THE VOICE OF PERSEVERANCE: THE SELF-PERCEPTIONS OF
AFRICAN AMERICAN HIGH SCHOOL MALES
WITH THE ZERO TOLERANCE POLICY

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James Olive, Ph.D., Committee Chair

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine the self-perceptions and “lived” experiences of four African-American high school males who have been affected by the implementation of Zero Tolerance discipline policies in their middle to high school years. Through an interview process participants contribute their powerful voices of perseverance that bridge the gap in the literature on the racial disproportionality in discipline for African American males, the impact of discipline on self-esteem in African American young men, and Culturally Responsible Leadership. The participants identify the key factors that answer the secondary questions of how their experiences resonate with the constructs of Critical Race Theory and the School to Prison Pipeline and the internal and external factors that contributed to their perseverance. The findings also identify three major themes of isolation, misappropriated discipline, and the value of the African American high school male as human capital that have emerged and give deeper meaning to the impact of Zero Tolerance Policy on African American young men and the need for progressive leadership that embraces not alienates.
DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to my beautiful family and my dearest friends who have kept the faith with me on this journey. Their love and support have been the foundation that allowed me to pursue my passion for education and social justice. Their generosity has been my model to always serve with a grateful heart. Their wisdom has brought clarity to the ongoing mission of making a difference every day.

Ad Maiorem Dei Gloriam
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I want to sincerely thank the four men who shared their stories and their voice to spark the dialogue for change. Their perseverance and positive attitudes lit a fire that continues to burn in the name of cultural responsibility, achievement, and racial equality.

I am eternally grateful to my family who has shared this road, given me strength to overcome the obstacles, and kept me focused with their prayers, their laughter, and their unconditional love.

And I wish to express my gratitude to the talented leaders of Cohort 16 for their collaboration and their commitment to empowering leadership.
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CHAPTER I

In the fall of 2012, a tall, skinny young man, named Maurice, walked into high school with bright eyes and an even brighter smile embarking on a new journey as a freshman. Like many of his classmates, he found his niche in subjects that allowed him to be creative and colorful expanding his vocabulary and expressing more opinions than instructors expect from a freshman. Within a few months, his eagerness to speak freely about issues got him into trouble with teachers and he found himself receiving in-school suspensions cited as being disrespectful. The trend continued and Maurice’s repeated failure to simply follow expectations, along with mischievous classroom behavior, resulted in out-of-school suspensions as well. Towards the end of his freshman year, Maurice had fallen behind in his work and he had established a reputation as a difficult freshman. His scheduled speech-language therapy sessions brought him into my daily routine where we worked extensively on articulation and practiced role-playing to assist with re-building relationships within the school environment. On the last day of final exams in his freshman year, Maurice made an ill-fated decision to pull the fire alarm in protest of a teacher’s removal of him from the classroom.

According to the school district’s discipline policies, the pulling of the fire alarm warranted an automatic hearing for consequences that ranged from extended suspensions to referral for expulsion. Maurice spent the next several months with home instruction in all academic areas. As his case manager, I offered to provide the necessary instruction along with services that met his needs on his Individualized Education Plan (IEP) through special education. His extended removal from the formal school setting put Maurice on a
path that progressed deeper and deeper into negative external influences. Although he was receiving his curriculum and servicing of goals on his IEP, he could not bridge the gap created by the stringent discipline policies born out of the concept of Zero Tolerance. The well-intended Zero Tolerance philosophy that infiltrated educational institutions to provide safe, secure learning communities had a significant impact on school districts that serviced low socio-economic African American communities. Maurice came from a community that had suffered economic loss of industry and loss of a stable tax base. This confluence of strict discipline policies in the school district, economic instability within families, and difficulty with social-emotional growth as a high school student was not only seen in Maurice’s situation.

In February 2015, the UCLA Center for Civil Rights released a report that detailed nationwide suspension rates for school districts across the country from the 2011-2012 school year. For Maple Heights City Schools, Black students were listed as receiving suspensions at a rate of 50.13% versus White students who were suspended at a rate of 30.77% (Exner, 2015). Many African American male students experienced suspensions and extended periods of time in their home environment as a result of the implementation of Zero Tolerance discipline standards in my school district. As a special education provider to many students who were suspended with subsequent decline in their academic skills, I wondered what could be done to address behavioral and discipline guidelines while still maintaining consistent academic rigor and success. By Maurice’s junior year, I encountered his father at a high school football game where he stated that Maurice was placed on house arrest from numerous incidences with the police and with his family. Stories like those of Maurice are very common, however there are students
who have received numerous suspensions and yet continue into their senior year earning credits towards graduation. Since my initial experience with such a bright student, witnessing his failure to thrive in the academic world and spending more time in suspensions, I have wanted to research factors that make a difference in the lives of young African American males who have endured the swift consequences of Zero Tolerance Policy.

Zero Tolerance in public education was created out of the Gun Free Schools Act of 1994 as a result of incidents where White students initiated shooting sprees in schools (McNeal & Dunbar, 2010). Initially formulated as a policy by the federal government to crack down on the heinous crimes of drug cartels, Zero Tolerance became the prevalent terminology and fundamental philosophy to insure safe, violence-free, and drug-free environments. Zero Tolerance discipline policies were designed to insure school-wide safety and to provide administrators with the tools to maintain order in their learning communities. The unintended consequences of Zero Tolerance Policy in the school environment is the increase in African American male students excluded from their school setting in disproportionate numbers. The original intent of safety born out of a need to address White students’ criminal behavior has targeted African American males resulting in a significant impact on their educational experiences (Mosca & Hollister, 2004).

In 2014 the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights released a report on the data collection and study of school discipline across the country. Statistically African American students faced out-of-school suspensions at a rate three times greater than any other population of students (Hall & Karanxa, 2012). Historically changes in
the treatment of African American students in the public school system originate from the “separate but equal” philosophy that led to the landmark decision of *Brown vs. the Board of Education* in 1954 (Walker, 2014). Although African American students were integrated into the public school setting based on this court decision, discrepancies in academic achievement and discipline policies continue to raise concerns and drive research to understand the relationship between the African American culture with the development of strong academic skills and socially appropriate behaviors. A significant concern for the African American student in the public school setting is the assessment of academic and social skills based on a predominantly White accepted system of social rules (Gill, 2014). The rules of Zero Tolerance discipline and the rhetoric of Zero Tolerance policies in schools are built on the language of federal government directives which gave rise to a White standard and an increased disproportionality of African American males suspended based on a culturally biased code of conduct. The intersection of a White system of socially acceptable behaviors with the rigidness of the Zero Tolerance philosophy in urban education has created a greater divide for the African American male student to overcome (Ogbu, 2004). The need for a safe environment in schools through Zero Tolerance policies has resulted in significant academic and social issues for African American male students who have difficulty with the rigid standards.

**Statement of the Problem**

The problem this study sought to address is the impact of racially disproportionate discipline practices which are based in Zero Tolerance policies on African American male students in an urban public school district. The Zero Tolerance impact on schools has been evident in the increased number of suspensions and subsequent increased
numbers in the number of African American males who fail to complete their high school education (Vega, Moore, & Miranda, 2015). Without a gradient to determine punitive consequences for negative behavior, African American males are removed from the school setting with limited transition plans in place to assist their return from suspensions.

Racially disproportionate discipline practices have had negative consequences on a low socio-economic community with limited job opportunities for young men without a high school diploma (Howard 2013a & 2013b; Kincaid, 2010). It is my belief, that for change to occur in discipline practices and for African American males to add a new chapter in overcoming the achievement gap, their stories must be heard. By listening to their lived experiences, their voice, and their concerns, African American males can provide the insight for changing the tide of exclusion and promote positive rhetoric with improved policies that establish engagement and achievement for all students.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of African American high school males who have been impacted by Zero Tolerance discipline policies during their middle school and high school years in an urban school district. This study has endeavored to connect the literature on Zero Tolerance policies and racial disproportionality in discipline with that of the human voice speaking from experience with the concepts of Critical Race Theory and school pipeline-to-prison.
Research Questions

Through my experiences working in special education in a primarily African American, low socio-economic urban school district, the issue of racial disproportionality in the context of Zero Tolerance policies has inspired me to formulate the questions that can bring to light the student perspective on discipline patterns and create the dialogue for change.

The primary research question that the study seeks to address is:

Given their experiences, what are the perceptions of African American high school males toward Zero Tolerance discipline policies?

To ascertain a comprehensive understanding of the primary research question, the following sub-questions have been identified:

(1) How do the experiences with Zero Tolerance policies resonate with the literature and theories of critical race and school pipeline to prison?; and

(2) What are the internal and external factors that have assisted African American high school males to persevere within the rigid context of Zero Tolerance policies?

