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**AN EXPLORATION INTO URBAN MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS' PERSPECTIVES
ON STUDENT VOICE AND THEIR CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT APPROACHES**

By

Gina D. Upshaw

Arcadia University

Dissertation
Arcadia University's Graduate Board
in Fulfillment of the
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Approved and recommended for acceptance as a dissertation in partial fulfillment of the requirements of Doctor of Education.

May 15, 2024

Special committee directing the doctoral work of
Gina D. Upshaw-McCalop

Dr. Jodi Bornstein, Ph.D.

Dr. Peggy Hickman, Ph.D.

Dr. Priscilla Jeter-Iles, Ed.D

Abstract

This dissertation explored the intersectionality between student voice and classroom management within middle school educational settings through the perspective of ten urban middle school teachers. Classroom management is defined as the array of techniques educators employ to foster an environment conducive to learning, often characterized by order, focus, and positivity. This encompasses the establishment of explicit expectations and procedures, adept handling of student behaviors, and the promotion of an ambiance that nurtures student engagement and scholastic achievement. The significance of adept classroom management is particularly pronounced in urban middle schools, where it is pivotal for engendering affirmative learning contexts. However, the prevalent dependence on suspensions as a disciplinary tactic can detrimentally impact this goal by displacing students from the learning environment, thereby potentially aggravating behavioral challenges and educational inequities. As the educational community seeks viable alternatives to suspensions, the incorporation of student voice into classroom management emerges as a promising strategy. This approach has demonstrated potential in ameliorating conflicts, enhancing student-teacher rapport, and diminishing reliance on exclusionary disciplinary practices, which disproportionately usher Black children into the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP). The core ambition of this phenomenological qualitative research delved into ten urban middle school educators' perceptions of student voice and its integration into their classroom management tactics and strategies. Employing Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a conceptual framework, this study endeavored to dissect the dynamics of student voice within classroom management. This inquiry is critical for advancing our comprehension of how classroom management can evolve to more accurately mirror the multifaceted needs and viewpoints of a diverse student body. Such understanding is instrumental

in guiding the reform of educational practices toward fostering more equitable and responsive learning environments.

The findings of this phenomenological qualitative study shed light on the importance of teachers' use of integrating student perspectives into the realm of their classroom management decisions and relationship-building within educational settings. Through a nuanced exploration of lived experiences of ten urban middle school teachers, this research underscores the transformative potential inherent in amplifying student voices. By recognizing students as active contributors to their own learning environments, educators can foster a culture of mutual respect, empathy, and collaboration. This study highlights the multifaceted benefits of centering student voice, not only in fostering a sense of ownership and agency but also in nurturing positive teacher-student relationships.. Furthermore, the findings advocate for continued efforts towards paradigm shifts in traditional educational practices towards more inclusive and student-centered approaches. The teachers in my study all believed that by acknowledging and valuing the diverse perspectives and experiences of their students, they could do better work in cultivating environments that honor individuality and promote equity. This study serves as a catalyst for transformative reforms, urging stakeholders within the educational landscape to continue to (re)evaluate existing classroom management approaches, that are often top down and teacher-centered, to those that embrace strategies that prioritize the voices and agency of students. Ultimately, the implications of this research extend beyond the confines of the classroom, resonating with broader discussions surrounding educational equity, social justice, and democratic participation in schools. It calls for a continued focus on the power dynamics within educational spaces, positioning students as active collaborators in the co-creation of knowledge and the reimagining of educational practices. Through the integration of student

voice in classroom management approaches, transformative reforms can be realized, paving the way for more inclusive, equitable, and empowering educational experiences for all.

Keywords: *Student voice, classroom management, suspension, critical race theory, and school-to-prison-pipeline*

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the middle school teachers who participated in this study and all middle school teachers in urban environments across the United States of America who show up daily for our young people. As a former middle school teacher, I know all too well that we often don't see the fruits of our labor; thank you for continuing to plant the seeds and watering our students' minds, hearts, and souls. The work you do every day is invaluable; thank you for your continued hard work, dedication, and support of our middle school babies.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Exploring the integration of student voices as a potential strategy to support urban middle school teachers' classroom management approaches is an underdeveloped area of scholarly research. Although there are numerous evidence-based curriculums and instructional strategies for managing classroom behavior that center student engagement, voice and participation, such as Restorative Practices, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), Responsive Classroom, and Developmental Designs Programs—there remains a discernible gap in the literature on teachers' perspectives on effectively integrating student voice within their own classroom management approaches. This gap highlights a critical area for exploration and improvement, ensuring that classroom management strategies not only address behavioral issues but also genuinely empower students by valuing their input and making them active participants in their learning environment. Bridging this gap also requires a deliberate inquiry into strategies that explicitly incorporate student voice in classroom management, thereby enriching the student and teacher educational experiences and fostering a more inclusive, respectful, and responsive classroom culture. Therefore, this research study will explore how urban middle school teachers think about student voice as it relates to their classroom management approaches and strategies. Specifically, this study will explore ways that the utilization of student voice might be proactive to support teachers' classroom management approaches and potentially impact the rates of student suspension and expulsion, which can, in some cases, ultimately lead to the criminalization and oppression of young Black students by funneling them into the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP).

Statement of Problem

According to a nationwide study by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, Black students are 3.5 times more likely than White students to be suspended or expelled in grades K-12. Black children only constitute 18 percent of students, but they account for 46 percent of those suspended (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018). Research shows that when students are suspended frequently and consistently from school, they are placed at a greater risk of entering the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP), Skiba et al. (2014). I posit that teachers require more strategies for handling disruptive behaviors and managing their classrooms effectively. This approach is critical for interrupting the cycle, leading to severe consequences like suspension, expulsion, and other forms of school exclusion. It's important to clarify the specific role classroom management plays in this study, especially since the factors influencing suspensions extend beyond classroom interactions. Investigating classroom management is essential because of the dynamics within the classroom significantly affect a student's likelihood of facing suspension or exclusion, impacting their overall connection to the educational environment.

One approach to this can be for teachers to understand better how to solicit and utilize student voice when managing classroom behavior. I believe that it is paramount for there to be opportunities for urban middle school teachers to engage in meaningful dialogue with urban middle school students to understand student behavior and classroom management better. While the literature on student voice as a strategy for student engagement is robust (Mitra, Serrier, and Stoicovy, 2012; Mitra et al., 2012; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Mitra, 2006; Mansfield, 2013; Brasof, 2015), there remains a gap in understanding how these practices can be effectively

implemented in diverse educational settings which can include classroom management approaches.

The body of research on leveraging student voice in school decision-making processes is substantial and has been explored by various scholars over the years; however, the research on the intersection of student voice and teachers' classroom management decisions and choices is an area for further exploration. Notably, Mitra et al. (2012) have been instrumental in advancing this field. Their studies emphasized the importance of incorporating student voice into school decision-making processes. These contributions build on Mitra's earlier work in 2006, where she laid the foundational arguments for the significance of student voice in fostering a participatory culture within schools.

Robinson and Taylor (2007) further enriched the discourse by providing a theoretical framework that highlights the reciprocal relationships between students and teachers in the context of student voice initiatives. Their work underscores the transformative potential of such practices for both parties, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play.

Mansfield (2013) and Brasof (2015) extended the discussion by examining the implications and outcomes of student voice practices in varying educational landscapes. Mansfield focused on the psychological aspects, exploring how these practices influence students' identity and self-efficacy. In contrast, Brasof (2015) delved into the structural and policy-related challenges that schools face in implementing student voice strategies, suggesting the need for systemic changes to facilitate their adoption.

Despite these contributions, a gap remains in comprehensively understanding how urban middle school teachers might effectively implement student voice strategies across diverse educational settings and their connection to their classroom management decisions. This gap

points to the complexities involved in translating theory into practice, considering the varied socio-cultural, economic, and institutional contexts that schools operate within. Each scholar's work contributes a piece to the puzzle, offering insights into different facets of the issue—from theoretical underpinnings and empirical evidence to practical challenges and psychological impacts. This highlights the ongoing need for research that bridges the gap between the rich theoretical foundation laid by these scholars and the practical realities of educational practices.

Despite the wealth of evidence supporting the importance of incorporating student voice into the educational process, challenges such as institutional resistance, lack of teacher training, and varying interpretations of what student voice entails hinder widespread adoption (Domenico, 1998). Despite the extensive research supporting the inclusion of student voice as a critical tool for enhancing student involvement, participation, and investment in their learning journey, there remains a significant gap in the literature concerning its application in the specific context of managing classroom behavior, particularly within urban middle school environments. Engaging students as active participants in creating behavioral norms and interventions not only acknowledges their insights and experiences but also promotes a sense of ownership and responsibility toward a positive school climate. Yet, the literature scarcely addresses how such student-centered approaches might be systematically implemented and evaluated for efficacy in these specific settings, leaving teachers without a strong framework to harness the potential of student voice in transforming classroom management practices.

As a qualitative researcher contributing to student voice and classroom management literatures, my role involves deeply exploring and understanding the complex and nuanced experiences of urban middle school teachers when managing classroom behavior. Through the use of interviews with urban middle school teachers, I aim to give voice to the diverse

perspectives of teachers, uncovering their perceptions and experiences with their classroom management approaches. My work emphasizes the importance of creating inclusive and participatory educational environments where every student's voice is heard and valued. By analyzing and interpreting the data gathered from the teachers in my study, I hope to contribute to the development of more responsive, empathetic, and effective teaching strategies and educational settings. This, in turn, fosters a more engaging and supportive learning environment that accommodates the varied learning styles and preferences of students. Through my research, I advocate for student voice to empower students and encourage active participation in their own education, ensuring that the classroom is a space where every student can thrive. The hope of this qualitative study is to contribute to the growing body of work on the intersection of student voice and classroom management.

Therefore, the goal of this phenomenological qualitative study is to explore how urban middle school teachers define, perceive, and understand the role of student voice as it relates to managing classroom behavior.

This dissertation will:

- (1) Explore urban middle school teachers' perceptions of student voice and its role in classroom management.
- (2) Explore student voice using Critical Race Theory (CRT) to understand better how urban middle school teachers can proactively manage their classroom behavior.
- (3) Explore teachers' use of student voice when managing classroom behavior in urban middle schools.

Background of the Study

The researcher is a former urban middle school administrator who observed the following interaction between a teacher and two Black eighth-grade boys: It was recess and lunch on a warm sunny day. The policy in the middle school stated that once students were dismissed to either recess or lunch, they were not permitted back upstairs without teacher permission in the form of a note from a staff member. On this day, the two Black male eighth-grade students walked up the steps excitedly as they had permission to return to their lockers to obtain a football to play outside. As the researcher left her office, she observed the conversation in the hallway. The teacher yelled at the two students, “What are you doing up here?” while pointing her fingers in their faces. Before Student A could respond, Student B asked, “Why are you yelling at us?” The teacher then proceeded to say, “Who are you talking to? I asked you a question.” Student B responded, “I feel disrespected by how you are speaking to me, and if I can’t talk to you in that manner, why is it okay for you to speak to me that way?” The teacher continued to yell and berate both young men and called for them to go to the dean’s office because she felt disrespected. When the teacher turned around, she saw the researcher observing the entire exchange. The teacher escalated, yelling, “They need to be written up, they need to be suspended, they disrespected me!” The two young men, now fearful that they would get in trouble, escalated too and explained their side of what occurred. The researcher asked the teacher to return to her classroom and directed the students to grab lunch and return upstairs to discuss the incident further. After speaking with the two students at length, with the support of the school counselor, it was revealed that when the teacher pointed her fingers in their faces, they felt disrespected. When the researcher followed up with the teacher during her prep period to explain

how the students felt, the teacher, now de-escalated, understood why Student B responded in the manner he had.

This dialogue called attention to the importance of the impact of all kinds of interactions on students' experiences in school and better ways for teachers to approach and respond to students. This story also highlighted the significant importance of this work, as our school's data showed racially disproportionate discipline referrals, which aligned with recent research on disproportionality in discipline. Black students were overrepresented in the collected discipline data. As Kunesh and Noltemeyer (2019) state, “Black students, especially males, are more likely to be suspended and expelled than students of other races” (p. 472). Removing children from the classroom has many negative impacts, denies students direct access to free and appropriate public education (FAPE), and continues to widen the achievement gap. Students removed from the classroom for disciplinary reasons are at higher risk of being placed into the STPP (Fielding, 2004; Monroe, 2005; Skiba et al., 2014)

Moreover, research shows that disparities between Black and White students often occur for subjective infractions, such as defiance and disrespect (Skiba et al. (2014). In the situation I shared above, I wondered if the teacher had an established rapport with the students and respectfully spoke to them if the outcome would have been different? The teacher perceived the students' behavior as disrespectful; however, upon further exploration, the situation was remedied by the teacher talking with the students to understand better why they responded in the manner in which they did. This was an opportunity to listen to student voice and hear from both students and the teacher about their thoughts as a way to bring about greater understanding by listening. Doing so allowed the students to utilize their voices to convey how they interpreted the exchange, and the teacher’s response showed that she understood; as a result, the situation was

restored. Black students made up more than 95 percent of the student body at this urban middle school. This interaction made the researcher think that the racial and power dynamics between teachers and students in this urban middle school should be explored further.

This incident underscored the critical importance of fostering open communication and understanding in educational settings, particularly in contexts marked by significant racial and power imbalances. It highlights the potential for positive outcomes when teachers take the time to genuinely engage with and listen to their students, thereby challenging and mitigating the systemic disparities that too often influence disciplinary actions in schools. This emphasis on meaningful teacher-student interactions not only presents a blueprint for more equitable disciplinary practices but also serves as a critical step toward addressing and reducing the prevalence of disproportionality in schools.

Disproportionality

Disproportionate school discipline for students of color, mainly Black students, continues to be pervasive in the United States (Hoffman, 2014). In 2018, the U.S. Department of Education research showed that for the 2015–2016 academic year, “African American students are still, despite numerous national calls to action, the top recipients of school discipline outcomes (39% of out-of-school suspensions and 33% of expulsions), yet comprise only 15% of the K–12 schooling population” (Williams, Lewis, Glass, Butler, Lim, 2020, p. 2).

The issue of disproportionate school discipline affecting students of color, particularly African-American students, remains a significant concern within the educational system of the United States. Despite increasing awareness and numerous national initiatives aimed at addressing this disparity, evidence suggests that these efforts have yet to alter the status quo substantially. Skiba et al. (2014) highlight the enduring nature of this issue, pointing to systemic

practices and biases that continue to disadvantage Black students in disciplinary matters. Expanding on this, research conducted by the U.S. Department of Education in 2018 for the 2015–2016 academic year presents alarming statistics that underscore the magnitude of the problem. According to Williams, Lewis, Glass, Butler, and Lim (2020), African American students disproportionately bear the brunt of school disciplinary actions, receiving 39% of out-of-school suspensions and 33% of expulsions, despite making up only 15% of the K–12 student population.

This disproportionality not only reflects inherent biases within school discipline policies and practices but also suggests a broader systemic issue that affects the educational trajectory and well-being of Black students. The impact of such disciplinary measures extends beyond the immediate consequences of suspension or expulsion, affecting students' academic performance, self-esteem, and future opportunities. It contributes to a cycle of disadvantage, perpetuating educational inequities and reinforcing the school-to-prison pipeline. In this phenomenon, punitive school policies contribute to an increased likelihood of incarceration for marginalized students.

The persistence of these disparities, despite known consequences and efforts to address them, calls for a reevaluation of current disciplinary approaches and the implementation of more equitable practices. It emphasizes the need for schools to adopt restorative justice practices, culturally responsive teaching, and other inclusive strategies that aim to understand and mitigate the underlying issues leading to disciplinary actions. Moreover, it underlines the importance of continuous monitoring, research, and policy reform to ensure that all students, regardless of race, are provided with a supportive and fair educational environment. The dialogue around disproportionate school discipline, therefore, not only concerns the fairness of disciplinary

practices but also the broader implications for social justice, equity, and the right to education free from discrimination.

Integrating Student Voice in Urban Settings

“Student voice describes the many ways in which youth have opportunities to share decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (Mitra, 2008, p. 523). This may involve allowing students to offer their thoughts on the curriculum, the policies of the school, and other areas of their educational experience. By enabling students to have a say in the decisions that affect their education, schools can develop more responsive and equitable learning environments and gain a deeper understanding of the requirements and experiences of their student body. Research shows that integrating student voice as a part of classroom practices can significantly impact learning spaces in positive and productive ways (Mitra et al., 2012). The utilization of student voice in urban middle school classrooms can offer helpful strategies for teachers to understand better how to meet students where they are academically and socially, build relationships, and problem-solve with students around behavioral issues that may arise when managing the classroom (Mitra, Serrier, and Stoicovy, 2012; Mitra et al., 2012; Robinson and Taylor, 2007; Mitra, 2006; Mansfield, 2013).

I, too, believe that students are young scholars with something to say. When opportunities are provided to engage in meaningful conversations regarding perceptions of classroom issues, management, and behavior, this can lead to meaningful dialogue on ways to impact change in schools (Mitra, 2006). Educational scholars Robinson & Taylor (2005) state, “In order to create a school in which there is democratic inclusivity, there need to be ways of allowing the whole student body to participate in school decision-making and a recognition that there are multiple voices to be listened to” (p. 11). I believe it is vital for school communities to incorporate student

voices to avoid overly punitive practices when managing classroom behavior. Through this study, I aim to learn more about teachers' perceptions of student voice in their own classroom management and discipline decisions and explore if and how they consider the role of student voice in that work.

I believe that using and soliciting student voice as a pedagogical tool in urban middle school classrooms can provide students with opportunities to problem solve and offer additional insight for teachers on how to manage classroom behavior effectively. I'm curious about urban middle school teachers' definition of student voice; the ways that already integrate student voice in their own classroom practices, and their perceptions of the intersectionality of student voice, and the dismantling of the STPP. Therefore, through my study, I aim to learn with and from urban middle school teachers about the opportunities and limitations of student voice as it relates to their own classroom management strategies.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a theoretical framework founded by legal scholars in the 1970s to illuminate structural and racial disparities often engendered in laws and policies. "CRT developed in the 1970s as an intellectual project and movement of scholars of color who sought to critique and explore the relationships between law, race, racism, and social power in ways that existing fields such as Critical Legal Studies or the liberal civil rights tradition could not or had not" (Simson, 2014, p. 526).

CRT investigates how gender, class, and sexuality intersect with race and other types of social hierarchy and oppression, such as how these intersections determine power dynamics in society and how race and racism intersect with these different forms of social order and oppression. In the context of education, Critical race theory (CRT) can serve as a lens for

understanding how race and racism affect the experiences of children in schools, and it can also be used to guide attempts to establish educational settings that are more equitable and inclusive. Acknowledging the significance of students' voices in formulating educational policies and procedures is an essential component of CRT in education.

Critical race theory (CRT) and the incorporation of student perspectives can work together to challenge traditional power dynamics within the educational system, thereby promoting more equitable outcomes for all students. Educators possess the significant capability to foster the growth of a society that is both more equitable and inherently welcoming. This potential can be realized when they prioritize the unique experiences and perspectives of students belonging to underrepresented groups. By actively listening to students' voices and incorporating their insights into the educational framework, educators have the potential to ensure that the curriculum and classroom environment reflect a diverse range of experiences and viewpoints.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) offers a compelling framework for understanding the dynamics of student voice in urban middle schools through its emphasis on race and power structures in society. By applying CRT, my qualitative study explores how systemic inequities and racial biases can impact the experiences and expressions of student voice within urban middle school settings. CRT's focus on the interplay between race, power, and policy enables a deeper exploration of how marginalized students' voices are often silenced or marginalized, highlighting the importance of culturally responsive practices that empower all students. Through the narratives and lived experiences of the urban middle school teachers, I hope to uncover the ways in which institutional practices perpetuate disparities, thereby providing insights into how educational systems can be reformed to amplify the voices of students of color. In doing so, CRT not only frames my study's inquiry into the nuanced realities of student voice

in urban middle schools but also underscores the urgency of addressing racial injustices within educational contexts. CRT will be utilized in this study to help analyze teachers' perceptions of student voice and classroom management in urban middle school settings and draw upon students' cultural needs and customs.

By focusing on how urban middle school teachers perceive and utilize student voice, the study aims to unearth the potential of student voice as a transformative tool for challenging and changing the prevailing disciplinary practices. The research questions serve as a guide to explore how teachers' perceptions and uses of student voice can contribute to a more equitable and responsive approach to managing classroom behavior. This approach aligns with the CRT framework by seeking to address and dismantle systemic inequities and institutionalized oppression within the educational system.

The emphasis on engaging teachers in dialogue to understand cultural norms, expressions, and responses indicates a methodological approach that values the experiences and insights of teachers while critically exploring the structural conditions that shape their interactions with students. By exploring the role of student voice through a CRT lens, my study endeavors aim to highlight and leverage the agency of students, especially those from marginalized communities, in reimagining disciplinary practices that are just, inclusive, and supportive of all students' educational experiences. This study will employ CRT by exploring how teachers in urban middle schools perceive, solicit, and utilize student voice as a proactive strategy when managing classroom behavior.

Purpose of the Study

This phenomenological, qualitative case study aims to understand better how urban middle school teachers solicit and utilize student voice when managing classroom discipline as

an alternative to school exclusion. In this study, I explored teacher perceptions of student voice as a way to consider classroom management approaches. It is essential to consider the demographics of the student population and provide spaces to solicit student voice and input in an effort to create a school culture that is inclusive of all voices, teachers, and students. In most urban middle school environments, Black children account for the majority of the discipline referrals compared to White students (Skiba et al., 2014). Therefore, this dissertation will also explore urban middle school teachers' understanding of student voice and its role in classroom management in urban environments.

Research Questions

To better understand how urban middle school teachers consider student voice as a strategy in their classroom management, this work is guided by the following research questions:

RQ 1: How do teachers in urban middle schools regard the role of student voice in their classrooms?

RQ 2: What role does student voice play in their classroom management?

RQ 3: What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle schools?

These questions will be explored in this study by interviewing ten urban middle school teachers to understand better how they define student voice, and when and how it is utilized in their classroom management decisions.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for multiple reasons. As a former teacher, dean of students, and head of a middle school in an urban environment, I have witnessed Black students removed from the school setting for minor incidents that did not warrant such a response. I am a mother of two

Black children, and I am the Director of Climate and Culture in a large urban district. I am extremely passionate about social justice and democracy in schools.

Another example from my own teaching practice draws me to this study. Years ago, in one of my own classroom teaching experiences, while teaching a math lesson, I was walking around the classroom eating a piece of fruit when a student asked me why I was eating. The student began to tell me how it was unfair that students were not permitted to eat in class and that the lunch period was towards the end of the day. Instead of deeming his inquiry disruptive or disrespectful, I stopped the class and asked how everyone else felt about it. This conversation eventually led me to include a snack period in class. I sent a newsletter and email asking parents/guardians to sign up to donate items weekly. I led a community-building circle to discuss healthy snack options to increase focus during instructional time and provided time to model expectations for students adequately. The response was overwhelmingly positive from students and parents/guardians; everyone appreciated the responsiveness around this issue. The students felt heard, their needs were met, engagement was at an all-time high, and I also noticed that standardized test scores and classroom behavior improved, as did homework completion. This experience illuminated the importance of student voice and how children are little people with good sense who should be provided consistent and ongoing opportunities to offer feedback, voice their concerns, and be heard.

Fortunately, I was working in a school where the discipline approach was embedded in a school-wide, highly valued, and enacted social curriculum. Students were explicitly taught how to meet their needs in appropriate ways through community-building activities, relationship-building, and explicit teaching, which included modeling, noticing, and redirecting student behavior. This was such a powerful learning experience, and I hope to one day contribute

to the growing body of work on student voice and democracy in schools as a means to avoid exclusionary practices such as suspension, which often leads to the STPP.

Definition of Terms

Critical Race Theory (CRT): Daftary (2020) defines Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework particularly relevant to social work research aimed at investigating and empowering historically disenfranchised populations. CRT focuses on contextualizing problems within their social, political, and historical contexts while addressing power, privilege, racism, and other forms of oppression.

Classroom Management: “A collection of non-instructional classroom procedures implemented by teachers in classroom settings with all students for the purposes of teaching prosocial behavior and preventing and reducing inappropriate behavior” (Oliver, Wehby, & Reschly, 2011, pp. 7– 8).

