Families of students with exceptionalities: A phenomenological study of the lived experiences of families and public school discipline

by

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B.A., Arkansas Tech University, 2005
M.A., Arkansas Tech University, 2006

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Curriculum & Instruction
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2025

Abstract

In this study, I explored the lived experiences of eleven Kansas families navigating special education systems and disciplinary practices in public schools. I used a hermeneutic framework to interpret the meanings families ascribe to their advocacy, challenges, and resilience. Participants were limited to families of students with documented disabilities or exceptionalities who were enrolled in and received discipline from a Kansas public middle or high school. I collected data through semi-structured interviews in person and over Zoom and kept a researcher's journal of my thoughts and responses during the entire research process. I cleaned the transcripts of the interviews and analyzed them using grounded theory approaches informed by Charmaz's (2025) methodological guidance. I combed the transcripts twice to find recurring ideas, which I grouped into seven themes. Then, I read through the transcripts two more times to search for quotes that highlighted those themes and to check for outliers or discrepancies in my findings.

Those findings revealed seven central themes: accessing services or supports, discipline and its effects on student wellbeing, family and school staff relationships, parental advocacy and agency, inequity and bias, familial strain, and informal growth and supports. All participant families described accessing services as a prolonged and continuous process that could be emotionally and financially exhausting. Inequity and systemic bias appeared in surprising ways, such as school staff using overt racial or ableist remarks or with academic performance used to deny formal services or accommodations and to perpetuate misinformation about child development. School staff used informal and formal discipline to promote safety and to discourage undesired behaviors. However, when discipline was exclusionary, it was stigmatizing and reinforced negative student self-perception, often increasing the behaviors the school

attempted to decrease. Families reported behaviors being interpreted negatively, rather than being seen as communication or evidence of a skill deficit or underlying need. Teacher relationships emerged as pivotal: supportive educators were transformative influences that anchored the students in schooling, while punitive, traumatizing, or dismissive educators increased student disengagement, distrust of school staff, social isolation, and stress. Parental advocacy was a lifeline for student success, but also a burden, which left parents feeling misunderstood or marginalized. For some families, inequity and bias shaped daily school interactions, with race, disability, previous interactions with the district, academic standing, and narrow eligibility criteria influencing access to services and disciplinary outcomes. These systemic challenges encroached on the home and impacted family stress and dynamics, yet families also highlighted resilience and growth for their students through informal supports and affirming spaces, especially those within extracurricular activities.

This study contributes to scholarship on family experiences in special education and public-school discipline through parent and student voices. The findings underscore the impact of school staff responses to and perceptions of students and the deleterious effects on student wellbeing when these are negative or punitive. While the participants mostly communicated neutral or negative experiences, the study findings also emphasize the transformative potential of supportive relationships. Implications for changes in practice include the need for consistent, individualized supports, trauma-informed and restorative disciplinary approaches, supported family-school partnerships, and an overall deeper understanding of students', and their families', experiences. In the conclusion, I recommend changes in school policy that highlight the importance of upholding the mandates of IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004), addressing the effects of exclusionary discipline, increasing access to information and

supports, and strengthening the school-family-student relationship, especially for those students in need of support, such as those for whom the school issues a disciplinary action and those with disabilities or exceptionalities. Ultimately, this study calls for educational systems to move beyond deficit-based perceptions and toward practices that affirm the strengths and individuality of all students and their families.

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Major Professor
Dr. Suzanne Porath

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Table of Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the many educators who helped me reach this goal.

First, I am deeply grateful to my dissertation committee. To my chair, Dr. Suzanne Porath: thank you for your remarkable ability to listen, reframe, and get to the heart of both issues and intentions. I am indebted to your relaxed personality, steady encouragement, and insightful guidance. I am proud to work and research in a field that includes leaders like you. To Dr. Lawson, thank you for listening to my early ideas and helping me shape them into a realistic proposal. To Dr. Kraemer-Holland, thank you for opening new ways of thinking and being willing to support me through my exceptionality. To Dr. Teagarden, thank you for your dedication to special education – I hope to follow in your footsteps.

I also want to thank the educators in my family and circle of friends. To the Edmonsons, your consistent reminders of your belief in my ability to serve as a maven and advocate sustained me. A special thank-you to the four professors, impressive women in their fields, who supported my study: Dr. Kristen Humphrey, Dr. Ashley Shaw, Christel Benson, and Goldie Preloger. I am especially grateful to Dr. Kent Runyan. Your genuine care for your students, and your willingness to support their dreams (even when supporting mine meant recommending me for another university's program) changed my life. Because of you, I achieved a childhood dream I was once too scared to voice. It is my honor to work with you, sir.

Most of all, I thank the K–12 teachers who saw me as a student in need of care and understanding and chose to invest in me; you helped shape my identity, leaned into my strengths, and inspired me to care enough about myself to keep going and growing.

Finally, my deepest gratitude goes to my husband, who supported me and our children while I worked toward this personal goal; thank you.

Dedication

I dedicate this research to my sons and my students, from whom I have the pleasure of learning.

Chapter 1 - Introduction

Abstract

This study gives voice to an underrepresented group: students with exceptionalities and their families. Because discipline affects the family unit as well as the child, families are essential partners in understanding and addressing the issue (Lareau, 2022). The following chapters explore the current literature on disciplinary practices, providing context for the significance of this study which focused on the lived experiences of students with exceptionalities and their families as they interact with Kansas public schools.

Introduction to Research

In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, I explored the lived experiences of families of students with exceptionalities (SWE) in Kansas public schools. I sought to understand what school discipline meant to both students and their guardians. Similar to the Kansas State Department of Education, I defined families and parents broadly to include all legal guardians (Special Education for Exceptional Children Act, K.S.A. § 72-3404), since many primary caregivers are not biological parents and many of the participants had blended families through adoption or marriage, and any children residing in the home at the time of the interview.

Problem Statement

Students with exceptionalities remain disproportionately disciplined, despite federal laws intended to protect them. Exclusionary discipline practices carry lifelong consequences, yet stakeholders know little about how families experience these events. Without deeper understanding, schools cannot make informed policy decisions. Understanding the perspectives of families and students can guide discipline code development, school staff training, and

resource allocation toward prevention rather than exclusion. Additionally, the absence of local evidence in Kansas further underscores the need for deeper, context-specific insight.

Purpose Statement

I sought to describe how school behavior systems and misconceptions about students with disabilities were experienced by families and to interpret the meanings they attached to those experiences. My goal was to inform policy and practice by highlighting the centrality of school-family relationships. Although racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline is well documented, research specific to students with documented disabilities and exceptionalities, especially in Kansas, is limited; my most recent search identified Cooley (1995) and Mellard and Seybert (1996) as the last state-focused studies. I aimed to address this gap.

I approached this work as hermeneutic phenomenology. Conceptually, I treated lived experience as meaningful, contextual, and temporal rather than as data to be bracketed and reduced to a single essence (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2016). I assumed that understanding emerges through interpretation in dialogue between participant and researcher, part and whole, past and present. Practically, that meant I read each interview as a text situated within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, and I worked the hermeneutic circle by moving repeatedly between specific episodes and each family's broader narrative, while documenting when the participants' perception of their experiences and the effects, or meanings, shifted across settings and over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I applied this stance in data collection and analysis. I conducted semi-structured, conversational interviews with caregivers and, when possible, with adolescents, inviting them to make sense of discipline events rather than only list them. I transcribed interviews verbatim to preserve voice and language, and I kept a reflexive journal to record decisions, assumptions, and

moments when the interview encounters shaped recall or interpretation (Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2020). Analytically, I began with holistic readings, then identified meaning units and wrote interpretive memos; I clustered these into themes and reread the transcripts to refine claims. I then mapped themes to ecological levels to show how meanings were formed in classrooms and homes (micro/meso), constrained by policies and placements (exo/macro), and reshaped by time and memory (chrono). Throughout, I kept participants' words prominent and used portraitures to provide thick descriptions for transferability. In this way, phenomenology in my study was both a conceptual frame for meaning-making and a method of inquiry that relied on dialogic interviewing, reflexivity, part-whole interpretation, and ecological situating of experience.

Research Questions

1. How do Kansas public school students with documented exceptionalities and their families experience exclusionary discipline practices?
2. What perceived effects, if any, do Kansas public school exclusionary discipline practices have on the lived experience of students with documented exceptionalities?

Research Design

I employed a phenomenological design defined by Giorgi (1985) and outlined by Peoples (2020) to capture the lived experiences and meanings students with exceptionalities and their families attached to Kansas public school discipline. I chose hermeneutic, interpretive phenomenology because my questions asked how families and their children made meaning of exclusionary discipline within contexts and across time. The act of meaning making, instead of simply describing the phenomenon, makes this study interpretive rather than descriptive (Moustakas, 1994). Moreover, an interpretive stance let me treat memory and temporality as part

of meaning, read parts and whole in relation to those meanings, which I grouped into themes, and keep my positionality upfront and visible, especially since my positionality and experience mirrored some attributes of the participants and their narratives, rather than bracketed, so understanding was co-constructed with participants as outlined in Peoples (2020). Through semi-structured interviews, I documented the narratives of students and their families and analyzed commonalities and divergences in their experiences. I highlighted convergent elements to examine patterns across participant families by employing a grounded analysis design following the reflective structural analysis outlined by Moustakas (1994) and note-taking and thematic grouping outlined by Charmaz (2025).

Additionally, I looked at the data through an ecological systems framework as outlined by Bronfenbrenner (1981) to explore the interdependence of school and home environments. My decision to analyze discipline experiences through ecological systems was also informed by work conceptualizing school climate as inherently systemic. Rudasill et al. (2018) described climate as emerging from patterns of interactions across individual, classroom, school, and community levels. Treating discipline episodes as climate events rather than isolated misbehaviors allowed me to read family narratives as commentaries on the broader systems in which they were embedded, consistent with both Bronfenbrenner's model and a systems view of school climate.

Significance of Study

Exclusionary discipline practices (EDP) are any formal or informal exclusion of a student from a group or activity by school staff as an act of discipline. EDP may be detentions of varying lengths, removal of the student from the classroom or from peers, in-school (ISS) or out-of-school suspension (OSS), office discipline referrals (ODR), and expulsions and are usually

assigned with the intent of managing student behavior. For four decades researchers have examined classroom management (Marzano et al., 2003), yet behavior management remains one of the most complex challenges teachers face (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Martinez et al., 2016; Owens et al., 2018). When students exhibit unconventional or maladaptive behaviors, schools often assign exclusionary discipline. EDP have deleterious effects for students, particularly for vulnerable populations (Amemiya et al., 2020; Donovan et al., 1991; Cartledge et al., 2001; Mellard & Seybert, 1996; Green et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2002; Wilson et al., 2020; Djabrayan Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022, Zhang et al., 2004). Students with exceptionalities, including those with disabilities and giftedness, experience discipline at disproportionately high rates (Grasley-Boy et al., 2019).

SWE are more likely to be disciplined due to underdeveloped social skills, challenges recognizing social cues, and being less skilled at avoiding detection, but these behaviors are most often minor infractions that are not aggressive or violent in nature (Zhang et al., 2004; Leone et al., 2000; Mellard & Seybert, 1996). Due to the likelihood of their being maladjusted to public school environments, they are less able to meet expected behavior demands, which places them at greater risk of social exclusion in addition to discipline-related exclusion (Jacobsen, 2020; Leone et al, 2000; Zhang et al., 2004). Students with disabilities, despite inclusion efforts, are often excluded by their classroom teacher and peers (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Caslin, 2021). Research shows that students with disabilities recognize and are deeply affected by social isolation (Zhang et al., 2004).

While special education status may come with negative effects, exclusionary discipline certainly does as it exacerbates negative school experiences for SWE. Risk factors of experiencing EDPs for all students are poor academic performance, increased maladaptive

behaviors, dropout, failing grades, lower grade point averages, delinquency, and recidivism (Amemiya et al., 2020; Cartledge et al, 2001; Skiba, 2002; Zhang et al, 2004). Even more alarming is the positive relationship between EDPs and interaction with the juvenile justice system (Morgan et al., 2019; Fisher & Hennessy, 2016; Wald & Losen, 2015). Despite some protections under federal legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973), students with exceptionalities remain disproportionately disciplined, particularly under zero-tolerance policies that persist despite researcher suggestions to adopt restorative approaches (Skiba et al., 2006). Green et al. (2018) assert that disproportionality is a moral and ethical concern that has been highlighted and designated a top priority several times by the United States Department of Education, yet the problem persists.

All students deserve access to education in a safe environment conducive to learning. Classroom management is one of the most widely cited reasons for teacher stress and burnout (Amitai & Van Houtte, 2022; Wettstein et al., 2023). Teachers feel inadequate and ill-prepared when managing difficult behaviors (Hamilton & DeThorne, 2021; Rothi et al., 2008). In addition, maladaptive behaviors or lagging behavioral development can leave all individuals in the classroom with increased stress, not conducive to a safe learning environment (Herman et al., 2020). Moreover, school staff responses to behaviors outside of the range they deem appropriate can, when punitive, exacerbate negative effects for all involved. Exclusionary discipline practices not only increase everyone's stress, but damage trust between school staff and students and harm student academic success (Herman et al., 2020; Wettstein et al., 2023). For students with exceptionalities, who already suffer from isolation, these harms are compounded (Skiba et al., 2014; Zhang et al., 2004).

By centering families' voices, this study broadens existing research and addresses a state-level gap in Kansas. It may inform educators, policymakers, and stakeholders seeking alternatives to punitive approaches and contribute to larger conversations about equity in public schools.

List of Key Terms

The following is a list of terms, abbreviations, and acronyms used in this study. While some words are commonly used, specific definitions have been provided for clarity.

Behavior, Conventional and Unconventional: conventional behaviors are actions that are socially acceptable, while unconventional behaviors are any that stray from mainstream standards (Donovan et al., 1991).

Detention: in public schools, detentions are issued by school staff and are a pre-set time served by a student for a perceived behavioral infraction, usually outside of school hours and away from a student's chosen activities (Spaulding et al., 2010).

Discipline: the consequences a school imposes on a child who violates a school's code of student conduct or rules as determined by school personnel (Kansas School Safety and Security Act, K.S.A. § 72-6115).

Exclusionary Discipline Practices (EDP): Any formal or informal exclusion of a student from a group or activity by a school staff member as an act of discipline. Examples are being removed from peers to an isolated seat or the hallway, detentions of varying lengths and times of day, focus rooms, office referrals, in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsions (Nese et al., 2020).

Expulsion: An expulsion is a forcible and formal removal of enrollment of a student from a school. Kansas statutes set limits on expulsions for students as a term not exceeding 186 school

days. These students are also potentially barred from attending other schools: "A pupil who has been suspended or expelled from school by any school district may be refused admission to school in any other school district, regardless of residency, until such time as the period of suspension or expulsion has expired" (Kansas School Safety and Security Act, K.S.A. § 72-6115). Any school board can suspend or expel and certify a staff member with the authority to suspend or expel students for violations of adopted codes of conduct, disruptive conduct, dangerous conduct, or general disobedience (Kansas School Safety and Security Act, K.S.A. § 72-6115).

Student Family, Families of the Student: This term refers to an adult caregiver who is legally responsible for the child's welfare and may include a foster parent, legal guardian or surrogate parent, relatives, or another individual acting in place of the parent (Special Education for Exceptional Children Act, K.S.A. § 72-3404). For this study families also included any children residing in the home at the time of the interview.

Individualized Education Program (IEP): IEPs are the foundation of special education services and legal contracts between the district, the IEP team, the guardian, and the student on how students with exceptionalities will receive FAPE (Special Education for Exceptional Children Act, K.S.A. § 72-3429).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA): A federal law that guarantees eligible children with disabilities a free, appropriate, public education (FAPE). Free means that the families do not incur cost for supports or services or transportation in order to receive those services. Appropriate means that services, supports, and curriculum are individualized to meet the child's needs so they can make meaningful progress in schooling (Heward, 2013; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Infraction: for school staff, an infraction is any behavior that could potentially result in disciplinary action, including the involvement of law enforcement (Amemiya et al., 2020).

In-School Suspension (ISS): a temporary exclusion from the primary learning environment, the assigned classroom, to an alternate setting within the school building.

Office Disciplinary Referral (ODR): a formal referral of a student to the administrators' office by a classroom teacher or substitute teacher. Once filed, the administrator will send for the student to discuss the next steps and possibly issue discipline if the student is not removed from the classroom immediately after the perceived infraction.

Out-of-School Suspension (OSS): a temporary exclusion of the student from the school and school activities and for a short term for non-violent acts for no more than 10 school days, or for aggressive or violent acts no more than 90 days (Kansas School Safety and Security Act, K.S.A. § 72-6115).

Student Improvement Team (SIT): part of the general education intervention process where a team of teachers and counselors, along with the student and legal guardian, build an improvement plan for behavior or skill with the intention to alleviate developmental, social, or learning gaps or to identify for special education or related services (Heward, 2013).

Students with Exceptionalities (SWE): this is an umbrella term for students whose learning or development differs enough from age-level norms that they qualify for specialized support or individualized services in order to access the general education curriculum and includes students with disabilities and those with high ability, or giftedness (Heward, 2013).

Students with Disabilities (SWD): students who meet the Individuals With Disability Education Act (IDEA, 2004) definition by qualifying for at least one of the fourteen disability categories listed therein (Heward, 2013).

Twice-Exceptional students: this term refers to students enrolled in K-12 public education who meet the eligibility criteria for a disability under IDEA (2004) and the criteria for giftedness that is suggested in IDEA and outlined in KSDE special education procedures (Klingner, 2022).

Zero-tolerance policies: are disciplinary policies determined beforehand and usually published in student handbooks that are rigid, without interpretation from administrators based on the nuance of the situation when issuing formal discipline (Skiba et al., 2006).

Summary

Exclusionary discipline is common and is disproportionately issued, at rates of more than twice as likely, to students with exceptionalities and disabilities (Skiba et al., 2014). Federal law promises access to free and appropriate public education, yet current practices undermine that right (Zhang et al., 2004). This study illuminates the lived experiences of families and students in Kansas, with the goal of informing practice and reform.

Chapter 2 - Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews the history and current state of discipline in American public schools, with particular attention to an underrepresented group, students with exceptionalities (SWE) and their families, to provide context for the significance of this study that focuses on their lived experiences. The family unit experiences discipline together, and students' families play a significant role in the student's function within the school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Deslandes & Bertrand, 2005; Lareau, 2017; Woods-Jaeger et al., 2018). This chapter will explore current exclusionary discipline practices (EDP) and their impact on families but will first begin with the historical roots of exclusionary practices, then track reform movements, and finally discuss the theoretical frameworks guiding this study.

Historical Background

19th Century Background

Discipline and Authoritarian Foundations

Discipline is an integral part of schooling and to understand current disciplinary practices the ideologies that inform our practices over time must be examined. In the 18th century, the first American schools were guided by Protestant values that emphasized Protestant morality and obedience as much as, or more so, than academic learning (Kaestle, 1978; Tyack, 2007). School teachers and headmasters used strict discipline that usually involved corporal punishment to maintain authority over their students. Teachers ruled "by virtue of their position," and taught lessons centered on morality, "but the moral education of ordinary children in school was not a mission of the state and was not a matter of public debate" (Kaestle, 1978, p. 3). The pervasive thought was that schools needed to assert authority to shape children into model citizens. Even

after conversations started about using "moral suasion" instead of "the rod," teachers and school committees (early school boards of education) would fight against the outcry of parents. Punishment was necessary, they said, to produce children into "industrious, frugal, temperate, *subordinate* [emphasis added], trustworthy, brave, clean, and reverent adults" (Kaestle, 1978, p. 3). Students who deviated from the teacher's expected norms faced swift punitive correction.

Moral education and authoritarianism continued to be a focus for schools in the 19th century, which exacerbated the competition against parents for authority over their children (Kaestle, 1978). When educational philosophers challenged these ideas, the ideas became a debate between individual morality and maintaining social order leading to government involvement in the systemization of schooling. Movements to improve schools and attendance to those schools seem positive, until viewed from modern hindsight, which reveals racist and classist views of educational movements to reach the urban poor and encourage rural to urban migration (Kaestle, 1978). These biases and deficit-based ideas continue to permeate our educational system.

Disability and Institutionalization

In the 19th century, education for children with disabilities, when provided, usually meant homeschooling, or institutionalization. Toward the end of the century, early reformers promoted separate state institutions for types of disabilities, such as schools for the blind or deaf, and increasingly, custodial asylums. When American populations expanded due to industrialization, so did the population admitted to asylums, ultimately resulting in dismal and harmful environments for children with disabilities with no legal safeguards (Nielsen, 2012). This impulse to segregate difference was carried into public education. Even as access to public schooling increased, schools continued to exclude children with disabilities. Throughout the

century these children experienced severe exclusion and isolation and the stigma from this period continues. When schools began accepting students with disabilities, they were socially isolated by classroom or building; they were not included in spaces or activities with their non-disabled peers. This practice normalized separation over inclusion, fear of the unknown over acceptance, and bias over validation. These practices also set the stage for the twentieth-century battles over access and rights.

Early 20th Century Background

Discipline and Philosophical Shifts

The early 20th century marked a shift toward progressivism, led by John Dewey, who argued for democracy, creativity, and student-led collaboration in classrooms (Dewey, 1916). In contrast to previous schools of thought, Dewey defined effective discipline as a process of guiding children toward self-realization and self-control (Dewey, 1916). While his publications did incite reform efforts, traditional discipline models stubbornly remained dominant, especially in more urban settings (Tyack, 2007). As other voices joined Dewey in his efforts, tension built between traditional punitive authoritarian approaches and progressive growth-focused approaches to school discipline. That tension continues to persist in all spaces that make decisions about educational policy throughout history to today.

Disability and Advocacy bring Awareness

In the early 20th century, parental and professional advocates started publicizing the abysmal and abusive asylum. Journalists like Nelly Bly broadened public awareness of the horrific conditions of institutional care (Nielsen, 2012). Educators like Elizabeth Farrell brought the strengths of students with disabilities to the public eye (Nielsen, 2012). Soon afterward, movements to protect children with disabilities were formed, such as The Council for

Exceptional Children, which was founded in 1922 (Heward, 2013). Through their efforts, advocates built a system of connections and language, like a disability network, that helped form communities within disability-advocate and disabled communities (Nielsen, 2012). This network assisted in pushing legislation through, so those with disabilities would have federal legal protections and supports.

20th Century, Landmark Laws and Litigation

Legal Foundations of Educational Equity

The mid-20th century brought impressive, sweeping changes through landmark laws and litigation led by advocacy groups. From the late 50s to the 90s, advocates pushed legal action that resulted in court decisions, facts, and laws that defined the rights of students with disabilities. The Civil Rights Movement found its momentum with the most famous educational case in American history, *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (347 U.S. 483, 1954). With this case ruling in 1954, the Supreme Court declared that segregated schooling was unconstitutional and that equal access to public education was a right. While this case was focused on equality in race, it paved the way for activists and parent advocates to prove that exclusion and segregation of students with disabilities (SWD) was discriminatory and unconstitutional (Nagro et al., 2023; Wright & Wright, 2014). The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 provided funding for special education programs and required schools where the services were provided to document the services. Prior to this legislation SWE were not guaranteed any protection, assistance, or appropriate accommodations in US public schools. It took two decades after *Brown v. B.O.E.* (1954), but in the early 1970s, activists and advocates won two cases to secure the rights of students with disabilities to attend public school, *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia*.

These rulings stated that exclusion from public schooling violated American citizens the right of due process and equal protection under the constitution.

In the mid-1970s, two laws were passed that ensured children with disabilities would be educated, Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act and Public Law 94-142, or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). PL 94-142 established the foundation for special education law and was the precursor to the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (IDEA, 2004), which is the fundamental law that guides special education processes today. These laws guarantee free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students who meet the two-prong eligibility requirements set under the law and provide accommodations and services in individualized education programs (IEPs). When PL 94-142 was reauthorized in 1990 as IDEA, it included transition planning, procedural safeguards, due process procedures, and limitations for discipline for students who were protected under the law. In 1988, the Supreme Court ruled in *Honig v. Doe* that SWD could not be indefinitely suspended or expelled for behaviors related to their disability, which added another layer of protection for students and families. While the Supreme Court did not directly discuss manifestation determinations under IDEA, they did affirm the "stay put" provision, which means that SWD cannot be removed from their current educational placement unless guardians request a change or school staff can prove safety concerns (KSDE, 2025). "Stay put" protects SWD from being unilaterally removed from their current educational placements (IDEA, 2004). Stated another way, schools may not remove or exclude a student due to disruptive or dangerous behavior that stems from their disability. This is an important specification because it protects the child from disciplinary actions due to bias or lack of information; the law forces schools to address the connections between disability and behavior.

Unfortunately, while federal laws (IDEA, 2004; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973) protect children from legal action and expulsion, SWE continue to experience EDP at higher rates, often due to behaviors or lagging skills that are symptoms of their exceptionalities or disabilities, and the law does nothing to protect them from social exclusion and isolation. Additionally, litigation is beneficial because it can expand protections and because it highlights the conflict between school staff and students with disabilities and their families, which will hopefully spur more advocacy and effect change.

Legal Foundations that Promote EDP

In 1977, the Supreme Court upheld the right of schools to discipline students with corporal punishment in the *Ingraham v. Wright* case; however, there was a global shift away from physical punishment and many states banned its use in public schools over the next few decades (Gershoff & Font, 2016). As attitudes shifted away from corporal punishment as a means of controlling students, exclusionary practices gained prominence. In the late 20th century, EDP accelerated by federal policies like the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, and the rise of zero-tolerance and no-excuses approaches (Bailey et al., 2019; Skiba et al., 2006; Tyack, 2007). These policies assumed that removing disruptive students would deter misbehavior and improve learning environments (Skiba et al., 2006). In practice, such policies disproportionately targeted Black students, particularly males receiving special education services, and other students of color (Bell & Craig, 2023; Cooley, 1995; Gage et al., 2021; Hirschfield, 2018; Leone et al., 2000; Mellard & Seybert, 1996; Zhang et al., 2004). These approaches reflected deficit thinking, blaming student misbehavior on individual failings rather than systemic or environmental conditions (Djabrayan Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). School staff who rely on authoritarian behaviors or practices frequently attributed misbehavior to

flaws in the student or family, which they felt justified their punitive responses, but the attribution is often unfounded (Carroll et al., 2023; Smolkowski, 2023). Additionally, research shows that deficit model thinking increases punitive decision making (Carroll et al., 2023). EDPs are reactive, used to "teach" a student how to behave, but these practices are not used as teachable moments as much as they are punitive ones (Green, Maynard, & Stegenga, 2017). As a student reported to Michail (2012), "Suspension doesn't teach you anything." While EPDs certainly teach something, they do not seem to be teaching behavioral modification as per the issuer's goal (Bell, 2020; Bell & Craig, 2023; Caslin et al., 2021; Michail, 2012).