Significance of the Study

The findings of this study will be beneficial in contributing to the pre-existing literature that discusses the racial disproportionality of suspensions for African American high school males. The student perceptions of Zero Tolerance policies can have a significant impact on an urban school district’s development of best practice for
managing discipline while maintaining student engagement. Special education practitioners are primary witnesses to excessive suspensions because of the need to determine whether a behavior is a manifestation of a student’s disability. As the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (2004) provides protection for students with disabilities from disciplinary consequences without due process, the standard of discipline practice for all students should include guidelines that are not based solely on a one size fits all mandate for infractions. The goal of school administrators and educators is to provide academic rigor as well as a safe, constructive learning environment. The stringent guidelines of Zero Tolerance have resulted in placing students at the periphery with school suspensions rather than working with them to correct behaviors considered inappropriate for the school setting.

The study also contributes to a gap in the literature in articulating student life experiences and the character traits that motivate an African American male to persevere despite numerous disciplinary consequences. For the purpose of this study, perseverance in the school system is defined as continuance on a path to earn credits towards graduation. Through the words and emotions of the students, a dialogue of change can ensue to determine an improved policy that engages rather than ostracizes and teaches positive behavior supports versus continued punitive rhetoric that mirrors the juvenile justice system.

**Theoretical Framework**

The Theoretical Framework for this study draws from the following areas: (a) Critical Race Theory and (b) School Pipeline to Prison literature. Provided below are
overviews of each theoretical area and more detailed information regarding each of the theoretical lines of inquiry can be found in Chapter II.

**Critical Race Theory**

Studying the impact of racial disproportionality in Zero Tolerance policies and the far-reaching effects on the self-esteem of African American males through the lens of Critical Race Theory envelops the themes of racial stigmatization, stereotyping, and implicit biases in a White society (Simson, 2014). The ongoing profiling of African American males and continued separation from their educational setting due to a one-size-fits-all discipline protocol results in high risk populations of African American students enduring years of inequality and academic disparity (Brownstein, 2010). Critical Race Theory provide structure to understanding racial power dynamics within public school systems and the establishment of the White standard as the norm for behaviors, language usage, and academic success (Gibson, Wilson, Height, Kayama, & Marshall, 2014). Critical Race Theory serves as the foundation for understanding the cultural history of exclusion in the African American population with the perspective of African American high school males who have experienced the consequences and suspensions mandated by more stringent practices that address behavior in the educational setting.

**School-to-Prison Pipeline**

African American males learn their social skills from their home environment and from their social community. They develop coping skills by modelling, imitating, and copying behaviors displayed by a parent, sibling, or peer. Many times behaviors and
coping mechanisms are inappropriate creating conflict between the African American male and his school environment (Harris & Taylor, 2012). The failure to develop interpersonal social skills and coping mechanisms has been attributed to deprived cultural environments and consequently result in a failure for societal acceptance (Harris & Taylor, 2012). African American males who exhibit behaviors that do not comply with authority figures or societal standards in the school setting find themselves in disciplinary situations that result in marginalization. The lack of development with social skills and interpersonal skills places African-American males at risk with the juvenile justice system leading to the theory of the school pipeline-to-prison (Teske, 2011). The intersection of the educational system with the juvenile justice system created the school pipeline-to-prison with institutions failing to educate the children from high risk environments that results in incarceration (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). The confluence of the school pipeline-to-prison and the zero tolerance mandates places African American males in desperate need of policy changes and a refocusing on achievement rather than discipline.

**Researcher’s Lens**

The inspiration to conduct a qualitative research case study stems from my involvement with the subject matter and the desire to gain a deeper understanding of the subjects’ lived experiences. As a provider of speech-language services and special education instruction in an urban school district for the past eleven years, I have participated in numerous disciplinary hearings and Manifestation Determination Reviews wherein a student with a disability is given consideration of his disability prior to the decision of a suspension for a behavioral infraction in the school setting. The school
principal determines the punitive consequence when a student with a disability commits a
disciplinary infraction. The intervention specialist responsible for the implementation of
the student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) then serves as the advocate for the
student holding a Manifestation Determination Review with the IEP team. The incident
is reviewed by the team including the parent/guardian with a discussion as to whether the
student’s negative behavior is attributed to their disability or whether the incident of a
behavioral infraction is due to the school district not meeting the student’s needs
according to his/her Individualized Education Plan (IEP). The administrator is limited by
the Zero Tolerance policy of the school district that mandates definitive consequences. In
a school district with limited options for discipline, the most frequently used tactics are
suspensions that result in students missing valuable instructional time.

The most vulnerable students with disabilities who may also lack positive
behavioral models are further placed at risk for academic challenges. The use of
suspensions not only alienates students, but it also disengages parents and affects the
relationships that have been established between students and teachers. For African
American males in our school district, many of these students have been subjected to
suspensions for many years. Their shared experiences can shed light on the personal toll
that suspensions can take on a student and can be an inspirational model for perseverance
that assists future teachers and administrators to consider alternative methods for
discipline that promote positive qualities in the development of self-esteem in African
American males.
Definition of Terms

The following terms require definition and an explanation for their use in this study.

- Manifestation Determination Review (MDR): defined by Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) is the “process required by IDEA (2004) which is conducted when considering the exclusion of a student with a disability that constitutes a change of placement.” For the purpose of this study the MDR is the process by which a student with a disability is given consideration of his disability prior to the decision of a suspension for a behavioral infraction in the school setting.

- Individualized Education Plan (IEP) as defined by IDEA (2004): The “plan that describes the goals the team sets for a child with a disability during the school year, as well as any special support needed to help achieve access to a free and appropriate public education.” In this study the IEP is the document that serves to advocate for a student and referred to during a discipline proceeding to insure that the student’s needs were met prior to imparting a disciplinary decision.

- Zero Tolerance Policy: The policy of applying laws or penalties to even minor infringements of a code in order to reinforce its overall importance and enhance deterrence.”

Summary

Chapter I provided an overview on the significance in understanding the experiences of African American males and their perceptions of discipline practices
based on Zero Tolerance policies. The historical basis of Zero Tolerance in the language of our federal government derived from the need to insure safety and minimize criminal behavior (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Following the incidents of school violence that have also infiltrated public schools nationwide, the term has been attributed to discipline policies for behavior infractions in the educational setting. The resulting mandates have intersected with cultural and racial norms such that the standards of appropriate behavior have been established according to a culturally White philosophy placing African American students at the heart of a societal injustice of racial disproportionality in discipline practices. The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American males with Zero Tolerance policies in their urban school district. The challenge was to use their voice as a catalyst for change in policies and to understand the factors that can support the development of self-esteem in African American males to assist them with overcoming the achievement gap.

Chapter II will present a thorough review of the literature on Zero Tolerance Policies in relation to the cultural issues of racial disproportionality, self-esteem in African American males, and the concept of the school pipeline to prison. The purpose of the collective viewpoints from the literature was to provide the foundation and background that has contributed to the need to study the students’ perspective on Zero Tolerance Policies.
CHAPTER II

Review of Literature

Nelson Mandela has stated “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” (as cited in Commey, 2015, p.86) As an educator in an urban school district, education, as a weapon or a tool, continues to be the conduit for youth from negative influences to a future with employment and independence. Education is also the equalizer for students who come from different socio-economic, cultural, and ethnic backgrounds pursuing opportunities in their local and regional workforce. Where education can provide the foundation for future success and can set a positive direction for many students, Black males are at a disadvantage in the world of school discipline and the Zero Tolerance Policy facing increased out-of-school suspensions at a disproportional rate than their peers (Kayama, Haight, Gibson, & Wilson, 2015).

This study strives to address the effects of the Zero Tolerance Policy and the disadvantages that many Black students have endured over their years in an urban public school system. As such, a review of salient literature is necessary and provided in this chapter. This literature review consists of five sections. The first section traces the connection of Critical Race Theory with education inequity and the significance of storytelling to counteract the impact of marginalization from discipline policies. The second section provides the historical and social perspective of the Zero Tolerance Policy and the policy’s impact on the African American community. The third section involves
a description of the injustice of racial disproportionality as it applies to the implementation of discipline policies in public education. The fourth section provides insight into the social and emotional development of self-esteem in African American males particularly in the school setting. The fifth section establishes the foundational constructs of the School Pipeline-to-Prison Theory as the theoretical framework with which the voices and stories of African American male high school students can be heard and integrated into the social justice literature.

Black high school males who have endured numerous suspensions and/or expulsions over the years in their public school district can offer a compelling perspective on the increases in suspensions and impact of school discipline as a result of the Zero Tolerance Policy. The literature review identifies the essential impact on disciplinary statistics since the initiation of the Zero Tolerance Policy in the context of the self-esteem and self-perception of Black males.

**Critical Race Theory**

Public educational institutions have seen many changes and adaptations in education laws meant to create equity and equality for all students, but the fact remains that there continues to be inequity in achievement and the concept of White supremacy and domination has not been reversed in outcome or effect on the African American male student (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Critical Race Theory establishes the parameters for understanding structural racism that continues to permeate our society and for understanding the disparities in the education of White versus Black students. Historically education laws are rooted at the state level not under the Constitution, therefore it has taken many years for the development of consistent policies to change the
concept of White domination and oppression of Blacks in education as evidenced by the early stages of segregation (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Critical Race Theory provides the lens on the power structure fundamentally built on the concept of White privilege and the pervasiveness of racism in our educational systems. Orfield (2004) identified that a key problem with integration laws was the failure of legislation to demonstrate an understanding of the reasons why Black students received an inferior education in the first place. Critical Race Theory provides a deeper understanding of the power struggle that continued decades after Blacks were emancipated from slavery. Although the Supreme Court ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* allowed for education of Black students in the same public institutions as White students, the dominance of a “White” standard continued to proliferate educational systems in policy, curriculum, and discipline.

