

SCHOOL PERSONNEL PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS  
WITH DISABILITIES: A STUDY OF  
SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT DISCIPLINE

By

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in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for  
the Degree of  
DOCTOR OF EDUCATION  
July, 2015

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Title of Study: SCHOOL PERSONNEL PERCEPTIONS OF STUDENTS WITH  
DISABILITIES: A STUDY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT  
DISCIPLINE

Major Field: SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION

Abstract: The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of high school principal, special education teacher, and key school personnel perceptions of the process that leads to disciplining students with disabilities. Case Study methodology was used to ascertain the perceptions of eleven participants employed at a Mid-Western high school, purposefully selected based on their experience with the research topic. Data were gathered through face-to-face interviews, field notes, and documents related to the discipline of students with disabilities. The findings indicated that (1) students with disabilities potentially have the capacity to harm themselves or others; (2) school personnel consider the student's disability before implementing discipline; (3) the participants followed the rules governing students with disabilities discipline delineated by federal, state, and local authorities; (4) the participants noted a willingness to see things from the perspective of the student with disabilities when considering discipline; and (5) the participants noted a willingness to use personal experience as a basis for introspection and examination when considering discipline. I concluded that (1) students with disabilities who harm themselves or others is a major concern for the participants; (2) the participants placed value upon considering the student's disability before implementing discipline; (3) school personnel followed the rules mandated for disciplining students with disabilities; and (4) school personnel appeared to see merit in employing the tenets of Symbolic Interaction Theory and Phenomenology Theory as I interpret them to aid them in understanding the process of disciplining students with disabilities. These conclusions led to the following recommendations (1) training on how school personnel might deal with students who harm themselves or others; (2) consider establishing an on-site compliance facilitator at other schools; (3) identification of a particular theory/plan to follow to systemize the processes of disciplining students with disabilities; and (4) future research within and outside state related to the discipline of students with disabilities.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Publicly supported American secondary schools had their genesis in 1635 with the advent of the Boston Latin School; from the onset it became apparent that student discipline issues were among the initial problems encountered by school officials. To mitigate student discipline issues, early schoolmasters relied primarily upon corporal punishment (Insley, 2001; Richards, 2004). For more than 300 years, corporal punishment served as the basic form of student discipline in public schools. However, corporal punishment lost its effectiveness during the 1960s when it shifted from a public admonishment to a private admonishment in the school principal's office (Insley, 2001; Richards, 2004).

In the 1960s and early 1970s, schools began to use another approach to student discipline, that is, out-of-school suspensions and expulsions (Insley, 2001; Richards, 2004). In the late 1970s and the 1980s, as a result of litigation challenging out-of-school suspensions, schools began using in-school suspensions (Richards, 2004). Specifically, the litigation challenging out-of school suspension became manifest in *Goss v. Lopez* (1975), where the U. S. Supreme Court ruled, "At the very minimum, students facing suspension and the consequent interference with a protected property interest must be given some kind of notice and afforded some kind of hearing" (p. 3). Additionally, in 1975, Congress mandated that students with disabilities be entitled to a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (Cheadle, 1987). Congress determined that between 2.5 million and 3 million students with disabilities who were enrolled in

public schools were receiving less than a stellar education and 1.75 million students with disabilities were excluded from public education (Chambers, 2010; Katsiyannis, Yell, and Bradley, 2001). In the 1980s and 1990s, the media began to focus on school violence; thus, there was an increased focus on school suspension. By 2010, the number of students who became eligible for special education increased to more than 6.5 million (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010). Additionally, it was determined by Fenning and Rose, (2007); Rausch and Skiba, (2006); and the US Department of Justice, (2010), that minority students were overrepresented in special education as well in the exclusionary discipline practices of suspension and expulsion. Disproportionate representation of minority children in special education, however, appeared to be more acute, when noted that collectively minority children made up only 35% of school age children nationally in 2000, but 43% of those assigned to special education (National Research Council Panel Report, 2002).

### **Formal Statement of the Problem**

Since the dawn of K-12 schools in America, student discipline issues have presented a problem to school personnel. A review of the literature revealed that school personnel have traditionally employed corporal punishment, in-school suspension, and out-of-school suspension to mitigate disorderly and recalcitrant student behaviors (Insley, 2001; Richards, 2004). Wu, Pink, Crain, and Moles (1982) found that school administrator perceptions of what constitutes disruptive behavior affects how student discipline is administered. Gordon, Piana. and Kelecher, (2000); Stone and Stone, 2009; and Wu et al. (1982) found that teacher perception of students with disabilities affects how suspension policy is applied to students with disabilities. However, in response to perceived school violence and student drug use, school districts across America have adopted an approach used by the US Government to oppose the war on drugs. That is, students are automatically suspended or expelled from school for offenses perceived to be a threat to school safety (Zweffler & DeBeers, 2002).

Proponents of suspension/expulsion propose that schools become safer (The American Academy of Pediatrics, 1995; Stader, 2006). Thus, school districts have determined that all students are subject to automatic suspension or expulsion for behaviors that endanger the safety of students or school officials. However, school administrators are limited by the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, in how student discipline is applied to students with disabilities. Despite the protections of IDEA, students with disabilities are suspended at higher rates in comparison to students without disabilities (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Mendez, 2008; Miller, Ofer, Artz, Bah, Phenix, Sheehan, and Thomas, 2011). Thus, a dilemma exists: there is a need on one hand to maintain safe schools, while contrastingly there is a need to apply school suspension policy judiciously as it relates to students with disabilities.

One plausible explanation is that the dilemma of higher suspension rates of students with disabilities may be related to an in-balanced focus by school officials on school safety in contrast with an opportunity of students with disabilities to pursue a free and appropriate public education (Hartwig and Ruesch, 1994; Osborne, 2001). The US Department of Education (2010) determined that school districts in accordance with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 must, “provide a free appropriate public education to each qualified person with a disability who is in the school district’s jurisdiction” (p. 1). Additionally, according to the Harvard Civil Rights Project (2000) the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997) was amended by Congress, “to ensure that a child will not be punished for behavior that is characteristic of the child’s disability”(p. 9). Thus, there is a need to understand how suspension policy should be applied to students with disabilities.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this case study was to gain an understanding of high school principal, special education teacher, and key school personnel perceptions of the process that leads to disciplining students with disabilities.



## **Research Questions**

Patton (2002) stated that central research questions center around, “What common set of symbols and understandings has emerged to give meaning to people’s interaction?” (p. 132).

Therefore, the following research questions will provide direction for the proposed study:

- (1) What constitutes disruptive behavior as it relates to students with disabilities?
- (2) What factors are considered in the process of disciplining students with disabilities?
- (3) How do teachers, school administrators, and key school personnel navigate the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities?
- (4) What theory or theories help teachers, school administrators and key school personnel to understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities?

## **Epistemology**

As it relates to this study, knowledge is constructed and it becomes codified in legislative law, school district policy, school rules, and judicial interpretations of legislative mandates.

According to Crotty (1998) Constructionism supports the view that, “truth, or meaning comes into existence in and out of our engagements with realities in our world...[and that] there is no meaning without a mind [essentially] meaning is not discovered, but constructed” (p. 8-9). In essence, knowledge in the cited formats is constructed and given meaning by individuals and clusters of individuals.

## **Primary Theory Undergirding Study**

Symbolic Interaction Theory undergirds this study. George Herbert Mead is given credit for providing the ideas which gave genesis to the theory of symbolic interaction. However, Herbert Blumer expanded upon Mead’s ideas and subsequently coined them symbolic interaction. Blumer (1969) noted, “The term symbolic interactionism has come into use as a label for a relatively distinctive approach to the study of human group life and human conduct”(p. 1). According to Blumer symbolic interactionism is structured upon three core premises. Describing the first premise, Blumer (1969) stated, “Human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that things have for them”

(p. 2). The central concepts associated with the second premise are interaction and language, therefore Blumer iterated, “The meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of social interaction that one has with one’s fellows” (p. 2). Finally, the third premise centers around an individual’s ability to use cognitive processes to employ thought. As it related to the third premise, Blumer said, “Meanings are handled in, and modified through an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters” (p. 2). Essentially, Blumer stated, “Symbolic interactionism views meaning... as arising in the process of interaction between people [and] the meaning... grows out of the ways in which other persons act toward the person with regard to the thing” (p. 4). In essence, meaning is created through social interaction however meaning may be subjected to revision through interpretation.

### **Other Theories**

Symbolic Interactionism is one of several theories providing the foundation for this study. Other theories that explain my findings are: Chaos Theory; Behavior Modification Theory; Labeling Theory, Theory of Bureaucracy; Modern Structural Organization Theory, Hermeneutic Theory, Social Constructionism Theory, and Phenomenology Theory. This study employs the use of an inductive approach to data analysis, thus it is not apparent what theoretical framework will work best, however, Symbolic Interactionism Theory is the predominant theory.

### **Researcher Role**

I served in a public school district as a School Psychologist and administered more than 700 individual psychological examinations to children in grades K-12. A collateral duty included appointment as Chairperson of the Individualized Education Program or IEP Committee by the Director of Pupil Personnel Services. In concert with the parents of students with disabilities, this formalized committee made crucial decisions relevant to the academic placement of students with disabilities and, as needed, addressed issues of student discipline. Through the course of time, I established rapport with students with disabilities and strove to make the best possible decisions relevant to their academic placement. During my tenure, I noted that many of my clients were

minorities. In like manner, de-facto minority student overrepresentation in special education, as seen by Losen and Welner (2001), appears to be compounded by “Classifications that carry greater stigma and entail more restrictive placements,[for example] Emotionally Disturbed and Mild Mental Retardation have disproportionately been the preserve of students of color” (p. 427). The psychological assessment and evaluation of minority children appears to be a concern of long standing, as indicated by Oakland (1977), “It is perplexing and disturbing that black, Hispanic, and other minority children are over represented in classes for the mentally retarded, while underrepresented in classes for the ... gifted” (p. iii).

Plaintiffs challenging the use of tests with minority group children usually cite one or more of the following issues: (1) assessment practices are discriminatory when children are not tested in their dominant language or dialect ... (2) tests are used in a discriminatory way as documented by the fact that disproportionately more minority group children are assigned and retained within special education classes and lower ability groups ... [and] ... (3) tests are administered by persons who are professionally incompetent or who are not fully sensitive to subtle and language variability in the testing situation ... (p. 39).

Oakland (1977) concluded that tests may yield reliable information when used appropriately. In other studies, such as Zucker and Prieto (1977) and Prieto and Zucker (1980) found when given similar referral information, special education teachers; as well as regular classroom teachers were more likely to refer minority students for psychological evaluation. In a review of those referred for psychological evaluation, Bryan (1989) determined, “There is a concern that although Blacks have been shown to respond differently than the majority population on various test measures, clinicians continue to interpret the data without consideration for these differences” ( p. 141). Deninger (2008) wrote, “Where special education benefits thousands of students in the Commonwealth, some students are inappropriately identified as disabled and may actually lose ground rather than benefit from the manner in which such services are typically provided”(p.8). Thus, while students with disabilities

may be disproportionately suspended, this problem may also be compounded by over representation of minority students in special education.

I served as the primary research instrument in this study and examined documents, interviewed participants, and collected field notes (Creswell, 2009). Five special education teachers who were assigned to teach students with disabilities in a Mid-Western High School, one non-special education teacher who also teaches students with disabilities, the school principal and two assistant school principals having responsibility for children in grades ten through twelve, the Director of Guidance and Counseling, and the Director of Special Services, a total of eleven participants, served as the primary sources of data. I purposefully selected participants who could best help me derive meaning from the research problem and the research questions (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, I sought advice from the District Special Education Director reference other potential participants. Case Study is the methodology and the high school is the unit of analysis. My data collection sources were interview guiding questions, documents, and my field notes, which were descriptive, as well as reflective. Data analysis was inductive and interview data were transcribed and coded. I used the codes to generate themes which formed the basis of my findings. I essentially interpreted the meaning of data using an insider's approach to understanding that which emerged. My final write-up was a narrative format that employed the use of participant descriptions and themes that emanated from multiple sources.

### **Significance of the Study**

School administrators, teachers, counselors, and parents have an interest in understanding how discipline is applied to students with disabilities. Specifically procedural due process is required by disability law and school rules and policies in meeting the criteria for substantive due process must be deemed reasonable, rational, and fair (Yell, Rozalski, and Drasgow, 2001). In like manner according to Yell, Rozalski, and Drasgow (2001), substantive due process requires that, "Disciplinary sanctions used in schools must not consist of penalties or restraints that are unnecessary or excessive for the achievement of proper school purposes" (p. 3). In some instances the application of discipline

to students with disabilities may conflict with disability law. Thus, the proposed research might encourage special education teachers, school principals and key personnel to review disability law and ensure compliance. That is, the research may help school personnel to identify ways to navigate students with disabilities discipline policy. In essence, it becomes paramount for educators to discern when students with disabilities misbehavior merits treatment, and contrastingly when it requires punishment.

I have aligned myself with Symbolic Interaction Theory and more finitely with an advocacy point of view. I believe that the ultimate benefactor from the cited theoretical perspective will be special education students as well as key school personnel, who had an opportunity to evaluate how their perceptions of students with disabilities and their perceptions of what constituted disruptive behavior might affect the suspension of students with disabilities. It is contended that the resulting findings may provide benefit to the school district superintendent, the school district board of education, school principals, special education teachers, students with disabilities and their parents, as well as other stakeholders.

### **Assumptions**

I assume that suspension and expulsion should be proportionately distributed within all segments of the school population. Specifically, educators must discern when student misbehavior merits treatment and contrastingly when it requires punishment.

I also assume that students with disabilities diagnosed with emotional disturbance and behavior disorders experience higher rates of suspension and or expulsion. Studies conducted in fifteen states over a sixteen year period from 1995 to 2011, (i.e., Ali and Dufresne, 2008; Beyers and Houston, 2001; Cooley, 1995; Fabelo, Thompson, and Plotkin, 2011; Fasko, Grubb, and Osborne, 1997; Maryland State Department of Education, 2010; Massachusetts Department of Education, 2000; Mendez, 2003; Michigan Non Profit Association, 2003; Miller, Ofer, Artz, Bah, Foster, Phenix, Sheehan, and Thomas, 2011; Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning, 1996; Oklahoma State Department of Education, 2007; Potts, Njie, Detch, and

Walton,2003;Skiba, Wu, Kohler, Chung, and Simmons, 2001; and Waldman and Reba,2008) revealed there is disproportionately in the suspension and expulsion of students with disabilities. Additionally, five multiple-state studies conducted over a fifteen year period from 1996 to 2011, (i.e., Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger, 2007; Bowman-Perrott, Benz, Hsu, Kwok, Eisterhold, and Zhang, 2011; Fiore and Reynolds,1996;Wanger, Kutash, Duchnowski, Epstein, and Sumi,2005) andZhang, Katsiyannis, and Herbst, 2004).

I assume that the students with disabilities who are enrolled at the research site have been appropriately evaluated and thus meet the criteria for special education services.

Finally, the literature indicated that teacher and principal perceptions of students with disabilities effected disciplining these students. Therefore, I assume that teacher and principal perceptions may also have an effect on how discipline is implemented.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Child with Disabilities:** This definition is derived from federal law (IDEIA, 2004). Child with a disability means a child evaluated in accordance with Sec. 300.304 through 300.311 as having mental retardation, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance, an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, and other health impairments, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services (Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), 2004, Part 300).

**Expulsion:** according to Adams County School District (2002), “Exclusion of a student from attending school and participation in school activities for a specified period of time beyond that provided for suspension, but not to exceed one calendar year, unless otherwise authorized” (p. 1).

**Gun Free School Act or GFSA, 1994:** Requires those states receiving funds under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act or ESEA to expel for one year those students found to be in the possession of a firearm (Zweifler and DeBeers, 2002).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990, PL 101-476: Minimized unilateral removal of students with disabilities from schools (Richards, 2004).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA, 1997, PL 105-17: Delineates specific provisions related to procedural due process as it relates to students with disabilities (Osborne, 2001).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act or IDEIA, 2004, PL 108-446: This Act mandates that school districts report data reference the suspension and expulsion of students with disabilities to the US Secretary of Education (IDEIA, 2004, Section 618).

In-School suspension: as defined by the Adams County School District (2002) is a, “Student suspended from participation in regular school activities, but receives continuous educational instruction, supervision, and discipline” (p. 1).

No Child Left Behind Act, NCLB, 2002 as described by Alexander and Alexander (2009): “...prescribes more refined, and possibly harsher disciplinary rules for children with disabilities” (p. 570). Specifically, state law requires schools receiving federal funds under NCLB to mandatory suspend or expel students for one year, who were deemed to be in the possession of a firearm on school grounds (Alexander and Alexander, 2009).

Out-of-school suspension as noted by Adams County School District (2002) is: “The exclusion of a student from attending school and participating in school activities for a specified and limited period of time” (p.1).

Procedural Due Process Safeguards: A student’s right to be notified of an impending suspension or expulsion coupled with an opportunity to explain one’s version of a disciplinary incident in a fair and impartial hearing (Hartwig and Ruesch, 1994). In essence, the Harvard Civil Rights Project (2000) said that procedural due process, “requires that states provide fair and adequate procedures for determining when it will deprive a person of life, liberty, or property” (p. 94).

Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act(1973) Subpart D, noted, “While Congress intended Section 504 to be consistent with The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 is more encompassing” (p. 5). Disabilities associated with Section 504 are as follows: Acquired

Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), Allergies, Arthritis, Asthma, Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Cancer, Cerebral Palsy, Epilepsy, Obesity, Orthopedically Impaired, Student Formerly Receiving Special Education Services, Student with Special Health Care Needs, Temporarily Disabled, Tourette syndrome, and Traumatic Brain Injury.

Student Discipline: A broad category of techniques that may lead to student punishment (Hartwig and Ruesch, 1994).

Substantive Due Process Safeguards as noted by Yell, Rozalski, and Drasgow (2001, p. 3): Requires that, “disciplinary sanctions used in schools must not consist of penalties or restraints that are unnecessary or excessive for the achievement of proper school purposes.” Additionally, school rules and policies must be deemed reasonable, rational, and fair (Yell, Rozalski, and Drasgow, 2001). According to the Harvard Civil Rights Project, (2000), “A threshold issue in substantive due process analysis is whether the rule or policy in question provides adequate notice of what conduct is prohibited” (p. 99). Finally, the Harvard Civil Rights Project (2000) iterates that, “The state must be pursuing a legitimate government objective by a method that is rationally related to achieving its goal” (p. 100).

Zero Tolerance according to Alexander and Alexander (2009) is a: “A mandatory disciplinary measure that is imposed for a specified offense [and that] removes discretion from school officials by imposing set and immutable penalties” (p.532). In sum, Alexander and Alexander stated, “Zero tolerance does not obviate the necessity of procedural [and/or substantive] due process” (p. 532).

### **Summary**

Chapter I introduced the study, identified the problem relating to the discipline of students with disabilities and formally stated the problem. Additionally, I identified the purpose of the study, the research questions, and the theory or theories undergirding the study. Also, the role of the



researcher was outlined, the significance of the study identified, researcher assumptions were stated, definition of terms offered, and chapter summary was stated.

Chapter II reviewed the literature relevant to the discipline of students with disabilities. Specifically I reported the results of studies that were related to the discipline of students with disabilities. Additionally issues that are related to the problem of disciplining students with disabilities were presented and discussed. Chapter III addressed the research Methodology and described the participants, instrument, research design, procedures and explained how data were analyzed. Chapter IV allowed me to present data and report findings. In Chapter V, I discussed the findings and offered conclusions and recommendations.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

According to Swanson's 2008 report *Special Education in America*, six million students or 9% of the school age population were classified as students with disabilities. Swanson indicated students, ages 14 to 17 years of age or high school aged students accounted for 32% (1.92 million) of the students with disabilities in the nation's schools. Additionally, Swanson found students, ages 10-13 years represented 34 % (2.04 million), while students ages 6-9 years corresponded to 29% (1.74 million) students enrolled in our schools. Finally, Swanson noted 300,000 thousand students who ranged in age from 18 to 21 were also enrolled in special education programs. Swanson (2008) found, "Nearly six out of every ten high school special education student falls into a single administrative category, specific learning disabilities (SLD), which encompasses a number of conditions that are potentially difficult to diagnose..."(p. 10). The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (2009) defined SLD as, "one or more of the psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written that manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations" (p. 3). As it relates to the behavior of students with disabilities The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS2, 2006) reported , "Almost one in five students [7<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> grade] with disabilities... act not very well or not at all well [behaviorally]"(p. 2). Additionally, the NLTS2 noted 73% of emotionally disturbed children accounted for the largest percentage of suspension by disability. Also the NLTS2 found, "Boys

with disabilities are more likely than girls... to argue or fight with other students at school” (p. 5). Finally, the NLTS2 stated, “African American students with disabilities are reported to exhibit more problem behaviors at school” (p. 6).

School administrator perceptions of what constitutes disruptive behavior affects how student discipline is administered and in like manner teacher perceptions of students with disabilities affects how suspension policy is applied to students with disabilities. The purpose of this case study is to gain an understanding of high school principal and special education teacher perceptions of students with disabilities, their perceptions of what constitutes disruptive behavior, and how their perceptions may affect students with disabilities suspensions. Chapter II presents a review of the literature and provides a framework for the proposed study by reviewing the findings of other studies that have focused on how discipline is applied to students with disabilities. The issues and order of presentation follow: (1) students with disabilities self-injury and or injury to others, (2) consider student’s disability before implementing discipline, (3) follow the rules in disciplining students with disabilities, (4) the value of taking the role of the other (Symbolic Interaction Theory) as it relates to students with disabilities discipline (5) the value of drawing upon personal experiences (Phenomenology Theory) as it relates to students with disabilities discipline, (6) the impact of teacher perceptions, judgments and attitudes in student suspension, (7) the impact of school administrator management style and perceptions about what constitutes disruptive behavior, (8) perceptions of the effectiveness of suspension/expulsion in maintaining school safety, (9) the expanded application of zero tolerance policies by schools to include minor behavioral infractions; (10) differences in suspension/expulsion practices in urban and rural areas, (11) suspension /expulsion disparities, and (12) the legal protections mandated for students with disabilities. I used several information sources to conduct this literature review to include professional journals, books, dissertations, ERIC, JSTOR, Pro-Quest, and the internet. In harmony with the foregoing, I reviewed national

and state studies that focused on how discipline was applied to students with disabilities in public US schools. This review is reported in accordance with the twelve issues herein identified.

### **Students with Disabilities Self Injury or Injury to Others**

Matson and Turygin (2012) identified the characteristics of self-injurious behavior as, “(1) Behaviors that cause physical harm... in the form of tissue damage, (2) repetitive [behavior with] rhythmic movement, and a [behavioral] act [that] is not predetermined.”(pp. 1021-1022). Matson et al. further noted that self-injurious behavior might manifest itself as, “Head hitting, self-biting, pica and...suicidal behavior” (p. 1022). Matson and Turygin stated, “Common co-occurring behaviors in self-injurious individuals included tantrums, physical and verbal aggression, property destruction, non-compliance, and sexually inappropriate behaviors.” (p. 1023). Additionally, Matson et al. indicated, “Children with an intellectual disability, developmental delay, emotional problem, language impairment, autism, or cerebral palsy are prone to self-injurious behaviors” (p. 1022). Finally, Matson and Turygin stated there are four ways to assess self-injurious behaviors and they are, “(1) medical examination, (2) trained raters who observe behavior... [and] count occurrences, (3) function assessment [or a search for causes], and (4) standardized testing...” (p. 1023).

