and no White people? I walk by classes and I see they're all White or maybe one or two Black people. Why is that? It's very difficult to tell, engage the kids that way. Because you want them to feel that they're getting an education compatible in the sense that you're not being targeted as a field.

In this example, Participant 8 is hinting at a process in which students may come to see some parts of the school as off limits or inaccessible. This issue, which is illustrative of the interaction between VW and IW, will be taken up more fully later in the analysis.

In addition to lower tier academic and extracurricular spaces, participants reported that discipline spaces are predominantly Black. The clearest example of this is the in-school suspension (ISS) room, where students are held for part of a day, a whole day, or a few days at a time as a consequence for some disciplinary issue. Participant 5 observed, “If you walk into the ISS room, there's a certain group that's getting written up more than others.” Participant 18 was more specific about what students are in that group:

**Participant 18:** In observation, I think when you look at our in-school suspension room, it seems visually to be disproportionate to our student body. We are a minority majority school, however, there seems to be a disproportionate discipline rate for students of color.

When some participants discussed ways to more fully integrate the school, they spoke about creating a “bridge” to support students in their attempts to access the more highly regarded

spaces. For instance, Participant 7, spoke about culturally responsive practices as a way to support student:

**Participant 7:** we have a committee that talks about culturally responsive teaching practices, and so sharing in our broader community and helping each other and as staff work together to create opportunities for students to feel more represented and like they belong and that these programs that have been seen as more exclusive, find ways to bridge those opportunities for students and just little by little open up and create those little bridges, between both of staff and the students.

While rooted in good intentions, all of the “bridges” in these conversations were one-way routes from the second or third tier spaces, inhabited mostly by students of color, to first tier, predominantly White, spaces. Often absent in these conversations was how these racialized tiers developed in the first place or how to create more successful and celebrated Black spaces at VHS.

Another major form of VW, according to participants, is that the educational staff is overwhelmingly White while the student body is only 45% White. This fact is clearly observable, “. . . there's also noticeably a majority White staff . . . myself included” (Participant 7), and a large portion of the participants thought that it contributed to racialized processes in the school and in classrooms, especially in the lower-achieving half of the school that is predominantly Black. Participant 17 stated, “I think teachers are disproportionately White and they're more likely to be uncomfortable with somebody who they identify with less”. Often, as will be discussed later, VHS educators connected the issue of a disproportionately White staff to differential discipline processes, suggesting that implicit bias, cultural mismatch, and

stereotyping played a role in Black students getting disciplined more often than White students.

A few participants pointed to something more systemic:

**Participant 19:** I think, of course it's not as simple as all White people don't understand, and all Black teachers are gonna understand, but I think that most teachers at this school are White, and people who were successful, like coming through a White school system. And, so if there were more diversity in the staff, I think it could be helpful, just not in terms of the dealings with the students, but just thinking about who are we, and why are we here, and who are we here for, and what... Are there systems that we're trying to recreate that we don't necessarily need to be doing that?

This participant saw a larger, structural issue that goes beyond individual interactions between students and educators. This is an important point, as it is certainly true that not all Black educators are equally effective with students of color, but the staggeringly disproportionate number of White educators may limit a school staff's ability to detect Whiteness in all of its forms or limit its ability (or will) to counteract it when they do detect it (Matias, 2013; Picower, 2009). Again, this hints at the nature of the interaction between visible and invisible Whiteness. In this case, the racial imbalance between staff and students is easily observable, but its impact is not always as easy to detect.

### **Invisible Whiteness**

Invisible Whiteness (IW) is defined as the less overt, often apparently non-racial mechanisms that assert and/or reinforce Whiteness as the institutional norm and maintains racial hierarchies. IW can be found in discourse, curriculum, staff/student interactions, pedagogical approaches, and other school policies and practices. Examples of IW found in these interviews are colorblind discourses—such as deficit narratives, minimization of race, naturalization—,

racially coded language, racially differential disciplinary or academic expectations based on White normative standards, and the increased cultural capital that White parents and students possess that allows them to influence disciplinary and academic practices and policies at VHS in ways that advantage them. In describing racial inequity in their school, most participants were able to articulate some forms of IW that were contributing to disproportionality in discipline or to the overall racial achievement gap. Also, most participants engaged in unconscious discursive strategies that reinforced Whiteness. In fact, most of those that identified forms of IW in their school also engaged in discursive Whiteness. As a result, IW was coded on the semantic level and at the latent level as a way to differentiate between the two.

**Invisible Whiteness (semantic level).** Many of the participants recognized that school behavioral and learning norms are extensions of Whiteness. For instance, Participant 22 stated, “I think our schools in general are based on a very Eurocentric White, upper middle class perception of how students work and learn.” Another discussed the fact that the school district was developing initiatives aimed at changing these norms to support its diverse student population:

**Participant 19:** I guess my feelings are, in that, that the district is working a lot...

Working around a lot of stuff, but especially around race and class, and how can the school serve students from all backgrounds and making sure that the school is working in a way that works for all students and not just like—You've come from a White privileged background, and your behaviors aren't... And we are expecting certain things from you and you're doing those things, and so it can go unspoken.

Most participants that described forms of IW expressed the ways in which a predominantly White educational staff may be imposing its cultural and racial norms and expectations onto students of color:

**Participant 15:** I do see a lot of students being disciplined for some behavior that is not the upper middle class White way of behaving, [chuckle] you know what I mean? Like still a lot of teachers... Like still a lot of people want kids to raise their hand and be quiet all the time. And there's that need, whereas culturally responsive teaching literature shows that sometimes students from collectivist cultures want to participate more out loud. It's not just gonna be like, quiet, raise your hand [chuckle] in your desk. So I imagine that some of that is along like cultural and racial lines.

Similarly, Participant 6 mentioned that economically advantaged White educators exhibit bias based on White, middle class norms:

**Participant 6:** There's a lot of implicit bias. Teachers are generally middle class White people that are educated and have very certain perspective of what success, normal intelligence looks like. And I wrote a whole paper about how we tend to set expectations based on what our understanding of success and normal and intelligence looks like. And how that just perpetuates the cycle of failure for not just African American, but culturally diverse, ethnically diverse people because it's based on a very White understanding of those things. And just because it's White doesn't mean that it's better.

According to some participants, the result of a predominantly White staff working with students of color goes beyond individually differentiated interactions and more deeply into systemic decision-making. For instance, in the following example, Participant 5 described a change he made in his classroom approach to improve student learning outcomes in a majority Black,



academic level class. However, he suggested that many educators are hesitant to make changes because they assume that their students will not be able to succeed:

**Participant 5:** So if you come at these kids from a perspective of, nothing's going to change, I can't do anything. And granted, you probably have a lot of data in your teaching experience to reinforce that idea. I certainly do. You're less likely to try to implement systems to change that. I implemented a system to change that and it changed it. Okay. Not sure where I started with that, what was the original for that?

**Interviewer:** Oh we were talking about the fact that most teachers are coming from a different background...

**Participant 5:** Oh, right. So if you come from a different background, I think you're less likely to get to that place where I'm willing to look at solutions, because I've had the negative reinforced enough.

This example describes an insidious process in which educators use prior experiences of Black student underachievement as a justification for not making pedagogical adjustments that may benefit the students. In this way, racially stratified structural arrangements reinforce notions of White superiority and Black inferiority and limit educator capacity to imagine meaningful change. Another participant talked about how educators that are not familiar with the background and struggles of a particular student may be more apt to give up on trying to help that student:

**Participant 11:** Yeah, know your kids. Take the time to care and actually talk to each individual that you pass, don't just let them pass you by, don't say nothing is a loss. It'll happen anyway because everybody got their own individuals views on life, so like if you don't know the struggle it's hard for you to invest as much in yourself into it.

The last two excerpts describe a self-reinforcing cycle of Whiteness, in which White norms are imposed on non-White students, students do not conform to those norms, implicit biases and stereotypes of Black underachievement and defiance are reinforced, and because the students do not seem willing or able to meet expectations, expectations get lowered or the students become less worthy of effort (Simson, 2015). Participant 6 theorized that this process starts at earlier educational levels, putting many students in almost impossible situations even before they get to high school:

**Participant 6:** I see the kids that have come to me, by the time they get to high school they're in ninth grade and they're reading on a second grade reading level. The students that I have that have that issue are all Black. I don't have any White kids that have this problem. And so I can't make this assumption accurately but I wonder if these kids had been White would they have received more effort and more services in elementary school by their teachers? Or are we gonna use the fact that they're African American as a justification for the fact that, "Well, they're just not very smart. Well, they just don't have support at home. Well, they just don't have this or they don't have that. So we'll just kind of let them pass through, they'll be okay." Whereas if you see a White kid like that, you're, "Well no, we need to help this kid."

The process that Participant 6 described is very similar to what Anne Ferguson (2000) found in her research, in which Black elementary school students become marginalized and constructed as unworthy, not as a result of the conscious acts of racist educators, but due to a complex web of Whiteness out of which they cannot escape.

Another important aspect of IW expressed by participants was the way that race becomes embedded in coded language that reinforces and naturalizes racial stratification. The coded

language at VHS can be seen as a way of making the visible invisible. In other words, even though the school is observably racially segregated in several ways, coded language decontextualizes segregation, stripping it of its racialized nature and normalizing disparities in terms of kids that are either meeting expectations or kids that are not. For example, when people at VHS talk about students in AP courses versus students in academic courses, they may not be directly referencing race, but since the racial distribution at each level is so pronounced, race is always present. In the following example, Participant 1 described how Whiteness is upheld at VHS using coded language:

**Participant 1:** When I meet with other teachers, when I meet with other staff in the building, and we talk about things like grading, things like measuring a student's progress on something, the way we're gonna potentially transition from standardized testing to maybe project-based testing or something like that, and I listen to the way they articulate their feelings about stuff, and everything seems to hinge around this idea that the picture of success is. And, really, the only picture of success that we're thinking about is semi-affluent to affluent White kid on their way to college. And everybody else needs to figure out how much of that they can attain on their own. But everyone sort of, in an unspoken way, knows or assumes that the students that aren't in that privileged, White population are only gonna be able to approximate it to a certain degree. I heard this expressed one time when someone was talking about SOL Scores. And they said, well your AP kids, those are the kids that are getting the 600s and the 500s, the advanced, passed advanced. Your academic students are the ones that are getting closer to 400. And when she made this comment, of course, using the labels of AP and academic, seemed completely innocent. But if you really understand what the label of AP and the label of academic

mean in VHS, she's like saying the White kids get the 600s and the non-White kids get the 400s. And that's okay, that's okay with her. She expressed that as sort of the natural order of things.

In this example, Participant 1 described how easily discourse can avoid explicit mentions of race while naturalizing racial stratification. Table 7, below, illustrates the many ways that Whiteness was encoded into the language and made invisible throughout these interviews.

Table 7

Invisible Whiteness at VHS Manifested in Racially Coded Language

Terms Associated with White Students	Terms Associated with Black and Students of Color
AP Kids	Academic Kids
Honors Kids	Special Ed (Collab, Self-Contained)
High Achievers	Lower Achieving
College-going	Defiant
Advance Scores (SOLs)	Standard Scores (SOLs)
Playing school	Expressing trauma
Self-motivated	At-risk
School-ready	Needy
	Behavior challenge
	Frequent Flyers

**Invisible Whiteness (Latent level).** At the latent, discursive level, most participants utilized narratives that implied that the subordination of Black students and other students of color at VHS is due to some sort of innate, immutable biological or cultural characteristic or a distant, historical process that is beyond their control. As noted earlier, many of the same educators that articulated sophisticated analyses of Whiteness and racial inequity also expressed these discursive forms of IW, indicating the deeply entrenched nature of Whiteness and the complexity of these issues. Different forms of latent expressions of IW were coded using the deductive, CRT codes that I created before the analysis. Not all of the provisional CRT codes fit

the data, but several were prevalent. Additionally, because these discursive strategies are related to each other and are often mutually reinforcing, many excerpts had more than one IW code attached to them. Below, I will briefly define the most prevalent latent IW codes and provide one or two illustrative excerpts. Later, when I describe the lower-order themes, I will explain in more detail how these expressions of IW informed participants' surface-level descriptions of school processes.

***Cultural deficit orientation.*** The most commonly coded latent expression of IW was cultural deficit orientation (CDO). CDO rationalizes lowered expectations and/or disproportionately poorer outcomes for students of color based on perceived cultural disadvantages or home environments. The cultural deficit perspective has permeated many social science disciplines like education and social work for decades (Allen & White-Smith, 2014; Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1999; Solorzano, 1997) and has resurfaced in several forms over time (Bonilla-Silva, 2018).

CDO was coded in about three quarters of the interviews. In this example, Participant 9 used CDO to explain why Black students seem to misbehave in school more than White students:

**Participant 9:** I don't know. Home life, not a lot of structure, not a lot of rules to follow, a lot of freedom. And they come into school and there's four walls and a teacher, and a Whiteboard and things to do, and they don't wanna do it.

In another example, Participant 12 suggested that students of color are not being asked to achieve at school by their families:

**Participant 12:** I don't know, it's weird because in our AVID classes we preach to the students to take AP classes, to take honors classes and they hear it from us that they need

to reach a higher level. But I don't think that clientele is hearing that at home. And I think a lot of our White clientele is hearing that at home.

This way of thinking suggests that “minority cultural values, as transmitted through the family, are dysfunctional, and therefore the reason for low educational and later occupational attainment” and “since minority parents fail to assimilate and embrace the educational values of the dominant group, and continue to transmit or socialize their children with values that inhibit educational mobility, then they are to blame if the low educational attainment continues into succeeding generations” (Solorzano, 1997, p. 13). This “blame the victim” mentality situates behavioral and academic problems within students of color and their families, thereby eliding an examination of racist social structures and ideologies that privilege White students and families and set up the conditions for racially differential school outcomes.

***Minimization of Racism.*** Another common form of IW discourse was Minimization of Racism (MR). MR is the avoidance of race and racism as contributors to inequitable outcomes and reliance on alternative explanations like poverty, historical conditions, or lack of social capital. One of Bonilla-Silva’s (2018) central frames of color-blind racism, MR suggests that racial discrimination is largely a thing of the past and disputes the salience of racism as a factor in disparate racial outcomes.

For example, Participant 9 asserted that disciplinary disproportionality was simply a reflection of behavior:

**Participant 9:** I don't think it has anything to do with racism. I think it has to do with students in a classroom. And if this student is misbehaving, that's the student that's gonna be called out.

In another example, Participant 4 suggested that the two schools in one phenomenon was a class issue:

**Participant 4:** And I don't know if... To me it's different. The class split I think is more important, whereas most of our lower level students are more of your financially struggling students.

Similar to Participant 4, several participants explained racial gaps in discipline and achievement as a class problem rather than a race problem. Of course, there is no question that socioeconomic status is an important contributing factor in educational inequity. However, the MR perspective fails to consider the critical intersection between race and class and the extensive research that indicates that race, regardless of class, is a key predictor of disparate educational outcomes.

*Naturalization.* Naturalization is a discursive tool that offers explanations of race-related phenomena as natural and normal. Another of Bonilla-Silva's frames, naturalization suggests that issues like segregated classes or disciplinary disproportionality are "natural and raceless occurrences" (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 66). About half of the participants utilized naturalization narratives to explain the racialized processes within the school. For instance, Participant 8 explained differences in educational achievement as a natural extension of differences in long-term goals between Black and White students:

**Participant 8:** and a lot of Black ... It's not saying because that's the truth. I mean, that that's the path, but it sometimes is a reality. Many ... It's Black and White, not just for the conversation, but most of them just want to get out of high school, you know? Some of them are first generation or they haven't had a model, so just let me get out of high school first, but you're often getting drilled that they're not going to go to college with that.

According to this explanation, the school is putting pressure on Black students to go to college, which is not part of their plans, and students are becoming disengaged as a result. This explanation ignores evidence that most Black students do aspire to go to college, even when they are aware of structural barriers that they have to overcome (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). By assuming that Black students that are struggling are not interested in academic achievement, academic disparities become a natural outcome of individual student motivation. This excerpt is also illustrative of the common co-occurrence of discursive IW tools. In this case, naturalization is partnered with a cultural deficit perspective that reinforces racial stratification as the natural order. Naturalization, along with CDO and MR, were the most common latent forms of IW in the interviews.

**The interaction of visible and invisible Whiteness.** The interviews provided several insights into ways that VW and IW interact and reinforce each other at VHS. In this example, Participant 12 suggested that the disproportionately White make-up of higher level classes inhibits Black students from attempting to enter those spaces and overwhelms many that do:

**Participant 7:** And there's a lot of talk about how African-American kids don't really feel included in the AP courses and at Honors level. And I know they've done some things to try and moderate that, but we're still hearing, and getting that kind of feedback and seeing sort of separations. And most of the African-American kids go to AVID, but not many of them are in the AP track.

Here, the clearly visible academic segregation at VHS sends an explicit and implicit message to Black students that they do not belong in the most rigorous academic classes, reinforcing and institutionalizing racial stratification as a result.



Related to the make-up of the staff, participants described a school in which the norms of the school are built upon Whiteness and upheld by a predominantly White staff who accept those norms as universal. They saw this as a profound cultural divide that leads to misunderstandings and a difficult disconnect. For instance, Participant 15 suggested that predominantly White staff members have lower expectations for students of color, which prevents those students from reaching their full potential. In this way, the VW of a disproportionately White staff unwittingly creates the conditions for deficit views (IW) of students of color to become confirmed and normalized:

**Participant 15:** But I think sometimes we just have low expectations that they can't do it and it's no wonder they don't because we're saying they can't, but they actually could. But there needs to be a lot of training for teachers. I need to learn more about it even...

Everybody, we all need to learn and grow in this way, because a lot of us are not from the same background as our students.

Several participants talked about ways that disciplinary interactions between students and staff members are influenced by this cultural divide in ways that create racially differential outcomes, which will be discussed in detail in the section on disciplinary disproportionality.

Another way to understand how IW and VW are mutually reinforcing is by putting the previous two tables together, as I have done in Table 8:

Table 8

An Example of the Relationship Between Visible Whiteness and Invisible Whiteness (combining Tables 6 and 7)

White Spaces	Non-White Spaces
AP Classes	Academic Classes
Honors Classes	Special Education Classes (Collab, Self-Contained)
STEM Lab	Alternative School
Orchestra	AVID
	In School Suspension
Terms Associated with White Students	Terms Associated with Black and Students of Color
AP Kids	Academic Kids
Honors Kids	Special Ed (Collab, Self-Contained)
High Achievers	Lower Achieving
College-going	Defiant
Advance Scores (SOLs)	Standard Scores (SOLs)
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School-ready	Needy
	Behavior challenge
	Frequent Flyers

Here, you get a clearer sense of how visibly segregated spaces become encoded into the language to normalize and de-racialize the stratified structure. The kids in AP classes, for example, who are mostly White, become “AP kids” or “high achievers”, and kids in Academic or Special Education classes, mostly students of color, become “Academic kids” or “at-risk.” The extraction of race that results from this coding obscures the historical, social, and cultural process that led to VHS being two schools in one, the next meta-theme to be discussed.

### Two Schools in One

Two Schools in One was coded when participants described VHS as two different schools in one building—one school that serves a largely White and middle/upper class population that is generally achieving at high levels and another that serves students of color

(mostly Black students) from more disadvantaged economic backgrounds who are generally achieving at lower levels or underachieving. The bifurcation of VHS maintains Whiteness at a structural level by institutionalizing a racially differentiated school experience for students and educators. What was striking about the interviews is how readily the participants endorsed this depiction of their school. Not only did they recognize this as a problem, most of them saw it as **the problem**—one that is deeply entrenched and creating disparate outcomes for their students. However, as will be shown, many seemed resigned to it or saw it as an extension of broader forces beyond their control. What was surprising, though, was how few participants, disagreed that their school was two schools in one or attempted to complicate the description. Only one participant disagreed entirely with the description. A few others suggested that while it was generally accurate, there were some parts of the school that were more integrated and that the school was making some attempts to address the issue (e.g. AVID and unlevelled 9<sup>th</sup> grade English classes).

Two Schools in One was coded in all but one interview. In that interview, one of the first, we talked exclusively about the lower-achieving school and I did not explicitly bring up the topic. As it became more apparent over the course of several interviews that Two Schools in One was a key emerging theme, I added a probe about it in the interviews, though I almost always waited for participants to bring it up themselves, either explicitly or in their descriptions of school practices, before asking it. Many participants did not need a prompt. For example, Participant 7 reported that it was widely recognized in the community:

**Participant 7:** But when I first got a job here, my son's dad was talking to somebody from Charlottesville and they said, "Oh yeah, that high school, they're either going to Yale or they're going to jail"

Participant 20, also without prompt, similarly suggested that this was part of the school's reputation, and attested to its accuracy:

**Participant 20:** I think that... I heard someone say recently that we are Yale or jail.

There's a dichotomy. Kids are either going to college or they're gonna struggle mightily.