Ogbu (2004) contends in his studies that “Whiteness” is at the center of educational institutions and that in order for Black students to have the same potential for achievement and to be successful, they take on the role of “acting White.” This need to “act White” has been the belief and burden carried by the African American male student population to reach the same levels of academic and vocational success as their White counterparts (Ogbu, 2004). Expanding the Critical Race lens from educational inequities to the issues within the American legal system bridges the connection to the overriding disproportionality that has resulted from Zero Tolerance policies. The rhetoric and standards of the judicial system and school discipline policies are also rooted in “White” culture. School discipline standards have followed the perspective that intertwine White supremacy with the historical notion about race and academic ability (Annamma,
Connor, & Ferri, 2013). With African American males receiving disciplinary consequences at a higher rate than their White counterparts, the cycle of marginalization and low academic achievement continues. African American students, in a study by Vega et al. (2015) perceive the limited safety in their neighborhood, school policies, and even teachers as barriers to their educational success. The continued perspective that Black students are “troublemakers” because they receive increased suspensions and expulsions subsequently results in the continued concerns with the achievement gap (Bowditch, 1993).

Perceptions of African American students are an important part of the dialogue in improving the effects of Zero Tolerance Policy. A key theme for Critical Race Theorists is of “naming one's own reality” for the psychic preservation of marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings, 1995). The historical oppression of the Black population and the subsequent permeation of White standards in public school systems have led to self-condemnation by African American male students who have endured numerous disciplinary consequences. The “naming of one’s own reality” through storytelling and the importance of the “voice” of the oppressed component in Critical Race Theory provides the foundation for the study of the self-perceptions of African American males with the Zero Tolerance Policy. The authentic voice of students can be the catalyst for change regarding the racial disproportionality of discipline in schools.

**Zero Tolerance Policy**

The Zero Tolerance Policy that developed out of the perception of the public over the increase in school violence, increases in violent incidences, and federal legislation banning weapons in school (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008) has
resulted in numerous disciplinary disadvantages for African American males. In the early 1980’s, federal policies were developed by the United States’ government to wage a war on drugs imposing harsh punishments on dealers and drug traffickers. The term “zero tolerance” is defined as a “philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the seriousness of the behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, & Garcia-Vlazquez, 2006). This form of immediate and legally mandated punishments that led to the adoption of Zero Tolerance eventually carried over into the educational arena (Lewis, Butler, Bonner, & Joubert, 2010).

Following the decision of Brown vs. Board of Education, there was an increase in the rates of suspensions for African American students with an even larger increase following the implementation of Zero Tolerance Policies (Walker, 2014). School administrators who followed the expanding use of Zero Tolerance to include insubordination, disrespect, and bullying initiated the harsh mandates that directly affected the cultural disparity of African American students in predominantly white public schools (Walker, 2014). The standard for behavior developed from the perspective of appropriate behavior observed in the white population placing African Americans at a disadvantage because of cultural differences (Walker, 2014). The belief that representation by African American teachers would decrease the number of disciplinary proceedings against African American males was examined by Sharp, Haider-Markel, Bright, and Sylvester (2014) who found that there was even a greater disparity in the teacher addressing curriculum versus teacher as a cop. African American
males were at a disadvantage with African American teachers due to the need to address the fear and misperceptions of African Americans in the public school system. The perception of the behavior of African Americans males can be attributed to the racial and cultural disparity in the juvenile justice system (Teske, 2011). Zero Tolerance policies continually demonstrate that African American males are the population at the highest risk for harsh discipline and increased separation from their educational institutions (Simson, 2014). Through a greater understanding of the constructs of Zero Tolerance policies and the impact on African American males, research and the literature continue to search for answers to the questions of cultural disparity in discipline.

**Racial Disproportionality**

According to The Civil Rights Project/Advancement Project in 2000, statistics show that Black youth have a higher incidents of suspension and expulsion than White youth (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). Documented research from the 1970’s to current day discipline practices demonstrate that Black students are far more likely to experience school discipline than White students with this overrepresentation of Black students in disciplinary procedures referred to as “racial disproportionality” (Ruck & Wortley, 2002; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). The discipline gap is a description of the disproportionality that is evident since the implementation of the Zero Tolerance Policy. The attempt to standardize policies to insure school safety and manage potentially violent situations has evolved into an ongoing discussion of unfair discipline practices that directly impact the African American population. Townsend (2000) addressed the disproportionality of discipline with African American males finding increased suspensions, expulsions, and overrepresentation in remedial courses which
have resulted in significant marginalization. Garibaldi (1992) also demonstrated statistical measures of disproportionality with African American males composing 43% of the entire school-age population, however their representation in disciplinary proceedings increased to 65% of the overall suspensions and 80% of the expulsions in the school district. Using data from The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth, Hannon, DeFina & Bruch (2013) and Schollenberger (2013) added to the literature of the discipline gap revealing that African Americans were at three times greater odds for suspension in schools than other students. Furthermore, discrimination in discipline patterns were based on colorism, specifically the skin tone placed students at greater odds for experiencing school suspension. The closer the color of the skin tone is to the dominant group, the less likely the student would be discriminated in disciplinary practices (Hannon, et al. 2013). African American males who have been subjected to numerous days of suspension and subsequent removal from their school setting have been more susceptible to lower achievement and the disproportionality permeates their overall potential for achievement (Lewis et al., 2010). According to the UCLA Civil Rights Project, nationwide suspension rates for African American males is at 29% nearly three times greater than White males at 10% (Payne, 2010). This trend is supported by the statistics that reveal an overwhelming overrepresentation of African American males who must endure decades of disproportionality of discipline that marginalize them from their peers and prevent them from accessing their right to a free and appropriate public educations.
Self-Esteem in African American Males

A pivotal decision that changed the landscape of education in the United States has not led to equality for all particularly in the African American community. The U.S. Supreme Court handed down the landmark decision of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas in 1954 stating racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional and psychologically harmful to the self-esteem of African American children (Walker, 2014). Since the Brown decision, the African American community has seen even greater cultural disparity with the interpretation of the Zero Tolerance policies. By the time African American children reach high school, they have developed a feeling of inadequacy and inferior achievement (Kincaid & Yin, 2011). In particular the African American community has been frustrated over the lack of education and failure to reach social and developmental milestones in their young men. African American males are increasingly experiencing the phenomenon of increased suspensions, expulsions, and overrepresentation in the discipline process resulting in significant negative effects (Kincaid & Yin, 2011). The self-esteem of African American males is affected by their socioeconomic status and relationship with their parent coupled with their educational outcomes (Reynolds, 2010). As African American males endure the impact of their environment and perceptions of them in society, the school system is a vital factor that contributes to their self-esteem.

The teachers, parents, and society as a whole have a responsibility in raising the bar of student achievement and in encouraging young African American men to be more engaged, more aware, and more motivated for success (Garibaldi, 1992). With the increase in disciplinary disparity and marginalization, it is essential that a counterculture
emerge that supports the self-esteem of African American males and increases their academic skills. Ruekberg (2006) focused on self-esteem and self-perceptions of African American males and discovered that there continues to be minimal change in self-esteem taking into account the persistent effects of poverty and low academic skills. The hope of Brown vs. Board of Education in bringing equal rights to educational opportunities for African American students requires constant vigilance and concerted effort to balance the socioeconomic conditions and racial disproportionality of discipline with positive programming in self-esteem (Ruekberg, 2006).

**School-to-Prison Pipeline**

School discipline practices have a potential for variation across the states with school administrators making decisions on discipline based on the adopted policies of the state legislature (Kennedy-Lewis, 2014). The states that have adopted the Zero Tolerance Policies as the foundation for discipline in the educational setting have presented a wide array of sanctions ranging from expulsions to in-school and out-of-school suspensions (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). This practice of moving students out of the school setting as disciplinary consequences and towards the juvenile justice system is known as the “school-to-prison pipeline” (National Educators’ Assn., 2015). The removal of students from the school setting has not shown that it improves their behavior, rather exclusionary discipline has contributed to juvenile delinquency and subsequent advancement toward involvement in the criminal justice system (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005). The repeated use of suspensions at a rate that is higher for African American males than any other population of students contributes to the high incidence of African American youth placed in juvenile detention facilities and give rise to an
increase in the achievement gap. The policies that were meant to foster positive behaviors in the school setting and improve student achievement have actually resulted in failures, truancy, and a feeding to the school-to-prison pipeline (Wilson, 2014). Punitive policies eventually deny students their civil rights and their ability to receive a free and appropriate public education (Porter, 2015).

