Purpose: School leaders are charged with making equitable decisions almost daily, but little about this process is known. Due to research suggesting principal implicit bias, or the stereotypes and attitudes held by individuals unconsciously that may or may not reflect actual preferences, may contribute to discipline gaps, the present study aimed to better understand how principals make discipline decisions and how implicit bias might interfere in these decisions.

Research methods: This qualitative study used in-depth interviews and document analysis with six mid-Atlantic principals to explore their discipline decision-making processes. Constant comparative analysis inclusive of explicit coding and analytical procedures supported the development of an informed grounded theory.

Findings: The data revealed a four-part recursive process of discipline decision-making inclusive of four themes relevant to equity. Principals used communication and data to gather information in a first step driven by relationships, reflected on considerations and policy to develop options in a second step driven by flexibility, selected an outcome in a third step driven by morality, and evaluated their efficacy in the recursive loop driven by experience.

Implications for research and practice: The findings allow for targeted research of the discipline decision-making process and potential consideration of practical interventions and curricular design for principal preparation programs that would allow for greater equity in discipline following office referrals.

1. Introduction

The US racial discipline gap persists with Black students over-represented by as much as 25% and White students under-represented by as much as 17% for exclusionary discipline (Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC), 2016). With reduced instruction time (Losen et al., 2017), academic decline (Morris and Perry, 2016; Rausch and Skiba, 2005), and high school dropout (Marchbanks et al., 2015) linked to exclusionary discipline, disproportionalities serve to perpetuate the racial stratification between Black and White students. Teacher-level contributors to this gap include differences in student expectations (Gerstenson et al., 2016), disproportionate office referrals for students of Color (Skiba et al., 2002), cultural and ethnic collision and collusion (Beachum and McCray, 2011), a lack of culturally responsive practices (Villegas and Lucas, 2002), and others (Howard, 2003; Lindsey et al., 2005). Nonetheless, the discipline gap continues to grow beyond the teacher referral level to that of the administrator with inequitable distribution of discipline severity despite similar behavioral infractions (Gullo and Beachum, 2020).

Implicit bias, or the stereotypes and attitudes held by individuals unconsciously that may or may not reflect actual preferences, additionally contributes to the racial discipline gap. A previous study revealed that school administrators’ levels of racial implicit bias explained a substantial portion of the differences between the severity of subjective discipline outcomes experienced by students based on their perceived race. Administrators who had higher levels of pro-White implicit bias tended to assign students of Color more severe discipline after controlling for socio-economic status and behavioral infraction (Gullo and Beachum, 2020). Practically stated, when people with more unconscious bias against Black students made subjective discipline, Black students experienced harsher forms of discipline than White students. Aside from establishing the potential of including administrators in implicit bias trainings, this finding revealed that implicit bias was influential at some
point(s) in the discipline decision-making process. Unfortunately, not much is known about this process.

1.1. Purpose and research questions

Few studies explore the process of school discipline from a school principal's perspective. With an aim to bridge the gap between research and current school practices, scholars must communicate with school leaders to understand the contextualized practices that occur in schools and how practitioners face the challenges of leading 21st century learning communities. The purpose of this study was to better understand the self-defined process by which school principals and assistant/vice principals made discipline decisions, potentially influenced by implicit biases. The further purpose was to use this understanding to develop an informed grounded theory (see Thornberg, 2012) of the discipline decision-making process and how implicit biases might influence such decisions. In line with this purpose, researchers sought to address the following research questions:

1. How do principals and assistant principals describe the school discipline decision-making process?
2. Where in this process might implicit bias interfere with discipline decisions?

The first research question addresses the need to better understand the process by which school leaders make discipline-specific decisions. An informed grounded theory of this process will not only build on the knowledge of how principals make decisions but provide an understanding of this specific and prominent area of inquiry within educational leadership. With a better understanding of this process, individuals could further study and develop targeted decision-making skills.

While the first research question explores the nuances of the principal decision-making process, the second question reflects an inquiry inspired by the influencing study of principal implicit bias (see Gullo, 2017; Gullo and Beachum, 2020). This hierarchical linear modeling study revealed that principal implicit bias accounted for 89% of the between-principal differences in subjective discipline severity by student race (as determined by perceived racial stereotypicality) after controlling for behavior severity and socio-economic status. Finding such a large effect is uncommon in educational research, which led the researchers to continue work around this topic and with this sample to better understand the process allowing for this finding. As such, the present study sought to both develop a theory of principal discipline decision-making and of how implicit bias might act in different areas of those decisions.

2. Literature review

Development of an informed grounded theory of discipline decision-making requires a theoretical understanding of decision-making and discipline. As such, the literature review begins with a discussion of general decision-making theory as a basis for understanding the core components of such theories followed by a summary of the limited literature regarding discipline-specific decision-making. Subsequently, the literature review transitions to a discussion of equity concerns related to discipline including prescriptive and zero-tolerance discipline. These are contextualized in school policy before transitioning to a primer on implicit bias as it relates to school discipline and equity-seeking efforts.

2.1. Theories of administrative decision-making

While decision-making specific to discipline is not well understood, many administrative theories exist. Thompson (1967), a forefather of administrative decision-making, described decisions as an interplay between preferential consensus and decision-means clarity. Johnson and Kruse equivocated these elements as the technical dimension, or decision-means clarity, and political dimension, or preferential consensus. In this matrix of clarity and consensus lie the major theories of decision-making with rationalistic theory (Edwards, 1954) following a high consensus and high clarity and garbage-can theory (Cohen et al., 1972) following low levels of each. In the middle exist various other theories of decision-making as seen in Table 1 reflective of the more realistic interplay of the political and technical dimensions of administrative decisions. Each theory offers a different approach to decision-making that fits different decision-making situations and needs.

2.2. Theories of decision-making in educational leadership

While each general theory of decision-making provides both strengths and weaknesses, Christopher Hodgkinson (1991) described decision-making in educational leadership as a moral art where a principal's logical decision-making process is unavoidably laden in both facts and values. Hodgkinson explains this as a continuum from translational (willing acceptance) to socio-pragmatic rational (driven by ethical structures such as utilitarianism, pragmatism, humanism, and liberalism) to sub-rational (based on what a principal likes or prefers). Rather than a specific model of how decisions are made, Hodgkinson provides a theory of what is involved in decisions made by educational leaders.

