# Elementary Principals' Decision to Use Exclusionary Discipline and the Influence of School Safety on that Decision

By

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# Table of Contents

## Abstract

The research is extensive. Students are removed from school using exclusionary discipline practices at alarming rates. The short-term and long-term implications for the students excluded are primarily negative. Often, a short-term solution of removing unwanted behaviors from a learning environment can result in long-term negative impacts on the children who have been removed. Principals are faced with many factors when making decisions about the use of exclusion, none more important than protecting the safety of the entire school community that they are charged to lead. While the responsibility of keeping schools safe cannot be argued, is that the justification for the high numbers of exclusion used in the state of Wisconsin? Despite what the research tells us, the decision to exclude impacts at all levels of education. This study will look at this challenge at the foundational level of elementary schools to understand why principals choose to exclude. Additionally, the research will explore how school safety might play a part in the decision-making process. This qualitative study will learn from interviews of elementary principals and will look through the lens of consequence analysis decision theory. In the end, you will see that there is no easy way to address the challenges that principals face, but there are some themes that emerge that when applied will allow principals to better meet the needs of the children and communities that they serve.

# Chapter 1 Introduction

On December 14, 2012, the world changed forever. In under 6 minutes, a man unworthy of naming walked into Sandy Hook Elementary School in Connecticut and opened fire on children and educators inside. While this was not the first or last school shooting, this event shockingly occurred in an elementary school. The worldwide attention that this event created forced every school to double down its efforts on school safety. As an elementary principal, I accepted an additional position as district safety coordinator. I worked tirelessly from that point on to train staff and students, fortify our schools, and re-write policies that had been in place for years with little to no attention paid to them. This event has proven to be a seminal event in the world of school safety, putting schools and communities on notice that school violence can happen anywhere, anytime, and at any grade level. Twenty-eight lives were needlessly lost that day, and their families will never be the same. This event and years of school safety work have caused me to question how we keep our schools safe.

The actions that are taken to make schools safer fall into a few different categories. Some are preventative, some are planning and preparing for when it is too late, and action has already occurred. Some school safety efforts provide a perception of safety, while others go undetected and do the actual work behind the scenes to make our schools as safe as possible. Since 2012, we have seen every mass-market tool, gizmo, or gadget ever created to keep schools safe. With so many existing solutions, my burning question ultimately comes down to the individuals who carry out these horrific acts and how they got to that point. For many of them, they have walked the halls of schools growing up, and it could be argued that if they had had better experiences

while in those schools as children, maybe they would not have come back with guns as teenagers or adults. In some way, are our schools responsible for the creation of these situations?

## Concerns about exclusionary discipline

While this connection may seem a little overdramatic, the fact of the matter is that current disciplinary practices commonly used throughout the country in schools at all levels are alienating children every day. In 2014, then U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, released a "Dear Colleague Letter" with recommendations to the education community in which Duncan indicated a correlation between school violence and exclusionary discipline practices used in school. The letter reinforced with data regarding the disproportionate use exclusion among students of color and students in poverty. In the letter, he stated that "Simply put, no school can be a great school and ultimately prepare all students for success if it is not first a safe school" (Duncan, 2014). Further, he said,

> No student or adult should feel unsafe or unable to focus on school, yet this is too often a reality. Simply relying on *suspensions and expulsions*, however, is not the answer to creating a safe and productive school environment. Unfortunately, a significant number of students are removed from class each year, even for minor infractions of school rules, due to exclusionary discipline practices, which disproportionately impact students of color and students with disabilities" (Duncan, 2014).

While this letter laid out clear guidance advocating for the reform of school discipline systems, the efforts were hampered in 2018 when the Trump administration and their education department's leadership retracted the letter. "The Dear Colleague letter was one of 69 guidance documents being revoked because they were deemed unnecessary, outdated, inconsistent with existing law, or otherwise improper" (Diament, 2019). The rescinding of the Obama-era

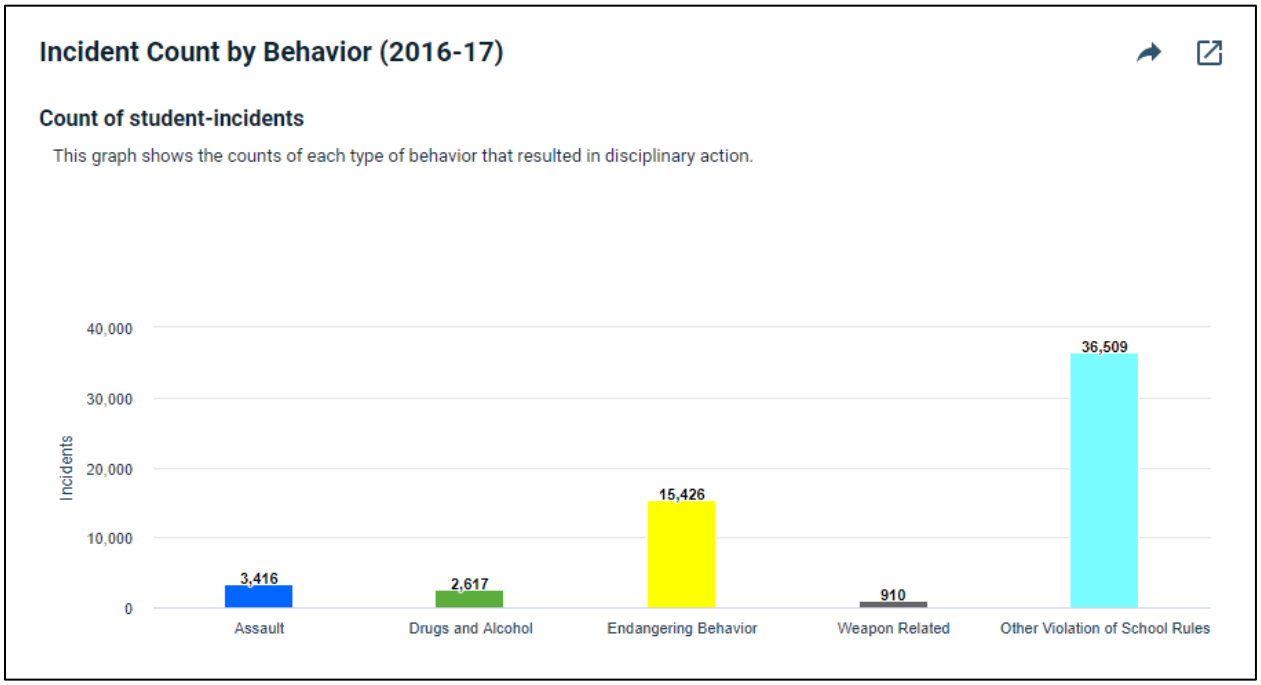
educational policies seen during the Trump administration represents differences in political and policy perspectives that influence educational practice. Through all the political divisiveness, schools continue to act inconsistently based on the best guidance at the time. Instead of working on ways to make schools safer for all and considering the recommendations of the Dear Colleague letter, many school systems continue to do business as they always have.

Nine years and far too many more school shootings later, Sandy Hook Elementary School has taught us to look at school safety differently. The time and energy invested in handling and preventing acts of violence in the school setting are staggering. But the more that I research, see, and understand, I feel convinced daily that the reality is that the people who have carried out these acts of terror in our schools, places of worship, and business may have all been negatively impacted by our current school environments. We need to begin the prevention of school violence much earlier on, at the level of student discipline, to help mitigate the number of children who grow up to resent schools in violent ways. In some capacity, our nations' schools have helped to create these incredibly lost and disconnected individuals. In this literature review, I will first examine the prevalence and impacts of exclusion and then gain a better understanding of why the practice is used. Maybe we can find a way to contribute to breaking the cycle of school violence.

## Prevalence of use of exclusionary discipline

In the state of Wisconsin, all public schools submit a report to the department of public instruction each year that includes information about out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and incidents resulting in these suspensions/expulsions. This information is formatted and made publicly available at https://dpi.wi.gov/wisedash/about-data/discipline.

Requirements changed for reporting beginning with the 2016-2017 school year, so these data are limited to only three years of publicly available data. The three tables shown below represent the number of exclusionary discipline incidents reported to the state broken down into five different categories. These data provide a snapshot of the use of exclusion in the state of Wisconsin. (This, of course, assumes that all districts and schools are properly reporting their data.) Consistent with other data presented in this paper, the five categories show us that the vast majority of behavioral incidents represented are for "other violations of school rules." Further demonstrating that exclusionary practices are used widely for violations of rules that do not directly affect school safety.

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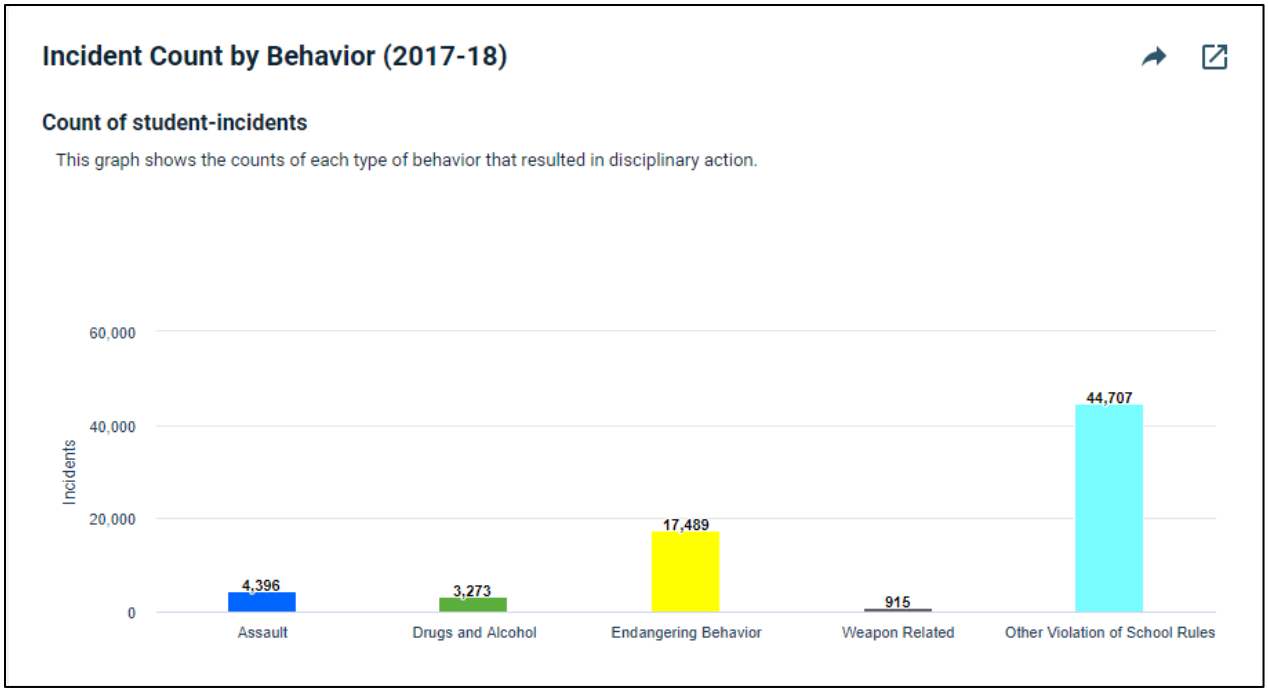


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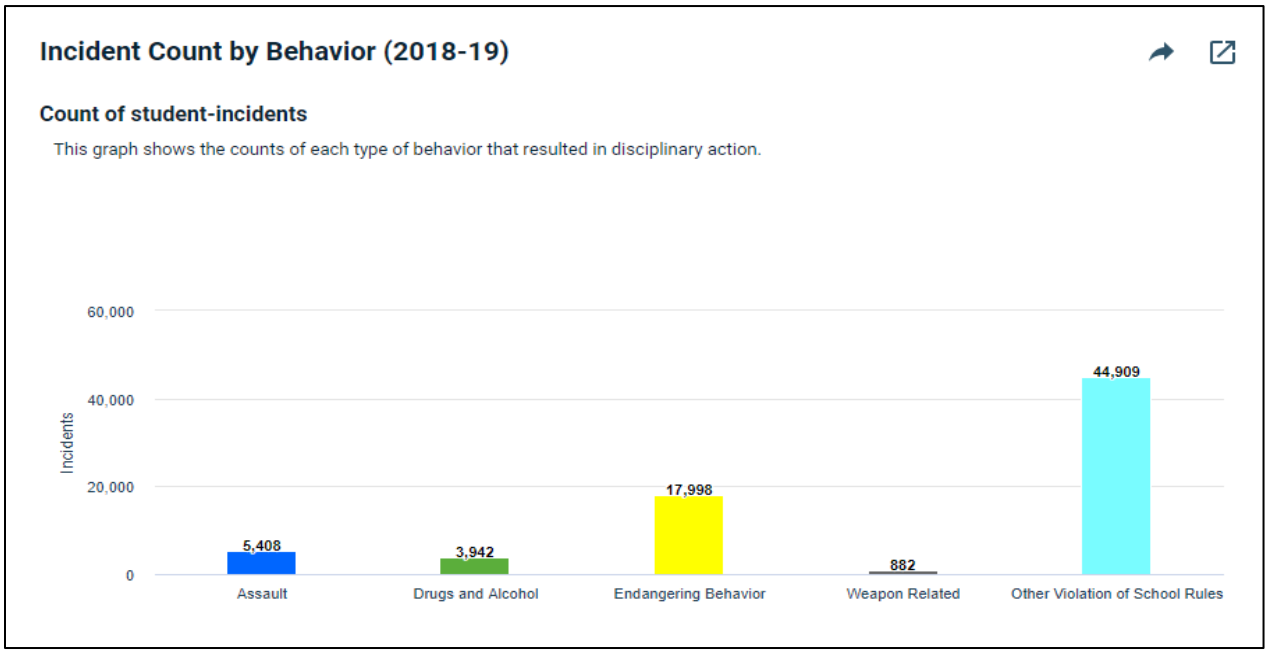


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https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/20218

Based on these data, the number of incidents resulting in exclusion is on a steady increase from 58,878 incidents in the 2016- 2017 school year to 73,139 in 2018-2019.

In 2018, Daniel J. Losen and Amir Whitaker released a joint report by the Center for Civil Rights Remedies of UCLA's Civil Rights Project and the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California. The report found that exclusionary discipline is doled out disproportionately to students of color and students with disabilities. The overall rate of occurrence was calculated to be 11 million instructional days lost to out-of-school suspensions in the United States during the 2015-2016 year (Losen & Whitaker, 2018). In Wisconsin, the rates of exclusion are some of the highest in the entire country, and the disparate impact of students of color and students with disabilities are prevalent. Effective or not, rates of exclusion from school and children missing opportunities to learn with their peers are areas that warrant additional study.

As shown in the above literature review, most experts agree excluding students from school has far more negative repercussions than benefits gained. During the 2015- 2016 school year, "U.S. students lost 62,596 years of instruction to out-of-school suspension" (Losen & Martinez, 2020). These losses are disproportionately inflicted upon students of color and students with disabilities (Fenning & Rose, 2007). These figures are supported by the numbers shared from Wisconsin and are consequential to the students and schools impacted. Individual students are missing out on vital instruction. The fact that disproportionately is present in these data is important to note as well as this will be addressed in a future section of the literature review.

## Alternatives to exclusion.

Many studies that look at the negative impacts of exclusion make the case that instead of working on modifying behaviors, schools should address the root cause of the misbehavior. Programs like School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS), Collaborative Proactive Solutions (CPS) are all offered to address the root cause of problems instead of reacting to issues once they have already happened. They share that reactionary exclusionary discipline practices increased aggressive behavior over time, and these effects are observable even at the elementary level (Greene, 2018), (Mergler et al., 2014), (Jacobsen et al., 2019), (Fenning & Rose, 2007). While the interventions and programs above have emerged from this research, more positive and proactive programs can be found and reviewed on the U.S. Department of Education *What Works Clearinghouse* (http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/). With the introduction of any new system to support students, time, training, and buy-in from staff are needed to make these programs effective. The alternatives focus on working on our school communities' hearts and minds more than they address local policy and procedures.

## Theoretical Framework

Chitpin and Evers, in their book on decision making in educational leadership, identify the day-to-day and moment-to-moment decisions that educational leaders make as one of the most critical defining factors of their leadership (Chitpin & Evers, 2014). Principals are faced with countless decisions each day. No one of these decisions may be potentially life-altering as their decisions are in an attempt to improve or change student behaviors. A building principal's decision to use exclusionary practice is one of many choices that these leaders make each day. Thus, my theoretical framework for this research revolves around the research on principal decision-making. This research is vast and, on many levels, leads only to more questions. Generally, it tells us that decisions are made based on data, internal, and external factors.

While data-driven decision-making is a crucial factor discussed throughout the research, Author Pamela Salazar describes it well when referring to this factor as "data-enriched thinking" (Salazar, 2008). This concept is incredibly relevant to the decision-making surrounding school discipline because principals must report to the state each year how frequently they are using exclusion. Understanding these data surrounding the frequency of behavioral occurrences, when events occur, those impacted, and other factors all add needed background information for principals to consider when decision-making.

Helen Marks and Jason Nance (2007) tell us that "policymakers assume that state and federal policies will filter down to the school site level. However, given the multiplicity of actors, interpretations of these policies may conflict, and their implementation may differ. As a result, a coherent, consistent understanding of the policies may not exist among all education stakeholders" (Marks & Nance, 2007). Two of the actors discussed by Marks and Nance are both internal and external factors that are unique to particular schools or communities. Albert Gibbs

and John Slate (2003) dive a little deeper into the internal and external factors and draw a correlation to how influences change based on the size of school and community where decisions are made (Gibbs & Slate, 2003). Because internal factors include the number of staff, students, and ultimately parents involved in a school, the researchers use the logic that as you have more people to contend with, you have more decisions to make and more influences on that decision-making process. While this logic applies both internally and externally, the concept of external factors circles back to how policies "filter down to the site level."

In an extensive study of principals, Crum et al. (2010) showed that most principals believe it is imperative to use sound data and best practices to be successful leaders. (Crum et al., 2010). Using research-based best practices, high-quality data-driven programs and peer-approved methods are simple ways that principals can gain credibility for their decision-making. Principals become empowered in making difficult decisions supported by research-based data indicating that the practice is effective.

With these factors that influence decision-making, it also becomes evident that although principals may have access to sound data and are knowledgeable about best practices, there is not always a reduction in exclusion. Steven Davis, in his research, found that principals were "rarely perfectly objective" when making decisions. "More importantly, decisions rarely produce perfect or optimal outcomes. This is because the most important decisions are often highly complex. Information may be incomplete, inaccurate, poorly understood, or ambiguous. Organizational and/or decision-maker goals may be unclear or subject to disagreement, and decision-making processes are often uneven" (Davis, 2005). This is one of many examples found that demonstrate a disconnect between best practice and actual practice. Davis went on to share that "school leaders are especially prone toward using heuristic or truncated thinking processes when making

complex decisions. This is because the frequency, volume, intensity, complexity, and novelty of important decision events in schools often defeats deliberative or reflective thinking" (Davis, 2005). In basic terms, principals often fall back on options perceived as easy or those based on their beliefs or past experiences instead of based on best practices.

In his research piece, Paul Nutt found that decisions are seldom made based on normative methods prescribed by scholars. "Most decision processes were found to be solution centered, which seemed to restrict innovation, limit the number of alternatives considered, and perpetuate the use of questionable tactics." He went on to note that "nothing remotely resembling the normative methods described in the literature was carried out" (Nutt, 1984). The perpetuation of questionable tactics even when more effective and equitable options are available will be a key to this framework. The research indicates that standard approaches based on best practice are often overlooked by principals when their own beliefs and ideas enter the picture, somehow justifying a different method or process.