**Culturally Responsible Leadership**

Every student knows that a new teacher may not be as fluent as experienced teachers in the discipline practices of a school district. Students in fact are savvy to know the teachers who may not be as strict in enforcing the rules. The same is true for teachers who do not realize that students may not understand the ramifications when they receive a disciplinary consequence. According to Townsend (2000), educators need to put aside their own beliefs and values and begin to engage the African American students in their class. When teachers set aside their own biases, they are better able to appreciate the cultural traditions of their students. They are more likely going to look for the common ground in relating to their students rather than stay disconnected from the student population. Ogbu (1982) discussed the concept of dominant culture and the resulting discontinuity of students with their surroundings when they are not the dominant group. Fostering important relationships requires educators and culturally responsible administrators to know their students cultures and traditions which would then lead to the possibility of decreased negative behaviors and increased positive expectations of students participating and investing in positive programs that reward accountability and integrity. When educators relate to their students culturally, they are actually building not only a singular relationship, but a generalized application to their student population.
Zero Tolerance policies that are the hallmark of school districts with culturally responsible administrators and faculty create an environment that thrives, whereas educators who only hold African American males to a White standard, will continue to perpetuate discontinuity and disengagement.

**Summary**

African American male high school students have experienced disproportionate consequences from discipline based on the Zero Tolerance Policy. Their lived experiences can provide a deeper understanding of the need to challenge the stringent nature of Zero Tolerance that results in the marginalization of students by suspensions and expulsions. The areas addressed in the literature review add to the research and to the voice of African American male high school students to question the impact of Zero Tolerance policies on the ability of students to persevere towards their graduation. The next chapter will provide the details of the methodology including the participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and limitations.
CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain a greater understanding of the lived experiences of African American males with the Zero Tolerance policy in their school district. Because of the individualized nature of narratives, a phenomenological study methodology was applied to this research. Max van Manen (2007) identifies phenomenological qualitative research as “a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence” (p.11). This sober reflection in qualitative research allows for a more practical application from a richer understanding of human experiences (van Manen, 1990). According to Creswell (2009), in-depth interview is the most significant method for collecting narrative information in case study research. A semi-structured interview process was implemented to allow for the interviews to follow a direction that would provide the most meaningful responses addressing the research questions.

Research Questions

The primary research question that the study sought to address is:

Given their experiences, what are the perceptions of African American high school males toward Zero Tolerance discipline policies?

To ascertain a comprehensive understanding of the primary research question, the following sub-questions have been identified:
(1) How do the experiences with Zero Tolerance policies resonate with the literature and theories of critical race and school pipeline-to-prison?

(2) What are the internal and external factors that have assisted African American high school males to persevere within the rigid context of Zero Tolerance policies?

**Setting**

The research study was conducted in an urban Ohio school district. The school district consists of an estimated 3,700 students attending five schools from Pre-kindergarten to twelfth grade. The student population of the community is 92.4% African American with a high school graduation rate of 73% (Niche.com, 2016). The increased use of suspensions as a discipline practice is very common in large urban school districts that have a greater need to manage student behaviors and maintain a safe learning environment. As stated in the Student Code of Conduct for this urban district, the school board has “zero tolerance” for violence, disruptive behavior, and inappropriate behavior. With the participants of this study from the same school district, the interviews were conducted in an administrative office for one of the participants and the local library for the other three participants.

**Participants**

The participants for this qualitative research study consisted of four African American high school males. A proposal of the study was submitted and initially reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Review Board of Ashland University prior to communication with potential participants. Participants for the study were
identified through secondary sources of school records of absences, in-school
suspensions, and out-of-school suspensions that I was able to access as an educator in the
school district. Convenience sampling was then used based on the increased amount of
suspensions and days of removal from the school setting. The final number of
participants depended on the number of African American male students willing to
discuss their personal experiences and their self-perceptions of the Zero Tolerance policy
as well as their self-perception of future goals.

**Data Collection**

Initially, data collection for the study began with using the Discipline Disparities
Risk Assessment Tool by the U.S. Department of Education (Osher, Fisher, Amos, Katz,
Dwyer, Duffey, & Colombi, 2015) to determine the student sample based on their history
of suspensions and discipline infractions. This tool was made available for use through
the National Clearing House on Supportive School Discipline website. Parents of the
students targeted as potential participants were contacted by phone to give an overview of
the study and answer potential questions then provided written protocol of the study and
informed consent forms that were completed by the parent. The consent of the parent
allowed me to make face-to-face contact with the students chosen based on the inclusion
criteria from their discipline records. The participant was given a thorough description of
the study with a participant consent form also completed. The initial phase of obtaining
consent by the parent and the student provided ample time to answer questions and insure
confidentiality of their responses. The data collection for one-on-one interviews included
the maintenance of field notes to accompany participant responses. Each interview was
transcribed and recorded to confirm accuracy. The interview of the participants involved
a standard protocol of open-ended questions that addressed the primary research question and the external factors related to the Zero Tolerance policies. The protocol questions (see Appendix D) were designed to address the key areas of the participants’ understanding of the school discipline policies, the participants’ personal involvement with discipline policies through their years of education in their urban school district, and their perceptions of the impact of Zero Tolerance policies on their educational experiences. The interviews were conducted at an administrative office for one of the participants and the local library for the other three participants. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours in length allowing time for reading of the questionnaire and providing any need for clarification. The responses from each interview were then read back to each participant to verify their accuracy and to confirm the credibility according to the use of member checking for validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000). I obtained a level of trust with each participant through social conversation prior to the interview phase. More probing questions were asked during the interviews as needed to discern the internal factors that have guided the participant to persevere and continue a course towards achieving a high school diploma. The responses of the participants were recorded, but their identities remained anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. The overall interview process was under a flexible time frame to allow the participant a relaxed environment for sharing opinions, thoughts, and stories. The narratives and responses of the initial questions and the more probing questions were all confirmed through member checking for validity (Creswell & Miller, 2000).
Data Analysis

The main unit of analysis for the research study was individual narrative which was obtained through an interview process. Following each interview, the responses of each participant were transcribed by me. The transcriptions were coupled with field notes which served as anecdotal records of the actual interview experiences. The transcribed interviews were then read several times and open coding was implemented (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). The open coding served to assess the emergence of themes related to experiences with Zero Tolerance disciplinary policies, self-esteem, support from adult relationships, and the achievement gap. Axial coding was then implemented to make the connections between emergent themes and to understand the context of the narratives in relation to the lived experiences with Zero Tolerance Policy. After the initial themes emerged from the open coding, selective coding addressed the sub-questions proposed by the phenomenological study (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that trustworthiness in research is essential to the value of the study. Trustworthiness is defined by dependability, confirmability, credibility, and transferability (Morrow, 2005).
**Dependability**

Creswell (2009) identifies dependability by whether the research can be repeated or replicated. For this qualitative study, replication of the study can be achieved through the detailed description of the phenomenological study design. The method of obtaining participants and ascertaining their narratives of their lived experiences in conjunction with my reflection on the effectiveness of this methodology established dependability (Shenton, 2004).

**Confirmability**

Confirmability is the concept that the results can be corroborated or confirmed (Creswell, 2009). The level of checking and corroboration of transcribed responses through triangulation demonstrated my commitment to confirmability. The analysis of the narratives through the lens of a conceptual framework rooted in Zero Tolerance Policy, Critical Race Theory and the School-to-Prison Pipeline provided triangulation of perspectives for confirmability (Patton, 2001).

**Credibility**

Credibility is established by the participants and their feedback on the accurate portrayal of their individual narratives. The use of iterative questioning from open-ended to more in-depth questions and establishing the rapport with participants from years of immersion in their schools insures the honesty in their responses (Shenton, 2004).
Transferability

Transferability is defined by whether the findings can be applied in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is achieved through rich, thick description. Extrapolating specific details and giving thick description to the lived experiences of the participants allowed the conclusions drawn from the intersectionality of themes to have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Limitations

One of the limitations of the study was the inability to account for the school suspensions that were given to students from another school district had they spent any amount of time transferring to another district. A second limitation is the possibility that some of the students selected for the study may have embellished parts of their personal narrative, however the study focused on the key term “self-perception” which qualifies that the responses were analyzed based on the students’ emotions and understanding of their connection to the discipline process.

The most significant limitation of the study was the number of participants interviewed. The study was initially designed for six students to participate. After using the Discipline Disparities Risk Assessment Tool, I sought the assistance of faculty and administration of the high school to determine a comprehensive approach to contact students who met the criterion for the study. Majority of the students who met the criterion were attending an alternative placement setting within the school district that focused on credit recovery. Initial phone contact with the students resulted in an interest to participate, but gaining access to the students was a major obstacle. I was informed
that due to the nature of the study concerning discipline, it was believed to present an obstacle to their completion of necessary work and further could upset the students. This difference in the understanding of the study resulted in an alternative approach to recruit subjects. I relied on the relationships already established with families in the school district to call and inform the parent and son of the study. Those that were interested and given the information with which to make an informed consent are the four participants interviewed and whose responses provided the data.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspective of African American male students who have endured discipline experiences established through Zero Tolerance Policies. The secondary issues of interest involve the connection of the students’ perspectives with the literature of school pipeline to prison and critical race theory to explore fundamental philosophies that can present a catalyst for change. The qualitative phenomenological study provided in-depth responses that allowed participants to share and reflect on experiences and factors that had a significant impact on determining their success versus exclusion. The major benefit of collecting the data through individual interviews was to capture the individual perspective while discovering shared experiences and common themes. The use of field notes and extensive effort to verify and confirm the transcribed interviews assures the participants that their stories would be an accurate reflection of their experiences. This chapter provides a summary of the key elements of the methodology of this phenomenological study. The next chapter will present the descriptive data collected, the findings, and the data analysis.
CHAPTER IV

Data Analysis

Introduction

The purpose for this phenomenological study was to connect the literature on Zero Tolerance discipline policies in education, its impact on African American male high school students with their own self-perceptions developed from their personal experiences. The study adds to the pre-existing knowledge on racial disproportionality, self-esteem, and culturally responsible leadership by giving a voice to the students who have endured the stringent protocol created from the implementation of Zero Tolerance. The study further examines the relationship of the “lived experiences” of the participants within the constructs of the School to Prison Pipeline and Critical Race Theory.