21st Century Attempts at Reform

In recent decades, recognition of the harms of exclusionary practices and evidence against zero-tolerance practices have fueled reforms. One important reform was the reauthorization of IDEA of 2004 with significant revisions to more effectively serve and protect SWD (Wright & Wright, 2014). Additionally, IDEA (2004) mandated that guardians be included as active participants in the process of identifying the needs and needed supports of the student, which strengthens the cooperation of the teacher-parent-student team (Wright & Wright, 2014).

One of the provisions was suggestions for intervention frameworks, such as Response to Intervention (RTI), which emphasized early intervention and identification of SWD. In 2015 the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), with a goal to improve the educational outcome of all students, introduced an integration of RTI and Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) called Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS), which is a framework for aligning the process monitoring of RTI with the behavioral and school climate supports of PBIS by building infrastructure for school staff to get training on effective delivery of student supports (Howley et al., 2023; McIntosh et al., 2021).

States and districts have begun to reexamine policies and adopt alternatives, although the adoption and application have occurred unevenly (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). Alternative disciplinary practices included restorative justice, trauma-informed practices, and culturally responsive teaching, which shows a movement toward understanding and preventive approaches, rather than exclusionary or reactive ones (Hammond, 2014; Morrison & Thorsborne, 2005). As with all innovation, there are laggards to the new schools of thought and research-based disciplinary practices, such as MTSS, have experienced a decades-long lag in implementation (Djabrayan Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). However, in the past decade state departments of education began to address the issue through policy due to the increase, and overuse, of suspensions (Green et al., 2018). Researchers have also called for systematic changes that are motivated by paradigm shifts for school staff on child development and behavior (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Osher et al., 2010). The school disciplinary data shows a disparity driven at the district level, rather than the state level, which implies that changes can be made now without waiting for state-mandated policies to better serve their students (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). This point reinforces the need to examine and publish lived experiences, since students and their families navigate the distance between policy and day-to-day classroom realities.

Current Practices

Exclusionary Discipline Practices

EDP are school leaders' reactions to student behavior by excluding students from their general education classroom or school grounds. Several conflicting frameworks exist on behavior management in public schools. Some schools allow school resource officers to participate in school discipline, while others rely solely on building administration. Often, a teacher assigns a lower tier of exclusionary discipline, often detention during lunch and before or

after school hours or an office referral. When the behavior is repeated or escalated, or when the classroom teacher is exasperated or triggered, the student will most likely receive discipline from building administrators (Hamilton & DeThorne, 2021). This is usually due to the lingering expectation from America's early schools where compliance was the goal. The most extreme types of EDP issued by administrators are suspension and expulsion; and most suspensions are for minor classroom behaviors or attendance (Skiba et al., 2014). Not only do EDP contribute to student misbehavior, but they highlight inherent racial and ableist bias, as Black male students receive disproportionally higher rates of EDP and, but BIPOC students receive higher rates of EDP for the same behaviors as their White peers (Hirschfield, 2018; Michail, 2012, Zhang et al., 2004). Schools with higher percentages of BIPOC students have higher rates of EDP, which further reveals systematic bias (Martinez et al., 2016).

Some schools attempt restorative practices, but most consider ISS, which is an EDP, as a milder consequence for the student and satisfactory substitute for alternative practices (Cholewa et al., 2018). However, research shows a positive relationship between ISS and lower student achievement and increased risk of dropout similar to the effects of OSS (Cholewa et al., 2018). Administrators cite many reasons for relying on EPDs; Djabrayan Hannigan & Hannigan (2022) simplify these reasons into three categories: to save time, face, and energy, and all these reasons benefit adults at the cost of the students.

The effects of EDP are significant for all involved. Students, their families, teachers of record, and school administrators are shaped by classroom experiences and resulting disciplinary practices. Alternative disciplinary practices do require more visible time and effort for all participants: board members, upper and building administration, school staff, and students; but reactive practices cost more overall, in hidden time and resources, not including the social cost of

lower student achievement and economic cost of lower graduation rates (Djabrayan Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022; Rumberger & Losen, 2017). For discipline reform to benefit all, all stakeholders must work as a team to implement change not only in individual classrooms or buildings, but district wide. Upper administration works with the school board to write or approve policies and building administration interprets those policies to make day-to-day, on-the-ground decisions on EDP. Additionally, when EDP comes without a lack of clear or prior communication or care, families of students begin to distrust school staff, and the parent-school or parent-teacher relationships become strained (Adams & Christensen, 2000).

Alternative Disciplinary Practices

In recent decades, recognition of the harms of exclusionary discipline practices has fueled reforms. States and districts have begun to reexamine policies and adopt alternatives, although the adoption and application have occurred unevenly (Ritter & Anderson, 2018). As with all innovation, there are laggards to the new schools of thought and research-based disciplinary practices that have experienced a decades-long lag (Djabrayan Hannigan & Hannigan, 2022). However, in the past decade state departments of education began to address the issue through policy due to the increase, and overuse, of out-of-school suspensions (Green et al., 2018).

When there was a push to implement in-school suspensions as an alternative to OSS, most schools adopted the practice and added “focus” or ISS rooms. Unfortunately, ISS, though perceived as a milder consequence, still correlate with lower achievement and dropout (Cholewa et al., 2018). The school disciplinary data showing overuse of OSS also shows that the disparity in number of disciplinary acts is driven at the district level, rather than the state level, which implies that changes can be made now without waiting for state-mandated policies to better serve students and their families (Ritter & Anderson, 2018).

Discipline is an integral part of schooling. Schools' most important function is to provide safe environments that support student learning and development. Public school discipline procedures are necessary, and while discipline is highly criticized and researched, schools may have barriers to implementing alternative disciplinary practices due to a lack of funding, community support, staff, space, or skill. Schools must balance all students' right to education with the necessity of maintaining a safe environment for all. Current examples of discipline reform include, but are not limited to, restorative justice programs, trauma- and stress-informed practices, social-emotional skill building, school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS), and school staff professional development (McIntosh et al., 2021; Simonsen et al., 2020; Stegelin et al., 2020).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

Since SWE are the most vulnerable to EDP and most likely to be moved to alternative school settings, school-wide PBIS must be implemented with fidelity to provide equity, which would keep more students in traditional settings without sacrificing school safety (Grasley-Boy et al., 2019). The goal of PBIS is to improve the school environment to reduce undesired and maladaptive behaviors and improve social and academic outcomes through positive, relational pedagogy (Martinez & Wighting, 2023). Teacher-student relationships can be directly improved by providing teachers with explicit professional development on the processes of student behaviors and specific feedback on their individual interpersonal behaviors and cues (Pianta et al., 2012). Students feel connected to their school when they feel school staff care about them personally and positive social interactions between teachers and students promote student engagement (Martinez & Wighting, 2023). To promote this phenomenon, teachers must foster a caring and safe learning environment (Martinez & Wighting, 2023).

While classroom teachers do not need to wait for school-wide change to implement PBIS with their assigned students, PBIS is intended as a school-wide plan based on a researched framework. When administrators support a strategic plan for all school-based environments to be relational and safe, the classrooms will be also. School-wide PBIS plans will vary based on the needs of the population the school is serving, but at its center it is spending instructional time to explicitly teach and practice expected behaviors. Desired behaviors are supported throughout practice and reinforced periodically. The guiding force for PBIS is care for the student, which includes an understanding of the learning process and intentional relationship building led by the teacher. An example of how to implement PBIS at the elementary level may be connecting with each student for two minutes a day and at the secondary level keeping a checklist with a goal to check in with each student conversationally twice a week.

Social Emotional Learning

Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) is a key element of PBIS and restorative justice practices. PBIS and restorative practices are relational frameworks that rely on an understanding of behavior and development. Staff members must understand student behavior and development to be effective in PBIS or restorative practices, but direct teaching of SEL as a methodology has a positive impact on the student's efficacy, agency, and success (Gregory et al., 2016; Martinez & Wighting, 2023; Smith et al., 2015; Zoder-Martell et al., 2023). Not only is SEL impactful, but it is timely, as student stress seems to have increased dramatically (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL) lists competencies for SEL: self-awareness, self-management, social-awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making (CASEL, 2025).

Restorative Justice Practices

While SEL is a prevention framework that teaches students executive skills and emotional intelligence, Restorative Justice is a response-and-culture framework that repairs harm through relational connection and reintegrates all participants of the conflict into the community (i.e. school, classroom) after conflict (Morrison & Thorsborne, 2005). Both frameworks are focused on skill development through guidance, and both work well within MTSS. Most importantly, both require adult monitoring, modeling, and consistency. While they do not necessarily work in tandem and while they can both be misapplied, a successful implementation of both within the school community would benefit all (Castro-Villarreal, et al., 2016).

For example, research suggests that positive and restorative disciplinary practices increase student academic achievement (Gorski & Pothini, 2013; Nocera et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2015). When restorative justice practices are adopted, school-wide discipline broadens to include informal conferences, where most of the relational, proactive discipline occurs. Schools find they more effectively manage undesired behaviors in informal spaces, such as the hallways, because school staff are trained to act proactively and are supported in an environment that values relationships and skill development (Morrison & Thorsborne, 2005). This is an essential shift in practice as even a teacher who cares for her students and who is also effective in building rapport may issue EDP. The shift is the school staff member's reaction to undesired behavior: traditional, punitive practices move the staff member away from the students, while restorative practices move the staff member toward the student (Morrison & Thorsborne, 2005). Recently, educators have called for more widespread social-emotional learning and restorative practices due to post-pandemic stressors (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Unfortunately, even restorative practices can be misapplied without guidance and practice (Evans et al., 2020). Therefore, in

addition to whole-district support, training, monitoring, and surveying of all participants is necessary (Hough et al., 2017; Reddy, et al., 2022). Morrison & Thorsborne (2005) suggest a system of responsive regulation within the social justice model which includes relationship-centered practices that focus on individual dignity, growth, and responsive decisions guided by evidence, which builds institutional integrity, fortifying relationships at all levels of the school building.

School Staff Professional Development

Shockingly, most EDP are issued for minor classroom misbehavior and tardies or absences, which suggests that nurturing the teacher-student relationship and providing support for teachers on positive behavior management would reduce the number of issued EDP (Skiba et al., 2014). Additionally, the teacher is the most influential variable in student discipline as the classroom is an opportunity for relationship building (Nese et al., 2021). However, especially post-pandemic, an increasing number of teachers are novices, substitutes, or emergency hires who do not have licensure or adequate training on behavior management practices or who feel behavior management is a challenge (Melnick & Meister, 2008).

Due to social pressures, social identity, and unconscious bias, ascertaining the extent to which that bias is affecting rates of EDPs on different groups is difficult; however, research shows that purposeful reflection by public school authority figures is necessary due to the disproportionate rates of underrepresented student groups experiencing this phenomenon (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Since EDPs have limited positive effects and many deleterious effects on vulnerable student groups, stakeholders must deepen their understanding of this experience and develop practices that promote positive academic and social development. Carroll and colleagues (2023) found that more experienced school staff believed internal attributions were

driving student behavior, which resulted in fewer formal disciplinary actions. Therefore, less experienced school staff may lack knowledge of developmentally appropriate behavior or catalysts and habits driving the behavior, which could be solved by professional development or mentor guidance.

Marzano and colleagues (2003) warn that effective teaching cannot happen without a well-managed classroom, but this environment takes time to create and maintain. Educating teachers about unfamiliar behaviors will help them correctly interpret social interactions and create a safer space for all students (Hamilton & DeThorne, 2021). Teachers are unsure of appropriate procedures for managing perceived behavioral problems (Davidson et al., 2019; Rothi et al., 2008), which implies that teachers may not be appropriately trained on the developmental stages of adolescents and what constitutes a normal range of behavior (Carroll et al., 2023). For SWD, IDEA (2004) added language to the annual assessment that included functional goals that includes "behavior excesses and deficits, which must be addressed in a student's IEP if they interfere with a student's independence and functioning" (Yell, 2019, p. 54). Teachers must be aware of current legislation and the routinely updated language of the IEPs of the students in their classrooms.

Equally important, teachers need to be aware of social practices and socioeconomic attributes of communities in which their students reside (Rouse, 2019), but they also need to understand neurodiverse behaviors (Curran et al., 2021). Unfortunately, schools are likely to contribute to student misbehavior through ineffective responses to, bias about, misconceptions of student behavior, and mislabeling perceived aggressive student behavior (Hirschfield, 2018; Hamilton et al., 2021). Research shows that EDPs increase problem behaviors, and those behaviors are further incited by a continual exchange of disrespect between teacher and student

(Michail, 2012). As Keane et al. (2023) found that relationships between teacher and student were critical and that student-teacher conflict was "uniquely associated with students' concurrent aggression and rule breaking" (p. 5139).

Theoretical Framework

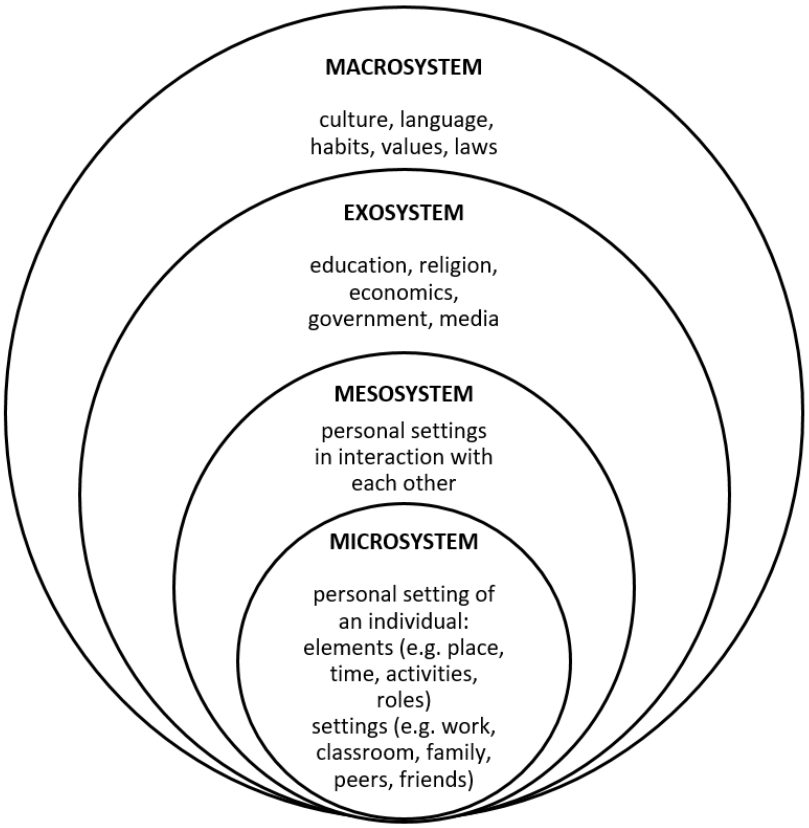
Urie Bronfenbrenner (1981) designed a theoretical framework to understand the effects of environments or settings upon an individual's, specifically a child's, development. The myriad settings with which the individual interacts are systems with interdependent and reciprocal relationships that influence the development of the individual. Some systems impact the individual indirectly and do not require interaction to affect the individual's development. This developmental ecology model includes four environmental system levels: the microsystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem. These levels have been built upon by other researchers to include additional levels, constructs, intra levels, new aspects of social networking between these systems, and novel ways of applying the theory to other disciplines (Christensen, 2016; Navarro & Tudge, 2023; Panopoulos & Drossinou-Korea, 2020; Rojas & Avitia, 2017).

For this research, inspired by the systems view of a school climate framework by Rudasill and colleagues (2018), the theoretical framework delineated the environments with which students and their families interact, which illuminated the complexity of their experiences, including behavior and perceptions of behavior within and between these systems to develop common themes. Most research on behavior management focuses on elementary students, but the contextual factors between the lower and higher grades differ greatly, including, but not limited to para-professional support, class size, behavior expectations, student workload, developmental needs, and physical changes (Carroll et al., 2023). Specifically, this framework

highlighted how different environments shape behavior and how families ascribe meaning to the experience of public-school discipline.

Moreover, it enhanced my research and interview questions that align with phenomenological research practices as this study focuses on perceptions of a specific, but complex experience for a specific group of individuals. The diagram below from Egan & Cowan (1979) illustrates the systems from the most influential and innermost sphere, the microsystem, to the outermost sphere, the macrosystem.

Figure 2.1 Bronfenbrenner's (1977) Diagram of Ecological Systems



This diagram shows how the spheres of influence, known as systems, interact.

Rudasill and colleagues (2018) argued that school climate itself can be understood as a multilevel system, shaped by interactions among individual characteristics, classroom practices, building and district norms, and broader community contexts. This systems view

of climate aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework and reinforces my decision to examine discipline experiences across micro, meso, exo, and macro levels. In this study, families' accounts of exclusionary discipline were not only about individual incidents but about the broader climate conditions that made those incidents feel predictable, inevitable, or inescapable.

From a systems perspective, exclusionary discipline practices are one manifestation of school climate. Rudasill and colleagues (2018) noted that student outcomes reflect the interplay of relational, instructional, and structural climate features over time.

System Levels

The myriad settings with which the individual interacts are systems with interdependent and reciprocal relationships that influence the development of the individual. Some systems impact the individual indirectly and do not require interaction to affect the individual's development. This developmental ecology model includes four environmental system levels: the microsystem, exosystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem.

The individual is at the center of the system network and their development as a person is the focus of the model. Their characteristics, such as their individual identity, beliefs, and talents or skills shape how they engage with settings, or environments, and relationships.

The microsystem is composed of immediate settings and relationships in which the individual participates directly, such as parent to child, teacher to student, student to peers, student with classroom routines.

The mesosystem includes interactions among two or more microsystems; for example, the relationship between two guardians or parents and the relationship between parents and the school. While microsystems require the individual's direct involvement, when those systems

interact without the individual in ways that impact the individual's development, they become part of the mesosystem.

Like the mesosystem, the exosystem does not require the individual's direct involvement. The exosystem is the larger societal system, which may include, but is not limited to, extended family, local policies and regulations, and community services and organizations, such as churches, after-school programs, or mental health clinics. Individuals may not participate in these environments, but their decisions shape the individual's experience and development.

The largest sphere of influence is the macrosystem, which includes cultural and structural forces that define norms, values, and ideologies of society. This may include federal and state laws, political climate, or pop culture.

The chronosystem is a later addition to the model and represents time as a factor, or change agent, in behavior development. A person's developmental stage shifts over time in the macrosystem (like educational policies), transitions that come with time (like matriculation through grade levels), and the cumulative experiences of an individual all affect their development.

Discipline through the Theoretical Framework

Individual

The individual level is a person's characteristics, identity, and mindset. Discipline shapes student self-concepts as repeated messages from caregivers form how the student sees, or labels their perceived inherent traits (Caslin, 2021). These labels form their developing identity and affect their self-efficacy and agency. Trauma and chronic stress can push students into continuous stress responses, which limit their ability to access the learning environment. In rigid, punitive environments, students can form oppositional identities and maladaptive behaviors that

affirm their negative self-labels, which increases the likelihood that they will experience EDP (Amemiya et al., 2020).

Microsystem

The microsystem is an individual's immediate settings. For a student, this would include any caregivers, siblings, classroom teachers, classroom peers, and any adults in a coaching or tutoring role with whom the student interacts on most days. If a student experiences exclusionary discipline, it will most likely occur during the day-to-day interactions with their classroom teacher and peers. Teacher–student relationships, classroom routines, peer norms, and family communication shape how behavior is interpreted and addressed. When students experience EDP, problem behaviors often increase. In addition, EDPs change peer relationships for the student by weakening original friend groups and creating stronger bonds with other students who experience EDPs and reinforcing a problem-behavior label (Jacobsen, 2020).

To reduce negative impacts during behavior development, parents and teachers can frame behavior as communication or growing skill and implement proactive procedures, such as predictable routines, relational warmth, clear expectations, and restorative conversations when expectations are not met. When teachers blame student behavior on external factors, similar to the deficit model, they attribute this behavior to the student's home environment (Carroll et al., 2023). When school staff blame student classroom misbehavior on modeling at home families feel alienated (Caslin, 2021; Carroll et al., 2023). Adams & Christensen (2000) cite trust between families and school staff as being a main predictor of overall school success and defined trust as parents feeling that school policies and the staff enacting those policies were dependable and predictable; therefore, communication between schools and families is key as trust between these groups lessened as students moved to upper grade levels.

Mesosystem

The mesosystem is made of connections between the microsystem settings. Links between home, classroom, employment, and extracurricular spaces determine consistency. For example, a student's development will be affected by discrepancies in how home routines match classroom expectations. Alignment between home and school in the form of shared expectations, routine two-way communication, and coordinated plans supports the teacher-parent-student team, lowers conflict, and reduces contradictory signals to students. Misalignment in the form of mixed messages, infrequent contact, or infrequent and isolated supports, harms the student by increasing their risk for EDP and harming the teacher-parent-student team by eroding trust. One example of a mesosystem for SWE is their IEP or 504 team who make decisions on behalf of the student that affect the student's school and home experiences. These linkages show that family life and school life influence one another and underscore why collaboration between parents and school staff is imperative for a child's development (Bronfenbrenner, 1981).

Exosystem

Exosystems are those that students do not control, but that impacts them indirectly. This ranges from anything that may affect a parent's ability to parent or advocate for their child, including, but not limited to, relationships with school staff, workplace relationships, flexibility in scheduling, partner or spousal support, peer relationships, illness, or household finances. These factors indirectly affect students by affecting their parents. Some school systems that impact students that they cannot control are district-set codes of conduct, staff experience and training, teacher to student ratios, counselor ratios, extracurricular availability, transportation, and availability of in-school resources, or presence of law enforcement in the building. These factors, and more, influence how a student experiences schooling. Public School discipline

policies are part of the exosystem, but the frequency and degree of issued discipline is directly impacted by the interaction between individuals, the student and the person in a position of power, the school staff member. Many constructs, such as referral thresholds, professional development on behavior development, or the ability of a classroom teacher to stay regulated during stress, shape adult responses to student behavior long before a single incident occurs.

The exosystem for children is a system of powers that determines their developmental potential. Bronfenbrenner (1981) asserts that the potential increases by the number of direct and indirect links the child has to those systems. For example, a child of a principal has more links to power systems in school than a child who is experiencing transience with fewer links to power and would therefore be more able to benefit from the educational system. Bronfenbrenner (1981) also notes that the power systems have to be responsive to the child's needs if he or she is to benefit; for example, if a teacher with a child is advocating for supports, the child only benefits from the added power of having a parent in the system if the special education team is responsive to the child's needs and the parent's efforts.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem is the system level of culture and subcultures that the other systems inhabit. American schools look and behave in similar ways, more like each other than if you compared one to a school in another country, because American culture is a macrosystem. Culture can include ideologies, religious beliefs, and even the political climate. Shifts in educational policy, such as zero-tolerance policies to holistic teaching practices or authoritarian, prescriptive teaching to student-led and student-focused pedagogy changes the experience of teachers and students and reflect the current social beliefs. These beliefs guide the decisions policy makers, school administrators, and classroom teachers make. They also guide the choices

of families, and those combined decisions affect the students' developmental trajectories. These influences often operate outside families' awareness, yet they set the terms for discipline, access, and opportunity across schools. Even without awareness of these influences, students experience them through their daily school and home routines, given and self-assigned labels, and opportunities or lack thereof. In this way, individual development is not only personal or interpersonal; it is cultural.

Chronosystem

The chronosystem is an act of time influencing the other system levels, which could be interpreted as growth or decline, transitions, cumulative experience, or the effect of memory has on the development of an individual (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). A simplistic application of the chronosystem to student experience would be the development as he or she matriculates through schooling and how the memories of schooling affect the current development of the individual. For this study, that may be the age at which a student received Special Education services, the onset and the frequency of EDP, and how prior interactions with school staff shape current experiences, beliefs, trust, and behaviors.

Time can impact the macrosystem, which in turn impacts all other systems, as new laws are passed or new cultural norms settle into place. The accumulation of similar events impacts a child by forming what they expect out of daily life. If schooling is an accumulation of experiences for a student, then acts of discipline also build over time. Early experiences would teach students what to expect from school staff and later experiences would either confirm or revise those expectations. As students matriculate to higher grade levels, the likelihood of negative interactions with school staff increases informal and formal acts of discipline, negative language from classroom teachers, and fewer relational interactions with school staff. Student

negative self-labeling occurs with repeated exposure to negative language and escalating frequency of corrections and consequences, which weakens trust and school attachment. This phenomenon adds weight to the argument that small, early interactions with children have lasting impacts on their future development.

Summary

In the literature review, I traced how school discipline grew from 19th-century authoritarian and moral traditions that favored obedience and punishment, and how disability was addressed through segregation and institutionalization, which normalized separation and stigma. I then outlined early 20th-century shifts: progressivism introduced growth-focused ideas, while parent and professional advocacy exposed institutional abuse and built networks, such as the Council for Exceptional Children, that later supported legal change. I reviewed landmark laws and litigation that established access and protections and explained how those decisions framed rights, due process, and limits on discipline for students with disabilities.

I also examined legal and policies that promoted exclusionary discipline accelerated suspensions and expulsions, disproportionately affecting Black students and students with exceptionalities, which reinforced deficit attributions. I then traced 21st-century reforms and showed that adoption and fidelity were uneven and that district-level variation suggested immediate, local levers for change. I reviewed current practices by defining exclusionary discipline, noting that many referrals stem from minor classroom behaviors and that disparities persist across race and ability status.

I summarized alternatives that move discipline from control to learning: restorative practices, trauma-informed approaches, and culturally responsive teaching, while emphasizing the need for training, monitoring, and equity checks to avoid misapplication. I suggested MTSS,

a pairing of RTI and PBIS, as a school-wide, relational framework that explicitly teaches expectations, strengthens teacher–student relationships, and can keep more students in general education when implemented with fidelity (KSDE, 2011). I treated SEL as the preventive skill base (self-regulation, relationships, decision-making) and restorative practices as the relational repair process, explaining how the two can work in tandem within MTSS when adults have time, coaching, and consistent language. I then addressed school staff professional development, noting the central role of the classroom teacher, gaps in preparation, the influence of bias and attributions on decision-making, and the importance of legal literacy, developmental knowledge, and community and cultural context.

Finally, I situated the study in Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to interpret behavior and discipline across micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono levels and to connect personal meaning with systemic context. This synthesis justified my focus: despite strong legal frameworks and promising alternatives, exclusionary discipline remains common and inequitable, especially for students with exceptionalities; Kansas-specific lived accounts are scarce; and family narratives are needed to inform policy and practice that keep students in community and learning.

Chapter 3 - Methodology

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study will be to understand the lived experience of families of students with exceptionalities (SWE) who have been disciplined with exclusionary practices (EDP) in Kansas public schools. The guiding theoretical framework for this study is Bronfenbrenner's (1981) ecological systems theory. In this chapter, I explain my research design, rationale, role, participants, procedures, instrumentation, and analysis. I documented my assumptions and reflections in a researcher's journal throughout the study (Peoples, 2020). I collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews with families and with students individually when they were willing. I recruited participants through two social media posts on Facebook (see Appendix C) and by using purposeful snowball sampling.

Research Design and Rationale

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand the lived experience of families of students with exceptionalities (SWE) who had been disciplined with exclusionary practices (EDP) in Kansas public schools. I framed the work with Bronfenbrenner's (1979; 1981) ecological systems theory to keep meaning situated across micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono levels.

