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Effects of Restorative Practices on Students with Disabilites: A Quantitative Study

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EFFECTS OF RESTORATIVE PRACTICES ON STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: A QUANTITATIVE STUDY

Dissertation

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of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education
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by

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mother, Linda Cooper, for unselfishly giving up so much to ensure that my sister and I were happy, confident, and successful adults. She is the best teacher and role model I have ever known, and I would not have accomplished this without her. I also dedicate this dissertation to my sister, Tracy Ellis. She has been there for me throughout our lives and has always believed in me, even when I doubted my own abilities. I am so proud and thankful to have my mother and sister as my best friends and biggest supporters. I would not be the person I am today without the two of them.

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Abstract

From the enactment of the *Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994* to the time of this study in

2019, school discipline has been a growing concern as more and more students fell victim

to the negative impacts of zero-tolerance discipline policies commonly utilized in U.S.

public schools. School discipline continues to be a mounting concern, as each year, more

students are suffering the negative impacts of zero-tolerance discipline policies. There

has been growing concern that students with special needs are particularly vulnerable due

to the exclusionary nature of dealing with behavioral issues that are often a manifestation

of the student's disability. In response to the disaster of zero-tolerance discipline policies

and the need for more therapeutic interventions, one rural, East Tennessee high school

began implementing a restorative intervention model for dealing with discipline. This

restorative approach to discipline was based on Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and

was expected to decrease suspensions, improve school attendance, and increase students'

academic progress. The population of this study was students with disabilities who were

enrolled in a rural, East Tennessee high school between the years of 2014-2019. The

results of the study indicated that although there was no significant difference in the

number of suspensions, the number of absences, or the GPA of students with disabilities,

there was a slight improvement in all three areas.

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Chapter I: Overview of the Study

Introduction

In 2019, administrators and teachers routinely used zero-tolerance policies in public schools to deal with student behaviors and rule infractions, despite the destructive effects of zero-tolerance policies and all the evidence that showed the failure of these policies to achieve their intended goals (Children's Defense Fund, 2012). Skiba and Knesting (2001) argued that if zero-tolerance discipline policies were ineffective, then the use of a procedure with such harsh side effects for individual students hardly seemed justified.

Zero-tolerance discipline policies gained momentum in the 1980s and 1990s as the result of the War on Drugs initiative (Stahl, 2016). With the enactment of the Gun-Free School Act (GFSA) of 1994, Congress sanctioned public-school funding subject to the implementation of zero-tolerance policies (Cerrone, 1999). Skiba and Knesting (2001) explained that under the zero-tolerance guidelines, if a student violated a school rule, especially ones related to drugs and weapons, zero-tolerance policies required a harsher punishment, as well as out-of-school suspension or expulsion from their base school to an Alternative Education Program (AEP). Skiba and Peterson (2000) concluded that zero-tolerance discipline policies were unsuccessful in reducing the number of severe student behaviors, and may have substantially increased the probability of future student suspensions, academic failure, and student drop out. Skiba and Knesting (2001) explained, from the inception of the implementation of zero-tolerance discipline

policies in U.S. public schools, administrators had recurrently imposed suspensions and expulsions on unruly students in the name of zero-tolerance, even when the infractions were minor. Skiba and Knesting (2001) asserted:

> The ubiquity of these minor incidents across time and location suggests that the overextension of school sanctions to minor misbehavior is not abnormal but somewhat inherent in the philosophy and application of zero tolerance. (p. 26)

While the goal of zero-tolerance discipline policies was to increase school safety, the students with social/emotional deficits, learning disabilities, and behavior disorders were more susceptible to being expelled or suspended from school (Henson, 2012). Likewise, Skiba and Peterson (2000) explained that when administrators imposed zero-tolerance policies on students and removed them from the classroom, the target behavior did not improve. Glass (2014) argued that zero-tolerance policies were not in the best interests of the school, as they removed students from the classroom and frequently created a culture that negatively impacted the learning process.

Furthermore, Zins and Elias (2007) stated that as a result of zero-tolerance discipline practices, a substantial percentage of the achievement gap between minority students and students with disabilities increased. Researchers at the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) (2014) Office for Civil Rights reported that suspensions in U.S. public schools occurred at rates inconsistent to the student population. On average, an American high school student has an 11% chance of being suspended in a single school year, based on data from the University of California-Los Angeles Civil Rights project. However, if that student is black, they have a 24% chance of being suspended for the same rule violations (USDOE, 2014). The USDOE (2014) further reported that the

probability of suspension or expulsion of a student with a disability from school was twice that of their non-disabled peers.

Smith, Fisher, and Frey (2015) noted that in a majority of the cases reviewed in the 2014 USDOE Civil Rights Suspension and Expulsion Data report, defiance—a nonaggressive act, was the most severe violation listed, and one that is general and unclearly defined. Losen and Gillespie (2012) noted that educators have traditionally thought of schools as focusing on academic instruction, with classroom management and discipline practices playing a minor, but supporting role. In reality, Losen and Gillespie (2012) explain that the way schools managed behavior had a considerable impact on students' academic achievement and broader life outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

Hargens (2012) defined the ideal learning environment as a place where students learn to solve problems on their own, respond to conflict nonviolently, develop socially and emotionally, and actively engage in the learning process. Unfortunately, it is easy to disrupt the ideal learning environment. For example, Rosenberg (2016) suggested that when students experience minor classroom disruptions, they all take a decline in their academic achievement, even those who are incredibly motivated or who are top performers.

Beginning in the late 1980s, administrators implemented zero-tolerance policies under the assumption that removing students who engaged in misconduct deterred potential offenders and simultaneously allowed others to continue learning, both of which made schools safer and created an improved climate for those students who remained (Advancement Project, 2010). Advocates at the Children's Defense Fund (2012) argued

that research did not support this assumption. According to analysts at the Children's Defense Fund (2012), the application of zero-tolerance policies nationwide has been unsuccessful in improving schools, communities, or students' safety. These policies have significantly increased the number of law enforcement officers occupied in and reacting to occurrences in schools but have not shown a related increase in school safety or improvement in students' total academic achievement.

The implementation of zero-tolerance discipline policies by administrators in U.S. public schools increased the number of students denied educational opportunities (Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014). Perry and Morris (2014) found that suspension and expulsion disrupted students' learning and eroded their connection to the school. Kupchik (2017) added that exclusionary punishment also damaged the academic achievement of non-suspended students. Skiba et al. (2014) explained that the overuse of punitive strategies, such as suspension or expulsion, was a temporary solution that concentrated only on the violated rules and the punishment deserved. Greenberg et al. (2003) expressed concerns that zero-tolerance policies may produce, enhance, or accelerate adverse mental health outcomes for students by creating increases in student isolation, anxiety, rejection, and breaking of healthy adult bonds.

Furthermore, zero-tolerance discipline practices have disproportionally harmed the most vulnerable children, primarily minorities, the economically disadvantaged, and those with a disability (Children's Defense Fund, 2012). For example, the Children's Defense Fund (2017) reported that in the U.S., students with disabilities (in all categories) comprised 14.8% of the total enrolled student population for 2010–11 school year; however, the same group accounted for 27.5% of the total out-of-school suspensions for

that same year. Losen and Gillespie (2012) stated that despite the absence of a laborious examination on this topic, current research analysis of suspension and expulsion data at the local level strongly indicates that zero-tolerance policies have not prevented misconduct. According to Planty, Hussar, and Snyder (2009), over three million students in grades K-12 were suspended during the 2008-2009 school year, doubling the rate from 1970. Elias (2004) reported that a "common feature of most students with learning disabilities (LD) is that they have difficulties with social relationships" (p. 53).

Wang, Reynolds, and Walberg (1988) pointed out that labeling students and removing them from the "mainstream" could cause "parents, teachers, and the students themselves to lower their expectations and lose confidence in the students' abilities" (p. 249). According to Elias, Wang, Weissberg, Zins, and Walberg (2002), it is imperative that regular and special education teachers concentrate their efforts on both skill development and creating an environment and a range of opportunities that improve those skills to reveal individual students' strengths. Elias (2004) explained that social-emotional learning (SEL) has a vast amount to add to both theory and practice in the area of learning disabilities and interventions could be incorporated using the various methodologies SEL provides. Regarding intervention, Perkes (2018) pointed out that "The analysis of behavior really can't be overstated. It really is a science to determine what motivates the behavior" (p. 5). Elias (2004) stated that SEL theory has shown that group interventions offer students significant opportunities for acquiring the necessary skills for applicable social interaction and relationships because "multimodal interventions provide a greater likelihood of positive results, which mobilize greater confidence and hope" (p. 62).

The purpose of this research study was to determine if there was a change in the number of suspensions, number of school absences, and grade point average (GPA) of students with disabilities before the implementation of restorative intervention (RI) practices compared to after implementation. As a special educator and lead teacher in a rural, East Tennessee high school, this researcher focused on strategies and best practices when implementing RI for behavior and how to best support students holistically to maximize their academic potential and improve their emotional well-being. Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, and Bachman (2008) discussed the importance of helping children focus amidst the many distractions that exist to their learning. According to Wallace et al. (2008), restorative strategies have been mutual and critical characteristics in classes that serve high school students with learning disabilities.

Research Questions

To address the purpose of this study, the researcher asked the following research questions:

Research question 1. What difference, if any, was there in the number of suspensions of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

Research question 2. What difference, if any, was there in the number of school absences of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

Research question 3. What difference, if any, was there in the GPA of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

Theoretical Framework

  The researcher based this study of RI for school discipline on the framework and philosophy of the SEL Theory. SEL Theory has origins in both ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) and self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985). According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), ecological systems theory suggests that the environments students live in shape their development. Deci and Ryan (1985) explained that with self-determination theory, students are more likely to thrive when in settings that meet their social and emotional needs, such as having meaningful relationships, gaining self-assurance in their abilities, and feeling autonomous. According to the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1992), "Learning is possible only after students' social, emotional and physical needs have been met" (p. 3). "When those needs are met, students are more likely to succeed in school" (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1992, p. 3). Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, and Hawkins (2004) added that there are commonalities shared by schools that enhance positive youth development, including opportunities for empowerment and skill-building, and the involvement of supportive adults and peers. According to Brackett and Rivers (2013), SEL was established for use in research and practice in emotional intelligence as pragmatic to the schools because it echoed a substantial acknowledgment of the role of both social and psychological characteristics in successful academic learning. Brackett and Rivers (2013) highlighted the significance of the learning culture and the necessity for teachers to develop meaningful relationships with students so they will have the necessary skills to establish such relationships with others.

In the 2008 Zero-Tolerance Task Force Report, Skiba et al. (2008) concluded that zero-tolerance discipline policies by school administrators have failed to assist students in developing problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. According to a study conducted by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) (2018), schools that encouraged social and emotional development gained significant benefits for their students, increased academic achievement, decreased disruptive behaviors, and enhanced relationships between students and notable people in their lives. The National Education Association (NEA) Education Policy and Practice Department (2008) concluded that the development of social and emotional skills was a critical factor in determining if students were sufficiently equipped to meet the demands of the classroom and decided if they would be able to participate in learning thoroughly and benefit from instruction. According to Jones et al. (2017) , social-emotional education could be taught and cultivated in schools so that "students increase their ability to integrate thinking, emotions, and behavior in ways that lead to positive school and life outcomes" (p. 11).

Zero-tolerance policies, as implemented, seem to oppose what many child development experts consider crucial to student success (Teske, 2011). Teske (2011) explained, "School systems, in general, are limited in their resources to adequately respond to disruptive behavior, creating an overreliance on zero-tolerance strategies" (p. 88). Skiba et al. (2008) asserted, "It is time to make the shifts in policy, practice, and research needed to implement policies that can keep schools safe and preserve the opportunity to learn for all students" (p. 141).