Participant Profiles

The participants for this study were four African-American male students who were all educated in the same urban Ohio school district. Although the design of the study involved the use of a convenience sample of students, it became apparent in the recruiting phase for participants that my having a prior relationship with them was essential for insuring confidentiality and trust. I knew the participants as a member of their high school faculty over the last three years. Although I had developed a relationship with them and their parents over the last few years, they only came into contact with me during the interviews and not during their typical school day. Amir, Magnus, and Deshawn are currently in their senior year of high school and on track to graduate. Gabriel is a recent graduate of the same high school as the other three
participants. Each of the participants matched the criterion used to gain their insights on the Zero Tolerance Policy.

1) They were either on track to graduate on time from high school or a recent graduate.

2) The participants had endured disciplinary consequences during their time in middle school through high school.

3) The participants and their parents freely signed the informed consent for the study.

Data Collection

The participants were interviewed following a protocol of twenty standard questions that reflected many aspects of their experiences from middle school to high school. The questions allowed for each participant to provide a basic response with opportunity to reveal more information as prompted by a more probing question. As the interviews progressed, the participants opened up more about themselves and also about future ideas for discipline. After the interviews were completed, they were transcribed and read to each participant for accuracy. Open coding was implemented to determine the commonalities that exist between their experiences (van Manen, 1990). The open coding involved literal codes searching for similarities of specific words in the texts as well as analytical codes of the shared experiences that were described in each participant’s personal story (Hesse-Bieber & Leavy, 2011). Searching for textual similarities and patterns in the shared experiences was accomplished to consolidate the data and find meaning in their explanations (Grbich, 2007). The five main categories that emerged from the coding are as follows:
a.) Attitude about school
b.) Knowledge of discipline code
c.) Role of adult support
d.) Race and discipline
e.) Self-awareness

After each participant provided a general response to a question, a probing question followed to achieve a greater understanding of their experiences. As the interviews progressed, I also used field notes to capture the non-verbal communication displayed by the participants as well as any changes in emotions that ensued depending on the question.

**Attitude**

The literature on African-American males’ self-esteem continues to support the need to balance socioeconomic conditions and racial disproportionality with positive programming (Ruekberg, 2006). Questions on the interview protocol asking about positive or negative school experiences initially revealed optimistic views of their high school years. All four of the participants initially responded positively to the question. Amir felt that there were positive improvements that have been made over the years in the school district. He stated “There are more focused kids in the classroom.” Magnus had a balanced response stating, “There’s been a few things that didn’t go my way.” Upon further probing of specific events that were positive, extracurricular activities had a significant impact on the participants’ experiences citing their ability to play a sport as making a major difference. Deshawn credited football as being the most positive influence for him once he transitioned to high school. All four of the participants
expressed that transitioning to high school was made more difficult by their fear of being bullied. Both Deshawn and Magnus expressed that going into high school they “worried about being bullied on.” Once they felt a part of the greater community of the high school or part of a smaller community on a team sport, they did not fear negative interactions with peers. Gabriel also added to the transition experiences stating, “Socially, in a lot of ways, there were simple solutions.” Gabriel identified staying out of trouble as the key to positive high school experiences. The presence of smaller school communities and sports teams provides a sociological common thread of belonging that links to the issues with self-esteem in African American males.

Knowledge of Disciplinary Practices

The body of literature that describes the disproportionality of suspensions in African-American males and the implementation of the Zero Tolerance policies in the school setting are the critical issues for this study. The participant’s knowledge of Zero Tolerance is very important, because it serves as the fundamental philosophy for the school district’s disciplinary handbook. Each of the participants had experienced disciplinary consequences during their high school years although they were unable to describe the rules that they were expected to follow. When each of the participants was asked if they could describe what they understood about the Zero Tolerance Policy, they had differing answers, however their answers were still aligned with having very little knowledge of the origin of Zero Tolerance or that it is in the language of their school district’s disciplinary handbook. Amir, a senior, quickly responded when asked what Zero Tolerance meant stating, “No, I’m not sure what it means.” With further probing, Amir was able to respond that he know the range of consequences for breaking school
rules. He described the least serious of consequences as a phone call home with the most severe to him “being kicked off of the basketball team.” Gabriel and Deshawn had comparable thoughts on Zero Tolerance. Deshawn explained it as “They don’t accept any playing around with that. You can’t mess up.” Gabriel was more in line with the language in describing Zero Tolerance as “It’s like something happens once and there is an automatic suspension- no warning.” Magnus stated that he thought Zero Tolerance was the same as every discipline warning, “No fighting, no messing around, keep your hands to yourself.” Through open-coding of the terms in the transcriptions and of the shared experiences that were linked with discipline, this category revealed the lack of comprehension of the language of Zero Tolerance Policy and the inconsistencies with the participants’ perception on the severity of discipline.

**Role of Adult Support**

In asking the participants questions aligned with adult support, the internal and external factors related to their academic success may have been revealed. Considering all of the participants had at one time received a detention or suspension, the role of a supportive adult relates to the concept of culturally responsible leadership where the “educational expectations, practices, and policies reflect the values of the individuals who create them” All four of the participants spoke of adults that had an impact on their high school successes both academically and socially. Deshawn had the most enthusiastic response talking about how much he appreciated his football coaches. He stated that the coaches “taught me how to be calm.” Another aspect of the importance of adult support was described by Amir appreciating the advocacy of a former principle stating “He was outspoken for the kids.” Teachers were significant supports for each of the participants as
they described the positive messages they received as encouragement. Gabriel expressed that the factor that kept him on track to graduate was “people who cared and would say ‘I want to see you do better.’” Magnus spoke highly of teachers who taught him how to be a leader. Parents were also significant supports to the students particularly when it came to their experiences with discipline. Magnus stated that when he was sent to the principal’s office, he was asked if he wanted to talk to his mom and he expressed that “Yes, I can talk to my mom about it (disciplinary infraction).” He elaborated that he never worried about being able to have support from home. Gabriel and Amir also shared that their mothers expected that they would serve their detentions. All of the participants had a positive adult support both in the classroom setting and out of school whether it was a parent or a coach.

The successful teacher and parent relationships were characterized by supportive words of encouragement, however support was not consistently present when the coding linked adult support specifically with the discipline process. Although parents were considered to be very supportive of their sons, the participants also shared when they received discipline without any assistance in the process. Gabriel characterized his experience with the discipline procedure as “dismissive.” Amir also described a protocol of principals checking security cameras to determine accountability for physical altercations, however in his circumstance, the principal opted to not view the cameras and did not place a phone call home to his mother completing foregoing the protocol for discipline. Gabriel further articulated the concern when students are being disciplined stating “I would sit down and have a real talk or find the root and see how to resolve it.” The learning curve with discipline is intrinsically connected to the adult relationships that
develop during the participants’ high school years. All four participants had a clear understanding of the teachers, principals, and coaches who encourage them and those who fall short in consistent communication or those who fail to follow the fundamental protocols that impact the students’ experiences with discipline.

**Race and Discipline**

Working in a school district where majority of the student population is African-American, the disproportionality in discipline is not an overt problem. On the surface, it would appear that students receive the same severity of consequences, however the participants in this study had definite ideas about race and discipline. The fact that majority of the faculty in this urban district are White was a noticeable dichotomy for the participants. Amir characterized the race issue as a matter of racial profiling. He stated “Certain teachers judge students by their profile- if I wear my pants down-I’m not smart.” Gabriel felt that the race issue is not any different in his school district than in any other school district. Deshawn described his perspective in stating that he accepted his consequences when disciplined, but “when I get ten days suspension and a White boy gets three- that’s just wrong.” Magnus also had a specific response to the difference in discipline for a white high school student and an African American high school student. He expressed that “if anything goes down-like they can resolve something with talking-but if police are called- there is brutality against the Black.”

Although the population does not present itself as a school community that would be affected by the racial disproportionality of African American males suspended at a rate of 3:1 over other races, the participants of this study spoke with conviction about the fact that inconsistencies in discipline practices for white students and African American
students is wrong and they see it carried out in their communities when they speak of brutality. The most vibrant vocabulary in the interviews were elicited when the questions referred to race and the perception of what is considered fair. This category also overlapped to a large extent with the supportive role of adults in the school setting where the participants of this study are clearly students not only of academics but of the people who are meant to be role models for them in education and in life.