Lance, York, Lee, and Zimmerman (2014) studied the association between Autism, developmental regression [developmental delays, IDEIA, 2014] and self-injurious behaviors. Their sample included 125 subjects ranging in age from 4 to 17 years. This group included 94 males and 31 females living in Baltimore, Maryland who were diagnosed with self-injurious behavior and autism. Essentially, Lance et al. reviewed their records and noted the, “occurrence and frequency of hitting, head-banging, biting, skin picking, pinching, scratching... and other problem behaviors [to] include aggression, disruption, [and] dangerous acts.” (p. 409). Primarily, Lance et al. found that those with autism to include those with and without developmental delays had, “similar occurrences of hitting, head banging, biting, skin picking, scratching, and eye poking” (p. 412). Additionally, Lance et al. found, “A lack of difference in terms of gender and

cognitive functioning” (p. 412) as it related to the sample they studied. Finally, Lance et al. found via review of records that, “The most common co-existing diagnoses was intellectual disability seen in 72% of patients and the second most common co-existing diagnoses was disruptive behavior disorder seen in 52% of patients...” (p. 410).

Tureck, Matson and Beighley (2013) designed a study to, “examine the impact of Autism [and] verbal ability on the rates of self-injurious behavior as it related to a group of adults with severe intellectual disability, i.e., IQs between 20 and 34” (p. 2470). The sample included 45 males and 22 females who resided in the Southeastern United States and ranged in age from 16 to 88 years. Tureck et al. found, “Individuals with intellectual disabilities and autism exhibited significantly higher rates of self-injurious behavior than individuals with only intellectual disabilities” (p. 2471). Additionally, Tureck et al. found, “Verbal individuals had significantly higher rates of self-injurious behavior than non-verbal individuals” (p. 2471). Finally, Tureck et al. found, “Individuals with autism who were verbal exhibited higher rates of self-injurious behavior” (p. 2471).

### **Consider Student’s Disability before Implementing Discipline**

Molen, Henry, and Luit (2014) examined the working and short term memory development in children with mild to borderline intellectual disabilities. According to Molen et al., “Working memory refers to the capacity to simultaneously store and manipulate [or process] information over brief periods of time [while short term memory on the other hand] is the capacity to temporarily hold and maintain information [and] prevent it from fading away” (p. 638). Molen et al. noted, “Children with mild to borderline intellectual disability [scored] between 50 and 85 on IQ tests” (p. 637). The sample included 197 children, 110 boys and 87 girls, between the ages of 9 and 16 who were enrolled in Special Education Classes in the Netherlands. Molen et al. found, “Working memory... continued to develop until around age 15 years [and] short term memory showed no further developmental increases after the age of 10 years” (p.637). Molen et al. also indicated with, “typically developing children there is some

evidence for a more protracted development in working memory up until age 20 and beyond... [and] short term memory develops until around age 15 years” (pp. 637-639).

Neece, Baker, Blacher, and Crnic (2011) studied Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) among children with and without intellectual disability (ID). Their sample included 228, 5-8 year old children from California (78%) and Pennsylvania (22%). The children were classified as follows: (1) ID or Intellectual Disability (IQ = 70 or lower, n=76), (2) BIF or Borderline Intellectual Functioning (IQ =71-84, n=11), and (3) TD or Typically Developing (IQ = 85 or higher, n=141). Boys accounted for 58.4% of the sample and girls for 41.6% of the sample. This was a longitudinal study that followed the cited children from the ages of 5 through 8 years. Neece et al. found, “The rates of ADHD were significantly higher in the ID and Borderline Intellectual Functioning groups compared to the TD group [additionally] there were no significant differences in rates of ADHD by gender” (p. 627). Neece et al. also found, “ADHD children in the ID group had higher levels of both inattentive and hyperactive/impulse symptoms [and] for ADHD children with TD and BID, ODD (Oppositional Defiant Disorder) was the most common co-occurring disorder” (pp. 631-632). The Mayo Clinic (2014) noted, “Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is a chronic condition that affects millions of children and often persists into adulthood” (p. 1).

### **Follow the Rules in Disciplining Students with Disabilities**

The US Department of Education’s 35<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress (2013), the most current report available to the public, assessed if the states were in compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), i.e. a federal law. Specifically, as it relates to this study Congress was interested in ascertaining if school districts were implementing discipline guidelines as delineated by IDEIA (2004). In essence, the goal of Congress was to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities were not abridged and that the rules governing the discipline of students with disabilities were followed. The US Department of Education therefore collected data from the individual states and analyzed it electronically in its

Data Analysis System (DANS). The US Department of Education reported that nationally, “[Disabled] children or students between the ages of 3-21 years were unilaterally removed to an interim alternative educational setting by school personnel for drugs, weapons, or serious bodily injury ... in school year 2010-11” (p. 70). That is the guidelines delineated by IDEIA, 2004 as it related to disciplining students with disabilities was being followed by the states.

### **The Impact of Teacher Perceptions, Judgments and Attitudes**

Wu, Pink, Crain, and Moles (1982) found, “Teacher’s lack of interest [in students] increases an individual student’s chances of receiving a suspension” (p. 258). Specifically, an unfavorable teacher perception of a student may increase the probability of suspension; while contrastingly, a favorable teacher perception of a student may decrease the likelihood of student suspension. Wu et al. also found that a teacher’s belief in a student’s ability to rationalize and solve a variety of his/her personal problems affects student suspension: “When teachers think students are incapable of solving problems, they are likely to be less patient or less tolerant when students misbehave” (p. 259). In essence, the research of Wu et al. supports if teachers believe that when students are unable to solve their problems, student suspensions increase. In an analysis of school violence, Noguera (1995) stated, “Teachers make the first referral in the discipline process, and therefore have tremendous influence in determining who receives discipline and why” (p. 202). Teachers thus make key decisions in reference to student discipline. Gordon, Piana, and Kelecher (2000) found, “How the [discipline] code is applied often depends on how individual teachers and administrators interpret student behavior” (p. 12). Specifically, Gordon et al. argued, “Too much room for arbitrary interpretation may allow teacher’s conscious or unconscious beliefs about their students to influence their decisions about how to discipline” (p. 12). In sum, teachers must make judgments in reference to student misbehavior, and these judgments may lead to higher suspension rates (Stone and Stone, 2009).

### **School Administrator Management Style and Perceptions about Discipline**

Wu et al. (1982) found, “Centralized administrative control of disciplinary matters leads to more suspensions” (p. 262). Specifically, knowledge of how a school is managed allows predictions to be made relevant to the rate of student suspension. Wu et al. suggested, “Suspension may be indeed a problem of school management and not merely a problem of student misconduct” (p. 260). In an analysis of school violence, Noguera (1995) indicated, “Most efforts to ensure the safety of students and teachers are ineffective [thus] the act of punishment becomes an important exercise for showing who has control” (p. 200). In sum, the school administrator’s style of management, and perceptions about what constitutes disruptive behavior will determine how student discipline is administered (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000).

### **Zero Tolerance Policy**

#### **Zero Tolerance Policy is Ineffective**

Heaviside, Rowland, Williams, and Farris (1998) in a study commissioned by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) found schools that use zero tolerance policies are less safe than schools without such policies. Heaviside et al. determined, based on a representative sample of 1,234 public elementary, middle, and secondary schools in the 50 states and the District of Columbia, that 94% of the schools adopted zero tolerance policies for firearms, 88% for drugs, 87% for alcohol, 79% for tobacco, and 79% for violent crimes. However, it was found 85% of the schools with zero tolerance policies reported serious crimes in schools, while 74% of those schools without zero tolerance policies reported no crimes. School principals in this study were asked to rate the following discipline issues: (1) student possession of weapons; (2) student use or sale of drugs; (3) student alcohol use; (4) student tobacco use; and (5) student violence, as a serious problem, moderate problem, or not a problem at school. NCES found 43% of the principals perceived these discipline issues in their schools as minor, 41% as moderate, and 16% as serious. Thus, one might draw the conclusion that zero tolerance policies are ineffective and



schools, especially those without zero tolerance policies, are relatively safe places for students to learn.

Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, and Garcia-Vazquez (2006) found the following: “(1) Serious and deadly violence remain a relatively small proportion of school disruptions; (2) suspension ... appears to predict higher future rates of misbehavior ... and (3) zero tolerance policies appear to have increased the use ... of strategies such as security technology...” (pp. 4-8). In sum, Skiba et al. concluded, “Zero tolerance policy does not result in safer schools” (p. 8). Additionally, Witt (2007) noted, “Race-based disciplinary disparities... remains largely obscured from public view by the popular emphasis on ‘zero tolerance’ crackdowns, which are supposed to deliver equally harsh punishments based on a student’s infraction, not skin color” (p. 2).

The Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights (2011) found, “Maintaining a safe and healthy school environment is a critical responsibility of schools. Yet relying on suspension, expulsion, and arrest has not been found to make schools safer, more orderly, or more productive” (p. 1). Similarly, a study conducted by the California Education Development Center (2011) found, “A significant portion of the state’s suspensions and expulsions are unrelated to school safety issues” (p. 3).

### **Zero Tolerance Policy is Effective**

The American Academy of Pediatrics (1995) determined drug use prevails at a high rate among high school and junior high school students. Specifically, the American Academy of Pediatrics indicated, “One third of high school seniors continue to experiment with illegal drugs while over half of high school seniors admit to drinking alcohol regularly” (p. 784). Additionally, the American Academy of Pediatrics found, “15% of eighth graders use tobacco products regularly and 69% admit to having experimented with alcohol” (p. 784). The American Academy of Pediatrics concluded, “Schools must be encouraged to develop comprehensive policies to ensure that they are free of tobacco, alcohol, and other drugs” (p. 782). In sum, the American

Academy of Pediatrics recommended, "Schools have a zero tolerance policy against tobacco, alcohol, and other drug use" (p. 782).

Stader (2006) found the following: "Zero tolerance policy and an emphasis on school safety have decreased the number of students carrying weapons to school" (p. 68). However, Stader cautioned, "Zero tolerance policies can reduce the incidents of weapons only so much. The rest of the safe schools equation requires deliberate effort to improve school culture, reduce student conflict, and proactively address gang influences in and around schools" (p. 72).

Substantial evidence seems to indicate zero tolerance policies are ineffective. However, there is evidence to support the use of zero tolerance policy as it relates to weapons and drug use. In sum, findings from these studies are contravening and may warrant further research.

### **Minor Behavioral Infractions**

School Zero Tolerance Policy gained credibility with the enactment of the Congressional Gun Free School Act in 1994. Specifically, this Act mandates that public schools expel students who are found to be in the possession of a weapon. This Act was amended in 1997 to include expelling students who possessed illegal drugs. There have been no further amendments to this Act since 1997; however, states have expanded the parameters of this Act well beyond the intent of the US Congress to include according to Peden (2001), "Any behavior the school administration deems inappropriate" (p. 37). A sampling of the afore-mentioned follows: According to Cooley (1995) 92 percent of the behavioral infractions that led to suspension/expulsion of regular and special education students in Kansas were not serious violations. That is, Cooley determined students were suspended or expelled for disobedience, disrespect to teachers, and skipping school. Fiore and Reynolds (1996) discovered general misconduct, for example, insubordination, disobedience, and foul language accounted for 79.5 percent of the incidents of misbehavior leading to the suspension/expulsion of disabled students. The Harvard Civil Rights Project (2000) revealed, "Students are more likely to be disciplined for minor misconduct and to receive punishment disproportionate to their conduct" (p. 8). Ali and

Dufresne (2008) determined 61 percent of all Connecticut students were suspended for minor violations, for example, insubordination, disrespect, and offensive language. Stone and Stone (2009) learned, “Suspension for minor, non-violent offenses such as truancy, disobedience, disrespect, and classroom disruption is not effective in reducing the behavioral problems it is intended to address” (p. 27).

### **Serious Behavioral Infractions**

Cooley (1995) noted eight percent of the behavioral infractions associated with regular and special education students were serious in nature. For example, illegal drugs accounted for approximately five percent of suspensions/expulsions, assaults on teachers accounted for approximately two percent of the suspensions/expulsions, and guns in school accounted for approximately one percent of the suspension/expulsions. According to Fiore and Reynolds (1996) 19.5 percent of the incidents of student serious misbehavior were attributed to weapons violations, illegal drug use, and alcohol consumption. The US Department of Education’s 30<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of the Individuals with Disability Education Act (2008) established nationwide, “0.19 % of students served under IDEA were removed to an interim alternative educational setting by school personnel for drug or weapon offenses” (p. 144). Ali and Dufresne (2008) in their study discovered 39 percent of Connecticut students were suspended for serious behavioral violations to include weapons possession and illegal drug possession. The Maryland Department of Education determined 1.9 percent of suspensions were for weapons and that 0.02 percent of suspensions were for firearms. Additionally, the Maryland Department of Education (2010) substantiated only 2.5 percent of students were suspended for dangerous acts to include arson, assault, and drugs. In sum, it would appear suspension is employed at a lower rate for serious student misconduct and at a higher rate for non-serious incidents, thus it seems efforts to ensure school safety are not the primary focus of student suspension.

## **Suspension /Expulsion of Students**

### **Suspension /Expulsion in Urban Schools**

Dunbar and Villarruel (2004) designed a study to assess how Michigan school principals interpreted and applied zero tolerance policy. They discovered urban school principals were (1) aware of the specifics of zero tolerance policy, (2) indicated zero tolerance policy clarified how suspension/expulsion was to be administered, (3) associated student possession of weapons in school with violence, and (4) adhered to zero tolerance policy as mandated. In a longitudinal study, the Maryland Department of Education (2010) revealed students in urban schools experienced unstable housing, poor methods of transportation to school, higher teacher and administrator turnovers, fear of violence and high rates of suspension and expulsion.

### **Suspension /Expulsion in Rural Schools**

According to Polakow-Suransky (1999) a student in a rural Michigan school who was discovered with a weapon in his car during hunting season received a ten-day suspension in lieu of a one-year expulsion mandated by the Gun –Free School Act of 1994. In a study of suspension, expulsion, and zero tolerance policies, Gordon, Piana and Keleher (2000), learned , “A student in a rural Vermont School was not suspended or expelled when he explained that he’d brought a loaded shotgun to school because it was hunting season” (p. 8). Dunbar and Villarruel (2004) reported rural school principals in Michigan were (1) un- clear about the specifics of zero tolerance policy, (2) indicated zero tolerance policy was not necessary, (3) associated student possession of firearms with hunting season, and (4) did not adhere to state mandated zero tolerance policy. Stone and Stone (2009) concluded that, “Suspension is used inconsistently as a disciplinary consequence across school districts, within each district, within schools, and within classrooms” (p. 30).

### **Suspension/Expulsion Disparities**

Wheelock (1986), in a study of student exclusion practices in Boston Middle Schools, postulated, “Schools may confuse student behavior which requires treatment with behavior

suggesting punishment [and] the result can be misuse of suspension for behavior which may be disruptive but also related to a student's disability" (p. 68). Wheelock argued, "Suspension for special needs students should be decreased when the student's behavior is related to their disability" (p. 69).

Potts, Njie, Detch, and Walton (2003) conducted a longitudinal study of zero tolerance in Tennessee schools and learned special education students represented between 16-17 percent of the total school population, but 23-25 percent of those were suspended or expelled.

According to The Oklahoma State Department of Education (2007), "15.19 % of LEAs [82 of 543 LEAs] in Oklahoma had significant discrepancies in the rates of suspension or expulsion between students with disabilities and students without disabilities in school year 2004" (p. 13).

Ali and Dufresne (2008) examined out-of-school suspension policy and practice in Connecticut and discovered 15 percent of special education students were suspended compared to 6 percent of non-special education students. Fabelo, Thompson, and Plotkin (2011) noted students with disabilities accounted for 13.2 percent of the total school population, but 74.6 percent of those suspended or expelled.

**Disparity in the Suspension/Expulsion of Children with ED/BD.** In a national study of disciplinary exclusion among students with ED/BD and LD in the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) National Data Base , Achilles, McLaughlin, and Croninger (2007) detected children with ED/BD were more likely to be suspended or expelled than were children with LD. Bowman-Perrott, Benz, Hsu, Kwok, Eisterhold, and Zang (2011) analyzed the SEELS National Data Base and learned special education students, aged 6-12 years, with ED/BD were at the greatest risk of suspension or expulsion. Additionally, Fabelo, Thompson, and Plotkin (2011) revealed Texas students with ED/BD accounted for 9.9 percent of all students with disabilities in Texas, but 90.2 percent of those suspended or expelled in Texas. ED/BD is a disability that is not exclusively within the purview of elementary school age children, but contrastingly may affect children at any age.

**Disparity in the Suspension/Expulsion of Children with LD.** Cooley (1995) was tasked by the Kansas State Board of Education to study suspension and expulsion of regular and special education students in Kansas and found students with LD accounted for 4.5 percent of the Kansas school population, but 11 percent of those suspended or expelled in Kansas. Fiore and Reynolds (1996) were contracted by the US Department of Education to analyze discipline issues in special education nationally; they reported students with LD accounted for 51.2 percent of all special education students nationally but 52.8 percent of those suspended or expelled nationally. Fabelo, Thompson, and Plotkin (2011) reported students with LD accounted for 70.8 percent of all disabled students in Texas, but 76.2 percent of those suspended or expelled in Texas.

**Disparity in the Suspension/Expulsion of Black Students.** Wu et al. (1982) found, “Black students are at least twice as likely as Whites to have been suspended” (p. 251). However, Wu et al. noted, “The higher suspension rate experienced by minorities is not simply a matter of their more frequent misbehavior or anti-social attitude [but is] indicative of unequal treatment against them” (p. 268). Witt (2007) discovered, “In every state but Idaho... Black students are being suspended in numbers greater than would be expected from their proportion of the student population” (p. 1). Witt also noted, “No other ethnic group is disciplined at such a high rate... yet Black students are no more likely to misbehave than other students from the same social and economic environments” (pp 1-2). Skiba and Williams (2014) noted, “Research has failed to support the common perception that racial and ethnic disparities in school punishment stem from issues of poverty and increased misbehavior among students of color” (p. 6). Additionally, Skiba and Williams stated, “Statistical approaches have failed to find evidence that students of color act out a higher rates that could justify differential punishment” (p. 6).

**Disparity in the Suspension/Expulsion of Black Students with Disabilities.** In a national longitudinal study of disciplinary exclusion Zhang, Katsiyannis and Herbst (2004) discovered African-Americans were three times more likely to be suspended/expelled than any other race/ethnicity receiving special education services. Rausch and Skiba (2006) in a study of

discipline, disability, and race in Indiana schools learned Black students with disabilities were suspended or expelled at a rate of 2.8 times higher than other students with disabilities. Rausch and Skiba also found, “Black disabled students were 3.4 times more likely to receive suspensions or expulsions greater than ten days” (p. 5). The Oklahoma State Department of Education (2007) revealed in the 2005 school year that “66 of 543 LEAs [12.15%] had significant discrepancies in rates of suspension or expulsion by race/ethnicity [and] as a state Oklahoma has a significant discrepancy in the rates of suspension and expulsion for students with disabilities who are Black (not Hispanic)” (p. 13). Miller, Ofer, Artz, Bah, Foster, Phenix, Sheehan, and Thomas (2011) studied the growing use of suspension in New York City Public Schools and noted Black disabled students accounted for 36 percent of the student enrollment, but 53 percent of suspensions in New York City.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Ethnicity, Gender and Grade Level.** Losen and Martinez (2013) in a national study found that, “30% of enrolled African American males high school students, 31% of enrolled African American male middle school students, and 10% of enrolled African American male elementary students were suspended in school year 2011-2012” (p. 9). Additionally, Losen and Martinez discovered that, “19% of enrolled African American female high school students, 17% of enrolled African American female middle school students and 3% of enrolled African American female elementary school children were suspended in school year 2011-2012” (p. 9). Collectively, African American male and female students accounted for the largest percentage of suspensions by ethnicity during the 2011-2012 school year across all grade levels.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Ethnicity, Grade Level, and Students With and Without Disabilities.** In a national study, Losen and Martinez (2013) found, “32% of African American enrolled high school students with disabilities, 31% of African American enrolled middle school students with disabilities, and 9% of African American enrolled elementary school children with disabilities were suspended in school year 2011-2012” (p. 10).

Contrastingly, Losen and Martinez found, “23% of African American enrolled high school students without disabilities, 23% of African American enrolled middle school students without disabilities, and 6% of African American enrolled elementary students without disabilities were suspended in school year 2011-2012” (p. 10). It appeared African American students with disabilities accounted for the largest percentage of suspensions/expulsions by ethnicity at all grade levels.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Student Socio-Economic Status.** Wu et al. (1982) learned students who received free and reduced lunches, as well as students whose fathers were not full-time employed experienced higher rates of suspension. However, Wu et al. noted, “Even when poverty related problems are taken into consideration, the non-White students still experience more suspensions” (p. 269). Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) determined, “Students who received free or reduced cost lunch were more likely to be suspended than those paying full cost” (p. 4). Mendez (2003) conducted a longitudinal study in Florida and revealed SES was the best predictor of student suspension.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Student Grade Level.** Beyers and Houston (2001) found ninth graders enrolled in Delaware Schools accounted for the highest rate [21.7 percent] of suspensions and the highest rate [29.4 percent] of expulsions in Delaware. Ali and Dufresne (2008) discovered ninth graders enrolled in Connecticut public schools accounted for the largest percent [22 percent] of suspensions by grade level. Schools across the nation are organized differently, that is ninth grade in some school systems is considered high school.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Student Gender.** Wu et al. (1982) established, “Male students in every kind of school location [urban, suburban, and rural] and level [middle school, high school] are more likely to be suspended than females” (p. 251). The Delaware Department of Education (2001) found male students accounted for 70.3 percent of the suspensions and 71.4 percent of the expulsions.



Waldman and Reba (2008) determined male students accounted for 83.5 percent of all suspensions.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Gender and Grade Level.** Losen and Martinez (2013) in a national study found, “15% of enrolled male high school students, 15% of enrolled male middle school students, and 4% of enrolled male elementary school students were suspended in school year 2011-2012” (p. 9). Additionally, Losen and Martinez determined, “8% of enrolled female high school students, 7% of enrolled female middle school students, and 1% of enrolled female elementary school students were suspended in school year 2011-2012” (p. 9). This data seems to indicate male students at every grade level are suspended at a higher percentage than female students.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Grade Level and With and Without Disabilities.** Losen and Martinez (2013) in a national study found “20% of enrolled high school students with disabilities, 18% of enrolled middle school students with disabilities, and 4% of enrolled elementary school students with disabilities were suspended in school year 2011-2012” (p. 10). Contrastingly, Losen and Martinez discovered “7% of enrolled high school students without disabilities, 7% of enrolled middle school students without disabilities, and 2% of enrolled elementary school students without disabilities were suspended in school year 2011-2012” (p. 10). Students with disabilities at every grade level appear to be suspended at a higher percentage than students without disabilities.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Student Age and Urban, Suburban, and Rural Areas.** The Minnesota Department of Children, Families, and Learning (1996) found 13-year-olds accounted for the greatest percent [19.5 percent] of suspensions in urban areas, while 14-year-olds accounted for the greatest percent [17.5 percent] of the suspensions in suburban areas, and 15-year-olds accounted for the greatest percent [15.7 percent] of the suspensions in rural areas. Additionally, Waldman and Reba (2008) determined children between 13-15 years of age were more likely to be suspended than any other age group.

**Disparity in Suspension/Expulsion by Student Achievement.** Wu et al. (1982) found, “Low-ability students are more frequently suspended” (p. 265). However, Wu et al. also noted “Students need not be truly low in their ability as long as they are considered to have low ability they are more likely to be suspended by the school” (p. 266). Finally, Wu et al. also determined “The probability of being suspended is reduced if [student] grades are above average, i.e. ‘B’ or above” (p. 267).

