

**Examining the Relationship between Externalizing Behaviors and Traditional Discipline
Practices in the Elementary School Setting**

Carly G. Slivinski

Department of Strategic Leadership and Administrative Studies, Marywood University

Abstract

Externalizing behaviors, or outwardly directed behaviors that are disruptive or harmful to others, present significant challenges for elementary schools and adversely affect students' academic, social, and emotional outcomes. These behaviors are disruptive to the learning environment, create interpersonal problems among children, contribute to teacher burnout, and negatively impact school climate. To manage these undesirable behaviors, elementary schools in the United States embody a retributive approach aimed at achieving compliance through deterrence and control. Known as traditional discipline practices, these strict and inflexible punishments utilize an operant conditioning framework whereby unwanted behavior is paired with a negative stimulus to discourage its occurrence.

Despite their goal of reducing undesirable behavior, traditional discipline practices exacerbate its incidence over time, decrease academic performance, hinder students' social and emotional wellbeing, and perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline for students of color. Teachers and administrators play an important role in how externalizing behavior is reported and addressed in the school setting. Factors such as staff gender, role, personal bias, past experiences, and professional training influence how school personnel respond to and manage student behavior, directly impacting student outcomes.

This study examines the relationship between the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary students and teachers' and administrators' use of traditional discipline practices in the elementary school setting. It also explores relationships between student gender, student ethnicity, special education enrollment, staff gender, and staff role as well as any relationship they have with the independent and dependent variables. Results indicate that externalizing behaviors and traditional discipline practices are dependent on one another. Several other significant relationships among the student and staff demographic factors were also found. Suggestions for future research and implications for practice are discussed.

Keywords: externalizing behavior, traditional discipline practices, elementary schools, school administrators, trauma-informed practices

Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Chapter One: The Problem and Its Setting	6
Introduction.....	6
Theoretical Framework	9
Conceptual Framework	11
Purpose.....	12
Research Question	12
Sub-Questions	13
Hypotheses	13
Definitions.....	13
Delimitations	15
Assumptions.....	15
Significance of Study	16
Chapter Two: Literature Review	18
Introduction.....	18
Externalizing Behaviors.....	19
Child Demographics	20
Emotional Dysregulation	21
Psychopathology of Externalizing Behaviors	22
Social/Emotional Competence.....	24
Executive Functioning	25
Learning Deficits	26

Maternal Health	27
Trauma	27
Impacts of Externalizing Behavior	30
Traditional Discipline Practices	33
Problems with Traditional Discipline Practices.....	36
The Role of Administrators and Teachers in Student Behavior and Discipline	40
Administrators.....	40
Teachers	41
Summary	44
Chapter Three: Methodology	46
Research Design.....	46
Sample.....	46
Inclusion Criteria	47
Exclusion Criteria	48
Recruitment.....	48
Instrumentation	48
Procedure	49
Analysis of Data.....	50
Supplemental Analyses.....	51
Chapter Four: Results	52
Introduction.....	52
Demographics	52
Subproblem One	55

Subproblem Two.....	56
Subproblem Three.....	57
Supplemental Analyses.....	59
Student Gender and Behaviors/Discipline	59
Student Ethnicity and Behaviors/Discipline	60
Special Education and Behaviors/Discipline	61
Referral Source and Student Gender/Behaviors	62
Chapter Five: Discussion	63
Introduction.....	63
Discussion.....	63
Implications for Practice	71
Limitations	74
Future Research	74
Conclusion	76
References.....	79
Appendix A.....	88
Appendix B	89
Appendix C	90
Appendix D.....	91
Appendix E	92
Appendix F.....	93