I selected a hermeneutic phenomenology because my questions concerned how families and adolescents made sense of EDP in real contexts and over time. Rather than bracketing prior knowledge to describe a decontextualized "essence," I treated understanding as interpretive and co-constructed through dialogue, language, and setting (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994). This stance fits the study in four ways. First, the phenomenon of families' experiences of EDP unfolded within nested systems; hermeneutic phenomenology allowed me to read parts and

whole in relation, by employing the hermeneutic circle, while mapping participant meaning-making to EST levels. Second, participants' temporal narratives and memories were integral to how they interpreted present events; an interpretive approach treats temporality as part of meaning (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Third, the approach aligned with my positionality and reflexive practice: I acknowledged how my standpoint shaped interviewing and analysis rather than attempting to remove it, consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology, and I kept track of that shaping in a ongoing researcher's journal (Peoples, 2020). Fourth, because EDP is entangled with ethics, power, and identity, an interpretive lens supported careful reading of language in participants' accounts, where a purely descriptive reading would reduce depth and richness.

In this chapter, I explained my research design, rationale, role, participants, procedures, instrumentation, and analysis. I documented assumptions and reflections in a researcher's journal throughout the study (Peoples, 2020). I collected qualitative data through semi-structured interviews (see Appendix B) with families and, when students were willing, conducted individual interviews with adolescents. I recruited participants through two social-media posts on Facebook (see Appendix C) and purposeful snowball sampling. I transcribed interviews verbatim and moved iteratively between episodes and whole narratives to interpret how families and students understood their experiences of EDP within and across ecological systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994; Rudasill et al., 2018).

Conceptual Frameworks

I applied Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory to situate the problem and to interpret interactions among home, school, policy, culture, and time (1979, 1981). Framing the family and the individual student inside nested systems helped me read how relationships,

structures, and contexts shaped behavior and development, and how family–school partnerships operated across those levels. The model kept the student within systems and supported my analysis of discipline as an interaction among immediate relationships, institutional arrangements, cultural values, and memory across time.

I chose hermeneutic, interpretive, phenomenology because my questions asked how families made meaning of exclusionary discipline, not only what happened. I wanted to do more than describe a phenomenon but wanted to make sense of the experiences as the participants also made sense of discipline, advocacy, schooling, and belonging. I treated lived experience as contextual and temporal, and I approached understanding as co-constructed through dialogue and interpretation rather than bracketed description (Creswell & Poth, 2016, 2018; Peoples, 2020). This stance fits the study in four ways. First, it aligned with EST: I moved through the hermeneutic circle, reading parts, including quotations I pulled, in light of the whole narratives and back again, while mapping meanings to micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono levels. Second, it treated temporality and memory as integral to meaning, which mattered because families interpreted current events through earlier experiences and anticipated futures (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Third, it matched the ethical and relational character of discipline decisions; parents and students framed events in terms of dignity, justice, and belonging, and since that framing is participant interpretation, I felt it best to match the methods to what I assumed would occur or be revealed through the interview and analysis processes. Fourth, it acknowledged positionality: I wrote from lived proximity as an educator with an exceptionality who interacts with disciplinary systems within public schools and a caregiver of children with dual exceptionalities, and I treated this reflexivity as data (Peoples, 2020).

In practice, I conducted semi-structured, conversational interviews that invited participants to tell and interpret their stories; I transcribed verbatim to preserve voice; I kept a reflexive journal to track assumptions, shifts, and the ways the interview encounter shaped recall (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2020). Analytically, I began with holistic readings, identified meaning units, drafted interpretive memos, and clustered themes. I returned to transcripts to check claims against counterexamples and then situated themes inside EST to show how meanings formed in classrooms and homes, were constrained by policy and placement, and changed over time. I chose hermeneutic rather than descriptive phenomenology because my aim was not to reduce accounts to an invariant essence; I sought to make sense of experience as participants themselves were making sense of discipline, advocacy, schooling, and belonging (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Moustakas, 1994).

Research Purpose

I sought to describe how school behavior systems and misconceptions about students with disabilities were experienced by families and to interpret the meanings they attached to those experiences. My goal was to inform policy and practice by highlighting the centrality of school-family relationships. Although racial disproportionality in exclusionary discipline is well documented, research specific to students with documented disabilities and exceptionalities – especially in Kansas – is limited; my most recent search identified Cooley (1995) and Mellard and Seybert (1996) as the last state-focused studies. I aimed to address this gap.

I approached this work as hermeneutic phenomenology. Conceptually, I treated lived experience as meaningful, contextual, and temporal rather than as data to be bracketed and reduced to a single essence (Moustakas, 1994; Creswell & Poth, 2016). I assumed that understanding emerges through interpretation in dialogue between participant and researcher,

part and whole, past and present. Practically, that meant I read each interview as a text situated within Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems, and I worked the hermeneutic circle by moving repeatedly between specific episodes and each family's broader narrative, while documenting when the participants' perception of their experiences and the effects, or meanings, shifted across settings and over time (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I applied this stance in data collection and analysis. I conducted semi-structured, conversational interviews with caregivers and, when possible, with adolescents, inviting them to make sense of discipline events rather than only list them. I transcribed interviews verbatim to preserve voice and language, and I kept a reflexive journal to record decisions, assumptions, and moments when the interviews shaped recall or interpretation (Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2020). Analytically, I began with holistic readings, then identified meaning units and wrote interpretive memos; I clustered these into themes and reread the transcripts to refine claims. I then mapped themes to ecological levels to show how meanings were formed in classrooms and homes (micro/meso), constrained by policies and placements (exo/macro), and reshaped by time and memory (chrono). Throughout, I kept participants' words prominent and used portraitures to provide thick descriptions for transferability. In this way, phenomenology in my study was both a conceptual frame for meaning-making and a method of inquiry that relied on dialogic interviewing, reflexivity, part-whole interpretation, and ecological situating of experience.

Research Questions

The following questions inform this research study:

1. How do Kansas public school students with documented exceptionalities and their families experience exclusionary discipline practices?

2. What perceived effects, if any, do Kansas public school exclusionary discipline practices have on the lived experience of students with documented exceptionalities?

As outlined in Chapter 1, these questions framed my focus on lived experience and meaning. I addressed Research Question 1 through in depth, semi structured interviews with caregivers and, when possible, with adolescents. I invited participants to describe specific incidents, settings, and relationships and I transcribed their accounts verbatim so that I could identify meaning units and themes grounded in their own language.

I addressed Research Question 2 through cross case analysis and ecological mapping of perceived effects across micro, meso, exo, macro, and chrono system levels. I compared family narratives, clustered themes, and examined how participants linked exclusionary discipline to changes in identity, relationships, school attachment, and daily life. In this way, the research questions introduced in Chapter 1 were carried through the design in Chapter 3 and answered through the interpretive, ecological systems analysis that follows in Chapters 4 and 5.

Data

Data Collection

The purpose of data collection in this phenomenological study was to conduct an empirical analysis on how families and SWE experience EDP and ascribe meaning to that experience. Empirical analysis notes expectations and direct observations; therefore, expectations will be explored in the researcher journal before, during, and after the interview process and adapted prompts to clarify meaning while avoiding leading questions (Peoples, 2020). Data collection included semi-structured interviews and only I cleaned and analyzed the resulting transcripts. I did not conduct focus groups due to sensitivity, confidentiality concerns, and timeline constraints.

Participant Recruitment

After IRB approval I posted two calls on Facebook for participants. I used purposive sampling to reach families with students with exceptionalities who experienced EDP in a Kansas public school. When a participant agreed to the interview process, I used snowball sampling and reached 11 families who met the limitation criteria and had varied experiences across demographics, schools, and types of EDP (Moustakas, 1994).

Semi-Structured Interviews

Interviews balanced structure and conversational flow (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2020). I used probing follow-up questions such as, "Can you give me an example of when you have experienced this?" to encourage participants to describe the experience instead of opinions about the experience and to limit potentially biased responses or guided questions (Peoples, 2020). The full protocol for the family interviews and student interviews, when permitted, appears in the Appendix.

All interviews were recorded via Zoom, but two interviews were in person and when this happened, I logged in to Zoom and turned off the camera to limit distractions. Zoom supported attention to verbal and nonverbal cues and reduced travel demands for me and time demands for the participants. I took shorthand notes during sessions and completed journal entries immediately after to preserve impressions. I attempted to cap family interviews at 60 minutes and individual student interviews at 30 minutes to respect time, but at the one-hour mark I paused to honor participants' schedules; some chose to end, while others wished to continue. When parents and students allowed individual student interviews, I scheduled them after the family interview session.

As a first-time qualitative researcher, I did my best to follow interview practices described in Vagel (2018) by relying on active listening techniques and holding a genuine interest in participants' stories. Special education and school discipline are emotionally charged topics; despite my efforts to create a safe, accepting space, strong feelings likely shaped what and how participants shared. For example, members of the Warren family sounded noticeably more hopeful when recalling positive school experiences and more reserved when describing painful ones. This aligns with Peoples' observation that "how one remembers something influences how one sees the world in present day" (p. 50). Several participants cried when expressing hurt or anger; during the Jackson interview I wept with the mother. I discuss these moments further in the analysis in the Findings and Conclusion chapters.

Many experiences described were several years in the past, which affected remembering and retelling. I also noticed an interpretive pattern during the Moore and Warren family interviews: a parent described a child's experience and then immediately reflected on how that event reshaped their view of a staff member. That connection seemed possible because of temporal distance; parents were linking experiences to later social outcomes while narrating them to me. Finally, my lack of a formal follow-up interview, originally planned for clarification and elaboration, limited my ability to probe some accounts more deeply and to check the validity of my interpretation.

Researcher's Journal

Following hermeneutic phenomenology, I made my perspectives explicit through journaling before, during, and after the interviewing and data analysis process (Peoples, 2020). My journal included typed entries on an online document, embedded photos of handwritten notes, and speech-to-text reflections from long commutes. This reflexive practice gave me space

to make connections, question assumptions, and document subjectivity and bias; it deepened my involvement and supported a more holistic understanding of participants' experiences. Before interviewing, in my journal, I documented my researcher Dasein and fore-conceptions in the style of Heidegger, which are included in the conclusion chapter (Peoples, 2020; Vagel, 2018). Rather than bracketing, I treated my stance as part of the interpretive act as I see myself as inseparable from the data as a researcher and as a person with similar experiences as my participants (Moustakas, 1994). I documented assumptions, metacognitive notes, emergent insights, and concept maps, which I eventually developed into participant experience and theme matrixes (see example in Appendix D) to help me understand and separate the data. This contributed to theme development and helped separate description from later interpretation. The journaling process assisted in capturing a composite summary of the essences of the participants' experiences, which will be explained in the Findings section (Peoples, 2020; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

Data Analysis

For data analysis, I drew on Moustakas' (1994) and Charmaz's (2025) approaches while holding Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory in view, with a visual diagram in sight, to consider how systems interacted for the child and their family. Immediately after each interview, I titled and saved the transcript file, deleted the video recording, and retained only the audio file until I completed the interview series and transcript cleaning. Zoom provides transcripts which I cleaned by removing all timestamps, repeated words, and the filler words "yeah," "um," and "uh." After all interviews were complete, I redacted participant names and assigned pseudonyms for families and frequently mentioned individuals. I chose names rather than numbers to preserve a sense of connection; as I repeatedly returned to reading the data, I began to think of participants

by these pseudonyms. I also redacted school and school staff names and replaced them with [redacted].

To begin the analysis, I began by reading slowly for a holistic sense of the story, noting initial impressions, questions, and ideas by writing directly on the transcript (Peoples, 2020; Moustakas, 1994). Then, I identified preliminary meaning units, which are ideas or themes that illuminate the phenomenon as defined by Giorgi (1985), in Peoples (2020) and Moustakas (1994). When I perceived a new meaning or a shift in a prior meaning, I recorded it as field data in my reflexive journal (Moustakas, 1994). During analysis, I continued memo writing in the style of Charmaz (2025). I wrote directly on transcript copies, on sticky notes, and in colored pens to explicate categories and refine codes into mini units, which I then grouped into themes. As Charmaz (2025) notes, "Memos give you a space and place for making comparisons between data and data, data and codes, codes of data and other code, codes and category, and category and concept, and for articulating conjectures about these comparisons" (p. 164). This early and continuous analytic writing fits both phenomenology and my personal working habits.

I reduced preliminary units into thematic essences and wrote those themes in single words. I then grouped the words into categories, from which my seven major themes evolved. I organized those themes by research questions and ecological system level by creating matrixes to organize my thoughts (see example in Appendix D). To show saturation, I used Peoples' (2020) frequency descriptors of most, many, and some. I then synthesized across the narratives to compose a general structural description while retaining individual nuance. Next, I pulled significant quotes from each transcript and organized them under each theme. Finally, to check for any missed nuance or outliers, I reread each participant's account to make sense of participants' sensemaking and ensure accuracy (Crewell & Poth, 2018; Peoples, 2020).

Throughout, I spent time with transcripts and journal entries to avoid discounting details and to keep description distinct from interpretation (Moustakas, 1994). Following development of the final themes, I returned to individual transcripts to write structured narratives, which I made into family portraitures included in the findings chapter, since doing so grounded the reflective structural analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Finally, I wrote summaries of the themes and then embedded my organized quotes to make a coherent whole. Peoples (2020) describes this as thematic reorganization of individual descriptions.

Pilot Study

Before conducting this research, I piloted my interview with two volunteer parents. On November 6, 2023, I conducted the first pilot in a coffee shop with the mother of a former student who had experienced EDP; she also had a younger child with exceptionalities. Her feedback led me to adjust my approach and reduce potential leading prompts. On January 26, 2024, I conducted a brief pilot phone interview with a parent of a former student with an IEP who had experienced EDP. The phone format yielded fewer details but helped streamline timing and probing questions. I did not record or scribe either interview. Both parents provided feedback on my approach, questions, and demeanor. The practice was illuminating because the question order and natural flow of conversation did not go as I had expected or intended. From this process, I practiced wait time and reflective listening and reduced the number of interview questions to adhere to preset time limits.

Limitations

This study relied on and is limited by self-reported participant experiences, which is important because understanding how the phenomena are experienced by students and their families and how, in turn, their perceptions may have shaped their experiences. The experiences

are also distanced by time, recalled after varying delays, and memory is often unreliable. The effect of distance of time will be discussed through the lens of the guiding framework in the Findings chapter.

Recruitment through snowballing may have constrained diversity of perspectives. Families may have declined due to time, privacy, or fear of identification. Online interviews may have excluded potential participants without stable internet. As with any qualitative study, findings are not generalizable but are offered as credible, situated interpretations.

Moreover, no incentives will be offered for participation, which could limit a participant's willingness to spend time without obvious benefit, other than sharing with an active listener. Finally, a limitation to this study are limits of the researcher's knowledge base and analysis skill at the time of writing. Due to these limits, caution should be used in generalizing results to other populations.

Delimitations

I recruited only participants who met the following criteria: (a) were families with at least one child of (b) 10 to 20 years of age who (c) had documented exceptionalities or disabilities and (e) experienced exclusionary discipline issued from a Kansas public school. I interviewed eleven families and completed four secondary interviews with students who were willing to talk with me without their parents.

I collected my data in only English and through interviews within a single summer and I recruited through purposive and snowball sampling rather than a random sample. I framed my analysis through hermeneutic phenomenology and the ecological systems model and did not stratify my findings by diagnosis or level or participation in any specific programs. In fact, I only asked generally about supports and missed the opportunity to hear about specific programs

implemented in schools. I invited limited member checking by only asking clarifying questions during all interviews and only conducting a few follow-up conversations. I did not conduct focus groups or send my data to the participant for confirmation. I aimed for depth in limited topics with my participants and hoped that transferability occurred with my rich descriptions.

Researcher Positionality

My prior experience as a teacher shaped my view that exclusionary discipline often harms students, even as I recognized the complexity of managing safety at scale. I reserved office referrals for significant safety concerns and favored in-class supports when feasible. I was a white, middle-class, neurodiverse woman and the primary caregiver of children with exceptionalities who had experienced informal exclusion. I raised my sons with Conscious Discipline and brought related practices into my classroom (Miller et al., 2017). That proximity gave me language, empathy, and access to caregiver networks, but it also risked interpreting their accounts through my own biases and experiences.

I treated this dual position as a methodological feature to manage, not a problem to hide. I disclosed my roles during recruitment and interviews; I asked open invitations rather than leading prompts; and I kept a reflexive journal before and after each interview to name assumptions, track moments of resonance, and note how the interview encounter shaped recall and meaning. I transcribed verbatim to keep participants' words in the foreground and wrote analytic memos that logged decision points and shifts in interpretation. When I identified with a participant's experience, I returned to the transcripts to review for accuracy and ensure I separated participants' meanings from my own.

This stance mattered analytically. It made me attentive to dignity, safety, and belonging, and it made me aware that my history predisposed me to see harm in exclusion. By naming that

predisposition, maintaining an audit trail, and grounding interpretations in participants' language, I aimed to keep proximity productive for understanding while protecting credibility and respect for the people who trusted me with their stories.

Trustworthiness

I approached interpretation with the understanding that I brought a particular history and that other interpretations were possible. I documented selection and analysis decisions and followed COREQ reporting guidance to support transparency and transferability (Tong et al., 2007). Under these guidelines, I met the personal characteristics and reflexivity requirements during in-depth and semi-structured interviews as suggested in Domain 1 of the COREQ for qualitative research and shared these in the Researcher Positionality section. I met all requirements for Domain 2: study design, except for No. 23, which requires the return of interview transcripts, which I did not complete due to time constraints. Therefore, I also did not complete No. 28, Participant Checking, but completed all other steps of Domain 3: analysis and findings. I hope to complete these last two steps before publication of my findings.

To establish trustworthiness within the subjective nature of phenomenological research, I used validation strategies following the practices of Heidegger and fellow researchers in phenomenology (Peoples, 2020). I assumed, like Heidegger, that I brought my own understandings, assumptions, and distractions to the interpretation process and that my findings may be only one of many possible interpretations. However, the research is transferable as the findings were similar to prior research.

Ethical Considerations

I completed CITI certificate training for conducting ethical research with human subjects and received IRB approval. I obtained guardian consent and, when applicable, student assent (see

Appendix A). I de-identified all data, stored recordings and files in secure, password protected, university-hosted systems, and only I have access. I removed or altered any potentially identifying details in the data.

Procedures

Timeline

Listed in sequential order:

1. Seek IRB approval: October 2024
2. Send Call for Participation on social media platforms & email to administration of Kansas rural public high schools: March 2025 (see Appendix C)
3. Schedule semi-structured Zoom interviews with participants: April through July 2025
4. Code and Analyze Initial interviews: July 2025
5. Code and Analyze researcher journal: August 2025
6. Data Analysis complete: September 2025

Participants

I used purposeful sampling to gather family participants who were adult guardians and their students who either had IEPs, 504 Plans, or a diagnosed disability or exceptionality and experienced EDP in Kansas public schools. I limited the student participants to those of middle and high school age, although families also described experiences with siblings who were younger. I did not restrict gender, race, or socioeconomic status and noted those demographics as possible limitations. Following phenomenological guidance by Moustakas (1994) I recruited within the 5-25 participant goal to research saturation with variation in experience. Ultimately, I interviewed 11 families, some with their children present and others not, and 4 individual

students of those families. These students were the oldest in the sample (ages 16–20), which likely contributed to their willingness to speak with me. My initial goal was to interview all students separately; several either opted out themselves or their parents declined on their behalf. When families reminded younger children that participation was optional, many chose other activities at home. Even so, some younger children occasionally offered brief comments or answered a parent's direct questions during the family interview. I included a descriptive table with pseudonyms in Appendix D and informed consent and assent materials in Appendix A.

Research Setting

I conducted most interviews via Zoom because of travel and time constraints and because automated speaker identification made transcript cleaning easier. Two families requested in-person meetings; one took place in a private room at a public library, and another occurred in the family's home. These sessions felt especially connective because of physical proximity, though they were harder to transcribe and more susceptible to recording issues, such as the laptop microphone not being sensitive enough to detect distant or mumbled speech, which affected the data I captured. Online interviewing carried its own benefits and challenges for rapport, observation, and ethics (de Villiers et al., 2022). Most families joined from living rooms or kitchens; two students spoke from their bedrooms; in larger families, children often drifted in and out of view and these interruptions enriched the family portrait but seemed to stress the parent. I joined from my campus office after hours, behind a locked door, to minimize disruptions on my end. With participants' permission, I recorded every session on a password-protected laptop through Zoom, deleted video files immediately after each interview, and retained audio only until I finished the interview series and cleaned the transcripts. The two in-

person interviews were recorded in the same secure manner as the online interviews, but with the camera off to limit distractions.

Disclosure Statement

To ensure the integrity of my study, it is important to uphold transparency; therefore, I will clarify the balance of generative AI support and my skills as a developing researcher and writer as they pertain to my dissertation authorship.

In the process of preparing this dissertation, I used a generative artificial intelligence tool, ChatGPT-4o as an assistant after my research collection and my first phase of coding for themes was complete. Specifically, ChatGPT assisted with my writing structure: organizing my themes into coherent paragraphs, suggesting smooth transitions, and maintaining alignment with a consistent academic style. Often, I asked Chat to reword a phrase or reorganize a paragraph to better fit within my personal and phenomenological research writing styles.

At all stages, I am responsible for the accuracy of my analysis, the interpretation of data, and my voice. The AI tool functioned only as a supplementary organizational aid and did not generate or alter raw data, nor did it conduct coding, identify themes, or draw conclusions independently. On occasion, I used Chat as a thesaurus and brainstorming-assistant to smooth phrasing and transitions for flow. I held research ethics; in order to protect the identity of my participants, raw data was not uploaded to the application. To obtain support, I wrote a profile of my own family and our experiences, which mirror some of the experiences of the participant families, and I recorded myself answering my own research questions to act as a mock interview transcript. My family's portraiture and mock interview transcript was used to explore connections and to write an example narrative to use as a formulaic guide. My prompt request asked ChatGPT to create a portraiture of my family in the style of current phenomenological

research to use as a writing template. Then, I asked ChatGPT to explain the rationale for each paragraph in the portraiture so that the template was easier to emulate.

As is suggested by Everson (2025), I modeled transparency by working closely with my mentor, my dissertation chair, to oversee my use of generative AI to protect the originality and authenticity of my dissertation (pp. 30-37). The use of ChatGPT was consistent with ethical research practices to ensure the integrity of my voice and the voices of my research participants.

Summary

I grounded this study in hermeneutic phenomenology and Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (EST) to interpret how families experienced exclusionary discipline practices (EDP) in Kansas public schools and how they made meaning across nested systems over time. Building from that foundation, I explained the research design and rationale first, clarifying why an interpretive phenomenology fit questions about meaning rather than measurement, and how EST (micro, meso, exo, macro, chrono) kept context and temporality in view as I moved between parts of a story and each family's complete narrative.

With the frameworks established, I stated the purpose, which is to describe the lived experiences of families and students who have exceptionalities and have experienced disciplinary exclusion from a Kansas public school, then presented two guiding research questions focused on lived experience and perceived effects of EDP. After IRB approval, I moved to participants and recruitment: I posted two calls on Facebook (see Appendix C), used purposeful and snowball sampling, and interviewed eleven families and four adolescents who varied in demographics and intersectionality and whose perspectives varied across settings and types of discipline.

From there, I detailed data collection. I conducted semi-structured, conversational interviews, mostly on Zoom and two face-to-face, recorded sessions, and transcribed verbatim to preserve language and nuance. In parallel, I maintained a reflexive researcher's journal before, during, and after interviews to surface assumptions, log decision points, and note how the interview encountered shaped recall and interpretation.

I then outlined analysis procedures. I began with holistic readings, identified meaning units, and wrote analytic memos, clustering codes into themes while checking claims against the transcripts. Next, I mapped themes to EST levels to show how meanings formed in classrooms and homes, were constrained by policies and placements, and shifted across time (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; Rudasill et al., 2019). To anchor cross-narrative themes in thick description, I developed family portraitures and then synthesized them across participant stories.

Because interviewing on emotionally charged topics required careful preparation, I piloted the protocol with two parents (one in person, one by phone); their feedback led me to streamline prompts, practice wait time and tighten sessions. I followed with a discussion of limitations and delimitations: the reliance on self-reported, often retrospective accounts; recruitment that may have narrowed perspectives; limited member checking and no focus groups; a single-summer timeframe and single-language data window; and an analytic frame centered on hermeneutic phenomenology and EST rather than diagnosis-based or other comparisons.

Next, I addressed positionality and trustworthiness. As a white, middle-class, neurodiverse educator and caregiver of children with exceptionalities, I acknowledged proximity as both asset and risk. To protect credibility, I disclosed roles during recruitment, kept an audit trail, returned repeatedly to transcripts to separate participants' meanings from my own, and

aligned reporting with COREQ guidance by noting exceptions on transcript return and participant checking.

Finally, I summarized ethics, procedures, and settings. I completed CITI training, secured IRB approval, obtained consent and assent (see Appendix A), de-identified data, and stored files securely. I laid out the timeline from approval to recruitment, interviewing, and analysis. Most interviews occurred via Zoom for access and scheduling; two took place face-to-face, one in a community space and the last in the participant's home. I closed with a transparent disclosure of limited, post-collection use of generative AI as a writing and organization aid, but not for coding or analysis, under my chair's oversight and without uploading raw data.

Taken together, the chapter presented a coherent design: an interpretive phenomenology framed by EST, a purposeful and transparent approach to recruitment and data collection, a reflexive and systematic analysis, and safeguards for credibility and ethics, so that the findings remain closely tied to families' words and situated within the systems that shaped them.

Chapter 4 - Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the lived experiences of families and students who have exceptionalities and have experienced disciplinary exclusion from a Kansas public school. A phenomenological approach was used to describe the ways in which families are affected by the experience of navigating special education and school-issued discipline.

In this chapter, I present research findings and connect the findings of the study with hermeneutic phenomenology. Specifically, I present the cross-narrative themes that emerged from the lived experiences of the parents navigating school systems in special education and discipline for their children with exceptionalities. I also highlight the experiences of the four student participants who were willing to discuss their points of view in an additional private interview. For each theme, I added support with direct quotes and paraphrasing of participant voices to create portraitures for each family. After the portraitures, I discuss themes and explicitly state how each relates to the study's two research questions.

Participants

Participants in this study met the following criteria: (a) were families with at least one child of (b) 10 to 20 years of age who (c) had documented exceptionalities or disabilities and (e) experienced exclusionary discipline issued from a Kansas public school. I interviewed eleven families and completed four secondary interviews with students who were willing to talk with me without their parents.

Participant Portraitures

The Daniels Family

The Daniels family is led by Heather and Chad, a couple devoted to their biological, adopted, and foster children. Heather is energetic and hands-on, often a little frazzled by the pace of raising a large family, but she is content and committed to doing what she and her husband believe is best for their children. Chad is her counterpart as a gentle giant: quiet, calm, and easygoing; he is stable with an easy smile. Together, they have built a household full of activity and connection.

