

Middle School Administrators' Perspectives of Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports: A Case Study

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Abstract: The problem is that African American students are more than twice as likely to be involved in either in-school or out-of-school suspension compared to white students, resulting in these students missing more classroom instruction and falling further behind academically (Jackson, 2023). The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore the fidelity of equity-focused Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SPBIS) implementation and its impacts on academic achievement and narrow discipline gaps for minority students in middle schools, as perceived by middle school administrators. The study explored two central research questions: (1) How do middle school administrators perceive the influence of SPBIS on the academic achievement of minority students? (2) How do middle school administrators describe the influence of SPBIS implementation on disciplinary disparities among minority students? This study utilized a qualitative case study design and included six middle school administrators from the southeastern region of the United States. Data were collected through individual interviews, focus group, and document analysis of academic and disciplinary data. Thematic analysis revealed four distinct findings: The importance of strategic training and staff buy-in, SPBIS's perceived contribution to academic gains, mixed results in behavioral outcomes by subgroup, and challenges related to fidelity, particularly regarding Tier 3 implementation. The study offers practical recommendations for school leaders and educators seeking to use SPBIS to reduce discipline disparities and improve academic achievement for historically underserved students. Implications include the need for sustained professional development, data-informed decision-making, and targeted support for schools in high-poverty communities.

Keywords: Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SPBIS), Middle School Administrators, Fidelity, Discipline Disparities, Academic Achievement Gaps, Equity in Education.

INTRODUCTION

Persistent disparities in school disciplinary practices have long contributed to inequitable educational outcomes for minority students, specifically African American students. Research shows that minority students are disproportionately subjected to disciplinary actions compared to white students, despite little evidence suggesting they commit more infractions (Curran & Finch, 2021). Traditionally, schools lack practical preventative discipline training, resulting in a heavy reliance on punitive and reactive disciplinary measures (Bastable *et al.*, 2021). These practices have contributed to the school-to-prison pipeline because students subjected to exclusionary discipline are disproportionately represented in the juvenile justice system (Hemez *et al.*, 2021).

As a response to the long-standing discipline gap, schools are adopting evidence-based frameworks like Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SPBIS). SPBIS is a multitiered framework designed to prevent undesired behaviors from students (Sugai & Horner, 2020). Research has shown that schools that have implemented SPBIS with fidelity report a decrease in exclusionary discipline while positively influencing academic achievement over time

(Corbin *et al.*, 2022; Elrod *et al.*, 2022). While studies suggest emerging evidence of SPBIS positively improving student academics (Estrapala *et al.*, 2021), much of the existing literature focuses on quantitative outcomes. This leaves a gap in qualitative insight regarding administrators' perceptions of the effects of implementing SPBIS with fidelity on minority students' academic achievement and discipline outcomes.

SPBIS operates through three tiers: Tier 1 provides universal support, establishing schoolwide expectations and proactive strategies for all students; Tier 2 provides target interventions for students who require additional behavioral support beyond Tier 1; and Tier 3 offers intensive, individualized interventions for students to support their behavioral and academic needs. Reducing discipline disparities and promoting equitable academic outcomes is achieved by implementing all three tiers effectively and consistently. Establishing a strong SPBIS framework also improves overall school culture, emphasizing the role of school administrators in creating initiatives that promote equity and preventative measures over punitive measures (Scaletta & Hughes, 2022).

Administrators play a pivotal role in the successful implementation of SPBIS. Administrators are responsible for setting the vision, modeling best practices, and supporting teachers through continuous professional development (Fallon *et al.*, 2022).

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Literature that supports consistent implementation of SPBIS can improve academics and discipline and enhance the overall organizational health of the school (Gage *et al.*, 2020). Despite these benefits, limited research explores the perspectives of middle school administrators' implementation of SPBIS, particularly in diverse school settings. Although existing studies support the idea that SPBIS can reduce racial disparities in discipline, they do not sufficiently examine how administrators' attitudes, decisions, and practices affect these outcomes over time.

Addressing racial disparities in school discipline is both a moral and theoretical imperative that is linked to broader goals of educational equity and social justice. Exclusionary discipline practices have resulted in white students being less likely to be expelled from school than minority students. As schools strive to promote equitable opportunities for all students, understanding the role of leadership in implementing reform efforts is essential. Administrators' perspectives are critical because their leadership influences the use of SPBIS with fidelity. It is also their responsibility to ensure that all students receive fair and equitable treatment. Therefore, understanding how administrators implement and utilize these three tiers is essential. This study seeks to address the gap in literature by exploring the experiences and perspectives of middle school administrators in implementing SPBIS with fidelity to reduce disciplinary disparities among minority students.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative exploratory case study was to explore the fidelity of equity-focused Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SPBIS) implementation and its impacts on academic achievement and narrow discipline gaps for minority students in middle schools, as perceived by middle school administrators. Specifically, this study examined how administrators perceived the use of SPBIS to address disciplinary gaps and academic achievement outcomes among minority students.