Chapter One

The Problem and Its Setting

Introduction

Externalizing behaviors, or outwardly directed behaviors that are disruptive or harmful to others, are a significant problem in elementary schools and negatively impact students, teachers, and the school environment (Aldabbagh et al., 2024). These behaviors manifest in many ways and may consist of tantrums, yelling, the use of profanity, throwing or destroying objects, defying authority, and hyperactivity (Frawley et al., 2023; Mitchison et al., 2020). Other forms include aggressive and violent behavior such as slapping, punching, pinching, kicking, or spitting and engaging in fights with peers (Frawley et al., 2023; Mitchison et al., 2020). Externalizing behaviors often stem from emotional dysregulation, which is defined as a child's ability to manage behaviors, thoughts, and feelings in accordance with their environment (Paulus et al., 2021). Children without emotional regulation skills are unable to identify, modify, and appropriately cope with changes in their emotions and struggle to manage intense or complex feelings, often resulting in externalized and disruptive behaviors (Paulus et al., 2021).

Children exhibiting externalizing behaviors are difficult to manage in the classroom and their frequent displays of inappropriate and disruptive behavior make them a challenge to teach (Aldabbagh et al., 2024). These disruptions force educators to pause instruction in order to redirect the behavior, interrupting the learning process and adding to teachers' workloads (Aldabbagh et al., 2024). The challenges associated with externalizing behaviors lead to high levels of job-related stress and burnout among teachers (Chan et al., 2021). Additionally, externalizing behaviors impede the development of positive relationships between students and staff which are fundamental to children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic success in

school (Caldarella et al., 2021; Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). Schools in which externalizing behaviors are prevalent also tend to have negative school climates, which are characterized by hostile and unsupportive environments fraught with burnout, job stress, and low morale among staff as well as diminished achievement and a lack of trust among students (Finch et al., 2023).

Children exhibiting externalizing behaviors often suffer socially and academically because of their conduct. These behaviors are associated with greater peer rejection and difficulty developing friendships and positive relationships (Aldabbagh, et al., 2024). As a result, children displaying these behaviors are ostracized from their peers and struggle to develop prosocial interpersonal skills and social/emotional competence (Ogelman et al., 2020). Students exhibiting externalizing behaviors tend to underperform academically and achieve lower grades than their peers (Kulkarni & Sullivan, 2022). Their behaviors frequently interfere with their ability to engage in and focus on the curricula which results in these children falling behind academically (Kulkarni & Sullivan, 2022).

Across the United States, traditional discipline practices are the primary approach to address the incidence of externalizing behaviors occurring in schools. These practices embody an operant framework and aim to deter behavior through punishment (Jacobson, 2021). These punishments entail the delivery of an undesirable stimulus or the revocation of a pleasurable stimulus to discourage the preceding behavior (Jacobson, 2021). Traditional discipline practices are rooted in zero-tolerance policies which support the delivery of strict and inflexible punishments that do not take into account the context of the behavior and are applied indiscriminately (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). These practices include exclusionary discipline, teacher reprimands, detention, and revocation of student privileges (Caldarella et al., 2021). Although decisions surrounding discipline are typically made by school administrators,

classroom teachers and their skill level, attitudes, degree of burnout, and relationships with students majorly influence student behavior and discipline outcomes (Crockett et al., 2018; Eddy et al., 2020; Welsh, 2024).

Despite their goal of deterring undesirable behavior through punishment, traditional discipline practices are not effective in the long term. Although these practices may suppress externalizing behaviors temporarily, they do not facilitate sustained change; rather, they increase the likelihood that the behavior will intensify and recur (Caldarella et al., 2021). Zero tolerance policies do not consider the totality of the circumstances surrounding a behavior, nor do they allow opportunities for students to express their feelings associated with the behavior and to rectify their actions (Gomez et al., 2021; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). This leads to internalized anger and shame and increases the incidence of undesirable behavior (Gomez et al., 2021). Traditional discipline also may retraumatize children who have experienced past trauma by exposing them to harsh consequences that trigger a trauma response (Porges, 2022; Sanders et al., 2024).