**Self-Awareness**

Many of the questions in the interview protocol were meant to allow the participants a broad spectrum from which to respond. Where some of the questions had short, concise answers, there were others that clearly touched upon a meaningful concept which then created an opportunity for the participant to reflect more deeply. In the reflective responses, the participants commented on whether discipline practices had any impact on changing behavior or whether there may be a better way to deal with discipline. The participants also had specific ideas on whether disciplinary consequences have had an impact on their achievement. Deshawn spoke of the fact that he does not think that suspensions change behavior, but they do impact grades. He expressed “Yea getting suspended does affect grades cause you’re not going to class and you’re not getting prepared for what you got to do.” In talking about what made the difference for him to stay on track in school, Deshawn added “Football and after-school event keep you on the right track, because you have to keep your grades up.” The similar sentiment was shared by Magnus who emphasized that suspensions can make it very difficult on academic success. He stated “The suspension is ten days. They always give you ten days.” And he further stated “Suspensions affect grades because I’m not there so you end
up taking a random test and no teachers to help you study.” Magnus also offered insight into the impact of suspensions on self-esteem. His concern for discipline directly connected to attitude stating “If a kid is real good and he gets in trouble because something happens, it can change his whole attitude. It can change from high self-esteem to low self-esteem.”

Given time to reflect on advice for an incoming student, the participants also had ideas that they believe would be beneficial for faculty and for students. Magnus instructed “Don’t mess up the opportunities you got. Join a sport. Also tell them that there are cameras that watch everything you do.” Amir also shared words that speak of positive results when he said “Let students know what they did is wrong, but do not judge them. This is what we can do to fix it.” Gabriel added to the sentiment of giving good advice stating “I would tell them it’s best to stay in your lane- stay focus- all this bad behavior is not worth it.”

The responses of the participants in this study have truly embraced the essence of phenomenological research by revealing genuine emotion and perspective on issues of racial disproportionality within the constructs of the Zero Tolerance Policy, the impact of disciplinary practices on academic achievement, the issue of race even in a school district that is primarily a population of African American students, and ways that can keep students on the right track socially and academically. The field notes that were maintained throughout each interview help to paint the picture of young men who have strong convictions about social justice with raw emotion shared when speaking of the feeling of being “dismissed” or when the thought of police being called would definitively result in brutality against Blacks. Their emotions were also deeply rooted
when acknowledging the family members and teachers who have given them words of encouragement over the years and who have believed in their talents. With the participants giving honest and mature perspectives, the categories of attitude, knowledge of discipline, role of adult support, race, and self-awareness provide the infrastructure to allow broader themes to emerge.

**Emergent Themes**

From the coding and the categorization of the responses of the participants in this study, three major themes have emerged that emphasize the impact of Zero Tolerance Policy on quality of life issues and human capital in young African American high school men. The first theme focuses on the concept of disciplining the person and not the behavior. The second emergent theme is of isolation from a sociological and educational perspective. And the final theme that has emerged is of African American high school males as valued human capital within the community of their school district.

**Theme One: Misappropriated Discipline**

The participants comments that referred to feeling stereotyped sheds light on an important distinction in Zero Tolerance policies. The intention may be to correct a behavior, but each of the participants expressed that they personally did not feel that a consequence changed their behavior. The overriding theme that emerges when students feel that they are being judged is that of misappropriation of the discipline policies. Many of the participant responses alluded to the feeling of “being watched” by security cameras or being led through a disciplinary process without any assistance. The student is receiving a consequence, however the student also feels that they are “marked” once
they must be reprimanded. This misappropriation of “person-centered” discipline versus “behavior-centered” discipline is clearly a concern expressed through the various responses provided in the interview process. This study aimed to understand the students’ perspectives and their view of themselves along with their perceptions of teachers is directly linked to the issues raised through Critical Race Theory and the School to Prison Pipeline. If the perception is that a student becomes “bad” after even one infraction, then the educator has placed the student on the road to negative experiences with discipline. The educator is also on a negative path failing to appreciate cultural differences that offer opportunities for engagement.

**Theme Two: Isolation**

Magnus stated that suspensions are “always ten days out” and this expression points to the underpinnings that Zero Tolerance policies isolate students from their school communities and thus isolate them sociologically from opportunities for engagement. All of the participants spoke of a feeling of being along with trying to make up work when given a suspension. The intent to remove a problem student does not typically mean that the student’s behavior will change. The student returns from a period of what can only be identified as isolation and continues to feel like an outsider. This prevalent theme of a student needing to be removed from the school results in a cycle of building a relationship then tearing it down again. Teachers who may be encouraging a student are also isolated from the student when out of school suspensions are increasing in number of days. There is a clear loss of academics, social interaction, and investment by the student when Zero Tolerance only implements removal and suspensions to maintain order.
Theme Three: Human Capital

I was struck by the expression that African American males feel stereotyped in their own school setting. The combination of Amir stating that if “my pants are down, I’m not smart” and Magnus stating that when a “good kid goes from high self-esteem to low self-esteem” creates a loss of value to the talents and ideas that can come from the student. The participants describe the strict nature of Zero Tolerance when they state that there is “no warning.” This is a significant problem, because there is the loss of seeing the person. The student is measured by the number of incidents that are negative rather than by an overall body of work that demonstrates effort and motivation. The self-perceptions of the participants highlight this negative value rather than the value of human capital. Educators who value engagement and drawing more out of their students will promote the human capital of African American males in their school district. On the other hand, educators who do not value cultural differences or traditions coupled with the use of suspensions to keep a student away will not allow the student’s talents to develop thus not investing in that student’s human capital. Zero Tolerance policies do not have to take away from a student’s human capital, but until the policies focus more on the student than on the status quo of maintaining order, the African American male student may still face stereotyping and an inability to stand out for his strengths.

Summary

This chapter summarizes the data collection and the data analysis of the interviews with four African American male participants. Their responses were transcribed with open-coding initially applied and resulted in the recognition of five main categories were key concepts significant to the students’ success and achievement in the
school setting. Attitude, knowledge of discipline practices, role of adult support, race, and self-awareness all contribute to the effectiveness of Zero Tolerance policies and contribute to the infrastructure that revealed the three main themes indicative of the students’ experiences. Isolation, misappropriation of the discipline, and the student as human capital are significant themes that bridge the literature of Critical Race Theory, School to Prison Pipeline, low self-esteem, and culturally responsible leadership with the voices of African American males who have persevered. The next chapter will discuss the findings, future research recommendations, implications, and conclusions.
CHAPTER V

Introduction

Zero Tolerance discipline policies have become the standard in public school settings to insure safety and stability with discipline. The policies were designed to allow administrators to maintain order and for educators to have a standard by which they could establish learning communities with consistent behavior from students. The unintended problem that came from Zero Tolerance however, it the disproportionate amount of African American males enduring numerous days of suspension and subsequent disengagement. The literature that speaks to the issues born out of Critical Race Theory and the School to Prison Pipeline cannot stand alone as the only explanation for problems with Zero Tolerance policies. This study places the emphasis on listening to the voice of the African American male students who have offered deep insights by sharing their “lived experiences” with discipline and with persevering academically in high school.

This chapter provides an overview of the findings of the study in relation to the theoretical framework and in relations to the responses that encompassed the importance of culturally responsible leadership. Future recommendations to continue the study with a larger population or with parent input are also discussed keeping the focus of Zero Tolerance on changing behaviors and appreciating the person.

Statement of Problem

The problem that this study sought to address was the impact of racially disproportionate discipline practices based in the constructs of Zero Tolerance policies on African American male students from an urban public school district. Communities with
low socio-economic growth are especially at risk when Zero Tolerance policies are implemented due to the divisive and alienating nature of out-of-school suspensions and the lack of commitment to motivate and encourage young African American men who endure numerous experiences with discipline. Although a body of literature exists that explains racial disproportionality in discipline, self-esteem issues, and the importance of culturally responsible leadership in education, the missing component to make sense of the literature is the voice of students who persevered academically and can speak to the need for change in discipline practices.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gain a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of African American high school males who have been impacted by the implementation of Zero Tolerance discipline policies in their urban school district. Through the lens of Critical Race Theory and School to Prison Pipeline, this study endeavored to link the literature of racial disproportionality in discipline practices, self-esteem, and culturally responsible leadership with the voices of African American high school men whose responses encourage the heart to strive for more inclusive options for discipline and initiate the importance of language that promotes quality of life in education.

**Review of Methodology**

The significance of this study was to acquire a more meaningful understanding of the experiences of African American high school males who have endured the impact of Zero Tolerance policies. The need to gain a more rich description from the narratives of
African American students resulted in a phenomenological research design where a standard interview protocol captured the initial issues and questions covering various aspects of school, discipline, and achievement. Interviews were transcribed and reread to the participants for member checking. After each interview was transcribed, open coding of the texts transcriptions was accomplished. The initial coding phase illuminated the basic connection of responses to questions through literal coding. Further analytical coding resulted in five main categories to serve as the infrastructure to maintain a focus and gain deeper meaning of the participants’ narratives. Finally, axial coding was implemented to link the categories from the students’ responses with the primary and secondary research questions. The axial coding resulted in three main themes to emerge that connected the constructs of Critical Race Theory and School to Prison Pipeline with the need to understand the “lived experiences” of African American high school males with the Zero Tolerance policies of discipline.