In other interviews, I brought it up when it seemed to relate to what they participants were saying, as was the case with Participant 18:

**Participant 18:** Well, I think that is a true depiction in some ways. We have segregated spaces, I mentioned our upper level classes, our fine arts program, our engineering lab, very heavily White spaces.

Well over half of the participants saw bifurcation at VHS as a microcosm of the community as a whole. For some, the school simply reflected the race and class divisions that are part of the city's history. For Participant 23, this idea is widely recognized among school staff:

**Participant 23:** VHS is like the city and that's two schools in one. As much as people try from administrative to teachers to student groups, I think everyone acknowledges it, but it continues to be microcosm of the city. And a lot of times that's along race lines. It's certainly around socio-economic lines. You see it in classes. You see it at lunch.

Participant 20 saw it mostly along class lines, citing the widening income gap in the community as a contributor to the school's equity issues:

**Participant 20:** Well, with the cost of living in Virginia City, there's almost no middle class. So kids are either living in section 8 housing or their parents can afford a half-million-dollar house or more.

Only a couple of the participants went further with this idea to suggest that VHS plays a role in shaping or maintaining the city's racial and class divides or has a role in addressing them.

Participant 18 did not think VHS should take the blame for all of the city's issues, but is responsible for contending with them: "I often think that it's not always directly as a school, Virginia high school, it's not directly our fault, but it is our problem." Participant 17 was the only participant that directly named VHS as part of the problem:

**Participant 17:** Virginia City is a very segregated place and has issues with equity around race and that education is part of that and our school has problems with tracking and equity and suspending people who are disproportionately, who are non-White, is a part of that.

The ability of VHS's staff members to see the school's racialized structure and discipline processes as part of a larger community issue indicates that they are able to recognize the school as embedded in a larger context. However, the fact that very few participants spoke to VHS's specific role or responsibility in contributing to and addressing the community's problems may suggest a need for organizational self-reflection. Without it, there is a risk that educators at VHS will accept inequity as a natural extension of external forces beyond their control.

### **Tracking: "The kids have been packaged"**

In addition to the structure of VHS being symptomatic of a larger community issue, most VHS staff members pointed to academic tracking as the most significant factor at the heart of the two schools in one makeup and as a key piece of the disciplinary disproportionality puzzle:

**Participant 1:** Basically all of our subjects are leveled and you look at the students that come into my classroom for an academic level class, compare those to the students who come in for an advanced placement class, and if you didn't know that we weren't segregated, it would look pretty darn segregated.

For them, tracking relates to discipline in a number of ways and it often starts early, making it especially difficult to overcome at the high school level. Participant 8 described it evocatively:

**Participant 8:** I'll hear talks of certain types of kids in the way that I see it, because sometimes it's like taboo, but I see it in the kids and I deal with them. In the years I've been here, it's like the kids have been packaged. I don't know whether it's from elementary or whatever, but you can tell they've been together for years, and they've been groomed together, they've been in classes together, and they just get cycled around through the same channels.

This description of the students as being “packaged” hints at the way that tracking becomes a destiny for many students. According to participants, tracking impacts the ways that the school staffs and structures classes, the ways that the community perceives the school and its students, and the ways that students perceive themselves; all in ways that recreate and ratify Whiteness.

Indeed, the participants reported that members of the school community sense that tracking is destiny and lower level classes restrict opportunities. Participant 16 said that people of color in the community are keenly aware of this phenomenon:

**Participant 16:** And I think locally, from stuff I've done, you'd hear this anecdotal stuff about people feeling like they were treated unfairly or their kids were treated unfairly, or their kids were tracked and then pigeonholed and whatever it might be, so they didn't feel like the system was fair to them.

And according to Participant 17, White parents are aware of it as well and they will use their influence to keep the classes segregated (Lewis & Diamond, 2015):

**Participant 17:** We have our AP students over here and then we have our academic level students over here. Our academic level students are perceived as being not as good in the

class... Something that, if a kid needs to go down to an academic level class and they're White, their parents don't want them to, because the perception is that they're going to be in this free-for-all, discipline-less, chaotic experience.

The parental pressure is so strong, Participant 17 asserted, that White students who are academically more appropriate for academic level classes are being kept in AP level classes, and as a result, the level of rigor in those AP classes changes to accommodate segregation:

**Participant 17:** Like, yeah, I think it goes beyond the tracking, but I think the tracking is a big part of it. I wish that we had fewer AP sections. I wish that... I think AP... I think there's all this pressure. We're all trying to get into this elite school, and so we all have to take AP classes because we won't be in the top ten percent and the top college won't want us unless we have four AP classes every year that we're in high school, and so we have all these sections of AP classes that are not filled with AP level students. And so then, so the AP curriculum, it's been watered down, but we're watering it down for the White kids and not everyone else, we're watering it down.

The bifurcated school structure not only segregates students, it also segregated teachers. According to several participants, teachers who predominantly teach in either one school or the other live in two different universes, leading to a fractured organizational culture. In the following example, Participant 4 was describing the difficulty in implementing school policies due to the vastly different experiences and perspectives of teachers that teach honors classes versus those that teach non-honors classes. I probed further:

**Interviewer:** Well, this is really interesting that you bring this up, because I've talked about this with a couple of other people, and this is something that I had heard about the school, previous to doing this, is that the phrase, kind of two schools in one...

**Participant 4:** Yes, 100%.

**Interviewer:** ...comes up a lot. And you say 100%. And that's what you're describing?

**Participant 4:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** How does that... Can you expand upon how that looks and how that... or the impact that has?

**Participant 4:** Yeah, basically our school is... We only have really two levels, if you take out... If you lump honors and AP together, we have two levels. We have academic, and we have an honors level. Pretty much, not 100%, but I would say a fairly high percent, it's split along race and class, where our lower level classes are mostly minority, low socioeconomic level students, and our honors level classes are mostly White, upper middle class students. There's a little bit of overlap, but very, very little. And I think that does make a difference in how we are able to implement policies.

Participant 4's observation is an important one and will be discussed in more detail regarding its implications for SWPBIS implementation. It also highlights a key observation of this analysis—that any description of school policies, practices, and cultural characteristics has to be filtered through a two-schools-in-one structural lens. And because the two schools in one structure is shaped by and valorizes Whiteness, addressing the root causes of disciplinary disproportionality and other forms of racial inequity requires the identification and interrogation of the subtle and covert manifestations of Whiteness that permeate its culture and institutional processes.

Below, I will report the findings related to the lower-order themes. After each theme is described, I will illustrate how participants expressed Whiteness within each theme and how racism was prevalent in the discussions even when issues of race were not being specifically discussed. Additionally, throughout the analysis, I will illustrate the ways in which educators at



VHS were attempting to grapple with and challenge Whiteness in hopes of providing some openings for progress and a more equitable educational experience for all students.

## **Lower Order Themes**

### **Introduction**

The lower-order thematic findings reveal that educators at VHS possess a largely progressive and humanistic orientation towards school discipline. Additionally, most participants were supportive of the broad goals of SWPBIS and their attitudes towards student behavior and discipline were congruent with the underlying philosophy of SWPBIS. In terms of racial disproportionality, participants offered many different possible explanations, some of which included a sophisticated and self-reflective racial analysis and some of which relied on narratives that were unwittingly rooted in Whiteness. Importantly, most participants saw disproportionality not as an isolated issue, but one thread within a broader web of racialized school processes situated within a broader social structure and one that cannot be separated from student academic experiences. While generally supportive of the overall aims of SWPBIS, they expressed deep concerns about the SWPBIS implementation process, reporting that past and current school initiatives are disjointed and have not always been implemented in thoughtful and intentional ways.

### **“Suspension is Stupid”**

**Introduction.** The theme “Suspension is Stupid” encapsulates participant perceptions of what must be prioritized in the school discipline process. Educators at VHS seem to be in general agreement that student behavior is more than just an isolated set of reactions to a specific set of circumstances or that students who engage in unwanted behavior are “bad kids.” Rather, they see problematic behavior as stemming from unmet needs that prevent students from fully

focusing on school-related tasks. Additionally, most VHS staff members were in agreement that OSS is not an effective form of discipline. Instead, they seemed to favor strategies that attempt to keep students in the classroom and learn from mistakes. There is some tension, however, in the views of VHS educators on how to address the student needs at school and what consequences are appropriate for students who present behavioral challenges. For instance, some participants felt that ISS was an effective aspect of discipline at VHS, whereas others felt that it was as equally ineffective as OSS.

Despite a lack of consensus on all details, the general perception of discipline at VHS is well-aligned with the goals of SWPBIS and represents an opportunity as VHS begins SWPBIS implementation. Additionally, these views suggest an overall repudiation of the basic logic of zero tolerance and exclusionary discipline, which has been the predominant disciplinary paradigm for several decades. This mindset shift should encourage VHS to develop systems of support for a more humanistic and less punitive disciplinary approach.

**Decreasing chaos.** Before commenting on what is needed to improve at VHS around discipline, a large portion of participants acknowledged that the overall disciplinary climate seemed to be improving, such as Participant 17:

**Participant 17:** And I think that people feel that, I think that there's a perception that...

Like you used to walk through the front office and in the discipline office, you would see six Black guys all sitting around the discipline officer's desk, not officer you know sitting in the office, waiting to be processed by an assistant principal. And now you don't see that anymore, that's not a thing. So that's good. And I think that there's a general perception, even though there is still problems that are always here, I think that there is a perception that there is more order and less chaos.

In many interviews, participants attributed this improvement to the current set of administrators developing strong relationships with students:

**Participant 12:** I think, maybe it's just 'cause I know the vice principals and staff pretty well, 'cause I worked closely with them, but I think that the vice principals, and I think the principal, too...I don't work with him as much, but I think as a whole, they make a point of knowing each and every student.

A few participants, like Participant 4, agreed that administrators had positive relationships with students, but were a little ambivalent about it, thinking that it might be resulting in students getting away with poor behavior:

**Participant 4:** I don't know if this is a positive or a negative, I haven't really decided in my mind. I think the students have generally pretty positive relationships with the administrators, which I think is good. Sometimes I think it can be so positive that it's not really a punishment to go to... [chuckle] So yeah.

These mixed feelings come up again under the theme Looking for Consistency, where some staff members voiced frustration with what they perceive as lack of administrative follow-up on classroom referrals. This example also highlights the fact that discipline at VHS is not a settled topic. While most are sensitive to underlying issues that might be at the root of student behavior problems, not all are in agreement about how to respond to unwanted behavior or how to meet often challenging student needs.

**Unmet student needs.** They did, however, agree with the idea that undesirable student behavior is symptom and expression of unmet needs. Here, Participant 16 summarized the predominant attitude:

**Participant 16:** Whereas what I would hope for, it would be some sort of environment in which you could express your frustration, that would be validated, but we're still somehow moving ourselves back into the position of, how do I positively respond to this? How do I ask myself, what is the underlying need that's going on here?

Most participants suggested that students were bringing in personal issues from outside of school that made it difficult for them to fully meet classroom and school expectations. For instance, Participant 8 stated that many students have outside issues that forces them to deprioritize school:

**Participant 8:** It's often, you know, like I was saying earlier, most of the time education is not the primary concern. Sometimes you have to win them over with something else, and you'll harp on a kid and deal with the kids like, "Man, look, that's not even my issue right now. My brother might be going to jail," or whatever the case may be. I'm not concerned.

In another example, Participant 6 argued that students cannot focus on academic responsibilities until basic needs are met:

**Participant 6:** Because expectations for what those relationships will look like, create a culture of safety, create a culture of trust, create a culture of accountability. And then from that space, then we can start talking about what academics, I think, will look like. But it's kind of like a kid that's coming from a home where they don't have anything to eat, everybody's fighting all the time. You can't expect them to come to school and perform well. You just can't. Because their needs, that they have as a human being, are not being met. So surely they're not gonna come here and show you their intellectual prowess when they walk into the classroom. So for me, that's where it starts.

A specific need that was discussed in some interviews was students who were dealing with the adverse effects of trauma. A couple of the participants talked about recent staff trainings at the school regarding trauma, so it is a topic that many educators at VHS are aware of. Those that talked about it suggested that the impact of trauma should be considered when considering how to address student behavior. For instance, Participant 23 saw the need to teach students, particularly those that have been exposed to trauma, self-regulation skills:

**Participant 23:** I think the acknowledgment of trauma and how that impacts the brain.

And then what that looks like. And again, that goes to the socio-emotional scales of, have we taught self-regulation and co-regulation skills?

As VHS moves to implement SWPBIS, it may consider ways to integrate trauma-informed approaches into the framework (Plumb, Bush, & Kersevich, 2016), particularly if staff members are already aware of it and understand its potential impact. However, as I will discuss later in the analysis, the ways that participants framed trauma suggests a risk that trauma narratives become a stand-in for racial deficit narratives and further naturalizes perceived racial differences.

Most participants saw the need for educators to take unmet student needs into account when reacting to student behavior. Instead of an immediate and punitive response, the majority of participants, such as in the following excerpt, favored a more measured and personal approach:

**Participant 21:** treating any type of behavioral issue with some sensitivity that maybe it wasn't like a conscious decision to do that, that this was a result of something, and that letting a student de-escalate and being a calming person during that process for them to

have a real conversation that there's some specific needs that they don't even know that they have, that they need met, because of what they're dealing with at home.

**Keeping it in the classroom.** This personal approach was seen as a way to keep students in the classroom, which most participants saw as a priority. This perspective aligns with the proactive approach that is central to SWPBIS. Participant 11 summarizes the common perspective that teachers should engage multiple strategies before turning to an office referral:

**Participant 11:** You can write a classroom referral, you can document it in the classroom, like if you continuously get these behaviors then it might get to the point that you need to write an office referral but please by all means keep it in the classroom first, try to do some type of intervention in the classroom, keep that kid after school, have a talk with them after school, talk with their parent. Take the proper steps before actually writing that office referral.

Participant 17 perceived that this was the generally accepted rule at VHS, though not everyone is on board:

**Participant 17:** Like writing a lot of referrals is not a good thing, and I think it's recognized as such, and I think, I want to think that the people who are complaining that the referrals aren't taken seriously are the people who are writing too many of them.

Some participants felt that students frequently bore the burden of responsibility for classroom incidents, even though the teacher often plays a role in escalating the situation.

Participant 15 observed that some teachers may be focused on maintaining control, which limits their ability to reflect on other dynamics playing out in the classroom:

**Participant 15:** And there's still a fear among teachers that they need to control behavior. So like they're gonna try to do things to extinguish that bad behavior, but then it almost

makes it worse. You can see behavior escalating, you can see power struggles happening between teachers and students. You see kids getting sent out or like disciplined and they're like, "I didn't do anything." And they don't understand what it is because they just didn't see the purpose to the instruction, or they were like having to sit the whole time, not get up, and move.

In most interviews, participants emphasized the importance of educators building trusting relationships with students in order to keep students in class and avoid escalating situations. For many, such as Participant 3, relationships are the centerpiece of a positive disciplinary environment:

**Participant 3:** it's just a relationship thing. I have a good relationship with everybody. I try to go out of my way to have that with all different groups of kids. And so, I think that's part of it. I think the relationship part is huge in teaching with kids. And it doesn't necessarily mean their race, but just different lifestyles outside of school, and different things that they may be facing. You just have to be aware of that, I think, when you talk to parents, when you talk to kids.

Additionally, many participants felt that most educators in the building were engaged in building positive relationships and that it was a building block for successful SWPBIS implementation:

**Participant 18:** I think our teachers do a lot of proactive work and what I mean by that is they build relationships with students, that kind of thing that can help de-escalate before it gets to a disciplinary need. I think that our teachers do a lot of work in their classrooms or just outside in the hallway to try to keep students in their classrooms.

**“It isn’t teaching them anything”.** The focus on meeting student needs, developing positive educator/student relationships, and keeping kids in the classroom logically led the

majority of participants to conclude that, as Participant 6 asserted, “Suspension is stupid. I think it’s stupid.” There was a clear perception that the logic of suspension is counterintuitive:

**Participant 16:** but I've definitely always believed it really doesn't serve anybody's interest to physically have somebody be kicked out of school for a few days. I just don't understand that. And of course, it only makes sense for somebody who wants to be in school.

And, more importantly, suspension does not result in more positive behavior:

**Participant 21:** Well, what are you doing for the students? Well, we suspend them. That's part of the process to correct their behavior, and it doesn't do anything, like a punishment. It's just punishing the behavior. There's nothing to teach them like a positive behavior.

In fact, many participants endorsed the use of restorative practices as a fairer, more humane, and more educational response to discipline issues, as was the case with Participant 18:

**Participant 18:** And then if they step out of line, there's a restorative element to the response, and it's not, it doesn't become antagonistic, or... I hope it would help students feel more a part of the process, as opposed to a pawn in the process, a victim of the process.

Currently, VHS utilizes restorative conferences on an occasional basis, usually facilitated by a consultant who is not a school employee.

An interesting point of tension in the interviews appeared in the staff perspectives on in-school (ISS) suspension at VHS. Many participants, such as Participant 2, felt that while it was an ineffective consequence in the past, it was more meaningful now, after a recent change in staffing:



**Participant 2:** one thing that I felt has improved this year is in-school suspension, in the sense that I think students see that much more of a consequence this year so that, I think, in-school suspension is working to some degree.

However, others were not convinced that ISS is the answer. More consistent with the idea that putting students out of class is counter-productive, some saw ISS as similarly harmful as out-of-school suspension, such as Participant 7:

**Participant 7:** I don't feel like in-school suspension is effective in any school. It's kind of a vacation. Most of those kids are asking to get out of class and their actions are getting them what they want. And so I feel like I would love to see better ways of engaging them and reengaging them in the community. And obviously, we talk a lot about trauma-based pedagogy and trying to understand our students, and so I feel like if we're just putting out fires and putting kids in in-school suspension, that that's not really practicing what we're trying to preach.

The differing perspectives on ISS highlight the difficult task ahead of VHS as it implements SWPBIS and attempts to develop a school-wide culture of prevention.

**Whiteness discourse in “Suspension is Stupid”.** While the findings under “Suspension is Stupid” suggest a positive starting point for the implementation of SWPBIS, a deeper look at the data through a CRT lens offers several points of caution. Most importantly, it is crucial to understand these findings within the meta-thematic context of a racially bifurcated school that is built upon White norms and structured to uphold Whiteness. As I conducted the interviews at VHS, I quickly realized that race was always present in the discussion, even when the specific topic of conversation was apparently non-racial. When we talked about student behavior and school disciplinary processes at VHS, we were rarely talking about the whole school. Instead,

we were almost always discussing the school that is majority Black students and other students of color, low-income, and in non-honors or lower-level academic courses. The importance of this fact cannot be understated. It means, for instance, that when educators at VHS talked about underlying student needs, trauma, teachers' reactions to student behavior, suspension, and restorative practices, what we were actually talking about was underlying Black student needs, Black student trauma, teachers' reactions to Black student behavior, suspending Black students, and restorative practices for Black students. This characterization may seem over-simplified, but it is intended to make the point that any analysis of discipline and staff perceptions thereof at VHS is incomplete without a significant consideration of race and racism. Below, I will describe some of the ways that Whiteness infused the discourse and suggest critical issues to consider for SWPBIS implementation.

***Student baggage and the dangers of deficit discourse.*** The predominant feeling expressed by participants that student behavior often stems from unmet needs is an important insight. It implies, as many participants stated, that disciplinary interactions are not isolated events and that approaches to discipline that fail to address those needs, such as suspension, will be ineffective. However, there were several instances in which participant discussions of student unmet needs also ratified Whiteness through deficit discourse. Deficit discourse reinforces the notion that certain types of students are, by nature or culture, lesser than others. Especially at a place like VHS, where discipline is focused on students of color, discussions of unmet needs or student “baggage,” as one participant described it, are inherently racialized.

In the following excerpt, Participant 6 offered a deeply humanistic approach to creating a preventative and caring school culture. At the same time, he fell back on a well-worn cultural deficit narrative:

**Participant 6:** . . . because expectations for what those relationships will look like, create a culture of safety, create a culture of trust, create a culture of accountability. And then from that space, then we can start talking about what academics, I think, will look like. But it's kind of like a kid that's coming from a home where they don't have anything to eat, everybody's fighting all the time. You can't expect them to come to school and perform well. You just can't. Because their needs that they have as a human being are not being met. So surely they're not gonna come here and show you their intellectual prowess when they walk into the classroom. So for me, that's where it starts.

This example is illustrative of the subtlety of Whiteness and how intelligent and caring educators can uphold it. There is no specific mention of race or class here, but they are clearly present in the ideas being expressed, which—while highly sympathetic to struggling students—place the onus of underachievement on students and families via generalizations rooted in cultural deficits.

