CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND REDUCING DISCIPLINE REFERRALS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: AN ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY

by

HEATHER LEE MANERING YOUNG

(Under the Direction of April Peters-Hawkins)

ABSTRACT

This study examined a middle school with a disparity in discipline referrals for male students of color and the effect of staff development aimed at increasing cultural competency. Students with disciplinary referrals were removed from the instructional setting and faced lost instructional time. Teachers often initiated discipline referrals resulting in suspension. By providing teachers cultural competency skills, the goal was to reduce referrals and suspensions for all students, but Black males in particular.

There is a dearth of literature about how staff development focused on cultural competence can impact the overall outcomes for male students of color who are part of a discipline disparity. Nationally, the need for knowing how to address what is referred to as the “school-to-prison pipeline” demands a need for urgent information to help school leaders improve the lot for male students of color (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005).

This study endeavored to determine if staff development could provide a pathway for change in teacher mindsets and practices based on cultural competency. Using the principles of action research, evidence-based staff development, and cultural competency, this study pursued solutions to the dynamic of reducing the removal of students from
class, especially male student of color. The research questions guiding this study were:

What is learned by an action research team about how to identify interventions and to evaluate them regarding student disciplinary referrals and teacher staff development,

How can teachers’ examination of and reflecting on disciplinary data change their disciplinary practices? And How does staff development that teaches skills of cultural proficiency impact teachers’ practices in developing classroom culture and disciplinary practices?

This study used data from the school informational database, interviews, and documents such as researcher notes, which were reviewed and analyzed to identify needs or trends to inform interventions. The results of the study show a reduction in the total number of referrals, but the total days of suspension increased. The action research team noted additional awareness of race and culture when working with teachers and students. Teachers showed increased awareness of race as a notable identifier when determining best-case scenarios for students with disciplinary issues.

Key Words: Staff development, student discipline, action research, cultural competency
CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND REDUCING DISCIPLINE REFERRALS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: AN ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY

by

HEATHER LEE MANERING YOUNG

B. S Ed., The University of Georgia, 1998
M. Ed., The University of Georgia, 2002

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2016
CULTURAL COMPETENCE AND REDUCING DISCIPLINE REFERRALS IN MIDDLE SCHOOL: AN ACTION RESEARCH CASE STUDY

by

HEATHER LEE MANERING YOUNG

Major Professor: April Peters-Hawkins
Committee: Karen E. Watkins
Karen C. Bryant
Walker J. Parrish

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dena of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2016
DEDICATION

To my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ who has sustained me all of my days. All honor and glory are yours now and forever.

To Travis who has seen me through this journey. Your love and encouragement have helped me to achieve my dreams.

To Ethan and Eleanor who are a constant reminder that the most important work I do is as their mother. I love you.

To my parents, Jack and Janet Manering, who taught me that my life was whatever I wanted to make of it. The hard work and “can do” attitude you instilled in me have served me well. While they are gone from this world, I know that they are looking down and are proud of this accomplishment.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to extend words of appreciation to the members of my doctoral advisory committee: April Peters-Hawkins, my major professor, and members Karen E. Watkins and Karen C. Bryant. Thank you for investing your time and expertise to this study. I would also like to thank the Education Administration and Policy professors who also provided a learning environment that helped shape me into a scholarly practitioner.

I would like to add a special note of appreciation and gratitude to Dr. Melissa R. Young whom I met as a teacher candidate and who changed my life. She has seen me both personally and professionally through all of my successes and challenges. She is a role model of a dedicated scholar, teacher, wife, mother, and Christian. It is she who set the bar so high for me and then helped me to see it through. I will be forever grateful for her patience and guidance through this process.

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues at my local school that supported this study. Further, special recognition goes to the members of the first Ed.D in Educational Administration and Policy Cohort at UGA. I learned so much from each of your insights. A special thank you goes out to my small “group me” peers who cheered me along the way and were there to discuss all matters related to my work.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF TABLES</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIST OF FIGURES</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 ISSUE IDENTIFICATION, PURPOSE, AND QUESTIONS</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Statement of the Problem</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discipline and Data</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suspension as a Faulty Means of Changing Behaviors</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of Instruction</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types of Schools</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Culture Versus Student Culture</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBIS/ as a Vehicle of Equity and Training</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Competency</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Evidence-Based Staff Development ................................................................. 20
Gaps and Trends ............................................................................................ 22

3 METHODOLOGY ............................................................................................ 25
Introduction ...................................................................................................... 25
Choice of Methodology ..................................................................................... 25
Context .............................................................................................................. 27
Subjectivity Statement ...................................................................................... 29
Participation ...................................................................................................... 30
Interventions .................................................................................................... 32
Staff Development Sessions ............................................................................ 32
Interviews .......................................................................................................... 37
Student Interviews ............................................................................................ 38
Teacher Interviews ........................................................................................... 40
MMART Interviews .......................................................................................... 42
Rigor Measures ................................................................................................. 44
Data Collection and Analysis .......................................................................... 47

4 CASE STUDY REPORT .................................................................................... 55
Introduction ...................................................................................................... 55
Situating the Study: McCartney Middle School and Sussex Public Schools ...... 57
Project Origins ................................................................................................. 58
Phase 1: Constructing ....................................................................................... 59
Phase 2: Planning Action ................................................................................... 93
Phase 3: Taking Action ..................................................................................... 104
Phase 4: Evaluating Action

Conclusion

FINDINGS

Individual Learning

Group Learning

Organizational Learning and Policy Level Learning

Data Did Not Tell the Whole Story

Incentives Powerless as a Tool for Change

Teacher Ownership Versus Student Accountability

Individualized Needs of Teachers Based on Classroom Circumstances

Participation and Mindfulness

Reflections on Self and One’s Practice

Limitations

Conclusion

ANALYSIS, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Purpose of the Study

Research Questions

Study Summary

Action Research for Individual, Group, and Organizational Learning

Study Conclusions

Implications for Theory

Implications for Practice and Policy

Recommendations
## LIST OF TABLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Table 1:</td>
<td>“McCartney Middle School Action Research Team Members (MMART)”</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 2:</td>
<td>“Teacher Interview Criteria”</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 3:</td>
<td>“Timeline of MMART Activities”</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 4:</td>
<td>“August 2015 Discipline Data”</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 5:</td>
<td>“September Disciplinary Data”</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 6:</td>
<td>“October Discipline Data”</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 7:</td>
<td>“Finding Related To The Research Questions”</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table 8:</td>
<td>“Comparison of the 2014-15 and the 2015-16 8th Grade Discipline Incidents”</td>
<td>145</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Page #</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 1</td>
<td>“Staff Development Session 2 Summarizing Activity”</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 2</td>
<td>“Student Interview Probes”</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 3</td>
<td>“Teacher Interview Probes”</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 4</td>
<td>“Action Research Team Interviews – Pre-Intervention”</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 5</td>
<td>“MMART Exit Survey Questions”</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 6</td>
<td>“The Action Research Process for the McCartney Middle School Action Research Team Work”</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 7</td>
<td>“Referrals for 8th Grade Students by Race and Ethnicity for 2014-15”</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 8</td>
<td>“Referrals for 8th Grade Students by Gender”</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 9</td>
<td>“Students with referrals by Ethnicity/Gender”</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 10</td>
<td>“School Population by Ethnicity/Race”</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 11</td>
<td>“MMS Gifted Students by Ethnicity and Race”</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 12</td>
<td>“MMART Team Members, Positions, and Demographics”</td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 13</td>
<td>“Reflection Scenario from January's Staff Development Session”</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 14</td>
<td>“Teacher Reflection Results from Staff Development Session 2”</td>
<td>137</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Figure 15</td>
<td>“Teacher Responses about Forming Student Relationships”</td>
<td>138</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 1

ISSUE IDENTIFICATION, PURPOSE, AND QUESTIONS

Introduction

Not so long ago, it was a politically correct assertion to talk about not seeing “color” in terms of race and identity. Not seeing color was a call to equality. It meant you did not see people’s race and therefore you would not judge them by it. It was a battle cry in the post-civil rights, post *Brown v. Board* world; yet we now know that we have a problem with race in America and we can point to one ideal as embodying the oversimplification of this sophisticated and important identifying characteristic – colorblindness. To be colorblind is to be ignorant that race has value in society, that there is privilege associated with being White, and that there is a lack of equity in many situations when someone is of color (Scruggs, 2009). Schools mirror the societies that they serve and McCartney Middle School¹ is no different (Singleton, 2014).

Sociologists recognize and affirm that while race is commonly used as a physical identifier in terms of a visual description, as in hazel eyes or blond hair, it has value unlike those other identifiers. Race matters. Vincent and Tobin (2010) note:

> Despite schools’ best efforts to practice fair and equitable discipline, evidence exists that students from non-White backgrounds, in particular African American students, are excluded from school at a disproportionate rate and for less severe behavioral violations compared to their White peers (p. 1).

¹ The name of the school has been changed.
Race is a lens by which a person sees himself or herself in the world, how people perceive them, and the assumptions that lie within. Sociologists define race as a social construct that is complicated, value-laden, and benefit inclusive (McIntosh, 1989).

There is a larger discussion happening nationally about the issues of race as it pertains to the police (Capehart, 2015). We have seen on the news a racially motivated massacre at a church in South Carolina (Horowitz, Corasaniti, & Southall, 2015) and if you asked teachers at McCartney Middle (MMS) in the schoolyard or the faculty meeting about race, you would hear that race is not an issue; in fact they have no idea what you are talking about. How can it be that in 2016 where more than half of the students at MMS identify as Black, we have teachers who will not say the word Black when talking about a student for fear of being offensive (Marshall & Oliva, 2006)?

**Statement of the Problem**

The issue at hand is that students at MMS were missing exceptional amounts of instructional time for disciplinary reasons. These students were then heading down a detrimental path, which had devastating consequences--most notably not graduating on time from high school, or not graduating at all. In working with teachers at MMS since Summer 2014, it was clear that the conversation to help push the work of cultural competency in motion had not been had. These critical conversations are essential tools to the march towards a more equitable treatment of all students according to scholars such as Singleton (2014), Ladson-Billings & Tate IV (1995), Noguera (2003), and Skiba and Sprague (2008).

In preparing to begin this study, I had frequent conversations with people about my studies and my plans. I had a brief and informal meeting with the eighth grade teachers in the early part of 2015, letting them know what I was going to be studying once it was approved
through the IRB. While no one voiced concerns in that meeting, it was mentioned to me later that many of the teachers were “worried” because I had revealed that the issue would require discussing race and working towards improving our student discipline outcomes. Additionally, I am an evaluator for many of the teachers in eighth grade and they felt pressure to participate and yet were fearful that their evaluation would be tied to the study. This was not the case and it was my goal to ensure that they would not feel that the two were at all connected.

What was curious was that while they were concerned, they did not have a lot of facts to back up their worry. None of the teachers at MMS knew how many referrals they had written in the last school year. They did not know how many students of each particular demographic group they taught, and out of those groups how many of them received referrals. None of the teachers calculated the total number of conferences they held, parent phone calls they made, or signatures they gave (minor discipline consequences), and yet they were uneasy. This signaled to me that while race to me was a topic of my vernacular, it was not a topic with which everyone was comfortable examining. My primary hope was that the teachers’ concerns were of the unknown and the fear of change, which is stressful for better or worse. Facts and tools would be solace to those that were looking to be reflective and aware of the current situation and what could be done to make improvements (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014).

This study is positioned at the intersection of action research, evidence-based staff development, and cultural competency. Through the development of staff development sessions, and based on the work of the action research team and the principles of cultural competency, each teacher may gain awareness of cultural competency and how to examine one’s own practice to improve equity. The action research team worked to examine the issue of discipline disparities at both the macro level (the eighth grade) and the micro level (individual teachers and
students) to increase the quality outcomes for students who had discipline issues, especially male students of color.

**Research Questions**

This study addresses how to develop teachers to manage their classrooms with additional cultural competence and sensitivity learned in staff development and to reduce the number of discipline referrals by cultivating a better understanding of teacher-student relationships. Referrals that result in excluding students from the instructional setting perpetuate a system by which many students once in trouble remain in trouble (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Gregory, Skiba, and Noguera (2010) write, “Overall little is known about the types of interventions that reduce the racial discipline gap” (p. 65). There is minimal agreement about whether the disparity is racially driven at all.

Primarily those that are at the discrete and intimate levels of this work, the teachers, were not aware of their discipline data or school-wide data and how they measured against their teammates and/or the school at large. The trend of data awareness seemed to only have extended to the realm of assessment, academics, and standards at MMS. Moreover, no one seemed to be clamoring for this information. My suspicion was that we knew little about how to coach teachers to best manage students and perhaps that is why we did not share their data with them readily. Additionally was the concern that once data is made available to teachers it is essentially public and the community may not be prepared to have all of the facts about their school which was high ranking and well regarded. Knowing the facts, based on the data, would help to shed light on areas where there could be shoring up of skills to help improve the issue of missing instruction for students with discipline referrals. Likewise, investigating teacher practices and beliefs could potentially shift the mindset from removal of students for the good of
the majority to seeing each individual student, particularly those that were challenging, as an equal responsibility of the school to educate. Research states that school suspensions originate at the classroom level (Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Teachers might reflect on their own relationships and start to question the general policies of the larger system where there was a formulaic approach to discipline and those with the longest and most significant issues received the least amount of intervention if the only interventions were exclusionary consequences.

This study investigated the role of teacher staff development in reducing the incidence of student discipline referrals for eighth grade students at MMS. In particular, the staff development sessions addressed skills of cultural competency, data evaluation, and reflection of practice.

This study investigated the following research questions:

1. What is learned by an action research team about how to identify interventions and to evaluate them regarding student disciplinary referrals and teacher staff development?

2. How can teachers’ examination of and reflecting on disciplinary data change their disciplinary practices?

3. How does staff development that teaches skills of cultural proficiency impact teachers’ practices in developing classroom culture and disciplinary practices?

**Significance**

There is not much understood about the effects of school-based staff development as interventions to decrease the number of student discipline referrals in middle school. The impact of reducing the number of referrals beyond an improved climate of student-teacher relationships is that students had more access to direct instruction on a consistent basis by avoiding those consequences, which exclude them from impactful learning. Students who are excluded get
behind in their learning and then stay behind because they often become frustrated and then behave poorly to express their frustration. The cycle is then set in motion. Moreover, cultural competence is not a requisite element of pre-service teaching in most universities, but with the ever growing public outcry to ensure that our male citizens of color, as well as other vulnerable groups such as English Language Learners and students with disabilities, are getting equitable treatment both in and out of school, we must investigate ways to provide teachers the tools that they need, including emphasis on reflective practice, to inch closer to the ideals of equity for all students (Sleeter, 2001).

In the remaining chapters of this action research study, Chapter 2 presents a literature review, which focuses on discipline and data, suspension as a faulty means of changing behavior, loss of instruction, the classroom teacher, teacher culture versus student culture, and evidence-based staff development. Chapter 3 provides a discussion of the methods used in this multiple-case research project, including methods of data collection and data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the story of the case. Chapter 5 presents findings related to each research question, and Chapter 6 presents the final summary, conclusions, and implications.

**Definition of Terms**

The primary concepts explored are defined for the context of this study as follows:

- **Cultural Competency**: Cultural competence is a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency or among professionals and enable that system, agency or those professions to work effectively in cross-cultural situations.

- **Cultural Proficiency**: There is no agreed upon definition for cultural proficiency, in fact many argue that proficiency in this area is not achievable, but competence
is. For the purposes of this study, the term proficiency means that an individual or program is so congruent in its behaviors that it is pervasive among all individuals and programs in a system.

- **Evidence-Based Staff Development**: staff development that is designed to relate directly to the work of the teachers and is connected to student achievement.

- **Exclusionary Discipline**: discipline that removes a student from his or her instructional setting. Examples of this are out of school suspension (OSS) and in-school suspension (ISS).

- **Staff Development**: staff development refers to the process whereby employees of an organization enhance their knowledge and skills in directions that are advantageous to their role in the organization. For the purpose of this study, the sessions of staff development must be job-embedded and specific as well as personalized, as is the case with team meetings and individual interviews. The terms professional development and staff development are used interchangeably.
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The Project for Civil Rights introduced a major report with the frank question, “Does anybody know how many students were suspended from school in their child’s district? Should we care?” (Losen & Gillespie, 2012, p. 6) It is hard to address a problem that is unknown or unseen. Principals now use data to improve their schools academically and to evaluate where they are currently when compared to other schools. Conventionally teachers are not presented with their disciplinary data. Fenning and Rose (2007) note that documenting discipline issues is an important activity to ensure that those that are disenfranchised are protected (p. 539). Losen and Gillespie (2012) outline a set of advocacy guidelines for different groups of stakeholders. One group, the educators, is encouraged to use disaggregated discipline data to guide and evaluate reform efforts and to seek changes to school policies and practices where suspension rates are high (p. 9). Bizarrely, in a day and age when data is more readily available than ever before, many educators do not know their school’s disciplinary data or their own classroom disciplinary data. Parents know even less.

The disproportionate relationship of discipline referrals between student groups at McCartney Middle School (MMS) suggests that there is a phenomenon within the school that is driving the practice that Black male students are receiving most of the consequences and those consequences are exclusionary. This phenomenon is one that is noted repeatedly in the empirical literature on this topic of equality in discipline practices to the degree that it is universally
accepted as fact that male students of color are not getting a fair shake at school when it comes to discipline. What scholars do not agree upon are the reasons for this issue, the degree that it is the result of bias and prejudice, the manner in which it is measured, and what can be done to change the dynamic. There is concern about how much bias is actually represented with the gap in Black and White disciplinary numbers. “Disproportionate suspension cannot be attributed to school size, urbanicity, or student poverty” (Gregory, Cornell, & Fan, 2011, p. 26). Skiba et al. (2002) are cautious to note that there are no studies that can empirically connect the disparity as discrimination (p. 320).

**Discipline and Data**

Data systems exist, but what and how they measure different instances of discipline referrals is not uniform. “…Greater awareness will help produce more effective approaches…without resorting to frequent out-of-school suspensions” (Losen & Martinez, 2013). There is the suggestion that the phenomena may be the exaggeration of the statistics because of the method of reporting. Additionally, deciding what constitutes a disparity is another question of mathematics and there is little to no agreement about whether 10% is officially a disparity or if it depends on the school itself. This complicates the matter when academics look to verify each other’s information and to replicate what they see in different contexts (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2002).

Two studies, Brown (2007) and Fenning and Rose (2007), note that students who are often suspended or who are attending alternative schools because of habitual discipline issues are often the same students who have poor attendance and academic records. Additionally, those same students who have struggled tend to be male and non-White. Often they are poor. There is the suggestion of a race-based or class-based disparity using exclusionary discipline practices.
Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports or PBIS is based on the premises of Applied Behavior Analysis and it endeavors to have guidelines and expectations for students, which are consistent and achievable, coupled with a positive recognition system. The training of the teachers and the staff is a vital component to the work of PBIS. A study by Vincent and Tobin (2010) strove to evaluate if PBIS is a method that can decrease ethnic disparities in exclusionary discipline consequences. Their study examined disciplinary data collected during the 2004–2005 academic year in a school district with 88 schools and found that minority students were significantly more likely to be excluded from school than White students regardless of the implementation of the PBIS system (Vincent & Tobin, 2010).

The notion that students with disciplinary issues do not care about their schooling and that they are ‘problems’ instead of ‘learners’ shifts the perspective of the teachers and principals involved to being less therapeutic and more punitive. Furthermore, students who are in alternative programs are off the radar for NCLB-style accountability systems, which does a great disservice to those for whom education has the most likelihood of changing their life’s trajectory, but who are not receiving the support that they desperately need (Brown, 2007; Fenning & Rose, 2007). Not having an accurate picture of all learners helps to perpetuate the idea that there is less of a problem than there may actually be.

Since the early 1970’s, suspensions have at least doubled and the gap for students of color receiving suspensions from school has substantially increased for Black students in particular:

Besides the obvious loss of time in the classroom, suspensions matter because they are among the leading indicators of whether a child will drop out of school, and because out of school suspension increases a child’s risk for future incarcerations (Losen & Gillespie,
Nationally, the data for discipline issues paints a stark picture that is both sobering and scary. If the data holds true to the trend, the United States will continue to spend more on incarceration than education per capita (Fella & Gallipoli, 2014). Furthermore, schools are feeding the behaviors and mindsets that are so prevalent in the vulnerable individuals who live in poverty and behind bars (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

**Suspension as a Faulty Means of Changing Behaviors**

With the modern movement in schools being to use only those strategies that are research-based to be effective, suspension as a means of improving overall outcomes falls short (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) noted that past suspension is the best indicator of future suspensions. Inclusively the literature agrees that exclusionary practices such as suspension and expulsion are not effective ways of improving student discipline: “harsh responses do more harm than good” (Losen & Martinez, 2013, p. 2).

According to the American Psychological Association:

> There is no evidence that increasing suspensions and expulsions improves student behavior or guarantees school safety. In fact, schools that employ more suspensions and expulsions have poorer ratings of school climate and school safety, higher rates of racial disparity in discipline, and lower scores on academic achievement tests. (Skiba, 2014, p. 1)

Schools that rely heavily on exclusion from the classroom see a disproportionate effect in working to close the achievement gap, which impacts students of color (Gregory et al., 2010). Students who miss class and instructional time continue in a cycle of academic failure, disengagement, and escalating rule breaking. There are studies, including Rossow and Parkinson
(1999), that note that students who are suspended see the time away as a break or holiday, but many studies including Brown (2007) noted that most students feel punished when they are excluded. Students who view themselves on the way out of school see consequences as immaterial and useless (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Schools are feeding the cycle by taking those that are the most vulnerable to not complete their education and pushing them in that direction either by accident or on purpose. The final outcomes are not positive for the individuals or society at large.

**Loss of Instruction**

The loss of instruction is not temporary or minor. One study compared the reading levels of two groups based on one factor, a single suspension from school. Every student in the first group had been suspended only one time. No students in the second group had been suspended at all. Students who had received one suspension were reading three grade levels behind their non-suspended peers at the end of the year, but they were five years behind two years later. School suspension has been a moderate to strong predictor of dropout and not graduating on time (Gregory et al., 2010). Low achievement is highly correlated with aggressive behavior and disciplinary referrals. Faced with repeated academic struggles, underperforming students may become frustrated, disaffected, and have lower self-confidence, all of which contribute to a higher rate of school disruption (Gregory et al., 2010; Noguera, 2003).

Several studies focused exclusively on middle school because of the significance of the middle school experience as a strong indicator in informing a student’s future success or failure. Gregory et al. (2010) focused on middle school students exclusively to address what they deemed was a lack of awareness for educators and policymakers. The study that was conducted by Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, and Legters (2003), and was cited in Gregory et al.
(2010), showed that middle school students who were incarcerated in ninth grade inevitably had struggled profoundly in middle school, and were behind in reading levels. Additionally, most were according to the study “minority” students. Middle school is for many students the end of childhood and the start towards adulthood. In elementary school, we teach students how to behave and the school accepts some responsibility and accountability for student behavior. Middle school shifts the emphasis onto the students to be much more accountable for their behaviors with the school “expecting” that students know how to behave. There is a drop-off in the teaching of expectations for behavior.

**Types of Schools**

The discipline referral predominantly starts at the classroom level. It is the final step in the student management plan for classroom teachers when it comes to routine and minor behaviors. Major discipline issues are often immediately referred to the administrator such as drugs, weapons, fighting, and/or bullying. Once a student crosses the threshold of that level of infraction with their teacher (they have repeatedly been reprimanded by the teacher) there is little to nothing that student can do to redeem themselves. It is a step-lock system that only increases the level of consequence regardless of the overall infraction or the context. This being said, it would bear to reason that teacher opinions, beliefs, and training in the areas of student management could play a role in how and whom students get sent for consequences of a referral.

Reviewing kinds of parenting and/or types of schools as a measure of how students are treated and how they perceive their schools is one lens by which to examine the issue of student discipline. Schools mirror different styles of parenting (authoritative, indifferent, etc.). Gregory et al. (2011) and Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke and Curran (2004) showed that schools that had environments that were authoritarian had students who were more engaged in learning and
cooperative in the classroom. Authoritarian schools were described as having a large degree of student-perceived support or care and a great level of academic expectations, which the study called “academic push.” This type of balance between social support and high levels of rigor was beneficial to students of all races and backgrounds (Gregory et al., 2010). The idea of having support for students to help them to achieve more academically mirrors the PBIS model.

Students who perceived that they had a positive relationship with their teachers and school earned higher grade-point averages. Skiba et al. (2011) cited Townsend (2000), suggesting that the unfamiliarity of White teachers with the interactional patterns that characterize many African American males may cause these teachers to interpret impassioned or emotive interactions as combative or argumentative (Skiba et al., p. 87).