Johnson and Kruse offer a more observable approach to decision-making suggesting three key themes to the effective decision-making process of school leaders: (1) organizational sensemaking akin to a reflective and reflexive decision-making practice, (2) decision-making as a socially constructed process that is influenced by a socio-political environment, and (3) the process of decision-making as both active and dynamic working both recursively and iteratively. Considering these themes in the context of school decision-making reveals the impact of organizational learning, school climate and culture, and experiential learning on the school decision-making process. More specific to discipline, the school learns what methods of discipline are effective for their environment and community. The community and disciplinary climate create a culture, which in turn reflects on the discipline processes available and appropriate in the context. Finally, the school leader learns through experience about the process based on the relationships and outcomes represented.

2.3. Discipline decision-making

Decision-making regarding discipline warrants its own challenges inclusive of school safety, student education, equity, behavior modification, and policy adherence. The decision-maker must ensure the education of all students—innocents, offenders, and victims—remains equitable in a safe and supportive environment while considering how to best modify behavior and attend to policy requirements. While some might assume the student code of conduct determines discipline decisions, research showed that it acts more as guidelines than policy (Kennedy et al., 2017).

Kennedy and colleagues (2017) found that a coexistence in disciplinary goals between development and deterrence reflected outcomes of contradictions, compromises, and emotional work. Principals aimed to use discipline to develop students into model citizens and to deter students from recidivism, which often resulted in inconsistencies. Considering the students as individuals and developing relationships created disciplinary inconsistencies and often violated school codes of conduct but resulted in more instructional and effective discipline. Principals sometimes did not believe in certain forms of punishment and were forced to compromise on values by following the student code of conduct. When paired with academic outcomes, these compromises left principals with feelings of guilt or pride depending on the situation. In this study, Kennedy and colleagues took the weight of disciplinary decision-making placed on school administrators to a level of concern where accountability and structure no longer reflected the individualistic and culturally responsive climate that social justice advocates put forth. This is consistent with findings by Curran and Finch (2020) and to
“colorblind” policy concerns where strict decision-making structures implemented to advance racial equity result in less culturally responsive practices and often decreased equity (Husband, 2016; Kang and Lane, 2010).

### 2.4. Colorblind and prescriptive discipline

While colorblind ideology initially aimed to reduce discrimination against people of Color by ignoring differences (albeit debatable), the actuality of such ideology is in strict juxtaposition to culturally responsive practices where differences are acknowledged and celebrated (Gay, 2010; Wells, 2014). Bonilla-Silva (2014) identified four frames central to what he termed “Colorblind Racism” as follow: (1) abstract liberalism, (2) naturalization, (3) cultural racism, and (4) minimization of racism. Abstract liberalism uses ideas that avoid race to warrant differences while naturalization occurs when a difference is attributed to a natural occurrence. Cultural racism stems from long-standing cultural constructions; minimization deals with reduction of the problem in the given context. Together these frames of colorblind racism begin to highlight the blind (in)justice seen in prescriptive discipline situated in systemic racism by avoiding race, naturalizing and minimizing disproportionalities, and reinforcing racist cultural constructions.

Prescriptive discipline, codes of conduct that define specific outcomes for specific behavior infractions, perpetuates colorblind racism in its effort to objectify discipline decisions without regard to individual circumstances. For example, a student repeatedly bullied based on race might physically defend themselves in violent altercations. The student would receive increasingly harsher discipline based on a prescriptive discipline system that responds to first-time offenders with inclusionary discipline (e.g., parent conferences, counselor interventions, and in-school suspensions) and repeat offenders with more exclusionary discipline (e.g., out-of-school suspensions, expulsions). Meanwhile, novel attackers would continue to receive level one discipline outcomes. While school personnel understand the racial driver of the students’ involvement in fights, colorblind and prescriptive discipline policies prevent acknowledgement. This social justice dilemma (see DeMatthews, 2018) is further compounded by a principal’s disciplinary perspective (DeMatthews et al., 2017). DeMatthews and colleagues categorized principals based on discipline perspectives such that the “rigid rule enforcer” (p. 532) would stick to the code of conduct, the “flexible and cognizant disciplinarian” (p. 534) would consider the circumstances and apply discipline as it relates to the situation. The “overt racial justifier” (p. 530) would attribute the student’s fighting response to poor parenting stemming from race or socioeconomic status. As such, flexible disciplinary processes like those described in Kennedy and colleagues’ (2017) work to offer a higher potential for equitable disciplinary practices.

### 2.5. School discipline policy

Despite the promise of more flexible discipline systems, most school codes of conduct include prescriptive discipline that is typically punitive and reactive (Fenning et al., 2008, 2012). In fact, a content analysis of nearly all Illinois high school discipline codes of conduct revealed that even minor infractions such as tardiness and truancy tended to have punitive responses that included exclusionary discipline such as suspension and expulsion (Fenning et al., 2008). These findings were confirmed in a second content analysis including policies from Georgia, Texas, Oregon, New York, Illinois, and Iowa where 33% of the codes mentioned suspensions for tardiness and 54% for truancy (Fenning et al., 2012). In New York state (in closest proximity to the study’s eastern US sample), 60% of codes mentioned suspensions for tardiness and truancy. Some of these prescriptive discipline policies are zero tolerance policies, or policies which assign exclusionary discipline whenever a specific behavior infraction occurs.

Research repeatedly shows that zero-tolerance policies are ineffective and inequitable (APA Task Force, 2008). Such policies were denounced by the Obama-Era Dear Colleague Letter (Obama, 2014) that encouraged more alternatives to exclusionary discipline, yet zero-tolerance policies remain commonplace. In the 2013–14 school year alone, 16,035 US public school students were expelled due to zero-tolerance policies (CRDC, 2016). While only 15.5% of students identified as Black or African American that year, 22.6% of the students expelled due to zero-tolerance policies identified as Black or African American (7.1-point discrepancy). Even so, codes of conduct are changing; in Maryland, the Dear Colleague letter was followed by a change in the state-wide discipline guidelines that encouraged more options for discipline responses (Curran and Finch, 2020). Curran and Finch found that this initiative led to an increase in the options for disciplinary outcomes in codes of conduct with the largest increase for the most serious infractions and a moderate decrease in exclusionary discipline. However, this flexibility did not translate to increased variability in the kinds of outcomes selected by principals. The authors suggested that the code changes, “could drive decreases in the use of exclusionary practices, but their ability to do so
will hinge largely on decisions made by principals…” (p. 22). Unfortunately, principals still make biased decisions (Gullo and Beachum, 2020).