Participant 8 shared a similarly compassionate point of view:

**Participant 8:** Often times I'll get back to having that connection or having some type of relationship when you talk to Johnny and he didn't sleep last night and he got different factors at home or hungry or whatever. He just needed some time to just kind of be, you know, in class with a hood on that was like okay, he just need maybe five or 10 minutes. It's first period. Get out of my ear, you know? Not really being able to kind of gauge the student for whatever reason. Sometimes you just don't know, and often times I've heard people say, "How do you know this stuff about the kids?" Sometimes you just got to take the time.

Here, Participant 8 is suggesting that showing sympathy for a student can make a deep impact. While this may be true, it does not acknowledge the structural conditions—the Whiteness—inside and outside of the school that even the most positive personal interaction cannot address.

*Trauma: The new deficit discourse?* The deficit narrative was particularly evident when several participants discussed underlying trauma that may be at the root of some student’s behavioral or academic struggles. In many cases, these perspectives seemed to medicalize student struggle, making racial stratification a natural extension of trauma. In the following example, Participant 5 described the way that many students “express trauma” and the challenges associated with it:

**Participant 5:** We got a lot of students in this building who express trauma. And we try to do... We've done these trauma trainings, but they're like snapshot things and not really helpful. They teach us about trauma, but they don't say, "Here's what you should actually do." Or if they do tell us what to do, if you broke it down, it's actually like a 20-minute cycle of intervention that a classroom teacher doesn't actually have time to do. So, to come back. So, we have issues dealing with, "How do we manage students who come who express trauma?" and we are not well equipped I think as a school necessarily to do that. I think some of us do it well. I think I do it okay, but I don't think that we as a school entirely do. And I think recognizing that is an important reason for implementing something like this.

**Interviewer:** And when you say "express trauma" what does that look like?

**Participant 5:** Yeah. The things that stress teachers out the most in this building are kids who are inattentive in class, speak out, cursing, conflict, the incessant picking that happens that eventually turns into a fight, not doing stuff, defiance. Which for students,

and I'm not a psychologist so I don't know, but these things, in some cases when a kids self-defensive or protective, because that's where they're sort of living, but then those manifest in unhelpful ways at school. They don't have success here because of that. And then when you get into a confrontation with the teacher about those sorts of things, you're coming at a situation from different places and then you get conflict. And you get referrals, you get suspensions, and you get detentions. So I'm not sure where I started with this.

**Interviewer:** Expressing trauma.

**Participant 5:** Yeah, so, I think that's the expressing of trauma, or even just sort of like, "I'm bad at school. This is not a safe space for me. I'm not gonna do well here. I have not done well here. And I don't have a reason to believe that I will do well here. Because my brothers didn't do well here and my parents may not have done well here." So that's how I think they express trauma or their simple frustration.

An interesting aspect of this excerpt is how Participant 5's descriptions of the common behaviors associated with "expressing trauma"—disruption and defiance—mirror the kinds of behaviors that tend to be at the heart of racial disproportionality in discipline. In this way, the ostensibly race-neutral discussion of trauma takes on a racial dimension and trauma becomes a biological explanation of racially unequal school outcomes.

**“Suspension is Stupid” Summary.** Overall, the findings under the theme Suspension is Stupid suggest that most VHS educators' perspectives about discipline are consistent with the philosophy and aims of SWPBIS. They are looking for an alternative to punitive and exclusionary discipline that seeks to address the unmet needs of students and support their

learning and growth. The SWPBIS emphasis on prevention and focus on positive approaches to discipline offer much of what they seek.

However, the findings also suggest that any discussions of discipline at VHS are highly racialized, even when race is not explicitly present in the discourse. As such, while SWPBIS may present a way to improve the broader disciplinary environment, it does not address structural conditions that funnel Black students and other students of color into more fraught disciplinary positions or discursive practices that justify and normalize disproportionality in disciplinary processes and outcomes.

### **Looking For Consistency**

**Introduction.** The theme Looking for Consistency captures the feelings expressed by participants that fragmented systems and a highly variable disciplinary process were presenting barriers to more effective school operation and improved disciplinary outcomes. At the system level, there was often a sense that while the system was not broken, it could be improved if these barriers were addressed. Specifically, some educators felt that VHS was well-resourced and had several programs in place for struggling students, but those resources and programs were not working in unison. Also, many participants were complimentary of the current administration but lacked confidence in the school's ability to implement a large, long-term organizational change due to very high recent administrative turnover rates. Another concern was the sense that teachers and other educators at VHS operate in siloes, which makes it hard to implement initiatives effectively at the whole-school level and build trust across the large staff.

Specifically regarding discipline, consistency was a recurring concern across the interviews. Most participants sought more consistency in disciplinary expectations and procedures across classrooms and once students were referred to administrators. They felt that

the lack of consistency in these areas places undue stress on students and teachers alike. Staff members observed the difficulty faced by students having to adapt to vastly different disciplinary environments, sometimes several times a day. Additionally, lack of consistency across classrooms advantages those students in more positive learning environments and sets the stage for arbitrary and potentially biased decisions by teachers. When discipline moved into the administrative arena, after an office discipline referral (ODR) is written, staff felt that the administrative response was unpredictable. While many participants expressed a desire for more administrative consistency, not all agreed on what consistency looks like. In fact, it was clear that several participants were working through this issue during our discussions. Some wanted more consistent—sometimes more punitive—consequences for students, feeling that an ODR signified a higher level of student offense. Others, though, suggested that ODRs were often a result of actions by both teachers and students, and that the desire for stronger punishment was more of a “face-saving” response. For some, the specific consequence was less relevant than the communication process that occurred as a result of the ODR. For these participants, it was important for administrators to follow up with them during and after the decision-making process. Finally, several participants noted the reciprocal nature of the disciplinary process in which classroom consistency and administrative consistency went hand in hand. These issues are complicated at the secondary level, where schools are often bigger, more complex, and more fragmented.

The responses that make up this theme reveal the complex nature of discipline, which will be explored further in the discussion of the following theme regarding disciplinary disproportionality. What is clear is that discipline is a process in which decisions are made by multiple people at multiple times, making “consistency” a substantial challenge. Additionally,

discipline is both systemic and highly personal. The educators in these interviews struggled to square these two aspects of discipline. On one hand, they felt a need for a more consistent and evenly applied system. On the other hand, they recognized how context-specific and challenging disciplinary interactions are and the need to respond to each one individually.

**Inconsistent systems.** In some interviews, participants talked about a number of programs that are in place to help struggling students, but they expressed some frustration that these programs were acting in isolation and, as a result, not as effective as they could be.

**Participant 8:** You know, because we do have some ... I just wish we could collaborate more with the therapeutic day treatment (TDT) providers and other people out there. I think we do have a lot of resources, but it's often just we don't know what each other's doing, and we don't communicate. I have had a conversation with the TDT providers, you know, or really giving information in terms of what they do.

Participant 16 also felt that there are a lot of individual people working hard for students, giving VHS something to build on when implementing SWPBIS:

**Participant 16:** So I can't really speak to the systemic implementation or structures or how some of that is working. I've certainly seen it. I've seen individual people do ... There's one kid that I'm working with and there's just a lot of people bending over backwards trying to help this kid out. There really are. So I see that as far as positives, that there's these kids that people really work hard to help out.

**Changing administration.** Many participants partly blamed high rates of administrative turnover for VHS's fragmented system of initiatives and lack of school cohesion. However, most of them also felt that the current administration was moving the school in the right



direction. Participant 18, for instance, sensed a positive movement for the school, despite the administrative turnover:

**Participant 18:** We have a strong administration team with a vision and a purpose, and I think that will help us stay the course. There's been a lot of turnover in admin, I think we've had seven or something like that in the past nine years, so to have someone like our principal staying for even just, next year will be his third year, [chuckle] feels like good momentum.

Participant 5 articulated this issue most clearly. When asked how confident he was that the school could successfully implement SWPBIS, he responded:

**Participant 5:** I'm not very confident. Number one, I have worked under 13 different administrators in seven years. And this kind of programmatic change takes a lot of consistent leadership. And so if you continue to have administrative turnover of that order of magnitude, it's not gonna be carried through. It might be there hanging out, but it's not gonna be implemented and people are not gonna follow through on it.

Later, he joked that the current principal had been in place for close to two years and if felt like “the golden age of VHS.” He finished the thought with an important observation:

**Participant 5:** And every time you do something new it has to be articulated. And I don't think things are necessarily articulated well every time they happen new. So I think this staff is very used to turnover. And they're very used to people not sticking around. And some of them, I think, a little bit cynical about that in terms of what we can actually achieve.

In terms of SWPBIS, this concern is important. Particularly at the high school level, administrative support is a key factor in successful implementation (Flannery, Hershfeldt, & Freeman, 2018).

**“Little fiefdoms”.** Another barrier to consistency and a particularly difficult issue for high schools is the extent to which educators are often operating in silos (Flannery, Frank, McGrath Kato, Doren, & Fenning, 2013; Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, & Flannery, 2015). According to a large number of participants, this is a significant factor contributing to inconsistent application of discipline and fractured implementation of initiatives. As Participant 1 put it, “Teachers are weird people (laughter). We get fiercely independent, we get stuck in our ways, we have our own little fiefdoms we like to run.” When discussing the implementation of school-wide initiatives, Participant 23 saw this as a major barrier:

**Participant 23:** For teachers and administrators. And so I think everyone gets in their day to day routine and people are super siloed because of their schedule. And so then it's harder for things to spread because everybody's operating in silos all day long. So I think that slows the pace.

Participant 9 saw the same thing and suggested the SWPBIS might be more successfully implemented if the training targeted specific groups or departments in the school:

**Participant 9:** This school is bigger. This school has a lot more people that are in their own little corner of the world. I think that doing it as a whole school might be difficult off the bat. It might be better to do it in pods, or partial or something. I don't know.

This perspective may be important to consider, especially when planning discussions of difficult topics, such as school discipline and racial inequity. Some educators may not feel safe to express themselves freely in front of staff members with whom they do not work closely.

In addition to making it harder to develop consistent school-wide systems, a siloed staff also limits the ability for educators to assess school practices and policies at a broad level. For instance, when asked about disciplinary practices in the school, Participant 4 answered:

**Participant 4:** My sense is that it's not very consistent. Yeah, my sense is that it's not very consistent. I don't know that I've ever really honestly had conversations with all that many teachers about, other than my own colleagues that I work with pretty closely, about their behavior policies.

This presents another challenge for implementation if staff members and departments are not sure how other staff members and departments are being held accountable. The current literature on SWPBIS at the secondary level supports these findings, indicating that implementation may be less successful in high schools compared to elementary and middle schools due to the difficulty of obtaining and sustaining staff buy-in in more complex and bigger organizations where staff members exercise a greater degree of autonomy (Flannery et al., 2013; Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009; Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, & Flannery, 2015).

**No consistent disciplinary system.** In terms of school discipline, while there was general consensus that policies and processes should consider the underlying needs of students, there was not a feeling that current disciplinary practices were consistently doing so. The majority of participants were troubled by inconsistencies in disciplinary practices from classroom to classroom as well as unpredictable responses from administrators once disciplinary incidents became office disciplinary referrals (ODRs). They indicated several possible consequences of these inconsistencies, including more stress on students, staff frustration, and dissolution of trust amongst teachers and between teachers and administrators. However, there

was not a unified perspective on what consistency in discipline actually would look like, suggesting a need for further staff discussion on the topic.

***Looking for consistency across classrooms.*** Participant 13 noted that in one classroom, a teacher might write someone up for chewing gum and, in another, a teacher might not write someone up for fighting in class. As a result, according to her, kids don't know what to expect. Many participants shared this concern. For example:

**Participant 3:** Behavior, there's just different issues about what... There's not consistency from class to class, which I think causes the kids to have some behavioral issues, where I think this helps lay down foundation for the whole school-wide and then every class-wide. And just the more we have of that, the better the kids will be able to understand what they're supposed to be doing and then do it.

In addition to being difficult for students, Participant 19 saw the inconsistency as a broader problem with systemic implications:

**Participant 19:** But I feel like there's a lot of things where we agree and I don't think anyone here is super draconian, but at the same time, [chuckle] everything does feel kind of like patchwork. And yeah, the difference between... If the exact same student did something in my class and in three other classes, I think it would be four different reactions in terms of people not even knowing how to log in to write a referral or "Oh, I'm just gonna email the counselor or I'll deal with it with the student myself", or that I think that there aren't systems in place, so it's like teachers kind of pick what works best for them rather than having a more systematic approach that would at least give us better information about what's happening in the school.

Because SWPBIS at the whole school level seeks to create a more consistent, system-wide disciplinary environment, the staff concerns about disciplinary consistency indicate a possible openness to a core element of SWPBIS.

Some perceived that the lack of disciplinary consistency from class to class was impacting learning and contributing to inequity. For instance, Participant 15 observed that when classrooms were run with consistent structure, students were able to do high level work:

**Participant 15:** And I've seen this 'cause I've been in a lot of classrooms that behavior differs from classroom to classroom. The same kids could behave completely differently in one classroom than they do in another. They could be totally engaged, like doing high level stuff in one, and then in the other, not at all.

Aside from contributing to variable learning environments for students, some teachers thought that a lack of a more consistent disciplinary protocol may lead to some students being disciplined differently than others. Participant 19 suggested that students of color feel like they are bearing the burden of an inconsistent system:

**Participant 19:** I feel like it is a pretty salient thing or... In this building, it's real, you can't... There's dynamics happening that are hard to miss or that are, you're struggling with, you're aware of what it could be and you don't wanna be that person. And how do you deal with that?

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Participant 19:** And a lot of... Yeah, and mixed messages, I think from admin and from different teachers about what do different teachers expect? And what even different administrators expect, and what are the systems that we have in... If you're late once, if you're late twice, if you're not where you should be, if you're yelling and if you say

certain... Using certain language, all of these different things, I think people are pretty aware that there's... That people feel like it's not being applied, equitably. And some of my Latino students have talked about that too, that they feel like they're kind of under the radar more for different things.

**Looking for administrative consistency.** A key moment in the disciplinary cycle is when it moves from the classroom or hallway to the administrative office. A large number of participants expressed their own frustration at the unpredictability of the ODR process and suggested that other staff members were equally or more frustrated. Some thought that administrative responses to ODRs depended greatly on which administrator received the referral. Participant 2 summed up this perspective:

**Participant 2:** And I know I've certainly felt this way, I certainly longed for consistency, both across classrooms and from administrators, in the sense that I know that there are even the ways sometimes that different administrators process referrals. It's like, "Well, I know this administrator would've done this, and this administrator only gave the student this."

For some VHS educators, the main issue with administrative consistency was the question of whether or not the administrator was supporting the teacher. They contended that an ODR indicated a level of behavior that demanded a more severe consequence. For instance:

**Participant 2:** I think I would want administration to be a little bit more consistent in the sense of, sometimes an instance will happen, and I will refer a student for something that I feel was definitely referral worthy. And then the consequences that the student gets feels more like a slap on the wrist or more like a, "Go apologize to the teacher," and not

actually anything that then the student is able to say, "Oh, yeah. There was the line, I crossed it, and this is my consequence."

However, other participants, like Participant 8, wondered whether some of the staff members expressing frustration with administration really had the students' best interests in mind:

**Participant 8:** Yeah. I do see some teachers can get frustrated, and either this is just terminology, people they may want kids to get a consequence, but what they're really asking is the kids get punished. They're not getting consequences. They want the kid to get punished, and they often say that because a student, they wrote a kid up, they automatically want to see something like something needs to happen to the kid.

This point of tension was common in the discussions about administrative consistency.

In many interviews, I sensed that participants were grappling with these issues in real time.

Many of them seemed to want more consistency from administration in response to ODRs, but they struggled to pinpoint what consistency would actually look like. This struggle is represented in the following excerpt in which Participant 23 responded to my question of what could be improved about discipline at VHS:

**Participant 23:** Consistency. I think there's not a consistency among administrators. I think there's not always a consistency among offenses.

**Interviewer:** Yeah.

**Participant 23:** Which I don't know that there should be necessarily because every student comes to the situation with a different set of circumstances. You can sort of argue that either way I guess. But I think that it's harder for people to know what to expect. I think it leaves room for like, well they got this, but they only got that. So they must be playing this favorite or it allows for more of that discontent.

Participant 19 wondered aloud about whether consistency was even a desirable goal:

**Participant 19:** Yeah, and I don't know... And I think that there's also, it's really easy to just want answers, and it's funny again, because for me, I'm like teach... Like teaching and learning's all about questions, questions, and nothing's easy and everything's complicated, but then when it comes to, where is this referral going, who's gonna... How many days of ISS? Like people want systems and clear-cut things when that's not really realistic and that's not what's best for the students probably most of the time.

**Admin communicating with teachers.** In fact, some participants indicated that consistency of consequences was less important than, as Participant 13 put it, consistency in the “adjudication process.” For Participant 13, most educators understood that different situations and students may call for different responses, but that administrators need to more consistently communicate what they did and why they did it. This sense that a consistent process was more important than a consistent disciplinary action was echoed in several interviews. As Participant 19 put it, “I feel like it . . . a lot of times referrals do just go out into a Black hole.”

For some, like Participants 10, the lack of communication translated into a perceived lack of administrative support, especially when it seemed like no consequence was given:

**Participant 10:** And then also some teachers were frustrated with certain administrators, and I don't think that it's an across-the-board situation where you'd write a referral after you had done multiple interventions and then the student would get a warning.

**Interviewer:** Uh huh.

**Participant 10:** And it's like, we've given them 50 warnings in class. So that was not effective.



One interesting point about teacher/administrative communication was brought up by Participant 19, who wondered whether communication after a referral was too late.

**Participant 19:** But I don't think that that's always the case. I think that maybe like we need... There should be more systems about a quick thing that's like, "I'm worried about this student. The student did something, I'm worried about it." Or like 'cause I feel a lot of teachers are doing a lot before it gets to that point, and that the referral, it's like one of these, only communications we have between us and Admin. And it feels, like... It doesn't feel like, "This is what's happening in my room. I wanna let you know. And I need help." It feels like, "Bring the hammer down."

This observation may be an important one because it reflects the fact that ODRs often do not come after a single occurrence of behavior but after a series of events that have produced an intractable situation for the student and teacher. At that point, some staff members may feel that a student needs more than “someone to listen.” It is at this point when humanistic orientations towards discipline may be put to the test and discipline becomes personal.

What seems clear from the discussions about administrative consistency in the interviews is that the moment when discipline moves from the classroom to administrative level is an important pivot point in the disciplinary process (Skiba et al., 2011). It is at this moment when individual student behavior becomes an institutional issue and where the resultant decisions can be most impactful on a student's educational trajectory. As such, Participant 2 articulated the importance of ongoing communication about how these moments are handled:

**Participant 2:** I don't know how you sit down and do it, other than that I think that part of it is, you have to be willing to define if student does X, this is the response, which takes time and effort and, again, collaboration around what consequences make sense for

what some of these students are doing, while also knowing that there is the teacher behavior piece. That you have some teachers that, "You're annoying me, so you're out" which, as an administrator, I can appreciate being, trying to figure out, "Okay, well, this student was sent to me, or this referral was written, but what was the student's behavior actually within this context?" And then what does that mean or what's this.

### **Whiteness discourse in Looking for Consistency: Is consistency just for one school?**

The excerpts in this theme that were coded for latent forms of Whiteness discourse raise an important question about consistency at VHS—What does consistency really mean in a school that is really two schools in one? For example, when some participants discussed the types of resources that VHS has available for students, they were generally talking about students from only one of the schools. In this example, Participant 16 described several ways that struggling students are addressed:

**Participant 16:** There's so many more services for kids that have behavioral issues. The idea that you have therapeutic day treatment and places that you can go ... Now, there may have been some of those things that I was just ignorant of. The credit recovery classroom where you could do a whole computer stuff if you're struggling to engage in the academics in different ways ... There's ways in which I think they have found services, outlets, call it what you want, for certain groups of kids that are productive.

This example illustrates two structural features of VHS that maintain Whiteness. First, it suggests that VHS's predominant response to struggling students is individual remediation, implying that the root of their struggles lies within the students and not within the systems that constrain them. Second, these programs are for "certain groups of kids"—kids that are likely to

be students of color who attend the lower-tier school, indicating that the focus on systematic consistency is aimed at one school and not the other.

The idea that consistency is a concept relegated to one half of the school is reinforced by participant perceptions about consistency across classrooms. The following excerpts contain deficit narratives that serve to justify and normalize a two-tiered school. They also show that the call for consistency across classrooms is not about the whole school. Here, Participant 2, while engaging in individual deficit discourse, made it clear whom consistency is for:

**Participant 2:** I teach students who are much different than your honors level kids. And so, that might not be as true for teachers of honors level kids who, those kids have a lot of motivation or usually have motivation on their own. And maybe they don't notice inconsistencies across classroom. But for kids, my kids, who need really consistent structure, I know that my co-teachers and I absolutely feel the difference between, "Well, they just came from a classroom where they were allowed to do x, y, and z. And now they're having to remember, 'Oh, yeah, in this classroom, I'm not allowed to do x, y and z.'" "

In a similar way, Participant 4 indicated that the need for consistency was a necessary remedy for students who come from certain cultural backgrounds:

**Participant 4:** It might be different in another school, but I think it's different when you're looking at students whose parents have talked to them and taught them how to be in school and how they should act in school and whose parents, when the teachers call, the student gets disciplined at home when the student's not doing what they're supposed to be in school. Then to me, that's different because they already have some sort of expectation formed in their mind of how they should be in class. But when you have a lot

of students who that's not necessarily the case, they don't necessarily have parents that are responsive to teacher phone calls or that even know what the student should be doing in class, or have a very different idea of how the student should act in class than what the teacher does, then I think it's extremely important for the students to be... For the expectations across the school to be very clear to the student. And for it not to change from classroom to classroom.