## Consequence Analysis Decision Theory

In reviewing the research on exclusionary discipline, the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline on students become clear. We begin to see a pattern that starts with students becoming disconnected from a school academically, socially, and emotionally. Those consequences can extend to long-term effects that include prison or carrying out acts of violence later in life. As we consider the negative and positive consequences of exclusionary discipline, a theory that arises to guide the work is the consequence analysis decision theory. Joseph Licata describes this theory applied to educational administration as "a way of looking at school problems in terms of their consequences." He goes on to state that "While the model does not take the position that the ends justify the means, it does suggest continuous examination of

consequences as a base for rational problem-solving" (Licata, 1978). The research findings throughout this entire dissertation will be examined through this theoretical lens. Principals will be asked to reflect on both positive and negative consequences that come from their decision to exclude a child from school. As I work to gain an understanding of the decision-making process of principals, this analysis of consequences will help to guide that inquiry.

Other decision theories explored include classical decision theory and administrative decision theory. The use of consequence analysis decision theory lends itself well to this framework because of the well-documented disproportionality, overuse, and long-term consequences for students excluded from school. The questions in this study will encourage participant reflection on the consequences both positive and negative associated with the decisions they make surrounding exclusion.

## The Questions

Knowing that exclusion and other punitive discipline approaches are impacting large numbers of students in our public schools each year, we must look deeply into the consequences of these trends. First, we need better to understand the effects, both long-term and short-term, the exclusion has students and schools. The research is extensive in this area. With an understanding of the effects gained from the existing research, we can better understand the decision-making process that leads to this practice.

Because I believe that it is essential that schools start children out on the right foot at the elementary level, I will focus as much as I am able on the elementary school level. The way we work with students and their families at the elementary level sets the stage for the rest of their lives.

There is some folk wisdom that the use of exclusionary discipline leads to safer schools. Is this true? Does this explain its prevalence and increase in usage? Further research is needed to truly understand principals' intentions and reasoning for the use of exclusionary discipline. To that end, this dissertation research will focus on the following questions:

1. Why do elementary school principals administer exclusionary discipline practices?

2. Does school safety influence principals' decision-making process?

# Chapter 2 Review of Literature

In this literature review, I will begin by highlighting research on the impacts of exclusionary and punitive discipline. With that foundation, I will explore the role of school principals' decision-making process surrounding school discipline. Overall, this body of literature is heavily weighted at the middle and high school levels and includes information on exclusionary discipline and the factors that influence its use. Regardless of the age level, I hope to learn from the findings and guide my future work in the field.

## Defining Terms

Establishing a clear set of key terms used throughout my research is crucial to ensure clarity and consistency about how these terms are deployed and understood for audiences working across fields.

**Exclusionary Discipline -** The process of removing students from classroom instruction or school for a specific period or permanently because of a disciplinary infraction.

**Punitive Discipline –** Discipline systems based solely on negative consequences intended to teach recipient hard lessons that will make it undesirable to repeat the offense.

**Suspension** – Removal of a student from their class for all or part of a day because of a disciplinary infraction. Suspensions can be carried out in-school or out-of-school depending on the way that it is administered.

**Expulsion** – Long-term (greater than two weeks) removal of a student from the school district because of a disciplinary infraction. This can only be done with the school board's action based on a recommendation from the school administration. Procedures for expulsion are laid out in Wisconsin state statute 120.13.

**Zero Tolerance** – A term applied to school discipline in the 1990s, which sets clear expectations for immediate removal for a given list of disciplinary infractions. Intended to make schools safer, the guidelines with no direction afforded led to a steep increase in students' exclusion from schools.

**PBIS** – Positive Behavior Interventions and Support or **PBS** Positive Behavior Supports is a proactive behavior framework that uses all school lessons and activities to teach positive behaviors and actions that focus on encouraging desired behaviors instead of creating consequences for negative behaviors.

**Collaborative Proactive Solutions (CPS) –** A non-punitive, non-adversarial, trauma-informed model of care Dr. Ross Greene originated and described in his various books, including *The Explosive Child, Lost at School, Lost & Found,* and *Raising Human Beings*.

**Zones of Regulation** – Created by Leah Kuypers, M.A. ED, OTR/L. Zones of Regulation is a framework designed to foster regulation and emotional control that often results in disruptive or maladaptive behaviors.

## Organization of the Literature

To understand the landscape surrounding this topic, I dove deeply into the relevant existing literature that pertains to exclusionary discipline and principals' decision-making. The research gathered has been sorted into the following sections.

- School safety overview
- Research on the impacts of exclusionary/punitive discipline.
    - Impacts on individual children.
    - Disproportionality.
    - Impact on school safety.
- Why do principals use exclusionary/punitive discipline?
- How do principals make decisions?
- How does policy influence principals' decision-making as it pertains to discipline?
- Does an individual principal's discretion impact decision-making?
- Do principals make decisions based on research and best practice?
- Do external pressures impact when principals implement exclusionary discipline?
- Are principals responding to their perspectives and beliefs when they implement exclusionary discipline?

Throughout the review, I will continue to highlight studies that link to school safety and the implied beliefs that school principals somehow make schools safer by using exclusion.

## School Safety Overview

The fear of violence in schools is heavy on the hearts and minds of parents every day when they put their trust in schools to educate their children and keep them safe. While worry and fear may not be a prevalent thought daily, every time a violent act occurs, like an active shooter event, these thoughts come back to the forefront of hearts and minds. The FBI identified that 277 Active shooter incidents took place in the U.S. between 2000-2018. 42 (15.2%) took place in a PreK-12 School (https://www.fbi.gov/about/partnerships/office-of-partner-

engagement/active-shooter-incidents-graphics). While these numbers are relatively small compared to the number of school days that took place in all of the schools in the U.S. during that time. These 42 events and events that have taken place since 2018 represent one of the most terrifying and life-altering safety threats to our schools and the children that fill them daily.

Over the past ten years, research into active shooter events has moved beyond preparing for the potential of an active threat event and has evolved into a complex prevention process, including understanding, and assessing threats to schools before they happen. The Federal Bureau of Investigation and the United States Secret Service have both done extensive research and in a June 2018 report from the FBI, "the 63 active shooters examined in this study did not appear to be uniform in any way such that they could be readily identified prior to attacking based on demographics alone" (Silver et al., 2018). This message is consistent with Dr. Peter Langman, Ph.D., a well-respected researcher in threat assessment. In a recent article, he concluded by stating, "Mass shootings at schools are a rare phenomenon that cannot be accounted for by simplistic explanations" (Langman, 2017). While there is no direct connection that correlates pre-attack behaviors or factors to actual events, research tells that a combination of key stressors put on people can increase the likelihood of acting out in violent ways. These stressors include; mental health concerns, conflicts with friends/ peers, and conflict at school (Silver et al., 2018). The threat assessment process, completed in conjunction with law enforcement, tells us that these same stressors often present themselves through inappropriate and undesirable behaviors. (National Threat Assessment Center, 2018) In other words, the kids who need the most love will ask for it in the most unloving ways" (Unknown). Children often express the need for love and support through demonstrating negative behaviors.

If schools truly want to prevent school violence, addressing unwanted behaviors in a way that teaches skills on the better side of human nature sounds idealistic, but this is work worthy of the effort. Forward-thinking scholars like Ross Greene have some "ideas about how behaviorally challenging kids should be understood and about how to treat them in ways that are more compassionate and effective. Ideas about treating all kids in ways that are non-punitive, non-adversarial, collaborative, and that teach them skills on the better side of human nature" (Greene, 2018).

School violence is preventable to the extent that we can identify and respond to pre-attack behaviors before an actual event. While many of the stressors put on children come from home environments, if schools contribute additional stressors, we know that in 64% of active shooter events, one of the victims was explicitly targeted by the active shooter (Silver et al., 2018). As schools, we must ensure that it is not the school and school personnel adding these stressors. Instead, schools must advocate for children and provide the skills necessary to respond to stress in healthy ways. Though direct causation between exclusionary discipline and school safety is absent in the research, a general correlation exists. Taking the time to teach appropriate adaptive behaviors at a young age will decrease the number of behavioral incidents later in school and at the same time reduce the number of significant discipline concerns. If we improve behaviors, we reduce exclusion. Exclusion has negative impacts and disconnects students from schools, staff, and students. This disconnect is consistent with the stressors noted in pre-attack behaviors of active shooters.

## Research on the Impacts of Exclusionary/ Punitive Discipline

The use of disciplinary practices at all ages in schools is intended to modify or change undesirable behaviors. As a result, those in authority positions work to achieve desired or

acceptable behaviors. While the desired outcome of discipline is to have the desired behavior be present, ask any parent, and it is clear that it does not always go as smoothly as designed. There are often impacts, both intended, and accidental that come from the attempts at modifying behavior. In the following section, I will highlight many of the impacts of exclusion in the school setting.

### Impact on individual children

Based on my review, little research and observable evidence suggest that excluding students from schools is in any way beneficial to the excluded students. Negative impacts of exclusion include short- and long-term effects on students' self-image and significant barriers between students and quality instruction. This section of the literature review will show a definitive trend in the negative impacts, supported by the comprehensive meta-analysis completed by Welch & Little (2018). Scholars argue that a deficit mindset underlies the belief system that students will only change their behaviors through exclusionary behavior modification. This punitive line of thinking justifies the process of exclusion and is often casually referred to as “the school of hard knocks.” This “life is hard” approach follows the logic that if students would simply change their behavior, they could avoid the consequences and would be welcome back into school again. Glasser (1985) shares that this form of “Stimulus-Response psychology does not work in school or anywhere else because it treats living people as if they were dead things. It fails to recognize that the motivation of living creatures is always from within while dead things, like machines, are controlled from the outside” (Glasser, 1985). This research suggests that students are not viewed as complex people with identities and emotions (like, they are dead). Glasser argues that this perspective's long-term adverse effects can be incredibly destructive to the child’s development.

As we look at the negative impacts of exclusionary discipline, we must understand that while removal from a classroom or a school is a quick and effective way to regain control in a classroom or school, it negatively impacts the student in the short and long term. The research on the impacts of exclusionary discipline suggests that even though there are short-term benefits of excluding children with behavioral challenges from school, the long-term ramifications on the children with behavioral challenges are profound. Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy (2016), in their study, listen to "frequent flyers," identify that once students feel like they have been labeled as they are "bad," they find it overwhelming and almost impossible to shake this label. Ryan & Goodram (2013) highlight the negative impacts and demonstrate in great detail the disproportionate distribution of consequences. The majority impact students of color, students of low socioeconomic status, and those with disabilities (Ryan & Goodram, 2013). Specifically, at the elementary level, Jacobsen et al. (2019), in their study, "Punishment and Inequality at an Early Age: Exclusionary Discipline in Elementary School," dig deeper into a fragile family example to uncover significant inequalities in the doling out of disciplinary action. They examine the added stress exclusionary action puts on the already fragile families (Jacobsen et al., 2019).

With extensive research supporting how the exclusionary discipline has a negative long-term impact on students, it is still frequently used on children beginning at an incredibly young age. Kennedy & Soutullo (2018) interviewed 29 educators and nine students, which brought the researchers to a startling realization about their way of thinking. They found that educators and teachers "blame students" individual traits and decisions for their plights (Kennedy & Soutullo, 2018). This mindset exists even when identifying institutional barriers. Instead of looking at systemic problems that stand in the way of student success, students are consistently identified as the problem and punished for noncompliance in a broken system. To fully understand the

negative impacts of exclusionary disciplinary practices, we must look closely at the long-term effects of these actions on students.

### *Long-term outcomes for those excluded.*

Removing students from the classroom is a primary way that schools address student misbehavior. Research shows that such exclusionary discipline practices have lasting adverse effects on students, including an increased likelihood of repeating a grade, dropping out of school, and encountering the juvenile justice system — contributing to the school-to-prison pipeline (Fabelo et al., 2011). We now know that students who are suspended or expelled from school are less likely to succeed academically and more likely to enter the juvenile justice system. Exclusionary discipline has created a school-to-prison pipeline that funnels children away from schools into the juvenile and criminal justice systems (Mergler et al., 2014). Comparative to these data within exclusion rates, this marginalization of minorities and people of color is even more prevalent in the justice system. African American males make up a higher percentage of people in our justice system than any other group. With this knowledge, the need to get discipline right at our youngest levels becomes particularly important.

The construct of the school-to-prison pipeline is an extreme description of the negative outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline. While not every child excluded from school ends up going to prison or entering the juvenile justice system, data shows a direct correlation between these two areas. Hence, we can conclude that exclusionary discipline does not cause the school-to-prison pipeline but is a contributing factor.

In their 2014 work, Skiba et al. show “analysis suggests that regardless of demographic, achievement, or system status, out of school suspension and expulsions are in and of themselves risk factors for a range of negative developmental outcomes” (R. J. Skiba et al., 2014).

Throughout his extensive research, Skiba et al. tie school zero-tolerance and exclusionary discipline policies directly to the school-to-prison pipeline. Skiba et al. are cited in virtually all other research on exclusionary discipline cementing, their research as foundational in the field. They make a solid case supported throughout multiple areas of study that the long-term negative impacts of exclusion for school are real, and practice needs change to prevent the continuation of these trends.

Beyond the school to prison pipeline, Kupchik and Catlaw (2014) found in their study "that young adults with a history of school suspension are less likely than others to vote and volunteer in civic activities years later, suggesting that suspension negatively impacts the likelihood that youth engage in future political and civic activities." They went on to "conclude that suspension undermines the development of the individual skills and capacities necessary for a democratic society" (Kupchik & Catlaw, 2015). While the study does not provide this information in a way that implies causation, they find this to be a concerning correlation. Hence, excluded students may not only feel disconnected from their schools, but even their communities, states, or nation.

## Disproportionality

In 2020, disproportionality became one of the most discussed and volatile topics in school discipline. Events of the year brought attention to the inconsistencies and inequalities within the United States regarding racial and ethnic groups concerning reports of maltreatment, incarceration, and general law enforcement interactions. Evidence is clear that systemic policies and procedures more frequently negatively impact black and brown communities when compared to their white counterparts. In Welch & Little's (2018) meta-analysis of exclusionary discipline, they highlight "the disparities in disciplinary outcomes are fairly consistent across all

settings and grades indicating a systematic problem that starts as early as preschool" (Welsh & Little, 2018b). The meta-analysis demonstrates these disparities prevalent in all shapes and sizes of communities throughout the entire country. This consistency tells us that are not only small pockets of disproportionality. Instead, the findings are pervasive throughout the country.

In 2007, Pamela Fenning and Jennifer Rose completed a study on the overrepresentation of African American students punished by exclusionary discipline. In this meta-analysis of over 30 years of research on the topic, they identified "ethnic minority overrepresentation in exclusionary discipline as a pressing social justice issue." They shared that research dating back to 1975 demonstrated an "overrepresentation of ethnic minority students, particularly African American males" (Fenning & Rose, 2007). This body of research is an indictment of public schools. With solid evidence in place for over 30 years, exclusionary discipline continues to be used and is disproportionately affecting a population in our country already systemically marginalized. Exclusionary discipline only adds to the marginalization.

John Maag (2012) summarized the use of exclusion the most eloquently when he stated that "exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions are often administered idiosyncratically, unfairly, and in an increasingly peculiar fashion" (Maag, 2012). While many factors add to the "peculiar fashion," this research provides another example of the negative and disproportionate effect of exclusion on minority and underprivileged students and families. As student removal continues, the learning environment designed to help "all" students learn and grow, they continue to miss content and opportunity for social and emotional growth. This is evidence that by excluding the most challenging students, they only become more challenging.

Aydin Bal, Jennifer Betters-Burbon, and Rachel E. Fish (2019) found that "African American students were seven times and Native American and Latino students were two times

more likely to receive exclusionary discipline. African American students and Native American students were two to three times more likely to be labeled as emotionally disturbed." (Bal et al., 2019) Bal's work is extensive in this area adding to a growing body of work on the disproportionate impacts of exclusion of students of color as well as other negative outcomes including un-needed special education labels, increased drop out rates, and lower rates of college bound students of color.

### Impact on school safety

This research has explored the negative impacts of exclusion. In this section, we will explore the question does exclusionary discipline make schools safer? If principals choose to administer exclusionary consequences, then there would be hope that our schools are safer because of it.

Overall, existing research paints a clear picture that exclusionary discipline is overused, administered inequitably, and fails to positively change the behaviors of those excluded. Furthermore, although the use of exclusion is touted as a way to make schools safe, the research indicates that the opposite may be true. Skiba & Peterson have emerged as a highly respected resource for information tying student behavior to school safety. In their 1999 article on the dark side of zero tolerance, they indicate that "virtually no data suggest that zero-tolerance policies reduce school violence" (R. Skiba & Peterson, 1999). They further say, "since there are few incidents of serious violence and many incidents of minor disruption, policies that set harsh consequences indiscriminately will capture a few incidents of serious violence and many incidents of minor disruption…. Disrespect and disobedience are among the most common reasons for the suspension, and a significant portion of suspensions are for tardiness and truancy" (R. Skiba & Peterson, 1999). These findings show that although exclusion is often touted as a

tool to keep schools safe, these data show us that it is being used far more frequently when safety is not the primary factor.

The American Psychological Association (2008) conducted an in-depth look into zero-tolerance and exclusionary practices in schools. Among the findings, they noted that the practice of exclusion runs contrary to our best knowledge of child development. Moreover, the research indicated that the practice "has not been shown to improve school climate or school safety" (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008).

John Maag (2012) explained that "schools are caught in a contradiction of control. Disciplining a student both reinforces a school's legitimacy by punishing a rule violator and also threatens its legitimacy by exposing to society its inability to control rule violators" (Maag, 2012). The concept of contradiction is a fundamental understanding gained from this research. With reasonable effort and intention, schools have implemented policies that, on the surface, appear that they are keeping schools safe. Research is clear that these practices do not have a direct correlation to keeping schools safe. In reality, an alarming trend is evident that the results are just the opposite.

This research explores the question if school safety plays a role in elementary decisions making. The following finding from Broidy et al. (2003) becomes particularly worrisome when we understand that many studies show an increase in aggressive behaviors in response to exclusionary practices. In their work on development trajectories of childhood disruptive behaviors, they share that "chronic physical aggression during the elementary school years specifically increases the risk for continued physical violence as well as other nonviolent forms of delinquency during adolescence" (Broidy et al., 2003). Not only have we seen that exclusion from school leads to students being disconnected socially and emotionally from their peers.

Further, the findings are evidence that, in some cases, schools may be making students even more aggressive through exclusionary practices. While the study does not demonstrate direct causation, the evidence creates a stirring correlation.

Although research indicates a correlation between those who are excluded from schools and violent behaviors, it is important to note that the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the United States Department of Justice studied 63 active shooters between 2000 and 2013 and concluded that the shooters "did not appear to be uniform in any way such that they could be readily identified prior to attacking based on demographics alone" (Silver et al., 2018). This study, along with many others, clarifies that there is no single profile that fits all people who carry out active violence in schools. Further, to date, African American males and students with disabilities make up small percentages of those who have carried out acts of violence in schools. Instead, we can see that these populations' violence is more likely to end in the justice system and school to prison pipeline.

In summary, the research on the impacts of exclusionary/punitive practices paints a clear and dramatic image that the use of exclusionary practices is disproportionately implemented and does not make schools safer. If the research is so definitive on its use's negative ramifications, why is it so prevalent, and why do principals/ schools continue to use it? To address this concern, I will focus on the principals who are using these practices and try to gain insight into their decision-making process.

## Why do principals use exclusionary/ punitive discipline?

Despite the research, these data discussed in the introduction and literature review of this dissertation show that exclusionary practices continue, and in the state of Wisconsin, the frequency is growing. Although the research and data are clear, principals tasked with keeping school buildings safe regularly use exclusion. In this section, I will explore the decision-making process that leads to the use of exclusion and the factors that contribute to its continued use.

Principal decision-making is at the very heart of this research. Policies, procedures, laws, and legal precedence lay out a set of guidelines and expectations for school principals. With this backdrop, the discretions allowed individual biases, moral standards, and ethical perspectives, all influence leaders' decision-making process. Students bring their own set of circumstances that come into play as principals decide how to handle challenging behaviors at school. Even the best and most clear policies and procedures are influenced consciously and unconsciously by the principals charged with their enforcement. Authors Amanda Lewis and John Diamond wrote an inspiring book called *Despite the Best Intentions* (Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Throughout the book, they provide examples of schools and principals who continue to miss the mark on achieving equal treatment for all despite their best intentions. This work by Lewis and Diamond speaks loudly to the role personal beliefs and implicit bias can and does have on the decision-making process. Even systems designed with all the right pieces in place are carried out by imperfect humans.