In an effort to explain why students are suspended, Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) indicated, “Students are struggling with issues of identity and authority” (p. 8). Byres and McClenny (1998) discovered the frontal lobe of the brain is responsible for decision making, risk assessment, and impulse control. Additionally, Keating (2004) determined the pre-frontal cortex aids in cognitive processing, problem solving, and emotional control. Skiba, Reynolds, Graham, Sheras, Conoley, and Garcia-Vazquez (2006) reported, “Evidence from developmental neuroscience indicate the brain structure of adolescents are less well-developed than previously thought [thus] adolescents may be expected to take greater risks and reason less adequately about the consequences of their behavior” (p. 7). In essence, Skiba et al. questioned the appropriateness of zero tolerance suspension and expulsion policy as it related to adolescents.

### **Growing Number of Students Assigned to Special Education**

In 2008, more than six million students with disabilities or about nine percent of the nation’s school population were educated in our public schools and the number of students enrolled in special education is rising. That is, the disability category of Learning Disability in 2008 accounted for 57% of high school students with disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and other health impairments in 2008 represented 11% of high school students with disabilities. Additionally, in 2008 emotional disturbance accounted for 11% of high school students with disabilities, mental disabilities represented 10% of high school students with disabilities and all other disability categories accounted for 11% of high school students with

disabilities. Approximately one third or two million of the students with disabilities enrolled in public schools are of high school age, i.e., students ranging in age from 14 to 17.

According to Swanson (2008), key concerns associated with students with disabilities include, “Diagnoses of disabilities, overrepresentation of particular student groups...[and] school discipline... in relationship to diagnoses of disabilities” (p. 1). School psychologists in the recent past have used measures of intelligence or IQ Tests and batteries of other tests to include achievement and other light projective tests to identify children with disabilities. However, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) allows diagnosing specific Learning Disabilities by Response to Intervention (RTI). That is, the law allows diagnoses and intervention with students with disabilities through a three-tier system, i.e., regular classroom instruction, small group instruction, and individualized instruction. In essence, Swanson (2008) noted students, who experience difficulty with tier three, i.e., individualized instruction, “May be considered candidates for special education services” (p. 9).

As it relates to, “overrepresentation of particular student groups,” Swanson stated,, “African-American students are identified with disabilities 40 percent more often than the national average and are twice as likely to receive diagnoses for mental retardation and emotional disturbance” (p. 11). Swanson also stated, “Across racial and ethnic groups males are diagnosed with disabilities at two-times the rate of female students” (p. 11). Finally, in relationship to, “school discipline” Swanson found, “Special education students are generally more likely to become involved in major disciplinary incidents like suspension and expulsion than their peers in general education programs” (p. 1). For example, Swanson reported, “Students with Emotional Disturbance constitute 11% of disabled high school students, but accounted for 73% of students suspended or expelled” (p. 14). In like manner Swanson stated, “Students with health impairments to include attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) account for 11% of high school students with disabilities, but 41% of students with disabilities suspended or expelled” (p. 14). Collectively, according to Swanson among all categories of students with disabilities 33%

were suspended or expelled in school year 2006 compared to 21% of students without disabilities. In sum, Swanson stated, “Schools must first determine whether the problem behavior was attributable to individual’s disability and secondly schools must examine whether the misconduct was a result of the school’s failure to implement the student’s individualized Education Program (IEP)” (p. 15).

In a study of 26, 000 middle schools and high schools, Losen and Martinez (2013) discovered that, “well over two million students were suspended during the 2009-2010 academic year” (p. 1). Additionally, Losen and Martinez found, “20% of enrolled high school students with disabilities were suspended in comparison to 18% of enrolled middle school students with disabilities [while only] 7% of enrolled high school students without disabilities and 7% of enrolled middle school without disabilities were suspended in 2009-2010” (p. 10). In essence, Losen and Martinez stated, “The rate of disabled students suspended nearly tripled the rate of students without disabilities” (p. 13). Losen and Martinez also found that, “the vast majority of suspensions were for minor infraction of school rules...rather than for serious violent or criminal behavior” (p. 1). An alarming finding discovered by Losen and Martinez revealed that, “36% of all Black male students with disabilities enrolled in middle and high school were suspended at least once in 2009-2010 in comparison to 26% of White middle and high school students” (p. 11). In sum, Losen and Martinez concluded, “All educators... must find effective ways to address [student] disruptive behavior” (p. 2).

### **Legislative Issues**

Children with disabilities are protected by Constitutional Law, Case Law, Legislative law, and state law. For example, according to Alexander and Alexander (2009) The Fourteenth Amendment to the US Constitution guarantees that an individual’s right to, “life, liberty, and property” (p. 1147) cannot be abridged without due process of law. Alexander and Alexander noted, “Zero tolerance laws remove discretion from school officials by imposing set and immutable penalties [however] zero tolerance does not obviate the necessity of procedural due

process...” (p. 532). Furthermore Alexander and Alexander stated, “Challenges to zero tolerance have generally resulted in the court upholding the policies [of the school] if the policies comport with procedural due process” (p. 532). Alexander and Alexander (2009) reported, “In the final analysis the courts will not substitute their judgment as to the wisdom of zero tolerance policies so long as student due process rights are not denied” (p. 534). In *Goss vs. Lopez* (1975), several high school students were suspended from school without a hearing and without notice rendered to their parents. The Supreme Court of the United States determined students facing up to ten days of suspension had a property and a liberty interest in education. Additionally, it was determined these rights were protected by the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, which entitled the plaintiffs to notice, as well as a hearing. In essence *Goss v. Lopez* (1975) requires procedural due process and thus students subject to school suspension, “must be given some kind of notice and afforded some kind of hearing” (p. 3).

### **Case Law**

In *Milonas v. Williams* (1982), two teenage students who were enrolled in a private school that received both state and federal funding and that served students with emotional and behavioral disorders, “alleged that they had been denied a free appropriate public education and sought relief pursuant to the Education for all Handicapped Children Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act” (p. 2). Specifically, the students in *Milonas v. Williams* alleged for violation of school rules they were, “Placed in rooms that were approximately 4 X 8 X 9 with one small window for up to 24 hours” ( p. 9). Additionally, attorneys for the plaintiff in *Milonas v. Williams* claimed school officials grabbed students by the arm with one hand and pulled their hair with the other hand in what was deemed by school officials, “As the most effective way to bring a student under control” (p. 10). The Honorable Bruce S. Jenkins, a United States District Judge for the District of Utah issued an injunction that prohibited the defendants from implementing the punishment. Additionally, the District Court in *Milonas v. Williams* determined the, “Disciplinary practices carried on at the school violated First and Fourteenth Amendment

rights of the plaintiffs” (p. 8). Finally, the District Court in *Milonas v. Williams* noted under Section 1983, 42 U.S.C, “ Any person under the color of state law [who] causes another to be deprived of rights secured by the Constitution or laws of the United States shall be liable to the injured party” (p. 6). Thus, the District Court in *Milonas v. Williams*, “awarded the plaintiffs \$133,546.54” (p. 12). On appeal, the United States Court of Appeals, Tenth Federal Circuit, which has jurisdiction over Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, and New Mexico determined in the *Milonas v. Williams* case, “The District Court properly undertook a balancing process to determine whether the challenged disciplinary practices were onerous as to overcome the legitimate administrative and security interests of the school” (p. 11). In sum, the Tenth Federal Circuit Court concurred with the District Court.

In *Holman v. Wheeler* (1983) a case that reached The Supreme Court of Oklahoma, attorneys for the plaintiff alleged, “A school superintendent spanked and beat a student with unnecessary and excessive force while administering school discipline” (p, 1). The trial court upheld the superintendent’s action and dismissed the case. On appeal the Supreme Court of Oklahoma (1983) ruled, “The trial court erred and held that the appellant’s tort claim was within the purview of the Tort Claims Act” (p. 3).

In *Garcia v. Miera* (1987), a female student [Garcia] was held upside down by a teacher and struck five times on the front of the leg with a wooden paddle by the school principal [Miera] causing blood to penetrate her clothes. Although both of Garcia’s parents requested the child [Garcia] not be spanked again, Garcia was in fact spanked again. A physician who treated Garcia noted that he had not seen bruises like the ones inflicted upon Garcia from routine spankings. The District Court ruled for the defendants. However, the United States Court of Appeals, Tenth Federal Circuit in *Garcia v. Miera* ruled, “Excessive corporal punishment violates the pupil’s substantive due process rights [and that] the Fourteenth Amendment Liberty Interests are implicated” (p. 3). Thus, the Tenth Federal Circuit Court reversed the decision of the District Court.

In *Hayes v. Unified School District* (1989), the parents of two students with disabilities who were placed in in-school suspension for disruptive behavior and violation of school rules claimed their children's procedural and substantive due process rights were violated. The District Court ruled that the administrative remedies under the Education for all Handicapped Act (EHA) must be exhausted before other remedies are sought. However, under appeal, the Tenth Federal Circuit Court in *Hayes v. Unified School District*, which has jurisdiction over Oklahoma and five other states, had to determine, "whether the plaintiffs were required first to exhaust their administrative remedies under EHA"(p. 2). The Tenth Federal Circuit Court in *Hayes v. Unified School District* ruled "Administrative remedies under the EHA ... should not be applied inflexibly" (p. 7). In essence, exhaustion of administrative remedies is not a predisposition that would prevent the plaintiffs from appealing to a higher court. The Tenth Federal Circuit Court in *Hayes v. Unified School District* ruled the, "District Court erred ... we therefore reverse and remand to the District Court with instructions to dismiss for lack of jurisdiction" (p. 7).

### **Legislative Law**

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first Congressional Mandate to ensure educational rights for students with disabilities and according to the Harvard Civil Rights Project (2000); this Act, "provides protections against disciplinary practices with disproportionate adverse Impact on students with disabilities that generally mirror the adverse impact standard applied under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964" (p. 45). Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, and national origin for any program or activity that receives federal funding (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000). In like manner, Section 504 prevents discrimination in discipline practices that are applied to students with disabilities. The fore-mentioned is underscored in United States Code 29 (1998), which stated, "No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States...shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance..." (p. 794).

Additionally Alexander and Alexander (2009) noted The Education for All Handicapped Act or EAHCA, 1975 provided for a, “free appropriate education program [FAPE] in the least restrictive environment [LRE]” (p. 572) for students with disabilities. EAHCA was amended by the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, IDEA 1990, also known as Public Law 10-476, which minimized the unilateral removal of disabled students from school, unless they posed an immediate threat to the safety of others (Richards, 2004). IDEA 1990 was again amended in 1997 and designated Public Law 105-17. Specifically, IDEA 1997 required procedural due process in the form of a manifestation hearing for the suspension or expulsion of disabled students in excess of ten school days. Additionally, it allowed up to forty-five days of suspension if a disabled student brought a weapon or illegal drugs to school. Finally, it allowed up to forty-five days of suspension for disabled students deemed likely to injure self or others (Hartwig and Ruesch, 1994; Osborne, 2001). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, IDEIA 2004 or Public Law 108-446 is the most recent amendment to IDEA, however, the 1975, 1990, and 1997 provisions are still in force. Specifically, IDEIA (2004) requires that school districts report the following to the US Department of Education: “The number of children with disabilities who are subject to long-term suspension or expulsion” (p.92). School districts in accordance with IDEIA (2004) also must report, “the number and percentage of children with disabilities and without disabilities who are removed to an alternate educational setting or expelled” (p. 93).

### **Multiple Theories**

Potentially, multiple theories might be employed to explain the findings in this study. Other theories that are relevant in this study include: Chaos Theory; Behavior Modification Theory; Labeling Theory; the Theory of Bureaucracy, Modern Structural Organization Theory, Hermeneutic Theory, Phenomenology Theory, and Social Constructionism Theory.

### **Symbolic Interactionism Theory**



Blumer (1969) expounded upon symbolic interactionism by exploring what he called symbolic interactionism's, "root images" (p. 6). Blumer identified these "root images" as follows: "(1) Human groups or societies; (2) social interaction; (3) objects; (4) the human being as an actor; and (5) human action, and the interconnection of the lines of action" (pp. 6-21). As it related to the first "root image," Blumer seemed to be saying that individuals independently and collectively have the ability to initiate action.

In concert with the second "root image," Blumer appeared to offer the proposition that human behavior has potential to be shaped through social interaction by using symbols, language, or gestures to convey meaning. Blumer noted, "Interaction allows individuals to 'take each other's roles' ... [and that] such mutual role taking is the sine qua non [essential condition] of communication and effective symbolic interaction." (pp. 9-10).

In relationship to the third "root image," Blumer stated, "...Objects are the product of symbolic interaction [and] one can classify objects in three categories: (a) physical objects [things]; (b) social objects [people]; ...and (c) abstract objects..." (p. 10). Blumer characterized abstract objects as, "Moral principles, philosophical doctrines, or ideas such as justice, exploitation, or compassion" (p. 10). Essentially, the meaning that these objects have for individuals is created through interpretation.

In regard to the fourth "root image", Blumer noted the human being is the actor in symbolic interaction and thus interacts, "by placing himself in the position of others and viewing himself... from that position" (p. 13). Finally, in considering the fifth "root image," Blumer stated, "Joint action... is an inter linkage of the separate acts of the participants" (p. 17). In sum, the "root images" appear to be the foundational base upon which symbolic interaction rests.

Crotty (1998) noted that the tenets postulated by Blumer (1969) are rooted in pragmatism. The latter, according to Crotty, is, "An uncritical exploration of cultural ideas and values in terms of their practical outcomes" (p. 73). Crotty further elaborated that with pragmatism, "The authentic meaning of ideas and values is linked to their outcomes and therefore

to the practices in which they are embedded” (p.73). Thus, meaning is a central tenet of symbolic interactionism and becomes manifest, according to Crotty, “by the putting of oneself in the place of the other” (p. 75).

According to Crotty, “One form of interaction inquiry... [is] labeling theory [that is] the everyday ways in which we categorize people and things” (p.77). It was further noted by Crotty that, “This role taking... is possible only because of the ‘significant symbols’ -that is language and other symbolic tools... we share... through communication” (p. 75). Additionally, Crotty said, “Only through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of others and interpret their meaning” (p.75). In sum, symbolic interactionism, as viewed by Crotty, allows one to, “observe [and] to take the place of those within the culture and search out the insider’s perspective” (p. 77).

Patton (2002) stated symbolic interaction “is a perspective that places great emphasis on the importance of meaning and interpretation... in a reaction against behaviorism and mechanical stimulus-response psychology.”(p. 112). That is, Patton noted, “People create shared meaning through their interactions, and those meanings become their reality” (p. 112). Essentially, Patton found that symbolic interaction allows people to, “perceive, understand, and interpret the world... through close contact and direct interaction...” (p. 112). Patton indicated, “Labeling theory... what people are called... has been a primary focus of inquiry in symbolic interaction” (p. 112). In sum, Patton noted, “The importance of symbolic interactionism... is its distinct emphasis on the... symbols and the interpretative process that undergird interactions... to understand human behavior” (p. 113).

Lecompte and Preissle (2003) indicated the focus of symbolic interactionism is an, “analysis of the constructed nature of social meaning and reality” (p. 128). Additionally, Lecompte and Preissle stated that the assumptions undergirding symbolic interactionism are as follows: “(1) Meaning is constructed through social interaction; (2) individuals act on the basis of meaning they perceive; [and] (3) meanings change... because of different perceptions held by the

actors” (p. 128). Finally, Lecompte and Preissle noted the major concepts associated with symbolic interactionism are, “...symbols, meaning, interaction...role taking... [and] communication” (p. 130).

Forte (2008) stated, “Interactionists study the confluence of symbols and interaction [and that] actors act according to the meaning assigned to objects composing their worlds” [thus] social interaction is symbolic” (p. 173). Additionally, Forte said, “The researcher... endeavors to interpret actors who themselves interpret the objects in their world” (p. 173). Essentially, Forte stated, “The researcher... must engage in taking the role of the acting other and view the world from the subjects’ point of view” (p. 174). Taking the role of the other, according to Forte, “Increases the close, deep, and intimate contact... necessary for accurate understanding” (p. 174).

Dennis (2011) noted with symbolic interactionism, “Interaction depends entirely on the actors’ interpretations and understandings” (p. 349). Dennis said, “Meaning is thus something that is a product of social interaction, but requires active interpretation to be acted on” (p. 350). Additionally, Dennis iterated, “The social actor is central to... symbolic interaction...he or she interprets situations... roles are thus taken [and] attributed and aligned” (p. 351). Finally, Dennis stated, “Symbolic interactionist understand particular interactions as taking place in particular contexts” (p. 352).

### **Symbolic Interaction Theory and Students with Disabilities Behavioral Issues**

Rafalovich (2005) examined teacher, parent, and clinician perceptions of children’s unruly behavior, specifically the study determined how teachers and parents tend to pre-label disruptive children ADHD [Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder] before formal medical diagnosis” (p. 26) by clinicians. The sample included eighty-one participants, twenty five teachers, thirty parents, and twenty six clinicians. According to Rafalovich, the teachers, “were drawn from fourteen schools and taught grade levels ranging from pre-school to tenth grade... [and] the parents represented a wide range of occupations” (p. 29). Rafalovich noted the clinicians, on the other hand, included, “clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, pediatricians,

general practitioners, and family therapists” (p. 29). Interviews were used to collect data and they were initiated by telephone or in person and they lasted between twenty and ninety minutes. Parents and teachers reported that student academic and social-behavioral problems subsequently led to children being pre-labeled ADHD. Specifically, parents and teachers were able to identify students who were inattentive and hyperactive i.e. the fore-mentioned behaviors were deemed to be components of ADHD by clinicians. Rafalovich noted, “Violent exchanges with other students aroused suspicions of ADHD among parents and teachers [and] parents and teachers perceived violent children as having fundamental flaws in how they internalize symbols and negotiate social situations” (pp. 33-34). Rafalovich stated, “Parents and teachers appeared more inclined to suspect the presence of a behavior disorder when their symbolic authority had no apparent effect” (p. 34) on re-directing children’s inappropriate behavior. Finally, Rafalovich determined, “Interviews with clinicians suggested that that the actions of school representatives greatly influenced ADHD diagnoses . . . and that the mutual interest [between teachers and students]affects the way behavior disorders become socially constructed” (p. 38). Essentially children suspected of ADHD experienced difficulty interacting with their peers, teachers, and parents and they also experienced difficulty mastering language, thus these problems appeared to be compounded when teachers and parents were unable to re-direct inappropriate behavior. However, dyadic interaction between teachers and students provided an avenue to understand student problems and thus become sensitized to these problems.

### **Chaos Theory**

Chaos Theory represents a vacillation between order and disorder, thus students with disabilities may be in harmony with order at selected times, while contrastingly at other times demonstrate disorder through self-injurious behavior. In essence, it might be difficult to predict at what interval students with disabilities might display order in contrast to disorder. Wheatley (2006) noted, “The System [chaotic] is deterministic, but you can’t say what it’s going to do next” (p. 120). Thus, it is highly unlikely that school personnel might be able to predict with

accuracy when a student with disabilities might resort to self-injurious behavior. Wheatley made note of the long range consequences associated with Chaos Theory and in like manner Matson et al. (2012) pointed out the self-injurious behavior of students with disabilities in extreme cases can lead to, “suicide behavior” (p. 1022), such as a long range consequence.

### **Behavior Modification Theory**

Behavior Modification Theory according to McLeod (2007) is associated with changing behavior by the use of positive or negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement strengthens a desired behavior through a system of rewards. For example, rewards might be tangible or non-tangible. The former, might be a system of privileges or tokens, while the latter could be verbal comments or non-verbal gestures like head nods or smiles, which could be employed to ensure acceptable behavior is replicated. Negative reinforcement, the avoidance of negative consequences like an electric shock has no utility value in a school. McLeod noted, “Punishment...the opposite of reinforcement is designed to weaken or eliminate a response rather than increase it” (p. 6). Students with disabilities may be subject to various forms of punishment for mal-adaptive behavior to include suspension and expulsion.

### **Labeling Theory**

Calhoun (2002) stated, “Labeling Theory is rooted in the tradition of Symbolic Interactionism, which emphasizes the continuous construction of identity through interpersonal relationships and the importance of the perceptions of others on identity formation” (p. 1). Additionally, according to Crotty (1998), “One form of interaction inquiry...[is] labeling theory [that is] the everyday ways in which we categorize people and things” (P.77). In like manner, Patton (2002) noted, “Labeling Theory...what people are called...has been a primary focus of inquiry in Symbolic Interaction” (P. 112). For example, students with disabilities are categorized by labels in accordance with The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In essence, students with disabilities are labeled by law. In sum, Calhoun stated, “Labeling Theory is also interested

in...who has the power to impose labels, how that power is used, and how labels...illuminate social divides” (P. 1).

### **Bureaucratic Theory**

Bureaucratic Theory according to Max Weber (1909) is associated with the following principles: (1) hierarchical organization; (2) selection based on technical qualification; (3) job specialization; (4) career orientation; (5) rules and regulations; and (6) impersonality.

Hierarchical organization implies that some individuals give orders, while other individuals follow orders. Selection based on technical qualifications may rest on formal examinations or job interviews, while job specialization implies individuals perform a variety of jobs in organization based on their competency. Individuals employed in bureaucratic organization are employed for extended periods of time and their employment is generally protected from arbitrary termination. Finally, individuals associated with bureaucratic organizations are required to follow a formal system of rules, regulations, policies, guidelines and laws uniformly without regard to their feelings.

### **Modern Structural Organization Theory**

Modern Structural Organization Theory according to Shafritz et al. (2011) is, “Defined [by] rules...formal authority... specialization, and the division of labor” (P. 197). Thus, this theory appears to have tenets similar to Bureaucratic Theory. Modern Structural Organization Theory, as noted by Shafritz et al., is employed in organizations associated with, “quality and quantity of production...skilled operations and [in the] professions” (p. 197). Thus, this theory may have relevance for professional educators.

### **Hermeneutic Theory**

Patton (2002) noted, “Hermeneutics focuses on interpreting something of interest, traditionally a text...to include emphasis throughout [that] concerns the nature of interpretation...” (p. 497). As it relates to this study participants, while not actually articulating Hermeneutic Theory, did seem to identify a need to interpret laws governing the discipline of

students with disabilities by attempting to interpret these laws independently and also to seek others who might assist in the interpretation of said laws. In essence, the meanings of these laws were the central focus.

### **Phenomenology Theory**

Patton (2002) stated, “Phenomenology... aims to identify and describe the subjective experiences of respondents [and] it is a matter of studying everyday experiences from the point of view of the subject...” (p. 483). Participants in this study might make use of this theory when they draw upon their own experiences in search for meaning as it relates to the experience. Additionally, participants in interaction with their students might also search for the meaning of the experiences that students encounter.

### **Phenomenology Theory and Student Behavioral Issues**

A phenomenology study of sexual harassment and violence among girls attending high school in the urban slums of Nairobi, Kenya was conducted by Abuya, Onsoma, Moore, and Sague (2012). The purpose of this study, as noted by Abuya et al., was to “highlight the experiences of girls [attending school in Kenya] with regard to reported sexual harassment and violence in and out of school” (p. 337). The sample included twenty 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade girls attending school, ten girls who had dropped out of school, and fourteen teachers. The girls ranged in ages from 15-24 years. The method of data collection included structured interviews conducted face-to-face or via telephone. Abuya et al. found, “95% of the in-school sample experienced sexual harassment and violence in school” (p. 330). Additionally, Abuya et al. discovered, “100% of the girls in the in-school sample experienced sexual harassment and violence outside of the classroom” (p. 333). Also, Abuya et al. found, “35% of the girls ... experienced insults and name calling” (p. 333). Finally, Abuya et al. discovered teachers noted, “The girls stopped taking their studies seriously and lacked discipline in school ... [that is] the girls were undisciplined” (337). In essence, there appears to be value in drawing upon the experiences of troubled children, so as to understand their problems and also to mitigate these problems.