**Summary of Looking for Consistency.** Similar to the previous theme, the findings under Looking for Consistency indicate that VHS educators may be open to SWPBIS, which provides an organizational framework under which to place resources and interventions and develop a more consistent disciplinary approach and vocabulary throughout the school.

However, conversations about consistency are often conversations that reflect and, at times, uphold a segregated school system, pointing to potentially important implications for SWPBIS implementation that are captured in the following questions: How do you implement a whole-school framework in a two-school system? Will SWPBIS be another way to “fix” students who are individually and culturally deficient based on school standards and norms created for and by White, upper-middle class people?

### **Disproportional Discipline: “A Tsunami of Variables”**

**Introduction.** When asked specifically about racial disproportionality in school discipline, participants offered a number of explanations. They also recognized the complexity of the issue and the challenge in tackling it. For instance, Participant 18 efficiently illustrated how overwhelming the issue can be:

**Participant 18:** When I think about the problems of racial and socio-economic disproportionate representation in all the categories we don't want students to be in, I think about it as kinda being like a tsunami of lots of variables.

What may be encouraging, though, is that the majority of participants acknowledged racial disproportionality as a problem and most were able to speak to some of the ways that the macro and micro levels interact to contribute to it. In a sense, this theme illustrates some of the specific ways that disciplinary processes at VHS are shaped and constrained by the relationship between the ideological base (Whiteness) and superstructure (Two Schools in One) of VHS. As such, while many issues that were described under the meta-themes of Two Schools in One and Whiteness—such as tracking and a predominantly White staff—resurface in this section, this theme pertains to the specific ways that participants thought that these issues contributed to differential discipline patterns. The participants articulated several overt and subtle ways that Black students are put in disadvantaged positions relative to White students and put under a different disciplinary microscope.

However, even as VHS staff members acknowledged the problem and provided a sophisticated analysis, many also unwittingly relied on the discourse of Whiteness, which served to emphasize student deficits and naturalize racial stratification. Not surprisingly, the majority of coded excerpts that captured latent forms of discursive Whiteness were when participants were discussing racial disproportionality. The findings from this theme illuminate the ways that educators can simultaneously hold progressive (perhaps even enlightened) views and uphold Whiteness. As such, these findings may also help explain data that suggests that SWPBIS can be implemented well and still struggle to tackle racial disciplinary disparities.

**Almost all are Black.** Over half of the participants endorsed the idea that racial disproportionality in school discipline outcomes, on some level, accurately represented who was misbehaving at school. They had varying explanations for this, but many participants said that when they thought about specific behavioral issues they faced with students, most of the students they thought about were Black. It is worth remembering here that the bulk of the participants taught all or most of their classes in the school that is predominantly Black and lower achieving. As a result, it naturally follows that the majority of their students that have disciplinary issues are Black. This is an excellent example of how the two in one structure of the school complicates the interpretation of school processes and outcomes and reinforces racialized notions of behavior and achievement. The following quote from Participant 2 illustrates this issue well. Participant 2, like most participants, had trouble thinking of a specific example of students getting disciplined differently based on race. Not necessarily because it does not happen at VHS, but because students who are disciplined are generally Black:

**Interviewer:** Have you or can you tell me about any times that you've felt as if a student may have been disciplined differently based on race?

[pause]

**Participant 2:** There's nothing popping into my head right now especially because when I think of all of the students who I struggled with behaviorally over the last two years are all, almost all, Black. And so, I can't think... Yeah, I can't think of a specific example.

**“Carrying a lot more baggage”.** As discussed previously, most participants saw school behavior as inextricably linked to the level and severity of unmet needs that a student had. For some, this explanation of behavior was key in explaining disproportionality—if problematic behavior stems from students’ underlying baggage and Black students have more “baggage”,

then they are naturally going to act out more than White students. One way this was expressed, as with Participant 8, was to suggest that for many Black kids, factors outside of school impact motivation, leading to disciplinary problems:

**Participant 8:** From where I sit, most of the interactions with the kids that I have are kids who tend to get in trouble, or tend to be in classes where there's low academic performance, and many other different factors that contribute to either why they end up getting in trouble or things like that. Because a lot of the kids I deal with, education is not primary, it's a secondary thing for them. They have other different factors in their life, and can't really focus on education. Most of them, if they had their way, they're like, "I couldn't care less."

Further, given a society and school system that disadvantages people of color, some participants speculated that some Black students may act out of resentment. In this example, Participant 16, expressed the need to understand this behavior in context:

**Participant 16:** I just totally speculate it, but you'd have to think if you're an African American in our society that you are walking around a little bit with a chip on your shoulder, that the whole system really ain't doing a whole lot for you, there may be some individuals, but when you look at the whole system and you look who has and who doesn't, you can't help but be a little pissed off. Then I think that may then come out, that frustration. So the behavior is genuine, it's real, it's not made up. Nobody's saying this person just did that when they didn't do it, out of some racial animus, but the behavior may emerge from this large societal constellation of stresses and stressors, and you can't excuse a behavior, but you can certainly view it with a nuanced understanding in how you respond to it.

**Playing school.** Participants also suggested that Black students do not only have more unmet needs, but they also are disadvantaged compared to White students in adhering to school norms. In several interviews, participants talked about the performative nature of school discipline, in which there exists an implied script that should be followed. Participant 18 summed it up this way:

**Participant 18:** I think there are some students, clearly, who enjoy that they know how to do school, so this feels like a successful place for them, and this feels like a place where they get positive feedback more often than negative.

According to some, this script is written based on White, middle-class norms that students of color do not know how, or sometimes refuse, to follow. For Participant 1, the ability to “play” school is an important determinant of student success at VHS:

**Participant 1:** I think it's because, yeah, the norm, we have established this norm in our minds and the secondary impact of that is that we've established a picture of what it takes to achieve that and sometimes when I'm talking to people about this, I like to describe that as playing school. We have an expectation of what it looks like to play school. What you do when you show up and what you do when the bell rings and what you do when you gotta get to your next class and what you do at lunch and what you do when you need to go to the bathroom and what you do when you want a drink of water and all of that is playing school. When you have your homework done and the whole gamut of playing school is based around that... The assumed normalcy of that privileged White kid going to college path, and we have plenty of students here from every kind of background, that just don't play school in that way, because they don't know how, because [chuckle] that's meaningless to them. They have some other circumstance that



they're dealing with, that prevents them from doing that. I think that's where a lot of it comes from.

In the following example, I asked Participant 19 whether students were disciplined differently at VHS based on race. In response, he reflected on how he responded to students based on their ability to “play” school:

**Participant 19:** With the behavior stuff it's more like... I honestly feel more... For example, if you're in the hallway, I feel like White students have a little better understanding of like, "I'm gonna play the game, 'cause I know how to get away with this." And I feel like Black students and my ESL students are more resistant basically, to doing that. So that it's like, if I'm sitting in the hallway and students are walking by looking like, "I know where I'm going." I basically don't even ask. But if they were walking slowly, and have food in their hands, I feel like, "I have to ask this student." By and large, a lot of the times that is Black students. I don't know what it has to do about claiming space or not, being comfortable in the spaces where they're supposed to be, or what it is. But I feel like that, that does happen. And of course, it makes me terribly uncomfortable, because I'm like, "If they just walked a little faster and acted like they knew where they were going, I wouldn't say anything."

Participant 19's example provides some interesting insights into the ways that norms are established in schools and how they feed and feed off of racial and cultural biases that educator's possess. In this sense, students of color get put in a double-bind. They carry the burden of adhering to norms that were not made for them and, when they do not do so perfectly, it reinforces conditioned, negative perceptions of them in educators' minds. According to

Participant 18, when this story gets played out again and again in a child's life, inside and outside of school, the disadvantage magnifies:

**Participant 18:** But I do think that some of my students who might be... Who made mistakes or poor decisions, and we're caught making those poor decisions, who are maybe from middle income, upper income households, who tend to also be White. It's like they know the script that they're suppose to read from. And I'm not saying they're not genuine in their mea culpas, but there's a kind of a sense of like, "Okay, this is how the dialog is gonna go." And some of my students of color who might have a similar kind of discipline conversation, just to be totally blunt, when they're sitting across the room from an administrator, they're already... There's already a power differential there, and then when you layer in the kinds of looks they may get when they walk into a convenience store, or a cop stopping them. There's all these other layers for them, and they have a different script from their life experience. So I've had some students who, maybe reflect in my office like, "I shouldn't have mouthed off when they said I did something, but it just really made me mad." Whereas a White student was like, might not... I don't know, it's way too like... There's no way to be absolute in these obviously, but I think that sometimes my students who have gotten to high school and have a history of being called out in class, being called out into the hallway, being put on lunch detention, being put in time out on the playground, it's a much longer history that they come. They have a lot more baggage that they're carrying into a discipline conversation with the principal, than a student who's never been caught.

**“Instruction and behavior go hand in hand”.** A large number of participants felt that the quality of instruction in the lower level classes was highly variable and that disciplinary

issues were arising more often due to chaotic class environments and lack of rigor and relevance being provided by the teachers. In these conversations, the participants illuminated an important connection between academic tracking and disproportionate discipline. Participant 6 stated concisely that “Race is an excuse for lower standards academically and in some ways behaviorally.” Participant 23 agreed with this sentiment, asserting that the school is structured to disadvantage students of color:

**Participant 23:** So going back, two schools in one. So if you end up with a class of primarily lower achieving students, who are students of color, and they end up in these environments that are not well structured. It's like, I don't know how we expect it to be anything but. More discipline referrals and lower success rates. Like . . . we didn't set them up.

While many shared similar sentiments, several also pointed out, like Participant 15, that VHS does have many teachers at all levels that have high expectations and are successful with students:

**Participant 15:** And I think a lot of our teachers have high expectations for students academically, which helps. And we have some great teachers who are doing some really awesome things instructionally, which helps.

That being said, Participant 15 was also clear that this is not true across the board:

**Participant 15:** Like sometimes I think we convey low expectations for kids of color, like we'll say... I'll hear things like, "We're gonna do this thing, you guys can do it, it's easy," stuff like that. Whereas I think saying like, "This is gonna be hard, we're gonna work towards it, you guys can do it," is conveying higher expectations for academics. So I hear a lot of that in language.

Taken together, these comments convey some hope, in the sense that there are many educators at VHS providing relevant instruction and well-structured classroom settings. However, as many participants noted, the structural make-up of the school, set up by academic tracking, intrinsically puts students of color at a disadvantage and may be reinforcing a lower set of expectations, academically and disciplinarily, in some educators' minds.

**“We did school differently”.** Aside from tracking, the participants cited the overwhelmingly White, middle or upper class school staff as a possible cause of disproportional discipline. They provided several explanations as to why the background of the staff could be contributing to disproportionality. For instance, they suggested that staff may be imposing their own cultural expectations about what appropriate behavior looks like without considering that other cultures might have different expectations or norms. As Participant 10 put it, “So the majority of teachers tend to be middle class and White. And so we don't recognize, necessarily, that that's not who we're teaching all the time.” This, some participants asserted, was responsible for the fact that most discipline referrals are for sometimes minor, more subjective types of behaviors, such as defiance and disrespect. Participant 15 observed, “I do see a lot of students being disciplined for some behavior that is not the upper middle class White way of behaving.” Other participants discussed the ways that stereotypes and implicit bias impacts the kind of behavioral expectations that teachers have and their reactions to behavior, often resulting in different student outcomes for similar behaviors. They also posited that White students and parents have more social capital to expend in the school and are thus often allowed more leeway for their behavior.

***Clash of cultures.*** For many participants, the norms of the school are built upon Whiteness and upheld by a predominantly White staff who accept those norms as universal.

They described a profound cultural divide that leads to misunderstandings and a difficult disconnect. Here, Participant 1 explained how this might impact classroom discipline:

**Participant 1:** It's a clash of... It's a lot of things. The first thing that pops into my mind is a clash of the teachers' and administrators' values and understandings coming into contact with the students' values and understandings and expectations. So you have a... To be really blunt about it, you got a middle class White teacher and a Black student, and I think in many cases, they don't know how to speak the same language as one another. And you get some misinterpretation and the teacher finds themselves in a situation where they're having to interact with the person and they don't know how, or the student feels the same way about that. And the reaction of the teacher is to go with what they might perceive to be their only option and resolve the problem with the disciplinary action of get out and let me keep going and let me kind of retain the, quote unquote, "picture perfect normalcy that my classroom is supposed to be."

Participant 17 said that she catches herself responding differently to behaviors based on cultural expectations and norms:

**Participant 17:** Actually I mean, I can think of times when, they're my own failings, they're times when I was quick to send a kid out into the hallway and then thought about it for a second, was like, "Oh, I sent that same, that's not fair, I'm responding negatively because I'm less familiar with this kid, this kid's, the way he's presenting, is off-putting to me specifically, not actually that much of a problem for the class and it's a cultural thing."

It was particularly interesting to hear participants talk about the very subtle ways that this cultural divide can impact student/educator interactions and disciplinary outcomes. For instance, Participant 11 felt that because many teachers experiences were so different from their students,

it made it hard for teachers to expend the emotional energy that they might for a student that was more like them:

**Participant 11:** Take the time to care and actually talk to each individual that you pass, don't just let them pass you by. Don't say nothing is a loss. It'll happen anyway because everybody got their own individuals views on life, so like if you don't know the struggle it's hard for you to invest as much of yourself into it.

In a similar way, according to Participant 8, differences in disciplinary outcomes might be the result of a White teacher having more tolerance for a White student's slightly disruptive behavior. In this example, Participant 8 relayed the story of a Black student who was sometimes talkative in class and the teacher often sent him to the hall or to do work outside of the classroom with another teacher. With a White student with similar behaviors, the teacher seemed to be willing to deal with it more easily:

**Participant 8:** Whenever the special education teacher was there and had to pull out kids to do something, whether he needs it or not, the teacher said, "just take him. You just take him, because I don't wanna deal with him." Not because he's really that disruptive. It's just because just his kind of antics. It's like, "Ugh." So that may not be a direct discipline issue, but again, that avoiding ... I don't want to deal with you. But I've seen in other settings where you got that ... I mean, the same setting where you got another kid of a different race, you know? The teacher tends to be able to ... "I can deal with you a little bit more."

In both of these excerpts, the participants are describing the very subtle ways that students of color can become more expendable and more easily dismissed, particularly in the minds of White educators.

Some participants pointed out that differing cultural expectations of school behavior can create disproportionality, especially when so many disciplinary issues are based on perceptions of respect, defiance, and disruption. Participant 5 pointed out a key truth in K-12 education:

**Participant 5:** Yeah. The things that stress teachers out the most in this building are kids who are inattentive in class, speak out, cursing, conflict, the incessant picking that happens that eventually turns into a fight, not doing stuff, defiance.

Considering the pressure that teachers face to improve standardized test scores and meet curricular benchmarks, it is easy to understand why these kinds of student behaviors can become very stressful. This is especially true for teachers at VHS who teach academic and lower level classes where the margins between student success and failure are often very small. Given this context, it may be challenging for teachers to critically assess how they may be imposing their cultural norms of Whiteness on student behavior, especially when there are so many disciplinary decisions to be made on a daily basis.

That being said, some participants suggested that VHS educators need to reflect on how they are defining disrespect and defiance and how these definitions may be placing an unfair burden on students of color. In discussing the creation of school-wide norms as part of SWPBIS implementation, Participant 6 stated, “I would differentiate between being asked to be stereotypically White and being asked to be respectful. I think those are very different things.” Participant 12 expressed a similar concern:

**Participant 12:** I think modeling, and having purposeful discussion of what being respectful means, 'cause I think that depending on how you were raised, that might look differently. So I think us as a school setting those school-wide expectations of what does

being responsible mean, what does being respectful mean, even what does being on time mean.

Several participants indicated that an overwhelmingly White staff exacerbates the impact of implicit bias and stereotyping on achievement and disciplinary outcomes. Participant 7 succinctly stated, “there's just sort of this history of assuming that the Black kid in the red hoodie is going to be a bad kid.” Participant 22 underscored how stereotyping can impact how educators perceive behaviors to be more serious than they are:

**Participant 22:** I think throughout my entire career, I've seen students of color maybe treated differently or were thought of to be doing something deviant that wasn't deviant. These kids are just running around and yelling down the hallway, and I go down, and it's just a group of Latinos, probably talking a little louder in the hallway, but their conversation, their intent, they're just walking down the hallway talking like any other group of students. And I'm just used to it. Are they talking loud? Like, yeah, like, "Hey, let's keep it down." But it's not "sound the red flags that there's this deviant group of students running amok in our hallways!"

When stereotypes become embedded into our unconscious racial schema, they impact our decision-making via implicit bias. Particularly for White people, implicit bias can lead to evaluations of Black people as inferior or threatening and of White people as being more virtuous or intelligent (Simson, 2014). According to many staff members at VHS, implicit bias is leading to lowered academic expectations and differential disciplinary responses, especially from White educators. Participant 6 thought that Black students were being automatically academically disadvantaged by implicit bias:



**Participant 6:** Right, because I think White people have this implicit bias that they don't realize they have. So when you see a young Black child, you don't see the same level of potential in that kid as you see with the White kid.

For Participant 12, implicit bias is more than about individual interactions; it can also lead to a school-wide acceptance of the status quo:

**Participant 12:** I don't know. I really don't know. I think we're just... I think us as humans do what is familiar to us, and if we suspend this kind of kid for this kind of behavior all the time that it's easier for us. I think we are creatures of habit, and our biases show that.

Participant 22 shared a similar sentiment, asserting that in order to fully understand inequity at VHS, the staff will need to scrutinize its own implicit biases:

**Participant 22:** Some of it's really looking at, maybe, some implicit biases, making sure my staff is culturally competent. When you look at some of the gaps we have academically or some of the access gaps we have academically, it falls along socio-economic and racial lines. How are we moving that conversation forward on the why behind that? Not just because this is the way it's always been, and this is what we expect, really trying to figure out why is this happening?

*Cultural capital.* Another reason that White students might be at a disciplinary and academic advantage at a school with predominantly White educators, according to some participants, is that they and their parents possess more institutional power to influence decisions. This power can be seen as a form of cultural capital that has both racial and socioeconomic dimensions (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). At VHS, this capital can help maintain the stratified, bifurcated structure of the school. For instance, Participant 4 described a

phenomenon in which White parents fight for their students to be in upper level classes, not because it is academically appropriate, but because it is where White students belong:

**Participant 4:** But it's like now, I think we allow parents to dictate a lot of things here, and which has led to some of these things. When a parent says, "No I," when a teacher... I think we're addressing it actually when teachers say, "I recommend your student for this level." And parents say, "No, I want them at this level." Sometimes it's because they really think their child belongs in that. And sometimes I think it's for these other reasons where they don't want them in these other classes for reasons other than academics. And I think we've allowed those things to sort of go on and parents of students who are going to be fine in life I think. And parents who have some more influence, or feel they have more of a voice kind of dictating things that way. And I think we as a school and as a community... As a division, I think have allowed those sort of things to happen.

On a disciplinary level, there was a sense that White cultural capital can lead educators to avoid addressing the behaviors of White students, as described by Participant 11:

**Participant 11:** In a sense it will protect them in a sense of it will take that fear away, because some of them are not necessarily scared of the kid they're scared of the parent or the reaction that they can get from the parent, or what power that parent got, who that parent know, who they might run to, and how was rubbing this kid wrong going to affect my job?

It can also lead to different decisions when discipline moves to the administrative level. In the following excerpt, Participant 10 could not think of a time when a student was disciplined differently based on race, but did think that parents with more influence can impact an administrative decision:

**Participant 10:** No. Not based on race. I do think that sometimes administrators have a fear of parents with political capital or the wherewithal to appeal to the superintendent, kind of thing. So I don't know of a specific instance, but I could say... Like for example, maybe a student with marijuana or something and you know that this parent is gonna complain, maybe you involve the parents sooner versus someone else where you might just be like, "Here's a consequence."

When a school's staff is so predominantly White and the disconnect between the educators and students plays out each day throughout the school, the subtle processes that make students of color expendable and White students virtuous can become a structural feature.