Opposite the authoritative schools were those of indifference. Schools with high levels of indifference were found to have higher levels of discipline issues across the board regardless of any of the typically-cited factors causing problems, like size of the student enrollment, racial composition of the school, or levels of poverty. One study looked at health factors and school connectedness and found that students who were suspended for minor offenses were less connected to school and felt less cared about (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002, p. 145). White and Black students were suspended more at indifferent schools, which modeled an almost neglectful level of parenting. Students perceived this indifference in their schools and it is suggested that their perception perpetuated their reality. Students who are bonded to school and are engaged find themselves less likely to be delinquent and to have higher levels of achievement (Gregory et al., 2010). The findings on schools that were defined as indifferent show that they had the highest suspension rates. A school that does not use data to evaluate its practice and therefore continues to be neglectful of the work of educating its students can also wear the label
“indifferent.” MMS would be defined as indifferent using this criterion (Gregory et al., 2010).

**Teacher Culture versus Student Culture**

The culture of the teacher and his or her own race is also a point of dialogue in the studies of student management (Terrell & Lindsey, 2008). White students and teachers perceive racial disparity as accidental. While student populations are becoming increasingly diverse, the teacher workforce is nearly 80% White (Deruy, 2013). Furthermore, Black students feel that in some instances they are being pushed to react and to get in trouble in urban schools where most teachers are White and most students are Black (Skiba et al., 2002). Gregory et al. (2011) present this question when referring to the indifferent style of schools and how the gap between Black and White student disciplinary issues grows. The question is if there is a predominantly White teaching force and a predominantly Black student body, does this style contribute to more cultural insensitiveness and misunderstandings?

Research suggests that White teachers may be unfamiliar with the active and physical style of communication often found in Black teens (Rocque, 2010; Skiba et al., 2002). Staff perception about certain groups of students and their parents result in the over-identification of students as dangerous because they do not have the same levels of capital to negotiate in the school setting (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Trying to determine levels of discrimination and bias is tricky at best. Asking teachers their thoughts on race or gender issues will not necessarily yield solid information (Skiba et al., 2002). Notable is that the teacher is the one who is often determining if a student is referred to the administration for disciplinary action and in that action has a great deal of discretion or power.

Teachers are the first line of defense and for the sake of having order; often they do not react in a way that is therapeutic (Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2002). Studies show that
teachers are the single most important school factor in the academic success of students (Stronge, 2007). It may be gleaned that the same could be the case in terms of disciplinary issues. If teachers understood their role as a catalyst for a different outcome, perhaps they can “teach up” or coach students who have disciplinary issues that keep them from the learning environment, much like they do when students are found to have gaps in their learning. Overall, having teachers work with students is converse to the way that schools and teachers have traditionally viewed their role in student management. The system has not developed this way and when looked at from a distance, it mirrors the justice system more than effective parenting/child-rearing patterns (Noguera, 2003; Skiba et al., 2002).

Usually, Black students are being sanctioned for subjective rule violations such as “disrespect” or “disruption,” whereas White students are seeing more of the objective nature of discipline policy such as “truancy” and “vandalism” (Gregory et al., 2010; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Skiba et al., 2002). Gregory et al. (2010) write that, “Successful teachers of Black students support the idea that teachers differ from one another in their ability to elicit cooperation and diffuse conflict” (p. 65). Preparing teachers with knowledge such as relationship-building strategies, knowledge of linguistic patterns and community awareness among other elements can make a positive impact. Having clear expectations for students to avoid any ambiguity in rules also serves the purpose of increasing consistency in enforcement.

Scholars appear cautious in stating that one program or element is a sure way to improve the situation, but overall additional training are noted for teachers who are entering the diverse classrooms of today (Skiba et al., 2002). Exclusionary practices can foster a sense of injustice and rules can feel arbitrary according to a report by Skiba (2001) and noted by Brown (2007). Students are known to escalate behaviors if they feel that they are being treated unfairly
or confrontational. Students, who are removed from school not only for a temporary suspension, but more extended periods at alternative schools or programs, feel ostracized (Skiba et al., 2002). Often they wish to return to the alternative program or they drop out rather than attending an alternative school (Fenning & Rose, 2007). The skills necessary to work with students who have had exclusions from schooling are vital (Brown, 2007). Schools with high rates of exclusionary discipline are positively associated with academic failure and are more strongly influenced by school factors than student behavior (Noltemeyer & McLoughlin, 2010).

**PBIS as Vehicle of Equity and Training**

The model that is currently on trend in the state of Georgia is that of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS, and its sister data collection system which serves as a one size fits all management system for a school (Briggs et al., 2014). The San Jose Unified School District (2016) defines PBIS as:

> A proactive approach to establishing the behavioral supports and social culture and needed for all students in a school to achieve social, emotional and academic success. Attention is focused on creating and sustaining primary (school-wide), secondary (classroom), and tertiary (individual) systems of support that improve lifestyle results (personal, health, social, family, work, recreation) for all youth by making targeted misbehavior less effective, efficient, and relevant, and desired behavior more functional (p.1).

Schools that implement the PBIS system are given additional points on their CCRPI (College and Career Readiness Performance Index) rating. Credit for PBIS implementation on the CCRPI (Exceeding the Bar and Climate Rating) is earned when implementation with fidelity can be verified. A process that includes a review of data from the web based evaluation system, PBIS
Assessments, verifies fidelity of implementation. Additional data is considered through the recognition process (Georgia Department of Education, 2013).

School-wide Positive Behavior Support (SWPBS) is a set of disciplinary practices that is built on the assumption that behavioral expectations defined, supported, and implemented by the entire school community help to establish a common culture where all students are held to the same behavioral standards (Vincent & Tobin, 2010). MMS has recently signed on to adopting the PBIS model as a school and are in the first year (or study year) with implementation to begin in the fall of 2016. PBIS focuses on elements of Applied Behavioral Analysis, and in the last 30 years has shown improvements in disciplinary behavior, school climate, organizational health, and peer victimization, as well as the impact of discipline problem reduction on academic achievement.

Unfortunately, the study conducted by Vincent and Tobin (2010) note that while in both elementary and high schools, exclusionary discipline decreased in schools with PBIS, there was a lack of increase in equity in these numbers. Their student showed that SWPBS implementation might have little effect on the pervasive disproportionate exclusion of Black students (Skiba et al., 2008; McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, Smolkowski, & Sugai, 2014). McIntosh et al. (2014) note that the problem requires multiple steps and layers to addresses issues of disproportionality only one of which is the implementation of school wide PBIS. Since 2008, Georgia has been recognized as a PBIS-implementing state.

**Cultural Competency**

The National Center for Cultural Competence at Georgetown University sites several attempts at defining cultural competence, which are bound in the context in which they were fashioned or used (National Center for Cultural Competence, 2016). Much of what we see in the
world of equity in the public sector comes from healthcare, which seems to have parallel issues as it relates to the treatment of patients from a variety of backgrounds with gaps in services or care being shown for vulnerable populations such as the poor, people of color, the elderly, etc. (Nelson, Smedley & Stith, 2002)

The definition that best fits this study and the work of the McCartney Middle Action Research Team or MMART and its goals is that of Cross (1989). Cross (1989) suggested that for an organization to be moving towards cultural competency, it must have the following five elements: valuing diversity, having the capacity for cultural self-assessment, being conscious of the dynamics inherent when cultures interact, having institutionalized culture knowledge, and having developed adaptations to service, delivery reflecting an understanding of cultural diversity. Cross also states that these five elements must be manifested at every level of an organization including policy making, administrative and practice. Table 1 outlines MMART members. Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran (2004) support that, “...competence is directly related to an understanding of one’s own motives, beliefs, biases, values and assumptions about human behavior. (p. 29).”

Table 1

**McCartney Middle School Action Research Team Members (MMART)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position at MMS</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Gender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Julia Carlisle</td>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Heather Young</td>
<td>Assistant Principal and Researcher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Diane Tuttle</td>
<td>Assistant Principal</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Timothy Bustle</td>
<td>Lead 8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade teacher</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Amy Smith</td>
<td>8&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade counselor</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Katherine Privy</td>
<td>6&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; grade counselor</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This study as it was designed works on all three of these levels and the staff development sessions were created to address one or more of the five noted elements of a culturally competent organization. The work of the study by Cross was completed in 1989. Yet, in 2016, we find that in schools and on the national stage, we have a culture clinging to the notion of colorblindness while there is a continuous flow of evidence that states there is a need for tolerance, transparency, and understanding than ever before. Academically, we are subsidizing the failure of an entire generation of men of color. In terms of survival, we have made targets of these same people once they leave schools and are being martyred on the streets across the country.

Evidence-Based Staff Development

The era of school improvement has brought about the need for increased staff development that is effective in meeting the goals of the schools and the teachers it is serving. Much of what has passed for staff development has had little impact on the participants and their students. In an effort to improve the lot for staff development there has been exhaustive research into figuring out what works for teachers and schools to solve the issues that keep them from being as successful as possible. Staff development is a powerful tool that is rudimentary to the practice of teaching. Hirsh & Killion (2009) identify eight principles of effective staff development. They are: 1) principles shapes thoughts, words and actions, 2) diversity strengthens an organization, 3) leaders are responsible for building capacity in individuals, 4) ambitious goals lead to powerful actions and remarkable results, 5) maintaining the focus of professional learning on teaching and student learning produces academic success, 6) evaluation strengthens performance and results, 7) communities can solve their most complex problems by tapping internal expertise, 8) collaboration among educators builds shared responsibility and improves student learning (pp. 466-469.) Guskey (1986) describes the model of staff
development where there are positive outcomes as a result of change agents. Self-Efficacy Theory and Social Cognitive Theory support his model (Pajares, 1992). Guskey (1999) explores how to evaluate staff development programs for their effectiveness, but one of the keys to his work is the idea that you can find evidence of effectiveness by not proof that connects directly the support and staff development provided to the changes desired. The MMART team looked for evidence of the work in the summary data. The Center for Public Education commissioned a report by Gulamhussein (2013), which identified five principles of effective professional development.

1) The duration must be ongoing for the change to take hold.
2) There must be ongoing teacher support.
3) The exposure to the new concepts should be active and not passive
4) Modeling is highly effective
5) The content should not be generic, but specific to the teachers and their students (pp.14-17).

Proving that the staff development is tied directly to some gain is not possible due to the inability to isolate all of the other factors in a way that is not ethnically irresponsible or causes undue harm to the participants. Action research therefore is a sound way to study the effects of staff development because both are emergent, multifaceted, and participant-centered. When gathering evidence, Guskey (1999) makes special note that the measures must be meaningful to the stakeholders. Guskey (1999) is critical of action research because he notes that most school personnel lack the skills and the time necessary to do more than trivial levels of work. He does note that one area where he does see action research being impactful is that it “enhances professional growth, promotes collaboration, and decreases educators sense of isolation” (p. 46).
The style of the study is both specific to the context, it is geared towards the teachers’ active participation, it notes that their beliefs are central to their way of doing their work and it requires that they have ongoing training and access to resources while trying to work towards implementation.

**Gaps and Trends**

The literature and the gap in the research have one continuous theme: why after 25 years of consistent data are we still seeing a consistent disparity in disciplinary consequences for male students of color (Skiba et al., 2011)? The review in literature of data as a means of reaffirming that there is a problem, which is followed by sections with hypothetical avenues for further study. The more intriguing topics related to discipline and staff development are those that are practitioner-based. All of the literature notes that for the teaching population and the student population, student management can be a career-altering element to their work and experience. Teachers often leave the profession because of difficult student situations. Students who have discipline issues find that school is not effective. Pre-service teachers and veteran teachers remark consistently that they were unprepared for the rigors of dealing with real students.

Other nods at intervention mention “relationships” and “offering both high expectations and high levels of support” (Briggs et al., 2014; Losen & Martinez., 2013; McIntosh et al., 2014). But if left to explain what those two things mean to a novice or struggling classroom teacher, there is little substantive strategy to give them that is immediately implementable to change their classrooms. Simonsen, Fairbanks, Briesch, Myers, and Sugai (2008) examined the body of literature related to classroom management and its effectiveness, and it was admitted that there were a significant amount of empirical studies that were out of date and did not reflect the diversity that many schools find in their daily work. They noted that to make up this gap
schools would have to vet their own programs even if there was empirical research that showed it was effective.

The plausible solutions were people-based and context-based, and thus working with teachers in small groups that share the same students and that already existed to provide academic supports for students could generate solutions to help improve the lot for the students at MMS. The interventions in this study focused on teacher reflection, self-analysis, and creating dialogue about the issues of race and other areas of diversity and connecting with students to help them feel included and engaged (Milner, 2003). Each intervention was guided by the principle of cultural competence as a vehicle for changing the mindset of the teacher and thus their behaviors or their understanding of their behaviors.

Another critical gap is the minimal the connection of low achievement and high incidence of discipline, particularly when loosely referencing the implications of a lack of an education over the course of one’s life. The inability to read on grade level and ultimately a lack of functional literacy most certainly will set up students for lives less than they are innately capable. Arcia (2006) compared students who were suspended one time to those never suspended and found they ended up grade levels behind their peers. Notably, students regularly have other disciplinary steps before being removed, but nonetheless the disruptive behavior, even if addressed habitually, is at the expense of the student being on-task. Students lose instructional time long before a formal suspension. There is an undercurrent of why some students do not participate thoughtfully in what is a high stakes system for them and their long-term life goals.

Lastly there is an absence of how the home and family support, or the lack thereof, relates to school discipline practices. Literature does not examine: What do parents think when their child is suspended over and over again? How do they feel when they see him or her slipping
behind in school? Does the system tend to prey on the students who are the least likely to have advocates at home? Does this make the job of removing students even easier for the school in terms of doing what is equitable and just for the student both behaviorally and academically? Are schools transparent with parents about their expectations, their need to partner, and their accessibility?

It is hard to imagine looking at the numbers of students that were suspended that each of them does not have a home/family/parent/guardian who is advocating for him/her. Teachers and schools regularly spend significant energy examining the home life of students, but we need to work within the confines of our context to create interventions that are meaningful. Parents are sometimes the most frustrated with their children when they have other siblings who cause no issues and do not struggle in school, but one of their children is not as plugged in and causes them the same stress at home (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997).
CHAPTER 3

METHODODOLOGY

Introduction

There are players who impacted this work and their personal ideas and beliefs about race were at the center of energies that were invested in the interventions designed to bring critical awareness to the topics of race and equity and to inform teachers with data as well as strategies to increase their capacity to see themselves truthfully and to treat students more equitably (Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Terrell & Lindsey, 2008). It is noted that for a teacher to be able to relate to students they must be aware of themselves, what their perspectives are, how they are perceived, and how to bridge those gaps (Gay, 2002). Those are the key elements that were addressed in the staff development sessions provided to the eighth grade teachers at MMS as a part of this study.

Choice of Methodology

Action research aims to aid in the solving of a practical problem as well as furthering the goals of social sciences. Using action research at the local school is an excellent model for problem solving and investigation while also adding to the body of knowledge in the area of education, which is a well-researched social science. According to Simons (2009), case study denotes an instrumental and exploratory variety [of research] and serves the purpose of informing the overarching themes and goals of the project. Those themes and goals are to implement the standards of Action Research in an embedded context for the benefit of investigating and affecting a problem that is timely and significant using emergent insights and
data throughout the process (pp.19-21).

Action research requires participation of the stakeholders and incremental change which both add body to the work that was required for this investigation (Stringer, 2014). This particular study offers a window into a national phenomenon of racial disparities in the treatment of men or boys of color in a local school context and institutes the “plan-do-check-act” model of action research by having cycles of varying degrees over the duration of the study (Anderson, 2007, p. 20). The investigation into the initial problem or the exploratory change in and of itself contributes to the interventions while not being directly developed by the MMART. Treating this research as a case study in how to use action research to investigate a problem of a local school that has larger implications is a well-aligned plan for both academic research as well as local school change.

Yin (2009) states that case study is “an empirical inquiry about as contemporary phenomenon (e.g., a “case”), set within its real-world context—especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (p. 20). Using interviews, particularly critical incident interviews, surveys, researcher notes, and materials developed for staff development sessions it is easy to tie together the realities of the phenomena as well as any gains made by the interventions. As per Simons (2009) there are four goals of interviews, but in this study the main reason for the interviews is the second one that is noted which is to promote active engagement and learning for the interviewer and interviewee. The use of document analysis enriches the context and contributes to the analysis of issues (Simons, 2009, pp. 41-63).

The backbone of this study is a case study of action research, in particular the action research team, McCartney Middle Action Research team or MMART for short. Looking at discipline data which is evolving and the players who are tied to the situations of discipline
issues, teachers and students, represented a phenomenon that was context embedded meeting the requirements for both case study and for action research. Evaluating the effectiveness of the staff development sessions both wholly (after sessions with data generation) as well as individually (interviews) allowed for evidence based staff development tenets to be critically examined. The content of the staff development sessions served two purposes 1) to address the gaps evident in the discipline data for the school such as the overrepresentation of certain groups of students and 2) to meet the requirements of cultural competency or culturally responsive pedagogy.

**Context**

The process for selecting the MMART was guided by the principles of Action Research. They were selected purposefully as noted in Creswell (2009). Creswell (2009) states that choosing participants for qualitative studies should be done with the specific purpose of choosing people who can best help the researcher understand the problem. The team members were asked if they would help and the time involved was explained. This would not be something to be done in the midst of working, but along with the work and in addition to the work of the regular school day.

The team members were energetic to participate because of the nature of the problem. Those on the team deal directly with the discord among teachers and students, teachers and parents, teachers and administrators, teachers and other teachers, and the like. The individual player who has received the impact of student management most often was the student with the classroom teacher giving up authority, respect, and credibility by referring to the student to another authority often secondary. Each individual on the MMART has had numerous conversations with me about their frustration with the disciplinary practices of teachers at MMS
and other staff members not being contentious of race and culture and how they (the members of MMART) desired to improve the situation.

This study was conducted at McCartney Middle School, which is located in a large suburban/urban school district. It is one of the top five middle schools in its district. Middle schools in this district are grades 6-8 with students aged 11-14 generally. Each grade level has between 360-400 students and 12 general education teachers per grade level. The school is less than 10 years old and has only its second principal. It is a stable school by all measures and high achieving located in a safe area with lots of options for single-family housing including apartments. The eighth grade students and teachers are the sample for this study because they are the students and teachers with whom I work most closely. They generate the most discipline referrals in comparison with sixth and seventh grades and eighth grade is a gateway year to entering high school, which is the last major educational transition for students in the K-12 setting.

The eighth grade teachers consisted of 12 general education teachers along with three teachers who work as both co-teachers and resource teachers with our special education population. Working exclusively with one grade level allowed for ample time and contact to follow up on interventions and data collection. Coghlan and Brannick (2014) note that it is important to choose a study that is feasible in terms of time and resources. This study was feasible in those terms because the scope and relationship of the different people and elements were closely coupled. The MMART, the eighth grade teachers, and the eighth grade students were all interconnected and had relationships, which were part of the system of the school.
Subjectivity Statement

The relationship I have to the school is that of neophyte, outsider, and leader. I have worked at the school for less than two years. I am one of three assistant principals and I work with nearly all teachers in some capacity. I support the Math and Connections (electives) instructional programs. In terms of students, I support eighth grade students in all areas. I am the disciplinarian for them. I am considered the leader of the eighth grade teachers. I supervise assessments at my school. Finally, I live in the community where the school is located.

Before working at the school where this study was conducted, I was one of a much larger administrative team at a Title I high school where I represented a small minority in relation to the student body. Being White, upper middle class, college educated, Roman Catholic, and someone who had grown up in the diversity of South Florida post-Castro meant that I had more access to cultural capital than I would appear at first glance, but I had to earn my way into credibility with sensitive subjects. I realized that throughout this study that my level of comfort with all issues of race and identity could only be compared to the relative discomfort of nearly all of the other White counterparts with whom I work.

In my new school, I look like most of the teachers in the building as a White, middle-class woman, but to them, I am an outsider, first, because of my previous experiences at a much “rougher” school; second, as a former high school teacher of an elective; lastly someone who pushes the boundaries often compared to the status quo. They have come to expect that I solve problems in non-conventional ways. I have difficult conversations with them and expect to challenge their thinking. Based on the work of Stringer (2014), I acknowledge that both my work and me did upset the balance at my school and I worked to have as “soft” an entry as possible. I am comfortable not being popular with everyone as a leader.
To students, they often view me as someone who is mean and to be feared because of my position and my extroverted nature. Parents commonly ask me who the assistant principal is. When I pronounce that I am the assistant principal they often repeat themselves and acknowledge that I am the counselor or the teacher. This is also new to me at my school since until two years ago the administration had not changed in many years and the community grew accustomed to that. They are not comfortable with change and they insist that they need to talk to someone who is in charge; all the while I am the one they seek. After a few minutes, when I have convinced them that I am indeed someone who can help them, they relax. I have a casual style about the way I do my work so as to send the message that I am open to all levels of discourse and dialogue.

Setting myself apart socially or conversationally is an area where I work extremely hard. I try and am approachable. I do this so I have access to the “teacher-talk.” It is hard to lead people and to support them if you are not familiar with them so I have spent a great deal of my tenure building relationships, setting an example, and developing a culture where we are offering new ideas and ways of getting the work done. Not everyone is a fan and I would be remiss to say that it did not frustrate me because I was and am an “early adopter” and have innate trust in those for whom I work.

**Participation**

Early in the study, teachers in eighth grade were given information that we would be doing a study once I had IRB approval to examine the racial disparity in our discipline data. Once IRB approved the study for both teacher and for students, the MMART worked to recruit teachers and students to participate in the fall of 2015. Teachers were told that the study would involve participation in staff development sessions that we would include as part of our standing
eighteenth grade meetings monthly. Additionally, we planned to keep data on students and teachers from monthly team meetings, which happened on a rotating basis – one team per week. Lastly we would talk with individual teachers about their practices based on critical incidents as they emerged.

For students, we published a letter with the parent consent forms and student assent forms. Teachers were given copies for all students and were asked to work to collect them daily for several weeks. This was a difficult task as teachers are busy and had trouble conveying the study to students. The MMART talked both in person and via email about how to increase student participation.

Eventually, several MMART members adopted an eighth grade team of teachers and each morning would circulate during homeroom to give out additional forms, to answer questions and to collect forms. We continued to do this until late October. At that point it was clear that we would not be able to gain full access to all students. We were given permission to use summary data for students as part of the study, but only participating students and teachers would be open for interviews and specific kinds of data collection.

All interviews were transcribed using a transcription service. Interviewees were asked to member-check their transcripts. The recordings were done on my personal cell phone and those files were transferred without the names of interviewees to the transcription service. All names were pseudonyms and the key to those names and the transcripts were under lock and key in my office. Only I had access to the raw information either online or hardcopy. Often minor details were changed in reports to help in the disguise of identity. All of the participants have pseudonyms and the characteristics of the school have been disguised to protect any and all involved with the study including the members of the MMART and the school itself.
Interventions

Interventions came in three forms in this study. The first form of intervention was the staff development sessions. The second form of intervention came in the form of audio-recorded interviews with teachers, students, and MMART members. The third form of intervention was the work of the MMART team both in determining their own effectiveness in engaging in the examination of the problem and intervening and how they worked as a team based on their own cultural baggage.

Staff Development Sessions

The grander form of intervention was the staff development sessions. MMART wanted to infuse grade-level monthly managerial meetings with cultural competency knowledge and awareness. These meetings would be guided by the needs found in the data as well as the requirements of cultural competency research. Each month, the session would work towards increasing teachers’ awareness and mindfulness of their own culture and race and how that impacts individual students at our school.

Session 1: Introduction to study. In the first month, the MMART determined that it was important to introduce the topic of the study officially to the rest of the grade-level teachers, to answer questions about the work, and to gain consent for those that wanted to participate. The materials for this session were developed as part of the IRB application and approval process, and were designed to help ensure ethical participation of all subjects. In particular, great efforts were made to explain how their participation in the study would not impact their official teacher evaluation, as three of the members of MMART are official evaluators in the school.

Session 2: Mindfulness and reflectiveness. In the second session, the outcome was to increase teachers’ levels of mindfulness about which students make up our school. This was
done in a global way with the introduction of the *Village of 100 People* protocol (as cited in National School Reform Faculty, 2016). Teachers were asked to divide up into course teams (math teachers with math, language arts teacher with language arts, etc.) and to determine if the world only consisted of 100 people, what would it look like in terms of religion, language, race, money, and education? Once each team was allowed time to guess an educated answer, the true numbers were revealed. After that, they were asked to talk about how far off target they were or if they were on target, how did they determine their answers.