2.6. Beyond the code of conduct: implicit bias

While the school code of conduct might influence choices made by school principals when selecting appropriate discipline, it is not the only factor influencing decisions—especially for subjective discipline decisions (Girvin et al., 2016; Gullo, 2017; Kennedy et al., 2017). School principals face complex decisions, often with limited and vague information, when receiving an office disciplinary referral. According to McIntosh et al. (2014), this kind of decision presents a “vulnerable decision point” and hence, an opportunist point for implicit bias to influence the decision. “In general, implicit biases tend to affect decisions that involve more uncertainty, ambiguity, or discretion…there is more likely to be disproportionality (particularly for African American students) in ODRs and suspensions for more subjective problem behaviors” (McIntosh et al., 2014, p. 10). As such, it is important to consider the code of conduct as a guide but also the entire decision-making process employed by school principals when ascertaining how implicit bias might play a role.

Most work on the impacts of implicit bias in schools occurred at the teacher level where implicit bias was linked to detriments in both discipline and academics (Gullo et al., 2019). Implicit biases tend to act on students’ academics via teacher expectations, teacher traits, curricular materials, and access; and on student discipline via teacher determination of misbehavior, teacher reactions to behavior, and administrator reactions to discipline referrals. According to Starck and colleagues (2020), teacher patterns of implicit bias reflect that of the general population. As such, the pattern of teacher implicit bias logically extends to that of educational leaders.

While some interventions tasked at reducing the impact of implicit bias in schools focus on decision-making supports that might be structured through a code of conduct, many interventions exist to combat implicit bias in other ways. Strategies to reduce the impacts of implicit bias include three additional domains: mindfulness, information building, and intergroup contact (Beachum and Gullo, 2019; Gullo, 2020a,b). Leaders can practice mindfulness through reflexive and reflective leadership that informs future decisions and can consider why they are making choices with bias awareness through information-building practices that measure implicit biases and train leaders to recognize bias (Kahn, 2019). Furthermore, educators can collect and analyze data to bring awareness to current inequities and areas in need of improvement. To lower implicit bias before it presents a problem, leaders can engage in intergroup contact, shown to work whether in person (Gaertner and Dovidio, 2000), imagined (Stathi et al., 2011), game-based (Dunbar et al., 2014), or through counter-example exposure (Dasgupta and Asgari, 2004). A better knowledge of the discipline decision-making process and where implicit bias becomes involved could allow for targeted training and support for more equitable disciplinary practices.

3. Theoretical framework

While decision-making theory greatly informed the present study, lenses of critical race theory (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995), transformative social justice (K. M. Brown, 2004; Danley et al., 2008; Shields, 2010), and critical constructivism (Freire, 1968) framed inferences from the data. Critical race theory for education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) was used to situate the construction of knowledge within the framework based on critical constructivist epistemology (Freire, 1968) within a postmodernist theoretical framework (Danley, 2002). In this way, knowledge is constructed based on one’s perspectives and the systems of power in which that knowledge is embedded, but in a way that recognizes and uplifts differences and pluralism. Within this epistemological framing, transformative social justice leadership theory offered a structure for understanding the constructed knowledge.

Transformative social justice leadership reflects a structure pursuant of what Shields (2010) called socially just education. She maintained that socially just education occurs when an organization aims to provide all persons with respect, equal access and rights, equitable outcomes, mutual benefit, inclusivity in practice, and when the organization avoids funding-competitions for basic needs (p. 1037). Dantley (2008) suggested leaders, “should be relationship-driven, holistic, and morally grounded” (p. 128) to work towards such goals. This leadership style, transformative social justice leadership, extends to positive leadership practices such as the development of meaningful relationships, holistic flexibility, and equity-focused morality (Gullo, 2020a,b). Meaningful relationships include mutual benefit, deep understanding, and codependency while holistic flexibility, “refers to the practice of considering the whole situation and context when planning and then using creativity and flexibility to meet the specific needs of those involved” (Chapter 4). In equity-focused morality, leaders consider a variety of ethical structures and their reflections of equitable practices when making decisions. Together these foci of transformative social justice leadership provide the theoretical framework used to interpret the discipline decision-making process.

4. Methods

This qualitative, informed grounded theory study aimed to explore the process of principals when making discipline decisions that might be influenced by implicit biases; being focused on a process and based on the perspectives of multiple professionals, a qualitative design was most appropriate (Meyers et al., 2008). Prior to data collection, the Lehigh University IRB Committee approved the study. The study included interviews with participants and document analyses of the Student Code of Conduct documents from participants’ schools. After data collection, the primary researcher entered interview transcripts and analytical memos on the document analyses were entered into NVivo 11 (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2012) for coding. Subsequently the researcher sent summarized findings to participants for member checking while the secondary researcher reviewed the coding and findings. During member checking, all participants reviewed and provided feedback on the informed grounded theory inclusive of the connections to implicit bias based on the literature. This process helped to promote the methodological credibility and rigor by creating a feedback mechanism that supported the inferential elements of the theory with participant perspectives.