Participant 5 shared a perspective that underscores the insidious way that the structural reinforces the interpersonal and vice versa to naturalize and institutionalize racial hierarchy:

**Participant 5:** So I think that's probably a big part of the problem. And not just writing up referrals or whatever, but how do you engage with those students then? Or your willingness to work with those students. Cause you look at them and you're like, "Oh, their brain's broken, we can't do anything here today. We're not gonna get anything done. They're not gonna learn. They can't get to class on time." Without thinking about, "Okay, well, what systems can we put in place to change this behavior?"

Some participants also observed that White students and parents often feel empowered to protest a suspension decision and may get it downgraded to something less serious, like a little while in the in-school suspension (ISS) room. This was not as typical for Black students and parents, according to Participant 11's experience, suggesting that this may partly explain disproportionality in suspension numbers. I pressed on this point, wondering whether the expectation of protest and White parent involvement impacted administrator decision-making:

**Interviewer:** That's kind of after some event has occurred. Say a White student gets a discipline referral, the parent might come in and talk it down to something, whereas a Black student may get suspended, the parent doesn't come in, or the Black student sorta just accepts whatever he's given. Do you think that impacts how administrators, or teachers, make decisions? I think you were saying before-

**Participant 11:** I don't even think it's conscious. I do though. I get what you're saying. I don't think it's a conscious decision, but I do think it affects ... like they keep so much on their plate going, if they got so much going on right now, like in a situation where it's been a hot and heavy day, I'm just gonna make a quick rash decision and then you're on about it. So if the parent doesn't ever contact that person back at a time where their day has settled down, and they've got time to look back at that situation and say, "Oh, hold on, wait a minute, you're right. I should have just given him ISS for that. Go ahead and send him back to" ... you know what I mean? If that doesn't ever happen then you're just stuck with those couple days because it was a hot and heavy day and nobody had time to deal with it, and I know your parent isn't gonna call, so we're just gonna get rid of you for a couple days.

**Interviewer:** So on that same day the kid in front of them where they know the parent's gonna call they may say-

**Participant 11:** Yeah, go on and sit there for a little while.

In the scenario that Participant 11 described, multiple manifestations of Whiteness are at play, all leading to different racialized student experiences. First, White students and parents may feel more entitled to challenge school decisions. Additionally, White parents are likely more often in a position where they can take time from work to address the situation with the school

administration than Black parents, which reinforces notions of Black cultural inferiority. Then, based on the expectation of resistance and the pressure of a busy day, an administrator may give a White student a less severe consequence to avoid the hassle. On the other hand, a Black student may not be given the same consideration, resulting in a harsher consequence and confirmation of the power and privilege of Whiteness.

**Whiteness discourse in explaining racial disproportionality.** While the participants collectively offered a rich and nuanced examination of racial disproportionality in discipline at VHS, there were also many instances in which White racial advantage and Black racial disadvantage was normalized by minimizing race and racism in the discussion, leaning on cultural deficit narratives, and naturalizing inequity as an extension of biological and historical forces.

**Minimizing race and racism.** In explaining racial disproportionality, there were several strategies that participants utilized to avoid race or racism as a major cause. Here, Participant 9 provided the most obvious example:

**Participant 9:** I don't think it has anything to do with racism. I think it has to do with students in a classroom. And if this student is misbehaving, that's the student that's gonna be called out. I don't think it has anything at all.

No other participants were so quick to dismiss racism as a factor, though several tried to minimize race and racism, even when doing so required some rhetorical back-bending. For instance, several times in the interview, Participant 20 suggested that socio-economic status was the main reason for inequity, both academic and disciplinary, at VHS. In this excerpt, he explained that higher-level classes are not accessible to most students in from lower socio-

economic backgrounds. When I asked him how often class level corresponded to socio-economic status, he replied:

**Participant 20:** Oh, I think it would be almost a 1:1 ratio. There are some kids who are creeping up to the more advanced classes who are on fee-reduced lunch, but many of them have told me that they feel out of place in an AP class because they're the only person of color in there maybe, or because they've never taken one before.

Without intending to do so, Participant 20's perspective certainly reflects the important intersection of class and race in schools but it also highlights the folly of trying to diminish race in discussions about or interventions targeting disciplinary and academic disparities.

Participant 10 utilized similar minimization strategy by extracting race from the concept of cultural capital. When asked if students were disciplined differently at VHS based on race, Participant 10 responded:

**Participant 10:** No. Not based on race. I do think that sometimes administrators have a fear of parents with political capital or the wherewithal to appeal to the superintendent, kind of thing. So I don't know of a specific instance, but I could say... Like for example, maybe a student with marijuana or something and you know that this parent is gonna complain, maybe you involve the parents sooner versus someone else where you might just be like, "Here's a consequence."

Like Participant 20, Participant 10 recognized what is probably an important factor in differential disciplinary processes for students, but failed to recognize how political and cultural capital at VHS is distributed or the importance of race as a visual and symbolic signifier of status (Lewis & Diamond, 2015).

In this final example, Participant 4 minimizes race by using coded language as a stand-in:

**Participant 4:** So I think there could be a difference there in understanding how to change your behavior depending on where you are and who you're interacting with. Other than that, I don't know. It's not to say that I don't see disturbing behaviors from honors level kids, upper middle class kids. In some ways, the reason I prefer to teach academic level kids is 'cause I'm like when they're gonna do something wrong, it's gonna be... They're not gonna try to sneakily get around it. They're just gonna say, "I'm not gonna do that." And I'm like, "Okay. That's easy. Goodbye." [chuckle] Like you could get a consequence now. To me, that's almost kind of refreshing. It's kind of annoying sometimes too but it's... I think it could be a... It's just that those behaviors are so obvious, it's much more... It's easier to discipline them. And I think that could be a piece too and it's just kind of occurring to me now. They're so easy to identify as, "This is something that we need to have this structure and if you can't follow this simple expectation, then you're gonna get a consequence." Whereas I feel like our upper level kids, they sort of figure out how to manipulate the system and so it's harder to discipline those sneaky, getting around things acts. I don't know.

By stating the issue in terms of class level and socio-economic status, Participant 4 leaves the question of racial stratification unasked, thereby normalizing it. Additionally, this strategy frees Participant 4 from having to self-reflect on why disciplining lower-level students is so much more clear-cut for him than disciplining upper-level students—Why is it that upper-level kids are more easily able to “manipulate the system?” What biases may be present that make behavior by lower-level students match so clearly with my ideas of acceptable and unacceptable?

*Naturalizing Whiteness.* There were several instances in which participants biologized disproportionality and racial stratification or explained them as a natural extension of historical

processes outside of their control. In doing so, things like academic tracking and racial bifurcation become logical and unavoidable. These discursive strategies also extricate VHS educators and division officials from any responsibility in creating a racial system of advantages and disadvantages. In this example, Participant 5 turned academic tracking into a biological inevitability:

**Participant 5:** Our at risk students, who are poor, low income, or whatever, have a different educational experience in this school than our affluent students do. Because we track them by ability level. And by the time they get to VHS, they've been tracked... Well, maybe they're not tracking at middle school anymore, but they're tracked by ability. And so when they get here we see that distinction. And then it carries right through their four years.

This is an interesting example because there were many other instances when Participant 5 expressed a sophisticated racial analysis and drew insightful connections between the interpersonal and structural. In this case, though, she justifies tracking at VHS in two ways. One, tracking at VHS is simply a result of what occurred at earlier grade levels. Two, students are tracked by ability level, which according to this excerpt, is lower for students who are “poor, low income, or whatever.”

In the next example, Participant 4 presented a similar explanation of tracking and disciplinary disproportionality. In doing so, she failed to recognize the norms of Whiteness that set students on a course towards differential educational experiences:

**Participant 4:** I feel like I've talked to a lot of people about just tracking and different things like that and I think students get tracked from a young age, and I think a lot of the reason they get tracked, it could be... Sometimes it's because of behavior, that could be



part of why they're being tracked in the first place. And it could be that they're not being viewed as being, as capable of high attainment because these behaviors are sort of clouding judgment, or maybe they aren't actually reaching higher attainment because of the behaviors. I feel like sometimes it's hard to tell, but I do think the fact that you have... And I also. This is just maybe unique to our community. But because we have our schools set up the way they are, students start to be grouped together. They're all in the same school from fifth grade. The whole city is in the same school starting in fifth grade. So it's like if you start getting tracked that young, you're in same classes with the same kids every single year, and you start to kinda get used to the sort of silly behaviors that sort of start to manifest in those young years. And I feel like for some of our students, they start to get used to these kind of what I'd consider maybe not normal behaviors for a classroom. They sort of start to get used to them and not really even understand what a positive learning environment should look like. I think there's a lot of pieces, but I think to me where that discipline and race, maybe inequality or inequity comes from is the fact that they're all sort of tracked together. And so, all... When it's so disparate and those behaviors start... It just sort of naturally happens I guess.

**Summary of Disciplinary Disproportionality: “A tsunami of variables”.** Interview participants identified several possible explanations for disciplinary disproportionality at VHS. Some saw disproportionality as an accurate reflection of student behavior. In other words, more students of color act out than White students. Explanations for these differential behavior patterns varied, the most common of which were that students of color, and particularly Black students, are carrying more personal baggage to school and that White students are able to “play school” better than students of color. For most, disproportionality was part of a larger structural

issue that is caused by academic tracking. According to participants, tracking is at the heart of the bifurcated make-up of VHS and puts Black students at a disciplinary disadvantage before they even walk through VHS's doors.

In addition to tracking, most participants felt that the predominantly White staff contributed to disproportionality in a number of ways. First, White educators, most of whom come from middle or upper class backgrounds, may be imposing their own cultural experiences and expectations on students of color and students from low-income families. This "clash of cultures" may partly explain why disciplinary disproportion is especially pronounced for more subjective behaviors such as defiance, disrespect, and disruption. Other participants suggested that on overwhelmingly White staff may be acting on stereotypes and implicit bias that makes them see students of color as less capable and more threatening. Finally, according to some participants, a predominantly White staff may also contribute to higher levels of social capital for White students and parents that allows them to avoid the disciplinary microscope and decrease the severity of administrative disciplinary decisions.

The many examples of latent Whiteness in this theme help provide insights into how thoughtful educators can carry Whiteness with them and help further institutionalize it in schools. The frequently subtle ways that these discursive strategies normalize and valorize Whiteness are often difficult to detect and found within very insightful observations about their schools and students. Rather than diminish the insights of well-meaning educators at VHS, these findings demonstrate the potential constraints that SWPBIS, which is inherently race-neutral, face in addressing issues related to the STPP and disproportionality.

## Implementing SWPBIS

**Introduction.** On the topic of implementation of SWPBIS, there were two major strands of conversation. One strand related to with the extent to which SWPBIS might address root causes of disciplinary disproportionality. In general, participants expressed a cautious optimism that SWPBIS could play a positive role in addressing racial disparities. They suggested that now is a good time for implementation because racial disproportionality is a hot topic and because current VHS staff members are generally open to change. Specifically, participants expressed hope that SWPBIS could address the issues of consistency that were described previously. Many thought that SWPBIS might serve as a common framework under which to organize initiatives and resources already in place. Also, they hoped that SWPBIS would establish a common set of expectations that would create more consistency from class to class.

However, there was not uniformity of opinion on this topic. Some participants felt that, at best, SWPBIS should be seen as one small part of a larger set of tools to overcome racial inequities at VHS. As well, several problematized SWPBIS, suggesting that it has limited capacity to dismantle Whiteness or that, at worst, it may just proliferate Whiteness in a different way. What most participants agreed upon was that in order to address racial disproportionality, issues of racial inequity and racism have to be a primary part of the discussion throughout the SWPBIS implementation process.

The second strand of the SWPBIS conversation indicated that regardless of how participants felt about SWPBIS and disproportionality, nearly all of them agreed that it could not be successful unless it was implemented in a “good way.” Many were skeptical of successful implementation based on past experiences at VHS. Overwhelmingly, VHS educators contended that for SWPBIS to fulfill its promise, the school administration would have to commit to a long-

term, consistent, and incremental implementation process. During this process, SWPBIS would have to be prioritized, despite the school's habit of jumping from one initiative to another. Furthermore, "good" implementation meant that there will have to be concerted effort to get staff trust and buy-in, which may be especially challenging for some staff members who are resistant to change and skeptical of the goals of reducing racial disparities. Finally, for many participants, "good" implementation meant that there has to be less of a focus on outcomes and numbers, and more emphasis on process.

There were very few coded instances of discursive Whiteness for this theme. This is likely due to the fact that these conversations were not focused on specific school practices or student outcomes. Instead, they mostly related to broader issues of implementation characteristics and outcomes. Nonetheless, participant attitudes about implementation reveal some key insights regarding SWPBIS's affordances and constraints in addressing racial disproportionality in discipline that will be discussed in Chapter 5. Briefly, SWPBIS is unlikely to have any sustained, positive impact, and certainly has no chance of addressing disproportionality, without the kind of intentional implementation suggested by the participants.

**PBIS possibilities.** VHS educators sounded a note of cautious optimism that, if implemented well, SWPBIS could play a role in addressing issues related to disciplinary disproportionality. Their ideas about what good implementation means will be outlined later in this section. First, I will lay out some of the reasons that participants felt hopeful about SWPBIS. It should be noted that while most were positive about SWPBIS, there were varying levels of optimism, with most skepticism rooted in the challenges associated with implementing a whole-school initiative.

**“Concern about racial disparities”.** Over three quarters of the participants felt that SWPBIS was being implemented due to school division and community concerns about racial disparities in discipline. Participant 23 reported that SWPBIS is a result of a community and national concern:

**Participant 23:** So I think like in a community level that's certainly been an ongoing conversation. And then I think just in the past five years, certainly at a more national level of the school to prison pipeline numbers. And I think people are more aware of it and talking about more.

Participant 20 added that the school data reflects disproportionality and that most people feel that exclusionary discipline has been ineffective:

**Participant 20:** And our data show that a disproportionate number of kids of color are being punished, I'm sure, here. I'm pretty sure we realize that ISS and out-of-school suspension are not really changing behavior. And if we're really committed to growing the adults of the future, then we do need to figure out a better way to ensure that they're learning how to behave.

The fact that most participants recognized disciplinary disproportionality as an impetus for SWPBIS may present an opportunity for implementation to specifically address school processes that uphold Whiteness. However, as will be addressed in Chapter 5, it also may be expecting something that SWPBIS is not designed to deliver.

***The time is right.*** Many participants suggested that SWPBIS implementation is happening at a time that is favorable for addressing racism and racial disparities. According to the interviews, this window of opportunity stems from the national and local focus on race and discipline over the last five to ten years, which has made educators broadly aware of the

problem. For instance, Participant 3 said that the door has recently opened for conversations about race:

**Participant 3:** It's like a growing thing that we're facing now about... The numbers don't lie. I think people need to be exposed to 'em, and there needs to be changes to it, figure out what the problem is and how we can fix it moving forward.

**Interviewer:** You say it's a growing thing? There's a growing...

**Participant 3:** Race in schools towards adults, I think, is a growing issue. It's something when I first started teaching, it was never talked about and now it's big.

**Interviewer:** Okay, that's a... It may actually... This may be a good time to do that 'cause people are aware of it and actually more willing to talk about it.

**Participant 3:** Right. And I think it also opens the door for the teachers and the administrators are being on the same side also. "This is why we're doing what we're doing." Everybody's cards are on the table.

Additionally, participants said that recent tragic events in Charlottesville, Virginia and many other Southern towns and cities around Civil War monuments and the visible ascension of White Supremacist groups have made many people, especially White people, more cognizant of the ongoing existence of racism and racial inequality in our country and its systems. As a result of this increased awareness, Participant 1 felt that this was an opportune time for SWPBIS to be implemented in a way that targets issues of race and racism:

**Participant 1:** The really high visibility events were taking place. But you know, it's just like anything else. You gotta almost time these things perfectly because you gotta catch the wave, so to speak, at the right moment where you've still got the motivation but people haven't burned out yet, and we're still within that bubble.

In addition to the time being right, many participants perceived the current staff at VHS as generally being open to change. Participant 17 sensed that most VHS educators were more aware of racism and reflective about their own practices than he had seen in his previous school:

**Participant 17:** I think the staff here is generally better educated about that kind of thing, and we find less of the sort of grumbling, not quite aware that you're being racist, but you're being racist, kind of attitude towards teaching that I found from some people in my other school.

Participant 5 shared a similar sentiment, but also sounded a cautious note that I heard in several interviews. In this case, she shared that there had been a recent incident in which VHS school staff were publicly called out for being racist. Given this backdrop, she indicated that future discussions of race and racism would have to be handled in a way that did not put staff members on the defensive:

**Participant 5:** So I think it would have to be done in a way that honored and just recognized the work that we do while also recognizing shared struggles. Cause at the same time we all sort of see similar things happening. So I think there would be receptivity to it, but I just think you'd have to be careful about it, that's all. Just given our own sort of history.

This excerpt points to the precarious nature of efforts to combat racial disparities in systems that have been built upon Whiteness and where the people responsible for taking action are overwhelmingly White (DiAngelo, 2018). The caution sounded in many interviews underscores the challenge inherent in these efforts, even when, as many participants suggested, conditions seem well-suited to undertake them.

**Common framework.** The most commonly perceived potential benefit of SWPBIS for participants was the possibility that it could address some of the issues of consistency that were discussed earlier. In particular, some participants saw SWPBIS as a way to bring various resources and initiatives under one, broad umbrella. For Participant 7, SWPBIS had the potential to de-silo overlapping efforts:

**Participant 7:** Sure. It seems like there are a lot of people who are really actively involved in the community and there are some things that are... I don't know if they're a repeat or they have a lot of overlap it seems, so that it would be nice to put it all under an umbrella and really look at it and maybe streamline some of the things.

Participant 22 expressed excitement about the common mission and language that SWPBIS could bring:

**Participant 22:** I think it'll provide a framework for us to start to build in those pieces and try to build in that framework, that common language. So we can all... At least we're all speaking the same language when it comes down to trying to find solutions to some of the issues our students are facing and hopefully, give them some skills so they're able to deal with difficult situations, in the classroom, and in the hallway, and even some self-assessment. How am I reacting in these certain situations? What are our expectations for student behavior? What's your expectation when students exhibit this behavior? What do I do? And just trying to make sure... And bringing in counselors, and teachers, and admin together to help students with issues, instead of teachers trying to solve it all on their own or counselors trying to solve it all on their own. It's a team effort.

More participants talked about the possible benefit of creating a common set of school-wide expectations. They felt that SWPBIS had the potential to provide more consistency from



classroom to classroom. In this excerpt, Participant 9 illustrated this point by referring to a previous experience with SWPBIS:

**Participant 9:** And I think... I think some of the PBIS stuff helped in there with the expectations. I think they knew what was expected of them, and we knew more what we were supposed to expect of them, and I think that that was the key, that as the teacher in the classroom it wasn't just some random "Oh, you're doin' that, you're in trouble." It was "Okay, this is what we're lookin' for," and that kind of helped everybody in the room. I think it had somewhat of a positive impact, I really do. I think that... That was a while ago that I was in there, but I believe it had a positive impact.

This was a widely shared hope, but for some it was conditional. For example, Participant 15 thought that SWPBIS implementation at VHS had to include specific aspects of culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2010) across classrooms in order to effectively address disproportionality:

**Participant 15:** But in terms of being aware of your language, your conveyance of high expectations and teaching explicit routines and giving kids different ways to participate, I hope it involves some of that. If it does with the common expectations, I think it could definitely create more, like less disproportionality in discipline.

Participant 15's perspective again highlights the complexity that will likely be part of SWPBIS implementation at VHS. There is a broadly shared hope that SWPBIS has something positive to offer, but each educator may differ on the particulars.

**Problematizing PBIS.** A small number of participants were more specific about the potential barriers or limitations that might inhibit SWPBIS from addressing the causes of disciplinary disproportionality. Participant 10 felt that SWPBIS could be helpful, but also

acknowledged that it had a limited part to play in addressing issues of racial equity: “Yeah, that needs to be happening inside and outside the school, but yeah. But PBIS I think, it's one of those tools in the tool kit that we need to be doing.” Participant 19 suggested that there is nothing inherent in SWPBIS that promises positive change: “I feel like it's almost more like a tool, maybe. And it's, it could, it's a tool that could make everything worse or make everything better, depending on how you're gonna use it.” Going further, Participant 19—one of the few participants who really grappled with the potential downside of SWPBIS—wondered whether SWPBIS might end up being a tool for Whiteness:

**Participant 19:** I don't know. I feel like I can't even say it without sounding racist. Like being loud in the cafeteria or using certain language, or it's just... I feel like a lot of the times the things... The expectations that we have for how you're gonna function in this school, are being transgressed by students of color. And whether that's like, the school needs to... That's why with PBIS, I'm not always so sure. Is it like, "Okay. Well, here's what we need you to do." And then a lot of times it's like, "We're teaching you some White way of being. And is that appropriate?" Or is it like, "No. These are the systems that students need to understand in order to navigate their lives, and be successful. So, bring it down in the cafeteria." I just don't... But that's what I see. And I feel like students... The students also have an innate sense of that. So, it's like, "It's my lunch period and you're telling me to be quiet. This is the cafeteria. Why do I have to?"