## **Social Constructionism Theory**

Patton (2002) articulated, "...That Social Constuctionism refers to constructing knowledge about reality..." (p. 96). Crotty (1998) viewed, "Constructionism [to be useful] where the focus includes the collective generation [and transmission] of meaning" (p. 58). It thus appears, as it relates to this study, that where there is a perceived void in knowledge relevant to students with disabilities regarding discipline issues, participants might generate knowledge with their co-workers in the interim until the accepted protocol becomes clear.

### **Summary**

Chapter II provided a review of the literature relating to concerns associated with the suspension of students with disabilities. That is, there is evidence to indicate that students with disabilities may harm themselves or others. Additionally, there is a need to consider the students disability before implementing discipline. The literature indicates that it is imperative to follow the rules in disciplining students with disabilities. As it relates to Symbolic Interaction Theory and students with disabilities behavioral issues, i.e., there appears to be value for the teacher and the student with disabilities to interact as a dyad in order to understand student problems. In regards to Phenomenology Theory, to understand students and assist them there seems to be merit in drawing upon personal experiences. The existing research provides evidence of variability in how teachers and school administrators might apply student discipline based on their personal perceptions. Educators differ in perceptions of the effectiveness of zero tolerance suspensions and there is evidence that zero tolerance suspension/expulsion policy has been expanded beyond the intent of The US Congress to include minor behavioral infractions. There are differences in how suspension/expulsion is administered in urban and rural schools. There is evidence to indicate that there is disparity in the suspension/expulsion of students with disabilities, to include disparity in the suspension/expulsion of ED/BD students, LD students, students of color with disabilities, low SES students, and low ability students. There is also disparity in the suspension of adolescent students, especially male students, who range in age from 13-15 years. Multiple theories could



prove to be relevant in this study. The growing number of students assigned to special education is becoming a concern for educators. Finally, Constitutional safeguards, US Congressional Mandates, and State laws assure that students with disabilities guaranteed rights to a free and appropriate education will not be abridged.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides information on the participants, the instrument, the research design, research procedures, and the methods of data collection. I employed the use of a qualitative case study, which focused on issues related to the problem, the purpose, and the research questions that were introduced in Chapter I of this study and are reemphasized as follows:

#### **The Problem**

Students are automatically suspended or expelled from school for offenses perceived to be a threat to school safety (Zweffler & DeBeers, 2002). However, school administrators are limited by the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in how student discipline is applied to students with disabilities. Despite the protections of IDEA, students with disabilities are suspended at higher rates in comparison to students without disabilities (Harvard Civil Rights Project, 2000; Mendez, 2008; Miller, Ofer, Artz, Bah, Phenix, Sheehan, & Thomas, 2011). Thus, a dilemma exists: there is a need on one hand to maintain safe schools, while contrastingly, there is a need to apply school suspension policy judiciously as it relates to students with disabilities. One plausible explanation is that the dilemma of higher suspension rates of students with disabilities may be related to an in-balanced focus by school officials on school safety in contrast with an opportunity of students with disabilities to pursue a free and appropriate public education (Hartwig & Ruesch, 1994; Osborne, 2001).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this case study was to gain an understanding of high school principals, special education teachers, and key school personnel's perceptions of the process that leads to disciplining students with disabilities.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions provided direction for this study:

- (1) What constitutes disruptive behavior as relates to students with disabilities?
- (2) What factors are considered in the process of disciplining students with disabilities?
- (3) How do teachers, school administrators, and key school personnel navigate the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities?
- (4) What theory or theories helps teachers, school administrators, and key school personnel to understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities?

## **Primary Theory undergirding this study: Symbolic Interaction**

Blumer (1969) noted, "Interaction allows individuals to 'take each other's roles'... [and that] such mutual role taking is the sine qua non [essential condition] of communication and effective symbolic interaction" (pp. 9-10). Blumer also offered the proposition that human behavior has the potential to be shaped through social interaction by using symbols, language, or gestures to convey meaning. Additionally, Blumer placed credence on moral principles like justice, compassion, and non-exploitation.

## **Participants**

A total of eleven participants were purposefully selected for this study: five special education teachers who teach students with disabilities in a mid-western high school, one non-special education teacher who also teaches students with disabilities, one school principal, two assistant principals responsible for children in grades ten through twelve, the Director of Guidance and Counseling, and the Director of Special Services. See Appendix A for a further description of participants. . Additionally, I sought advice from the District Special Education

Director to reference other potential participants who had knowledge of the phenomenon under study. Participants were given pseudonyms to protect their identity.

The criteria for participant selection follows: special education teacher; traditional teacher who also teaches students with disabilities; and school administrators, all of whom were willing to participate in the study. I used purposeful selection to select participants for this study. Specifically, I sought individuals who I perceived possessed a wealth of knowledge relevant to students with disabilities discipline issues; for example, individuals who were informed and also willing to express their perceptions about students with disabilities' discipline issues in an individual interview format. According to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), purposeful selection allows one to, "select participants who are judged to be thoughtful, informative, articulate, and experienced with the research topic and setting" (p. 135).

### **Instrument**

I served as the instrument for data gathering and analysis of data and I used field notes, tape recorders, and computers as data-gathering tools. This process allowed for emerging data and co-construction of themes with participants. To ensure validity and reliability of this research, I used six strategies: (1) I spent prolonged time in the field to develop an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study, (2) I offered detailed descriptions during data collection and data analysis to convey findings, (3) I Triangulated data sources to justify themes as noted in Appendix B, (4) I used members checks to see if participants felt that themes were accurate; (5) I accepted negative or discrepant information that might counter the themes; (6) I used self-reflection to clarify any biases in how the interpretation of the findings were shaped by my history, culture, and gender. I have included a Trustworthiness Table in Appendix C that delineates the six strategies. Patton (2002) stated how detailed descriptions of collected data allow for, "deepening our understanding of individual variation" (p. 16). According to Patton, "Thick, rich descriptions provide the foundation for qualitative analysis" (p. 437). Additionally, Patton noted verbatim quotations support detailed descriptions by providing a window into the thoughts,

experiences, and perceptions of the participants. Patton stated, “To understand the interwoven complexities and fundamental patterns of social life-actual, perceived, constructed, and analyzed...takes a long time” (pp. 273-274). I used the emic or insider approach in data interpretation, which encouraged me to use participant language to establish meaning. Triangulation of data sources, including interview data, documents, and field notes, as noted by Patton, provided an opportunity for, “cross-data validity checks” (p. 248). Patton stated, , “Confirmatory cases fit already emergent patterns...and confirm and elaborate the findings” (p. 239). Contrastingly, Patton iterated, “Disconfirming cases do not fit the emergent pattern [and] are a source of rival interpretations [or] exceptions to ... primary patterns” (p. 239).

### **Research Design**

Stake (1995) stated, “Case study is the study of particularity and complexity of a single case coming to understand its activity within important circumstances” (p. xi). The focus of case study is on particularization and interpretation of data within a bounded system, while the goal is to understand the problem under study. A single case study is the design of this qualitative study and the unit of analysis was a high school (pseudonym, Redwood) serving tenth through twelfth graders. Guiding, open-ended questions formed the basis for data collection and subsequently allowed for interpretation of the phenomena. In essence, Stake’s Model of the case study provided the primary framework for guiding my study. Secondly, I drew upon Yin’s Model of the case study, which provides rationale for employing the case study. Specifically, Yin (2003) indicated that “illumination” provides a way to understand the phenomenon under study, while “revelatory” allows data gathering about a little known phenomenon. Additionally, Yin indicated that the case study is the preferred methodology when “How” research questions are posed and when the focus of research centers on contemporary issues. In harmony with Stake’s Model and Yin’s Model of the case study, I also used the case study approach to gain, “insights into broader issues” (Bailey, 2009, In Press). In sum, I gathered, “thick rich” qualitative data to describe the

phenomenon under study, which subsequently allowed emerging data to be analyzed and interpreted.

### **Procedures**

Before this proposed study was undertaken, I submitted the required application for approval to conduct research to the Oklahoma State University (OSU) Institutional Review Board and it was approved. I also sought permission from the School District Superintendent through a formal letter of request to gain entry to the schools within the district serving special education students in grades ten through twelve as noted in Appendix D. The school district I selected provided me with a positive experience as a principal intern for grades 10-12 during the 2009-2010 school year. Specifically, I established rapport with the school district in a number of ways, to include interacting with the superintendent, school board, principals, teachers, and students through various meetings, class visits, and school activities. I felt as though school officials and I established a mutual bond of trust and respect for each other, which allowed me to conduct the research.

In adherence to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), I purposefully, “selected participants whom I judged to be thoughtful, informative, articulate, and experienced with the research topic and setting” (p. 135). Additionally, I sought advice from the District Special Education Director to reference other potential participants. The school district where the research took place employed 11 special education teachers, 60 non-special education teachers, one principal, two assistant principals, and a Director of Guidance and Counseling, who were all supported by two counselors for the 2013-2014 school year. A Participant Request Letter was made available for review by potential participants as noted in Appendix E. The participants were presented with an informed consent form displayed in Appendix F, and by signing, indicated their willingness to participate in the study. Participants were allowed to withdraw at any time without consequences. The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants were protected and ensured throughout the

data collecting, data analysis, and finding phases. Specifically, participants were given pseudonyms to protect their confidentiality.

The approach to data collection was dialogue and language exchanges with participants adapted from Guba and Lincoln (1994). Essentially, data were primarily collected by interviews with participants using Guiding Questions stipulated in Appendix G, and secondarily, by document analysis and field notes. A Data Collection Table delineated in Appendix H depicts how data sources were utilized. I kept the collected data in a locked box and stored it in my office. I also kept the informed consent forms in a separate locked box that was stored in my office.

### **Open Ended Interviews**

I conducted one 45 minute open-ended interview, individually presented to each participant and also allowed for shorter interviews of approximately 30 minutes to follow at a later time as needed. The interviews allowed me to present a set of guiding questions to the participants in order to elicit information reference to the problem of disciplining disabled students. The interviews also allowed me to gather in-depth information relevant to the participants' experiences and perceptions. I also interjected probing questions, as needed, which allowed me to collect greater detail. During the interviews, I listened more than I talked, I kept participants focused on the guiding questions, and learned about their perspectives. I purposefully interviewed five teachers who taught students with disabilities, one English teacher who also taught students with disabilities, one school principal, two assistant principals, the Director of Guidance and Counseling, and the Director of Special Services to determine their role in student discipline. I was also interested in their personal attitudes and perceptions of students with disabilities and how their perceptions of what constituted disruptive behavior might impact the application of student discipline. In like manner, I sought advice from the District Special Education Director, to reference other potential participants. The individual interviews were tape-

recorded and I transcribed the interviews. Additionally, I took field notes during the interviews that provided “thick rich” descriptions of the phenomenon under study.

### **The Interview Process**

I was eager to begin the process of interviewing school personnel to discover their perceptions regarding disciplining students with disabilities. I arrived at the school at 08:40 AM on November 19, 2013. At 08:50 AM, I walked to the main school building and through the doorway of an unlocked door into a front foyer about 18 feet by 18 feet and waited for the school receptionist to grant me access into the controlled sphere of the school. The receptionist and I greeted each other cordially, and I was instructed to sign-in as a visitor. In the far most corner of the office was an end table and neatly stacked upon it were magazines, school literature leaflets that provided information about the school and US Air Force recruiting pamphlets. Only a few minutes elapsed before the principal entered the room and we pleasantly greeted each other. I scheduled five interviews back-to-back this day. This unique schedule minimized me interrupting the regularly scheduled school day.

### **Document Analysis**

I reviewed and considered memorandums, student handbooks, legal mandates, local school district policy, newspaper articles, and other documents as they are related to the discipline of students. Document analysis, as described by Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009), allowed me to, “gain valuable historical insights, identify potential trends, and explain how things got to be the way they are” (p. 373). Specifically, I reviewed local school district policy, mandates, and guidelines to identify the course of action that has been stipulated for disciplining students with disabilities. In essence there is a need for congruence between the individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act or IDEIA 2004 or PL 108-446, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and school discipline policy as it relates to the discipline of disabled students. For example, IDEIA and Section 504 require a Manifestation Determination before students with disabilities are suspended or expelled (Matrix Parent Network resource Center, 2008). I also



reviewed artifacts like student yearbooks, which potentially could render stories about student discipline.

### **Preparation of Data for Analysis**

In preparing to analyze the data, I focused on tape recording a verbatim account of what participants said during the interviews. I also transformed initial jottings associated with field notes into a written document, which allowed me to describe, in detail, the interview environment and to subsequently employ the use of reflexivity to express my personal feelings. Finally, I selected documents for analysis prior to beginning the research I believed would provide a wealth of information about discipline associated with students with disabilities. I then read these documents to discern their relevance to discipline issues associated with students with disabilities, I noted their currency of publication, and their representation of the school district, the state, and federal guidelines. I found five documents that met the specified criteria: (1) The Code of Federal Regulations (The U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2014); (2) Guidelines for Educators and Administrators for Implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Subpart D (The U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights ,OCR, 2010); (3) Policies and Procedures for Special Education (State Department of Education, 2010); (4) Local Board of Education Policy (2000); and (5) Public Law 108-446, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement ACT (IDEIA, 108<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2004).

### **Data Coding (Content/Textual Analysis)**

I developed the first set of alphabetized codes by following the advice rendered by Miles and Huberman (1984). Specifically, Miles and Huberman noted, "Creating codes prior to the fieldwork is helpful; it forces the analyst to tie research questions or conceptual interest directly to the data. But the analyst should be ready to bend the codes when they look inapplicable" (p. 64). Creswell (2009), in a similar fashion, appeared to lend credence to the use of a predetermined coding scheme. Specifically, Creswell recommended, "that a preliminary code book be developed for coding the data and permit the codebook to develop and change based on

the information learned during the data analysis” (p. 187-188). I started by implementing these strategies presented by Miles, Huberman, and Creswell; however, I abandoned my first coding scheme to minimize the probability of having data fit into a predetermined coding scheme and also to mitigate any potential bias on my perspective from infiltrating the data. My second coding scheme was created by reading and re-reading the individual transcripts, the transformed field notes from jottings, and the selected documents to ascertain the, “actual language of the participant” (Creswell, p. 186). Based upon the foregoing, the codes began to emerge. However, I initiated a third coding scheme that allowed me to review the transcribed interviews several times, thus a Coding Scheme Development Chart is presented in Appendix I.

The first reading was initiated to gain general insights and clues as it related to the data. A second reading allowed me to search for phrases, words, and terms used repetitively by the participants, and patterns began to emerge. A third reading paved the way for me to organize participant responses by topics, categories, alphabetized codes, definition of codes, and line numbers where topics could be found in accordance with the data and thus subsequently allowed me to develop a code book. Patton (2002) noted, “Developing some manageable classification or coding scheme is the first step of analysis” (p.463).

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed inductively. That is, I looked for participant re-occurring words, phrases, images, and metaphors. I also gathered exact participant comments in quotation format. I created codes using participant words and themes emerged. Categories compatible with the research questions and themes were then developed. The conceptual framework for analysis is shown in Appendix J. Five themes were interpreted and subsequently provided the basis for findings. In addition to interviews, I analyzed documents, and collected field notes that were descriptive and reflective. A Trustworthiness Table is included in Appendix C to depict how I established validity and reliability for this study. For example, I relied upon member’s meaning to ensure that the gathered data were accurate, valid, and complete, (Patton, 2002). In conjunction

with seeking validity and reliability, I used reflexivity to convey authenticity, trustworthiness, and to seek a balance in understanding the phenomena under study (Patton, 2002). I sought confirmatory, as well as disconfirming evidence in the analysis of data, to balance tentative and emerging findings that formed the final report, which has been presented in a narrative format. Finally, I drew upon all Oklahoma State University courses that I have taken over the last three years to assist me in qualitative data collection and analysis. From the onset of this proposed study to its culmination, I adhered to ethical principles without waiver.

### **Description of Setting and People**

Patton (2002) noted, “The description...is aimed at permitting the reader to understand what occurred in the session...the data simply describe what occurred” (p. 26-27). Additionally, Patton indicated that, “thick rich descriptions provide the foundation for qualitative analysis” (p. 437). Teachers, administrators, and key school personnel at Redwood High School are the unit of analysis and the focus of this study.

Redwood High School provides educational services to 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders and is part of an educational complex that includes elementary schools (K-5<sup>th</sup> grade), middle schools (6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> grade), and a junior high school (8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> grade). The cited schools are individually administered by school principals and geographically separated to accommodate the student population within the district. Access to Redwood’s main lobby is not abridged; however, entrance into the inner sanctums of the school is controlled by an electronic monitoring system. A day at Redwood starts with the pledge of allegiance initiated over the school intercom and followed by one minute of silence. The high school site includes land space approximately the size of seven football fields set side-by-side. Three independently constructed buildings are situated on the site to support the education of students. The main building is a one level structure that houses classrooms, offices, and a school library. A second building serves as a gymnasium, and a third structure provides accommodations for an auditorium and a band practice room. To the rear of the main building sits a high school football stadium that can accommodate hundreds

of spectators. The school system is governed by a district board of education and administered by a district superintendent. The district mission is to, “Champion academic and personal growth for every student”, while the district vision is, “Striving for excellence [and] shaping the future.”

The principal at Redwood has served more than twenty years in key school leadership positions, and he is assisted by two assistant principals and a staff of professionals that includes 60 –non-special education teachers, 11 special education teachers and a host of support personnel to include the school resource officer, counselors, and others. I conducted structured face-to-face interviews employing the use of an interview protocol with ten school personnel during the fall of 2013, and with one participant at the school district office during the spring of 2014. Before each interview, I provided the participants with a brief overview of my purpose for conducting the study and underscored that my focus was to ascertain their perceptions regarding disciplining students with disabilities. I advised participants that the interviews would be tape recorded, that a signed consent form was needed before we began the interviews, and that they were free to resign from the study at any time they chose. Those interviewed included 9 females and 2 males with experience in K-12 schools ranging from three years to 38 years. As it related to gender, five (5) females were special education teachers, one (1) female was an English teacher, One (1) female served as the director of special education, one (1) female was an assistant principal, and one (1) female was the director of guidance. The male participants included the school principal and the other assistant principal.

The interviews ranged from 30 minutes to 55 minutes and the average duration was 39 minutes. I tape recorded the interviews for later transcription, analysis, and interpretation. Additionally, I conducted follow-up interviews so that the participants and I could co-validate the themes and I conducted these interviews in various settings on the Redwood Campus including offices, classrooms, and the school library. The school interview settings were deemed to be divergent in their size, furnishings, equipment, and décor.

### **Role of Theory**

Symbolic Interaction Theory allowed me to interview, and subsequently document and analyze, how school principals, special education teachers, and other key school personnel might, “take the role of the other”, to understand disciplining students with disabilities when they arise. Additionally, as I interpret them, the theories Phenomenology and Hermeneutics assisted in providing understanding of the phenomena under study. According to Patton (2002), researchers, “use multiple perspectives or theories to interpret data” (p. 556).

### **Limitations of Study**

This study was limited to one high school located in a mid-western state; the sample included participants purposefully selected and their perception about students with disabilities discipline that correlated to a specific interval of time. This study is exclusive to those studied; findings may not be generalized to other school settings.

### **Delimitations**

This study is bounded, that is, a single case study was employed rather than the use of other methodologies. Additionally, my reference population included only educators employed in a school providing educational services to only 10<sup>th</sup>, 11<sup>th</sup>, and 12<sup>th</sup> graders. Finally, this study was narrowed to one high school located in one school district.

### **Summary**

The qualitative research study was designed to understand the school principal, special education teachers, and other key school personnel’s perceptions of issues associated with students with disabilities, perceptions of what constitutes disruptive behavior, and how their perceptions might affect suspensions of students with disabilities. Five special education teachers, one non-special education teacher who also teaches students with disabilities in a mid-western high school, the school principal and two assistant school principals having responsibility for children in grades ten through twelve, the Director of Guidance and Counseling, and the Director of Special Services were purposefully selected to provide the raw data for this study.

Additionally, I sought advice from the District Special Education Director to reference other potential participants. Therefore, I conducted individual interviews with the participants and the collected data were used to ascertain meaning in conjunction with document analysis and field notes. In essence, data acquired were triangulated to ensure credibility and confidence in the findings. The collected raw data were transcribed, coded, and interpreted. Finally, I relied upon member's meaning to ensure that the gathered data were accurate, valid, and complete (Patton, 2002).

Chapter IV provides information about the interviews. Additionally, I explained how the themes were interpreted using the literature, theories, and members experiences where offered. I subsequently presented the findings, and then offered a narrative summary of the findings. Chapter V allows me to discuss the findings and offer conclusions and recommendations.

## CHAPTER IV

### FINDINGS

The purpose of this case study was to gain an understanding of high school principal, special education teacher, and key school personnel perceptions of the process that leads to disciplining students with disabilities. This chapter presents the interviews, findings from eleven individually administered interviews, field notes taken concomitantly with the interviews, and key documents that I reviewed and perceived to have a direct bearing on how discipline must be implemented in a public school as it relates to students with disabilities. This chapter is organized into the following subheadings: Interviews, what I learned from the interviews, field notes and documents, identification of themes; interconnection of themes; interpretation of themes; presentation of findings; brief summary of findings; and chapter summary.

#### **Interviews**

##### **Kim**

The principal led me to the first interview, scheduled with Kim a special education teacher. We arrived at Kim's classroom at 09:00 AM; the principal introduced me to Kim, and she and I exchanged pleasantries, and the principal left her classroom. Before the interview with Kim, I explained the purpose of my study. I also talked about confidentiality as it related to the study; I subsequently underscored the fact that there were no right or wrong answers to the interview questions and that I was only seeking to ascertain her perceptions as they related to the discipline of students with disabilities.

During the course of the interview, Kim noted that she taught the moderately disabled a number of subjects to include English, Algebra, Biology, and US History. It became immediately apparent to me that I had also taken subjects with the same titles decades earlier, so it appeared that high school had changed very little since I was a student. Kim also mentioned that she was responsible for developing tests from “scratch” to assess the academic progress of students with disabilities in accordance with state guidelines that mandated students with disabilities be tested before a high school diploma was awarded. Kim indicated that these “special” tests could be auditorily administered and tape recorded, i.e. a departure from “standardized” testing procedures where students “traditionally” record their responses to questions on pre-developed answer sheets with number two pencils. As it related to student discipline issues, Kim said that she, “addressed that as quickly as possible before it gets out of hand.”

Kim’s classroom was approximately 24 feet by 25 feet. Her desk was situated to one side of the room and a number of student desks were arranged facing each other and parallel to the teacher’s desk. This room was equipped with a television monitor, an overhead projector system, student computers, a book case, and storage cabinets. The walls were blue and adorned with a variety of posters, and the floor was covered with white tiling. The classroom was well lit with ceiling lights and the noise level outside of it was barely audible. Kim and I re-arranged two of the student desks so that we would be facing each other for the interview. I positioned myself so that I could view the wall clock on her front wall. We started the interview at exactly 09:10 AM. In sum the interview with Kim was cordial, cooperative, and she was responsive to the protocol questions. She articulated compassion for students with disabilities. Specifically, she offered the following: “[We] treat them as our own children.” Similarly, she expressed empathy for students with disabilities by saying, “How would I feel if I was in his shoes?” Kim characterized disruptive behavior as a student who was, “trying to hurt another student, the teacher, or themselves.” She also noted that as it relates to discipline, “You kind of have to



sometimes take into consideration their disability.” Kim iterated that primary guidance that she followed in disciplining students with disabilities was, “the school code.”

### **Sally**

My second interview on November 19, 2013, was scheduled at 10:45 AM with Sally, a special education teacher. Kim escorted me to Sally’s classroom a few steps down the main hallway. Sally and I exchanged pleasant greetings, and Kim returned to her classroom.. Sally noted that she had remembered seeing me in the school a year earlier when I was an intern learning the ins and outs of school administration. This statement bolstered my comfort zone and aided me in establishing rapport. Sally then suggested that the interview take place in an adjoining room to her classroom, which she referred to as a work-study room.