Gartner and Lipsky (1987) rationalized that educating students with disabilities in mutual settings maintains their normalized shared participation. Gartner and Lipsky (1987) further asserted that teachers must deliberately organize instruction in the skills that are crucial to student achievement in the "social and environmental contexts in which they will ultimately use these skills" (p. 386). According to Wallace et al. (2008), how emotion guides attention and impacts learning and the significance of helping students focus among the numerous disruptions to their learning are common and essential factors in actual classrooms that include high school students with disabilities. According to Elias (2004), SEL is the missing piece that helps bridge a gap in both theory and practice when improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Based on the SEL theory, this researcher expected the analysis of data collected to yield a decrease in the number of suspensions, an increase in school attendance, and an increase in GPA of students with disabilities after RI implementation compared to the same status before RI implementation.

Significance of the Project

In an age of educational policy marked by accountability, it is suitable and imperative to survey the magnitude to which any broadly applied philosophy, practice, or policy has been shown based on comprehensive research to impact valuable educational goals (Skiba et al., 2008). Unbending school discipline policies have contributed to a publicly demoralizing progression called the *school-to-prison pipeline* whereby students are ousted from the school and into the streets, eventually into the juvenile justice – and later adult criminal justice – system (Holcomb & Allen, 2009). Additionally, Holcomb and Allen (2009) suggested that a one-size-fits-all, compulsory punishment system tends

to regard children as criminals and does not coincide with the school system's ultimate mission to educate and nurture. According to Blumenson and Nilsen (2002), the American Bar Association (ABA) opposed zero-tolerance policies as an issue of fundamental justice. The ABA rejected public education's determination to introduce into education an adult-oriented model of mandatory sentencing that fails to exhibit any awareness of adolescent growth or proportionality of punitive consequences (Blumenson & Nilsen, 2002). In 2001, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) criticized zero-tolerance discipline as clinically ineffective and connected to numerous adverse consequences, such as increased school dropout rates and discriminatory application of discipline practices. There is no dispute that schools must do everything possible in safeguarding learning environments, but there has been a great debate among civil rights and non-profit organizations, policymakers, and educational stakeholders regarding the practice of zero-tolerance guidelines and procedures to accomplish those goals. In response to this controversy, the researcher attempted to determine if the implementation of RI strategies were effective in reducing the number of suspensions of students with disabilities, increasing school attendance of students with disabilities, and increasing the GPA of students with disabilities. According to Dr. Hunter Gehlbach (2015), SEL is an integral part of a well-rounded education. Gehlbach (2015) conducted a study for Panorama Education, in which she noted that SEL was an essential device for improving educational achievement. Furthermore, Gehlbach (2015) found a direct correlation between positive social-emotional skills and improved school attendance and reduced disciplinary referrals. This researcher hoped to aid in developing a culture of

support for students with disabilities, teachers, and administrators in the implementation of RI in efforts to enhance student progress and achievement in school.

Furthermore, this researcher found gaps in the literature regarding discipline practices and students with disabilities. Elias (2004) explained, "the emotional and relational factors in learning and remeditative situations have not received sufficient attention to date" (p. 62). Determining when and how to teach and assess SEL skills continues to be an area with limited research and one that may provide educators the most insight when determining the most appropriate intervention strategies to use with struggling students (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

Description of the Terms

Positive Behavior Interventions Support (PBIS). In this study, PBIS is a proactive approach that establishes behavioral supports and a social culture for all students to achieve social, emotional, and academic success (Towvim, Anderson, Thomas, & Blaisdell, 2012).

Restorative Intervention (RI). A range of strategies and methods which can be utilized both to prevent relationship-damaging incidents from happening and to resolve them if they do (Restorative Justice Council, 2011).

Restorative Justice (RJ). For this research, restorative justice is a philosophy of punishment that focuses on stakeholder dialogue and efforts toward reparation and reconciliation as a response to the harm caused by crime and misconduct (Karp & Frank, 2016).

Restorative Practices (RP). For this research, Restorative Practices is a branch of social science that focuses on how to build social capital and achieve social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making (Wachtel, 2013).

Restorative Practices (in schools). Restorative Practices in school is a philosophical shift away from the traditional, punitive approach to discipline. The restorative view assesses misbehavior as an infraction against relationships and maintains a focus on accountability of actions with a specific emphasis on empathy and repairing of harm. Restorative Practices seeks to address underlying issues of misbehavior and reintegrated wrongdoers back into the school and classroom community (Wachtel, 2013).

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). Social-emotional learning refers to how students control their emotions, communicate with others, use empathy and compassion to recognize the needs of others, build relationships, and make good decisions (Rhodes, McNall, & McWhirter, 2019).

Zero-Tolerance Policy (in schools). For this research, zero-tolerance policy in schools was the school discipline policies that mandated predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses that required school officials to hand down specific, consistent, and harsh punishment—usually suspension or expulsion—when students broke specific rules. School officials applied the punishment regardless of the circumstances, the reasons for the behavior (like self-defense), or the student's history of discipline problems (Monahan, VanDerhei, Bechtold, & Cauffman, 2014).

Chapter II: Review of the Literature

The researcher began this review of literature during the spring of 2017. In the review of the literature, this researcher focused on the history of zero-tolerance discipline policies in American schools during the late 20th and 21st centuries and the negative impact the implementation of those policies had on students, especially those with certified disabilities. Through identifying these practices and the events leading to reform efforts by the federal government, this researcher acknowledged a changing trend in the use of punitive, zero-tolerance school discipline policies to more therapeutic approaches to student misconduct that teaches and reinforces appropriate behaviors. Moreover, this researcher acknowledged the need to reform school discipline procedures to include an adequate assessment of disruptive students to determine underlying reasons for the behavior in efforts to identify appropriate intervention strategies and reverse the negative impact of zero-tolerance discipline policies.

History and background of discipline (in education)

The 1700s. In colonial America, during the 1700s, religion played a significant role in how children were disciplined (Cremin, 1970). Educational Historian Lawrence Cremin (1970) asserted that children in colonial America were expected to be "well-behaved and reflections of their parents" (p. 2). The use of corporal or *physical* punishments was widespread, with teachers using whips, canes, paddles, rods, and so on

to deal with unruly students (McClellan, 1999). This, McClellan (1999) stated, was the parent's way of caring for their child and saving them from a sinful life. Although school discipline procedures have evolved since the inception of public schooling, the practice of corporal punishment has continued in some public schools throughout the U.S. According to Gershoff and Font (2016), school corporal punishment is presently legal in 19 states, with over 160,000 students being subject to corporal punishment in those schools each year. During the 1700s, philosophers such as John Locke, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine emphasized the significance of improved teacher-student relations and a curriculum to teach students self-discipline, instead of relying on strict punishments (Wright, 1965).

The 1800s. In the 1800s, according to Wright (1965), the school provided students with socialization outside the home and became like an extended family. While in school, the teacher was in charge of discipline, and parents expected them to enforce the rules and keep order in the classroom (Sauceman & Mays, 1999). According to Sauceman and Mays (1999), students were required to show respect for their parents, teachers, and peers. As part of the common-law doctrine in loco parentis (Latin for *in place of parents)*, it was the responsibility of the teacher to discipline the child (Sauceman & Mays, 1999). Sauceman and Mays (1999) asserted that *loco parentis* established a mindset that teachers had a legal responsibility to act as authority-holders in place of the parent. When students misbehaved, strict and swiftly administered discipline was used by teachers to manage one-room schools (Sauceman & Mays, 1999). Typical

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forms of punishment were whipping with a switch; a rod or 18-inch long, wooden ruler was used to strike the hand or buttocks; hickory stick spankings; standing with one's nose to the wall, and sitting on a chair with a dunce cap on the head (Cremin, 1970). Some other forms of punishment, Cremin (1970) recalled, included memorizing lengthy verses with moral messages, writing sentences repeatedly, and copying ethical statements as a reminder of the behavioral expectations. Losing recess time, scrubbing the floors, and for boys, sitting on the girls' side of the room wearing a bonnet, were all methods used to discipline students in one-room schools (Cremin, 1970).

By the mid-1800s, some American teachers were studying European models of educating children, like the theories of Philipp Emanuel von Fellenberg (Weymouth, 1967). Fellenberg argued that corporal punishment not be used for academic errors and suggested that learning occurred best with encouragement and kindness (Wemouth, 1967). Then-Secretary of State in Massachusetts Horace Mann urged that states be obliged to offer public education to all children (Groen, 2008). Mann stressed his opinion that universal public education was the most significant method to turn disobedient American children into disciplined, judicious republican citizens (Groen, 2008). Widely credited for creating public schools, Mann gained pervasive support from modernizers, particularly in the Whig Party (Groen, 2008). The majority of states, Groen (2008) explained, implemented a version of the construct that Horace Mann created in Massachusetts, particularly the platform for traditional schools providing training to

prepare and educate professional teachers. As a result, Groen (2008) claimed, educational historians credit Horace Mann as one of the pioneers of the Common School Movement.

In the late-1800s, Francis Parker introduced European concepts to the public school system through the progressive school movement (Allman & Slate, 2011). Parker's views were aligned with European educational theorists, emphasizing the necessity to move from a curriculum-centered and teacher-centered instruction to one that focused on the learner (Schugurensky, 2002). However, Schugurensky (2002) noted, Francis Parker, diverged from his European colleagues, in the particular emphasis that they placed on the democratization of scholastic practices in order to shape a more democratic society. According to Schugurensky (2002), Parker perceived the public school as an ideal community in which an emergent democracy could be formed in daily procedures, removing prejudice, endorsing freedom of inquiry, and solving problems supportively. Allman and Slate (2011) added that these pedagogic advances measured links regarding education and discipline and considered teachers' roles in creating favorable learning environments.

The 1900s. In the first decade of the 1900s, John Dewey and other Progressive Movement leaders further shifted the focus of education to a more child-centered way of teaching students (Ravitch, 1983). Ravitch (1983) asserted that supporters assisted in modifying the school setting to be "democracy in action [and substitute] teacher-pupil cooperation for teacher authoritarianism" (p. 47). In the early 1900s, evidence of good classroom discipline was students sitting quietly while learning by rote and memorization

methods (Garrett, 2008). According to Gershoff and Font (2016), corporal punishment was deemed an appropriate form of school discipline, and teachers utilized it above all other disciplinary methods. Conventional wisdom, Garrett (2008) explained, saw education as a process of controlling student behavior while teachers transferred information to the students. Throughout the 1900s, American schools commonly used corporal punishment as a method to motivate learners to perform better scholastically and uphold proper standards of behavior (Gershoff & Font, 2016). Public schools continued using corporal punishment as the primary disciplinary routine, but with a more diverse population having different attitudes regarding corporal punishment and influenced by industrialization and an influx of immigrants, public outlook shifted (Fontes, 2017; Geltner, 2014). According to Fontes (2017), educators were then compelled to examine new concepts of curriculum and disciplinary methods.

In the 1960s, school administrators began utilizing out-of-school suspension as a method of reducing student misbehavior, and schools have continued to utilize this practice (Adams, 2000). Researchers expressed concerns regarding the removal of students from the classroom because it promoted worse behavior and failed to address the students' behaviors at all (Garcia & Weiss, 2107). Nelson and Lind (2015) examined school suspension data and concluded that students who were expelled or suspended from school were more likely to become repeat offenders, receiving additional suspensions over time. Despite these findings, out-of-school suspension has continued to be one of the

most commonly used disciplinary consequences for student misbehavior (Blomberg, 2009).