## How does policy influence principals' decision-making as it pertains to discipline?

Every public school district is governed by a series of laws and legislation from both the federal and state levels. At the district level, school boards interpret those laws and create a set of

policies and procedures that dictate how their school district functions. While some areas leave no room for discretion, many laws allow school boards to make decisions based on what is best for the students, families, and communities they represent. Many laws dictate that there must be a policy on a specific topic, but policies can look different depending on the district. Once those laws are made into policy, how they are carried out varies between districts and even within districts.

Few policies elicit more debate than the zero-tolerance policy of the early 1990s. Initially developed in the law enforcement world of drug enforcement, the term made its way into schools symbolizing a philosophy that requires the use of predetermined consequences, usually exclusionary or punitive in nature, regardless of the severity of the behavioral infraction (R. J. Skiba et al., 2006). While systemically, this strict enforcement system designed to a hard stand on negative behaviors in school environments, drew praise from many, the principals and other educators on the front line observed negative impacts of the policy in schools. In 2006, the American Psychological Association created a zero-tolerance task force to explore zero-tolerance policies. The task force identified the creation of zero-tolerance as an effort to create a positive climate and keep schools safer. But these desired results did not happen. Quite the opposite, schools with high suspension and expulsion rates directly correlated with low engagement, a sense of community, and a feeling of safety within schools (R. J. Skiba et al., 2006). With this information, the task force studied alternatives. It made recommendations for how schools could continue the effort to keep schools safe while allowing more flexibility than just zero-tolerance.

An example of a zero-tolerance policy in action comes from a case study presented by Hightower and Klinker (2012). The case study looked at specific events that had occurred and, through interviews, assessed how those situations were impacted by personal bias and context.

One of the principals explained that he had worked hard to build a relationship with his students and did his best to support students throughout his building. He found himself faced with a situation where he knew that following board policy, based in his school on zero-tolerance policy, was not in students' best interest. While defending his students, other administrators asked, “why he takes this so seriously?” He was told that “administration isn’t brain surgery” he responded, “my mistakes are as deadly as those of an ill-prepared surgeon, and my victories are similarly life-sustaining” (Hightower & Klinker, 2012). This principal is like many others who take a Hippocratic-like oath, first to do no harm. The stakes are too high to follow policy and allow lives to be lost simply. While surgeons perform regular, high-risk surgeries, they do so with an enormous amount of preparation planning and legal protections. School principals make hundreds of decisions per week that have similar life-altering outcomes.

Research indicates that since the creation and rise of popularity of zero-tolerance policies in the late 90s and early 2000s, true zero-tolerance policies have seen an almost equal increase in use and decrease in use (R. J. Skiba et al., 2006). Though policies may no longer be called zero-tolerance, the widespread use of punitive and exclusionary discipline procedures that became so prevalent during the rise of zero-tolerance continues to occur at exceedingly high rates. The disproportionate distribution of these consequences and the growing research on the negative effects have caused districts to rethink discipline in their schools.

In a 2020 article by Jiangang Xia, Jianping Shen, and Jingping Sun, “Tight, Loose or Decoupling? A national study of the decision-making power relationship between district central office and school principals,” In this study, a tight coupling represented a strong alignment. In contrast, a loose coupling described a disconnect in the alignment from central office policy to principal action and decision making. The authors identified six major areas where decisions

were made: establishing curriculum, performance standards, teachers' professional development programs, evaluating teachers, hiring, discipline policies, and school budget. The research indicated a tight coupling between central office and school principals in performance standards, establishing curriculum, and teacher professional development programs. Further, a loose coupling in hiring and evaluating teachers and, when it came to student discipline, a decoupling (Xia et al., 2020). This designates that even though the school board and central office set clear guidelines and expectations, there are some areas, including school discipline, where policy and practice do not always align.

Kennedy et al., in their 2017 study about administrator beliefs and choices regarding exclusionary discipline, stated that districts must develop policies that "address administrative misconceptions about the ineffective practice by providing both pressure and support for change" (Kennedy et al., 2017a). The study clarifies that even with clear policies in place, administrative perspectives are a prominent element in their implementation. While school districts put great effort into creating fair and equitable behavioral systems, even the best policies are carried out by well-intentioned and imperfect principals.

### Does an individual principal's discretion impact decision-making?

There are agreement and understanding among researchers and educators that not all students enter schools with the same backgrounds, experiences, or levels of support from home. While there is much debate surrounding systemic issues in schools, the research indicates that most educators understand that to provide equitable outcomes for all students, the services and support provided to students must be considered on an individual child basis. Like the students we serve, schools consist of educators and school leaders who often have their own biases, beliefs, and perspectives. Understanding that every situation is different, discretion or flexibility

for school principals must exist to meet the needs of students, staff, families, and the entire school community. This discretion allowed principals can make decision-making about behavioral outcomes simultaneously more straightforward and more complex.

To that point, Findlay (2015), in a summary of her research on insights into elementary principals' decision making, shared that "principals appeared to understand discretion as being part of larger, more complex issues or a gray area." This gray area proved to be heavily influenced by "pressure from their superiors, the expectations of parents and staff, and the threat of legal action" (Findlay, 2015). While school principals are afforded discretion in decision-making, Findlay argues that key stakeholders should regularly review this discretion. Although key stakeholders' concept of review sounds official, those stakeholders may not always be advocating for all children. They may only perpetuate the inequities created by exclusionary discipline practice and protect the status quo for those benefiting from the practice.

In the 2011 report from the state of Texas called *Breaking Schools' Rules*, researchers analyzed millions of school and juvenile justice records across Texas. Noteworthy to this study, they found that "Only three percent of the disciplinary actions were for conduct for which state law mandates suspensions and expulsions; the remainder of disciplinary actions was made at the discretion of school officials, primarily in response to violations of local schools' conduct codes" (Fabelo et al., 2011). This finding is in alignment with the Wisconsin data presented in the opening of this review. It is important considering that less than 5% of all exclusion is used to address significant safety concerns. The other 95% is being implemented for far less severe incidents based on building principals' discretion, who often feel like they have no other option.

In 2017 Brianna Kennedy, Amy Murphy, and Adam Jordan released a study focused on Title 1 middle schools and the administrators' beliefs and choices about discipline. A month

later, they shared the following as part of a blog post on the American Journal of Education Forum.

> Administrators consistently referred to a shared set of consequences from which they could choose, and all of them described relying upon a discipline system in which the consequences became increasingly harsh if students repeated their offenses. Out-of-school suspension was considered the harshest consequence that could be used (short of expulsion) but also the least effective, which highlights the contradictions inherent in administrators' work: They must deter misbehavior while developing positive relationships, instill both fear and trust, and impose sanctions that they do not necessarily believe in–and that are not necessarily effective–because they do not have access to better alternatives. Negotiating these contradictions and making uncomfortable compromises sometimes resulted in feelings of demoralization and failure (Kennedy et al., 2017b).

While allowing principals to have the discretion to carry out behavioral consequences seems to be an essential part of the equation for addressing school discipline problems, discretion begins to place principals in a position where conflicts and contradictions only seem to complicate an already difficult situation.

### Do principals make decisions based on research and best practice?

If research and best practice guide administrative decisions making, why is this not the case when it comes to discipline? Are there other areas of principal practice where they do follow the research and best practices? The research and best practices around school discipline point to systems that rely less on exclusionary and punitive discipline and rely more on relationship building and positive, proactive solutions to challenging behaviors. Welch & Little (2018) performed a systematic review of disciplinary exclusion, which showed exclusion to be

an ineffective way of addressing challenging behaviors. The meta-analysis provides a collection of all available research on the topic of exclusion from 2012-2018. It demonstrates that exclusion has countless adverse side effects and few if any documented benefits for children. A key table in the study provides ten pages of summaries of 72 studies conducted during 2012-2018 that demonstrate that exclusion has substantial negative impacts on students (Welsh & Little, 2018b). Despite this research, these data at the beginning of this review tell us that school principals commonly use exclusionary discipline.

In her case study called *Putting Research to Work*, Melissa Patschke highlighted six smart moves that elementary principals should take to support children who struggle with emotional, behavioral, and ultimately learning issues. Based on her research, she established that the best practices would include; principals who secure a well-equipped team, knowing what approaches do work, having high aims, including all stakeholders, capitalizing on teachers as leaders, and reflecting on the process (Patschke, 2012). In her conclusion, Patschke noted that this effort to center kids' needs and best interests were incredibly effective in her school. These researched-based "moves" improved student behavior and learning, making the argument that principals acting based on the research and best practices may be a more effective approach.

However, "best" is a subjective rather than objective label. As Ermeling et al. (2015) suggest, at times, "best practices" can be the enemy of better teaching. They write,

> "Best" suggests a definitive superiority to alternative practices; it's a label based more on an appeal to authority than on research. As an iterative process of ongoing exploration and testing, research avoids definitive statements like 'best practices'… better teaching is built by steady, relentless, continual improvement— one lesson and one unit at a time" (Ermeling et al., 2015).

Research such as this demonstrates that educators and educational leaders have a culture that is continually pushing them to do better than the scripted best practices. Leaders recognize that every child, every school, and every community is different and has unique needs. This autonomy afforded to educators returns focus to the discretion afforded to principals. Although best practices may exist, with the best intentions, principals choose what they believe to be right at the moment for their school community.

## Do external pressures impact when principals implement exclusionary discipline?

In the 1999 article on the dark side of zero tolerance, Russ Skiba and Reece Peterson share multiple disciplinary actions that made national news. Among them was a 1997 incident where a 12-year-old boy brought and flashed a toy gun in class in a Rhode Island school. Because of zero-tolerance policies, the principal suspended the student and stated that "suspension sends an unambiguous message to students and protects the school from possible legal action" (R. Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Although this is an example from 1997, this line of thinking is still prevalent in today's decision-making processes for schools and principals. Throughout this section, we will explore a few of the external pressures put on schools and, by extension, principals to exclude children from school.

### *Where are the pressures coming from?*

As evidenced in the 2011 report from Texas, only 3% of millions of school and juvenile justice records analyzed that year represented major offenses that required suspension or expulsion by laws. The other 97% of suspensions and expulsions were at the discretion of school officials (Fabelo et al., 2011). While legal expectations do rightfully influence some

exclusionary practices, the fact that such a large percentage of other incidents lead to exclusion indicates that other pressures on principals to exclude exist.

In her 2015 work looking at student discipline at the elementary level, Nora Findlay shared that “influences upon their decision-making included pressure from their superiors, the expectations of parents and staff, and the threat of legal action” (Findlay, 2015). These factors all played a part in the principal decision-making process, deciding if, when, and for how long children would be excluded from school. Findlay summarized a quote from an interview with a principal where the principal “pointed out his staff wanted him to be more punitive (which he was against) and to develop a ‘really hard and fast, consistent set of expectations that if they [students] do not follow, then we are going to go after them’" (Findlay, 2015). This pressure from teachers is supported in research by Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy in 2013. Through ethnographic interviews, they found that teachers looked to the office as a source of support. When teachers felt a loss of control in the classroom, they looked to the principal to remove students and support the teachers, often without the principal fully understanding what led to the request for removal (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016).

One understudied area is the influence of parents and community on school principals to exclude. Lewis & Diamond (2015), in their book *Despite the Best Intentions,* have an entire section of the book dedicated to the "opportunity hoarding" that takes place when parents with privilege (most frequently white parents with privilege) manipulate the system for the benefit of their children, often at the expense of underprivileged (minoritized) students and families. Parents of privilege will often pressure schools and administrators to make sure that there are no distractions to learning caused by the "bad kids." This hoarding of opportunity promotes the disproportionate removal of underprivileged children for the gain of the families and students of

privilege. As we have seen in the state of Wisconsin, this type of research or any mention of this concept is often met with great resistance, and even proposed legislation that would outlaw many of the words and concepts are written about in this paragraph. While this may be challenging work, it is work worthy of being done for the benefit of our children and schools.

## Are principals responding to their perspectives and beliefs when they implement exclusionary discipline?

Throughout the research, clear patterns in justifying the continued use of exclusionary punishment have emerged. While some principals seem to administer exclusionary discipline as a last resort when no other options seem available, others use the practice, standing firm behind the idea that there must be exclusionary consequences to change behaviors. Some differences in perspectives are based on policy and practice, yet many seem to be based on the principal's core beliefs and perspectives. In this section, I explore the research surrounding principals' perspectives and beliefs of principals, particularly their views regarding the use of exclusion.

In their 2004 quantitative research *School Characteristics Related to the Use of Suspension*, Christle et al. survey principals from both high suspending schools and low suspending schools. In their findings, a trend emerges among principal perspectives. Recognizing that their perspectives change over time, they identify that principals with nine years or less experience as a principal use more suspensions than their counterparts with an average of 14 years or more experience. They also find that the principals with less experience were more likely to have goals to reduce suspensions, while the principals with more experience did not identify this as a need (Christle et al., 2004). The authors indicated that new principals used exclusion more frequently to establish themselves as tough on behavior and gain teachers' support. They then showed that as principals established themselves, they then could use less

harsh techniques based on the experiences and relationships that they had built over time. These findings indicate that beliefs and perspectives change over time. The longer a principal does their job, the more confident and comfortable they become with their use of exclusion.

Welch and Little (2018), in *The School Discipline Dilemma,* comprehensively review discipline disparities, identifying that principal perspective plays an important role in explaining disparities in the use of exclusionary practices (Welsh & Little, 2018a). Many differences in perspectives and beliefs in the research stem from schools' inherent mission to instill white middle-class values in all students even when many of the students and families that the schools serve do not have those same values in their homes. Regardless of the policies and laws that impact the way principals discipline, we cannot underestimate the power that morals, individual bias, and perspectives play in principal decision-making. When the vast majority of principals in the state mirror the white middle-class values in their personal lives, it is interesting to consider how those same beliefs, perspectives, and values impact their decision-making processes.

Again, here I draw from the 2017 work of Brianna Kennedy, Amy Murphy, and Adam Jordan on Title 1 middle schools and the administrators' beliefs and choices about discipline. The authors connect a moral belief system tied to conservative Protestantism. While they are discussing the use of corporal punishment, they link the moral authority of schools to conservative teachings stating that "sparing the rod" can result in "spoiling the child" (Kennedy et al., 2017a). The study finds that many principals bring a moral perspective that only through severe consequences will children learn to change their behavior. They discussed a study in which graduate students were provided detailed scientifically significant information and training on the use of punitive discipline. Upon completion of the work, 78% of students from the class still felt that punitive discipline would be part of their professional practice. In doing so, 78% of

the students in those courses made clear that their morals and faith were more important than the research backed by science.

All principals, like all people, have biases and preconceived beliefs that affect their day-to-day decision-making. Often principals acting with the best of intentions do so with a lack of understanding of ethical issues and challenges surrounding the decision. The lack of understanding of principals is explained well by Anderson (2015), "For researchers and educators immersed in this work, why preschoolers are put out of school and the entrenched racial disparity seems most closely tied to reasons such as teacher bias and children living in poverty whose hitting, biting, and pinching is frequently labeled misconduct rather than developmental delays" (Anderson, 2015). Anderson asks educators to look at the whole child and their developmental level instead of focusing only on the behaviors.

For many school principals, their perspectives and their districts' policy-makers perspectives are based on the stimulus-response model. William Glasser explains the stimulus-response and "holds that the behavior of all living creatures is their best response to some external event that impinges upon them" (Glasser, 1985). Principals and schools are often looking for the next reward-based or punishment system to promote positive behaviors and consequence negative behaviors. Regardless of the evolution, exclusion from the classroom and school remains a constant as the most substantial disciplinary stimulus. He states that "when these traditional 'motivators' do not work, we do not blame the incorrect theory, we blame the students. It is their fault that they do not respond 'properly' to what we do" (Glasser, 1985). By blaming students when they do not respond in desirable ways to school discipline, they overlook the more significant, system-level problems at play. As such, Glasser compels principals to examine the broken system before blaming the children. Other scholars have supported this

view, claiming that there needs to be more attention on how school systems produce undesirable student behavior and less on individual students as the "problem." Extensive research exists studying a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline. This school of thought makes a direct correlation between the systems in place in school and for far too many students their eventual transition to the justice system and ultimately to prison.

Principals' morals, individual bias, and perspectives all play an essential part in the disciplinary decision-making process. In turn, research demonstrates that principals must be willing to examine their own beliefs and practice. Given the consistent use and negative side effects of exclusionary discipline, this suggests that many principals are not self-reflecting in ways research has indicated. Principals need to understand that just because exclusionary discipline has always been used, it does not mean that it is the only way to change behaviors moving forward. For principals, this means that many times, making the right decision for children may not necessarily be the most popular decision among teachers, parents, and the community.

## Conclusions from and the Gap in the Literature

This review has identified an apparent disconnect between what the research tells us about school discipline and what these data demonstrate is actually happening in schools. While countless factors influence this disconnect, the review has identified that principal decision-making plays a role in how discipline is carried out in schools.

When student behaviors are involved, many personal and systemic factors allow decision-makers to enter a grey area that leads to inequalities and disproportional representation within the populations being excluded from school. In Wisconsin, the state report card system

that compares how schools are doing academically reflects the fact that educational systems are held to a higher standard of consistency, efficacy, and accountability in academic performance than they are in discipline. With higher expectations for student performance, principals and teachers turn to best practices and research to help students realize their potential. However, as this review has covered, there is a disconnect in applying research and best practices when it comes to addressing and correcting negative student behaviors. As stated, principals begin to set behavioral expectations and work with challenging students at the very youngest ages that students start school. Early elementary school is a foundational age for development, and there is more to be learned about how schools and principals should be working with the most challenging students. Misuse of exclusion with our youngest learners could leave long-lasting negative impacts that will impact the child and their view of school for the rest of their life. To address this, it will be necessary to hear directly from elementary principals about their reasons behind why they exclude, what other methods they have tried, and what resources and evidence they need that would allow them to discontinue the practice entirely. It is an accepted belief that early literacy development is key to long-term success. Why should behavioral modification be any different?

This literature review has identified that there are still questions about why exclusionary practices are used at the elementary level. Even though safety is often cited as a primary reason for exclusion, our youngest learners are less likely to cause significant bodily harm than what we have seen carried out by older students. Despite this, elementary-age children are regularly being removed from school, often for defiance and non-compliance. The research has helped us to understand what general factors are considered when principals make the decision to exclude but taking time to consider what goes into the decision-making process specifically of elementary

principals is worthy of investigation. Elementary schools are inherently incredibly safe places to learn and grow. That learning comes from all the great experiences, but there is also meaningful learning tied to failure and learning from one's mistakes. If excluding a child from school can be proven as the best method to help them learn from their negative behaviors, these data indicate that we should have behaviors well in check. The fact that for far too many students the results of exclusion are more negative than positive, demonstrates a need to better understand the decision-making process and find a better way to help our youngest students learn from their mistakes.

# Chapter 3 Design of the Study and Methodology

## Research Questions

After an extensive review of literature on school safety, impacts from the use of exclusion, and the factors that influence the decision to exclude, it is evident that there is more to learn about why these decisions are made and the factors that contribute to them. Further research is needed to understand principals' intentions and reasoning for the use of exclusionary discipline. To that end, this dissertation research focuses on the following questions:

1. Why do elementary school principals administer exclusionary discipline practices?

2. Does school safety influence principals' decision-making process?

## The Research Design

When I set out on this research, my work's primary purpose was to understand why elementary principals choose to use exclusionary discipline. The literature solidifies that exclusion is not an effective way of changing behavioral outcomes. Despite this, principals often justify the use of exclusion by stating, "When you jeopardize the safety of yourself or others, I have no choice but to exclude you from…" There is a perception that by excluding students from school, we somehow make schools safer. Even more concerning is the incredibly high use of exclusion when safety is not the primary concern. Instead, it is used to handle defiance and disrespect, further alienating students asking for help in all the wrong ways.