The next level of the session was based off of the work of many researchers, but in particular an article by Dray and Wisneski, (2011) stating, that mindfulness makes space for alternative interpretations of student behavior and gives teachers the opportunity to respond differently. They offer tools to help do this, including reflective questions based on discipline referrals.

Teachers were then asked to think back to the last time they had a major discipline happening in their classrooms. They were asked reflective questions about what they thought and what they knew in hindsight. Ultimately the session asked for them to take into account moving forward how quick anyhow can size up a situation without allowing for the facts to speak for themselves. The summarizing activity was a ticket out of the door survey where teachers were given a link to an online survey to answer questions about what they had learned or reflected upon (see Figure 1). This was to generate data to share with the MMART on what the outcomes were for the session and possible openings for the next session in terms of content.
Module 2 - Ticket out the door

Thank you for your thoughtful participation today for our module. Please complete the following questions to summarize our work together.

* Required

Reflect on today’s session. On a scale of 1 to 5, how much did this session help you reflect on your relationships with students who are different from you?

If you did not attend the session, do not answer this question.

1 2 3 4 5

This session did not make me reflect on my practice of working with students who were different than me.

This session made me reflect deeply on my relationship with students who are different from me.

How often do you find yourself reflecting on the topics of race, socio economics, gender of your students? *

- Daily
- Several Times a Week
- Several Times a Marking Period
- Hardly Ever

When you are having a difficult time with a student regarding their behavior, what are some of the areas you think about often and regularly in terms of working with that student? *

Check all that apply.

- Socio-Economic Status (Free Lunch, Reduced Lunch, Homelessness)
- IEP Status
- Geography (Student is from here, not from here, etc.)
- Health Issues

https://docs.google.com/forms/d/1dbLCCFvAzDrXIPQ5bPjv5Y-5kFpMUJUL16NitrRMx/viewform
Figure 1. Staff Development Session 2 Summarizing Activity

Session 3: Privilege Walk. The third session was presented as a means of giving each individual the opportunity to outwardly reflect on their own cultural identity and how there is value and privilege, or a lack thereof, with many individual identifiers (race, religion, socio-economics, family dynamics, etc.). Much of what is privileged is not of our choosing and our students face the same issues. As adults are able to see how those areas effect where and how we end up in our lives both professionally and personally, but we often do not acknowledge this in our students.
In an effort to remove the colorblindness as well as other good intentioned, but misguided thinking, we endeavored on a privilege walk. A privilege walk is a simulation or demonstration where participants show symbolically what kinds of privilege all individuals possess. In our privilege walk, all of the participants lined up shoulder to shoulder and based on a statement read to them by the facilitator they took a step forward if it was a positive impact on their access to privilege or a step backward if it was a negative impact on their access to privilege. Several members of the MMART had participated in this style of activity in other settings like graduate school classes or seminars for staff development. All found it beneficial and being that the study had been ongoing for several months, felt that people would be comfortable of this kind of exposure in front of one another. This activity solicited teachers to explain personal things about themselves that would not be apparent in an everyday work environment. It was important to establish trust within the study for us to get accurate results and impact. Having met already and worked on the topic of reflectiveness helped establish a foundation for this work because it would invite the teachers to express outwardly what being reflective would have shown them inwardly (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 52). The MMART decided that we would allow for individuals to participate in the walk voluntarily, but all were invited to watch. At the end of the “walk,” everyone was invited to write his or her cultural autobiography and submit it anonymously. This would allow further reflection. The prompts for the privilege walk were pulled from a variety of sources, most notably the University of Albany’s School of Social Welfare (2016). The autobiographies were submitted via Google doc as well for ease of analysis.

**Session 4: Clarifying expectations.** The final session was delivered with the express goal of tying discipline issues to teacher behaviors. Tying discipline expectations to individual
teacher practices and their ability to articulate to students what they expect are key to reducing the number of issues teachers have in their classrooms (Morrissey, Bohanon, & Fenning, 2010). The previous sessions asked them to be reflective of who they are and how they perceive themselves and their students, but this session asked them to connect that self-image to how they design classroom management in order for students to meet their expectations.

Teachers were given scenarios from MMS that were from other grade levels and then asked based on what was presented to them to formulate questions, to determine if rules were broken, and if yes, what rules, etc. Then as a group, we discussed their perspectives on the situations. Following that, teachers were asked to work in groups to define four major rules that are commonly coded in classroom discipline violations.

**Interviews**

According to Stringer (2014) “interviews provide opportunities for participants to describe the situation in their own terms. It is a reflective process that enables the interviewee to explore his or her experience in detail and to reveal many feathers of that experience that have an effect on the issue investigated” (p. 106). In keeping with the credibility of CIT, “Flanagan stressed the importance of informing the interviewees about the purpose of the study, the basis for participant recruitment and preservation of their anonymity (Hughes, 2007, p.5). To initiate an interview, those that were being requested to participate were asked in person if they would be open to talking with me about an issue or a particular data point regarding student referrals and cultural proficiency. It was explained that the interview was informal and to gather information and was not punitive or to cast judgment on those that would participate. Participants were asked what time was convenient for them and what place would they prefer. Interviews took place in classrooms, in my office, via Skype and also in a restaurant during a
school break. Because of the open nature of the semi-structured interview, it was easy to ask for additional details from participants of if the introduced a new element or topic, to have them elaborate. The emic knowledge that was gathered was in fact authentic and “good” data because it was true to those that presented it in the interview. The nuances of teacher behaviors that come from their belief systems is not objective and therefore the interview was meant to gather the insider’s perspective” (Stringer, 2014, p.106).

Interview participants were selected based on Critical Incident Criteria for interviews and they were asked to explain their experiences regarding how they managed student behaviors or how teachers managed them when there were issues as well as reflecting on how those behaviors could or could not be racially motivated. The MMART selected the interview participants and the interviews were done with complete transparency to the participant. It was explained to the interviewee the reason they were selected, for example, “You had the most referrals last year.” The goals for the investigation were reviewed with each participant, “We are hoping to figure out what helps kids behave at school.” The participants were reminded that their identity would be disguised in the final write-up.

**Student Interviews**

In order to gain insights about students and their perceptions, the MMART wanted to interview students who had significantly declining or increasing behavioral issues. Because the study was focused on issues of race, it was important to identify students of color, particularly males, for this these interviews. Stringer (2014) notes interviewing primary or key stakeholders as criteria for who should be interviewed (p.104). With the goal of determining what needs to be addressed in the staff development sessions with regards to students, the MMART felt that it would be beneficial to find students who had either escalating or deescalating discipline referrals.
during their middle school years. Students were identified based on the MMART criteria as well as the limitations of the students who were participating in the study. The limitations were such that not all students in the grade level were participating. After some searching and discussion with the MMART, two students were identified as representing the qualities that were identified by the MMART as areas of interest.

For students, the focus was to see how they related to their experiences and the relationships that they had with teachers. Teacher relationships and student behavior was noted in the literature with regards to students who were found to have a greater engagement and more positive experience in school – they had an improved relationship with their teachers and vice versa (McNeely, Nonnemaker & Blum, 2002). The student interviews in this study were done to see if the phenomena described in the literature could be substantiated and if so, how so, and if not, why not. The probes were created and approved by the IRB before being used (see Figure 2).

**Student Interview Probes**

Tell me about a time in one of your classes when you felt that one or more of your teachers set up a positive plan to help encourage you to behave according to their rules?

How did the plan work?

Why did the plan work?

What about the plan made it work?

Was there a time when your teacher had a plan to reward you and it made no impact on you and your behaviors?

Do you find that incentives are more useful for you for good behavior or good grades?

Do you see a connection between your behavior and your grades?

When you have discipline problems, what are those like?

Was there a time when you felt that you were treated differently than another student who did the same thing?

What was that like? How did you handle that?

How much do your parents know or understand about how you behave in school?

What is most important to you about school?

What is most important to you about your relationship with your teachers?

If you would give advice to your teachers about how to handle a student like you what would you say?

Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic that I have not asked you about?

*Figure 2. Student Interview Probes*
Teacher Interviews

Teacher questions were formulated as a way to focus the responses on those areas where the team was looking for information or gaps in information about teacher practices as it related to cultural proficiency and that would help to add to the research questions. In interviewing teachers, the MMART wanted to talk to teacher who represented the extremes on the continuum, in terms of total numbers of referrals or specific issues that were racial in nature that happened during the year. Again, they were seen as key stakeholders in this study because as those that had either significant discipline referrals or racial issues, they could provide information to the team about the day-to-day. For example, a student requested to be removed from a team of teachers whom he felt were racist towards him. That prompted interviews with his teachers to determine if there were issues of racial tension that were either undetected by them or if the teachers were dismissive of the racial accusations. Interview questions asked teachers to talk about and to reflect on their own classrooms, what worked for them, what did not and ask them to explore the reasons behind what was working (see Figure 3). Interview probes were submitted to IRB for approval to be used with teachers who consented to participate and who consented to be interviewed.
Teacher Interview Probes

Tell me about a time in one of your classes when you felt that your students responded to positively to incentives you set for them?
How did the plan work?
Why did the plan work?
What about the plan made it work?
Was there a time when you had incentives and they had no impact on your students’ behavior?
How did the plan work?
Why did the plan work?
What about the plan made it not work?
Do you find that incentives are more useful for motivating students’ behavior or academics?
Tell me about that.
Do you see a correlation between your style of teaching and your classroom management issues?
Describe that connection if there is one.
When you have issues of student discipline, what are those like?
How do you handle them?
When you have discipline problems, what are those like?
Was there a time when you felt that you treated a student differently than another student when they basically both did the same thing?
What was that like?
How did you handle that? How much do your parents know or understand about how students behave in school? What is most important to you about your teaching and your students?
What is most important to you about your relationship with your students and your colleagues?
If you would give advice to your about how to handle a students what would you say?
Is there anything else you would like to share about this topic that I have not asked you about?

Figure 3. Teacher Interview Probes

The teacher who had the most discipline referrals in the year before the interventions was interviewed to gain insight in the possible change effect—especially because once the sessions were implemented, she saw a significant drop in her need to write referrals. We also wanted to investigate whether making her aware of her discipline data triggered any reflections on her practice and how that connected or did not connect to the staff development sessions.
The two teachers who wrote the most referrals during the study were interviewed to determine if the sessions were making an impact, if they were aware of their discipline data, and if understanding the data had any impact. MMART was curious because these two teachers shared nearly all of the same students who were predominantly male and of color, and all under the umbrella of special education. One of the teachers was White and one was Black.

**MMART Interviews**

The members of the MMART were also interviewed before and after the interventions. The semi-structured interviews of the MMART members were done prior to starting the bulk of the interventions and work in order to gain insight into their perspectives on the school, the teachers, and the relationships that would be part of the ongoing work of the team (Figure 4).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action Research Team Interviews – Pre-Intervention</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is your position here at MMS?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. What is your educational background?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. How long have you worked here at beautiful MMS?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. What made you want to be a school principal (teacher, guidance counselor)?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. How do you see your role as principal as it involves working with the counselors/teachers/administrators/students/parents?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. What do you see is the most significant obstacles to student success?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. What do you see is the most significant factor with the student in terms of behavior?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. What do you think most teachers would say as the root cause of students who have behavioral issues?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. What do you think is the most beneficial thing for students in terms of improving negative behaviors?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Do you ever see race or gender play a role in terms of student discipline issues with teachers?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Is there anything you would like to add that I haven't asked you about because it relates to these questions?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4. Action Research Team Interviews – Pre-Intervention*
In order to avoid adding my own perceptions to the interview protocol, it was easier to ask general questions and then follow up to ask for details based on their answers (Stringer, 2014). Once those interviews were completed, they were member checked and then analysed for themes related to the research questions. Those results were presented to the team and then there was time for additional conversation about those beliefs held by members. The entirety of transcripts was also presented to the team so they were able to bring their own perspective to the interviews. At the end of the study, the MMART members were asked to complete a questionnaire about their experiences as a means of summarizing their learning and to help answer the research question about how did the team intervene and then measure that work (Figure 5). After-action interviews are seen as valuable to anticipate issues and generate emergent learning in action (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p. 84).

**MMART Exit Survey Questions**

- Tell me about a time when the work of the AR team have brought your own attention to your own beliefs or bias.
- Can you share with me about a time when based on the work of the AR team you saw a student disciplinary situation differently?
- Based on the conversations about cultural competency and building that capacity in the staff, have you noticed particular strengths or weaknesses in teachers or staff?
- Do you confront those beliefs with those individuals?
- As the AR team has worked to look at specific students and teachers, are there areas where you feel the work of the AR team has furthered frank conversations about students of color not being treated fairly?
- What are some additional ways we as a team could identify interventions for teachers?
- What are some ways you feel are best to evaluate teacher staff development?
- If the total number of referrals continues to be discrepant in terms of students of color, what are additional ways that this issue could be addressed through staff development?
- Do you see progress as it relates to this study in the work of the teachers or in the work of the AR team? If so, how?

*Figure 5. MMART Exit Survey Questions*
Rigor Measures

Ensuring rigor in action research requires that levels of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability are established (Stringer, 2014).

• Triangulation: Stake (2005), Stringer (2014), and Crewsell (2014) all note that triangulation of data sources is a valid way to add reliability and dependability to a study. In this study, there were multiple sources of information in this study, such as interview transcripts, discipline data, teacher interviews, staff development session materials, meeting agendas, researcher notes, and summarizing activities after staff development sessions.

• Member Checking: Member checking was instituted to ensure that post interview participants felt that it was an accurate reflection of the participants thoughts and feelings. In addition, there was extensive member checking by the MMART with all of the data and materials, and with individuals who were interviewed with their own transcripts (Creswell, 2014, p. 201; Stringer, 2014, p. 93).

• Time In The Field: Prolonged time in the filed is also noted as a means of credibility for a study (Creswell, 2014, p. 202; Stringer, 2014, p. 92). There was prolonged engagement in this study as the initial concept of this work began in Summer 2014 and the final staff development session was delivered in January of 2016. Several additional interviews and data collections followed, with all data being collected by April 2016.

• Clarifying Bias: Bias was a significant concern in this study because of the embedded nature of the researcher and the action research team in the context of the study. Questions related to bias were included in all work with the action research team interviews and were noted in the study in both the statement of bias as in the study as
well as the findings with regards to final calculations of total referrals not being done to avoid changing the consequences for referrals or minimizing teacher efficacy in writing referrals as they felt were necessary (Creswell, 2014, p. 202).

The nature of action research is quite opposite of traditional methods in that the results of the study are particular to the people and the contexts of the work (Stringer 2014, p. 94). There is however some elements which can be transferred to other settings and in this study that is achieved by the extensive amount of planning for the interventions to ensure that there are multiple levels of inquiry and analysis through interviews, staff development session materials and researcher notes.

As a case study, there were other sub-cases that contributed to the overall case of the action research team and project. Overall the sub-cases helped to identify the interactions within the case and across entities to see an integrated system, which in this particular study was the school (Stake, 2006, p. 2). Interacting were the 8th grade teachers, the 8th grade students, the administration and the counseling staff as well as the district policy for disciplining students. The interviews were interventions for specific participants (both teachers and students) to help draw their attention to their own situations and behaviors (increasing mindfulness) as well as to support the study goals of determining what the MMART can learn about the effectiveness of interventions. The sub-cases that were:

- Students with a significant decrease or increase in discipline referrals
- Teachers with a significant increase or decrease in referrals
- Teachers with unusual classroom dynamics such as two teachers who share all of the same students who happen to be special education students who are majority male and majority Black who had the most referrals for the year
• Teachers who had volatile situations with students that were racially charged

In following with the emergence of both embedded case study work and the tenets of Action Research, these interviews were decided upon while the study was ongoing. It was predictable that these would be possible areas of inquiry, but they were organically chosen as the team met and reviewed the current status of both the students, the teachers and the needs of the team to generate data to help make decisions. In support of the evidence-based staff development these interviews were both the reason for and the proof of the staff development sessions needs and impacts (Coghlan & Brannick, 2014, p.89). I worked with the eighth grade teachers as a whole for a school year, delivering specific staff development sessions created by the MMART in order to see if we could positively impact the total number of referrals written by teachers.

In an effort to be transparent about bias, I did not want teachers to avoid writing referrals because of the study that they felt were warranted in order to shift the numbers of referrals in a favorable direction. The final data for the year concluding the study was not looked at in its totality until March 2016, as I was concerned that seeing the overall trend could make me change my own judgment of different referrals and consequences. I ultimately processed all of the referrals for eighth grade students, decided on the rule codes that were used based on the guidelines set for me by the district-level discipline office and published in their handbook as well as assigning consequences. In an attempt to avoid undermining my teachers trust in me and the current discipline referral process as it stood and to attempt to be as consistent as possible in my own practice, I was cautious to not see the overall totals nor the disaggregated numbers until I was prepared to conclude the study.
Data Collection and Analysis

Data for this study was collected and analyzed as a simultaneous process as noted in Creswell (2009). Initial data was collected from the school’s student information database where all discipline referrals are entered. The total number of referrals was queried for the school year 2013-14, which started the initial conversation from the school principal about the need for further investigation. The numbers were disaggregated by race and gender. For the school year 2014-15, the same data was pulled from the system and disaggregated. This data was used with the MMART during its initial meetings to drive the work forward and to create a foundation for the need for the work.

Using descriptive statistics, the data were presented both graphically and in summary to give the team substantial specifics on who was receiving referrals, for which rules, by which teachers, and the educational and demographic information for those students. Descriptive statistics were used as data was pulled on a monthly basis during the active phases of the study. According to Stringer (2014) using statistics “contribute to a clearer picture of the status of the research project. (p. 122). Taking that data and then using descriptive analysis as noted by Creighton (2007) is held to be more informative because it tells you about the particular school or situation whereas inferential statistic would be more helpful in understanding a national trend or phenomena (p. xii). This sharing of the descriptive statistics of the discipline data informed the question about whether the awareness of data could or would change behavior. Also, at the conclusion of the study the entire summary of the data for both of the school years was queried, disaggregated, and summarized. This was done after the sessions were completed and all other data generated. I did not want to unduly influence the overall outcomes of the study and its goals
to try and reduce the number of referrals teachers wrote by steering teacher behaviors from my position as the disciplinarian for the grade level.

Semi-structured interviews with each of the members of the MMART were conducted at the beginning of the study. The semi-structured style was used to find out “what is in and on someone else’s mind (Simons, 2009, p. 43). Each member was invited to meet with me for an interview at his or her convenience. At the start of each interview, I told the participants that these interviews were to give our team an idea of common themes and beliefs that would guide our work and would add additional understanding to our context. Each interview was audio recorded. Once the interview was complete, they were emailed to a transcription service. The transcript was then emailed to the MMART member for them to review and to revise. Each member did this within a week of receiving his or her transcript. Once all of the interviews were complete and member checked, I used the method of reading and re-reading them to see if common themes emerged as described by Simons (2009).

This data was to inform the starting point for the initial research question when the team was to determine, first, how it would work together to determine effective interventions and, second, how effectively they were implemented. It would be impossible to work as a team without having in-depth knowledge of each member’s perspective both on the school and the roles of the different people in the school. According to Stringer (2014), preliminary observations and interviews may lead to more extensive processes that enable participants to construct more sophisticated and detailed accounts of their situation, enabling them to see the complex web of interactions and activities within which problematic events are played out. (p. 123)
The questions asked required each member to describe themselves in the context of the school as well as how they see themselves and their job as it relates to students, to parents, to teachers, to counselors and to administrators. The use of interviews to achieve these insights is consistent with Simons (2014) where she discusses using the study of individuals as a means “to understand how the experience and actions of a single person or person contribute to an understanding of the case. (p. 70). They were asked to discuss what they feel are the main barriers in students’ ability to behave well at school and to be successful.

In the process of the study, there were issues that were presented by the data that begged for additional explanations to inform the MMRT about its ability to do valuable work and to impact the student disciplinary data but influencing teacher practices. Teachers were selected to be interviewed based on their discipline data. The discipline data was looked at descriptively. As noted by Barbour (2001), “rather than aspiring to statistical generalizability or representativeness, qualitative research usually aims to reflect the diversity within a given population (p. 1115). Their specific discipline data was divulged to them when they were asked if they were willing to be interviewed. With such a small sample of teachers, those that were seen as being to the extremes in terms of quantity or quality of discipline referrals were candidates for the interviews.

Overall five teachers were interviewed during the study. Each of these teachers helped to explain a specific nuance or characteristic about student referrals and management that made them useful to the MMRT in terms of determining areas of need for the staff development sessions (see Table 2). All were women and all but one was White, which is not unique to MMS. Nationally there is a lack of men in teaching, especially men of color. The MMS teachers represent most of the faculty in those two demographic areas (female and White), but
unlike their other White and female colleagues they had particular information that was needed about how they manage their students, who they write referrals for, and how they see their work with students who are not meeting their expectations for acceptable behavior in the classroom.

Table 2

*Teacher Interview Criteria*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Interviewee Criteria</th>
<th>Rationale for Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Brown</td>
<td>Female/White</td>
<td>Had written the most referrals for the school year 2015-16 in eighth grade and shared students with Ms. Riley.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Cohen</td>
<td>Female/White</td>
<td>Had a student who accused her of being a racist and treating him unfairly.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Edwards</td>
<td>Female/White</td>
<td>Had the same student as Ms. Cohen accuse her of being a racist and treating him unfairly on the same day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Riley</td>
<td>Female/Black</td>
<td>Had written the most referrals for the school year 2015-16 in eighth grade and shared the same students with Ms. Brown.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ms. Roberts</td>
<td>Female/White</td>
<td>Wrote the most referrals for the school year 2014-15. Represented a brand new teacher to the profession. Had parents accuse her of being racially ignorant.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In deciding upon how to interview the teachers as well as the students, the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) was employed. Flanagan (1954) defines (CIT):

> [as a] set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles ... By an incident is meant any specifiable human activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act (p. 1).
As it relates to this study the critical incident technique was used to investigate what Flanagan refers to as “motivation and leadership” and which he then states is the investigation of as “attitudes” (p 28). According to Flanagan, “an incident is critical if it makes a ‘significant’ contribution, either positively or negatively to the general aim of the activity’ and it should be capable of being critiqued or analysed” (p 12). The critical incident technique was used in these interviews because, “critical incident technique (CIT) is a well proven qualitative research approach that offers a practical step-by-step approach to collecting and analysing information about human activities and their significance to the people involved” (Lipu, Williamson, & Lloyd, 2007, p. 49).

The Critical Incident technique is useful for this kind of work because:

• it focuses on real-life human experiences;
• it enables the development of practical outcomes;
• it is relatively flexible (Hughes, 2007, p. 3).

Once the teachers were interviewed, their audio recordings were emailed to a transcription service and then the written transcript was emailed the interviewee. Each interviewee was given the opportunity to member-check his/her work. The teachers granted all requests for interviews. The subjects and CIT as the method of interviewing served the purpose of determining inferences and predictions about the behaviors of the person performing the act.

Student interviews were done to inform the team about the student perspectives on both increased and decreased discipline referrals during middle school years. Based on the students who had volunteered to participate in the study, it was decided that talking with students of color would offer the most insight into the research question inquiring about teachers’ cultural competence and how it may alter their work with students who are culturally different than
themselves by increasing mindfulness and reflectiveness on the basis of culture. Critical incident technique was selected for student interviews as their discipline situations were viewed as crucial to the success of lack thereof of a student based on what is noted in the literature about the trajectory both academically and behaviorally for students who have even one suspension from school (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010). In particular the student who had dramatically increased his discipline referrals since sixth grade and at the time of his interview had more referrals than any other student in the for the school year. Juxtaposed by the other student who was female, but of color who had no discipline referrals for the year after having significant numbers of referrals in both elementary school and sixth and seventh grades.

Additionally, the two students interviewed had a connection to special education. The male student was dismissed from special education and the female student remained. He was in special education for OHI (Other Health Impairment), which, in his case, was Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. The female student was in special education for EBD (Emotional Behavior Disorder) as well as secondary learning disabilities. Both students agreed to be interviewed in my office during the school day and to have the interview recorded. Once the interview was recorded, the recording was sent to a transcription service. The transcript was then printed out for the students and they were asked to review it in my office and make any changes. Both interviews were read repeatedly as was done with the teacher interviews.

As a quick measure to see if themes would emerge from the two interviews, the frequency of repeated words was presented to the MMART as an informal means of seeing if there was any initial analysis that would be gleaned. The transcripts were fed into a word cloud application and then shared with the MMART. The complete transcripts were also reviewed for the MMART to review to formulate their own opinions of themes. Once everyone had the
opportunity to read and to review them, the team discussed them and how the student perspectives could or should inform interventions with teachers.