From the mid-late 1900s, teachers increased their parental roles in schools, while state legal systems were starting to establish methods to control youth offenders in efforts to distinguish them from adult criminals (Allman & Slate, 2011). According to Allman and Slate (2011), the idea of punishment for adult criminals and providing rehabilitation for children who violated rules was one value attached to this development, thus sanctifying a foundation to the division between juvenile delinquency and suffering as its cure. During the mid-late 1900s, mental health professionals and educators facilitated the transformation of school discipline, as there was an increase in the awareness of potential links in student misbehavior and physiological/psychological problems, like attention deficit disorder (ADD), hyperactivity (ADHD), or emotional disturbance (EMD) (Watson, 2013). Watson (2013) suggested that changes in the family component, an increase of violence in movies and on television, and the effects of unlawful drug use also impacted students' ability and desire to focus in school.

In the late 1900s, with compulsory attendance laws in over 30 states, educators were pushed to establish effective discipline strategies, as before those laws, "disruptive youth were expelled or discouraged from attending schools" (Hyman, 1990, p. 23). School administrators added school psychologist and counselor positions throughout schools for the increased obligation of responding to student misconduct (Hyman, 1990).

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The 2000s. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, adolescents perpetrated severe crimes on school property, temporarily turning some schools into war zones (Niemi, 1998). According to Volokh, reactions to these events initiated countless individuals to advocate for a return to the harsher discipline practices, which in some instances, were considered zero-tolerance. In the first decade of the 21st century, there was a public outcry for students to remain in school rather than being suspended or expelled (Ullman, 2016). Out-of-school suspension has been utilized more often for minor offenses, regardless of its original intention to address major violations of school policies and more severe inappropriate behavior (American Psychological Association (APA) Zero Tolerance Task Force (ZTTF), 2008).

Furthermore, Ullman (2016) revealed that social awareness and revelations from various research called for a reform to school discipline policies to ones that emphasize improvement and analysis over punishment, in efforts to replace harsh zero-tolerance discipline policies with cooperative opportunities for restoration. An effective discipline practice, according to Nelson (2002), involves all stakeholders in its design. Nelson (2002) argued that principals and teachers are in charge of implementing the school discipline practices to nurture appropriate behavior from the students. However, Nelson (2002) added that parents, students, and community stakeholders should be represented proportionately in the plan of punishment procedures. To accomplish this, Nelson (2002) affirms that teachers and administrators must include authentic professional development opportunities to obtain strategies for classroom and school discipline routines.

Educators are still searching to find the best strategies for managing student behavior while maintaining a safe environment that is conducive to learning (Predy, Mcintosh, & Frank, 2014). Rewarding students for proper conduct and positive contributions to the school community is imperative. According to Fronius, Persson, Guckenburg, Hurley, and Petrosino (2016), building effective discipline practices includes consistency and teamwork. Furthermore, Fronius et al. (2016) stated that evaluation of school discipline practices should be ongoing and that regular assessment of strategies must continue to make improvements in reducing school disruptions. While the zero-tolerance policy sought to strengthen safety measures in schools, students with emotional, behavioral, or learning disabilities were susceptible to suspensions and expulsions (Henson, 2012). The all-encompassing feature of ZT policy aid this condition as it negates to accommodate the fact that many of the behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities are outside their control (Alnaim, 2018). Though some of the behaviors above fell under the zero-tolerance policy guidelines, they exposed this group of students to several disciplinary actions that were not integrated initially to address their exceptional needs (Alnaim, 2018).

IDEA and Students with Disabilities

Students with learning and attention deficits frequently experience feelings of disappointment, shortage of recognition among their peers, and higher levels of bullying, which can upsurge the possibility of misconduct and truancy (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) offers protections

for students with disabilities by establishing specific rules about the discipline that schools must follow. According to Losen, Hodson, Ee, and Martinez (2014), schools were prohibited from suspending special education students for behavior that their Individual Education Program (IEP) team concluded was a manifestation of their disability. If the behavior of a disabled student was a result or characteristic of their disability, schools must then offer special education services to provide them the opportunity to make progress on their goals if suspended for a total of ten or more days in one school year (Losen et al., 2014). The unbalanced suspension rates of students with disabilities indicate that schools may be failing to identify the possible connections between their disability and unruly behaviors (Loveless, 2017).

In a 2014 publication of the National Center for Learning Disabilities titled, "The State of Learning Disabilities," Dr. Candace Cortiella and Dr. Sheldon Horowitz upheld that learners with disabilities were likely to be suspended at rates more than twice that of their non-disabled peers. The loss of instructional time increases the possibility of the student having to repeat a grade and dropping out of school altogether (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014). Many students experience problems and adversities at one time or another, but for students with disabilities, barriers can be more recurrent and be far more negatively impactful (Castillo, 2016). Students that are chronically absent from school face many obstacles. Poor attendance has had high costs in terms of young people's academic learning, connection to peers, teachers and schools, health, high school graduation, and future employment (Jacob & Lovett, 2017). According to a report by the

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National Collaborative on Education and Health (2015), student's physical health accounts for 36% of attendance challenges while student's mental health accounts for 24% of attendance challenges. Academic issues pertain to 27% of attendance challenges in schools (National Collaborative on Education and Health, 2015). According to Christani, Revetti, Young, and Larwin (2015), applying interventions in the areas of health, academics, and behavior can improve academic success and students' presence in schools. IDEA was revised further ensure that students with disabilities whose behavior impedes learning have those behaviors addressed within their IEP (O'Connor, Peterson, & Palmon, 2014). According to O'Connor et al. (2014), while this was the required practice before IDEA 1997, it was rarely applied; students with such needs were disciplined and inadequately served, and recurrently dropped out of school as a result. The revisions to IDEA 1997 also equalized intervention with safety, permitting school officials to remove students from school for possession of drugs or a weapon (O'Connor et al., 2014).

Zero-Tolerance Discipline Policies

The term *zero-tolerance* came about in the 1980s as a result of the War on Drugs initiative to end school violence and drugs in public schools (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Members of Congress authorized zero-tolerance procedures concerning weapons on school grounds when it passed the Gun-Free Schools Act (1994), prohibiting the illegal use, possession, or distribution of drugs and alcohol by pupils and staff on school and college campuses (Schoonover, 2018). The Gun-Free Schools Act (1994) mandated that

educational agencies and institutions of higher learning must establish disciplinary sanctions for violations or risk losing federal funding (Skiba & Peterson, 2000). As a result, Skiba and Peterson (2000) noted that schools and colleges immediately began implementing zero-tolerance policies to protect their federal funding.

The Gun-Free Schools Act (1994) was the catalyst for school zero-tolerance policies that soon went beyond drugs and weapons to include hate speech, harassment, fighting, and dress codes (Cerrone, 1999). According to Stahl (2016), school principals, who had to administer zero-tolerance policies, began to suspend and expel students for seemingly trivial offenses. Teske (2011) noted that these infractions typically involved fighting, disruption in school, and smoking. With the near doubling of students suspended annually, rising from 1.7 million in 1974 to 3.1 million in 2001, Teske (2011) concluded this was evidence that zero-tolerance had stretched far beyond drugs and weapons.

Wide-ranging interpretations of zero-tolerance discipline policies have directed attention to exposed incidents in which prototypical students were suspended or expelled for minor school violations, such as possession of nail clippers or over-the-counter medication (APA, 2008; Peterson & Skiba, 2001). Several cases have resulted in a legal action filed against school districts, and some states have modified their zero-tolerance procedures to allow administrators the use of discretion (Pipho, 1998). Unfortunately, some schools have negated to include flexibility into their zero-tolerance policies since

these punishments are anticipated to not only decrease behavior infractions, but they also convey a powerful message to other potential violators (Skiba & Peterson, 2003).

The Effects of Zero-Tolerance Discipline Policies. In 2010, a 12-year-old girl wrote *I love my friends Abby and Faith* on her desk with an erasable marker, which the school considered an act of vandalism (Shared Justice, 2018). As a result, the student was handcuffed, arrested, and detained at a police precinct for several hours before being released. While extreme, occurrences like this are not uncommon; students throughout the U.S. faced disciplinary procedures that delivered harsh and predetermined punishments, rather than focusing on restorative practices. According to Maag (2012), there is limited research proving evidence of the success of zero-tolerance policies in regards to improving student conduct or school safety. Likewise, Atkinson (2005) added that zero-tolerance discipline practices have often inflicted unintentional harm on students, overshadowing any advantages gained from exclusionary discipline practices. Zero-tolerance procedures are applied habitually in schools, with approximately 75% of schools denoting in 2001, the use of some method of zero-tolerance discipline (National Association of School Psychologists, 2001). In a 2008 report titled *Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools?,* Skiba et al. (2008) provided an evidentiary review and recommendations that were adopted by the APA Council of Representatives. In their research, Skiba et al. (2008) concluded that zero-tolerance discipline procedures in schools, intended to reduce school violence and behavior problems, have had the opposite effect. Numerous researchers have argued that in a time of the educational policy defined

by accountability, it is suitable and vital to discern the extent to which any widely-implemented philosophy, practice, or procedure has established, through comprehensive research, that it has contributed to advancing meaningful educational goals (Heitzeg, 2009; Payne, 2018; Skiba et al., 2008).

In 2008, the APA commissioned the Zero-Tolerance Task Force (ZTTF) to examine the evidence concerning the effects of zero-tolerance. According to Skiba et al. (2008), the ZTTF reviewed the assumptions that underlie zero-tolerance guidelines and all information pertinent to examining those assumptions in practice. The ZTTF integrated the data regarding the results of exclusionary discipline on students of color and students with disabilities due to concerns regarding the impartiality in school discipline practices (Skiba et al., 2008). The conclusions of the study warned of the negative impact of zero-tolerance policies regarding child development, the connection between education and the juvenile justice system, and on students, families, and communities (Skiba et al., 2008). Skiba et al. (2008) analyzed ten years of research data on the effects of zero-tolerance policies in middle and secondary schools. Their findings revealed that zero-tolerance discipline methods not only fall short of making schools safe or more effective in managing student behavior, but they can also increase the occurrence of delinquent behavior and failure rates (Skiba et al., 2008). The APA ZTTF report data also indicated that zero-tolerance policies failed to increase the uniformity of punishment across student groups and fell short of decreasing disproportionate application of discipline across racial lines (Skiba et al., 2008). Ultimately, this unbalanced approach to

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dealing with school discipline played a significant role in continuing the *school-to-prison pipeline*. The *school-to-prison pipeline* refers to a national trend in which school policies and practices have directly and indirectly pushed students out of school and on a pathway to prison. Often zero-tolerance policies in schools have funneled students into this pipeline. Zero-tolerance policies required school officials to give students a specific, consistent, and harsh punishment, usually suspension or expulsion, when specific rules were violated. The punishment is applied irrespective of the circumstances, the reasons for the behavior (such as self-defense), or the student's history of disciplinary problems.

There are approaches to discipline that, according to Skiba et al. (2008), can target corrective actions to explicit misconducts without compromising school welfare or requiring that all students receive the same punishment. In the APA ZTTF report, Skiba et al. (2008) offered three recommended levels of intervention: primary prevention strategies that target all students; secondary approaches that target students at risk for violence or disruption; and tertiary approaches that target students with previous violent or disruptive behaviors. Furthermore, the APA ZTTF report does not claim that schools should discard zero-tolerance policies, but that they be amended to allow for added flexibility and so that individual teachers and administrators could exercise their judgment on proper responses to incidents taking place in their classrooms or buildings (Skiba et al., 2008). Several incidents resulting in disciplinary action by the school occur due to the student's bad judgment and not because of an intent to cause harm (Farberman, 2006). Farberman (2006) stated, "zero-tolerance policies may exacerbate the normal

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challenges of adolescence and possibly punish a teenager more severely than warranted" (p. 3).