Students who are removed from the classroom or suspended from school feel disconnected and unwelcome which damages relationships with educators and school authority figures, reinforces feelings of rejection, and worsens self-esteem (Jacobson, 2021; Sanders et al., 2024). These students are further alienated from prosocial interactions and positive supports, impairing students' social/emotional competency and contributing to even more externalizing behaviors (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). Exclusionary discipline, which entails the removal of children from the classroom, deprives them of important instructional time and adversely impacts their academic performance (Gomez et al., 2021; Welsh, 2024). Lastly, racial disparities in school discipline exist whereby Black students are disciplined more frequently than non-Black

students, forcing them out of the classroom and predisposing them to criminal activity and exposure to the justice system (Dutil, 2020).

Although several studies have been conducted on the various impacts of externalizing behaviors and traditional discipline practices in elementary schools, there is a dearth of research exploring the relationship between the two variables. However, there is some evidence which suggests that traditional discipline practices, particularly exclusionary discipline, may exacerbate the incidence of externalizing behaviors. Achieving a deeper understanding of the cause of and factors contributing to externalizing behaviors will support educators and administrators in devising solutions to this problem. This study aims to add to the current body of literature regarding externalizing behaviors in the elementary classroom by examining whether they relate to the application of traditional discipline practices.

Theoretical Framework

Two theories guide this research: labeling theory and choice theory. Labeling theory is based on the premise that the labels assigned to a person by society are internalized and influence subsequent behavior (see Figure 1). Developed by Howard Becker in 1963, labeling theory posits that people act in accordance with the labels that others in their environment ascribe them. Individuals eventually adopt those labels and conform to the roles that society expects them to personify. Through this lens, behavior originates not so much from internal loci as it does from other's responses to previous displays of behavior (Mowen et al., 2021).

Labeling theory focuses particularly on deviant behaviors and explores the relationship between deviant acts and stigmatized labels from society. In an educational context, children who are labeled as deviant, unruly, or "bad" by their teachers and peers internalize and manifest those labels by displaying increased externalizing behaviors. Students who exhibit these

behaviors are likely to receive various forms of traditional discipline, which emphasize punishment and reinforce feelings of rejection and low self-esteem. According to labeling theory, these children are directly or implicitly labeled a problem child which perpetuates negative self-conceptions and leads to furthered deviant acts (Mowen et al., 2021).



Figure 1: Labeling Theory

Choice theory originates from the work of William Glasser and takes a humanistic approach to understanding behavior. This theory postulates that behavior is chosen, either consciously or unconsciously, and is motivated by five basic needs: survival, belonging, power, freedom, and fun (see Figure 2). Behavior cannot be controlled by external circumstances and therefore efforts to modify behavior must first identify underlying needs and focus on communication and problem-solving rather than punishment (Lyngstad, 2023).

According to choice theory, attempts to deter behavior through consequences are futile unless the unmet needs motivating the behavior are simultaneously addressed. This theory provides a foundational understanding for potential outcomes of this study where traditional

discipline practices correlate with externalizing behaviors. Through this lens, traditional discipline practices may be ineffective at addressing externalizing behavior because their approach to manage it entails the use external control and does not take into consideration factors contributing to the behavior (Lyngstad, 2023).