An additional generation of data was that of summarizing activities for each of the staff development sessions held with the eighth grade teachers. This was in part to model the teaching strategies that teachers were implementing in their classrooms as well as a way to measure the effect of what teachers were reflecting on and attaining from the sessions. Staff development sessions all contained a “ticket out of the door” or summarizing activity for the participants to engage in. Each staff development session had a different summarizing and data generating activity that was specific to its theme. Modeling this summarizing technique is expected for teachers in their lessons with students and the administration models this technique for teachers in all meetings and staff development sessions.

For staff development session 1, consent forms were collected as a means of determining the readiness of the groups in terms of participation. With a small number of eighth grade teachers, it was important to see if there would be sufficient participation from teachers to pursue the study. At the completion of staff development session 2, teachers were asked reflective questions about their practices via an online survey. This was done to gauge the teachers’ personal practices about what they reflect on when working with students. This was analyzed using descriptive statistics.

After the privilege activities in staff development session 3, teachers were given instructions on how to write a cultural autobiography. This was to extend the learning that was done in the staff development session and was voluntary. It was analyzed for participation to see how comfortable some teachers were with spending additional time offering deep reflections on their own cultural identity.
During staff development session 4, teachers worked in small groups and were asked at the end of the session to compile their thoughts and ideas about clarifying rules for students to ensure maximum compliance. This was done to give input to the upcoming PBIS implementation as well as to get teachers to think critically about how they convey to students what they expect versus unstated expectations, which are often culturally biased or driven.

At the end of the study, each member of the MMART was asked to complete an online set of questions in lieu of a face-to-face interview because none of the members were able to meet for an interview at the time of the year when the study concluded. These questions were then reviewed to see if there were summarizing key points from the entirety of the experience of being a member of the MMART. The data collection and analysis served the action research tenets in as much as it served to investigate a practical problem with a bigger social science objective, it was emergent, it was context embedded, and participatory.
CHAPTER 4
CASE STUDY REPORT

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore interventions for teachers delivered through staff development at McCartney Middle School\(^2\) to increase cultural competency and thus decrease the total number of discipline referrals written and subsequently for male students of color. This case study focused on the function of the McCartney Middle Action Research Team or MMART team as an intervention generator, data reviewer and support body both formally during the MMART process and in individual and informal settings where conversations were framed by the work of the study. The study was conceived in Summer 2014 and formalized in July of 2015 after IRB was approved. Individual teachers were also used as case studies to determine if any shift in mindset had happened through the work of the MMART staff development sessions and team meetings as well as to talk about specific referrals where their discretion played out in a particular direction for a given student and discipline problem.

This chapter details the origins of the research problem and the MMART process developed to address it (see Figure 6).

\(^2\) All names in this chapter, including school district, school, and students, are pseudonyms
Figure 6. The Action Research Process for the McCartney Middle School Action Research Team Work

The MMART phases of study: construction, planning action, taking action and evaluating action are discussed utilizing Stringer’s (2007) simple core steps of look, think, and act. The core steps serve as the lens through which MMART may be linked to the actions taken, clarifying the interactions for the study. This chapter tells the story of the researcher and the MMART team working collaboratively, in the richness of the real-life context of the case, to identify interventions used to solve problems of inequity for the students at McCartney Middle School (Simons, 2009). The process ultimately led to some answers and even more questions about the nature of effective staff development, the mindset of the participants in those sessions, the underlying school culture and race, and how to link the work to student outcomes for sustainable change.
Situating the Study: McCartney Middle School (MMS) and Sussex Public Schools

Sussex Public Schools is a large urban/suburban school district in the state of Georgia. According to the state’s department of education FTE data reports as of October 2015, the system served 176,052 students. It has over 20,000 employees and is the county’s largest employer, as well as one of the top employers in the state according to the district’s website. It has a FY2015 budget of $1.860 billion. SPS is nationally ranked in terms of academics and is in the top 20 in terms of total enrollment nationally. It has been awarded national accolades for closing the achievement gap.

Located on the edge of the district, MMS is a school of approximately 1,100 students in grades six through eight. It is fed by two elementary schools and ultimately sends its students to one high school, which is also fed by a sister middle school. The cluster of schools is led by the high school principal who originally was the principal of MMS. McCartney Middle School opened in 2009 and has 1,114 students as of Fall 2015.

McCartney Middle has had two principals in its history. The current principal, Dr. Julia Carlisle, holds a Ph.D. in Education with a concentration in educational measurements and statistics. Dr. Carlisle is a data-driven decision machine. She consistently uses any and all data to inform decisions, practices, and progress. Overall, MMS ranks in the upper tier of middle schools in Sussex Schools. Out of all of the system middle schools, it ranks and has ranked in the top five since it opened in 2009 on the internal measurement tool used to evaluate the principal and the school’s effectiveness based on a myriad of areas. This internal tool correlates to the state grading system for schools. The most updated metrics for these quality measurement tools are now considering any student with one discipline referral, regardless of the severity of the rule broken or the consequence, as a negative mark against the school’s overall ranking.
The guiding principle for schools currently is to measure how ready students are for college and careers once they leave school based on the education they received. The fact that the exclusion from instruction significantly impacts Black male students at MMS was cause for concern and need for further investigation (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Based on the detriment that any discipline issue has on the overall evaluation for the school means that if discipline issues increase, there might be a concern among stakeholders in the community as well as those in the Sussex system about the overall health of the school.

My role as the assistant principal is chiefly to support the principal. This precept in the Sussex Public Schools is repeated ad infinitum to ensure that while it is positively assured that assistant principals have opinions and ideas of their own, ultimately they are expected to ensure the vision of their leader, the school principal. I was hired as the assistant principal for eighth grade at MMS Fall of 2015, which was my second position as an assistant principal in SPS. I left my post at a large high school to avoid a long commute. I knew nothing of middle school outside of my own experience as a student and what little I could interpret from friends and colleagues who were working in middle school. I was grateful for this opportunity because while it was scary to step into the unknown, the positives outweighed the negatives both professionally and personally. I should note that I have only worked in SPS and this was my sixth school and my seventh principal. It has been an overall positive experience professionally.

**Project Origins**

The catalyst for this study came directly from the school’s principal, Dr. Julia Carlisle. She was named principal in February 2014, and as I began my stint at her school, I asked her if she had any ideas about projects I could take on as a part of my studies. She was immediate in her response that she was suspect about the number of discipline referrals for Black students,
particularly boys. Having never spent significant time thinking along those terms and having transferred from a much larger high school where I spent most of my tenure absorbed in ninth grade discipline, I figured that she was a new principal who was looking too closely at the status quo, and that after some initial digging I could satisfy her that there was little with which to be concerned. I felt that there was likely no study to be done. I was mistaken.

The disproportionate relationship of discipline referrals between White and Black students at McCartney Middle School suggests that there is a phenomenon within the school that is driving the practice that Black students are receiving most of the consequences and the most significant consequences are exclusionary. The data for discipline at McCartney Middle is pulled from the student information system, which is the district-based student information database. All discipline referrals are entered into part of the database and it notes the rule that was violated by code as well as the consequences. These records follow a student throughout their time in SPS and if a student leaves, they are sent in hardcopy to the next school for that student.

The critical issue at hand is that of students who are missing exceptional amounts of instructional time for disciplinary reasons and then starting a vicious cycle, which has devastating consequences, most notably not graduating on time or at all from high school, lives of poverty or incarceration, and the propagation of the “school to prison pipeline” (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005). This marked the start of my work and my study.

Phase 1: Constructing

Stringer (2014) states that action research is a participatory process that relies on people’s collective knowledge of their own situation to provide a basis for action and to discover solutions to challenges within their operating system. It is further described as a constant process of observation, reflection, and action that engages stakeholders as full and equal participants in the
research process. Stringer (2014) notes that during this initial phase of observation and entry into the setting its purpose is to, “enable research facilitators to gain an overall picture of the situation to develop positive relationships with people and to help them think more deeply about their issues and concerns” (p. 96).

The first cycle in the thesis phase, constructing, is described by Coghlan and Brannick (2014) as, “dialogic activity in which the stakeholders of the project engage in constructing which action will be planned and taken” (p. 9). The phase of constructing would allow me entry into my new school and a way of generating information and building relationships to eventually form plans and interventions to implement.

In this study, the dialogue helped to generate an understanding of who the stakeholders were and who wanted a participatory role in this work. As a means of gathering relevant information as Stringer (2014) noted, the core steps are look, think, and act (p. 8). This produced “meaningful descriptions and interpretations” (p. 96) as well as assisted in planning and implementing solutions.

The initial “constructing” period for the study started in Summer 2014 (see Table 3). Disciplinary data from the 2013-14 school year found 522 days of direct instruction were missed for disciplinary consequences of ISS (in school suspension) and OSS (out of school suspension). ISS is when a student is “suspended” but they are at school, in a special room and their schoolwork is delivered to them. Students do not have the ability to move about the building without a teacher and are there for up to 9 days according to the district policy. OSS is out of school suspension and this is the more traditional variety of school suspension when a student is prohibited to coming on campus for a time period.
### Table 3

**Timeline of MMART Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Activities/Intervention</th>
<th>Objectives/Goals/Considerations</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6/1/14</td>
<td>Meeting with principal</td>
<td>Gain understanding of pertinent issues that the principal would be open to exploring.</td>
<td>Initial awareness of potential study focus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/27/14</td>
<td>Email invitation sent to potential/preliminary</td>
<td>Gain participation and start generating data and dialog.</td>
<td>All three individuals agreed to participate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>members of the MMART</td>
<td></td>
<td>Initial/informal meeting planned for overview and to generate more ideas about ways to frame the study and whom to include</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/14</td>
<td>Secure local school principal/district approval for the study</td>
<td>To have approval to move forward and have more formal and structured interactions regarding the topic.</td>
<td>School District Research Application Completed and Filed with District Research Office for School System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12/11/14</td>
<td>Initial MMART meeting with preliminary members</td>
<td>To give an overview of pertinent literature. (Empirical table of data)</td>
<td>Suggestions of adding more members to the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To talk about the IRB process and how it will effect the timeline.</td>
<td>Questions about what interventions will look like</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To gain additional understanding from them about the topic.</td>
<td>Concerns about sensitivity of topics to be discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>To solicit additional possible members of the MMART.</td>
<td>Potential outcomes from study discussed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/15</td>
<td>Conduct initial meetings with those that were identified as potential MMART members</td>
<td></td>
<td>Additional possible names of team members were generated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Team was made aware of timeline and possible barriers to timeline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/2015-3/2015</td>
<td>Informal conversations with team members and teachers</td>
<td></td>
<td>Additional data generated related to current teacher practices and attitudes about student behavior.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3 (con’t)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dates</th>
<th>Activities/Intervention</th>
<th>Objectives/Goals/Considerations</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5/1/15</td>
<td>Invite additional members to MMART</td>
<td>Add additional perspectives and experiences to MMART</td>
<td>Two Additional Members Invited and Added SY2015-16 8th Grade Counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>SY2015-16 8th Grade Lead Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/3/15</td>
<td>Convene MMART - 1st meeting</td>
<td>Discuss meeting schedule, current data and to identify gaps, bias, and possible intervention.</td>
<td>-Norms created</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Job Aide</td>
<td>Minutes taken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Empirical Findings Table</td>
<td>Staff Development Session 1 Objective Determined</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Consent Forms Completed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/2015 - 12/2015</td>
<td>IRB Consent/Assent Forms Distributed</td>
<td>MMART members adopted a team to help get forms distributed and collected. MMART members also answered student questions related to the study.</td>
<td>Consent/Assent Forms Filed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/5/15</td>
<td>MMART identifies possible session topics and activities</td>
<td>Determine Staff Development Session I interventions and implementation plan</td>
<td>Agenda</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Journal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Intervention Plan Data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interviews with Students and Teachers Transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline Data Presented to Teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8/7/15</td>
<td>Initial meeting of grade level regarding study, introduction of topic, Q and A, IRB forms completed</td>
<td>To gain participation and to answer questions about the study and its scope. To gain insight into their concerns and understandings.</td>
<td>Consent Forms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Minutes/Reflection Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Agenda/Session Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Meeting Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/1/15</td>
<td>MMART Meeting 1 - September</td>
<td>Staff Development Session 2 Development</td>
<td>Staff Development Session Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9/1/15</td>
<td>8th Grade SD Session – Staff Development Session 2</td>
<td>To gain insight into the level of reflectiveness of participants.</td>
<td>Data from Staff Development Session</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dates</td>
<td>Activities/Intervention</td>
<td>Objectives/Goals/Considerations</td>
<td>Outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/1/15</td>
<td>MMART Meeting 2 - September</td>
<td>Staff Development Session 3 Development</td>
<td>Staff Development Session Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/1/15</td>
<td>8th Grade SD Session – Staff Development Session 3</td>
<td>To assess teacher’s own bias towards their own cultural identifiers.</td>
<td>Cultural Autobiographies Researcher Notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/1/15</td>
<td>Semi Constructed Team Interviews Interview MMART Members personal goals, etc.</td>
<td>To get data, to help identify assumptions, bias,</td>
<td>Interview Transcripts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interview Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11/1/15</td>
<td>MMART Meeting</td>
<td>Staff Development Session 4 Development</td>
<td>Staff Development Session Materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1/1/16</td>
<td>8th Grade SD Session – Staff Development Session 4</td>
<td>To have teachers interact with one another to define rules and to discuss how to develop rules that are both useful and enforceable so that students can be taught the rules for maximum impact.</td>
<td>Teacher collaboration work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10/2015-4/2016</td>
<td>Interview 8th grade teachers whom have particular situations/referrals to share. (CIT)</td>
<td>To generate perspective data about their personal bias, how they view the topic, how they situate themselves in the problem.</td>
<td>Interview Transcripts Interview Questions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3/2016-4/2016</td>
<td>Generate exit data for and with MMART</td>
<td>To gain insight into each team members overall summary of the work that was done.</td>
<td>Intervention Plan Data CIT Interviews with Students and Teachers Discipline data presented to teams</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5/27/16</td>
<td>Report Out to Principal and Faculty</td>
<td>To establish additional plans for how staff development can be developed to meet emergent needs and to develop additional supports for discipline staff development.</td>
<td>Presentation to Staff About MMART Study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>06/16</td>
<td>Determine future implications for the interventions and study findings</td>
<td></td>
<td>Agenda</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There is a nine-day limit imposed by the state for days of suspension for each referral except for students who fall under the protection of the special education program. For most rules, students in special education cannot be suspended out of school more than a cumulative total of nine days in a school year without convening an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) staffing meeting or a disciplinary hearing.

Direct instruction in this study is defined by a student being in his or her regular assigned classroom with his or her assigned teacher to participate in the collective experience of classroom learning. Exclusionary discipline is that of ISS and OSS where a student is given all of the opportunities to do his or her work and not be punished academically, but the students do not have the same access to their teacher and to their classroom resources.

Many of the days of missed instruction were for the same students having multiple suspensions for different referrals, or multiple days for a single infraction by the same student or students. Black students served most of the days; most of the Black students who were disciplined were male. All other areas examined in the percentage of the total school versus the percentage of discipline referrals align, with the exception of Black and White students. With 42% of the school population identifying as Black, Black students received 58.96% of the referrals of discipline that resulted in a referral. In particular, if you compare the other ethnic groups (except for White students), there is almost a perfect 1:1 ratio between total population of the school and the overall issues of discipline in the school in the 2014-15 school year.

Reviewing the 2014-15 data there are three times as many referrals for male students who are Black than White male students (see Figure 7). When looking at gender boys received more than five times as many referrals as female students (see Figure 8).
For unique students who got one or more referrals, there were nearly twice as many Black male students than White male students (see Figure 9).

**Figure 7.** Referrals for 8th grade students by Race/Ethnicity 2014-15

Figure 8. Referrals for 8th Grade Students by Gender


Figure 9. Students with referrals by ethnicity/gender

Figure 10. School Population by Ethnicity/Race


For the basis of this study, the focus was narrowed to the eighth grade because of the direct connection of myself to those students and teachers as well as the importance of having a positive and academically robust school experience before entering the high-stakes world of high school. Of the total number of Black male student discipline referrals, 14 boys got 83 discipline referrals in eighth grade. The school average per student in the eighth grade was 1.6 discipline referrals per pupil. For Black males in eighth grade it was 1.8. The most common infraction was classroom disruption.

The construction phase ended up having several concentrations based on data, situations, and observations: (1) ISS, (2) Support Staff, and (3) Team Blue. ISS was an area for examination since it was the in-school suspension program, which in the two years of the study was staffed by three different people. Many of the students who were
being looked at in this study spent much of their instructional time in the ISS room. Support staff was examined because they work with all teachers, all students and all parents. They are often the most public face of the school and are involved in sensitive issues, which touch on the topics of race.

Grade levels at MMS were divided into teams. Each team was denoted by a color, symbol or name. For the 2014-15 school year, each team had a color: Blue, Gray, Red (for the 2015-16 school year, each team had an animal: Owl, Fox, and Bear). Team Blue was examined during the 2014-15 school year because it had the newest teacher in the eighth grade (Ms. Roberts) with the most referrals along with the most contentious teacher (Ms. Stitch), who was retiring. Both of the teachers had issues that were racially charged during the time of the study. Ms. Roberts had a different second year than her first. On the Blue Team, Ms. Cohen, who did not appear in the 2014-15 year to have issues that were racially fueled had one pointed episode with a Black male student in the second year which required additional investigation since it was volatile and without precedence.

Initially, one of the major hurdles to starting the work with teachers and students as well as the team was that of getting the IRB approval. Working with minors required additional layers of protection for students and their information. One of the additional challenges was working on the school year timeline so that the study would happen organically for the teachers and the team. Initially the approval came in late April, but because it was the end of the 2014-15 school year, it seemed ill advised to start working on specific interventions or with specific students. Student assent was modified and was approved later due to minor changes and shifting of dates, but the assent process was
constant throughout the first semester of the school year. Additional amendments would be filed at the end of the study to allow for interview information to be included from the MMART before the interventions began.

**Examining ISS: Consequence of Choice**

ISS is one of the issues with which I was interested in exploring. Would this particular consequence be as bad as out-of-school suspension? The idea behind ISS is to keep students in the school building to have more control over what students are doing and able to do academically. With students missing hundreds of hours of traditional instruction, the ISS room was one of those critical areas where discipline could be the hindrance to a positive school experience academically. I continually think to myself throughout this process, if we are not willing to give the most and the best instruction to the students who are the most vulnerable, then why do we exist? I am shamelessly saying repeatedly that I worry not over the fate of our gifted students. Most of them need little of what we offer them. They are already so many steps ahead of their average and challenged peers that we would be hard pressed to see any closure in that gap, but yet we continuously spend the resources on the best and the brightest and those that are behind fall further and further behind. If the vulnerable are also the ones spending their educational minutes in the ISS room, it would bear examination that the ISS room was important to this study.

In Fall 2014, as we were planning for the start of school, I was getting briefed on staffing, hours, and responsibilities. The previous year’s ISS coordinator had left a typed list of suggestions and/or comments related to the process. Overall they amounted to what sounded like a hill of complaints and inconveniences. The principal addressed them
all, but did not necessarily comply with the demands. The ISS staffer was a clerk named Ms. Hilsenbeck. As a clerk, she was hired to do clerical work. I have worked in numerous other schools previous to MMS and at all of them, a certified teacher in a variety of academic areas, from physical education to math to social studies, was the person who coordinated ISS and provided supervision to those students. In a school with a huge disparity in discipline and students treating ISS like a revolving door, it could be that the lack of someone trained to work with these students would make a difference. Ceaselessly using my “new” status, I remarked that it might be more beneficial to have a teacher in the ISS classroom who has a basic knowledge of child psychology, student learning, the schools instructional climate and expectations as well as increased respect from the student body.

Dr. Carlisle remarked that we had missed the deadline to displace a teacher that we did not have a need for in the health and PE department based on our enrollment. Because of this, the teacher was three-quarter time (6-hour days) and would arrive sometime during the first academic period. It was suggested that we use him in ISS as a way to increase the “teacherness” of ISS and push it back in the direction of being an instructional setting for those that were having issues behaving. The clerk, Ms. Hilsenbeck, would still need to be in the ISS room in the morning and would get things started, paperwork fixed, assignments organized, but Mr. Winterrowd, the “extra” PE teacher would come in and stay with the students the remainder of the day.

The system seemed to instantly relieve Ms. Hilsenbeck who found her stint in ISS for the previous years to be outside of her comfort zone and her skill set. Mr. Winterrowd looked forward to his time with those students because he would be able to
develop relationships, counsel them, work on their course work with them and without any push from the administration, create dialogue with those students to intervene in the behavior patterns.

In October 2014, the enrollment numbers for staffing changed. The increase in student enrollment had increased the teacher allotment. One of the health teachers, Mr. Simeon, asked if we could consider putting him in the ISS room. He had planned on retiring at the end of the year and would not mind shifting into a new role. This would mean that Mr. Winterrowd, a much newer teacher, had the opportunity to teach in his field. It also meant that Ms. Hilsenbeck could get out of the ISS entirely. Additionally, the high school with the former MMS principal had an opening, and Ms. Hilsenbeck could transfer. She seemed elated to be reunited with those that had moved to the high school with the former principal.

The significant part of this scenario is the last conversation I had with Mrs. Hilsenbeck about the ISS clientele. Her comments about the students in ISS were straight out of the literature on the topic of race and school discipline. She remarked, “Well you know that they [Blacks] don’t train their kids very well and that is why they get in trouble.” Being curious, I asked her to elaborate. She said that if “they would just do like we [Whites] do and be stable, stay married and raise our kids’ right, those boys in ISS would not be there.” I could not resist the urge to poke at her argument because if this was, in fact, the person working most closely with the students in ISS until October 2014, then the correlation could be made that while she did not give them ISS as a consequence nor did she write referrals, she might affect the element of recidivism, which turns ISS into a proxy educational setting.
I stated that it was not an MMS phenomenon, but a universal one that in all societies there is an element of vulnerable populations that regardless of money, or status, or intellect, is being overrepresented in both school suspensions and in the prison population. She was stunned. Her backpedaling over being confronted with the facts as it relates to her own beliefs did not sit well; it was apparent. She then quickly changed the subject and asked me what I was planning on studying for my graduate work. I replied, “the disparities in discipline referrals for Black male students.” She said, “Have a nice day” and left my office.

Welcome to MMS

As was notable about the issues with Ms. Hilsenbeck and how students view those in her position, parents have an opposite view of the school. Support staff is some of the first people that they meet when they enroll. Clerks and other support staff learn vital and intimate information about students and families almost instantly. The public hands over mortgage statements, custody papers, and birth certificates to people they hardly know. There is an understood set of rules about this work beyond FERPA and other regulations that those that work with the public as proxy for the government need this information and are entrusted with it. At MMS while the expectations are the same in terms of what is needed to enroll (timelines, deadlines, etc.), the treatment of different families is not always uniform.

---

3 The Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) (20 U.S.C. § 1232g; 34 CFR Part 99) is a Federal law that protects the privacy of student education records. The law applies to all schools that receive funds under an applicable program of the U.S. Department of Education.
Ms. Battles is unlike other bursars that I have worked with before and I have found that other MMS staff and faculty remark similarly about her. First, she is more educated than most people who serve as bursar. She is not only college educated; she holds a degree in computer science and worked as a programmer at previous jobs. She could not keep up with the chaos of that job and therefore needed something with a slower pace and more control. Typically, as an administrator, I rarely, if ever, got involved with the matriculation process other than to help create a schedule if there was an issue, to communicate with families who speak Spanish, and at the start of the school year, I would help to funnel new students into the bursar’s office to turn in necessary paperwork so they could be in compliance and start school with their peers. I occasionally saw emails about expiring immunizations, or as the testing coordinator, I would work with the clerks to get testing records put into permanent files. Again that was all I knew about that job and how it related to me.

There were several instances where I started to see that perhaps the feelings of Ms. Hilsenbeck were more pervasive than I had thought. I brought this to the attention of Dr. Carlisle, and to the eighth grade counselor, Ms. Smith. Both were on the MMART and knew that my lens for issues of race and equity was focused on any and all possible areas where impact could be made. It was a pretty routine happening where Ms. Battles would bring to my attention or the attention of other assistant principals and their respective counselor that a student was lacking updated residency paperwork. She would dutifully present her copious and detailed documentation about contacting the parent.

Often we would hear that the parents were less than receptive to her request. Ms. Battles was, according to her, “just doing her job.” Ms. Battles never understood all the
animosity that came with her tracking down these documents. “How could people not have their paperwork in order?” she would gasp exasperated. She was baffled by anyone who was not able to produce a utility bill that was not subject to disconnect. How could we allow students at the school without having the right papers on file? Who were these people that pushed back so hard when she questioned them about their residency affidavit? And the dialogue continued. As someone who often called parents with less than favorable news, I was also puzzled that it was such a fight with her. It was not that I never had a difficult or combative parent to contend with, but to have that as the rule and not the exception seemed unusual for individuals who were in employed in places like schools.