Pianta, Hamre, and Allen (2012) explained that while there are some provisional applications of zero-tolerance discipline policies, "it is the potential disruption of student engagement with instruction in their classroom that is the truest measure of the impact of such policies" (p. 365). According to DeMitchell and Hambacher (2016), students who feel supported by the teachers and administrators and connected to the school are less likely to have behavioral issues and are more likely to have increased academic success. In the National Institute of Justice Report, Payne (2018) asserted that a school climate that "creates relationships of respect and connection between adults and students is integral in developing and sustaining a safe school" (p. 8). Teske (2011) stated that within the context of school discipline, building-level administrators applied zero-tolerance policies under the assumption that removing disruptive students deterred others from similar conduct and simultaneously enhanced the classroom environment; however, this assumption failed to consider various factors that impeded the zero-tolerance plan of upholding a safe and orderly learning environment.

In an article titled *Policies and Programs Aimed at Keeping Kids Safe and Out of Trouble*, Qureshi (2014) concluded that "despite a 20-year history of implementation, there are surprisingly few data that could directly test the assumptions of a zero-tolerance approach to school discipline, and the available data tend to contradict those assumptions" (p. 4). Furthermore, Skiba et al. (2008) recommended to the ZTTF that

zero-tolerance policies may negatively impact the relationship of schools with the juvenile justice system and appear to conflict with what research has shown concerning child development. Skiba et al. (2008) further recommended that policymakers make changes to current zero-tolerance policies to ones that meet the needs of the school for discipline and maintain student safety while maximizing their opportunity to learn. Passero (2015), professor of Applied Psychology at New York University, resolved that instruction played an active part in guarding against illegal behavior and that zero-tolerance policies interrupt a student's educational course. Zero-tolerance strategies are not successful in cultivating a student's impending life outcomes. Not only do zero-tolerance policies unproductively and punitively discipline students, Dunbar and Villarruel (2002) argued, but they also eliminate the opportunity for students to acquire critical moral lessons and create relationships with teachers (Essex, 2000).

Zero-tolerance policies were primarily designed to penalize students and offer limited opportunities for training or support. Losen and Gillespie (2012) explained that zero-tolerance policies inherently conflict with prescriptions for healthy child development. Passero (2015) concluded that new policies must be developed to foster positive student outcomes and reduce the probability of unlawful behavior and impending imprisonment. Suspending and banishing those who misbehave at school bolsters the school-to-prison pipeline, which references the guidelines, comparable to zero-tolerance, that remove vulnerable students from school and multiply their odds of becoming entangled in the criminal justice system (Nance, 2016).

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Passero (2015) suggested that a more appropriate and rehabilitative outcome for a student who misbehaves would be assigning regular conferences with a school counselor or social worker. It is essential to provide a misbehaving student with assistance in developing problem-solving and social abilities (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011). Educating students on ways to cope with their anger and urges, as well as listen to others and settle conflicts conscientiously, best addresses the source of the unsafe conduct than does merely pushing them out of school (Boccanfuso & Kuhfeld, 2011; Essex, 2000).

Findings from a 2000 study conducted at Harvard University by the Civil Rights Project concluded that the custom of using overly harsh punishments "either destroys a child's spirit, has no effect at all, worsens the problem, or makes it more difficult for you to work with the child in school" (The Civil Rights Project, 2000, p. 24). According to Nussbaum (2017), strict and unyielding discipline policies completely conflict with two primary growth-related necessities of school-aged children: 1) the growth of solid and trusting connections with important adults in their lives, chiefly individuals in their school; and 2) the development of optimistic outlooks regarding justice and equality. The results of these policies promote distancing students from school and intensify the behaviors they seek to alleviate (Nussbaum, 2017). Researchers at Harvard University asserted that this destruction is predominantly essential for students who have previously been considered *at risk* for academic failure and regularly have had the consequence of pushing them out of school entirely (The Civil Rights Project, 2000). Bird and Bassin (2014) summarized that zero-tolerance policies had not only failed improving school

safety and school climate but that students' behaviors rarely improved when administrators suspended or expelled those students. Furthermore, Bird and Bassin (2014) pointed out that the overuse of zero-tolerance policies by school administrators "have not resolved, and indeed may have exacerbated, minority overrepresentation in school punishments" (p. 860).

The Effects of Zero-Tolerance Discipline Policies on Students with Disabilities. Zero-tolerance policies have had a profound impact on students with special needs. Removing a student from school is problematic for any child, but it is particularly devastating for one who already struggles, especially a child with a disability (Castillo, 2016; Elias, 2004; Gregory & Fergus, 2017; Perkes, 2018). For these students, Perkes (2018) explains that removal from school can make it nearly impossible to catch up after returning. The further students fall behind, the higher the likelihood that they will drop out (Perkes, 2018). Furthermore, Perkes (2018) stated that zero-tolerance policies were primarily designed to penalize students and offer limited opportunities for training or support.

Researchers at the Children's Defense Fund (2012) explained that zero-tolerance discipline policies have inequitably damaged the most susceptible students, mainly minorities, the economically deprived, and those with a disability. According to Losen (2018), "To suspend a student because of behavior that is a result of their disability is the equivalent of denying that student access to education" (p. 16). For example, Losen (2018) explained that students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

usually qualify for special services under the classification of Other Health Impairment (OHI). According to Losen (2018), symptoms of ADHD have regularly consisted of behavior deemed *disruptive*, including interrupting others, talking out of turn, or when expected to be silent, getting out of their seat without permission, or continually failing to follow teacher directives. Likewise, Losen (2018) pointed out that students diagnosed with emotional disturbance (ED) have often exhibited challenging behavior, such as refusing to participate in class or school activities, defiance, and obsessive or compulsive behavior. Furthermore, Losen (2018) noted that for students with mental health issues, the school setting could be particularly trying, thus they may be tardy or absent from school more frequently than their non-disabled peers.

Skiba and Peterson (1999) revealed that the most frequent disciplinary actions that schools deal with had been trivial disruptive behaviors such as tardiness, class absence, disrespect, and non-compliance, all of which are common among students with disabilities. National data obtained from the USDOE (2014) Office of Civil Rights revealed that, on average, students with disabilities lost over 56 days of instruction for every 100 students enrolled. Even more troubling, the analysis of state data revealed that Tennessee had the fifth highest percentage of lost class time among students with disabilities, averaging 223 days of instruction lost per 100 students enrolled (USDOE, 2014). Losen (2018) noted that loss of instructional time for students with disabilities creates considerable inequities in the opportunity to learn.

In a study exploring discipline referrals and suspensions in two different middle schools, Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) concluded that the use of suspension was disproportionate by race, disability status, and gender. Furthermore, students who had emotional disabilities were more likely than students in other special or general education categories to be suspended from school (Skiba et al., 1997). Dr. Mara Schiff (2013) with the School of Criminology and Criminal Justice at Florida Atlantic University concluded:

A notable impact of zero-tolerance is a marked lack of dignity for the offending youth who is summarily dismissed from either the classroom or the school, with little or no say in what happened nor what the appropriate consequence should be, nor effective strategies for re-engagement once having been excluded from the school structure. Such students fall further and further behind as they lose capacity and resources to make up lost work and reenter the school environment. (p. 4)

Considerable research has established the relationship between restorative justice and suspension rates; however, there is a lack of research on the relationship between restorative justice and the discipline gap (Cavanagh, 2009; Gregory, Skiba, & Mediratta, 2017; Morrison, Blood, & Thorsborne, 2005; Schiff, 2013). In efforts to improve discipline policies in her school district, Educational Specialist Polly Long (2015) conducted a quantitative, summative program evaluation to assess the disciplinary program in her school district and provide information on the correlation between restorative justice and out-of-school suspension rates, as well as the correlation between

restorative justice and the discipline gap. Long's (2015) study took place in a racially diverse, urban school where 100% of the kindergarten through eighth-grade student population was financially disadvantaged. The program evaluation, according to Long (2015), examined post and existing discipline data from three academic years. The discipline data collected, Long (2015) explained, was the number of out-of-school suspensions, defined as temporarily removing a student from a less restrictive, regular education setting to a more restrictive setting. As a result of the study, Long (2015) determined that data from the current evaluation were consistent with present research authenticating the connection between restorative justice and decreases in rates of out-of-school suspension. Further data from the evaluation added to existing research by demonstrating a link between restorative justice and a narrowing of the discipline gap in an urban school (Long, 2015). Consistent with prior research, Long's (2015) study revealed that restorative justice was related to reductions in out-of-school suspension rates.

Numerous studies have indicated that zero-tolerance approaches are unsuccessful and create harmful effects on students and their social and academic development (Arcia, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2012; Perry & Morris, 2014; Skiba & Peterson, 2000). A retributive model of student discipline, one based on punishments, has also been found to force a detachment between the offender and the victim, and between them and the school community (Ryan & Ruddy, 2015). Ryan and Ruddy (2015) suggested that when a student is expelled or suspended, they lose trust in the school system that is ideally

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there to support them. According to Jones et al. (2018), punitive and exclusionary approaches to student misconduct have further adverse effects at the cost of the students' educational opportunities. In fact, in an Australian study of the impacts of suspensions, researchers found there was no improvement in behavior, and students had an increased likelihood of anti-social or violent behavior in the following twelve months after the suspension (Fronius et al., 2016). According to Barbadoro (2017), suspended students were found to be significantly impacted by a loss of instructional time, felt *lost* upon returning to class, had lower levels of trust in the adults at the school, and became increasingly frustrated with their lower academic achievement. Losen and Gillespie (2012) concluded that "zero-tolerance policies that prescribe automatic and harsh punishments undermine the ability of teachers and administrators to form trusting relationships with students, and ultimately, these policies transmit negative messages about fairness, equity, and justice" (p. 57). The research concerning the adverse effects of zero-tolerance on suspended or expelled students has led a charge for new approaches for dealing with conflict in schools (Fronius et al., 2016). According to Lochmiller (2013), traditional, punitive approaches to school discipline resulted in higher absenteeism, increased drop-out and failure rates, and an increased potential for getting involved in high-risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol use and violence. Student perceptions of feeling disconnected with their school community, lowered self-esteem, and failing grades are other negative impacts resulting from exclusionary discipline (APA ZTTF, 2008; Lehman, 2016; Mann, de Ridder, & Fujita, 2013).

Hyman and Snook (2000) described the abusive nature of zero-tolerance policies on otherwise non–violent children in their book entitled *Dangerous Schools: What We Can Do About the Physical and Emotional Abuse of Children*. Hyman and Snook (2000) urged that educational leaders stop criminalizing student behavior in schools because they are turning what should be an educational experience into a punishment–orientated culture where all children are presumed guilty until they are proven innocent, a paradox for the treatment of adults in our society. Furthermore, Hyman and Snook (2000) expressed their professional opinion that the only solution to reforming zero-tolerance policies is to stop utilizing them in school discipline practices.