To achieve this purpose, data were collected through interviews and a focus group with six middle school administrators located in the southeastern United States. Each participant participated in a focus group or an individual interview using open-ended questions designed to elicit detailed insights regarding SPBIS implementation and their perspectives on the impact on minority students' outcomes. While Sim *et al.*

(2018) suggested sampling approximately 10 administrators would suffice for saturation, this study reached thematic saturation with a sample of six administrators due to the depth and richness of participant responses.

Results from this research aimed to support middle school administrators who either currently implement SPBIS or who have considered initiating an intervention to reduce discipline and academic achievement gaps among minority students. The qualitative study solely focused on the perspectives of middle school administrators who use SPBIS with fidelity at their schools, with the goal of contributing to a deeper understanding of how SPBIS practices influence equity in disciplinary outcomes and academic achievement among minority students.

Problem Statement

The problem is that African American students are more than twice as likely to be involved in either in-school or out-of-school suspension compared to white students, resulting in these students missing more classroom instruction and falling further behind academically (Jackson, 2023). Deltour (2022) stated that additional research is necessary to understand the demographic background of students and the implementation of Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SPBIS) in middle schools. McIntosh *et al.* (2021, p. 359) state that future research is needed to answer, "a key research question that remains is whether equity-focused PBIS implementation can experimentally improve outcomes and narrow discipline gaps for students of color in all schools."

Existing studies have been limited to single middle school settings, which may confound the effects of SPBIS with specific implementing schools (Deltour *et al.*, 2022, p. 1634). Therefore, additional research is necessary to gain a more comprehensive understanding of administrators' perspectives on SPBIS in middle schools with a diverse population. This will minimize the risk of attributing program effects to specific school environments alone.

Schoolwide Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (SPBIS) aim to prevent undesirable behavior and provide effective intervention (Lee & Gage, 2020). Promising research associates SPBIS with reduced discipline incidents and improved academic gains, with a growing awareness of the potential to address

discipline disparities among African Americans. However, further studies are needed to examine the effectiveness of SPBIS adaptations in various school environments from a middle school perspective.

SPBIS consists of three tiers ranging from schoolwide expectations to personalized behavior plans (Bastable *et al.*, 2021). This research will explore how middle school administrators use all tiers with fidelity and how adaptations of SPBIS in diverse school environments affect minority students (McIntosh *et al.*, 2021). Understanding how administrators use SPBIS in varying school environments is essential, as their support is vital for the success of schoolwide initiatives. Thus, exploring SPBIS implementation from administrators' perspectives will provide valuable insight and outline practical steps for broader implementation.

Research Questions

RQ1: How do middle school administrators perceive the influence of SPBIS on the academic achievement of minority students?

RQ2: How do middle school administrators describe the influence of SPBIS implementation on disciplinary disparities among minority students?

Significance of Study

This study aimed to benefit middle school administrators by providing insight from their colleagues on how Schoolwide Behavior Interventions and Support (SPBIS) influence discipline and academic achievement gaps. African American students are 3.8 times more likely to be involved in either in-school or out-of-school suspension compared to white students, resulting in substantial disciplinary and achievement gaps (Jackson, 2023). These gaps start as early as prekindergarten and increase as students progress through school (Gopalan & Nelson, 2019). This issue has become a significant stakeholder concern (Gage *et al.*, 2020).

School administrators must ensure that all students receive fair and equitable treatment. Behavioral programs like SPBIS have proven to reduce unequal treatment among races by fostering cultural acceptance and reducing disciplinary actions. If implemented correctly, SPBIS may reduce office referrals, suspensions, or expulsions for minority students (Payno-Simmons, 2021; Gage *et al.*, 2020). Exploring the perspectives of middle school

administrators who use SPBIS added to the literature by offering schools with similar demographics best practices that can be adopted.

This study differed from past research, which focused on elementary schools. Although school discipline has evolved in the last twenty years, African American students continue to experience disciplinary disparities; they remain 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than their white peers (Payno-Simmons, 2021). While research documents the benefits of implementing schoolwide positive behavior intervention, there are research gaps on implementation in middle schools. Specifically, there is limited qualitative research on how middle school administrators' use of SPBIS with fidelity minimizes disciplinary and academic achievement gaps for African Americans (Deltour *et al.*, 2022). This study contributed to the field by addressing this gap and providing insights into how SPBIS is applied in middle schools from the perspectives of middle school administrators.

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Social Justice Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT). Each framework collectively informed the exploration of middle school administrators' perspectives of SPBIS implementation, particularly in relation to promoting equity in disciplinary practices and academic achievement among African American students. These theoretical frameworks guided the study's design, data collection, and analysis by ensuring that the research focused on systemic inequities, administrators' efforts to promote inclusive environments, and strategies for promoting equitable educational outcomes.