Heather and Chad's biological children span a wide age range, with the oldest daughter now grown and preparing to welcome the family's first grandchild. Their second daughter excels academically and is known for her drive. Their teenage son, though intelligent and capable, has struggled with focus and motivation, making school a source of frustration at times, which Heather expresses in bafflement. Their younger daughter, a high school freshman, mirrors her older sister in her involvement in activities. The youngest biological son is in sixth grade and is currently awaiting an ADHD evaluation. Like his brother, he often struggles to stay focused in class, but his family has learned from their experiences and are searching for effective supports.

In addition to their five biological children, the Daniels family has opened their home to many foster children. Within the past year, two brothers the family has fostered since they were toddlers became permanent members through adoption. The older of the two has an IEP for emotional disturbance and developmental delay. Schooling has been very difficult, marked by exclusionary discipline that included being restrained and placed in solitary confinement, which were some practices Heather and Chad firmly believe violated his IEP. They have spoken passionately about these incidents to school upper administration and are researching ways to advocate for their son.

The Daniels household is defined more by connection than by struggle. The family is active in their church community and with school activities. Heather's flexible job allows her to juggle school meetings, therapy appointments, and family schedules, while Chad's calm demeanor makes him effective in managing the daily needs of the children. Evenings are often spent together, with the children playing outside. The boys are often outside playing catch or the oldest practices T-ball with the younger brothers.

The Garcia Family

The Garcia family includes Ricky and Victoria, a father and stepmother who have worked together for the past two years to raise their middle school–aged son, Martin, while navigating a school system that often struggled to meet his needs. Ricky is deeply committed to his son, frequently leaving work to respond to school calls or pick him up when escalations occurred, but disassociates when he feels overwhelmed by Martin's needs. Victoria is organized and relational. She manages most of the communication with teachers and administrators, "documenting everything" by carefully tracking incidents, services, and routines. Together, they balance the everyday realities of parenting with the added stress of frequent school disruptions and systemic barriers that have increased stress and negatively impacted the family dynamics. Also residing in the home are Victoria's three children from a previous marriage and Ricky and Victoria's toddler daughter.

Martin has a history of disrupted schooling, beginning with homeschooling before entering public school in second grade. From the start, his placements have been inconsistent—sometimes in special education classrooms, other times in autism-specific programs, and occasionally in mainstream settings with supports. Ricky and Victoria blame Martin's birthmother for his educational disruptions and lack of social and executive skills. The parents

also believe the frequent changes in educational setting kept Martin from developing social skills he may have developed if left in a class of his chronologically-aged peers. At one time, Martin was the only verbal student in a class of nonverbal peers, where he functioned more as a helper than a true peer. He has also been placed in general education classrooms with and without formal supports, but this was short-lived as teachers and administrators interpreted Martin's behavior as out of control or violent. While his current middle school placement seems to offer more behavioral support, suspensions, in-school exclusions, and repeated parent pickups remain common.

Behavioral escalations are a frequent challenge for Martin. He elopes from class or from the school – he hides in mechanical rooms or unused spaces and once left the school building and was found blocks away. When he returns he routinely refuses to re-engage in activities. At times, school staff have called resource officers, with threats that he could be handcuffed if he did not comply—actions that left both Martin and his parents in shock. For Victoria, who is also an educator in another school, these moments highlighted a lack of proactive strategies and co-regulation skills among staff. They believe Daniel's behaviors are often misinterpreted as defiance rather than as signs of overstimulation or dysregulation.

The family's dynamics add layers of complexity. Martin transitions between Victoria and Ricky's home and his birth mother's, and Mondays following weekends with his mother are particularly difficult. School escalations are so predictable that on Mondays that calls from the school for Victoria or Ricky to pick up Martin have become routine. Tensions with Martin's birth mother, including a Child Protective Services investigation after an injury at Victoria's home, have also added stress to the household. Ricky tends to placate and focus on being grateful

for what the school has done for Martin. Victoria responds with more stress and feelings of "just surviving the neurospicy chaos" of their homelife.

Despite the difference in viewpoints, Victoria and Ricky are committed to each other and the growth of all of the children in the home. They recognize Martin's difficulties with social cues—such as asking strangers for hugs or becoming distressed over small disruptions—and have used role-play and explicit teaching to help him learn appropriate responses. Martin is devoted to his toddler sister, so the parents talk out their parenting of her in order to help Martin make connections. While progress has been slow, they celebrate small victories and continue seeking services, though long waits for autism clinics and limited effectiveness of behavioral therapies and limited access to local community supports have been frustrating.

The Jackson Family

The Jackson family includes Brooklyn, a woman in her early thirties whose life is centered on raising a large, blended family. She and her second husband are raising their biological children, who are of mixed races but identify as Black, alongside his children from a previous relationship. Also central to the household are Brooklyn's two older daughters from her first marriage. These daughters remain deeply connected to daily family life, and during the interview Brooklyn frequently messaged them in their family group chat, asking for clarifications and incorporating their voices into the conversation.

Brooklyn is a passionate and deeply reflective mother whose own life experiences profoundly shape her advocacy. She was influenced by the challenges her mother faced as a woman with intellectual disabilities who had spent much of her life within special education systems and who endured racial bias in schools. Growing up with that, history gave Brooklyn both insight into inequities and determination to resist them for her own children. In addition,

Brooklyn has drawn strength and inspiration from her own more recent success in higher education. Returning to school and achieving academic success has empowered her not only professionally but also personally, giving her confidence in her role as a mother and advocate. She is proud to be a role model for her children and hopes they will see in her both resilience and possibility.

Race and bias are central to the Jackson family's narrative. Brooklyn worries most about her Black son, who, though light-skinned and somewhat shielded from the harshest stereotypes, still experiences judgment from school staff. She is even more concerned for her darker-skinned daughters, who she believes are more visibly stigmatized by teachers and administrators. She described moments where her daughter's head wrap was prohibited while racial slurs were ignored, and she noted how her son was punished for behaviors that white classmates were allowed to engage in without consequence. These experiences have left the family deeply mistrustful of how schools handle discipline and equity.

Despite these challenges, Brooklyn emphasizes the strengths of her children. One daughter shines academically, while others pursue activities and leadership roles with enthusiasm. Brooklyn takes the lead in advocating for equitable treatment and ensuring that teachers recognize her children's capabilities. At home, the Jacksons work to nurture a strong family bond.

The King Family

The King family includes Rachel, a mother whose advocacy for her daughter Sierra has been inspired by her daughter's resilience. Rachel is thoughtful in her reflections, often weighing how school experiences affect her children and the family as a whole. Her husband is supportive, and together they raise three children: Beth, their eldest daughter, Sierra, and their son and

youngest, Brad, all of whom held IEPs for giftedness. Parenting has required not only patience and resilience, but also a willingness to challenge school systems that Rachel feels have frequently misunderstood or minimized Sierra's needs due to her gifted label despite Sierra also having ADHD.

Sierra was diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety later in her schooling, around seventh grade after a mental health episode and held her gifted IEP since the third grade when she was assessed. She is articulate and determined, yet her journey through school has been complicated by teachers' inconsistent understanding of her learning and behavioral differences. Rachel recalls Sierra swinging from "hyper-curious" to "dreamy" from a young age, which often clashed with classroom structures. Accommodations were inconsistently applied and her gifted label led to misunderstanding of her needs. A few times, her behaviors were misinterpreted as defiance rather than struggles rooted in disability or lagging skills and while these occasions were rare, they heavily impacted the sensitive Sierra.

Middle school was particularly difficult, as Sierra's impulsiveness and anxiety escalated under disciplinary systems that prioritized compliance. She was sometimes excluded from activities or treated more harshly than peers in confounding ways, such as being excluded from a test-score celebration when she had the highest score in the class but lacked a benchmark of percentage growth to attend. These experiences left her discouraged and less motivated to engage. Rachel described how Sierra often internalized these struggles, returning home exhausted or upset after school days where she felt misunderstood and needed hours to read or listen to music before she was ready to interact with the family.

Despite challenges, Sierra experienced growth and showed resilience that continues to inspire Rachel. Rachel described moments where supportive teachers recognized Sierra's

strengths and offered encouragement, which made an enormous difference in her confidence. Rachel learned to step into the role of advocate, requesting meetings, clarifying accommodations, and pressing for consistency between teachers as Sierra matriculated through schooling. When Sierra reached her final years of high school, Rachel stepped back and let Sierra take the lead. Sierra requested outside therapy so Rachel set up a system where Sierra could make an appointment whenever she needed it and the bill would be sent to her parents for payment. While navigating schooling was exhausting for Sierra at times, she has learned to voice her needs and find effective support systems for herself.

The Lane Family

The Lane family includes Julie, an elementary art teacher for over 20 years who is the building representative for the teacher union. Julie has a calm demeanor which has helped her build strong connections with her students and family. Not having children of their own, she and her supportive husband decided to foster a local sibling pair of girls whom they eventually adopted. The younger daughter is Mia and is entering high school next year and is concerned about being connected with her sister's struggles in schooling. The oldest daughter is Melody who is an intelligent and engaging 11th grader who qualified for the state competition in Forensics at her school. Melody's struggles in schooling started to become more visible in the 6th grade. Her mother describes her as very intelligent and praised her 4.0 grade point average but described how this was a barrier when advocating for her daughter's needs, even though OSS and ISS Melody did not allow her grades to decline. Melody's school seemed to only see her through an academic lens and dismissed her social and behavioral needs. Unfortunately, the family's experiences continued to undergo increasing strain as Melody's behavior became so erratic that she put herself in danger. Other family members also suffered, as Julie and Mia felt

the social stigma left in the wake of Melody's experience. Julie felt directly opposed by her colleagues, even as a long-time educator and leader in the district and she was unsuccessful in advocating for Melody with the IEP team and Melody's principal and classroom teachers. Mia felt ostracized by preconceived ideas and questions about her sister from family, friends, and school staff.

The family continued to suffer under strain until Julie's husband decided to retire and stay at home to support the family. Because of his early retirement, he was on-call for Melody's needs and to complete advocacy and mental health responder training, so he was better equipped to interact with the school and outside resources that he and Julie felt Melody needed. Those needs and behaviors became extreme to the point where Julie and her husband were concerned for Melody's immediate safety and had Melody placed in a psychiatric residential treatment facility where she is under constant supervision. While the family and Melody miss each other, Julie describes the situation as beneficial for everyone and hopes that finally the school will acquiesce to a behavior IEP.

The Moore Family

The Moore family includes Victoria, a mother who has felt lost navigating years learning how to parent and support her child, Max, who is a young transgender man with physical and neurodevelopmental disabilities that were not identified until their teenage years. Victoria is articulate and thoughtful, describing herself as both isolated and determined in her role. Her husband Doug has been a steady partner in parenting, though Victoria shoulders the daily needs of her children, including communicating with the school and maintaining the relationships between family members. Their younger daughter, Helena, brings joy to her family, but the differences in expectations and experience between siblings have created ongoing strain.

Max, the eldest child, is a bright student who has consistently performed at the top of their class academically, earning straight A's. Despite this, Max's blunt communication style and other challenges related to ADHD and autism spectrum disorder have shaped build tension with teachers and family members. What some adults saw as defiance, Victoria described as honesty and a lack of clear expectations. For Max, correcting a teacher or standing in the "right" spot in choir was about accuracy, but teachers often viewed these moments as disrespect.

Schooling for Max has been marked by social misinterpretation and systemic failure. In elementary school, they frequently faced exclusionary practices such as being sent to a safe seat or safe room, punishments that left lasting impressions and eventually led to Max's reliance on self-isolation. These incidents lessened significantly once Max began ADHD medication in upper elementary grades, a turning point that reduced disciplinary removals, but Max continued to be socially excluded. Middle school brought a new set of challenges: teachers often threatened to involve the school resource officer rather than using de-escalation, and bullying incidents went unaddressed. When Max was punched on the bus, both they and the aggressor were suspended, reinforcing Max's sense of injustice and loneliness.

Victoria expressed frustration with inconsistent documentation and poor communication from the school as Max progressed through the grade levels. While elementary teachers documented every incident, middle and high school often left it up to Max to self-report disciplinary actions and Victoria was unsure of herself when interpreting Max's attempts at communicating those experiences. The IEP process compounded this frustration: though Max was identified as gifted, the plan focused on enrichment rather than classroom supports for ADHD or ASD. The autism diagnosis yielded no meaningful adjustments at school, leaving the family feeling unseen.

At home, Victoria and Doug worked to balance consequences with compassion, often struggling with when to hold Max accountable and when to recognize behaviors as disability related. Navigating this process put a strain on the relationships between family members with different views of what was best for Max. This balance also created strain with Helena, who questioned why her sibling seemed to "get away" with things she could not. Currently, the family is finding more stability with medication and distance as Max moved out of the home when they graduated.

The Neil Family

The Neil family includes Ruby, a mother who speaks candidly and passionately about herself and her family, including her youngest son, Brady, and his frustrating school experiences. Ruby is frustrated by what she perceives as systemic failures in education, something she sees mirrored in her role as an instructor for a state university. She consistently speaks with a positive outlook and no-nonsense attitude when discussing her frustrations and focuses on what she and her family can control. She balances her advocacy role with the weight of community judgment, especially since she and her husband are popular leaders, determined that her youngest son will not be defined or define himself by the challenges he has faced, but how he has grown because of them.

Her husband, David, shares parenting responsibilities and is the heart of the household by cooking and hosting weekly family dinners that are defined by connection with his wife and two sons. David is more reserved in his interactions, in part due to his public service role in the community, and because of this role he, at Ruby's request, took charge of navigating school conflicts and disciplinary issues when Brady moved to the upper grades.

Brady is a bright, strong-willed young man whose academic ability was apparent early in elementary school. He quickly mastered material, but by third grade his behavior and personality drew unwanted attention from teachers. Ruby recalled how one fifth grade teacher seemed to single him out, creating situations to "put him in his place" and using public shaming as a disciplinary tool. During his third-grade year he experienced what both Ruby and Brady state was the pinnacle of feeling shame at school. His teacher used a "clipboard" system, where Brady's missteps were visibly marked for peers to see and where Brady was expected to document his behaviors from class to class, carrying it with him at all times. At first, his parents supported this, thinking it would lead to Brady seeing the connection between his behavior and how he was perceived. Ultimately, the situation left Ruby and her family deeply regretful. They saw this as stigmatizing and harmful, reinforcing the perception that Brady was a "problem child."

As Brady grew older, the problems continued, but the repercussions were more severe. Teachers announced test grades aloud, isolated him at lunch, and occasionally dismissed his perspective as dishonesty when he attempted to explain his experiences. Ruby noted that these approaches eroded Brady's trust in adults and damaged his confidence. In addition to the adult-led stigmatization, Brady experienced peer bullying related to body image and athleticism, which were sometimes exacerbated when teachers or coaches compared him unfavorably to others and was especially hurtful when adults, including the parents of peers, compared him to his older brother who was seen as an exemplary student and is an engaging, gregarious young man.

Ruby consistently confronted administrators and teachers about these practices, pointing to the harmful effects of grade shaming, public humiliation, and inconsistent disciplinary responses. Her advocacy was persistent but emotionally draining, as she felt increasingly

frustrated and unheard. She and David provide Brady with stability at home and reinforce school-issued discipline by adding family talks that focus on honesty and taking responsibility for the part of the situation that may have been within Brady's control. Ruby emphasized that the same traits labeled as defiance in school, such as his independent spirit, could also be viewed as strengths when nurtured appropriately.

By his junior year in high school, Brady had matured significantly, finding confidence through athletics and weightlifting. Ruby attributed his weightlifting class and interactions with one of his football coaches as periods of exponential growth, where his resilience became more visible, his self-confidence grew, and his outlook became more positive. The Neil family continues to support him through his final year of public schooling with determination and the pride they feel in their collective strength as a family.

The Peters Family

The Peters family includes Ashley, a single mother who has worked tirelessly to support her son Chase through a school system that has often misunderstood his needs. Sarah is thoughtful and persistent, balancing her role as advocate with the worry of being labeled a "problem parent." Chase received outside speech services during his elementary years and held an IEP for ADHD but had some learning and behavioral needs that kept Chase and his mother feeling limited when navigating the school system.

Chase is what his mother describes as "a big dude" who is low-energy but thrives in hands-on, interest-based learning. He shines in classes like choir, hunter education, and history, especially when teachers connect the content to his passion for wrestling or the outdoors. However, his school experience has been uneven and dependent on the actions of school staff and Chase's perceptions of the attitudes of his classroom teachers. Some educators have

embraced his interests and supported him, while others have dismissed or punished behaviors that stem from his disabilities or have broken trust by humiliating him in front of his peers.

Chase has had an IEP since kindergarten, but its implementation has often been inconsistent. Broad goals such as “stay on task” have left too much room for interpretation, enabling teachers to discipline him for skill deficits that needed support. One frequent issue involved his need to listen to music to help regulate and focus. When teachers treated this accommodation as misbehavior, Sarah intervened to clarify and eventually secured its inclusion in his IEP. While this improved his engagement, she noted that teachers varied widely in their willingness to honor accommodations.

Labels and stigma have weighed heavily on Chase’s experience. Being called “special ed” or “slow” by peers and even coaches deeply hurt him, reinforcing stereotypes and diminishing his confidence. His schedule was rearranged for his sophomore year without his knowledge until he arrived at the honors Chemistry class and was told by the teacher that he wasn’t on the roster. When Chase questioned the change to a regular Chemistry class in an attempt to advocate for himself, the counselor told him that his IEP wouldn’t allow him to take the honors-level classes. Chase has also faced discipline that he perceived as unfair, such as being punished for making an inappropriate joke or failing a physical education test administered after incurring a school-sports related injury. He prefers restorative responses—such as private correction—over exclusionary measures that escalated his frustration and highlighted the reciprocal nature of building rapport with students; he cared about the class when he felt the teacher cared about him.

The Shaw Family

The Shaw family includes Cindy, a school psychologist whose professional expertise both strengthens and complicates her role in advocating for her son, Lucas, who is her only child and is in 6th grade with an IEP for ADHD. Cindy strongly feels the tension between being perceived as an "expert" and simply being a parent and has often felt judged by school staff. She believes her background may intimidate teachers, but she continues to advocate fiercely for her son in the school environment and in her extended family. Her partner is supportive at home and sometimes handles school meetings when Cindy feels like her presence will be ineffective. Cindy now handles day-to-day communication with the school and all of Lucas' transportation and physical needs.

Lucas is a bright and curious young man who is charmingly friendly. He is large for his age and seems to take up a lot of space with his exuberance and movements. He demonstrated advanced academic skills early similar to the hyperfocus and monotropism of a child with ASD. For example, as a kindergartner, he was solving math problems far above his level and reading anatomy texts for adults. Cindy feels frustrated when others assume that her child is autistic and swings between explaining Lucas' exceptionalities or agreeing to avoid the tediousness of explaining her expertise and her child.

Despite Lucas' exceptional abilities, school assessments repeatedly placed him "below grade level," a mismatch that continues to frustrate the entire family. An outside IQ evaluation revealed a splintered profile, which is common for ASD, with highly specialized skills and a score in the 150s, but the district denied him gifted services due to narrow curriculum and testing benchmarks.

Cindy cries when describing missed enrichment opportunities for Lucas due to misunderstandings between her, Lucas, and school staff. She provides those opportunities for Lucas when she is able, such as local theater and robotics camps. Cindy is concerned also with Lucas' socialization as he tends to form friendships "in a helper role" and wants Lucas to form relationships at school "that challenge him." She and her husband continuously converse about socializing to guide Lucas because watching him grow without close friendships, and being aware of it, is heartbreaking for his parents.

The Warren Family

The Warren family includes Sage, who is a confident and assertive speaker who balances being an elementary school reading specialist and member of the GEI team for the elementary school in which her children attended. Her husband is supportive and involved in the processes of child rearing and schooling, including attending IEP meetings, but was unable to make the interview time due to a familial obligation. The oldest child in the Warren family is Leah, who has been diagnosed with ASD, ADHD, General Anxiety Disorder, and ODD as a manifestation of her other diagnoses. There are two younger children in the home and Sage stated that explaining different expectations for behavior to her younger children was a struggle and that while the family adores Leah, supporting her does add stress to the family members, especially when Leah's behaviors derail a planned family event or routine. A benefit of the family's struggle is the entire family's depth of skill in using positive supports to regulate themselves and deescalate situations.

Sage believes that her leadership role in the school during Leah's early schooling expedited the IEP process and services provided and also gave Leah advantages with the administrative staff, since the current head principal is a friend of the family. Her dual roles had

a drawback as Sage often felt tension in being the "expert" versus being "Leah's mom" and found that she had to step out of meetings so the members could have the opportunity to be candid about Leah. She described intense mixed feelings standing in the hallway outside of meetings. Sage also removed herself from parts of the building where Leah might be. Sage also remembered hiding from Leah so that she could learn to rely on other adults and not use Sage as her only source of safety. Even though Sage's position in the school had advantages, she felt as if she "fought tooth and nail" for every support within the IEP and she and her husband faced delays by the school and the insurance company to get approval for therapy and Applied Behavior Analysis services. Eventually they applied for a Serious Emotional Disturbance waiver to force the state's hand to fund under Medicaid and get access to these resources. Leah had a wonderful experience in kindergarten in spite of the difficulty in learning to rely on other adults than her parents. First grade brought struggles and eventually trauma from outside family events and "larger personalities" of other students in that class, but Leah had the foundation of her kindergarten experience and bonds with staff outside of her assigned classroom. Specifically, when Leah would lose control, the classroom teacher would call Sage, but the head principal began arriving instead and taking Leah through a routine coregulation strategy in the safe space of her office. Leah continues to struggle, and Sage is continuously finding new ways to support new challenges, but Leah is making progress through schooling, and her family continues to lovingly support her.

The White Family

The White family includes Amy, who is a brash and confident "straight shooter," who speaks in a direct, no-nonsense, but caring way that is reminiscent of an older, beloved southern aunt. Amy is the great aunt of her two adopted daughters who are biological siblings. Amy and

her husband, who are in their late 50s, were happy to adopt their nieces since they did not have children of their own and were settled with the means to support them and spoil them with occasional treats to the snow cone stand and other small outings. The daughters are Kate, who is in 7th grade and has an IEP for ASD, PTSD, and reactive attachment disorder, and Sarah who is in 5th grade and has a 504 plan for reactive attachment disorder. Amy faced challenges in navigating the IEP process and advocating for what she felt were appropriate services and accommodations for Kate. They have changed schools after inadequate services and staff training and hired an attorney to secure the IEP in the second school after repeated denials from the staff. Amy's opinion of teachers is overwhelmingly supportive, and she shows that support by providing snacks and treats for the class each quarter and volunteering wherever she can. Amy has also been frustrated with the exhaustion of advocating for her child due to Kate's routine absence from school on Mondays to receive therapy, which is outlined in her IEP. This frustration has led her to want to support other families going through the same struggles and she hopes to form a parent group and run for the school board one day so she can support families with children like Kate.

Themes

In this section, I present summaries of participants' experiences after analysis. Embedded within each summary are quotes from interview transcripts to support the findings. The findings were grouped into meaning units, which were grouped into themes per the data analysis procedures outlined in the methodology chapter. The table below shows the seven major themes with frequent subthemes and their appearance in participant interview transcripts.

The findings are written to be understandable and identifiable to any person who has had a similar experience. The emotions of the participants affect the meaning behind their words, so

expressions, body language, and visible emotional responses are included in the descriptions. Each summary begins with similarities between families, but differences between experiences are also noted when they emerged during the interview and analysis processes.

Finally, I added a section below each theme to summarize how that theme aligns to the study's research questions, which were:

1. How do Kansas public school students with documented exceptionalities and their families experience exclusionary discipline practices?
2. What perceived effects, if any, do Kansas public school exclusionary discipline practices have on the lived experience of students with documented exceptionalities?

Summary of Themes

Access

Across participant families, obtaining and retaining access to appropriate services was consistently described as adversarial. Families reported delays, denials, and dismissals even when they felt needs were obvious; Brooklyn shared, "They said she wasn't severe enough. But she's falling through the cracks. Isn't that what support is for?" This points to severity-based gatekeeping that contradicts the purpose of early and appropriate support (addresses RQ1). Academic success was often cited to deny behavioral or social-emotional support; Julie noted, "She's got straight As, so they said she didn't need an IEP. Meanwhile, I'm getting calls every week." This shows how grades were used as a blunt proxy for need despite ongoing behavior concerns (addresses RQ1). The White family hired legal counsel, sharing, "We had to hire an attorney just to get the IEP. Without him, they would have just kept saying no." This illustrates that access sometimes depended on legal pressure, adding financial and time strain to advocacy (addresses RQ2).

Gifted labels frequently overshadowed disability-related needs: Max said, “They told me I was gifted, but nothing changed for my ADHD or autism. It was like they only wanted the part of me that gets good grades,” which reflects masking, where enrichment displaced disability-specific supports (addresses RQ1). Brady similarly stated, “The time in gifted was a waste. I learned how to use my strengths on my own and with my parents.” This suggests enrichment alone did not meet core needs and shifted support work to families (addresses RQ2).

Families described goals so vague that they functioned punitively: Ashley pointed out, “His IEP said, ‘stay on task.’ That’s not a goal. That’s just a way to punish him when he can’t,” indicating that non-measurable language operated as a compliance directive rather than a teachable, supported skill (addresses RQ1). Her son Chase seconded, “They say I have to stay on task and it’s my goal. That’s just something they can use against me when I can’t sit still. They don’t know anything, and they don’t care.” This conveys a student’s loss of trust when “goals” become tools for blame instead of help (addresses RQ2).

Inconsistent implementation compounded harm: Sierra complained, “One teacher would let me take breaks, and then another wouldn’t. It just made me feel like I was being difficult, even though it was supposed to be an accommodation.” This shows how uneven delivery of accommodations creates stigma and self-doubt (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Even mothers with advanced training or experience in education met barriers: Cindy shared, “He has a 150 IQ, but they told me he didn’t qualify for gifted. How do you explain that?” highlighting rigid or inconsistent eligibility criteria (addresses RQ1); and Sage shared a similar experience, “I sat on the GEI team. And still, I had to fight tooth and nail.” This demonstrates that insider status did not remove systemic resistance (addresses RQ1).

Plans often privileged enrichment over disability supports: Violet said, “The IEP was all about enrichment. Nothing about autism or ADHD. Nothing,” indicating a strengths-only emphasis that left documented needs unaddressed (addresses RQ1); and Ruby stated, “They never talked about supports or supporting him. It was always about what he was doing wrong.” This reflects a deficit orientation that displaced accommodation and skill-building and eroded confidence in the process (addresses RQ2). Placement mismatches undermined progress as shown in Victoria’s statement: “He’s been in three different programs, and none of them fit. He was the only verbal kid, basically the helper to the teacher and not interacting with the other kids so not growing in social skills that he needs.” This suggests that inappropriate settings limited peer interaction and stalled targeted social-skill development (addresses RQ2).