**Review of Findings**

The primary research question that this study sought to address was:

*Given their experiences, what are the perceptions of African American high school males toward Zero Tolerance discipline policies?*

Sub-questions were also identified and include the following:

(1) *How do the experiences with Zero Tolerance policies resonate with the literature and theories of critical race and school pipeline to prison?* And
What are the internal and external factors that have assisted African American high school males to persevere within the rigid context of Zero Tolerance policies?

This study addressed the major research question of the gaining a deeper understanding of the self-perceptions of African American males with the Zero Tolerance policies in their school district. The participants articulated their perceptions in relation to teachers, administration, peers, and their parents. The study also endeavored to understand the factors, both internal and external, that motivated and supported the students so that they could be successful. The data supports the concept that students relied heavily on extracurricular activities and relationships with faculty to “stay on track” and “stay in line.” Their responses echoed each other as they described the impact of a coach, an administrator, and a parent in providing positive comments and belief in themselves that they could be so much more. Involvement and inclusivity were attributed to maintaining academic standards which was contrasted with the isolation that results in suspensions.

The findings further support the impact of race and the students’ perceptions of race through the lens of Critical Race Theory. Major concepts expressed by the students included stereotyping of African American males and disproportionality of suspensions if a White student received anything different in number of days out of school. It did not go unnoticed that the population of students in the school district is predominantly African American, but the faculty population is predominantly White. Participants did not feel that their school district was any different than any other school district in terms of the relationships between White faculty and African American students. The inherent
difference in cultural awareness rested heavily on faculty that students characterized as judgmental and categorizing students “good” versus “bad.”

The students experience with Zero Tolerance policies were described from a perspective of process and not from knowledge of the meaning behind Zero Tolerance. The descriptive data opened a door of insight into the students’ feelings of being “dismissed” rather than invited into a conversation to change behavior. Participants understood the need for the consequence and the nature of the desired behavior, but the absence of stating that the process was “fair” or “just” led to more meaningful responses with recommendations for changes that could occur in the future with discipline. The students clearly made recommendations that would counteract the potential road a student may take which would align with the School to Prison Pipeline. The students’ “lived” experiences with Zero Tolerance and their willingness to talk about it has led them to desire changes and to want to continue on a strong academic path.

The voice of the students answered the primary research question by connecting their thoughts on discipline with the literature and rhetoric of Critical Race Theory and School to Prison Pipeline. From their responses, three primary themes emerged that represent their thoughts and feelings on Zero Tolerance discipline policies. The themes of isolation, misappropriation of discipline, and human capital encompass their voice of discipline. The process and the subsequent removal from school results in feelings of isolation and additional concerns to close the academic gap. It was clear from their descriptions that discipline through Zero Tolerance punishes a person, but does not address the behavior therefore it is a misappropriation of discipline. The participants did not see any correlation between the consequence and any improvement in behavior.
Finally the theme of human capital proves to be the finding that resonated the most with the voice of the students. African American males have been disciplined at a disproportionate rate and the change that needs to occur is in placing a value on them within their school districts and their communities. Their skills and talents need to be recognized even though there is potential experience with discipline. The positive needs to be emphasized academically, socially, and culturally. The voice of perseverance is the voice of change where the recommendations the students offer focus on the person and not the punishment. Zero Tolerance policies have had a major impact in how schools try to maintain safety, but the policies have also taken the human element out of the process. Through the data stated in this study, the voice of African American males needs to be heard and their thoughts on improving the process will help to enact change in process and in the language of discipline in education.

Reflections and Implications

The inspiration for me to want to gain a more rich understanding of the “lived experiences” with African American males with the Zero Tolerance policy came from my own personal experiences and observations of students receiving numerous days of suspensions for behavior issues in a large public school district. Even though the student population of the school district was primarily African American, the potential was evident that African American males would be suspended at a higher frequency and would therefore spend many days away from the classroom, away from the curriculum, and more importantly away from teachers whose relationships with students are integral to their social and academic success. Listening to the students’ perceptions on Zero Tolerance led to a greater understanding of their concerns regarding fair discipline.
systems, the influence of positive teachers and coaches who helped them stay on the right track to graduation, and the need for the language and severity spectrum of Zero Tolerance policies to be more user-friendly. When students cannot explain their school district’s discipline policy, yet they are expected to adhere to the rules, there is an obvious disconnect between the district leadership and the students’ investment in following a safe learning environment. This study hopes to bridge the gap in the literature that can help explain Zero Tolerance, but also the study can bridge the communication gap between students and faculty which is a relationship that frequently is off-balance due to the dichotomy of a primarily white faculty with a primarily African American student population.

**Leadership Implications**

The findings of this study have implications for advancing disciplinary improvements at key administrative levels in a school district. The overreaching arc of discipline mandated by Zero Tolerance policies has had a profound impact on the students, parents, and the teaching staff. Every out-of-school suspension results in a student struggling to complete assignments, a teacher creatively trying to bridge the gap in instruction, and a parent dealing with the ramifications of the social-emotional isolation of their child. The leadership of a school district needs to consider the immediate needs of the high school student facing the challenges of suspension, but more importantly, based on the results of this study, the leadership needs to consider the cultural implications and long-term effects on the self-esteem of African American males facing school suspensions at a disproportionate rate.
Culturally responsible leadership focuses on an inclusive philosophy where differences in race can lead to a collaborative process with administration, teachers, and parents collectively supporting methods of discipline that focus on accountability and not isolation. Administration sets the standard and communicates the goals and mission of the district to the community. Changing the face of discipline into an engaging, holistic process forces school districts to search for common ground, understand cultural issues, and close the disproportionality gap that exists with African American males not only for their high school years, but also for their contributions to their community after graduation. This study highlights the perception of African American males who view current Zero Tolerance standards ineffective in their attempt to change behaviors while continuing to perpetuate the stereotyping and racial profiling of African American males. District leadership has a moral and ethical imperative to hear the voices of these students and initiate a new dialogue that places the emphasis on intellectual, emotional, and social growth. Re-imagining discipline at the superintendent level down through the building principal level can lead to alternative policies that promote the value of every student and raise the awareness of all staff minimizing bias and increasing cultural sensitivity. The intent of Zero Tolerance to keep schools safe does not address the whole student whose talents and strengths should be recognized before his name is considered synonymous with discipline. The administrative leadership of school districts can narrow the achievement gap and continue to build the self-esteem of African American males if there is a motivation to look beyond the stringent guidelines of Zero Tolerance and change the rhetoric to enable all students to reach their full potential.
Policymaker and Stakeholder Implications

With a school district administration that is willing to pursue alternative discipline practices that offer a holistic approach to student growth and development, the policymakers and stakeholders should build an infrastructure of inclusion and engagement for all students, families, and community members. The themes from this study of isolation, misappropriation of discipline, and human capital offer implications that resonate with the need for a personal invitation that communicates and connects with parents and the community in culturally responsible, inclusive policies. If the goal of administrators is to educate each student to their full potential, then the educational and discipline policies of a school district should mirror the philosophy that all students should be engaged in purpose-driven discipline and engaged learning. Policymakers, seeing the impact of Zero Tolerance in our school districts, should seek the opportunity to provide policies for students, staff, and families that place a priority on cultural awareness, communication, engagement, and discipline that promotes strengths instead of weaknesses. Cultural awareness should be a part of professional development for staff and modeled by stakeholders promoting the policies of engagement and inclusion. The physical model of alternative discipline that empowers and engagement that fosters relationships should be paired with consistent communication of an ongoing vision for families, students, and community members to feel that all students in the district are “our children” and all policies enrich the holistic development of all students.

Recommendations for Future Research

The initial design of this research study involved an increased number of student participants. Because I was only able to secure four participants, I would strongly
recommend that another study would expand the number of students who can be interviewed and offer insight into the impact of Zero Tolerance policies. With an increased number of students, the coding could result in even more categories that would help manage and focus the significant factors that can keep a student on track. An increased number of student participants would also lend to the discussion that could benefit a primarily white faculty regarding the perceptions of their students across the curriculum.

Another important recommendation for further research would be to involve the parents, namely mothers, in an extension of this study. Each participant of this study spoke very highly of the importance of their mother in enduring disciplinary consequences. Because the mothers were also asked to sign a parent informed consent form, they asked many important questions that would help their son share his experiences with Zero Tolerance policies. As mothers they have another lens that would be most beneficial to gain a deeper meaning of their sons’ “lived experiences” with discipline in their public school district.

