MIDDLE SCHOOL TEACHERS’ PERSPECTIVES ABOUT THE EFFECTIVENESS OF POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS IN A DIVERSE DISTRICT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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By

Laureen Riddick

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By

Laureen Riddick
DEDICATION

This study is wholeheartedly dedicated to my mother, who has been my source of inspiration and given me strength throughout my doctoral program. She continues to provide moral, spiritual, and emotional support. She has taught me that drive and discipline will always reap a reward.

To my love Andre, who has been my encouragement throughout my entire educational journey. He continues to provide unconditional love throughout all of my challenges and obstacles and inspires me to overcome.
I would like to express the deepest appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Zeman, who bestowed on me a tremendous amount of knowledge and guidance throughout my entire doctoral process. Throughout the journey, her mentorship and care were unmatched.

I would like to thank my committee co-chair, Dr. McNair, for her commitment to my development as a researcher and student. Her work demonstrated a commitment to education and the development and importance of transformational leaders. Your advice and feedback have been invaluable.

In addition, a thank you to Dr. Jewell, who is responsible for developing me as a leader. Her mentorship and unwavering support of my growth has had a lasting impact on who I am today.
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Abstract

By Laureen Riddick

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2021

This study used a phenomenological design to discover how middle school teachers in northern California perceived the effectiveness of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in improving school climate and lowering office discipline referrals. PBIS is a school-wide initiative implemented in schools across the United States as an approach for addressing discipline and promoting a positive school climate. The researcher examined teacher perceptions on effectiveness of PBIS at the middle school level. The district implemented PBIS to align with district initiatives to lower exclusionary discipline practices (office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions) for students, with an emphasis on African American males, students with disabilities, and foster youth. The study used transformative learning theory and teacher self-efficacy to guide the research. The overarching research question explored was: What are middle school teachers’ perceptions about the effectiveness of PBIS? Data were collected from individual semi-structured open-ended interviews; concern statements; and examination of the trends of suspension, expulsion, and office discipline referrals pre-PBIS and post-PBIS. Data analysis revealed that all participants used positive terms to describe their school’s climate. Participants also experienced shared benefits and barriers when discussing PBIS in their school settings. The results of this study support PBIS in middle schools and addressed barriers. The results could be
used to guide the decision-making process of those responsible for PBIS at the local school
district level as well as at the individual school and classroom levels.

*Keywords:* exclusionary discipline, office discipline referrals (ODRs), Positive Behavior
Interventions and Supports (PBIS), school climate, phenomenology, middle school
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

Addressing student behavior is a challenge for many teachers, schools, and school districts across the nation (Cramer & Bennett, 2015). To effectively create a positive school space, schools need a positive school climate, which comes as a result of reducing challenging student behavior. School climate is important to the social-emotional well-being of students and their overall success in school (Peguero & Bracy, 2015). Schools and districts are looking for effective approaches to this problem of challenging student behavior.

School districts across the nation are implementing formal initiatives that utilize the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) framework (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015), defined as a school-wide, data-driven systematic framework that implements multiple tiers of evidence-based practices to meet the academic, social, and behavioral needs of all students within a school (Swain-Bradway et al., 2013). PBIS is an evidence-based program that research has shown to help schools transform their cultures into one that is more proactive, positive, and less reactive; it is currently being implemented in nearly 26,000 schools nationwide (Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, 2018). The goal of PBIS is to lower office discipline referrals (ODRs) of students while simultaneously improving a school climate.

Heightened attention and awareness are on the rates of suspension, expulsion, and removal from instruction for African American students, particularly African American students with disabilities, as a result of disproportionate inclusion rates when compared to other peer groups (Fenning & Rose, 2007). Analyzing the basis for the growing trend of behavioral infractions is a complex problem. Some researchers, such as Skiba et al. (2002), have analyzed
disciplinary infractions to determine predictive factors of student misbehavior. Skiba et al.’s (2002) research found students’ racial and gender identities were strong predictors of disciplinary infractions, but the reasons for these behaviors were not determined. They found African American males were more likely to receive a disciplinary infraction and were more likely to be suspended, removed from the classroom, or expelled from a school when compared to students of other ethnicities.

District and school leaders have attempted to curtail the increasing rates of student misbehaviors by implementing behavioral frameworks such as PBIS. PBIS is a systems-change approach to providing proactive behavioral supports to all students and planning and preparing intervention supports for students needing more help to meet the desired behavioral outcomes (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Unfortunately, implementation of PBIS at the secondary level has proven difficult and the reasons have not been well documented (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016). An emerging line of research indicates that implementation challenges may be due in part to lack of teacher support for School Wide Positive Behavioral Supports (SWPBS). Research has identified that teacher support for PBIS is an influential factor in the process of implementation (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016).

A lack of teacher support can derail the change efforts for any school, yet the issue may be more problematic in secondary schools (middle and high schools) due to the complexities of the school setting when compared to elementary school settings. Secondary schools tend to be larger with more complex departmental organization and administrative structures that present challenges to collaboration and communication (Flannery et al., 2013). Secondary teachers are more content-area specialized, with priorities relating to preparing students for graduation and promoting independent, young adults who can successfully compete in a global economy.
(Bohanon et al., 2006). Whereas teachers in elementary schools are more apt to view teaching social and behavioral expectations as a natural part of their role, teachers in secondary schools tend to place increasing responsibility on students to manage their own behavior without supports. Moreover, secondary teachers tend to receive less preparation and training in social, emotional, and behavioral supports than elementary teachers, and secondary teachers tend to emphasize punitive consequences (Flannery et al., 2013), believing them to be more effective and authentic than reinforcement (Lohrmann et al., 2013).

Middle schools are the focus for this study, and they present a unique educational experience (Eichhorn, 1966). Eichhorn (1966) pointed out that middle schools have prepubescent, early adolescent, and adolescent students and coined the term:

Transescence: the stage of development, which begins prior to the onset of puberty and extends through the early stages of adolescence. Since puberty does not occur for all precisely at the same chronological age in human development, the transescent designation is based on many physical, social, emotional, and intellectual changes in body chemistry that appear prior to the puberty cycle to the time in which the body gains a practical degree of stabilization over these complex pubescent changes. (p. 3)

Eichhorn believed that middle-school-aged students were at an age when children move from dependence to a more independent status. Eichhorn also emphasized the importance of middle schools developing programs that are sensitive to the characteristics of students 10-13 years of age. He saw middle-level students as distinctly different from elementary- and high school-level students and observed in many cases that middle schools were simply patterned after high schools and not meeting the needs of students in the “middle.” Eichhorn’s idea of middle schools was that the child’s development be the driving force for the school program. This is a “child-centered” approach. Since middle school students vary greatly in their development, their needs within PBIS may also vary greatly.
Considering the aforementioned challenges, it is not surprising that a lower percentage of middle schools have achieved school wide PBIS implementation as compared with elementary schools (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Middle schools may take considerably more time to reach consensus and achieve meaningful change (Flannery et al., 2013), and they may encounter more struggles in sustainability (McIntosh et al., 2016). In one study, only a third of middle schools’ PBIS leadership teams reported they were able to achieve nearly 80% staff support for PBIS (Flannery et al., 2013). This is particularly important given that achieving this level of support is considered a critical initial step to implementation (Coffey & Horner, 2012). Yet, there is little research to guide teams in achieving this level of staff support.

**Background**

School districts are tasked with providing safe and supportive environments to students and teachers (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). School discipline practices have become a national concern (Peguero et al., 2016), and historically, schools have relied on traditional discipline to address student behavior (Bell, 2015; Skiba, 2014). Because of the ineffectiveness of traditional discipline, many school districts are seeking an alternative method for lowering office discipline referrals (ODRs) and improving school climate (Smolkowski et al., 2016). An alternative approach many schools have implemented is PBIS, a framework to improve school climate and lower ODRs (Swain-Bradway et al., 2015). Researchers support PBIS being an effective alternative approach, but have also stated there is a lack of research available focused on school climate and PBIS in diverse student populations and a need exists for further qualitative research related to implementing PBIS in middle schools where exclusionary discipline has a high impact on students’ academic and socioemotional development (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016).
Schools are seeking an alternative to traditional discipline practices that have proven to no longer be effective at managing student behavior (Nocera et al., 2014). Numerous school systems in the early 1990s began adopting a zero-tolerance approach to school discipline by increasing the use of exclusionary discipline practices (Nocera et al., 2014). Zero-tolerance discipline practices include the use of exclusionary practices such as suspension and expulsion from school. These practices have been ridiculed for being ineffective discipline practices and producing adverse outcomes for students (Carrino, 2016). In the early 2000s, educational policy focused on identifying preventative methods of addressing discipline rather than punitive discipline to address challenging student behavior (Cramer & Bennett, 2016). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 emphasized early intervention for challenging student behavior and focused on teachers to provide behavioral interventions as part of classroom management (NCLB, 2002). In the early 2000s, federal policy began focusing on positive behavior; PBIS intervention models have been implemented nationwide with the intent of providing all students with evidence-based practices to improve behavior and decrease the need for special education services for behavioral concerns (Cramer & Bennett, 2016).

School safety concerns began in public schools across the nation decades ago (Peguero et al., 2016), and teachers are tasked with meeting both the social and behavioral needs of students (Andreou et al., 2015). Researchers have stressed the importance of schools maintaining a positive school climate (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013), and school climate has become the focus of several federal and local school improvement initiatives (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Although zero-tolerance policies were first aimed at combating school violence and improving school climate, researchers have shown that these types of traditional discipline practices are associated with adverse student outcomes such as increased suspensions from school, poor academic
performance, high dropout rates, and increased student involvement with law enforcement agencies (Bell, 2015; Peguero & Bracy, 2015; Skiba & Losen, 2015). Research states that the most effective method for reducing problem behavior is prevention, yet schools tend to still use punitive measures as the primary method of dealing with problem behavior (Fitzgerald et al., 2014). By incorporating PBIS, schools may find an alternative to inappropriate student behavior rather than relying solely on punitive discipline (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016).

The use of data to guide decisions is a key feature of PBIS; however, data from teachers, the central stakeholder group charged with implementation, are seldom gathered and used to guide implementation decisions. Teacher concerns and needs are not well understood, and the degree of their acceptance or resistance to PBIS is unknown. Although PBIS is a positive approach to discipline and behavior support, it is evident that not all teachers will immediately embrace the framework. If their perspectives could be understood, issues that could thwart implementation may be avoided or mitigated. Previous studies in PBIS have examined the perspectives of team members, coordinators, and administrators, but little research has focused on the perspectives of the teachers at the school wide level. Teachers work directly with students and are expected to implement the practices of PBIS; therefore, it is essential to reach a better understanding of their concerns and needs.

PBIS is a school-wide initiative implemented in schools across America, used in over 20,000 schools (Childs et al., 2016). Studies show researchers support the implementations of school wide PBIS in elementary schools (Dutton-Tillery et al., 2010; Klein et al., 2012) as well as that PBIS makes a positive influence in school environments (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). Yet there is a significant lack in research regarding PBIS in middle schools (Flannery et al., 2013; Malloy et al., 2015). Furthermore, since PBIS has been effective in other school settings,
and there is a lack of literature examining the school climate perceptions of middle school teachers, qualitative research related to the implementation of PBIS at the middle school level is needed (Feuerborn & Tyre, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

Schools across the nation have implemented traditional discipline practices that are ineffective at producing positive student outcomes and disproportionally impact students of color, especially African American males (Bell, 2015; Skiba, 2014). Students receiving only one occurrence of suspension from school are twice as likely to drop out of school and eight times more likely to be incarcerated than students who are not suspended from school (Peguero & Bracy, 2015). High school dropouts are four times more likely to receive government assistance, twice as likely to be fired from a job more than once, three times more likely to be arrested, twice as likely to use drugs, and twice as likely to be considered in poor health as individuals who graduate high school (Lansford et al., 2002). According to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Education Statistics (2015), a high school dropout costs the U.S. economy an estimated $250,000 over the course of their lifetime because of a greater reliance on government assistance programs, increased criminal activity, poorer overall health, and lower federal tax contributions. Although researchers have revealed the negative impact of traditional discipline practices by associating the practices with negative school climates, poor academic outcomes, increased dropout rates, disproportionate discipline practices, and the increased likelihood of students being incarcerated (Curran, 2016; Hoffman, 2014; Skiba, 2014), educators have continued to use traditional discipline methods for decades (Curran, 2016). As a result of the ineffectiveness of traditional discipline practices, many school officials have sought alternative methods for addressing student behavior and improving school climate (Smolkowski
et al., 2016), PBIS among them. Because maintaining a positive school climate is important to improving student outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Peguero & Bracy, 2015), information was needed to identify the influence on school climate of alternate programs such as PBIS.

I conducted a phenomenological study of three middle schools in a northern California school district to explore the perspectives of the middle school teachers on implementing PBIS with emphasis on school climate and barriers to the implementation of PBIS. Because of the lack of qualitative research on the outcomes of discipline practices, the results provided insights regarding implementing PBIS in highly diverse middle school environments. Furthermore, there is a lack of research regarding PBIS in middle schools and the perception of middle school teachers. This study seeks to aid the district in gaining a better understanding of the concerns and needs of the middle school teachers and the effectiveness of PBIS in improving middle schools’ PBIS programs.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine middle school teachers’ perspectives on the effectiveness of PBIS in lowering office discipline referrals and improving school climate.

**Research Questions**

The study explored how middle school teachers described PBIS and the effect, if any, on school climate and office discipline referrals (ODRs). Furthermore, the study sought teachers’ perceptions on benefits, if any, from PBIS, and whether the participants experienced any barriers with PBIS. The research questions of the study were used to gain an understanding of school climate through the perspectives of various middle school teachers. The only way to observe the
nature of a phenomenon is through the lived experiences of individuals experiencing the event (Moustakas, 1994).

*Overarching question:* What are middle school teachers’ perceptions about the effectiveness of PBIS? The study utilized four sub questions to support the overarching question:

1. How do select middle school teachers describe the school climate when a school has PBIS?
2. What benefits, if any, did middle school teachers experience from PBIS?
3. What barriers, if any, do middle school teachers experience with PBIS?
4. What impact, if any, did PBIS have on the number of office discipline referrals?

**Significance of the Study**

The research study contributes to the existing body of literature regarding the implementation of PBIS in middle schools. The majority of research regarding PBIS focuses on elementary schools (Kelm et al., 2014) or the influence of PBIS on student outcomes (Mitchel & Bradshaw, 2013). Research related to the implementation of PBIS in diverse middle schools serving students of color is limited. A majority of the current studies related to PBIS are quantitative and do not examine the perceptions of the study participants (Flannery et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2012). Few studies focused on the perceptions of teachers (Feuerborn et al., 2015; McIntosh et al., 2014).