While zero-tolerance laws were established initially in response to guns and other weapons in schools, many of the suspensions reported are in response to non-weapon, non-drug, and non-violent infractions (Alnaim, 2018). Suspension and expulsion, the common consequences demanded by zero-tolerance policies, disrupt a student's education by removing them from school (Passero, 2015). According to Passero (2018), disruption can often become a more permanent departure from teaching, in general. Students suspended for more extended periods drop out of school more often than students suspended for shorter periods (Alnaim, 2018). The students who drop out are unable to benefit from the protective components of education, including keeping them safe and nurturing positive peer relationships, both of which may increase the probability that they will commit future crimes (Passero, 2015). According to Passero (2015), despite the potential harm the zero-tolerance procedures could create, school administrators

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continued to utilize them as part of their corrective actions. Bell (2015) believed it was because schools received federal funding in exchange for compliance, and they depend on this subsidy to support their students with the resources that they require to be academically successful. According to Dunbar and Villarruel (2002), the removal of students from school for disciplinary reasons amplifies the likelihood they will quit school altogether, as they often have no alternative schools or educational opportunities. Considering that punitive exclusion from school increases dropout rates and dropping out of school increases one's chance to perpetrate a crime, Passero (2015) asserts, that these students are consequently at higher risk for criminal behavior.

Although numerous studies have cited the negative results of implementing zero-tolerance discipline policies, punitive disciplinary consequences, which often remove students from instruction, are amazingly common (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Carter, Fine, and Russell (2014) reported that in the 2009-2010 school year, over three million public school students in the United States received an exclusionary punishment of some sort. Research has further revealed that the majority of students most negatively impacted by zero-tolerance policies were minorities, low-income students, and students with disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioral disorders (Brackett & Rivers, 2013). Alnaim (2018) found that students with disabilities were often suspended for trivial offenses outside the law's intention, and for actions that were frequently a manifestation of their disability. According to Alnaim (2018), student suspensions were a harsh concern because students were not learning the appropriate replacement behaviors

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and because the penalties were not usually instantaneous, so it was difficult for them to connect the punishment to the actual violation.

A further concern Alnaim (2018) pointed out was that for some students, the school setting might be too problematic, either academically, socially, or both. Likewise, Alnaim (2018) explains, this escape or avoidance behavior often is exhibited in students with learning disabilities and emotional disturbance. Perhaps, Alnaim (2018) suggested the child desires to be with a parent who is home throughout the school day, then we have confidently reinforced an opposing action. Losinski, Katsiyannis, Ryan, and Baughan (2014) argued that students with disabilities and minority students had higher odds of getting expelled from school due to disciplinary actions. It is imperative to mention that expelling students with disabilities from school continues, and in some states, those expulsions comprise a substantial percentage of the students expelled yearly (Skiba et al., 2008).

The debate regarding the over-representation of African American students and students with disabilities have developed into a national issue with Swenson and Ryder (2016) publishing the *Dear Colleague Letter*, endorsed by the USDOE (2016). The *Dear Colleague Letter* brought attention to the need for schools to "identify, avoid and remedy discriminatory discipline" (Swenson & Ryder, 2016, p. 1). The letter urges schools to correct these discriminatory discipline practices or to face legal action by these departments under U.S. Civil Rights laws (USDOE, 2016). The USDOE (2016) has also released a variety of guiding principles for improving school climate and supportive

school discipline. It is imperative that school districts outline standards for policies to promote effective school discipline and positive behavior. Far too many school districts continue to utilize corrective discipline measures, such as zero-tolerance policies, that result in adverse effects for students and contribute to the *school-to-prison pipeline*.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq., was revised in 2004 to safeguard that there would be no punishment imposed on a student for actions that were an attribute of their disability (Sackel, 2006). Under the IDEA (1997), students with disabilities have the right to Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. Likewise, two civil rights laws prohibit the discrimination of students with disabilities—Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the USDOE (2014) Section 504 in public elementary and secondary schools. Although federal law provides this protection for individual education students, school officials often unfairly discipline children with disabilities (Education Ombudsman, 2012).

As outlined in the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, the USDOE's (2014) definition of the term *student* does not include those youth protected under the IDEA 1997 Individual Education Plans (IEP). As detailed in Special Rule—part c of Section 14601 where it states, "Schools that have students with IEPs that bring guns or knives to school are guaranteed due process procedures" (USDOE, 2014, p. 3). These due process

proceedings might result in a return of the student to their general educational settings if the conduct in question was decided by the IEP team to be a manifestation of their disability. For these students, teaching replacement skills and providing appropriate supports for behavior is imperative (Cohen, 2006).

The principal purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004) was to safeguard that all students with disabilities have obtainable access to a free and appropriate public education; one that stresses special education and associated services that are intended to meet their individual needs and prime them for additional education, occupation, and independent living (IDEA, 2004). Children with disabilities and their parents were guaranteed the necessary rights based on revisions to IDEA 2004 guidelines. One of the most significant changes to IDEA 2004 was the addition of a new section concerning students with disabilities who violate their districts' *Student Codes of Conduct* (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). According to Yell et al. (2006), before 2004, the term *Student Code of Conduct* was not stated in the IDEA. The revised IDEA (2004) had evolved with a change in viewpoint concerning punishment for students with disabilities if they impose severe physical injury upon another person, offering a further zero-tolerance tactic that is in absolute conflict with the ideals upon which IDEA had originated; the mindset of providing specific deliberation for all students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Yell et al., 2006).

According to Dwyer (2005), there may be incidences when children with disabilities threaten other students in the school with a weapon but remain protected

under the IDEA. In those instances, school administrators may individually remove a student with a disability from their natural setting for up to 45 days per occurrence (Dwyer, 2005). Swenson and Ryder (2016) pointed out that if the student has behavioral supports in place upon recurring episodes of misconduct or classroom disturbance, the IEP team should reconvene to deliberate on whether there should be a revision to the student's behavioral supports. According to Sweet, Stevens, Katz, and Williams (2015), another change made by the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act of 2004 explicitly stated that:

> a child with a disability who is removed from his or her current placement for disciplinary reasons, irrespective of whether the behavior is determined to be a manifestation of the child's disability, must be allowed to participate in the general education curriculum, although in another setting, and to progress toward meeting his or her IEP goals. (p. 17)

Social/Emotional Learning (SEL)

In response to discipline policies that were detrimental to children, educators and child development experts began to shift how they thought about the skills students needed to be successful in school and life (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2009). Gregory and Fergus (2017) suggested that implementing a disciplinary policy that integrated SEL would lead to improved student behavior without the overuse of suspensions, expulsions, and other harsh disciplinary actions. Strawhun, Fluke, and Peterson (2014) explained how programs that emphasized prevention, early

identification of students with behavioral concerns, and social skills instruction should replace the existing zero-tolerance approach to discipline. Jones et al. (2017) suggested that a child's success or failure was not only determined by cognitive skills but that SEL skills also contributed to student success. When multi-year, integrated efforts were used to develop students' social and emotional skills, Bridgeland, Bruce, and Hariharan (2013) explained that many risky behaviors (e.g., drug use, violence, bullying, and dropping out) were prevented or reduced. Bridgeland et al. (2013) suggested that SEL can have a positive effect on school culture and promote a multitude of academic, social, and emotional benefits for students. According to Durlak et al. (2011), rigorous studies of SEL in schools indicated that students receiving quality SEL instruction demonstrated better academic performance, improved attitudes and behaviors, greater motivation to learn, more profound commitment to school, increased time devoted to schoolwork, and better classroom behavior. Moreover, Durlak et al. (2011) reported decreased negative student behavior, decreased disruptive class behavior, noncompliance, aggression, delinquent acts, and disciplinary referrals, as well as reduced emotional distress, with fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal.

The theory of SEL was rooted in the area of positive youth development (Greenberg et al., 2003) which maintains that the necessities of students must be attended by creating environments or settings that support outcomes such as school achievement, mutually supportive personal connections with adults and peers, problem-solving, and community engagement (Catalano et al., 2004). Brackett and Rivers (2013) explained

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that SEL programming is a decisive youth development intervention that typically includes strategies to improve skill-building and is a holistic approach that is attentive to promoting assets, not on stopping problems. According to Brackett and Rivers (2013), schools are predominant locations that serve the educational and developmental needs of students and, therefore, are reasonable targets for extensive efforts to encourage positive youth development. In *The State of LD*, Cortiella and Horowitz (2014) asserted:

> Social and emotional learning has the potential to allow students with learning and attention issues to access their education and be emotionally available to learn truly. To accomplish this, it's essential for schools to provide targeted support that helps these children develop the interpersonal and self-regulation skills they need to be successful in learning and in life. (p. 4)

Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS)

According to Ingersoll, Sirinides, and Dougherty (2018), the creators of Positive Behavior Intervention Support (PBIS) designed the approach to help school personnel implement evidence-based behavioral supports into a scale that focuses on the most stringent behavioral intervention only after trying less harsh responses. Like SEL, PBIS strategies stem from the belief that students learned best in a safe and well-managed learning environment and established a common purpose and approach to discipline throughout the school by having positive expectations for all students. These expectations were taught, practiced, and reinforced through a reward system (CASEL, 2018). Both SEL and PBIS are positive approaches to student behavior in that they promote positive

environments and give students direct opportunities to develop and use positive skills (Gregory & Fergus, 2017). When developing a framework for intervention, Gregory et al. (2017) asserted that if SEL and restorative intervention practices are implemented together and implemented well, both can help to boost the same outcomes, such as improved school climate, student-student, and student-teacher relationships, reduced conflicts, and decreases in exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions. According to Gregory and Fergus (2017), "The restorative practices model of school discipline incorporates the social-emotional component and provides a more respectful, equitable, and sustainable way of incorporating social-emotional learning dealing with student behavior" (p. 132). According to Mellard, Prewett, and Deshler (2012), the general purpose of PBIS is to expand social, emotional, and educational outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities and ones from understated populations.

As more administrators implemented PBIS in their schools, a three-tiered model of behavioral support and intervention emerged, which used a *population-based* framework (USDOE, 2014). According to McInerney and Elledge (2013), the three-tiered approach aligned closely with the Response to Intervention (RTI) framework, which also used a three-tiered approach primarily to address students' academic issues. McInerney and Elledge (2013) concur that PBIS and RTI frameworks mutually focused on providing student support based on their level of need, providing universal provisions to all students, and secondary and tertiary supports to students who need them (McInerney & Elledge, 2013). In *The State of LD*, (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014)

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reminded schools of the mandate to offer positive behavior supports to students with disabilities who require them.

Restorative Justice

Restorative justice began in the 1970s as an alternative to criminal prosecution and traditional sentencing (Leung, 1999), where emphasizing repairing the harm done to people and relationships as the result of a crime is favorable to merely punishing the offender (Zehr, 1990). The earliest applications of Restorative Justice (RJ) in the United States were in the criminal and juvenile justice systems (Fronius et al., 2016). According to Fronius et al. (2016), the confirmation of RJ's usefulness within the justice system has directed the implementation of RJ interventions on a larger scale, mainly for misdemeanor crimes that are nonaggressive, and for adolescents.

Zehr (1990), the author of *Changing Lenses–A New Focus for Crime and Justice*, was one of the first to describe the concept of RJ. In *Changing Lenses*, Zehr provided an alternative structure for how policymakers view crime and justice. According to Dorne (2008), *Changing Lenses* juxtaposed a *retributive justice* structure, where the view of crime is that of a violation against the state, while the restorative justice structure views the crime as a violation of persons and relations. Restorative Practices (RP) researcher Ted Wachtel (2013) regards RJ as a subcategory of RP, with the essential merging hypothesis that "human beings are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in their behavior when those in positions of authority do things with them, rather than to them or for them" (Wachtel, 2013, p. 3). According to

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McCold and Wachtel (2003), the most restorative processes involve the active participation of the stakeholders-victims, offenders and their communities of care, whose needs are, respectively, obtaining reparation, taking responsibility, and achieving reconciliation. McCold and Wachtel (2003) asserted that RJ is ideally attained through a supportive process involving all the primary stakeholders in the decision-making on how best to repair the harm done by the offense. Wachtel (2013) explained that through a restorative process, the involvement of the victims, offenders, and their communities are all expected to repair the harm caused by the criminal act. According to Ashworth et al. (2008), the philosophy of RJ sparked a movement toward RP for discipline in schools. Ashworth et al. (2008) claimed that RJ is a more appropriate approach for addressing challenging behaviors through genuine conversation, coming to an understanding, and making things right.