Sally and I sat in student chairs with attached desks at approximately a 90 degree angle from each other. Sally sat to my right and I sat near the entrance/exit way with my back toward the outer wall. Our interview started as scheduled. During the course of this interview Sally noted that she taught children the, “core subjects,” to include English, math, science, and social studies who had multiple and severe disabilities. Sally said,, “I always try to put myself in their situations especially if the behavior is unusual to that particular student.” She also stated that she was responsible for coordinating the work study program that provided opportunities for students to explore careers and build upon their employment skills.

At the end of the interview, Sally and I talked for a few more minutes longer about her experiences as a special education teacher. She mentioned that there was another room that adjoined her classroom that I had not earlier noticed; she called this a “seclusion room” and iterated that this room which afforded one-way observation was not to be used as punishment but to isolate students with disabilities whose behavior was determined to be temporarily uncontrollable. I saw a parallel between Sally’s seclusion room and observation rooms that were used by mental health clinicians during my training as a school psychologist. These clinician rooms, during my tenure as an intern psychologist, were used to determine how children

interacted with other children and toys. Specifically, during my experience, observation might reveal if children were aggressive or if they acted in socially acceptable ways. Based on these observations, the clinicians that I allied with and studied under their tutorage were able to render recommendations that might improve disruptive behavior.

Sally described disruptive behavior as a student, “Hitting another student or staff member.” As it potentially related to disciplining students with disabilities, Sally noted that she assessed, “The severity of their disability.” In making decisions relevant to disciplining students with disabilities, Sally offered the following, “I am always going to go first [to the] federal regulations.” In sum, this interview was punctuated with enthusiasm and laughter. Additionally, Sally seemed to place a premium on student respect for teachers in that she mentioned the term respect several times. Sally provided this closing thought: “I think students with disabilities need discipline, they need [teacher] expectations [and] they need structure.

## **Mel**

On November 19, 2013 I also had a third scheduled interview appointment with Mel, a special education teacher. Sally accompanied me to the next interview, and we arrived at Mel’s classroom at 11:25AM for an 11:45 AM interview. I noticed that Mel was busy reviewing material on her desk top computer and concomitantly engaged in conversation with her teacher’s aide. We greeted each other cordially and jointly began to ascertain where we might conduct our interview with minimal interruption. Having become familiar with the layout of the school, I recommended that we use a room within the school library. We hastily walked the short distance to the library and inquired about the availability of the indicated room. The librarian checked the request list to determine if this room had been reserved by other school personnel and subsequently told us that the room was available for our use.

We walked the few steps to the granted room, an adjunct room within the school library. Although there were no windows in this room, the florescent overhead illumination made it easy to see and to read and closing the door seemed to provide an environment conducive for our

interview. The only furniture was a round wooden table, approximately four feet in diameter with four metal office chairs covered in brown fabric. In sum, I found this room to be quiet, comfortable and uninhibited by the rumblings occurring in the main library.

I sat with my back to the wall in order to have access to an electrical outlet for my tape recorder and Mel sat to my right. We started the interview at 11:45 AM. During the interview, Mel appeared to be comfortable and confident, and I learned that she taught children with mental disabilities and specific learning disabilities and also served as the on-site Compliance Facilitator as it related to the implementation of federal and state law associated with the discipline of students with disabilities. She also noted that she served as the Department Chairperson for Special Education at the high school.

Mel presented me with a two-sided chart that reflected how discipline of special education students should unfold at the school level. That is, one side of the chart depicted how discipline of students under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 should take place and on the other side of the chart it outlined how discipline in accordance with The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) should be implemented. I found this two-sided chart to be very comprehensive. Mel noted that she used this chart as an instructional tool to assist administrators and teachers with the processes specified by the mandates.

Mel's comments led me to render an interpretation that she had potentially aligned herself with the Theory of Hermeneutics, which places a premium on the interpretation of written texts, as well as seeking agreement on interpretation among a 'circle' of interpreters. Specifically, Mel said, "I am in a position to train, give guidance, so [when] I take something like federal regulations, I am going to consult people who know a lot about it and see if what I am interpreting is how they see it as well." This perspective offers tenets of Hermeneutics and thus would appear to be useful for Mel based on her current responsibilities. Mel stated that disruptive behavior, "is something I need to intervene with and address." She also noted, "You must consider the disability before you impose discipline." Our interview ended pleasantly.

## **Christian**

November 19, 2013, I walked unescorted down a long corridor, about the length of a football field, to Christian's office for my fourth interview of the day. Upon arrival at the front office, I was greeted by her secretary, who called Christian by telephone to announce my presence. After a few minutes had elapsed, Christian came to the front office, and she and I exchanged greetings. Christian noted that new ceiling florescent lights recently had been installed in her office and they appeared to provide adequate illumination.

Christian was seated at her desk and I was offered one of the two seats parallel to her desk, I choose the armless chair nearest to her desk. Before the interview, Christian indicated that she served as the Head of the Guidance Department and also served on the administrative team with the building administrators. We exchanged a few words about her busy day and began the interview at 12:40, as scheduled.

During the course of the interview, Christian caught my attention when she indicated that at one time in her career she had served as a school psychologist. I shared a similar experience and I was amazed to find out that we both had been certified in the same state. This revelation aided in establishing rapport and opened up a channel of communication relevant to test and measurement; however, I harnessed further probing of this subject area since it was not the focus of our interview.

Christian indicated that her role in disciplining students with disabilities was one designed to support the school administration and that the focus of the Guidance Department centered on bolstering student academic achievement and potential college enrollment. Christian characterized disruptive behavior as, "anything physical [for example] fighting". She also noted, "The disability needs to be looked at when considering discipline". Additionally, she pointed out that in disciplining students with disabilities, "We have to follow state law". Christian left me with the summation, "While they [students with disabilities] might have the same disability, each student might manifest that disability in different ways [thus] it's important to really get to know

the student and to understand what's going on with them." As a former school counselor, I got to know my students by reviewing their records, interacting with them via counseling and communicating with their parents and teachers.

### **John**

At approximately 1:15 PM on November 19, 2013, I made my way unescorted to the assistant principal's office to interview John, my fifth interview of the day. John responded rapidly, and we greeted each other cordially at the threshold offering entrance to his office. He invited me into his work space and offered me a seat at his conference table. I sat on the side of the table nearest the entrance/exit way and John sat at the head of the table to my left. Family pictures were placed on top of one of the file cabinets directly behind John as he sat at the conference table. Additionally, as I entered John's office I noticed framed words of encouragement designed to capture the attention of students who had an opportunity to visit the assistant principal's office.

We began the interview as planned, and John noted that he was responsible for, "handling student discipline" at the school. He also indicated that he had assumed other responsibilities at the school to include hiring teachers and custodial staff. Additionally, John noted that he was responsible for other duties that may not be addressed in his job description. John's comment provided the impetus that provoked laughter from both of us, which I deemed to be genuine. I responded that as a United States Air Force Commissioned Officer I too assumed responsibilities that were not delineated in my job description and that the Air Force termed these unwritten responsibilities as "extra duties". It appeared that John and I were off to a "good" start and also that rapport had been established.

During the interview John viewed disruptive behavior as students "fighting". In disciplining students with disabilities John stated that he considered the, "severity of their handicap". I noted that John's use of the term "handicap" is reminiscent of PL 94-142, i.e., The Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) which became law in 1975 and has hence

been amended and renamed, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). It might also be noted that PL 94-142 remains in effect and also at the time of the interview John was a tenured school administrator with 38 years of experience. I interpret John's use of the word "handicap" as a personal choice made on his own volition. I also perceive that John may have deemed the terms "handicap" and "children with disabilities" as equal and interchangeable. John seemed to place merit in students following the rules. For example, as it relates to students with disabilities, John noted, "Even though you [the student] have a disability, there are still rules and procedures and policies that you must adhere to." Our interview ended pleasantly.

### **Robert**

I arrived at Redwood High School at 09:00 AM on November 20, 2013, in preparation for the second day of interviewing. I was scheduled to interview five school personnel and the first--or collectively the sixth, was to begin at 09:30 AM. It was a quiet peaceful morning, and the school grounds appeared deserted. I parked as close as I could to the front entrance way; I sat in my vehicle for about 15 minutes, reviewed my notes and at about 09:15 AM walked the few paces to the school. I entered the front door and was subsequently granted access to the secure area of the school by the receptionist. After exchanging morning greetings with the receptionist, I followed the standard procedure of signing in and receiving a temporary visitor's name tag.

The time had passed rapidly, and soon I realized that it was 09:20 AM, as confirmed by a clock on the wall directly behind Robert's desk, which was synchronized with my wrist watch. A few more minutes elapsed and soon a staffer passed by Robert's office, saw me sitting at the conference table, entered the office and inquired if I needed help. I indicated that I had an appointment with Robert and thanked her for inquiring. As I continued to wait the appointed time of 09:30 AM arrived, yet Robert was not yet present. I was at a crossroad and pondered what direction to take, but decided to wait a little longer.

At approximately 09:48 AM, Robert arrived and explained that an emergency had arisen that needed his immediate attention. I was pleased to see him, we exchanged pleasant greetings and he assumed a chair at the conference table to my right, leaving an empty chair between us. Thus we began the interview at 09:50 AM. Robert was open and outgoing throughout the interview and offered his perceptions relevant to discipline as it related to students with disabilities, for example, he noted, "I make it a point to have a good relationship with my special needs students that helps me deal with their discipline a little bit better". Robert considered disruptive behavior to be, "anything that disrupts or interrupts the learning process". Additionally, before disciplining students with disabilities, Robert stated, "We always have to ask did the student's disability cause the incident." In disciplining students with disabilities Robert seemed to place credence in adhering to, "the policy." We ended the interview at 10:45 AM.

### **Shannon**

My next, and seventh, interview occurred on November 20, 2013 at Redwood High School and was scheduled for 10:55 AM with Shannon a special education teacher. I walked about forty paces to her classroom, located in the rear of the main building. As I entered her classroom we greeted each other cordially. Although Shannon did not have a scheduled class during this time frame, two students were present and appeared to be very involved with a project on two separate computer terminals. Thus, in order not disrupt these students, Shannon and I sought another venue for our interview.

We jointly elected to see if the library conference room might be available and walked together to the front of the building using the same hallway that I had taken a few minutes earlier to reach Shannon's classroom. We arrived at the library, met with the librarian and inquired about the availability of the conference room. After a short wait we were granted permission to use the room. This room was becoming very familiar to me since I had used it for an interview the day before.

As a school principal intern a year earlier, I had visited Shannon's classroom thus rapport was easy to establish. The interview began as scheduled at 10:55 AM. Of particular interest to me was her statement, "I have high expectations for my students, I won't let them use disability as an excuse". This was reminiscent of the Rosenthal and Jacobson (1968) study where these researchers found that when teachers set expectations for students perceived to be poorly performing academically and behaviorally that these students acted in accordance with the expectations and thus improved academically, as well as behaviorally. Also of interest was Shannon's declaration, "to teach them [students with disabilities] the rules". Shannon may have viewing rules as a pathway for an orderly and disciplined society.

Shannon construed disruptive behavior to be, "When somebody [is] talking when I am talking." In disciplining students with disabilities, Shannon noted, "I just really individualize their treatment according to what their disability is [and] follow the policy that is involved". We ended the interview at 11:30 AM.

### **Lisa**

On November 20, 2013, I spent the interval between the culmination of interview seven, approximately one hour and a half, in the school library reflecting and preparing myself for interview eight. At about 12:55, I used a school developed map, which reflected the layout and location of teacher classrooms to guide me as I walked unescorted from the library to meet with Lisa, a special education teacher. I arrived at Lisa's classroom around 1:00 PM, found the room locked and subsequently knocked on her door and waited for a response. Lisa responded within a few minutes, unlocked her door from the inside of the room and invited me into her instructional area. We greeted each other pleasantly, and Lisa offered me a seat of my choice.

Two computer work stations were situated directly behind the five student chairs. This room was also equipped with a portable TV, an overhead projector that appeared to be best viewed by those who chose to be seated at the table, a sink to the right of the computer stations, as well as a brown two-door storage cabinet, which was located to the left of the sink.



Additionally, the florescent overhead illumination in this room appeared to be adequate for our interview. I sat on the left side of the classroom at the eight foot table and Lisa sat to my left and near to her desk.

We began the interview at 1:05 PM and during its course Lisa noted that she taught US History, Mathematics, and English to Children who had been classified as Intellectually Disabled (ID) and Learning Disabled (LD). As it related to student discipline Lisa noted that she expected students to follow the school rules. Also of interest was Lisa's poignant statement reference school safety, i.e., she said, "I think it's really important that you try to provide a safe environment and let the kids know that you care about them". I connected the first part of her statement, "a safe environment", to the firearms incidents that seem to prevail in schools all across the country that engender pain and suffering to an infinite number of people, who are both directly and indirectly impacted by these incidents. Additionally, I saw a parallel between Lisa's reference to, "let the kids know you care about them", and the Wentzel (1997) study, which found that students believed that caring teachers listened to their concerns, acted fairly, and inquired if they [students] needed help with their academic assignments. The Wentzel (1997) study also found that if students felt that teachers cared about them, then they [students] were motivated to expend greater academic effort and also to be more willing to conform to behavioral rules.

Lisa defined disruptive behavior as, "students trying to fight with other kids". In disciplining students with disabilities, Lisa assessed "their mental age". School rules and classroom rules set the behavioral parameters for Lisa's students. Our interview ended at 1:35 PM.

### **Gene**

On November 20, 2013, I spent the fifty-five minute interval between interview eight with Lisa, and interview nine in the school library, by reviewing my notes and preparing for the next interview and reflecting on previous interviews.. I arrived at approximately 2:20 PM for an interview with Gene, an assistant principal and observed that her office door was open and that

she was consulting with two male students. At about 2:25 PM Gene exited her office, entered the vestibule, and relayed to me that she was summing up her meeting with the two students and noted that she would be available to meet with me soon.

At 2:28 PM, the two male students exited Gene's office. She then invited me in, and subsequently initiated a cordial greeting, which I reciprocated. I was then offered a seat and initially took one near her desk and closest to the office entrance/exit way. Gene's office was approximately 15 feet X 11 feet; her desk was arranged to right of the office doorway and was accompanied with an office chair. A desk top computer, a standard office phone, and a wireless phone were neatly arranged on desk, as well as what appeared to be a family portrait. I decided to move to a chair near an electrical outlet that could accommodate my tape recorder. Gene sat to my right on a 180 degree parallel plane. A three tier book shelf was situated to my left as I entered Gene's office, and it appeared to be filled near to capacity with what seemed to be professional books that would garner the attention of educators. Sitting to Gene's right was a brown file cabinet adorned with a live green plant situated on the top.

We began the interview at 2:30 PM, and Gene noted that one of her primary responsibilities were to oversee student discipline issues at Redwood High School. In this regard, Gene underscored the usefulness for all students and especially students with disabilities to be governed by, "rules and guides". I associated the latter with The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), court rulings, and district guidelines delineating how discipline associated with students with disabilities must be implemented. Gene also pointed out that the district Director for Special Needs Children was a valuable resource to call upon when issues related to students with disabilities discipline arose. Gene considered disruptive behavior as, "anything that impedes the learning environment". I construed this to be general but, harnessed probing to allow Gene to continue expressing her perceptions, since many seasoned interviewers tend to believe that listening is preferred to talking. It might also be noted that at the time of the interview Gene noted that she possessed three years of experience as an educator.

Additionally, this interview was conducted in the afternoon, after a busy day, thus Gene may have been showing the effects of exhaustion. Gene stated that before implementing discipline, “You have to be aware of what their disabilities are”. Our interview ended at 3:05 PM.

### **Lynn**

On November 21, 2013, I arrived at the school at 2:20 PM for the tenth interview planned for the previous day, which was rescheduled due to commitments earlier agreed upon by the participant. I was granted access to the secure area of the main building, signed in as required and subsequently received my temporary stick-on identification name badge that verified my visitor status. I met Lynn, an English teacher at the library, as agreed upon the day before, and we inquired about the availability of a conference room within the library previously used. The librarian informed us that the room was open for use.

I sat in what was becoming my usual chair near the door, while Lynn sat at my right at a 90 degree angle. Lynn of average height and appearing young was dressed in blue jeans and a green and black sweater. We began the interview at 2:40 PM.

Lynn was congenial and cooperative throughout the interview and noted, “I try to handle discipline problems early so the student doesn’t suffer severe out-of-class discipline consequences.” It appeared Lynn was referring to minimizing out-of-school student suspensions. Lynn construed disruptive behavior to be, “students talking”. Additionally, she noted that before discipline is implemented that she “definitely considers their disability”. Lynn used, “classroom rules and...school rules” as the basis to guide discipline issues. The interview ended at 3:15 PM. After the interview, Lynn and I chatted briefly about my positive experiences in high school English.

### **Elle**

I arrived at the district school office at 12:30 Noon on April 2, 2014, for the eleventh and last of my scheduled interviews, at 1:00 PM with the special services director Elle. Habit and past training have motivated me to always be early, rather than late; however, I remained in my

vehicle until 12:45 Noon. As I pulled into the parking lot, I noticed only a few cars, and I attributed this to the possibility that many personnel may have been at lunch.

The district office is located within the city limits and away from the schools that this district serves. The building can be described as a one story brick structure that takes up approximately one city block. Three entry ways provide easy access to the building, i.e., one is located in front of the building and adjacent to a well-traveled street, a second is situated in the rear of the building, and a third entrance is also in the rear of the building and is electronically monitored by the receptionist. I used the latter, and immediately upon entrance I was greeted by the receptionist. I was instructed to sign in on the visitor's log book. The receptionist offered me a seat, which I accepted, while she called Elle's secretary to announce my arrival.

At approximately 12:50 PM, I was warmly greeted by Elle and she led the way to her office. Elle's office was about 10 feet by 14 feet in dimensions, the walls were light brown, and matched the dark brown rug covering the floor. The ceiling florescent lighting was adequate and allowed me to read unhampered. Elle and I sat around a portable folding table, made of metal that geometrically gave the appearance of a square. This table resembled one that might be used by individuals who were engaged in card playing.

I sat at one end of the table with my back to a window, and Elle sat to my right. Elle's desk was arranged behind her and upon it sat a desk top computer, a printer, a telephone, neatly stacked papers, and family pictures. From where I was seated and about 8 feet away was situated a built-in-book shelf that was multi-leveled and stocked with what appeared to be professional books. A wall clock was affixed to the left of the book shelf, and I noted that its ticking was not audible; the room was quiet and conducive for our interview. Elle was dressed in red slacks, a blue blouse, and a brown business jacket. Rapport was easy to establish, since Elle and I remembered each other from a year earlier during my principal intern. Our interview started at 1:00 PM.

During the interview, I noted that Elle spoke about the so called “hidden disorders” that school personnel may encounter. That is, issues that students encounter that may not be easily discernable as emotional and behavioral problems. Elle went on to say, “I think [hidden disabilities] are the ones that create the most problems in our school districts because people think that they can change their behavior because they look normal.” Elle viewed disruptive behavior as an act that is, “physically or emotionally harmful to another student or themselves”. She also stated, “If a student is in an intellectually disabled class, discipline should be tailored”. Elle appeared to see merit in following the state policies and procedures manual. Our interview ended at 1:45 PM.

Before I left Elle’s office, we chatted briefly, and she offered me a document to review entitled, “Policies and Procedures for Special Education”. This document is significant because it was created by the state department of education in the state where the study was conducted and it has been sanctioned by the state superintendent of public instruction.

### **What I Learned During the Interviews**

I learned that school personnel at Redwood High School intervened expeditiously to mitigate injury by employing the use of the school resource officer (SRO) and other law enforcement entities as warranted. In like manner other school personnel also intervened to mitigate student injury. Additionally, school administrators and teachers made it known in the interviews that student Individual Education Programs (IEPs) were updated as needed in order to provide plans of behavioral intervention to accommodate children with disabilities who misbehaved.

I discovered that the teachers and staff at Redwood High School demonstrated compassion and concern for children with disabilities. This revelation manifested itself in the dyadic interview sessions that I had with the participants. I noted that school personnel were willing to assess student discipline on an individual basis by considering the child’s disability. Additionally, it became evident that traditional students at Redwood High School also displayed

compassion and concern for children with disabilities by volunteering their non-class time to assist teachers in meeting the social needs of children with disabilities.

Students with disabilities and traditional students are governed by different codes of behavior. For example, traditional students discovered with weapons on the school campus are subject to one year expulsions, which are mandated by the Gun Free School Act (GFSA, 1994). Contrastingly, students with disabilities found on school property with a weapon are subject to removal to an interim alternative educational setting for a period not to exceed 45 school days as required by The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). In sum, I found that school personnel followed the laws governing the discipline of students with disabilities. In this regard, the appointment of an On-Site Compliance Facilitator by the principal appears to ensure compliance with disability law.

It became known that educators who work with children have been tasked to develop special tests, mandated by the state to assess the academic skills of children with disabilities before they are awarded a high school diploma. I perceive this to be an enormous responsibility that requires deviation from traditional standardized testing. Specifically, concerns of test validity and test reliability are crucial for traditional standardized testing.

Finally, I learned first-hand that qualitative research can be time consuming. That is, I spent numerous hours in transcribing and typing interview data. I discovered that listening is an art that must be developed. Additionally, it became evident to me that a backup tape recorder may have proved to be useful, since my primary tape recorder mal-functioned.

### **Field Notes and Documents**

In conjunction with the structured interviews, I took jottings with each interview that were later developed into field notes. Essentially, my field notes mirrored the interviews as far as verbal content, however, these jottings allowed me to capture participant non-verbal communication. That is, all of the participants used gestures and facial expressions to communicate salient points. Additionally, many participants punctuated comments with robust

laughter, which I construed to be authentic. I reviewed a plethora of documents perceived to be related to students with disabilities discipline that included State Attorney General Opinions, State Supreme Court Decisions, Memorandums, and a host of other documents. I finally selected the five previously cited documents for analysis based on their relevance to students with disabilities discipline and their representation of local, state, and federal policy. I also assessed their currency of publication.

### **Identification of Themes**

Themes provide the foundation for identifying the study findings, thus I used a technique to identify themes proposed by Ryan and Bernard (2013), “participant word repetition” (p. 2), a recurring, unifying subject or idea. I then created codes using participant words and subsequently themes emerged. Categories compatible with the research questions and themes were then developed. The afore-mentioned set the stage for theme analysis and interpretation. Additionally, I was able to extract participant quotes to support these themes. Pseudonyms are used in lieu of the participant’s names to offer quotes to support the themes. Theme One (harm to self or others): Elle “[disruptive behavior is behavior that is] physically or emotionally harmful to another student or themselves.” Kim noted, “[disruptive behavior occurs when a student is] trying to hurt another student, teacher or themselves.” Lynn said, “Serious [behavioral infractions] would be where someone would be putting another student at harm [that is] harm others emotionally.” In harmony with participant quotes, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEIA, 2004, p. 2727) stated, “School personnel may remove a student [with disabilities] to an interim alternative educational setting ... if the child ... has inflicted serious bodily injury upon another person while at school.”

Participant quotes undergirding Theme Two (the disability): Mel reported, “You must consider the disability before you impose discipline.” Christian indicated that, “the disability needs to be looked at when considering discipline.” Gene noted, “You just have to be aware of what their disabilities are.” IDEIA (2004, p. 2726-2727) stated, “If the behavior ... is determined

not to be a manifestation of the child's disability ... apply the relevant disciplinary procedures ... if the behavior was a manifestation ... conduct a ... behavioral assessment ... and implement behavioral intervention."