Social Justice Theory

Social Justice Theory emphasizes diversity and equity access as key principles of a just society (Rawls, 1971). Relating to education, this theory advocates systems that promote equality and dignity for all students rather than prioritizing academic excellence at the expense of marginalized groups (North, 2006; Hanley, 2021). This perspective challenges practices that unintentionally promote the privilege of a specific population while disadvantaging others. In relation to the study, Social Justice Theory provides an understanding of SPBIS because this approach ensures that all students, regardless of background, are treated with dignity and have equitable

opportunities to succeed. SPBIS emphasizes preventative, positive behavioral programs rather than punitive measures, which, with social justice principles, seek to dismantle exclusionary practices and foster equitable educational opportunities for minority students. The theory informed the creation of interview protocols by ensuring that the questions examined administrators' use of SPBIS to promote fairness and equitable access.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) outlines a critical examination of how race and racism are embedded within social institutions, including schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). The permanence of racism, counter-storytelling, and critique of liberalism are foundational concepts of CRT that informed the analytical lens of this study. CRT posits that systemic inequities like the disproportionate disciplinary actions against African American students are not aberrations but rather manifestations of enduring racial hierarchies. In an educational context, Critical Race Theory critiques traditional disciplinary policies that promote the disproportionate disciplinary actions faced by minority students (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Joseph *et al.*, 2021). SPBIS can be used to address these disparities by promoting equitable treatment and reducing bias in disciplinary practices. Through CRT, this study aimed to examine how administrators recognize and dismantle systemic racial barriers in schools' discipline systems. CRT also guided the thematic analysis by highlighting patterns of inequity narrated by administrators and their efforts to create racially just school climates.

Integration of Theories

Both Social Justice Theory and Critical Race Theory (CRT) provide a comprehensive framework for analyzing the implementation of SPBIS in middle schools. Social Justice Theory emphasizes the importance of all students receiving fair, equitable, and supportive treatment within the educational system. CRT critically examined systemic biases that disproportionately affect minority students in discipline and academics. These theories guided the selection of participants by targeting administrators actively engaged in SPBIS initiatives, shaped the design of interview and focus group questions by focusing on equity and systemic barriers, and guided data analysis. Combining the theoretical perspectives aided in the study, offering a comprehensive analysis of how SPBIS

can be used to promote equitable disciplinary practices and improve academic achievement for African American students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perspectives on Student Bias

Crawford (2000) argued that racial bias in schools placed institutions at risk of legal action due to violations of federal civil rights laws, notably Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which prohibits racial discrimination in federally funded educational programs. Although additional rulings like *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) declared school segregation unconstitutional, there continued to be barriers to equity. Research confirms that black students are suspended or expelled at disproportionately higher rates than their white peers, despite similar behavior patterns (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2021; Jackson, 2023). A total of 5.3 million disciplinary cases were recorded in the 2017-2018 school year, with nearly all those recorded involving in-school or out-of-school suspensions. While corporal punishment accounts for approximately 1% of all cases, these data reveal continuous inequities across racial and ethnic subgroups.

Implicit bias plays a critical role in shaping how educators perceive and respond to student behavior, which often results in the detriment of minority students. Historically majority of American educators are white females, which has contributed to higher discipline rates for students of color due to preconceived bias and cultural misunderstandings (Johnson *et al.*, 2018). Teachers' assumptions, though often unintentional, can hinder students' success and influence access to opportunities (Jackson, 2023). These assumptions affect academic achievement, self-esteem, and discipline referrals. According to Crawford (2000) and Gray *et al.* (2023), these assumptions places schools at legal risk of violating civil rights protections. While *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) established the legal foundation for educational equity, structural inequities continue to have a negative impact on the discipline and academic achievement of minority students.

Curriculum bias is another manifestation of student bias. Many school curricula lack diverse histories, perspectives, and contributions, which leads to the erasure of minority voices and experiences (Miller, 2023). When students do not see themselves

represented, it can result in disengagement, low self-worth, and lack of motivation. Persistent disparities in access to gifted education further highlight systemic inequities. For over two decades, black students only accounted for 7.3% of students identified for Gifted and Talented Education despite accounting for a large percentage of the student population (Ford *et al.*, 2023). These patterns point to the long-term consequences of bias across instructional and behavioral outcomes in educational institutions.

Discipline and Academic Achievement Gaps Trends

Discipline disparities continue to widen the academic achievement gap between African American and white students. Current studies agree that minority students are over three percent more likely to receive disciplinary action, particularly suspensions and expulsions (Jackson, 2023; Keyes, 2022). These exclusionary practices reduce instructional time and are linked to increased dropout rates. The connection between discipline and achievement has become a discussion, specifically its impact on the school-to-prison pipeline.