In addition to the research on the impacts of exclusion on students, this study frequently refers back to publicly available data found on the Wisconsin department of public instruction website. These data were discussed in the first chapter of this research and will continue to be a

part of the discussion throughout the rest of the paper. The state requires all schools receiving state funds to report to the state each year the number of suspensions and expulsions used in each of their buildings during that school year and for what basic purpose the suspension was used. The categories that counts are separated into are assault, drug & alcohol, endangering behaviors, weapon-related, and other violations of school rules. As discussed in chapter 1, year after year other violations of school rules continue to be the most used category for the use of exclusion. The foggy grey area created with this catch-all category allows for a high level of school and principal-level discretion when making the decision to exclude. Review of data and review of literature both indicate that there is room to reduce the use of exclusion, especially at the elementary level.

As an elementary principal, safety coordinator, and district administrator, examining practice at the elementary level is incredibly important to me for many reasons. The fact that there is alignment between the pre-attack behaviors discovered in the research of Peter Langman and the very behaviors that often lead to exclusion from school, there is cause to question if our attempts to make a problem better, may be making the problem worse. As an elementary principal, I saw year after year how vital it is to start students off on the right foot in school. How we work with students and families at the very youngest levels sets the tone for school interactions for the rest of those children's lives. It is essential that we not only do everything to help create a love of learning within those students, but we also demonstrate love and support for students, especially when they need redirection for unwanted behaviors. Our commitment to the students must be the same or similar to the Hippocratic oath taken by doctors. Do no harm!

With this as my foundation, I set out to understand the "why" behind the decision-making process of principals. If barriers are standing between practice and a better way of supporting students, we must identify them and eradicate the use of a broken practice.

## Research Design – Critical Qualitative Study

A qualitative research design will be used to address these questions. "Qualitative research is based on the belief that knowledge is constructed by people in an ongoing fashion as they engage in and make meaning of an activity, experience, or phenomenon" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). While qualitative methods may be able to break down the frequency and effects of exclusionary practices, the qualitative process allows for making meaning of information collected in interviews of elementary principals. Ultimately qualitative research enables us to gain a better understanding of the influences that affect decision-making. With these assumptions and the theoretical framework shared above, this research allowed me to address the human factors that contribute to the use of exclusionary practices in schools. By connecting with the selected participants, Cresswell tells us we can "collect data in the natural setting sensitive to the people and places under the study, and collect data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes" (Creswell, 2013). Collecting data and establishing the themes of that data will happen through an interview process. In her book *Salsa Dancing into the Social Sciences,* Kristen Luker says this of the interview process. “I think that interviews are, almost by definition, accurate accounts of the kinds of mental maps that people carry around inside their heads and that it is this, rather than some videotape of “reality” which is of interest to us” (Luker, 2010). More importantly than learning from just one person’s perspective, Luker tells us that hearing the same thing from multiple people allows us to “be reasonably sure that you are tapping into something that is reliably social and not just individual” (Luker, 2010). This concept

of learning about things is considered reliably social and is key to the choice to use interviews and qualitative research.

Qualitative study and interviews, in general, can take many forms. This study specifically used a critical qualitative study to guide the research. In his book on the subject, Cameron White describes critical qualitative research as "research that informs social education through a lens that ensures the investigation of issues in education tied to power and privilege, ultimately leading to advocacy and activism" (White, 2015). White goes on to list six assumptions in critical qualitative research in social education:

1. Social and historically constructed power issues affect all human endeavor;
2. Ideology and value judgments, knowledge, skills, and dispositions;
3. Capitalism affects the construction of individual and group processes/products;
4. Objectivity is a myth, and language and culture necessitate subjectivity;
5. Privilege and oppression are rampant, and critical consciousness is a primary focus;
6. Traditional and mainstream practices contribute to the reproduction of issues tied to equality and social justice. (White, 2015)

When we consider these assumptions and the implications, they have on decision-making within schools, this methodology allows for a line of questioning that challenges mainstream beliefs and practices. This methodology pushes thinking to advocate for equality and social justice for all children that our public schools are privileged to serve. It allows me to learn from the people making the decisions at the elementary school level and advocate for change, especially when using school safety as the primary justification for the use of exclusion.

While the term critical is in the name of this study, I would like to be clear that this is not a study based on Critical Race Theory. CRT, as it is referred to most frequently, does have some similarities with the critical qualitative research in the fact that it looks deeply at historical and current systems that reproduce power and privilege. While race is discussed in this dissertation, it was not at the heart of the research and is not prevalent in the data that was researched or studied during this process. While I understand that implicit bias and institutional racism probably play a part in the disciplinary decisions of principals, the application of the critical qualitative research for this dissertation is a critical focus on current practices, policies, and beliefs surrounding the used of exclusion and the impact of safety on that decision making process. When looking at data, it is evident that additional focus the role of implicit bias and institutional racism on the decision-making process would worthy of additional study. That stated, this is not the focus of my research questions. To do this, I would have needed to look beyond what the interviewees told me to decern the impact of bias and racism in their decision-making process.

With the critical qualitative design in mind, the questions that I prepared for my interviews with elementary principals were designed to ask principals to reflect critically on their own policies, practices and beliefs as they answered the questions. The hope of this methodology was to be able to push principals to think about the why behind their decision to exclude and not just because that is what they were told to do or what they have always seen done in the past. One question challenged the principal to think about how excluding a child from school positively impacted the child being excluded. Critically thinking, if it is not creating some form of positive outcome, should this really be a practice that we are using to change behaviors for the better.

Ultimately, to make changes to systems that continue to perpetuate inequities and negative impacts for children, we must begin by being critical of the processes, procedures, and beliefs that got us to that point to begin with. This research will attempt to do exactly that.

## Participants - Elementary Principals

To gain perspective on elementary principals' decision-making process, I attempted to select approximately 12 elementary principals to be interviewed and share their beliefs, perspectives, experiences with exclusionary discipline. The process to select these principals was designed in a way that these elementary principals could be selected from any area within the state and not just one geographic area. The process used to select participants for an interview is laid out in detail below.

## Participant Selection Process Summary

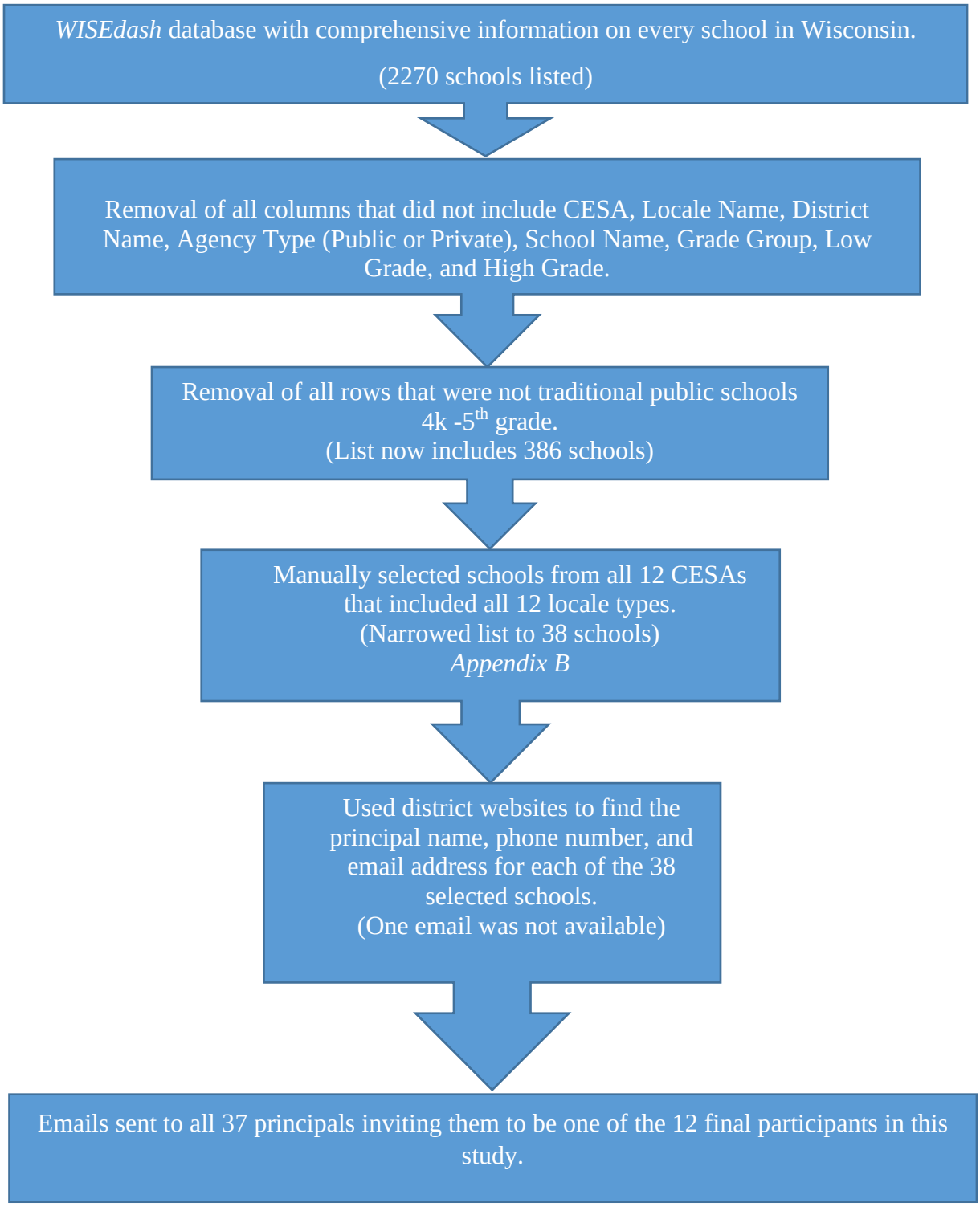


Table 3. A.

The first step of selecting participants was defining the types of schools where I would be seeking principals and then trying to select schools that were across the spectrum of schools in all areas of the state. To accomplish this, I went to the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction website. I used the publicly available WISEdash to find a detailed spreadsheet that contains all schools and information about them, including where they are located and what type of "locale" they exist. https://dpi.wi.gov/wisedash/download-files/year Once I downloaded this spreadsheet, I began to sort the data to select between 30 and 40 target schools where I would contact principals and request an interview.

When the spreadsheet was first opened, it listed a total of 2270 schools. Each of the schools was categorized into 12 different CESA areas across the state that each represent different geographical areas of the state. In Wisconsin, every school is part of one of these CESA areas. Each school also had a column labeled Locale Name. In this column, schools were broken down into the following 12 categories: Distant Town, Fringe Town, Large City, Large Suburb, Mid-sized City, Mid-sized Suburb, Remote Town, Rural Distant, Rural Fringe, Rural Remote, Small City, and Small Suburb. Understanding that the CESA designations would give me geographical diversity and the Locale would speak to community and school size, my selection process centered around getting a good mixture of these categories.

In the spreadsheet, I kept these data in the following columns. CESA, Locale Name, District Name, Agency Type (Public or Private), School Name, Grade Group, Low Grade, and High Grade. I then hid these data in other columns that would not be needed for this selection process.

By sorting the columns, I hid data in the rows that included any non-public schools, all schools that were not elementary, all charter schools, and finally, all schools that were not

configured in a way that started with four-year-old kindergarten and ended in 5th grade. Upon completing this process, I reduced the list from the original 2270 schools to a target list of 386 schools that met all the above criteria.

From this list of 386 schools, I began to look at the local types in each CESA area to have each of the 12 CESA areas each represent a different Locale. Through this process, 38 schools were selected. I used district websites to find the following information: principal name, gender, email, phone, and a school website link. The completed spreadsheet can be found in the Appendices as Appendix A.

Once gaining IRB approval and approval from the proposal committee, recruitment emails were sent to the 38 principals selected for the study. (Recruitment email found in Appendix B) The initial set of emails was sent to principals in the final month of their school year. Three of the principals responded with interest in participating and all interviews were set at that time for those participants. Two principals responded promptly and declined participation. No other responses were received.

Once the school year concluded, a second round of emails was sent to those who had not responded to the first email. The second was the same invitation with the title of the email being second notice. This round of emails led to four more emails and a formal rejection from a larger school district whose principal had sent the request to their administrative office. To get three more interviews, I turned to known peers in the field who met the identified criteria and had an interest in participating in the study.

In the end, the following principals were selected as participants for the study. Each principal has been given a pseudonym and some basic demographic information pertaining to the study

has been shared. Seven of the participants identified as male and the other three as female providing good perspective from multiple men and women. All participants identified as white providing no racial diversity.

**Participant Information**

| Pseudonym | Gender | Locale | Total Years as a Principal |
|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | M | Large suburb | 20 |
| Angelica | F | Small city | 5 |
| Peggy | F | Rural - remote | 8 |
| James | M | Rural - distant | 8 |
| Hercules | M | Distant town | 9 |
| Thomas | M | Distant town | 5 |
| Maria | F | Rural - fringe | 11 |
| Alexander | M | Rural - fringe | 5 |
| Eliza | F | Rural - fringe | 9 |
| George | M | Rural - remote | 8 |

Table 3. B.

While the entire selection process did not yield the diversity or interest in the study that I had originally hoped for, the ten interviews completed provided solid themes for the study. They represent 7 of the CESA areas from the state of Wisconsin and include a small city and large suburb along with mostly rural and distant districts. While this is not perfectly balanced, in many ways, this is similar to the distribution of population across the state with the vast majority of the state consisting of rural communities and just a few larger urban areas.

It is important to note in the table above that the years in the role of principal are not necessarily all within the school that they were currently serving in. For Alexander, as an example, you will see that although he has been a principal for five years, these data on the Wisconsin Department of Instruction website for suspension from his school only demonstrate

one year of his leadership in that building. The other two years were completed under the guidance of the former principal.

## Pilot Study

After receiving approval to continue the study and before contacting the target participants, an interview was completed to make final adjustments to questions, receive feedback on the quality of questions, the time it takes to interview, and the value of the time spent interviewing. For this pilot study, I turned to a trusted colleague in the profession that met all the criteria of the selection process but was not chosen to be part of the actual study. By taking this time before contacting participants, I was able to describe the process and importance of time spent participating to the final participants.

Through the pilot study, it became evident that taking the time to study the publicly available data for each school before the interview gave me as the interviewer a great deal of credibility with the participants. The more that I could speak to their specific school and the use of suspension in their building, the more that principals were willing to open up and engage in meaningful conversations. In addition to having data in front of me when interviewing, a couple of the questions were moved around in order and a few questions were re-worded for added clarity following the pilot study.

The principal interviewed as a part of the pilot study provided positive feedback and expressed interest in learning more about the study when it was complete. She appreciated that the conversation required her to do some reflection on her own practice and stated that she would need to spend some time reflecting on her practice following our conversation. This was an outstanding veteran principal and the fact that the conversation led to this type of thinking and

reflection was a positive outcome from the process and is in line with the Critical Qualitative study and the research resulting in activism. If all principals leave the process reflecting on their process with a desire to reduce their use of exclusion, that is a win for the children in our state.

## Participants

Despite some challenges securing the number of interviews that I had hoped for, ten elementary principals agreed to participate and were interviewed. Unfortunately, there was neither racial nor ethnic diversity in the participant group. While this diversity would have been incredibly valuable, the selection process was set up in a randomized way and did not have a method to recruit racial diversity. Even with an additional metric in place to recruit more diversity, the population of elementary principals in the state of Wisconsin that do not identify as white is a small percentage. Future work in this area may require a different selection process to access a more diverse participant field.

When we look deeper at the ten participants, there is a strong leaning toward veteran principals. All the principals cited between five and 20 years of experience with most in the middle of that range. When you consider that most principals have taught for several years before moving to administration the collective experience of this group was impressive. Many had not only longevity as a principal and as an educator, but many had longevity in the district and had moved up over time as well. While there is a natural tendency for principals to have higher levels of experience, the fact that the pool of participants had the amount of experience that they did have was consistent with the 2004 quantitative research *School Characteristics Related to the Use of Suspension* by Christle et al, that indicated that brand new principals use exclusion at a much high level than their veteran peers. The fact that no new principals volunteered for the study may have happened because of the selection process, but it also may

have been a result of the fact that those newer principals may not be quite as confident in being in the study as the veterans that participated demonstrated.

While an attempt was made to select a diverse population of schools representing small and larger schools in rural, suburban, and urban schools, the group interviewed represented primarily smaller rural districts with little urban or suburban school representation in the study. With primarily rural and smaller schools represented, the population of principals interviewed also represented very minimal racial diversity with the primary population of students being represented as white. Based on publicly available data, the demographics for each of the target schools can be examined in table 3.B. seen below.

**Study School Demographics**

| Pseudonym | Locale | 4k-5 Enrollment 19-20 | American Indian or Alaskan Native | Asian | Black or African American | Hispanic or Latino | Native Hawaiian or Pacific Island | White | Two or More | Students with Disabilities | Economic Dis-advantage | English Learner |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Aaron | Large suburb | 335 | 0.6% | 1.9% | 4.7% | 23.0% | 0.0% | 62.7% | 7.1% | 18.0% | 53.4% | 5.3% |
| Angelica | Small city | 295 | 0.0% | 0.0% | 5.8% | 15.9% | 0.0% | 67.0% | 11.2% | 15.9% | 71.7% | 6.5% |
| Peggy | Rural - remote | 206 | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1.0% | 0.5% | 0.0% | 96.6% | 1.9% | 19.3% | 58.0% | 0.0% |
| James | Rural - distant | 162 | 0.0% | 0.0% | 0.0% | 9.5% | 0.0% | 87.1% | 3.4% | 17.0% | 46.3% | 2.7% |
| Hercules | Distant town | 745 | 0.4% | 0.3% | 0.0% | 3.6% | 0.1% | 90.8% | 4.8% | 14.2% | 33.1% | 0.1% |
| Thomas | Distant town | 480 | 0.4% | 0.2% | 0.0% | 0.9% | 0.0% | 95.3% | 3.2% | 12.2% | 50.2% | 0.2% |
| Maria | Rural - fringe | 338 | 0.3% | 0.7% | 2.3% | 1.6% | 0.3% | 93.5% | 1.3% | 16.0% | 32.4% | 0.0% |
| Alexander | Rural - fringe | 286 | 0.8% | 1.6% | 0.0% | 3.1% | 0.0% | 91.8% | 2.7% | 10.9% | 35.0% | 2.7% |
| Eliza | Rural - fringe | 614 | 0.0% | 0.7% | 0.6% | 28.3% | 0.0% | 66.9% | 3.5% | 13.8% | 43.1% | 13.8% |
| George | Rural - remote | 224 | 0.0% | 0.0% | 1.3% | 5.4% | 0.0% | 89.7% | 3.6% | 17.0% | 52.9% | 2.7% |

Table 3. C.

## Participants use of exclusion.

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction allows us to dig even deeper into these data and sort the type of incident that resulted in the suspension of students. The categories used to disaggregate these data include, just like in chapter one, assault, drug and alcohol, endangering behavior, weapon-related, and other violation of school rules. When conducting the interviews, it

appeared that there was a common understanding among the participants that assault, drugs, and alcohol, endangering behaviors, and weapon-related were in some regards unarguable that consequences were needed to address these behaviors up to and including suspension and expulsion. These have been grouped and have been labeled as severe. Other violation of school rules, on the other hand, leaves so much room for discretion and interpretation that it on the other hand could be looked at more aggressively. These have been relabeled as discretionary. Not only is this the area that is the most connected to discretion, but it is also by far the most used method identified across the state.