The researcher sought to examine the influence PBIS has on school climate and ODRs through the perspectives of middle school teachers. Therefore, with this study, the gap in the current literature was addressed by providing qualitative data that examined the perceptions of middle school teachers regarding school climate and ODRs when school wide PBIS has been
implemented at their schools. Furthermore, the study sought to assess the district’s goal, which states that by June 30, 2020, the schools which implemented at least two years of PBIS will close the equity gap by 2% of the previous years’ suspensions of the following subgroups: African American, Students with Disabilities, and Homeless and Foster Youth.

The significance of this study is that it will provide an understanding of how middle school teachers perceive the school climate at a school with PBIS. School districts may find it beneficial to learn the perceptions of various middle school teachers regarding the influence, if any, of PBIS on school climate. By understanding the perceptions of middle school teachers, district leaders may gain knowledge about developing school support strategies for how to effectively practice PBIS in middle schools. Middle school principals may obtain information from the results of the study regarding how teachers perceive school climate and ODRs after PBIS is implemented that may assist in resolving issues that occur throughout. Additionally, middle school teachers who are not yet involved in PBIS may gain an understanding of how PBIS may influence their school climate. This study allows for middle school teachers’ perceptions to be shared and included in the decision-making process regarding PBIS at the district level as well as at the school and classroom levels.

Theoretical Framework

Transformative learning theory provided the foundational framework for understanding the influence of PBIS in middle schools (Mezirow, 1996). This theory supports PBIS in middle schools as a way of improving school climate and lowering ODRs, which was the primary focus of the research study. Transformative learning theory was used to describe learning as the process through which adults make meaning of their experiences (Mezirow, 1997). The researcher gathered the voices from the study participants so transformative learning might occur
from the sharing of their lived experiences and understanding may be gained regarding the influence that PBIS may, or may not, have on school climate.

Researchers have utilized transformative learning theory as a theoretical framework to guide research in the field of education. Mezirow’s transformative learning theory has been used by researchers to explain how adults experience a shift in perspectives (Kucukaydin & Cranton, 2013). Similarly, the researcher used the transformative learning theory as a guide to examine if the experience of having PBIS influenced or shifted the school climate perceptions of middle school teachers that participated in the study.

The study was also guided by teacher self-efficacy theory, defined as teachers’ perceptions of their ability to affect student outcomes. Teacher self-efficacy contributes to many positive variables, such as academic achievement, motivation, and on-task behavior in students (Ashton, 1984). Teacher self-efficacy is an indication of teachers’ feelings of professional effectiveness and preparation to meet the challenges of their classrooms, and research suggests that it is also a protective factor against job stress in the school (Schwarzer & Hallum, 2008; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). To determine the influence implementing PBIS may have had on teachers’ perceptions of PBIS in middle schools, the researcher examined the perspectives of various teachers from middle schools as seen through the lenses of the transformative learning theory and teacher self-efficacy theory.

**Methods of Inquiry**

A phenomenological approach to qualitative research allowed this researcher to share the perspectives of middle school teachers to gain an understanding of what influence PBIS had on their perceptions about PBIS with particular emphasis on school climate and ODRs. The
purpose of the approach was to compare data from various sources and closely examine patterns and results from each.

As Patton (2015) stated, “there is essence to shared experiences” (p. 115). Examining these ideas and experiences that teachers share towards using positive behavior interventions in attempts to increase desired behaviors fits well with the phenomenological qualitative tradition (Moustakas, 1994). “Phenomenological studies investigate what was experienced, how it was experienced, and, finally, the meaning that the interviewees assign to the experience” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014, p. 382). By applying phenomenological interviews, the researcher was able to gather multiple meanings of the experience (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014) through the lens of the people who actually experienced it (Mapp, 2008). Patton (2015) stated that phenomenological research aims to describe, “how people experience some phenomenon” (p. 115). Using phenomenology, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews to evoke more valid data by developing a connection with the study participants by establishing trust, being genuine, keeping eye contact while talking, and using a comfortable voice tone (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014). The interviews helped the researcher gather more in-depth information to understand why teachers perceive PBIS to be effective or not, but also the challenges and effective interventions.

Three participating schools from one diverse district in northern California were used for the study. Participating schools were recruited based on involvement with PBIS and reported demographics demonstrating a diverse student population. All participating schools were in the readiness stage of PBIS implementation or beyond. The readiness stage is defined as implementation has occurred within the last year. As it would not be meaningful to assess the needs and concerns of teachers if they did not have at least a basic understanding of PBIS, all
schools had received an awareness training that described the basic principles of PBIS as administered by the district’s Multi Tiered System of Supports specialists.

To reach an understanding of teachers’ concerns, statements of concern were gathered from middle school teachers. Teacher were provided with an open-ended prompt for concern statements. To encourage genuine responses, teachers were asked to provide their responses anonymously via a survey link. One-on-one interviews were conducted with nine middle school teachers from the three middle schools selected for the study. Interviews were voluntary, lasted approximately 45 minutes, and were recorded.

ODR and suspension data were compared pre- and post-implementation of PBIS to examine trends and changes once PBIS had been utilized within the school system. The data were collected from the School Wide Information System (SWIS) data platform.

**Delimitations**

The study occurred during the spring semester of the academic school year (March 2020-June 2020). The study examined perspectives of middle school teachers from three middle schools in one diverse northern California school district. The teachers in this study only included teachers that had been at the school before and after the implementation of PBIS. Furthermore, only middle school teachers serving students in Grades 7-8 were used in the study; high school and elementary teachers were excluded. Therefore, the study is not generalizable to other middle schools or school districts. However, the research is a starting point for other school districts to gain a better understanding of the implementation process of PBIS and what factors need to be considered. This study is a snapshot of one point in time. It is a one-time assessment rather than over time. The survey-administered concern statements were limited to middle school teachers in the diverse northern California school district serving middle school
students (defined as seventh and eighth graders). The one-on-one interviews were limited to the three selected middle schools and consisted of only middle school teachers employed at the school pre- and post-implementation of PBIS. The criteria used for selecting the three middle schools within the northern California district included:

1. A middle school defined as having grades 7th and 8th
2. Over 80% of the students received free or reduced lunch
3. The school population consisted of the following student populations:
   a. African American students
   b. Foster youth
   c. Homeless
   d. English Language Learners (ELL)

**Definition of Terms**

Definitions of the following terms have been included to provide clarity for the reader to understand the references used within this study.

*Exclusionary Discipline Practices:* Traditional discipline practices in which students that demonstrate problem behavior are excluded, or suspended, from participating in school activities (Peguero & Bracy, 2015).

*Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS):* A school-wide approach to behavioral change in students through a tiered implementation framework that includes teaching appropriate social school behaviors, implementing research-based intervention practices, and using data-based decision making (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

*School climate:* School climate refers to the quality and character of the social interactions within a particular school setting (Klein et al., 2012).

*Traditional Discipline:* Strict discipline policies with severe consequences for displaying disruptive behavior at school that was intended to act as a deterrent to other students who may choose to display similar disruptive behavior in school (Skiba, 2014).
Zero tolerance (ZT): A policy of strict, uncompromising enforcement of rules. The approach is intended to send the message that certain behaviors will not be tolerated on school grounds by punishing all offenses, major and minor, uniformly and severely (Skiba, 2014).

Summary

An overview of the current literature supports the implementation of school wide PBIS and reveals a gap in the existing literature involving the implementation of PBIS in middle schools. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how middle school teachers perceive PBIS with an emphasis on school climate and ODRs. The research questions guiding the study were also identified. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature supporting the research.
CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter contains a review of the literature. The transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1996) was selected as the primary theory and teacher self-efficacy was the secondary theory guiding the theoretical approach of the study. In an attempt to provide knowledge about the relationship that may exist between the implementation of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and the school climate perceptions of middle school teachers, Chapter 2 establishes the theoretical framework of the research study and reviews the literature related to the study. The review of literature is organized into subsections of topics related to school climate, school discipline, and the implementation of PBIS in schools. The research reviewed suggested a need for alternatives to zero-tolerance and traditional discipline practices. Furthermore, the literature highlighted the need to study the potential influence that PBIS may have on middle school teacher perceptions.

Theoretical Framework

A phenomenological approach to qualitative research allowed the researcher to share the experiences and perspectives of middle school teachers to gain an understanding of what influence PBIS had on school climate in middle schools participating in the study. The researcher explored transformative learning theory to gain an understanding of the importance of implementing PBIS on climate school in middle schools. Transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1996) provided the foundational framework for implementing PBIS as an influence on the theoretical foundation of the research study.
Transformative Learning Theory

The researcher used the transformative learning theory to guide the research study in the exploration of ODRs and school climate perspectives of middle school teachers employed in schools implementing PBIS. Mezirow developed the transformative learning theory (Christie et al., 2015; Kitchenham, 2008; Mezirow, 1996; Moyer & Sinclair, 2016), which is defined as the process of using experiences to guide future actions (Mezirow, 1996). According to Mezirow (1997), transformative learning is the process of implementing change.

Researchers have used transformative learning to guide research in the field of education. Christie et al. (2015) used transformative learning to help teachers understand how social structures and belief systems may influence student learning. Christie et al. concluded that transformative learning theory adds value to various types of organized learning experiences by assisting individuals in regularly re-assessing their learning and enabling them to apply what has been learned in unexpected situations.

The researcher used transformative learning theory to provide an understanding of how the perceptions of middle school teachers regarding ODRs and school climate may be influenced by the implementation of PBIS. Moyer and Sinclair (2016) provided insight gained from applying transformative learning theory to experiences outside of the ideal classroom environment in a discussion based on empirical qualitative research, which explored how learning may arise from the intersection of faith and the pursuit of sustainability within faith-based organizations operating in Kenya.

The researcher sought to explain how the implementation of PBIS may influence teachers’ perceptions of school climate in middle schools where PBIS had been implemented.
The examination of the perceptions of middle school teachers may lead to a better understanding of how the implementation of PBIS can change teachers’ views.

Transformative learning theory was ideal for guiding the research study because of the researcher’s focus on developing meaning from the lived experiences of middle school teachers so that others in the field may learn through their shared experiences. Transformative learning is about educating from a particular worldview or a particular educational philosophy (Taylor, 2008). In this research study, the PBIS framework acted as the educational philosophy. Transformative learning happens when there is critical self-reflection of the assumptions that support the perspective in use (Kitchenham, 2008). This researcher utilized transformative learning theory as a guide to educate other professionals in the field about the implementation of PBIS through learning from the perspectives of middle school teachers participating in the study. This research study provides a focus on making meaning of lived experiences specifically related to transformative learning theory.

**Teacher Self-Efficacy**

Self-efficacy advanced into the study of education and was applied to teachers as teacher self-efficacy theory (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Teacher self-efficacy (TSE) has been associated with positive student outcomes, both academically and behaviorally. TSE has been positively correlated with student motivation, student engagement, teacher competency, reduced teacher burnout, and lower referral rates for special education services. According to researchers, teachers with high teacher self-efficacy tend to enjoy teaching more, are better able to manage stress, and are more willing to seek advice from colleagues. Other characteristics of high teacher self-efficacy include the ability to self-regulate emotions, control the learning environment, delay gratification, motivate students, and entertain the belief that all students can
learn (Brouwers & Tomic, 2000; Gibson & Dembo, 1984; Ross & Bruce, 2007; Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2007).

Brouwers and Tomic's (2000) longitudinal study focused on the issue of teacher burnout as it related to teacher self-efficacy in managing students who displayed challenging behaviors. The participants consisted of secondary-level teachers in the Netherlands. The research reported that two fundamental traits of teacher burnout (emotional exhaustion and depersonalization) significantly impacted a teacher’s perceived self-efficacy in classroom management. Furthermore, according to Brouwers and Tomic (2000), “The more emotionally exhausted teachers are, the poorer their performances will generally be” (p. 248). Therefore, they claimed that emotional exhaustion leads to lower teacher self-efficacy. Consequently, low self-efficacy leads to heightened depersonalization. As a result, teachers might become cynical, cold, and distant, developing negative attitudes toward disruptive students. The research reported that as a consequence, teachers deem themselves to be ineffective in managing students with challenging behaviors.

Teachers' self-efficacy beliefs have been linked to teachers’ classroom behavior and practices and to improved student academic achievement (Ashton et al., 1986; Brophy & Good, 1984; Goddard et al., 2000). Teachers who feel effective are more likely to support positive student attitudes toward school and toward other children as well as to have students who report a higher sense of self-efficacy such as beliefs aligned with the framework that guides PBIS. In addition, the research supports the relationship between teachers' self-efficacy and student performance as being bidirectional; teachers feel more effective when their students do well, and students do well when teachers feel more effective (Ross, 1992).
Teachers perceive their sense of self-efficacy in relation to two social systems within their schools. The first guides teachers' interactions with students (relating to classroom goals, teaching tasks, and relationships with students), and the second links teachers to colleagues and the school administration (referring to attainment of school goals and relationships with principals and colleagues; Friedman & Kass, 2002).

TSE states that by supporting and enhancing teacher self-efficacy, not only are student outcomes improved, but teacher practices are positively impacted as well. Teachers with higher levels of self-efficacy and more positive attributions are more likely to endorse behavioral consequences aligned with the PBIS philosophy.

Related Literature

Historically, school discipline has been reactive as opposed to proactive. Exclusionary discipline has been viewed as a way to maintain safety (Wright et al., 2014). Often times the response to inappropriate behavior is punitive consequences, which can be anything from loss of privileges, in-school or out-of-school suspension, to even expulsion. Reactive responses to manage the behavior of students continue to be the standard in schools across the country, many still relying on punitive consequences (Maag, 2001). Reactive disciplinary strategies produce an immediate reduction in disruptive behavior, yet the decrease is usually only temporary, with the behavior reoccurring at another time (Cohen, 2016).

A dramatic shift occurred in 2013 as California’s educational system changed the way schools were made accountable and funded by implementing the Local Control Funding Formula or LCFF (California Department of Education [CDE], 2018c). With the new LCFF as law, the California School Dashboard was created for accountability purposes in the following areas: suspension rate, academic indicators (English and math), English language learner progress,
chronic absenteeism, graduation rate, and college/career readiness (CDE, 2018c). School personnel, along with key stakeholders, must analyze student data to determine which systems/services need to continue or be put in place to maximize student success.