Out-of-School Suspension: “Out-of-school suspensions are a defined period of time where the student is prohibited from attending school and usually asked not to enter the school grounds” (Michail, 2011, p. 159).

Student Voice: “Student voice describes the many ways in which youth have opportunities to share decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (Mitra, 2008, p. 523).

School-to-prison pipeline (STPP): “Practices associated with suspending students, involving police in school disciplinary matters, and introducing youth to the delinquency system have been referred to as the ‘school-to-prison pipeline’ (STPP)” (Gonsoulin et al., 2012, p. 310).

Role of the Researcher

I have over twenty years of experience working in urban middle schools as a teacher, dean of students, middle school principal, and director of climate and culture. My primary goal for this study is to explore the use of student voice as a strategy used by teachers in urban middle school settings when managing classroom behavior in order to build positive relationships and rapport with students and potentially, ultimately, dismantle the STTP. Clarifying the role of the researcher will provide additional context for the reader to understand the significance of this study better.

As a dean of students, the researcher had the opportunity to create internal processes and systems of tracking, monitoring, and analyzing student behavior through office discipline referrals in an urban middle school setting. Hailing from a family of educators, both teachers and administrators, the researcher was taught early in her career that students possess their own funds of knowledge that every educator should know how to tap into to help them better meet their needs in more appropriate ways. “When students and teachers become co-researchers, collaboration is about leveraging the capacities of students and educators to create collective inquiry processes” (Brasof, 2017, p. 25). This emphasis on the mutual engagement of students and educators, as highlighted by Brasof (2017), underscores the transformative potential of such collaborative inquiry. Yet, it contrasts sharply with the historical oversight at this school, where student input was previously undervalued in understanding behavior dynamics.

Although these processes—where students and teachers collaborate as co-researchers to leverage their collective capacities for inquiry—are vital and necessary for creating a more inclusive and responsive educational environment, research shows that this approach is not often taken in schools. Instead, exclusionary practices are often utilized, overlooking the potential

benefits of engaging directly with students' perspectives and experiences. This omission underscores the importance of reevaluating traditional approaches to understanding and addressing student behavior, advocating for the integration of student voices as essential to developing more effective and empathetic educational strategies.

As a Black woman, the researcher must be mindful of her presentation, approach, tone, and dialogue when speaking with teachers to avoid intimidation, shame, or blame. The researcher aims to support the development of relationships and rapport between teachers and Black students in urban middle school settings. Lastly, based on the lived experiences of the researcher, she holds certain beliefs and possible biases about classroom discipline and student voice. Noguera (2003) writes about teachers ignoring issues that cause disruptive behavior and contributing to the marginalization of students, especially those of color. In the researcher's view, educators need to focus more on support for students and teachers to decrease office discipline referrals and prevent students from entering the STTP. This research study aims to illuminate the need for student voice as a viable strategy when responding to behavior in the middle school classroom.

Conclusion

There continues to be an overrepresentation of Black students in urban middle school environments receiving discipline referrals nationwide. This study explores urban middle school teachers' perspectives on student voice and their classroom management approaches. It is the researcher's belief that when urban middle school teachers work to better understand the growing needs of their students of the school community, the possibilities are endless. Therefore, this dissertation explores the possibilities of student voice to avoid suspension and exclusion by

utilizing student voice in urban middle schools for teachers to effectively manage classroom behavior.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

According to the National Center for Education Statistics, roughly 2.6 million public school students received one or more out-of-school suspensions (2019). “The disproportionate number of suspensions of African American students, specifically males, leads to lower achievement and, therefore, a more negative attitude toward school, which can display itself in self-destructive or defiant behaviors leading to more suspensions” (Boucher, 2014, p. 86). Reflecting on Boucher's (2014) analysis of the vicious cycle where the high suspension rates among Black male students perpetuate lower academic achievement and negative attitudes toward education, Skiba et al. (2014) further contends that such disparities have only intensified over time, underscoring a growing concern in educational equity. While the research surrounding this issue is vast, there continues to be limited research on the solicitation and utilization of student voice as a means to dismantle the STPP.

Background/Relevant Literature

Black students in urban middle school environments continue to be overrepresented in discipline referral data compared to their White counterparts. Skiba et al. (2014) write that Black students are sometimes subjected to exclusionary practices, like suspension and expulsion, at a rate three times higher than other students and, therefore, are overrepresented in office discipline referrals in schools. “School exclusion is now the accepted directive for a range of behaviors that are considered to put the school community at risk, such as violence, aggression, and increasing disruption” (Michail, 2011, p. 158). There continues to be limited research on the effectiveness

of exclusionary practices. Additionally, Williams et al. (2020) writes when students are “reprimanded for normal adolescent behavior (i.e., disengagement, disrespect, excessive noise, or dress code violations) or cultural expressions (i.e., nonverbal communication or cultural style of communication), it could seriously damage that student’s social, emotional, and cognitive development” (Williams et al., 2020, p. 3). There is an overabundance of research literature from urban scholars that posits when Black students are suspended and expelled from school; they may experience prison at some point in their lifetime (Noguera, 2003; Skiba, 2000; Skiba, 2011).

During the 2017-18 school year, about 2.5 million K-12 students were suspended at least once (U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights, 2018). Overusing suspensions and other exclusionary practices for Black students in the United States, specifically in urban middle schools, could ultimately lead to incarceration. As Willis et al. (2019) state, “With limited resources and training, many teachers rely on reactive, punitive responses to classroom problem behaviors, resulting in 3.8 million school suspensions annually, dramatically higher in middle schools” (p. 213). “From a problem-solving, prevention, and intervention perspective, it is important to know how many students are suspended from the different levels (i.e., elementary, middle, and high school) of our schools, whether they are important demographic trends, and what types of incidents are triggering the need for suspensions.” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 31).

Classroom management stands as a formidable challenge that a significant number of teachers, particularly those in urban middle school environments, find difficult to master. This difficulty is not trivial, as the inability to effectively manage a classroom in these settings has far-reaching implications. It directly affects the quality of the learning environment, making it harder for students to engage with and absorb the curriculum presented to them. Furthermore, this struggle contributes significantly to disparities in disciplinary actions within schools, often

resulting in a disproportionate number of disciplinary measures being meted out to students from certain demographics (Skiba et al., 2014).

In light of this pressing issue, the work of scholars Kwok and Svajda-Hardy (2021) comes as a beacon of guidance. They delve into the heart of the matter by suggesting a foundational approach to address disciplinary imbalances. Their assertion, “One remedy for disciplinary disproportionality is effective classroom management” (Kwok and Svajda-Hardy, 2021, p. 2), underscores the profound impact that skilled classroom management can have. According to them, the essence of effective classroom management transcends the mere maintenance of order and discipline. Instead, it embodies the principle of equitable education by creating a classroom environment that minimizes the need for disciplinary actions. This is achieved by promoting a positive, engaging, and inclusive learning atmosphere that naturally deters behavioral issues.

Such an approach does more than just address immediate behavioral problems; it lays the foundation for a broader educational climate that is fundamentally more supportive and inclusive of all students. By fostering an environment where students feel valued and engaged, educators can significantly reduce the reliance on punitive measures and, in turn, work toward closing the gap in disciplinary disparities (Skiba et al., 2014). This approach to classroom management not only benefits the students by providing them with a more conducive learning environment but also supports teachers in becoming more effective educators. Through this lens, effective classroom management is seen not just as a tool for maintaining order but as a critical element in the pursuit of a more equitable and just educational system.

This is important to this study because it helps to underscore the need to explore student voice as a viable strategy to manage classroom behavior. There is a gap in the research on the

intersectionality of student voice and classroom management. Bridging the gap in research on the intersectionality of student voice and classroom management is pivotal for crafting more inclusive and effective educational environments. This connection underscores the potential for student voice to serve as a powerful tool in classroom management strategies. By integrating students' perspectives and experiences into the management of classrooms, educators can foster a more engaging and responsive learning atmosphere. This approach not only takes into account the various perspectives and experiences that students bring to the classroom, but it also gives them the ability to play an active part in the process of their own education. Consequently, exploring this intersectionality can lead to innovative strategies that enhance both student engagement and classroom dynamics, ultimately contributing to a more holistic understanding of effective teaching and learning practices.

Therefore, this review of the literature will focus on three areas:

1. Classroom Management in urban middle schools in the United States
2. Exploration of student voice as a vehicle to manage classroom behavior, and
3. Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework and its intersections with the STPP and the impact on Black students in urban middle school settings

Educational Disparities and Discipline

In many urban middle school environments, “behavior problems reported by teachers included distractibility, hyperactivity and immature behaviors, which can lead to off-task behavior in the classroom” (Wills, Caldarella, Mason, Lappin and Anderson, 2019, p. 213). As Boucher (2016) states, “The disproportionate number of suspensions of African American students, specifically males, leads to lower achievement and, therefore, a more negative attitude toward school, which can display itself in self-destructive or defiant behaviors leading to more

suspensions” (p. 86). The link between classroom behavior issues and disciplinary actions, as highlighted by Wills et al. (2019) and Boucher (2016), suggests a cycle where initial behavioral problems can escalate into more severe consequences, including suspensions, which further negatively affect students' attitudes and achievements.

This evidence of an educational disparity highlights a cyclical pattern where punitive measures become both a cause and effect of negative student attitudes and behaviors. Similarly, Kwok and Svajda-Hardy (2021) further illuminate this issue by stating, “Discipline is not dispensed equally. Throughout many classrooms in the United States, students of color are likely to receive more frequent and harsher consequences” (Kwok and Svajda-Hardy, 2021, p. 2). In particular, Black students in urban middle school settings are disciplined more than other students (Skiba et al. 2014). This creates a disproportionate number of Black students being overrepresented in the discipline referral data. “The disproportionate number of African-American youths who experience school failure has prompted researchers and theorists to consider alternative educational frameworks for such students” (Monroe & Obidah, 2004, p. 258). Punitive practices punish the student rather than educate them. Educators must critique the behavior, not the child. When students break the rules, they are rarely allowed to express their feelings and provide a rationale for their response or tone—which teachers may read as disruptive. In most cases, Black students are reprimanded according to the draconian policies set forth in many urban middle schools. “This is sometimes referred to as the ‘deficit view,’ where the student is seen as being at fault and must be fixed” (Michail, 2011, p. 161).

In exploring the landscape of educational challenges, one of the most pressing issues is the management of discipline within public schools. Monroe (2009) highlights this concern, noting its ubiquity across the United States. Transitioning to the specific implications of these

disciplinary practices, it becomes evident that they disproportionately affect Black students, leading to their exclusion not just from the classroom but, in many instances, from the educational system itself. Monroe (2009) further illuminates this issue, presenting a body of research that underscores the disproportionate frequency and severity of disciplinary actions against Black males compared to their peers. “Discipline is a widespread concern in public schools throughout the nation” (Monroe, 2009, p. 322). The use of exclusionary practices results in Black students being removed from the general classroom and, in some cases, the entire school environment. “Educators across the nation share a common dilemma. Research studies completed since the 1970s demonstrate that Black males are disciplined with greater frequency and severity than their peers” (Monroe, 2005, p. 49). The research outlined in this literature review supports the view that exclusionary practices in classroom management are linked to Black students experiencing prison at some point in their lifetime (Skiba et al. 2014).

Additionally, educational scholar Simson (2014) writes,

“Punitive school discipline procedures have increasingly taken hold in America’s schools. While they are detrimental to all students’ well-being and academic success, they have proven to disproportionately punish minority students, especially African-American Youth. Such policies feed into wider social issues that, once more, disproportionately affect minority communities: the school-to-prison pipeline, high school dropout rates, the push-out phenomenon, and the criminalization of schools” (Simson, 2014, p. 506).

Research shows that minor infractions such as disrespect and disruption of classes do not warrant immediate removal from instruction and tend to be subjective in nature. Educational researcher Conwright (2022) writes, “Punitive school discipline practices, which

disproportionately affect Black and Brown children, contribute to the flow of young people into the criminal legal system and the prison industry” (Conwright, 2022, p. 27). While many researchers have explored several key factors underscoring causes for these continued racial disparities, through this study, I seek to explore and learn more about how teachers perceive student voice as a means to manage classroom behavior. The next section of this literature review will outline zero-tolerance policies in urban middle schools and their intersections with the STPP.

Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools

Zero tolerance is a policy that is described as the practice of imposing the harshest feasible punishment on any individual who is found guilty of committing a crime or breaking a regulation. “Zero tolerance policy was created as a result of the Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994” (Dunbar and McNeal, 2010, p. 293). Zero tolerance policies call for schools to overly discipline students no matter the infraction. The notion is an if this, then that, as in, if a student breaks a rule and the consequence is suspension, then the school, without giving any attention or respect to the external factors, suspends a student regardless of whether or not the infraction was minor in nature; this is especially true for Black students. “Racial disparities in school discipline in the U.S. schools have been documented and analyzed in scholarly articles for decades” (Hoffman, 2014, p. 70). Unfortunately, Black students are subjected to more punitive discipline measures in these settings.

“The rise in school expulsions/suspensions coupled with the increased pace and scope of governmental focus on school safety issues raised questions among lawmakers, educators, and the general public regarding the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies” (McNeal & Dunbar, 2010, p. 297). In a study by Caton in 2012, zero-tolerance policies greatly impacted Black males’ “educational experience” (Caton, 2012, p. 1055). Ultimately, zero-tolerance policies

coupled with overly punitive practices—such as teachers removing students from the classroom for misbehavior and minor offenses—often lead to Black students entering what scholars call the STPP. Neither they nor the nation at large can afford to have Black children in urban middle school environments follow this path. “Public schools across the country have adopted various components of the zero-tolerance policies with the goal of ensuring the safety of school personnel and students. These policies are rooted historically in federal drug policies designed to deter drug trafficking” (Caton, 2012, p. 1056). Zero-tolerance policies have not proven effective when responding to misbehavior as the removal of students from the classroom setting does not work to remedy the behavior; instead, it separates the child from the classroom, and upon their return, there are little to no opportunities for the student and teacher to discuss expectations for behavior moving forward. Ultimately, zero tolerance policies lead to suspension, and removal from schools, which then goes on a student’s permanent record, making it difficult for them to find an alternative placement and could potentially lead them to a life of incarceration later in life, hence the School-to-Prison Pipeline.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

“The School to Prison Pipeline (STPP) is a term now commonly used to define the pathway for youths from the educational system to the criminal justice system in the United States” (Dutil, 2020, p. 171). “The impact of the school-to-prison pipeline is substantial, involving millions of young people. Of the 49 million U.S. students enrolled in the 2011- 2012 academic year, 3.5 million students experienced in-school detention, 1.9 million students were suspended for at least one day, 1.6 million students were suspended more than one time, and 130,000 students were expelled” (U.S. Department of Education, 2014b).

When schools fail to consider how a student's social environment—such as exposure to violence, poverty, and instability—affects their ability to learn and perform academically, they may inadvertently contribute to the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP). For instance, disciplinary actions that do not account for the underlying social issues can lead to suspensions or expulsions, pushing students away from educational support and towards environments that increase the risk of criminal behavior.

“Hundreds of school districts across the country employ discipline policies that push students out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system at alarming rates—a phenomenon known as the school-to-prison pipeline” (Elias, 2013, p. 39). Excluding students from school, especially Black students in urban middle school environments is highly problematic. Research shows that exclusionary practices do not fix the behavior or prevent future misbehavior from happening (Skiba et al., 2014).

In many urban middle school environments, minute by minute, students are controlled by staff and teachers alike with little to no opportunities to learn how to self-govern, a skill that is transferable well beyond middle school for students to be successful no matter where they are. The researcher believes by controlling students from the moment they walk into the building when they can speak, eat, stand, move about the building, play, use the lavatory, and carry out countless other routines that, the schools are operating like a prison system. Additionally, students are subjected to harsh treatment in the form of overly punitive practices for minor infractions. In some schools, students are policed, with metal detectors present at the entrances of the building, and they are treated like prison inmates, often subjected to verbal abuse and criticism without consideration for their emotional well-being or the impact it has on their psyche

(Noguera, 2003). Black students subjected to these environments with little or no voice in how school policies are shaped are at a greater risk of ending up in prison later in life.

Rather than harshly controlling student behavior for minor infractions in urban middle school settings, there are other possibilities, including student voice, that seek to be more restorative by creating spaces for students to provide input and feedback on classroom management. Black children who experience punitive “school discipline protocols and the smaller number subsequently caught within the school-to-prison pipeline share commonalities and experiences that place them at higher risk for these outcomes” (Mallett, 2016, p. 565).

According to Mallet (2016), these outcomes include an increased likelihood of academic failure and dropout, greater rates of incarceration, diminished employment prospects, and ongoing mental health challenges. These children are more likely to be suspended or expelled, which disrupts their education and contributes to academic underachievement. Once caught in the school-to-prison pipeline, they face an increased probability of entering the criminal justice system, which can lead to a cycle of incarceration and release that makes it difficult to secure stable employment or pursue further education. Moreover, these experiences can lead to long-term psychological stress and mental health issues, further compounding the challenges these children face. Thus, the punitive disciplinary measures and the school-to-prison pipeline not only affect their immediate educational environment but also have far-reaching implications for their futures, perpetuating cycles of poverty, incarceration, and marginalization.

Teacher Perceptions of Student Behavior

Many teachers and school leaders find it challenging to follow local and state educational curriculum mandates aimed at improving student performance while also creating a respectful and supportive classroom environment, which is essential for students' academic and social

growth. “Teachers are increasingly accountable for student achievement, yet their incapacity to meet the demands placed on them has created the perception that harsh methods are needed to control student behavior” (Boucher, 2016, p. 86). Teacher perceptions hold great weight when managing classroom behavior. In urban middle school settings, many students are struggling to meet their social and academic needs appropriately. As Pane et al. (2013) state, “In urban contexts, teachers’ heightened concern with disruptive behavior often takes precedence over learning due to misunderstandings or conflicting expectations about appropriate classroom behavior” p. 298. Therefore, fostering relationships between teachers and students in urban middle school settings is vital to understanding where students are coming from, where they are going, and who they are as individuals. When students misbehave or display behaviors deemed inappropriate or challenging for the teacher, it is often because they do not feel heard or seen. Some Black students often feel disrespected by teachers and vice versa. “All students hope to be treated equally by their teachers, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, and other social characteristics” (McGrady & Reynolds, 2013, p. 3). Teachers may espouse the importance of building relationships and rapport with students but violate their ideals when responding to rule-breaking (Argyris & Schon, 1996). In some cases, teachers in urban middle school environments lack the capacity to adequately address student behavior in meaningful and appropriate ways instead of resorting to exclusionary practices. “Few studies explore the social aspects of classroom interactions to understand and transform oppressive classroom relationship expectations and teachers’ exclusionary school discipline practices” (Pane et al., 2014, p. 302).

Teachers’ perceptions of Black student misbehavior play a critical role in applying discipline. “Misbehavior generally refers to disruptive behavior that undermines the lesson plan and obstructs the learning of the misbehaving student or her or his peers while positive behavior

typically includes actions that are on-task and follow classroom rules and procedures.” (Kwok, 2019, p. 341). An exploration of urban middle schools and Black student responses in classroom environments may work to prevent the removal of Black students from the classroom in urban middle school settings and protect them from the STPP while improving classroom management.

Schools frequently shy away from addressing topics related to race, as such discussions can lead to discomfort among both students and staff. This avoidance, however, can have significant implications for school discipline, creating an environment where misunderstandings and biases go unchallenged. Without open conversations about race, students might not develop the necessary cultural competence and empathy to interact positively with peers from diverse backgrounds. This lack of understanding can lead to conflicts that are misinterpreted or mishandled, potentially resulting in disciplinary actions that disproportionately affect students of color. By not discussing race, schools miss the opportunity to foster a more inclusive environment that teaches students how to navigate and respect racial differences. This oversight can perpetuate a cycle where disciplinary measures reinforce racial stereotypes and inequalities rather than addressing the root causes of conflicts. Therefore, integrating discussions about race into the school curriculum and culture is crucial for developing fair and effective disciplinary practices that recognize and respect diversity. Promoting open dialogue between all key stakeholders—students, parents/guardians, staff, and the school community—is essential. “Teacher perceptions could be linked to school characteristics as teachers may think more negatively in the context of under-resourced schools. Because minorities attend these schools more often, it leads to an appearance of race-based discrimination when the negative perceptions may be due to limited resources instead” (Martinez, 2020, p. 995). However, some teachers approach this work with a deficit view that students are wrong and must be corrected (Michail,

2011). The hope here is for teachers struggling with classroom management in urban middle school environments to move beyond their discomfort and utilize student voice as an opportunity to mitigate issues that arise in the classroom.

Classroom Management in urban middle schools in the United States

Classroom management is defined as “A collection of non-instructional classroom procedures implemented by teachers in classroom settings with all students for the purposes of teaching prosocial behavior and preventing and reducing inappropriate behavior” (Oliver, Wehby, & Reschly, 2011, pp. 7– 8). Classroom management and student discipline are foundational to effective teaching and learning, affecting not only the academic success of students but also their social and emotional development. The acknowledgment of these areas as top concerns for educators underscores the necessity for continuous research, training, and development of innovative strategies to address these complex issues. “Effective classroom management strategies and student discipline persistently rank among teachers’ top concerns” (Monroe & Obidah, 2004, p. 265). Monroe & Obidah’s research (2004) underscores the critical importance of classroom management and student discipline, pinpointing them as persistent challenges that educators face. These concerns are not trivial; they directly impact the learning environment, teacher satisfaction, and, ultimately, student success. However, the approach to handling these challenges, particularly through practices such as excessive use of suspensions and expulsions, raises significant issues.

Suspensions and expulsions are disciplinary actions intended to address severe or repeated behavioral issues. While designed to maintain a conducive learning environment by removing disruptive elements, these practices have far-reaching consequences beyond the immediate goal of restoring classroom order. Firstly, they represent a form of exclusionary

discipline that not only removes the student from the educational setting but also symbolically isolates them from the peer group and educational opportunities (Skiba, 2000; Skiba, 2011).

The impact of such disciplinary measures extends beyond the individual student. Families and communities are also affected, experiencing a form of segregation. When a student is suspended or expelled, their family must often scramble to find alternative supervision or education arrangements, which can strain family resources and time. Moreover, the stigma associated with suspension or expulsion can lead to a sense of alienation and marginalization from the school community, affecting the students' and families' relationship with the school and other families.

The broader community feels the impact as well. Schools are community hubs, and when students are excluded from this environment, it can create or exacerbate divisions within the community. It signals to other students and community members that certain behaviors result in exclusion, which can reinforce negative stereotypes or biases against groups disproportionately affected by these disciplinary actions. Additionally, students who are suspended or expelled are at a higher risk of academic underachievement, dropping out, and involvement in the juvenile justice system, which can perpetuate cycles of disadvantage and marginalization within the community (Skiba et al. 2014).

Therefore, while effective classroom management and student discipline are undoubtedly critical to the functioning of educational institutions, the reliance on exclusionary practices such as suspensions and expulsions warrants a reevaluation. The potential for these measures to segregate and marginalize students, families, and communities highlights the need for alternative disciplinary approaches that are restorative rather than punitive, aiming to integrate rather than exclude and address the root causes of behavioral issues while maintaining a supportive and

inclusive educational environment. “To date, some urban education literature implicitly links discipline, ideology, and culture but has not examined teachers’ sense of agency to transform classroom disciplinary decisions that may significantly reduce suspensions, which contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline” (Pane, Rocco, Miller and Salmon, 2013, p. 302).

Transition to Middle School and Classroom Management

Classroom management is necessary in all classrooms to effectively deliver instruction and maximize learning. Middle school urban environments can prove to be incredibly challenging spaces for teachers as middle school students often experience decreased academic achievement and learning (Theriot and Dupper, 2010; Kwok, 2019). Some scholars suggest that when Black students transition from elementary to middle school, they struggle with physical, cognitive, and social-emotional changes (Theriot and Dupper, 2010). Duchesne, Ratelle, and Roy (2012) write:

“The research on sources of stress experienced by adolescents entering middle school suggests that the ability to adapt to new teaching and evaluative practices, maintain elementary school performance, and establish harmonious relationships with other students and adults at school are typical concerns at this time” (p. 682).

Based on research in adolescent development, some students in urban middle school settings have difficulty adjusting to the many changes of adolescence, including puberty, students’ developing their sexual identities, and understanding their power and influence.