Instructional gaps in foundational skills, such as those found in reading, are critical areas of instruction that experience achievement gaps, which further contribute to the disparities in student achievement. Klien *et al.* (2022) found that missed academic hours lead to increased dropout rates. South Carolina's Act 284, Read to Succeed, reinforces the importance of reading proficiency by retaining students who score the lowest reading achievement level (South Carolina Department of Education, 2023). Research suggests that improving reading proficiency can lead to a decrease in disruptive behaviors. Bachore (2022) emphasized reading as a building block that affects the personal independence of minority students, while Keyes (2022) linked early literacy to the efforts to dismantle the prison pipeline. These findings highlight the need for integrated behavior and academic interventions that are proactive in addressing the causes of disparities.

The Administrator's Role in Promoting Equity

School administrators play a vital role in fostering equitable learning environments. African American students are 39% more likely to receive out-of-school suspension yet only represent 15% of the K-12 population (Williams *et al.*, 2023). Curran (2019) highlighted that such disparities require leadership to

reverse. Administrators are responsible for implementing reforms that ensure students are treated fairly and supported academically and behaviorally.

The success of interventions like Schoolwide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SPBIS) heavily depends on administrators' support. Scaletta and Hughes (2022) found that SPBIS works best when implemented schoolwide and constantly monitored. Williams *et al.* (2023) reported that they spend a considerable amount of time monitoring discipline, often limiting their time to focus on academics. By adopting proactive frameworks and supporting teachers through professional development, administrators can reduce disciplinary disruptions and create environments conducive to learning. Providing professional development opportunities ensures that the staff have the support of administrators. Administrators must allocate time for resources, training, modeling, and monitoring progress. When administrators are actively involved in creating equitable school cultures, teachers are more likely to implement with fidelity (Macy & Wheeler, 2021).

Current SPBIS Research and Implementation

SPBIS is a multitiered intervention system designed to promote positive student behavior and reduce exclusionary disciplinary practices. Research indicates that minority students are more likely to receive disciplinary actions than white students, despite no evidence suggesting they are more likely to have an infraction (Curran, 2020). SPBIS addresses this by encouraging preventative positive behavioral intervention. Studies have linked improved academic achievement and disciplinary gaps for minority students to the fidelity implementation of SPBIS (Macy & Wheeler, 2021; Bastable *et al.*, 2021).

Despite promising outcomes, challenges continue to persist. SPBIS' implementation fidelity is often compromised by limited staff buy-in, lack of planning, or inadequate administrative support. Macy and Wheeler (2021) identify three characteristics of staff buy-in: inclusive planning, consistent professional behavior aligned with the intervention, and complete follow-through of the process. Both time constraints and limited resources further complicate the fidelity of SPBIS. Robert (2020) recommends that schools develop action plans to support administrators and staff through the implementation process. Ensuring that all stakeholders are appropriately trained and supported increases the likelihood of successful outcomes.

Tiered SPBIS Interventions: Tier 1, Tier 2, and Tier 3

Tier 1

Tier 1 serves as the foundational support that is implemented schoolwide. This tier focuses on developing behavioral expectations, teaching them to all students, acknowledging appropriate behaviors, developing and implementing procedures for addressing problem behaviors, and collecting and reviewing data to monitor the effectiveness of implementation (Bruhn *et al.*, 2022; Grasely-Boy *et al.*, 2022). Studies have shown that Tier 1 is effective for 80% of students when implemented with fidelity (Center on PBIS, 2025). Bruhn *et al.* (2022) also note the need for more research to explore Tier 1's impacts on academic achievement.

Tier 2

Students who are unresponsive to Tier 1 move to Tier 2 (Bruhn *et al.*, 2022). This tier provides small-group interventions. Social skills and behavioral modification strategies are programs offered in Tier 2 (Nese *et al.*, 2023). In secondary schools, Tier 2 has the potential to reduce suspensions and negative interactions with legal systems. Kelly *et al.* (2023) caution against prematurely advancing students to Tier 2 prior to adopting appropriate Tier 1 support. Approximately 15% of students benefit from Tier 2 intervention when implemented with fidelity.

Tier 3

Tier 3 is reserved for students with the most intensive needs, which represents about 5% of the school's population. This tier incorporates individualized interventions designed by a multidisciplinary team that includes administrators, behavioral coaches, teachers, and families (Center on PBIS, 2025). Bruhn *et al.* (2022) emphasize that schools should fully commit to implementing both Tier 1 and Tier 2 before referring a student to Tier 3. Key concepts of Tier 3 include functional behavior assessments, wraparound services, person-centered planning, and cultural and contextual fit. These concepts are crucial for ensuring that interventions address students and reduce long-term disparities.

METHODOLOGY

The study used qualitative methods to explore administrative perspectives on how SPBIS influences outcomes for minority students, which cannot be

adequately captured through quantitative data. Mack *et al.* (2005) emphasized that qualitative inquiry is well-suited for capturing context-specific meaning, which is appropriate for educational studies involving equity and implementation fidelity. Specifically, this study utilized interviews, focus groups, and data documentation reviews to allow for data triangulation. These methods aligned with the exploratory case study approach by examining how SPBIS is understood and applied in practice.