4.1. Sampling

Because this study was designed to better understand the process used by school principals to make discipline decisions and how and when implicit bias might interfere with the decision-making process, participants were drawn from a prior study that found that principals’ levels of implicit racial bias accounted for differences in discipline severity based on race for subjective-type behavior infractions (Gullo, 2017; Gullo and Beachum, 2020). This purposeful, criterion sampling approach was selected because it involved a group with pre-established rapport and who met several previously defined criteria: (1) principals or assistant/principal involved in school discipline (2) working in the state who (3) worked in a district with 10–90% students identifying as Latinx or African American and (4) reported at least ten incidents of exclusionary discipline to Safe Schools in the 2015–16 school year. Furthermore, the findings of the previous study suggested principals in this sample were (5) influenced by implicit racial biases when making discipline severity decisions. Seven of the original 42 participants gave their informed consent for interviews; however, only six interviews occurred before theoretical saturation. The final group consisted of six administrators as presented in Table 2, where two administrators represented demographic subgroups of Color with one identifying as Black.
and the other as Latina. Based on the findings of Starck and colleagues (2020) that teacher implicit bias is reflective of racial biases in the general population and the associated patterns of disciplinary disproportionality based on bias levels (Chin et al., 2020), the administrators in this sample are expected to mirror that of most districts where discipline discrepancies exist.

4.2. Data collection

4.2.1. Interviews

The primary researcher interviewed each participant for 30–40 min using Zoom Video Conferencing; these semi-structured interviews were recorded with audio only to help maintain confidentiality. Semi-structured interviews were most appropriate for this study because they offer a systematic approach to interviews that focuses interviews on the same issues for each participant while allowing for freedom to follow-up on and explore the participant’s responses beyond the question guide (Patton, 2014). Here, participant responses focused on the research questions but remained open to follow unexpected responses by participants and obtain deeper meaning. The semi-structured interviews were guided by the following questions:

1. What happens at your school after an office disciplinary referral is submitted?
2. How are you involved in the discipline process?
3. Tell me about how you choose which disciplinary action/outcome is most appropriate for a particular student.
4. What do you know about the student when making this decision?
5. Is there anything else you would like to share about how you make discipline decisions?

The researchers transcribed the interviews within three months and then destroyed the audio files. The researcher entered the interview transcripts into NVivo for analysis through coding. The primary researcher stored data on her computer with security established through password protection.

4.2.2. Document analysis

The primary researcher collected student Codes of Conduct for all schools represented by the participating principals for a total of five documents (two principals from the same district had a district-wide code rather than school specific code). These documents were publicly available on the websites of each school or district. The researchers focused on the discipline decision process and any policy that would help to determine the discipline outcome based on a student’s behavior infraction when reviewing these documents. Additionally, the researcher wrote analytical memos (see Saldana, 2015) on any codes that discussed a focus on equity or inclusive practices.

4.3. Data analysis

When conducting data analyses, the researchers used constant comparative analysis described by Glaser and Strauss (1967) as, “using explicit coding and analytical procedures” (p. 101). The constant comparative methods occurred in four stages: (1) comparing data on each category or initial coding, (2) category integration and processing or axial coding, (3) structuring a theory, and (4) writing the theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967, p. 105). The constant comparative analysis was conducted based on the informed grounded theory approach to grounded theory qualitative inquiry (see Thornberg, 2012). This approach informs the creation of grounded theories through the embedding of literature review to inform the development of theoretically-driven grounded theories such that an understanding of current literature paired with the data in the study generates new potential theories for future exploration. As such, the development of grounded theory in this study bases a discipline decision-making process on newly collected data, considers this process in light of decision-making theory, and then builds on the process with the use of implicit bias literature to develop an informed grounded theory of how the process integrates with the problem of implicit bias in discipline decision-making.

Initial coding was performed using Saldana’s (2015) methods in NVivo with a focus on content and process codes. As this was an informed grounded theory study of a process, second round coding looked for chronological patterns in addition to the standard process of axial coding for categorical integration. After completing both stages of coding, the process was diagramed using a concept map and summarized into a theory of process. This theory of process was considered in light of the current literature on implicit bias in education and decision-making to develop an informed grounded theory of the process and potential interference.

4.4. Theoretical saturation

Data saturation was determined by highly similar responses on core theoretical categories and no novel findings based on the recommendations for theoretical sampling put forth by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and later by Saunders and colleagues (2018). Core theoretical categories emerged during data collection as the parts of the process in line with the emergent design (see Maxwell, 2013). The primary research compared notes from each interview following each session to assess whether responses began to overlap. After the sixth interview, prior interviews described processes like that of the new interview and the fifth and sixth interviews included only support for previously emerging core theoretical categories with no new concepts. As the saturation criteria were obtained, the sample was demographically balanced by role and gender, and all grade levels were represented, theoretical saturation was assumed.
4.5. Positionality

The primary researcher identifies as a White female. Based on experiences in the prior study, she held expectations of implicit bias and a lens of social justice and critical race theory when engaging in both the data collection and analysis. While these might bias the study towards finding such results, the researchers used several measures to establish trustworthiness (described below) to check any biases beyond those that supported the theoretical framework. The researchers’ prolonged engagement with research discipline and school equity adds trustworthiness to some of the insights drawn from the data (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Furthermore, the theoretical framework combined with a critical race theory lens allowed for careful interpretation within the racial-cultural context (Milner, 2007). The secondary researcher identifies as an African American male and was involved mostly with the supervision and peer-member checking of this study.

4.6. Trustworthiness

To establish trustworthiness, the researchers used prolonged engagement, triangulation, peer debriefing, and member-checking (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). The researchers established prolonged engagement by working previously with those sampled and working extensively within this topic of study. While the interviews in this study lasted only 30–40 min, prior involvement with the sample on a previous study included several additional hours of interaction over the course of an entire school year. Triangulation occurred in methods, sources, analysts, and theory (Denzin, 1978; Patton, 1999) such that data were collected through both interviews and document analyses inclusive of analytical memos, included multiple perspectives from males and females working with different grade levels, were reviewed by a secondary researcher, and were analyzed using theoretical framework inclusive of a variety of lenses. Although theories were used as lenses for consideration, the analysis included no a priori codes. The primary researcher consulted with an uninvolved peer working in the field of educational leadership to establish peer debriefing, and findings were sent to participants for member-checking before being accepted as final.