Taken together, these accounts depict an adversarial path to services that are often intertwined with discipline: achievement was used to deny behavioral supports; gifted labels masked disability needs; vague goals enabled punitive responses; and inconsistent implementation eroded trust (addresses RQ1). In response, parents felt compelled to protect their children, which placed families and schools in conflict during and after incidents; the burden of consistent advocacy reshaped daily life and colored how students interpreted staff responses, diminishing engagement with schooling (addresses RQ2).

Discipline

Families described most school-issued disciplinary practices as exclusionary, stigmatizing, and traumatic, even as frequency and duration varied. They reported heavy use of suspensions in upper levels, isolation at lower levels, and the threat of physical restraint at all levels; Sierra shared, “Every time they pulled me out of class, I felt like everyone was looking at

me like I was the problem." This captures the lived experience of public removal and the stigma it created (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Two families shared some positive experiences, but no families cited proactive supports except for Sage, who secured them only "after endless meetings and discussions," yet "still" worries about staff changes; before those procedures, Sage shared, "She was restrained, put against the wall, and all the kids had to leave. Of course she was ashamed." This underscores how proactive supports were rare, hard-won, and fragile, and how restraint produced shame (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Public shaming practices left lasting harm: Brady said, "Carrying the clipboard was the worst part…Everyone knew when I was in trouble, even if it was something small" and Ruby shared, as she noted her lingering guilt over the experience, "That clipboard was a Scarlet Letter. Everyone knew when he was in trouble." These accounts show how visible markers normalized shaming and harmed identity for both student and family (addresses RQ2). Students' blunt or direct speech was disciplined as defiance rather than understood as disability-related behavior: Chase stated, "One time I made a joke, and she [the teacher] acted like I was being disrespectful...She made it worse by writing me up instead of just talking to me"; his mother, Ashley, also shared, "They wrote him up for having music on his phone—when that was his IEP accommodation." These examples show misinterpretation of disability-related communication and failure to honor accommodations (addresses RQ1) and how that misreading escalated consequences and eroded trust (addresses RQ2).

Families also described racialized differences: Brooklyn clarified, "If you're a Black boy, you're sent to the office. My son got punished for the same thing his white friends got away

with." This points to differential treatment for the same behaviors and the added burden of race in discipline (addresses RQ1) and the fear and vigilance it produced (addresses RQ2).

Threats of police involvement escalated fear and shame: Victoria shared, "They told us if he didn't calm down, they'd handcuff him. He was eleven," and Max seconded the experience, "They said if I didn't stop [raising their voice in argument], they'd call the officer...it just made me feel like a criminal." These threats reframed school as a policing space and left students feeling criminalized (addresses RQ2).

Isolation rooms and "safe seats" functioned as punishment: Cindy Shaw observed, "They called it a safe seat, but it was punishment. He started to hate school" and "They told him Officer [name redacted] was going to come get him. He was ten years old." These practices illustrate how exclusionary responses were embedded in daily routines and increased school aversion (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Exclusion also bled into attendance and instruction: Amy pointed out, "They counted her therapy as truancy...I offered them a solution to give the services in school and even pay for the specialists to come to the school, but they didn't like that either." Amy felt trapped by the school procedures when advocating for her daughter – the school simply seemed to want to punish the family. This shows procedural barriers that prioritized punishment over problem-solving and added stress at home (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Julie asserted, "They sat her in ISS all day with no work. A teacher walked by and said, 'Oh, the rumor's true—you're back'." This captures lost instructional time and the reinforcement of stigma through staff comments (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Overall, families emphasized that these practices did not build skill, offer support, or teach co-regulation; instead, they damaged relationships, increased stress and negative

associations with school, promoted misunderstanding of adolescent development and exceptionalities, and reinforced negative self-labeling—leaving students feeling criminalized and families isolated (addresses RQ2). At the same time, the descriptions of isolation rooms, "safe seats," removals from class, ISS without work, and threats of restraint or police involvement show that exclusionary responses remained routine and visible across grade levels (addresses RQ1).

School Staff Relationships

Students thrived or withdrew largely in response to staff support and rapport. Sierra shared, "The teachers who got me just let me move a little or listen to music, and then I could actually focus. The ones who didn't just thought I was being disrespectful or lazy." The difference here is interpretive: honoring simple regulation needs improved attention, while misreading student behavior invited punitive responses (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Brady noticed the contrast as well: "Some teachers looked for me to mess up. Like they already knew. My [football] coach asks questions and doesn't hold stuff against me. He wants me to be my best." Anticipatory bias versus relational coaching set the tone for discipline and belonging (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). For Max, the perception differences were clear: "I was blunt, but some teachers saw it as honesty. Others called it rude. It depended on who was in front of me…I felt like there were a few who listened to me...the gifted teacher did." Cindy saw two trajectories in one child: "When he had a good teacher, he wrote more than ever. When he had a bad one, he shut down." Classroom climate toggled participation and withdrawal (addresses RQ1 and RQ2) Identity-aware interpretations of behavior lowered conflict; deficit readings escalated it (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Not every interaction modeled care. Ruby Neil reported, "His teacher challenged him to an arm-wrestling match to prove a point. Who does that?" Boundary-crossing behavior

damaged trust and modeled confrontation rather than co-regulation (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Violet underscored the role of identity-aware practice: “His gifted teacher got them. She let them be blunt without punishing them.” Understanding behaviors associated with exceptionalities allows staff to see those behaviors as difference, not defiance, which prevents unnecessary referrals (addresses RQ1). Sometimes belief alone kept students going. Brooklyn shared, “One teacher believed in me. I still think about her. She kept me going when everyone else said I wasn’t smart enough.” A single affirming adult functioned as a protective factor for identity and persistence (addresses RQ2).

In addition to school staff interpretations of individual student behaviors, teaching practices impacted student experience. Chase discussed the link between pedagogy and his engagement: “In choir and in my hunting class we are doing stuff, not filling out worksheets or taking notes...My chemistry teacher just stands at the front and takes notes on the projector, and we’re supposed to follow along. I liked science before that. That is stupid. Kids hate it.” Active learning supported regulation and engagement, while passive lectures invited disengagement (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Leaning into strengths lifted engagement. Ashley emphasized, “He loves choir and hunting. When teachers tie learning to that, he shines.” Interest-aligned work increased motivation and on-task behavior (addresses RQ2).

When school staff communicated effectively with families and between team members, they were coordinated and families felt it. Amy pointed out, “Her current team – the psychologist, psychiatrist, principal – they’re all in it together. That makes all the difference.” Consistency across adults stabilized responses and reduced crises (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Additionally, a shift in language could reset a team. Sage affirmed, “One administrator said, ‘She needs a break, not a punishment.’ That language changed everything.” Framing steered adults

toward support rather than sanctions (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Gaps in information often fueled misreadings. Julie Lane shared, “Teachers didn’t even know she had a 504. They just treated her like she was defiant.” Missing accommodation knowledge turned supports into infractions and eroded trust (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Misinformation, missing information, language shifts, and collaboration all affect the experience of students and their families when navigating public school spaces. Unfortunately, even committed leaders could not offset inconsistencies in information or application. Ricky lamented, “The principal tries, but some staff just escalate things until they blow up.” Uneven practice undercut leadership intent and accelerated conflict (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). And in formal spaces, narratives diverged. Cindy noted that reports from two of Lucas’s teachers read like accounts of different children, which shows how daily micro-interactions accumulate into conflicting portraits with real consequences (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Across accounts, the everyday choices of school staff to accommodate or correct, inquire or assume, connect or control, determined whether discipline functioned as supportive and preventive or punitive and escalating (addresses RQ1). Those choices communicated either affirmation or isolation, shaping students’ efficacy, identity, agency, engagement, and willingness to seek help across settings (addresses RQ2).

Parent Agency and Advocacy

Across family accounts, advocacy was relentless, exhausting, but essential to obtain and maintain equitable practices. Parents believed that without their intervention, and sometimes even with it, their child’s needs would not be addressed. Overall, parents described the experience as adversarial and spoke more about advocating for supports than they did about disciplinary incidents or their effects. Ruby lamented, “Every meeting, every call, it’s a fight.

People think I'm a nag, but if I don't, who will?" The quote frames advocacy as constant negotiation to access basic supports (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Ashley pointed out, "If I stay quiet, he doesn't get what he needs. If I speak up, I'm the problem parent." Here, parents were positioned as either ineffective or adversarial, narrowing options for collaboration (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). In addition to the emotional and energy toll, the families' advocacy work was costly and constant in professional spaces: Sage shared, "I'd step out of meetings so they could talk freely but then step back in to fight for her. It's exhausting." This captures how even careful, strategic participation drained time and emotional energy (addresses RQ2). Amy spent hours in meetings and hired counsel: "We shouldn't have to hire lawyers to get our kids help." Access hinged on legal leverage, adding financial burden to already heavy advocacy (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Families juggled records, schedules, and multiple children: Victoria admitted, "I keep track of every paper, every call. Ricky leaves work to pick him up every Monday." Advocacy spilled into logistics that rearranged jobs and daily life (addresses RQ2). Surprisingly, professional expertise did not guarantee agency. Cindy conceded, "I know my background intimidates them. I try not to come in guns blazing, but I know what's best for my son," and Julie seconded the issue when she indicated, "I risk everything when I push back." Even insiders faced resistance and reputational risk when asserting needs, further showing the potential social and professional cost of advocacy (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Advocacy efforts impacted family relationships and homelife. The advocacy also reflected lived histories and values and in several instances, spanned generations. Brooklyn Jackson cautioned, "I lived it. I had teachers abuse me. That's why I will never stop speaking up for my kids," and Violet shared, "People said, 'Just spank him.' They don't understand autism. They don't get it." Past harm and disability misunderstanding fueled persistence and shaped how

families approached schools (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Students recognized both the burden and the benefit of having parents who advocated for them within educational systems. Sierra shared, "I know my mom has talked to teachers for me...I don't always like it, but I know it's the reason I get help...now she supports my therapy," and Chase agreed, "My mom would talk to the coaches or the counselor...She knows it's stupid too." These reflections acknowledge advocacy as a lifeline that secured supports, even when it complicated peer or teacher dynamics (addresses RQ2). Max emphasized, "My mom was the only one who explained that being blunt was part of autism...mostly she helped me at home." When schools fell short, families shouldered interpretation and support work themselves (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Even when families tried to balance accountability and support, the load remained heavy: Brady shared, "My parents were always at the school...Sometimes that is better, and I can just keep moving forward...It's my last year and we know I won't be here [in the school] forever." Advocacy sustained progress in the short term but also marked time—families counted down to relief rather than repair (addresses RQ2).

Taken together, parents described becoming perpetual negotiators—emailing, calling, meeting, documenting, sometimes hiring attorneys, and navigating insider–outsider roles—in direct response to service denials and exclusionary events (addresses RQ1). Those efforts carried real costs in time, stress, and strained roles and relationships at home, even as they often improved a child's access to help (addresses RQ2). In this way, advocacy functioned as a burden for families but as a lifeline for the children.

Inequity and Bias

Families described how equity and bias shaped experiences at the intersections of race, disability or exceptionality, socioeconomic status, and social or professional standing. Brooklyn

asserted, “They told me my head wrap wasn’t allowed. They ignored racial slurs. My kids live that every day.” The account points to uneven rule enforcement and the added burden of race in day-to-day discipline (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). In addition to racial bias, ability labels or labels inherited from past experiences narrowed how staff interpreted behavior. Brady shared, “I felt like once people decided I was a bad kid, that’s all they saw. I couldn’t shake it,” and Ruby Neil concurred, “The community decided he was a ‘bad kid.’ No one saw anything else.” These reflections show how reputational labeling channels staff responses and reinforces biases over time (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Additionally, Ashley underscored, “Once you’re labeled special ed, that’s all people see,” and Chase lamented, “People call you ‘special ed’ like it means you’re dumb...My coach called me ‘Sped’...that made me mad a little...but mostly sad.” Here, disability labeling functioned as a stigma that shaped treatment and eroded identity, which in turn eroded trust in school staff and added to the risk of student disengagement (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). In addition to labels, disability-related traits were frequently framed as defiance. Max shared, “People thought I was being smart-alecky, but I was just being direct. That’s autism, not attitude,” and Violet acknowledged, “He’s blunt. That’s autism. But they call it disrespect.” These misreadings converted differences into misconduct, inviting punitive responses rather than support (addresses RQ1) and undermining trust and self-concept (addresses RQ2).

Dual-exceptionality also impacted experience. Gifted status both masked needs and blocked services. Sierra shared, “Being in gifted meant I was supposed to be good at everything...I felt like the stupid gifted kid...I couldn’t focus,” revealing how a strengths-based label eclipsed attention and regulation needs (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). In contrast, Cindy stated, “Gifted? Not according to their numbers. Never mind his IQ was through the roof,” highlighting rigid criteria that denied access despite evidence and a miscommunication of criteria for services

that fueled mistrust from the family to the school (addresses RQ1). Even when a student was not labeled dual exceptional, achievement bias occurred. Julie also shared, “Her grades hid everything. So she didn’t get help until she ended up in a PRTF [psychiatric residential treatment facility].” This shows how achievement masked needs and delayed support until a crisis placement occurred, which highlights the lack of proactive supports in favor of reactive interventions (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

While the labeling and framing showed how bias impacts the day-to-day lives of staff and students by creating inequities, bias also created inequities in discipline and perceptions of safety. Sage emphasized, “If there was a conflict, she was the scapegoat. Every time,” pointing to patterned blame that fast-tracked consequences (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Victoria lamented, “Instead of training him in social skills in how to behave like they want, they threatened to cuff him...And then they call us to pick him up when he is losing it after being threatened.” Threats of policing and practices of exclusion and isolation escalated fear, dysregulation, and removal rather than proactively teaching lagging skills or implementing supports (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Threatening to involve the judicial system for disability-related behaviors is not only illegal, but unethical, and shows inequity in discipline systems, but also in communication systems as communication efforts varied in family experience and between staff members or staff building groups. Further inequities to access were stratified by resources. Amy emphasized, “Most parents don’t have money for attorneys...That’s why so many kids get left behind,” connecting service access and discipline alternatives to family means (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Across accounts, families perceived inequity as a throughline: racialized enforcement, stigmatizing labels, misinterpretation of disability traits, achievement masking, and rigid eligibility rules shaped how discipline and services were delivered (addresses RQ1). Those

dynamics, in turn, eroded trust, harmed identity, narrowed agency, and altered trajectories across social, behavioral, and academic domains, which left families feeling the need to be vigilant and students feeling a lack of efficacy (addresses RQ2).

Family Strain

When families struggled to navigate schooling or special education, the impact extended beyond the student and strained the whole household—finances, schedules, and employment. Julie Lane shared, "My husband quit his job to deal with the school calls. I got judged at work. My younger daughter was treated like she was trouble too." School-based crises spilled into employment and sibling identity, reshaping daily life at home (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Victoria asserted, "CPS came to our door because of his mom. We were terrified." This shows how institutional surveillance amplified fear and destabilized the family (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). In addition to the strain on the household, strain occurred in sibling dynamics and identity development. Sierra shared, "I felt bad for my brother and sister sometimes...I just kept not getting it right," and Max contended, "My sister would ask why I got away with things...She didn't like me for a long time," while Sage explained, "Her brother thinks it's unfair—why does she get away with it? That hurts." Perceived inequity within the household became another consequence of school struggles, affecting how siblings related and how students saw themselves (addresses RQ2). Family strain was compounded in single-caregiver homes as the advocacy efforts, and their resulting role tensions, were not shared between both parents. Chase acknowledged, "I know my mom has had to help me a lot...it's just me and her, so she kind of has to," and Cindy affirmed, "It's hard being both the mom and the professional. Sometimes they resent me for it." Caregivers carried dual roles and hard choices, with relationship strain as a byproduct (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Family strain was felt poignantly in the home and between familial relationships, but was also felt outside, in community spaces through social relationship development and access to opportunities, and within, through individual emotional wellbeing. Many families experienced social fallout. Ruby shared, “We couldn’t go to a ballgame without whispers...we stopped being invited to things, even his brother stopped getting invited.” Community judgment extended school stigma into public spaces (addresses RQ2). Within many participants, the emotional toll was stubbornly consistent: Brooklyn noted, “I hear those teachers in my head: ‘You’re not smart enough.’ It still hurts”; Amy said, “I’m exhausted. But I know we’re lucky compared to some”; Ashley described, “I can’t win. I either say nothing, or I fight and get labeled difficult.” These reflections capture lasting shame, fatigue, and double binds that eroded trust and wellbeing (addresses RQ2).

Across accounts, school strain led to home strain: exclusionary episodes and service conflicts cascaded into logistics, employment disruptions, sibling tension, and caregiver role stress (addresses RQ1). The effects were often negative, fatigue, guilt, shame, social isolation, loss of efficacy, and ongoing emotional labor, leaving many feeling “frazzled,” “isolated,” “tired,” and “lost,” even as some families later described growth and found, informal supports that are discussed in the following section (addresses RQ2).

Supports and Growth

Systemic and personal challenges did not prevent meaningful growth when support was intentional either through staff, outside professionals, or persistent parental advocacy. Families described concrete classroom moves they could mirror at home even when they were not reliably implemented at school, such as planned breaks, co-regulation, extracurricular anchors, and role-play or practicing social stories, which are elements of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and

Restorative Justice practices discussed previously in the literature review. Skill and identity gains followed: Sierra remembered where acts of teacher affirmation built confidence, “When a teacher told me I was good at writing, it felt huge...And then I joined forensics and I was good at that too.” Small affirmations opened academic identity and participation by impacting student self perception and labeling (addresses RQ2). Brady asserted that physical activity and a safe space acted as a buffer by empowering him to make it through spaces where he felt judged, “Lifting weights gave me confidence...My coaches support me.” Regulated, strength-based spaces functioned as protection and motivation (addresses RQ2). Max remarked that they found two supports within an environment that largely felt aversive and stressful, “The gifted teacher let me be blunt and still respected me...The ELA teacher...let me rant in my writing.” School staff modeling respect for communication style and expressive outlets, which are hallmarks of proactive Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) approaches, reduced conflict and increased student engagement (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Chase shared similar experiences, “Wrestling and hunting are what I’m good at...I like choir too.” Interest-aligned activities anchored belonging and engagement behaviors (addresses RQ2).

In addition to skill development and proactive approaches, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) strategies appeared in family narratives. Targeted positive reinforcement and therapy mattered: Amy shared, “Snacks and buzz bucks...actually help...the therapy...is essential to her growth.” Layered supports, such as those outlined in the literature review under MTSS, paired skill practice with inside- and outside-school resources, such as clinical care (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Families amplified strengths and relationships: Ruby explained, “He’s strong-willed...that’s the same strength that’ll make him successful...routines and group sports has helped with that impulsiveness.” Home routines and structured teams

channeled traits into assets (addresses RQ2). The connections made between positive spaces and teachers and the students was catalytic: Ashley observed, “He’s a different kid in choir...one teacher gave him a color chart…It really helped him…he just needs someone to connect with him.” Relational cues plus simple visual tools stabilized behavior (addresses RQ1 and RQ2).

Caregiver modeling, including the proactive approaches of role-play and social stories, contributed to effective positive change. Brooklyn highlighted, “I’m finishing my degree...my kids see me do it.” Adult persistence modeled agency, persistence for long-term goals, and future orientation (addresses RQ2). Simple regulation strategies, such as those taught in SEL, helped: Cindy stated, “When he can move around…he’s himself again.” Movement breaks acted as low-lift preventions (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). In addition to proactive supports, supports were implemented after occurrences and wins were celebrated across families. Sage reported, “The day she handled a [peer] conflict without exploding – we took her out for ice cream.” This recognition, similar to an immediate classroom reward used in PBIS models, reinforced emerging self-regulation (addresses RQ2). In line with Restorative Justice practices, alignment with safety and appropriate fit were pivotal: Violet recounted, “The [medication] helped [him manage his behaviors]. But it was the gifted teacher who really made him feel safe.” As noted in the relationship section, more than other supports, trust with a single adult amplified the perceived benefit of all other supports, including clinical (addresses RQ2).

Systems changes, including changes in environment, offered potential for positive growth and change: Julie Lane emphasized, “The PRTF [Psychiatric Residential Treatment Facility] gave us hope that she’ll get an IEP when she comes back.” Policy and placement shifts reopened access to services (addresses RQ1 and RQ2). Practice built skills over time: Victoria reflected, “Role-play helps him. He still struggles, but we see progress. He is going to a summer school

program where they teach social skills and I think it will help. Some days he is doing well there" and she also noted "He is close to [his little sister, name redacted], and he watches and learns when I teach her…that seems to help a lot." Iterative coaching—at school and at home—translated into gradual gains (addresses RQ2).

Across accounts, families frequently offered counterexamples that contrasted with negative episodes: co-regulation, predictable routines, extracurricular anchors, general-education teachers honoring IEP supports, and PBIS practices, such as breaks, student-led tasks, clear communication, and rewards. These are glimpses of discipline handled relationally and restoratively, not punitively (addresses RQ1). Not every family reported school-based positives; a few described growth arising mainly from home advocacy and personal resilience. Still, when supports were present, participants perceived them as protective and beneficial, building parental agency, student confidence and developing identity, and a slow return of engagement and belonging in educational spaces over time (addresses RQ2).

Similarities Across Families

Each family initially experienced either barriers or denial of appropriate services from the school staff even when the needs felt obvious to the families and when the parent advocate had prior experience with special education or student advocacy. Additionally, each family began their interviews describing punitive discipline, exclusion, and social stigmatization instead of supportive interventions. In two instances, these situations improved with continued family advocacy and a change in classroom teachers, classroom procedures, or school administration. Classroom teachers, coaches, counselors, and administrators greatly impact the experience of the student and family within the school system and beyond to other systems with which the student and their families interact. When school staff were consistently empathetic and understanding,

the student experienced success, but when school staff were rigid or when they misinterpreted student behavior, these actions led to harmful outcomes. In addition to school staff dispositions, systemic inequities changed a student's and their family's agency and access to support. Examples of these inequities include racial bias, placement status, school interpretation of criteria for services and supports, and misunderstanding or misinterpretation of exceptionalities, skill deficits, disabilities, and behaviors.

Across families, what was often described as "the school" was, in effect, a description of the perceived school climate. Rudasill et al. (2018) define climate as the shared perceptions of norms, relationships, and practices within a school system. In this study, families' descriptions of chronic exclusion, inconsistent accommodations, and racialized discipline illustrate a climate in which safety and fairness were unevenly distributed. Conversely, accounts of individual teachers who "got" their students and teams that "were all in it together" reflected pockets of positive classroom climate operating within a broader system that often felt adversarial. These patterns echo Rudasill and colleagues (2018) assertion that climate is produced by ongoing interactions across system levels rather than by single policies. Families did not experience discipline as a neutral enforcement of rules; they experienced it as a climate signal about whether their children were valued, safe, and understood.

Connection to Framework

My chosen theoretical framework, hermeneutic phenomenology, was applied with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory as a priori analysis system after the initial coding process as described in the data analysis section of Chapter 3. After compiling the themes from the coding process, I pulled quotations from the transcripts that supported the themes. When this was complete, I analyzed the data again with a lens of each system within Bronfenbrenner's

(1981) model. He asserts that child development is influenced by systems, which may include, but are not limited to, biological, interpersonal, social, and cultural factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). The experience of the participants is unique. While all children develop in contexts specific to their experience that are distinctive to their individual and environmental circumstances that result in different outcomes, children with disabilities and exceptionalities often confound or surprise adult preconceptions of typical child development (Heward, 2013).

Therefore, a systematic view of their experience can assist in delineating actions or areas where support is needed. Bronfenbrenner's holistic way of viewing development pairs easily with hermeneutic phenomenology as they both consider context; the systems theory considers how a child is shaped, or develops, by different contexts and hermeneutic phenomenology interprets the meaning of experience of a phenomenon within context as it asserts that no experience is free from interpretation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Moustakas, 1994). By pairing these two frameworks, I have a fuller picture of family experiences with advocacy, disability and exceptionality, and discipline by situating them within the context in which they occur.

My findings support a systems view of school climate and discipline. Rudasill et al. (2018) argued that improving student outcomes requires attention to climate processes at multiple levels rather than focusing narrowly on individual students. Families in this study repeatedly showed how exclusionary discipline, vague IEP goals, and inconsistent accommodations were not isolated missteps but features of a climate that prioritized control and compliance over relationship and support. When schools invest in relational practices, restorative responses, and predictable, caring routines, they are not only issuing effective discipline; they are reshaping climate conditions that make exclusionary responses less likely (Rudasill et al., 2018). This aligns with my participants' counterexamples, where a single supportive classroom or

extracurricular space shifted a student's trajectory, even when broader system patterns remained harsh.

Microsystem

Because the microsystem sits closest to the child, it often has the strongest effect on development. Families described how immediate settings, such as home dynamics and classroom interactions with peers and staff, shaped daily life. At home, Rachel King described the strain of explaining to Beth and Brad why Sierra's expectations differed, showing how differing needs affected sibling relationships. In classrooms, Sierra remembered, "One teacher would let me take breaks, and then another wouldn't. It just made me feel like I was being difficult." Brady said weightlifting gave him a sense of control, highlighting how extracurricular spaces can affirm identity. Cindy observed that teachers either encouraged or dismissed Lucas's creativity, directly shaping his engagement. And for Chase, belonging grew in places like choir and wrestling, even as some teachers and coaches misread his humor and intentions. Together, these accounts show how affirmation or alienation in the microsystem can tip a student toward feeling capable and supported, or toward feeling rejected and stigmatized, often through seemingly small adult decisions.

Mesosystem

A person's mesosystem is a system of their microsystems, which means that when a microsystem extends to interact with at least one other microsystem a mesosystem occurs (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Therefore, interactions between home, school, place of employment, and social life are mesosystems. Further adding evidence to the appropriateness of conducting this research with the ecological systems framework, Bronfenbrenner (1981) argues that other than the family unit, the institutions that serve children are the only other "setting that serves as a

comprehensive context for human development," which is important because context between these two interworking systems illuminates the impact of these settings on a child's development over time (p. 132). The family unit experiences discipline together, and students' families play a significant role in the student's function within the school, as families of students are partners with the educational system, charged with the academic, social, and emotional development of the student (Lareau, 2022).

Formal and informal communication between microsystems is a mesosystem. Victoria, Violet, and Ruby all discussed how little communication was sent, especially during middle school years, from school staff even when their children experienced formal discipline. Parents were forced to rely on reports from their children, which the parents found frustrating, especially when they had to reach out to the school for clarification. In the three most extreme instances of EDP, students were isolated and only after the child reacted out of their dysregulation, did the school staff contact parents. Martin was found several times self-isolated as a result of elopement but was also placed alone in a "focus room," which is his school's equivalent of temporary in-school suspension or time-out. The Garcia family was not notified until Martin was overwhelmed into a stress response, kicking and yelling on the floor. The school administrators called Ricky to remove Martin from the school premises, but no formal communication or discipline was issued. Victoria arrived and was told by an administrator that they were prepared to have the school resource officer, who was also in the room, handcuffed and physically restrained Martin.

Connections between home and school revealed both collaboration and conflict, with parents often serving as bridges when systems failed. Ruby recounted that advocacy had become a daily reality, as discipline consistently overshadowed discussions of support and tended to

become the focus of discussions at home as well. Ashley emphasized the strain of balancing constant school communication with supporting Chase through his frustration and schoolwork at home, which left her feeling equally frustrated and drained.