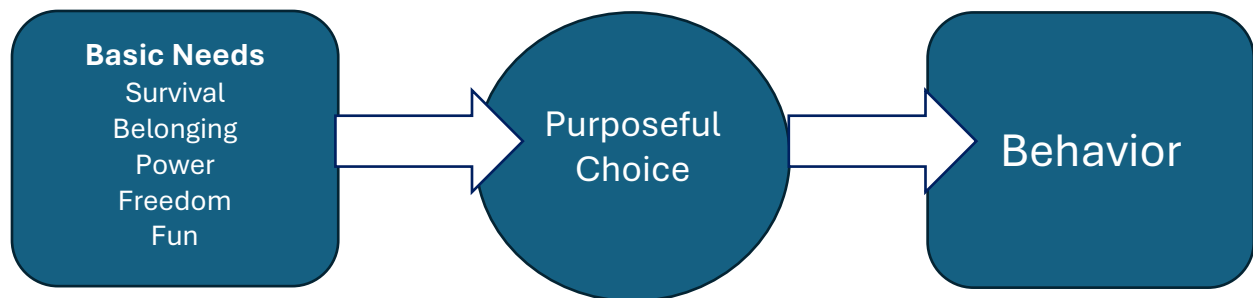


Figure 2: Choice Theory

Conceptual Framework

This conceptual framework (see Figure 3) depicts the potential relationship between traditional discipline practices and externalizing behaviors in elementary schools. Externalizing behaviors are the independent variable of this study and are measured by examining incidences of student misconduct entered into the district's student information system by teachers and administrators. Traditional discipline practices comprise the dependent variable of this study and are determined by the number of disciplinary actions consisting of exclusionary discipline, verbal warnings, and revocation of privileges occurring across all elementary buildings. This framework illustrates an emerging theme throughout the literature which suggests that rather than working as a deterrent, traditional discipline practices increase the frequency of externalizing behaviors among elementary students despite its consideration as the dependent variable for this study.



Figure 3: Conceptual framework of the relationship between traditional discipline practices and externalizing behaviors in elementary schools

Purpose

The purpose of this correlational quantitative study is to test the theories of labeling theory and choice theory to examine the relationship between the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary students and teachers' and administrators' usage of traditional discipline practices in the elementary school setting. The independent variable "externalizing behavior" is defined as undesirable and outwardly directed behavior that harms, disrupts, or negatively impacts others within the school setting. The dependent variable "traditional discipline practice" is defined as the use of verbal warnings, exclusionary discipline, or revocation of privileges with the intent to punish and deter behaviors.

Research Question: What is the relationship between the use of traditional discipline practices by elementary teachers and administrators and the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary students?

Sub-questions:

1. What are the traditional discipline practices used by elementary teachers and administrators?
2. What are the externalizing behaviors exhibited by elementary students?
3. What is the relationship between the use of traditional discipline practices by elementary teachers and administrators and the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary students?

Hypotheses:

Null: There is no relationship between the use of traditional discipline practices by elementary teachers and administrators and the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary students.

Alternative: There is a relationship between the use of traditional discipline practices by elementary teachers and administrators and the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary students.

Definitions

Elementary teachers – trained professionals responsible for providing instruction to students in schools (Datnow, 2020). The term “educator” is applied to classroom teachers as well as state-certified guidance counselors (American School Counselor Association, 2023). For this study, educators will be defined as classroom teachers and guidance counselors working with students in kindergarten and first and second grades.

Administrators – individuals in leadership positions within a school district who oversee operations and are responsible for developing and implementing policies and procedures, managing personnel, and providing support to educators. These include superintendents, principals, assistant principals, and any non-teaching position tasked with a supervisory role, and

their specific responsibilities vary given their hierarchical rank within leadership (National Center for Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2024). For this study, school administrators will be defined as building principals and assistant principals.

Elementary students – students enrolled in kindergarten through eighth grade (22 Pa. Code § 4.21). For this study, elementary students will be defined as students enrolled in kindergarten through fifth grade.

Public school districts – governmental entities that are organized geographically and provide education to K-12 students at the local level (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). In this study, the public school district will be defined as a school district located in Northeast Pennsylvania.

Northeast Pennsylvania – geographical region of Pennsylvania comprising 14 counties that are situated in the eastern region of the state below the northernmost counties (Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania, 2024). For this study, Northeast Pennsylvania comprises one county within this region in which the studied school district is located.