5. Findings

Findings revealed four major themes embedded in a recursive discipline decision-making process: (1) relationships, (2) flexibility, (3) morality, and (4) experience. The interpretations for the first three themes are based on the concepts of meaningful relationships, holistic flexibility, and equity-focused morality as discussed by Gullo (2020a,b) and based upon Danley’s (2008) work around transformative social justice leadership as conceptualized through the theoretical framework and detailed in that section of this manuscript. The interpretation of experience was driven by participant definitions such that experience is defined as: the collection of skills and understandings obtained over time through “on-the-job” practice often measured as time (years) employed in a specific role. Figure 1 illustrates the emergent informed grounded theory such that:

- Step 1: Relationships are key as principals use data and communication to gather information for decision-making.
- Step 2: Principals develop alternatives based on considerations and policy. While considerations largely depend on the principal’s self-defined goal of discipline, policy typically presents the available options. Flexibility is key in allowing the principal to consider all possible options and create additional alternatives when viable.
- Step 3: Principals make the actual choice; morality is embedded in ethical and equitable processing making it a key aspect of this step.
- Recursive Process: Experience is key and drives reflexivity within each step.

5.1. Relationships

Principals repeatedly noted the importance of relationships for enacting effective discipline with a focus on students and teachers. When asked about the process of discipline, Mr. Bally stated, “I think it’s all about establishing those relationships with kids and being respectful of the student, their culture, their situation.” He went on to say, “The teachers are just as important as the relationships with the students.” Mr. Bally acknowledged the importance of relationships in the context of respect, culture, and situation. These contextual factors align with the principal of cultural competence discussed within Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995) such that respect, culture, and situation offered principals a chance to, “utilize students’ culture as a vehicle for learning” (Ladson-Billings and Tate, 1995, p. 161). Without meaningful relationships, a principal’s pedagogy lacks potential for cultural relevance.

To begin making a discipline decision, principals gather information through data and communication. Meaningful relationships allow for richer information collection by enabling communication and enhancing data access. Ms. Farrow defined this first step of the decision-making process:

I think it would be knowing their case history, knowing their family dynamic, knowing what motivates that child, knowing the academic profile, knowing their personality, knowing their friends, knowing their social engagement with the school activities. All of those things go into talking with the student to decide.

Ms. Farrow discussed the importance of understanding the child on a social-emotional level and in the context of numerical data. Ms. Escher focused on the importance of both data and student communication: “I ask them how they’re doing. Then we look in the computer and really talk about it.” With the computer referencing the data collected on the student and the behavioral infraction, Ms. Escher highlighted the importance of the conversation that occurs during this information gathering phase. Ms. Alvarez conferred: “I can’t imagine just doling out discipline and not having a conversation with the kid.” Together these statements link the importance of relationships and gathering information in the first step of the process with meaningful student-principal relationships representing both a communicative strategy and an access-point for information as well.

While student communication seems intuitive in the principals’ statements, they often noted the importance of talking with teachers and

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**Figure 1.** Administrator Discipline Decision-Making Model visualized as an iterative cycle inclusive of four parts (three steps and a recursive loop).
guidance counselors as well. Mr. Bally's school had weekly meetings to discuss concerns about students and reflect on related data and experiences. Similarly, Mr. Deal noted the importance of reviewing data for recidivism while Ms. Alvarez highlighted the importance of gathering academic records. Mr. Deal went on to explain why data is only part of the information process: "... a lot of it's just communication, making sure you're touching base with different people that are involved. So, everyone's on the same page or at least informed." While Mr. Deal's communicative focus was not only purposed with gathering information, it draws the focus of this step back to relationships. "It's about having those conversations and make them [the students and teachers] feel like they're being heard," noted Mr. Bally. This focus on the importance of teacher conversation is consistent with the findings of DeMatthews' team (2017) where principals considered these conversations important not only for information about the infraction but also about the potential of teacher-targeting of the student based on race or other factors. This links relationships, such as that with the teacher, with implicit bias mediation through its potential to offer a tool for detecting teacher-student bias. Gathering information through data collection and communication is both a group-supporting and accountability process.

Finally, relationships were noted repeatedly for the efficacy-inducing nature within discipline. That relationship element is so important too—a lot of times if kids have strong relationships, even if an infraction's committed it makes it a lot easier to repair it and teach it if the relationship's there, but you know, within restorative practices, that big idea is: you can't restore a relationship that wasn't there to begin with. -Mr. Deal

This links the process of gathering information and the importance of relationships to the greater picture, both of which are central to what Dantley and colleagues (2008) termed meaningful relationships. Ms. Farrow noted, "The disciplinary system works best when there's a relationship between the student and the administrator." Together, the principals named several of the tools associated with meaningful relationships such as communication, understanding, reciprocation, trust, and feedback.

When considered in the context of implicit bias, the literature related to the reduction of implicit bias through such relationships informs the theory. Researchers associated cooperative and respectful relationships with reductions in the impact of implicit and explicit bias on decisions (Aberson et al., 2004). Similarly, relationships with staff offer opportunities for shared decision making, which is associated with reductions in implicit bias impact (Beachum and Gullo, 2019). Positive intergroup contact (contact with others who represent different subgroups than oneself) appears to reduce levels of implicit racial and gender bias (Allen et al., 2010; Dovidio et al., 2000). Furthermore, using data to inform decisions could lessen inequitable decision-making when disaggregated by equity indicators such as race (Girvan et al., 2018). Data use and communication in the context of positive relationships offers a strong mechanism for countering bias in disciplinary decision-making. Thus, principals who forge meaningful relationships will likely lead schools with more equitable and effective discipline outcomes.

5.2. Flexibility

In the second phase of the discipline decision-making process, principals develop outcome options influenced by policy and considerations. The principal's flexibility is key to efficacy within this phase because the principal must consider how the behavior is best addressed within the confines of the policy but in the breadth of student considerations. For example, when students are repeatedly late the Code of Conduct at Mr. Bally's school required an after-school detention. He noted, "I'm pretty flexible with students for after school detention. If they're going to a teacher to receive assistance in the subject. As long as the teacher emails us, we'll count that as a detention." Mr. Bally recognized the restorative nature of the after-school detention, but also recognized the value of supporting students with extra help. Here, Mr. Bally used holistic flexibility to address a behavioral infraction in a way that restored the missed instructional time and better supported student learning. This flexibility is considered holistic because it considers the entire situation within the context of the school and student needs rather than in isolation. This empowers both the student and school leaders by offering more opportunities for creative solutions, perspective taking, and event modifications such as changes in schedules, curricula, or transportation plans.