Furthermore, this study employed an exploratory case study design, which is most appropriate when outcomes are unclear and existing literature is limited (Hussein, 2023). Exploratory case studies are used to investigate questions of "how" and "why," particularly when boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly identified (Yin, 2018). According to Hussein (2023), case studies can be categorized as descriptive, descriptive, exploratory, or explanatory, each serving different research objectives. The descriptive case study describes relationships between variables, while an explanatory one is used to test theoretical propositions alone. Exploratory is used in case studies when the intent is to generate understanding when prior knowledge is insufficient. This study fits the exploratory model, as it investigates the underexplored intersection of SPBIS fidelity and racial equity through administrator perspectives. Previous research has not extensively examined how SPBIS is interpreted, adapted, and led in equity-focused ways at the middle school level.

This design was selected because the study sought to explore the lived experiences of participants along with their beliefs and perceptions, which is a complex phenomenon that could not be adequately researched through quantitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Qualitative methodology aligned with the research problem, which addressed the disproportionate academic achievement and disciplinary gaps faced among minority students. Additionally, the study aligned with the purpose of the study, which sought to understand how middle school administrators perceived the fidelity and implementation of SPBIS. Qualitative research allowed for a rich, detailed understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives rather than relying on numerical data alone (Mack *et al.*, 2005). Qualitative inquiry was necessary to answer the research questions about how administrators experienced and supported equity-focused discipline reform.

Participant Selection

Purposeful sampling was used to recruit participants who could provide valuable, relevant insights into the research problem. According to Creswell and Creswell (2018), purposeful sampling fostered a deeper understanding of the central phenomenon by selecting individuals with direct experience. The researcher identified districts that have implemented SPBIS at the middle school level, focusing on schools with diverse student demographics and a minimum of two years of SPBIS implementation.

Participants were chosen based on their administrative roles, experience with student discipline, and academic achievement. Four administrators were selected for interviews to provide in-depth, individualized perspectives on their experiences regarding the influence of SPBIS on minority students' academic and disciplinary achievement. Two additional administrators were included in a focus group to foster discussion and identify common themes or differences in practices. The combination of interviews and focus groups allowed for both personal narratives and vibrant interaction that could reveal broader trends.

Procedures for Recruitment and Participation

The data collection process commenced following IRB approval. Eligibility criteria were established to ensure that participants had the necessary professional expertise and knowledge to inform the study's purpose. Principals were selected based on the following criteria:

- Participants must be over the age of 30;
- Participants must possess a master's degree or higher in administration leadership;
- Participants must have three or more years of experience as a middle school administrator;
- Administrators must be working in a middle school (sixth through eighth); and
- Participants' schools must implement all three tiers of the SPBIS program.

Participants were drawn from schools located in a district located in the southeastern United States.

A recruitment email was sent to 21 potential participants, providing an overview of the case study. Six administrators responded by email or text, expressing interest in the study. Each was sent a letter

of consent to sign electronically. All participants agreed to participate in either an interview or a focus group. They were informed that they could opt out at any time. Participants were assigned pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality.

Data Collection

Data collection included interviews, focus groups, and archived data analysis. After signing consent forms, four administrators were randomly selected for interviews. Scheduling was coordinated via email, allowing participants to select a time and preference for either in-person interviews or via Microsoft Teams. Selected participants were interviewed using the open-ended interview questions and recorded with their consent. Transcriptions were sent to participants for members to check and ensure accuracy, and the recording was deleted once transcripts were approved.

Two administrators participated in a focus group using Microsoft Teams. The session was recorded and transcribed in real-time using the meeting platform transcription feature. The transcript was analyzed and reviewed several times to ensure accuracy and sent to participants for member checking. Once participants confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts, the recordings were later destroyed.

The use of both individual interviews and focus groups was intentional to enhance methodological rigor. Individual interviews allowed for a deep exploration of each participant's experiences and perspectives. While the focus group encouraged interactive dialogue, enabling participants to build on each other's insights. This dual approach led to a comprehensive understanding of discipline referral practices and their implications.

Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data were collected from participants and the state's Department of Education website. Emails were sent to participants asking for summarized documentation of discipline referrals for minority students. Additionally, academic data for reading and math test scores from the 2023-2024 school year for participating in schools were collected from the state's Department of Education website. Data retrieved from the state's Department of Education was anonymized by using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. The researcher requested that all emails containing sensitive information be sent with encryption to protect the school's privacy. These documents are stored

securely in a password-protected and encrypted file that is only accessible to the researcher. After three years of post-study, those sensitive files will be permanently deleted in accordance with data retention policies.

Data Analysis

Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed using a methodical approach. Transcripts were reviewed multiple times for accuracy and were sent to participants for member checking. Once verified, the audio recording was permanently destroyed. The initial phase of data analysis involved reviewing and examining the data to develop conceptual categories that aligned with the research questions. This step included examining interview transcripts, notes, and documents to identify the initial patterns and themes.