Traditional discipline practices – long-standing approaches to discipline in elementary schools that embody an operant framework when addressing student behaviors. The goal of these practices is to deter students through punishment and include verbal reprimands, suspension, detention, revocation of rewards or privileges, or isolation from activities or desirable experiences (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). In this study, traditional discipline practices will be defined as verbal warnings, detentions (after school and during lunch), in-school and out-of-school suspensions, parent pick-up from school, removal from class/activity, and revocation of privileges. Traditional discipline practices will be assessed through secondary data analysis. See Chapter 3 Instrumentation for additional information.

Externalizing behaviors – outwardly directed behaviors that negatively impact the environment and are detrimental to others. These behaviors are undesirable and problematic, are observable to others, can be unsafe or dangerous, and when occurring in a school are disruptive to the learning environment (Aldabbagh et al., 2024). In this study, externalizing behaviors will be defined as disrespect toward staff, defiance, work refusal, lying, stealing, profanity, unsafe behavior, physical confrontation (i.e., fights with peers, aggression), eloping, harassment/intimidation, and disruptive behavior. Externalizing behaviors will be assessed through secondary data analysis. See Chapter 3 Instrumentation for additional information.

Delimitations

This study is delimited to the district's three elementary schools comprising kindergarten and grades first through fifth. Data sources are delimited to teachers and administrators assigned to one of the three elementary schools who report the incidence of behavior and/or deliver a disciplinary action in response to the behavior. Data collection is delimited to student infractions and disciplinary actions entered and maintained in the district's student information system. Data is delimited to traditional discipline practices and externalizing behaviors occurring during the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. This study will not be delimited to incidences of disciplinary practices or externalizing behaviors that involve the same student more than once.

Assumptions

This study assumes that data is entered accurately by school personnel and consistently across the three elementary schools. It also assumes that infraction codes and disciplinary action codes are defined the same by all teachers and administrators within and across all buildings. Lastly, this study assumes that all incidences of externalizing behavior are reported and logged in the student information system.

Significance of Study

Externalizing behaviors have significant impacts on students, teachers, and the school environment. These behaviors impair students' ability to learn and engage in the classroom setting which results in poor academic outcomes (Finch et al., 2023). They also evoke fear among non-offending peers in the classroom and fragment the learning process which negatively affects other students' academic progress (Petersen, 2024). Aggressive or violent behaviors directed toward educators and frequent disruptions within the classroom contribute to teacher burnout and motivate teachers to leave the profession altogether, worsening the national teacher shortage (Aragon et al., 2024; Koch, 2024). Externalizing behaviors foster negative school climates which reduce job satisfaction and self-efficacy among educators, decrease students' sense of belonging and support, and exacerbate the incidence of undesirable behavior in the long-term (Aragon et al., 2024; Finch et al., 2023). Lastly, externalizing behaviors and their effects place children at risk of experiencing a plethora of challenges in adulthood such as poor physical and mental health, long-term unemployment, homelessness, substance abuse, criminal justice involvement, domestic violence, and poverty (Ogundele, 2018).

There is empirical evidence to suggest that traditional discipline practices may be ineffective at reducing externalizing behavior. Some research findings indicate that they in fact increase the incidence of this behavior over time, which is of significant concern given the multitude of negative impacts that externalizing behaviors have on children and their environment (Caldarella et al., 2021). By examining traditional discipline practices and externalizing behaviors in elementary schools, this study will provide greater insight into whether a relationship exists between the variables. In doing so, its findings will generate

implications for improved discipline practices that will serve to successfully reduce externalizing behaviors and their adverse effects.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Introduction

In recent years, the frequency and severity of problematic behaviors occurring among students in kindergarten through twelfth grade have increased significantly in the United States (Long, 2024). Teachers consider student behavior to be one of the greatest concerns in education today, ranked second only to low pay (Long, 2024). Increased mental health needs, higher incidences of childhood trauma, and delayed social/emotional development, due in part to the COVID-19 pandemic, are thought to be key contributors to the recent uptick in behavioral problems, specifically among elementary-aged students (Long, 2024; Rappaport & Minahan, 2024). Approximately 10% of school-aged children have mental health needs, and 1 in 4 children enrolled in elementary school have experienced some form of trauma which is associated with behavioral problems (Rappaport & Minahan, 2024; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2024).