Adolescent changes in urban middle school students present unique challenges and opportunities for teachers to use varied classroom management approaches. During this developmental stage, students experience rapid physical, emotional, and cognitive growth, which can significantly affect their behavior and learning in the classroom. Urban environments often

add layers of complexity due to diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, cultural dynamics, and exposure to various stressors. These changes require educators to adopt flexible, culturally responsive, and empathetic classroom management strategies. Effective classroom management in this context involves creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment that acknowledges and leverages students' unique backgrounds and experiences. By fostering strong relationships and setting clear expectations, Teachers can address the multifaceted needs of urban middle school students. This approach not only helps in managing the classroom more effectively but also supports students' overall development and academic success.

Some students experience bullying and peer pressure, and their need for privacy increases. In response to these changes, some urban middle school teachers struggle with understanding how to assist students in identifying what they are experiencing and managing classroom behavior. Middle school students are often chatty, unorganized, and have difficulty focusing (Theriot and Dupper, 2010; Duchesne, Ratelle, and Roy, 2012). When misbehavior arises, some teachers want a formula—a step-by-step response or guide to rule-breaking and a prescribed consequence for every infraction. Hence, some educators solely rely on school-wide disciplinary approaches to remedy student behavior. One example of this is a Tier 1 approach. A Tier 1 school-based approach involves implementing universal strategies and practices that are designed to support the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students within a school setting. This approach focuses on creating a positive and inclusive environment that lays the foundation for learning and development for every student (Emdin, 2016). Some of these approaches include but are not limited to Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports, Restorative Practices, or Development Designs, just to name a few. While all are evidence-based approaches, responding to misbehavior in the classroom is not one-size-fits-all. Many factors

contribute to how teachers in urban middle school settings manage classroom behavior. I believe that urban middle schools would benefit from the utilization and solicitation of student voice when managing classroom behavior to avoid the overuse of suspensions and expulsions, and through my study, aim to learn from urban middle school teachers about this topic.

Exploring the Impact of Student Voice

“Student voice describes the many ways in which youth have opportunities to share decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (Mitra, 2008, p. 523). In recent years,, student voice has garnered increasing attention and significance in education research and scholarship. Student voice encapsulates not only the active participation of students in school-based decision-making processes but also students’ capacity to influence policy, curriculum design, classroom management approaches, and the overall educational atmosphere. This concept emphasizes the importance of listening to and valuing the perspectives of students, as their insights can lead to more engaging and effective educational practices. By fostering an environment where student input and feedback are actively sought and respected, educators can create more inclusive and responsive educational systems. This approach has been shown to enhance student engagement, motivation, and student ownership over their learning journey (Mitra, 2006). Moreover, the integration of student voice into the fabric of educational planning and decision-making processes reflects a shift towards more democratic and participatory models of education, where the learners themselves are seen as key stakeholders in their educational outcomes. Scholars and educators have recognized students' pivotal role in shaping their learning experiences and improving educational institutions (Mitra, 2006; Fielding, 2004; Mitra & Gross, 2009; Mansfield, 2013).

Mitra (2006) focused on the concept of student voice, emphasizing the importance of students' participation in decision-making processes within schools. Mitra argued that engaging students in conversations about their education not only benefits their learning experiences but also contributes to a more inclusive and democratic school environment. By examining case studies and empirical data, Mitra (2006) highlighted how student voice initiatives can lead to

significant changes in school policies, practices, and classroom management strategies, particularly in urban settings where diverse student populations may feel marginalized.

Fielding (2004) centered on the idea of radical collegiality, where the relationships between students and teachers transcend traditional hierarchies, fostering a more collaborative and equitable educational environment. Fielding proposed that genuine student voice involves not just listening to students but actively involving them in the co-construction of their learning experiences. This approach has implications for classroom management in urban middle schools, as it encourages mutual respect and understanding, potentially leading to more harmonious and effective learning spaces.

Mitra & Gross (2009) further explored the dynamics of student voice, specifically examining how it can be effectively implemented in educational reform efforts. They identified challenges and opportunities in fostering student agency, highlighting the need for schools to create structures that genuinely empower students. Their research suggests that for student voice to have a transformative impact on classroom management and overall educational quality, it must be systematically integrated into the school culture, with clear channels for student participation and influence.

Mansfield (2013) focused on leadership and its role in enhancing student voice. Mansfield argued that effective school leadership is critical in creating an environment where student voice is valued and acted upon. This includes not only principals and administrators but also teachers who take on leadership roles within their classrooms. Mansfield's work suggests that when leaders prioritize student voice, it can lead to more engaged learning environments, improved student-teacher relationships, and more responsive classroom management practices,

particularly in the context of urban middle schools where students face unique challenges and opportunities.

Together, these scholars contribute to a comprehensive understanding of student voice, highlighting its significance in shaping educational experiences and outcomes. Their work underscores the importance of genuine participation, collaboration, and empowerment of students in the decision-making processes, especially in urban middle schools where the diversity and complexity of student needs demand innovative approaches to classroom management and educational reform. Building on their foundations, further research could explore practical strategies for implementing student voice initiatives, measuring their impact, and navigating the challenges inherent in transforming traditional educational paradigms.

Building upon the foundations laid by previous researchers, this exploration sought to delve deeper into the multifaceted realm of student voice, examining its various dimensions, implications, and the transformative potential it holds for both students and the educational landscape in urban middle schools with regard to classroom management.

Here are some examples of ways that student voice literature talks about how to integrate student voice in schools. Educators can motivate students to engage in extracurricular activities and join organizations to enhance their leadership skills and influence educational policies. Gathering students' perspectives on school policies, programs, and initiatives can be effectively done through surveys and focus groups. Organizing student-led conferences or meetings enables peers to share their views on school issues and collaborate on finding solutions. Establishing student councils or leadership groups that work in partnership with school administrators can lead to positive changes in the learning environment. Additionally, enabling students to work

alongside teachers in creating lesson plans and activities that are engaging and relevant to their experiences and interests can further enrich the educational experience.

In general, giving students the ability to have a voice in the decisions that affect their education can assist in creating a school environment that is more positive and welcoming, as well as one that recognizes the viewpoints and contributions made by all students (Mitra et al., 2012). In regards to the classroom experience, research shows that soliciting and utilizing student voice in the classroom allows teachers to leverage relationships, build community, and better understand the needs of all their students (Mitra, 2009). Another reason that student voice is vital for educators to explore is that students are young people with good sense, and their perceptions matter. “Soliciting student voice is a type of conversation that must occur between adult and student stakeholders, and this can only be done if students are included in school reform efforts” (Mansfield, 2013, p. 425). Recognizing the value of incorporating student perspectives into educational reforms, as highlighted by Mansfield (2013), underlines the necessity of engaging students directly in discussions about school improvement. This approach aligns with Mitra's (2006) assertion that listening to student voices is crucial because students provide unique insights and information that are frequently overlooked in educational planning and decision-making processes. Mitra (2006) states, “The importance of learning from student voices stems from the belief that students themselves are often neglected sources of useful information” p. 8). Some teachers fear a loss of control when relinquishing power to students; they also specify time as an impediment to seeking student voice (Casella, 2003; Domenico, 1998; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Noguera, 1995).

When student voices are valued and included in accurate decision-making, school reform efforts can be more effective (Brasof, 2015). “Students and adults struggle regarding power in

developing student voice initiatives, including how best to delegate responsibilities to students, how to provide opportunities for all members to participate, and how to resolve disagreements of opinion, especially when adults and young people have opposing views” (Mitra et al., 2012, p. 109). Schools can kickstart this process of utilizing student voice by surveying parents/guardians, students, and staff to ascertain ways to improve school culture. With input from surveys, schools can create goals to improve their overall climate.

School leaders, teachers, and students can work collaboratively to seek out ways to proactively guide students in becoming responsible adolescents. Examples from the researcher’s experience of how to accomplish this include:

- Convening all-school meetings to establish school-wide goals with opportunities for student voice and input.
- Conducting community meetings at the start of every day led by students.
- Establishing cross-grade advisories to provide older students an opportunity to mentor younger students.
- Inviting and encouraging parent/guardians participation on a consistent basis by requesting that they volunteer in schools and virtually, Training staff on student voice, relationship building, and restorative practices on a consistent and ongoing basis.
- Administering student well-being surveys quarterly to better understand how to meet students’ needs.
- Consistently checking in with students individually and in small groups.

Students are key stakeholders with something to say about how to better classroom management in their classrooms, and as part of my study, I want to explore and learn from urban middle school teachers if this is a shared belief among teachers in urban middle school settings.

Additionally, it is the researcher's belief that when teachers and administrators alike engage in dialogue with students on effective classroom management strategies and practices, young people are provided with an opportunity to give feedback for which teachers and administrators can make informed decisions regarding its school-wide practices, norms, and policies. According to Quinn and Owen (2016), "The United Nations has stated that it is a child's legal right to participate in decisions which affect their lives (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), 1989", p. 61). However, little has been written about the utilization or the importance of student voice as a strategy to develop school policies that are more restorative and inclusive of student autonomy and relationship building. **"The complexity of amplifying student voice within a youth-adult partnership should not be underestimated"** (Beattie, 2012, p.159).

Therefore, this research centers around middle school teachers in urban environments as it relates to classroom management. Additionally, it is vital for schools to begin to think differently about discipline and the potential outcomes of exclusionary practices that can ultimately lead to the STPP.

Student Voice and Classroom Management

The expression of student voice and effective classroom management of the learning environment are two crucial components of a productive educational setting. They may appear to be unrelated ideas, but in reality, they are intertwined and can complement one another to make learning in the classroom a rewarding experience. This section outlines how student voice and

classroom management are connected and ways that student voice can be successfully incorporated into urban middle school classrooms.

The term "student voice" refers to the active engagement and inclusion of students in the decision-making process within the classroom, and encouraging student voice is an integral part of this process. It instills a sense of duty, ownership, and belonging in its recipients. Effective classroom management can result when students feel more valued and invested in the learning environment. The student voice can be inspired by allowing middle school students to voice their thoughts, ideas, and concerns and giving them a platform to do so, in addition to facilitating joint efforts and conversations in small groups and providing an opportunity for students to have input toward establishing norms and expectations in the classroom. Participation of students in decision-making processes, including selecting themes for projects and developing rules for the classroom, is also critical.

Effective classroom management can be aided by the creation of a healthy classroom culture in which children have the sense that they are supported and safe. In addition to encouraging students to work together cooperatively and collaboratively. Along with establishing solid connections with students by taking an interest in their personal life and academic progress.

The way in which some educators in urban middle schools evaluate and respect the contributions and viewpoints of their students is an important topic that has to be discussed in order to gain a better understanding of the way in which they perceive the voices of their pupils. The method by which educators understand and respond to student feedback can have a substantial bearing on student engagement, academic achievement, and the entire school's culture. I wonder if many educators working in urban middle schools believe that student voice is an indispensable component of successful teaching and learning? I wonder what they believe

about embracing the viewpoints and ideas of students to establish an environment in the classroom that is more democratic and inclusive. These questions are at the heart of my study.

It is crucial to explore the attitudes and beliefs of urban middle school teachers. The way in which urban middle school teachers see the importance of student voice may vary greatly depending on the perspectives and ideas they hold about teaching and learning and their specific schooling contexts. Some teachers prioritize traditional, teacher-centered teaching methods, viewing them as essential to maintaining control and focus in the classroom. They may regard student voice as either undermining their authority or as an irrelevant diversion. Traditional instruction often involves teacher-led lectures, standardized testing, and a fixed curriculum, where the teacher's role is primarily to impart knowledge, and the student's role is to absorb it. This approach can limit students' opportunities to express their thoughts and engage actively with the material. On the other hand, some educators are more receptive to innovative teaching strategies, valuing student voice highly as a means to foster critical thinking and empower students. These innovative methods might include project-based learning, collaborative discussions, and integrating technology into the classroom, which encourage students to take an active role in their learning process.

When cultivating student voice, teachers who prioritize student voice in their classrooms may use various instructional methods to encourage students to share their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. These tactics may include the creation of a classroom atmosphere that is supportive and respectful, the use of student-led discussions and projects, the incorporation of student feedback into lesson planning, and the provision of chances for students to collaborate with their fellow classmates. The next section of this literature review will outline teacher perceptions of student behavior as it relates to student voice and classroom management in urban middle

schools. Incorporating student voice in classroom management has the potential to empower students and provide educators with valuable insights into students' needs and preferences, enabling more effective and tailored teaching strategies. Through this dynamic, the educational experience is enriched for both students and teachers, fostering a learning environment that prioritizes mutual respect and shared growth.

Elevating Student Voice in Urban Middle School Classroom Management

The ability of teachers to maintain order in their classrooms and to ensure that their students are heard and respected is of the utmost importance. Establishing explicit norms and expectations for students, keeping a classroom environment that is positive and courteous, and employing appropriate disciplinary measures when they are necessary are all essential components of effective classroom management. The classroom culture should value student participation and encourage students to share their opinions and ideas.

With the overuse of suspensions and expulsions, it is essential for teachers to actively seek out opportunities for students to share their thoughts and ideas in the classroom to cultivate an atmosphere that values the contributions of all students. Teachers can encourage students to provide feedback on classroom activities and assignments and express their opinions on how the classroom environment might be improved by soliciting the students' input. Teachers can assist students in becoming more involved and invested in their learning by valuing and embracing student voice in the classroom. This can result in enhanced social and emotional well-being and higher motivation and academic performance. The objectives of this chapter describe and detail the literature on classroom management, student voice, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP) as it relates to how some teachers in urban middle schools respond when Black students misbehave in the classroom. This literature reveals several key factors that lead to excessive use

of exclusionary practices when managing classroom behavior in urban middle school settings—including, but not limited to, suspension and expulsion for Black students in urban middle schools. This literature review will consistently explore student voice as a viable strategy for managing classroom behavior.

The Intersection of Student Voice and Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory is an example of a framework that analyzes how race and racism interact with social, cultural, and political power systems and how these connections influence marginalized communities. When Critical Race Theory is applied to the field of education, it can be used to explore and develop an understanding of the numerous ways in which students of color are disadvantaged by the widespread presence of racism in schools. Student voice is a notion that emphasizes the importance of allowing students to have input into their own educational experiences. It has been demonstrated that when students can share their opinions and ideas, they become more engaged and invested in their education, resulting in higher academic accomplishments (Mitra, 2009).

Consequently, the intersection of student voice and critical race theory allows students of color and other underrepresented groups to discuss their perspectives and experiences in educational contexts. Suppose educators strive to elevate students' voices and incorporate their input into decision-making processes. In that case, they can contribute to constructing more equitable and inclusive learning environments that benefit all students.

In conclusion, how teachers of urban middle schools view the importance of student voice can have a significant bearing on both the quality of the learning environment and the overall achievement of their pupils. Urban middle school teachers are able to provide their students with a learning environment that is more welcoming and enabling when they recognize

the significance of the student voice and actively seek out solutions to barriers that exist in the classroom. My study will delve into the intricacies of classroom management by examining the perspectives of urban middle school teachers on the significance of student voice. Recognizing the pivotal role that student engagement and participation play in shaping a conducive learning environment, this research aims to uncover how the teachers in my study navigate the challenges and barriers to incorporating student voice into their classroom management. By focusing on the strategies employed by teachers to create a more inclusive and responsive classroom, my study seeks to contribute to the broader discourse on enhancing educational outcomes and fostering an atmosphere where every student feels valued and heard. Through qualitative analysis, this study will explore the relationship between teacher attitudes toward student voice, thereby offering insights into how to promote student agency.

Theoretical/ Conceptual Framework

“Critical Race Theory (CRT) first emerged as a counter-legal scholarship to the positivist and liberal legal disclosure of civil rights” (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p.7). It is “a theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). In this study, CRT will help provide a deeper understanding of the power dynamics in many urban middle school classrooms between teachers and urban middle school students. There is also a gap in the literature regarding the intersections of student voice and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Therefore, it is essential to highlight the growing need for student voice in urban middle school classrooms and the potential to illuminate opportunities to address racial inequities—such as the growing number of Black children being overrepresented in discipline referral data.

CRT as a theoretical framework is necessary for educators to take a more critical stance on classroom management and discipline in schools, especially urban middle school environments. CRT will be utilized in this study to understand better that the system of schools is a racialized system, one that stems from decades of the oppression of Black people. “By challenging teachers’ stereotypical constructions of urban students, the belief is that they will develop a greater capacity to identify and empathize with their students”(Picower, 2009, p. 199). CRT will also help to illuminate the institutional racism that exists in many of our schools and how the presence of student voices might serve as an avenue to close the discipline gap.

CRT provides structure and framing for the issue of teachers subjecting Black students in urban middle schools to draconian and mechanistic disciplinary practices, leading to more Black children being caught in the STPP. There is a gap in the literature connecting student voice to CRT. Therefore, through the use of CRT as a way to analyze, I hope to explore ways that educators in urban middle school environments can work to better understand the needs of Black students, respond to misbehavior in the classroom equitably, and build positive and meaningful relationships with students of color by soliciting student voice to support disciplinary policies. “CRT offers conceptual tools for interrogating how race and racism have been institutionalized and are maintained. It provides a helpful lens for analyzing the Whiteness of teacher education and conceptualizing how it might be addressed.” (Sleeter, 2016, p. 157). While CRT provides a framework for understanding the structural dynamics of race and racism within educational systems, there is a notable gap in exploring how these insights can be applied to the practical aspects of classroom management, particularly in the context of urban middle schools where student voice plays a critical role. There is limited research on the importance of student voice when urban middle school teachers manage classroom behavior. “CRT in education as a

theoretical and analytical framework that challenges how race and racism impact educational structures, practices, and discourses" (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). Black children are still overrepresented in discipline referral data. "All students hope to be treated equally by their teachers, regardless of race, ethnicity, class, and other social characteristics" (McGrady and Reynolds, 2012, p.3). When Black children are disciplined, the risks of suspension and expulsion from school increase. There is a growing need to shift the focus in urban middle school environments from autocratic to democratic approaches, such that teachers explore new strategies to meet students where they are.

Too often in urban middle school environments, Black children are disciplined for actions that are subjective (Conwright, 2022). Many teachers of Black students have biased expectations of Black students and how they should or should not behave. Therefore, this study explores how teachers in urban middle school settings perceive and understand student voice when managing classroom behavior. "CRT scholars in both the law and in education believe that examining and exposing the ways that racialized inequality manifests and persists must inform social actions that can lead to social change" (Dixson, 2017, p. 233). It remains true that Black students in urban middle school settings are disciplined more consistently and frequently than White students (Boucher, 2014; Kunesh and Noltemeyer, 2015).

Far too often in urban middle school classrooms, Black students exhibit behavior that a teacher may perceive as disruptive or disrespectful. At that moment, there is often a choice on the teacher's end, assign a consequence regardless of the context or engage in dialogue with the student. "Effective communication, the tool of CRT, is also essential for quality instruction in the classroom, yet many teachers carry with them misconceptions and confusions about their diverse students that cause them to struggle in communicating" (Bonner, Warren, and Jiang, 2018, p.

702). Therefore, fostering an environment of understanding and dialogue, rather than immediate disciplinary action, could bridge the gap in communication and contribute to a more inclusive and effective educational experience for Black students in urban middle schools.

Conclusion

“Students rarely have a role in school decision-making processes and have even fewer opportunities to participate in educational improvement efforts” (Mitra, 2009, p. 312). This issue continues as teachers often expect students to be passive learners, sitting in their seats for hours, remaining quiet, compliant, and listening to the teacher talk. In many urban school environments, students are controlled from the moment they walk in the door; teachers dictate when students can speak, get up from their seats, use the lavatory, play, engage with others, or complete basic tasks. There is little to no room for students to contribute to teaching practices for the purpose of improving instructional outcomes. Beyond academic conformity, research shows that teacher response to rule-breaking by urban middle school students is often overly punitive and does not seek to teach students how to repair or correct disruptive behavior, and thus, the cycle continues.

This study explored the ways in which student voice can be utilized in the urban middle school environment in an effort to impact classroom management approaches and potentially reduce suspensions and expulsions, which can ultimately lead to Black students being placed in the STPP. Ultimately, this study aimed to hear from teachers to learn how they perceive and define student voice, their experiences with engaging and soliciting feedback from students in their decision-making, and to make a connection between student voice and classroom management in urban middle schools.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This study is an exploration of how urban middle school teachers consider student voice as a potential strategy when managing classroom behavior. This is critical, especially for Black students who are overrepresented in discipline referral data. The alternative is often harmful punitive practices such as removal and, in some cases, exclusion from the classroom setting. As a former dean of students, teacher, and head of a middle school, it is my conviction that some teachers in urban middle school settings who struggle with classroom management tend to overly penalize Black students. Fenning and Rose (2007) posit that once students are removed from the classroom for misbehavior and labeled disruptive, schools often treat them with suspension and, in some cases, expel them. Ultimately, these responses place Black children in the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP).

This qualitative study used a phenomenological approach to seek input from ten urban middle school teachers on how they solicit and utilize student voice as a strategy to manage student behavior. This study sought input from urban middle school teachers on which factors contribute to their understanding of student voice when responding to misbehavior in the classroom both proactively and reactively. This study looked broadly at how teachers in urban middle school environments include student voice when managing classroom behavior. As such, this study asks the following questions:

RQ 1: How do teachers in urban middle schools regard the role of student voice in their classrooms?

RQ 2: What role does student voice play in their classroom management?

RQ 3: What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle schools?

Table 3.1 Research Sub-Questions:

<p>RQ 1: How do teachers in urban middle schools regard the role of student voice in their classrooms?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What does your classroom look like on a daily basis? 2. What does the term “student voice” mean to you? 3. What does “student voice” look, sound, and feel like in your classroom or school?
<p>RQ 2: What role does student voice play in their classroom management?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 4. Can you describe your approach to classroom management to me? 5. Do you believe student behavior needs to be managed? Why or why not? 6. What is the role of student voice in your classroom management? 7. Do you feel students should have a say in how teachers manage classroom behavior? Why or why not? 8. Are there opportunities in your classroom for students to provide you with feedback on your classroom management? Why or Why not?
<p>RQ 3: What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle schools?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 9. What are your thoughts on suspensions? In your experience, has suspension proven to be an effective method for remedying student behavior? 10. What are your thoughts on utilizing student voice as a viable strategy to promote alternatives to suspension?

Research Design

For this qualitative study, the researcher conducted semi-structured individual interviews with ten urban middle charter school teachers. As the Director of Climate and Culture for a major urban school district in the mid-Atlantic area, I wanted to learn from and with teachers in my local context. Therefore, for this study, I recruited charter school teachers due to my lack of

direct supervisory role in charter school contexts in this major urban district, therefore minimizing any conflict in that regard. In addition, as part of the initial recruitment, I asked potential participants if they knew me and if so they were not accepted to participate in the study, thus also reducing this potential conflict. While all ten teachers in the study work in charter schools, that specific context is not considered an important data point since the study is not about any specific context other than urban middle schools. This research, anchored in a particular setting and experiences, should be understood as reflecting only the perspectives of the ten urban middle charter school teachers in my study rather than a broader population. Given the nature of qualitative research, which prioritizes detailed, context-specific insights, the ability to generalize its findings is inherently limited. Consequently, while this study yields valuable insights into the teachers within its focus, it should not be seen as a universally applicable portrayal of all teachers in urban middle charter schools.

“Qualitative research relies primarily on human perception and understanding” (Stake, 2010, p. 11). The goals of this study are:

- (1) involve participants in a semi-structured interview discussion on their experiences regarding student voice in their middle school classroom;
- (2) gauge and better understand the factors that influence urban middle school teachers’ management of classroom behavior in urban settings, in particular, their interactions with Black students;
- (3) understand the utilization and solicitation of student voice by participating teachers as they share their experiences managing classroom discipline;
- (4) seek input from urban middle school teachers on the factors that contribute to their understanding of student voice as a vehicle to respond to misbehavior in the classroom

Therefore, the researcher explored urban middle school teachers' understanding of student voice as a potential strategy for classroom management by involving participants in individual interviews on their unique experiences regarding student voice in their middle charter school classroom.

My study used a phenomenological approach because I believe it is essential to lift up teachers' voices to understand their experiences as urban middle school teachers. As Creswell (2013) states, "A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences" (p. 76). "Phenomenological approaches seek to explore, describe, and analyze the meaning of individual lived experience: how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it makes sense of it, and talk about it with others" (Marshall & Rossman, 2011, p. 19; Patton, 2002). Additionally, I am interested in learning more about urban middle school teachers' perceptions of student voice and if they see connections between the concept and classroom management. This study aimed to better understand the utilization and solicitation of student voice by urban teachers managing classroom discipline as a possible strategy to avoid suspension and expulsion of Black students in urban middle school settings. This study gained input from ten urban middle charter school teachers on the factors that contribute to their understanding of student voice as a vehicle to respond to misbehavior in the classroom.