Dual roles of parents operate in the mesosystem because they participate actively in both home and school settings (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Cindy described the blur of being both a school psychologist and Lucas's mother in meetings, while Sage recalled stepping out of IEP meetings so staff could speak candidly before reentering to advocate – an insider-outsider dance that captured the strain of occupying conflicting roles across settings. Ruby Neil's "every meeting, every call, it's a fight" statement underscored how advocacy often replaced partnership when school responses defaulted to discipline over support.

The mesosystem also included real-time coordination among family members, as when Brooklyn messaged her older daughters during the interview to clarify school details. The mesosystem also impacted coordination with schedules, as the Lane household adjusted work and routines around frequent school calls. Together, these accounts show how the mesosystem amplified stress yet also created the bridges families needed: even when exhausting, advocacy connected home and school in ways that shaped access to services, the tone of relationships, and the trajectory of students' daily experience.

Exosystem

The exosystem refers to settings that affect a person without their direct participation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In this study, district special education criteria and discipline policies, public services, and workplaces shaped family experience even when parents or students were not present or directly involved in those settings. District and school rules that impact the classroom set the terms for home life: parents in dual roles, such as advocate and teacher leader

or educational psychologist, described emotional strain, with Cindy balancing professional knowledge and motherhood, Brooklyn developing distrust of systems, and Victoria feeling increasingly helpless and stressed by meetings. These indirect forces also altered family dynamics. Melody's sister felt the weight of her sister's reputation impacting her own classroom experience, Brady's social isolation spilled into his parent's and older sibling's peer relationships, and Sierra carried guilt as the "problem child."

Decisions at the federal, state, and district level impacted eligibility criteria and availability of support systems. Ashley described persistent barriers to behavioral supports for Chase despite clear needs. Victoria noted that Max's IEP focused only on gifted enrichment, overlooking ASD and ADHD, which shows system priorities. Sierra and Brady reported that gifted labels overshadowed other needs, leaving them misunderstood and isolated in both general and gifted settings. Across accounts, policies and institutional practices, school, work, and insurance operated at a distance yet exerted powerful influence on family stability and student well-being.

Macrosystem

The macrosystem encompasses the cultural ideologies, belief systems, and broad norms that shape and align the inner systems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Just as French cafes share recognizable features, American public schools exhibit consistent structures and expectations despite local variation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Within this layer, families encountered cultural values that normalized bias and inequity. Cognitive bias was pervasive: unconscious attitudes and stereotypes influenced how adults interpreted behavior and justified decisions, a pattern visible in the data when viewed as a "behavioral phenomenon rather than a mental structure" (De Houwer, 2019, p. 836). Julie recounted that her daughter was denied a behavior IEP because her

grades were too high, revealing achievement bias. Similar logic appeared for Brady and Rachel, where implicit assumptions about giftedness suggested that skill in one area implied skill in all areas.

Families also describe gender and racial bias. Some comments dismissed boys' needs with "just a boy, he'll grow out of it," while Brady heard "be a man" from coaches and was framed as "a boy acting like a boy" by a disciplinary team. Sierra reported being dismissed by an administrator as a girl, and Max described feeling isolated and disliked due to gender nonconformity. Racial bias surfaced starkly. Brooklyn shared, "My daughter's head wrap was not allowed at school, but when racial slurs were directed at her, nothing was done," and she described racist disciplinary experiences for her older daughters and middle-school son, expressing fear that inequities fall hardest on darker-skinned children.

Ableism also threaded through these accounts, including intergenerational patterns in Brooklyn's family, where her mother's experiences with the special education system reflected and reproduced systemic ableism through Brooklyn's own schooling experience. Across the narratives, students were disciplined for behaviors related to exceptionalities and disabilities, contradicting federal protections for SWE (IDEA, 2004; Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973). Taken together, these narratives show how macrosystem beliefs about achievement, gender, race, and disability filter into everyday decisions, align practices across settings, and ultimately shape who is seen as capable or deserving of support.

Chronosystem

Across families, time functioned as more than a backdrop as in Bronfenbrenner's first EST publication (1977), it became an active participant in the development of the individual as he described in his later publication (1981); time shaped meaning and individual development.

He described microtime, which is what occurs during an interaction within a EST system and mesotime, which is a pattern of interaction during a short timeframe, such as a week, which would show frequency and duration (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Lastly, there is macrotime, which is broader and encompasses historical time (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). For this study, examples of each would be microtime as a teacher redirection of student behavior, mesotime as inconsistent implementation of school supports by the teacher or different teachers toward the student, and macrotime as cultural norms, such as inclusivity and ability-based language use, or policy, such as zero-tolerance practices to MTSS. Additionally, time is also described by Bronfenbrenner (1981) in transitions and turning points, which, for this study, could be moves between schools and grade levels, staffing changes, and legal support changes, such as individualized support plans. Time of experience also matters; for example, an exclusionary experience in early elementary carries a different weight, meaning, implications, and consequences, than a first exclusionary experience in upperclassman high school grade levels (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Therefore, timing of first experiences and experiences accumulated across years, transitions, and policy shifts, influenced how students and parents interpreted their present state. Sierra described inconsistent support from one year to the next, which eroded trust and pushed her to "handle things on her own." Leah's trajectory split sharply. Her kindergarten class felt safe and nurturing, while first grade became a turning point that introduced stress and family strain. Chase found stability in choir and wrestling even as classroom responses were negative, and Max recalled periods when gifted identification eclipsed other needs before coaches helped him reframe his strengths more accurately. Parents also noticed system movement: Ashley described how school responses changed as behaviors escalated, and Julie observed safety concerns that intensified over time.

Memory threaded through these shifts. Families often juxtaposed a hard year with a better one, a punitive response with a restorative one, and those comparisons became the lens through which they read current events. In this sense, recall was interpretive, not static. Early episodes were retold in light of later experiences, refining how families understood cause, responsibility, and possibility. Brooklyn carried intergenerational memories of bias and special education into her advocacy, which strengthened her insistence on dignity for her children. Over time, what began as isolated incidents coalesced into narratives of either repair or rupture.

The chronosystem also captured movement from resignation to growth. Some students and parents described "survival mode" periods—frequent calls, removals, or meetings that narrowed attention to getting through each day. Yet many accounts paired strain with hope. Brady reframed early frustration as information about what mattered to him and found identity and control in weightlifting, with coaches reinforcing that growth. Parents frequently balanced negative interactions with examples of relational skill-building and small wins, signaling belief that the system could do better and that their children could flourish within it.

Taken together, the chronosystem in these accounts was a memory-in-motion: past experiences shaped present expectations, present supports revised the meaning of the past, and both informed families' sense of what the future might hold. The Neil family was excited about almost graduating from formal schooling, while Julie expressed fears of what may happen once her daughter graduates. Growth emerged where relationships stayed steady across transitions, where staff responses became more positive and consistent year to year, and where families' advocacy shifted systems from crisis management to skill-building and belonging.

Summary

As Peoples (2020) suggests, I looked for themes that were common to all and to most of the participants and made notes where significant differences existed. This is important to accurately describe the experiences that are unique to each participant, to demonstrate ethical research practice and to help develop my ideas about the phenomenon.

Within the mesosystem of schools, Families consistently face barriers to accessing and determining appropriate services, such as IEPs, outside therapy, or accommodations. Families feel their school systems are reactive and resistant. Some families reported needing constant advocacy to obtain and keep services that align with what the family believes are the child's needs. Discipline is consistently punitive, stigmatizing, or misaligned with the student's needs, which are a catalyst for negative self-labeling and dysregulation or stress for the student and fueling distrust from the families. This is an example of the mesosystem influencing the microsystem. Success or failure is hinged on teacher, coach, or administrator attitudes and actions based on their interpretations of the student's behavior. Some behaviors are seen as defiance or disengagement instead of attributes of a disability or exceptionality and were especially impactful, by sparking feelings of shame, when part of the child's microsystem of a classroom of peers. As described above, when the micro and mesosystems interacted, it was mostly reported negatively. Advocacy is an important support for the student, but a burden on the family. Families experienced significant relational, emotional, and financial strain due to advocacy efforts. The strain is multi-faceted and long-lasting as struggles leak into exosystems, such as the parents' workplaces and microsystems, such as family interpersonal relationships, family finances, and developing ideas about identity for the student.

Within the exosystem, primary care givers, which were overwhelmingly mothers even in homes where the daily care duties were shared, were the central advocates for their students, but the role is exhausting and seems to carry potential for social stigma in the schools, even when the mothers were teachers in their student's building, which is a complication where the exosystem and mesosystems interact. Within the families, within the home and school, there were observations about inequities in treatment between students of the same family. The inequities were systemic, but also intersectional – race, gender, disability status and type, academic ability, and the family's ability to navigate the educational system changed the experience for each student and seems to shape how the school staff responded to each student.

Despite strain and challenges, students and their families are resilient and found or were provided some strategies or supports that were effective, which situates growth within the chronosystem. The participant families were resourceful and ultimately hopeful, even when relationships or the school system fell short of supporting the students' needs.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

Discussion

The purpose of this qualitative study was to describe the lived experiences of families and students who have exceptionalities and have experienced disciplinary exclusion from a Kansas public school. A phenomenological approach was used to describe the ways in which families are affected by the experience of navigating special education and school-issued discipline. My findings and the following discussion are situated inside the historical background and more recent patterns I traced in Chapter 2. Families' accounts of removal, isolation, and use of shame echoed the older authoritarian logics that valued order and separation over learning. The persistence of those logics helped explain why exclusion remained a routine response even when schools had access to better options.

This research extended previous research on school discipline and exceptionality (Gage et al., 2021; Green, et al., 2019; Hamovich, 2006; Klingner, 2022; Mellard & Seybert, 1996; Morgan et al., 2019; Weiner, 1972), inequity (Hirschfield, 2018; Nese et al., 2020; Nogurea, 2003; Ritter & Anderson, 2018; Skiba et al., 2014; Wald & Losen, 2015), increasing undesirable behaviors (Amemiya et al., 2020; Jacobsen, 2020; Owens et al., 2018), social-emotional outcomes (Jacobsen, 2020; Michail, 2012; Noltemeyer et al., 2012; Skiba et al., 2006; Smolkowski, 2023; Spaulding et al., 2010; Sterns & Sterns, 2017), and academic outcomes (Gregory et al., 2010) by centering on family narratives instead of institutional data. It also extended research on the teacher-student relationship (Bell, 2020; Gregory et al., 2016; Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Hamilton & DeThorne, 2021; Keane, 2023; Maki et al., 2022) and the teacher-parent or school-parent relationship (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Bell & Craig, 2023) by focusing only on Kansas public schools. Previous research established the existence of

disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices but rarely explores how these patterns are interpreted by those who experience them. By documenting the accounts of parents and students, the research illuminates how systemic inequalities are understood, resisted, and sometimes internalized within families.

The literature review chapter outlined legal architecture that in turn protected or further isolated students with exceptionalities. In this study, families still described informal removals, gatekeeping by severity, and delays that functioned like de facto exclusions. The gap between protections on paper and practice on the ground remained a central tension. Heavy reliance on exclusionary practices, especially in middle and secondary-grade accounts, matched the zero-tolerance era and the policy habits that grew from the Gun-Free Schools Act. Some families' stories suggested these were not isolated staff choices but district-level patterns that had become normalized, while others noted that the significant impact stemmed from isolated staff choices that communicated a preference of control over care, those staff choices would be impacted by district- or state-wide policies toward restorative, relational, and positive approaches.

Additionally, this study is inspired by Lareau (2011), which researched case studies that demonstrate how insider knowledge within educational systems, such as those held by Sage Warren and Cindy Shaw, can both empower and isolate parents. Their professional experience as educators and educational psychologists gave them tools for advocacy and an understanding of the processes, but it also heightened their awareness of inequities that less-informed families, such as the Garcia family, did not see, even when they had a sense of the injustices within the system.

A parent's agency affects their ability to advocate for their child. The ease of advocating and the need to advocate depends on school staff relationships. Successful advocating increases agency, unsuccessful advocating increases feelings of frustration and helplessness, which decreases advocacy, agency, and efficacy. The level of success in advocating affects ability to access support and resources. All of these things, in turn affect the outcomes: disciplinary experiences, inequities, amount of family strain, growth. Additionally, those outcomes impact each other, for example, exclusionary disciplinary experiences increase family strain and slow student developmental growth. The inequities families described in their advocacy efforts aligned with the disproportionality literature evidence from Chapter 2. Differential referrals, harsher consequences for some demographics for similar behaviors, and the masking of needs by achievement or gifted labels showed how race, disability, societal power, and status intersected in daily decisions. For example, when students had accommodations honored, expectations taught, harm repaired, or interests leveraged, families described the skill-building effects predicted by PBIS, SEL, and restorative approaches. These counterexamples demonstrated what changed when adults moved from exclusion to inclusion in relationships and practice.

Synthesis By Research Question

The research questions and themes from the data connect directly to the literature support in Chapter 2. Access speaks to Child Find, IDEA eligibility, and the policy to practice gap (IDEA, 2004; Skiba et al., 2002). Discipline reflects the zero-tolerance legacy and district habits (Skiba et al., 2006; 2014; Spaulding et al., 2010). Relationships illustrate the mechanisms PBIS that SEL predict (Simonsen et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2015). Advocacy exposes the costs families carry when systems do not work or are inconsistent (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015; Utting & Pugh, 2004). Inequity and bias mirror documented historical disproportionality and inequity (Ritter &

Anderson, 2018; Wald & Losen, 2015; Wiley & Ralph, 2025). Family strain shows collateral effects of EDP (Smolkowski, 2023). Supports and growth display what becomes possible under restorative practices and supports. Additionally, the data answered how the effects of EDP impact students and their families in all the themes of this study over time (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013; Bronfenbrenner, 1981). In the section below, I discuss how each theme answers the research questions of this study.

Research Question 1

How do Kansas public school students with documented exceptionalities and their families experience exclusionary discipline practices?

Access to supports was often described as a fight rather than a process. Families encountered narrow interpretations of eligibility and shifting standards. Julie was told that strong grades meant her daughter did not need formal services even as the family received repeated behavior calls. Brooklyn heard that her child was not severe enough and asked how a child could be falling through the cracks if systems existed to prevent exactly that. The White family needed an attorney to secure an Individualized Education Program. These stories illustrate how procedural gatekeeping reframed help as a privilege rather than a right. Chapter 2 situates this within broader patterns where adult systems lean on exclusion as a reactive response instead of prevention. Such reactions push help further out of reach and increase the burden on families.

For the theme of discipline, families describe that most discipline, but not all, was exclusionary and at times incorporated shame and isolation. Students and caregivers described exclusion as common and harmful. Families reported in school suspension without instruction, office cycles that removed students from learning, and threats of restraint or police involvement. Sierra felt marked when pulled from class. Brady described public shaming through a behavior

clipboard. Julie's child sat through a full day of in school suspension with no work. Victoria was told her son would be handcuffed if he did not calm down. Chapter 2 echoes these harms. In school suspension correlates with lower achievement and higher dropout, and exclusion tends to increase problem behavior rather than teach replacement skills. Families' accounts match that research and show how exclusion can become routine rather than extraordinary.

The theme of staff relationships shone throughout family accounts. Not only did families consistently judge daily experiences by the quality of relationships with school staff, but this was the area that was the most impactful lever in student wellbeing. Trusting adults de-escalated tense moments and made accommodations feel expected and normal rather than singled out as a need or disability, or simply refusing supports altogether. Sierra described two contrasting general education classrooms where in one, the teacher allowed small adjustments like movement and music to ease distractions and encourage focus. In another, the same behaviors drew accusations of disrespect and she was singled out in front of peers for her requests. Brady experienced a similar split. Some teachers seemed to expect him to fail while his coach asked questions to help refine needed supports and expected growth without excuse. These accounts align with Chapter 2 findings that the classroom teacher is the most influential variable in discipline because of the central role of relationship building in student engagement and behavior. Research indicates that many exclusions are issued for minor classroom behaviors (Amemiya et al., 2020), which implies that more relational and preventive classroom practices can reduce formal discipline (Chen et al., 2021; Gregory & Ripski, 2008).

Reinforcing the theme of inequity and bias, families saw discipline and access as stratified by race, diagnosis, and resources. Gifted identification sometimes masked disability-related needs, which delayed help for Sierra and complicated recognition of support needs for

Max. Amy noted that families without funds for counsel were more likely to be left behind. These reports fit Chapter 2 findings that students with exceptionalities face higher rates of exclusion and that disproportionality raises moral and ethical concerns. Connections to juvenile justice also appear in the literature, underscoring why families experience school discipline as high stakes.

Additionally, families described labels that stuck. Brady and Ruby felt that once a child was seen as a problem, every action was read through that lens. Ashley and Chase explained how the label special education became shorthand for low ability and a cue for peers and staff to treat a student as less capable. Max and Violet described directness related to autism being reframed as attitude and punished. Brooklyn reported racialized double standards that sent her child out for behaviors peers were allowed to correct in the room. Chapter 2 connects these patterns to deficit views and to research showing that when adults attribute behavior to fixed student traits rather than context, responses trend punitive. The literature also documents district-level variation in disparities, which means local practice can either reduce or intensify inequity.

For the theme of parental agency and advocacy, the narratives showed that caregivers became interpreters, negotiators, and record keepers to protect their children. Ruby described every meeting as a fight. Ashley felt caught between staying quiet and being labeled difficult. Sage stepped out to let staff talk freely and then stepped back in to push for help. Amy tracked hours of meetings and hired counsel. Cindy and Julie noted how being a professional in education could both help and complicate advocacy. Families' advocacy reshaped daily life and sometimes secured critical supports, but it also carried social and emotional costs. Chapter 2 links family school trust to student success and urges schools to build dependable communication so that partnership, rather than conflict, becomes the norm.

Throughout the accounts, resilience was expressed through informal supports and adaptive strategies. Even in difficult contexts, families named growth that came from safe people and safe spaces. Sierra traced confidence to a teacher who named her strengths and to a forensics class where she excelled. Brady found stability in athletics and a supportive coaching staff. Max described a gifted teacher who honored bluntness as honesty and an English teacher who welcomed intensity in writing. Ashley saw how choir and a simple color chart encouraged participation for her son, which reinforced research that shows positive interactions with the school build trust for families (Adams & Christensen, 2000; Ferguson, 2001). Amy credited reinforcement systems and therapy. Victoria and Violet saw progress through role play, movement, and a classroom where their children felt safe. These accounts align with Chapter 2 findings that positive and restorative approaches, as well as schoolwide positive behavior supports, can improve academic and social outcomes when implemented with care, monitoring, and fidelity (Nocera et al., 2014; Noltemeyer et al., 2012; Owens et al., 2018; Pettit, 2023).

Research Question 2

What perceived effects, if any, do Kansas public school exclusionary discipline practices have on the lived experience of students with documented exceptionalities?

For the theme of disciplinary experiences, families overwhelmingly perceived exclusion as teaching the wrong lesson to their students (Michail, 2012). Students learned to disengage, distrust adults, and internalize negative labels (Keane et al., 2023). Brady and Ruby both used the image of public shame to describe how exclusion followed a student through the day. Max and Chase linked punitive responses to misunderstanding disability related communication. Chapter 2 captures this dynamic. Exclusion for minor behaviors is common, tends to increase misbehavior, and is often rooted in mistaken attributions about students rather than about context

(Pianta, 2017; Weiner, 1972; Wettstein et al., 2023). That helps explain why families saw discipline not as instruction but as stigma.

The theme of family strain is shown when familied described how school decisions reverberated through their households. Julie reported a spouse leaving work to respond to calls and act as an advocate for their older daughter and how her younger sibling was being treated as "trouble" by association. Victoria described a threat from the school to involve the judicial system that terrified the family, echoing the negative research implications on schools partnering with school resource officers for EDP implementation (Fisher & Hennessy, 2016). Ruby shared social fallout as she overheard whispers and saw fewer invitations, which included revoked invitations for the older sibling in the household during his senior year. These instances are echoes of research outlining the many deleterious social impacts of EDP (Jacobsen, 2020; Morrison & Thorsborne, 2005; Smolkowski, 2023; Utting & Pugh, 2004). Single caregivers like Ashley and Brooklyn felt they could never do enough and cited how exhausted they felt. These effects match Chapter 2 where exclusion is associated with hidden costs in time, resources, and social capital, and with strain in family-school and inter-family relationships when communication is ineffective or unpredictable.

For the theme of inequity and bias, disparities noted by the families seemed to shape their perceptions of safety and fairness. Brooklyn contrasted responses to her child with responses to white peers for the same behaviors. Amy emphasized that legal help changed outcomes, which meant families with fewer resources endured longer delays and harsher consequences. Chapter 2 notes that district practices drive many disparities and that systems must be redesigned to address disproportionality through preventive schoolwide supports rather than through removal. Families in this study experienced those differences and adjusted their expectations of school accordingly.

For the theme of school staff relationships, the impact was shown when supportive adults noticed and responded to stress and opened access by providing support, initiating open communication, and building rapport. Julie described a team that worked together with clear roles and consistent follow-through. Ricky saw how inconsistent staff responses escalated crises even when the principal tried to help. Cindy noticed how two teachers could produce opposite outcomes for the same child. Chapter 2 points to the classroom as the key site where teacher actions can either prevent exclusion or trigger it. That literature helps explain why families in this study attributed large effects to small daily choices.

The theme of access was highlighted when schools used achievement or behavior to deny support, even when students declined socially and emotionally. Julie's daughter did not receive help until residential treatment became necessary. Families interpreted these delays as harmful in themselves because needs went unaddressed and behavior escalated. Chapter 2 shows that exclusion and delayed support are linked with lower achievement and higher risk of dropout, which is consistent with the trajectories families described.

The theme of parental agency and advocacy was illustrated in family narratives, in fact, it was the focus for every parent participant. Advocacy protected students but taxed caregivers. Ruby tracked every document and communication from the school. Amy logged meetings and coordinated outside providers. Cindy balanced being a parent and a professional. Students saw the benefits, even when they felt embarrassed by constant adult involvement. Chapter 2 emphasizes that trust and predictable communication strengthen family school partnerships. Families in this study reported that when schools recognized parents as partners and used clear communication, stress eased and advocacy felt more collaborative and less adversarial.

Interpretation

Interpretation in hermeneutic phenomenology rests on the idea that understanding arises through interaction between lived experience and reflective analysis (Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2020). Through the data analysis, I found that families consistently situated disciplinary experiences within ethical and relational frameworks. They did not describe their struggles in procedural terms alone but in themes of justice, dignity, and trust.

Parents such as Victoria Moore and Cindy Shaw spoke of school systems that demanded cooperation without reciprocity, leaving them to bear the emotional and logistical weight of their child's support. Student participants Sierra King, Max Moore, and Chase Peters described feelings of stigma and isolation, but also identified teachers who "saw them" as moments of healing. These narratives underscored the impact of interpretation of discipline. Each decision, conversation, or consequence or lack thereof between the school and home became a construct through which families understood the ethical priorities of their schools.

Bronfenbrenner's (1981) Ecological Systems Theory helped me interpret these accounts across levels and systems. At the micro level, teacher-student moments, which could include tone, timing, or repair before correction, set the meaning of discipline. At the meso level, home-school coordination or misalignment shaped trust. At the exo level, codes of conduct, staffing, and evaluation timelines narrowed options before incidents occurred. At the macro level, policy eras and cultural beliefs about compliance and merit defined what counted as equitable or "fair." Across chrono time, early experiences taught expectations that later episodes were either confirmed or revised. Time shapes interpretation (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). Consistent support rebuilt trust over months; inconsistent implementation amplified harm. Families made sense of current incidents

through earlier ones, which is why “good years” and “bad years” seemed to matter beyond the isolated incidents.

The chronosystem also affected the families’ sensemaking, which became apparent during the interview process as parents recounted experiences they carried from their own schooling; memories that colored their engagement with their children' s schools. Over time, discipline accumulated emotional weight, transforming from discrete events into shared family narratives, most poignantly in the Jackson, Garcia, and King narratives. The families with positive past school experiences, such as the Lane, Neil, and White narrative, disillusionment came as an emotional shock. The ecological model, viewed hermeneutically, became a process of meaning-making where each system had a layer of interpretation that shaped how families made sense of inclusion, discipline, and belonging (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 1981, Moustakas, 1994).

Shifting Scope

Applying the ecological systems model to the phenomenon of Kansas public school discipline for students with exceptionalities and their families changed what I expected to glean from the data. I noticed during interviews that the families wanted to discuss their frustrations of advocating in special education more than they wanted to discuss discipline, which was evident in the amount of time spent describing each, even when the research questions and interview protocol (see Appendix B) focused more on discipline. Discipline stories were shocking and deeply impactful for the children, but the bafflement and hurt parents expressed was more in the injustice over why their child was not receiving support when they needed it. Their hurt was compounded when the support was blocked from colleagues and friendly acquaintances who were also their children’s teachers.

Interdependent Constructs

Families, schools, and policies are intertwined within a dynamic ecology that continuously shaped and reshaped the lived experiences of the students and families. No family's experience existed in isolation; rather, each story represented the interplay of interdependent constructs: advocacy, resilience, institutional barriers, and care. The families' narratives demonstrated that individual advocacy often emerged in response to systemic rigidity, and that resilience was not innate but cultivated through cycles of struggle and adaptation. Within the ecological framework, parents' persistent negotiation of bureaucratic obstacles became an act of both resistance and restoration as they attempted to preserve their children's humanity within structures that often reduced them to compliance.

The parent advocacy-agency-efficacy construct as an interdependent variable began to become apparent to me as I wrote the Findings chapter. As I analyzed the transcripts in greater depth, I recognized that the themes extended beyond isolated experiences and instead reflected a network of relationships between systems, people, and responses. I reorganized the codes into broader conceptual groups to better reflect this interaction. The first group, School Environment, included themes of Staff Relationships, Limited Access, and Bias. These represented external conditions that shaped each family's daily encounters with school systems. The second group, Outcomes, included Disciplinary Experiences, Inequities, Family Strain, and Resilience (expressed through informal supports and adaptive strategies). These were the tangible and emotional consequences of how families were positioned within the school environment.

The remaining theme, Parental Advocacy and Agency, resisted placement within either category because it functioned across them. Advocacy acted as both an internal resource and a dynamic process that influenced and was influenced by the other groups. A parent's sense of

agency affected their ability to advocate, and the ease of advocating depended on relationships with staff and access to support. Successful advocacy reinforced efficacy: unsuccessful attempts heightened frustration and helplessness, which in turn reduced advocacy. These cyclical interactions formed a self-sustaining system where efficacy, agency, and advocacy continually shaped one another. This reciprocal process influenced every outcome—disciplinary experiences, access to resources, and the family's capacity for resilience—demonstrating that advocacy is both catalyst and consequence within the ecology of schooling.