With the state’s acknowledgment of suspension rates being a priority and the widespread evidence of disproportionately high suspension rates between student groups and grade spans that exist, it is imperative that school administration take a second look at their current systems of discipline and identify areas of enhancement/improvement (Payne & Welch, 2015). Zero-tolerance discipline practices are often found in California schools, which can unintentionally track students into the “school-to-prison pipeline” by “criminalizing a wide variety of student behavior, including behavior as minor as tardiness, absences, noncompliance, and disrespect” (Castillo, 2016, p. 45).

**Disproportionalities of School Discipline**

America is diverse. Currently, in California, students of color represent two-thirds of the student population (CDE, 2018a). Nationally, enrollment in public education for elementary and secondary schools has increased. Furthermore, data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2015) indicate that student enrollment will continue to rise in the next decade. Also, racial/ethnic distributions of public school students across the country and within regions have shifted. Over the past decade, the number of White students enrolled in public education has decreased from 59 to 50% and is projected to continue to follow this trend (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2015).

More than 6.4 million students are attending public schools in California. Among these students, a total of 381,000 suspensions were levied during the 2016-2017 academic school year. While African American students account for only 5.8% of the state's public school enrollment,
they represent 17.8% of students who are suspended in the state and 14.1% of those who are expelled. Last year included 67,000 suspensions and 800 expulsions of African American students. In other words, there were totals of 186 suspensions and two expulsions of African American students per day (Fitzgerald, 2015; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Morris & Perry, 2016). The data support that African American students are over-exposed to exclusionary discipline. No other student ethnic group experiences this type of disproportionality in discipline.

African American male students are suffering from a severe discipline gap. African American males are statistically more likely to be incarcerated than to graduate from a 4-year university (Noguera, 2008). America has the highest rates of incarceration in the world, with the rates for African American men at historically high levels and considered by many to be in part the result of institutionalized racism. In 2018, the Brown Center released a report on American Education, and a significant finding of the study focuses on out-of-school suspensions (Loveless, 2018). For several years, California educational leaders have encouraged schools to reduce the number of exclusionary punishments. A reason cited for the request is that racial disparities associated with suspensions are evident. The Brown Center reported that suspensions of African American students, particularly males, occur at rates three to four times higher than the state average for all students (Loveless, 2018).

A recent report by Wood et al. (2018) was released entitled The Capitol of Suspensions: Examining the Racial Exclusion of Black Males in Sacramento County, which documented how Black males are disproportionately impacted by exclusionary discipline practices in Sacramento County. The research stated that Black male students are 5.4 times more likely to be suspended in Sacramento County than the statewide average. Furthermore, Sacramento County has four school districts in the top 20 suspension districts for African American males in the State of
California. The report presented a picture of the bleak educational conditions that some African American males in Sacramento must navigate and highlights the importance of districts improving their cultural proficiency practices (Wood et al., 2018).

**Contributing Factors of School Discipline**

Several factors put a student more at-risk for getting suspended or expelled. These characteristics include students of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and males of African American or Latino backgrounds (Mizel et al., 2016). As stated by the NAACP Legal Defense Fund:

> Historical qualities in the education system, particularly segregated schools, concentrated poverty, and entrenched stereotypes influence how school officials and law enforcement label and treat students that misbehave. Notably, racially isolated schools that primarily educate students of color are more likely to be among the nations’ “dropout factories” and also among those that utilize the harshest, most exclusionary means of discipline. (as cited in Castillo, 2016, p. 49)

In an attempt to alleviate the school-to-prison pipeline, one study specifically looked at the risk factors of 2,539 Southern Californian students in Grades 10 through 12 who had been suspended or expelled (Mizel et al., 2016). Individual factors and family relationships were examined, such as “academic engagement, mental health, family alcohol/marijuana use, and cultural values about family and parental monitoring” (Mizel et al., 2016, p. 104). The study concluded that African American male students who self-reported they used marijuana and had parents of low educational background were at the highest risk for suspensions and or expulsions from school (Mizel et al., 2016).

More than 400 U.S. elementary and middle schools were examined in 2001, and it was discovered that African American students were at risk for tougher punishments than their White counterparts (Castillo, 2016). African American students were given harsher punishments for
incidents such as disrespect, whereas students who were White were lightly disciplined for such things as tobacco use (Castillo, 2016). Many schools in California are exploring alternative discipline practices that appear to have the potential to reduce school suspensions and increase the safety of schools (Vancel et al., 2016).

**Effects of School Discipline**

Research has demonstrated that students who are consistently suspended are being tracked into the prison industrial complex. Research states that students subjected to suspensions are more likely to have low socioeconomic standing and to have an increased dependence on social services (Darensbourg et al., 2010; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Skiba et al., 2014).

Although schools have been adopting more alternative measures for student discipline in recent years, punitive systems are overly represented in predominately African American-enrolled schools (Payne & Welch, 2015). The term “school-to-prison pipeline” is often associated with punitive discipline practices, as students who are suspended or expelled often end up in the justice system; they either go directly due to the nature of their incident or indirectly by way of falling behind in academics due to the loss in instructional time, being at risk for being retained, feeling disconnected from school, dropping out of school, and or stumbling into further legal troubles (Huang & Cornell, 2016; Mizel et al., 2016). Castillo (2016) went on to state that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention discovered that suspended or expelled students were highly likely to “become teen parents and engage in delinquent behavior” (p. 49). Unfortunately, students returning from out-of-school suspensions often continue with the same behaviors and are at risk for future incidents (Huang & Cornell, 2016). Students who have experienced exclusionary practices are “eight times more likely to be incarcerated than those of their peers who graduate” (Castillo, 2016, p. 49).
Another consequence of school suspensions is the loss of instructional time. According to Losen and Whitaker (2017), although suspension rates have declined, an estimated 840,000 days of instruction in California schools were lost in the 2014-2015 school year due to school discipline. Losen and Whitaker (2017) also discovered that in districts that had the largest discipline gap between students of color and White students, students of color lost 45 more days of instruction than their White peers, and the “disruption/defiance category contributed to 71% of that difference” (p. 1). The loss of instructional time is alarming, as these students are more likely to experience “academic underperformance” (Castillo, 2016, p. 48).

With the loss of instructional time, students will inevitably fall behind their peers and put high school graduation in jeopardy. Rumberger and Losen (2017) stated, the “negative impact of the suspension on graduation rates in California translates into a statewide economic burden on 2.7 billion dollars in lifetime costs from just one graduating class” (p. 4). The literature has identified factors that contribute to a student being more likely to experience exclusionary discipline practices.

**School Climate**

School climate is the quality and character of the social interactions within a school setting (Klein et al., 2012). It is the product of the interactions among all students and all school staff that have developed over time including shared beliefs, values and attitudes, and setting the parameters of acceptable behavior and norms for the whole school environment (Bradshaw et al., 2014). The positive relationships established among teachers and students significantly shape the school learning environment and contribute to a positive school climate (Bradshaw et al., 2014; Klein et al., 2012). School climate is an essential factor in establishing effective schools (Calaraella et al., 2011). Research suggests that school climate is a critical component of
creating a positive school environment (Bosworth et al., 2011; Thapa et al., 2013) and is a contributing factor in the outcomes of students (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Shukla et al., 2016; Wang & Degol, 2016). Positive school climate supports academic achievement in students, while an adverse school climate limits the academic performance of students attending the school (Sulak, 2016). Lindstrom Johnson et al. (2016) claimed that school climate can potentially influence students' plans and, therefore, can positively contribute to students' outlook about college and post-graduation. Deepa’s (2015) research identified that absenteeism in high school students has a relationship to school climate. The findings suggest that high schools with a history of adverse school climates have a higher rate of high school students that are chronically absent. Hendron and Kearney (2016) examined the relationship between school climate and student absenteeism and found that school climate and absenteeism severity were closely related. Research has examined students' perceptions of a positive school climate and has identified a connection between positive school climate and increased student satisfaction with their own personal and academic life (Suldo et al., 2013). Students attending a school with a positive school climate experience less aggressive behavior (Elsaesser et al., 2013) and report a reduced number of incidents related to bullying (Low et al., 2014).

There is a need supported by research to examine the relationship between establishing a positive school climate and school wide PBIS as an alternative to exclusionary discipline. PBIS is intended to improve school climate while simultaneously addressing problematic student behavior in a school (Smolkowski et al., 2016). The goal of school wide PBIS initiatives is to build a positive school climate by following a foundational framework that consistently reinforces positive behavioral norms (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014). Calaraella et al. (2011) found that school climate showed significant improvements over four years in schools that
implemented PBIS. The results of the study showed the importance of relationships between the implementation of PBIS and the school climate of a high school (Calaraella et al., 2011).

Furthermore, Calaraella et al. (2011) called for further investigation into the relationship between implementing PBIS and the impact on school climate and student outcomes. Bradshaw et al. (2009) found that the I PBIS contributed to an improvement in the overall school climate. Bosworth and Judkins (2014) found that the use of school-wide PBIS decreased incidents of bullying. Furthermore, the study found school-wide PBIS supported a positive school climate in middle schools. Mitchell and Bradshaw (2013) researched the role of classroom discipline strategies and the impact of student perceptions about school climate. The study revealed, from the perspectives of students, that the implementation of a school-wide PBIS rather than the use of exclusionary discipline created a positive school climate (Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). These research studies support additional inquiry into the influence of PBIS on school climate and classroom use of ODRs in middle school settings.

**Alternative Discipline Practices**

School discipline systems have been set up to allow corporal punishment, zero tolerance, and progressive discipline, and yet, issues with student behavior remain constant. As students break particular rules, the only lesson is not to do "it" again. Schools that implement restorative practices have demonstrated a drop in the need for “punitive school discipline” (Gregory et al., 2016, p. 2). Alternatives to suspension do exist. Suspension should be a last resort, and California Education Code offers an array of alternatives to discipline (Robinett, 2012). Another alternative to suspension is the requirement of a parent/guardian to attend class with their child, an allowable alternative under Ed. Code 48900.1, which “authorizes a teacher to require a parent to attend class with his or her child” instead of an out-of-school suspension (Robinett, 2012,
p. 34). The only restrictions are that the student was suspended from class by his or her teacher and the student violated Ed Code 48900 for “an obscene act or habitual profanity or vulgarity” or 48900 for “disruption or willful defiance” (Robinett, 2012, p. 34). Robinett (2012) identified the potential inconvenience that this may bring parents and cited California Labor Code section 230.7 that protects parents from termination (p. 35).

Positive behavioral interventions and support. Formally known as Positive Behavior Support (PBS), PBIS has developed to be a school-wide framework (Sugai & Horner, 2002). PBIS was originally developed from the field of special education as a behavior intervention tool for special needs students. PBIS is an applied science that combines educational and environmental change methods to improve the quality of school environments and lower the number of incidents related to problematic student behavior (Carr et al., 2002). The implementation of PBIS has evolved from its original application into a broad range of systematic and individualized strategies appropriate for addressing the behavioral needs of all students within a school setting (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

Implementation. According to Sugai and Horner (2002), PBIS is an evidence-based, school-wide method for managing problematic student behavior. PBIS allows for the fostering of a positive school climate through the promotion of prosocial student behavior and is used in schools to decrease negative behavior and promote positive school culture and environment (Horner et al., 2010). PBIS is a school-wide approach to decreasing problem student behavior through the promotion of positive action (Soloman et al., 2012). The PBIS framework guides schools in moving away from traditional discipline to an alternative approach (Safran & Oswald, 2003). Vital elements of the PBIS framework include prevention-focused support, teaching appropriate school behaviors, research-based intervention practices, systems change to support
effective methods, and the use of data-based decision making (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Horner et al. (2010) described PBIS as having three levels of implementation: primary preventions, secondary intervention, and tertiary intervention. These levels, or tiers, form the framework for PBIS.

The PBIS framework was established for the implementation of school wide PBIS to act as a guide for public schools (Horner et al., 2010). The implementation of PBIS is completed in three tiers that are tailored to meet the individual needs of teachers and students within the school environment (Horner et al., 2004). This tiered system includes an intervention intended to promote the positive behavior of all students. Secondary interventions of support are intended for a targeted group of students who demonstrate needs beyond universal support practices. The tertiary level of support is intended for students demonstrating behavioral needs after secondary interventions have been implemented but have not been effective at meeting the student’s behavioral needs (Farkas et al., 2012). Each of these tiered levels of support includes specific systems and practices for schools to implement. Tier one uses systems and practices to create a school wide positive social culture. Tier two uses systems and practices that provide moderate support to students who continue to exhibit problem behavior. Tier three uses systems and practices to provide individualized support for students demonstrating chronic problem behavior (Horner & Sugai, 2015).

The PBIS framework requires a school team to be first formally trained in the implementation of the three tiers of PBIS. Afterward, the team develops a plan for implementing PBIS that is specific to their school based on identified factors from data collection (Horner & Sugai, 2015). Ennis and Swoszowski (2011) stated that this decision-making team is responsible for representing the school. The decision-making team should include representatives from each
grade level or subject area, school counselors, administrators, special education teachers, and support staff members. Critical features of PBIS implementation are observed in the majority of schools implementing PBIS school wide. These key features included are as follows:

1. Defining and teaching a small number of positively stated school wide expectations
2. Acknowledging the prosocial behavior of all students
3. Establishing a continuum of consequences so that discipline is consistent
4. Systematically teaching replacement behaviors (Kelm et al., 2014)

The above tenets of PBIS must be consistently implemented across all school settings with all students for PBIS to be effective. Research shows that the PBIS framework of PBIS has been taught to teachers and used in various school settings with diverse student populations (Fallon et al., 2012).