**Participant's School's Use of Exclusion**

| **Pseudonym** | **Gender** | **Locale** | **4k-5 Enrollment 19-20** | **Years in Role** | **17-18 suspensions** | | **18-19 suspensions** | | **19-20 suspensions** | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | | | Severe | Discretion | Severe | Discretion | Severe | Discretion |
| Aaron | M | Large suburb | 335 | 20 | 0* | | 14* | | 12* | |
| | | | | | 0 | 0 | 11 | 2 | 8 | 4 |
| Angelica | F | Small city | 295 | 5 | 58 | | 78 | | 36 | |
| | | | | | 1 | 57 | 1 | 77 | 1 | 35 |
| Peggy | F | Rural - remote | 206 | 8 | 0 | | 0 | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| James | M | Rural - distant | 162 | 8 | 2 | | 1 | | 3 | |
| | | | | | 0 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 0 |
| Hercules | M | Distant town | 745 | 9 | 11 | | 7 | | 10 | |
| | | | | | 8 | 3 | 7 | 0 | 9 | 1 |
| Thomas | M | Distant town | 480 | 5 | 13* | | 1 | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 6 | 7 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| Maria | F | Rural - fringe | 338 | 11 | 2 | | 0 | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Alexander | M | Rural - fringe | 286 | 5 | 2* | | 3* | | 8 | |
| | | | | | 1 | 1 | 0 | 3 | 2 | 6 |
| Eliza | F | Rural - fringe | 614 | 9 | 5 | | 0 | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 5 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| George | M | Rural - remote | 224 | 8 | 0 | | 1 | | 0 | |
| | | | | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| | | | | | * Not principal at that time | | | | = more discretion | |

Table 3.D.

Table 3.D. helps us in many ways to understand the participants and how their perspectives shared during the interviews align with publicly available data.

## Instrumentation - Interview protocol

Interviews in qualitative research are designed to allow the participants to openly share stories, experiences, and opinions that cannot be measured in the same way as quantitative research. With this understanding, the list of questions below was carefully developed to create opportunities to capture the participants' thinking, beliefs, and opinions. The questions are targeted so that the information gained ties back to the two primary research questions.

1. Why do elementary principals administer exclusionary discipline practices?
2. Does school safety influence principals' decision-making process?

In addition to addressing these questions, the interview questions were designed to tie back to the conceptual framework of consequence analysis decision theory. This correlation can be seen in the way that the questions are presented below. For many of the questions, this format allowed me to ask principals to reflect on the consequences both positive and negative of the use of exclusionary practices. Each question and the justification for asking it can be seen below.

1. Exclusionary discipline can have slightly different meanings depending on the district and context that it is used. Will you describe exclusionary discipline in the context that you understand and use it?

This question was designed to make sure from the start that the principals and I are all using the terminology of exclusionary discipline the same way. Even when the definitions varied slightly, I could then tie back to their definition as they answered additional questions.

2. Tell me about a time that your use of exclusionary discipline resulted in positive outcomes for the student involved.

This question goes directly to the consequence analysis decision theory discussed in the theoretical framework. This way of looking at school problems in terms of their consequences asks the principals to think about the positive consequences of their decisions to exclude. Because the theory encourages examination of both positive and negative consequences, this question is intended to make principals think about the positive outcomes of a behavioral modification strategy that by nature is negative.

3. Based on publicly available data, the DPI shows that your school suspends *** number of students last school year. Can you explain what these data mean to you?

*** *For this question, data shared in this dissertation as part of table 3.D. was read back to the principals who in most cases had administered the consequences and had reported the reasons to the state.*

One of the consequences for principals and the schools involved in the use of exclusion is that these data on the frequency and purpose for the use of exclusion becomes public information that is easily accessible on the internet. This question is intended to understand the thinking that goes into these data. Is there a lot of stock put into these data, is it accurate, does it demonstrate improvement in a desired direction? Although fairly open-ended, this question also demonstrated that I had done my homework on these data from the principal's school.

4. Tell me about a time that you felt that for the safety of the school, that you must use exclusion of a child to keep the school safe.

Again, the concept of consequence analysis comes through in this question as principals were asked to reflect on the outcomes of their choices to exclude. There is an assumption that if they used exclusion to address safety, they must have felt at that moment that the consequence for inaction would be a compromise of the safety of the school.

5. As administrators, our decisions are not always perfect. Have you have experienced a time when you were part of a decision to use exclusion that did not feel right to you?

One of the consequences of deciding to exclude can be the internal battle with oneself on if they chose to do the right thing or not. This question asks principals to reflect on that feeling and the series of events that led up to that decision. Most everyone can reflect on experiences where if they had the chance to do it all over again, they would have done it differently.

6. Can you share an example of a situation or two that typically would have ended with the exclusion of a child, and you were somehow able to turn the situation around for the good of all involved?

Again, this question asks principals to think about the positive consequences of quick and creative thinking that led to children being able to stay in school when common practice would have excluded them quickly from the learning environment. In allowing principals to share some of their success stories, may help to provide a road map with strategies that could be used by other principals in these situations to prevent the use of exclusion from becoming the accepted norm in their school community.

7. When making behavioral decisions that affect children, tell me about some of the factors that contribute to your decision-making.

There are times as a principal that consequences for decision-making come from sources other than just looking at the best interest of the child. Often, laws, district rules, parents, teachers, and other students present factors that need to be weighed into the decision-making process. Some of these factors result in positives for children and others do not. As acting principals, this group was asked to identify some of these factors and talk about how they influence their decision-making process for the good or bad.

8. What would you need to become a principal who uses no exclusionary practices to change behavior in your school?

More than anything, this question is designed to identify what is holding them back from using zero exclusions within their school environment. This again assumes that principals would rather not exclude children from school because of the negative consequences correlated to the action. Taking time to think about what they would need to change the practice is intended again to gain insight into how to address the concern before it becomes a larger issue.

9. Does the use of exclusionary discipline make schools safer?

This question is a point-blank question to the principals on how they feel about the core question guiding this research.

### Interviews

All the interviews for this study were conducted using the Zoom virtual meeting software. This allowed for easy access to a pseudo face-to-face experience between me and the principals being interviewed at the time that worked well for the participants. Each interview was recorded so that the responses could be transcribed and analyzed using NVivo software to identify trends and themes from the gathered during the process. Participants were asked for consent to be recorded before the recording started and asked again for a record once the recording began. Included in this request for consent, participants were reminded that their names nor the names of their schools would be used in the dissertation. The only data being collected would be their beliefs, perspectives, and stories that would help to answer my research questions. Because these interviews were conducted virtually, I have kept the recording of their consent as documentation of their consent instead of trying to arrange for signed consent agreements to be passed back and forth virtually.

During our time together, participants were asked a series of questions and were encouraged to speak to their own beliefs and values as they pertain to the use of exclusion in their roles and responsibilities. I attempted to keep the interviews as comfortable and conversational as possible to make the participants feel valued and respected during the process. As interviews progressed, and trends began to emerge, I was able to dig deeper into certain topics where multiple people had already spoken about the same themes. I would share different language and word choices of other participants and ask the current person interviewed if they felt the concepts overlapped or if they were speaking to a different type of concept. These clarifying questions and discussions provided more depth to the interviews and helped to solidify key themes in my quest for answers about the use of exclusion and its tie to school safety. This method of asking open-ended questions and letting the subjects guide the conversation with their stories and experience is central to quality qualitative research. Even during the more closed-ended questions in the interviews, principals were allowed and encouraged to explain their answers based on their own experiences and beliefs. By allowing the participants to tell their stories and share their beliefs openly and candidly, we can get a good look into their decision-making process.

## Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed and recorded, they were all loaded into NVivo for analysis as well as reviewed through a manual note-taking and coding process. This process included multiple times of listening to and reading through responses from the principals that were interviewed. Commonalities were identified as well as unique concepts or quotes that spoke to the expertise and perspective gained through the qualitative research. This process also identified a few outliers that stood out from the majority perspectives. Selected statements were identified as key concepts and they are shared with some surrounding context in chapter 4.

Trends in the responses quickly began to emerge. There were many thought-provoking statements brought to the table from the principals. With the goal of this research set to better understand the reasoning behind the decision to exclude children from school, this format allowed for participants to share not only their beliefs but specific stories and example of how they put their beliefs into practice.

While NVivo provided some structure for the responses, the most meaningful organization of the ideas came through reviewing the interviews multiple times and beginning to organize the commonalities and differences in preparation for writing chapter 4. This was also an opportunity to begin to develop some of the key concepts, ideas, and answers that would develop into the findings in chapter five. The more that the answers were organized and explained in chapter 4, the more the findings of the study emerged. This iterative process is consistent with the function and goal of qualitative interviews. This connection back to the goal of the research provides evidence that the study is accomplishing the intended goal to better understand the decision-making process of elementary principals.

## Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

This research process began only after the completion of the CITI program course on the use of human subjects in research. While many aspects of the CITI programming do not apply to this research, a few important notes on ethical considerations are noted in this section. While 100% publicly available data was used to select participants and have collected names and contact information, the research and findings are not tied to these participants through any form of identifiable process. No names of principals, the teams they work with, the schools, or names of students are used in the completion of this research.

It is important to note again that the selection process of principals, as well as these data collection process about the schools where these principals serve, is all gathered from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction publicly available data found on their website. The dashboard of information can be found at https://wisedash.dpi.wi.gov/Dashboard/dashboard/16840. This resource is discussed throughout this study and is key to the study. Because this is all publicly available data, confidentially is only a concern if were to tie the information directly to participants. This is part of why pseudonyms are used in place of names in Chapter 4 when the interviews are shared.

I used peer review and debriefing to address the trustworthiness and validity throughout the research. Peer review and debriefing with my advisor and other colleagues familiar with my study provided an external check of the research process (Creswell, 2013). These strategies allowed me to ensure trustworthiness and validity. This type of formal discussion helped me learn from the process and observe important social trends that become crucial to the findings.

Even though I have identified the commitment in this study's framework to critical qualitative research that leads to “advocacy and activism”(White, 2015), I recognize my perspective and bias leading into this study and worked hard to be objective. As I interviewed, listened to, and interpreted the perspectives shared with me during the process, I did my best to keep my bias and beliefs in check. While I feel strongly that exclusionary discipline is overused, and we must start children off on the right foot at the elementary level, my own bias and beliefs must be set aside when researching for this study. I depended on peer review and debriefing to make sure that my own bias and perspectives in check while embarking on this vital work for our children.

# Chapter 4 Presenting the Data

## Research Questions

Through these data collection processes, the two primary research questions remained foundational to the study.

1. Why do elementary school principals administer exclusionary discipline practices?
2. Does school safety influence principals' decision-making process?

With each question asked and each response received, these questions were in the background defining the context of the conversation.

## Findings and Analysis

In the sections below you will see common themes that quickly began to emerge through the interviews as well as some direct quotes from participants that both aligned with the themes. Quotations are used to explain the themes and to show the commonality and the differences between your participants. This section is not intended to give value to responses, but simply to present what was shared in an organized fashion so that the information can be processed in the finding portion of chapter five.

## Responses by Question

### Defining Exclusion

While the most common definition of exclusionary discipline cites examples such as suspension and expulsions, it is important to understand exactly how the principals interviewed in this study define exclusion. When participants were asked to define exclusionary discipline, they were specifically asked to define it in the way that they understand, use, and practice it in

their school context. In making the distinction and clarification of the question, the intent was not to hear repeats of the same standard answer but to understand what the terminology means to the individuals that may be dolling out this type of discipline.

While the most common definitions of exclusion cite the most severe examples such as suspension and exclusion, the group of principals that were interviewed for this study had a more inclusive working definition. While all the principals gave definitions that included suspension and expulsion, the line that defined when exclusion began, tended to get blurry with some participants believing that any removal from any portion of the day away from peers would be considered exclusion while others felt that there were instances where students could be removed for short times or for targeted purposes that they would not necessarily categorize as exclusion. For these principals, removal for short times or at specific times was fair game but once students were secluded to the office or sent home, then it became exclusion. Many cited examples of times where students were removed for short periods for targeted discussions and interventions by the principals, teachers, support staff, counselors, special education teachers, or any other person working with the students to target unwanted behaviors. Some likened the short-term removal for the purposes of connecting with students to students being pulled from their peers for extra support in reading or math.

One definition, offered by Peggy, defined exclusion as “alienating the student by separating the child from their peers as a consequence.” While the core concept of removal for punishment was present with all, the word alienating stood out in this interview. Aaron made it clear that the term exclusion equaled suspension in his mind and stated that “suspensions, as a form of behavioral modification, at the elementary level are not appropriate. There are better ways to change behavior” Hercules shared the sentiments of the many other interviewees in

stating that in his school, “short term removal from peers is used as regulation and re-teaching strategy. Long-term separation from peers, in or out of school, was a consequence.” He went on to say that “the goal is always the short term, and the long term is a last resort.”

In the end, the principals could all identify the type of suspensions and expulsions which is required to be reported to the department of public instruction each year. In addition to this, the concept of any removal away from peers being exclusion began to emerge. This established at least a minimum standard for defining exclusionary discipline and opened the door for further discussion into the grey area that is developed by each principal having a slightly different view of when exclusion begins.

### Positive outcomes of exclusion for children

During the interviews, principals were invited to cite examples of the exclusion of a child, for the purpose of discipline, that resulted in positive outcomes for the student. For most participants, there was a long pause before they proceeded with this response. For James, he stated simply, “no, it was not intended to be positive.” For Eliza, there was a moment of self-discovery when she admitted that she had never thought of the use of exclusion from that perspective. She went on to identify that “there really are not positive outcomes for children when you get to that point.”

For the other principals, after the pause, they began to talk about situations where the use of exclusion had led to improved relationships with families and students once the severity of the concerns was addressed by exclusion like out-of-school suspensions. Aaron told a story where the suspension began to turn things in the right direction. “It was a sort of wake-up call” for the family. “Through some really rough conversations, it ultimately brought the family in, improved

the relationship between the parents and the school, and that child is doing far better now that the relationship has been developed."

Thomas was proud to report that through some of these difficult communications that "relationships were able to be built in a way that parents and school realized that they were on the same team" and that both had the best interest of the children in mind. Before these conversations and exclusions, parents often felt like it was a fight against the school. Once these conversations were had, parents felt more supported, could align their efforts, and for a few of the principals, they cited situations where student behavior began to change for the better with this consistency between home and school expectations.

Maria, Eliza, Peggy, and Alexander all shared stories that the positive outcome for the child was an all or partial alternative placement for children where underlying social and emotional needs could be addressed in ways that the public elementary school was not capable of meeting. The participants for this study represent a large geographic area of the state of Wisconsin. In multiple interviews, principals talked about alternative schools to support the most challenging of students. Based on their geography, one can conclude that alternative placement facilities are present in all areas of the state. Even when they are not in the same community, principals talked about providing transportation to get children to the alternative placement where the social, emotional, behavioral, and mental health needs of the children could be better me than in the school setting.

Collectively within these stories from principals there appeared to be a genuine concern for these students. Principals talked about the "weight of the decision to send a student to an alternative placement" (Maria) and a feeling of "helplessness" (Peggy) when situations at school

raise to that level. Alexander identified the need and advantages of the alternative placement as "the only way to get to and fully address some of the roots of the negative behaviors."

While many of the principals could cite some positives, they could almost all agree that the consequence itself did not lead to a positive. It was the conversations and relationships built once the consequence had occurred that resulted in the positives for the students.

### The meaning of the DPI reporting on discipline

Before interviews, publicly available data from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction was analyzed to gain an insight into the number of suspensions currently used within the selected schools and the reasons indicated for these suspensions to occur. When interpreting these data, there were two important notes to consider. The first note to consider is that no data were available at the time that interviews were conducted for the 19-20 school year. The second piece to remember was discussed in multiple interviews was that principals had the last two years on their minds. The 19-20 school year ended on March 13th as the state braced for a pandemic. For many of the principals, the 20-21 school year had been a year like no other with some starting with virtual instruction and all working on how to get children safely back into a school environment during a pandemic.

When principals were read the numbers of suspensions used within their schools over the past few years, they were asked to confirm the accuracy and then to explain what those publicly available data mean to them. Alexander's data reflected an uptick from past practice while in his first year but reported a significant drop off in the second year in the position. He enthusiastically shared that "I love this kind of data. This is the data that allows people to really see the issue and then figure out how to fix it." Reflecting on his first couple of years in the district he was excited

to continue to “reduce the use of exclusion and instead make sure that we have ways to support the students we have within the school environment.”

George reported that his “low numbers are a reflection on the relationships that have been built with kids. We have also worked a lot with staff to understand the zones of regulation and what tools they have available to them to help children deescalate.” Like many of the principals, he expressed an overall desire to “keep these numbers as low as possible.” Maria’s data showed one exclusion in her first year in the position and zero over the course of the next two years. She shared that “these numbers are a reflection of the hard work that has done by staff to rethink the way that we work with challenging students.” Her goal is to “always to keep the children in school.” She went on to share with some frustration that the one suspension in her first year was actually done by her superintendent on a day that she was out of the building. She “typically works with children, engages families, and gets the child back into the classroom as soon as they are deescalated and ready.”

Eliza, who had 5 suspensions in the 17-18 school year reported that “those numbers have more about the politics of the district than they are a reflection of our school and the way that we function. There are times that the district insists on the use of suspension. I don’t believe that sending them home is going to change anything. Luckily the majority of my staff feels the same way.” She attributed the zeros to gaining buy-in from her staff and embracing the fact that their school was by far the best environment for her struggling students.

Thomas entered a school that had suspended 13 students the year before he came. In his first year suspended one and in the second suspended zero. He shared that this “reduction in the use of suspension coincided directly with his implementation of PBIS. The system got all staff on the same page and made clear the steps that need to be taken to address unwanted behaviors.”

He felt strongly that unifying his staff around common expectations and procedures was key to their success in reducing exclusion.

Hercules led the largest school in the sample with 745 students. This school was a new building that combined students and staff from three smaller, outdated schools. He indicated that the suspension numbers of eleven, seven, and ten were a "reflection of combining three schools into one and the work needed to build one new culture with three different teaching staffs and three different groups of kids coming together." He believed he was "getting there and expects the next set of numbers to be much lower."

James who had seen two, one, and three suspensions over the course of three years predicted an increase for the next release of data. He indicated that "the vast majority of the instances came down to just a couple of families where, despite great effort, he was unable to get families on board and working with him and the school." While those numbers were not the highest in total, he did represent the smallest of the ten schools in the study with 162 students.

Much like James, who had shared about the impact of family support and home life of children, Peggy too recognized that not all of her students get the same level of support at home. In contrast to James, who had used zero exclusion over the three years that were studied, said that "it started with recognizing the homelives of her students." She noted that this understanding of homelives was not something that she had learned overnight. "Twenty-plus years of her career in the same building and community helps you to understand the students and families that we serve." She also noted that recent increases in special education staff and mental health resources have allowed her to further work to meet the needs of her most challenging students over the past couple of years.

Aaron, who had recently begun his position had replaced a principal who had used 14 and 12 suspensions over the past couple of years reported that he has used zero in his time in the building. He has been able to bring a "completely different approach to discipline." He shared that "by spending more time building relationships, talking with students to get to the root cause of the problem, and facilitating conversation with staff, students, and families, we have been able to find solutions to problems that did not include excluding children from school." Remaining calm and taking time to listen and talk things out was key to his strategy of working with students, staff, and families.

The highest user of exclusion in the study was Angelica who worked in a small city school. Her numbers of 58, 77, and 36 were higher than she wanted them to be. She shared that the "number had continued to slowly drop off as they have been able to increase mental health resources, increase a focus on PBIS, and eliminated a dojo system that sent home negative instances throughout the day as well as some positive." When we talked more about the "negative Dojo," she went on to share that "by getting staff to focus on the positive side of PBIS, there is a shift in the mindset of the staff and the entire culture of the building is becoming more positive." Her words and actions throughout the interview demonstrated a true discomfort with the numbers and a deep desire to "better support her children."

### Times when safety dictated the need to exclude.

During the interviews, principals were asked to recall and share specific situations where they felt that they had no choice but to suspend children for the safety of the school. Without exception, each principal could cite situations when students had become violent with other children. Even with intervention and constant supervision, there were times that the children attacked other children violently. While the situations were without question justified to be

considered violent, it is important to acknowledge that no weapons were present in these stories but there were examples when students had grabbed materials from the classroom or playground and attempted or successfully used the objects to hit, threaten, or attack someone. Many of the participants specifically talked about "a line," that if crossed, they felt like removing the child from the school was their only acceptable option for the safety of the other students and staff.