Figure 5.1 Interdependent Constructs Model

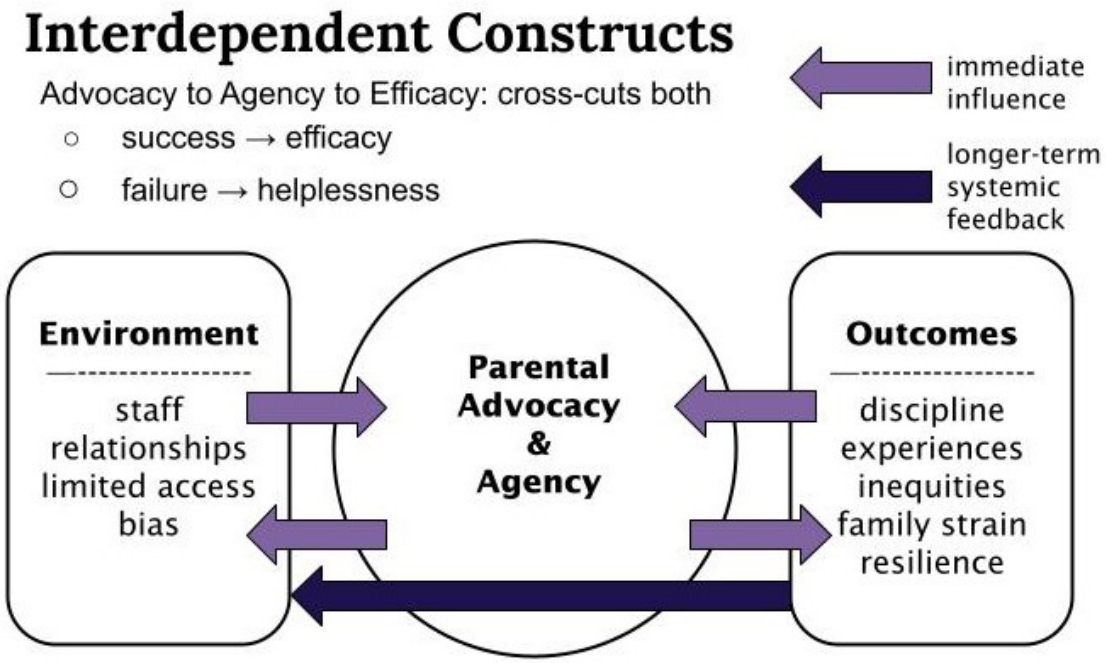


Figure 5.1 above is a visual model I developed from this study's findings to illustrate how parental advocacy and agency operate as an interactive construct situated between the two primary domains, environment and outcomes. Grounded in the study's phenomenological data, the model reflects that parents' advocacy efforts are shaped by immediate environmental factors, such as staff and student relationships, limited access to resources, and systemic bias, and that

those efforts in turn influence the outcomes experienced by their children. The environment domain encompasses external conditions that emerged from the data. For example, the quality of staff and student relationships, families' limited access to supports, and experiences of bias, which collectively shape each family's daily school encounters. The outcomes domain captures the tangible and emotional consequences of those encounters, including students' discipline experiences, inequitable treatment, family strain, including the parental burden of continual advocacy, and adaptive growth in the form of family resilience. Notably, parental advocacy and agency reside at the center of this model because it functions across both domains, creating a reciprocal cycle: it is both influenced by the environment and a driver of outcomes, acting as an immediate catalyst in day-to-day interactions and, over time, feeding back into longer-term systemic changes. For example, Sierra explained, "I know my mom has talked to teachers for me… I know it's the reason I get help," highlighting how a parent's persistent advocacy, though taxing, directly led to support for the child. Consistent with an ecological systems perspective, this interdependent model underscores that families, schools, and policies exist in a dynamic, multi-layered ecology: participants' lived experiences of advocacy and struggle are entwined with both immediate interpersonal contexts and broader systemic forces, with each influencing and reshaping the other over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1981). In sum, the model provides a holistic framework that links key emergent themes, from staff and student trust and parental burden to inequitable systems and adaptive resilience, demonstrating how these factors coalesce and feedback into one another in the lives of the families in this study while they navigate school systems.

As shown previously and mentioned above, Bronfenbrenner's (1981) ecological model offered a way to understand this interconnectedness. The microsystem of home was shaped by the mesosystem of school relationships and constrained by the exosystem of district and state policy. Yet it was within these intersections that meaning was created. When families like the Warren or Moore families encountered procedural obstacles, they drew on community networks, emotional labor, and shared histories to reinterpret their challenges as advocacy. Their efforts demonstrate the reciprocal nature of influence within educational ecosystems that families shape institutions as they are shaped by them. While Bronfenbrenner (1981) would say these are dyadic relationships, I am not yet sure if the relationship is equal due to the inherent power that schools hold as institutions with legal authority. I hope to research this power dynamic further and discuss ideas below.

Changing the Narrative, Reframing

Each family exhibited characteristics of persistence, reflection, and unwavering commitment to their children's well-being. Parents like Sage Warren, Ruby Neil, and Brooklyn Jackson described stressful navigating complex systems while trying to preserve their children's confidence. Their advocacy was emotional as much as procedural. They expressed grief over lost time, gratitude for teachers who cared, and exhaustion from repeatedly explaining and fighting for their children's needs.

They worked to assign meaning to contradictory feedback from schools, or sometimes disillusionment after unmet expectations. They celebrated moments of progress while anticipating new barriers as their children went through changes in classrooms, grade levels, or developmental stages. The mothers showed great strength that was relational rather than positional. It came from deep emotional investment and mutual reliance within the family unit

for the sake of the child. This pattern transcended age, racial, socioeconomic, and occupational differences, suggesting that advocacy and resilience are not traits, but adaptive processes developed through lived experience.

Like studies that discuss sensemaking and attribution (Carroll et al., 2023; Guttmann, 1982; Weiner, 1972), the families struggled to understand the significance or purpose behind frustrating school experiences. They worked to assign meaning to contradictory feedback from schools, or sometimes disillusionment after unmet expectations. They celebrated moments of progress while anticipating new barriers as their children went through changes in classrooms, grade levels, or developmental stages. The mothers showed great strength that was relational rather than positional. It came from deep emotional investment and mutual reliance within the family unit for the sake of the child. This pattern transcended age, racial, socioeconomic, and occupational differences, suggesting that advocacy and resilience are not traits, but adaptive processes developed through lived experience. As prior research shows (Harry, 2008; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2015; Lareau, 2011), increased effective communication and targeted relationship building between schools and families impacts student academic and social success, despite advocacy struggles or failed past experiences.

Families were not simply reacting to school decisions. Rather, they were interpreting and reframing them within broader moral and emotional contexts or, stated with hermeneutic terminology, families were making sense of it. Through a hermeneutic lens, meaning emerges in the dialogue between past experiences and present encounters (Moustakas, 1994). Families judged each related experience against their own beliefs, which was apparent in the language they chose, which highlighted dignity, fairness, safety, and care. Through their interviews they also judged experiences against previous experiences and the experiences related to them by

others. For example, when Sage discussed how last year's classroom teacher treatment of her daughter differed from the current teacher's choices, Sage produces meanings that answered if this change was support or punishment or if they were respected or discounted. Which meaning she chose to assign to the experience shaped what choices she made next. For students, that could mean their attributions of teacher behavior, or the meaning they assign to teacher choices, influences whether they withdraw or engage. Another example from the data comes from Brooklyn Jackson's memories of her mother's schooling under racist and ableist systems, which shaped how she interpreted her own, and then her children's schooling experiences. Bronfenbrenner's (1981) EST combined with hermeneutic phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Peoples, 2020), revealed that behavior, discipline, and inclusion are not isolated events but ongoing negotiations of identity and belonging across time. This interpretive approach also reframes "noncompliance" as a form of agency. Parents who challenged disciplinary decisions were not rejecting authority but insisting on accountability. Their stories challenge deficit narratives by highlighting how resistance can be an expression of care.

Implications

For Families

The families in this study highlighted the crucial importance of both knowledge and connection when navigating special education processes. Many parents described entering IEP meetings uncertain of their legal rights and hesitant to challenge school professionals. Without clear guidance or support, several participants confessed to feeling helpless and overwhelmed. Ruby lamented that "every meeting, every call, it's a fight. People think I'm a nag, but if I don't, who will?" This quote is framing advocacy as a constant, exhausting battle to secure basic supports that the families expected to be provided. Even parents with insider knowledge, like

Sage who had professional experience in schools, felt torn between roles. Sage recognized that when she asserted her daughter's needs, staff tended to interpret her advocacy as confrontation, forcing her to "step back in [the meeting] to fight for her" despite the emotional toll of balancing dual roles. These accounts underscore that access to clear procedural information and empathetic support is critical for effective parent participation.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), states are required to provide parents with a procedural safeguards notice, often given as a handbook of rights, and to maintain Parent Training and Information Centers to educate and assist families (IDEA, 2004). In theory, these resources are meant to empower families as equal partners in the IEP process. In practice, however, this study's findings suggest that the mandated handbooks and parent centers alone have been inadequate. Receiving a dense booklet of legal safeguards or knowing a center exists did not translate into parents feeling prepared, confident, or supported when they walked into school meetings. Participants still reported confusion about the process, intimidation by professional jargon, and a sense of isolation despite these formal supports. Notably, Amy shared, "We shouldn't have to hire lawyers to get our kids help," pointing to the extreme steps some families felt forced to take when information and informal support fell short. This gap between the existence of resources and parents' lived realities shows that merely providing information is not enough; the information must be accessible, clear, and guided with relational support.

To truly fulfill IDEA's promise of collaborative family engagement, schools and communities should expand on these measures with more proactive, family-centered training and advocacy support (IDEA, 2004). Districts might offer workshops or orientation sessions that demystify the IEP process, walking parents through their rights and the procedures in plain

language and interactive formats. Such training should prepare parents for collaboration rather than confrontation, helping them understand how to advocate for their child's needs without feeling adversarial or lost, as many parents noted. Additionally, schools or community organizations can facilitate parent-to-parent mentorship programs and advocacy groups. Connecting less experienced parents with veteran parent advocates through support groups could reduce feelings of isolation and strengthen collective agency through the sharing of firsthand experiences and strategies. These peer networks, alongside emotional support groups, allow families to learn from each other and to band together when pushing for improvements.

In short, while IDEA (2004) provides a vital legal framework for parent participation and rights, the experiences of these families make clear that more personalized and community-rooted support is necessary. By investing in practical training, clearer communication, and parent support networks, educational systems can better equip parents to partner confidently in their children's education, which may move the IEP experience from one of helplessness and conflict into one of empowerment and collaboration between equal partners.

For District & Building Administrators

Rudasill and colleagues (2018) argued that school climate itself can be understood as a multilevel system, shaped by interactions among individual characteristics, classroom practices, building and district norms, and broader community contexts. This systems view of climate aligns closely with Bronfenbrenner's ecological framework and reinforces my decision to examine discipline experiences across micro, meso, exo, and macro levels. In this study, families' accounts of exclusionary discipline were not only about individual incidents but about the broader climate conditions that made those incidents feel predictable, inevitable, or inescapable. From a systems perspective, exclusionary discipline

practices are one manifestation of school climate. Rudasill and colleagues (2018) noted that student outcomes reflect the interplay of relational, instructional, and structural climate features over time. This resonates with my findings: when students described classrooms as caring, flexible, and fair, they also reported lower stress and fewer exclusionary events; when they described climates as punitive or dismissive, they reported increased conflict, anxiety, and withdrawal.

Due to my findings and the literature support from chapter 2, district and school leaders need to adopt a multifaceted, preventative approach that aligns discipline with supportive practices and ensures consistency across classrooms. This begins with implementing positive behavior frameworks with fidelity. Research indicates that when PBIS is executed consistently, it can improve school climate and keep more students in mainstream classrooms without sacrificing safety (Grasley-Boy et al., 2019). A unified, district-wide MTSS plan establishes common expectations and fidelity checks so that every school explicitly teaches and reinforces positive behaviors. Families in the study revealed that fragmentation between special education supports and disciplinary practices left them "navigating contradictory expectations." Sierra noted that her accommodation for taking short breaks was honored by some teachers but ignored by others, making her feel "difficult" for needing support. Such inconsistencies erode trust and efficacy. To prevent this, district leaders must ensure that discipline policies are integrated with special education services and social-emotional supports. When behavioral expectations, intervention and individualized plans are coordinated, students receive consistent messages and support rather than mixed signals. Aligning these policies is a systemic safeguard so that a student's behavior is understood in context as lagging skill, communication needs,

or difference from disability, rather than punished in isolation. In short, a cohesive policy structure grounded in care and early intervention can reduce the need for EDP by addressing issues before they escalate. The guiding principle of positive and restorative frameworks is care for the student and intentional relationship-building (Grasley-Boy et al., 2019; Martinez & Wighting, 2023). When administrators support a strategic plan for all school environments to be relational and safe, it empowers teachers to respond to challenges more consistently and compassionately. The district levers from Chapter 2 could be applied here: build PBIS fidelity checks throughout MTSS tiers; schedule restorative conferencing capacity; protect instructional time by reducing EDP for nonviolent, classroom-managed behaviors; and require measurability reviews for behavior-related IEP goals. Publish a family-facing stance that frames discipline as skill-building, not removal.

Districts should also institutionalize restorative justice, SEL, and trauma-informed programming as central components of their discipline approach. Participants in this study repeatedly emphasized the importance of feeling seen and understood by school staff. Prioritizing connection over compliance means that when a behavioral issue arises, the school's first response is to understand the student's perspective and needs rather than reflexively punish. Restorative justice practices offer structured ways to do this by viewing misbehavior as an opportunity for connection, discussion, skill-building, and healing. Instead of defaulting to EDP, a school might hold a restorative conference where the student, teachers, and possibly family members discuss the harm caused and build a plan to make amends. This kind of relational response not only holds students accountable in a constructive manner, it also reinforces their belonging in the school community. As discussed in the literature review, restorative conferences

allow school staff to more effectively manage behavior in all spaces by acting proactively (Morrison & Thorsborne, 2005). Such practices shift the adult response from one that pushes the student away through exclusion to one that draws the student in, and moves the school staff toward the student, to problem-solve and learn together (Morrison & Thorsborne, 2005). Sierra recalled how a simple act of teacher affirmation transformed her outlook: "When a teacher told me I was good at writing, it felt huge... And then I joined forensics and I was good at that too." This anecdote illustrates how restorative, relationship-centered approaches can unlock student potential, such as a teacher's positive feedback, made the student feel valued and spurred engagement. Adopting SEL programming is equally vital, as it provides students with explicit lessons in self-management, empathy, and communication. These competencies help students handle frustration or conflict without resorting to disruption, thereby preventing incidents that might otherwise lead to disciplinary removal. Direct teaching of SEL skills has been linked to improvements in students' self-efficacy and behavior (Nocera et al., 2014).

Given the heightened stress and trauma many adolescents have experienced, a trauma-informed approach is critical and may be even more timely, as Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2020) describe, due to post-pandemic increases in student anxiety and dysregulation. Teachers and administrators should be trained to recognize signs of trauma or disability-related stress and interpret behavioral outbursts as communication of need rather than willful defiance. This mindset shift, supported by trauma-informed care, was echoed by families in the study who often saw their children's challenging behaviors as stemming from anxiety, sensory overload, or misunderstanding, factors that EDP exacerbate. Ultimately, the integration of SEL, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice into the school culture must be sustained over time, not treated as a short-term initiative. Implementing these reforms is an involved process requiring

patience and reflection. District leaders should plan for multi-year professional development and coaching, allocate resources for program facilitators, and resist pressures to abandon new approaches prematurely. By committing to these frameworks long-term, districts signal that building a positive, inclusive environment is as important as academics.

Both district administrators and building principals have a decisive role in reducing EDP by modeling the values of equity and inclusion and holding their systems accountable. Leadership modeling sets the tone: when principals and district officials visibly engage in non-punitive practices, their staff receive clear permission to do the same. Administrators can also model collaboration by participating in professional development alongside teachers, such as training in crisis prevention, de-escalation, and culturally responsive communication. Several families observed variability in how staff handled incidents, noting that even a well-intentioned principal could be undermined by inconsistent responses in the classroom. “The principal tries, but some staff just escalate things until they blow up,” Mr. Garcia lamented, indicating that uneven practices undercut the school’s overall efforts. This underscores why leaders must go beyond setting a vision and actively ensure everyone is participating. Regular discipline data reviews are a powerful tool for this. School and district administrators should examine referral, suspension, and expulsion data disaggregated by student subgroup, teacher, and offense to identify disparities in severity or frequency. If data reveal that a particular teacher or grade level issues a disproportionate number of referrals, the administrator can intervene with coaching or resources before the problem worsens. This practice aligns with broader research showing that EDP often disproportionately affects certain demographic groups, BIPOC students with exceptionalities, at significantly higher rates. Rather than viewing such inequities as abstract statistics, a conscientious principal must look at their building data and reflect in order to remove

any implicit biases or inequities within the school. A commitment to equity audits and transparency in discipline data signals to the entire school community that fairness is non-negotiable. In addition to school data, leaders could collect qualitative feedback from families and students about disciplinary experiences. The study's participants frequently pointed out subtle barriers, such as negative labels, skepticism toward parent input, inconsistent rule enforcement, that may not register in raw numbers but nonetheless generate an environment of exclusion. School administrators might invite representatives of local families to serve on a discipline policy review board or host community listening sessions for feedback on their current practices.

In the literature review, I wrote that leaders needed to be more aware of systemic barriers that clash or combine with school policies in harmful ways; therefore, leaders must lead by example. As stated previously, principals and staff must continually check their personal biases, especially regarding relationship-building and language use, because subtle negative talk or low expectations can inflict lasting damage. Researchers also recommended reflective practice, because educators who consciously address their own assumptions and biases are better equipped to treat students equitably (Noltemeyer et al., 2012). Leaders should support self-reflection and frank conversations about equity among staff, modeling the humility and growth mindset needed to change habits and the school environment.

Another key recommendation is to improve family-facing communication and truly partner with families in addressing behavior. The families in this study often felt sidelined or out of the loop when their child was disciplined. Several parents described inconsistent notification and scant explanation of incidents, especially as their children entered middle and high school, they were frequently informed only after the fact or had to rely on their child to relay

information. This breakdown in communication not only caused confusion, but eroded trust. When schools failed to proactively communicate with families, it conveyed a message that the family's insight was not valued or that the situation was already a foregone conclusion. One mother, Victoria, expressed frustration that in elementary school every incident was documented for her, but in later years "it was up to [her son] to self-report," leaving her unsure what was truly occurring. Such lapses forced parents into a detective role; as Victoria put it, "I keep track of every paper, every call," and her husband would regularly leave work early to respond to school issues. This kind of advocacy burden was a common theme and contributed to family strain and adversarial perceptions about the family-school relationship. Districts and schools must therefore commit to clear, frequent, and accessible communication with families around discipline. In practical terms, this means notifying guardians immediately when a significant behavior incident occurs or when a pattern of minor incidents is emerging, rather than waiting for a crisis or for parents to inquire. It also means communicating in everyday language and, when appropriate, in the family's home language, so that parents can engage without feeling intimidated or confused. Research has long shown that when parents are well-informed and treated as partners, they are more likely to collaborate and less likely to feel alienated (Adams & Christenson, 2000). Consistent with Bronfenbrenner's (1981) mesosystem emphasis, the alignment and transparency between school and family supports the teacher-parent-student team, lowers conflict, and reduces contradictory signals to students, whereas misalignment or infrequent contact increases the risk of exclusionary outcomes. To achieve this, districts could establish family-facing protocols such as sending a same-day summary note or phone call home after any office referral or removal, accompanied by an invitation to discuss next steps. Rather than only issuing the legally required suspension letter, schools might also provide a user-friendly guide outlining what the

consequence means, what supports will be put in place for the student, and who to contact with questions. Several families in the study remarked that they often had to "make noise" to get information or action. Finally, partnering new or struggling families with parent mentors or advocacy groups could reduce isolation and confusion. The dissertation findings highlighted how some parents, through years of navigating the system, became adept advocates and their knowledge could be shared to help others. A district might facilitate a parent-to-parent network or collaborate with local nonprofits that specialize in parent advocacy in special education and discipline. By treating families as team members, schools not only gain valuable insights into student behavior, since parents can often identify triggers or effective strategies, but they also demonstrate respect for the family's role. When schools take initiative to communicate and include families, the burden of constant advocacy is lightened, allowing parents to engage more positively. Moreover, involving families early and often in discipline matters ensures that interventions can be more holistic. For example, a restorative conference after a behavioral incident could include a parent or guardian, which not only makes the process more transparent but also allows the student to be supported on all sides. According to restorative justice practices, two-way communication and authentic collaboration with families are indispensable components of an equitable discipline system (Nocera et al., 2014). In sum, districts should treat families as key stakeholders in discipline reform, providing them knowledge, voice, and multiple channels to engage, so that no family feels that they must "fight tooth and nail" alone for their child.

Achieving the above changes requires significant investments in professional development (PD). Districts should recognize that teachers and administrators may not inherently know how to implement restorative, trauma-informed, or bias-aware practices. From the findings, many educators were described as using punitive measures or misinterpreting

student behavior due to a perceived lack of training. One of the most striking findings from the literature is that a majority of suspensions are issued for minor, subjective infractions like "disrespect" or tardiness. This suggests that improved classroom management and teacher-student relationships could eliminate a significant amount of EDP. Research confirms that the classroom teacher is the most influential factor in student discipline outcomes, as each classroom is an opportunity either for relationship-building or for conflict (Nese et al., 2021). Yet, many teachers, especially early career teachers, feel underprepared to handle challenging behaviors (Melnick & Meister, 2008). These gaps must be filled through systematic professional learning.

Districts should require and fund ongoing PD in areas such as de-escalation techniques, culturally responsive classroom management, special education law and accommodations, SEL integration, and restorative practices. An emphasis should be placed on helping staff shift their mindsets about student behavior. As the literature review and findings indicate, unconscious bias and deficit thinking often affect how teachers interpret behavior, leading to disproportionate discipline for underrepresented groups. As Brady shared, "I felt like once people decided I was a bad kid, that's all I ever was to them," describing how a negative label from teachers became a self-fulfilling prophecy. To counter this, PD should include guided reflection on personal biases and how implicit assumptions about race, disability, or intent can skew disciplinary decisions. Researchers argue that deliberate reflection by school authorities is necessary to reduce inequities in discipline (Noltemeyer et al., 2012).

Practical training activities might involve case studies where teachers analyze a discipline scenario from multiple perspectives or coaching where an observer helps a teacher reframe a student's misbehavior as a lagging skill or communication issue. In fact, families frequently saw their children's outbursts or rule-breaking as signals of distress or needs, a perspective educators

could adopt with training. For instance, one family explained that their son's habit of listening to music in class was a self-calming strategy tied to his disability, yet some untrained teachers punished it as "defiance," thereby escalating the conflict. Stories like this highlight that when teachers are equipped to recognize and accommodate neurodiverse needs, many confrontations can be avoided. Ongoing PD can equip staff with specific strategies, so they have alternatives to EDP.

Importantly, training should also cover relationship-building skills. The power of a caring educator occurred repeatedly in the narratives. Teachers must be reminded that every interaction, even minor, can either build a bridge or a wall with a student (Nese et al., 2021). Research shows that seemingly small negative actions, such as a sarcastic remark or being sent into the hallway, are not small to the student and can significantly damage rapport (Amemiya et al., 2020; Jacobsen, 2020). Through role-playing and reflection, educators can become more mindful of their language and tone. They also need support to manage their own stress; therefore, mindfulness training or coaching on self-regulation would be beneficial. Additionally, mentorship programs can be a part of this effort: pairing less experienced teachers with veterans who exemplify compassionate discipline could accelerate the adoption of effective techniques.

Above all, the district must send a consistent message that learning is a process that applies to adults as well: just as we expect students to learn from mistakes, staff are expected to continually learn and practice more effective ways to support students. By investing in PD to support a community of reflective practice within schools, districts and administrators can equip their teams to break old patterns that rely on exclusion.

In summary, administrators need to take the lead in creating an equitable, relationship-centered school climate that keeps students and their families included. The family and student

narratives underscored that changes could develop a sense of safety and belonging. Students flourish when they are understood rather than excluded or isolated, and families reciprocate trust when they no longer must fight to be heard (Adams & Christenson, 2000). By heeding these insights and the broader research base, districts and administrators can significantly reduce EDP and improve equity, ensuring support for every student.

For General Education Teachers

Chapter 2 identified specific knowledge gaps in adolescent development, disability-informed interpretation, and legal literacy for individualized plan implementation. The misread bluntness as defiance, the non-measurable goals, and the uneven accommodation use in the data reflected those gaps. Targeted professional development should therefore center: (1) reading behavior as communication and potential lagging skill; (2) precise, measurable supports tied to function; (3) repair language and routines after conflict; and (4) quick legal checks that keep accommodations active during escalation as outlined under IDEA (2004).

Teachers stand between policy and practice, meaning teachers interpret the district or school policy for discipline and based their conscious decisions on that internal interpretation. Oftentimes, like students, teachers react to stress from emotional and unconscious triggers, pre-assumptions, misinformation, and habits. Families cited how one caring teacher or one caring statement empowered the students, which shifted their trajectories in schooling. Researchers have studied the impact of teacher behavior on student response, success, and rapport (Bell & Craig, 2023; Caslin, 2021; Cholewa et al., 2018; Frenzel et al., 2021; Green et al., 2018, Gregory & Ripski, 2008; Guttman, 1982; Hamilton & DeThorne, 2021). We know that language is powerful, especially when given from one who holds power to one who has less (Berk, 2009;

Darling-Hammond, 2024). Additionally, researchers have shown that seemingly small negative disciplinary actions are not small to those to whom they are being issued (Amemiya et al., 2020; Jacobsen, 2020).

As stated above, all school staff need preparation that addresses disability, identity, and emotional regulation as part of classroom management. They need time and guidance on purposeful, routine reflection about personal bias and cultural assumptions. Once this is complete, school staff need systematic ways to respond to behavior, such as those recommended by Aspy & Grossman (2011) who introduced a neuro-affirming framework for matching a student's observable behavior, antecedents, consequences, and characteristics, strengths and needs to what specific skills need to be taught or what obstacles need to be removed. It is a positive, easily-followed framework that could be adapted for responding to any student with undesirable or maladaptive behaviors (Aspy & Grossman, 2011). Teachers often do provide clear communication, predictable structures, and genuine care for learning and for their students, so my only conclusion is that harm is often unintentional and unconscious, but those two descriptors do not excuse the harm that teachers often cause for their students and their families; therefore, more work must be done.

For me, the Researcher

During the course of this research, I was hired to teach special education courses for teacher candidates, a role I took on despite lacking formal training in special education. My new employers cited the insight from my personal and professional positionality and my ability to build rapport as reasons for trusting me with my current position. In many ways, my positionality, being a white, middle-class, neurodiverse educator and a mother of children with exceptionalities, gave me language, empathy, and insider awareness. It allowed me to connect

with families and recognize injustice. However, I realized that bias could stem from this very closeness and could affect my research, which I discussed in the limitations section. Positionality is not the same as bias: the former situates where I stand, which is shaped by my identities and experiences, while the latter consists of the preconceived notions and assumptions I carry as a result. I became acutely aware of some biases I brought into this work during the interview and analysis processes, and of others' biases operating in school systems, which I needed to confront through reflection.