**Influence.** Research indicates that implementing a school wide PBIS initiative has a positive influence on school discipline, school climate, and student outcomes. Ogulmus and Vuran (2016) found that PBIS had a significant effect on improving negative student behavior and creating positive school climate in elementary schools. Chin et al. (2012) revealed a significant decrease in in-school suspension in elementary schools that implemented PBIS school wide. Kelm et al. (2014) found a decrease in ODRs for problematic student behavior and an increase in student academic achievement when PBIS was implemented. Bradshaw et al. (2009) studied the influence of PBIS on the perception of school climate of teachers at 37 elementary schools. The findings suggested that teachers revealed a positive climate after the implementation of PBIS. A majority of the research available regarding SWPBIS focuses on the PBIS in elementary schools (Dutton-Tillery et al., 2010; Kelm et al., 2014; Klein et al., 2012).
**Middle schools.** Although many of the studies regarding the implementation of PBIS have occurred in the elementary school setting, there appears to be a significant gap in the number of studies examining the implementation of PBIS in middle school settings. It is crucial to examine the implementation of PBIS in middle schools (Calaraella et al., 2011; Flannery et al., 2013; Malloy et al., 2015). Further research may uncover additional barriers to implementing PBIS in middle schools and provide suggestions for schools currently implementing or schools new to implementing PBIS (Flannery et al., 2013). Calaraella et al. (2011) suggested further research that contains a consistent measurement of implementation of PBIS in secondary schools, providing additional support for conducting further research related to the implementation of PBIS in secondary schools. Dutton-Tillery et al. (2010) suggested further exploration of the perceptions of behavior and the implementation of PBIS in other school districts and grade levels, including secondary schools. Malloy et al. (2015) also called for further research, which explores the implementation of PBIS in secondary school settings. These research studies supported the use of middle school settings in this research study in order to collectively consider the influence PBIS may have in secondary schools.

**Barriers.** Researchers have identified some potential barriers to the implementation of school wide PBIS. According to research, barriers to the sustainability of any school-based practice are essentially inevitable and often arise from the structure or dynamics of school resources, staff capacity, and school district policy (Turri et al., 2016). The results of Turri et al. (2016) provided empirical evidence that supported the idea that the presence of implementation barriers is related to implementation fidelity. Just as a relationship has been established between barriers and implementation fidelity, Feuerborn et al. (2016) also identified a relationship between school climate and barriers to the implementation of PBIS in middle schools.
Feuerborn et al. (2016) conducted a qualitative study seeking to gain a better understanding of middle and high school teachers' concerns and needs related to the implementation of PBIS in their schools and identified school climate as a common concern related to the implementation of PBIS. Both Turri et al. (2016) and Feuerborn et al. (2016) suggested future research that seeks to identify specific barriers that may influence the implementation of school wide practices such as PBIS. This research study sought to identify any perceived barriers to implementing PBIS by exploring the perceptions of secondary teachers. Obtaining and maintaining the buy-in of teachers is commonly identified as a potential barrier to the implementation of many school wide PBIS initiatives. In a quantitative study that included elementary and secondary schools, Pinkelman et al. (2015) sought to identify enablers and barriers related to the sustainability of the implementation of school wide PBIS. The results of Pinkelman et al. (2015) study revealed staff buy-in to be the most frequently identified barrier to sustaining the implementation of school wide PBIS.

Coffey and Horner (2012) also identified staff buy-in as relevant while examining facilitators and barriers to the implementation and sustainability of school wide PBIS. In another study, Lohrmann et al. (2016) investigated how problems with teacher and administrator buy-in of PBIS develop and are resolved from the perspectives of internal and external coaches. Results of the research study indicated that the sustained implementation of PBIS might be threatened if teachers perceive that the intervention is not producing important outcomes or worth the effort of implementation (Lohrmann et al., 2013). McDaniel et al. (2014) also identified staff buy-in as a barrier to the implementation of PBIS in their study of the implementation of PBIS in alternative education settings.
The review of literature related to barriers to implementing PBIS suggested that additional research is needed in middle school settings. Feuerborn et al. (2016) suggested that further research should be conducted to identify barriers by exploring the concerns of various school staff members. Pinkelman et al. (2015) suggested continued research to support further factors identified in their study as barriers to the implementation of PBIS. Further, Lohrmann et al. (2013) called for additional research that, through the perception of school staff members, examines the school climate conditions of schools that either successfully or unsuccessfully implement school wide PBIS. If the teachers of middle schools do not perceive a positive change in school climate when implementing PBIS, this perception may become a barrier to future implementation and sustainability of PBIS in middle schools and, thus, is worth further examination.

**Summary**

The purpose of Chapter 2 of this study was first to identify the theoretical framework that was used as a guide the research and then to present the literature identified as relevant to the research and that supported the research questions. The literature reviewed was used to establish what contribution the results of this research study would provide. Many research studies supported the implementation of PBIS as a school wide approach to improving school climate and reducing discipline concerns. Although the implementation of PBIS was widely studied, additional research related to certain aspects of PBIS was required to understand further the potential of implementing PBIS in diverse middle schools as an approach for improving school climate. Additional information was also needed to identify any potential barriers to implementing PBIS in middle schools. Finally, there was a lack of research that explored the
perception of school climate through the experience of middle school teachers. The in-depth, rich descriptions of middle school teachers would be a valuable addition to the literature.

Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature related to school discipline issues and the implementation of PBIS. The literature reviewed supported the need for this research study. Chapter 3 introduces the research design, methods of data collection, and data analysis procedures of this research study.
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

An outcome of the ineffectiveness of traditional discipline practices has been that many districts are seeking alternative methods for addressing student behavior and improving school climate (Smolkowski et al., 2016). Because maintaining a positive school climate is imperative to creating positive student outcomes and contributing to students feeling connected to school (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Peguero & Bracy, 2015), school districts have turned to Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

PBIS is a multi-tiered framework to make schools more effective and welcoming places. It establishes a social culture and the behavior supports needed to improve social, emotional, behavioral, and academic outcomes for all students. PBIS aims to support students’, families’, and the community’s needs. The program takes three years to be implemented with fidelity, and schools can be at varying stages of the implementation process based on school, student, and staff needs (Bradshaw et al., 2015).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine middle school teachers’ perspectives on the effectiveness of PBIS in lowering office discipline referrals (ODRs) and improving school climate. The objective was to examine teachers’ perceptions on effectiveness of PBIS at the middle school level. Phenomenology indicates that the researcher systematically sets aside personal biases of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). In addition, the researcher utilizes intuition and imagination as part of the data analysis (Moustakas, 1994).

Due to the lack of qualitative research on the outcomes of discipline practices for middle school students from the perspective of middle school teachers, the results will provide insights
regarding implementing PBIS in highly diverse middle school environments, which will aid districts in gaining a better understanding of the concerns and needs of the middle school teachers when implementing PBIS.

Chapter 3 begins with a discussion of the design used for this study followed by a description of the setting and participants of the study. Following this discussion are an examination of the procedures, the researcher’s role, the data collection process, and the data analysis used to establish an understanding of middle school teachers’ perceptions of school climate and ODRs when PBIS is implemented. Chapter 3 concludes with a discussion of the trustworthiness of the study followed by a discussion of the ethical considerations of the research study.

**Design**

I utilized a qualitative phenomenological research design for this research study. Data were collected through concern statements, archival data, and semi structured interviews. The phenomenological approach provided an avenue to describe the essence of the PBIS experience for middle school teachers. This type of study adds to the research on PBIS by providing a better understanding of the concerns, if any, middle school teachers have when PBIS is implemented in diverse schools.

The focus of the study was to understand middle school teachers by investigating teachers' perspectives of their school climate and ODRs after PBIS was implemented at their schools. A qualitative research design was chosen to examine how the teachers constructed the meaning of their experiences (Patton, 2015). Many research studies related to PBIS are quantitative in design and do not examine the perceptions of teachers (Flannery et al., 2013; Klein et al., 2012).
Selecting a qualitative research design allowed the researcher to conduct an examination of how the participating teachers in this study perceived their school climate before, during, and after their schools implemented PBIS. In phenomenological research, a relationship exists between the external perception of a natural object and the internal perceptions, memories, and judgments of the experience of that object (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological study seeks to describe the subjective experiences of participants. Examination of the lived experiences of individuals provides prevailing descriptions and is the only way to produce the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenological approach was used to emphasize the shared experience of a group of participants with a particular phenomenon while the essence of that experience was described. Phenomenology seeks to explain the essential nature of a shared experience (Creswell, 2013). The researcher of this study utilized a phenomenological approach to qualitative research to capture the essence of the perceptions the teachers had toward PBIS with a focus on school climate and ODRs.

**Research Questions**

In order to investigate the lived experiences and perceptions of middle school teachers in the PBIS environment, *Overarching question:* What are middle school teachers’ perceptions about the effectiveness of PBIS?

The study utilized four sub-questions to support the overarching question:

1. How do select middle school teachers describe the school climate when a school has PBIS?
2. What benefits, if any, did middle school teachers experience from PBIS?
3. What barriers, if any, do middle school teachers experience with PBIS?
4. What impact, if any, did PBIS have on the number of office discipline referrals?
Setting

The setting of the study was a northern California, urban school district. The school district had several middle schools implementing PBIS in accordance with a district initiative. The researcher chose this district because it contained several middle schools implementing PBIS and served several subgroups that had been historically underserved (socioeconomically disadvantaged, African American males, foster youth, special education, and homeless). The researcher selected the teacher participants from multiple middle schools within the selected school district.

The researcher first obtained approval from the northern California school district and then asked for consent from principals to contact middle school teachers and present the middle school teachers with a request to participate in the research study (see Appendix A). The middle school teachers were all teachers from three public middle schools selected from one school district that was implementing PBIS.

The district serves nearly 27,000 students. Of the students attending school within the district, 87.9% of the students are socioeconomically disadvantaged. The district’s student population represents a diverse population with 79.6% of the students qualifying for free or reduced lunch, 30.7% of them being English language learners, and 0.7% of the students being foster youth (California School Dashboard, 2018d). According to the CDE (2018d), student enrollment was as follows: 12.7% African Americans 41.5% Hispanic, and 27.3% White.

Sites

Three schools were selected to participate in this study using both a criterion and convenience sample. The selection of these schools was based on their being recognized by the northern California school district as a school implementing PBIS. The school district’s
associate superintendent and principals were contacted via email requesting their written consent (see Appendix A). In addition, a one-page summary of the study highlighting the study’s purpose, significance, and methods was sent to the associate superintendent and the three principals of the middle schools (see Appendix A).

Table 1  
Participating Sites

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Enrollment</td>
<td>544</td>
<td>468</td>
<td>547</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grades served</td>
<td>7th-8th</td>
<td>6th-8th</td>
<td>K-8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number teachers (7th and 8th)</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Site one.** School A (pseudonym) is located in the northern California district and serves Grades 7-8. The 2019-2020 academic year was the first year of PBIS implementation. The middle school had 544 students. According to the California Dashboard (2018d) 18.2% Asian, 3.1% Pacific Islander, 19.7% African American, 46.9% Hispanic, 0.6% American Indian, 7.7% White, 0.6% Filipino, and 2.8% Two or More Races represented the race/ethnicity of the student population. A criterion for participation in the study was that special groups as mentioned in the district initiative had to be represented in the student population. Special groups represented at School A included 1.1% foster youth, 29.0% English learners, 19.7% students with disabilities, 12.5% homeless, and 89.3% socioeconomically disadvantaged. Conditions and climate of the school were represented by data related to the attitudes, behaviors, and performance of students. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), a way to measure this statistic is through suspensions. School A’s suspension data for 2018-2019 school year included 11.4% of students
being suspended at least once and 22.7% of African American students being suspended at least once (CDE, 2018d).

**Site two.** School B (pseudonym) is located in the northern California district and serves Grades 6-8. The 2018-2019 academic year was the second year of PBIS implementation. The middle school has 468 students. According to the California School Dashboard (2018d), 6.4% Asian, 1.5% Pacific Islander, 14.5% African American, 60.7% Hispanic, 1.7% American Indian, 7.3% White, 0.4% Filipino, and 3.6% Two or More Races represented the race/ethnicity of the student population. A criterion for participation in the study was that special groups as mentioned in the district initiative had to be represented in the student population. Special groups represented at School B included 0.2% foster youth, 23.9% English learners, 19.7% students with disabilities, 6.8% homeless, and 80.3% socioeconomically disadvantaged. Conditions and climate of the school were represented by data related to the attitudes, behaviors, and performance of students. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), a way to measure this statistic is through suspensions. School B suspension data for 2018-2019 school year included 19.1% of students being suspended at least once and 28.9% of African American students being suspended at least once (California School Dashboard, 2018d).

**Site three.** School C (pseudonym) is located in the northern California district and serves Grades K-8. The 2017-2018 academic year was the third year of PBIS implementation. The middle school has 547 students. According to the California School Dashboard (2018d), 11.9% Asian, 0.7% Pacific Islander, 16.5% African American, 36.6% Hispanic, 0.4% American Indian, 21.6% White, 1.8% Filipino, and 6.4% Two or More Races represented the race/ethnicity of the student population. A criterion for participation in the study was that special groups as mentioned in the district initiative had to be represented in the student population. Special
groups represented at School C included 0.7% foster youth, 31.1% English learners, 17.7% students with disabilities, 11.7% homeless, and 94% socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Conditions and climate of the school were represented by data related to the attitudes, behaviors, and performance of students. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), a way to measure this statistic is through suspensions. School C suspension data for 2018-2019 school year included 5.5% of students being suspended at least once and 11% of African American students being suspended at least once (CDE, 2018d).

**Participants**

Criterion and purposeful sampling were used when selecting middle school teachers from the sites described. Qualitative inquiry typically provides an in-depth focus on a small sample of participants selected for a specific purpose (Patton, 2015). A phenomenological approach to qualitative research involves collecting data from a number of individuals who have experienced the same phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The aim of purposeful sampling is to obtain participants with insight into the phenomenon (Patton, 2015). The researcher obtained a purposeful sample by selecting current teachers from multiple middle schools implementing PBIS in a diverse public school district located in northern California.

All school sites had been recognized for implementing PBIS. Principals were asked to identify middle school teachers serving seventh- and eighth-grade students based on the criterion that they had been a teacher at the school before PBIS implementation.

The goal was to have 9-12 teachers who could participate in the structured interview representing each of the three schools; the final number of participants totaled nine. Following the principals’ identification of middle school teachers, the teachers were contacted via email and were notified that they were recommended by the principal as a possible participant (see
Appendix B). Following teacher agreement, written consent forms were sent via email and were collected the day of the structured interview; hard copies were provided as requested (see Appendix C).

**Sampling Procedures**

A total of nine middle school teachers from three different schools participated in this study for the structured interviews. Teachers were from Grades 7 and 8. The study was open to all content area teachers including, but not limited to, general education teachers and special education teachers. After receiving the principals’ lists of middle school teachers meeting the specific criteria, the researcher emailed the teachers to explain the research study and offered to provide them with the interview questions. After explaining the research, teachers were asked if they were willing to participate in the study. Consent forms were emailed to the teachers who agree to participate prior to any data collection. Teachers were offered an incentive of a $10 Starbucks gift card for being involved in the structured interviews to demonstrate gratitude for their participation and signify the conclusion of their participation in the study.