Next, a detailed reading of the data was followed to refine and verify the initial categories. During this phase, coding commenced using open, axial, and selective coding techniques to identify common themes. The coding scheme was adjusted throughout the process as new patterns and insights emerged. The findings were systematically documented, highlighting key themes and patterns. Qualitative software and AI tools, such as AI-assisted software (Dedoose and ChatGPT) were used exclusively for organizational and data management purposes. The authors maintained complete control over all analyses, interpretations, and written content to ensure compliance with ethical and academic integrity standards. Adding ethical clarification, facilitated data organization and presentation.

The last step in the analysis process included synthesizing interpretation and meaningful insights. Themes were analyzed in relation to the research questions and theoretical framework, ensuring validity through member checking and triangulation.

Data analysis aligned with the study's research questions. Interviews and focus groups were the primary data sources, while data documents were used as secondary data. Data collection and analysis were simultaneously conducted to ensure coherence and consistency. Notes and memos, including nonverbal cues, were annotated and analyzed to identify significant ideas and patterns.

Themes were developed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how administrators

implement SPBIS to reduce discipline and academic achievement gaps among minority students. Each theme was introduced with a summary before presenting participant quotes. The coding process was iterative, allowing for adjustments and modifications as themes became more defined. Table 5 presents an outline of the key themes identified in the study.

Once themes were discovered, a coherent narrative was constructed to reflect participants' perspectives on the effectiveness of SPBIS. Findings were validated through triangulation, member checking, and comparison with existing literature to reinforce credibility (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This systematic approach identified key themes that provide credible and meaningful insights into the impact of SPBIS on minority students' academic achievement and disciplinary outcomes. Furthermore, by incorporating methodological rigor, maintaining alignment with research questions, and maintaining consistency in theme development, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the role of SPBIS in educational leadership.

RESULTS

The section presents the findings of the study, derived from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Data analysis was conducted using thematic analysis, following established qualitative research methodologies. Four themes emerged, which are outlined in Table 5 and discussed in detail. Participant quotes and document references are presented to support interpretations and conclusions.

Theme 1: Effective SPBIS Implementation Requires Strategic Training and Staff Buy-in

The first theme identified outlines key factors and the importance of fully implementing SPBIS. Successful implementation of SPBIS requires strategic planning and buy-in from faculty and staff. In addition, several administrators agreed that sustained professional development is necessary to train teachers properly. Additionally, administrators emphasized that SPBIS is the most effective when all staff members understand and adhere to the framework. At the beginning of the year, all teachers receive intensive SPBIS training, which is a crucial component.

Administrators acknowledged that professional development is a crucial factor in SPBIS's success. Leadership hosts SPBIS-focused training at the

beginning of the school year, followed by periodic sessions based on behavioral trends throughout the school year. Administrators noted that they consider school data when planning professional development throughout the school year. P1 and P4 stated that, in addition to the initial training provided at the beginning of the year, administrators conduct bi-monthly workshops to reinforce best practices. P2 shared, "The first Wednesday of the month is House Fellowship... it's like a booster shot for SPBIS." These findings align with previous research that suggest schoolwide behavior interventions are most effective when accompanied by strategic professional development along with administrative support (Sugai & Horner, 2020; Terrell & Cho, 2023). However, discrepancies in training availability among different schools suggest a need for standardized administrator training to ensure equitable implementation.

Administrators also discussed strategies for the implementation of all three tiers during the workshop. P3 is in its second year of implementation and stated that its school has committed to incorporating more explicit training on SPBIS. P1 referenced the lack of Tier 3 resources. "There wasn't a lot of information about how to [do Tier 3, or what Tier 3 looks like as far as interventions? And so that's been a struggle for us coming up with Tier 3 interventions." As a result, the school created a committee of teachers that is dedicated to finding resources for Tier 3 intervention.

The data from the study also supports the use of Social Learning Theory for understanding how SPBIS influences student behavior. The theory states that individuals learn through observations and imitation; this directly connects to administrator and teacher modeling of expected behaviors (Bandura, 1977; Crewdson *et al.*, 2023; Bryant & Wilson, 2020). Administrators who actively reinforce positive behaviors and reward student successes are more likely to replicate these behaviors. As a result, professional development ensures that educators are using SPBIS consistently by equipping them with the necessary skills. SPBIS reinforces the core value of Social Learning Theory by observing, practicing, and rewarding behavioral norms in a social setting.

Theme 2: SPBIS Implementation Contributes to Academic Achievement Gains among Minority Students

Understanding the influence of SPBIS on minority students' academic achievement is the second theme that emerged from the study. Operant conditioning

provides insight into how SPBIS indirectly supports academic achievement. Schools are reinforcing positive behaviors by creating environments that are encouraging, safe, and predictable (Skinner, 1953; Schlinger, 2021). Students are more likely to overcome academic challenges when they experience positive feedback for meeting expectations. Furthermore, SPBIS promotes frequent feedback, which is a key component of Operant Conditioning Theory. Applying these behavioral patterns and reinforcing them with clear consequences and recognition systems create a learning environment conducive to academic achievement.