Study Design

The study included ten urban middle charter school teachers. The researcher chose a smaller sampling size in order to delve deeper into teacher perceptions and understandings of student voice as it relates to classroom management in urban middle school settings. All participants were urban middle school teachers currently teaching in an urban middle school. For

the purposes of this study, urban charter schools are situated within a large urban school district, schools where 80% or more of the student population qualify for free or reduced lunch, and schools that are composed of primarily Black children. While state-by-state requirements for teaching licenses vary, the following qualifications are generally required for a teaching career in the United States of America:

1. An undergraduate degree.
2. Completion of a teacher education program approved by the state.
3. Successful completion of a teacher certification or licensure exam.

Each participant in this study met the above-mentioned qualifications and also additional requirements, stated below.

Participants and Participant Selection

The study’s sampling strategy is a purposive sampling strategy. Purposive sampling is the process of choosing participants who can provide specific desired perspectives on a topic or issue according to preselected criteria (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). See the chart below:

Table 3.2 Criteria for the participant pool:

Criteria 1	Have an earned bachelor’s degree.
Criteria 2	Hold a PA Teaching License for Middle School grades 4-8.
Criteria 3	Be considered a Highly qualified teacher, having passed both the Praxis 1 and 2 teaching exams in the state of Pennsylvania - <i>All Pennsylvania educators for grades 4-8 are required to pass a basic skills test as well as the Pennsylvania Grades 4-8 Core Assessment Praxis #5152. Praxis #5152 has three subtests: Pedagogy (Praxis #5153), English Language Arts and Social Studies (Praxis #5154), and Mathematics and Science (Praxis #5155).</i>

Criteria 4	Be a full-time middle school teacher of record.
Criteria 5	Be a current teacher for at least one year in an urban charter middle school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

I created a flier to solicit study participants that included the details and criteria for the study. I reached out via email to four urban charter middle schools to recruit participants. Participants were recruited by first sharing the flier with administrators of the four charter schools via email to obtain their permission to share the flier with their teachers. The flier included a link to a preliminary survey (Appendix C) for all potentially interested participants to complete. This preliminary survey ensured that all interested participants met the study inclusion criteria outlined above in Table 3.2..

The first ten interested responders who met all the requirements were selected according to the criteria that matched the study design. An email was sent to those who completed the preliminary survey but were not selected, thanking them for their interest and informing them that they were not selected for the study. Once all eligible participants were identified, the researcher sent a Google Form survey link to each participant. The survey (Appendix C) collected the following information from participants:

- Demographic information: First and Last name
- Best Contact Phone Number/Email Address
- Availability for an interview
- Educational background (if they are certified or considered highly qualified, along with current teaching status)

The responders had 1-3 business days to complete the Google form survey link. Included in this form was the information letting the interested responders who no longer wish to participate they will have an option on the survey to indicate that they no longer wish to be part of the study. If the survey was not completed within the time frame allotted, the interested responder was not eligible to participate in the study. The researcher selected the first ten responders who returned the google form. In order to generate robust data, purposive sampling will be based on the aforementioned criteria (see Appendix A).

The ten selected responders were then contacted via email and provided with an outline of the following steps within the research study, which included scheduling a one-on-one interview with the researcher via Zoom. In addition, participants were sent the consent form via email, and upon completion, they read the IRB and consented to be a part of my study by submitting the IRB via email, which occurred before the one-to-one interview. The nature of data collection is outlined and included in the next section.

Nature of Data and Data Collection

The data collection for this qualitative research study was crucial to the study's outcome and was conducted in phases. The first phase included a survey using Google Survey that was administered via email to participants; this survey ensured all participants fit the criteria for the study as listed above.

Phase two was that researcher conducted one-hour one-to-one individual interviews via Zoom with the ten selected teacher participants to share their experiences as middle school teachers in urban environments to collect data on the research questions 1-3:

RQ 1: How do urban middle school teachers regard the role of student voice in their classrooms?

RQ 2: What, if any, role does student voice currently play in their classroom management approaches?

RQ 3: What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle schools?

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with each participant via Zoom, each lasting one hour. Choosing to do the interviews via Zoom was helpful for convenience as the participants lived throughout the large metropolitan city and also I anticipated that participants would potentially provided a more comfortable setting in which participants could choose a location of their choice for the interview. Participants were asked to choose a quiet location free from background noise and distractions to ensure that they would not interrupted.

The semi-structured interview allowed me to ask the exploratory predetermined questions and allowed me room to ask questions that built upon the participants' answers and input. Semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2012) are a mix of structured and unstructured interviews, and this format was chosen to allow for more flexibility for the researchers to ask any follow-up questions that will further illuminate the participant responses. This allowed participants to provide information that may not have been initially included in the interview guide. During the interview process, the researcher video/audio recorded the session and also took hand-written notes using a journal.

The researcher conducted one round of interviews per participant using this semi-structured interview protocol (Appendix B). Each interview was recorded via Zoom interview. Upon completion of each interview, I created written memos to capture my thoughts on the themes and sub-themes that emerged from the interview. In addition, I transcribed the notes taken in the journal and then transferred them to the interview protocol guide (Appendix

B). The researcher transcribed all video data from the interviews into word-by-word transcripts. I first listened to the video recording of each semi-structured interview. Then I transcribed the data from the semi-structured interviews into a written format to convert spoken words into written format.

I transcribed verbatim, word-for-word, the summary of what was said by all participants. When conducting verbatim transcription, recording each speech and any non-verbal sounds that may occur throughout the conversation, such as laughter, pauses, and interruptions, is necessary. After completing the verbatim transcription, I utilized Zoom's transcription tool to assist with transcribing the audio from each individual video recording via Zoom. After I finished the transcription, I reviewed it to revise and proofread the content to ensure that it was accurate and understandable, in addition to checking to see that the text had a clear and error-free structure. In the last step, I examined and checked the transcript to ensure it was accurate and complete. The following section will review the data analysis.

Data Analysis

“Data analysis in qualitative research consists of preparing and organizing the data (i.e., text data as in transcripts, or image data as in photographs) for analysis, then reducing the data into themes through a process of coding and condensing for codes, and finally representing the data in figures, tables, or a discussion” (Creswell, 2007, p. 180). First, the researcher reviewed the audio transcriptions. After first reviewing, the researcher started the coding process. The researcher coded participants using pseudonyms in order to protect their identities. All transcriptions remained confidential, and pseudonyms were used for all participants throughout the research process.

Coding qualitative data entails arranging and categorizing non-numerical data, such as interview transcripts, notes from focus group talks, or observational logs, to locate recurring themes and patterns. For the purposes of this phenomenological qualitative study, I used the following procedures to code the data from the semi-structured interviews:

1. To become familiar with the data, I read over all of the transcripts several times before beginning the coding process. This allowed me to understand the materials and locate any preliminary themes or patterns.
2. I created a codebook, a document that serves as a reference and outlines the codes or themes that I applied to my data. It provided a list of codes, descriptions, and examples illustrating each code's use. I began by developing preliminary codes based on the research questions I intended to answer and then added to or modified those codes as I proceeded through the data.
3. I then assigned codes to the data by going over the data methodically and giving relevant codes to various parts of the text or other data units. I used NVivo, software designed specifically for qualitative data analysis, and manual methods, such as highlighting and commenting on text within a Word document.
4. Next, while working through the data, I discovered that some codes must be modified, combined, or split. Therefore, I reviewed and refined the codes. This iteration process helped to guarantee that my codes appropriately represented the data.
5. Upon coding the data, I evaluated the codes to look for more prominent themes and patterns. I then moved on to the next step of collecting together codes that

were related in some way, comparing and contrasting different codes, and searching for links between different topics.

6. After recognizing recurring topics and patterns, the next step was to interpret the findings by placing them in the context of my qualitative study's research questions and goals. This included a discussion of the consequences of my findings, the identification of limits, and the suggestion of areas for additional research.

It is important to note that qualitative data analysis is an iterative and reflective process; therefore, as I worked through the data, I reviewed and changed my codes and themes numerous times. After the coding process, I recorded by making notes of the recurring themes from the participants' perspectives. The researcher followed Creswell's (2018) guide for data analysis: "(1) organized and prepared the data for analysis; (2) read all of the data; (3) coded all of the data; (4) generated a description for themes and sub-themes; (5) Represented the description and themes" (p. 268-269).

To increase the reliability and trustworthiness of the findings of my qualitative research study, member checks, also known as respondent validation or participant feedback, were carried out. I shared preliminary interpretations, themes, and conclusions with all study participants to collect their feedback and guarantee the correctness and authenticity of the data. This is a part of the process known as member checks. "In member checking, the research devises a way to ask the participants whether he got it right" (Marshall and Rossman, 2011, p. 221). In this case, the researcher first analyzed and summarized the data before sharing it with participants. I conducted member checks in phases throughout the study process, which will include the following:

1. While collecting data and gathering information, I checked that I properly documented the participants' responses by summarizing their statements and then asking for either clarification or confirmation during the time of the interview. By taking this strategy, I clarified any questions or concerns as soon as they arose and improved the methods I used to collect data during the interview process..
2. After the data had been collected, before analysis, I shared interview transcripts with all ten participants via email to verify their accuracy and ensure that they were complete. This provided participants with the opportunity to rectify any errors that may have been made and supply any new information that may have been overlooked or not fully collected during the initial data collection. Eight participants responded via email, verifying that their information was captured correctly.
3. As I proceeded through analyzing the data and developing themes or categories, I shared these preliminary findings with participants to collect their feedback via email. This input helped refine my analysis and ensure my interpretations were firmly rooted in the participants' perspectives.

It was essential to maintain a flexible approach and customize the process of member checking to fit the requirements of the particular research setting, study design, and participants involved.

Critical Race Theory and Coding

Critical Race Theory, historically, is a “theoretical and analytical framework that challenges the ways of race and racism’s impact on educational structures, practices, and

discourses” (Yosso, 2005, p.74). Based on the coding procedures, using the CRT framework will help establish a deeper understanding of the power dynamics in many urban middle school classrooms between teachers and students. The CRT framework operates by employing a set of coding procedures that are designed to analyze the intricate power dynamics that exist within urban middle school classrooms, particularly between teachers and students. By scrutinizing the interactions, policies, and practices through the lens of race and power, CRT enables researchers and educators to uncover the subtle yet significant ways in which racial biases and systemic inequalities manifest in educational settings. By highlighting the systemic barriers and biases, the CRT framework not only fosters a more profound understanding of the complex interactions between teachers and students but also paves the way for the development of more equitable and inclusive educational practices that can address and mitigate the effects of these power imbalances. Within my analysis, participants' responses will inform the following research questions related to CRT: **RQ 1:** How do urban middle school teachers regard the role of student voice in their classrooms? **RQ 2:** What, if any, role does student voice currently play in their classroom management approaches? **RQ 3:** What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle schools? The ultimate goal of this phenomenological qualitative study was to add to the body of growing research around student voice while helping to make meaningful connections between student voice and how middle school teachers in urban settings approach classroom management and discipline.

Human Subject Protections (Institutional Review Board)

The researcher completed an application to Arcadia University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) after receiving a CITI certification. Respondents selected for interviews were asked to sign consent forms to participate in the study. Participants were asked to engage in a recorded

one-to-one interview via Zoom. Participants were also asked to participate in the follow-up data reviews as mentioned in the consent form. The video transcription of the session was used for data collection. Zoom complies with applicable laws and regulations in the jurisdictions in which it operates. Zoom provides users with a unique encryption key for every video and audio recording.

Additionally, Zoom requires password protection when the media is stored on a secure personal drive, thus providing an extra layer of security. Zoom is designed to deliver a safe and secure virtual meeting environment with the appropriate settings and safeguards. Zoom enables secure meetings via multiple methods and technologies, including optional two-factor authentication; optional end-to-end AES-256 GCM meeting encryption; passcode authentication; the ability to deny, block, or remove attendees; and lock meeting/webinar access. After the research study is completed, all media will be stored for twelve weeks to allow time to adequately and effectively analyze the data. All records will be discarded appropriately after 16 weeks. The data was not downloaded onto an external or internal computer hard drive. All written surveys administered electronically were reviewed, analyzed, and upon completion of my study, discarded to ensure a complete data analysis.

Positionality Statement - Role of the researcher

The researcher identifies as a Black woman with over twenty years of experience in education. The researcher has experience training, coaching, and developing teachers in urban middle school environments. The researcher has experienced racial microaggressions in the workplace and observed many teachers in urban middle school settings trigger Black students through yelling, berating, and, in some cases, avoiding Black students altogether. “Particularly in qualitative research, the role of the researcher as the primary data collection instrument

necessitates the identification of personal values, assumptions, and biases at the outset of the study” (Creswell, 2018, p. 281). Due to these past experiences, the researcher was mindful of her tone when conducting the semi-structured interviews so as not to place blame but to understand better how some teachers perceive student voice as a potential strategy when responding to misbehavior in the classroom and ultimately dismantling the STPP. The researcher is currently the Director of Climate and Culture for a large school district in the Mid-Atlantic region, having been a former dean of students, middle school teacher, and head of a middle school. The researcher avoided judgment when engaging with urban middle school teachers; the researcher has extensive experience asking questions and providing feedback to teachers, and, in some cases, the outcomes were not fruitful. Some of these conversations led to teachers’ feelings of guilt and blame. Therefore, as it relates to the goal of this study, it delved into the tensions that inform teachers’ default punitive responses to student behavior while encouraging their solicitation and utilization of student voice and any other alternatives to suspension.

Through this study, the researcher learned from the perspectives and experiences of urban middle school teachers on the role of student voice in their classroom management. The researcher’s aims are twofold: (1) to learn from and with urban middle school teachers about their experience with and understanding of the importance of the solicitation and utilization of student's voice when responding to misbehavior and (2) to continue to shine the light on the disproportionality that exists for Black children who are disciplined at rates much higher than those of their White counterparts, to protect them from the STPP while instituting practices connected to student voice.

A Trustworthiness of the Study

The researcher ensured that the validity of the study was proficient. Using an interview study design, the researcher used a phenomenological qualitative study to understand better how ten urban middle school teachers utilize and solicit student voice in their classroom management approaches. The methods and coding of this study were used by Saldana (2013) and Ormrod & Leedy (2015). The researcher utilized “rich, thick description to convey findings” (Creswell, 2018, p. 274.)

In a qualitative study, offering a complete, in-depth, and multi-layered account of the investigated phenomena is required to write a thick and rich description. I first spent time reviewing, rereading, and analyzing the data of the interview transcripts. I read for and coded, finding recurring themes, trends, and other information potentially hidden within the data. I used clear and specific language to immerse the reader in the research atmosphere. I incorporated direct quotes from my participants to convey genuine and in-depth insights into their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. I contextualized these quotes within the more prominent themes and patterns I have noticed in the research.

Additionally, I recognized any contradictions, inconsistencies, or divergent perspectives within my data, investigated these distinctions, and in my analysis, discussed possible explanations for why they occur. Instead of simply presenting the data, I used my detailed description to evaluate it and determine what the data means. I explained the meanings, relationships, and consequences of the patterns and themes I noticed, in addition to including a wide range of examples, anecdotes, and descriptions to highlight the intricacy and breadth of the topic being researched in my study. I was reflexive by acknowledging and thinking about my

positionality, biases, and influence on the research process, describing how my experiences and points of view may have shaped my interpretations and conclusions.

Finally, I repeatedly returned to my description to refine and enrich it as necessary. The purpose of providing a thorough and nuanced grasp of the phenomenon being researched is to achieve a thick and rich description. I am aware of the bias I bring to this study as a former teacher, dean of students, and principal who has worked with several teachers in urban middle school settings. Therefore, it was necessary for me to self-reflect to “create an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers” (Creswell, 2018, p. 274-275). The ability to appraise one's progress, recognize one's strengths and flaws, and enhance one's research process are all made possible via self-reflection, a vital talent for researchers to cultivate. The following are some actions that I engaged in towards this self-reflection:

1. I first put aside time to ensure that self-reflection becomes a constant component of my research routine by making it a habit to schedule it at the end of each week.
2. I kept a research diary throughout the study process by writing a journal to chronicle my thoughts, observations, obstacles, and successes. This assisted in tracking my development and recognizing patterns in my thinking as well as my behavior.
3. I asked myself the following questions during the coding process:
 - a. What new things have I picked up recently?
 - b. What obstacles did I confront, and how did I get beyond them?
 - c. What could I have done differently or better to make the situation better?

- d. Where do my expertise and where do I need improvement as a researcher?
- e. Should I address any preconceived notions or biases that I may have?

I evaluated my progress and goals by maintaining a consistent review schedule for my research objectives and assessing the degree to which I was moving closer to accomplishing them. I considered the ethical consequences of my research, such as the possibility of causing harm to the participants, potential conflicts of interest, or concerns regarding the privacy of participants' data. I thought about how to fix these problems while preserving the credibility of my work. I exercised self-compassion and acknowledged that every researcher has obstacles and roadblocks in their work. When things did not go as planned, I remembered to be kind to myself and take advantage of the situation as an opportunity for personal development and improvement. I used the new understandings I have learned through self-reflection to guide my future research efforts in hopes of my reflection serving as a source of inspiration as I strived to continuously improve my research process, adjust techniques, and build my talents.

Conclusion

To acquire robust data, a qualitative approach is the most appropriate methodology for this study. Participants were recruited by first sharing the flier with administrators of the four charter schools to obtain their permission to share it with their teachers. The flier included a link to the consent form. Once the consent form was signed by the ten chosen teachers, they received a link to the Google Survey. Once interested participants completed the survey, the researcher used purposive sampling to choose ten participants. By using semi-structured interviews, the

researcher captured the data through one-to-one interviews. When conducting the data analysis from the interviews, the researcher compared recurring themes from all participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

This phenomenological, qualitative study aimed to understand better how urban middle school teachers solicit and utilize student voice when managing classroom discipline as an alternative to school exclusion. This chapter summarizes the research study's findings. Therefore, for this research study, the first step in the data collection process entailed the researcher inviting ten urban middle charter school teachers to sign the consent form. Participants then completed an online survey to gather demographic information, ensuring they met the participation criteria. They provided the researcher with their names, email addresses, phone numbers, and grade level in which they currently teach. The online survey was designed to ensure that all participants fit the study criteria. Once the survey was completed and the final list of participants, the researcher scheduled a one-to-one, one-hour, semi-structured Zoom interview with each of the ten selected participants. The researcher used purposive sampling to choose the first ten participants. The following section provides an overview of the data analysis and study findings.

Data Analysis

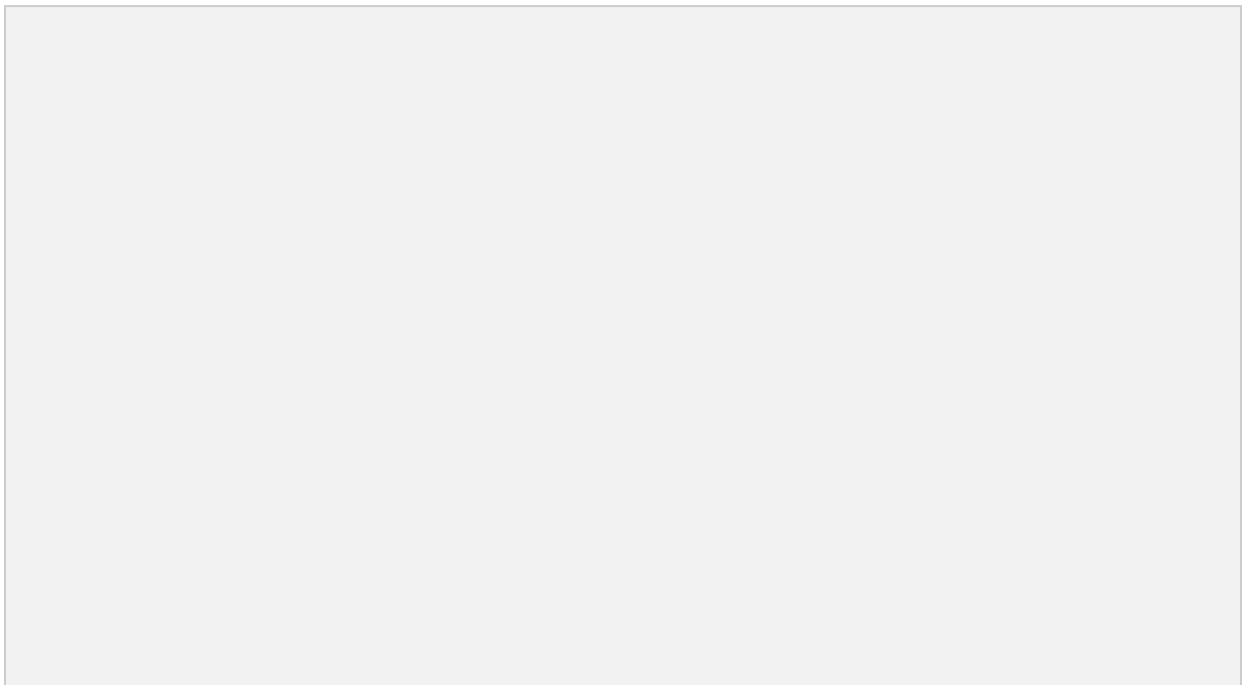
The role of student voice in influencing classroom management practices by ten urban middle charter school teachers is at the heart of this study. This dissertation is a qualitative exploration of the ways in which teachers consider the use of student voice in their classroom management approaches. The findings presented in this study are based on the semi-structured interviews of ten urban middle charter school teachers in response to a series of questions that were aligned to three research questions, which included:

RQ 1: How do urban middle charter school teachers regard the role of student voice in their classrooms?

RQ 2: What, if any, role does student voice currently play in their classroom management approaches?

RQ 3: What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle charter schools?

This study employed a phenomenological qualitative research methodology that utilized semi-structured interviews. While coding the data (Saldana, 2012), the researcher identified many themes from the participants' responses. Coding the data involved organizing and sorting the interview data into themes and sub-themes important to my research study. The next section of this chapter explains the themes and sub-themes presented in **Figure 4.1** below.



Phenomenological Themes

A phenomenological theme is a recurrent prominent aspect or pattern of human experiences as individuals subjectively see and report them. Phenomenologists use the term to refer to a recurring or notable aspect or pattern of human experiences. Phenomenology is a philosophical and psychological approach that focuses on understanding the essence of lived experiences from the perspective of the person experiencing them. In phenomenological research, academics frequently try to find and investigate these themes by conducting interviews, keeping diaries, or reading narratives (Stake, 2010). This is accomplished by evaluating qualitative data. How individuals make sense of and explain their experiences often shares common threads or structures, and these themes might symbolize those. Phenomenological themes are significant in illuminating the breadth of the human experience, which in turn contributes to our comprehension of a wide range of psychological, social, and existential events. The next section of this chapter will discuss my participant's responses to the questions about the role of student voice and classroom management.

Research Question 1: How do urban middle school teachers regard the role of student voice in their classrooms? To explore this guiding question, participants were asked three questions:

1. What does your classroom look like on a daily basis?
2. What does the term “student voice” mean to you?
3. What does “student voice” look, sound, and feel like in your classroom or school?

The following sub-themes emerged when asked to define student voice and how student voice is enacted in their classrooms:

1. Safe and inclusive environments.

2. Student-centered learning.
3. Student empowerment.
4. Cultural responsiveness.

In this section, the participants will be identified using pseudonyms to protect their identities. For example, Claire Harrison will refer to an 8th-grade math teacher. This measure ensured that the participants were safeguarded in accordance with the requirements set by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as outlined in Chapter 3. See coding table 4.2 below:

Table 4.2

<u>Pseudonym</u>	<u>Current Grade Level(s)</u>	<u>Subject</u>
Leo Cascade	5th Grade	English
Amelia Bennet	5th Grade	Art
Nina Veb	6th Grade	Math
Ben Phoenix	6th Grade	Math
Frank Lighthouse	6th Grade	Math
Jack Pinnacle	6th and 7th Grade	Math
Charley Falcon	7th Grade	English
Max Citadel	8th Grade	English
Ivy Ben	8th Grade	Science
Claire Harrison	8th Grade	Math

Phenomenological Theme #1: Safe and Inclusive Environment. In my research, I found a significant pattern. All participants emphasized the importance for middle school students to advocate for themselves and to have opportunities for open expression in a classroom environment that promotes emotional safety. As mentioned in Chapters 1 and 2, participants'

comments support the notion that some students in urban middle schools often have heightened safety concerns due to the prevalence of violence in their neighborhoods (Kwok et al., 2021). Therefore, teachers believe that it is crucial to establish environments where students feel visible and heard in their classrooms to avoid triggering experiences similar to those in some of their communities. The first section of this analysis and findings will focus on the first phenomenological theme of safe and inclusive environments.