**Sample size.** The researcher aimed the sample size at 9-12 teachers, three to four teachers from School A, three to four teachers from School B, and three to four teachers from School C. This sample size was in line with published guidelines (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). After criteria sampling, a convenience sample was used. Convenience sampling in this case means that the teachers selected were willing to participate. Pseudonyms are used to maintain teachers’ confidentiality. Interviews were one-on-one to maintain confidentiality and privacy.
**Procedures**

The researcher’s first step was to obtain the necessary approval for conducting the research study by contacting the associate superintendent in the northern California district and submitting the proposal for district-level review (see Appendix A). The researcher then emailed the principals of three middle schools implementing PBIS to request permission to seek study participants from their school. The researcher used purposeful sampling to ensure participants had experienced the phenomenon. Triangulation was applied by collecting data in multiple ways. The following procedures were utilized to collect data on middle school teachers’ perspectives on PBIS implementation: (a) concern statements, (b) archival data, and (c) interviews.

**The Researcher’s Role**

Data were analyzed using methods recommended by Moustakas (1994). Moustakas discussed the need for researchers to set aside bias. The researcher was a part of the implementation of PBIS in a middle school setting, and her prior PBIS experience may have been considered a bias. The researcher enjoyed the process of implementing PBIS due to the emphasis on positive behavior, rather than negative behavior. Yet, she recognized the need to learn more about PBIS in middle schools.

Bias was addressed by recognizing that the researcher had biases related to the study including believing PBIS is beneficial and also that some schools do not use PBIS with fidelity. The researcher took time to reflect and be open-minded before each interview and before collecting any other type of data. The researcher recorded teacher responses, used transcripts, and took detailed notes during interview observations, which aided in lowering potential bias. It is also important to note the researcher had been a middle school teacher in the northern
California District for 4 years at the time of the study. As a middle school teacher within the district, the researcher had experience with PBIS and the implementation experience.

**Data Collection**

In phenomenological research methods, data collection needs to focus on how the participant experiences the phenomenon. Three modes of data collection were used for this study including (a) concern statements, (b) review of archival data, and (c) individual interviews.

**Concern Statements**

Qualitative open-ended items were used to gather more specific information about teacher concerns, needs, and existing capacities. These items were intended to provide more specific feedback and establish a baseline. The open-ended statement of concern was used to assess teacher concerns for PBIS. Open-ended statements establish a method of assessing stakeholder concerns for an innovation and is a component of the Concerns-Based Adoption Model (CBAM). To encourage genuine responses, teachers provided their responses anonymously via a survey link (Hall & Hord, 2011, p. 79). The survey was available to all middle school teachers in the northern California school district and was provided at the end of district PBIS training as an option to complete.

| Table 2
Concern Statements |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you think of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports what concerns do you have? Please be detailed and answer in complete sentences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Archival Data

Office discipline referral and suspension data were obtained from the three participating school sites. Variables included the number of ODRs from 2018-2019 and the number of ODRs from 2019-2020, the number of suspensions from 2018-2019 and the number of suspensions from 2019-2020, the number of expulsions from 2018-2019 and the number of expulsions from 2019-2020. The archival data specifically focused on middle school students, African American students, foster youth, and special education as to align with the district initiative.

Interviews

The researcher conducted structured interviews with the study participants. Phenomenological studies focus on descriptions of experiences and are typically conducted using extended interviews with participants that provide in-depth responses (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews allow for the collection of direct quotations from participants about their experiences (Patton, 2015).

The researcher conducted the interviews individually with each participant face-to-face or virtually using the Zoom platform. Interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the participant and the researcher and were 25-45 minutes in length. The researcher used predetermined interview questions (see Appendix D) to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each interviewee (Patton, 2015). The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim each interview session. The audio recordings were transferred to a secure password-protected laptop. The transcriptions were digitally stored on the same password-protected laptop, and hard copies were stored in a locked file cabinet (Patton, 2015).

The researcher began the interview with demographic and get-to-know-you questions intended to foster a positive interview environment wherein the teacher felt comfortable opening
up and sharing his or her experiences (Creswell, 2013). The researcher followed up the introductory questions with the actual interview questions directly related to the research questions and potential probing questions. The researcher focused on the central phenomenon of the study by relating the interview questions directly to the research questions. Probing questions were used when needed to allow participants to elaborate on their responses (Patton, 2015). The researcher concluded the interviews with questions seeking any additional information the teacher may have had about PBIS that was not already shared during the interview.

The focus of the study was to highlight the experience middle school teachers had with PBIS. School climate and ODRs were established as important factors in effective schools and was a focus during the interviews (Bosworth et al., 2011; Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Klein et al., 2012). The interview questions were intended to gather the information that would answer the research questions and provide the essence of the central phenomenon of the study. The interviews concluded with a question about any last thoughts or ideas of the participants (Creswell, 2013), allowing for any additional information from the participants that could be used to provide suggestions for other middle schools implementing PBIS.

**Data Analysis**

**Concern Statements**

Thematic analysis, a well-established method of qualitative analysis was used to analyze each response to the concerns and needs prompts (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The concern statements were read independently, codes or phases were recorded, and then the codes were grouped into themes. This method of analysis allowed the researcher to understand the specific nature of teachers’ concerns and needs.
Archival Data

Archival data were analyzed to determine if the number of ODRs, suspensions, and expulsions increased, decreased, or experienced no change from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020. The analysis focused on the number of ODRs before the implementation of PBIS and the number of ODRs since the implementation of PBIS. The analysis also focused on the number of out-of-school suspensions/expulsions before the implementation of PBIS and since the implementation of PBIS. School Wide Information System (SWIS) was the data platform used to collect and analyze ODRs. Aeries (student information system) was the data system used to collect and analyze suspensions.

Interviews

Data collection for the research study was in the form of individual interviews. As preparation for data analysis, each participant’s interview session audio recording was transcribed verbatim. Data analysis coincided with the data collection. Using phenomenological data analysis procedures identified by Moustakas (1994) and supported by Creswell (2013), the data analysis of the research study included the bracketing out of the researcher’s assumptions regarding school climate, ODRs, and the implementation of PBIS.

The researcher organized statements relevant to the phenomenon from the data collected from participants, identified meaning from the statements, and coded them into common themes. The themes were further developed into textural and structural descriptions of the experiences related to school climate and ODRs when a school had implemented PBIS. A thematic analysis software was used to easily identify and analyze patterns of themes within the interviews.
Ethical Considerations

Since this qualitative research study sought to understand the perceptions of middle school teachers through the use of human subjects as participants, there were ethical considerations (Creswell, 2013). The researcher provided informed consent forms to the participants to be reviewed and signed before data collection began (see Appendix C). Before each interview session, the researcher further explained the consent form and reminded participants they could have opted out of the research study at any time. The researcher used pseudonyms for participants and school locations to minimize the risk of potential negative results influencing the schools and the selected participants of the study. To further ensure confidentiality of the participants, all physical and digital data gathered were kept secure at all times.

Limitations

Possible limitations have been identified. This study looked at one northern California school district and only focused on three middle school sites. The findings of the study may not be generalized to other middle school sites within or outside the northern California school district. The researcher is a teacher within the northern California school district, which made her an insider. Teachers may have limited their responses due to their relationship with the researcher or her perceived relationship with the school district.

Summary

Chapter 3 identifies a phenomenological approach to qualitative research as the research design of the research study. The rationale and justification for using a phenomenological research design to conduct this study was provided. The site and participants of the research study were explained along with how the site and participants were selected. Data were
collected from semi-structured interviews. Data analysis procedures for the data collected were discussed (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The chapter concludes with an outline of the procedures for strengthening the ethical considerations of the research study.
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine middle school teachers’ perspectives on the effectiveness of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in lowering office discipline referrals (ODRs) and improving school climate. The objective was to examine teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of PBIS at the middle school level. The purpose of Chapter 4 is to present the results of the data analysis and begins with a statement about the impact of COVID-19 on K-12 education and the study. A brief introduction to each participant is followed by the findings of the study. This chapter outlines how horizontalizing statements relevant to the phenomenon were formed and coded into common themes. The themes were then further developed into descriptions of the experience of the school climate, discipline data were used to examine trends with ODRs, if any. The results are discussed in a narrative form organized by theme and then presented as answers to the study’s research questions.

Impact of COVID on Education

The study was conducted from spring 2020 to fall 2020. In March 2020, the three schools participating in the study switched to virtual learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The current closure of the physical school and the switch to virtual learning increased the amount of time students spent at home. Furthermore, in a short period of time, teachers had to adapt to a new model of instruction. Understanding these impacts and how best to support students’ social and emotional needs after the huge disruption of COVID-19 was an integral part of instruction that occurred from March through June 2020. Participants stated that many students faced
greater food insecurity, loss of family income, loss of family members to the coronavirus, and fear of catching the virus themselves. At the time of this study, all participants were middle school teachers that just concluded the academic school year 2019-2020.

Participants

One school district in the Northern California region agreed to participate in the study. Three middle schools within the district with PBIS programs were selected, and the principals were contacted for their approval of the researcher to interview teachers. The principal identified teachers that (a) taught seventh- and or eighth-grade students and (b) had taught at the site for a minimum of 2 years. The middle schools and participants were described using pseudonyms. Of the 15 teachers contacted (five teachers from each middle school), nine agreed to participate in the study and also met the participation requirement of being employed at the school for a minimum of 2 years. Table 3 depicts demographic data for the participants, specifically gender, age, ethnicity. Eight general education teachers and one special education teacher were interviewed. Of the participants, two were male and seven were female. The age range was between 25 and 45 years old.

Table 3
Demographic Information for Participants: Gender, Age, and Ethnicity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Frequency of response</th>
<th>Demographic</th>
<th>Frequency of response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td>Race/Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Black/African American</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>White/Caucasian</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>Latino or Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30 years old</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>American Indian or Alaskan Native</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-40 years old</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-50 years old</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50 years or older</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The demographic portion of the interview also asked participants to identify their race/ethnicity. The breakdown for race/ethnicity was as follows: one participant reported to be Black/African American, four participants reported to be White/Caucasian, three participants reported to be Latino/Hispanic, and one participant reported to be American Indian or Alaskan Native. Participants were asked about their highest degree earned, the grade they thought at the time of the study, the subject they taught at the time of the study, and the number of years they had taught (see Table 4).

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participant 4</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participant 7</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree: BA/BS</td>
<td>Degree: BA/BS</td>
<td>Degree: BA/BS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade levels taught: 7th and 8th</td>
<td>Grade levels taught: 7th and 8th</td>
<td>Grade levels taught: 7th and 8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Experience: 2 years</td>
<td>Teaching Experience: 5 years</td>
<td>Teaching Experience: 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject: Science</td>
<td>Subject: Science</td>
<td>Subject: History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participant 5</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participant 8</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree: EDD</td>
<td>Degree: BA/BS</td>
<td>Degree: MA/MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade levels taught: 7th and 8th</td>
<td>Grade levels taught: 7th and 8th</td>
<td>Grade levels taught: 7th and 8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Experience: 10 years</td>
<td>Teaching Experience: 4 years</td>
<td>Teaching Experience: 14 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject: Physical Education</td>
<td>Subject: Science</td>
<td>Subject: Science</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participant 6</strong></td>
<td><strong>Participant 9</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Degree: MA/MS</td>
<td>Degree: BA/BS</td>
<td>Degree: MA/MS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade levels taught: 7th and 8th</td>
<td>Grade levels taught: 8th</td>
<td>Grade levels taught: 7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Experience: 3 years</td>
<td>Teaching Experience: 18 years</td>
<td>Teaching Experience: 4 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject: Math</td>
<td>Subject: ELA</td>
<td>Subject: Special Education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Qualitative data were collected from nine teachers referred to the researcher by their sites’ principals. Site principals identified the teachers that met the required criteria. Teachers in the interviews met the following inclusion criteria: (a) teacher at district-identified PBIS school,
(b) middle school teacher teaching seventh- and or eighth-grade students, and (c) teacher at the site for a minimum of 2 years. The nine participants shared their experiences through their unique individual lenses. In addition to coming from three different schools, the participants also varied in their years of teaching. Participants are described next in greater detail using pseudonyms.

**Participant 1**

In his reply to the study invitation, Participant 1 identified himself as a science teacher at School A. He had 2 years of experience in the field of education all at School A and was an intern teacher, meaning he was still in the process of earning his teaching credential. Participant 1 was part of the PBIS team at the school, and he regularly gave out PBIS incentive tickets to his students and noticed improved behavior when he did so on a consistent basis. He did write more ODRs this year in comparison to last school year, but stated it was to gather the data on the incidents not necessarily to get the student in trouble. He highlighted “the biggest concern is teacher buy-in and getting them to move from a reactive approach to a restorative approach.”

**Participant 2**

Participant 2 identified herself as a physical education teacher (Department Chair) at School A in her response to the invitation to participate in the study. She was also earning her doctorate. Participant 2 had 10 years of experience in the field of education with three of those years spent at School A. During the interview with Participant 2, she explained that before the school began implementing PBIS, staff members were not consistent in how they acknowledged the positive behavior of students. “Kids would get rewarded for their behavior, but there was no consistency.” Participant 2 excitedly reported how PBIS changed the school culture by improving teacher consistency in rewarding the positive behavior of students. “The [kids] in my
house [team] expect a reward and that, accompanied with consistent expectations, really allowed us to change that school culture.” Participant 2 acknowledged not all teachers bought into the acknowledgment system and they continued to have challenges with their students. She also mentioned that a great deal of the work to implement and maintain PBIS was on her, the PBIS facilitator. “Once our Vice-Principal left and we did not have a consistent Activities Director, a lot of the responsibilities with PBIS became mine, which was a challenge because I was also teaching full time.”

Participant 3

Participant 3 identified herself as a math teacher at School A in her response to the invitation to participate in the study. Participant 3 had 3 years of teaching experience, all at School A, had recently finished the intern program, and was in the teacher induction program. During the interview, Participant 3 highlighted that she wanted to join the PBIS team for the upcoming school year and would be talking to the new principal. She was nervous about the transition to a new administrator and what that would mean for some of the established programs. “We have a new Principal and I think a new Vice Principal, I don’t know what this means for PBIS.” She already had strong relationships with her students so PBIS and the PBIS incentives like the tickets only improved things in her classroom. “I was really into the tickets and giving them away for everything.” She mentioned that a new teacher was struggling in her class with behavior management; the tickets did not seem to help the situation and the behaviors continued to get worse.