I decided I would pay attention to Ms. Battles and her interactions with families when a man came to school one day in August 2015 and demanded to speak to the principal regarding Ms. Battles. Ms. Battles had previously come to me and to another assistant principal about this “strange family” that had “homeschool records” and according to Ms. Battles, nothing added up. It should be noted here that beyond residency paperwork, Ms. Battles often found that people who had homeschooled their children were suspect. The father of two prospective students wanted to talk with Dr. Carlisle because his wife had left the school on numerous occasions since July trying to enroll their children with no success. What was worse was that the father felt that the reason was because they were Latino and there was word in the community – to which he was new – that Ms. Battles was unkind to anyone who was not White.

Dr. Carlisle was out of the building and as is the custom, one or two of the assistant principals meet with concerned parents in her absence. Ms. Tuttle and I were
happy to meet with this man. He entered Ms. Tuttle’s office. He was soft spoken and had a calm disposition. We sat and he introduced himself and as is my practice, I asked, “Mr. Sanchez, how can we help?” He smiled and he retold the long and winding story of how in July he and his wife were relocating. She made an appointment and met with Ms. Battles to enroll their children. He remarked that they had moved from Puerto Rico, but they had at one point lived in New England. Mr. Sanchez said that he and his wife had homeschooled his children at one point, but it was not the bulk of their education. He said his children were bright, talented, and were hoping to get the school year started on the right foot. He told us, “MMS has a wonderful reputation as a school. It is why we moved here. But Ms. Battles has a reputation as the gate-keeper to getting your kids here and she is not fair to Latinos.”

We assured him that we would enroll his children on that day, and that if he could please call his wife and have her bring his children to the school, we would personally show them around, get their schedules created, and that we would not allow Ms. Battles to continue to cause them problems. We told him that we were not content with the reputation that Latinos were not welcome at our school. We were apologetic that his children had now missed nearly five weeks of school because of paperwork, which Mr. Sanchez said he had fulfilled to the best of his abilities. Mr. Sanchez left to call his wife and Ms. Tuttle and I were left alone to begin handling this situation. Ms. Tuttle said, “I am shocked and I am glad that we know that this is what the reputation is. Why would she do this?” I told Ms. Tuttle that our job was to get those children in school and that we had an ethical and legal obligation to educate any child that is brought to our school and whom we have reasonable expectations lives in our attendance zone. Ms. Tuttle was
a brand new assistant principal and I was her mentor. I tried to work on sticky situations with her so that she could see some of the things that often are difficult for a new administrator because they do not know or are not confident in what the “right” thing to do is. Now we had to work with Ms. Battles to get this accomplished.

Knowing that I was not able to face Ms. Battles and remain professional, I picked up the phone and dialed her desk from Ms. Tuttle’s office. “Janie, what is the situation with the Sanchez family?” I questioned. She recalled not understanding where the students had been in school or could not account for each and every month of their education that brought them to MMS. She said that she was nothing by polite to the family, but they had not done what she asked. I calmly, but firmly said, “those kids are starting school today.” She started to contradict me saying, “Ms. Young, they need to…” I cut her off and said, “Those students are starting today. We are obligated to enroll them and I do not care about paperwork at this point. Put my name all over this. They start today. Are we clear?” She continued to rebut. I interrupted her again. “Janie – enroll them. No questions – just do it.” Ms. Tuttle and I greeted the two new students, one girl in the sixth grade and one boy in the eighth grade. Both were sweet, shy, and friendly. We gave them the tour, assigned them to our warmest teachers, and made sure that the parents were willing to give us another try.

When I reported back to Ms. Smith in our office about the new student and the turmoil that the family had endured, I asked her to check in on the new eighth grader, like we do all students. Ms. Smith said, “You know I am not surprised. She [Ms. Battles] does this all the time. It’s ridiculous.” I noted that I agreed that I was never at peace not welcoming people into our school, and that despite issues of protocol and process, we had
to be cordial and let people know that we are a team. I was hoping that this was an isolated episode, but alas there would be more evidence that our school was not welcoming at least in certain areas.

Throughout the year Dr. Carlisle would bring up different issues that parents had brought to her about their view of Ms. Battles and how she works with them. Personally I made note that not a single issue came to us from a White family. Maybe it was coincidence. I had hoped that there would be other ways for me to check my theory about Ms. Battles and how we were in taking our students. My chance arrived second semester.

I got a phone call from Ms. Battles that we had an unusual circumstance for a new student. The student had once lived in our area with relatives, moved away to live with his mother, and was now back living with relatives. His aunt was the person enrolling him. Ms. Battles called me to tell me how on top of things the aunt was despite being in her 20s. The aunt had told Ms. Battles of the issues that had brought him back to Georgia and that they had retrieved him with only the clothes on his back. The extended family was committed to the success of her nephew, Bobby, and his new life with them in Georgia. They had bought him an entire wardrobe, book bag, and all the typical necessities of a teen boy.

Ms. Battles seemed so sensitive and sympathetic to him. She delivered his papers to me and reminded me again of how sad the situation was and how wonderful that Bobby was getting this chance to have a better life. I have to admit; I was so thrilled to see her taking in a new student like this. I also have to admit that I assumed the student was Black. We were growing in all areas, but most of the new students we had enrolled
were Black, and if I was honest about my biases, those students who came with family issues and IEPs often were Black. I stereotyped the new student without even thinking.

Ms. Battles asked me to call the aunt personally to see if there was anything else I could do to help. I called the aunt who was appreciative of my call. I told her that I would try and meet her nephew the next day. I went and told Ms. Smith that we had a student coming to us who did not have good grades or attendance and was in the midst of a family crisis. I told Ms. Smith how Ms. Battles had brought the details of this to me and was so interested in helping him transition here. Ms. Smith was, like me, curious about Ms. Battles’ new attitude towards students like Bobby—coming from a non-traditional family, with an IEP and poor grades. Honestly, we were sarcastic in our response because it was so out of character.

As was normal, things got in the way and I did not meet Bobby on his first, or his second or even his third day of school. His case manager, Ms. McClure, stopped by to say that they were working feverishly to get a handle on his services so we can quickly get him where he needed to be for his IEP. His aunt called me and left me a message asking that I call her back. I called her back and she had said that they were working hard to help him on his homework and that while she understood we were a system of almost exclusively online textbooks delivered through the student online portal, this was a barrier for Bobby and for them. She wanted a set of books. I said of course we could get those as long as there were books for his classes. We had some classes that had gotten away from having a traditional book. I pulled up Bobby’s schedule and as is the case, his school picture from two years ago popped up. I continued to listen to his aunt and halfway returned my end of the conversation, but I could not take my eyes off of his
picture. Bobby was White. I was crestfallen. Not that Bobby being White is a
disappointment overall, but Bobby being White possibly explained Ms. Battles’ incessant
help and caring for this family. Once I hung up the phone, I went to the bookroom and
pulled the books. I walked them to the front desk and I left them for Bobby’s aunt. Ms.
Battles was walking by and I told her the books were for Bobby. She asked how he was
doing. She remarked again how wonderful his aunt was. I felt sick.

When I returned to my office, Ms. Smith was at her desk. I said to her, “you
know that new kid? Have you met him yet?” She said, “Yes, I’ve met him. He seems
nice.” I said, “You know I thought he was Black?” Ms. Smith said, “I though the same
thing…” I then asked, “Do you think that is why Ms. Battles was so nice to them?” She
replied, “you know I thought the same thing once I knew he was White. It was like all
the pieces came together.” She shook her head. Ms. Smith then said, “you know I think
I have figured it out after all these years why people are so mad when they talk with her.
Ms. Battles always has the “I don’t believe you” in her voice when she talking with
families. She is suspicious. When I talk to families when she asks me to call, they are
not happy to share the details of what is happening, but they don’t get mad at me. One
parent told me, “she acts like I am lying to her or being dishonest. It isn’t her place to
judge me.” The Bobby and the Sanchez incidents both lead me to make a decision about
Ms. Battles and her contact with my students. I would end it.

I went to Dr. Carlisle and appealed to her to allow me to speak to families with
paperwork issues and see if I could do better. The new practice was that Ms. Battles
would bring me the documentation and tell me what they lacked. I called the family on
speaker phone with Ms. Battles to listen and to advise me if there was a question, but
essentially, she no longer had contact with the families in eighth grade that were under my umbrella of influence. Nearly every parent from December on provided the necessary paperwork to us in a timely fashion without any negative disagreements. I have had to get Ms. Battles to bend on a few for a day here and there so a middle school student could ride the bus. I still have not yet been able to have the conversation about holding children responsible for the action of their parents. We cannot help who raises us and some kids make it in life despite poor parenting. Some parents are great parents, but logistics like appointments, paperwork, and processes are not their strength. They still love their children, no matter the color.

Ms. Battles still does not see herself in this racially driven behavior, but for the time being there is a workable solution to help some of our families be treated more equitably. It would be hard to determine if the experiences were the same in other grade levels because of the compartmentalization of duties at MMS. Each assistant principal and counselor work exclusively with the students in their grade level. There were some indications that it happened in other grade levels as I was mentoring the new assistant principal in seventh grade and sometimes we did have to help a family that felt Ms. Battles treated them poorly.

**Ms. Roberts, Ms. Stich, and Team Blue**

The teacher with the most number of discipline referrals written in eighth grade for the 2014-15 school year was Ms. Roberts who was a member of the Blue Team. She was a young, White, pretty, fresh-faced, new teacher right out of college who served on the team with the least amounts of expertise or savvy in dealing with discipline. I attempted to meet with Ms. Roberts to interview her on what MMART saw was a critical
incident in her being the teacher with the most referrals during the last school year. MMART wanted to gain insight into the thoughts of teachers who were at the helm of the process. What did they think, feel, and understand? What were their goals?

Because of the delayed nature of the data the interview was done after the first semester of her second year, during the 2015-16 school year. When I initially asked her about being interviewed because of this particular piece of information, she was hard on herself and reluctant. She often takes too much responsibility for situations and it took a while to get her to see that while she may not have wanted to write the most referrals, she did and it was a fact that could lead to better information for the school and her moving forward. My wanting to talk to her was not punitive or judgmental, but informational. It took months to get to a place where interviewing her was something to which she was open. Even with the delay for the interview, MMART still saw value in what she could share because we would forever have brand new teachers in the school. Knowing how to coach, support and encourage new teachers is one of the elements where this study could serve a longer lasting purpose.

We interviewed her with three semesters under her belt and well into her second semester of her second year teaching. In her defense, Ms. Roberts, was by far the most respected teacher of her team, beloved by her students, and viewed as consistent among parents and peers. Soliciting constant feedback, visiting other veteran star teachers on her free periods, and working tirelessly with her mentor, her administrator, and anyone else, she toiled to improve and was hungry to continue. She was reasonable, cordial, and flexible.
When asked in her interview about what would she share with someone like herself about managing a classroom, she remarked that she would tell them to do what works for them and while it is important to listen to others, you have to be able to follow through. It has to align with your individual teaching styles. One area that was of particular interest was a story she told about a student being removed from her class by another administrator during that first year. I asked her about the student because his parents initially told Ms. Roberts that because their son was Black and also big for his age, she was probably intimidated by him and found fault in his behaviors. Eventually the parents partnered with Ms. Roberts and the relationship blossomed.

That was a successful implementation of consistency and communication with a parent to improve a student’s outcomes. The side note to this was that when the student was removed from her class for derailing the entire lesson to the extent which Ms. Roberts could not be productive, the Assistant Principal (AP) informed her that often Black boys find White women to be nags and that was the issue. The student received no consequences for his behavior, and furthermore the comments of the AP led Ms. Roberts to believe that her race made her a nag to many of her students. A year later, she saw the claim as ridiculous and she was shameful in that she did not report my former colleague’s comments to the principal or me.

When asked about her training prior to teaching, she said it was silly, useless, and not even a sufficient background to manage what the expectations were for a classroom. In particular, she found the role-playing with her pre-service peers so impractical. Lastly, when asked about how the communication with parents had been taught to her, she noted that she had no idea how to work with parents before having a “real” teaching job.
MMART was reflective on her remarks and found that the assistant principal’s comment to be detrimental although it would be hard to know to whom other similar comments may have been made. The training of the teachers was an area that was reinforced both for this study and looking at the implementation of the PBIS program for the upcoming school year.

Another member of the Blue Team, Ms. Stich, announced her retirement in the fall of the 2014-15 school year. While she wrote few discipline referrals, she did instigate the majority of contentious parent situations for the entire grade level (many of them overtly racial in nature). She would often call parents after she had had trouble with their child in class and overhearing her conversations with parents in my outer office, I would often feel that her tone and her word choice was accusatory. Perhaps it is my own bias about teachers who overly accuse students of being “disrespectful” but they in turn were disrespectful to students in response. Ms. Stitch was one to raise her voice, roll her eyes, get in the personal space of students and banter back and forth which caused power struggles. I never once heard her say that she might have mishandled a situation, which is usual for most teachers when kids try their patience. Inevitably, parents would call me and demand a face-to-face conference with Ms. Stitch. She would not improve in her delivery in person and often she left having attacked the parents and the students, but claiming she was the victim of poor child rearing. By the end of the year, she was using her office call button to signal for additional administrative support and when help arrived she asked to be the one who got to leave the room to cool off.

Ms. Stitch did come into my office on several occasions to rant about poor and disrespectful behavior of any number of students. She was faithful about calling parents,
but to that end would typically say things that would make me cringe if I overheard them. At one point, after a parent of a Black male student whom she had called was less than supportive, she came directly to me and said, “Mrs. Young, you know what it is?” I remained quiet. “It’s Black culture,” she concluded. She continued, “Those people do not know how to be respectful.” I could hardly breathe. I said, “I don’t know if I would blame the entirety of Black culture on that student’s behavior. I wouldn’t want anyone to blame my entire race or ethnic group or religious affiliation with anything that my kids do. It’s like when a student commits a crime and the news always reports that the student attends this school or that. We [as the school] did not sell them the weapon or teach them how to break the law. We should be left out of it. I am not surprised that the mother was not on board to help you.” She stomped out of my office at that point.

I was hoping that perhaps my curt, if not somewhat sarcastic, response would shut her down until she left our ranks. I was not pleased when less than a week later, she was once again in my office demanding that I do “some type of voodoo” on the parents of the student so they would do “their job” and get their kids in order.

The male teacher, Mr. Boatright, on the Blue Team built relationships with students by showing care and concern for them, treating them with kindness and helping students feel comfortable in his class by modeling respect. One area of weakness for him was not setting his expectations academically high enough for his students. He had never taught the accelerated or advanced/gifted students before the 2015-16 school year. The 2015-16 school year brought him that opportunity and he soared. As a school wide initiative, we had begun a cohort for teachers to get their gifted endorsement on campus. The strategies learned and the training received added to an invisible increase in his
status. In my observation, there are many unwritten rules about teachers and pecking order. Teachers of gifted and talented students are considered to be “better” among teachers both from their peers and from the community versus special education teachers or even worse, general education teachers.

Mr. Boatright was a Black man and in a school with so few male teachers and so few teachers of color, he was aware of the value he had in terms of working with our young men of color. He also was married to White woman, and in that, knew the struggle of raising biracial children. His personal experiences made him someone who was not overtly didactic in terms of race, but one who would often help to bring balance to racially charged situations. There were times when students who would not usually be a problem for him would all of a sudden be disrespectful, and because of the depth of his relationships with his students he could have a directed conversation and that would get the student’s attention and the situation would improve.

Tapping into his cultural capital was not something that could be done quickly because it was so situational. I talked with him about this role and two particular situations with a Black male and a Black female student. The male student was removed from his class during the start of the second semester because after ignoring the behaviors, minimizing the loss of instructional time, and direct, but discreet redirection, the student would not relent. I had never been called to Mr. Boatwright’s classroom so this was unusual. The next week, at the start of the school day, Mr. Boatright brought a young lady who had never had an issue with a teacher to my office. When she was asked to move her seat in class, she refused Mr. Boatright. His request was low-key according to him and the student. He needed her to move to make space for someone else. She had
never displayed blatant disrespect before. In my office, the two of them were discussing the situation and he said to her, “after all I have done for you to help you, this is how you treat me.” The student fell silent. They both went and called her mother who immediately knew that the teacher had been working with her daughter and had developed a personal and positive relationship with her, and that the teacher was the victim in this struggle for respect and ultimately time for teaching.

The next day I asked Mr. Boatright how he was able to handle what could have escalated to a referral and suspension, and he remarked that he tried to let the kids know that he cares and that he wants what is best for them. He commented, “I try and be calm and not to pick at them.” The student was so sorry for what had happened. As for the young man, his behaviors have continued and escalated. He was suspended both for the referrals where I removed him as well as several others. Mostly, he was unable to know when he should stop contributing to the argument either between himself and the teacher or when he would interject in other people’s drama with their teacher. His mother was a teacher and a supportive parent. She was able to understand the expectation for her son, but no work that we did at school changed the ever-increasing discipline. He even had to be removed from the ISS room because he would not follow the simple directions of the teacher in that classroom.

**Student Assignment**

All of the eighth grade special education students were served on the Blue team during the 2014-15 school year, some in collaborative (two teacher) classes and some in resource classrooms where the setting is limited to a small number of students. There were two additional teachers who served in the collaborative and resource classes outside
of the four teachers on the team. Common logic would suggest that if there were more adults in the classroom there would be fewer problems working with students, but apparently this logic did not pan out. It is important to note that collaborative classes have a majority of general education students so the general education students are receiving the benefit of a smaller teacher-to-student ratio. Again, it made no detectable difference for these students or their respective teachers because student groups were more heterogeneous during the 2015-16 school year than in previous years. This change allowed for more balance on teams and more perspective from teachers.

In previous years, all of the gifted students were on one team and all of the students with special needs were on a different team. The 2015-16 school year provided a chance to place a variety of students with a variety of teachers. To increase one’s capacity and to avoid labeling, we placed gifted students on all teams and the students with IEPs are on one of two teams. Racially this helped diversify teams because there is an overrepresentation of White students in the gifted program (see Figure 11). This change created tension in the community when incoming sixth grade families called and asked if we had made a mistake because “Ms. (insert name)” was the sixth grade gifted language arts teacher and their child had someone else. Dr. Carlisle persisted in her goal of having more diverse students for each team and in the 2015-16 school year MMS has all but two teachers certified to teach gifted students so this pattern of having diverse students on all teams is sustainable. We realized that after several assessments that the non-gifted students who were in blended gifted/general education classes started to outperform their gifted peers. This was surprising to many faculty members, particularly those that had been the gifted teachers before this change.
As the phase of construction continued on and I was peppering conversations with these questions and ideas swirling around regarding our students and our discipline, it was hard to imagine that no one had had this conversation already. The faculty, nearly exclusively White and female, working with students who are majority Black and male, could foster a need for tools and teachable moments to help ease this burden, but no conversation had been had and people were a bit leery of me moving in that direction.

**Discipline, Consequences, and Administrator Training**

The inquiry into the elements of consequences provided a variety of both information and impetus for inquiry. There is an array of consequences available to the school by the system, which are assigned by the administrator, usually an assistant principal, but sometimes a principal. At MMS, discipline is done by grade level. The

---

**Figure 11. MMS Gifted Students by Ethnicity and Race**

Source: MMS Student Information System, 2016
assistant principal who processes the referral selects the rule violation codes that are derived from the student conduct handbook, which is a system-based document made public.

There is a state-based set of codes, but those are not used in Sussex Public Schools. The codes for SPS are correlated for Georgia. Reports at the state level reflect state coding and not SPS coding. Teachers do not seem to be aware of this coding nor the rules that are written in the codes. The terms for the official rules are not defined for teachers anywhere that is easily accessed. There are 13 rules with specific details, which are lettered for each rule. Some codes are used sparingly since they are flagged at the state’s Department of Education and if they are used frequently, can flag the school as one that is dangerous and in need of intervention from the state. Several of the codes are broad and can be used in nearly all situations, such as the failure to follow verbal directions or class disruption. What is beguiling is that nearly all issues of disciplinary referrals are those that come from not following directions, typically verbal, thus causing a classroom disruption because of the level of redirection required to quell the behavior.

There are rules that are so overly specific that I never use them. Many of these rules relate to weapons, drugs, sexual misconduct, or severe violence and injury to others. The school administrators assign these codes and the training for that portion of the job is a four-hour staff development session at the start of their tenure as administrators and annual updates are often delivered by one of the assistant principal to the others by way of email and handouts. It is common practice to use and misuse the same rules over and over again without any regard to gravity or to consistency. The same parallel can be said for consequences. This is not a criticism of the system or the job, but it is one of the
harsh realities of scarcity of time for training when jobs are multifaceted and there is tremendous movement in the largeness of the system.

School principals select which items are on the menu of consequences with the exception of ISS and OSS, which are standard and required from the district system. Their system of steps towards increasing consequences is based on ISS and OSS solely. For instance, a student who has had four discipline referrals resulting in ISS or OSS and not for attendance-related rules can be placed on a behavior contract. This contract invokes specific and personalized interventions for the student as well as increased vigilance of the school to monitor the student’s behavior and put the parents on notice about the impending possibility of a discipline hearing and possible separation from the school and/or system.

This policy discourages schools from thinking creatively if they have a student whom they want to discipline and to rehabilitate. By not assigning ISS or OSS, the district does not recognize that the referral was a step. If the student were to do something heinous as the next offense, there is often a question about why a more standard and harsh punishment was not issued for the previous issue so as to send the student a direct warning about the gravity of his/her behaviors. I see this as a disconnect because of the disenfranchisement that is represented in the literature. A student who is struggling to behave and be successful in school who is removed from instruction and then returned with frustration because he or she is behind in their learning potentially directs the student towards being removed from the school. School administrators are encouraged to think “inside the box” which is found in the literature as well (Fenning & Rose, 2007).
ISS (In-School Suspension) and OSS (Out-Of-School Suspension) are the typical brands of exclusionary discipline both nationally and at MMS. Saturday detention, after-school detention, or moving to an alternative classroom where instruction is given, all offer some value to the student and do not let his or her behaviors go unnoticed. If this is the sixth or seventh time that the student has had an issue in a given year, the ISS or OSS option are all that the district discipline office will recognize as legitimate steps in removing the student and getting him or her to an alternative school for intensive schooling which will provide increased teacher attention.

There are other options at MMS meted out at the administrative level, such as Saturday detention or after-school detention. Teachers can assign Saturday detention, after-school detention, and silent lunch detention for minor classroom offenses. After-school detention is also available for students who are missing work and need to make it up. Likewise, teachers can remove less structured and social times such as the “walk ‘n talk” program and clubs, which happen twice a month but only for academic needs or reasons. Most parents are supportive of Saturday school because they are able to help in the redirection process and their child is not losing any classroom seat time.

There were two discipline referrals during the 2014-15 school year where parents did not partner with the school to provide consequences that were appropriate and maintained direct instruction for their children. Two parents insisted on ISS for their student because the prescribed punishment was not agreeable to them. The students involved were behaving dangerously on the bus after repeated interventions including moving their seats, conferencing, and detention. The driver, the transportation department, and I all made the parents aware that there were problems with their
children’s behavior on the bus and it was dangerous and it needed to stop immediately.

The prescribed punishment is to be suspended from the bus per the student handbook for MMS, but the parents of the students in question refused to transport their children to school. As a means of compromise I offered Saturday school detention as an alternative but the parents refused to partner with the school and bring the students to Saturday detention. We were unable to come to a better solution that was in the students’ academic interests. The parents would not be “inconvenienced” in their own words and MMS was left to support the bus driver and help the students understand that what they were doing was not acceptable and was dangerous. The students were suspended and given ISS for several days for these referrals.

As the administrator, I felt hamstrung because I removed the students from the instruction that they needed, but I sent them home on the bus on those same days where they could not behave and had caused problems. Those same students got yet another referral being disruptive and dangerous on the bus. I asked another assistant principal to process the referral as I was in the middle of testing season and could not find time to do it efficiently. She asked me what I would want to give as a consequence and I said to “put them off of the bus.” This was the school’s protocol and after my early concessions felt that the parents would be more open to the bus suspension since the previous ISS stints did not stop the bus problems. My assistant principal colleague took me literally and suspended the students off of the bus for the rest of the school year. The parents contested this to the county office and the county office then told MMS that the students could only be off the bus for two weeks. The prescribed punishment according to the MMS handbook would be a month off of the bus. My colleague was confused about why
I was not upset at this mandate from the district office. I remarked that when I asked her to “put them off of the bus.” I assumed she would follow the school’s procedure and based on the fact that this was the third time the students received a bus referral that she would give them a month bus suspension. This made me concerned as to what other areas were there inconsistencies with student behavior on the administrative team even when specific and written protocols existed as in this case.