In multiple of these conversations, principals differentiated between an adult's (teachers, support staff, and principals) ability to work through a tough situation. The same maturity and patience did not exist yet with the child's peers. Maria shared that "even though we work with all students to help them understand and be patient, they are not able to put their own emotions aside in the moment and that can provoke a child with maladaptive behavior skills." For Alexander, he talked about "competition, at the elementary level, often leads to escalated behaviors." He shared that "students, at times, lash out against what is perceived by them as unfair applications of rules in unstructured (student-initiated) play on the playground. All kids want to win, playing at school and not always winning is very different than playing at home with younger siblings."

Hercules identified these acts of violence as caused by "unmet mental health needs that manifest themselves in severely undesirable behaviors." The story he shared about violent behavior from a fourth-grader led to multiple exclusions and conversations with school support teams, administration, and parents. Although many options were discussed, parents were so concerned about the level of violence being demonstrated by their student that they pulled the child from the school setting to home school him. Hercules shared that "as hard as they had worked to find a positive resolution, as much as it would have been to work through the approaches discussed, it was easier for the school when the parents made the decision that they did, but your heart breaks for the child and their family. I worry about his future."

### The decisions that did not feel right

With an almost seamless transition from the sentiments of Hercules in the last question, principals were now asked to talk through a story of a time where the decision to exclude a child from school did not feel right. The worry and concern shared by Hercules continued to come through in the responses. To be fair, there were a couple of participants who did not indicate that the suspensions left them feeling this way. George talked about the fact that he had "done this job long enough to understand that some of these things are just going to happen with children. Suspension is the only option that we have sometimes."

James stated that "it never feels right. I absolutely hate suspensions. The last thing that I want to do as an educator is to remove a student from a learning environment." Peggy shared that "you always wish that you could have done more to prevent the students from getting in that place. I wish that we all had a better understanding of trauma and its impact on our students. Maybe we could avoid some of these issues if that was the case." Some behaviors seem to be within the control of the students while others seem to reflect the circumstances of where and how the students are being raised. Thomas said that "you hear teachers say all the time that they just wish they could take the kids home and provide stability for them. You feel that way as a principal from time to time as well." Alexander shared that the decision to suspend seldom feels "right" but there are times that the safety of the other students and staff must be prioritized. "Children have to learn at some point that they cannot respond immediately with harsh language and violence to every situation that becomes uncomfortable."

While most of the participant principals could reflect on times that they did not feel good about making the decision to exclude, the recurring thoughts continued to be that there are times when there are no other options and there is a desire to do more to prevent this type of behaviors

from occurring again in the future. Maria shared that "as elementary principals, we question everything. It is always my goal to get a student what they need and get them back into the classroom as quickly as possible. Sometimes, that feels right, and other times, you just don't know. You make a decision and hope for the best." For Eliza and Angelica, They always "second guess" themselves. Eliza said, "the stakes are just too high. I think if I hit the time in my career when it no longer bothers me when I issue a suspension, it may be time to hang it up."

### Turning the situation around for the good of the child

During the interviews, principals discussed the importance of relationship building, building-level systems for teaching skills, mental health resources, and other processes that led to perceived positive outcomes for students. The next question asked them to think about specific situations where behaviors had begun to escalate toward suspendable acts and themselves or their staff were able to turn the situation around for the good of the child.

Peggy immediately went into a story about an incredibly busy day for herself where a student was upset, causing issues in his classroom, and was sent to her office. With the student obviously upset and a task in front of her that needed to be completed, she encouraged the student to just sit and relax, take some deep breaths, and promised that they would talk as she finished the task she was working on. After five to ten minutes as she was reaching the end of her task, and the student had been sitting quietly for a few minutes. The student raised his voice and said loudly to her, "you would be pissed too if everyone, including your own mom, forgot your birthday!" Her heart sunk, she stopped working, and she went to work supporting the child with a much stronger understanding of why the student was unable to function in the classroom with his peers. With a little effort and scrambling around the school, she presented the child with a gift card to Culver's and explained to the child that sometimes as we get older, we actually can

take our parents out to dinner to celebrate our birthdays. With the small gesture, a strong relationship built, and simply working to understand the why behind the behavior, she experienced a success story with that child that lasted long beyond his birthday.

Aaron shared his belief that "60% of behaviors are due to the fact that children are struggling with the content in class while the other 40% are because they are not being challenged enough" He went on to tell an amazing story of when he was working with a fourth-grade student who had been a struggling behaviorally for quite some time. He sat and did some math problems with him for a while. As a former math teacher himself, Aaron continued to increase the difficulty of the problems and at the end of the informal assessment determined that the student should be advanced at least a couple of levels in math. This concept blew the parents away. Instead of hearing how bad their son was from school, they heard for the first time just how exceptional he was. After some formal testing, subject level advancement, that student is about to finish high school with great grades across the board and almost no behavior challenges. He stated that it was "important to have teachers that are knowledgeable enough to see the troubles brewing before they become a problem and have a plan in place to change the course."

Maria said she had experienced many situations where things were headed in the wrong direction and time was invested to "understand the why behind the behavior." She shared that "there is always a reason for the behavior. If you take the time to talk, listen, and problem solve. If we do that, we can avoid situations ending in suspensions of children." For her, getting her staff better at this was her primary goal. "Teachers are getting better at understanding how to listen and work with struggling students. They are making strides at understanding that "exclusion does not need to be the first step in addressing behaviors." She admitted that she still had work to do, but teachers were beginning to embrace this type of thinking.

For James, the addition of a full-time school counselor last year was one of the best results he has seen for children. In many cases, students now have an intermediate coaching, counseling, and supportive step before the behaviors come to him. With the counselor's support, we can "redirect and modify to create a safe learning environment for all. Although this was not a specific situation shared, the core of this was present in many of the interviews. Most principals were genuinely excited to give examples of relationships built with both the students and the families that could be leveraged for future situations. They gave examples of programs and resources now provided for children that may not have been provided had things not escalated to the point that they had.

### The pressures to exclude

With this question, principals were asked to talk about the factors that influence their decisions to exclude children from school. The question intends to try to understand some of the factors in the front and back of the principal's minders when making the choice to exclude. For James, he talked about the child's choices as the primary factor when deciding to exclude. "If the child can begin to de-escalate, from an emotional situation and we can talk it through, we can usually find a way to keep the child at school." If they continue to be escalated, he is left with little to no choice but to exclude. For George, Alexander, and Maria, the number one pressure for them was their need to create a safe environment for not only that student but all other students and staff as well. For all of them, the overall expectation of creating a safe school was the first thing listed when considering factors. Maria went on to list "the level of educational disruption" She stated that some "teachers tend to have higher levels of empathy, tolerance, and strategies. Ultimately, when that level of disruption is met, the teacher needs that child out of the room." When we dug a little deeper into that, it was the legal expectations, the teacher expectation, the

community expectation, and the overall school expectation of safe behavior. Principals indicated a responsibility to the other children and to the family of those children to maintain a safe environment for all children to learn.

Peggy, Hercules, and Eliza, all identified the number one pressure to exclude came from within. They all identified the need to take a moment to let their emotions settle before making final decisions about emotions. Peggy said, “the decisions you regret the most, are the ones you make when your emotions are at their highest point.” For all these principals, understanding themselves and controlling their own emotions and personal beliefs in the moment was the largest pressure affecting their decision to exclude. Peggy shared that even when parents choose to “blast you and the school on Facebook, setting your own emotions aside in that moment is the only way that we can help children.” She reminded me again, “there is a reason that kids are going off.” The needs stability from us. In these moments it is important to “plant the seed and help children find themselves.” For Peggy, the child was the primary factor influencing her choices.

Alexander shared that “Sometimes a teacher with the best of intentions draws a line in the sand and once you as the principal have been called in, you have no choice but to support the teacher and back the line that was drawn. You find yourself wishing that you would have been called sooner to intervene before the line had been drawn. You can have conversations with that teacher to help prevent that from happening again in the future, but once the ball is rolling you are kind of stuck with that situation.” These sentiments came through with many of the interviews. Many of the principals talked about needing to get the teachers and staff all on the same page. PBIS was a common term thrown out to help to make sure that all expectations were the same in all classrooms. This need for alignment was demonstrated when Aaron shared some

powerful ways that he interacted with teachers to have them reflect on the lines they were drawing in the sand for students. “My favorite question of a teacher is to ask them if (insert name of a great student) had done the exact same thing, would your reaction have been the same?” He also would ask, “help me understand how it is possible to get kicked out of your classroom within the first two minutes after a student enters? Were you really that surprised by the behavior, or could you have predicted it and prevented it?” Again, with this question, Aaron came back to the need for relationships between staff and students. “The more challenging the student, the harder they and their staff needed to work to build those relationships.”

### Getting to Zero

To really understand the mindset of principals, each of them was asked what they would need to become a principal that uses no exclusionary practices to change behavior in their schools. Maria quickly acknowledged that it “may not be completely possible to get to non-exclusionary practices, but if we were going to get there, we would need much better training and preparation for our classroom teachers.” Eliza, James, Peggy, Alexander, and George all spoke to the same theme citing a need for additional training, preparation, and professional development for teachers and staff. The word “mindset” was used by Eliza, Hercules, and Peggy when they spoke about the need to change the way that teachers view children with challenging behaviors. This aligned with the theme of increased training and preparation talked about in most of the interviews.

Another incredibly common theme throughout the responses included the concept of increased mental health services and resources. Except for George, all of the participants at some point in time during their interview talked about the incredible need for mental health support and resources for our youngest learners. For Maria, getting to zero means “increasing support to

better understand the root cause of the behaviors. For many of our children that is mental health support that we simply cannot supply in the public school." Angelica said that it was "more complex than just connecting students with mental health professionals. Schools need support to provide access, eliminate insurance barriers, and support parents who are often too overwhelmed with their own personal and professional challenges to help themselves." Clearly, getting the right support for students who struggle was a huge step for these principals in the journey to zero exclusion.

As ideas continued to flow from these principals many discussed the need to create and maintain a common vision and align staff to that vision. This was paramount for James, Aaron, Hercules, and Thomas. Programs such as PBIS were mentioned, but Aaron gave a more detailed example about how he works to get his staff to that shared vision. In any situation where exclusion is being considered, he encourages staff to think about what the students are going home to?" and asks them to begin their thinking by reflecting on "what will be learned by that student at home?" He felt if he could get all teachers thinking about that, he could find ways to better meet students' needs at school.

Alexander shared a need to get to zero which was unique to in this interview when he stated that "I wish I had a more diverse staff, more male role models, more diversity in their experiences that better mirror the experiences of our students." George also took a strong stand on what was needed to get to zero as a principal who has used almost zero exclusion for the past three years. He said simply "It is all about the relationships. Positive and proactive relationships. Teachers, staff, myself, All of us need to connect better with our students to understand who they are before we worry about what we are going to teach them." Although George was not the only

principal to talk about relationships, it was evident that this was foundational to the level of success that he has had as a principal.

### Does Exclusion make schools safer?

When asked the simple question at the end of each interview if the use of exclusion makes schools safer, only three participants committed to yes or no answer with one yes and two no. For the rest and even in the follow-up from the three definitive yes and no answers, this question is an incredibly difficult question to answer with a definitive conclusion. James was the one lone Yes answer. He went on to say that "exclusion removes the aggression and makes the school environment safer." He went on to say, that "unfortunately, there is a price to be paid when you get to that point." That price is paid primarily by the student being excluded. Alexander answered with a strong no stating that "every day we excluded is a day that we lose relationship with the student. Our positive connection to our students may be the best thing going for some of these students. Sending them away sends them the wrong message." Hercules also answered no. He acknowledged that "there may be short term gains, but you have not addressed the root of the concern."

Maria thought about the question for a moment and then answered with "I don't think so, students don't learn because of exclusion. We have to invest time to teach students to better regulate and teach all to be more accepting and tolerant of differences." She felt strongly that there were better options available to her and her team for most if not all behavioral concerns that resulted in exclusion.

Thomas shared that "exclusion gives the appearance of safety, but it is not going to change the behavior." Similarly, Peggy said "I don't think it fixes anything. It may give the impression of safety, but it has just prolonged the start of the work that needs to be done." The

idea that exclusion created the appearance or impression of safety was not unique to these principals. For many, there were comments made throughout the interviews about using exclusion to demonstrate to staff, students, and families that you were taking a situation seriously by excluding to keep others safe.

"It depends" was the theme of the answers for George, Aaron, and Eliza. For these principals, it depended on what side of the incident that you were on, what the exclusion was being used to address, and if you are using it exclusively or as a small part of a behavioral intervention plan as a last resort when all else fails. George went on to share that "it needs to be used correctly. When it is used exclusively as a discipline tool, we cause more issues than we solve." Aaron wanted to know more about the situation He wanted to know "What were the signs? What could have been done to prevent the actions from taking place? Is it being used exclusively for violence or are we talking about non-compliance as well?" All these questions demonstrate the level of complexity to this simple question. Eliza went on to make the statement that "exclusion will not fix the problem. You need to connect with students, not disconnect with them to build the types of relationships needed to make a difference in their lives." While it was hard to say definitively that exclusion does not keep schools safe, it was evident in the responses that there were many caveats to the statement that it does keep our schools safe.

Angelica may have addressed this question as a summary of thoughts when she shared that "the reality is that it is necessary at times, but it is very much overused. Kids need trust and relationships. They need mental health support. They get none of that when excluded from school." When you pair this with some of the examples that she gave during her interview, it is evident that this is a principal who wants badly to use zero exclusion but knows that she needs

more support than she currently has to get to that point. In the meantime, children will continue to miss out on the opportunity to connect with school staff and build the relationships they need.

## Common themes from the interviews

As discussed in Chapter three, NVivo provided some structure to the organization of the interviews, but the most meaningful part of the development of themes came through listening to the interviews, note-taking, and the development of the table and themes shared in this section. Table 4.A. on the next page, captures some of how I visualized and made connections while organizing thoughts and developing the themes from the interviews. The process of note-taking and reporting out the findings in chapter four acted as an iterative process of discovery. The more that I reported out, the more that themes developed. Hand notes were taken, re-organized, and eventually, those concepts were put into the theme development table. These themes began to establish a set of ideas considered when principals were faced with a decision to exclude.

**Theme Development Table**

| **Exclusion for Safety** | **vs** | **Exclusion for Non-Compliance** |
|---|---|---|
| Assault<br>Drugs and Alcohol<br>Endangering Behaviors<br>Weapon Related | | "Other Violations of School Rules"<br>Non-Compliance<br>Disrespect<br>Attendance |
| **Exclusion as Discipline** | **vs** | **Exclusion with Developmental Purpose** |
| Exclusion as a consequence with the intent help children choose differently the next time to avoid the negative consequence. | | Movement Breaks<br>Sensory Rooms<br>Connecting with Trusted Adults<br>Therapeutic Sessions<br>Working with support on Zones of Regulation |
| **Exclusionary Practices** | **vs** | **Inclusionary Practices** |
| Time in a special seat away from peers<br>Time in Hall<br>Time in Office<br>Loss of privileges (aka detention) lunch, recess, afterschool<br>In-School Suspension<br>Out of School Suspension<br>Alternative Placements<br>Expulsion | | Creating culturally responsive classrooms<br>Universal teaching of Behavioral expectations (PBIS)<br>Universal teaching and classroom support of Zones of Regulation<br>Providing scaffolded expectations and activities for children within the classroom<br>Allowing for alternative seating |
| **Mental Health Matters!** | | |
| Need more mental health support<br>Many behaviors are reflections of underlying mental health needs<br>Mental health supports have helped to decrease behavioral instances and proved additional support for working with our most challenging students. | | |
| **Relationships Help Us Understand the Why!** | | |
| Building meaningful relationships with students and their families allows for schools' staff to build connections, demonstrate that we care, fully understand the children, develop trust, get on the same team, and engage students and parents in the process of correcting inappropriate behaviors. | | |

Table 4. A.

This table was developed as an organizational tool for key concepts and trends that came through in the interviews. As I reviewed the responses from participants, it was clear that distinctions were being made that are shared in the first four sections of the table. To speak the same language, the conversations led us to clearer definitions of what exclusion is, what it should be used for, and practices that replace it. As information was and notes were added to the table, themes began to emerge that were then developed into some simple statements that can be seen below.

**Summary of the interview responses analyzed.**

- Most principals indicated that excluding children from the learning environment was a less than desirable solution even if they believed that there were times where it was necessary. (non-favorable option)
- Principals differentiated between the use of exclusion for safety-related vs compliance-based violations. (Safety or Compliance) – More (other) options exist to address non-compliance.
- Principals differentiated between exclusion as a form of discipline vs short-term exclusion with the intent to regulate and return the student to the learning environment (solution vs strategy) The strategy to regulate behavior and return to the classroom setting came through.
- Principals indicated their belief that to reduce exclusion work needs to be done to continue to develop inclusionary practices to teach all students behaviors on the better side of human nature. (Inclusion requires proactive planning) - if we are going to have all children successfully participate in the learning environment, then we must continue to proactively teach desired behaviors.

- Principals indicated their belief that there is a need for additional mental health resources not only for schools but for communities as well. (Mental Health Matters)
- Rules without Relationships is a recipe for disaster. (The Power of Relationships)

While the developmental notes and drafts were not quite this neat and clean, these notes became the location where the headings and key themes for my findings were developed. While I had looked at ways to continue to clean up the notes into a more presentable format, I felt in this chapter, it was important to explain how the information was organized and demonstrate the development and learning process that occurred along the way.

# Chapter 5 Discussion and Implications

In this section, I will share my findings, my thoughts on the interviews, how these interviews aligned with my original hypothesis, how the interviews aligned with the research, the limitations of the study, and implications for further study. Through all of this, I hope to demonstrate how I have added to the body of work targeting school safety, school discipline, and principal decision-making. If the findings laid out below are in any way able to improve the educational experience for even a few children, the work will have been worth the effort.

## Research Questions

Through these data collection processes, the two primary research questions remained foundational to the study.

1. Why do elementary school principals administer exclusionary discipline practices?
2. Does school safety influence principals' decision-making process?

Through the entire process of completing this dissertation the core concept of better understanding the decision to exclude that is made by elementary principals daily has been foundational to the work. The two primary research questions have been the guiding force that led to an in-depth study of the existing literature in the field. These questions have been the guiding force interviewing principals to better understand the individual beliefs and perspectives of the people making the decisions daily. In this section, I will make connections to the findings and give my perspective on the meaning of all of the information gathered through this process.

## Findings

Following an extensive review of the interviews, an iterative note-taking, and theme table development described at the end of chapter four, seven key themes emerged from the interviews

that will be shared in this section with some context and justification provided to support each of the concepts. These common themes are not in any type of rank order, but instead, they are listed in the order that they naturally developed through the iterative process of reviewing and reporting out on the interviews. Although not every principal used these words, as we discussed, it was clear through the conversations that we were all speaking the same language on these specific topics.

- Passion and Commitment
- Non-Favorable Option
- Safety and Compliance
- Solution vs Strategy
- Inclusion Requires Proactive Planning
- Mental Health Matters
- The Power of Relationships

### Passion and Commitment

As I begin this section, I feel that it is crucial to mention the heart and passion demonstrated by the ten principals interviewed during this process. There was an overwhelming feeling from the group that the use of exclusion was not a desired outcome of their leadership yet they all could identify times where they felt it was necessary. Some of the times where it is necessary it was due to legal, and policy-driven purposes while others had foundational internal beliefs that there were situations that required the use of exclusion. Regardless of why or often they may have used exclusion in the past, each principal in this study represented someone who has dedicated their career to making a positive impact in the lives of the children they serve.

Peggy specifically talked about how “emotional” this work can be. Effective leaders give of themselves for the good of children and the community. These principals do just that.

### Non-Favorable Option

Most principals indicated that excluding children from the learning environment was a less than desirable solution even if they believed that there were times where it was necessary. James explained this well when he stated that he “hates removing kids from the learning environment.” These sediments were shared in almost every interview. They may not have been tied to the same question, but in every conversation, there was a time when the conversation turned to a disdain of the idea of removing the child from an environment with the resources that they need to learn and be successful. While this may have been accompanied at some point in time with the justification for some behaviors to result in exclusion, their need to exclude came more from a place of requirement, more so than personal choice.