We had a new science teacher, she was writing referrals and sending students out of class all the time, a lot of other teachers tried to get her to pass out tickets and gave her ideas about what she could do in her class, but it did not help, she ended up quitting in December and that classroom never recovered.
Participant 4

Participant 4 identified herself as a science teacher at School B in her response to the invitation to participate in the study. Participant 4 had 5 years of teaching experience, with three years spent at School B. She was involuntarily transferred to a new school due to low enrollment, but because another teacher relocated, she was allowed to return back to School B. She had been involved with the PBIS program at her site in the past and will continue that involvement for the 2020-2021 school year. She had a new principal this year that seemed enthusiastic about the work the PBIS team has been doing over the years. “We have a new principal this upcoming year, I’m glad my vice principal is returning. She has been the administrator working with the PBIS team, the new principal seems enthusiastic about PBIS.”

Participant 5

Participant 5 identified herself as a science teacher at School B in her response to the invitation to participate in the study. Participant 5 had 4 years of teaching experience, all at School B. Participant 5 said she would be moving and would not be returning to School B for the 2020-2021 school year. She said the relocation was due to her boyfriend changing job locations and she would be looking for a new teaching placement near his work location. She did her entire career at School B. She stated the school has implemented PBIS but still has work that needs to be done to improve the school climate. “[B] has been implementing PBIS and I see the students get their positive behavior tickets, and they are excited about the rewards, but the school needs to work somethings still . . . yeah . . . like the school climate needs to improve overall.”
Participant 6

Participant 6 identified herself as an ELA teacher at School B in her response to the invitation to participate in the study. Participant 6 had 18 years of teaching experience, all at various schools within the district. She was also the acting union representative at her school as well as a new teacher induction mentor. “I’m involved in several different things on campus, I appreciate getting to work with the new teachers. I have been a new teacher mentor for several years. Several of our new teachers really buy into PBIS.”

Participant 7

Participant 7 identified himself as a History teacher at School C in his response to the invitation to participate in the study. Participant 7 shared that he had two years of teaching experience, all at School C. “I was a long-term substitute for the district, and then after the credential program I got this job. Most of the teachers at my site on the middle school participate in PBIS, the students really like fun Friday.”

Participant 8

Participant 8 identified herself as a science teacher at School C in her response to the invitation to participate in the study. Participant 8 had 14 years of teaching experience, but had only been at the school and within the district for 2 years. She recently completed her Masters in Educational Leadership and would like to transition into administration within the next few years.

Participant 9

Participant 9 identified herself as a special education teacher at School C in her response to the invitation to participate in the study. Participant 9 had 4 years of teaching experience, all
at School C, and recently finished her MA in special education and accepted a new job within the district as a PBIS specialist.

**Concern Statements**

On June 2, 2020, the researcher sent Cycle 1 of the PBIS concern statements. The survey was administered to all middle school teachers working within the three selected schools within the northern California school district. During the first cycle, 12 teachers responded to the two concern statement prompts (see Table 5). A second reminder email asking for participants to respond to the prompt generated an additional six responses from six participants. The total number of responses completed was 18 responses from 18 participants.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5 Concern Statements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Statement 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When you think of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports what concerns do you have? Please be detailed and answer in complete sentences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Results**

This research explored how middle school teachers in three northern California middle schools perceived the effectiveness of PBIS in lowering ODRs and improving school climate. A qualitative phenomenological research design was used to understand the phenomenon of the implementation of PBIS in middle schools by investigating the participants’ perceptions of the effectiveness of PBIS. Data were gathered and then analyzed using phenomenological data analysis procedures identified by Moustakas (1994) and supported by Creswell (2013).
Individual interview transcripts and concern statements were coded and established into themes, which then were aligned with the study’s research questions. This section presents the findings gathered from the data, including the words of study participants, to describe the essence of the phenomenon studied and to answer the research questions.

**Theme Development**

The researcher identified eight open codes from individual interviews and written concern statements. The eight open codes were used to support the development of thematic categories with textural and structural descriptions (see Table 6). Following the data analysis procedures of Moustakas (1994), the researcher formed preliminary groupings by identifying each non-repetitive statement. Repetitive statements were then coded and categorized. I eliminated codes with a frequency of fewer than five occurrences leaving eight open codes. Further analysis and clustering of the eight open codes yielded four central themes:

1. Experienced improved school climate
2. Experienced improved school practices
3. Experienced difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide practices
4. Experienced difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy in
Table 6

*Developed Theme Open Code Frequency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Developed Theme</th>
<th>Open Code</th>
<th>Frequency of open code across data sets</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Experienced improved school climate</td>
<td>Described improved school climate</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Described current school climate as better</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced improved school practices</td>
<td>Improvement in ineffective and inconsistent discipline practices</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Improved practices for acknowledging positive student behavior</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide practices</td>
<td>Identified financial resources as a need for maintaining PBIS</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identified monitoring/data tracking as a barrier</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in</td>
<td>Identified establishing buy in of teachers as a barrier</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identified maintaining teacher buy-in as a barrier</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Addressing the Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study and the analysis of the data collected. By examining and categorizing statements into codes and themes described in the previous section, the researcher was able to formulate answers to the research questions. Table 7 displays the research questions and the themes identified to answer the research question.
Table 7
Research Questions and Identified Themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Theme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How do select middle school teachers describe the school climate when a school has</td>
<td>Experienced improved school climate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PBIS?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What benefits, if any did middle school teachers experience from PBIS?</td>
<td>Experienced improved school practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What barriers, if any, do middle school teachers experience from PBIS?</td>
<td>Experienced difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Experienced difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Research question one.** Theme one emerged from the data and formed the answer to the first research question: How do select middle school teachers describe the school climate when a school has PBIS? Theme one represents how participants experienced an improvement in school climate when a school had PBIS. The two open codes used to formulate theme one described the climate of the schools at the time of the study as improved and better. When analyzed, the two open codes with high reoccurring frequencies depicting a common experience related to an improvement in school climate were: (a) described an improvement in the school climate and (b) described school climate as better.

**Described an improvement in the school climate.** This code first emerged when the individual interview transcriptions were analyzed and then reappeared when the concern statements were coded. During individual interviews, seven participants described their current school climate as improved, and the others responded using terms reflective of an improved school climate. These perceptions of the improved school climate emerged when participants
responded to Question 4 during the interview. Participant 3 responded, “The climate has improved, it is more positive for both the students and teachers.”

**Described school climate as better.** Participant 6 responded to the question a little differently but still reflective of the current better school climate by stating, “Well, it has gotten better. Because, just being realistic, there was a time when it wasn’t.” Participants’ responses on the concern statements described their school’s current climate in better terms, such as, “The school climate at my school since we started using PBIS strategies has seen a better overall climate among students and teachers for the most part.” Participant 2 shared during the individual interview, “Since doing PBIS, my school’s climate has become more positive and negative student behaviors have decreased.”

**Research question two.** Theme two emerged from the data to form the answer to the second research question: What benefits, if any, did middle school teachers experience from PBIS? Theme two describes how middle school teachers experienced the benefit of improved school practices at a school with PBIS. This theme emerged from two open codes with high reoccurring frequencies that, when analyzed, illustrated a common experience of improved school practices as a result of implementing PBIS. With 20 occurrences, this theme had a higher number of reoccurring open codes than the other three themes that emerged. The two frequently reoccurring codes were: (a) improvement in ineffective and inconsistent discipline practices and (b) improved practices for acknowledging positive student behavior.

**Improvement in ineffective and inconsistent discipline practices.** This code appeared in the transcriptions of the individual interviews and surfaced again in the participant responses on the concern statements. Participant 1 revealed during the interview that School A “has a reputation for discipline issues” before the school implemented PBIS. During the interview with
Participant 2, she offered a similar perception of climate at School A before the school had PBIS. “We had a lot of referrals. A lot of suspensions.” Participant 5 had a similar perception of the school climate at School B, reflected in her interview, “When I came to the school, behavior was bad. There were a lot of fights. They were a lot of kids roaming the hallways when they were supposed to be in class. A lot of disruptive behavior.” Participant 5 credited PBIS for beginning the process of changing the school’s discipline practices and making them more consistent. A concern statement response stated that School B had inconsistent discipline practices before the school had PBIS. “I was here when we were not very consistent with what was going on. Each teacher had their own management plan. With PBIS that is starting to change.” Participant 9 stated that establishing discipline flowcharts was an influential factor in PBIS.

PBIS has positively impacted the school climate at school C. Since expectations are taught, and consequences are fair, ambiguity has been eliminated, and teachers (as well as students) have a clear understanding of how things are run. The school has become safer, fairer, and more positive.

Participant 8 affirmed in her interview that PBIS improved the discipline practices at School C, “Since PBIS, discipline is down, and expectations for a safe environment has increased.”

*Improved practices for acknowledging positive student behavior.* This open code was developed from reoccurring statements found during the analysis of the individual interviews. Participant 2 shared that PBIS improved how the teachers acknowledged the positive behavior of students. “I think that PBIS provides a framework that helps students learn what the behavior expectations are. I think that PBIS holds teachers accountable, as adults, to deliver on our promises.” Participant 7’s response to interview Question 6 also suggested that PBIS improved how teachers acknowledged the positive behavior of students, “Teachers are more consistent
with how students are rewarded, and in turn, the students are more consistent with their behavior."

**Research question three.** Both themes three and four are used to answer research question three: What barriers, if any, do middle school teachers experience from PBIS? Theme three identified difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide PBIS practices and four identified establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in as barriers to PBIS.

**Theme three: Experienced difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide PBIS practices.** This theme emerged from two open codes with high reoccurring frequencies that, when analyzed, illustrated a common experience of difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide PBIS practices. The two frequently reoccurring codes were: (a) identified financial resources as a need for maintaining PBIS and (b) identified monitoring/data tracking as a barrier.

*Identified financial resources as a need for maintaining PBIS.* This code was developed from reoccurring statements found when analyzing the transcriptions of the individual participant interviews. When responding to Question 11 on the interview guide, Participant 4 mentioned the struggle, as PBIS leader on campus, funding the acknowledgment system that is a part of PBIS.

Funding has been difficult. We’ve had to be really creative in the type of rewards, there wasn’t like a PBIS budget, so, we have had to be really creative. We have a new principal this upcoming school year who promises to support funding though moving forward.

Participant 4 was the only participant to say financial resources were a barrier to PBIS, specifically. However, several participants indicated that more financial resources would help overcome the barriers to maintaining PBIS. When responding to Question 12 from the interview guide, four participants suggested that extra funding would be beneficial to overcoming barriers to maintaining PBIS. Participant 3 mentioned the need for extra funding for purchasing student
incentives. “Money always helps. I mean for the rewards and stuff.” Participant 8 shared the same need for more funds to maintain the acknowledgment system of PBIS.

*Identified monitoring/data tracking as a barrier.* This code first surfaced during analysis of the interview transcriptions and reoccurred more frequently in the concern statements. During the interview with Participant 7, he stated monitoring PBIS as one of several barriers he experienced with PBIS. “Monitoring PBIS is challenging, and luckily we have a PBIS team that is willing to adjust, when we see an issue.” Participant 9 mentioned that at the beginning, PBIS was hard to monitor. “The first year was tough because it [PBIS] was something new, hard to monitor.” Participant 4 said monitoring has been the biggest barrier to PBIS. “I would say that maybe our biggest barrier to PBIS, adults being consistent.”

*Theme four: Experienced difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in.* This theme emerged from a statement that first appeared during analysis of the data from the individual interviews. Several reoccurrences were coded along with related statements during the analysis of the data gathered from the concern statements. Two open codes with high reoccurring frequencies, when analyzed, illustrated a common experience of teacher buy-in as a barrier. The two frequently reoccurring codes were: (a) identified establishing buy-in of teachers as a barrier and and (b) identified maintaining teacher buy-in as a barrier.

*Identified establishing teacher buy-in of teachers as a barrier.* This code was first coded in the individual interview transcriptions. Participant 2 specifically referenced teacher buy-in as a barrier. During the interview with Participant 2, she identified initial teacher buy-in as a past barrier. “Just getting everyone on the same page is all. That initial teacher buy-in, you know, especially from veteran teachers.” When Participant 4 was asked at the end of her interview if there were anything else she would like to share about PBIS at her site, she reflected on the
importance of establishing buy-in from teachers. “Buy-in makes a huge difference. Before, we had a group where some were for it, and some were not. It doesn’t work unless you have 100% or, close to 100% on board.”

A concern statement indicated that it was particularly hard to obtain teacher buy-in at the middle school level, “Teachers’ buy-in is an issue. Many of the teachers did not understand how or why they were to reward students for doing what they were supposed to do.” Participant 9 shared that it seemed more difficult to obtain initial buy-in, “It’s [PBIS] often seen as an elementary thing.” Participant 8 stated, “Getting buy-in was hard. But, once all the staff was finally on board and we consistently followed our PBIS plan, PBIS has been easy. I like that there are clear and consistent expectations throughout the school.”

Identified maintaining teacher buy-in as a barrier. This code emerged during analysis of the concern statements. Seven participants wrote statements indicating that maintaining teacher buy-in was a barrier to implementing PBIS. Participant 1 recognized that not only was it difficult to obtain buy-in but that also maintaining teacher buy-in over time was a barrier to implementing PBIS. “The biggest obstacle in PBIS at our school was getting the entire staff to buy in and staying consistent after doing so.” Participant 5 stated, “Achieving and then constantly maintaining teacher buy-in impacts the outcomes of PBIS.” Participant 2 shared, “At the beginning of the year we are all about PBIS, but as the year progresses, it’s hard to keep up everyone’s momentum, and we become less consistent.”

A Change in Office Discipline Referrals

To examine discipline data, access was provided to two data managing systems. The first platform was the northern California district’s principal dashboard (M. Jewell, personal communication, August 21, 2020). The principal’s dashboard is used to share district and school
site data that include, but are not limited to, disciplinary behaviors and the resulting consequences (M. Jewell, personal communication, August 21, 2020). The second data management system used was SWIS, a confidential web-based information system used to collect, summarize, and use student behavior data for decision making. Schools A, B, and C had information in the principal dashboard that identified the top five offenses resulting in suspension out of school and had data reporting the top five consequences. The data were used to compare data from the academic school years of 2018-2019 and 2019-2020. For the SWIS suite, Schools A, B, and C had referral data for the 2019-2020 school year, but only school C had office discipline data for the 2018-2019 school year. The data were used to answer the research question: What impact, if any, did PBIS have on the number of office discipline referrals? The theme that emerged was that School C experienced an increase in the number of ODRs; findings were not able to be determined for schools A and B (M. Jewell, personal communication, August 21, 2020).