A significant theme that participants reported in the interviews on student voice and classroom management was the need for students to feel safe expressing their thoughts and ideas in the middle school classroom. In response to the question "What does 'student voice' mean to you?" participants emphasized the paramount importance of students feeling emotionally secure in expressing themselves. These teachers asserted that fostering safe and inclusive environments where every student is acknowledged and listened to is vital for their success. Jack, a 6th and 7th grade math teacher, shared,

When you are dealing with inner city youth, they are dealing with a lot in their communities. Hearing them is a part of giving them a platform to speak out and seek an understanding of what students may be going through. In my experience, students will reject their learning environment when they don't feel heard. This goes hand in hand with creating a positive school culture.

Frank, a 6th-grade math teacher, noted similar to Jack,

You never know what situation a child is dealing with, either last night, two nights ago, or last week. So you always want to have an open ear to what students have to say and the tone that they say it because most of them are crying out for help. No matter what the situation is. If it is in the middle [of class], at the end of class, or after school, I think student voice is very important. Sometimes students are crying for help, and it's our job as educators to listen to and support them.

Amelia, a 5th-grade art teacher, shared that, similar to Frank,

We have to create safe spaces for our students. A safe space is where students don't feel like they are restricted or have anxiety about sharing something that's on their minds so that they feel comfortable sharing. A safe space is where they feel safe to express what

they need to express without fear of someone else saying something to them or about what they said. My classroom is an active, safe space where we interact with each other respectfully, and sometimes it looks like mediation if and when conflict arises.

Jack and Frank's remarks signify that they believe that the overall culture in the classroom should be inclusive, safe, and inviting of student voice to ensure student success. Amelia's response suggests that it is important for teachers to proactively pursue chances for students to express their thoughts and ideas in the classroom to foster an environment that appreciates all students' input. According to Jack and Frank, they believe that creating a pleasant learning environment and helping students succeed academically and emotionally appears vital. Ivy, an 8th grade science teacher shared a similar idea to Frank and Amelia, expressed, "Creating a safe space where all viewpoints are respected, and students feel comfortable expressing themselves." These teachers practice that in order for students to feel comfortable speaking up in urban middle school classrooms, they need to know that their opinions are respected. According to the teachers in my study, they perceive that when students are more likely to feel appreciated, valued, and comfortable expressing themselves in an atmosphere designated as a safe classroom. When participants were asked, what does your classroom look like on a daily basis? Claire, an 8th-grade math teacher, shared, "My classroom is a welcoming and relaxing environment with flexible seating arrangements, students are working in groups, and it's a good noise." Leo, a 5th-grade English teacher, expressed, "We are a family in my classroom." These responses from Claire and Leo illuminate the importance of creating a sense of community in the classroom.

Charley, a 7th-grade english teacher shared:

My classroom is pretty standard. Students are in working groups. I have assigned seating, which is sometimes loosened up based on the behavior students demonstrate. There is a vast diversity of skill levels in my classroom. I do expect a certain amount of silence in my room. Conversations are monitored to ensure that students are on topic, and I use proximity to ensure that students are on task.

It is important to note that Charley's response alludes to the idea that it is vital to have order in the classroom to ensure a high level of student engagement. In connection with what Frank shared previously in relation to safe spaces, Jack shared, "The culture in my classroom is positive; it is a safe space where students are engaged and on task, volunteering and asking questions." Ben noted, "My classroom looks like a warm and welcoming environment with flexible seating arrangements." Frank, like Ben, expressed, "My classroom is organized; students are engaged and on task." Claire explained, "The culture in my classroom is positive, and there is a noticeable dialogue between students at all times."

The insights shared by Frank, Jack, Ben, and Claire collectively emphasize their belief in the significance of cultivating a positive and engaging classroom environment. Frank initiated the discussion by underscoring the importance of safe spaces in educational settings. Echoing Frank's sentiments, Jack described his classroom as a vibrant hub of activity characterized by student engagement, active participation, and an overall positive culture. Jack holds the view that his classroom environment is conducive to students feeling comfortable to volunteer and ask questions.

Similarly, Ben highlighted his classroom's warm and welcoming nature, attributing this to flexible seating arrangements that foster a sense of comfort and inclusivity. Frank's subsequent comments resonated with Ben's observations, as he noted the organized nature of his classroom, which also supports student engagement and focus. Lastly, Claire's contribution further reinforced the theme of safe and inclusive environments by describing her classroom as brimming with positive energy and constant student dialogue. Collectively, these reflections from teachers underscore their belief in the crucial role of a nurturing and supportive classroom atmosphere in enhancing student engagement and learning.

This data collected from participants supports that effective classroom management can be aided by creating a healthy classroom culture in which children feel supported and safe. In these urban middle charter classrooms, these teachers hold the conviction that they are practicing culturally responsive classroom management by understanding and respecting all students' backgrounds. The teachers in my study feel that establishing a setting where all students feel valued and understood. Additionally, teachers are of the sentiment that promoting open communication and giving students places to talk about their needs can help them feel safe and like they belong. According to the participants in my study, a safe and culturally sensitive setting helps students learn, improves their overall health, and helps them grow as people.

Phenomenological Theme #2: Student-Centered Learning. Student-centered learning is an educational method that prioritizes customizing instruction to accommodate individual students' varied needs, interests, and abilities. The statements collected from participants on the connections between student voice and student-centered learning support the idea that teachers who value student voice in the classroom may use various teaching methods to get students to talk about their thoughts, ideas, and points of view. According to the teachers in my study, these strategies might include making the classroom a friendly and supportive space, allowing students to lead discussions and projects, using student feedback to plan lessons, and allowing students to work with their peers. Nina, a 6th-grade math teacher, shared

I see my students as co-creators in the classroom; I love hearing from my students. They are hilarious, actually! I work to provide students with opportunities to contribute to classroom discussions and the lesson in general.

Nina's teaching approach aligns closely with Mitra's principles in her 2006 work on the importance of student voice in education (Mitra, 2006). Mitra emphasizes the empowerment and engagement of students by valuing their contributions, a concept Nina embodies by treating her

students as co-creators in the learning process. This method actively seeks student input and acknowledges their unique perspectives, enhancing classroom dynamics but also fostering a more inclusive and participatory educational environment, echoing Mitra's findings on the positive impacts of student involvement.

Leo, a 5th-grade English teacher, shared similar ideas to Nina saying, "creating an environment where learning is fun, group work is often, and students are provided with opportunities to teach the class." This quote from Leo emphasizes the importance of a positive and collaborative learning atmosphere. Leo's beliefs signify the value of making education enjoyable, promoting teamwork, and empowering students to take an active role in their learning by teaching their peers. Ben noted, "I allow my students to choose when they want to work in groups, pairs, or independently." Max, an 8th-grade English teacher, explained, "I often share the agenda for the class period with my students and allow them to choose which activity they would like to work on first." Ben's and Max's teaching strategies are connected through their emphasis on student autonomy and choice in the learning process. By allowing students to choose their working arrangements, Ben practices fostering independence and collaboration skills, similar to how Max enables students to take charge of their learning. Both approaches demonstrate a shift from traditional teacher-centered methods to a more student-centered classroom, where students are empowered to make decisions about their learning. This alignment in their educational philosophies suggests a shared belief in the importance of fostering student agency and engagement in the classroom.

These teachers feel that in urban middle schools, the integration of student voice fosters a student-centered learning environment by empowering learners to actively participate in their education, shaping curricula and teaching methods to better meet their diverse needs and

interests. Teachers in this study hold the view that this approach not only enhances engagement and motivation among students but also cultivates a sense of ownership and responsibility toward their learning journey, making education more relevant and effective.

These statements create the narrative that students are more likely to be engaged, motivated, and invested in their learning when given a say in how those experiences will be structured. The data from my study suggests educators can motivate students to offer feedback on classroom activities and assignments and articulate their viewpoints on enhancing the classroom environment by actively seeking the students' input. Teachers perceive that this approach has the potential to improve social and emotional well-being and increase motivation and academic achievement. Ivy shared,

At the end of every lesson, I provide students with an exit ticket which asks students, what did you like about the lesson, what didn't you like about the lesson, and how can I improve on the lesson?

Ivy's implementation of exit tickets after her classes directly aligns with the educational methodologies advocated by Boucher (2016). Boucher's research promotes active student feedback during the learning process, highlighting its importance in improving teaching efficacy. Ivy practices apply Boucher's suggestion for ongoing, introspective teaching techniques by inquiring about students' preferences and making suggestions for improving the class. According to Boucher (2016), this approach allows students to participate actively in their education and allows teachers to adjust and improve their teaching methods. Ivy's approach is a pragmatic implementation of Boucher's theory, showcasing its pertinence and efficacy in modern educational environments. This is important to my study because my findings indicate that these outcomes underscore teachers' beliefs in fostering an educational environment that values and incorporates student perspectives, particularly in urban charter school settings where diverse

student needs and backgrounds must be acknowledged and addressed. Additionally, Ben stated, "I like to provide my students with real-life examples to engage them better because they are very much interested in what is happening in their communities and city. "This analysis highlights the positive impacts of student-centered approaches shared by participants, suggesting that they can be a powerful tool for educators seeking to create more inclusive, effective, and dynamic learning environments.

Phenomenological Theme #3: Student Empowerment. The third theme concerning student voice and how it is enacted in the classroom centers around student empowerment. In my research, the teachers involved perceive "student voice" and "student empowerment" as crucial elements for enhancing inclusivity in schools and transforming the learning process, surpassing their status as mere educational buzzwords. Max shared,

We vote in my class all the time; I give them the agenda for the day and give them the opportunity to switch things up depending on their needs. For example, they may not want to work on the computer, so I ask them if they want to do that first or last.

Ivy, like Max, shared, "I give my students some decision-making in what they want to be taught and how they want to be taught." Charley shared, "I encourage open debates and discussions where students can express their opinions." These statements help illustrate that allowing students to have a voice is essential for making the classroom a pleasant and welcoming learning place. Nina, similar to Charley, stated:

It is, first, necessary to acknowledge that my students have a voice. It is important for me to empower my students by engaging them in meaningful dialogue, and this happens daily. I also encourage my students to communicate what they are thinking and feeling, this helps me to better understand their needs and helps me to support them.

In Ben's words,

There is a sense of ownership in my classroom. In response to the needs in my classroom, I started a student council in my room with my students. Student voice has helped me by giving input on rewards and consequences, which has helped to minimize frustration. We

all learn in different ways, and I find that students value having a voice.

Ben's approach reflects an understanding of the importance of student empowerment and participation. By establishing a student council, he concludes that by proactively responding to the diverse needs within his classroom, he believes that he is committed to fostering an inclusive and responsive learning environment. The positive impact of student input on rewards and consequences indicates Ben's recognition of the value of collaborative decision-making and its role in reducing frustration and enhancing the overall educational experience. Additionally, Ben's response demonstrates the importance of incorporating student voice as a viable strategy to manage classroom behavior.

As shared by participants from my study, they hold the view that constantly listening to students, respecting their ideas, and using their feedback to improve the overall culture in the classroom can go a long way toward empowering students and improving their education and is aligned with the literature as outlined previously (Mitra, 2004). Finally, cultural responsiveness was the fourth phenomenological theme that emerged in how the teachers defined and enacted student voice.

Phenomenological Theme #4: Cultural Responsiveness. Ben shared a powerful statement:

“I walk through the neighborhood of my school every morning, speaking with the parents and families of my students; this helps me to gauge better what they might be dealing with when they walk into the classroom. I am better able to support them.”

Cultural responsiveness is an educational method that acknowledges the significance of incorporating students' cultural backgrounds into every part of the learning process (Picower, 2009). Ben's remark supports the idea that culturally responsive teachers recognize and integrate their students' cultural backgrounds into their

classroom management approaches. This inclusivity not only cultivates a learning atmosphere that is more captivating and relatable but also enables students to express themselves with greater freedom and authenticity.

Frank explained

I play jazz in my classroom every day or some sort of clean R&B or Hip-Hop music that my students can relate to; playing music helps to create a warm and calm atmosphere. As I have gotten older and now that I am a parent, I work really hard to allow students to have a voice. If I see a kid who is crying out for help, they always want to talk about something; I always lend an ear. I give students roles and jobs in my classroom that interest them. I work to keep them busy. I know the strengths and weaknesses of my students. I work to make them feel special through those jobs and roles I give them; this way, they feel a part of the classroom.

Frank's teaching method vividly embodies the ideals of culturally sensitive teaching.

Through the use of jazz, R&B, and Hip-Hop music in the classroom, he establishes an inviting and tranquil atmosphere while demonstrating recognition and appreciation for his students' cultural heritage and preferences. This musical integration serves as a conduit, linking students' lives with their academic experiences and enhancing the relevance and captivation of learning.

Furthermore, Frank's dedication to actively listening and empowering his students is a fundamental principle of culturally responsive teaching. This strategy is essential for bolstering the emotional well-being of pupils, particularly those who may experience marginalization or misunderstanding.

Frank's teaching approaches connect with the empowering research on how student voice and critical race theory can be brought together to acknowledge the experiences and viewpoints of students when managing student behavior. Moreover, Frank's experiences are critical and essential to my study as they highlight the need to allow students to have a voice and the need for teachers to take the time to get to know and better understand students to ensure that they are included in the day-to-day classroom management. Therefore, Frank holds the conviction that

implementing a system of allocating roles and tasks based on individual preferences and aptitudes is a strategic approach that appreciates diversity and individual uniqueness. It facilitates classroom management and empowers students by fostering a sense of worth and integration into the classroom community. This approach recognizes and appreciates the distinct contributions of each student, in line with the culturally responsive teaching philosophy of acknowledging and celebrating individual variations while fostering collective unity and achievement.

These responses from the teachers in my study highlight the multifaceted nature of student voice, suggesting a need for more inclusive and varied platforms for expression in classroom settings. Additionally, Charley shared,

I work to make the work relevant and meaningful for students so that they feel connected, and I work to build trust with students through meaningful conversations about their personal experiences inside and outside of the classroom.

Similarly to Charley, Leo expressed that “I make the work relevant and meaningful by connecting it to their everyday lives.” Charley talks a lot about how important it is to give students work value by connecting it to things they do in and out of school. Not only is this method meant to teach, but it is also meant to build trust by talking about the students' situations meaningfully. Leo agrees with this and stresses the importance of connecting what students learn to their everyday lives. Like Charley, Leo wants to improve the learning process by making it more exciting and relevant. Both of these teachers suggest that the key to good education is ensuring that each student finds the learning process interesting and important to them personally. The teacher's responses support the importance of creating and cultivating relationships with students. The next section of this chapter focuses on the teachers' stated challenges and barriers to enacting student voice in their classrooms/with their students.

Enacting Student Voice - Challenges and Barriers

Regarding the second research question, "What challenges and barriers do you encounter in implementing student voice?" The analysis of participant responses indicated that there were minimal challenges and barriers in enacting student voice in the classroom. Claire shared, "Sometimes, given the time constraints of the lessons, it's challenging to create spaces for students to share how they feel." Claire's response alludes to the idea that instructional time may need to be more inclusive of student voice. Ben expressed, "It's hard to get students to come out of their shells, which is why building relationships is extremely important." Ben's response highlights the importance of building relationships with students and creating safe spaces where students feel comfortable speaking. Jack explained, "A challenge is that leadership has to be willing to listen to students." Jack also noted, "Enacting student voice has to extend beyond the classroom." Jack's narrative speaks to the need for school-based leadership teams to value student input and alludes to the idea that utilizing student voice should be a school-wide initiative. Max shared, "Challenges are around having stronger voices than others in the classroom, which makes finding a balance to ensure equity of voice a little harder." Max's experience highlights the importance of equity of voice to ensure that all students are heard.

Frank expressed,

The challenge is trying to get a collective group of kids coming from so many different places and households, getting them to be polite to their fellow students. A challenge is making sure students understand not to talk while somebody else is talking. Some days, it's smooth, and other days, it's pure chaos where I have to separate kids so all voices can be heard.

This quote from Frank emphasizes the multifaceted difficulties teachers encounter in effectively overseeing classrooms consisting of pupils from varying origins and houses. This highlights the challenge of teaching fundamental social etiquette, such as being polite and

respecting others' speaking opportunities, demonstrating the intricate nature of social education within a heterogeneous community. The juxtaposition between tranquil and tumultuous days highlights the unpredictable nature of classroom dynamics, necessitating the teacher's utilization of various tactics, such as student segregation, to ensure equitable participation. This remark effectively demonstrates the delicate task that instructors undertake in creating a harmonious and inclusive learning environment while managing their students' diverse behaviors and demands.

Amelia explained that “some challenges arise when trying to resolve issues between students, so I work to help students explain what they are experiencing and how I can best help them.” This analysis delved into a few participants' challenges in implementing student voice. However, despite these challenges, there is an overarching belief among these teachers that empowering students to take an active role in the disciplinary process leads to more meaningful and lasting behavioral changes. This belief is supported by anecdotal evidence of improved student-teacher relationships and a more positive school climate.

Research Question 2: What, if any, role does student voice currently play in their classroom management approaches?

To further explore what role, if any, does student voice play in teachers' classroom management approaches in their classrooms? Participants in this research study were asked the following questions during the semi-structured interview:

1. Can you describe your classroom management approach to me?
2. Do you believe that student behavior needs to be managed why or why not?
3. What is the role of student voice in your classroom management?
4. Do you feel students should have a say in how teachers manage classroom behavior?
5. Are there opportunities in your classroom for students to provide you with feedback on

your classroom management? Why or why not?

In addition to understanding how the teachers define and enact student voice in their classrooms, it is vital to understand what role student voice plays in classroom management and whether or not teachers feel that students should have a say in how teachers manage classroom behavior. The following themes emerged when exploring student voice and classroom management:

1. Communication of clear and consistent expectations.
2. Student involvement.

Phenomenological Theme #5: Communication of Clear and Consistent

Expectations. In response to questions presented above regarding student voice and classroom management, Max shared,

Are we managing children? Is that what we want to do? My gut is like I do not want to manage my children because in a true learning environment, I want the students to be in it, and I want them to be able to manage themselves. I ask thought-provoking questions and encourage students to come to me when they have issues. My classroom looks like open communication and structure.

Max's quote demonstrates a more modern way of designing a classroom which differs from traditional methods focusing on control and consistency. His focus on student self-management fits with educational ideas that support student autonomy and motivation that comes from within.

Max's idea of "guided discovery," in which the teacher is more of a guide than a boss, fits with his desire not to "manage" children but to create a setting where they can manage themselves. This method is meant to help students learn to think critically and solve problems while letting them learn independently with little help from adults. It differs from behaviorist models, which use rewards and punishments to change behavior and teach lessons. According to

Max, his classroom has open communication and structure, a balanced method that gives students freedom while providing a supportive framework.

Max's philosophy is similar to the shift in educational paradigms from teacher-centered to student-centered learning. It stresses the value of creating spaces where students can learn to self-regulate and be interested in their learning. This method suggests that open and responsive classrooms are better than rigid and authoritarian ones. Max's comment resonates with the notion that classroom management is necessary and demonstrates that it is vital to empower students when and if they are experiencing issues.

Ben shared,

In my classroom, we discuss everything that needs to happen and the expectations. If one person messes up as a group, we are all accountable. It is not arguing; it is dialogue and supportive, and everyone collectively contributes to the conversation. We are a classroom community, and we create agreements together, and when we need to revisit those agreements, we do so together.

Ben's comment demonstrates a profound focus on shared accountability and fostering community within the classroom. Ben's method of engaging in group discussions and establishing clear standards cultivates a collective responsibility, indicating that each student's acts impact the entire classroom. The remark implies that reframing interactions as "dialogue" instead of "arguing" promotes a positive and encouraging atmosphere where effective communication is crucial in resolving conflicts. The frequent utilization of the term "together" emphasizes the cooperative essence of this classroom, wherein choices and modifications to agreements are cooperatively formulated. This strategy is expected to increase student involvement and foster a sense of ownership in the learning process as students actively establish and uphold their classroom norms.

Nina shared,

Students are leaders in their own right. I provide my students with opportunities to participate in daily decision-making, which helps with classroom management. Structure and routines are necessary to ensure student success in the classroom.

This quote from Nina underscores the significance of students as engaged contributors and trailblazers in their educational environment. Nina emphasizes the significance of empowering students by incorporating them in everyday decision-making, which can positively influence classroom management. Nina's reference to structure and routines suggests a conviction in the necessity of a harmonious approach, where student independence is combined with a steady and foreseeable learning atmosphere. In general, Nina's narrative demonstrates an educational philosophy that prioritizes student autonomy, interactive learning, and the advantages of a structured classroom environment.

Leo shared:

In my classroom, everyone has a clean slate every day. Whatever happened the day before is the day before. I pride myself on being energetic. My classroom is organized yet spontaneous. I provide students with movement breaks, and I make sure when I am teaching, I am always in close proximity to my students. Students are also redirected as necessary.

This quote from Leo demonstrates a contemporary and caring way of teaching. Giving students a fresh start every day shows a solid dedication to creating a positive and accepting learning environment, which is essential for keeping students motivated and upbeat. Leo is proud of his active and exciting nature, which helps make the classroom lively and involved. The balance between order and flexibility is well thought out, as evident by the movement breaks and close proximity between teachers and students. This helps students with a range of learning needs stay focused and involved. The fact that students are told to be redirected when needed shows a proactive and careful approach to classroom management.

Amelia expressed:

In my classroom, I establish clear expectations for student behavior and what is allowed and what is not. The first week of school is extremely important for this work, with reminders throughout the year. I allow students time to practice, and I work to model the behavior I want to see in my classroom. I am consistently communicating expectations.

Amelia's comment demonstrates a proactive and organized method for managing the classroom, highlighting the significance of establishing explicit behavioral standards at the beginning of the academic year. Amelia's method of allocating the initial week to establish norms, accompanied by continuous reminders, demonstrates a recognition of the need for consistency in sustaining these expectations. In addition, her emphasis on exemplifying desired behaviors and providing pupils with ample opportunities to practice them showcases a dedication to a nurturing and instructive approach to discipline rather than relying primarily on punishing actions.

These statements from teachers create the narrative that it also encourages fairness and equality because students and teachers must follow the same rules. Students learn essential life skills like self-discipline and responsibility, which are necessary for doing well in school and social situations. Teachers believe that clear and consistent expectations for behavior in urban middle school classrooms help keep the classroom calm and productive while teaching students essential life skills. Overall, participants felt that it was vital for effective classroom management to establish clear expectations for behavior and classroom norms to help create a predictable and structured environment where students know what is expected of them. The following section outlines the need for student involvement when managing classroom behavior.

Phenomenological Theme #6: Student Involvement. Student involvement refers to involving students in setting classroom norms and expectations regarding classroom management.

Ivy explained:

Unfortunately, not all teachers have students' best interests at heart; sometimes they belittle students. Students should have opportunities to share with their teachers how their teachers make them feel. Allowing students to have a say in how they are disciplined is important, and it also helps teach them communication skills. Student voices are important, and as teachers, we need them to help us see things from their perspectives and experiences.

Ivy's quote highlights several critical issues in the educational context. It acknowledges the unfortunate reality that not all teachers prioritize their students' well-being, sometimes resulting in belittlement. This underscores the necessity for creating safe spaces where students can express their feelings about their interactions with teachers. Secondly, Ivy emphasizes the importance of student input in disciplinary processes. Teachers believe that this approach seems to foster a fair and understanding educational environment and is a practical avenue for teaching students valuable communication skills. Lastly, the quote underscores the significance of student perspectives in enhancing teachers' understanding and approach, advocating for a more empathetic and inclusive educational system that values and learns from diverse student experiences.

Ben shared:

I think students should have a say in how we manage behavior because they are in the classroom. As the teacher, I am not coming up with outlandish expectations. We talk and discuss it together. Having consistent dialogue makes my students feel involved. Their experience matters.