Flexibility is especially reflected in a holistic manner through the considerations in the decision-making process. Ms. Alvarez noted that during the first phase, these considerations are often explored:

You want to have a conversation like, ‘Why is it that you’re late to school? What's going on at home?’ Because sometimes you don’t know their parent has overnight shifts or something and they're just getting home and they’re dealing with getting their baby sister ready for school.

With this consideration of the student's needs, developing options for addressing behavior becomes critical. While the student commits an infraction at a potentially high recidivism rate, the nature of the infraction is unrelated to the student's intention but has potentially harmful implications if not addressed. This flexibility in decision-making is further informed by Kennedy's team (2017) where they noted, “low--suspending principals used flexibility in applying the school discipline policies” (p. 250). With lower rates of suspension correlating with flexibility, the likelihood of more efficient discipline might be indicated.

Considerations were plentiful in the responses of principals and included factors such as student age, the infraction, student culture, student academics, time of day and year, and most of all recidivism. You take the kid into account, take the level of severity of the infraction into account, going to look at the past history, have they done this before and there is some level of progression, progressive discipline, but it's not always totally linear. -Mr. Deal

Progressive discipline was heard often concerning considerations both overall and in the context of policy. In Ms. Farrow's school, this progression determined when flexibility entered the decision-making process: "It's kind of like the first offense you'll do this, the second offense you'll do this. And the third offense on up is always at the discretion of the assistant principal." Even when recidivism became more policy-related, considerations remained important within the context of policy. As Ms. Alvarez noted:

I think it's important to know the whole picture before you just slam them with whatever discipline unless it's something egregious. Like, you know, they get in a fight. I mean there's really no conversation there. You just can't have a physical fight in school.

Ms. Alvarez highlighted the common notion of the principals that circumstances existed where flexibility was not an option. This is consistent with research where principals expressed times where no positive options appear available (DeMatthews et al., 2017). There seems a place and time for flexibility, but the student-focus was perpetuated by the holistic consideration of options and situations. Ms. Escher said, "I'll be honest, I treated everything that came across my desk differently just because sometimes you don't know what's going on at home." This was supported repeatedly, but Mr. Deal got to the core of the sentiment:

So, I just think it's really important to look at all the variables that go into it. We're dealing with human beings and we're not dealing with something that is a perfect science and therefore when we try to apply this scientific linear process discipline, I think it often does result in things being unfair.
Despite the promise of flexibility to avoid “things being unfair,” schools and state legislation often demonstrated the “linear process discipline” or rigidity in policy by the inclusion of what the principals called, “cause and effect” or “prescriptive discipline” in every Code of Conduct. These policies, which some may refer to as zero-tolerance, occur when a Code of Conduct offers little or no choice in the disciplinary outcome. For example, Pennsylvania Law 24 Pa PS 1317.2 states that any student who brings a weapon to school must be expelled from the school for no less than one year. Similarly, all school Codes of Conduct examined required that infractions for physical aggression resulted in a three-to-ten-day suspension (minimum and maximum number of days varied by school). While commonplace, most principals showed a level of aversion to the policy: “I do hate the idea of applying kind of like a general script to, the kid did this and that’s the outcome, but generally that’s what it is.” Mr. Deal went on to say, “We do have a code of conduct, we do have guidelines, but I operate under the, the notion that every single case and every single kid is different,” again highlighting the interplay of both policy and considerations. Some principals even saw the code as not written for them, “Elementary schools should use common sense and the code of conduct is often written for the high school,” noted Mr. Cheston.

Schools appeared to be listening to such sentiments. Ms. Escher was one of four principals discussing a transition: We are revising the code of conduct at this time to give ourselves much more flexibility. The old system… was: You did this, this happened. You did this, this happened. You did this, this happened. There really weren’t any ranges. Now, we are finding that in order to deal with equity issues and to deal with family issues we have different dynamics.

This shift to a more flexible interpretation of the code of conduct that allows for consideration of equity issues and a focus on educational outcomes is consistent with the Obama-Era Dear Colleague letter (Obama, 2014) urging for a focus on reducing racial disparities in school discipline through alternatives to exclusionary discipline. It also aligns to the findings of Curran and Finch (2020) expressing a change towards more discipline options following Maryland guidelines reflective of the Dear Colleague letter. Ms. Escher captured this sentiment in saying, “giving that flexibility and that choice is important.”

5.3. Morality

While the goal of discipline might initially seem obvious, a debate exists over the balance between education and safety. This conflict was also presented by the principals who subscribed to one of the following goals of discipline:

Behavioral Change

- “Obviously with behaviors we want the behavior to change.” Ms. Escher
- “The goal is ultimately to change the behavior.” Ms. Farrow

Student Education

- “Our primary job is to help that child and educate them. Discipline something that’s required to help people learn.” Mr. Cheston

Student Education for Behavioral Change

- “The goal of discipline is for you to teach the child so that it doesn’t occur again.” Mr. Deal

Behavior Interruption (i.e., remove student from school to allow for a natural break)

- “Suspension in general is not an effective tool to modify behavior, but what it does: it allows for a natural break in the time of education for everyone to cool down and think logically.” Mr. Bally

Each goal related to how a principal attended to the considerations highlighted in step two, but also reflected the underpinning of morality in the decision-making process. While the first three goals focused on the student and structured morality in rights-based ethics (students have a right to an education), the fourth employed utilitarian ethics (best for everyone). This balance between individual and collective is complicated by the ethical consideration of deontology and virtue such that educators have a duty to educate all students (including those experiencing discipline) but want to avoid punishing virtuous students with the distraction of students exhibiting less favorable behaviors. As such, the third step, making a choice, reflects the goal of discipline in terms of the principal’s moral stance, hence the theme of morality. In this sense, the morality reflects an ethical structure of sensemaking inasmuch as the goal of discipline reflects a principal’s positionality with regards to ethics. While each ethical structure holds its own strengths and weaknesses, the focus shifts to if and how the ethical structure supports school fairness, often considered in terms of equity, and the decision-maker’s sense of morality. In this way the constitution of morality in step three is truly reflective of equity-focused morality.