**Northern California District: Offenses and the resulting top five consequences.** In 2018-2019 in the Northern California School District of the study, the top five offenses resulting in out-of-school suspension were the following:

1. Willfully used force/violence
2. Treat/Caused/Attempted Injury
3. Disrupted/Defied School Rules
4. Sexual Harassment
5. Dangerous Object/Firearm

In 2018-2019 in the Northern California School District of the study, the top five consequences were the following:
1. Suspension Out of School
2. Parent Called
3. Counseled by Vice Principal
4. Detention
5. Restorative Justice program

**Principal dashboard.** District wide, the average discipline count per academic day increased from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 (see Figure 1). The April-June data for 2019-2020 were not reported due to school closures as a result of COVID-19.

![Average discipline count per academic day by month](image)

*Figure 1.* Average discipline count per academic day by month. Compiled from “School Principal Dashboard Report,” by M. Jewell, personal communication, August 21, 2020.

**School A: Offenses and the resulting top five consequences.** In 2018-2019, school A identified the top five offenses resulting in suspension out of school:

1. Willfully Used Force/Violence
2. Threat/Caused/Attempted Injury
3. Disrupted/Defied School Rules
4. Sexual Harassment
5. Dangerous Object/Firearm

In 2018-2019, School A identified the top five consequences as:

1. Suspension Out of School
2. Restorative Justice Program
3. Parent Called
4. Counseled by Vice Principal
5. Counseled by Principal

In 2019-2020, School A identified the top five offenses resulting in suspension out of school:

1. Parent Called
2. Willfully Used force/violence
3. Threat/Caused/Attempted Injury
4. Disrupted/Defied School Rules
5. Sexual Harassment

In 2019-2020, School A identified the top five consequences as:

1. Parent Called
2. Suspension Out of School
3. Detention
4. Counseled by Vice Principal
5. Referred by Teacher

At School A, the average discipline count per academic day increased from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 (see Figures 2 and 3).
**Figure 2.** Average discipline count per academic day by month (2018-2019). *Note.* Compiled from “School Principal Dashboard Report,” by M. Jewell, personal communication, August 21, 2020.

**Figure 3.** Average discipline count per academic day by month (2019-2020). *Note.* Compiled from “School Principal Dashboard Report,” by M. Jewell, personal communication, August 21, 2020.

**School B: Offenses and the resulting top five consequences.** In 2018-2019, School B identified the top five offenses resulting in suspension out of school:

1. Willfully Used Force/violence
2. Disrupted/Defied School Rules
3. Obscene Act Habitual Vulgar
4. Threat/Caused/Attempted Injury
5. Dangerous Object/Firearm/Knife

In 2018-2019, School B identified the top five consequences as:

1. Detention
2. Suspension Out of School
3. Parent Called
4. Referred to Principal
5. Restorative Justice Program

In 2019-2020, School B identified the top five offenses resulting in suspension out of school as:

1. Willfully Used Force/Violence
2. Obscene Act Habitual Vulgar
3. Threat/Caused/Attempted Injury
4. Dangerous Object/Firearm/Knife
5. Disrupted/Defied School Rules

In 2019-2020, School B identified the top five consequences as:

1. Detention
2. Suspension Out of School
3. Parent Called
4. Student Conference
5. In-House Suspension

At School B, the discipline count per academic day increased from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 (see Figures 4 and 5).
School C: Offenses and the resulting top five consequences. In 2018-2019, School C identified the top five offenses resulting in suspension out of school as:

1. Willfully Used Force/Violence
2. Threat/Caused/Attempted Injury
3. Obscene Act Habitual Vulgar
4. 
5. 


Figure 5. Average discipline count per academic day by month (2019-2020). Note. Compiled from “School Principal Dashboard Report,” by M. Jewell, personal communication, August 21, 2020.
4. Threats to School Personnel/Pupils
5. Disrupted/Defied School Rules

In 2018-2019, School C identified the top five consequences as:

1. Suspension Out of School
2. Parent Called
3. Counseled by Principal/VP
4. Teen Intervention
5. Counseled by Counselor

In 2019-2020, School C identified the top five offenses resulting in suspension out of school as:

1. Willfully Used Force/Violence
2. Threat/caused/Attempted Injury
3. Obscene Act Habitual Vulgar
4. Property Damage School/Private
5. Threats to School Personnel

In 2019-2020, School C identified the top five consequences as:

1. Suspensions Out of School
2. Parent Called
3. Counseled by Principal/VP/Counselor
4. Community Service at the School with Parent Permission
5. Detention

At School, C the average discipline count per academic day increased from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020 (see Figures 6 and 7).
Office discipline referrals at School C. The number of ODRs increased for all months with data with the exception of January and March. It should be noted that March 2020 is the month of school closures due to COVID-19 (see Figures 8 and 9).
Summary

Chapter 4 presented the results of a qualitative research study conducted to discover how middle school teachers in northern California School District perceived the effectiveness of PBIS at the middle school level. This phenomenological study sought to understand how a sample of
nine middle teachers perceived their school’s climate when the school had implemented PBIS. Results were presented in narrative form and organized by themes used to answer the four research questions that guided the study. Results show that all nine participants favorably described their school climate after PBIS had been implemented and credited some aspect of the PBIS framework with improving their school’s climate. Each of the participants identified at least one barrier to the effectiveness of PBIS at their site during their interview. The discipline data showed an increase in the number of discipline incidents from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020. School C’s SWIS data showed an increase in ODRs. This study’s findings are significant in several ways and, as discussed in Chapter 5, may have meaningful implications in the understanding of the impact of implementing PBIS in secondary schools and understanding of the barriers faced particularly by middle schools.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine middle school teachers’ perspectives on the effectiveness of PBIS in lowering ODRs and improving school climate. The objective was to examine teachers’ perceptions of the effectiveness of PBIS at the middle school level. PBIS is defined as a data-driven systematic framework that implements multiple tiers of evidence-based practices to promote positive behavioral change in students and to meet the academic, social, and behavioral needs of all students by fostering a positive school climate (Swain-Bradway et al., 2013). At the time of this dissertation, research related to the implementation of PBIS in middle schools was limited (Bradshaw et al., 2015). Various PBIS research studies are quantitative (Freeman et al., 2016) and few qualitative researchers focused on the perspectives and experiences of middle school teachers (Pinkelman et al., 2015). The study was guided by an overarching question: What are middle school teachers’ perceptions about PBIS? Four sub-questions guided the study and the analysis of the data collected: (a) How do select middle school teachers describe school climate when a school has PBIS? (b) What benefits, if any, do middle school teachers experience from PBIS? (c) What barriers, if any, do middle school teachers experience with PBIS? (d) What impact, if any, did PBIS have on the number of office discipline referrals? Data collection began with conducting interviews (9) with the study participants. Middle school teachers within the study district responded to a written concern statement two-question prompt (18). Discipline data for all three middle schools were examined and trends in ODRs were analyzed. Data collection concluded with follow-up interviews with three of the participants to gain clarity in the discrepancy between interview data.
and discipline data. This chapter provides a summary of the study’s findings along with practical implications of the findings. Delimitations and limitations of the study are presented and discussed. Also included are recommendations for future research.

**Summary of Findings**

The participants in this study were teachers at three different middle schools located in a northern California school district. They shared their perspectives of PBIS in middle schools and their perceptions of school climate, benefits of PBIS, and barriers to PBIS. Analysis of the data revealed eight open codes, which yielded four central themes: (a) experienced improved school climate, (b) experienced improved school practices, (c) experienced difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide practices, and (d) experienced difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in. The results of this study show that a majority of participants perceived an improved school climate, identified benefits of having PBIS on the middle school campus, and identified barriers to implementing and maintaining PBIS.

For Research Question 1, the results of this study suggested that middle school teachers described their school climate as improved as related to PBIS. During the interviews, participants described their school’s climate as improved once PBIS had been implemented. None of the participants in the study associated PBIS with a negative school climate. The consistency with which participants experienced an improved school climate as related to PBIS, despite their different middle school and levels of implementation, provided an answer to the first research question. The concern statements reflected supporting evidence that over time, the school climate has improved and some participants attributed this to school practices such as implementing PBIS and the behavior expectations associated with a school wide approach of the system.
For Research Question 2, middle school teachers shared common experiences in another area where school wide practices improved as a result of PBIS. When data across all data sets were analyzed, participants described several positive school practices as a benefit of PBIS. Participants identified that their school improved in reducing or eliminating ineffective and inconsistent discipline practices and participants stated that improved school practices were largely attributed to acknowledging positive student behavior. The commonality that participants experienced improved school practices as a benefit of PBIS in their schools provided a consistent answer to the second research question.

Answering the third research question, the results of this study suggested that middle school teachers experienced difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide practices and also experienced difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in as barriers to PBIS. This answer to the third research question was provided by themes three and four. The themes appeared when asked during the interview about potential barriers to PBIS. Although the results yielded various perceptions of barriers to the PBIS in middle schools, difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide practices, and difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in were identified as barriers experienced most among the participants.

Discipline data were also examined and were not reflective of the interviews. PBIS did not seem to correlate to a reduction in out-of-school suspensions. According to the northern California district data management system, the average discipline count per academic day increased from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020. Furthermore, only School C had been documenting ODRs with fidelity in the PBIS data system SWIS. When looking at the number of ODRs from 2018-2019 to 2019-2020, the volume increased for all months with the exception of January and March. It is worth noting that March is the month of school closures due to COVID-19. The
data answer the final question and show that PBIS had little to no impact on lowering the ODRs at middle schools with PBIS.

**Discussion**

The results of this study contributed to the existing body of literature that supports the implementation of PBIS to bring about school climate change. Many teachers, schools, and school districts across the nation struggle to find innovative ways to be restorative instead of reactive to problem behavior of students while also be tasked to establish and maintain positive school climate (Bosworth et al., 2011; Cramer & Bennett, 2015; Monahan et al., 2014). School climate has become the main focus of many federal and local school improvement initiatives (Bradshaw et al., 2014). Maintaining a positive school climate has been associated with improved student behavior (Elsaesser et al., 2013; Low et al., 2014) and has been recognized as having an important influence on individual student outcomes (Bosworth & Judkins, 2014; Klein et al., 2012; Shukla et al., 2016; Wang & Degol, 2016). PBIS is intended to enhance school climate and address student behavior throughout the school environment (Smolkowski et al., 2016). Researchers have suggested that PBIS has positively influenced school environments (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). The results of this study revealed that middle school teachers described their school climate after PBIS as improving or better. Due to the consistency with which the teachers experienced an improved school climate, the results of this study provided significant additional support for PBIS to improve school climate.

This research study contributed to the existing body of literature of PBIS specifically in middle schools. Most of the current research regarding PBIS had a primary focus on PBIS in elementary schools (Kelm et al., 2014), and research related to PBIS in middle schools was limited (Bradshaw et al., 2015; Calaraella et al., 2011; Flannery et al., 2013; Malloy et al., 2015).
Previous researchers have suggested a relationship between PBIS and improved school climate in secondary schools (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Calaraella et al., 2011; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). The results of this study indicated there are benefits to having PBIS at the secondary schools, as each study participant reported a benefit of having PBIS in their school. The two most common benefits of implementing PBIS reported by the study participants were the improvement in ineffective and inconsistent discipline practices and the improvement in practices for acknowledging positive student behavior. With the results of this study indicating positive benefits to PBIS in middle schools, this research study expanded the literature available on PBIS in middle schools and the literature available regarding the benefits of PBIS.

The results of this study also expanded on the literature available regarding potential barriers to implementing PBIS in middle schools. Researchers previously identified barriers to implementing school wide practices, like PBIS, as an area in need of further research (Feuerborn et al., 2016; Flannery et al., 2013; Turri et al., 2016). Each participant in this study identified at least one barrier to PBIS in the middle school setting. The results of this study revealed that most of the participants identified either difficulty monitoring and maintaining school wide practices or difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in as a barrier to PBIS in their middle school. Several researchers have identified teacher buy-in as a frequent barrier to the sustainability of school wide PBIS (Coffey & Horner, 2012; Lohrmann et al., 2016; McDaniel et al., 2014; Pinkelman et al., 2015). The results of this study not only expanded the literature related to the barriers of PBIS in middle school, but also helped confirm other researchers’ identification of teacher buy-in as a potential barrier to PBIS in secondary schools.

An inconsistency existed between teachers’ perceptions of improved school climate as a result of PBIS and the number of ODRs. Studies show that teachers perceive barriers to
consistent high-quality implementation and sustainability of SWPBIS (Feuerborn et al., 2016; Feuerborn et al., 2017; Feuerborn et al., 2015; Kincaid et al., 2007; McDaniel et al., 2014; McIntosh et al., 2014; McIntosh et al., 2013; Tyre & Feuerborn, 2017; Tyre et al., 2020). Inconsistencies in implementation could lead to inaccurate or incomplete data collected by ODRs. If teachers experience or perceive themselves to experience barriers to school wide PBIS implementation, their ability to completely and accurately complete ODRs could be similarly affected.

**Implications**

This study highlights practical implications for district leaders, school administrators, and teachers leading PBIS in middle schools. These implications assist in determining the strengths and weaknesses in studying the influence that PBIS has on the perceptions middle teachers have on school climate when PBIS is implemented. Further, this study allowed the voices of middle school teachers to be shared. The implications presented in this study along with the shared voice of study participants could guide the decision-making process of PBIS at the local school district level as well as at the individual school and classroom levels.

**District Leaders**

The results of this study could be used to guide the decision-making process of school district leaders that provide support to middle schools. It is important for educational leaders to maintain positive school climates and safe school environments (Calaraella et al., 2011; Klein et al., 2012; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2013). These shared positive school climate perceptions and the benefits of PBIS can be used as additional support for school district leaders to support their middle schools with PBIS. Researchers have identified district support as an important aspect of the sustainability of PBIS (McIntosh et al., 2014). The results of this study may assist district
leaders in making decisions on how they will demonstrate their support of PBIS at secondary schools. Those decisions could then potentially improve the sustainability of PBIS in the district’s secondary schools.

Restorative justice practices have been mentioned in the literature as a way for school to move away from traditional discipline practices and embrace alternative discipline practices. The benefits of restorative justice practices have been well established with a keystone component being the building of relationships. The blending of restorative justice practices and PBIS can benefit a school district because it would put greater emphasis on the building of relationships. The establishment and fostering of relationships emphasizes the importance of connecting everyone and foster positive school climate.