This theme is tied to Social Justice Theory. This theory advocates equitable access to quality instruction and educational opportunities. Consistently implementing SPBIS proactively addresses behaviors that may constitute barriers to minority students' academic achievement (Hanley, 2021; Oxley & Holden, 2021; Kelly *et al.*, 2023). Schools that have implemented SPBIS with fidelity were more likely to engage minority students in a more meaningful way, reducing the chances of them being involved in punitive discipline. However, the study revealed inequalities in training, funding, and access to resources across schools. These challenges reveal ongoing issues that undermine the theory's full realization. Addressing these disparities requires a district-wide commitment to the advancement of equitable support.

There were different opinions that SPBIS has a direct impact on the academic achievement of minority students. In schools with a low percentage of students living in poverty, administrators credit the implementation of SPBIS with closing the academic achievement gap among minority students and their white peers. For example, P1 highlighted the impact of schoolwide celebrations on academic motivation, stating, "We had an increase when we celebrated our honor roll for the first and second quarters. We did see an increase in that; we felt that was directly one of the aspects [that was directly related to PBIS." These celebrations were believed to boost student engagement and performance using a positive reinforcement strategy. However, this perception is contrasted by the study's Data Checklist, which revealed the highest disparities among African American and white students. During the 2023-2024 school year, only 18% of African American students met or exceeded state standards in math compared to 47% of their white peers. These results suggest that while SPBIS may support student motivation,

administrators may want to examine external factors like rigor, curriculum alignment, and access to academic resources to determine if SPBIS solely influences minority students' academics.

Other schools with a more diverse population expressed similar experiences. P6 shared a positive correlation at their school. P6 stressed the importance of fidelity in implementing all tiers and as a result, it has contributed to minority students' academic success at SPBIS. The participant recalled when the school did not prioritize SPBIS and the impact it had on minority students' academic achievement. P6 added, "It put all students on the same playing field because they did know what they expected."

The participant also explained that the district had a change in leadership, so there were some differences in opinions on what behavior initiatives are best practices. P6 stated that the school plans to continue using SPBIS with fidelity because of its proven academic success compared to schools that have used it inconsistently. Supporting data from the study's Data Checklist reinforces P6's particularly, in reading. However, math shows inconsistent results.

Some differences in opinions have been shared among participants, which are noted. Schools that have a higher percentage of students in poverty struggled to see a direct impact on academic achievement, with growth being inconsistent across grade levels. Notably, the study's Data Checklist revealed that the school with the highest percentage of African American students experienced a 22% achievement gap in reading and 24% in math. P2 shared, "We are not seeing the growth that we would like to see across the board. We have pockets, so to speak. In particular, 7th grade ELA is knocking it out of the park." P2 further explains that the administration team is trying to understand why inconsistencies exist and what the outside influences are. P6 also shared that although SPBIS aids with establishing clear behavior expectations that result in better focus and engagement in learning, they are not seeing an impact on one subgroup over another. These findings suggest that while SPBIS may positively influence school climate, additional studies may be needed to address the academic needs of students in high-poverty environments.

Theme 3: SPBIS Improves behavioral Outcomes, though Results Vary by Subgroup

Participants shared similar experiences when describing the impacts of SPBIS on students' discipline. There was a consensus that behavior

improved among African American students when SPBIS was implemented with fidelity. However, some participants shared mixed reviews of SPBIS has a direct impact on minority students' discipline compared to white students. P2 shared that initially, she did not feel that SPBIS was a contributing factor in reducing unwanted behavior. However, after reviewing her school's data, she noticed a trend that proved that SPBIS is working to close disciplinary gaps. When the school was migrating towards another behavior intervention, disciplinary gaps began to grow. The school committed to doing a restart, and P5 noted, "We've had a decrease in behavior referrals. And so, we do feel really good about the direction in which our behavior is moving." P1 agreed that SPBIS is helpful with reducing negative behavior but noted that her disciplinary records did not indicate one population over the other benefiting from SPBIS from a disciplinary perspective.

These findings are connected to Critical Race Theory (CRT). CRT states that racism is embedded in institutional institutions and that disciplinary disparities are not random but systemic. CRT is supported through SPBIS due to administrators reporting improved equity through effective interventions that directly address systemic bias (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Joseph *et al.*, 2021; Williams *et al.*, 2023). However, administrators expressed concern that they may have teachers who are not fully invested in SPBIS and may resort to punitive measures, resulting in inequitable disciplinary practices. This supports the CRT argument that colorblind implementation of policies without explicitly addressing bias will fail to dismantle inequity. Therefore, schools must integrate anti-bias training and culturally responsive training in conjunction with SPBIS to ensure a successful outcome.