Like Ivy's, Ben's experiences emphasize the value of including students in discussions about classroom expectations. It appears that this belief is based on the understanding that students are directly involved in classroom management, providing valuable insights and experiences that can inform effective behavior management strategies. Additionally, these comments described by Ben and Ivy feel democratic and inclusive, aiming to give students a voice in decisions that

affect them. This can foster students' sense of ownership and responsibility regarding their behavior.

Amelia expressed,

The students at my school are often very different and constantly changing, making it hard to keep the learning setting positive and helpful. Therefore, involving students in managing their behavior gives them the power to take responsibility for their actions and builds a sense of duty. Students are more likely to follow the rules and guidelines the school community sets if they have a say in what is expected of them and what will happen if they do not.

This quote from Amelia reflects the challenges and dynamism inherent in educational settings, emphasizing the diversity and fluidity of student populations that can impact the learning environment. Amelia advocates for student involvement in behavior management, suggesting that empowering students to take responsibility for their actions fosters a sense of duty and ownership. Finally, the quote implies that when students are engaged in setting rules and expectations, they are more likely to adhere to them, highlighting the importance of participatory and inclusive approaches in education.

Charley shared,

Students are able to provide me feedback during our one-to-ones, which happens weekly; I ask students how I can best support them during our one-to-ones. I also provide students with opportunities when students proactively share when there is conflict to provide me with feedback on how I can help.

Charley's experiences support the idea of giving students a place to talk about their thoughts on classroom management, teaching methods, the curriculum, and the general atmosphere of the classroom, which is what student voice means. It can be essential to let students have a say in choices about their education in urban middle school classrooms, where students may face a range of issues that can affect their academic and personal success.

Max explained,

Every once in a while, it comes up in discussion. I don't plan it intentionally, but throughout the year, it comes up, and I allow them to tell me what they think. I feel like sometimes they may be scared to speak, so I prompt them to say more about how they feel.

This quote from Max reflects an adaptive and responsive approach to classroom discussions. Max acknowledges the spontaneous nature of specific topics arising in class and values student input, indicating a learner-centered teaching philosophy. Furthermore, Max's awareness of potential student reticence and their efforts to encourage open communication demonstrates a supportive and empathetic teaching style, aiming to foster a safe and inclusive environment for expression.

Research Question 3: What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle charter schools?

To further explore and understand what role, if any, student voice might have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle charter schools, participants were asked:

1. What are your thoughts on suspension? In your experience, has suspension proven to be an effective method for remedying student behavior?
2. What are your thoughts on utilizing student voice as a viable strategy to promote alternatives to suspension?

I heard from participants that building relationships with students is necessary to manage classroom behavior and avoid suspension effectively. Some tenets of relationship building that participants shared centered around trust, active listening, community building, and supportive student-teacher relationships. This section is in response to research question 3 and is divided into two sub-themes:

1. Active Listening.

2. Student Voice and Suspensions.

Phenomenological Theme #7: Active Listening. Participants noted the importance of listening to students, having one-on-one conversations with students, and providing students with opportunities to explain themselves when something happens in the classroom. A powerful quote from Leo:

I do not interact and engage with students like how it was when I grew up, which was very traditional, where we sat in rows and could not make a sound. We are dinosaurs in a sense because students today are very different, and they need different approaches. I listen to my students; I ask them how we can make this fun. How do we make this a better learning experience for you? I am very receptive to change. I want them to learn, so I constantly solicit feedback and input on what I need to do better as their teacher; this way, if I need to change or adapt the lesson or how I manage the room, I can because my students expressed what they need.

This quote from Leo reflects a significant shift in his educational philosophy and pedagogical approaches from his own days as a student in school. Leo acknowledged the outdated nature of traditional, rigid classroom structures, emphasizing the need for adaptability and responsiveness to the evolving needs of contemporary students. By actively listening to students and seeking their input, Leo believes in a learner-centered approach, valuing student engagement and co-creation in the learning process. This stance highlights the importance of flexibility and continuous improvement in teaching, focusing on each student's unique needs and preferences to enhance their learning experience. Ben expressed, similar to Leo:

I always ask my students if there are things I can do better to let me know. Sometimes I can ask them if I was too harsh when redirecting them. We are human; sometimes, I might have a bad day and take it out on them. It's not barking at them all day; it's about listening. Listening to my students is what made my classroom management better; I started listening because they are humans, too, and they have feelings.

In Leo's experiences, he recognizes the inherent human aspect of teaching, acknowledging that teachers can have bad days and might unintentionally reflect this in their interactions with students. This awareness is pivotal in building a respectful and understanding

classroom environment. The focus on prioritizing listening over merely teaching and instructing represents a notable departure from conventional educational approaches. Teaching refers to the act of imparting knowledge or skills to students, traditionally involving direct instruction where the teacher delivers content and the students are expected to absorb this information. This conventional method often centers on the teacher's perspective and control, with less emphasis on students' input or engagement through active listening. It suggests a more democratic and inclusive classroom dynamic where students' voices and feelings are valued. This strategy seems to enhance classroom management while fostering a more engaging and responsive learning environment.

Ben's experiences further develop these themes, portraying the teacher as someone who is not only open to change but actively seeks it. The teacher's willingness to ask students for feedback on making learning fun and compelling shows a commitment to student-centered education. This approach contrasts starkly with the "traditional" methods the speaker mentions, where student input is minimal, and the environment is more rigid. By actively soliciting student feedback and being receptive to change, the teacher believes that by demonstrating flexibility and adaptability, which is crucial in modern education, acknowledging that students' needs and learning styles are diverse and ever-evolving. Overall, Leo and Ben illustrate a teaching philosophy grounded in empathy, respect, and adaptability, recognizing the dynamic nature of education and the diverse needs of students in contemporary classrooms.

Frank shared, "Students can talk to me any time about whatever they feel like they need to. I am always open, and I work to make sure they know that." Frank's narrative demonstrates his dedication to transparent communication and emotional accessibility, underscoring the significance of providing students with easy access and assistance. Frank's narrative speaks to

his proactive endeavors to establish a trustworthy and all-encompassing atmosphere that encourages pupils to freely express their opinions and requirements. Nina shared:

I never know what my students are going through, struggling with, or need. I really listen to them because it helps me to better support them, and I care about their experiences in and outside of the classroom.

Nina's experiences reflect the teacher's deep understanding and empathy towards her students. By acknowledging the complexity and diversity of her students' lives, she demonstrates an awareness that each student's experience is unique and potentially challenging. The emphasis on actively listening signifies a commitment to responsive and individualized support, which is crucial in fostering a nurturing educational environment. Teachers conclude that this approach not only aids in academic guidance but also shows a genuine concern for the student's overall well-being, extending beyond the confines of the classroom.

Ben also expressed, "My students are able to talk to me, and they communicate with me consistently." Similarly, Amelia explained, "I listen to my students to provide them with opportunities to explain how they feel especially when something is bothering them."

The two quotes from Ben and Amelia highlight their commitment to open communication with their students. Ben's statement emphasizes the consistency and ease with which his students communicate with him, suggesting a comfortable and ongoing dialogue. Amelia's approach, on the other hand, focuses on active listening to understand and address the specific needs and concerns of her students, indicating a more empathetic and responsive interaction. Both approaches underscore the importance of teacher-student communication in fostering a supportive educational environment.

It seems that an important narrative here is that active listening strengthens the connection between teacher and student and gives students the power to take responsibility for

their actions and healthily solve problems. Teachers noted that using focused support and active listening can help make the classroom more welcoming and supportive for all students. These teachers create opportunities for students to express their thoughts, opinions, and experiences during class discussions, one-on-one conversations, or written assignments. I get the sense from teachers that this approach not only fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment but also allows teachers to better understand the cultural perspectives that each student brings to the classroom.

Phenomenological Theme #8: Student Voice and Suspensions. The third and final research question explores what role, if any, does student voice might have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions as a management approach. A few teachers in my study talked about how they believe that suspensions are ineffective in addressing student behavioral issues.

Claire shared,

It depends on the severity of the behavior. Sometimes, the length of suspensions is too long. I am really on the fence with suspensions because I do not believe suspensions work. It's just a constant learning loss for students.

This quote from Claire reflects a nuanced view of student suspensions, acknowledging their complexity in the educational setting. It seems as if Claire recognizes the necessity of suspensions in severe cases like bullying and fights yet emphasizes the importance of evaluating each incident individually, indicating an understanding that blanket policies may not be practical or fair. The mention of "constant learning loss" highlights a significant concern about the negative academic impact of suspensions, suggesting that Claire sees potential harm in removing students from the learning environment. Finally, Claire's ambivalence ("on the fence") about suspensions underscores a critical dilemma in education: balancing discipline and the

educational needs of students, which remains a challenging aspect of school administration and policy.

Leo expressed,

Suspension does not scare middle schoolers. For the students, they think, I don't have to be in school; I don't have to worry about books. It's a three-day break for some students. We have to be a positive light for students.

Leo uniquely highlights a critical perspective on traditional disciplinary approaches like suspension in schools. Firstly, it underscores the ineffectiveness of suspension as a deterrent for middle schoolers, suggesting that students may view this punishment as a break from school rather than a consequence of their actions. Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of positive reinforcement and role modeling in education. It implies that being a "positive light" for students can be more impactful than punitive measures in fostering a constructive learning environment.

These quotes offer a nuanced perspective on the effectiveness of suspensions in schools, particularly highlighting concerns about their impact on students and teachers. Claire's initial statement highlights the intricacy of assessing the suitability of suspensions, emphasizing the necessity of evaluating each situation individually and considering the gravity of the misconduct. This viewpoint recognizes that suspensions for severe offenses like bullying and fights can be justified. Still, there is an implicit concern about the potential overuse or inappropriate application of suspensions for less severe issues. The quote also touches on the unintended educational consequences of suspensions, suggesting that they may not effectively deter middle schoolers. Instead, students might perceive suspensions as a break from school responsibilities, leading to a loss in learning continuity. This perspective argues for a more supportive and rehabilitative approach, indicating that being a "positive light" for students might be more beneficial than punitive measures.

Leo extends Claire's critique, framing suspensions as a disadvantageous break for students and teachers. These perspectives raise concerns about the negative impact of suspensions on students' home life and educational progress, highlighting the irrevocable loss of instructional time. The emphasis on the students' "quality of life at home" suggests a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding disciplinary actions and their ripple effects beyond the classroom.

This analysis suggests a need for more holistic and constructive approaches to student discipline that prioritize ongoing learning, address the root causes of behavioral issues, and consider the broader implications of removing students from the educational environment.

Like Claire and Leo, Nina shared:

I am not a fan of suspensions; suspensions are really just a vacation for the teachers. I worry about their quality of life at home, worry about them missing instruction, and we can never get that time back.

This quote from Nina highlights a critical perspective on the practice of suspensions in schools. Nina views suspensions not as a disciplinary tool for students but as a respite for teachers, suggesting that suspensions may be used more for adult convenience than student correction. Additionally, there is a concern about the negative impact of suspensions on students, particularly regarding their home environment and the loss of instructional time, emphasizing the belief that time lost due to suspensions is irretrievable and detrimental to the student's educational journey. Ivy explained

Suspensions might help the teacher, but the student is missing their education. Suspensions cause emotional damage, and it is utterly useless. To be honest, sometimes teachers are wrong about certain things, like how they talk to students. Everyone is human, and we all make mistakes. There should always be room for students to offer an explanation because we never really know what is going on with a student until we ask. Suspensions are dehumanizing.

Ivy's response reflects a nuanced understanding of the complexities surrounding school suspensions, indicating an awareness of both the short-term benefits and the long-term detrimental effects these disciplinary actions can have. Ivy's acknowledgment that suspensions might temporarily ease classroom management challenges for teachers suggests an appreciation of the practical realities of teaching. However, Ivy critically examines the broader impact of suspensions, particularly emphasizing the educational loss and emotional harm inflicted on students. This perspective underscores a deep concern for student welfare and development beyond classroom order. Ivy's admission of the fallibility of educators and the importance of understanding students' backgrounds and circumstances reveals an empathetic, student-centered approach. This approach is underpinned by believing in the importance of dialogue and understanding in disciplinary situations. The use of the term "dehumanizing" to describe suspensions is particularly striking, signifying a strong moral stance against practices that reduce students to their behaviors without considering their humanity and individual needs. Ivy's response demonstrates a thoughtful, compassionate, and critically engaged approach to discipline, favoring restorative and empathetic practices over punitive measures.

The impact of suspensions extends beyond the individual student, affecting the overall school culture. The teachers in my study report that suspensions often do not act as a deterrent to other students. Instead, they contribute to an adverse school climate, where punitive measures are seen as the primary response to challenges. The teachers believe this approach undermines efforts to establish a supportive and inclusive educational environment, which fosters positive student behavior and academic achievement. The data from my study suggests a need for alternative practices rather than punitive strategies, focusing on understanding the root causes of misbehavior, supporting students in developing coping and social skills, and maintaining their

engagement in the learning process.

Moreover, Charley shared, “Suspensions are a break for the teacher, and therefore, students should have a say in what their consequences are; perhaps it would reduce the use of suspensions.” This quote from Charley reflects that suspensions while offering a temporary respite for teachers, may not be the most effective disciplinary measure for students. The suggestion that students should have input into their consequences implies a belief in more democratic, participatory approaches to discipline, which might lead to more meaningful and effective outcomes. Lastly, Charley hints at the potential for reduced reliance on suspensions if alternative, student-informed disciplinary methods are adopted, indicating a need for reform in traditional disciplinary practices.

Ben explained:

I have a love-hate relationship with suspensions. Students should only be suspended for major things like bullying, fighting, and bringing a weapon to school. But then, when they are removed from the classroom, they are missing out on learning. That's a hard question to answer. Ultimately you have to have suspensions in place in schools. It's a sticky situation! When students are suspended, they are often home alone, sometimes without a parent, food, or guidance, and they are missing learning. No one is really winning in the suspension battle.

Ben expresses a complex perspective on suspensions. His statement reveals an understanding of the necessity and drawbacks of this disciplinary action. He first acknowledges that suspensions are essential for serious offenses like bullying, fighting, or bringing weapons to school, highlighting his concern for maintaining a safe and orderly learning environment. However, he also recognizes the significant negative impact of suspensions on students' learning and well-being, mainly when they are left unsupervised at home, possibly without adequate resources or guidance. This dilemma reflects educators' broader challenges in balancing

discipline with students' educational and social needs, illustrating the intricate nature of decision-making in educational settings.

Jack simply stated, “Suspensions do not benefit the student. Suspension is not effective at all.” Max echoed Claire and Nina’s sentiments on suspension and shared, "Some students just need help with social skills, as in knowing the proper place and time for certain behaviors. Being out of school is never an effective method for managing student behavior. It is a disservice to students because they are losing instruction and opportunities to be social in school.” These comments from Jack and Max present a critical view of student suspensions in educational settings, emphasizing their ineffectiveness in addressing behavioral issues. They are aligned with the work of Skiba et al., 2014. Jack's statement is a straightforward assertion against suspensions, highlighting their lack of benefit to students. He implies that suspension fails to address the root causes of problematic behavior.

Max's contribution builds on Jack’s perspective by suggesting that behavioral issues often stem from a lack of social skills, such as understanding appropriate behaviors in different contexts. He argues that suspensions, which remove students from the school environment, are counterproductive. Teachers feel that by being out of school, students miss out on essential learning and socialization opportunities, which could otherwise contribute to their personal and social development. Max views suspension as a disservice, depriving students of the chance to learn and practice social skills in the very setting where they need to apply them.

Overall, Jack and Max advocate for alternative methods to suspension, focusing on understanding and addressing the underlying causes of student misbehavior. It suggests that educational approaches should aim to teach and reinforce positive behaviors and social skills rather than simply punishing negative behaviors through exclusionary practices like suspension.

Frank shared a compelling quote similar to Claire, Nina, and Ben,

When students are suspended from school, often they are home alone, left to raise themselves, sometimes students do not eat, and in some cases, they play video games all day. Students miss important instructional time, and their suspensions are doing a disservice to students. When parents are fully involved, sometimes suspensions work because there is alignment between the parent and the school; when that happens, parents are better able to hold students accountable at home. Student voice could be extremely beneficial, whereas the teacher and student could have a student-led conference to discuss the incident and possible solutions.

This quote from Frank addresses several critical aspects of student suspensions, highlighting the complex nature of this disciplinary action and its impact on students, particularly in urban settings. Frank points out that suspensions often leave students unsupervised at home, where they may engage in unproductive activities like playing video games all day. This suggests that suspensions, rather than being corrective or educational, may contribute to negative behaviors or habits.

The mention of students potentially not eating during suspensions raises concerns about their basic needs and safety. This highlights a crucial aspect of child welfare, emphasizing that suspensions can exacerbate issues for students who may already be facing challenges in their home environments. Frank also emphasizes the loss of crucial instructional time due to suspensions. This can have long-term academic consequences, as students miss learning opportunities and may need help to catch up upon returning to school.

Frank suggests that suspensions can be more effective when there is alignment between parents and the school. Parental involvement is crucial for holding students accountable and ensuring suspension is a learning experience rather than just time off from school.

Frank proposes an alternative to traditional suspensions: student-led conferences. This approach involves the student in the disciplinary process, allowing them to express their perspective and

participate in developing solutions. It is a more restorative approach, focusing on understanding and addressing the root causes of the behavior rather than just punishing it.

Frank underscores the limitations and potential negative consequences of traditional suspension practices in schools, especially in urban settings. It advocates for more restorative and inclusive approaches, like student-led conferences, which can foster accountability, understanding, and better student outcomes. Frank's insights reflect a growing recognition in education of the need for disciplinary practices that are not only punitive but also constructive and supportive of students' overall well-being and development.

Amelia shared,

Suspension should not effectively remedy student behavior.

The teacher is never really involved in the decision-making around this. In my experience, the Dean of students is the one who decides when a student will be suspended. They don't even communicate with the teacher about why the student was suspended or even for how long. It's like gossip in the building like, Did you hear so and so got suspended? It's really weird, but now we have a system where there is a Google doc where the teachers can see who was suspended and why so at least we now know.

Amelia's quote highlights several critical issues in the disciplinary process at her school. First, she questions the effectiveness of suspensions in altering student behavior, suggesting that this standard punitive measure might not address the underlying causes of the issues. Secondly, she points out a need for teacher involvement in decision-making, indicating a disconnect between classroom experiences and administrative actions. This separation could lead to decisions that do not fully consider the student's educational context or needs. Thirdly, Amelia notes a communication gap between the decision-makers (the Dean of Students, in this case) and the teachers, which leads to a need for more transparency and understanding about disciplinary actions. Finally, she mentions the introduction of a Google doc as a solution to improve communication and transparency, implying that the school is recognizing and addressing these

issues, albeit incrementally. This change represents a step towards more informed and collaborative approaches to student discipline.

Student Voice and Alternatives to Suspension

This section of my dissertation pivots towards a crucial aspect of my exploration into the perceptions and insights of urban middle school teachers regarding the utilization of student voice as a strategic alternative to suspension. This exploration is pivotal, as it sheds light on the practicalities and effectiveness of student voice in real-world educational settings. This detailed exploration of teacher responses and reflections aims to unravel the nuances of implementing student voice as a transformative tool, ultimately contributing to the broader discourse on progressive disciplinary approaches in education.

The final question asked of participants during the semi-structured interview connected to research question three was, what are your thoughts on utilizing student voice as a viable strategy to promote alternatives to suspension? Claire shared, “Instead of suspending students, conflict resolution is needed, along with peer circles so that students can talk it out.” Leo expressed, “Soliciting input from students helps to create a level of accountability.”

This quote from Leo succinctly emphasizes the significance of engaging pupils in the educational process. Leo promotes a participatory approach by seeking input from students, encouraging them to actively contribute to their learning environment rather than being passive users of knowledge. Leo asserts that when students are given agency in their education, they have a higher propensity for engagement and motivation. Students experience a sense of significance attributed to their opinions and ideas, which might enhance their enthusiasm and engagement in learning. Furthermore, Leo's reference to "accountability" holds great importance. In this context, accountability encompasses more than just the teacher's duty to instruct. It

implies that when students can express their opinions, they also assume accountability for their educational achievements. This collective responsibility can result in a more dynamic and efficient educational experience.

Soliciting input requires students to think critically about their educational needs and preferences. This process can help develop essential life skills such as decision-making, problem-solving, and self-advocacy. Leo suggests building a collaborative classroom culture to foster community and collaboration. Through this process, Leo suggests that students acquire the ability to appreciate and esteem the viewpoints of their classmates, fostering a learning atmosphere that is both comprehensive and encouraging. Leo suggests soliciting input can help the teacher understand and cater to a wide range of learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and individual needs. Leo's perspective underscores a progressive approach to education where student participation is vital to creating a more accountable, engaging, and effective learning environment.

Nina explained,

We need to hear from students, especially when it comes to suspension. I think inviting students to participate in the conversation about consequences could be extremely beneficial.

Charley, similar to what Claire shared:

Some schools will utilize student conferences instead, which have proven, in my experience, to be helpful. Conflict resolution also works instead of suspensions. Student voice could be extremely beneficial.

Charley promotes alternate disciplinary approaches instead of standard suspensions, highlighting the efficacy of student conferences and dispute mediation. He proposes that these methods, which he has seen to be beneficial via personal experience, can promote more favorable results compared to suspensions. In addition, Charley emphasizes the significance of

integrating student input into the disciplinary procedure, expressing a belief in its capacity to significantly enhance the situation.

Jack uniquely shared, “Students can create their own punishments. I think it would be a good idea to solicit input from students.” Max shared, similar to Nina:

I think using students' voices could be valuable; hearing their voice about suspension if they think it's effective would be valuable. We should hear from students more regarding consequences.

Jack's perspective on suspensions demonstrates a forward-thinking attitude to disciplinary measures in school environments. Jack's suggestion of having students devise their penalties promotes a participatory and potentially empathic system wherein students take responsibility for the outcomes of their behavior. His proposal to seek feedback from students demonstrates a recognition of the significance of student voice and autonomy in shaping their educational setting. Jack holds the view that implementing this strategy has the potential to cultivate a strong sense of accountability and camaraderie among students as they actively participate in defining the disciplinary structure.

Frank expressed, "We take our middle school students for granted. They are extremely intelligent and always have something to offer to the conversation." Frank's remarks demonstrate an acknowledgment of the frequently underestimated potential of middle school students. He underscores their intellect and the significance they contribute to conversations, implying a conviction in the relevance of actively involving and attentively considering younger kids. This viewpoint questions prevailing notions of middle school students as transitional learners, instead emphasizing their capacity to make significant contributions to educational and intellectual settings.

Amelia shared,

I think utilizing student voice could definitely help to reduce suspensions. For example, talking back, minor infractions, etc., suspension is not necessary. I believe fighting could warrant a suspension but it all depends on the history, the nature of the fight, serious incident or not. Having conversations is necessary and could help with avoiding suspensions. Guidelines and rules must be well established with student input. Teachers should first give a warning, then have a social conference, call home, send students to buddy room, send a restorative letter home, then give a detention and only then maybe a suspension depending after that depending on the infraction, There are so many different factors involved that we are not able to control for which again why it's important to build relationships with students. Like bringing a weapon to school because that immediately puts everyone in danger, that's what I think of when I think about suspensions.

Amelia's statement demonstrates her comprehension of the potential beneficial influence of student participation in decision-making procedures, particularly in relation to disciplinary measures such as suspensions. Amelia believes that by advocating for the incorporation of student voice, she suggests that students' opinions and ideas have the potential to enhance the efficacy and equity of disciplinary procedures. This approach suggests a transition towards educational techniques that are more inclusive and participatory, acknowledging the importance of students' contributions in fostering a well-rounded and empathic school environment. Collectively, these works, alongside the real-world experiences provided by the teachers in my qualitative study, present a compelling argument against the effectiveness of suspensions in managing classroom behavior, advocating for more inclusive and restorative approaches.