Interview participants noted that PBIS requires a facilitator. This facilitator is expected to be the leader during PBIS team meetings, attend professional development, and take an active role in the decisions and implementation of PBIS at the site level. The PBIS facilitator is typical a teacher and several of these responsibilities occur outside of the school day. A suggestion for districts would be to provide PBIS facilitators with stipends that are comparable to department leader stipends. A stipend position recognizes the commitment of the facilitator to provide support and leadership for PBIS outside of the instructional day.

School Administrators

Support from an administrator can either be a barrier or an enabler to school wide PBIS implementation (Coffey & Horner, 2012; Feuerborn & Tyre, 2017; Feuerborn et al., 2016; Lohrmann et al., 2018). School leadership plays a large role in the perceptions of PBIS at a site; therefore, it is important to the school. Through an understanding of the middle school teachers that participated in the study, school administrators may be more prepared to develop support
strategies for the school wide implementation of PBIS. Researchers have indicated that classroom teachers have expressed that PBIS becomes a priority within a school when school administrators are actively involved (Andreou et al., 2015). The results of this study provide administrators of secondary schools with information on how middle school teachers that participated in the study perceived school climate, the benefits of PBIS implementation experienced by the participants, and also the barriers of implementing PBIS the participants experienced. School administrators can use this information to gain an understanding of how PBIS may influence their school climate and may use the experiences shared by the study participants regarding the barriers to PBIS to strategically plan to address the potential of difficulty when monitoring and maintaining PBIS in their schools.

Teachers strongly stated that the degree of involvement by the site administrator determined the success of the school PBIS program. Administrators should take an active role in participating and engaging in PBIS, while simultaneously developing teacher leaders in the process. Administrators that find value in PBIS and incorporate it into the school culture and climate foster connectedness to PBIS. The results of this study provided school administrators with both benefits and barriers to PBIS that could be used to establish support strategies that may improve the school experience.

Secondary Teachers

Teacher support and ownership of PBIS is another crucial factor in school wide PBIS sustainability. Teacher support and buy-in are essential to the successful implementation and sustainability of school wide PBIS (Andreou et al., 2015; Coffey & Horner, 2012; Feuerborn et al., 2016; Kincaid et al., 2007; Tyre & Feuerborn, 2017). School staff are key stakeholders in educational change efforts and their buy-in is crucial for an initiative to be successful. If school
staff do not buy into the initiative, it is less likely to be implemented effectively or sustained long
term. However, there will likely always be staff who disagree with a change initiative (Coffey &
Horner, 2012).

Significant implications of the study’s findings arise for secondary classroom teachers. All the participants of the study were middle school teachers. Participants in the study shared similar experiences of positive school climates and benefits of PBIS. Gleaning from the lived experiences of their peers, secondary school teachers may exhibit more commitment to the PBIS in their classrooms. Researchers have identified that obtaining full teacher commitment to PBIS can be a challenge (Feuerborn et al., 2015). The results of this study may assist secondary school teachers in understanding how PBIS may improve their school climate and thus improve their commitment to PBIS.

**PBIS Professional Development**

Professional development is crucial component of successfully implementing PBIS at the site level. Training for teachers should begin with the “why” which involves looking at the disproportionalities in school discipline data. Teachers need to see, for example in California, that African American male students are suspended at disproportionate rates when compared to their white peers. The “why” can be taken further by using specific school site discipline data. School sites should see their own discipline data and examine if any disproportionalities exist for any student groups (i.e., African American, Special Education, Foster Youth and Homeless). Once the “why” has been strongly established training should continue surrounding the “what” which is improving school climate and lowering office discipline referrals to improve existing disproportionalities. The “how” is the implementation of PBIS. If the “how” is mentioned prior
to the “why” and “what” low teacher buy in can become a factor, because personal accountability has not been established.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Given the findings of this study, along with its limitations, further research is recommended. Specifically, further research is recommended that replicates the methods of this study in other geographic locations, research that further investigates the relationship between PBIS and school climate in middle schools, and research that further explores possible barriers of PBIS in secondary schools. Because this study was limited to the northern region of California, additional studies replicating the methods of this study should be conducted in other schools across the nation. None of the participants was from a high school setting; hence, additional research using high school settings should be conducted. Future research should look at conducting a case study that focuses on one school site that examines the perspective of students, parents, teachers, and the school principal. This would allow for a longitudinal approach and give a holistic approach to the effectiveness of PBIS.

These recommendations are based on the findings of this study, which found that PBIS had a positive influence on the participants’ perceptions of their school climate and that there are benefits and barriers to PBIS in middle schools.

**Summary**

This study was developed to explore how middle school teachers perceived school climate when PBIS was implemented. The lived experiences of the study participants provided insight into the use of PBIS in middle schools and the impact PBIS has on teacher perceptions of school climate after PBIS. The results of this study found that PBIS had a positive influence on the participants’ perceptions of their school’s climate, and the participants revealed how their
schools experienced benefits from implementing PBIS. The study’s findings also revealed that the study participants had notable experiences related to difficulty monitoring and maintaining implementation of PBIS and difficulty establishing and maintaining teacher buy-in as barriers to PBIS in middle schools.
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Dissertation Study Approval Request

Dear :

Please consider having your schools participate in a study about teacher perspectives implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in middle schools. The following information is provided to you to help with your decision. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time.

I am a middle school teacher within our school district and am conducting this study through University of Pacific as part of my doctoral degree. Your participation would mean that I could observe in schools and interview approximately 9-12 teachers spread amongst three sites, for which I will obtain their consent. I will conduct individual interviews of a minimum of three teachers at three middle school sites.

The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of teachers in regards to implementing PBIS. The school’s name and teachers’ names will be kept confidential in the study results. There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. The expected benefits are that teachers will have an opportunity to express their experiences and be part of the growing research on PBIS to improve schools.

This study will be reviewed and approved by the University of Pacific Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any data collection. Feel free to contact me at the numbers below regarding the study. I would be happy to discuss this study with you and provide the research protocols. Please sign your consent to participate and allow me to work with 9-12 of your teachers spread amongst three sites. This indicates you have full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep. Thank you in advance.

Thank you in advance.
Sincerely.

Laureen Riddick
Doctoral Candidate | Education & Organizational Leadership
University of the Pacific | Sacramento, California
Cell Phone: (916) 834-7624
l_riddick@u.pacific.edu

Associate Superintendent Consent   Date
Dear:

Please consider having your school participate in a study about teacher perspectives implementing Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in middle schools. The following information is provided to you to help with your decision. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time. I am a middle school teacher within our school district and am conducting this study through University of Pacific as part of my doctoral degree. Your participation would mean that I could observe in your school and interview approximately 3-4 teachers, for which I will obtain their consent.

The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of teachers in regards to implementing PBIS. The school’s name and teachers’ names will be kept confidential in the study results. There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study. The expected benefits are that teachers will have an opportunity to express their experiences and be part of the growing research on PBIS to improve schools.

This study will be reviewed and approved by the University of Pacific Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to any data collection. Feel free to contact me at the numbers below regarding the study. I would be happy to discuss this study with you and provide the research protocols. Please sign your consent to participate and allow me to work with 3-4 of your teachers and observe your school site. This indicates you have full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the procedures. A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Thank you in advance.

Sincerely,

Laureen Riddick
Doctoral Candidate | Education & Organizational Leadership
University of the Pacific | Sacramento, California
Cell Phone: (916) 834-7624
L_riddick@u.pacific.edu

_________________________             ____________________________
Principal Consent                                  Date
Information for Superintendent and Principals

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support (PBIS) is a school-wide initiative used by schools in the United States to address discipline and promote a positive school climate. This study will use a phenomenological design to examine office discipline referrals and school climate. The perceptions of middle school teachers from one school district in northern California that is implementing PBIS will be explored. The selected district is implementing PBIS as an initiative to lower exclusionary discipline practices for students with an emphasis on African American males, students with disabilities, and foster youth.

The purpose of this study is to examine how middle schools in a northern California school district perceive the use of office discipline referrals and school climate while using the PBIS framework. PBIS is a school-wide tiered implementation framework to promote positive behavioral change in students and foster a positive school climate (Sugai & Horner, 2002). The transformative learning theory and teacher self efficacy guided the research study in examining three research questions: (a) How do select middle school teachers describe the school climate when a school has PBIS? (b) What benefits, if any, do middle school teachers experience from implementing PBIS? (c) What barriers, if any, do middle school teachers experience from implementing PBIS? Data will be collected from individual semi-structured open-ended interviews.

The significance of this study is to provide an understanding of how middle school teachers perceive the school climate while implementing PBIS. Educational leaders may find examining the perceptions of various middle school teachers regarding the influence, if any, of PBIS on school climate beneficial. By understanding the perceptions of middle school teachers,
district leaders may gain knowledge about developing school support strategies for how to effectively implement PBIS in middle schools.
Date:

To: (middle school teacher at a PBIS designated school site)

As a doctoral student in the Benerd School of Education at University of Pacific, Sacramento, I am conducting a qualitative research study as part of the requirements for a doctorate in Educational and Organizational Leadership. The purpose of my study is to understand middle school teachers’ perceptions of school climate in schools implementing Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS), and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study. If you are currently employed as a teacher within a middle school that is currently implementing PBIS, were employed at the school prior to the implementation of PBIS, and are willing to participate, you will be asked to complete an interview either face-to-face or via video conferencing regarding your experiences with school climate and the implementation of PBIS. It should take you no more than 30-45 minutes to complete the interview. Your participation will be completely confidential, and no personal or identifying information will be shared. To participate, please sign and return the attached consent form via e-mail within five days. I will be contacting you to schedule the interview upon receipt of the e-mail.

Sincerely,

Laureen Riddick
Doctoral Candidate | Education & Organizational Leadership
University of the Pacific | Sacramento, California
Cell Phone: (916) 834-7624
L_riddick@u.pacific.edu

_________________________             ____________________________
Participant Consent                                  Date
APPENDIX C: TEACHER CONSENT FORM

BERNDT COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

RESEARCH SUBJECT’S CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Middle School Teachers’ Perspectives about the Effectiveness of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports in a Diverse Environment

Name of Lead Researcher: Laureen Riddick
Name of Faculty Advisor: Dr. Anne Zeman

You are being invited to participate in a research study, and your participation is entirely voluntary. The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine middle school teachers’ perspectives on the effectiveness of Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in reducing office discipline referrals and improving school climate. The objective is to examine teachers’ perceptions of effectiveness of PBIS at the middle school level.

The expected duration of participation in this study will be 45 minutes to 1 hour. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to complete an interview about the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) program at your middle school. There are some possible risks involved for participants. The possible risks include possibly feeling uncomfortable discussing your personal experiences at your school site. We don’t anticipate any adverse impact to you or any discomfort as we discuss the PBIS program. There are no direct benefits to the participants. I hope the research contributes to the effectiveness of PBIS at the school site level and at the district level.

CONFIDENTIALITY

We will take reasonable steps to keep confidential any information that is obtained in connection with this research study and that can be identified with you. Measures to protect your confidentiality are: the interview recordings will be stored on a locked computer, no names will be used in the study, and confidentiality will be protected and not provided to district or site level administrators. Upon completion of the research study, the data obtained will be maintained in a safe, locked or otherwise secured location and will be destroyed after a period of three years after the research is completed.

PARTICIPATION

You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are a middle school teacher at a school that has implemented Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS).

We expect to have 6-9 participants take part in this study. Please feel free to ask any questions you may have.

Your decision whether or not to participate will involve no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you decide to participate, you are free to discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
COLLECTION OF INFORMATION

All personal information will be removed from all records and data collection tools. No information will be used or distributed for future research studies. You will be given a copy of the form to keep.

CONTACT INFORMATION

I am the lead researcher in this study and I am a doctoral candidate at the University of the Pacific, Bernard School of Education. This research is part of my dissertation for a doctorate in Educational and Organizational Leadership. If you have any questions about the research at any time, please contact me at (916) 834-7624 or by email at L_Riddick@u.pacific.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant in a research project or wish to speak with an independent contact, please contact the Office of Research & Sponsored Programs, University of the Pacific at (209) 946-3903 or by email at IRB@pacific.edu.

COMPENSATION

Participants are being offered a $10 gift card for their participation.

1. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT AND SIGNATURE

I hereby consent. (Indicate Yes or No)

- To be audio recorded during this study.
  ____Yes____No

You will be offered a copy of this form to keep.

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the information provided above, that you have been afforded the opportunity to ask, and have answered any questions that you may have, that your participation is completely voluntary, that you understand that you may withdraw your consent and discontinue participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled, that you will receive a copy of this form, and that you are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies.

Signed: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

Research Study Participant (Print Name): ________________________________
Individual Interview: Teachers Perspectives on implementing PBIS in a Diverse District

Time of interview:

Date: Place:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Position of Interviewee:

Description: This interview is being used to provide data for the Teachers Perspectives on Implementing PBIS in a Diverse District.

Script: “Thanks again for meeting with me. I have some questions for the research I am doing, please answer honestly. None of your answers will affect anything at school. Once again, I am recording this so I can listen to it later. Do you have any questions before I start?”

Interview Questions

**Background Questions:**

1. What grade and subject do you teach?

2. Why did you become a teacher?

2. How long have you been in education/ a teacher?

**School Climate Questions:**

4. Describe the current climate of your school?

5. How would you describe the climate of your school prior to your school implementing PBIS Probes- Describe any significant difference in the school climate. What changes in school climate have you experienced if any?
6. How has the implementation of PBIS influenced the school climate in your school? Probe- Describe any changes in school climate that may have occurred and the length of time that the change became evident after the implementation of PBIS.

7. Describe a personal experience with the change in school climate in your school. Probe- Describe any influence PBIS has had on school climate that you have experienced personally/professionally?

8. How do you think the school community (faculty, students, families, and community members) perceives the school’s climate since the implementation of PBIS? Probe- How about before? Describe indications/observations that lead to your conclusions.

9. What aspect of PBIS do you feel has influenced your school’s climate?

**Office Discipline Referrals**

10. Do you write office discipline referrals? If so approximately how many do you write a month/ quarter/semester?

11. Since the implementation of PBIS do you believe your referral number have stayed the same, increased, or decreased, explain.

**Barriers**

10. What barriers, if any, did the school experience in implementing PBIS?

11. What barriers, if any, did you experience in implementing PBIS?

12. What additional resources would have been helpful in overcoming any barriers?

**Concluding Questions**

13. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with implementing PBIS with fidelity in a secondary school? Probe- any advice for others?