**Phase 2: Planning Action**

Looking to effect change means that identifying where the change could reasonably take place is how this study needed to be actionable. Teachers are those that most directly impact this process from the perspective of discipline referrals being written. If a teacher viewed their role in the process of discipline differently and had their attention drawn to the facts of who is receiving the majority of the discipline referrals and what the implications of those discipline referrals were, then perhaps it could reduce the overrepresentation of male students of color being removed from the instructional setting as a result of their behavior. Teachers are a part of a bigger school culture and while the issues with Ms. Battles and Ms. Hilsenbeck are not directly related to instruction, they are indicative of a school culture that is tolerant of inequity. Research states that much of what we see in boys of color and their achievement gap is a result of years missing instruction in previous school, being embarrassed or self-conscious of gaps in their knowledge, and then moving ahead not behaving so that they can be removed to avoid future embarrassment.

Teachers possibly do not see the dynamic this way or see how they are contributing to it. Teachers being empowered to see their work differently and valuing
their own instruction can be enough to see that ISS is not a substitute for what a student would get from them. Having critical conversations about race, gender and other value-laden characteristics of students, which vary vastly from the race and gender of the teachers could lead to a different result. Using a vehicle that already exists, but adding layers to it to help encourage these conversations and open up the dialogue amongst teachers both on their own team and as a grade level has the real potential to shift mindsets and increase mindfulness (Thornton & McEntee, 1995). Having a team of people to examine data, create frameworks to address gaps in what teachers are seeing, feeling, and saying and then to talk with individual students and teachers to get a better summation of what the thinking is behind some of our students and their situations will inform the change agents beyond the eighth grade to think critically about not only what teachers need in terms of professional development, but how to assess its impact and how to use it as a dynamic tool for change. The literature about staff development and professional learning communities is clear, particularly in terms of its impact on achievement, but using the same model to add to teachers’ toolboxes to help students get more out of their instruction by being present and valued by their teachers is not all together conclusive (Stoll, Bolam, McMahon, Wallace, & Thomas, 2006).

While the issue of discipline disparities is well documented in the MMS school data, and then mirrored in empirical studies and theoretical papers, the causes for this are not all together defined at the school level. The use of the MMART model allows for the constant monitoring and intervening taking place. Working with the teachers as an embedded part of the system allows for me to examine my practice and how I talk about this part of my work with teachers, with my principal and with others.
The MMART Team

Trying to determine who would best meet the needs of this work and inform the actions taken was a difficult task. Initially, because of my own limited scope of people and their experiences, I choose to have three people serve on the team. After consulting with my committee during my oral comprehensive exams, it was advised to increase the number of participants to add to the depth of the work and data collection as well as to guarantee consistent participation among a team. With more individuals serving as members of this team, it would mean that work could continue if one or two people decided not to continue on the team or had to miss a meeting or intervention session.

Ultimately, the MMART team was selected based on who would have a vested interest in this work, bring a unique perspective or set of experiences, and/or had the social capital to work with teachers on this issue. The team consisted of six members, five women and one man (Figure 12): the school principal, the eighth grade guidance counselor, the guidance counselor for the sixth grade who previously had been an administrator and also served as the eighth grade counselor during the 2014-15 school year, the new seventh grade assistant principal who had previously worked as the school’s instructional coach, lead language arts teacher, a charter member of the faculty and former teacher of the year, and the lead eighth grade teacher who was new to the school in 2014-15. There were two members of the team who were Black, one woman and one man.
All of the members had been classroom teachers, except for the sixth grade counselor. Four of the six members are parents and have children who are school-aged. Two members, Ms. Tuttle and Ms. Privy, are graduates of Sussex schools. Both the principal and the lead teacher for eighth grade hold a Ph.D. in education. The lead teacher studied young Black males in middle school and how culture participates in their success or lack of success at school. As an ironic and interesting note, the conclusion of his dissertation advocated for increased and on-going staff development for teachers to help bridge the gap in positive ways between the dominant and subordinate cultures in schools.

To begin the process of developing a team that would be able to work together effectively, honestly, and efficiently, I conducted semi-structured interviews so that I could examine both similarities and differences in terms of ideologies related to race, to school dynamics and culture, to previous experiences, and to goals and objectives for participation. The principal felt that the single most important element to student success was the relationship between the student and the teacher. Dr. Carlisle and Ms. Tuttle
both felt that the effectiveness of the teacher was at the heart of students who were successful both behaviorally and academically. Dr. Bustle felt that the home/school connection often contributed negatively to students who were not being successful. Ms. Privy focused on inherent behavioral issues such as those driven by chemical issues or disorders.

All of the members were supportive of the idea that teachers could be taught skills to help them to communicate better with students. All of the members were in agreement that there were racial issues that were not well articulated in the school and could be causing issues with students who were different from the majority of the faculty, which was female and White. When asked to delve deeper into that, Ms. Privy noted that many of those teaching in SPS could have come along when she did when the majority of the students looked like the majority of the teachers and while times have changed, those teachers have not. Ms. Tuttle noted that she concurred with that idea using Ms. Stich as her example. This supported my claim that Ms. Stitch was a case study in teachers not held accountable for their biases. Ms. Tuttle made a strong point that without someone wanting to change, change is hard. Dr. Bustle supported that idea that change is something that has to be embraced and acknowledged for it to make a difference. All members were hopeful that change was possible and information was going to come from our work together.

The MMART meetings happened monthly. The role of the team was two-fold. Their major responsibility was to be what I thought of as a mirror and a filter. They had to help me to reflect on the teachers’ attitudes, behaviors and actions as well as to filter what I was seeing and hearing. Was I being biased? Were the teachers giving me a
histrionic view of things? Additionally, the team was to help use the information that I brought to them from the staff development sessions and interviews along with data to generate further movements and interventions for the study. I created agendas for the meetings, which I emailed out in advance to the team when I reminded them of the meetings. I produced a meeting calendar for the first meeting so they could plan ahead. I then asked for one of the members to take minutes of the meetings. Upon meeting with my dissertation committee in my oral comprehensive exams, it was suggested that I record the meetings and transcribe them. I only had one additional meeting left, but I did record that meeting and transcribe it. I have to say that while the transcription gave me a lot of detail, I felt that it stilted the conversation more than the previous meetings. It reminded me of how sensitive the subjects were that we were talking about.

The first course of action was to meet with the MMART team to digest the baseline data, to get their takeaways, to set norms, and to talk about how we would work as a team. Every member of the team worked with one or more of the other team members in outside of the team. This helped the team move forward more quickly because there were already established bonds of trust and a mutual respect, which would allow members to be honest and to share openly without fear of retribution. The agenda for the team involved reviewing data that helped the members have a better specific understanding of the status quo in the school. We would meet monthly and review progress and then based on those findings, as well as on other anecdotal information generated during team meetings, we would create a plan for a staff development session on a particular topic. I would deliver then deliver the staff development session and generate reflective data. The team would also recommend other ways we could generate
information or perhaps intervene when trends or areas of need were identified.

Working during both Phase 1 (constructing) and 2 (planning action), it was decided that the way to create spaces for teachers to reflect on their practices and to learn additional cultural competency skills was to use approaches that already existed. The schedule at MMS is meeting-driven. This being the status quo, the idea for this study was going to feed off of that structure and inject the interventions through meetings, which were already in place for teachers and were something with which they were familiar. It was common to meet as a team with the administrator several times a year to discuss students who were having trouble and to create plans for those students. Parent conferences, Student Support Team meetings, social worker referrals, etc. often came from the teacher-team meeting work.

The MMART members who most often participated in the smaller team meetings were Ms. Smith, the eighth grade counselor, and myself. Attention was paid to the nature of those team conversations. In November it was clear that the smaller team meetings were not able to move in the direction of cultural competence training. The “kid talk” meetings were a staple of the school culture and we had several teams with difficult situations including multiple teachers who were in jeopardy of losing their jobs. Having them openly participate in what was risky conversation and training was not fruitful. Notes from the meetings turned into long lists of names and simple notations about current grades. Concerns from MMART over ensuring consent/assent was completed for each of those students as well as the dynamics of working with teams where perhaps one or two members was not consenting to participate made the use of these meetings as a truly embedded part of the study a fallacy. The meetings do have purpose, but that
purpose is to serve the needs of the teachers to network and to collaborate about students who are struggling. There is neither time nor space to add to that set agenda and therefore this was not a part of the finished product for this work.

Another level of the study’s work was when eighth grade teachers would meet as a group for staff development based on the needs identified by the MMART. This staff development would happen as part of a standing monthly grade-level meeting that was informational before the study commenced. Unlike the small team meetings, teachers did not drive the agenda in these meetings. A previous meeting of building-level leaders decided what needed to be disseminated and most of it was managerial/informational. The MMART team wanted to attempt to identify if there were common trends of themes between these two settings for intervention. Since the data for the team meetings was not collected and used as originally designed, the only useful data generated was that of MMART members’ notes from these meetings and reflections. Dr. Bustle seemed to never have a negative comment related to his own team meetings (Team Bear). Ms. Smith, as the counselor, who participated in all three teams’ meetings (Owl, Fox, and Bear) had a slightly more critical view. She often felt that the teachers were avoiding parents and also that while there was a lot of identifying issues, there were few action plans being made other than to contact the parents and then to assign more time for the students to complete the work they were missing. Overall, the solutions were universal while the needs were obviously individual. There was a true mismatch and for that reason, those meetings took on a distinctly academic and managerial focus. There was not a great deal of creativity coming to neither light nor reflective practice.

Each month, the MMART met to debrief the information from the smaller team
meetings, to look at macro level student data, and data from previous staff development sessions, and then to design the next session to be delivered. The MMART team was advisory in this portion of the work although the eighth grade lead teacher and the eighth grade counselor were in attendance at the large staff development sessions.

Making the teachers comfortable with the study was not an easy task. During the previous year when the initial IRB paperwork was being generated, I briefly presented the idea to the eighth grade teachers that I would be studying our grade, our students, and our teachers. While they all politely nodded at me when I asked them if they were “good” with the idea of learning about cultural competency and how that related to student discipline, after the meeting, some came back to me saying that teachers were concerned and hesitant to participate. While at that time it felt like a roadblock, it was actually more of a speed bump. It was an excellent reminder that after immersing myself in the literature and having taken many classes that helped me to become more aware of culture and bias, my teachers were not as comfortable as I had become with this subject matter. This was why the study was important. Those critical conversations that can lead people to be aware of their own culture and thus more aware of other cultures were the nucleus for this work (Singleton, 2014). The fact that these people were teachers did not make the lessons any easier nor did it ease their minds that the students that they have to assert themselves around might reveal them to be less than equitable disciplinarians.

**August 2015 MMART Meeting**

At the August meeting, I presented the team with the overarching principles for the study including the rudiments of MMART. We set norms so that all of the participants would have ownership of the meeting’s workings and frameworks. I issued
each participant a folder of the hard copies of the presentation of slides, the empirical
table of studies pertinent to the work at hand, as well as a blank journal for them to use if
they wanted to make notes along the journey. I also reviewed the consent forms and
asked for them to sign them. All of the members did so. I asked for one of the members
to volunteer to take notes, which Ms. Tuttle happily volunteered to do.

September 2015 MMART Meeting 1

The meeting for the start of September involved looking at the updated discipline
referral data for the 2015-16 school year. Each subsequent meeting would review the
previous month’s discipline data. The total number of referrals is four (see Table 4). All
of the students who got referrals were male and three were students of color. The
discipline issues were: misbehavior on the bus and disrespect towards another student
either in gesture or in word. MMART wanted to know how the team meetings (Team
Owl, Team Fox, Team Bear) were going and they were given a report of the overall gist
of the issues being brought up. Nearly all of the issues were minor, but enough to
concern teachers regarding long-term academic issues.

Table 4

August 2015 Discipline Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Rule Violation</th>
<th>Referral Date</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Rude and Disrespectful Behavior to another Student or Students</td>
<td>8/24/15</td>
<td>2 Days ISS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Rude and Disrespectful Behavior to another Student or Students</td>
<td>8/27/15</td>
<td>1 Day ISS /1 Day OSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Multi-Race/Mixed Race</td>
<td>Disruption of a School Bus</td>
<td>8/28/15</td>
<td>3 Days Bus Suspension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Disruption of a School Bus</td>
<td>8/28/15</td>
<td>3 Days Bus Suspension</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
September 2015 MMART Meeting 2

MMART met for a second time in September because of the total number of weeks in the month. Review of discipline data for this year was shared which illustrated that of the 11 referrals, 10 were for male students (see Table 5). Of the 10 males with referrals, only one was White. The most common rule charged which was rude and disrespectful behavior towards other students. Class disruption made its first appearance as well this month.

Table 5

September Disciplinary Data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Rule Violation</th>
<th>Referral Date</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Oral threat/intimidation</td>
<td>9/2/15</td>
<td>3 Days ISS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Rude and Disrespectful Behavior to another Student or Students</td>
<td>9/14/15</td>
<td>Administrative Detention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Fighting</td>
<td>9/18/15</td>
<td>2 Days ISS/2 Days OSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Fighting</td>
<td>9/18/15</td>
<td>2 Days ISS/ 2 Days OSS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Not Following Verbal Directions</td>
<td>9/21/15</td>
<td>1 Day ISS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Rude and/or disrespectful conduct</td>
<td>9/22/15</td>
<td>2 Days ISS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Behavior that could cause physical injury</td>
<td>9/22/15</td>
<td>2 Days ISS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Cheating</td>
<td>9/29/15</td>
<td>Administrative Detention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Class Disruption</td>
<td>9/30/15</td>
<td>1 Day ISS/ 3 Days OSS</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The team then decided that the next staff development would need to help teachers to focus on their own bias and how each of us has things that we are identified
by that we did not choose. The discussion of the privilege activity (University of Albany, 2016) was discussed and designed based on input from the group, especially Ms. Smith, the eighth grade counselor who had done this style of activity before at a staff development session for counselors. One area of major concern was the consent/assent process for students and parents. How would the teamwork around not having all or a majority of students enrolled in the study? The team agreed to each take a team of students and work each morning to collect forms, answer questions, and encourage students to complete the process.

**Phase 3: Taking Action**

**October 2015 MMART Meeting**

At the October MMART meeting, there was discussion about talking with specific students who could help us to understand the motivation of students who have behavior issues so we can help to coach teachers with that perspective in mind. The team discussed what criteria we could use to determine who could help us to understand the undercurrents at play. The team thought to talk with students of color since they continued to be the most represented in the discipline data. They wanted to see if we could identify students who had either increased or decreased their incidence of behavior issues in middle school.

After talking about students we knew and who was part of the study it was decided that I would talk with Sara and Michael. Sara’s exceptionality is Emotional Behavior Disorder (EBD) and was part of the Special Education program. EBD is an emotional disorder characterized by excesses, deficits or disturbances of behavior. The child's difficulty is emotionally based and cannot be adequately explained by intellectual,
cultural, sensory general health factors, or other additional exclusionary factor. Michael was exited from special education in seventh grade. He was bright, but in his time at MMS had gone from being barely a blip on the radar to being in high jeopardy to be removed from the school. Due to the fact that he has over 40 total disciplinary referrals in his time in the district and had the most of any other student in the school for the year of 2015-16. Once I interviewed them I would bring those transcripts to the next meeting to digest them with the team.

As was our practice, we discussed the discipline data for the previous month (see Table 6). October saw two female referrals which overall is significant since most months there are none. The referrals from 10/2 were not related to one another. Classroom disruption and not following verbal directions are four of the total referrals, which are vague

Table 6

*October Discipline Data*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Rule Violation</th>
<th>Referral Date</th>
<th>Consequence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Not Following Verbal Directions</td>
<td>10/2/15</td>
<td>Administrative Detention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Mixed Race/Multi Racial</td>
<td>Not Following Verbal Directions</td>
<td>10/2/15</td>
<td>Administrative Warning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Classroom Disruption</td>
<td>10/20/15</td>
<td>Saturday Detention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Classroom Disruption</td>
<td>10/20/15</td>
<td>Saturday Detention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Ethnic, racial, sexual, religious, disability slur</td>
<td>10/23/15</td>
<td>2 Days ISS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Failure to Serve another Disciplinary Consequence</td>
<td>10/26/15</td>
<td>1 Day ISS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Rude and/or disrespectful conduct</td>
<td>10/30/15</td>
<td>Administrative Detention</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Additionally, they wanted to see if we could talk with the two teachers who had the most referrals, Ms. Riley and Ms. Brown. Both are special education teachers who worked with nearly an identical bunch of students. One teacher has them for language arts and social studies. The other teacher had them for science and math. The students alternated between them, but spend most of the day together. I interviewed the two teachers during the second semester due to time constraints and scheduling conflicts earlier in the school year.

**Critical Incident Interviews – Students with Converse Discipline Data**

Sara was a Black girl in the eighth grade who receives special education services at MMS. MMART initially wanted to select two male students of color with either increasing or decreasing discipline issues in middle school, but there was not a male who was participating in the study who had declining discipline referrals. Heavy set, severe eczema and clearly someone who does not fit the status quo, she is kind, soft-spoken, and mature. She has two mothers, which she shares without any hesitation. Sara was one of the first students I met at MMS and I have continuously made an effort to smile at her and to complement her whenever possible. It is clear that she suffers from a lack of self-confidence. Unofficially, she is a leader among her peers because she gives off the air of being calm, cool and collected. I asked her if she would be willing to talk with me about my study and she was happy to accommodate me. We met in my office and sat at my little round table. I told her that it was my way of trying to understand what happens with kids in school and I wanted her to know that I would not be upset if she was critical about school. I also informed her that once I got her interview typed out, she would be able to come back and review it for editing. She did come back for the member checking and
she did not change anything, other than the spelling of her name, which the transcriber had misspelled.

For a student who hardly says a word, she sat with me for nearly 45 minutes explaining her take on the student/teacher relationship. She also explained that she was hardly ever in trouble in the eighth grade because she felt that she was able to manage her behavior better because she was older, but in elementary school and early in middle school, she was in trouble a lot more often.

Michael was the yin to Sara’s yang. Michael was smaller than average, spindly, with a voice that had not yet developed into the baritone man voice that many eighth grade boys have. He was the child of an older single mother who works out of town most of the time and he is left to fend for himself. He is an only child who takes medication sporadically. He can be found consuming large quantities of junk food during breakfast time, which often coincided with what felt to others like a manic state. Michael is the only student I have ever had to prohibit from riding the school bus for more than a week or two. He wore braces, which made his voice almost seem louder because he could not completely close his mouth. He had no peers at school because of his behaviors which others found annoying. Michael had significantly ramped up the nature and the frequency of his behavior issues. There were times in seventh grade where Michael was so upset that he was not able to comply with any sort of adult directions, even if it was to sit and to take a deep breath so we could talk. Other times he was happy and willing to follow along with teacher directions. He was bright and school was not difficult for him.
He was not officially in the gifted program, but based on the new design for teams he was put into gifted-blended classes so he would possibly find better ways to engage his mind than being disruptive.

Michael was prone to not only disrespectful words, but he would also slam doors, throw his book bag, physically get into the space of others and occasionally push, shove, or hit others. Michael was raised by a single mother who was always willing to come to school for meetings, answer phone calls or emails regarding her son, and was basically an involved and active parent. It was hard to know what these disruptive behaviors meant for Michael.

At one point early in the year a new faculty member had started a soccer club and that was the first time that Michael was seriously interested in the attention and praise of an adult. This positive situation only lasted briefly because when Michael was chronically in trouble in class, he was dismissed from the soccer group. This did not escalate nor deescalate his behaviors. He seems almost detached while in the midst of one of his issues.

It should be noted that until the second semester of seventh grade, Michael had an Individualized Educational Plan or IEP for Other Health Impairments, which was related to a diagnosis of ADHD. An IEP is a plan that is developed by a committee annually for students who are found eligible for special education services. It is a legally binding document that holds a school accountable for meeting students’ needs based on their exceptionality. Based on a lack of data collected by teachers, he was dismissed from his IEP. He is supposed to take medication daily for this ongoing challenge. His mother does hold him responsible for this chores but he does not always take his medication. He is
slightly more manageable while on the medication. He is known to spiral out of control and to escalate behaviors until he has to be taken home. There have been times that his behaviors seem so extreme and out of his control that I ask for his mother to come to school and take him home. I do not process it as a discipline issue since I cannot determine whether he is in control of what he is doing.

I invited him to my office for an interview like Sara and gave him similar instructions. Unlike Sara, Michael incessantly talks in class, in the halls, and to his peers. When he was in my office, he answered the questions asked, but there was no elaboration. He did not feel the need to expand on his ideas and he had little insight into what was behind the issue of his behaviors. It was almost if he never had reflected on the idea of his behavior despite the exceptional amount of hours, days and weeks he had missed from school due to his suspensions.

**Intervention Cycle 1: August 2015**

The team identified that the first staff development session would be getting the teachers familiar with the study, getting consent forms signed and collected and showing the group the overview of their discipline data which had never been presented to them before. Participation in the study was optional however attending the monthly meetings was required and there were standing team meetings that regardless of someone’s participation status in the study all teachers would still attend. The team meetings were to discuss the issues for the students on each team and happened on a rotating basis. Because of the team model, it would be impossible to continue to conduct business for the school and the students and only work with a portion of the teachers. Originally the team meeting notes were going to be used as a data source, but because of the gaps in
student participation and to a lesser degree teacher participation, that data was not used as part of the study. The collective good that was perceived by participating in this study was something that the principal set as an expectation for the eighth grade teachers at the pre-planning sessions for the school year.

**Intervention Cycle 2: September 2015**

The second staff development session was about starting the path of reflectiveness. Based on team meetings and the comments that teachers were making, it was clear that while I assume that teachers have the best intentions, the reality was that they were talking about students in a way that prevented a growth mindset. What was interesting was they were willing to say a student was “low,” “behind,” “unidentified,” [a nod to special education] or “had crazy parents.” They would only remark as if the behaviors were wholly under the power of the student and were not an area where they needed to strategize to get them on the right track. Perhaps the teams felt that having a mindful and reflective attitude regarding their practice could help to open the door to thinking more in terms of proactive and corrective behavioral teaching, and not the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality. This staff development session was not overtly about race and inequity, but one of the tenets of cultural competency is a willingness to examine one’s own self, culture, beliefs, and bias as a preliminary step to increase competence which requires reflectiveness.

There were three components to the second staff development session. The initial activity was a protocol from Smith and Armstrong’s (2002) *Village of 100 People* (as cited in National School Reform Faculty, 2016). In this protocol, the teachers were asked to work in groups and decide which percentage of people would fall into any number of
demographic categories. They were then shown the reality of the world if the world were only 100 people:

If we could at this very moment shrink the earth’s population to a village of 100, with all existing human ratios staying the same, the village would look like this: There would be 57 Asians, 21 Europeans, 14 people of the Western Hemisphere (North and South America), and 8 Africans. 70 of the 100 would be non-White; 30 would be White. 70 of the 100 would be non-Christian; 30 would be Christian.

50 percent of the entire world’s wealth would be in the hands of 6 people -- all 6 would be U.S. citizens 70 would be unable to read; 50 would suffer from malnutrition; 80 would live in substandard housing; and only 1 would have a university education. (as cited in National School Reform Faculty, 2016)

This protocol is designed to give perspectives on tolerance and a more global view of the world. It was to help situate them culturally and demographically. The next task was to ask teachers to think back to the last time they had a discipline issue with a student. The teachers were asked then to think about the following questions:

- Have I already interpreted the behavior?
- Am I making assumptions about why the student behaves the way that he or she does?
- Have I already passed judgment on whether the behavior was good or bad? Stop and describe what you and the student said and did and in what order.
- What leads you to believe that the behavior was wrong or desirable?
- What about the behavior leads to your interpretation?
I asked teachers to share in small groups about their reflection. Then I asked them to share with the larger group. There was little conversation at that point. The question of interpreting the behaviors was interesting. I pushed them a little further, “Do we guess that a student is being disrespectful for no other reason than to upset us?” Once there was a time for all who wished to respond, I asked for the teachers to move forward and to consider how mindfulness could impact their relationships with students. As a generation of data, I asked the teachers to complete a summarizing activity.

**Intervention Cycle 3: Staff Development Session 3 – October 2015**

The role of privilege in the lives of different people is one of those unspoken areas of sociology that mystifies people. The MMART wanted to help teachers become more sensitive to those areas of the lives of our students that are not chosen, but either positively or negatively places them in a different part of society. One of the MMART members, Amy, the eighth grade counselor, mentioned that at one of her counseling staff development sessions, they did an activity where they each had a fictitious persona and based on that persona they move a game piece forward or back after having had them all line up together to start. The game pieces represented people, etc. Rather than do the activity with game pieces and fictitious situations, MMART decided to make it more authentic by having the teachers step forward and backward based off information from their lives.