**“Part of the discussion”.** Even though few participants interrogated SWPBIS like Participant 19, a significant number of them contended that in order for SWPBIS to effectively address disproportionality, race and racism will have to be a central topic throughout implementation. For Participant 2, it is an opportunity to bring those issues to the table:

**Participant 2:** Framing it as this very, it's a clear framework that hopefully is... Provides both teachers and students a less subjective means to address behavior. And so I think there is... There could absolutely be opportunity there to sort of pair that with a discussion around race. Yeah, I don't know what that would look like, but I could see it being an opportunity to do so.

Others felt more strongly that given the deep structural inequity in the school and the Whiteness of the staff, there has to be a reckoning with these issues. This excerpts from Participant 6 illustrates this line of thinking:

**Participant 6:** Given the makeup of our school, given the cultural phenomena that's been going on in our city for the last couple of years . . . That has to be part of the discussion, because any time you're talking about discipline or you're talking about expectations for students, I think the topic of race and bias needs to be a pretty prevalent point of discussion. All the White people are gonna be, "Oh my God, I can't believe we're talking about this again." I'll be, "No, but we need to talk about it because you don't realize this is an issue for you." It's just gonna have to be.

There were still others, such as Participant 19, who agreed that race and racism had to be areas of focus, but harbored doubts about whether it could be sustained:

**Participant 19:** And what are the things that we're... I guess that it would be interesting like, what are the things that we're most worried about, and are those things and if those are things that mostly students of color are doing, like there's such a huge and complicated discussion around like how to have that. How do you start looking at that? And it's probably, I guess, I'm like a little skeptical of the ability of the staff to wanna have really difficult sustained conversations.

Finally, Participant 13 was also skeptical, because some of the staff were already feeling defensive about these issues. This excerpt is taken from my interview notes:

**Notes from Participant 13 Interview:** Said that staff were called racist a couple of years ago and that turned off the conversation. Need to address these issues in a targeted way. Yes, we can talk about institutional racism, but can't accuse all White teachers of being racist. Thought that there are actually racist teachers at VHS, but they just turn off once conversations begin this way.

The interviews suggested several areas where SWPBIS may potentially be able to address disproportionality. However, as many participants pointed out, it cannot happen by accident. According to the participants, a precondition for positive change is that the issues that underlie disproportionality are a central focus of implementation. As several participants noted, keeping that focus is not a simple task. And, as will be discussed further in Chapter 5, SWPBIS is not an inherently race-conscious framework. As a result, expectations that it will impact disproportionality may be more hopeful than realistic.

**“Implementing in a good way”.** There was almost universal agreement that if VHS is to receive any significant benefits from SWPBIS, it will have to be implemented well. As discussed above, many participants expressed qualified optimism. For instance, Participant 1 said, “I think if it was implemented in a good way, I think it would probably be successful.” Similarly, when asked “How confident are you that VHS can make this kind of organizational change?”, Participant 16 replied, “How confident am I they can do it? I'm confident they can do it, if they choose to do it, if they go about it the right way.” What is the right way? According to participants, the right way means implementation that is intentional, incremental, consistent, and persistent over many years, even when things get messy. It means not losing focus when the

next trendy initiative comes around or when there is staff turnover. It means working hard to achieve staff buy-in, even though there will be resistance. Finally, it means a focus on process and people, rather than outcomes and numbers. All of these components are interrelated—pointing to a clear concern about staff commitment and trust. Not all VHS educators were equally confident that VHS could pull it off. In fact, many had seen counter-examples in the recent past. However, many held out hope, seeing VHS as a place of unfulfilled potential and opportunity. As Participant 6 asserted, “I mean, if you wanna make cultural change, you have to freaking go for it.”

**Following through.** One of the most consistent sentiments voiced throughout the interviews was the need for consistent follow-through. It was clear that this was a perspective born from experience. Participants provided examples of past and current initiatives at VHS that did not include the requisite follow-through. As a result, many expressed the need for it, but were not sure that it could happen. Participant 2 described a superficial implementation process that has been the norm at VHS:

**Participant 2:** If we're gonna implement it well, then it has to be something that is really intentional in terms of training, in terms of being consistent on following up, so it's not just something that you train once during PD in August when everyone's brains are fuzzy anyway. [chuckle] And then maybe look for an observation again once and then don't mention again, it's gonna have to be much more.

Participant 4 was more blunt, expressing clear skepticism:

**Participant 4:** I would love to see this work. I'm skeptical just because so far, I... I don't know, maybe I'm just lacking faith that people will actually, again, follow through.

Several participants offered clear examples from the recent past in which VHS introduced a topic or initiative without the necessary build-up or follow-through to get a sustained impact. It is clear, for example, that VHS has been trying to address issues of racial equity, but many staff members see these efforts as half-baked or superficial. Here is an example provided by Participant 8:

**Participant 8:** A couple months ago we watched this movie, "I'm Not a Racist, Am I?" We get the email, we show up and even in the notes that we communicate with the district, why did we watch this movie? What was the point? Because there was no precursor, no follow-up.

Participant 6 shared similar examples and wondered whether VHS had the organizational capacity to substantially address the difficult issues it faces:

**Participant 6:** So I think that everybody knows that... Especially with what's been going on in our town for the last couple of years, everybody knows that there are serious issues that need to be addressed and worked through, and that is gonna be painful, and it's gonna be messy, and it's not gonna be fun sometimes, but on the other side of that is gonna be something really beautiful. I think everybody knows that, but I'm just not sure how many people are really capable of sustaining the dialogue and asking the right questions and putting people in positions to really see significant change here and here.

This excerpt captures well the hope that many participants expressed as well as the lingering uncertainty that significant change is possible.

One thing that many participants warned against was a superficial level of implementation that leads to a short organizational attention span. They observed a history of

the school division jumping to the next trend, leaving prior initiatives to wither on the vine.

Participant 2 provided a recent example:

**Participant 2:** I think that it's something that we're gonna have to be really intentional and thoughtful about, because I think what I have seen in the last two years is, at the beginning of the year, there's always this big push for some new practice. And then inevitably, halfway through the school year, it feels like we haven't checked in on it. My first year here, the big push was around learning targets and having really clearly defined learning targets, and we went through training. There was PD at the beginning of the school year around how to write them, where to post them in your classroom. And I think on the first observation that administration did, they checked for them. And then I think we maybe heard about them in a formal setting maybe one more time, and then they disappeared.

Participant 23 described how this trend has led to a sense of skepticism and distrust within the staff.

**Participant 23:** I think there's always the historical nature of philosophical changes where people that have been around for a while are like, oh this is one more thing. The district has short attention span. The district decides like this is the thing. And they put all their eggs in the basket and then go like full force. And then either because there's like personnel change or something new and shiny gets the attention, and like this will be one more thing.

**Getting staff buy-in.** This idea of building trust among staff over the course of implementation came up often. Most felt that the majority of faculty members would be open to SWPBIS, but that willingness could be curtailed if implementation was not thoughtful and

respectful of educators' time and other responsibilities. Also, several participants were fearful that the more resistant members of staff could stand in the way of successful implementation.

There was general agreement that a slow, sustained implementation process was key to building buy-in:

**Participant 18:** The part that I feel almost daunted by, is making sure that we do it slow enough to get buy-in.

Participant 3 expressed a common sentiment that one benefit of a slow implementation was that educators would not be overwhelmed by the task:

**Participant 3:** And I think you'll lose buy-in from the beginning that way if you don't... You have to make it obtainable for the adults, so then they can make an example for the kids.

Further, many participants suggested that in building staff buy-in, there would have to be focus on resistant staff members. As Participant 20 put it, "And there's a grand divide in terms of the curmudgeons and the free thinkers." For some, this divide could put the whole effort at risk.

Participant 8 asserted that students are quick to recognize fissures in the program:

**Participant 8:** A system can put the things in place . . . the system can give you those parameters and that framework, but if behind that you're the person, you're still not willing to adjust or do something different, at the end of the day it'll still kind of be there. And the kids, they can discern this better than any adult, especially those who have felt some type of violation. They can feel it. They know it and they can discern it very quickly.



Some participants specifically pointed out a perceived divide around issues of race and racism. In this example, Participant 17 expressed his worry that too many staff members lacked the required self-reflection and awareness to be motivated to challenge Whiteness:

**Participant 17:** I guess I keep coming back to the culturally responsive stuff, but when I listen to people talk about... It's like there's people here who are very up on that and talk about it in a way that's smart and sensitive, and shows that they're thoughtful people and there's other people who say things that are just wildly misinformed and just, so it's kind of split. You can find the people who are really anti-racist actively trying to put that agenda forward and then you can find the people who are, for lack of a better word, complicit.

These sentiments about staff distrust and resistance point to a significant challenge in implementing SWPBIS as a response to racial disparities. Even as a “race-neutral” framework, getting staff buy-in for the broad, organizational change that SWPBIS requires is a challenge. Given the added complexity and potential resistance, implementing a race-conscious SWPBIS is a daunting task, at best.

***Focusing on outcomes.*** A majority of participants specifically cited a historical administrative over-focus on outcomes as a barrier to building trust and buy-in. They hoped that SWPBIS implementation would focus on process and addressing issues specific to VHS. This issue was most often brought up regarding racial disproportionality. Some participants reported that VHS had been directed by the division to lower the suspension rates of Black students. Many people felt that the school division was more concerned with protecting their image as opposed to really addressing the issue. For some, like Participant 11, this focus on numbers resulted in a relaxing of disciplinary standards:

**Participant 11:** People care too much about numbers instead of what's actually happening, like if this is the group that's showing off, discipline them accordingly. Like it doesn't really matter if it was more of them than them this week, because what I start to feel like then is when we start to let stuff slide because of stuff like that then I start to feel like we're failing them.

For others, like Participant 7, the major concern was that the focus on outcomes distracted from a focus on the needs of the students.

**Participant 7:** I really don't have a whole lot of perspective. I know I've heard from a few people that, "They really look down on it if you start writing up the Black kids." Because that's sort of coming down from the state, those numbers and that's what they're looking at. So it would be nice to just have more authentic, take away the numbers and actually deal with the people.

In the following excerpt, Participant 17 appreciated the concern about racial disparities, but still wondered if the response has been appropriate:

**Participant 17:** Yeah, and I think that's a very valid concern and I think that concern has been... That was a concern with the previous administration. I remember hearing very explicitly in a beginning of the year PD. Like we have... "Here are the percentages for our suspensions. Here's how many White kids we've suspended and here is how many Black kids". And you see the disparity and that's a problem. And it was presented, I think, in a very thoughtful way. It wasn't presented in a... It was presented as in, "Here's data to show you that this is a thing that as a school, we are doing. You are part of this problem. And we should be... We care about kids, we should be trying to fix that". But yeah, I see the other side of it too, which is... Yeah, that is also partially pressure that's coming from

above. And I think that's good to want to address that. But yeah, I don't know about the quality of the way that it's being addressed.

There was some indication that certain staff members felt that they were bearing the blame for disproportionality and the sole responsibility for fixing it. Participant 5 hoped that SWPBIS could provide supports for staff that felt that the mandate to lower suspensions had not been accompanied by the necessary alternative support systems:

**Participant 5:** And I have a sense from the division, that there's often a sense or an attempt to... There's a pressure to cut down on discipline referrals or cut down... A couple of years ago, they told us we couldn't do out of school suspensions, period. But they've done that without providing us with guidance for other things we should do. So, if you get rid of those things, fine, but we got to do something. And so I'm not sure if the PBIS thing came from the division or from admin or a little bit of both, but I think it's in that similar vein and I'm sort of appreciative that they're getting a program behind what is their ultimate goal.

**Summary of Implementing of SWPBIS.** Staff attitudes about SWPBIS implementation suggests a hope, perhaps an unrealistic one, that SWPBIS will help address racial disciplinary disproportionality and a need for a thoughtful, deliberate, and incremental implementation process. Even while some participants expressed optimism for SWPBIS in shrinking racial disparities, it was cautious. Further, a few posed pointed questions about whether or not SWPBIS might just end up recreating Whiteness in a new package. These questions are important and will be considered more fully in the next chapter. What is clear from this theme, though, is that while staff seem open to many of the aims of SWPBIS, they remain skeptical that it can be implemented in way the builds staff buy-in and sustainability.

## Chapter 5: Discussion and Implications

### Introduction

The aim of this study was to open the “black box” of research that suggests that SWPBIS is a useful framework for replacing zero tolerance with a more preventative and positive school disciplinary approach, but generally ineffective in reducing disparate racial disciplinary outcomes. Given a policy context in which many school districts and states are implementing SWPBIS to address concerns about the racially disproportionate use of school disciplinary practices that contribute to the school to prison pipeline (STPP), this study takes a critical look at its strengths and limitations pertaining to racial disproportionality in school discipline. Critical race theory (CRT) posits that because we live in a society in which racism and racial stratification is deeply entrenched and endemic, “race-neutral” and colorblind laws, policies, and frameworks like SWPBIS only serve to maintain an unequal status quo. Using CRT as its main theoretical lens to examine educator perceptions of school disciplinary policies and practices, disciplinary disproportionality, and the broad aims of SWPBIS, this study sought to understand the specific context of one high school in the pre-implementation stages of SWPBIS. Since educators are the front-line implementers of SWPBIS, their perspectives are crucial in understanding the potential viability and sustainability of SWPBIS in any given setting. The findings illustrate a variety of ways, both overt and subtle, that Whiteness imposes and reinforces a stratified and segregated social order at VHS, suggesting that academic and disciplinary racial gaps are, in large part, structurally imposed, and appear to be inevitable. The conceptual framework detailed at the beginning of the previous chapter offers a lens through which to see how SWPBIS may be constrained, at structural and individual levels, in addressing the complex

issues related to racial disproportionality at VHS, even though the majority of its staff members are well-intentioned and concerned about racial disparities.

### **Implementing in Pervasive Whiteness**

Participants in this study describe school in which Whiteness is pervasive. Racial segregation and stratification are salient features of everyday life at VHS and play out in both daily interpersonal interactions and entrenched systems built over years. As such, the findings suggest that more preventative and positive disciplinary strategies are not sufficient to address racial stratification. If, as the conceptual framework of this analysis illustrates, the day to day routines of the school are rooted in Whiteness and deeply structured to reinforce and maintain the racial hierarchy, any intervention that focuses solely on changing the routines without altering the structure is unlikely to address the roots of inequity, even if those changes are an improvement over past approaches.

The system of racial advantages and disadvantages at VHS is most clearly encapsulated in its prominent structural characteristic and one of the two meta-themes for this analysis—two schools in one. This reality was endorsed by almost every participant and was seen as the key contributor to a variety of racialized processes and outcomes at VHS. Data from the U.S. Department of Education (2018) supports participant observations of a racially bifurcated educational setting. The most recent report from the 2015-2016 school year shows that enrollment in Calculus, one of the highest levels of math, was over 80% White and about 7% Black, even though White students make up just over 45% of the student body and Black students make up over 33%. Gifted and Talented (G & T) program enrollment presents another stark example. Over 70% of G & T students were White and just over 13% were Black. In contrast, nearly 60% of students who were diagnosed with a learning disability were Black,

compared to just over 20% who were White. In the same year, almost 60% of out-of-school suspensions and 70% of in-school suspensions at VHS were served by Black students, compared to close to 17% and 12% by White students, respectively.

The findings support Bonilla-Silva's (2015) emphasis on the racial structure created through and by Whiteness that "shapes the life chances of the various races" and "is responsible for the production and reproduction of systemic racial advantages for some (the dominant racial group) and disadvantages for others (the subordinated races)" (p. 1360). As Bonilla-Silva stresses, and this study clearly indicates, this structure is not upheld by the prejudice of individuals. Instead, it is woven into the fabric of our society in the form of a pervasive racial ideology that can be difficult to recognize. In fact, since the end of the Jim Crow era, when racism was clearly visible and overt, a new kind of racism has emerged that has upheld the racial structure. According to Bonilla-Silva (2015), this "new racism" is characterized by:

- (1) the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practices,
- (2) the avoidance of direct racial terminology,
- (3) the elaboration of a racial political agenda that eschews direct racial references,
- (4) the subtle character of most mechanisms to reproduce racial privilege, and
- (5) the rearticulation of some racial practices of the past (p. 1362).

The distinction between structural and interpersonal racism is important to this analysis because it suggests how people who do not hold consciously racist views can still uphold the ideology of Whiteness. More apt in the case of this study, it illustrates how even those who may hope for equality in racial outcomes and have the best of intentions, such as the educators at VHS, can still be implicated in the maintenance of racial hierarchies.

Disciplinary disproportionality is a feature of VHS' structure rather than an accidental, unfortunate outcome rooted in acts of bigotry or individual interactions. In a variety of different

ways both overt and subtle—e.g. academic tracking, underrepresentation of people of color on the faculty, racialized school spaces, coded language, discursive Whiteness—this study’s data indicate that White students and families are assigned more value than students of color and their families. The cumulative impact of all of these factors renders Black students and other students of color less worthy, more expendable, and easier to exclude. As Lewis & Diamond found in their case study of one school in a large Midwestern city, “long histories of racial hierarchy mean that there are collective, group-level differences in access to various kinds of resources that matter for school experiences” (p. 78).

At VHS, each time a Black student gets suspended out of school or gets placed in the ISS room and each time a White student is given a break or sent back to class with a warning, racialized structures and outcomes become easily explained and justified (Simson, 2015). Absent deeply entrenched structural inequality, these individual instances could potentially be ignored as anomalies. Or, as trends emerge, new strategies and approaches to discipline can be implemented to reverse it. But in a system that is deeply stratified and rooted in Whiteness, individual disciplinary processes become part of the historical and ongoing accumulation of systemic advantages and disadvantages.

In examining the entrenched systemic processes that created and continue to uphold VHS’s racially stratified structure, I am not implying that SWPBIS can or should be expected to address all of them and totally dismantle Whiteness. Instead, this analysis provides a view of the context in which SWPBIS is being implemented and the perceptions of those that will be most responsible for its implementation. This contextualized perspective of SWPBIS implementation underscores the complex nature of discipline in schools. As the interviews in this study make clear, discipline is a component of a large set of interrelated school practices and is one of the

many ways that students get categorized and sorted (Carter et al. 2017; Domina, Penner, & Penner, 2017). To the question of whether or not SWPBIS can attend to issues of racialized discipline and equity, the findings offer hope and doubt. They suggest that VHS has group of educators that is ready to move on from zero tolerance and create a more equitable set of opportunities for its students. They also suggest that the ability, and perhaps the motivation, for them to reach either of these goals is profoundly shaped by a deeply rooted set of structures and social and discursive practices that are based in Whiteness and are recreated on a daily basis.

The following discussion outlines what the findings reveal about the opportunities and barriers at VHS as they embark on SWPBIS implementation. In keeping with the focus of this study, the discussion will be organized to address each of the four research questions outlined in Chapter 3. To finish, I will offer thoughts on the implications of this study in terms of policy, practice, and future research.

### **Educator Perceptions of Current Disciplinary Procedure and Practices**

Overall, the participants felt that VHS's disciplinary climate was improving. They perceived a decreasingly chaotic environment, characterized by declining suspension rates and office disciplinary referrals. Many participants attributed this improvement to a more stable and responsive administrative staff, though there was some disagreement on the overall effectiveness of administrative interventions. This sense of positive progress may be reflecting national trends, which show that suspension rates are slowly dropping. A Child Trends' analysis (Harper, Ryberg, & Temkin, 2018) of national data, showed that between the 2011-12 school year and the 2015-16 school year, schools went from suspending 5.6 percent of students to 4.7 percent. However, while suspension rates dropped for every demographic group, racial and other disparities remained. In particular, Black students and students with disabilities were suspended



at double the rate of White students and students without disabilities. These numbers tend to mirror what is happening at VHS, where there have been modest overall improvements accompanied by persistent disproportionality. While most participants were pleased with the school's progress, major concerns remained, including the sense that current disciplinary practices were not focused on the underlying needs of students and were not consistent across the school or from classroom to classroom. These issues will be discussed further in the section focused on the second research question regarding educator priorities for change in school disciplinary practices.

**Whitewashing discipline: semantic vs. latent understandings.** Before moving to priorities for change, it is important to understand participant perceptions of discipline in the context of a school rooted in Whiteness. The deductive/inductive approach to data analysis allowed for a deeper understanding of how ostensibly non-racial conversations at VHS are inherently racialized and how well-meaning educators become implicated in Whiteness. The school's superstructure, characterized by its racial bifurcation, helps us understand that generalized discussions of discipline are primarily discussions about disciplining Black students. When participants talked about the underlying needs of students and issues of consistency, the implicit focus was on the underlying needs of Black students and more consistency for Black students. As a result, examining latent meanings in the discourse provided a deeper understanding of various manifestations of Whiteness at VHS, which may help increase the school's ability to address the roots of racialized discipline and other forms of school inequity.