Conclusion

This study concludes by emphasizing the transformative potential of incorporating student voice in disciplinary actions within urban middle schools. It suggests that when students are given a platform to express themselves and actively resolve conflicts, it addresses immediate behavioral issues and contributes to their overall personal and social development. The findings advocate for a shift in disciplinary practices, moving from punitive measures to more restorative

and inclusive approaches. Building on these insights, the transition towards restorative and inclusive disciplinary practices not only promises to reshape the educational landscape in urban middle schools but also to foster environments where every student's voice is valued and heard. Consequently, this paradigm shift underscores the critical role of student engagement in creating more equitable and effective learning communities. The following section will delve deeper into the summary and discussion of these findings.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

Building on foundational research on student voice in schools, it appears from participant responses that teachers and schools can help create a welcoming and helpful learning setting that meets the needs of all students better. Empowering students to participate in decision-making processes regarding their education helps foster a school atmosphere that is both favorable and inclusive while acknowledging all students' perspectives and contributions (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). Contrary to the perspectives presented in the existing literature on classroom management, particularly as outlined in Noguera's (2003) study, which discusses the importance of challenging strict disciplinary measures in order to move towards more structured environment for effective learning, this analysis proposes an alternative approach. It suggests that fostering a more flexible, student-centered classroom environment can lead to improved student engagement and learning outcomes. By comparing traditional methods that prioritize order and control with approaches that emphasize empathy, collaboration, and adaptability, this discussion aims to highlight the benefits of rethinking conventional classroom management strategies. The teachers in my study believe that practices that allow students to take a more

active role in their learning process can significantly enhance the educational experience and foster a more inclusive and supportive classroom atmosphere.

This research presents a critical analysis of the existing literature on challenges faced in some urban middle schools, specifically through the lens of implementing student voice. While the broad challenges outlined in scholarly work are acknowledged as valid, this study reveals distinct variations in practical realities encountered within these educational settings. Such disparities underscore the imperative for adaptable, context-sensitive approaches tailored for teachers to effectively foster student voice and expression. Furthermore, it underscores the pivotal role of teacher strategies in effectively managing and navigating these challenges, thereby contributing significantly to the field of education.

My study explored the utilization of student voice when managing classroom behavior in urban middle schools. This research study explored teachers' perspectives working in urban middle schools concerning student voice and their classroom management. This study looked specifically at how the use of student voice could be proactive to support classroom management as a means to avoid suspension and expulsion, both of which can, in some circumstances, ultimately lead to the criminalization and oppression of young Black students by funneling them into the School-to-Prison Pipeline (STPP).

To further draw upon the experiences of urban middle school teachers, the researcher used a phenomenological qualitative study to answer the following research questions: **RQ 1:** How do urban middle school teachers regard the role of student voice in their classrooms? **RQ 2:** What, if any, role does student voice currently play in their classroom management approaches? **RQ 3:** What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle schools?

Qualitative research focuses on specific, detailed ideas that are specific to the situation and therefore, it is naturally hard to generalize its results. So, while this study provides useful information from the teachers in this study, it shouldn't be taken as a general picture of all teachers in urban middle charter schools. Therefore, the researcher used purposive sampling (Creswell, 2013) and semi-structured interviews with ten urban middle charter school teachers to answer the research questions. The data from the semi-structured interviews revealed that teachers consider it crucial to incorporate student voice in managing classroom behavior. They also highlighted the importance of actively seeking and using student input as a strategy to decrease suspensions in urban middle schools.

Interpretation of the Findings

Historically, educational research has predominantly focused on teacher-led strategies for managing classroom environments, often overlooking the potential contributions of students in these processes (Noguera, 2003). Approaches that solely rely on teacher-led strategies have been critiqued for their limited scope in addressing the complexities of classroom dynamics and for not fully leveraging the benefits of fostering democratic principles in educational contexts. In contrast, the works of Mitra (2006) and Brasof (2015) have underscored the importance of integrating student voice into the decision-making framework, thereby enriching the classroom environment through the inclusion of diverse viewpoints and fostering a sense of ownership and responsibility among students towards their learning environments.

Beattie (2012) further expanded on these ideas by examining the effects of student voice initiatives in school reform efforts, highlighting how such practices can lead to significant improvements in classroom management and overall school culture. This body of research collectively suggests that when students are empowered to actively participate in discussions and

decisions that affect their learning experience, there is a notable shift in classroom dynamics. This shift not only democratizes the educational process but also contributes to the development of a more engaged and cooperative learning environment.

Moreover, in this study, the teachers who I interviewed build upon these foundational insights by sharing the practical implications of student agency in their classroom management approaches. This research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how student voice can be effectively integrated into classroom management practices. By doing so, it seeks to offer evidence-based strategies that educators can employ to foster more inclusive, democratic, and effective urban middle school classroom learning environments.

The ongoing exploration of student voice and how it can be utilized and considered in classroom management approaches enriches the field of education by challenging traditional notions of authority and governance in schools. By drawing upon the seminal works of Mitra (2006), Brasof (2015), and Beattie (2012) and by further investigating the role of student agency, this study contributes to a nuanced understanding of how teachers use of democratic practices can enhance classroom management and, ultimately, the quality of education provided to students.

The interpretation of my findings for this phenomenological qualitative study on student voice and classroom management holds significant importance in shedding light on the complex dynamics within educational settings. This research focused on exploring teachers' lived experiences and perspectives about student voice and its role in classroom management. By interpreting findings, the researcher delved into the rich narratives and insights shared by teachers, aiming to discern patterns, themes, and commonalities in their experiences. This qualitative inquiry not only seeks to highlight the multifaceted nature of student voice but also its

impact on the overall classroom environment and management strategies employed by teachers in urban middle school settings. By uncovering these underlying themes and meanings, the research contributes to the researcher's understanding of how student voice can inform and shape classroom management practices, potentially leading to more inclusive and student-centered educational environments.

Furthermore, this study's interpretation of findings facilitated a deeper appreciation of the nuances surrounding student-teacher interactions and the power dynamics inherent in classroom management. The insights from this research can offer valuable guidance to educators, administrators, and policymakers in fostering a more collaborative and empowering educational experience where students' voices are heard and integrated into effective classroom management approaches. In essence, the interpretation of findings in this phenomenological qualitative study provided a holistic understanding of the intricate interplay between student voice and classroom management, with the potential to drive positive changes in educational practices and outcomes. Finally, the phenomenological themes of student voice, classroom management, and relationships are outlined in the next section.

Student Voice

Student voice entails giving students a forum to discuss their perspectives on various issues, such as school policies, teaching techniques, curriculum, and the general culture of the school. Urban schools often resort to punitive approaches to discipline due to a combination of high student populations, resource constraints, and the prevalence of zero-tolerance policies. These schools serve culturally and socioeconomically diverse student bodies, which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts that are frequently addressed through punitive measures, exacerbated by a lack of culturally responsive training for staff. Safety concerns, systemic

inequities, and the pressure to maintain high standardized test scores further contribute to the reliance on harsh disciplinary actions. Additionally, educators may lack training in alternative methods, and challenging home environments for students can result in behavior issues that are met with punishment rather than support. This approach can lead to negative academic outcomes and contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline. Therefore, it can be especially crucial to give students a voice in the decisions made regarding their education.

Schools can contribute to developing an inclusive and supportive learning environment that better satisfies the requirements of all students if they actively include students in the decision-making process. Additionally, as stated in the literature review of this study, student voice can be inspired by allowing middle school students to voice their thoughts, ideas, and concerns and giving them a platform to do so (Mitra, 2006). The ten teachers in my study hold the view that creating safe spaces within their classrooms that welcome and amplify the voices of their students are integral to student success. . This finding is critical to my study as it highlights the need for urban middle school teachers to cultivate an atmosphere where each student feels respected, heard, and empowered.

When student voices are valued and included in accurate decision-making, school reform efforts can be more effective (Brasof, 2015). “Students and adults struggle regarding power in developing student voice initiatives, including how best to delegate responsibilities to students, how to provide opportunities for all members to participate, and how to resolve disagreements of opinion, especially when adults and young people have opposing views” (Mitra et al., 2012, p. 109). Schools can kickstart this process of utilizing student voice by surveying parents/guardians, students, and staff to ascertain ways to improve school culture. With input from surveys, schools should create goals to improve their overall climate.

School leaders, teachers, and students should work collaboratively to seek out ways to proactively guide students in becoming responsible adolescents. Examples from the researcher's experience of how to accomplish this include:

- Convening all-school meetings to establish school-wide goals with opportunities for student voice and input.
- Conducting community meetings at the start of every day led by students.
- Establishing cross-grade advisories to provide older students an opportunity to mentor younger students.
- Inviting and encouraging parent/guardians participation on a consistent basis by requesting that they volunteer in schools and virtually
- Training staff on student voice, relationship building, and restorative practices on a consistent and ongoing basis.
- Administering student well-being surveys quarterly to better understand how to meet students' needs.
- Consistently checking in with students individually and in small groups.

Students are key stakeholders with something to say about how to better classroom management in their classrooms, and as part of my study, I explored and learned from urban middle school teachers if this is a shared belief among teachers in urban middle school settings.

It is imperative for educational environments to facilitate opportunities where student voices are actively solicited and incorporated into classroom management approaches. This encompasses enabling student participation in classroom management strategies, including assignments of roles and decision-making processes concerning instructional methods, whether through collaborative group work, pair activities, or individual tasks. The teachers in this

research study have underscored the significance of creating avenues for students to express difficulties they encounter, both academically and socially and ensuring the provision of supportive environments where such disclosures can occur safely. The concept of student voice, as delineated by teachers, embodies the principles of self-advocacy, choice, transparency in the communication of daily agendas, and democratic engagement in selecting classroom undertakings. The pedagogical discourse reveals a consensus among teachers regarding the value derived from student feedback, recognizing students as vital contributors to the educational process. This interaction not only aids teachers in addressing the needs and concerns of students but also plays a pivotal role in the management of classroom behavior through the distribution of responsibilities. Acknowledging and empowering student voice thus emerges as a fundamental component in fostering a participatory and inclusive learning atmosphere. This exploration of the significance of incorporating student voice within classroom management and pedagogical practices underscores the foundational role of participatory engagement in enhancing educational outcomes. In the next section, I delve deeper into the interrelation between student voice and the cultivation of safe spaces, examining how these dynamics further contribute to the creation of an empowering and inclusive learning environment. My study's results resonate with existing bodies of research (Robinson and Taylor, 2007 and Mitra, 2009), demonstrating that active listening and student voice play a pivotal role in personalizing student learning experiences. Previous studies (Mitra, 2006; Mansfield, 2013; Brasof, 2015) indicate that actively seeking and incorporating student voice in the classroom enables teachers to capitalize on interpersonal connections, foster a sense of belonging, and gain a deeper comprehension of the requirements of every student.

Student Voice and Safe Spaces. Student voice and safe spaces are essential to fostering a positive and inclusive learning environment in urban middle school classrooms (Gonsoulin et al., 2012). In urban middle school settings, where students often come from diverse backgrounds and face various challenges, providing them a platform to express themselves can be empowering. Teachers who encourage student voice create an atmosphere where young learners can share their thoughts, concerns, and interests, which can lead to a more collaborative and democratic classroom environment.

Safe spaces are equally crucial in urban middle school classrooms, where some students may experience external pressures, peer conflicts, or societal issues affecting their emotional well-being. Creating safe spaces involves cultivating an environment where students feel emotionally secure, free from judgment, and can express themselves authentically. In urban settings, many students may grapple with stressors related to their surroundings, socioeconomic status, or cultural backgrounds. Safe spaces provide a refuge from these challenges, allowing students to focus on their learning without fearing ridicule or discrimination. It was evident from the data that when teachers prioritize safe spaces, they promote mental health and emotional well-being among their students, which can lead to improved academic outcomes and overall personal growth.

Safe spaces create communities inside the classroom where all students feel seen, welcomed, and heard. It was evident in this study that teachers work extremely hard to ensure students feel safe to utilize their voice, and this is accomplished through greeting students daily, playing music in the classroom, providing students with movement breaks, encouraging self-advocacy, having one-to-one conversations with students, conflict resolution in spaces where there are inspirational quotes in a well organized student-centered environment. Teachers shared

that creating spaces free of shame and embarrassment for students to feel comfortable speaking their truth is vital. Student voice and safe spaces look like teachers and students interacting with one another respectfully.

Combining student voice and safe spaces in urban middle school classrooms can be transformative. When students are given opportunities to contribute to classroom decisions, they develop a sense of ownership in their education. Moreover, safe spaces help students to build relationships with their peers and teachers, fostering a sense of belonging. These two concepts work hand in hand to create a positive, inclusive, and supportive learning environment that empowers urban middle school students to thrive academically and personally. Ultimately, prioritizing student voice and safe spaces enhances the educational experience and prepares students to navigate the complexities of the urban world beyond the classroom.

In the broader context of education, the teachers in my study share the importance of recognizing and valuing students' unique perspectives and voices. By actively involving their urban middle school students in the classroom management process, the teachers talk about how they can enhance their educational experiences and prepare their students for active citizenship in a democratic society. Cultivating student voice in classroom management is not just a pedagogical choice but a necessary step towards creating more inclusive, respectful, and engaging learning environments that benefit students and educators alike.

Classroom Management

Classroom management has long been a topic of paramount importance in education, garnering the attention of numerous scholars and researchers over the years. From the pioneering work of Kounin (1970) and his insights into effective teacher behavior in the 1970s to the more recent contributions of researchers (Kwok, 2019; Kwok & Svajda-Hardy, 2021) who emphasized

the significance of building positive teacher-student relationships, the evolution of classroom management strategies has been shaped by the wisdom and expertise of these past scholars. Their collective efforts have provided valuable insights into creating conducive learning environments and underscored classroom management's dynamic nature, recognizing its ongoing relevance and adaptability in today's diverse educational settings. This introduction serves as a tribute to the foundational work of these scholars while setting the stage for an exploration of the importance of student voice and classroom management approaches and their implications in modern educational contexts.

The teachers in my study say that student involvement is necessary to manage classroom behavior effectively and that students need more opportunities to lead. They shared that student involvement in classroom management reduces bullying and other minor incidents that sometimes occur in the classroom. Historically, studies have shown that students rarely have a role in classroom decision-making processes (Mitra, 2009; McGrady & Reynolds, 2012; Beatie, 2012; Mitra et al., 2012). The statement about teachers' perceptions of student involvement in classroom management playing a significant role in reducing bullying and other minor incidents is important to my qualitative study on student voice for several reasons. Firstly, it provides empirical evidence from the teachers' perspectives, highlighting the positive impact of empowering students through participatory decision-making. This aligns with the broader educational discourse that advocates for student voice and participation when managing classroom behavior. Furthermore, by contrasting current observations with historical studies that indicate students' limited role in classroom decision-making, my study underscores the importance of continuing to explore and focus on more democratic educational practices. This contrast not only emphasizes the importance of evolving classroom dynamics but also situates

my findings within a larger context of educational research and policy development. In doing so, it contributes to the growing body of literature that supports the integration of student voice into classroom management. This evidence strengthens the argument for reevaluating traditional teacher-centric approaches and supports a move toward more collaborative and participatory models of classroom management.

According to the teachers in my study, classroom management was less about control, but more about fostering a conducive and engaging learning environment. As research shows, effective classroom management ensures that students feel safe and respected within the learning space and well-managed classroom can become a sanctuary for learning. All of the teachers in my study shared that when students are comfortable and secure, they are more likely to engage actively in lessons, ask questions, and collaborate with peers, ultimately enhancing their educational outcomes.

In addition, the teachers shared that classroom management is essential for maximizing instructional time. In urban middle schools, teachers often work with students who may need to catch up academically or face a range of academic disparities. Efficient classroom management techniques help minimize disruptions and keep students focused on the lesson. By maintaining a structured and organized learning environment, teachers can make the most of every minute in the classroom, ensuring that essential content is covered and students can catch up or excel.

Existing research dating back to the 1970s on school discipline strategies and the use of exclusionary practices resulting in Black students being removed from the classroom often overlook the teachers' perspectives on student's voice (Monroe, 2005); however, this qualitative study from urban middle school teachers provides a fresh lens, highlighting student voice as a viable and necessary shift. The findings of this phenomenological qualitative study provide

valuable insight into the complex relationship between student voice and classroom management. Through semi-structured interviews and rigorous analysis, the researcher was able to unearth a rich tapestry of experiences and perspectives from urban middle school teachers. The overarching theme that emerged from this research is the fundamental importance of empowering students to have a voice in their learning environments. When students are given opportunities to be seen and heard, the teachers share that from their experiences, their students feel valued and are more likely to be engaged and cooperative, which positively influences the classroom management in their classrooms..

Furthermore, this study highlights the need to continue and deepen research in the need for a shift in traditional paradigms of classroom management. The findings from my study suggest that involving students in classroom decision-making processes, setting clear expectations for participation and engagement, and nurturing open communication channels are vital strategies for effective classroom management.

Finally, classroom management is crucial for building strong teacher-student relationships. Students know what is expected of them and feel their teachers care about their progress when they set clear goals and rules. This trust and rapport between teachers and students can lead to a more positive classroom atmosphere, where students are more willing to participate, seek help when needed, and strive for academic excellence. In this way, classroom management impacts immediate behavior and contributes to a lasting, positive impact on students' lives.

Challenges and Barriers to Enacting Student Voice

Specifically, participants were asked about the challenges and barriers to enacting student voice in their classroom management approaches and decisions. time constraints

previously were a barrier to enacting student voice in the classroom. And while it was a barrier, the teachers in my study all shared that the work was important to do, even when there might not be time or other teaching demands were paramount. The teachers in my study emphasize the significance of employing three fundamental strategies to surmount these obstacles effectively. First, teachers shared that effective communication with their students is a crucial element, which involves the clear, concise, and thoughtful exchange of ideas and information. Second, teachers shared that the ability to manage the classroom environment skillfully is identified as an essential skill. This encompasses strategies for maintaining order, engaging students, and creating a conducive learning atmosphere. Lastly, the teachers in my study believe that the development of strong relationships is a key factor. This entails building trust, understanding, and rapport with students to foster a supportive and collaborative educational environment. These three components are collectively recognized as vital tools in addressing and overcoming the challenges presented.

More clarity between the existing literature and the data collected from my study on teachers' perspectives of challenges of incorporating student voice when managing classroom behavior is an area for further research. . Many educators, due to traditional training, may not have the skills or comfort level to encourage open dialogue and student participation in decision-making processes. This can lead to a classroom atmosphere where student voices are not adequately heard or valued. Fenning & Rose (2007) explored the relationship between school policies, racial and ethnic disparities, and student voice. They argue that institutional policies, particularly those related to discipline, can disproportionately affect students from marginalized backgrounds, thereby silencing their voices. The challenge here is to create equitable and inclusive school policies that allow all students, regardless of their background, to express

themselves and be heard.

My study's findings resonate with existing bodies of research (Robinson and Taylor, 2007 and Mitra, 2009), demonstrating that student voice plays a pivotal role in personalizing student learning experiences. Previous studies (Mitra, 2006; Mansfield, 2013; Brasof, 2015) indicate that actively seeking and incorporating student input in the classroom enables teachers to capitalize on interpersonal connections and foster a sense of belonging and engagement.

Building Meaningful and Connective Relationships

Scholars and educators alike have long recognized the paramount importance of building meaningful relationships within the context of urban middle school classrooms. As the researcher delved into the dynamics of these educational environments, it was evident that these connections extend beyond mere social interactions; they serve as the foundation for successful teaching and learning. Drawing on the insights of previous scholars (Monroe, 2015; Quinn & Owen, 2016), the researcher embarked on a journey to explore the multifaceted significance of fostering relationships in urban middle school settings. From enhancing student engagement to promoting socioemotional well-being, the influence of these connections reverberates throughout the entire educational environment, ultimately shaping the educational experiences and outcomes of students in urban middle schools.

Fostering strong teacher-student relationships creates a supportive and safe learning environment. In many urban settings, students often face challenges outside the classroom, such as poverty, violence, or unstable home lives. By building solid relationships, teachers can offer stability and trust, making it easier for students to engage in their studies and express their concerns or needs. Additionally, these relationships enable teachers better to understand their students' unique needs and backgrounds. Establishing connections with students allows educators

to tailor their teaching methods to cater to each student's learning style and needs. This individualized approach can improve academic outcomes and increase overall student success.

More importantly, when teachers build strong relationships with their students, they become role models and mentors. Teachers can fill this crucial role in urban settings where students may lack positive adult influences. These relationships extend beyond academic instruction, providing students with guidance, emotional support, and the opportunity to develop essential life skills. Teachers often become a source of inspiration and motivation, helping students navigate challenges and pursue their dreams.

Lastly, building relationships with students enhances classroom discipline and behavior management. When students feel a sense of connection and respect for their teachers, they are likely to exhibit positive behavior and engage in their studies. Teachers can leverage these relationships to address discipline issues more effectively, focusing on restorative practices that help students learn from their mistakes and make better choices in the future. In urban middle schools, where maintaining a positive and productive classroom environment can be challenging, solid teacher-student relationships are a cornerstone of effective classroom management strategies.

Implications for Practice

My qualitative study on urban middle school teachers's perspectives on the utilization of student voice in their classroom management approaches revealed insightful perspectives. The teachers in my study believe that suspensions, while sometimes necessary, often do not address the underlying issues leading to the problematic behavior. Building upon the foundational research that underscores the challenges of suspension in schools from scholars including but not limited to, (Skiba et al. 2014; Boucher, 2016; Monroe, 2008; Conwright, 2022 and Duutil, 2020),

my study focused on the experiences of urban middle school teachers who have effectively incorporated student voice in their classes, showcasing its beneficial influence on student engagement and conduct. This study highlights how these ten teachers share their thoughts on disciplinary approaches in their own practice by actively engaging students in decision-making processes. My research entails interviews with urban middle school teachers who offer practical perspectives on incorporating student input into routine classroom management. The teachers are convinced that utilizing student voice presents a departure from conventional disciplinary approaches and support key ideas that place importance on the viewpoints and concepts of students, resulting in more cohesive and fruitful learning settings.

Relying on the data from my study, having student-run organizations and activities to participate in is one method to encourage students to have their voices heard. These can include student government, clubs, and after-school programs that allow students to explore their interests and take on leadership roles related to those interests. In addition, teachers should encourage open communication and feedback from students by checking in with them frequently and soliciting their thoughts on various classroom activities and assignments. This can help develop trust and a sense of community in the classroom. Encouraging student voices in urban middle schools is critical for ensuring students feel heard and encouraged in their educational path. This is especially important for students who are at the middle school level. Educators can create a learning environment that is more inclusive, engaging, and responsive to all students' needs if they incorporate their own pupils' viewpoints and ideas.

According to the the teachers in my study, establishing student-led norms and expectations encourages a system of shared accountability, promoting stronger peer-to-peer interactions and reducing the hierarchical nature of authority. Inclusion is crucial to educational

environments as it amplifies underrepresented perspectives, fostering a greater sense of inclusivity within the classroom. Students' engagement in classroom management debates promotes the development of crucial life skills, including conflict resolution, problem-solving, and leadership abilities. These strategies include but are not limited to:

Classroom Norms and Expectations: Instead of unilaterally establishing classroom regulations, educators might facilitate dialogues wherein students are encouraged to actively participate in developing classroom norms.

Student Councils or Behavior Committees: Implement committees or councils that provide a platform for students to engage in dialogue regarding behavioral concerns and potential resolutions.

Feedback Loops: Refer to organizing periodic "town hall" meetings, during which students can express their problems, suggestions, or compliments about classroom behavior and management.

Utilize student surveys to conduct anonymous assessments of the classroom climate and gather comments for potential enhancements.

Restorative Justice Circles: Implementing restorative justice circles is recommended in behavioral concerns. These circles aim to engage the individuals responsible for the misconduct and other students, fostering an environment conducive to open discourse and cultivating mutual understanding.

Peer mediation: An approach that involves providing students with training in conflict resolution skills, enabling them to manage minor disputes before they escalate effectively. Including student opinions in parent-teacher conferences can prove advantageous in developing a complete approach to behavior management.

In summary, the implications for practical application concerning the integration of student voice and effective classroom management within urban middle schools are significant and have the potential to bring about substantial changes in the field of education. By acknowledging and appreciating students' perspectives, educators can establish inclusive and robust educational settings that cultivate active participation, drive, and personal investment in one's learning experience. Implementing measures to foster students' voice has positively impacted classroom management. It can significantly contribute to the holistic development of students, encompassing both their academic achievements and socio-emotional well-being. It is imperative for educators and administrators to wholeheartedly adopt these ideas and allocate resources toward professional development programs that properly equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to incorporate student voice into their instructional practices seamlessly. Using this approach, it is possible to facilitate the development of fair and student-focused educational opportunities inside urban middle schools. This has the potential to enable the upcoming generation to succeed in a world characterized by diversity and constant change.