The purpose of the activity was two-fold. First, it would make the teachers vulnerable to one another and connect how students feel vulnerable about who they are culturally. Second, it would assist the teachers in realizing that their students are vulnerable in invisible ways that impact the students greatly. Realizing that students have
cultural baggage like all people do, and trying to know students and to be aware of the kinds of value-laden situations students are a part of, may help teachers react differently to students or perhaps see why some students may not be open to their teachers.

Because the month of November and December are both shorter in terms of days of school and long on deadlines for teachers to meet the work of the study took a brief respite, giving me the opportunity to reflect what I thought would be the last phase and cycle of the work. I was concerned that perhaps the work was not sinking in for the teachers and that there would be no lasting impact. I wanted to continue to dig into what was happening with teachers, students and referrals, but every time I did I ended up in a similar place with not much gained in terms of understanding. The complex nature of each situation with students and teachers seemed to be so much deeper than I was able to go because of how unwilling people were to talk about student behavior and race.

Ironically, there have been high profile cases brought forward by the media such as the police shooting in Ferguson, Missouri, the death of Eric Garner during an arrest for a minor infraction and then dying in custody, the case of “rough riding” Freddy Gray in police custody in Baltimore, and the tragic case of Trayvon Martin which happened before the study, but was and still is part of the vernacular when talking about race in the United States. The national conversation seems to be ongoing and fruitless, but nonetheless, we could see and hear that much of what the media was discussing started to work its way into the schoolhouse.

During this interlude, there was a referral, which I found to be worth investigating because of the speed (within one day) with which it escalated and how disjointed all of the characters seemed to be. A student, James, who had been both academically and
behaviorally in jeopardy in seventh grade, had seemed to improve in eighth grade. James was not without any issues behaviorally, but considering that in seventh grade he was a daily disruption to his own learning as well as the learning of others, progress seemed to have been made. Academically James was failing everything, but he was trying to participate and he was working to try and meet his teachers’ expectations in terms of his behaviors. All of a sudden in the late part of first semester, I was called to a math classroom. I found him outside of the classroom pacing back and forth, the teacher, Ms. Cohen, was in the doorway, shaking her head and James was muttering under his breath that the teacher was a racist. I found this to be an opportunity to investigate the student’s claims that he was not being treated the same as everyone else. Later that same day the student was found to be cursing loudly in the lunchroom to his friends. Another one of his teachers, Ms. Edwards, asked him to step aside so they could privately discuss the matter and he exploded. I walked up at that moment and escorted the student away so that he could calm down and the teachers could resume lunch. He again was claiming that this teacher was a racist. Both teachers were White women. Later I asked him if he could give me examples of his treatment so I could figure out how to improve things. He then said he said that to make everyone uncomfortable and to get out of the situations.

James was a student about whom I had conversations with teachers on a weekly basis. Countless hours had been spent trying to negotiate on his behalf both academically and behaviorally so that one-day James could complete his education and be independent. He was a strange combination of paradoxes. He is smart, but he has failed nearly all of his classes. He paid no attention to most of his teachers but when he did with what little work he completed, he earned decent marks. He was blatantly disrespectful, but he
required that he be given respect. He required adults to explain themselves even for little things they asked of him. He was known to sit defiantly backwards in class with his back to the teacher because he “just felt like it.” When his mother participated in conferences with teachers, he shrugged his shoulders and said he did not care about school, his grades, attending summer school, etc.

His behavior came to a head at the start of second semester when, within the course of a day James required redirection from two different teachers. When he was redirected, he called both teachers racists. James is Black and the teachers were both White and he was adamant that he was being treated badly because he is Black. He wanted me to fix it for him. What was unusual was that his teachers wanted nothing to do with him once he called them racists because they felt that they were in serious professional jeopardy if they continued to teach or supervise James and this label stuck. I spoke to James’ counselor who had known him since he had been at MMS, and she and I have both remarked previous to these situations that we were at a loss as to what we could do for him.

We did not find his mother to be supportive of any kind of punitive measures in his parenting. She repeatedly said, “I know you can do it James. James, you can do it, right? James, you are going to do it, right? James didn’t mean what he said,” which sent James conflicting messages about how he should behave according to the adults in his life. While it was good to have a mother who believed in him and his potential to be better than his behavior and grades, she could not seem to push through her belief in him to hold him accountable for his actions, his learning, and his mistakes.

MMART thought it would be good to talk with the two teachers, Ms. Cohen and
Ms. Edwards, about these referrals as well as about James overall. I wanted to know what James’ motivation was in his calling his teachers racists. Did he truly feel that way or was that the automatic button to push to get him out of a situation where he felt he was powerless? If he did feel powerless, why? What could we [as the school] have done differently to have the situation turn out differently and have him remain with his teachers and repair those relationships? I also wanted to investigate his teachers’ feelings about the term *racist* and see if they could unpack their interaction with James, and what it was like as a White teacher working with many male students of color. Did they find they could not relate to some of the things they heard and saw from students? Did they put any stock into the idea that if they were male, of color, or both things would be different for them? Do they think that their male colleagues have it easier? Was moving James off their team something they would have asked me to do if I had not done it on my own? What would they wish for if they end up in a situation like this?

**January 2016 MMART Meeting**

At the January 2016 meeting of MMART, I presented the transcripts from the students. I asked the members to read through the transcripts, which the students had reviewed, and member-checked. I then showed them word clouds I developed based on the frequency of repeated words. I deleted the words that were mine as the interviewer and used only their words. The conclusion would be to encourage teachers to reach out to all students in a way that allows the students to be heard and to not immediately react and cause a power struggle. Such was the work of Staff Development Session 2 where teachers would be asked to allow for a moment of mindfulness to allow for a pause before interpreting behaviors of students.
Intervention Cycle 4: Staff Development Session 4 January 2016

Students often come to my office when they get a referral and when I ask them what happened, they say they have no idea why they are in trouble and the teacher was not clear with them. Sometimes the student is being savvy and trying to make me believe they are being maligned. There are times when a student does not see how they are in trouble for being disrespectful. I often ask them to replay the scenario with me, and based on that I can typically explain to them how as an adult I would understand why what they did as disrespectful.

This cycle of having to explain to students why their behaviors are not aligning with expectations gave rise to the MMART team wanting to move in two directions. One direction was to look at the dynamic at the teachers with the most referrals up to that point. The other vein of investigation was to ask teachers to try and define some of the rules they deemed to be problematic or were inconsistently enforced. The work on the rules was an area the PBIS team was going to ask all teachers in all grade levels to work on as part of their training. I agreed to start with eighth grade first so we could pilot how we did the work for the other grades and I could tie it into my study.

Staff Development Session 4 asked teachers to try and sit in my position as the administrator to evaluate how the rules cross paths with real scenarios when I was not the first-person observer, but I am the one who has to give the consequences and understand the narrative of the situation. This was to help the teachers understand the importance of clear rules that students understand and which parents and other stakeholders can support. This was to help alleviate the assertions that rules are often biased, and to satisfy those that govern and exist in these created paradigms (teachers and students) with solid
explanations for the chosen rules. I used a recent scenario (Figure 13) where I had to discipline students from another grade level in the absence of their administrator. I choose this situation because none of the eighth grade teachers were privy to the situation they did not have knowledge of what the outcomes were after the students were dealt with and their parents informed. As a side note, most of the parents of the students involved were not supportive of consequences for their child’s behavior for these referrals. One of the parents actually came to the school everyday for a week to try and get me to redact the incident from her child’s school records and he was one of the main players in the situation.

A bunch of students are taken to the bathroom on the way to lunch. In the bathroom some students are throwing paper towels, some are trapping others in the stalls, some are swinging on the doors and other are “dunking” on one another. Based on this behavior ask yourself….

- Did they break any rules?
- What rules did they break?
- What kind of consequences should they get?
- What sorts of things should we consider when we give consequences?

Figure 13. Reflection Scenario from January's Staff Development Session

Some of the teachers were bemused at the questions I asked. When I pushed and said, “Did we tell them not to trap one another in the stalls? Aren’t we responsible for this since we allowed more than a couple go to the bathroom at a time?” I was playing the devil’s advocate based on feedback the parents involved had given to me. Many of the parents felt that while their child was 12 or 13, we did not have a reasonable expectation for the boys to not behave as they did without our direct supervision. One mother wanted to know why there was not an adult in the bathroom. We told her we wanted middle
grades students to be able to have some privacy, but she continued to feel the school was in the wrong. Ultimately, consequences were handed out and served, but parents were not content with the result.

The PBIS team chose these rules because they felt these were rules of great subjectivity and ambiguity, which caused students confusion and thus referrals. The word “anything” is problematic and appears in two of the four rules because inherently you cannot teach “everything” in terms of behavior or “anything” and it is an area of vagueness for the teachers. The teachers want to ensure to have students locked down and that somehow teachers will not have any issues if the rules are specific enough. What we find is the opposite. Rules the teachers found to be specific or particular are actually general and open-ended. Rules written in such a way are miserable to enforce and usually lead to less “good” behavior than having no rule at all.

**Critical Incident Interviews**

The teachers with the most referrals for the year were Ms. Riley and Ms. Brown. What is curious about them and their discipline referrals is, unlike most teachers, they taught nearly all of the same students twice each day. They shared students across curriculum areas because they were the only resource (small setting) special education teachers in eighth grade. Ms. Riley taught science and math. Ms. Brown taught social studies and language arts. The schedule had students go from one teacher to the other and then back twice each day.

This was a new structure from last year when Ms. Riley taught science and math, but the two class periods were consecutive and the students were with her for one block of time. Ms. Riley requested this not happen again because it made it hard for students to
remain engaged for that amount of time without a natural break. In 2015-16, Ms. Brown was new to MMS, and we were able to offer additional resource classes to meet the needs of the students. Ms. Brown is a White woman and Ms. Riley is a Black woman. Both are veteran teachers. Ms. Riley had worked in group-homes and in psychiatric facilities as an educator with students who had precarious mental illness issues. Both teachers had positive relationships with their colleagues and were seen as part of the eighth grade “family”. It is not always typical to be included as an equal educator when you are a special education teacher in all settings in schools. Often both students and teachers see the special education teachers as not "real" teachers. The MMART asked me to interview these women about the dynamics of their classrooms and what kinds of interventions could be gleaned from them.

Speaking with Ms. Riley I found she was not surprised or put off by being interviewed because of the numbers of discipline referrals. I asked her to reflect on her classes, her students and what was happening in her classes and she was forthcoming. When speaking to Ms. Brown, it was apparent she was also not upset about being interviewed because of the numbers of referrals she had written. Both teachers remarked that they had never written as many referrals as they had this year. They were experiencing students who were much harder to motivate, to reach, and with whom to make academic progress. Ms. Riley noted that last year she worked with Class Dojo in her resource groups to help articulate and incentivize students who are working to meet her expectations both academically and behaviorally. Offering additional privileges like using electronics for special periods, listening to music, and the occasional edible treat all served to help students work towards improvements during the 2014-15 school year.
In 2015-16 Ms. Riley found it was not at all the same situation. Students would often meet the minimum mark of five points for the week to get a treat and then they would stop working. It became a game, and because their behaviors were plateauing with little change in sight, she ended her use of the Class Dojo.

Ms. Riley pondered that if she had an alternative way to still give students instruction, but separate them, she might have had less issues. She gave an example when a student comes to first period and is having a hard time, she works with them, but by third period when he comes back, often the behaviors have continued and escalated, especially if it is peer-based (which much of it was.) If she could send that student to another room and offer a screencast of the instruction, she could help to deescalate the situation so the student does not need a referral. Ms. Riley mentioned one student who has her for resource classes was only placed in her class because she could not behave appropriately in larger settings but academically was far beyond the students the resource math class. The young lady could “stir things up” fast and get the others so off-task that major amounts of time were lost in class. When reflecting on this, it would seem time was going to be lost either way, ISS or with a student who was a disruption. With the discipline frameworks as it stood, the greater good was the focus and the student who was a disruption was removed by a referral with suspension.

I had been involved with the behaviors of the serious offenders in their classes. Dr. Carlisle, the school principal, was made aware of the undercurrents of these classes by way of the MMART as well as through our personal conversations. One of the Riley/Brown students was sent to alternative school and was subsequently put on homebound instruction because he was not able to participate appropriately at the
alternative school. His behaviors were deviant, sexualized, and dangerous. He would lord over his two female teachers, Ms. Riley and Ms. Brown, and say and do threatening things. One day in my office, he was in trouble with Ms. Riley and the three of us were talking about the current situation. Unexpectedly and as a total non sequitur, he glares at me and says, “I’m not afraid of you teachers.” I told him I did not intend for him to be afraid of me and I asked him what he meant by his statement. He repeated himself and did not elaborate. I told him again that making him afraid was not my purpose and I found his comments strange and inappropriate. He had no reaction. Eventually he was found to be touching himself inappropriately and in full view of his teachers and classmates. The final referral was where he gestured to his teacher that he was going to punch her multiple times and in close quarters. This threatening movement sent him to a disciplinary hearing, which requires the school principal’s approval. He was separated from MMS for the remainder of the school year. In late March, he was removed from alternative school.

According to Coghlan and Brannick (2014), central to the development of actionable knowledge is the evaluation of both “intended and unintended” outcomes of action, for the purpose of determining: whether the original constructing fit; whether the actions taken matched the constructing; whether the action taken were appropriate; and what feeds into the next cycles of constructing, planning, and action.

**Phase 4 – Evaluating Action**

Although the interventions and the exit interviews marked the final steps in the MMART process, the ongoing impact of this study had become evident. One member of the MMART, Ms. Smith, continually comes to me to draw attention to possible areas of
inequity that are either perceived or evidentiary so work towards opportunities for learning and improved outcomes could be created. Dr. Carlisle continues to make a concerted effort to staff the school with high quality, effective educators who make student relationships and a growth mindset a central core value for MMS. Ms. Tuttle, as a new administrator, is using her work with the MMART as a means to bridge this information to her teachers in another grade level to help the students have an overall more equitable experience. Dr. Bustle continues to feel the topic is important for teachers to be aware of and to continue to include it in opportunities to role-play and to work as a team for the improvement of the cultural competence of all involved.

The goal of empowering teachers with cultural competence and increased mindfulness to work with all students and thus decrease disciplinary issues and referrals was a lofty and long-term goal. Short-term, the project became about making the conversation about race, class, and poverty more pervasive. Talking about and working on solutions for individual situations, but not disavowing the importance of race is a first step in a long journey. Implementing PBIS will continue the bigger conversation about being clear with students, training teachers about classroom management and invoking positive reinforcements for all students in all areas of the school. Making discipline data part of the regular discourse at the school level has also facilitated teachers a more realistic picture of the trends and issues at MMS.

Conclusion

As the author of an action research project within my school, I was able to facilitate learning on multiple levels and make meaning and generate knowledge between both MMART and grade-level teachers. As change agents, our efforts resulted in the
generation of new understandings and paths for dialogue regarding race and student
discipline. Working collaboratively with the MMART, there is now increased
momentum for the implementation of PBIS and the teacher training for that program,
increased awareness among stakeholders about the perception of students regarding
teacher relationships, and the importance of staff development as a means of meeting new
challenges.
CHAPTER 5

FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine if staff development could affect the number of referrals being written for eighth grade students at MMS, particularly for the male students of color, by increasing cultural competency in the teachers who are the originators of most discipline referrals. This chapter presents findings from meetings, interviews, and data queries augmented with researcher notes as evidence of the findings for the research questions of the study. Each of the thematic findings correlates to the research questions as shown in Table 7.

Table 7
Finding related to the research questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Themes Within Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is learned by an action research team about how to identify interventions and to evaluate them regarding student disciplinary referrals and teacher staff development?</td>
<td>Individual Learning Group Learning Organizational Learning and Policy Level Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How can teacher's examination of and reflecting on disciplinary data change their disciplinary practices?</td>
<td>Data did not Tell the Whole Picture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How does staff development that teaches skills of cultural proficiency impact teacher's practices in developing classroom culture and disciplinary practices?</td>
<td>Reflectiveness on Self and One’s Practice Incentives Powerless as Tool for Change Teacher Ownership versus Student Accountability Individualized Needs of Teachers Based on Classroom Circumstances Participation and Mindfulness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Individual Learning

As a researcher, I learned significant leadership skills in both the design and the execution of this project. Namely, the importance of knowing the context of a situation and the people that is embedded in that context as an essential part to any kind of positive investigation and change. Additionally, I now see that investigation as an intervention is making stakeholders privy to information. Dr. Carlisle noted in her first interview that she felt that issues of race were covert at MMS. After the constructing phase, I came to a different conclusion. The race issues were not hidden, but they were tolerated and accepted. In the exit MMART survey, Dr. Carlisle said that the data work “confirmed her suspicions” about the discipline issues at MMS.

Ms. Tuttle noted historically there had been little attention or conversation about race in the school. I found this to be evident in my talking with the group of teachers in our staff development sessions and when I dealt with individual referrals. Ms. Tuttle found that her work with MMART was helping her to be more reflective in working with her own students’ discipline issues in seventh grade. As a new administrator, she was biased to thinking that teachers who wrote referrals did so out of a lack of compassion for their students. This changed once she started asking more questions and putting more specific interventions in place for particular students. She notes in her exit questions:

I had an incident earlier this year in which a certain young boy of color was sent to my office (more than any other seventh grade student) for a behavior that was very conducive to his IEP. I inquired more about his IEP goals and how we could best meet them. It was then I noticed that the teachers were not doing all that
could be done to help this student meet his IEP goals. I printed the goals for each of his teachers and put interventions in place to help the student.

Ms. Smith also came to me repeatedly throughout the study to remark that she had just spoken to a parent, a teacher, and a student and now she was starting to see and to hear things differently. Race was something she was more aware of and while she often felt that it was more about misunderstanding than ignorance, her heightened awareness were the result of the work of MMART. Her comments about the teachers work with students and discipline were captured in the exit reflection questions:

Overall, I feel that many teachers don't utilize the discipline procedure effectively, which causes students receiving signatures/referrals when a simple discussion could have helped. I think some teachers are passive and when they get tired, they react sometimes too harshly.

Ms. Privy found that the work of the MMART made her remember the importance of being aware that everyone has bias and it colors how situations look to us. Ms. Privy remarked when asked if she can think of something that personally she learned during the time with the MMART, she stated, “During our first discussion. It [bias] was a reminder to me that I always need to reflect on this issue.”

**Group Learning**

As a group, there was significant learning about the context of discipline at MMS. During meetings, MMART members would ask for clarification about rules and procedures or about specific students or teachers. At the conclusion of the study, Ms. Smith remarked, “I feel that the members of the group help teachers broaden their thoughts when dealing with a student. Due to this research, I confront teachers more often
when I think a situation could be handled differently.” The team has engaged in frank conversations, but through the lens of school-wide dialogue, the conversation is lacking.

When MMART members were asked about whether they felt their work had furthered conversations about cultural diversity, Dr. Bustle, the only teacher on the team, noted, “I don't think it has furthered conversations about them [students] not being treated fairly but I do think it furthered conversations about how to differentiate discipline methods.” While this is not entirely within the goals of the study’s outline, it does show that even from the teacher level, there is chatter about discipline methods and being reflective about student management.

**Organizational Learning and Policy Level Learning**

MMART members recognize the need to continue the training into the future as a way to continue the conversation and to continue to inform more culturally sensitive and aware teacher behavior. The effect on the policy level of the school and organizational levels was not evident in this work. The findings do tend to inform the upcoming work of the PBIS team and initiative that will roll out for the upcoming school year. All of the MMART members shared ideas of ways to continue this work to increase the cultural competency of teachers and to reduce incidents of discipline problems for all students, including:

“We could create study committees involving the teachers who need intervention strategies and those that are role models and implement the strategies.”
“Teachers could be given a snapshot [of discipline data] without names of teachers who are giving out the most signatures/referrals because it varies highly team to team.”

“I believe hands-on scenarios are very beneficial. Act out situations and discuss how to handle it and how not to handle it.”

“Continuing to share discipline data.”

All of the MMART members responded that as a school, there is work to be done in terms of creating more robust conversations about race at school. When asked in exit interviews to reflect on what they have noticed in terms of strengths and weaknesses, even after the work of MMART, their responses included:

“There are weaknesses in some of our staff. I have brought it to their attention by providing the teacher with interventions that can be put into place so that the student experiences more success in the building.”

“I have not noticed many conversations about cultural competency taking place. However, I believe those conversations are crucial and beneficial.”

“I have frequently noticed strengths and weaknesses in staff regarding this issue. I have typically discussed this with my administrator. I have had open conversations with staff members in general on this topic.”

**Data Did Not Tell the Whole Story**

Data was the beginning and the end of this study on the macro level, but the study endeavored to determine if teacher’s examination of data could change their behavior. The findings were inconclusive. Primarily, teachers did not know what their baseline discipline data was. They guessed that they were writing more referrals than years past,
but that was based on their hunches. Ms. Riley and Ms. Brown both were at the top of
the totals for the 2015-16 school year and yet they were sure that they had never had to
write as many referrals as they currently were writing. Additionally one teacher noted
that not all referrals were created equal in her eyes. Ms. Roberts who had written the
most referrals in the 2014-15 year and an inconsequential amount the following year said,
“Well, and I think another part of it and it's important to note is a lot of those referrals
were for plagiarism from book projects which were the easiest thing they had to do. But,
I felt like I – I mean I felt like at one point, I wrote nine referrals from student
plagiarizing.” Writing referrals for different reasons is an area that Ms. Roberts noted
had changed from 2014-15 to 2015-16 based on the advice she was taking as a first year
teacher. In 2014-15 she taught all of the IEP students who had co-taught language arts.
When students who had IEPs acted poorly in class, she would consult with the student’s
case manager. She remarked,

Last year, a lot the incidents I can think of that resulted in a lot more referrals
were students with either behavior plans or who were EBD. And so I’d
often consult the case manager and the case manager would say, ‘just go ahead
and write them up.’ But it was more of the big acts of acting out rather than small
annoyances of picking on their peers or bothering their peers or talking out. It
was more all of a sudden throwing a chair.

Without other experience under her belt, she often complied. Additionally consulting
with one of her team members (Ms. Stich) she was often advised to write up students
only to find out that if the student did the same thing in the other teacher’s class, the
teacher would often back peddle, which really sent mixed messages to Ms. Roberts and to the shared students.

And then to in the beginning not knowing her very well to hear, ‘oh you should write a referral for that.’ Because with me, it was often, ‘Where is the line between this is a referral or this is a signature? That line was very fuzzy to me as a new teacher. And so seeking [advice], I learned throughout the year that maybe she was not the best person to seek advice from. Because I felt like she was constantly pushing the button and getting students removed, but then at the last minute, she would say, I'm not going to write a referral for that.

Clearly the idea of writing a significant amount of referrals depends on the reasons for them and also how consistent that process is among the teachers when a teacher is reflecting on their practice. It is plausible that Ms. Roberts was the outlier for the 2014-15 school year based on the advice she was given and her willingness to follow through with those referrals. For Ms. Riley and Ms. Brown the total number of referrals was their evidence that they knew they were struggling, but the solutions were not in how they as teachers were behaving, but in the structure of their teaching.

Each of the MMART meetings were rich in informational with the use of current data as well as baseline data which drove the study’s direction, intervention creation and the measure of how well a staff development session was received. Individual teacher interviews were brought about based on data and from those interviews, the specific teachers had the chance to participate in an interview which was an intervention. How those specific teachers may change their practice is not something that could be measured
on an emergent basis during the study. With a careful review of the interview transcripts, there are seeds of mindful reflection about students and behavioral situations, but until there is another situation where those beliefs are challenged, it is difficult to determine if the data that created the space for the interview of the need for the staff development session will alter the behavior of the participants. That question requires longer study.

**Incentives Powerless as Tool for Change**

During Sara and Michael’s interviews, I asked them to discuss the role of incentives in helping motivate them to behave and to be academically successful. Both students felt that teachers taking time to get to know students would help all students have a better relationship with their students. Neither student felt particularly strong about having things incentivized at school. Ms. Riley was particularly frustrated with the lack of usefulness that her incentive plans had become with her current group of students. She remarked that last year she used the online APP Class Dojo with great success. Students bought in to her plans. As is a well-established best practice, students set the rules and have a group norming of those rules so that all of the students are part of the process of governance. This year, she has zero positive results from the Class Dojo.