**Summary**

I was moved by the story of one student who never made it through high school due to disciplinary infractions to pursue an in-depth study with African American males and their perceptions with the Zero Tolerance discipline policies. I see students suspended every day with subsequent struggles to transition back to a classroom setting and to manage his curriculum. The purpose of this study was to understand the impact of Zero Tolerance policies through the lens of Critical Race Theory and School Pipeline to Prison. Connecting the participants’ voices with the literature provides a deeper
understanding of the “lived experiences” of African American males with the Zero Tolerance policies and provides a catalyst for change. The hope is that the voices of the students will continue into discussions of alternate methods for behavior management and will help to promote the strengths and talents of African American males in their school districts so that they are truly valued for the leaders that they view themselves to be. Educators can promote more culturally engaging learning environments if they listen to the voices of the students whose “lived experiences” speak for a generation that has shown perseverance and eagerly anticipates being part of the change process.
References


Reynolds, R. (2010). "They think you're lazy," and other messages Black parents send their Black sons: An exploration of critical race theory in the examination of
educational outcomes for Black males. *Journal of African American Males in Education, 1*(2), 144-163.


APPENDIX A

INFORMED CONSENT FORM
Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Mary McDermott and I am the Special Education Coordinator for the Elementary Schools and Middle School for the Maple Heights City School District. Currently I am beginning to conduct research towards the completion of a doctoral degree at Ashland University. My research will be based on the high school students’ self-perception of the Zero Tolerance discipline policy. I believe it is important to understand the students’ perspective on discipline and consequences based on their years in the Maple Heights schools.

I will be conducting interviews with students to learn about their feelings, reflections, and concerns with discipline as they approach graduation from high school. Interviews will consist of 20 questions that address the students’ comprehension of the discipline policies in Maple Heights School District, experience with consequences as a result of the Zero Tolerance policy, and factors that made a difference in keeping them on track with behaviors and academics.

As the responses are collected, I will not be using any personal information or the name of the student participant. The interview process does not present any risk to the student and the data will only be shared between myself and my dissertation chair, Dr. James Olive.

I would like very much if your student was able to participate in this research study to better understand the students’ experiences with discipline. Participation is voluntary and he/she may withdraw at any time without consequence.

I would appreciate your support in this study that can give a voice to the students of Maple Heights. Thank you so much for your assistance.

Mary T. McDermott
Researcher/Special Education Coordinator Studies
(216) 438-6020 ext. 6308

Dr. James Olive
Professor/Dept. of Leadership Studies
Ashland University
(419) 207-6643
I understand and I am in agreement with my child’s participation in a research study that will address the Zero Tolerance policy in Maple Heights School District. I understand the purpose of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the students’ perspective on discipline policies.

- My child’s participation is voluntary and may be discontinued at any time.
- All responses for the interview questions will be confidential and not affect the child’s record in any way.
- All identifiable information will be destroyed when the study is completed.
- No personal information or student name will be used in the study.

_____________________________               _______________________________
Student                                                  Date

_____________________________              ________________________________
Parent        Date
APPENDIX B
PARENT CONSENT FORM
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

(FOR PARENT CONSIDERATION)

The Voice of Perseverance: Self-perceptions of African American High School Males with the Zero Tolerance Policy

PURPOSE & BACKGROUND

Mary McDermott, Special Education Coordinator for Maple Heights City Schools and a doctoral research student, is conducting a study to understand student perceptions with the Zero Tolerance Policy. You are being asked to participate, because you are a high school student who has experienced discipline consequences according to the Zero Tolerance Policy in Maple Heights School District. I am trying to gain a better understanding of the students’ perspective with Zero Tolerance and an understanding of the factors that affect your ability to stay on track to graduate from high school.

PROCEDURES

If you agree to participate in the study, the following events will occur:

- You will be interviewed by Mary McDermott for approximately 1 hour and a half.
- You will be asked to review your responses with the researcher to insure accuracy of the responses.
- Interviews will be audiotaped and will last for approximately 1 hour and a half.

RISKS

There are no risks associated with this study, however you are asked to recall and reflect upon events and experiences that may have resulted in negative feelings associated with them.

Your name and personal information will not be shared with anyone. Names will be changed to protect your identity.

All records and responses will be kept in a sealed cabinet with password protected computer back-up files.

Files will be destroyed once the 36 month program is required.
Participants should not share any information about the study or share any questions so as to preserve the integrity of the study.

BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefits for participation in this study, however the ability to gain insight from a student’s perspective is valuable in understanding discipline procedures.

COSTS & PAYMENT

There are no costs associated with the participation in this study. There is also no payment associated with this study.

QUESTIONS

You will have the opportunity to discuss with Mrs. Mary McDermott any questions or comments about the study. At any point during the study, questions can be posed and answered directly to the researcher. Additional comments and questions can be directed to Dr. James Olive.

If you do not want to talk to the researcher, you may contact the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at Ashland University which protects volunteer participants in research studies. You may reach the HSRB from 8:00am to 5:00pm Monday thru Friday at (419) 207-6198.

CONSENT

You will be provided with a copy of the consent form to keep for your records.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY AND YOU ARE FREE TO DECLINE AND/OR WITHDRAW YOUR PARTICIPATION AT ANY TIME DURING THE STUDY.

Your desire to participate or not to participate in the study will have no influence on your status as a student or potential employee of Maple Heights School District.

IF YOU ARE IN AGREEMENT, PLEASE SIGN BELOW:

______________________________________             __________________________
Participant                                                                           Date
□ I have read the consent form with my child and agree with his/her participation.
APPENDIX C

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

The Voice of Perseverance: Self-perceptions of African American High School Males with the
Zero Tolerance Policy

PURPOSE & BACKGROUND

Mary McDermott, Special Education Coordinator for Maple Heights City Schools and a doctoral research student, is conducting a study to understand student perceptions with the Zero Tolerance Policy. You are being asked to participate, because you are a high school student who has experienced discipline consequences according to the Zero Tolerance Policy in Maple Heights School District. I am trying to gain a better understanding of the students’ perspective with Zero Tolerance and an understanding of the factors that affect your ability to stay on track to graduate from high school.

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Your name and personal information will not be shared with anyone. Names will be changed to protect your identity.

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Participants should not share any information about the study or share any questions so as to preserve the integrity of the study.
BENEFITS

There will be no direct benefits for participation in this study, however the ability to gain insight from a student’s perspective is valuable in understanding discipline procedures.

COSTS & PAYMENT

There are no costs associated with the participation in this study. There is also no payment associated with this study.

QUESTIONS

You will have the opportunity to discuss with Mrs. Mary McDermott any questions or comments about the study. At any point during the study, questions can be posed and answered directly to the researcher. Additional comments and questions can be directed to Dr. James Olive.

If you do not want to talk to the researcher, you may contact the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at Ashland University which protects volunteer participants in research studies. You may reach the HSRB from 8:00am to 5:00pm Monday thru Friday at (419) 207-6198.

CONSENT

You will be provided with a copy of the consent form to keep for your records.

PARTICIPATION IS VOLUNTARY AND YOU ARE FREE TO DECLINE AND/OR WITHDRAW YOUR PARTICIPATION AT ANY TIME DURING THE STUDY.

Your desire to participate or not to participate in the study will have no influence on your status as a student or potential employee of Maple Heights School District.

IF YOU ARE IN AGREEMENT, PLEASE SIGN BELOW:

______________________________________             __________________________
Participant                                                                           Date
APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Middle School – High School Experience

1. How can you describe your overall experience as a student in Maple Heights School District?

2. Are there any particular events that stand out in your middle school or high school years that were positive? Are there any events that were considered negative?

3. Are there any people, i.e. teachers, coaches, etc. that you view as helpful in your middle school and high school years? What did you learn from them?

4. How would you describe the transition from middle school to high school academically and socially?

5. What are issues that you viewed as difficult with the transition to high school? Were those issues resolved, if so, how were they resolved?

6. Can you explain the discipline policy/student handbook policy for your school? Do you think it is a fair set of rules?

7. Can you describe what you understand about Zero Tolerance policy?

8. Do you understand the range of consequences for the breaking of school rules? What is the least of the punishments? What is the most severe of consequences?

9. When did you first encounter a disciplinary infraction/consequence in school?

10. Did you understand why you were given the consequence? Did you feel that you were part of the process?

11. Did anyone provide you with assistance during the discipline process? Did you ask for any assistance to understand the procedures that were followed?
12. Can you describe the role of your parent/guardian in the discipline process? Can you talk to your parent about discipline? Can you talk to a teacher/principal?

13. Do you think that the consequences you have received fit the incident? If so how do you perceive that the consequence was appropriate? If not why did the consequence not fit?

14. Do you think that race plays any part in the way students are disciplined in Maple Heights? Do you think gender plays any part in the way students are disciplined?

15. Do you think Zero Tolerance discipline has made an impact on the safety of schools in Maple Heights School District? If so, how? If not, why not?

16. Did suspensions help you to change your behaviors? How did you feel when you were at home during your suspension? Do suspensions affect your academic achievement?

17. Do suspensions impact a student’s self-esteem? What could be done to keep a student’s self-esteem high during disciplinary consequences?

18. If you could be the person in charge of discipline, what would you do differently in Maple Heights High School? In Middle School?

19. How have you been able to maintain your track towards graduation when you were suspended more than once in school? What factors kept you on the right track?

20. What piece of advice would you give an incoming high school freshman about discipline?