Participant quotes providing evidence for Theme Three (the rules): Shannon stated, "I will follow the policy that is involved, the handbook and highlight the rules." Lynn indicated, "[I] expect them [students with disabilities] to follow my classroom rules [and] obviously the school rules." Lisa said, "I make sure that they [students with disabilities] know my expectations, the classroom rules [and] the school rules." IDEIA (2004, p. 2726) specified, "School personnel ... may remove a child with a disability who violates a code of student conduct ... or suspension for not more than 10 consecutive school days." That is, IDEIA provides guidance in situations involving the discipline of students with disabilities.

Participant quotes that corroborate Theme Four (their side/their shoes): Mel noted, "A lot of us tend to empathize and try to see it from their side and [then] figure out why he did this and what motivated him to do whatever the misconduct was." Kim said, "How would I feel if I was in his shoes?" Christian offered the following, "I can see their side of things, I like to work through the situations about why they might have done something that they've done." John stated, "I would try to insert myself in their shoes and see how I would respond."

Participant quotes associated with Theme Five (my/ personal experience): Robert reported, "I think over the years my experience has made me a better teacher in the same way that my experience has made me a better disciplinarian." Mel said, "...[Being] in this business for as many years as I have, I think I have developed an understanding of disabled students and their behavior." Kim indicated, "My professional development classes have not prepared me as much as being in the trenches – in the classroom and being with the kids... it's just experience, personal experience with the kids."



### **Interconnection of Themes (Thematic/Narrative Analysis)**

Five themes emerged by using “word repetitions” (Ryan & Bernard, 2013, p. 2). The five themes that emerged are as follows: (1) harm to self or others; (2) the disability; (3) the rules; (4) their side/their shoes; and (5) my/personal experience. Participant words were then organized into four categories as follows: (1) disruptive behavior associated with students with disabilities as delineated by participants; (2) factors and circumstances considered by participants before implementing discipline to students with disabilities (3) participant sources for deciding upon a course of action to take in disciplining students with disabilities; and (4) theory or theories that participants connect with that may have the potential to assist them in disciplining students with disabilities.

In the analysis of data I learned that the problem solving model delineated by the Global Institute for Corporate Education (2014), shown in Appendix K, provided a “good fit” to interconnect the themes. The problem solving model is associated with the following sequential steps: (1) define the problem; (2) analyze the problem; (3) identify as many potential solutions to bring resolution to the problem; (4) choose the best solution and adopt a plan of action; (5) Implement the solution.

#### **Theme One**

The participants in this study identified a myriad of ways that students with disabilities potentially “harm themselves or others” (Theme One), i.e., ‘the problem’ was identified or defined. Thus, step one in the problem solving model was specified and a number of words to characterize harm to self and harm to others were used by the participants. Specifically, Christian and John used the term “fighting”, while Lisa described disruptive behavior as students, “trying to fight with other kids”. Sally depicted disruptive behavior as, “Hitting another student or staff member”. Lynn characterized disruptive behavior as, “harm [to] others emotionally by name calling... or physical harm.” Additionally, John and Shannon iterated the dangers that might prevail if students were in the possession of “weapons”; for example, they specified “guns,

knives, or bombs”. Gene, on the other hand, underscored the hazards connected with, “illegal drug use.” Students also potentially cause harm by “making threats” as noted by Robert and Shannon. These threats according to Robert might be manifested via “Bullying and harassment.” Robert also spoke of a student, “who eats and tries to bite himself and harm himself all the time.” Matson and Turygin (2012) characterized the fore-mentioned behavior as “pica,” i.e., the ingestion of an inedible (p. 1022). Elle talked about potentially resorting to behavior management plans to cope with an autistic student who is, “head banging.” Also, Shannon expressed a need to bring a counselor in with potential “suicide” cases. As it relates to the foregoing, Matson and Turygin (2012) noted that self-injurious behavior, “may... be conceptualized as a symptom of a broader disorder [that is] suicidal ideation, suicide plans, [and] suicidal gestures” (p. 1022). In sum, disruptive behavior directed inwardly and/or outwardly may be perceived by participants as a problem warranting resolution. Thus, students causing harm to self or others (Theme One) coincides with, “defining the problem,” as specified by the first step in the problem solving model articulated by GICE (2014).

In sum, in reference to theme one participant words collectively seem to indicate that children with disabilities have the potential to inflict harm upon themselves, as well as harm to others. Additionally, it appears that this potential harm warrants intervention from a myriad of perspectives to include administrative, legal, and medical. It also seems that the student’s Individual Education Program (IEP) provides a starting place for teachers and others to become aware of student behavioral issues and subsequently employ this tool to mitigate student maladaptive behavior.

## **Theme Two**

All of the participants in this study noted that they considered, “the disabilities” (Theme Two) before implementing discipline; thus, this paved the way to, “analyze the problem”, the second step in the GICE (2014) problem solving model. Manifestation Hearings provide the mechanism to analyze students with disabilities inappropriate behavior. Specifically, a panel of

school personnel, the Individual Education Program (IEP) Committee, seeks to ascertain if the child's disability contributed or caused the dysfunctional behavior. Christian noted, "You must have a manifestation hearing and... education services must be provided to a disabled student if they are out for a certain length of time." Gene indicated, "We have to gather a team to decide if it's appropriate to have that discipline and that is before the manifestation would happen." The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) states the following, "If... the conduct was a manifestation of the child's disability... a functional behavioral assessment and a behavioral intervention plan are implemented" (p. 2727). Contrastingly, IDEIA noted, "If the behavior that gave rise to the violation of the school code is determined not to be a manifestation of the child's disability.... the relevant disciplinary procedures... may be applied" (p. 2727). In addition to a manifestation hearing, the students with disabilities IEP records may provide another route to "analyze" the student's problem. Lisa noted, "[I would review] their IEP records to see if there is anything that could be causing the problem." John indicated, "[I] think it's very important... to check the IEP and see what's in there... what form of discipline that the student has been exposed to in the past and how that was dealt with." Also, Elle noted the benefits of reviewing the child's medical records as a way to "analyze" his or her problem. In essence, manifestation hearings and the review of IEP records, as well as the child's medical records provides ways to "analyze the problem" and make determinations as to what precipitated the child's inappropriate behavior. Thus, the initiatives taken by school personnel to examine students with disabilities records appears to be compatible with the second step in Global Institute for Corporate Education Model, i.e. to "analyze the problem."

In reference to theme two, it appears that students with disabilities are uniquely different from each other, thus a case-by-case analysis of each student's particular circumstances appears to have merit when considering discipline. For example, a student with a sensory disability like diminished hearing may also experience difficulty communicating with his/her teacher.

Therefore, this student may be unaware that he/she has violated a school code because of the

disability. In sum, it appears rational for the teacher to consider the student's disability before punishment is implemented.

### **Theme Three**

All of the participants in this study perceived a need to follow "the rules" (Theme Three) in disciplining students with disabilities and following the rules served as one way to "solve student problems", which is step three in the problem solving model. The rules come in a number of formats to include for example, policies and procedures, guidelines, regulations, and laws. John said, "The rules and policies are good for all-it helps to keep us all safe and in a good environment". Shannon stated, "I'm not going to make my own rules." Lynn noted, "[Students] follow my classroom rules."

Rules are drafted at the local, state, and federal levels to ensure that discipline is administered to students with disabilities judiciously. Two seminal laws, The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) provide the foundation for rules associated with student with disabilities discipline. IDEIA identifies 14 specific disability categories associated with student learning and behavior. However a few of the categories used by IDEIA and Section 504 overlap. For, example, Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder are found in both IDEIA and Section 504. However, just following the rules as enumerated in the cited laws is not a panacea, but only one way to begin the process of "identifying solutions" (step three in the problem solving model) to the problems that students with disabilities might encounter.

Schools are characterized by hierarchical organization, job specialization, personnel selection based on technical qualifications, long-term career opportunities, and regulation by formal rules and regulations. Thus, it would appear that school employees are expected to follow the rules with little deviation. In some institutions, sanctions are implemented for those who fail to follow the rules and these sanctions might range from warnings to dismissal. Thus, it would appear that it behooves school personnel to follow the rules.

## **Themes Four and Five**

As I interpret it, “Taking the role of the other to understand their situation” (Theme Four) appeared to be useful for the participants in this study. In this regard, John indicated, “I would try to insert myself in their shoes... and see how I would respond to it”. This appears to engender an emotional content that can be associated with the tenets of Symbolic Interaction Theory.

It appears that schools provide a fertile ground for teachers and students to interact with each other. Additionally, it seems that interaction has the potential to open up opportunities for teachers to become sensitized to the issues that students experience and subsequently offer remedies to mitigate non-conforming student behavior. It also appears by the very nature of their employment teachers help students to progress to their maximum levels academically and behaviorally. Thus, teacher and student dyadic interaction seems to be expected.

Additionally, as I interpret their statements, participants in this study appeared willing to draw upon their “personal experience” (Theme Five) in search of new meaning. That is, this approach appears useful for seeking a solution to the problem, again the third step in the problem solving model. Specifically, Lisa stated, “I think I’m a lot more confident now than I was when I first started as a teacher.” Sally offered, “As I have gained more experience I have become more comfortable.” The cited statements might be associated with the principles of Phenomenology Theory. In essence, the statements of participants in this study seem to provide a way for participants to look inwardly by introspection to find new ways to approach issues from personal experiences (Phenomenology).

It appears that reflection upon personal experiences has the potential to guide future behavior. That is, it seems if one’s experiences are perceived to be meaningful, individuals might attempt to replicate them. Contrastingly, it appears that if experiences are perceived to have little or no utility value, individuals generally try to avoid replication. It also seems that teachers in drawing upon their own experiences might perceive a better way to accomplish a task. In like

manner it seems that when teachers assess the experiences of their students they might wish to instruct students on how to avoid abysses that students might be facing. In sum, following the rules and employing the use of theory appear to be in harmony with the goal to seek “multiple solutions” to a problem (step three) as noted by GICE (2014).

Step four in GICE (2014) calls for the problem solver to, “choose the best solution.” The best solution is a matter of personal perception and selection, heretofore identified as following the laws, policies and procedures, regulations, or guidelines that have unified under the rubric of rules or employ the use of theory, which in this case is Symbolic Interaction and/or Phenomenology. Finally, the last step in the Problem Solving Model delineated by GICE (2014) calls for the chosen solution or solutions to be implemented. Through the principal’s proactive approach to appoint a “Compliant Facilitator” to oversee and implement the rules associated with students with disabilities discipline it would appear that potential abysses associated with noncompliance of rules could be avoided. In sum, the Problem Solving Model appears useful in this study for interconnecting the themes that emerged.

### **Interpretation of Themes**

Theme Interpretation according to Creswell (2009) has three facets, i.e., (1) “... Information gleaned from the literature, (2) theory, and (3) personal interpretation, couched in... culture, history, and experiences” (p. 189). In reference to the first major finding (harm to self or others), there is a plethora of research that relates to students causing harm to themselves; therefore, this will be the central focus of the first major finding. Appendix L demonstrates how themes were interpreted.

#### **Theme One**

Collectively, studies conducted by Matson and Turygin (2012), Lance et al. (2014) and Tureck et al. (2013) seem to imply that an individual diagnosed with a singular disability may also experience co-existing disabilities that may compound problems as it relates to discipline. For example, children amenable to self-injury may also experience an intellectual disability, a

developmental delay, an emotional problem, language impairment, autism or cerebral palsy (Matson et al). Thus intervention and treatment become paramount. At the school level, counselors, school psychologists, school doctors and other support personnel might offer strategies of intervention to mitigate self-injurious behavior. Additionally, medical intervention at the school level to include prescribed drugs might mitigate behavioral problems.

Chaos Theory appears to have applicability with the theme of students with disabilities causing harm to themselves, specifically in the form of self-injurious behavior. Chaos is a vacillation between order and disorder. Wheatley (2006) stated that “Chaos has always partnered with order... [and that] chaos is the last state before a system plunges into random behavior, where no order exists” (p. 117). Potentially, it appears that students with disabilities who harm themselves could vacillate between non-injurious behavior and self-injurious behavior. Chaos is also unpredictable. Rouse (2009) stated that “Chaos Theory refers to an apparent lack of order in a system that nevertheless obeys particular laws or rules; this understanding... refers to an inherent lack of predictability...” (p. 1). Wheatley (2006) indicated, “The system is deterministic, but you can’t say what it’s going to do next” (p. 120). Matson et al. (2012) reported that self-injurious behavior, i.e. “The act [itself] is not predetermined” (p. 1022). Thus, it might be said that it is highly unlikely that school personnel might be able to predict with accuracy when a student with disabilities might resort to self-injurious behavior. Chaos Theory is also characterized by fractals, i.e. patterns. Wheatley (2006) noted that “Fractals are everywhere around us in... nature [and in] our brains, lungs, and circulatory systems” (p. 123-124). Matson et al. indicated that self-injurious behaviors were “Typically repetitive [with] rhythmic movement” (p. 1021) thus becoming pattern like. Chaos Theory has been associated with “the butterfly effect,” i.e. initial small changes may lead to chaotic results. Rouse (2009) noted that “... very simple or small systems and events can cause very complex behaviors or events... [and] such a small system... illustrates the impossibility of making predictions... (p. 1).” Wheatley spoke about the ecological effect created by the Exxon Valdez Tanker, i.e., an incident with potentially

long range consequences. Similarly, according to Matson et al. the self-injurious behavior of students with disabilities in extreme cases can lead to “suicidal behavior,” (p. 1022) i.e., a potentially long range consequence. Feedback is an essential component of Chaos Theory; specifically, there is chaos when feedback is employed. Wheatley (2006) noted when “The system feedbacks on itself [it] magnifies slight variances [and] communicates through its network [thus] becoming disturbed and unstable...” (p. 122). Potentially, when school personnel attempt to intervene and mitigate the self-injurious behavior of students with disabilities, these students may become agitated and unstable. Finally, Chaos Theory is characterized by turbulence. Wheatley said, “We live in the midst of increasing turbulence [thus] a new relationship with chaos is possible” (p. 115). In essence, the self-injurious behavior of students with disabilities is a kind of turbulence that leads to chaos and disorder.

Behavior Modification is also a theory that appears to have relevance for the first major theme. McLeod (2007, p. 4) stated that B.F. Skinner determined that “Behavior which is reinforced tends to be repeated [while] behavior which is not reinforced tends to die out or be extinguished.” McLeod (2007) noted that Skinner used both positive reinforcement (rewards) and negative reinforcement (avoidance of negative consequences) to reinforce behavior. McLeod (2007, p. 6) stated that “Punishment is the opposite of reinforcement since it is designed to weaken or eliminate rather than increase it.” Wilson, Robeck, and Michael (1974) reported, “Significantly fewer instances of inappropriate behavior when teachers systematically reinforced pupils positively [rather than] when disruptive activities were ignored” (p. 108). In sum, Behavior Modification Theory appears to be a useful approach to change inappropriate behavior.

Both Behavior Modification Theory and Chaos Theory appear to serve as mechanisms that allow one to understand how individuals might explain and cope with behavior, especially mal-adaptive behavior. Behavior Modification has been used for decades in a number of settings to include schools, clinical facilities, and juvenile detention centers and it appears to be a useful approach. Essentially, the goal of Behavior Modification is to change behavior perceived to be



inappropriate and to improve one's overall behavior. Chaos Theory seems to provide an explanation of principles, for example turbulence, feedback, and patterns that are associated with behavior and thus to potentially enhance our understanding of behavior. It would appear that both of the cited theories have benefit for school personnel.

Robert noted, "Just watching my... student that eats and tries to bite himself and harm himself all the time, he is so unaware that that is happening to him... he doesn't even know it's... him hurting himself." Elle described disruptive behavior as a student who is "physically or emotionally harmful to another student... or really to themselves... I think when... physical bodies are harmed we need to look at it seriously."

It appeared that the category of students causing harm to themselves raises serious concerns for school personnel. Additionally, it seemed that students who harm themselves are unaware of the physical consequences of their behavior. Finally, it appeared that students who harm themselves are construed to be in a vulnerable state that warrants intervention.

## **Theme Two**

In accordance with the Molen et al. study (2014), it would appear that students with disabilities with low IQ scores (50-85) would experience difficulty in processing and understanding information as it relates to the consequences of a behavioral act (working memory) after the age of 15 years, and they would have no or limited ability to remember information for short periods of time (short term memory) after the age of 10 years. According to Molen et al., it would seem that students with disabilities are 5 years behind in working memory, as well as 5 years behind in short term memory when compared to typically developing children. Having these short falls in memory, however, does not exempt students with disabilities from the consequences of misbehavior; concomitantly, this does not preclude us, school personnel, from considering and being sensitive to the students with disabilities complex situation and offering intervention where warranted.

Children with ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) qualify for educational services in public schools under Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Subpart D. The National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH, 2014) noted that “Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is one of the most common childhood disorders and can continue through adolescence and adulthood” (p. 1). The NIMH (2014) also indicated that “Symptoms of ADHD include difficulty staying focused and paying attention, difficulty controlling behavior, and hyperactivity (p. 1).” The Mayo Clinic (2014, p. 1) defined Oppositional Deficit Disorder (ODD) as “A child or teen [with] a persistent pattern of tantrums, arguing, and angry or disruptive behavior toward... authority figures.” It should be noted that ODD is a medical term that is not incorporated in IDEA (2004) or Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Thus, it would seem that a child with Attention Deficit/ Hyperactivity Disorder, an intellectual disability, and Oppositional Defiant Disorder presents a compound problem for educators as it relates to discipline issues. In sum, it would appear that students with disabilities, who are unable to render their attention to abiding by school rules, will likely not follow the rules.

Calhoun (2002) stated, “Labeling Theory emphasizes the complex factors that come into play in the labeling or identifying of deviant individuals and groups [and] the potentially reinforcing effect of that labeling” (p. 1). Calhoun also noted that “Labeling theory is also interested in... who has the power to impose labels, how that power is used, and how labels... illuminate social divides” (p. 1). Finally, Calhoun said, “Labeling theory is rooted in the tradition of Symbolic Interactionism, which emphasizes the continuous construction of identity through interpersonal relationships and the importance of the perceptions of others on identity formation” (p. 1).

Students with disabilities are generally powerless to label themselves; thus, labeling appears to manifest itself primarily in medical and legal settings. From the medical perspective, it would seem that intervention to mitigate suffering would be paramount; while from the legal perspective, laws appear to be formulated to protect the rights of those labeled. Reference the

latter, students with disabilities are protected by a litany of federal, state, and local mandates designed to ensure a free and appropriate education in our public schools. IDEIA (2004) is a seminal document with roots that can be traced back to the early 1970s that provides protections for a number of categories (labels) of disabled students.

Robert said, “We had a young lady who was violent it was caused by her disability, we’re not going to suspend her for that, but we’re going to make other adjustments in her life so she can’t hurt other people.” Gene noted, “If a child is unable to sit still you have different types of discipline available to levy, you probably wouldn’t want to give that child an excessive amount of detention time, so you just have to be aware of what their disabilities are.” Mel offered, “If you have a student whose disability causes him to have outburst and in those outburst maybe he strikes another person, you cannot impose the same discipline on him as someone who chose to take a swing at another kid, because his disability is what is governing the action.” The participants appeared to be sensitive to the varied and multiple disabilities experienced by students and thus assessed the potential effect of their disabilities in relationship to discipline. Additionally, it appeared that participants evaluated each potential discipline issue on a case-by-case basis. Essentially participants were telling a story about their experiences. Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (1995) stated, “Member’s stories... may present extended descriptions of events they witnessed or directly experienced...” (p. 116-117). It would appear that students with disabilities experience varied disabilities and thus it seems that a lock-step approach to discipline may not work effectively in all situations.

### **Theme Three**

IDEIA (2004), while termed a law might also be considered a binding rule. For example, the Merriam-Webster on line Dictionary (2014) defined a rule as “a legal precept or doctrine” and a law as a “rule of conduct or action prescribed or formally recognized as binding and enforced by a controlling authority” (p. 1). It would appear that since IDEIA (2004) is being monitored yearly by Congress that the rules relating to students with disabilities are followed

without deviation. Specifically, the 35<sup>th</sup> annual report (2013) to the US Congress submitted by the State Department of Education in the state where this study was conducted indicated that school districts in the state are removing students with disabilities possessing drugs, weapons, precipitating serious body injury or for other rule violations if warranted.

Mel noted, “Schools depend on special staff to know and relay valid information regarding laws [rules] that pertain to disabled students [and] they also rely on special staff for guidance in understanding what student compliance may look like.” Sally said “Special Education Teachers tend to be even more driven by federal mandates [or rules], which often limits how students can be disciplined. We are driven by teams rather than individual administrative decisions.” Shannon indicated, “Zero Tolerance [rules] can go too far when teachers don’t look at individual backgrounds, they can send students into a downward spiral [where students] lose motivation, grades sink [and] in-school suspensions can go overboard.” Teachers appeared to rely on special staff to make them aware of new developments and changes in the rules related to disciplining students with disabilities in the present study. However, there also seemed to be a need to temper rules with some latitude in order to accommodate unforeseen situational variables in the present study. Team management, i.e. Individual Education Program Teams (IEP Teams) and administrative oversight appeared also to work well for the participants in this study.

#### **Theme Four**

Sally said, “I always try to put myself in their situation... that helps me prepare for how I need to interact with that student... I often have to think about what environment that student came from... especially if the behavior is unusual to that particular student.” Mel noted, “A lot of us tend to empathize and try to see it from their side... I try to figure out why he did that and what motivated him to do whatever the misconduct was.” Elle stated, “I think we would have less discipline issues if we could take on that role... hopefully you know what steps you can take after that to prevent it from happening again.” Participant comments as I interpret them appeared to

illustrate the precepts of Symbolic Interaction Theory, i.e., teachers and school personnel in this study seemed to be able to adopt the theory of Symbolic Interaction through their interactions with students with disabilities in order to make informed decisions relevant to discipline issues. In sum, it would appear that Symbolic Interaction Theory was useful for the participants in this study.

### **Theme Five**

The study conducted by Abuya et al. (2012) seems to imply that the negative experiences that high school girls encountered in Kenya impacted unfavorably upon their behavior and their academic pursuits. Additionally, it appeared that name calling [labeling] also had a negative effect upon the participants in the Abuya et al. study. As I interpret the Abuya et al. study it would appear that teachers and school personnel might understand and subsequently aid students in reaching resolution to their problems if they become aware of the experiences that these students encounter. Thus Phenomenology Theory appears to provide a window to render new meaning to the personal experiences that one encounters.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The study findings answer the research questions, thus a discussion of each of the seven findings is presented. The focus will center on allowing participant voices to be heard. Thus an effort will be undertaken to delineate multiple participant perceptions that emerged from the interviews and field notes, as well as to see how documents relevant to students with disabilities address discipline issues. Participant quotations and document wording in harmony with Geertz (1973) and Denzin (2001) will be used to support the findings with “thick descriptions.” A summary of major findings is noted in Appendix M

### **First Finding: Students with Disabilities potentially have the Capacity to Harm Themselves or Others**

All of the participants in this study indicated that disruptive behavior in the context of students with disabilities was perceived as students who caused harm to themselves or others.

Two participant perspectives appeared to emerge. That is, a perspective where participants made reference to harm that was self-initiated by students and a perspective where participants focused their attention on students who initiated harm that befell upon others. In reference to self-injury, Robert made reference to a student that “eats and tries to bite himself and harm himself all the time.” Elle spoke of a student that may have been suffering from autism who engaged in “head banging.” Additionally, Gene, Robert, and Shannon noted students who may use illegal drugs. In reference to students that initiate harm to others Robert spoke of students bullying others, while Kim, Sally, Christian, Shannon, and Gene made reference to students that may use inappropriate language in their interaction with others to include the use of profane words. Additionally, Kim talked of students who may “Throw things,” while Sally and Mel employed the use of the words “Hit another student,” Christian and John made use of the terms “Fighting with others.” Four of the five documents that I reviewed made reference to students who cause harm to themselves or others. For example, The code of Federal Regulations (2014, Section 300.530, p. 3), The Policies and Procedures for Special Education (2010, p. 163), and The individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004, p. 2727) all employ the use of the same exact language as follows: “School personnel may remove a student [who] has inflicted serious body injury upon another person while at school... or others.”