At the competition of the interviews, all participants were offered the opportunity to learn from my study and be given access to these data collected through the process when it becomes available. Multiple participants were very interested in the findings citing a genuine concern for the responsibility that educators have in directing children in the right direction toward their future. This desire to learn from these findings is yet another indication that these principals wish to find a more meaningful way to work with children that are exhibiting unwanted behaviors. Although it was not said directly, there is some indication from these discussion that they at times feel caught up in a system that lacks more desirable outcomes for students who struggle.

### Safety or Compliance

Another common theme was that some exclusion is truly used as an attempt to keep schools safe, while some exclusion is used to ensure the compliance of students. Principals differentiated between the use of exclusion for safety-related vs compliance-based violations. This was discussed in the methods section with the state of Wisconsin spelling out the different reasons for suspension. When a suspension is used to address weapon-related offenses or to address assault, or drug-related challenges, there is a solid argument that the safety of school and children are in jeopardy if these acts are not handled properly. While exclusion should not the automatic response, as demonstrated in the research on zero-tolerance, there are some cases where a student must be removed at least temporarily to keep the rest of the school safe. At the same time, many suspensions and expulsions are more discretionary in nature based on non-compliant and non-conforming behaviors. These data on the number of suspensions based on violation of other school rules and expectations paints a clear picture that not every suspension issued in our state and beyond is being done for the sole reason of safety. While this line between safety-related and discretionary is incredibly fuzzy, every interview in some capacity addressed this line between safety and discretionary. Even if the response was “it depends” like Eliza shared, when asked if exclusion keeps schools safe, the concept that some exclusion is not necessarily safety related came through. When all exclusion is discussed together, this only complicates the conversation. The fuzziness of this line is exactly why better understanding the principal decision-making process is vital to addressing the overuse of exclusion. We may never eliminate the need for all exclusion, but there is plenty of room for improvement.

### Solution vs Strategy

Another theme that emerged from the interviews was clarifying the definition of exclusion consequently. Principals differentiated between exclusion as a discipline vs short-term exclusion with the intent to regulate and return the student to the learning environment. The concept, while not always in these terms, of regulate and return was something that every principal identified. The idea is that principals can support a student who is struggling, provide them with what they need to regulate their own behavior. Once regulated, principals could return them to the classroom learning environment without turning to exclusion as a consequence with no chance to return. This was a simple concept that principals were very much in favor of. Principals shared many examples of how they used short-term exclusion as a form of prevention or technique to regulate and return students to the classroom. Although the reporting on this type of exclusion is not quite as straightforward, many principals acknowledged that they did indeed use short-term exclusion and, in many cases, these short and targeted times would prevent a child from escalating to the point of consequence in the form of suspension or expulsion.

### Inclusion Requires Proactive Planning

Another theme that developed was the concept that it took time, dedication, and a lot of proactive work to prevent students from behaving in ways that may often result in exclusion. Principals believed that to reduce exclusion, work needs to be done to develop inclusionary practices that teach all students behaviors on the better side of human nature. Programs like PBIS were mentioned frequently. Principals could identify that planning and preparing their staff to understand a common set of behavioral expectations was positive for any school. Beyond the creation of these common expectations, principals talked about the importance of proactively teaching skills needed and responding to data to identify additional areas where behaviors

needed to be taught. While PBIS one way to bring people to a common understanding, Alexander and Maria both discussed similar efforts to train and unify staff around common goals for their students. More than anything, this theme reminds us that to work on children's behaviors, principals must first address the behaviors of the adults in the building. It is difficult to get all efforts going in the same direction if the adults in the building are doing their own thing.

### Mental Health Matters

Questions asked during the interviews like, what would you need to become a principal who uses zero exclusionary discipline often led to discussions about the need for additional mental health support for students and their families. In addition, the theme of mental health needs came through from many other stories and answers as well. Principals believed that there is a need for additional mental health resources not only for schools but for communities as well. It is often explained that the definition of insanity is to continue to do the same thing and somehow expect different results. When it comes to the methods that are currently used in schools to address unwanted behaviors, they have failed to evolve at the level in which we have developed new knowledge in the mental health field. Much of the work of meeting the mental health needs of students cannot be accomplished systematically in the hour-by-hour schedule students are asked to move through during a school day. Mental health supports are often complex and time-consuming processes that require a different level of expertise and training than most classroom level and building level administrators possess. While additional staffing and programs to address changing mental health needs may provide some levels of support for children, providing district level and building level staff development that provides teachers the strategies needed to better support children is key to meeting these needs. Beyond the training,

school leaders must then respond to the training and begin to question practices and procedures that prohibit an emotionally supportive learning environment. In other words, we need to not only look at new practices to begin, but as importantly we must look at old practices that must come to an end.

## The Power of Relationships

With the establishment of these themes, you begin to see some of the thoughts going through the minds of principals when faced with the choice to exclude a child. Because it was so quickly established that exclusion is not a favorable option for principals, much of the conversations during the interviews talked about ways to prevent exclusion in the first place. Having the opportunity to listen and learn from these principals as they talked about their experiences and beliefs, one theme that came through maybe stronger than any other was the desire of the principal to establish meaningful and trust-filled relationships with students, families, and their educational staff. Story after story principals talked about the ways that they had earned trust, made personal connections, built relationships. These relationships allowed the principals the opportunity to begin to understand the cause of the challenging behavior. The outward behaviors that can be seen are easy to memorialize with data. What is going on in the mind of a child or parent is much more difficult to discern. Principals that take the time to develop meaningful and trust-filled relationships can understand the why behind the behavior, support the child or family, and keep those children safely in the school environment so they can learn with their peers. There may be other ways to get to this same goal, but for the principals interviewed for this study, it all begins and ends with the need for meaningful relationships. We cannot underestimate the role played by the power of human connection or the lack thereof.

## Answering the research questions

With the key themes from the interviews established, this section will answer the research questions with the findings from the research and interviews. The theoretical framework for this research revolves around the research on principal decision-making. Generally, it tells us that decisions are made based on data, internal, and external factors. These factors will be compared to the responses in the interviews to monitor the level of connection to these categories. More specifically to this study, the discovery will be enhanced through the application of consequence analysis decision theory. At a simple level, are the consequences, both positive and negative, considered when principals are making decisions about exclusionary discipline? While both positive and negative consequences will be identified, the natural connection to the negative impacts on school safety is highly considered in the second question.

## Applying the Framework

Table 5.A on the next page will provide a visual depiction of how the consequence analysis framework was applied to this study. While the table does not provide a comprehensive look at the entire study or findings, it demonstrates how the framework was applied to the study and process. The essential components of the framework are developing a problem definition, charting alternatives, planning for problem solutions, and implementing objectives. Much like the problem-solving process itself, this process is cyclical and iterative. As we learn through the process of testing alternatives, we should continually circle back to understand the consequences to make sure that our decisions are leading to far more positive consequences than negative consequences.

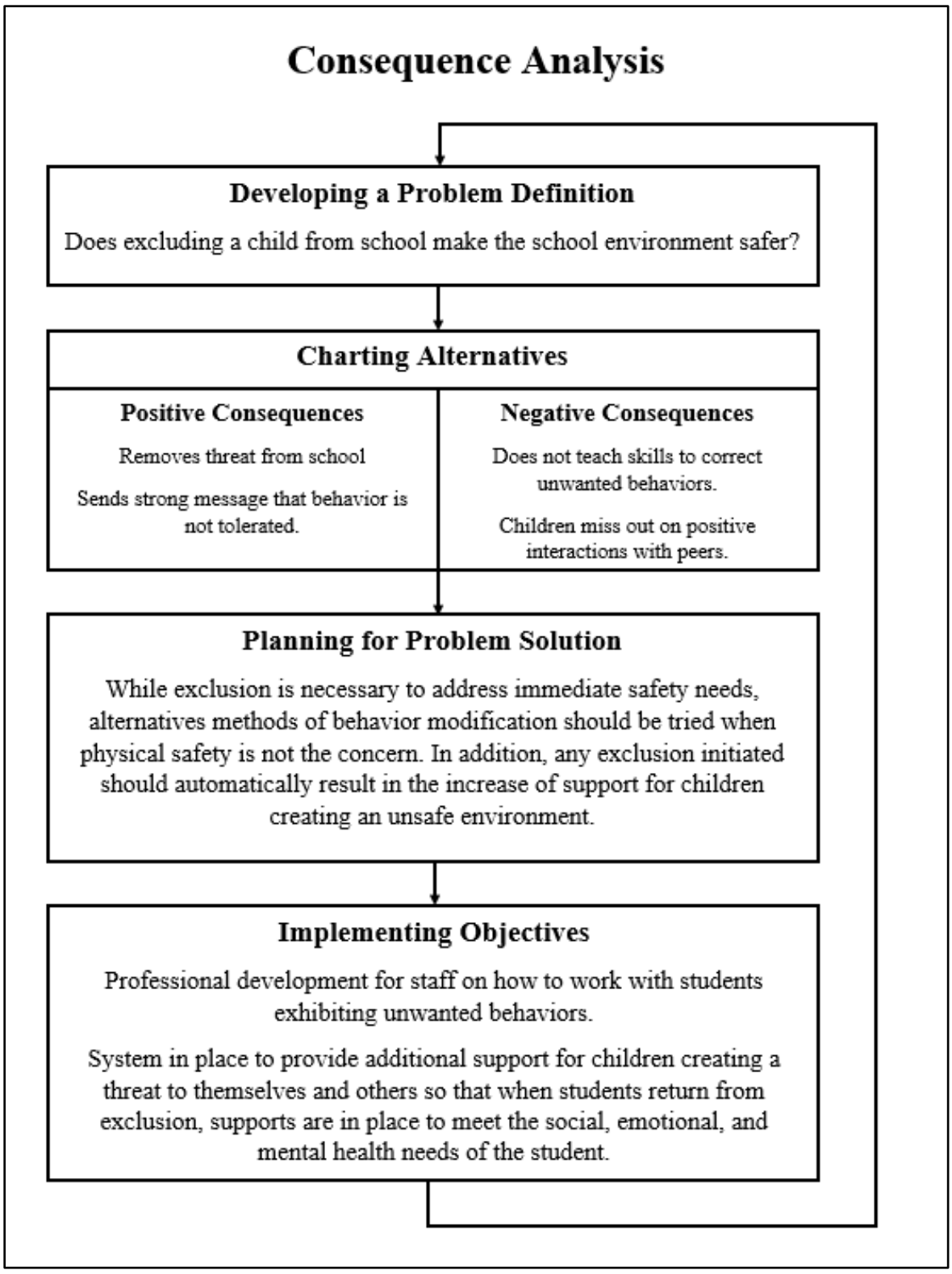
Consequence Analysis
Developing a Problem Definition
Does excluding a child from school make the school environment safer?
Charting Alternatives
Positive Consequences
Removes threat from school
Sends strong message that behavior is not tolerated.
Negative Consequences
Does not teach skills to correct unwanted behaviors.
Children miss out on positive interactions with peers.
Planning for Problem Solution
While exclusion is necessary to address immediate safety needs, alternatives methods of behavior modification should be tried when physical safety is not the concern. In addition, any exclusion initiated should automatically result in the increase of support for children creating an unsafe environment.
Implementing Objectives
Professional development for staff on how to work with students exhibiting unwanted behaviors.
System in place to provide additional support for children creating a threat to themselves and others so that when students return from exclusion, supports are in place to meet the social, emotional, and mental health needs of the student.

Table 5.A

### Why do elementary school principals administer exclusionary discipline practices?

To fully understand and answer this question, we must first acknowledge that the use of exclusionary discipline is a common and accepted practice that is fully established and expected by staff, students, families, and communities. So much so that the state of Wisconsin, along with many other states, feels that it is important enough that schools must report out on the frequency of use. While research and common sense tell us that a negative consequence tied to removing children from the learning environment is that they will not learn at the same rate as their peers, the practice is accepted and expected in schools throughout the state and nation. Principals faced with the decision to exclude must weigh these data, internal, and external pressures when making the decision to exclude. The fact that exclusion is accepted and expected quickly begins to shift those pressures toward the quick and expected response of suspending children that fail to meet expectations.

While research and interviews alike identify the perceived goal of exclusion to improve behavior, the same research and interviews cite numerous examples where behavior is not improved and, in some instances made worse using exclusion. Just like Kennedy, Lewis, and Murphy shared in their work on "Listening to the Frequent Flyers," (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016) principals could identify situations where students hit a point where they could do nothing right. Once these children began to believe that they were "bad kids" it was and is incredibly difficult to help the children positively rebuild their self-image.

There are clearly times where principals are forced to use exclusion even though their personal beliefs and the research indicate that they will not get the intended outcome of changed behavior. Instead, they get a few moments of peace and simply put off the work of addressing the behavior until after the child returns to the school setting. This short-term solution can lead to

far more work and undesirable outcomes for children if we do not address the needs as they present themselves.

Many of the principals involved in this study cited examples of positive and proactive work being done to prevent children from getting to the point of exclusion. None of them hoped or planned to use exclusion. They wanted to do their best to keep kids from getting to point of exclusion but many cited situations with students who could quickly flip a switch and become violent. They shared stories of circumstances where students had "attacked" classmates and staff often without warning. The reality, for most principals it is when a child gets to this point that exclusion is used. This can be used as an indicator that we need to better address the needs of this situation and prevent it from happening again, but in the end, it is the primary reason why principals exclude.

Ultimately, exclusion is used to remove a threat or disruption from the learning environment so that learning is not interrupted for the rest of the students. There is an inherent pressure on principals to create a safe and distraction-free learning environment for children. Whether these pressures are from internal and external sources, the fact of the matter is that when we look at the question, why do principals administer exclusionary discipline, I think it is safe to say that it is done for the good of the school and the good of the other students much more so than it is done for the good of the child. While the negative consequences, as well as the positive consequences, are considered for the rest of the children and school, those same considerations are not always made for the child who is struggling to meet behavioral expectations. If exclusion is your go-to, it may be time to rethink the supports that you have in place to help your most challenging students.

## Does school safety influence principals' decision-making process?

At the very foundation of principal practice is the expectation that they establish an environment within their school that is safe and inclusive. As education secretary, Arnie Duncan stated, “no school can be a great school and ultimately prepare all students for success if it is not first a safe school.” (Duncan, 2014) Our public schools function with a deep understanding of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs that, in simple terms, state that basic needs including the need to feel safe, and the need to feel a sense of belonging and love are essential long before children can reach the point of being able to learn. To ask if safety influences a principal’s decision-making process is kind of a silly question. The consequences for not creating a safe school are life-altering and, in most cases, not for the better. The heart of this question is do principals consider the long-term impacts of their decision to exclude in terms of school safety and the prevention of school violence.

“Safety,” the term, has a systemic meaning within the school environment and on some level, it represents “law and order.” As educational leaders, we frequently question the systems that are in place because “they have always been there.” In many ways, public schools continue to replicate systems that were designed in another time to produce graduates like a factory often so that those graduates could go on to work on actual assembly lines. Systems exist in school to create conformity and to develop uniformity in the children deemed worthy to graduate. These systems have been developed over time to teach the values of the mainstream population. Because this dissertation has been approached from a critical qualitative research perspective that encourages us to empower the disempowered, it is critical “that societal transformation can be our only goal.” (White, 2015) Often non-conforming beliefs and behaviors can quickly be labeled as unsafe or disrespectful to the accepted norms of the community. These pressures or

community norms come from staff within the building and parents and the community outside of the building. Within many school systems across the state and nation, principals are tasked with the expectation to keep schools safe based on these systems of law and order and conformity. Critical qualitative research compels us to ensure the investigation of issues tied to power and privilege ultimately leading to advocacy and activism. When we interrogate the use of exclusion at the elementary level, these data may represent more a lack of conformity to cultural norms and very few actual threats to our schools.

Exclusionary practices prioritize the safety of the entire school and other students over the individual needs of the student who is being excluded. From this perspective, exclusion gives the perception of safety for all while investing little into supporting the struggling student. By itself, exclusion has the ability to alienate students and leave them feeling isolated and excluded. In chapter two, I discussed the work done investigating pre-attack behaviors of individuals who have carried out horrific attacks against schools, their teachers, and students. The stressors listed on the attackers included significant mental health concerns, conflicts with friends/peers, and conflicts with schools. By excluding, principals add stressors to students who are already struggling. When principals were asked in this study if they ever have situations where they had suspended a child that did not feel right to them, many of them said yes. This conflict between doing what is “safe” for the school and for the other students vs supporting students in need of help is the decision that principals are faced with on a daily basis.

One concept discussed with my team during the defense of this dissertation was the role of fear in the decision-making process especially when we tie unwanted behaviors to the fear of school violence. The more that we know about pre-attack behaviors, the more we worry and fear the worst when we see those behaviors present in the school environment. The role of fear may

even be increased even more prevalent when behaviors are being carried out by students of color. Mawene and Bal discuss the “othering” (Mawene & Bal, 2020) of students of color and student who come from social and economic situations inconsistent with the norms and values of the majority of the community. When you add in the fact that a particular child does not come to school each day from an environment that is consistent with the way that you were raised or choose to live in, the fear of something different can absolutely play into the thinking and decision-making process of educators and principals.

As we apply the theoretical framework about principal decision making and specifically the consequence analysis decision theory, we return to the questions of why do elementary principals make the decision to exclude and does safety play into that decision? Based on this body of research and the responses by principals it is evident that safety does indeed play a role with principals are making the decision to exclude. For many, it is central to the process.

## Discussion

### What do I think?

When undesirable behaviors occur, as educators, we have the choice to either use consequences to help children choose differently the next time, or we can teach children how to work through the situation next time so that the behavior does not continue. The first relies on the belief that all children have the ability to control themselves and are choosing to make undesirable choices in hopes of attaining something that they want. The second concept assumes that children are constantly learning, growing, and testing. It also assumes that children have the desire to do well and meet expectations. Personal beliefs, experiences, and perspectives play a huge role in how you choose to interpret undesirable behaviors. For this reason, my desire to

understand principal decision-making is truly a desire to help principals understand how their beliefs influence the entire culture of their school and community.

The inception of this dissertation began with my deep passion for the prevention of school violence, up to and including, mass casualty school shooting scenarios that have become all too common in our country. Extensive research into the pre-attack behaviors of people who have carried out these horrific acts of violence has identified key stressors on the individuals that may have led to the point of carrying out the violence. Some of these indicator behaviors are things that we can begin to see in children even at the elementary school level. While schools are built to teach children academic skills, they also begin to teach children how to interact with others in a social setting starting with our very youngest learners. Schools provide a safe place for children to learn about how to interact with others both socially and emotionally. Caring staff is there to work through setting expectations and helping children to follow those expectations so that a great learning environment can be created for all learners. To accomplish this, just like in society, rules are created and there are consequences for not following those rules. Teachers and principals are charged with the responsibility to teach expectations and administer processes that ensure that all students meet those expectations. These interviews along with over 20 years as an educator make it clear that there are many different approaches to addressing undesirable behaviors from children. Many invest time and energy in building relationships with students to teach and re-teach appropriate ways to handle tough situations. Some methods depend more on consequences to reach the desired behaviors. Consequence systems are designed to create an undesirable outcome for poor choices in hopes that the child makes the desired choice to avoid the negative behavior. The problem is this choice is not always that easy and is often beyond the child's capability to make the desired choice.  When principals are faced with the decision to

exclude or not to exclude, their ability to understand what is within the child's control and what is not is incredibly important. If principals ask children to change behaviors that they cannot control and do not offer the opportunity to learn how to control the behaviors, they are only going to prolong the problem or make it grow.

When the consequences are for actions that the child cannot control or for reasons that they do not understand at a young age, it begins to create some of the same stressors on our youngest children that can be seen later in life. If fitting into the school environment continues to be a struggle for students as they grow older, schools could indeed be contributing to challenges facing young people as they grow up. The principals in this study could identify the types of behavioral consequences that should be reported to the state as they collect data on the use of exclusion across the state. One significant concern with these data is that principals leave themselves some latitude on what cases go that far and what situations are handled with a different level of discretion. From the first occurrence of behavioral concerns principals can adjust the consequences and can decide to work on the root of the problem, or simply exclude as consequence and remove students from their opportunity to learn from and through the undesirable behaviors.