This kind of Whiteness in discourse was exemplified in participant discussions about the extent to which current disciplinary practices were addressing the underlying student needs contributing to problematic behavior. On the surface, this perspective suggests that participants

understood discipline as a complex phenomenon to be addressed with sensitivity and compassion. However, when seen through a critical race lens, it becomes apparent that a majority of participants framed student needs through a deficit perspective that placed ultimate responsibility for discipline problems on dysfunctional cultural values and home environments (Solorzano, 1997). The notion that some students are culturally superior to others reinforces and is reinforced by the racial hierarchies that currently exist at VHS and allows educators to unwittingly avoid examining their own or the school's responsibility in contributing to disproportionality.

The literature suggests that colorblind and deficit perspectives remain prevalent and can have serious implications for how perceived school problems are addressed (Bertrand, Freelon, & Rogers, 2018; CADRE report, 2017; Nelson & Guerra, 2014; Zirkel & Pollack, 2016). Logically, deficit-oriented perspectives can lead to deficit-oriented policies that spawn deficit-oriented practices (Bertrand, Freelon, & Rogers, 2018). For instance, in a case study of one schools district that analyzed the debate around where school funds would be allocated, colorblind and deficit narratives contributed to policy decisions that saw some students as worthy or unworthy. They found that cultural deficit perspectives were highly deterministic:

These perspectives are disturbing in their fatalism. These social and economic patterns are not seen as something that can be addressed through, perhaps, access to specialized resources, such as the expensive professional tutors that are available to more affluent students. Instead, the issues are seen as somehow leading these students to be

“unsalvageable”—regrettably perhaps, but “unsalvageable” nevertheless (p. 1539)

Furthermore, Nelson and Guerra's (2014) qualitative surveys of 111 teachers and educational leaders in two districts in Texas and Michigan suggested that when educators use a deficit lens,

they generally “attempt to close the achievement gap with technical fixes rather than question their own effectiveness in providing equitable, culturally responsive learning environments. (p. 88). This idea, which has direct implications for SWPBIS, will be explored more thoroughly in the discussion of the final research question.

The key point for this discussion is that examining the ways that participants perceived the disciplinary context at VHS at a semantic and latent level helped sharpened the understanding of the subtle and not-so-subtle racialized nature of their perspectives and, by extension, the racialized nature of the impending implementation of SWPBIS.

### **Priorities for Change**

**Zero tolerance.** Participants overwhelmingly rejected exclusionary discipline in favor of disciplinary approaches that contribute to student growth and attends to their unmet needs. Educator attitudes towards discipline were clearly aligned with a key aim of SWPBIS—creating a more positive and preventative school disciplinary climate and reducing the use of reactionary and punitive disciplinary practices (Bradshaw, Waadsdorf, & Leaf, 2015; Simonsen & Myers, 2015). In terms of this aspect of the STPP, research has clearly shown that when implemented well, SWPBIS can contribute to decreases in discipline problems and the use of OSS (Barrett, Bradshaw, Lewis-Palmer, 2008; Bradshaw, Mitchell, & Leaf, 2010; Bradshaw, Waasdorp, & Leaf, 2015; Eversten, 2012; Flannery, Fenning, Kato, & McIntosh, 2014; Freeman et al., 2016; Luiselli, Putnam, & Sunderland, 2002; Mass-Galloway, Panyan, Smith, & Wessendorf, 2008; Mccurdy, Mannella, & Eldridge, 2003; Muscott, Mann, & LeBrun, 2008; Nelson, Martella, & Marchand-Martella, 2002; Scott & Barrett, 2004; Waasdorp, Bradshaw, & Leaf, 2012). One of the most attractive features of SWPBIS is that it is a flexible framework that allows schools to choose strategies and interventions that meet their specific needs (McIntosh et al., 2016; Sugai &

Simonsen, 2012), an idea that was represented in this study when participants suggested that keeping students in the classroom is of the utmost importance in promoting higher levels of student success. This may present an opportunity for VHS to try new approaches to discipline, including increasing its use of restorative justice, with which many staff members are already familiar.

One area of discipline that may need further discussion at VHS is the use of in-school suspension (ISS). There were several participants who indicated that ISS may be a positive aspect of discipline at VHS and others who felt that it was just as harmful as OSS. The most current available data (U.S. Department of Education, 2018) show that ISS is used more often than OSS at VHS and that close to 70% of ISS were served by Black students, compared to close to 12% by White students. It is possible that ISS is simply replacing OSS as the exclusionary punishment of choice. In a recent quasi-experimental study by Gage, Grasley-Boy, George, Childs, & Kincaid (2019), SWPBIS was shown to decrease the use of OSS, but not ISS, suggesting that schools may be replacing one with the other. There is some evidence to indicate that, like OSS, ISS is associated with poorer student outcomes (Noltmeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015). Other studies suggest that ISS, when implemented in ways that emphasize student growth, can be a useful tool in the disciplinary tool bag (Children's Defense Fund, 2014).

**Consistency.** Another finding that bodes well for SWPBIS is that educators at VHS seek more consistency in several aspects of school discipline. Consistency is one of the foundational elements of the SWPBIS framework (Evanovich & Scott, 2016; Sugai & Horner, 2002). Implementation of SWPBIS requires schools to establish a set of school-wide expectations that are consistently taught and reinforced throughout the building (Sugai & Horner, 2002). This process is intended to help make school a more predictable environment for students and staff

and create a common language around which the school culture is built (Young, Caldarella, Richardson, & Young, 2012). Additionally, consistent application of chosen strategies is key to SWPBIS implementation fidelity (Evanovich & Scott, 2016). Given the high level of concern about consistency in the interviews, the emphasis SWPBIS places on consistent practices and a common framework should help increase staff buy-in.

A common concern of participants was that because the school is so large and educators tend to have more autonomy at the high school level, implementing initiatives and creating systems of accountability seems overwhelming. In other words, lack of consistency is, to some degree, built into the secondary school setting. SWPBIS literature focused on the secondary level supports these concerns, indicating that implementation may be less successful in high schools compared to elementary and middle schools due to the increased contextual complexity (Flannery et al., 2013; Flannery, Sugai, & Anderson, 2009; Swain-Bradway, Pinkney, & Flannery, 2015). These issues will likely have to be a focus for the SWPBIS team at VHS. If, for example, VHS educators do not sense that SWPBIS is being implemented consistently across the whole school, they may be less likely to adopt the language and strategies of SWPBIS themselves.

However, as the data reveal, consistency is not a settled topic at VHS. Nor is it easy to achieve under SWPBIS. The interviews suggested that educators struggled to define consistency and that the concept of consistency may need to be addressed throughout implementation. In particular, many participants struggled to reconcile their desire for consistent consequences for student behavior and their acknowledgment that student behavior must be considered in context. For some, consistency was more about process and communication rather than specific rules or reactions to behavioral infractions.

In the PBIS literature, the question of consistency is also unresolved. On one hand, Sugai and Horner (2002), two of the major architects of SWPBIS, argue that over the last twenty years, schools have been overly focused on consistent responses to behavior problems and “displays of antisocial behavior” (p. 25). Indeed, zero tolerance discipline ostensibly heralds consistency above all else. As an alternative, Sugai and Horner (2002) emphasize consistent language and processes across systems. For example, expectations should be taught similarly at the whole school level and the classroom level. This aspect of consistency was highly endorsed by participants in this study, who expressed concerns that different expectations and disciplinary environments from class to class were creating hardships for students. Especially at the high school level, where students often attend several classes a day, it is asking a lot of them to adapt to such varied classroom contexts.

On the other hand, SWPBIS suggests that schools develop detailed lists of what are considered minor and major infractions and how they will be dealt with (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Often, what become defined as “major” offenses result in ODRs and become the grounds for school exclusion (Christofferson & Callahan, 2015). As a result, consistency in SWPBIS can look eerily similar to zero tolerance and, as Decoteau and Clough (2015) suggest, may “undermine the discipline practices and decision-making of teachers who are more apt to rely on socio-emotional and relational discipline approaches, especially outside of their classrooms” (p. 170). In this study, some educators indicated that, for them, more consistency equated to more consistent punishment, whereas others felt that a consistent process that included more attention to student needs and the contextual elements of student behavior was desirable. This tension reflects similar tensions within SWBPIS and will require attention if VHS hopes that SWBPIS will contribute to a more inclusive disciplinary culture.

**Concerns about racial disproportionality.** Despite the inherent race-neutrality of SWPBIS and inconsistent evidence that it can address racial disproportionality, the views of many of the participants in this study indicate that SWPBIS at VHS may be one tool in the equity toolbox. Most participants saw SWPBIS as a response to concerns in the community and the school division about racial disproportionality and several hoped that issues of race and racism would be included in the implementation process. The fact that the majority of educators at VHS are concerned about disproportionality and hope that SWPBIS implementation addresses issues of race and racism presents an opportunity for SWPBIS to positively impact racialized discipline. Of course, as will be further discussed in the following section, there are several barriers that must be addressed for this to happen. However, some literature suggests that there are ways to make SWPBIS more effective in decreasing disproportionality (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014; Vincent, Randall, Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011), though evidence backing these claims is scant (Tobin & Vincent, 2011; Vincent, Swain-Bradway, Tobin, & May, 2011). For instance, using data from 46 schools, Tobin and Vincent found that certain strategies commonly employed under SWPBIS, such as increased use of teacher praise and reinforcement when students meet behavioral expectations, were more effective in reducing disproportionality than others. Another important strategy that had a positive impact was the use of regular disciplinary data reports to inform SWPBIS team and faculty training. These results suggest that it may be possible to find specific strategies and interventions within the SWPBIS framework that target the causes of disproportionality if a particular school or division were so inclined. At VHS, where participants considered disproportionality a problem and viewed SWPBIS as a tool to address it, there might be opportunities to implement culturally responsive practices and strategies (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, & Smolkowski, 2014; Vincent, Randall,

Cartledge, Tobin, & Swain-Bradway, 2011) or train staff to increase awareness of implicit bias and its consequences (Staats, 2016; Wald, 2014).

What is unclear from the data is the level of commitment that VHS educators have for making SWPBIS a more race-conscious initiative. As of yet, there is no research that shows examples of a long-term, race-conscious implementation of SWPBIS. As several participants pointed out, recent events in the nation and in Virginia have heightened community awareness around issues of racial equity. However, one wonders when this apparent window of opportunity will end. If the issue of racial equity becomes less urgent and, as is inevitable, SWPBIS implementation runs into periods of difficulty and uncertainty, will the priorities of staff remain constant? Or, will the persistent Whiteness at VHS overwhelm the process?

Some of the findings suggest reason for concern. For instance, very few participants voiced concerns about SWPBIS regarding its ability to address disproportionality, raising the question of how critically VHS educators are examining the problem. Only one, Participant 19, specifically worried that SWPBIS could reproduce systems of Whiteness. Even more concerning is the contention, brought up by a couple of participants, that White educators at VHS were already feeling defensive about these issues. This kind of defensiveness may reflect a kind of white fragility, which manifests when confronting issues of race and racism causes a kind of racial stress that often, “triggers a range of defensive responses” that may include “argumentation, silence, or withdrawal from the stress-inducing situation” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 2). According to Jayakumar and Adamian (2017), White fragility is related to a new kind of colorblind racism, where White people, even those with increased knowledge about structural racism, avoid racially vulnerable situations that might expose their own complicity in racialized systems. This concept is particularly salient in relation to this study, in which participants often



showed high levels of awareness of certain kinds of structural racism. As this analysis indicated, though, the same participants that spoke to issues of Whiteness also reinforced Whiteness in their discourse. This suggests that while concerns about racial disproportionality are currently present, there may be resistance if SWPBIS implementation pushes White educators past their comfort levels.

### **Understandings of Disproportionality**

In addition to showing concern about racial disproportionality, participants recognized the complexity of the issue and offered a variety of explanations for its existence and persistence. For many, disproportionality was directly related to the ways that Whiteness was structured into the VHS system. Many participants offered critical insights into the connections between academic stratification and disciplinary outcomes. It was clear from their responses that in a bifurcated school system, where students are racially segregated through a number of ostensibly non-racial processes, such as academic tracking, Black students and other students of color are seen as more disruptive, more at-risk, and more expendable.

In essence, participants saw disproportionality as a “tsunami of variables”—interrelated and interacting interpersonal and structural processes that create a cycle of inequity. This analysis shows how this cycle can be seen as a feedback loop that is fueled by the logics of Whiteness. The participants described a system in which racial stratification starts well before the students enter high school. At VHS, stratification is reinforced and institutionalized through continued tracking processes and the creation of racialized spaces that celebrate and advantage White students and devalue and disadvantage Black student and other students of color. The structural hierarchy is maintained through a series of interpersonal interactions and daily systemic processes—characterized by unequal academic expectations, differential discipline

based in stereotypes, implicit biases, and cultural expectations, and inequitable distribution of cultural capital—that are overseen by a mostly White staff that have themselves benefitted from the same system.

This apparent feedback loop is reminiscent of the model offered by Simson (2014), that illustrates how race becomes constructed and reconstructed through cyclical interactions between racially hierarchical structures and social interactions that are informed by and reinforce the hierarchies. Simson posits that in school disciplinary interactions, the behavior of Black students is often viewed with more scrutiny and often seen as more suspicious or defiant, resulting in more severe consequences. As a result:

At a minimum, the portion of racial disproportionality in school discipline that cannot be explained by socioeconomic factors and by rates of actual misbehavior can be attributed to this process. Completing the vicious cycle, the experiences of American youth confirms and rigidifies broader social meanings that associate inferiority and lack of true societal belonging with blackness, and superiority and societal leadership with whiteness (p. 534).

Simson's model and participant perceptions in this study indicate that disproportionality, like Whiteness, is a tautology, a logic that continuously proves itself. What is particularly insidious about this is that it is possible to recognize particular components of the cycle, as many educators at VHS do, and still not see its comprehensive nature and how the components fit together. It is easy to understand, then, why schools and educators may feel completely overwhelmed by the scope of the issue(s).

The fact that these issues are complex and require attention to several interconnecting threads underscores the problematic nature of discourse related to disciplinary disproportionality.

When explaining disproportionality, participants regularly normalized the current system by minimizing racism, naturalizing racial disparities, and citing cultural deficits. Again, this does not mean that educators at VHS are virulent racists. Rather, it means that they are part of a society where racial hierarchies have been reified over centuries, structurally and ideologically. While there is no way to measure the extent to which these underlying assumptions impact racially differentiated practices and outcomes in education, it is possible that they become self-fulfilling prophecies, where attitudes rooted in Whiteness lead to the passive acceptance of policies and practices that uphold racial advantages and disadvantages (Diamond, Randolph, & Spillane, 2004; Fergus, 2017).

According to some research, individual attitudes of educators are one aspect of a broader, organizational school habitus that helps “make for an unawareness of how everyday life produces deleterious consequences for racial and ethnic minorities” (McDonald & Harvey Wingfield, 2009, p. 29). For instance, as part of a longitudinal study of urban elementary schools, Diamond, Randolph, and Spillane (2004) examined the interaction between school context and teachers’ beliefs and actions. They found that in schools that served more lower-income, Black students, there was a coupling between teachers’ emphasis on student deficits and an organizational sense of accountability to its students:

The organizational habitus is like a current that guides teacher expectations and sense of responsibility in a particular direction. The substance of everyday teacher interaction, those conversations about and evaluations of students that make up the micropolitical context, are the waves of sentiment that accumulate and give direction to the stream of beliefs. Our work suggests that in predominately lower-income and African American

schools, the current of belief and practice tends toward lower expectations followed by a decreased sense of responsibility for students (p. 76).

This concept of organizational habitus may be helpful in understanding the ways that visible Whiteness and invisible Whiteness interact and reinforce each other at VHS. The structured ways that students of color are segregated and subordinated feeds and is fed by educators' implicit attitudes, rendering students of one school as less worthy than those of the other, and normalizing the current arrangement. The data in this study suggest that many educators recognize how some aspects of this arrangement contribute to disproportionality, but may fail to recognize how it is influenced by and influences their own beliefs and practices.

### **SWPBIS Implementation and Disproportionality**

The findings suggest several specific limitations of SWPBIS to address racial disproportionality at VHS, some of which will be highlighted below. But perhaps SWPBIS's biggest limitation is its emphasis on internal, school-based strategies and lack of attention to broader social and historical forces that undergird educational policies and practices. As this study has shown, an over-focus on the day-to-day details can obfuscate the bigger picture. Gillborn (2015), in his analysis of the U.S. and English educational systems, says that this approach, which "seeks school-based solutions to school-based problems and totally ignores existing structural and historical relations of domination" (p. 44), predominates educational policy. Gillborn's critique is informed by Thrupp and Wilmott (2003), who distinguish between problem-solving and critical perspectives in education. Problem-solving perspectives, such as SWPBIS, "reflect 'common-sense', functionalist, ahistorical, individuated and often monocultural views about the purposes and problems of school" (p. 4). Critical perspectives, on the other hand, assume that "schools play a key role in perpetuating social inequality through

reproducing the values and ideologies of dominant social groups (for example, middle class, white, male) and the status rankings of the existing social structure” (p. 4). Without such a critical perspective at VHS, it is unlikely that reform efforts, such as SWPBIS, will seriously address the deep, structural roots of disproportionality.

**Who is SWPBIS for?:** Aside from the fact that SWPBIS is not inherently equipped to address disproportionality, barriers to successful implementation can even more severely limit its impact. One key barrier to implementation found in this study is the two-school structure of VHS. Applying a whole-school framework in a bifurcated school raises questions about whom SWPBIS is for and who bears the burden of implementation. For SWPBIS, a disciplinary framework, this question is especially important, since the majority of “discipline” is happening in the school populated by mostly Black, less affluent students. Even before it starts, it seems likely that half of the school community will question the need to take on such a broad-based organizational change. Especially at a high school in which educators are already highly siloed (Bohanon, Fenning, Borgmeier, Flannery, & Malloy, 2009) and concerned with their own “little fiefdoms,” staff buy-in seems like a significant challenge.

It is likely in this environment that staff members who primarily work with students of color in lower level classes will carry a heavier burden in SWPBIS implementation and be held to a different standard of accountability. Perhaps the heaviest burden, though, will be carried by the students. Because SWPBIS is built from a problem-solving perspective rather than a critical one, it is easy to see how it could become simply a new iteration of Whiteness. If, for instance, it does not meet the hoped-for goals of reducing disciplinary disparities, it could reinforce deficit perspective. As Nelson & Guerra (2014) suggest:

What is most problematic about this is that when technical solutions fail to close the gap, deficit thinking is likely to be reinforced and school improvement efforts stall (García & Guerra, 2004). In other words, students are blamed for their “lack of motivation and interest in education” and parents for their “failure to value education and support their children,” rather than the school being held responsible. (pps. 88-89)

Or, in the case of Bornstein’s (2014; 2017) multicase qualitative analysis of inclusive school leaders in five diverse school districts that were implementing SWPBIS, in part, to address disproportionate discipline, he found that it was being used as a tool for compliance and creating order. When students did not comply, they were placed in higher tiers and seen as potentially having a behavioral disorder. In this way, one deficit perspective was replaced with another so that “student who were formerly regarded as disorderly increasingly came to be regarded as disordered” (2017, p. 136). In these schools, the terms of the discourse changed, but the roots of the discourse remained, as did a system of stratification.

If SWPBIS is to play any part in addressing issues related to racial disproportionality and racialized school practices at VHS, it has to be implemented well. Even in a scenario in which VHS overcomes its structural barriers and SWPBIS truly becomes a whole-school initiative, if implementation is haphazard or unsustainable, local efforts to make SWPBIS culturally responsive and race-conscious will suffer the same fate. As such, participant concerns about implementation and perceptions regarding barriers to implementation should be given serious consideration. Overall, many of the participant concerns point to a lack of trust among educators that VHS leadership can pull this off. For organizational change initiatives to work, trust is essential (Lines, Selart, Espedal, & Johansen, 2005; Sloyan & Ludema, 2010). Participants pointed to several areas that have contributed to staff distrust regarding new programs and

initiatives. One issue is the high administrative turnover rate in the recent past. According to participants, the turnover has led to poor administrative follow-through and accountability, lack of consistent vision, and a short programmatic attention span—leading many staff members to ignore initiatives or jump in half-heartedly. Another issue was the historical lack of school and division follow-through on prior initiatives. The point that follow-through and persistence was essential to building trust and successful implementation was made throughout the interviews. It is clear that for SWPBIS to work at VHS, the leadership team will have to have a long-term plan that builds over time. Persistence is probably even more important if implementation includes difficult issues of racial and economic equity. It is likely that there will be setbacks and moments of discomfort. If leadership is willing to work through those moments, they may be able to strengthen trust and staff buy-in.