While each principal will make decisions based on their preferred ethical structure, equity-focused morality challenges the principal to expand their thinking as reflective of several ethical structures as each relates to equity. As such, the principal questions each ethical structure in ways that reflect an equity-focused mindset, but often in an implicit manner. When asked about how he knows what choice to make, Mr. Cheston noted, “You expose yourself to leaders who talk about discipline or you read about it and then you have to have your own beliefs.” Here, Mr. Cheston exemplified the various perspectives he employs when making decisions, that of other leaders, that of the literature, and that of his own construction. If contextualized through equity-focused mindfulness, a principal working to reduce the impact of implicit bias might consider different perspectives of the ethical structures they employ. For example, a principal engaged in cultural relativism might ask themselves how their choices are affected by their personal cultural beliefs; a principal engaged in contractarianism driven by the code of conduct might consider whether the code of conduct is reflective of equitable practices or if it sustains systemic inequities. These considerations could be based on the various perspectives gathered in the way described by Mr. Cheston. Similarly, when Ms. Escher stated that she tried to be, “as fair and understanding as possible,” she, in a way, highlighted her own questioning of various ethical structures through the balance of what is fair, what is worth understanding, and what is possible. One can contextualize fairness in rights-based ethics, understanding in cultural relativism, and possibility in contractarianism. Ms. Escher went on to ask, “How is this helping them get to where they need to be?” While engrained in a goal-driven moral structure, the questions of “how” and “where they need to be” employ multi-level sensemaking where other structures become involved such as cultural relativism through reflection on cultural needs and Aristotelian virtue ethics in consideration of individual virtues and definitions of related happiness. When applied with an equity-focused lens, these moral structures present a higher level of thinking about fairness and student needs that drive the decision-selection process of the principals.

5.4. Experience

The discipline decision-making process ended on a positive and growth-oriented note in the final, recursive element of the cycle: experience. Like most decision-making processes, the discipline process is an iterative cycle where the third step is connected to the first—here through experiential learning. After each instance of discipline, principals evaluated the efficacy of their prior decision-making processes. Mr.
Barry said: “Really strong principals are really reflective and know thyself and understand why they make the decisions they do. And it only comes with experience and it only comes with age.” This does not go to say that younger and less experienced principals will be poor discipline decision-makers, but that experience will develop abilities through reflexivity. Mr. Barry highlights this through his focus on reflection and self-understanding in decision-making as well as experiential learning in that he both self-references his practice while self-reinforcing through experience. Mr. Cheston explains, “Theory is what you need to help make your decision, but it's experience that helps you get better at your craft.” New principals are armed with theoretical knowledge and decision-making abilities, but the practical element grows with experience. Mr. Barry linked experience to the success in his school saying, “I use my experience to leverage the best choice to change the behavior and we're finding success with that.” Mr. Barry connects to all three steps of the discipline decision-making process in that experience allows for more and higher-quality relationships, a greater understanding of what flexibility looks like when it is effective, and a clearer understanding of morality. The link also demonstrates that experience will not enhance equitable discipline without equitable relationships, equitable flexibility, and equitable morality. Even outside the confines of equity, these traits of meaningful relationships, holistic flexibility, and equity-focused morality are critical to the impact of experience because a repeated practice of ineffective discipline will result in similarly ineffective discipline. Experience works if and only if it is part of a reflective learning process.

6. Discussion

6.1. A process of perspective

The informed grounded theory that emerged is general in nature and follows an almost logical, or expected, flow of decision-making: gather information, consider options, make a choice, reflect on whether that choice worked, and repeat. As Mr. Deal noted, “Every single case, every single kid is different.” This is core to the highly simplistic structure of this model because it shows the need for generality in the model. Rather than an overly structural approach to modeling the administrator discipline decision-making process, such a dynamic process as decision-making in educational leadership must hold room for the individuality of students and avoid a colorblind, student-blind approach where those individual traits are structurally ignored. Instead, this is a process open to perspective and differentiation where each part and general theme is, in short, inclusive.

Why then is it important to theoretically define such a process of decision-making? In defining the model, it becomes a tool for guiding practice and communication around this process. The themes that guide the process help to identify the kinds of strategies that will prove most effective at each part and those combinations needed to create change to the entire process. In part one, the principal’s perspective is focused on connections as tools for gaining clarity. In part two, the perspective focuses on creating effective options involving flexible thinking, perspective taking, and creativity. Third, the principal’s perspective is based on their self-defined Goal of Discipline and morality. With the completion of this process, the perspective is based on experience and again by those relationships, flexibility, and morality for which the fourth part, reflection, develops the experience. Understanding the viewpoint and focus of the principal in each part, helps to clarify the potential of implicit bias to interfere with decisions.

6.2. Connections to decision-making theory

In addition to creating a lens to understand principal perspectives, this informed grounded theory of principal discipline decision-making also serves to connect the discipline decision-making process to the greater body of theory in administrative decision-making. The model best reflects the mixed-scanning model of Etzioni (1967) where rationalistic and incrementalism decision-making is combined for a realistic, micro and macro approach. While principals muddle through each discipline decision in the primary three steps of the model, the process becomes more rationalistic when the recursive element allows principals to reflect on the efficacy of the decision and build greater knowledge to inform future decisions. The model also reflects the elements of decisions in educational leadership noted by Johnson and Kruse, especially where the potential interplay of implicit bias is involved. Principals engage in organization sensemaking by reflecting on available options and by practicing reflexivity when choosing what data to collect and review based on considerations. The decision is socially constructed and influenced by the socio-political environment through the potential areas where implicit bias might act. Relationships are particularly of concern in this socio-political piece based on the perspectives available to the principal through both empathy and knowledge access. Flexibility and morality too can be viewed in this socio-political framing as considerations of rigidity to policy and overall good as were questioned in the qualitative work by Kennedy and colleagues (2017). Furthermore, this model’s recursive process of reflection offers room for the active and dynamic element of the decision-making process such that the process occurs in iterative steps that are influenced by recursion. These connections help to drive future consideration of both how this model represents the larger body of decision-making research and how to explore other decisions in educational leadership.