For many principals, they understand that the behaviors that often lead to exclusion have root causes that need to be addressed before the behaviors will change for the better. Many principals interviewed talked about the use of short-term removal with plans to regulate and return vs the use of exclusion as a solution. The concept of regulating and returning speaks loudly to the overall concern about the challenges facing many young children. Principals cited countless examples of children struggling with mental health needs and other developmental delays that need to be better understood and addressed if the schools are going to be able to

engage them safely in learning with their peers. The concerns about mental health came throughout the research and interviews. The call for more support in this area must be heard. When asked about what would be needed to eliminate the use of exclusion in schools, principals shared the need for more mental health resources to support struggling students. While I have some concerns about the first response of principals and teachers who want to send the children who do not fit into the classroom to someone or somewhere to meet their needs, if this is done with the correct intention to regulate, re-teach, support, and then return children to their peers better equipped to learn, this concept has a great deal of merit.

This concept of helping children regulate and return was an idea that many of the principals talked about. Some of them continued to discuss alternative environments for children that needed levels of support that they were unable to provide in the school setting. While the intent of the alternative settings may be coming from a mindset of better supporting the child, a concern that I have is that although principals discussed the desire to use less exclusion in the form of suspension and expulsions, they did not seem to have a large of concern about excluding children and placing them in a different school. While these alternative placements and alternative schools are designed to better support students who are struggling, they are still providing the same result for the rest of the school. To the rest of the school, life can continue to go on as "normal." At least until the placement ends and the child returns having missed days, months, or even years of the social education with their peers. Comments were made about "remote in," "gradual return," "alternative programs," "special education," and even using "IEPs," to separate children from their peers. Again, if these systems are intended as short-term solutions to provide intense intervention so that children can return to the classroom, then I am in full support. If these are simply more acceptable ways to exclude children with challenging

behaviors, I am concerned that we can reduce the appearance of exclusion, provide the perception of support, and ultimately continue to exclude the problem without addressing the challenges facing these children.

### Is it consistent with the research literature?

Research indicates that exclusion is overused and that by itself it does not do what it is believed that it should and change behaviors for the better. This is consistent with the views and perspectives of the principals that were interviewed. Even the principal who had used the most exclusion of the group indicated that the exclusion itself did not change behavior for the better. She identified a need for increased support to work with her most challenging students to address the reasons behind the negative behaviors. While attempts have been made in this area, her continued use of exclusion indicates a continued need for additional resources and supports.

Research and participants both also indicated a need for positive, proactive, and preventative solutions to address challenging behaviors instead of depending on exclusion to change the behaviors after they have occurred. School-wide systems like PBIS that use data to identify areas for improvement were cited frequently in the research as well as in the interviews. These systems respond to these data with positive and proactive teaching to all students as well as targeted teaching to students who need an extra dose of the learning opportunities to understand the expectations.

In the literature review for this dissertation, Silver's research on pre-attack behaviors of eventual perpetrators of mass casualty events shared a list of key stressors on these people leading up to the event. These stressors include mental health concerns, conflicts with peers and friends, and conflicts at school. As principals told their stories about situations leading to their use of suspension, you could simply copy and paste these stressors for children in schools. The

need to create an environment in school to support children to handle these stressors effectively is essential. Hercules hit this on the head when he discussed the situations that he had handled as often being a “reflection of unmet mental health needs” and not just a choice to make poor decisions.

Peggy expressed “the need for love and support as we help children through situations where they are demonstrating negative behaviors.” This comment as well as the desire shared by Maria to understand “the reason why” is in line with the research and practices of Ross Greene to understand the lagging skills and unsolved problems to teach behaviors on the better side of human nature. Kennedy makes clear with her research at the middle school level that once children are labeled as “bad” it is very hard to shake that label. All of this reinforces the need for schools to get these needs addressed early in the child’s educational career before they become major problems on a trajectory toward tragedy.

## Limitations of the Study

As you look at the entirety of this study, it is evident that more could be done to learn from elementary principals and principals at all levels about their decision to exclude. With that as background, this section will identify many of the limitations of the study and lead toward the implications for further study. In this section, I will also address some of the impacts of conducting this research during a global pandemic.

On a simple level, ten participants were a great start, but further gains could be made by increasing that sample size and gaining additional perspectives and beliefs. Probably more important than the sample size itself would be to increase the diversity of not only the principals in the study but also the schools and children that they represent. The selection process favored veteran principals who might have felt comfortable sharing their mindset on discipline. Research

indicates that principals early in their careers use more exclusion than veterans. Gathering insights from newer principals may have strengthened our understanding of why the decision-making process changes over time.

Much like the lack of diversity of school populations and principals, the study is unfortunately void of any meaningful data surrounding the disproportionate use of exclusion on students of color. This is a huge concern in the state of Wisconsin and beyond. I do believe that there are concepts and beliefs shared in this dissertation that could help to reduce the disproportionate use of exclusion, but this study and participants did not directly address the role that race and ethnicity play in discipline. Although there were extensive comments on working to understand who you are working with, where they come from, and not expecting all behavior to mirror your own cultural beliefs and expectations, more could have been done throughout this study to address the disproportionality. This dissertation and study took place not only during a global pandemic but during a cultural revolution as well. The events surrounding the death of George Floyd as well as the most polarized election in our nation's history make it clear that conversations about race can no longer and should no longer be avoided. They must be embraced.

### Unpredicted Conditions Impacting the Study

While the pandemic did not directly impact the results, it has caused a slight shift in perspective that was mentioned by many of the participating principals. As an elementary principal for 10 years, I can tell you that there really is not a "normal" when it comes to the way that schools operate on a daily basis. All schools have ups, downs, ins, and outs that somehow create safe learning environments for our students. Although there is no normal, each principal in this study would concur that "operating" schools through a global pandemic and national lock-

down was anything but normal. When we looked at and discussed data, there was always a part of the discussion about these data and how they were affected by closing our schools early in 2020 and some type of crazy start to the 2020-2021 school year. The impact of closing schools early in 2020 can be seen in data from the state. In chapter one, I had reported the number of occurrences of exclusionary discipline reported to the state has been on the rise since the inception of the reporting mechanism. In 2016-2017 there were 58,878 total exclusions and that number grew to 73,139 in the 18-19 school year. The 19-20 school year that included the pandemic closure saw the number drop to a four-year low at 52,593. Although this is still a lot of exclusion, it is consistent with the interviews in stating that there was less exclusion in 19-20 in large part due to the pandemic.

Between not having children in school and then making every effort possible to keep the children more than six feet apart, major behavioral incident rates dropped off significantly. Just like the behavior change in our schools, the threats of school violence and active shooters almost completely went away as well. While it is obvious that an empty school is not a very desirable target for an active threat, the fact of the matters is that as I bring this dissertation to a close and schools return to a more "normal" operation again, the incident rate for suspendable behaviors in school has climbed back us and unfortunately the violent threats to schools and communities have been revived as well. Conversations about the need for mental health support in schools and communities ring loud and just like the calls for racial justice, there is a need to respond to these calls. While these were not factors planned for during the design of the study, I feel that the timing and circumstances must be noted. They may not have made a huge difference in the findings but need to be recognized when interrogating the reliability of the information gathered.

## Implications for Further Study

There are many ways this research could be extended. Much like the limitations, a more extensive and purposeful selection process instead of open sampling could target new principals, schools that use high amounts of exclusion, or schools that have large numbers of exclusions of black and brown children. These efforts may be able to help us learn more about these circumstances as well as gain useful information to better train new principals before they perpetuate poor past practice without a full understanding of the impacts on children or the strategies to prevent the issues in the first place. Some sample questions from this line of thinking could include the following:

- Do years of experience impact the decision of a principal to use exclusionary discipline?
- What are schools that use minimal exclusion doing differently when compared to schools that use high rates of exclusion?
- Are the rules for disciplinary exclusion the same for all students?

In addition to selecting a more diverse group of participants, this research continues to indicate a need to understand and develop ways to better support children and families struggling with significant mental health-related needs. This type of research begins to depart from the world of educational research, but more connections between the mental health and school communities can only strengthen the support needed for children and ultimately for our communities. To a participant, when these struggling students and situations were discussed during the interviews, there was a genuine sense from the group that they wish that there was more that they were able to do for these children. When the bucket brigade can no longer keep up with the growth of a fire, you either lose the fight or have to change your method of

delivering water. Our country and more importantly our children cannot afford to be lost. We must find another way to work with and support our most challenging and vulnerable students before it is too late. Potential research questions in this area could include the following:

- Do quality mental health supports provided by schools reduce the amount of exclusionary discipline used in that school?
- Do mental health factors influence the principal's decision-making process when choosing to use exclusion as a consequence?
- Do quality mental health supports provided by schools make our schools safer?

While all of these potential questions would need to be interrogated and the logistics of a meaningful study determined, they are just a few examples of the work that remains to be done in this field of study.

## Implications for Policy and Practice

To conduct this level of research to gain valuable information and perspective on policy and practice without applying the learning to current policy and practice would be nothing more than an exercise of futility. The research is clear that the way that schools and specifically principals work with and support our most challenging students must be improved for the good of our children and the safety of our schools. To be clear, the findings are not an implication that principals have somehow been making poor decisions. Instead, it is a reflection of applying out-of-date policy and practice to an everchanging community dynamic. As our students and communities change over time, so must the way that we serve them. To that end, the findings of this dissertation demonstrate four key implications for policy and practice that should be studied, and changes made within not only individual schools but at the state and national level as well.

The most important consideration to understand is that the consequence itself does not result in anything positive for the child who is struggling. It is just an indicator of a problem that needs attention. The principals in this study that responded to that indicator in positive ways did not report a continued need for the exclusion. Simply explained, the act of excluding a child from their learning environment alone will not result in the positive change in behavior that is hoped for. Using that opportunity teach, support, and learn with the child in that moment may be the only way that will learn more appropriate and adaptive behaviors to handle those situations in the future. Translating this into policy and practice could be accomplished by requiring schools that use exclusion to document additional support put in place to address the immediate needs of the child and better understand the root of the negative behavior that led to exclusion in the first place. A few concepts to integrate into policy would include the following.

- Schools must begin with the assumption that all children have the ability and desire to do well. Not all negative behaviors are a result of the choice to be non-compliant or to seek something desirable to them through making poor choices.
- Districts should develop policy that requires the identification of the reason behind negative behaviors so that exclusion is not seen as a solution to challenging behavior. If used at all, it should be used as an indicator that additional support should be put in place to meet the needs of the students so that the behavior stops.
- School districts should continue to look for ways to enhance and improve support for struggling students that focus on a regulate and return focus. This means that systems and supports need to be in place, not to provide alternative exclusion, but with the intent of working with children and returning them to the classroom with their peers as quickly as possible.

When we look at these data included in this research and interview principals there are examples of significant safety concerns that do and probably always should result in the exclusion of a child from the learning environment for at least some amount of time. In many ways, it just makes sense to remove a threat from an environment for the safety of all. This research does not argue against that premise but instead argues that the children that caused that threat to safety deserve and need our support, compassion, and understanding despite their indiscretions. If schools and principals can turn their focus to this level of support, compassion, and understanding, just as we have seen in multiple target schools, we can see exclusion rates drop to near-zero levels.

## Conclusion

In Cameron White's book, he shares the following when describing critical qualitative research. "We are all social "human" beings struggling to develop knowledge, skills, and dispositions through lifelong education, both in and out of "school" in order to make the best of life, hopefully for ourselves and others." (White, 2015) As I bring this dissertation to a close, I feel that it is essential to remind all readers that elementary schools are incredibly safe places to learn. When we acknowledge the critical qualitative framework, we recognize that all education is or should be social education and that children will make mistakes. Allowing them to learn lessons from those mistakes in a safe and loving environment may prevent them from making those mistakes later in life when the stakes are much higher. Beginning with the youngest learners that walk into our schools, it is essential that we provide that safe, and nurturing learning environment that allows for mistakes and imperfections. It is through mistakes, missteps, and poor decisions, that we often learn the most important lessons in our life. If our schools deal with these learning opportunities in punitive ways, we cannot fully capitalize on the incredibly safe

place to fail that our schools are able to create. Critical qualitative research challenges us to consider the role of education to empower the disempowered.

Ray Rist (1996) in is study on social class and teacher expectations states that “It should be apparent, of course, that if one desires this society to retain its present social class configuration and the disproportional access to wealth, power, social and economic mobility, medical care, and choice of life styles, one should not disturb the methods of education as presented in this study.” (Rist, 1996) If we truly look at the use of exclusion through a critical lens, it is evident that advocacy toward change is essential. As Rist identifies, apathy allows for continual perpetuation of systems and methodologies that are ineffective and causing more harm that good.

In an attempt to help children to learn desired behaviors principals will, at the time, exclude children from school as an attempt to modify behavior and in many cases to help keep schools safe. The decision to exclude or not to exclude is at the heart of this research. These data from this dissertation suggest that the decision should not be, exclude or do nothing, but instead, exclude or find a better way to support children in learning more desirable behaviors. The literature review is clear and has been confirmed by the participants in this study, that the act of exclusion does not get the desired results of changing behaviors for the better, but instead, it can have severely negative impacts on the children affected by the punishment. Instead of exclusion as a solution, principals indicated that short-term exclusion from the classroom learning environment with their peers could be used to regulate and return children to the classroom while always attempting to teach behaviors that lie on the better side of human nature. As had been demonstrated, children are not robots or machines that function in response to simple stimuli. Our children are complex human beings that come from every walk of life and have varying

levels of support from their home environment. They are truly not uniform, and neither can our response be to unwanted behaviors.

Jacobson's 2018 work on the fragile family study indicates that there are some populations of children that come from homes where instability and inconsistency are the norms. These students from fragile home environments need a deep level of understanding, empathy, compassion, and energy beginning at the early elementary level. When we take the time to understand the environments that these children come from, teachers and administration can often find it easier to make connections with these children and their families. This effort to better understand the why behind behaviors is crucial to the role of educators and it does not stop with just the "fragile" families. The responsibility of schools to work with, understand, and support all children regardless of what they look like, where they live, and what language they speak is critical to the culture and safety of our schools and communities.

Exclusion and other punitive disciplinary approaches are often used under the auspices of safety. Because they give the perception that principals are somehow making schools safer by excluding students, the students themselves are often not considered in the impacts of the choice. This often leads to further alienating students who struggle to find their place in the school setting. Often the behaviors leading to exclusion are simply a manifestation or indication of underlying issues that need compassion, love, and attention to address them properly and conversely can grow when handled as controlled behaviors with consequences to change those behaviors.

This research has helped me beyond my expectations to put words, evidence, and structure behind a set of deep-seated beliefs and values that I have held for many years. Education is a business of people. Imperfect humans doing all that they can, in the ways that they

believe will be the most effective, to prepare the next generation of children for a future that is completely unpredictable and complicated future. Guiding and directing young lives is not simple, it is not black and white. Educators need to be able to set themselves aside for the good of children. It is intense and emotional work. It is work that is to be done for the future of our children and the future of our country and world.

As I conclude this research, I know that the most important work is yet to come. Implementing the implications for policy and procedures within the district where I serve will be the opportunity to put research into practice for the good of children and the future of our communities. It is my hope that this work has allowed me to add to the body of research with a concentrated look at exclusion at the elementary level. Through this process, I hope that I have added to this body of work and further built the foundation for my career as an educational leader who understands that it is easier to get things right the first time than correct them over time. Starting children out on the right foot makes it easier to keep them headed in the right direction. If we can get children headed in the right direction, we can change outcomes, change negative perceptions about schools, and make our schools even safer.

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# Appendices

## Appendix A

**List of targeted schools representing all 12 CESAs and all 12 locale types**

| CESA | District | School |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Franklin Public | Ben Franklin Elementary |
| 1 | South Milwaukee | Blakewood Elementary |
| 1 | Brown Deer | Brown Deer Elementary |
| 2 | Madison Metropolitan | Frank Allis Elementary |
| 2 | Jefferson | Sullivan Elementary |
| 2 | Janesville | Adams Elementary |
| 3 | Black Hawk | Black Hawk Elementary |
| 3 | Kickapoo Area | Kickapoo Elementary |
| 3 | Seneca Area | Seneca Elementary |
| 4 | La Crosse | Summit Environmental School |
| 4 | Holmen | Viking Elementary |
| 4 | Onalaska | Northern Hills Elementary |
| 5 | Auburndale | Auburndale Elementary |
| 5 | Cambria-Friesland | Cambria Friesland Elementary |
| 5 | Portage Community | Endeavor Elementary |
| 6 | Slinger | Allenton Elementary |
| 6 | Dodgeland | Dodgeland Elementary |
| 6 | Kewaskum | Farmington Elementary |
| 7 | Brillion | Brillion Elementary |
| 7 | Pulaski Community | Glenbrook Elementary |
| 7 | Oostburg | Oostburg Elementary |
| 7 | Green Bay Area Public | Baird Elementary |
| 8 | Oconto Falls Public | Abrams Elementary |
| 8 | Coleman | Coleman Elementary |
| 8 | Gillett | Gillett Elementary |
| 9 | Rhinelander | Central Elementary |
| 9 | D C Everest Area | Weston Elementary |
| 9 | Rib Lake | Rib Lake Elementary |
| 10 | Augusta | Augusta Elementary |
| 10 | Bruce | Bruce Elementary |
| 10 | Cornell | Cornell Elementary |
| 11 | Chetek-Weyerhaeuser Area | Chetek-Weyerhaeuser Roselawn Elementary |
| 11 | Ellsworth Community | Ellsworth Elementary |
| 11 | Spring Valley | Spring Valley Elementary |
| 12 | Ashland | Lake Superior Elementary |
| 12 | Phillips | Phillips Elementary |
| 12 | Winter | Winter Elementary |

## Appendix B

**Original Recruitment Letter**

*Note: The same email was sent a second time to most of the participants with the subject as Second Notice, and the salutation included their first and last name.*

Subject: Important Research on Exclusionary Discipline at the Elementary Level

(Originally sent on May 9, 2021, to 36 potential principals)

Dear Elementary Principal,

I am seeking 12 elementary principals to take part in one-on-one virtual interviews to help me complete my dissertation and add to the body of research on exclusionary discipline practices at the elementary level. Please take the time to read the rest of this invitation and consider sharing your experiences and perspectives with me for about 25 minutes during a time that works well for you.

My name is David Brokopp and I am currently the principal of Lakeview Elementary School in Whitewater, WI. Currently, I am also in the final stages of completing my Ph.D. through the University of Wisconsin-Madison in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis. (I would love to share with you about this amazing program if you are interested in learning more) I am currently seeking 12 elementary principals that I will ask to complete a 25 minute one on one virtual interview with me. Your name, your school's name, and any other personally identifiable information will not be shared in my paper, but your stories, experiences, perspectives, and beliefs will be a vital part of my work.

As an elementary principal for the past 10 years, I like many of us, have been faced with more than a few challenging students. We know and talk all the time about how vital it is to get children started on the right foot academically and have made herculean efforts across the state to push the academic standard to lower and lower grades because we understand the importance of getting children started on the right foot. When it comes to that same emphasis on establishing positive behavior for our very youngest learners, there is still room for growth and improvement.
If you are still reading this and have some interest in participating in this study, thank you! Here are some additional details for the next steps.

1. Please respond to this email letting me know that you are interested in participating. Once I receive that email, I will email you and find the best times of day and or days of the week for us to connect.
2. I will ask for written consent to participate before the interview. Participation is, of course, voluntary on your part.
3. Once I received this information, I will be in communication with you to set up our interview. The interviews will take place over videoconference and will be audio recorded. These recordings will be used only by me as part of the information gathering.

4. Once our interview time is set, we will meet virtually, discuss the questions for my study, and that is it. Prior to the start of the interview, I will confirm consent as we begin the interview. I will offer to share information gathered from the process with you, but other than that, there will be no requirement for your future efforts.

From one elementary Principal to another, thank you for considering being part of this study. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to let me know.

Thank you and have a great day!

David Brokopp