According to Umbreit and Armour (2011), RJ has rapidly grown as a local, national, and global social movement that strives to unite people to address the damage impeded by crime. Umbreit and Armour (2011) stated, "Restorative justice views violence, community decline, and fear-based responses as indicators of broken relationships. It offers a different response, namely the use of restorative solutions to repair the harm related to conflict, crime, and victimization." (p. 2)

Restorative Practices in Education

By the late 1990s, the phrase *restorative justice* had become prominent, developing widespread usage by 2006 (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007). The RJ program

had appealed to various sections of society, consisting of law enforcement officers, judges, teachers, policymakers, and juvenile justice organizations (Johnstone & Van Ness, 2007). Schools began implementing strategies derived from RJ procedures (Hargens, 2012). RP programs in schools and the criminal justice system both used similar models (Smith et al., 2015). Smith et al. (2015) explained that RP could include preemptive methods intended to develop abilities and aptitude in students and adults. Examples of preventative methods in RP may involve teachers and students developing classroom expectations mutually or arranging community building within the classroom (Smith et al., 2015). RJ emphasizes justice as needs and responsibilities, expands justice as discussions involving the victim, offender, and school, and accepts responsibility as acknowledging the impact of actions and repairing the hurt (Monell, 2018). In this method, explained Monell (2018), students, teachers, and the community could work together to meet the needs of all stakeholders involved.

While the focus of RJ is on making the victim(s) whole, the added benefit of incorporating RP in schools is a reduction in disciplinary actions such as suspensions and expulsions (Bloomfield, Barnes, & Huyse, 2003). Likewise, Bloomfield et al. (2003) asserted that the restorative approach to discipline is more effective and reformative, with reconciliatory actions imposed, such as writing apology letters or performing community service. This approach develops and fosters empathy because full rectification of the conflict requires participating parties to understand the needs of all stakeholders.

According to Cohen (2006), PBIS and RP are school-wide models that can be utilized together to increase favorable outcomes for student behaviors. Cohen (2006) explained that both PBIS and RP emphasized prevention and constructive responses to unruly behavior. Likewise, Cohen (2006) pointed out that both PBIS and RP share other essential commonalities, including placing great importance on student and staff engagement and involvement, supporting social-emotional learning for students and staff, and utilizing effective strategies as alternatives to addressing student misbehavior.

As policymakers pursued alternative approaches to punitive, zero-tolerance discipline practices (Stinchcomb, Bazemore, & Riestenberg, 2006), therapeutic approaches to discipline presented an alternative model that provided more appropriate strategies to address the needs of each school's distinguishing culture and the broader community. According to Stinchcomb et al. (2006), policymakers, practitioners, and scholars have considered RP as a potential theoretical framework within which to develop a more favorable and equitable approach to addressing student misbehavior. Stinchcomb et al. (2006) explained that within the RJ framework, reactions to crime, bullying, disciplinary offenses, truancy, drug, and alcohol-related crimes, and some violent offenses within schools could be controlled adequately by using RP.

According to Fronius et al. (2016), educators across the United States have been looking to RP as an alternative to exclusionary disciplinary actions. The popularity of RP in schools had been driven in part by many developments (Fronius et al., 2016). First, there was a perception that zero-tolerance policies, popular in the United States during

the 1980s–1990s, have hurt students and schools (Losen, 2015). Second, Fronius et al. (2016) noted that research indicated disparities among students who were receiving exclusionary punishment such as suspension and expulsion. For example, Gregory et al. (2017) reported that African American students were 26.2% more likely to be suspended for their first offense than White students. Data from a previous study indicated the disproportionate use of punishment with racial and ethnic minorities and students with disabilities (Losen, 2015).

Bazemore and Schiff (2013) performed a census of RJ practices in the U.S. justice system and established policies to assess the quality and reliability of the various methods of RP in schools. According to Bazemore and Schiff (2013), the most commonly utilized practices were moderately casual, such as restorative conferences and offender mediation. Furthermore, Bazemore and Schiff (2013) identified conferencing as an approach that could potentially be utilized to engage stakeholders and repair the damage caused. In the years following the 2005 census, Bazemore and Schiff (2013) reported that partnership and organization among justice systems and schools have improved. The excessive use of exclusionary punishment has been a concern for schools and the juvenile justice system combined (Schiff, 2013), so therefore the two structures have shared concentrations in their attempts to implement RP programs within the school.

The Impact of Restorative Practices in Education. There is limited research on RP in schools due to it being in the early stages of development; however, research from a 2009 study found investigative studies that have shown favorable outcomes of RJ

methodologies regarding their effect on school climate, student conduct, and relationships between teachers and students (Illinois, 2009). Academic achievement in school has traditionally been conceptualized in terms of designated levels of knowledge that provide the foundations for students' socialization as educated individuals endowed with the academic, personal, social, and professional skills prerequisite for participation in society (Pasternak, 2013). A review of the studies conducted indicated two main directions of research, one of which leads to the study of causal factors, the other in the search for practical methods meant to improve discipline in the schools.

The Impact of Restorative Practices in Education on Students with Disabilities. A zero-tolerance approach to discipline is a reactive one that results in a disproportionate application of disciplinary measures to specific subgroups, particularly students who are African American, Latino, or students with an emotional disorder or learning disability (Fabelo, Thompson, & Plotkin, 2011; Skiba et al., 2011). This disproportionality has contributed to the widening of the academic achievement gap between the subgroups mentioned above and their peers (Skiba, Arredondo, & Rausch, 2014). Additionally, zero-tolerance discipline practices avoid the fostering of social and emotional competency by punishing the student with no opportunity to teach them appropriate behaviors (Berg, Osher, Moroney, & Yoder, 2017). According to Skiba, Michael, Nardo, and Peterson (2002), over 25 years of research has consistently reported disproportionality in the traditional discipline methods.

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Additionally, students from African American, Latino, and disabled students are more likely than their white or non-disabled peers to receive out of school suspensions or expulsions as a consequence of the same, or similar, problem behavior (Skiba et al., 2011). When these students are out of school, whether in the office for a discipline referral, suspended, or expelled, they are missing critical instructional time (Blomberg, 2009). This loss of instructional time, Blomberg (2009) explained, decreases academic achievement, therefore contributing to the widening of an achievement gap between these students and their white or typical peers. Students with disabilities on Individual Education Programs (IEPs) have also been demonstrated to receive disproportionate disciplinary measures compared to their typically developing peers (Bergh & Cowell, 2013).

In *Assessing the Role of School Discipline in Disproportionate Minority Contact with the Juvenile Justice System: Final Technical Report,* Marchbanks and Blake (2017) explained that three out of four students with an educational disability were suspended at least once between seventh and twelfth grade. This study also found an alarming trend correlating the type of student disability to the likelihood of suspension. Interestingly, students with a learning disability or emotional disorder were significantly more likely to receive disciplinary action than their non-disabled peers. However, students with a physical disability or intellectual disability were less likely to receive disciplinary action than their typical peers (Fabelo et al., 2011). Research has not yet been published indicating the cause for this disproportionality, but it is clear that the application of

current discipline policies has not been accomplished equitably, nor has it been administered according to the IDEA (2004) guidelines. Last, traditional discipline policies are not teaching social or emotional skills. As mentioned above, the word discipline itself means to teach. Nelsen, Lott, and Glenn (2005) asked, "Where did we ever get the crazy idea that to make people do better, we first have to make them feel worse?" (p. 111). Punishment first tends to *shame* a person for his/her wrongdoing; it does not teach (Monroe, 2008).

In contrast, RP created opportunities for students to recognize and understand the causes of emotions, empathize with others, and learn appropriate ways to express emotions (Amstutz & Mullet, 2015). RP teaches students by combining tools such as cooperative experiences, constructive conflict resolution, and civic values to most effectively ensure that all relevant parties to a conflict can make amends (Johnson & Johnson, 2012). Discipline has been described in terms of control and support. Traditional discipline emphasizes high control over the situation with little support for the student involved. RP emphasizes high control over the situation, together with high support levels for the student involved. Building positive relationships with students occurs when they believe that school communities are working with them, rather than focusing on doing things to them, and trust is formed (Wachtel, 2013). According to Wachtel (2013), this trust increases the effectiveness of discipline and decreases defiance and conflict. Tyler (2006) argued that by giving people, particularly students, a voice in the decision-making and involvement in the procedural justice process, they would

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perceive institutional authority as more authentic and unbiased. Tyler (2006) also makes the case that empowering youth may lead to better self-regulation without the need for formal discipline.

West Philadelphia High School reported that *violent acts and serious incidents* dropped 52% in the first year of RP implementation; an additional 40% drop followed this through the first half of year two (Lewis, 2009). McCold (2008) reported that RP decreased offenses by 58% for youths who participated in an alternative education program in Pennsylvania during a three-month follow-up. In a continuation of the study of using the same program, McCold (2008) found sustained effects within two years of implementation, with declines in offending of approximately 50%. In both studies, McCold (2008) reported that recidivism rates were significantly related to youth's length of participation in RP, with youth who complete the program showing more of a reduction compared to those discharged early. A potential means for why participants who finished the alternative education program did well in McCold's (2008) analyses that indicate positive increases in self-esteem and pro-social attitudes for *stayers* versus *leavers*.

Persistent school absenteeism and truancy have been connected to a wide range of unfavorable childhood and adult outcomes, including low academic success, high failure rates, problems with attaining jobs, deprived health, increased odds of living in hardship, higher risk of juvenile deviance, and aggressive behavior (Baker et al., 2001; McCluskey et al., 2004). Corrective and exclusionary approaches to address absence and truancy may

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fail, as discussed above, as those methods could prevent youth from reconnecting with school and, sequentially, increase their probability of engagement with the justice system. RP is an alternative approach to addressing truancy and chronic absenteeism among students.

In reviewing the literature, various researchers found insufficient and varied data about the impact of RP on academic progress or student achievement. McMorris, Beckman, Shea, Baumgartner, and Eggert (2013) noted that for students in their sample who stayed enrolled in school the following year, there was a connection between RP application and a slight rise in students' grade point averages. There was a considerable decline in the number of students on course to graduate in the year of their involvement with RP (McMorris et al., 2013). This decline may have been because of poor student attendance before program implementation, suggested McMorris et al., (2013), and most of these students got back on track the next school year. The USDOE (2014) also reported an ample increase in graduation rates for schools applying RP strategies compared to non-RP schools. The USDOE (2014) found that throughout three years of post-RP implementation, graduation rates increased by 60% compared to just 7% in non-RP schools. Elsewhere, the results are more mixed. Fronius et al. (2016) reported no substantial change in GPA between RP participants and non-participants. Lewis (2009) suggested that there was an improvement in student test scores in one Pennsylvania school, but provided no data.

Chapter III: Methodology

The purpose of this non-experimental, quantitative research study was to determine if there was a change in the number of suspensions, number of school absences, and grade point average (GPA) of students with disabilities before the implementation of the school-wide restorative intervention (RI) compared to that of the same population after implementation. This researcher examined the following: (a) the number of students with disabilities suspended as a result of discipline (b) the number of absences of students with disabilities, (c) the GPA of students with disabilities.