Each school agreed that creating incentives that motivate students is a vital component of SPBIS. Each school has committed to motivating students in different ways. For instance, P3 focused on how his school integrates competition and SPBIS. He stated, "Competition seems to be the key to motivating students to perform better academically and behaviorally." P5 shared that guidance counselors at her school motivate students by leading monthly themes. P5 stated, "Guidance counselors facilitate a 'trait of the month' and identify students and teachers who exemplify these traits." These approaches reflect a commitment made by administrators to tailoring SPBIS based on school culture and the needs of students. The effectiveness of these efforts is supported by the

study's Data Checklist, which revealed that African American students receive in-school and out-of-school suspensions at rates comparable to their white peers. This suggests that when SPBIS is implemented utilizing intentional strategies, it can produce more equitable outcomes.

Theme 4: Fidelity Challenges Include Teacher Resistance and Inadequate Tier 3 Resources

All participants noted that there are many challenges with implementing SPBIS with fidelity. Furthermore, they also expressed that these challenges impact the success of the program. Five out of six participants mentioned the lack of formal training for administrators. P1 noted that she has had to rely on finding resources that are not always readily available. On the contrary, P4 noted that she has had extensive training on SPBIS and helped the district establish SPBIS in multiple schools. P4 also noted that she received formal training as a teacher, coach, and administrator.

Teacher buy-in was another challenge shared by participants. Collectively, administrators agreed that if students are not invested in SPBIS, they will be less likely to succeed. P5 and P6 coincide in that they have encountered teachers who are reluctant to implement SPBIS with fidelity and prefer traditional behavior management initiatives. P2 stated, "The challenge is shifting teacher mindsets towards a supportive rather than punitive behavior approach." P2 explained that she regularly meets with her administrative team to develop coaching to address this challenge.

From a Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective, the barriers revealed by administrators pose a hindrance to implementing SPBIS with fidelity. CRT asserts that racism is embedded in policies and training that disproportionately affect minority students (Crenshaw *et al.*, 1995; Joseph *et al.*, 2021; Byrd, 2020). When schools fail to provide culturally responsive interventions or neglect to eradicate racial disciplinary trends, they risk reinforcing the same inequities SPBIS seeks to abolish. Administrators in this study acknowledge and agree that examining implicit bias, although a difficult topic, is necessary and remains an abstract goal rather than an actionable practice. Therefore, fidelity must include procedural consistency and a commitment to social justice.

CONCLUSION

The objective of the study was to explore the fidelity of equity-focused Schoolwide Positive Behavior

Interventions and Supports (SPBIS) implementation and its impact on academic achievement and narrow discipline gaps for minority students in middle schools, as perceived by middle school administrators. The research questions driving the study influenced how SPBIS implementation improves disciplinary and academic achievement for minority students in middle schools. Four themes were derived from the interviews and a focus group of middle school administrators. Theme 1 was focused on the implementation of SPBIS. Theme 2 described the influence of SPBIS on minority students' academic achievement. Theme 3 described the influence of SPBIS on minority students' discipline. Theme 4 discussed the challenges of implementing SPBIS with fidelity.

Leaders can use results from the study to mitigate the issues underlying SPBIS implementation and effectiveness. Aligned with Research Question 2, how SPBIS impacts disciplinary disparities among minority students, leaders are encouraged to strengthen leadership and accountability structures. Administrators should set clear expectations for SPBIS and continuously monitor. One way to achieve this is by assigning an SPBIS coordinator or leadership team to oversee implementation across all tiers and ensure alignment with schoolwide behavioral goals (Gage *et al.*, 2020).

Next, schools should also integrate restorative justice practices to foster inclusive environments that emphasize accountability, empathy, and relationship-building. Restorative justice practices should complement SPBIS and aid in the goal of reducing academic and disciplinary achievement gaps. Training in conflict resolution and peer mediation can help teachers manage behavior while supporting students' social-emotional development (Macy & Wheeler, 2021). These practices are particularly effective when aligned with Tier 2 and Tier 3 supports.

Lastly, school leaders should guide teachers to implement SPBIS with fidelity by participating in professional learning communities (PLCs). Sharing best practices and engaging in cooperative reflection can enhance implementation, improve fidelity, and promote innovation in addressing student behavior and equity concerns, particularly for African American students (Bastable *et al.*, 2021).

Although research was conducted using a smaller sample size, the results of the study can be utilized to promote equitable outcomes through SPBIS.

Recommendations for both leaders and practitioners were made based on these findings, alongside suggestions for future research. This study contributes to the growing body of knowledge on equity-centered behavioral interventions. It highlights the importance of fidelity, cultural responsiveness, and leadership commitment in narrowing academic and disciplinary disparities for minority students.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there are no conflict of interest regarding the research, publication, or authorship of this article.

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