## **Implications**

### **Policy Implications**

One promising policy implication of this study is that educators appear to widely condemn the exclusionary, reactive, and punitive disciplinary practices that prevailed under the zero tolerance paradigm. If this finding applies more widely, it could be a hopeful signal for the end of the zero tolerance era. More positive and preventative approaches such as SWPBIS, when implemented well, can provide educators with new tools to improve relationships with students, set high expectations, and keep students in the classroom. Research showing that SWPBIS results in decreased ODRs, suspensions, and expulsions justifies its growing popularity, despite its limitations.

However, the results of this study underscore the need for school discipline to be seen as part of a larger set of school routines and practices rather than as an isolated phenomenon.

Disciplinary disproportionality is symptomatic of deeply racially and economically stratified structural arrangement, or as Skiba and colleagues (2002) put it, a “complex of inequity” (p. 322). Without such critical perspective, in the current policy environment, school leaders and government officials will continue to call upon colorblind, school-based, and managerialist initiatives such as SWPBIS to address disproportionality and then shrug their shoulders when it fails to do so.

In order to cut at the roots of racial disproportionality in school discipline, policies and initiatives must address both the structural conditions that create racial hierarchies and the attitudes and perspectives that stem from and maintain them. This presents a challenge in the current political climate, in which race-conscious and structural equity policies are often seen as too challenging or even inflammatory (Gillborn, 2015). As Gillborn (2015) indicates, race equity “has constantly to fight for the legitimacy as a significant topic for education policy-makers” (p. 50). This struggle implicates education policy as a component in maintaining White supremacy. The persistent popularity of colorblind approaches to policy reflect, as Dumans, Dixson, and Mayorga (2016) put it, “a kind of collective desire to *not imagine* race as a problem” (p. 4).

A striking example of how this kind of colorblind approach can undercut efforts to create more equitable educational environments is the 2010 passage of a bill in Arizona that outlawed ethnic studies programs in public schools and effectively shut down a Mexican-American studies program at Tucson Unified School District (Cabrera, Meza, Romero, & Rodriguez, 2013), despite the fact that it was highly effective in increasing academic achievement and graduation rates (Cabrera, Milem, & Marx, 2012). The law, premised in colorblind ideology, suggested that such ethnic studies programs promoted “the resentment toward a race or class of people” and



were designed “primarily for pupils of a particular ethnic group” (Cabrera et al., 2013, p. 9). These views ignore the many ways in which educational policy and practice has contributed to inequity and advantaged Whiteness. This Arizona case is instructive when considering VHS, who recently invested millions of dollars to construct a STEM lab, which, as several participants pointed out, is ostensibly for all students but in reality is a predominantly White space that benefits mostly White, affluent students. It is worth imagining a scenario in which the same money had been proposed to build an ethnic or African American studies wing. In the current climate, it is unlikely that it would have been as uncontroversial as the STEM lab. Rather than face resistance to this kind of approach to structural inequity, it is much easier to implement something like SWPBIS, which does not pose any significant threat to White privilege and power.

While the emphasis of this dissertation is on the people that are disadvantaged by a two-school system, it is equally important that SWPBIS or any other initiative meant to enact school change and reverse disparate outcomes consider who benefits from current arrangements. Power and privilege are not easily acquiesced and systemic change will require a challenge to deeply entrenched structural advantages and a willingness to endure the requisite pain and discomfort that will almost certainly accompany it. After all, this research is not uncovering anything new. We have known for decades that Black students are punished at school more often and more severely than White students (Children’s Defense Fund, 1972). We have also known that students of color have been disproportionately ushered into lower academic tracks (Ansalone, 2006) and special education classrooms (Artiles, 2011) to their collective detriment. Yet, these issues persist. While this dissertation might help illuminate some of the specific ways that these processes play out at VHS, the fact that they exist is not revelatory.

The efforts of Bal and colleagues (2012; 2106) to transform SWPBIS into Culturally Responsive PBIS (CRPBIS) is the most comprehensive attempt yet to maintain the core elements of SWPBIS but add components that come from a critical perspective and are explicitly race-conscious. Bal and his team have implemented CRPBIS in several schools in Wisconsin and early reports offer promise that this approach, which includes marginalized students and families in all aspects of the implementation process, has the potential to attend to deeper structural, historical, and cultural issues (Bal, 2018). That being said, there is not yet any clear evidence that CRPBIS can fulfill this promise or have a sustained impact. Nevertheless, state and local support for schools to implement culturally responsive forms of SWPBIS (Bal, 2015; Vincent et al., 2011) may help provide a clearer picture of the possibilities for SWPBIS to address racial disproportionality.

### **Practice Implications.**

The findings of this study offer several suggestions for social work and education practice. First, they reinforce the need for practitioners to engage in critical self-reflection and training that helps them interrogate their own role in maintaining racial stratification and disciplinary disproportionality. This study clearly supports the work of CRT scholars that show how practitioners with the best of intentions can be a part of the problem (Bonilla-Silva, 2018; Collins, 2009; Diamond & Lewis, 2015; Leonardo, 2013). Participants in this study were able to identify several ways the Whiteness manifested itself at VHS to put students of color in disadvantaged disciplinary and academic positions. Simultaneously, they engaged in discursive forms of Whiteness that implicitly ratified or reinforced the current arrangement.

What may be encouraging is that most educators at VHS, unlike participants in other studies of educators (Stoll, 2014; Vaught & Castagno, 2008), did not avoid issues of race and

racism in our conversations. Additionally, many of them identified elements of structural racism and expressed interest in making race and racism a central focus of school change efforts. While their openness about this topic could reflect their comfort level with me as a former educator or White person, it could also indicate that educators are becoming more aware of the complex nature of racism in education and more willing to address it. However, as in Stoll's (2014) study, VHS participants did rely on colorblind narratives to explain and address racial inequity at their school. In particular, many participants employed cultural deficit narratives that tended to absolve the school or school system from responsibility. Additionally, several participants used naturalization discourse to biologize or normalize hierarchies. Strategies rooted in colorblind narratives can lead to an SWPBIS that puts a newer, prettier veneer around Whiteness. For example, without a clear idea of how current expectations are based on White norms and how interpretations of student behavior benefit White students and criminalize students of color, then new expectations under SWPBIS are likely to do just the same. As such, while colorblind ideology may be changing, it is still prevalent and needs to be addressed for practitioners to fully understand how school policies and practices may be bolstering Whiteness.

The findings also indicate the social workers have an important role to play in dismantling the STPP. Inherent in the social work discipline is the person-in-environment perspective and explicit social justice orientation, both of which provide a lens through which social workers understand the connection between and interaction of the micro and macro. While many educators emphasize issues of social justice, there is no explicit social justice value orientation or theoretical perspective in the discipline of education (Cochran-Smith, 2010). While it is debatable whether these lenses have been fully engaged by social workers to address structural racism (Corley & Young, 2018), school social workers and social workers that engage

with the educational system are more prepared than most to help place proposed interventions like SWPBIS in their proper context.

The role of social work in this area has been directly addressed by Teasley and colleagues (2017), who posit that “Racially disproportionate use of suspension and expulsion is a grand challenge for social work, which is well positioned to address the challenge because of the key roles that social workers play in schools” (p. 1). However, they also lament that there has yet to be a concerted effort with social work to deal with issues of the STPP. This study reinforces the notion that social workers are in a unique position to push school policy in new directions.

Lastly, this study provides insights into how SWPBIS can contribute to improved disciplinary practices and a more positive school environment. Despite its limitations, it would be inadvisable to throw the SWPBIS baby out with the bathwater. After all, this analysis is less a critique of SWBPIS itself and more of critique of the policy environment that overstates its scope and impact. As discussed previously, SWPBIS offers several components that meet the stated needs and interests of educators at VHS. As research suggests, SWPBIS can help educators and other practitioners develop more positive and preventative approaches to school discipline. Moreover, the flexibility of the SWPBIS framework allows schools to identify context-specific needs and address them through training and evaluation. Including critical and frank discussions of race and racism throughout SWPBIS implementation may help SWPBIS become a more race-conscious framework and push back against hegemonic Whiteness. Furthermore, it has the potential to reverberate beyond SWPBIS by making VHS staff members more comfortable about these issues and able to locate the ways that Whiteness permeates other practices and initiatives. In this way, SWPBIS becomes more than a disciplinary framework. It becomes a seed for broader organizational change. While likely not sufficient for making the

kinds of necessary structural changes that this analysis points to, SWPBIS can represent a positive step towards more thoughtful and effective educational practice.

### **Directions for Future Research.**

There are several aspects of this study that suggest the need for further examination. There is still a need to understand and examine educator perceptions of school discipline and SWPBIS. Because educators are the ground-level implementers of SWPBIS and a key participant in student disciplinary interactions, their perspectives offer insights into the current state of practice and the possibilities for change. While there is a growing literature on educator responses to key aspects of SWPBIS (e.g. Dutton Tillery, Varjas, Meyers, & Smith Collins, 2010; Fallon, O'Keefe, Gage, & Sugai, 2015; Feuerborn & Chinn, 2012; Tyre & Feuerborn, 2017), there are several opportunities for growth in this area.

In particular, there are very few studies that analyze educator perceptions of SWPBIS through critical lenses. Critical approaches to analysis are important not because they expose educators as unprofessional or unfit, but because they can uncover often subtle and hidden ways that structural oppression is conveyed through practice and discourse. For example, Irby and Clough's (2015) critical exploration of the ways that educators express the need for consistency in school discipline provided important insights into the multiple competing meanings of consistency in school discipline and the "limits and unintended consequences of relying uncritically on consistency as a guiding principle for improving school discipline" (p. 170). For instance, in the case of VHS, how might understandings of consistency uphold a system rooted in Whiteness? This is especially important for SWPBIS research, since consistency is a key characteristic of the framework.

Also, longitudinal approaches would add to our understanding of how educator perceptions may change throughout the SWPBIS implementation process. This is particularly important to understanding SWPBIS's role in addressing disproportionality. For instance, at a school like VHS, where many educators are hopeful that SWPBIS will help reduce disproportionality and are open to conversations about race and racism, research that follows implementation over time would provide a richer understand of how and why these perceptions may change, and how such changes impact the direction of SWPBIS.

Additionally, future research efforts should strive to include the voices and perspectives of students and their families. They, along with teachers, are key players in everyday disciplinary interactions and have important insights into the processes that impact them. The perspectives of students and families provide a more complete and triangulated picture of the school context. And, consistent with the epistemological project of CRT, centering the voices of students and families, especially those of color, honors the experiential knowledge of those that have been most impacted by a society deeply structured by racism (Ladson-Billings, 1998). This kind of knowledge can be a critical check on Whiteness. For instance, parent organization called CADRE, made of mostly Black and Latino parents in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), released a 2017 report evaluating the impact of SWPBIS after ten years of implementation that offered critical insights into why racial disparities remained in school discipline despite overall decreases in suspensions and expulsions. It is unlikely that research focused on school personnel could have produced similar insights.

Finally, given the important perspective that social workers bring to schools, more research is needed on how school social workers understand and play a role in issues around school discipline, the school to prison pipeline, and SWPBIS.

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## APPENDIX A

### RECRUITMENT SCRIPT

My name is Mike Massey and I am doing research on Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) implementation at your school. Just as a reminder, PBIS is the component of VTSS that focuses on student behavior and social/emotional wellness.

I am a doctoral student in the School of Social Work at VCU and my research interests center around school policy and educational equity. Before going back to school for my PhD., I was a school counselor for 15 years, so my interest in school policy comes from my own experiences as an educator.

For this project, I would like to interview members of the educational staff, which includes teachers, instructional assistants, administrators, school counselors, social workers, librarians, and other staff members that have direct educational contact with students. In this interview, I am interested in understanding your perspective on a couple of core elements of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS). Topics may include organizational change, school discipline practices, and racial disproportion in disciplinary outcomes. The interviews will take about one hour and can be held at your convenience, either during school hours or non-school hours. Because your school is only in its initial implementation stage, I realize that you have only been given some introductory information about PBIS. To participate in this interview, you are not required to have prior knowledge of SWPBIS.

Your participation will help me complete my dissertation, but more importantly, it may help your school do a better job in implementing PBIS in a way that is meaningful and helpful to students and educators. This is a great chance to have a voice in the implementation process!

All interview responses will be confidential and participation is completely voluntary. The identities of participants will not be revealed in any research reports or to any school administrators at any time. If you are interested or have questions, please contact me at [masseym@vcu.edu](mailto:masseym@vcu.edu), 434-465-5731, or in person if you see me in the building.

Thank you very much for your time.

## APPENDIX B

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

*So I can focus on our conversation, I would like to audio record the interview. For your information, only members of the research team will be privy to the recording, which will be eventually destroyed after it is transcribed. Your participation in this interview is entirely voluntary, but if you do choose to participate I will need you to sign a consent form after we have discussed the project's aims, risks and benefits. I emailed the consent form to you and I'd like to take a moment to review it with you now. Essentially, this document states that: (1) all information will be held confidential, (2) your participation is voluntary and you may stop at any time for any reason, and (3) we do not know of any particular risks or direct benefits to you personally related to participation. What questions do you have for me regarding the study? Are you willing to participate? If not, you can go now. If so, and if all of your questions have been answered, I would appreciate it if you would please sign the consent form, indicating that you are willing to participate in this interview. Thank you for your agreeing to participate. To respect your time, I have planned this interview to last about one hour. During this time, I have several questions that we would like to cover. If time begins to run short, it may be necessary to interrupt you in order to push ahead and complete this line of questioning. Do you have any questions?*

*In this interview, I am interested in understanding your perspective on a couple of core elements of School-Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), which is the component of VTSS that focuses on student behavior and social/emotional wellness. Because your school is only in its initial implementation stage, you are not required to have prior knowledge of SWPBIS in order to participate. I will give you a brief description of each element and you can provide your perspective based on your past experiences, your training, your educational philosophy, and your experiences at VHS. This study intends to help the school VTSS/PBIS team understand staff needs and concerns so they can implement in a more informed way, so please be as honest and open as possible.*

Let's get started.

First, what is your position? (Teacher/Administrator/Counselor/Teacher Aide)

How long have been working at VHS?

How long have you been an educator?

How would you rate your level of knowledge about SWPBIS? (None/Low/Moderate/High)

If you have some knowledge of SWPBIS, can you describe your experiences with it?

#### **Organizational Change**

The first thing I'd like to discuss is organizational change. Because the SWPBIS model is a whole school framework and looks to improve school climate, it requires major organizational changes that include all of the school staff teaching and reinforcing agreed-upon student behavioral expectations and social skills, sustained staff training, and administrative supports for staff members to plan and implement preventative practices. Put another way, it can be said that SWPBIS is just as much about changing adult behavior than it is about changing student behavior.

- How confident are you that VHS can make these kind of organizational changes?
  - What might inhibit change?
  - Promote change?
- From your perspective, in what ways could the school climate at VHS be improved?
- If you were in charge of school change efforts, what issues would you prioritize?

### **Student Outcomes**

Another important element of SWPBIS is a focus on improved student outcomes. One of the most important outcomes that almost all schools emphasize is decreasing office disciplinary referrals, suspensions, and expulsions.

- In your experience, what is fair or unfair about disciplinary practices at VHS?
- What changes, if any, do you feel would improve disciplinary practices at VHS?
- An additional area of concern for many schools, including VHS, is that African-American students are disciplined and suspended at disproportionately higher rates than their White peers. Can you tell me about any times that you felt as if students have been disciplined differently based on their race?
- Could you tell about a time when a colleague or student has expressed concern about how a student was disciplined?
- Based on what you know about SWPBIS, to what extent do you feel that it could help address racial disproportionality in discipline at VHS?

## APPENDIX C

### PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

#### **TITLE OF STUDY: School Staff Perceptions of SWPBIS**

#### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to gain in-depth information of high school educational staff knowledge and perceptions of key elements of School Wide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), including organizational change, preventative discipline, and reduction of racial disciplinary disproportionality.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you are an educational staff member at VHS and you have expressed willingness to be interviewed.

#### **DESCRIPTION OF THE STUDY AND YOUR INVOLVEMENT**

If you elect to participate, you will take part in an interview containing open-ended questions regarding specific elements of SWPBIS. The interview will take about 60 minutes.

You will be asked about your understanding and perceptions of several key elements of SWPBIS in relation to your school. You are not required to have prior knowledge about SWPBIS.

#### **RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

There are no expected risks to participating in this study, other than the small possibility of a breach of your confidentiality. Measures to protect your confidentiality are discussed below.

#### **BENEFITS TO YOU AND OTHERS**

You may not get any direct benefit from this study, but your valuable input will provide the basis for the creation of strategies regarding the implementation of SWPBIS and future professional development at VHS.

#### **COSTS**

There are no costs to you for participating in this study, other than your time

#### **ALTERNATIVES**

The alternative to participating in this study is not to participate in this study.

#### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Potentially identifiable information about you will consist of your name and your email address. Data is being collected only for research purposes. Your data will be identified by an ID number that will be kept separate from your contact information.

We will keep your interview data on a password protected cloud storage system. We will keep interview data separate from your contact information. Your contact information will be destroyed once the interview and analysis has been completed. Interview data will be presented in aggregate form only, though specific, unidentified quotations may be used to

highlight specific key findings. What we find from this study may be presented at meetings or published in papers, but your name will not ever be used in these presentations or papers.

The interviews will be digitally recorded, but recordings will be destroyed after transcription, identifying details will be stripped from transcripts, and interview data will be destroyed after three years.

### **VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You do not have to participate in this study. If you choose to participate, you may stop at any time without any penalty. You may also choose not to answer particular questions that are asked in the study.

### **QUESTIONS**

If you have any questions, complaints, or concerns about your participation in this research, contact:

**Michael Massey, 434-465-5731 or [masseym@vcu.edu](mailto:masseym@vcu.edu)**

The researcher named above is the best person to call for questions about your participation in this study.

If you have any general questions about your rights as a participant in this or any other research, you may contact:

Office of Research, Virginia Commonwealth University  
800 East Leigh Street, Suite 3000  
P.O. Box 980568  
Richmond, VA 23298  
Telephone: (804) 827-2157

Contact this number for general questions, concerns or complaints about research. You may also call this number if you cannot reach the research team or if you wish to talk with someone else. General information about participation in research studies can also be found at <http://www.research.vcu.edu/irb/volunteers.htm>.

### **CONSENT**

*I have been given the chance to read this consent form. I understand the information about this study. Questions that I wanted to ask about the study have been answered. My signature says that I am willing to participate in this study. I will receive a copy of the consent form once I have agreed to participate.*

---

Participant name printed

Participant signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Person Conducting Informed Consent  
Discussion / Witness <sup>3</sup>  
(Printed)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Person Conducting Informed Consent  
Discussion / Witness

Date

## APPENDIX D

### HIERARCHICAL LIST OF THEMES AND CODES

59 CODES NESTED AND SUBNESTED WITHIN TWO META-THEMATIC CATEGORIES  
AND FOUR LOWER-ORDER THEMATIC CATEGORIES

#### Meta-Themes

(Bold=Thematic Category)

- **Whiteness**
  - Invisible Whiteness (latent)
    - Abstract liberalism
    - Cultural deficit orientation
    - Hidden norms of whiteness
    - Individual deficit orientation
    - Minimization of racism
    - Naturalizations
    - Personal relationship
    - Structural relationship
  - Invisible Whiteness (semantic)
  - Visible Whiteness
    - “That space doesn’t feel accessible”
- **Two Schools in One**
  - Tracking: “the kids have been packaged”
  - “it’s a microcosm”

#### Lower-Order Themes

- **“Suspension is stupid”**
  - “decreasing chaos”
    - positive student/administrator relationships
  - Student baggage
    - “unmet needs”
    - “high school students need it”
    - “expressing trauma”
  - “It’s a relationship thing”
  - Keeping it in the classroom
    - “the teacher’s behavior
  - “It isn’t teaching them anything”
    - Improving ISS
    - Using restorative practices
- **Looking for consistency**

- Consistency challenges
  - “we have resources”
  - changing administration
  - little fiefdoms
- No Consistent Disciplinary System
  - Looking for consistency across classrooms
  - Looking for administrative consistency
    - Admin communicating with teachers
  - Consistency a “two-way street”
- **Disproportional discipline: “A tsunami of variables”**
  - “Almost all are Black”
    - “carrying a lot more baggage”
    - playing school
  - “Instruction and behavior go hand in hand”
  - “We did school differently”
    - Clash of cultures
      - Defining respect or defiance
      - Differential discipline
        - Cultural capital
        - Implicit bias
        - Stereotyping
- **Implementing SWPBIS**
  - PBIS Possibilities
    - “Concern about racial disparities”
    - The time is right
    - “open to this”
    - “common framework”
      - “common expectations”
    - Problematising PBIS
  - “Implementing in a good way”
    - following through
      - “prioritizing initiatives”
      - jumping to the next cool thing
    - Getting staff buy-in
      - “being asked to prioritize”
      - the willing and unwilling
    - “Part of the discussion”
    - Focusing on outcomes