Research Design

For this study, the researcher adopted a quantitative, non-experimental research design because there was no manipulation of variables, and the research focused on variables in their natural setting (Wiersma & Jurs, 2009). The research method was appropriate for this study because it examined a group of high school students with disabilities in their natural setting over five years, from 2014-2019. The researcher examined the number of suspensions, the number of school absences, and GPA of students with disabilities enrolled in an East Tennessee high school during the 2014-2019

school years, from two years before the implementation of school-wide RI discipline practices compared to that of the same population for two years after RI implementation.

The methods described in this research were designed to answer three core questions: (1) what difference, if any, was there in the number of suspensions of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI? (2) what difference, if any, was there in the number of school absences of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI? (3) what difference, if any, was there in the GPA of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

Population of the Study

The population of this study was students with disabilities who were enrolled in a rural, East Tennessee high school between the years of 2014-2019. Archival data were used for the 2014-2016 school years (two years before the implementation of school-wide RI) and the 2017-2019 school year (two years after the implementation of school-wide RI). The 2016-2017 school year was excluded intentionally by the researcher, as this was the pilot year of the implementation of school-wide RI. To be considered a student with disabilities, a student had one or more of the following disabilities: Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Other Health Impaired (OHI) for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Emotional Disturbance (ED), Intellectual Disability (ID), Multiple Disabilities (MD), Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), Visually Impaired (VI), and Language Impaired (LI). Secondary data were of students

enrolled in the high school at some point during the 2014-2019 school years. Data for

students in the cognitively impaired programs at the high school, as well as students

whose IEP required intervention other than RI, were not included in this study because

when these students were involved in disciplinary action, they were required to work with

the school psychologist and social worker on an individual behavior plan. Therefore,

these students did not participate in the in-school RI program at all or to the same extent

necessary for evaluation.

Data Collection

The researcher collected secondary data for the study using the number of

suspensions, number of absences, and GPA of students with disabilities enrolled in an

East Tennessee high school between the years of 2014-2019. After receiving permission

from the district and school principal to obtain the data, the Institutional Review Board

(IRB) approved the study. The researcher then proceeded with the process of gathering

secondary data from 2014-2016 (two years before RI implementation) and 2017-2019

(two years after RI implementation) school years. This researcher provided the school

district a sample spreadsheet for data collection and analysis. The researcher requested

the following information from the high school in which the study took place for the

years from 2014-2019: (1) student with a disability (2) conduct records for students with

a disability (3) attendance records of students with a disability (4) academic transcripts of

students with a disability. This study was an examination of data previously and routinely

gathered by school administration on policies that were already part of standard practice

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at the school. The researcher collected data from the Student Information System (SIS) used by the district. For each student, the researcher entered the information onto a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. In efforts to maintain confidentiality and remove student identifiers, this researcher coded each participant and replaced their name with a randomly assigned number. Once all of the student information was added to the spreadsheet, and names were removed and assigned a code number, the researcher began the analysis process.

Analytical Methods

This study used a quantitative methodology to determine if there was a change in students with disabilities performance based on the number of suspensions, the number of absences, and GPA before and after the implementation of school-wide RI. For this study, the independent variable was group status with two levels: before RI implementation and after RI implementation. The dependent variables were the number of suspensions, number of absences, and GPA of students with disabilities from the classes of 2014-2019. The researcher employed inferential statistics, including an independent sample t-test, to address each of the three research questions. Green and Salkind (2016) explained that an independent sample t-test could be used to determine the variance in the means of two independent groups. A t-test was appropriate because the researcher sought to compare the number of suspensions, absences, and mean GPA of a group of students two years before school-wide RI implementation to that of the same sample two years after implementation. The researcher compared means of group status

before and after school-wide implementation of RI to the dependent variables of the number of suspensions, the number of absences, and GPA. To analyze the data, the researcher used IBM's Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS).

Reliability and Validity

In an attempt to increase the validity and reliability of the study, the researcher chose extant data collection and standardized measures of achievement. The researcher collected existing data using dependable state and local institutions that gather the data through valid and reliable measures. Calculating student GPA by standardized processes was a standard measure of achievement.

Limitations and Delimitations

According to Simon and Goes (2011), limitations are possible weaknesses in your study and are beyond your control. One limitation in this study was time, as there were only two years of data after RI implementation. This study spanned over a five-year interval, and therefore, is a snapshot dependent on conditions occurring during that time.

This researcher also acknowledges several delimitations of the study, which could make vulnerable the internal and external validity of the research, due in part to the following: (a) The study was delimited to students with disabilities within one high school, and some students with disabilities were excluded due to specialized disciplinary interventions required by their IEP. The researcher chose to focus on students with disabilities as opposed to a larger sample because research has shown that minorities and students with disabilities are the groups most negatively impacted by zero-tolerance

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discipline policies. Including more high schools in the study, or including all students, regardless of disability, may have changed the results of the study. (b) The data were collected only two years before implementation and two years after the implementation of RI. This researcher was limited to the number of years after implementation, as the pilot year was 2015-2016. A delimitation was only using two years before RI implementation in the data collection. Collecting data over a more extended period may have provided different results.

Assumptions and Biases of the Study

For this study, the researcher assumed that the data collected on students through disciplinary referrals were accurate and documented correctly. The researcher assumed that teachers, administrators, and support staff utilized best practices and followed guidelines provided through training and professional development opportunities to implement appropriate restorative practice strategies when dealing with student misconduct.

Chapter IV: Analyses and Results

The purpose of this quantitative study was to determine what differences, if any, were there in the number of suspensions, number of school absences, and GPA of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of a school-wide RI.

Data Analysis

This researcher used Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) for data analysis. The data collection and analysis was completed for each research question. An independent samples t-test was used to analyze whether there was a statistically significant difference in the number of suspensions, absences, and GPA of students with disabilities before the implementation of school-wide RI compared to after its implementation. When using an independent samples t-test, the two samples must be independent and unrelated to each other. An independent samples t-test can be used when samples from two separate populations are obtained (Skaik, 2015). An independent samples t-test compares the means between two separate groups on the same continuous, dependent variable (Marshall, 2017). In this study, the dependent variables were the number of suspensions of students with disabilities, the number of school absences of students with disabilities, and the GPA of students with disabilities. The independent variable was group status with two levels: before the implementation of school-wide RI and after the implementation of school-wide RI. For this study, the researcher used archival data to determine if there was

a significant difference in the number of suspensions, the number of school absences, and GPA of students with disabilities before the implementation of school-wide RI compared to after its implementation.

Research Questions

Research question 1. What difference, if any, was there in the number of suspensions of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

For research question one, the independent variable was group status with two levels: before the implementation of school-wide RI and after implementation of RI. The dependent variable was the number of suspensions of students with disabilities. The researcher conducted an independent samples t-test to compare the number of suspensions before and after the implementation of school-wide RI. The researcher checked for normality and outliers, then transformed outliers to be the highest number of normal distribution. The researcher tested the assumption of equal variances using the Levene's test for equality of variances. Based on the Levene's test for equality of variances, the assumption of equal variances was met ($F = .084$, $p = .772$).

The researcher determined there was not a significant difference in the number of suspensions of students with disabilities before the implementation of school-wide RI compared to after implementation ($t = .889$, $p = .375$) (see Table 1). Though there was not a significant difference, the number of suspensions of students with disabilities

decreased slightly after the implementation of school-wide RI (*M* = 1.544) compared to

before implementation (*M* = 1.733).

Table 1

Independent Samples T-Test: Number of Suspensions

t	df	Sig.	Mean Diff	Std. Error	95% C I	
					Lower	Upper
.889	540	.375	.190	.213	-.230	.609

Research question 2: What difference, if any, was there in the number of

absences of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide

RI?

For research question two, the independent variable was group status with two

levels: before the implementation of school-wide RI and after implementation of RI. The

dependent variable was the number of absences of students with disabilities. The

researcher conducted an independent samples t-test to compare the number of absences

before and after the implementation of school-wide RI. The researcher checked for

normality and outliers, then transformed outliers to be the highest number of normal

distribution. The researcher tested the assumption of equal variances using the Levene's

test for equality of variances. Based on the Levene's test for equality of variances, the

assumption of equal variances was met (*F* = .002, *p* = .962).

The researcher determined there was not a significant difference in the number of

absences of students with disabilities before the implementation of school-wide RI

compared to after implementation ($t = 1.494$, $p = .136$) (see Table 2). Though it was not

significant, school absences of students with disabilities decreased slightly after the

implementation of school-wide RI ($M = 10.301$) compared to before implementation ($M = 11.290$).

Table 2

Independent Samples T-Test: Number of Absences

t	df	Sig.	Mean Diff	Std. Error	95% C I	
					Lower	Upper
1.494	540	.136	.989	.662	-.311	2.289

Research question 3: What difference, if any, was there in the GPA of students

with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

For research question three, the independent variable was group status with two

levels: before the implementation of school-wide RI and after implementation of RI. The

dependent variable was the GPA of students with disabilities. The researcher conducted

an independent samples t-test to compare the students' GPA before and after the

implementation of school-wide RI. The researcher checked for normality and outliers,

then transformed outliers to be the lowest number of normal distribution. The researcher

tested the assumption of equal variances using the Levene's test for equality of variances.

Based on the Levene's test for equality of variances, the assumption of equal variances was met ($F = 1.114$, $p = .292$). The researcher determined there was not a significant difference in the GPA of students with disabilities before the implementation of school-wide RI compared to after implementation ($t = -1.571$, $p = .117$) (see Table 3). Though it was not significant, the GPA of students with disabilities increased slightly after the implementation of school-wide RI ($M = 2.2821$) compared to before implementation ($M = 2.1746$).

Table 3

Independent Samples T-Test: GPA

t	df	Sig.	Mean Diff	Std. Error	95% C I	
					Lower	Upper
-1.571	540	.117	-.108	.068	-.242	.027

Summary of Results

Based on the data analysis of the study, the researcher determined that there was a slight decrease in the number of suspensions and absences of students with disabilities after the implementation of school-wide RI compared to before the implementation of school-wide RI. The researcher also confirms a slight increase in the GPA of students with disabilities after the implementation of school-wide RI compared to before implementation. Although data revealed slight improvements in all three dependent variables, the results suggest that there was no significant difference in the students with disabilities suspensions, absences, or GPA after the implementation of school-wide RI compared to that after implementation.

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Chapter V: Conclusions and Recommendations

This study examined the effects of incorporating school-wide RI for discipline in a rural, East Tennessee high school that had previously relied on zero-tolerance discipline strategies when dealing with student behavior. This researcher evaluated the school-wide RI program by examining the effects on students with disabilities' suspension rates, school absences, and GPA in order to address the following research questions:

Research question 1. What difference, if any, was there in the number of suspensions of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

Research question 2. What difference, if any, was there in the number of school absences of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

Research question 3. What difference, if any, was there in the GPA of students with disabilities before and after the implementation of school-wide RI?

Chapter V discusses the results of the present investigation. The researcher will begin by discussing the findings from the analysis of the data through the lens of social-emotional learning theory and the research questions. In the final two sections, the researcher will describe the implications of these findings for high school programs and make recommendations for future research.

Conclusions

There are few experimental studies that focus on RI and its use in schools, but the studies that do exist suggest that RI improves the school environment and enhances learning opportunities that may lead to a decrease in behavior problems (Chmelynski, 2005; McCold & Wachtel, 2003; Mirsky, 2007). This study attempted to further investigate the effectiveness of alternatives to suspension and exclusionary discipline procedures in a high school setting. This researcher evaluated the school-wide RI program by examining the effects on students with disabilities' number of suspensions, school absences, and GPA. Based on the findings from the independent samples t-test, this researcher concluded that there were no significant differences in the number of suspensions, absences, or GPA of students with disabilities before the implementation of school-wide RI compared to after implementation.