It became a game. They wanted to know what I minimum was for them to get a reward. They would hover at that number and once they hit it, they would start to slack off. They would recover just in time to receive whatever the prize was. It became a distraction more than a support. I ended it. Then they were mad at me and hurt. We haven’t gone back to it again this year.
Teacher Ownership Versus Student Accountability

As a contrast, one student named James openly claimed that he was being treated poorly by two of his White teachers because he was Black. When I interviewed his teachers, they were both upset by the accusation. Ms. Edwards had James in her co-taught Language Arts class since the fall and felt that they had a good relationship. She crossed paths with him in the cafeteria one day when she overheard him using inappropriate language. He then rebuked her request to go sit in the silent lunch room, and said that it was always the “Black boys” getting in trouble.

Ms. Edwards reached out to another teacher to both be a witness and to help deescalate. When I spoke with her she was not sure why he had said what he said. She felt that it was a power play and not truly a race issue. Later that week, James had another run in with another of his teachers who was also White. He blew up at her in the hallway and when I was called, he was pacing the hall saying she was a racist. When I spoke with James he admitted that neither of the teachers were racists and he used that term as a means of leveraging his own power, but the damage was done. Because of James’ poor behavior and grades and now his charged attacks for minor redirection, I moved him to a new team. He is doing better behaviorally, but his grades continue to be abysmal.

Sara and Michael were students who were selected based on their demographic information as well as the criteria regarding their discipline issues. Their interviews exposed that students are not always aware of the dynamics, which may be driving their issues at school. Sara had been in quite a lot of trouble both in elementary school and in her first year at middle school, but it had tapered off to nearly no incidents of a serious nature for eighth grade. Additionally, she was having more academic success. Sara had
had a complete behavioral turn-around in middle school, going from someone who had chronic issues at school to a leader and someone who worked very hard to increase her academic achievements.

Michael had the opposite situation, where he went from hardly any behavioral issues to being a nearly constant presence in my office in eighth grade. Michael had been dismissed from his IEP because he did not show enough need in the data to continue services. He was served under the Other Health Impairment umbrella. Sara was diagnosed as Emotional Behavior Disorders (EBD) as well as secondary issues related to a specific learning disability. Sara said that she felt that there was no connection between her success in school and her success with her behaviors. Michael said that he felt that his teachers could better address his needs, like one of his teachers who gave him more work to keep him busy and out of trouble. Sara did not blame anyone for her previous issues nor her current successes. She took complete ownership over herself. Michael did not feel that he was in control of his behaviors and should be allowed to be managed differently since he was impetuous and medicated.

These two examples show that students’ needs are specific and that the answers to improved student behavior may need to be individualized. The roots of all of the positive comments reside in the relationship with the teachers. Sara noted that the adult with which she is most comfortable or her favorite is her case manager and teacher, Ms. Brown. Regardless of Ms. Brown and Sara’s positive relationship, it was evident that based on data, Ms. Brown was struggling with some of her students behaviorally in class, along with her colleague, Ms. Riley.
Individualized Needs of Teachers Based on Classroom Circumstances

In terms of teachers who wrote the most referrals, we have two for the first semester of the 2015-16 school year. Ms. Riley and Ms. Brown are both special education teachers who share students between the four academic classes. One of the areas where they were in complete alignment was the importance of building a relationship. Ms. Riley said she often finds herself being honest, upfront, and maternal with her students. Ms. Brown finds that being low-key, talking with students in a caring tone and finding ways to hook them academically help her to manage her classroom.

Both teachers shared the only student in eighth grade who was sent to a hearing and subsequently separated from MMS for the remainder of the year. He has since been removed from his alternative school for behavior issues for the remainder of the school year. When I asked both teachers about this student, they each had their own take on what might have made a difference if there were no limitations to resources. Ms. Riley said that mental health services are what the student needed and his mother, who has custody of him, did seem to verbally recognize that her son has deep-rooted psychological issues, but she is unwilling or unable to do anything about them. She mentioned that he had a counselor, but that never seemed to come up when I talked with the student. He had a hatred of his father who lived out of state and whom was rumored to be very violent to his mother and verbally abusive to him and to his sisters. Ms. Brown felt that a strong male mentor might have been a good catalyst for change. Neither teacher felt that they were responsible for the student’s issues at school.

The expelled student was male student of color who received special education services. He was the exact person for whom we were doing the study. No amount of
cultural competency would have helped him to remain at our school because his issues were not racial in nature but more about mental health.

Staff Development Session 2 generated teacher’s views on how diverse the bigger world is and how our students are diverse and that diversity should be acknowledged in lieu of “colorblindness.” The data generated by the ticket out the door from Staff Development Session 2 show that teachers also hold that the home life is the one area where all teachers will reflect if a student needs help (Figure 14). The results show that a 12.5% of teachers out of 16 teachers do not contemplate anything other than the specific child and incident when making decisions about how to best manage a student. All of the teachers noted that they reflected on a child’s home life, which is not unusual except that it is beyond the teacher’s control. Nearly 40% of them found that thinking in terms of whether they were from Sussex or not made a difference in how they thought about problem solving for a student. For a school with a minute population of ESOL students, reflecting on their primary home language was also an interesting number at 31%. Less than half thought in terms of race.
The final question from Staff Development Session 2 summarizing activity asked teachers how they develop relationships with students. All of the responses had a common theme, which was related to creating open dialogue and getting to know the students as individuals (Figure 15).
Talking to the student; asking questions; observing their reactions and behaviors.

Get to know them...what do they like to do? What are they good at? What do we have in common? Start asking them questions about those things or ask them to help you with something they are good at doing. Find a way to have an inside joke with them. Once they know you're interested in them beyond what they score on a test, you've usually got them.

I try to set up a situation in my classroom where kids feel comfortable speaking with me, and know that they are in a safe environment to share. I'm friendly, but with boundaries. I let them know that sometimes issues can be greater than just the curriculum so we can talk - when the time is appropriate for it. My main concern is the whole child and not just if they can do math or science.

*Figure 15. Teacher Responses about Forming Student Relationships*

**Participation and Mindfulness**

For Staff Development Session 1, the data generated was the consent forms for teachers to participate. All teachers completed the forms except for two teachers. While two teachers were not officially part of the study, they attended all of the staff development sessions and participated actively. This signified that while not all had chosen to be in the data generation, each teacher got to receive the same information and perchance implement that information with their students.
All teachers participated in team meetings unless they were absent from school that day or had another required meeting to attend. From the copious amount of information generated in those meetings, there was a level of buy-in among all teachers. The MMART reflected on how to determine if staff development was effective for the teachers at MMS. Dr. Bustle, the only eighth grade teacher on the MMART and therefore a participant in the staff development sessions, stated that, “I believe that by getting input from teachers is very beneficial. See what is relevant for teachers and to teachers. If not it becomes gibberish that teachers don't want to hear. That causes unhealthy work environments.” These sessions were completely voluntary and yet, all of the teachers participated fully in them, even those that were not part of the informed consent. While they have officially bowed out of the study, they still participated in all of the Staff Development Sessions.

**Reflectiveness on Self and One’s Practice**

Staff Development Session 3 encouraged teachers to discuss debriefing questions to unpack the privilege activity. Additionally teachers were encouraged to write their own cultural autobiography to diagram their personal histories and draw connections to our students. One of the areas where I found it interesting was that I told them all were invited to watch the privilege activity even if they did not participate, and yet every teacher participated. At the end of the session, there were reflection questions that I asked to get the teachers to unpack the experience:

- Was there discomfort?
- Hesitancy?
- Shame?
• Pride?

• What do they think is behind those feelings?

This was late on a Friday afternoon, and the teachers stayed and chatted with each other and with me about their thoughts. One of the teachers asked where the questions related to sexual orientation were. I admitted that they were on the list, but I skipped them to avoid embarrassing him since I was well aware of that he was the only gay teacher we had in the group. He laughed and said that he wished I had asked. I felt sheepish. The questions about shame in the protocol registered with some of them who had family who were or had been incarcerated. One teacher who is older and a grandmother said, “Sometimes you have to bail out your son-in-law. It happens.” Another teacher said, “My husband is true Irish. Bar fights and handcuffs galore.”

Money was another area of shame, but only if you did not have much growing up. The same teacher married to the “Irishman” found that she had had a lot materially growing up, but she was shameful about it, since in her opinion, it was a farce. Her parents lived in debt with crushing stress. She also remarked that as the stereotype went they were raising her with “Christian” beliefs, but when a Black friend wanted to come to an extended family event, her grandmother was not pleased. She had forgotten this until the staff development session. Teachers were also asked to pen their own cultural autobiography and only two decided to share that with me. A link was sent out for them to submit them and they could be anonymous. Two teachers participated and shared their names. One was the teacher who had already mentioned her fighting husband, shame about her parents and money, and her extended family’s bigotry. The following day she sent me a message on social media that in part said:
[it] just awakens me into a deeper understanding of your research, your studies—though stereotypical appearances, environments of past and present and generalized behaviors may lead you to highly probable deductions of people, their backgrounds, where they reside and from where they come— you just truly never know what someone has experienced, how they remember and relate to their own circumstances and how that translates visually, behaviorally, introspectively and culturally. I even follow these thoughts immediately and persistently with why do I even care how others saw my responses and read my history or current status, and why am I questioning my honesty?

She felt very exposed, but also liberated and she found meaning in this process to help her evaluate her work with students and what they may or may not have in their cultural back pockets. One of the annual activities in her own classroom is to demonstrate how privilege works when students are reading and learning about the Civil Rights movement. She was already encouraging her students to reflect, but now she was realizing that she could learn from the same practice. Her reflection was evidence that at some of the teachers were starting to dig deep into their own cultural backpacks to see what privileges they had, and what privileges their students had and, what privileges they lack.

Following Staff Development Session 4, teachers were asked to answer some brief questions to share their viewpoints on the rule setting in classrooms and the school. Before ending the session, one teacher spoke up and said that middle school students cannot handle the levels of freedom that we had given them, especially in using mobile devices and being allowed to talk in the hallways during class transitions, which was not
the way it was during the 2014-15 school year. She wanted more authoritarian discipline at the school. Finally, teachers were asked to reflect on whether their own students would be able to answer these questions related to their classrooms: Do you think your student’s could give the “right” information if you asked them the following rules in your classroom?

1. List four things you are to do when you hear, “Give me your attention, please.”
2. List the procedures you must follow before using the bathroom.
3. List two things you must do to avoid being tardy.
4. What are the four items you are to bring to class always?
5. List the two times you are allowed to go to your locker.

Teachers mumbled their responses when they saw the questions. I asked specific individuals to share their thoughts. I asked Mr. Crystal who is known for his routines in class and lack of discipline problems how he achieves that with his students. He stated that each Monday he reviews his procedures, and that at the start of the year it takes about three weeks of training to get all of the students on board. Other teachers said that they thought their students knew the rules for their rooms, but did not necessarily use that information to follow the procedures.

During the second and fourth Staff Development Session, data was collected asking teachers if they had shifted their own level of reflectiveness regarding culture and how would they move forward in terms of creating a more positive student management system. On a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), most teachers selected “four” when asked how much this session helped them reflect on their relationship with students who are different from them. On a scale of 1 (did not make me reflect) to 5 (deep reflection),
15.4% of the respondents said that the session helped them reflect deeply on their practice with students who are different from them. Just over 60% selected “four” for the same question.

When asked how often they reflect on topics of race, socio economics and gender of students, 25% said daily, 43.8% said several times a week, 18.8% said several times during a marking period, and 12.5% said hardly ever. The survey asked teachers to mark all of the identifiers they contemplate when working with students, and the most common were home life (100%), followed by socio economic status (75%) and gender (43.8%). Home language was only chosen by 31.3% of the respondents. IEP, Race and Disabilities all scored the same with 43.8%.

Ms. Smith was the one MMART member who attended team meetings with teachers, which were held on a monthly basis. Her comments about those meetings also speak to the increased awareness teachers had about their work with a variety of students. She states, “I think the activities and conversations during team meetings helped all teachers and reflect on their individual beliefs.”

For Staff Development Session 1, the only data gathered was the consent forms for individuals to participate. All teachers completed the forms except for two teachers. For a population of teachers who claim tight time constraints to voluntarily participate in a study that you do not intend to be part of the data collection was curious to MMART. Nonetheless it meant that while not all were choosing to be in the data generation, each team all got to hear the same information and implement that information with their group of students. All teachers participated in team meetings unless they were absent from school that day or had another required meeting to attend.
From the copious amount of information generated in those meetings, there was a level of buy-in among all teachers that addressing student needs on an ongoing basis and then looking at the overall numbers of how many need help and who needs help, brought specific details to how each team was working with their students. Based on the data from Staff Development Session 2, the development of the privilege activity was created to help draw increasing attention to teacher’s own cultural knapsack to help increase their connection to students.

**Limitations**

There are two areas where this study addressed the idea of how a teacher’s examination of and reflecting on their data can change their practice. One is the use of incentives, which is not only pervasive in American education, but it is a tenant of the soon-to-be implemented PBIS system. Teachers have voiced their concerns over rewarding students for meeting expectations. Beyond that, there are overriding areas where teachers have some, but not complete, ownership over the framework for the discipline procedures in the school and students must be accountable for any kind of plan to work. In fact, based on the student interviews, student accountability seemed to be the most important element in one student’s turnaround.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of staff development on the total number of discipline referrals written for eighth grade students at MMS. While it is not possible to prove that staff development reduced the number of discipline referrals nor is it possible to quantify the amount of cultural competency that was gained, there is
evidence that the work that was done with the MMART did impact the number of referrals for eighth graders.

The total number of referrals is down 61 referrals between the 2014-15 school year and the 2015-16 school year (see Table 8). On the negative side, there are more days of ISS and OSS in the 2015-16 school year than in the previous year. There are 128 more days of ISS this year and 18 more days of OSS. The total number of unique students (students with at least one referral) is down by 28. Based on the purpose of the study, there is a reduction in referrals. In terms of consequences, that is beyond the control of the teacher and under the charge of the administrator.

Table 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category of Data</th>
<th>2014-15 Summary</th>
<th>2015-16 Summary</th>
<th>Difference</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total Referrals</td>
<td>183</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>-61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Students</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>-28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>158</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>-52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black</td>
<td>129</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>-43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>-9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>-4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multiracial</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>-3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISS DAYS</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>225</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OSS DAYS</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to determine the effect of teacher staff development focusing on cultural competency skills on discipline referrals as a means of reducing the racial disparity for male students of color.

Research Questions

This study looks to investigate the following research questions:

1. What is learned by an action research team about how to identify interventions and to evaluate them regarding student disciplinary referrals and teacher staff development?

2. How can teacher's examination of and reflecting on disciplinary data change their disciplinary practices?

3. How does staff development that teaches skills of cultural proficiency impact teacher's practices in developing classroom culture and disciplinary practices?

Study Summary

This McCarthy Middle Action Research Team was a case study that utilized document analysis, descriptive statistics and critical incident interviews to generate qualitative data. MMART consisted of six school faculty members and leaders from McCartney Middle School. These members were identified based on their relationship to the school. The team worked for over a year to develop plans for staff development
sessions, to digest data regarding discipline practices and referrals, to evaluate interview transcripts and documents, and to inform the next steps in the process. The team also evaluated data generated during their staff development sessions to gain insights into how teachers were processing the new information about culture competence and how it may or may not relate to discipline.

The catalyst of the study was my principal’s interest in investigating the issues she viewed as disparities in our discipline data. As an administrator at both my current and previous schools, I spent a significant portion of my workday on matters of student discipline. I hoped this collaborative research would help to inform our local school leadership about the areas of need for teacher staff development as it relates to student management and cultural competency. One aim of the study was to increase participants’ capacity to engage in MMART as a process for generating knowledge and developing actionable interventions to improve practice. Another aim of this study was to determine if data transparency could inform change for teachers and their discipline practices. Additionally, getting input from students and teachers who were outliers in the data as a means to determine what kinds of actionable knowledge could be gleaned from information was a goal of the work.

**Action Research for Individual, Group and Organizational Learning**

The findings from this study show the members of the MMART took to the process of MMART as a means for generating actionable learning within themselves, the group, and the organization. Preliminary interviews generated data that solidified the commitment of the members to the topic of equity and staff development as a tool for change. This work not only impacted the teachers that were the recipients of the
interventions, but members of the action research team actually found that the work of
the team influenced their own practice when working with students with disciplinary
issues.

**Study Conclusions**

These findings inform three conclusions drawn from the study. The conclusions
address the usefulness of MMART to individualize a problem and solutions for an
organization, how mindfulness and participation show an openness to learning, and how
there are limitations inherent to the improvements that can be made which are outside of
those that making discipline decisions at the school and teacher levels.

**Conclusion 1 – MMART is an Effective Means for Evaluating and Planning Staff
Development for Teachers**

The MMART model was an excellent partner with evidence-based staff
development in that one requires the work be emergent with participants as researchers
and the other is best as emergent, reactive, and individualized. Allowing for a team to
study a specific issue at the local school under the framework of MMART and the
decisions made and evaluated allowed for this study to have the flexibility necessary to
see if what was done made an impact, in what ways, and what the next steps needed to be
such as increased emphasis on clarifying expectations for students such as in the fourth
staff development session due to the large amount of referrals written up to that point for
nebulous rules. One of the principle tenets of the PBIS system which is being
implemented for the upcoming school year is the clarification of expectations as well as
the training of teachers to train the students to behave according to clearly defined and
easily understood rules and procedures (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, Smolkowski, & Sugai, 2014).

**Conclusion 2 – Teachers Need to Have Individualized Options to Meet the Needs of Their Students and Issues that are Unique to a Given School Year**

Ms. Roberts’ first year of teaching put her at the top of the list for referral writing, but as a second year teacher, and with some major changes to her team, she is no longer writing a significant number of referrals. It is important to place newer teachers in situations where they can have as much support and consistency from those that can influence them and their classrooms in positive ways. Ms. Roberts’ entire first year was a battle to gain credibility while being undermined by a retiree who was counting the days until the end of the year.

Ms. Riley and Ms. McClure are managing students unlike ones they have had experience with before and which are unusual for MMS in terms of the types of discipline issues that are being presented and other circumstances like parent support, medical issues, trauma to the students previous to their attending MMS and the like. There is a need for teachers in those unique situations to require something different for their students, particularly because they are working with a vulnerable population of students who require as much instruction as possible. Schools need to address these issues as they arise and be willing to put serious supports in place for the betterment of the teachers and the students. As was noted by Gregory et al. (2011) and Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke & Curran (2004), each school must develop almost parental-styles of management can be individualized and fit their students.
Additionally the PBIS system is developed within a framework that allows for significant teacher input into the way the program works at their school and in their classroom (McIntosh, Girvan, Horner, Smolkowski, & Sugai, 2014).

**Conclusion 3 - The Most Essential Elements to Effective Staff Development are Small Gains**

As was noted by Guskey (1986), teachers do not have to buy-in in order to be influenced positively by staff development; rather they must see gains in their work and that leads to buying in. Often teachers will gripe they are being invested in with professional development in a way they find unnecessary or wasteful of their time. Remarkably, when given the chance to participate voluntarily about a topic, which they had little to, no training in or perceived need for, all of the teachers participated willingly.

While it is difficult to say the reduction in referrals is directly related to their work in these sessions, it is a byproduct nonetheless. Teachers cannot improve if they do not see the value in what they are being asked to learn. Perhaps giving teachers the option to opt out of learning, we may see more implemented changes based on their own personal choices in what they are doing with their professional learning energies. Considering the changes to decrease inequitable practices are personal to the teachers themselves, their own bias, experience, and situations, it would be difficult to measure the gains, but the baseline data as it related to cultural competence was low to non-existence and now there are the beginnings of a dialogue at MMS.

**Implications for Theory**

Kurt Lewis, the father of action research, would have been encouraged to see his work implemented in this study as a means of creating emergent knowledge, action, and
refinement for a problem that has roots in sociology, psychology and positive outcomes for vulnerable populations. Working within the action research framework, MMART was able to exercise considerable flexibility in terms of how and why it made decisions. With evidence-based staff development undergirding the work as well, the generation of data served both as evidence and intervention. Additionally, cultural competence added a necessary layer of specificity and individuality to the work of the study so the recommendations made by MMART were informed by the needs of participants and stakeholders and working towards personalized, timely, and actionable solutions.

The implications for theory growing out of this study would be to refine ways in which areas of mindset can be developed in teachers for the improvement of students beyond academics. Much is dedicated to the evidence of effective staff development in terms of academics, but as this particular study showed no amount of effective teaching would matter if a student were removed from the instructional environment (Fenning, & Rose, 2007; Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010).

Guskey (1999) makes special note to diverge from Lewin and state that their models are at odds with one another. What can be said is emergent issues addressed with action research can create opportunities to show success in new strategies from staff development sessions regarding cultural competence (Guskey, 1999). Keeping more students in class for more time and then having effective teaching and learning will do much to improve student behavior and academics. There are not direct links to this kind of staff development and discipline practices in schools. There is a need for measured approaches in staff development that involve increasing the student/teacher relationships. Teacher awareness of and sensitivity for cultural diversity are called for throughout the
literature to decrease overrepresented populations of students being undereducated with tragic trajectories.

**Implications for Practice and Policy**

Teacher education programs should be teaching cultural competency as a rudiment for any teacher certification. Local schools should have action research teams evaluate the equity of school’s programs, both academic and disciplinary, so there is a quality assurance in place to address the specific faculty and students of a situation (Marshall & Oliva, 2006). After speaking with the variety of teacher participants and the overall group about this topic, it was clear that not one person felt prepared to manage a classroom from any standpoint, including culturally.

Teacher preparation programs need to pay special attention to matters of self-reflectiveness as a skill for the modern educator. School systems need routine auditing procedures to make recommendations that help schools tailor their professional development, policies, and procedures in order to increase the levels of equity across all areas. Lastly, community outreach to ensure the community and the school mirror each other and are extensions of each other should be an area of growth for all schools. This would help forge stronger bonds between teachers, students and families whenever possible so there is more trust and continuity among the stakeholders.

**Recommendations**

**For individuals**

Teaching is often described as both an art and a science. I disavow this inasmuch as art cannot be taught because it is mainly for those have a predetermined talent for said art. Teaching is not that kind of art. It is a humanity and in working with others it is
essential, more than any other skill, to be mindful and reflective in all areas of the work. For teachers, this means using data to show areas of gaps and weakness, not only academically, but also in terms of management of students. The teachers that have the greatest potential are those that are constantly reflective. Oversimplifying the work of teachers to basic step-lock procedures minimizes the level of work necessary and the complex nature of both their students and their level of education that must be achieved. Students, like all other beings, require teachers are able to decompress on their behalf to best meet their needs.

Consistent and pervasive open dialogue is also essential to superior teacher development. Insisting on a culture where teachers are fostered to believe in the power of constructive dialogue about their work in all areas will only help to achieve the ideal of improved equity for students. As is evident in this study, the most effective teachers already have open dialogue with stakeholders at all levels about their work and are incessant in their pursuit of reflection. These important elements should be honored as a crucial component to being a professional educator.

For organizations

As part of the mindfulness movement, organizations need to be cognizant that teachers need time to be mindful and to reflect on all areas of their duties. This expectation for time and space will also require some tools to help those that are not as tuned in to their own work and what they are or are not achieving. The work towards mindful and reflective teachers must become an essential component of the teacher culture both within a school and beyond.
Additionally, as it is now common for schools to have academic data teams, all schools should have discipline data teams as well as equity teams to review all of the school’s programs and offer reflections and suggestions to continue progress toward equity for all students. These “E-Teams” will give teachers the ability to be a part of the work on a school-wide level, while still being mindful of their own work.

Future Research

There has been significant study into the elements of effective staff development in schools, but that staff development is dedicated to academic needs and concerns and not the needs for more equitable discipline practices in schools especially for teachers. The inclusion of cultural competence training for all teachers who are pre-services should also be studied to see if this kind of training can make a marked difference in the beliefs and practices of teachers in how they work with students of a variety of backgrounds. Action research is a viable method of investigating and working towards solutions at schools, but there are few published studies of how to best implement this process for a local school.

Conclusion

This study identified some of the principal reasons why teachers struggle with classroom management and how staff development could augment their skills. One of the skills most necessary for improved student management is cultural competence, which stems from a mindfulness of practice and reflectiveness of beliefs. By identifying the issue of discipline disparity, a new dialogue among the teachers in eighth grade was forged and supported by the work of MMART. Ultimately, the total number of referrals written by teachers was reduced dramatically. Participants showed a continued need to
grow towards courageous conversations about race as it relates to student behaviors and management as well as academics as the reduction in discipline referrals could directly impact the achievement gap among vulnerable populations of students, such as boys of color.
REFERENCES


doi:10.1177/0042085907304947


Smith, D. J. (2011). *If the world were a village: A book about the world's people*: Toronto, ON: Kids Can Press Ltd.