Student Voice as an Alternative to Suspension

The utilization of student voice as an alternative to traditional disciplinary measures like suspension and expulsion in urban middle schools represents a transformative approach to managing classroom behavior. The responses from the teachers in this study align with the research presented in the literature review, which states that suspensions fail to address the underlying causes of the behavior (Skiba et al., 2014). Some of the teachers in my study shared that In some urban middle school settings, behavioral issues often stem from a complex mix of social, emotional, and environmental factors. When students are suspended, they are removed

from the educational environment, which denies them the opportunity for corrective learning experiences or the development of positive behavioral strategies. The teachers in my study shared that they too saw that suspensions can exacerbate issues, such as academic lag and disengagement from school, leading to recurring misbehavior and punishment.

My study highlights the importance of teachers learning the root causes of misbehavior and advocating for supportive measures to develop students' coping and social skills, as opposed to suspensions as the remedy.. Again, the responses from the teachers in this study point to a broader trend in educational research advocating for a shift from punitive to more restorative practices in schools to foster more inclusive and effective learning environments.

Specifically, Conwright (2022) and Duutil (2020) offer more contemporary perspectives. Conwright emphasizes the importance of alternative disciplinary measures focusing on restorative justice, arguing that these approaches are more effective in promoting positive behavior and school engagement. Duutil's (2020) research supports this by demonstrating the benefits of empathetic and understanding approaches to student discipline over punitive measures like suspensions. These views align with the participant responses in my qualitative study, where all ten teachers expressed a desire for more supportive and understanding disciplinary measures, highlighting the need for a shift away from traditional suspension practices to more inclusive and empathetic strategies.

Moreover, the practice of leveraging student voice over suspension and expulsion has implications for equity and inclusion. Traditional disciplinary measures have been criticized for disproportionately affecting students of color and those from low-income backgrounds, contributing to the "school-to-prison pipeline." By adopting a student voice-centered approach, schools can work towards dismantling these disparities, ensuring that all students have the

opportunity to succeed. This approach encourages the development of personalized support strategies that acknowledge and address systemic inequalities, thereby promoting a more equitable educational environment.

From a practical standpoint, implementing a student voice-centered approach requires teachers and schools to develop clear protocols for engaging students in meaningful conversations, training staff in restorative practices, and creating mechanisms for student participation in school governance. It also necessitates a shift in mindset among educators, who must view disciplinary moments as opportunities for learning and growth rather than solely as infractions to be punished. An important finding from my study was that none of the teachers had a specific or codified classroom management approach that they utilized in the classroom, nor did any of the teachers refer to any specific training or protocols that they used that were school-wide. Schools may also need to invest in resources to support these practices, such as professional development for teachers and staff, and to create spaces for teachers to connect and discuss their own classroom management approaches-- what works and what doesn't and to create a professional learning community around this work. I believe this is imperative if we are to create more equitable, belonging classroom spaces and where teachers can disrupt the school to prison pipeline.

As schools continue to seek ways to support their students' development and well-being, embracing student voice in disciplinary practices emerges as a powerful strategy for change.

Theoretical Implications

This dissertation started with a long and complicated journey to explore the complex relationship between CRT and student voice. It showed how this theoretical framework could be used to create a fair learning environment where the voices of urban middle school charter

school students are heard and given the tools to make fundamental changes. For many years, scholars (Sleeter, 2016; Daftary, 2016; and Dixon, 2017) have studied classroom management strategies to prevent and deal with misbehavior in urban middle schools to find less harsh ways to discipline students. This study used Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a framework to look at student voice and classroom management. CRT and student voice can work together if we listen to and understand the stories and points of view of students of color and other disadvantaged groups in schools. This intersection happens when schools pay attention to what students have to say. CRT is one way to look at how racism and race affect social, cultural, and political power structures and how these structures affect groups that are already at a disadvantage.

CRT stresses how important it is to know how power and advantage work in school systems. When it comes to the student voice, it makes us think about who gets to speak up and be heard in schools and when decisions are made about education, especially in day-to-day classroom operations. CRT wants us to see that students who are already on the outside, especially those from racial and ethnic minority groups, often have their views shut down or ignored, due to what are most often teacher centered and punitive approaches to discipline which are found across . This theoretical point of view forces us to rethink how power usually works in urban middle schools and work toward making them fairer places where all students' opinions are genuinely valued and included in the educational conversation.

Additionally, CRT stresses the idea of counter-narratives and stories as ways to fight against dominant beliefs. Looking at student voice through the lens of CRT, we see how students from disadvantaged situations can use their voices to speak up and gain the power to express what they think and feel. Students can fight against assumptions and unfair treatment in the school system by discussing their experiences. This theoretical implication shows how important

it is to ensure that students feel safe in the classroom and are urged to share their stories and points of view. This will help make schools more welcoming and fair for everyone.

CRT creates a way to think about and analyze how important it is to change structures and systems to fix racial inequality. This means that more than just amplifying individual student voices is needed when it comes to student voice. Instead, it asks for significant changes to be made to school policies and ways of teaching. Teachers and policymakers need to listen to students and work to remove the systemic barriers that keep racial inequality in education alive. This way, students' voices are not just empty words but lead to real change.

In conclusion, student voice and CRT interact in a way that questions established power structures, supports alternative stories, acknowledges intersectionality, and asks for changes to how the education system is set up. This point of meeting gives us a solid way to move forward with justice and fairness in education, which will help all students in the long run, but especially those who have been left out in the past.

Limitations to the Study

When considering the limitations of phenomenological research with a small sample size of ten participants, it is crucial to acknowledge these constraints explicitly. Acknowledging the limitations of a qualitative phenomenological study is of paramount importance for several reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates the researcher's commitment to transparency and intellectual honesty, which are fundamental principles in qualitative inquiry. By openly acknowledging the study's limitations, researchers provide readers with a clear understanding of the scope and boundaries of their findings, fostering trust and credibility in their work. Secondly, recognizing limitations encourages humility and self-reflection in the research process. Researchers become

more attuned to the potential biases, constraints, or gaps in their methodology, leading to improved rigor in future studies.

Furthermore, understanding the limitations of a qualitative phenomenological study can guide other researchers in building upon the existing knowledge base and refining research questions for future investigations. In essence, acknowledging limitations serves as a constructive step toward enhancing the quality and impact of qualitative phenomenological research. The following section will provide an overview of the limitations of this study:

Generalizability: The limited sample size of ten participants diminishes the likelihood of generalizing the findings to a broader population. The limited sample size may restrict the findings' generalizability solely to the study's participants. Since the participants come from a specific subset (urban middle school teachers from four charter schools in one large metropolitan area), findings are not generalizable to educators, including those in public or private schools or educators teaching at different grade levels.

Data Abundance: Despite the reputation of qualitative research for generating extensive and intricate data, including only ten participants imposes constraints on the comprehensiveness and scope of the gathered material, leading to the omission of certain facets of the phenomenon under investigation.

Limited Perspectives: The utilization of a small sample size may result in a constrained viewpoint regarding the phenomenon under investigation. This constraint is especially crucial when the phenomenon under consideration is intricate and has multiple facets. In addressing the limits associated with conducting phenomenological research with a minor participant pool, it is essential to explicitly address these constraints and establish a clear framework for the study's scope and aims. By doing so, the potential impact of these

limitations can be minimized. Furthermore, solid and rigorous data gathering and analysis techniques can significantly augment the study's dependability and validity. Using purposive sampling guarantees that the chosen participants can offer comprehensive, pertinent, and varied perspectives on the investigated issue.

It is important to note that qualitative research prioritizes depth, insight, and understanding over generalizability. Even small-scale studies conducted with great care can provide vital insights into human experience and behavior.

Lack of Diversity: Restricting the study to only ten urban charter school teachers excludes insights and experiences from a broader range of educators, particularly those from urban public or private schools.

Influence of School Policies: Charter schools often have unique or specialized missions, curriculums, or administrative structures. This might influence the experiences and views of the teachers, making them different from those in standard public or private schools.

As the researcher, it is crucial to acknowledge these limitations when presenting the findings so readers can interpret the results within the proper context. Additionally, recognizing these limitations can guide future research efforts to address them or to expand the study's scope.

In addition, the study included a limited one hour interview with each participant. In conclusion, it is crucial to accept the inherent limits of this phenomenological qualitative study. The study has provided valuable insights into the experiences and perspectives of instructors in the context of student voice and classroom management; nevertheless, it has also revealed certain limitations intrinsic to the study itself. This research's conclusions depend on the setting and can only be applied to a subset of educational environments. Despite these limitations, this study's

findings contribute significantly to the expanding corpus of knowledge regarding the role of student voice in the classroom setting. It highlights the necessity for further investigation and the consideration of a variety of research methodologies in order to gain a deeper comprehension of this complicated educational phenomenon.

Recommendations for Future Research

The utilization of student voice in urban middle school teachers' classroom management approaches is a dynamic area of study that presents potential opportunities for enhanced educational results, for teachers and for students. This research holds significant importance, especially within urban middle schools, where the educational setting tends to give greater complexity and diversity. The following are suggested avenues for further research in this field. Exploring student voice and classroom management through classroom observations, vignettes, and focus groups presents a comprehensive approach to understanding the dynamics of educational environments. Future research in this area should prioritize the development and implementation of structured observation protocols that capture the nuanced interactions between teachers and students. Such protocols can help in identifying specific behaviors, communication patterns, and management strategies that foster a positive learning environment. Additionally, scholars should consider longitudinal studies that track changes over time, allowing for an analysis of how student voice evolves in response to different classroom management practices. This would provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of various approaches and their impact on student engagement and academic outcomes.

Incorporating vignettes in future research offers a unique opportunity to delve into the perceptions and attitudes of both students and teachers regarding classroom management. By designing vignettes that reflect real-life scenarios, researchers can gather in-depth information

about the participants' thought processes, decision-making, and emotional responses. This qualitative approach can complement the data collected through observations by providing context and a deeper understanding of the underlying factors influencing classroom dynamics. Future studies should aim to create a diverse collection of vignettes that cover a wide range of situations, including those involving conflict resolution, student participation, and inclusive practices. Analyzing responses to these vignettes can shed light on the complexities of classroom management and highlight areas where additional support or training may be beneficial.

Lastly, focus groups could be a central component of future research endeavors, as they enable the collection of rich, qualitative data directly from the stakeholders. Engaging students, teachers, and administrators in discussions about classroom management and student voice can uncover perspectives that are often overlooked in more traditional research methods. Future studies should strive for inclusivity, ensuring that the voices of marginalized and underrepresented groups are heard. The use of focus groups to facilitate open dialogue about experiences, expectations, and suggestions for improvement can lead to the development of more effective and equitable classroom management strategies. Moreover, this approach encourages the co-creation of knowledge, empowering participants and fostering a sense of ownership over the research outcomes. By integrating classroom observations, vignettes, and focus groups, future research can provide a holistic view of the complex interplay between student voice and classroom management, paving the way for more responsive and adaptive educational practices.

This research endeavor contributes to the broader academic conversation on educational practices. It provides valuable insights and recommendations for educators, school administrators, and policymakers interested in fostering inclusive and effective learning environments in urban middle schools. This research aims to enhance teachers' agency and

prioritize their experiences as a focal point in the continuing discourse surrounding educational reform and enhancement. As we look to the future, we must continue to support and applaud the tireless dedication of these teachers who champion inclusivity, diversity, and the right of every student to have their voice heard in the classroom. Their unwavering commitment inspires a new generation of empathetic, informed, and engaged students prepared to navigate an increasingly complex world.

Utilization of Findings

The findings from my qualitative study underscore the profound need for creating environments in urban middle schools where students feel safe, valued, and engaged in their learning processes. Based on the collected data and analysis, several key areas have been identified as critical to improving classroom management and fostering student voice: the need for safe spaces, the importance of building meaningful relationships, the effectiveness of student-centered learning, and the potential of using student voice as an alternative to traditional disciplinary measures like suspensions.

To translate these findings into actionable strategies, the following steps are planned:

Development of Safe Spaces: Creating physical and emotional safe spaces within schools where students feel secure to express themselves and engage with their peers and teachers. This involves not only the physical arrangement of classrooms to promote inclusivity but also the cultivation of a school-wide culture that values diversity, equity, and respect.

Emphasis on Relationship Building: Prioritizing the development of strong, trusting relationships between students and educators. The goal of the training programs is to

provide educators with the tools they can use to form meaningful relationships with their students, learn about their stories and the struggles they've overcome, and facilitate their personal development.

Adoption of Student-Centered Learning: Implementing instructional strategies that place students at the center of the learning process. This includes integrating project-based learning, personalized learning plans, and other methodologies that encourage students to take ownership of their education and work collaboratively with their peers.

Promotion of Student Voice as a Discipline Alternative: Developing programs and policies that leverage student voice as a means of resolving conflicts and addressing behavioral issues. This approach recognizes the potential of peer mediation, student-led councils, and restorative justice practices to transform the school climate and reduce reliance on punitive disciplinary measures.

Future Directions - What's Next?

I hope to write a book on student voice and classroom management. To further disseminate the insights gained from my study and to provide a comprehensive guide for educators, this book will detail practical strategies for teachers to use to integrating student voice into their classroom management approaches and decision-making. . It will serve as a resource for teachers, administrators, and policymakers interested in reforming traditional classroom management practices to better meet the needs of today's diverse student populations.

In addition to the book, I hope to create a series of professional development programs for urban middle school teachers and school-based leadership teams. These programs will focus on the implementation of the findings from this study, with hands-on workshops, training

sessions, and ongoing support mechanisms designed to help educators transform their classrooms and schools. Topics will include creating and maintaining safe spaces, building teacher-student relationships, adopting student-centered learning approaches, and utilizing student voice as an alternative to suspensions. These professional development programs will be structured to encourage collaboration among educators, foster a community of practice, and provide a platform for sharing successes and challenges. The ultimate goal is to create a network of empowered educators who are committed to fostering an educational environment that values and practices student voice, thereby leading to more effective classroom management and improved student outcomes.

In conclusion, this study has laid the groundwork for me as a researcher towards a paradigm shift in how classroom management is conceptualized and practiced in urban middle schools. By focusing on student voice and the holistic needs of students, I believe educators can create more inclusive, engaging, and effective learning environments. The forthcoming book and professional development programs will be instrumental in translating these insights into practice, with the potential to transform educational experiences for students and educators alike.

Appendix A: Recruitment Flier

Research Study

STUDENT VOICE & CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

Greetings, Fellow Educator!

Please Join My Transformative Research Study Today!

My name is Gina Upshaw, a Doctoral Candidate in the Educational Leadership Program at Arcadia University. I am interested in learning more about the role of student voice as a classroom management strategy in urban middle schools.

I am looking for individuals who meet this study's selection criteria.

The criteria for this study include:

1. Have an earned bachelor's degree.
2. Hold a PA Teaching License for Middle School grades 4-8.
3. Be considered a Highly qualified teacher, having passed both the Praxis 1 and 2 teaching exams in the state of Pennsylvania - All Pennsylvania educators for grades 4-8 are required to pass a basic skills test as well as the Pennsylvania Grades 4-8 Core Assessment Praxis #5152. Praxis #5152 has three subtests: Pedagogy (Praxis #5153), English Language Arts and Social Studies (Praxis #5154), and Mathematics and Science (Praxis #5155)
4. Be a full-time middle school teacher of record.
5. Be a current teacher for at least one year in an urban charter middle school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

The interview will take place for one 1-hour interview via Zoom.

If you or someone you may know is interested and fits the criteria listed above, please complete the consent form included in the link below:

Link to the Consent Form

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1LLA_SHXoRuE-0igE5YIhPogihIEdhPiKRcK-CIt_yb0/edit

CONTACT: If you have any questions or need additional information, please contact gupshaw@arcadia.edu

Appendix B: Consent Form

Appendix C

Qualitative Research Study Consent

Dear Middle School Teacher,

My name is Gina D. Upshaw-McCalop, and I am a doctoral student in the School of Education at Arcadia University. You are invited to participate in a study I am conducting for my dissertation, An Exploration Into Student Voice and Classroom Management in urban middle schools. This study aims to learn more about how urban charter middle charter school teachers consider student voice when managing classroom behavior. The term "student voice" describes the opportunities available to students in urban middle schools to share their thoughts, ideas, and points of view regarding their educational experiences. It entails giving students a forum to discuss their perspectives on various issues, such as school policies, teaching techniques, curriculum, and the general culture of the school. I expect to have a total of 10 participants for this study.

Who can participate?

All participants must:

1. Have an earned bachelor's degree.
2. Hold a PA Teaching License for Middle School grades 4-8 OR...
3. Be considered a Highly qualified teacher, having passed both the Praxis 1 and 2 teaching exams in the state of Pennsylvania - *All Pennsylvania educators for grades 4-8 are required to pass a basic skills test as well as the Pennsylvania Grades 4-8 Core Assessment Praxis #5152. Praxis #5152 has three subtests: Pedagogy (Praxis #5153), English Language Arts and Social Studies (Praxis #5154), and Mathematics and Science (Praxis #5155)*
4. Be a full-time middle school teacher of record.
5. Be a current teacher for at least one year in an urban charter middle school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

What does participation involve?

If you agree to participate in my study on student voice and classroom management in urban middle schools, first, please read through and sign this consent form in its entirety. Once I receive your signed consent form, you will receive an email that will ask you to complete a Google Survey as a part of the

screening process, which will ask about your experiences teaching in urban middle schools. The link to the survey will be included in your eligibility email upon completion of this consent form.

Once the Google Survey is completed, I will then ask you to participate in a Zoom interview for approximately 1 hour with me. We will schedule this at a time that is convenient for you. During the interview, I will ask you about your experiences teaching middle school, either currently or in the past, along with questions regarding your perceptions of and experiences utilizing student voice within your classroom management strategies. The interview will be video and audio-recorded and transcribed using the tools in Zoom. You can choose whether to have your camera on or off. During the interview, I will also take handwritten notes to ensure that I am accurately capturing your voice.

Additionally, once the interview is complete and during the final stages of analyzing the data and preparing my research findings. As part of my commitment to ensuring the accuracy and validity of my research, I will invite you to participate in member checking. Member checking is an essential step in the research process, where I seek feedback from participants to verify the accuracy and interpretation of my findings.

Your participation in member checking is entirely voluntary and will involve reviewing a summary or excerpts of the data collected during the study. Your feedback will ensure my interpretations align with your experiences and perspectives. Your insights will be crucial in refining and strengthening the findings, making them more representative of your experiences.

Here are the critical details regarding member checking:

- You will receive a summary or excerpts of the data, my preliminary analysis, and interpretations. You will be asked to review these materials and provide feedback, comments, and suggestions. This may take approximately 15-30 minutes of your time.
- Please return your feedback via email within approximately 1-3 business days. I understand your time is valuable, and I assure you that your efforts will be highly appreciated.

How will your personal information be protected?

All of the study's data will be kept confidential. As the researcher, I will keep all information from our interview completely confidential; no names or other identifying information will be used in the findings of this study. When we meet on Zoom for our interview, password protection will be used to ensure the confidentiality of each participant, and a pseudonym will be used for the name of each participant in this study, as well as any additional names shared throughout the interview.

Any identifying information will be kept separate from the data and only accessible to the study researcher to protect participant confidentiality. The data will be aggregated and utilized for research. The concluding research will not make use of any information that might be used to identify the participants in any way. After the study, all the electronic data will be saved in a digital format on the researcher's personal computer, which will be safeguarded with a password. Three years after the study is finished, all data will be deleted permanently.

Are there any risks to participating in this study?

Participation in this study is voluntary and is not expected to involve risks beyond everyday life.

What if you don't want to participate or withdraw?

Please know that without giving a reason, you can decline to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty by emailing me. If, for any reason, you agree to participate and decide later that you don't want to continue with the interview at any time during the study, please send an email to the email address listed below, and any/all information collected up to that point will be permanently deleted.

During the interview, if there are any questions that you wish not to answer, you do not have to answer that question(s), and know that we can continue the interview with the remaining questions.

What if I have questions?

At any point in the study, you can contact me with any study-related questions or concerns you can email me at gupshaw@arcadia.edu. You can also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Jodi Bornstein, via email at bornstej@arcadia.edu

Thank you again for considering participating in my study on An Exploration Into Student Voice and Classroom Management in urban middle schools. By signing here, you affirm that you have read this consent form, understand the study, and agree (or consent) to participate as described above. You may keep a copy of this form for your records. **Please send your signed consent to me via email.**

Participant Name

Participant Signature

Date

Researcher Name

Researcher Signature

Date

This study has been approved by Arcadia University Institutional Review Board (IRB). To ensure that this research continues to protect your rights and minimizes your risk, the IRB reserves the right to examine and evaluate the data and research protocols involved in this study. If you wish additional information regarding your rights in this study, you may contact the Office for the Committee for the Protection of Research Subjects at (267) 620 - 4111.

Appendix C: Survey

Student Voice & Classroom Management - A Research Study

Greetings, and thank you for your interest in this qualitative research study on student voice and classroom management in urban middle schools. Please see the questions below; upon completion, your results will be uploaded into a spreadsheet, and you will be contacted if you meet the criteria for the study. The first 10 participants who meet the criteria will be selected to participate in the research study. If you do meet the criteria, you will be contacted via phone to schedule a 1 hour interview via Zoom. If you do not meet the criteria, you will receive an email within 48 hours of completion of the questionnaire. Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

First and Last Name

What is the best phone number with an area code to reach you?

What is your best complete email address?

urban middle schools are typically known for their diverse populations, including students from different cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds, and serve students in grades 5-8 or 6-8. urban middle schools are located within cities with dense populations. These schools are frequently encircled by residential, commercial, and even possibly industrial neighborhoods. urban middle schools are typically very easy to reach by public transportation and may be surrounded by a higher concentration of people, buildings, and infrastructure than schools in rural or suburban areas.

The resources that are made available to urban middle schools can vary greatly from one institution to the next. The proximity of certain urban charter schools to city amenities, such as museums, cultural institutions, and community groups, may benefit those schools. However, there is a possibility that students will also confront obstacles, such as classrooms that are too crowded, insufficient outside play places, or socioeconomic problems that are widespread in the neighborhood.

Do you teach in an urban charter middle school?

YES/NO

Are you currently teaching in an urban charter middle school in the City of Philadelphia?

YES/NO

If the answer to the previous question is yes, please continue with the survey. If the answer is no, please hit the submit button at the bottom as you are not eligible for participation at this time.

Thank you. If yes, please continue with the survey

What grade do you teach?

5th Grade

6th Grade

7th Grade

8th Grade

Do you have a bachelor's degree?

YES/NO

Do you have experience teaching or are you currently teaching in an urban charter middle school for one or more years?

YES/ NO

Are you certified to teach in a middle school setting according to the state of Pennsylvania?

YES/NO

Highly qualified teacher, having passed both the Praxis 1 and 2 teaching exams in the state of Pennsylvania - All Pennsylvania educators for grades 4-8 are required to pass a basic skills test as well as the Pennsylvania Grades 4-8 Core Assessment Praxis #5152. Praxis #5152 has three subtests: Pedagogy (Praxis #5153), English Language Arts and Social Studies (Praxis #5154), and Mathematics and Science (Praxis #5155).

YES/NO

Did you successfully complete a teacher certification or licensure exam in the state of Pennsylvania, where you teach in an urban middle school?

YES/NO

Thank you!

Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey, an email will be sent in 1-2 business days outlining the next steps. Looking forward to working with you.

Appendix D.

Interview Questions

<p>RQ 1: How do teachers in urban middle schools regard the role of student voice in their classrooms?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. What does your classroom look like on a daily basis?2. What does the term “student voice” mean to you?3. What does “student voice” look, sound, and feel like in your classroom or school?
<p>RQ 2: What role does student voice play in their classroom management?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">4. Can you describe your approach to classroom management to me?5. Do you believe student behavior needs to be managed? Why or why not?6. What is the role of student voice in your classroom management?7. Do you feel students should have a say in how teachers manage classroom behavior? Why or why not?8. Are there opportunities in your classroom for students to provide you with feedback on your classroom management? Why or Why not?
<p>RQ 3: What role, if any, might student voice have in disrupting the overuse of suspensions and expulsions in urban middle schools?</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none">9. What are your thoughts on suspensions? In your experience, has suspension proven to be an effective method for remedying student behavior?10. What are your thoughts on utilizing student voice as a viable strategy to promote alternatives to suspension?

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