I also realized I had to manage my ego, as I have learned to do as an educator, the part of me that might get defensive or insist on being correct, because truly inclusive practice demands humility and a willingness to set aside one's ego in service of students and families. I had always known that building relationships was my strength as a teacher, yet I can recall times when my own bias, stress, or triggers undermined my ability to support a student effectively. Those instances remind me that teaching requires empathy but equally demands humility and openness. This understanding echoes Noddings' (2008) ethics of care. Noddings (2008) argues that teachers must listen to and learn from students in order to build trust and meet students' needs. She warns that even well-intentioned educators can fail to care authentically if they remain too aligned to their own vision of what students should be, or how they should behave, instead of engaging in the time and attention that caring relationships require (Noddings, 2008). Genuine care in education means valuing students' and families' perspectives above my own preconceptions, and committing to relationship over control in every interaction, just as I suggest school staff do when engaging with students.

Engaging deeply with the families in this study ultimately transformed my understanding of inclusion. I no longer think of inclusion as mere placement or compliance with policy; instead,

I see it as a collective practice of care and belonging, built one interaction at a time. This evolution in my thinking was profoundly shaped by listening to the Jackson, Lane, and Garcia families. During the Jackson interview, both Brooklyn and I cried, as she shared the painful realities of racial bias and the enduring strength of her love and advocacy for her children. Their experiences underscored how bias in school systems can inflict deep wounds, and it humbled me to recognize the limits of my perspective as a white educator. Listening to the Lane family's story disheartened me. Here was a mother with decades of experience as a teacher and a teacher leader in her building and in the union who still felt powerless at times. Their journey revealed how systemic failures and lack of support could push a child into crisis. Hearing about their struggle, from miscommunications about accommodations to the drastic step of a residential placement, scared me. It forced me to realize how any family, even one armed with knowledge and status, or even my family, can be deeply vulnerable when schools lose sight of care. I felt a renewed urgency to challenge such systemic breakdowns. Listening to the Garcia family's story was like looking in a mirror at my own early days of advocating for my sons and for myself. In their experiences navigating misunderstandings and fighting for support, I saw reflections of my personal battles: the confusion, the determination, the consistent meetings and attempts at relationship building to obtain social capital, and the hard-won small victories. This recognition was both affirming and instructive. It reminded me of one of the reasons I am proud to be in education, and it reinforced how important it is to stand with other families and strengthen school-family bonds. Each of these families taught me something essential and, in doing so, strengthened my resolve to be an ally and an agent of change within education.

Through their examples, these families demonstrated what relational strength truly means. In this study, parents and caregivers showed a strength that was relational rather than

positional, a resilience born from emotional investment and mutual support within the family unit. I believe inclusive education is sustained by such relational bonds. The kind of advocacy and resilience needed for inclusion grows out of relationships, not from any official status or authority. This perspective aligns with Baglieri's (2024) argument, similar to Noddings (2008) that the project of inclusive education must be guided by an ethic of care and justice, focusing on deliberate caring actions and attitudes rather than bureaucratic compliance. Baglieri emphasizes collaborative access by drawing on the wisdom of community and individual experience, essentially asking educators to listen to the voices of those we serve. My participants' stories reinforced this idea. Their stories are not just data to interpret in isolation; they are a call for accountability, for myself and every other educator. They urge us to replace control with connection, to approach each child and family with curiosity and humility. By heeding this call, I hope to honor the courage of these families and continue reimagining schools as places where every child and their family feels seen, heard, and valued.

Future Research

The questions I propose below extend the gaps identified in Chapter 2: how teacher preparation changes early discipline decisions; how school framing and communication moderate outcomes; which exosystem constraints most shape accommodation versus exclusion; how administrator mindsets set building codes of conduct; how teacher beliefs predict responses once context is held constant; and how family-to-school sensemaking converges or diverges. Together, these studies would test the specific levers Chapter 2 raised and the daily mechanisms revealed in the data and discussion.

Discipline

Throughout this project I built a shelf of books on discipline, classroom management, systemic inequality, special education, and disability, and I still feel I have only scratched the surface. Going forward, I want to understand how classroom teacher and administrator dispositions shape discipline outcomes and how I can prepare future educators to choose responses that promote inclusion through modeling and skill building rather than exclusion. Because positive, proactive procedures often run against societal norms and practices of compliance and punishment, I plan to study practical levers that move schools toward a proactive, inclusive, and restorative stance.

In teacher preparation, especially as this is now my current focus, I want to investigate what changes early practice. I want to know which components of teacher preparation, such as supervised practice with de-escalation and personal regulation, most strongly predict reductions in office referrals for early career teachers. I will also follow candidates into their clinical placements to ask: how do teacher candidates make sense of discipline dilemmas in real classrooms, and how does guided reflection shift their sensemaking over time? Finally, I will compare coursework to see whether targeted study in restorative practices, SEL, and disability-informed or trauma-informed discipline reduces candidates' use or perception of punitive measures compared with standard classroom-management courses.

At the policy level, I plan to examine how a school's communication stance shapes outcomes. I will ask to what extent the clarity, frequency, and accessibility of school communication to families moderates the relationship between undesirable student behavior and formal consequences. I also want to compare frames: do schools that publicly describe discipline as skill-building across handbooks, professional learning, and family messages show lower disparities by race or disability than schools that frame discipline as rule enforcement? Alongside

those questions, I will test which exosystem constraints, such as counselor to student ratios, availability of alternative supports, or evaluation timelines most strongly predict whether behavior is addressed through accommodation rather than exclusion.

Because leadership choices set the tone for buildings, I will study administrators' beliefs directly: in what ways do administrator mindsets about safety, liability, and consistency shape schoolwide codes and the likelihood of suspensions for nonviolent behaviors?

I will also focus on day-to-day decision making. I want to know how teachers' dispositional beliefs about behavior, seeing it as skill-building needs versus willful defiance, predict the use of restorative rather than exclusionary responses when student and classroom factors are held constant. And because culture anchors our sense of equity and fairness, I will ask how norms about compliance and merit influence judgments of appropriate consequences, and how those judgments shift after structured training in equitable practices.

Finally, I will trace interpretive gaps between home and school: what sensemaking processes do families and educators use to interpret the same discipline events, and where do those interpretations converge or diverge? Those places of agreement and misunderstanding, I suspect, are where we can design training, policy, and routines that make school safer, fairer, and more relational for all.

Ecological Systems Theory

I would like to continue the research I began with this dissertation. While in the final stages of writing, colleagues shared information with me, such as the Ziggurat Model (Aspy & Grossman, 2011) and the combination of A-B-C (Antecedent-Behavior-Consequence) and the Iceberg models, called ABC-I that I would like to teach to my Special Education teacher candidates and local teachers of students with autism. I hope to use these models with EST to

promote deeper understanding of student behavior in my local community, but also in presentations and publications for my professional community.

The EST model has pushed me to think deeply about my choices and their effects. If I can include teacher and administrator voices to more student voices to my research, I would have a broader understanding of how every participant in the environment experiences the effects of operating within the educational system. I will continue to practice using systems-based thinking when reflecting on my own practice.

For EST-focused future research, I plan to test how integrating the Ziggurat Model with ABC-I inside an Ecological Systems (EST) frame changes teachers' analysis of function and context for student behavior, and to identify which specific components drive gains in teacher confidence and interpretive accuracy. I will evaluate whether a short, practice-based PD on Ziggurat and ABC-I improves special education teacher candidates' capacity to design function-based supports relative to standard coursework. In classrooms, I will track whether implementation reduces office discipline referrals and time out of instruction. I will also compare how teachers, administrators, and students interpret the same incidents after adoption, mapping convergence and divergence across EST system levels. Finally, to understand barriers, I will examine exosystem constraints, such as staffing, scheduling, and evaluation timelines that limit fidelity.

Additionally, future research could explicitly integrate systems-based models of school climate (Rudasill et al., 2018) with ecological and phenomenological approaches. For example, I could examine how teacher and administrator attributions for behavior operate within particular climate profiles, or how families' narratives of exclusion differ in schools that intentionally frame discipline as relationship-centered and skill-building versus rule-enforcing.

Additional Theories

Looking forward to my career as a researcher, I plan to extend this dissertation work with several complementary lenses. Attribution theory (Guttman, 1982; Carroll et al., 2023) may help me examine how adults and students explain, or attribute, student behavior and how those explanations shape teacher responses to student behavior and student responses to teachers. This would be expanding upon the work of Guttmann (1982) who discussed the casual attributions of stakeholders in education to undesirable student behavior and of Carroll et al. (2023) who studied teacher attributions to student behavior. Relationship theory could more deeply explain the connections between systems in the parent-child-school relationship. This could be similar to Martin & Dowson (2009) who studied the role of interpersonal student relationships on student engagement.

I could use Self Determination theory, as described by Deci & Ryan (2012), to analyze how autonomy affects discipline or how teachers escalate or de-escalate in their classroom management systems through the lens of relationship with students and their families (Deci & Ryan, 2012). Finally, I hope to better understand power systems as they relate to social capital, but from the student point of view. I would draw on Schildt and colleagues (2020) who discussed sensemaking in power systems, which seems an appropriate extension of my current work. They discuss how systemic power, which could be in my research the rules, resources, and eligibility of schooling, and episodic power, which would be akin to moment-to-moment disciplinary decisions made by teachers in the classroom (Schildt et al., 2020). With this theory comes what Weick (1995) called sensemaking under constraint; I could apply what he described for organizations, to families and teachers, similar to how Maitlis & Sonenshein (2010) applied it to organizational change.

Also, social capital theory is a natural choice as my research was already focused on the ability of some families to more effectively advocate for their students than others. I would extend the research by Liou & Chang, (2008) to see how the social capital of students and their families accumulate through network development and affect their ability to navigate the school systems of discipline and special education. By documenting the accounts of parents and students, this research already illuminates how systemic inequalities are understood, resisted, and sometimes internalized within families. Further research would deepen my insight and application of some of these theories could illuminate new information. Listed below are potential research questions I could use with some of the theories discussed above.

For research with the additional theories listed above, I plan to examine how teachers' causal attributions for student behavior predict restorative versus exclusionary responses, and whether those beliefs still forecast exclusion even when incidents are equally severe. I will also study how students' attributions about teachers' intentions shape their engagement, compliance, and trust, and compare how parents, teachers, and administrators narrate the same discipline episode to locate convergence and divergence. Through a relationship theory lens, I will test whether perceived relationship quality moderates the link between behavior incidents and formal consequences and identify which relational repairs most reduce repeat referrals. Using self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), I will assess the extent to which autonomy-supportive, agency-building practices lower office referrals for students with and without exceptionalities. Finally, integrating power systems and social capital perspectives, as modeled by Liou & Chang (2008), I will distinguish how systemic power, such as rules, resources, or eligibility, versus episodic power, on-the-spot decisions, shape outcomes; trace how educators and families make sense under constraint before and after structured reflection; and examine how

family social capital and students' peer and adult networks relate to access to accommodations and to differences in disciplinary trajectories independent of demographics and disability labels (Liou & Chang, 2008).

Call to Action

Bronfenbrenner (1977) warned that societies send conflicting messages when they speak of caring for others while still practicing exclusion. Since the classroom is a model of the larger system of society and since school double-messages have been researched (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; 1981), administrators and teachers need to spend purposeful time evaluating district, building, and classroom practices to root out unintentional and intentional bias because it harms our students and their families. The participant families experienced both care and exclusion. Their stories did not convince me that the schools or teachers are irreparably broken, but that we have a severe misalignment of purpose. Even when student behaviors are aggressive or insubordinate in nature, EDPs are ineffective, as they disregard the underlying contextual factors that play a role (Martinez et al., 2016). Therefore, I make this call to action, as others have before me: replace control with connection and see student behavior as communication of need, rather than defiance. This requires that educational stakeholders work as a team to mindfully design school systems that respond to need before there is a behavior crisis that results in pushing children away and out of schools. From an inherited punitive tradition to relational, skill-building approaches, these family accounts showed what changes when schools move from removal to repair, from exclusion to inclusive support, and what remains possible when policy and practice meet.

Closing Thoughts

This research is deeply personal to me. I am a mother of sons who receive special education services and a woman who was herself late diagnosed with an exceptionality. I know how it feels to sit at a table where decisions are made about your child while you try to translate both professional jargon and emotional weight of supporting and advocating for your child. I also know what it means to grow up misunderstood; to sense that your difference is a disruption rather than a contribution and to take upon myself the labels of others of being too much, not enough, or forgetful and lazy. Feeling socially isolated and excluded, both as a student and as a parent, shaped how I listened to the families in this study.

Conducting this research was not an act of distance but of recognition. I heard echoes of my own experiences in their words: the fatigue of repeating explanations and backing up every statement (even with strangers) with rationale, the fear of being labeled difficult or "one of those parents," and the determination to hold systems accountable without giving up on the systems – because I love teaching and teachers; they are my profession and my friends and colleagues. These families reminded me of what my sons and my students have taught me over the past two decades, that equity is not achieved through compliance but through relationships. We grow and help others to grow through the daily work of seeing and believing in another person's humanity, no matter how the situation seems.

As a scholar and educator, I leave this study changed. I no longer think of inclusion as placement or compliance with policy. I think of it as a collective practice of care for all students and all families, where belonging is built one interaction at a time. The families who trusted me with their stories illuminated how systems can harm but also how they can heal. Their courage gives me purpose as a teacher, advocate, researcher, and mother to continue reimagining schools as places where every child and their families feel seen, heard, and valued.

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Appendix A - Consent and Assent Forms

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Title of the Study: The experiences of families and public-school discipline.

Researcher: Emily George

DESCRIPTION OF THE RESEARCH

Exclusionary discipline practices used in public school settings are those that exclude a student from the learning environment or his or her peers, including detention, suspension, and expulsion. Students with exceptionalities are those who qualify for services through an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This research study investigates how students with exceptionalities and their families experience exclusionary discipline practices. This phenomenon will be described by conducting semi-structured interviews with students and their families.

Your family has been invited to participate in this research study about exclusionary discipline in public schools because they have documented exceptionalities and experience with exclusionary discipline.

If you choose to participate, you will be asked to describe your experiences as a parent of a child with exceptionalities who was issued a public-school exclusionary discipline. The interviews will take place over Zoom unless you prefer a face-to-face interview. If you allow your child to participate individually in addition to your family interview, they will be asked to describe their perception of the same events. The interview sessions will be limited to an hour in length. You will be asked to set a time for this session that is convenient for you and your child.

WHAT WILL MY FAMILY'S PARTICIPATION INVOLVE?

If you decide to allow your child to participate in this research, you will be asked to set up a time and place for you and your child to meet with the researcher via Zoom or at a location of your choosing. The interview will be limited to an hour in length. If additional time is necessary, it will be arranged at your consent and convenience. If you wish to see the interview questions in advance, they will be provided.

ARE THERE ANY RISKS TO MY FAMILY?

You and your child will guide the interview process. Your child will be asked to describe their experience in their own words and at their own pace. If at any time there are questions you do not wish your child to answer, you may decline for your child, discontinue the session, or refuse participation at any time without penalty.

As your child's privacy and confidentiality are important, their actual name will not be used in any publication, and any notes and recordings will be labeled with pseudonyms. You will be asked to specifically provide permission for the researchers to use any images, audio, or video in potential publications and presentations.

ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS TO MY FAMILY?
There will be no direct benefits or compensation for your or your child's participation in this study.

HOW WILL OUR CONFIDENTIALITY BE PROTECTED?
While there will probably be publications from this study, your and your child's names and any identifying characteristics will not be used. If you allow your child to participate in this study, the researchers would like to be able to quote your child directly without using their name. At the end of this consent, you will be asked to specifically provide permission for the researchers to use any images, audio, or video in potential publications and presentations.

Participant information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, will not be used or distributed for future research studies.

Audio recordings will be made of your family's and child's interview sessions for transcription and coding purposes. You may select to be recorded via Zoom, or I can visit at the location of your choosing.

The audio files will immediately be transcribed and deleted from the laptop. Video recordings are automatically and permanently deleted from the laptop.

All data collected will be labeled with pseudonyms. Any field notes and recordings made for this research will be used only by the researcher unless you provide permission for use in presentations/publications.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?
You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research, you should contact the researcher, Emily George at 573-777-0653 (emilygeorge@ksu.edu). Dr. Suzanne Porath, sporath@ksu.edu, 920-858-3010 will be supervising this research.

If you wish to speak to someone other than the researchers, you can contact Kansas State University's Institutional Review Board, Lisa Rubin, Chair, Committee on Research Involving Human Subjects, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224; Brad Woods, Associate Vice President for Research Compliance, 203 Fairchild Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, KS 66506, (785) 532-3224.

Your and your child's participation is completely voluntary.
If you begin the interview process and change your mind about your or your child's participation, you may end your child's participation at any time without penalty.

PROVIDING CONSENT

Before setting an appointment for the interview, please read this consent form. If you are satisfied with the information within the form, we can schedule a time and date for the interview.

Before the interview, the researcher will ask you to sign a consent form allowing your child to participate in the study. Your child will also be informed about the study and asked for their assent (agreement to participate). If you consent but your child does not wish to participate, the researcher will not conduct the session.

TERMS OF PARTICIPATION

I understand that this project is research and that my family's participation is voluntary. I also understand that if I decide to allow my child to participate in this study, I may withdraw my consent at any time and stop my child's participation at any time without explanation, penalty, loss of benefits, or academic standing to which I may otherwise be entitled.

I verify that my signature below indicates that I have read and understood this consent form and willingly agree to allow my child to participate in this study under the terms described and that my signature acknowledges that I have received a signed and dated copy of this consent form**.**

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT (GUARDIAN) INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Child's Name (printed): _____

Parent/Legal Guardian Name (printed): _____

The parent/guardian of the child agrees to allow their child to participate in this research study about public school discipline practices.	YES	NO
The parent/guardian of the child grants permission for the child to be **quoted** directly in publications or presentations related to this research without using their name.	YES	NO

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian: _____

Date Signed: _____

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: Emily George

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT (CHILD) INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Child's Name (printed): _____

Parent/Legal Guardian Name (printed): _____

The parent/guardian of the child agrees to allow their child to participate in this research study about public school discipline practices.	YES	NO
The parent/guardian of the child grants permission for the child to be **quoted** directly in publications or presentations related to this research without using their name.	YES	NO

Signature of Parent/Legal Guardian: _____

Date Signed: _____

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: Emily George

Child Assent for Research

You are being asked to participate in a research study that will help the researcher understand how students with exceptionalities and their families experience exclusionary discipline. I'm going to explain the study and, at the end, ask you if you would like to participate. You can ask questions at any time.

I have told your guardian about this research, and they have agreed to let you participate. However, even though they agreed to let you participate, you can choose not to.

Important things to know:

- You get to decide if you want to be part of this research.
- You can say "No" or "Yes"
- No one will be upset if you say "No"
- If you say "Yes," you can always say "No" later
- You can say "No" at anytime

You will be asked questions about your experience with exclusionary discipline practices. I will also ask you about your experiences within the school system. If you don't want to answer a question, you do not have to.

Your voice will be recorded during our Zoom session. I will listen to this recording to understand your point of view.

WHOM SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?
You may ask any questions about the research at any time. If you have questions about the research, you should contact the researcher, Emily George at 573-777-0653 (emilygeorge@ksu.edu).

If you want to participate in this research, please write and sign your name below.

Name of Child (printed): _____

Signature of Child: _____

Date Signed: _____

Name of Researcher Obtaining Consent: Emily George

Appendix B - Interview Protocol

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Introductory Script

Hello, my name is Emily George, and I am a student at Kansas State University. I am interviewing you because you responded to my social media post through email or you were recommended to me by another participant as someone who is willing to be interviewed for a study I am conducting. My research is focused on family experiences of students with exceptionalities who experienced Kansas public school discipline.

Before we begin, I need you to verbally agree to participate, but I would like to give you some basic information first. I would like to record our conversation so I can focus on conversing with you and not take notes while we are talking. I will transcribe the conversation after our interview, but I will not include any identifying information. Your name, your student's name, and names of locations and other persons will be changed or obscured. Also, I will not save the video recording and will permanently delete it as soon as transcription is complete.

You may decide not to answer any questions I ask. There are no expected, incorrect, or undesirable answers. Please feel comfortable stating your experiences and rest assured that everything you say will remain confidential. This means only I will be aware that your responses are yours. To be mindful of your time, I will set a timer to let you know when our time together reaches (an hour for parents, thirty minutes for students) minutes, so you can choose to conclude our meeting. If it is okay with you, I am going to start recording now.

Turn on recording feature in Zoom.

Are you willing to participate in this recorded Zoom interview? *Pause for response.* Thank you.

Questions

Experience

- Tell me about your family's experience with exclusionary discipline in public schools, such as detention or suspension.
- Tell me about your relationship with the school and school staff
- Tell me about your interactions with staff involved with the issuing and implementing of IEPs.
- Tell me about a recent school discipline issue with your child.
- Tell me how the family experienced the recent school discipline.

Effects

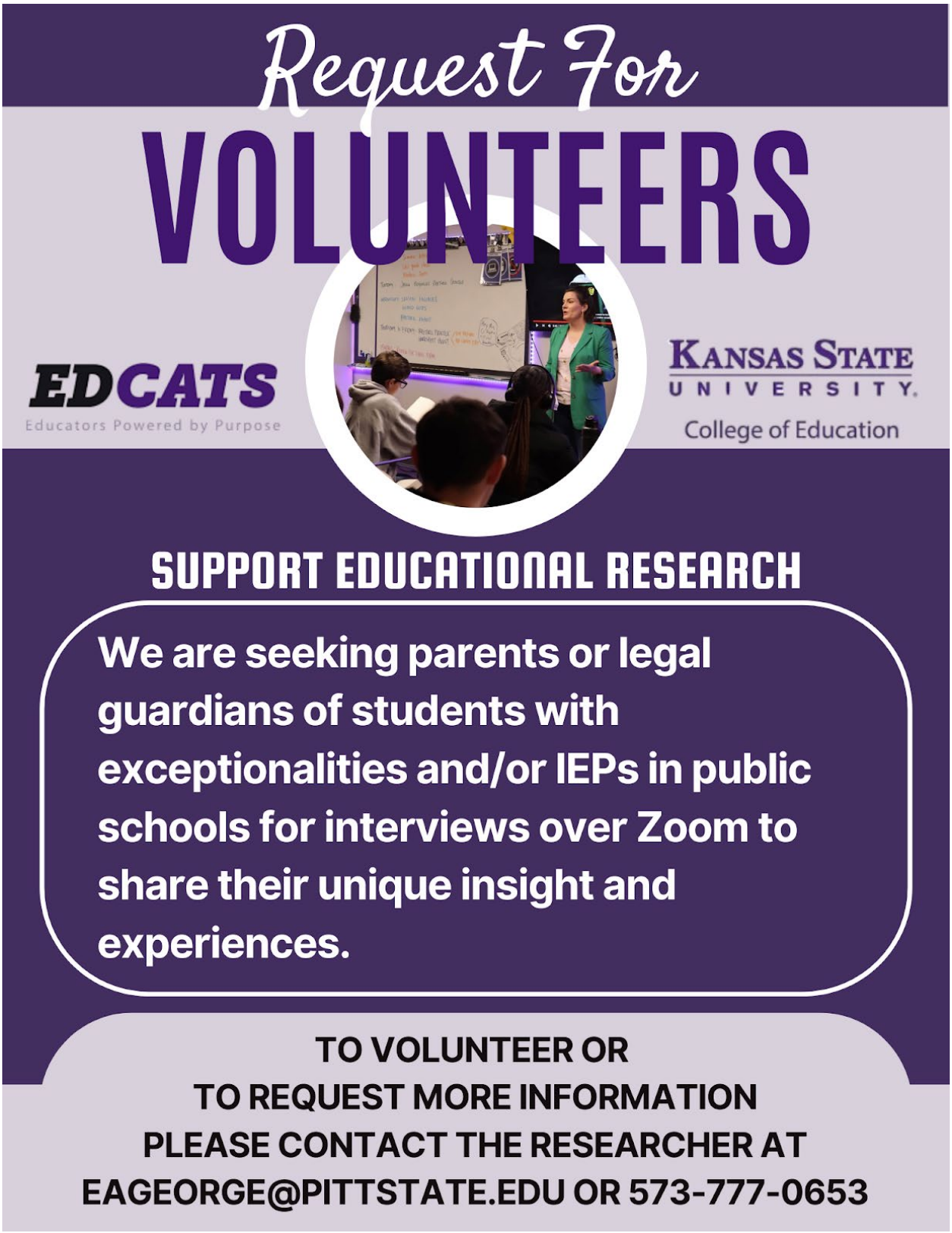
- Tell me how you think your child has been experiencing or responding to disciplinary actions from the school.
- Tell me how your family has experienced the effects of school discipline, both positive and negative.
- Considering your experiences, please describe, as a family, your views of discipline policies for students with IEPs.
- Tell me about your experience after serving school discipline.
- What other information would you like to share with me that we have not yet discussed?

Salutation

Thank you for spending time talking with me today. I value your time and appreciate your willingness and openness to these questions. I've learned much from your responses and hope to

continue to learn to better understand your point of view and how to best support students with exceptionalities and their families in navigating public schooling.

Appendix C - Call for Research Participants Social Media Post



Appendix D - Participant Response Theme Matrix

Themes	Subthemes	Daniels	Garcia	Jackson	King	Lane	Moore	Neil	Peters	Shaw	Warren	White
Accessing Services and Supports	Confusion with special education processes		X	X	X		X					X
	Difficulty obtaining formal services	X		X		X				X		X
	Inconsistencies in support				X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Discipline	isolated from peers in classroom	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	removed from classroom	X	X	X		X	X	X	X		X	
	suspension or expulsion		X	X	X	X	X	X	X			
	student misunderstanding of discipline rationale	X		X			X		X		X	X
Social Stigma	social stigma in school		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	
	social stigma outside of school				X		X	X		X		
	stigma extended to family			X		X	X	X			X	
School Staff Relationships	negative interaction between student and staff	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	
	traumatic interaction between student and staff	X		X			X	X				
	lack of partnership between parent and staff	X	X	X		X	X	X	X	X		X
	lack of school staff communication		X	X	X		X	X	X			X
Parental Advocacy	parent sees advocacy as adversarial	X		X		X	X	X	X		X	X
Parental Agency	parents feel helpless		X	X		X	X		X	X		
Inequity and Bias	racist, sexist, ableist inequities			X	X	X	X	X	X	X		
	student feeling misunderstood	X			X		X		X	X		
	Inconsistencies in discipline	X	X			X					X	X
Family Strain	financial strain	X	X									X
	scheduling strain	X	X			X		X	X		X	X
	parents feeling exhausted	X	X	X		X			X		X	X
	stressed sibling relationships		X		X	X	X				X	
Found Supports and Growth	positive relationship with staff member				X		X	X		X	X	
	positive school outlook from extracurriculars				X			X	X			
	found informal support systems	X	X						X	X	X	X
	separation by time increased growth				X		X	X			X	X