### **Second Finding: The Participants Considered the Student’s Disability before Implementing Discipline**

All of the participants associated with this study considered the student’s disability before implementing discipline. It appeared that the root cause of a student with disabilities maladaptive behavior had the potential to be related to his her disability. Robert iterated “We had a young lady who was violent ... also it was caused by her disability ... we’re not going to suspend her for that but, we’re going to make other adjustments in her life so she can’t hurt other people.” Mel said “If you have a student who’s moderately disabled and his disability causes him to strike another person you cannot impose the same discipline on him as somebody who chose to take a swing at

another kid.” Five or all of the documents reviewed, i.e., The Code of Federal Regulations (2014), Guidelines for Educators and Administrators for Implementing Section 505 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Subpart D (2010), Policies and Procedures for Special Education (2010), Local Board of education Policy (2000), and The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) underscored a need to consider the child’s disability before implementing discipline. For example, The Code of Federal Regulations (2014, Section 300.530, p. 1) and The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004, p. 2726) stated using the same exact words that “For disciplinary changes in placement that would exceed 10 consecutive school days [conduct a] manifestation [hearing] to determine if the behavior violation is a manifestation of the child’s disability.

**Third Finding: The Participants Followed the Rules Governing Students with Disabilities Discipline Delineated by Federal, State, and Local Authorities**

All of the participants who gave their time to this study navigated the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities by employing the use of the rules. Rules provide guidance to assist in the operation of organized society. Schools abide by rules implemented at the federal, state, and local levels. It appeared that school personnel relied on rules to guide them in the process of disciplining students with disabilities. Lynn iterated “I try to follow all school rules and expect them [students] to follow my class rules.” Lisa said “I make sure they know my expectations, the classroom rules [and] the school rules.” Shannon noted “I will refer to policy and [the] handbook always and highlight the rules.” All five of the documents reviewed made reference to the consequences that might be rendered to students for not following the rules. For example, The Code of Federal Regulations (2014, Section 300.530, p. 1), Policies and Procedures for Special Education (2010, p. 162), and The Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act (2004, p. 2726) all using the same language stated that “School personnel may remove a child with a disability who violates a code of student conduct...”

#### **Fourth Finding: The Participants Noted a Willingness to See Things from the Perspective of the Student with Disabilities**

A majority of the participants in this study (10 of 11) were able to take the role of the other, which appeared to help them to understand the process of disciplining disabled students. Crotty (1998) indicated that with Symbolic Interaction "... the emphasis [is] on putting oneself in the place of the other and seeing things from the perspective of other..." (p. 76). Further Crotty said "Only through dialogue can one become aware of the perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of others and interpret their meanings and intent" (p. 75). It appeared that as I interpreted participant statements a majority of the participants aligned themselves with the tenets of Symbolic Interaction Theory. Elle noted "I can always put myself in somebody else's place and sometimes the consequences are painful... I think we would have less discipline issues if we could take on this role..." Sally said "I always try to put myself in their situations... I need to interact with that student... I often have to think about what environment that student came from and what possibly could have happened in that student's day." Christian offered the following "I can see their side of things... I kind of like to work with them and work through the situations [and] why they might have done something that they've done."

#### **Fifth Finding: The Participants Noted a Willingness to use Personal Experience as a Basis for Introspection and Examination**

A majority of the participants in this study (10 of 11) were able to draw upon their own experiences in search for new meaning. Thus, as I interpret participant utterances, the Theory of Phenomenology, aided them in understanding the process of disciplining students with disabilities. Crotty (1998) noted that "Phenomenology suggest that, if we lay aside, as best we can, the previous understanding of that phenomena and revisit our immediate experiences of them, possibilities for new meaning emerge..." (p. 78). Based on the words spoken it seemed that many participants subscribed to the principles of Phenomenology Theory. Robert said "I think over the years my experience has made me a better teacher in the same way that my experience



has made me a better disciplinarian.” Sally indicated “As I have gained more experience...I have become more comfortable... with certain things... what I considered needed to be disciplined is not what the next person might consider.” Kim noted “My professional development classes have not prepared me as much as being in the trenches- in the classroom and being with the kids... it’s just experience, personal experience with the kids.”

### **Sixth Finding**

Two participants associated with this study indicated that they interpreted documents related to students with disabilities discipline. Therefore, as I interpret participant statements, the Theory of Hermeneutics appeared to guide them in understanding the process of disciplining students with disabilities. Crotty (1998) noted that “Hermeneutics has been brought to bear on texts other than Scriptures” (p. 87). In this study Hermeneutics Theory is associated with the interpretation of texts linked to disciplining students with disabilities. Patton (2002) said “The meaning of text then is negotiated among a community of interpreters... to the extent that some agreement is reached about meaning at a particular time and place [and] that meaning can only be based on consensual community validation” (p. 114). It seems that Hermeneutic Theory was useful for two participants. Mel said “I am in a position where I am supposed to train, give guidance... so that interpretations [will prevail] – when I take something like federal regulations, I am going to try to consult people who know a lot about it and see if what I am interpreting is how they see it as well.” Lynn noted “The written guidance I receive for disciplining my disabled students – I take it at face value and if I don’t understand it, well then I seek direction from either the Special Education Department or [principal’s name deleted].”

Discipline issues associated with students experiencing disabilities has reached the national level, as noted by yearly Congressional over-site to ensure compliance with disability law. It appears that interpretation of case law and legislative mandates as they relate to disability law is a task requiring unique skills, especially for lay personnel with little or no legal training. Thus, it would appear beneficial for lay personnel to seek aid in interpretation of disability law

through a “community of interpreters,” also known as a “hermeneutic circle.” That is, it appears if multiple individuals work together to interpret disability law this would minimize errors in interpretation.

### **Seventh Finding**

Two participants in this study noted that they constructed knowledge when they perceived specific knowledge was not available relevant to students with disabilities discipline. That is, as I interpret Social Constructionism Theory, it appeared to help participants to understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities. Oliver (1998, p. 4) offered the following in reference to Social Constructionism “This theoretical approach is centrally concerned with meaning. It shows the crucial importance of learning from disabled people’s experience to understand meanings of disability.” It appeared that two participants saw Social Constructionism Theory as useful. Lynn said that she would place focus on “Getting to know that student and trying to understand his or her limitations... so that I could set realistic expectations... and part of that is talking to the student and or his parents.” John noted “I would try to make an assessment of the student... [identify] what those disabilities are- what they can and can’t do...if I had no other information then I would probably assess it that way and try to be fair to what they are capable of doing.”

It would appear that there is little need to construct a model that guides one in how to discipline students with disabilities, since there is a litany of laws, rules, polices, and guidelines already formulated. Specifically, it appears that a constructed model may not be in harmony with the established and mandated approach. Thus, it would seem that creating a new approach may be construed to create problems, rather than limit problems in relation to students with disabilities discipline.

### **Summary of Findings**

There were seven findings in this study. First Finding: Students with disabilities potentially have the capacity to harm themselves or others. All of the participants in this study

indicated that disruptive behavior in the context of students with disabilities was perceived as students who caused harm to themselves or others. Essentially, participants described students who hurt themselves physically or hurt others physically and/or emotionally. Examples of behaviors subsumed under students causing harm to themselves included illegal drug use, pica, and head banging, while students who harmed others manifested itself in bullying, inappropriate language, and throwing things.

The Second Finding: The participants in this study considered the student's disability before implementing discipline. All of the participants felt that it was paramount to consider the student's disability before implementing discipline. That is, they perceived that for discipline to be effective there was a need to ascertain the severity of the student's disability. Participants spoke of tailoring discipline to the child's disability. Subsumed under the child's disability were concerns relevant to the child's ability to understand language, the child's developmental level, and the child's total environmental situation to include home, school, and other situations. For example, some teachers were reluctant to have children with disabilities stay for after school discipline if they knew the child did not have transportation home.

The Third Finding: The participants affiliated with this study followed the rules governing students with disabilities discipline delineated by federal, state, and local authorities. All of the participants navigated the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities by employing the use of rules. It was determined that the term "rules" was a generic way for participants to describe, laws, regulations, guidance, and policies that directly impacted on the discipline of students with disabilities. Of note as it relates to this finding was proactive position taken by the principal in appointing a "Compliant Facilitator" to oversee the implementation of "rules" relating to the discipline of students with disabilities.

The Fourth Finding: The participants in this study noted a willingness to see things from the perspective of the student with disabilities. A majority of the participants indicated that "taking the role" of the other helped them to understand the process of disciplining students with

disabilities. Essentially, school personnel as I interpreted what they said, they appeared to be aligning themselves with the tenets of Theory of Symbolic Interaction in order to understand the student's situation. Dyadic communication between the teacher and student is an essential component of the Theory of Symbolic Interaction. Thus, the teaching-learning environment provides unlimited opportunities for this two-way communication to prevail between teacher and student.

The Fifth Finding: The participants associated with this study noted a willingness to use personal experiences as a basis for introspection and examination. A majority of the participants noted that they drew upon their own personnel experience in search of new meaning. Thus, the principles of Phenomenology Theory as I interpret them appeared to provide an avenue for school personnel to understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities. For example, participants indicated that their experiences "had made them better disciplinarians," experiences made them "more comfortable with discipline issues," and experiences "prepared them for teaching in the classroom."

The Sixth Finding: Participants in this study saw merit in adhering to what I perceived to be the tenets of Hermeneutics Theory. As it related to the laws governing students with disabilities, participants appeared willing to interpret the language of the laws singularly. Additionally, participants expressed a desire to seek others whom they seemed to perceive had greater knowledge of the laws and could potentially assist in interpretation as it related to the laws.

Seventh Finding: Participants who volunteered their time for this study saw value in drawing upon what I considered the tenets of Social Constructionism. That is, participants made it known that individually, if the situation was void of knowledge relevant to students with disabilities rules, that construction of knowledge could prove useful. In essence, participants were expressing their perceptions of a course of action to be taken, when they may have been unaware of the established course to be pursued.

## **Chapter Summary**

As it relates to Chapter IV, I presented data from participant interviews, identified themes, interconnected themes, interpreted the themes that emerged from the data, and presented the findings. In essence, this chapter provided the framework for me to present the findings of the study. In Chapter V, I will discuss the findings, present conclusions, and offer recommendations.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this case study was to gain an understanding of high school principal, special education teacher, and key school personnel perceptions of the process that leads to disciplining students with disabilities. The discussion will focus on the participant's responses to the open-ended interview questions presented, field notes taken during the course of the interview, and documents reviewed, i.e., the study findings. In essence, the discussion will center on what I learned from the study in relationship to the fore-mentioned and the research questions, which are re-presented as follows: (1) constitutes disruptive behavior as it relates to students with disabilities?, (2) factors considered in the process of disciplining students with disabilities?, (3) teachers, school administrators, and key school personnel navigate the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities?, and (4) theory or theories help teachers, school administrators, and key school personnel to understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities? I will offer opinions, inferences or what I deduced from the findings (Patton, 2002). Finally, recommendations for future research will be presented.

#### **Discussion Using Research Questions**

##### **What Constitutes Disruptive Behavior**

In relationship to the first research question, (what constitutes disruptive behavior as it relates to students with disabilities?) the finding as it relates to this study was that students with disabilities potentially have the capacity to harm themselves or others. This harm according to the participants might be directed inwardly toward the student himself/herself and might manifest

itself in the form of physical, mental, or emotional harm. Specifically, Robert spoke of a student with disabilities who “eats and tries to bite himself [pica]. Contrastingly, harm might be directed outwardly toward others in the form of fights, threats, bullying, or inappropriate language that also might lead to physical, mental, or emotional harm. Kim brought attention to students who may “Try to hurt another student or the teacher.” and Sally spoke of students “Hitting another student or staff member.” Additionally, Mel noted students with disabilities may be prone to “Touch or hit another student.” In like manner, Christian, John, and Lisa talked about students who potentially might fight among themselves. Students who bring weapons to school as noted by John and Shannon potentially may bring harm to themselves as well as to others.

As it relates to this study, all categories of children with disabilities delineated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) may be subject to disruptive behaviors that students with disabilities may display. For example, The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (2009) cited two characteristics of children with Emotional Disabilities which may have a direct bearing on student behavior as follows: (1) “An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers” and (2) “[engagement] in inappropriate types of behavior...”(p. 2). Collectively, the cited characteristics might manifest themselves in a number of ways. That is, Christian, John, Robert, Shannon, Lisa, Lynn, and Sally spoke of students talking while the teacher is talking. Additionally, Kim, John, Robert, Shannon, and Lisa made mention of students who were in non-compliance with teacher directives. Finally, Sally, Christian, Robert, and Elle viewed disruptive behavior as students who were out of their seats. Additionally, The National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities (2009) stated that Children with Specific Learning Disabilities experience difficulty in “Understanding or using language...that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations” (p. 3). Acting out may take a number of forms to include “defiance” as pointed out by Robert and Kim. Additionally, frustrated students may display “anger issues” as cited by Sally

and “physical aggression” as noted by Mel. The National Dissemination for Children with Disabilities (2009) also stated that Children with an Intellectual Disability may display “...Deficits in adaptive behavior...” (p. 2). Finally, in this regard The National Institute of Mental Health (2014) indicated that Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder experience “Difficulty controlling behavior” (p. 1).

Public Law 108-446 (The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, IDEA 2004) characterizes disruptive behavior as it relates to students with disabilities as follows: “Carries or possesses a weapon...possesses or uses illegal drugs...inflicted serious body injury upon another person while at school...violates a school code...[or resorts to] behavior that impedes the child’s learning or that of others” (pp. 2726-2727). Additionally, the Code of Federal Regulations (2014) and the State Policies and Procedures [Manual] for Special Education (2010) employs the same exact language as Public Law 108-446 (2004), while Guidelines for Educators and Administrators for Implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Subpart D (2010) and Local School Board Policy (2000) use similar language to Public Law 108-446 (2004). In sum, it is highly probable that students with disabilities may act inappropriately on occasion due to their disabilities.

### **Factors Considered in the Process of Disciplining Students with Disabilities**

In consideration of research question two, (what factors are considered in the process of disciplining disabled students?) the finding associated with this study was that student disabilities must be considered in determining discipline. In general, students with disabilities may experience cognitive, emotional, or physical issues or any combination of these issues which are termed multiple disabilities. Mel stated that “A student who’s moderately [cognitive] disabled and his disability causes him to have [emotional] outbursts and in the outburst he strikes another person you cannot impose the same discipline because his disability is what is governing the action.” In like manner all of the participants noted that the child’s disability must be considered before discipline is imposed. Linked to the child’s disability is his/her ability to understand



language. Robert stated that “There’s no sense in using large vocabulary words if the kids do not understand.” In essence, a student’s ability to understand language is subject to variation. Sally encapsulated the concept of development level when she said “Many of my students because of the severity of their disability...are on the [cognitive] level of anywhere from a six- month-old to a six-year- old.”

Jean Piaget (1964), using his own children as subjects, identified four stages that correspond to chronological age development as follows: (1) stage one, birth to 2 years of age where the focus is on the child’s reflective behavioral responses to stimuli; (2) stage two, 2 – seven years of age where the child begins to use symbols [language] to represent objects; (3) stage three, 7 to 11 years of age which marks the beginning of the child’s thinking ability associated with concrete objects; and (4) stage four, ages 11 and above where the child develops abstract thinking ability, however, caution must be employed in attempting to super impose Piaget’s developmental stages upon students with disabilities, since it is construed that Piaget’s subjects were “normally developing”.

In considering the child’s disability before implementing discipline, PL 108-446 (2004) states the following: “If the conduct in question was caused by the child’s disability conduct [a] behavioral assessment and implement a behavioral intervention plan” (p. 2727). In essence discipline may be held in abeyance. However, PL 108-446 noted that if the child “Carries or possesses a weapon... possesses or uses illegal drugs... [or] inflicted serious bodily injury upon another while at school... remove to an interim alternative educational setting for not more than 45 school days...” (p. 2727). In like manner, PL 108-446 said “If The behavior that gave rise to the violation of the school code is determined not to be a manifestation of the child’s disability... relevant disciplinary procedures... may be applied... for not more than 10 school days...” (p. 2726). The Code of Federal Regulations (2014) and the State Policies and Procedures for Special Education (2010) duplicated the language of PL 108-446 (2004), while the Guidelines for Educators and Administrators Implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973,

Subpart D (2010) and local School Board Policy (2000) use similar language to PL 108-446 (2004). In sum participants noted that they were willing to consider the disabled child's total situation before implementing discipline. Sally said "A lot of times I just have to call parents or send a note home to get a true understanding of what is going on with my students".

### **How do School Personnel Navigate the Decision Making Process of Disciplining Students with Disabilities?**

Research question three was designed to ascertain how school personnel navigate the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities, thus the finding having bearing on this study was that the participants followed the rules governing students with disabilities discipline delineated by federal, state, and local authorities. All of the participants made reference to following the rules. However, the term rules appeared to be a generic phrase that included laws, guidelines, and policies. That is, according to the on line "Business Dictionary" (2015) "A rule serves as a norm for guiding or mandating action or conduct" (p. 1). Additionally, the "Business Dictionary" stated "Rules may be divided into... categories [as follows]: (1) mandates that may not be ignored in any circumstances; (2) guidelines that allow some discretion with interpretation, and (3) policies that imply a predetermined behavior [and] may be violated under certain circumstances"(p. 1). Participants offered the following as it relates to rules: Lynn said "I try to follow all school rules and expect them [students] to follow my classroom rules." Kim noted "I think that disabled students really need to be held accountable just like regular education students and under the same rules." John stated "These are my rules...this is what I expect and this is how you should behave." In relationship to the law Mel indicated they were given a document at the state with references to the federal regulations "And this is how we stay in compliance with the law." John noted "Following the law...the law is very clear on certain things that you can do." Sally said I am always going to go to what the federal regulations saying.

An individualized Education Program (IEP) is mandated by Public Law 108-446 (2004) to accommodate students with disabilities and defines objectives designed to help the child reach

educational goals. In relationship to the IEP John said “I think it’s very important to check the IEP...see what form of discipline that this student has been exposed to in the past...and how that [discipline] was dealt with.” Lisa noted “[I review} their IEP records to see if there is anything that could be causing the problem.” Additionally, Lynn stated “For discipline issues-sometimes they are on their IEPs [and] if it’s written on their IEPs I’m expected to follow it and I do.”

Participants employed the term guidelines as follows: Christian said “There are different guidelines that the administrators follow” Shannon noted “[I] follow the guidelines” and Sally indicated “We have federal guidelines that we obviously have to follow.” Finally, in relationship to policy Robert said “There are extremes that we have to have policies for.” In like manner Elle stated “Our policies and procedures manual that’s typically when you are on the severe end of discipline.”

PL 108-446 (2004) states “School personnel may remove a child with a disability who violates a code of student conduct for not more than 10 school days” (p. 2726). In the case of an Individualized Program (IEP) Public Law 108-446 (2004) stated “In the case of a child whose behavior impedes the child’s learning or that of others [the IEP Team must] consider the use of positive behavioral interventions and other strategies to address that behavior” (p. 2712). The Code of Federal Regulations (2014) and the State Policies and Procedures for Special Education (2010) replicate the language of PL 108-446 (2004), while Guidelines for Educators and Administrators Implementing Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Subpart D (2010) and local School Board Policy (2000) draw upon language similar to PL 108-446 (2004). The principal at Redwood appointed an on-site Compliance Facilitator to ensure school personnel understood and followed the laws relating to the discipline of students with disabilities. In sum, following the rules for disciplining students with disabilities as it relates to the participants in this study appeared to be enhanced by the school principal’s appointment of an on-site Compliance Facilitator. Following the rules can be traced to ancient Babylonia nearly 4,000 years ago

(Wikipedia, 2015). Thus, it would appear that organized societies have a long tradition of following the rules.

### **What Theory or Theories Help School Personnel Understand the Process of Disciplining Students with Disabilities?**

Research question four sought to determine what theory or theories might help school personnel understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities, thus two findings became evident as it related to this study. First, participants noted a willingness to see things from the perspective of students with disabilities, which I interpret as being in harmony with the tenets of Symbolic Interaction Theory. For example, Sally stated “I always try to put myself in their situation.” John noted “I would try to insert myself in their shoes and see how I would respond.” Additionally, Shannon said “I think I could put myself in their shoes very easily.” Blumer (1969) stated “Meaning arises out of social interaction that one has with one’s fellows... and meanings are...modified through an interpretative process...” (p. 2). My interpretation of Sally’s, John’s and Shannon’s statements of putting themselves in “their [student’s with disabilities] shoes” demonstrates their willingness to figuratively take on the role of students with disabilities in an effort to understand the trials and tribulations experienced by students and subsequently offer recommendation to mitigate mal-adaptive behavior. In essence, Sally, John’s, and Shannon’s articulations appear to depict self-interaction these participants independently had with themselves in order to understand the experiences of students with disabilities. The participants in interviews with me subsequently echoed their concerns to take on the roles of students with disabilities. Thus, taking on the roles of others appears to mirror a technique employed in psychotherapy termed “role playing,” whereby clients act out roles in an effort to resolve conflicts. In essence, it appeared that my interpretation of participant’s articulations of Symbolic Interaction Theory may have provided school personnel an avenue to interact with others in order to understand their circumstances. In describing Symbolic Interaction Theory Crotty (1998) noted that “Role taking is an interaction...and only through dialogue can one become aware of the

perceptions, feelings, and attitudes of others and interpret meaning” (p. 75). Additionally, Crotty pointed out that one form of interaction is labeling theory where we categorize people perceived to deviate from the “norm.” Essentially, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) and special education programs label and categorize students in accordance with their disabilities.

Secondly, Phenomenology Theory, according to Patton (2002) allows one to look at their lived experiences in a new way by “bracketing-out” extraneous information that might compete with the lived experience. Specifically, I perceive participant statements to be linked to the tenets of Phenomenology Theory. For example, Robert stated “I think over the years my experience has made me a better teacher in the same way my experience has made me a better disciplinarian.” Mel indicated “I think all of those years of experience and living through different discipline issues and seeing the outcome helped me to develop my own philosophy” and Sally said “As I have gained more experience I have become more comfortable with myself.” In essence, I interpret that participants noted a willingness to use personal experiences as a basis for introspection and examination which appears as to comport with Phenomenology Theory. From how I view what participant said there is an apparent association of their perceptions with Phenomenology Theory, which may provide an opportunity for school personnel to employ introspection to examine their own experiences. That is, Phenomenology Theory according to Crotty (1998) allows individuals to explore their own experiences through symbols [language] and to subsequently construct fresh perceptions, which renders a new understanding of their experiences. For example, school personnel through their experiences with students with disabilities may develop perceptions and feelings about their experiences and subsequently are able to make sense of these experiences by intrapersonal reflection or interpersonal interaction with others (Patton, 2002). In sum, it is my interpretation that both Symbolic Interaction Theory and Phenomenology Theory might prove to be useful for school personnel as they interact with students with disabilities.

## **Conclusions**

Students with disabilities harming themselves or others, is a major concern for school personnel in this study. That is, students with disabilities potentially have the capacity to display a variety of disruptive behaviors in school settings that can cause harm to themselves and others. For example, emotionally disturbed students, learning disabled students, intellectually disabled students and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) students, as well as other categories of students with disabilities may experience difficulty in controlling their behavior.

As it relates to this study, school personnel placed value upon considering the student's disability before discipline is implemented. Each disability delineated by PL 108-446 (2004) appears to be uniquely different and distinguishable as a stand-alone category. However children may experience multiple disabilities thus a case-by-case consideration for discipline appears to have merit.