On the other hand, the data did indicate that RI did have *some* positive effects on students with disabilities' number of suspensions, school absences, and GPA. Specifically, there were slight decreases in the number of suspensions and absences and a slight increase in the GPA of students with disabilities after school-wide RI implementation compared to before implementation. According to Engberg and Augustine (2019), many school-based interventions create a short-term decline in achievement, often seen most harshly among already struggling students, such as students with disabilities, as teachers learn to integrate new practices into their routines. As the RI program continues to grow and develop within the school, administrator buy-in and

support, teacher buy-in, professional development (PD) and training for all staff, and the inclusion of stakeholders are critical factors to the success of the school-wide RI program.

For school-wide RI to be successful, it is imperative that principals and administrators believe in the RI approach to school discipline and that they effectively communicate to teachers and staff the expectations. It is the school principal who is responsible for implementing the policies and practices within their building, and therefore the principal has a significant impact on the success or failure of the programs implemented in their school. For school-wide RI to be successful, the school principal must believe that relationship-building and keeping students in the classroom are vital in determining their educational success. The principal must also believe that teaching social-emotional skills and utilizing strategies that model and teach conflict-resolution skills will have a positive impact on student behavior, academic success, and school culture. The principal's vision must be to implement RI with integrity and must be willing to hold others accountable to that vision. It is the principal who is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the RP approach becomes the expectation.

Teacher buy-in is also key to the success of a school-wide RI program. Most educators in the building should actively support and engage in the RI strategies and approach to school discipline. In efforts to get teacher buy-in, a level of trust must be established between educators and administrators, as RP often requires educators to be vulnerable, especially in taking accountability for how their actions and biases often

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escalate student behavior, in a way that exclusionary discipline practices do not. Rather than focus on changing the minds of every staff member, Smith et al. (2015) suggested prioritizing the development of leadership of the most committed staff, winning over support in the *middle*, and convincing those that are against RI to stop actively resisting it. Then, continue to build a staff that supports RI by interviewing with a relational and restorative mindset (Smith et al., 2015).

Gregory et al. (2017) emphasized that the reform process begins by building a community, starting with adults. Schools must operate to balance efforts of proactive and preventative RI practices (celebrations and relationship building) with interventional, reactive practices (resolving conflicts). The significance of an intervention program is determined by its effect on quantifiable outcomes. Poor implementation of intervention due to lack of training or negative perceptions of participants may impact findings. Teachers must be provided sufficient training in RI practices to make sure the program has fidelity. Districts must support efforts to train teachers and administrators through PD opportunities to increase the probability of desired outcomes. Teacher training, PD, and knowledge dissemination can enable teachers to discover their role in social development and to build their capacity to encourage impartiality by applying socially proficient and culturally receptive methods, providing students with appropriate modeling and reinforcing social, emotional, and cognitive development. These endeavors must be informed by research, established in supportive procedures, and advanced through unceasing enhancement and evaluation research. Policies must be embedded to ensure

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that school leaders recognize and can model restorative practices. PD provided for all teachers and support staff in the building should be ongoing and intensive. The PD must occur throughout the year and include frequent observations and coaching sessions. PD should also be determined based on the need of the school. School leadership must devote a substantial amount of time to RI training, as well as training in the philosophies that support RP.

The involvement of community stakeholders is another critical element in the success of a school-wide RI program. There are various stakeholders within a school district or community with whom a partnership would be valuable. Ultimately, more supporters within the school district and community can render more people backing funding and support for RI implementation in individual schools and the district as a whole. Inviting school district leaders, community members, business owners, parents, and other relevant stakeholders to events that showcase the school's restorative culture will increase community awareness and support of school-wide RI.

It takes time for intervention to work. It could take several years of implementation before desired outcomes are evident. For this reason, Edgberg and Augustine (2019) warned that initial achievement impact estimates should be inferred with caution. Although the results of this study did not reveal that RI significantly improved the number of suspensions, number of absences, or GPA of students with disabilities, this researcher concluded that this could be the result of the early stage of intervention. Moving to a RI approach is a long-term, incremental reform, and schools

must adopt a long-term plan and commitment to RI and recognize that classrooms are a central site for change to occur (Cavanagh, 2009; Jensen et al., 2012; Payne & Welch, 2017). The slight decreases in students' suspensions and absences, and the slight increase in students' GPA, although not significant, is evidence of an upswing in all three variables after only two years of RI implementation. Continued support and training for teachers, administrators, and staff will increase the fidelity of the program implementation and may significantly improve student outcomes.

Implications for Practice and Research

Implications for practice. The most significant implication for practice based on the results of this study is that RI did result in a slight increase in school attendance and student GPA and a slight decrease in number of suspensions of students with disabilities However, more time is needed to determine if RI has long-term effects in showing significant decreases in number of suspensions, number of absences, and increased GPA of students with disabilities. Although the analyses of each variable did not prove to be significant, the positive gains did encourage this researcher that RI had the intended results.

Skiba et al. (2014) recognized the profound negative impact that zero-tolerance discipline policies had on students with disabilities. RI may increase favorable outcomes in assisting students in developing problem-solving and conflict resolution skills. By proactively cultivating relationships among students and staff and by building a sense of community within the classrooms and schools, students may be less likely to misbehave.

Furthermore, by addressing severe misbehavior through a restorative approach, students might realize the impacts of their behavior and be less likely to transgress. Brackett and Rivers (2013) explained that decisive youth development interventions, such as SEL, that incorporate strategies to improve skill-building and promote student assets are far more beneficial to student success than only stopping the problem behavior. According to Brackett and Rivers (2013), schools are ideal locations to cultivate the educational and developmental needs of students. Some barriers to RI success is teacher buy-in and sufficient training. To contend with these barriers, Cavanaugh (2009) recommend focusing on relationships with students as primary; achievement cannot progress, nor can content be covered until meaningful relationships are developed. RI has been shown to facilitate relationship building. Gregory et al. (2017) found that high RI implementing teachers were more effective than their low or non-RI implementing colleagues at forming positive relationships with a racially and ethnically diverse set of students; likewise, students perceived these teachers as being more respectful of them. RI can be a catalyst for teaching students how to form meaningful relationships with adults and peers while feeling connected to the school and community. Students who are subjected to the harmful effects of suspension and exclusion from the classroom are denied the opportunity to develop social and emotional skills that will benefit them throughout their lives.

Engberg and Augustine (2019) conducted a study to evaluate the impact of restorative practices in a mid-sized urban school district. The Pursuing Equitable and

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Restorative Communities (PERC) schools were developed as part of a Whole-School Change Program to incorporate RI throughout the district. Engberg and Augustine (2019) reported that suspension rates went down in the district overall in the first two years of implementation and that PERC further reduced both the number of days students were suspended, as well as the number of suspensions. PERC students were less likely to be suspended, and Engberg and Augustine (2019) concluded that they were also less likely to be suspended multiple times. In non-PERC schools, days absent due to suspension declined in the district by 18% from the 2014 – 2015 school year to the 2016 –2017 school year, but in the PERC schools, they declined by 36% (Engberg & Augustine, 2019).

Several studies that have investigated the link between implementing RI and student attendance have found positive associations. One such comparison found that chronic absenteeism in schools implementing RI decreased by 24%, whereas in schools not implementing RI during the same period, chronic absenteeism increased by 52% (USDOE, S014). Students are less likely to be absent from school when they have built positive relationships with teachers and peers and feel a sense of connection to the school.

There is limited and mixed evidence on the association between RI and academic achievement and attainment. Payne (2018) found no difference in grade point average (GPA) between restorative practices participants and nonparticipating students. Results from various studies indicate that RI is working in moderate and less notable ways.

Although some efforts appear to be more fruitful in desired outcomes, there are vast implications for the practice of RI.

Implications for research. Although prior studies suggest that RI is an effective intervention for keeping students with disabilities in school rather than removing them for suspension or expulsion, and although this study did show positive results, the fact remains that the statistical analyses of the data were not significant. Perhaps the most considerable implication for researching this topic is to allow for plenty of time for the RI intervention to occur. Change takes time, and the implementation evaluation is an invaluable source of information about why a program may or may not show favorable outcomes. There are numerous pre-post evaluations of RI, demonstrating decreases in suspensions and office referrals (Lewis, 2009; McCold, 2008; McMorris et al., 2013). Researchers have examined and discovered impacts of RI after one, two, three, and seven years of implementation (Bouffard, Cooper, & Bergseth, 2016; Dorne, 2008; Fronius et al., 2016). A 2016 study revealed that during one school year, increased use of RI practices was related to fewer office referrals for misconduct and defiance (Gregory et al., 2017).

Recommendations for Further Research

Some limitations to this study include timeframe, population, and scope. This researcher examined outcomes after two years of implementation. It is unknown whether there is an ideal number of years of implementation to achieve desired outcomes, but two years may be insufficient. Findings from this study may not apply to other populations or

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sample sizes. The study was delimited to students with disabilities within one high school, and some students with disabilities were excluded due to specialized disciplinary interventions required by their IEP. The researcher could improve on this study by including a larger sample size. By using a larger sample size or including several school districts, this researcher suggests there may be more accurate data to support the implementation of school-wide RI.

This study was limited in scope, as it does not address all questions of potential interest. A different methodology, such as a qualitative or mixed-methods approach, including teacher and student surveys, may allow for direct measure of student and teacher perceptions of the school-wide RI program.

It will be vital for researchers to continue to study the usefulness of different alternatives to suspension, so that schools may choose empirically validated methods or programs to replace out of school suspension. While the data on the ineffectiveness of suspension is concise and very well documented (Alnaim, 2018; Kupchik, 2017; Perkes, 2018), data on alternatives to suspension are lacking. Continued research in this area may offer administrators choices from successful, data-driven programs. This would allow them to make a convincing argument to the school board officials and promote system-wide changes in discipline practices. Despite robust data (Garcia & Weiss, 2107; Henson, 2012; Jones et al., 2018; Losen, 2018) on the ineffectiveness of suspensions, schools are still using it because successful, research-based alternatives are lacking. Henson (2012) explains that while zero-tolerance discipline policies aimed to reinforce security measures

in schools, the students with social/emotional deficits, learning disabilities, and behavior disorders were inclined to expulsions and suspensions. Zero-tolerance policy neglects to acknowledge that some of the behaviors demonstrated were a manifestation of the student's disability, and therefore beyond their control (Henson, 2012). While some of these problematic behaviors fall under the zero-tolerance policy guidelines, it exposes these students to many disciplinary actions that were not initially included in focusing on their individual needs. RI is an example of an alternative to suspension that would allow students with disabilities to remain in school to receive intervention while meeting their academic, social, and emotional needs. The majority of the research conducted has shown positive results in decreasing the number of office referrals and suspensions in schools (Cavanagh, 2009; Gray & Drewery, 2011; Poulson, 2017; Shepherd, 2017). Data also shows that RI can help change the culture and climate of a school (Kline, 2016; Mirsky, 2007; Morrison et al., 2005). This study demonstrated preliminary effectiveness, but much more needs to be done. Studies need to be replicated to lend more support for its use in schools before districts will spend time and money to implement such a program. Also, tracking individual students who participated in the program would allow the administration to reward students for making progress while in the program. Rewarding positive behavior is a critical piece of the SW-PBIS model, which all schools are mandated to implement by the IDEA 2004. The data collected in this study provided useful information about future directions for the school discipline procedures. The school should focus on the data provided by this study and continue to work to develop

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an empirically based program as an alternative to out of school suspension and exclusionary discipline. Successful programs would benefit the district financially and academically.

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