6.3. Systemic implicit bias

Systemic implicit bias is potentially embedded in each of the themed parts of this decision-making process. As demonstrated in part one of the model, principals’ information seeking is dependent on their relationships. This provides the potential for bias in several ways. Principals might have only developed relationships with some students and not others based on implicit or explicit preferences towards those students. A principal acting based on explicit biases might be named racist or inequitable, but one acting on implicit biases might not even recognize a pattern. This is especially of concern in districts where most teachers and administrators are of a culture that is different than students. Beachum and McCray (2011) discussed the potential of cultural collision and collusion in schools such that teachers and administrators conflict or collide with the values and beliefs of students from under-served communities (cultural collision). Furthermore, when principals all-too-willingly remove these same students from the educational process (i.e., suspension, expulsion, detention, etc.) in a manner that coincides with a student’s lack of engagement or concern about their academic progress, then cultural collusion is at play. Together these unintentional but impactful biases in relationships can influence step one through relationships.

In step two, principals must consider the student, the policy, and then create options for potential outcomes. In this step, bias might come into play in the way the decision-makers rate the importance of different considerations. For example, a principal who has an implicit preference for female students based on a stronger flight or flight association with male students might assume a male student was running down the hall without good reason but inquire more about a female student running in the hall when considering potential outcomes. This flexibility in perspective taking where a stereotype fills in information gaps for one situation but not another is not uncommon when implicit bias is related to a flight or fight response (A. L. Brown, 2015). When flexibility is at the core of a decision, alternatives increase; however, biases can limit the options for some parties and extend them for others.

In step three, principals make a selection based on their morals and Goal of Discipline. Providing a principal does not hold a moral structure that explicitly aims to put down or hold back students from one group or another, the choice selection is less likely to suffer from explicit bias. Nevertheless, implicit bias has the potential to act in this step through a principal’s methods of considering the Goal of Discipline. If a principal
believes students from a specific group require a different structure of learning or if a principal holds different expectations for students of different subgroups similar to the perspective of overt racial justifiers in Curran and Finch’s (2020) study, then these potentially good-willing morals will misinform the decisions. While it is unlikely that a principal will consciously believe, for example, that Black students cannot behave as well as White students, principals may hold implicitly different expectations for these groups. Here, implicit morals might influence outcome selections, and so discipline decisions.

Finally, part four of the cycle, the experience element of the recursive process, holds both the key to removing biases from future decisions and a key to training oneself to continue embedding biases in decisions. If a principal is working with a mindful consideration of implicit bias remediation in their decisions, then reflection and continued experience may help to work against the perpetuation of inequities. Conversely, principals who are not making such an effort and are already making implicitly or explicitly biased decisions might see their inequitable decisions as effective and reinforce such behavioral processes, thus perpetuating discipline gaps. Even when all information is present to a leader, poor decisions can result from confirmation biases (Jonas et al., 2001). If principals have an implicit bias, it might be repeatedly confirmed in this way and so practiced and perpetuated in experience.

6.4. A promising approach

Despite the potential for implicit bias to act in every element of this discipline decision-making process, this potential also offers a promising approach towards beginning to solve discipline inequities through evidenced strategies that reduce the impact of implicit bias. Strategies such as intergroup contact, decision-making supports, mindfulness, and information building help to decrease the impact of implicit bias in schools (Beachum and Gullo, 2019; Gullo, 2020a,b). A comprehensive approach where strategies related to all areas of implicit bias impact reduction can offer the most impact but beginning in any domain is promising.

6.5. Transformative social justice leadership for discipline decision-making

Transformative social justice leadership theories often focus on leaders’ use of relationships, flexibility, and morality (Dantley, 2002) similar to the structure found in this model. Gullo and Beachum (2019; 2020) used the transformative social justice leadership theoretical lens to frame implicit bias for social justice. This framework offers a matrix where leadership practices based on meaningful relationships, holistic flexibility, and equity-focused morality intersect with effective, evidenced strategies for implicit bias impact reduction: mindfulness, information building, decision-making supports, and intergroup contact. This intersection provides principals with a guide for removing implicit bias from decision-making processes such that strategies used within transformative leadership practices incur outcomes that are more socially just. As such, the informed grounded theory supports this school leader-focused and practitioner-oriented approach to leadership theory.

6.6. Implications

While this study’s major goal was to offer a theory of decision-making that would better inform how and when implicit bias might interfere with principals’ discipline decisions, it holds implications for policy, practice, and research. From a policy perspective, the present framework can offer a tool by which policymakers can define steps in the discipline process for school or entities outside the educational sector. Furthermore, the themes help to guide policymakers and practitioners in decisions around professional development and school-wide bias reduction programming. Based on the findings, schools should include principals in any professional developments aimed to reduce the impacts of implicit bias in schools. Practitioners can additionally use this model to guide mindfulness during the decision-making process to decrease the potential of implicit bias interference. The model even holds potential for principal preparation programs as a tool for training principals on equity-focused leadership strategies around disciplinary practices. Even with these many policy and practice implications, this grounded theory of the discipline process presents several opportunities for future study.

Such research should include quantitative works to confirm or deny the generalizability of this model and qualitative research to replicate this work in samples stemming from other areas of the country with different demographics. Research around strategy- and solution-focused efforts for implicit bias impact reduction remain important and must continue to work towards social justice and racial equity in schools.

6.7. Conclusions

This informed grounded theory is demonstrative of the links between implicit bias and the overall decision-making process. The model offers a general conceptualization of this decision-making process that allows for necessary student-focus and individuation. Principals make decisions in a four-part recursive process where relationships influence the gathering of information, flexibility influences the outcome development based on considerations and policy, morality influences the choice selection based on the Goal of Discipline, and experience influences the evaluation. This model serves as a guide for principal preparation programs and practitioners and as a framework for further study. We task these parties to continue to reflect upon this decision-making process in ways that will increase disciplinary equity for students and create inclusive and equitable schools.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

G. L. Gullo: Conceived and designed the experiments; Performed the experiments; Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data; Wrote the paper.

F. D. Beachum: Analyzed and interpreted the data; Contributed reagents, materials, analysis tools or data.

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Additional information

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