School personnel who participated in this study perceived worthiness in following the rules related to disciplining students with disabilities. Additionally, the school principal's appointment of an on-site Compliance Facilitator appeared to elevate adherence to rule compliance as it related to students with disabilities. Rules take a number of formats to include laws, guidelines, and school district policy.

Finally, it appeared that school personnel as it related to this study appeared to see merit in employing the tenets of Symbolic Interaction Theory and Phenomenological Theory to aid them in understanding the process of disciplining students with disabilities through their identification of words and concepts related to these theories. That is, Symbolic Interaction Theory provided an avenue to step into the shoes of another and see things from the perspective of the other, and thus become sensitized to the experiences of the other. Phenomenology Theory on the other hand allowed introspection of one's own personal experiences so that one could develop a new understanding of these experiences and draw upon them in their interactions with others.

## **Recommendations**

I first recommend schools consider rendering on-going and periodic training to teachers and other school personnel on how to mitigate harm that students with disabilities might inflict upon themselves and others. This effort could be in concert with making the school a safe environment for learning. Secondly, I recommend schools across the nation consider using an on-site Compliance Facilitator position to aid them in adhering to mandates related to students with disabilities discipline. That is, with the ever present enhanced federal government oversight on reviewing how students with disabilities are disciplined, a Compliance Facilitator position might prove to be beneficial. Thirdly, I recommend schools identify a particular theory/plan to follow to systematize their processes in disciplining students with disabilities. Fourthly, I recommend expanding research related to students with disabilities discipline to grade levels other than 10<sup>th</sup> through 12<sup>th</sup> to schools within and outside of the state, especially those grade levels and schools where adolescent children are enrolled. That is, the literature seems to indicate that adolescent children may experience issues related to discipline.

Future research might consider how school discipline is implemented in respect to traditional high school students. There is evidence that some recalcitrant students may be on a pathway that leads to incarceration. Thus, steps to mitigate the latter may prove to be beneficial to students, as well as society.

## **Researcher Assumptions**

I assume that the participants were truthful in their responses, that the findings are valid and that school personnel might perceive benefit in employing their application. I assume the findings might contribute to the literature as it relates to students with disabilities discipline issues. Finally, I assume that this study make awaken interest in the education and discipline of students with disabilities.

## **Chapter Summary**

In Chapter V, I discussed the findings that emerged in this study. Additionally, I offered conclusions that were deduced from the findings, that is, these were my opinions and my interpretations of the findings. Finally, I made recommendations for future research associated with the problem of disciplining disabled students.

### **Reflexivity**

Reflexivity, according to Creswell (2009), “means that researchers reflect about how their biases, values, and personal background... shape their interpretations formed during a study” (p. 233). Creswell further stated that “interpretation... means that the researcher draws meaning from the findings...[and] these meanings may result in lesson learned...” (p. 230). Additionally, according to Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2009) data interpretations “connect findings with personal experience...”(p. 456). Self-Reflexivity as explained by Patton (2002) answer this question: “How my perceptions and my background affected the data I have collected and my analysis of that data?” (p. 495). Patton further noted that as it relates to reflexivity “...complete objectivity [is]... impossible and pure subjectivity undermines credibility...” (p. 494). Essentially, Patton appears to be saying that data interpretation may be prone to personal bias based on one’s experiences however these biases must be clarified, as well as minimized. Additionally, Patton seems to be saying that if I allow my interpretations of data to be shaped exclusively by my feelings and thought I risk undermining the trustworthiness of the study, thus I as the researcher must balance objectivity with subjectivity.

In essence, I have been shaped by my professional experiences, thus I accept my biases which can be characterized as perceptions that minority children are overrepresented in special education, that psychological testing may render misdiagnosis, and that instruments used to assess children may not be culturally fair. In essence children’s classification and assignment of labels associated with special education may lead to inequities and inequalities as it relates to those



classified as special education, as well as stigmatizing children socially. I will describe my experiences associated with this study in the paragraph that follows.

As a school psychologist, I encountered students with varied disabilities and during my tenure there seemed to be a disproportionate number of students who were Black and subsequently diagnosed as emotionally disturbed, learning disabled, or intellectually disabled, i.e., these categories of students were deemed by school personnel to be prone to acting inappropriately behaviorally and thus potentially placed themselves, as well as others in harm's way. Additionally, as a school psychologist I administered batteries of examinations to students who were suspected of experiencing problems related to their schooling. These tests were designed to identify specific disabilities and the analyses and interpretations I rendered were validated by senior school psychologist at the school district office. In concert with the foregoing and as chairperson of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Committee my team and I were tasked with developing plans of intervention to mediate problems associated with student disabilities. In essence my team considered the child's disability in planning for remediation related to the student's academics and behavioral issues. Most essentially, my team and I followed the rules, laws, and court decisions pertaining to disciplining students with disabilities. Finally, by its very nature psychological testing requires interpretation, thus unwittingly I was adhering to the tenets of Hermeneutics Theory by offering a coherent explanation of the test results and subsequently consulting with senior staff at the school district office to minimize misinterpretation. Also, as an advocate for students with disabilities I may have also unwittingly aligned myself with Symbolic Theory as I attempted to understand student issues from their perspective. In sum, I am a product of my experiences, however, I have tempered my experiences so that they have not created biases in this study, i.e., I have listened to what the participants have said and used their words and thus see similarity in what they have said and my professional experiences.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Participant Demographic Table

Participant Code	Participant Pseudonym	Years of Experience	Participant Gender
SET	KIM	16	Female
SET	Sally	29	Female
SET	MEL	28	Female
DIR-C	CHRISTIAN	15	Female
A-PRIN	JOHN	38	Male
PRIN	ROBERT	20	Male
SET	SHANNON	23	Female
SET	LISA	20	Female
A-PRIN	GENE	3	Female
TET	LYNN	32	Female
DIR-SE	ELLE	28	Female
		Total =252	
		Average=22.9	

#### KEY:

SET-Special Education Teacher

TET-Traditional Education Teacher

PRIN-Principal

A-PRIN-Assistant Principal

DIR-C-Director of Counseling

DIR-SE-Director of Special Education Services

APPENDIX B

Triangulation of Data Sources

Data Source	DB-SHSO	F-CDIS	N-RULE	TH-SYMI	TH-PHEN
Interviews	X	X	X	X	X
Field Notes	X	X	X	X	X
PL-108-446	X	X	X		
Code of Federal Regulations	X	X	X		
Guidelines for Section 504	X	X	X		
State Policies / Procedures	X	X	X		
Local School Board Policy	X	X	X		

Key

DB-SHSO	Disruptive Behavior- Student Causing harm to self or others
F-CDIS	Factor-Consider Disability before implementing discipline
N-RULE	Navigate-Follow the rules
TH-SYMI	Theory-Symbolic Interaction
TH-PHEN	Theory- Phen.

APPENDIX C

Trustworthiness Table

<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Examples of Activities</b>	<b>Stage of Implementation</b>
Prolonged Time in Field	<p>I was in the field (school district) during November 2013 and April 2014 to conduct interviews.</p> <p>I communicated face-to-face with participants.</p> <p>I used electronic communication, telephone calls, and the district website to acquire information.</p>	<p>Data Collection</p> <p>Data Analysis</p>
Detailed Descriptions	<p>I developed a detailed description of the research site.</p> <p>I created portraits of participants.</p>	<p>Data Collection</p> <p>Data Analysis</p>
Triangulation	I used interviews, field notes, and documents to crosscheck and validate data collection and data analysis.	<p>Data Collection</p> <p>Data Analysis</p>
Member Checks	I conducted post-interviews with participants to co-construct themes.	<p>Data Analysis</p> <p>Data Interpretation</p>
Discrepant Information	I reviewed discrepant information that might counter themes.	<p>Data Analysis</p> <p>Data Interpretation</p>
Reflexivity	I used self-reflection to reveal personal biases that potentially might challenge the study findings.	<p>Findings</p> <p>Conclusions</p>

APPENDIX D

Letter to Superintendent

October 15, 2012  
39 S. University PL, APT. 8  
Stillwater, OK 74075

Dr. \_\_\_\_\_, Superintendent  
\_\_\_\_\_ Public Schools  
3333 S. Lewis Street  
OK 77777

Dear Dr. \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a graduate student at OSU, preparing to initiate research that will satisfy the requirement for my dissertation. My one year experience at Stillwater High School as a school principal intern, during School Year 2009-2010 was most rewarding and it provided me with an opportunity to learn leadership skills first-hand from a cadre of professionals.

My research interest is in how special education students are disciplined. I earlier consulted with your Director of Special Education, Dr. \_\_\_\_\_ with whom I discussed my proposal. Since the discipline of special education students has aroused the interest of the US Congress, she considers my proposed study worthy.

Specifically, I am requesting assess to special education teachers, school principals and others who provide educational services to students enrolled in grades 8 and 9. My goal is to interview four special education teachers, the school principal, two assistant principals and other key school personnel to ascertain their perceptions of how special education students are disciplined. I plan to interview each participant individually for approximately 45 minutes. Additionally, shorter follow-up interviews of 30 minutes per person are planned. I will not use the participant's names or identify the school district or its location in my final report. Most importantly, I will adhere to the highest standard of ethical principles throughout the research process.

Thank you for this consideration. I can be reached by e-mail at [charlesbd07@yahoo.com](mailto:charlesbd07@yahoo.com) or by telephone at 405-744-3701 or by cell phone at 919-816-5525.

Cordially,

Charles B. Davis



## APPENDIX E

### Participant Request

Dear Potential Participant,

I am a graduate student at OSU proposing to conduct research in your school. My research interest is in how special education students are disciplined. I will use a case study analysis to gain an understanding of middle school principal and special education teacher perceptions of disabled students, their perceptions of what constitutes disruptive behavior, and how their perceptions may affect disabled student suspensions. It is contended that you have gained valuable experience in disciplining special education students, therefore request that you participate in one 45 minute individual interview and one 30 minute follow-up interview to ascertain your perceptions as they relate to special education student discipline. Participation in this study is voluntarily and you can elect to drop-out of this study at any time without penalty. Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of your school will be protected throughout the study. Additionally, I will adhere to the highest standard of ethical principles during this study. If you have questions, please feel free to contact me via e-mail at [charlesby07@yahoo.com](mailto:charlesby07@yahoo.com) or by telephone at 405-744-3701.

Thank you for this consideration.

Cordially,

Charles B. Davis

APPENDIX F

ADULT CONSENT FORM

OKLAHOMA STATE UNIVERSITY

**PROJECT TITLE:** SCHOOL PERSONNEL PERCEPTIONS OF DISABLED STUDENTS: A STUDY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT DISCIPLINE

**INVESTIGATOR:** Charles B. Davis, an Oklahoma State University Student will be the investigator

**PURPOSE:** The purpose of the proposed case study is to gain an understanding of middle school principal and special education teacher perceptions of disabled students, their perceptions of what constitutes disruptive behavior, and how their perceptions may affect disabled student discipline.

**PROCEDURES:** The investigator will individually interview special education teachers, the school principal, assistant principals, and other key school personnel. An interview of approximately 45 minutes and a follow-up interview of 30 minutes will be administered to each participant in order to assess their perceptions of disabled student discipline.

**RISKS OF PARTICIPATION:** There are no known risks associated with this project which are greater than those ordinarily encountered in daily life.

**BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATION:** The proposed research may provide school officials with new data that provides an understanding of how discipline policy is applied to disabled students. Additionally, the proposed research may help school personnel to identify ways to navigate discipline policy. Attention participants and school officials, the following statement is applicable: "If you are interested, we will send you a copy of the results of the study when it is finished."

**CONFIDENTIALITY:** The records of this study will be kept private. Any written results will discuss group findings and will not include information that will identify you. Research records will be stored securely and only researchers and individuals responsible for research oversight will have access to the records. It is possible that the consent process and data collection will be observed by research oversight staff responsible for safeguarding the rights and wellbeing of people who participate in research.

**COMPENSATION:** No compensation will be offered to participants.

**CONTACTS:** You may contact my advisor, Dr. Bernita Krumm, Ph.D., who is located in 310 Willard Hall, Department of Education, Oklahoma State University, by telephone 405-744-9445 or by email: [bernita.krumm@okstate.edu](mailto:bernita.krumm@okstate.edu). You may also contact the investigator, Charles Davis via telephone: 405-744-3701 or by email: [charlesbd07@yahoo.com](mailto:charlesbd07@yahoo.com), should you desire to discuss your participation in the study and/or request information about the results of the study. If you have questions about your rights as a research volunteer, you may contact Dr. Shelia Kennison, IRB Chair, 219 Cordell North, Stillwater, OK or [irb@okstate.edu](mailto:irb@okstate.edu)

**PARTICIPANT RIGHT:** I understand that my participation is voluntary, that there is no penalty for refusal to participate, and that I am free to withdraw my consent and participation in this project at any time, without penalty.

**Consent Documentation:** I have been fully informed about the procedures listed here. I am aware of what I will be asked to do and of the benefits of my participation. I also understand the following statements:

I affirm that I am 18 years of age or older

I have read and fully understand this consent form. I sign it freely and voluntarily. A copy of this form will be given to me. I hereby give permission for my participation in this study.

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Signature of Participant Date

I certify that I have personally explained this document before requesting that the participant sign it.

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Signature of Researcher Date

APPENDIX G  
Interview Guiding Questions

(I) Ice Breaker Questions:

1. Tell me a little about your responsibilities at this school?
2. How many students do you teach/supervise?
3. How long have you taught/supervised disabled students?
4. Tell me about your beliefs as they relate to classroom behavior?

(II) Interview Guiding Questions:

1. What do you consider as disruptive behavior?
2. What disruptive behaviors do you consider as serious infractions?
3. What disruptive behaviors do you consider as minor infractions?
4. What sanctions do you implement to offset disruptive behavior?
5. How do you view the sanctions that you use with disabled students and the sanctions you use with other students?
  
6. What considerations do you give to a disabled student's academic ability when considering discipline?
7. How does a disabled student's chronological age fit into your discipline decision making?
8. What attention do you give to a disabled student's gender when considering discipline?
9. What role does your teacher-pupil interest in a disabled have in disciplining that student?
10. How do you view a disabled student's socio-economic status when considering discipline?
11. How do you consider a disabled student's ethnicity when discipline issues arise?
12. How do you view a disabled student's disability when considering discipline?
  
13. What primary guidance do you follow in disciplining disabled students?
14. What supporting guidance do you follow in disciplining disabled students?
15. What resources are available to assist you in disciplining disabled students?
16. How do you view written guidance directed to disciplining disabled students?
  
17. How do you acquire knowledge reference disabled student discipline policy?
18. How would you discipline disabled students if you were unaware of established policy?
19. What role does your professional/lived experience have in disciplining disabled students?
20. How do you view your ability to take the place of the disabled student when discipline concerns arise?
21. How do you interpret written guidance outlined for disciplining disabled students?

Is there anything else that you might tell me about disabled student discipline?

## Juxtaposition of Research Questions to Guiding Questions

**Research Question 1:** What constitutes disruptive behavior of disabled students?

- **Guiding Questions:**

1. What do you consider as disruptive behavior?
2. What disruptive behaviors do you consider as serious infractions?
3. What disruptive behaviors do you consider as minor infractions?
4. What sanctions do you implement to offset disruptive behavior?
5. How do you view the sanctions that you use with disabled students and the sanctions that you use with other students?

**Research Question 2:** What factors are considered in the process of disciplining disabled students?

- **Guiding Questions:**

1. What considerations do you give to a disabled student's academic ability when considering discipline?
2. How does a disabled student's chronological age fit into your discipline decision making?
3. What attention do you give to a disabled student's gender when considering discipline?
4. What role does your teacher-pupil interest in a disabled have in disciplining that student?
5. How do you view a disabled student's socio-economic status when considering discipline?
6. How do you consider a disabled student's ethnicity when discipline issues arise?
7. How do you view a disabled student's disability when considering discipline?

**Research Question 3:** How do teachers, school administrators, and key school personnel navigate the decision making process of disciplining disabled students?

- **Guiding Questions:**

1. What primary guidance do you follow in disciplining disabled students?
2. What supporting guidance do you follow in disciplining disabled students?
3. What resources are available to assist you in disciplining disabled students?
4. How do you view written guidance directed to disciplining disabled students?

**Research Question 4:** What theory or theories helps teachers, school administrators, and key school personnel to understand the process of disciplining disabled students?

- **Guiding Questions:**

1. How do you acquire knowledge reference disabled student discipline policy?
2. How would you discipline disabled students if you were unaware of established policy?
3. What role does your professional/lived experience have in disciplining disabled students?
4. How do you view your ability to take the place of the disabled student when discipline concerns arise?
5. How do you interpret written guidance outlined for disciplining disabled students?

APPENDIX H

Data Collection Table

Research Questions	What I want to Know	Method
What constitutes disruptive behavior as it relates to students with disabilities?	Participant perceptions of serious infractions, minor infractions, and other maladaptive behaviors displayed by students with disabilities	Interviews Field Notes Documents
What factors are considered in the process of disciplining students with disabilities?	Participant perceptions of conditions and circumstances that impact on disciplining students with disabilities to include student's disability, development level, ability to understand language, gender, ethnicity, social economic status, or other factors	Interviews Field Notes Documents
How do teachers, school administrators, and key school personnel navigate the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities?	Participant perceptions of primary and other guidance to be followed in disciplining students with disabilities	Interviews Field Notes Documents
What theory or theories help teachers, school administrators and key school personnel to understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities?	Participant perceptions of how interaction with others, personal self-introspection, knowledge construction, and interpretation of written guidance might be beneficial in disciplining students with disabilities	Interviews Field Notes

## APPENDIX I

### Coding Scheme Development Chart

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Coding Version	Comments
Version 1 (September 2014)	I used predetermined codes in accordance with Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994), Stake (1995) and Creswell (2009). These codes were based upon the research questions and the conceptual framework and subsequently included 35 alphabetized codes.
Version 2 (November 2014)	I used codes that emerged from the research. I employed pattern codes in accordance with Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994). This scheme allowed 53 alphabetized codes to emerge.
Version 3 (December 2014)	This coding scheme was based on Miles and Huberman (1984, 1994) and included 68 alphabetized and color coded codes that emerged after a reassessment of the data.

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## APPENDIX J

### Conceptual Framework

Numerical Category	Analytic Category
Category 1	Disruptive behaviors associated with students with disabilities as delineated by participants
Category 2	Factors and circumstances considered by participants before implementing discipline
Category 3	Participant sources for deciding upon a course of action to take in disciplining students with disabilities
Category 4	Theory or theories that participants connect with that may have the potential to assist them in disciplining students with disabilities



## APPENDIX K

### Themes Linked to Problem Solving Model

Research Questions	Participant Words	Themes	GICC Problem Solving Steps
What constitutes disruptive behavior as it relates to students with disabilities?	"He bites himself" "Head Banging" "Fighting" "Weapons in school" "Drug use" "Bullying" "Cuss words" "Code violation"	Harm to self or others	Identify the problem
What factors are considered in the process of disciplining students with disabilities?	"Disability causes him to have outburst" "Disability is governing action"	The Disability	Analyze the problem
How do school personnel navigate the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities?	"Follow the rules" "Follow the law" "Follow policy" "Consult parents"	The rules	Identify Solutions to problem
What theory or theories help school personnel understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities?	"Walk in his shoes" "In my experience"	Their side/their shoes  My/personal experience	Identify [other] multiple solutions  Identify solution to problem  Choose Best Solution Implement

APPENDIX L

Theme Interpretation

Themes	Literature Review	Theory	My Experience	Participant Experience
Harm to Self/others	Self-Injurious behavior and students with disabilities:  Matson et. al (2012) Lance et. al. (2014) Tureck et. al (2013)	Chaos Theory Behavior	Counseled students using peyote	Student who bites himself
		Modification Theory	Identified students with emotional problems using psychological examination	Head banging student
The Disability	Students with disabilities:  Molen et. al. (2014) Neece et. al (2011)	Labeling Theory	Labeled and categorized students using psychological examinations	Violent students  Students who experience outburst
The rules	35th Annual Report to Congress (2013) on implementation of IDEA	Theory of Bureaucracy	Member APA (School Psychologist Division) Commissioned USAF Officer	Special Staff  On-Site Compliance Facilitator
		Modern Structural Organization Theory		
Their side/their shoes	Students perceived with flaws in internalizing symbols and negotiating social interaction pre-diagnosed as ADHD:  Rafalovich (2005)	Symbolic Interaction Theory	Counseled disabled students	Put self in their shoes
			Interacted with IEP Committee	
My/personal experiences	Sexually harassed girls experienced behavioral and academic problems in high school  Abuya et. al. (2012)	Phenomenology Theory		

APPENDIX M

Summary of Major Findings

Participant	DB-SHSO	F-CDIS	N-RULE	TH-SYMI	TH-PHEN
Kim	X	X	X	X	X
Sally	X	X	X	X	X
Mel	X	X	X	X	X
Christian	X	X	X	X	X
John	X	X	X	X	X
Robert	X	X	X		X
Shannon	X	X	X	X	X
Lisa	X	X	X	X	X
Gene	X	X	X	X	X
Lynn	X	X	X	X	X
Elle	X	X	X	X	
Totals	11	11	11	10	10

Codes:

DB-SHSO Disruptive Behavior- Student Causing harm to self or others

F-CDIS Factor-Consider Disability before implementing discipline

N-RULE Navigate-Follow the rules

TH-SYMI Theory-Symbolic Interaction

TH-PHEN Theory- Phen.

## Juxtaposition of Findings, Interpretation, and Conclusions

Research Question	Major Finding	Interpretation of Findings	Conclusions
What constitutes disruptive behavior as relates to students with disabilities?	Students with disabilities potentially have the capacity to harm themselves or others	Children diagnosed with a singular disability may be adversely affected by multiple disabilities and thus may experience behavioral issues which compounds the problem of disciplining them	Students with disabilities who harm themselves or others is a major concern for participants
What factors are considered in the process of disciplining students with disabilities?	Participants considered the disability before implementing discipline	Students with disabilities may experience difficulty in processing and understanding the consequences of their behavior	School personnel placed value upon considering the student's disability before discipline
How do school personnel navigate the decision making process of disciplining students with disabilities?	The participants followed the rules governing student with disabilities discipline	PL-108-446 (2004), the overarching disability law is monitored yearly by Congress to ensure school district compliance with propositions related to students with disabilities discipline	School personnel placed worth in following the rules
What theory or theories might help school personnel to understand the process of disciplining students with disabilities?	(a) The participants noted a willingness to see things from student's perspective  (b) The participants noted a willingness to use personal experiences	(a) observe and then take the role of the other to become sensitized to their plight  (b) Becoming aware of one's experiences allows understanding of these experiences	(a) Participants saw merit in Symbolic Interaction Theory  (b) Participants saw merit in Phenomenology Theory

VITA

Charles Bernard Davis

Candidate for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Thesis: SCHOOL PERSONNEL PERCEPTIONS OF DISABLED STUDENTS: A STUDY OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENT DISCIPLINE

Major Field: School Administration

Biographical:

Education:

Completed the requirements for the Doctor of Education in School Administration at Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma in July, 2015.

Completed the requirements for the Master of Arts in Educational Counseling at Duke University, Durham, NC in 1977.

Completed the requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in History and Political Science at West Virginia State University, Institute, WV in 1961.

Experience:

Rendered educational services to US Air Force Personnel, as Director of Education. Managed academic, vocational, and professional development programs.

Provided psychological assessment services to 27 elementary, 8 middle, and 2 high schools. Assessed IQ, academic skills, and behavioral difficulties and served as Chairperson for IEP, i.e. placement of students in special education programs.

Professional Memberships:

Licensed School Administrator and Certified School Psychologist (Virginia, until 2018)  
Certified School Psychologist (Arizona, till 2021)  
Member, Arizona Association of School Psychologist  
Member, Virginia Psychological Association (VPA)  
Member, Virginia Academy of School Psychologist (VASP)