The social and emotional deficits that are commonly seen in children with mental health or trauma-related needs as well as the impacts that adverse experiences have on brain development make it difficult for children to self-regulate and moderate their response to external stimuli (Cai et al., 2023; Hutchison et al., 2020; Mitchison et al., 2020). This leads to the manifestation of disruptive and maladaptive behavior in the classroom that is challenging for teachers to manage, fragments the learning process, and creates an unpredictable and at times unsafe environment for staff and other students (Frawley et al., 2023; Tung et al., 2024; Wang & Liu, 2021). In response to these behaviors, school administrators and educators nationwide have embraced an approach to discipline which aims to deter undesirable behavior through

punishment (Hwang et al., 2022; Jacobson, 2021). This approach is rooted in retribution and control and is actualized through zero-tolerance policies that promote traditional discipline practices to punish student behavior and maintain order (Dutil, 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Lodi et al., 2022). Traditional discipline practices routinely entail the removal of a student from the classroom or school setting and the revocation of privileges as consequences for misconduct (Caldarella et al., 2021; Lodi et al., 2022).

Despite their objectives to reduce the incidence of undesirable behavior, traditional discipline practices are detrimental to student emotional, social, and academic wellbeing (Jacobsen et al., 2019; Welsh, 2024). Removing students from the classroom as a punishment for behavior restricts their engagement in the learning process and deprives them from prosocial peer engagement, thus creating academic disadvantages and limiting opportunities to develop critical social/emotional skills (Gomez et al., 2021). Not only are traditional discipline practices ineffective at deterring student misconduct, but they are also linked to the exacerbation of undesirable behavior over time, worsening the problem and yielding adverse short- and long-term outcomes for children, schools, and communities (Caldarella et al., 2021; Dutil, 2020; Gomez et al., 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2019).

Externalizing Behaviors

Among the behavioral issues proliferating throughout schools in the United States, externalizing behaviors are of utmost concern given their propensity to negatively impact students, staff, and school climate. Externalizing behaviors are defined as behaviors that are directed outward into the environment and are disruptive or harmful to others (Castro et al., 2021; Petersen, 2024). Unlike internalizing behaviors which are inwardly focused such as depression, anxiety, fear, and social withdrawal, externalizing behaviors are characterized by

displays of aggression, defiance, or antisocial tendencies (Crockett et al., 2018; Wang & Liu, 2021). Manifestations of externalizing behavior include hyperactivity, impulsivity, uncooperativeness, vandalism, and emotional outbursts which may consist of screaming, throwing or destroying objects, and using profane language (Castro et al., 2021; Crockett et al., 2018; Mitchison et al., 2020; Pickren et al., 2024). In more severe cases, externalizing behaviors include displays of physical aggression toward staff and peers by way of slapping, punching, pinching, kicking, or spitting (Frawley et al., 2023; McMahon et al., 2024; Mitchison et al., 2020).

Externalizing behaviors typically emerge in early childhood during preschool years (Tung et al., 2024). Approximately 50-60% of children who exhibit these behaviors by or around three years of age will continue to display these problems as they enter kindergarten (Ben-Harush et al., 2021). For these children, their behaviors are likely to increase as they progress through elementary school and reach their peak during first grade when more expectations are placed on young children and they experience a greater demand for attention and self-control (Horn et al., 2021; Wang & Liu, 2021). If interventions are not implemented early, these behaviors are likely to escalate and can progress into more serious problems over time (Castro et al., 2021). Additionally, children exhibiting externalizing behaviors in elementary school tend to experience internalizing behaviors during adolescence (Wang & Liu, 2021).

Child Demographics

Although any child may at some point exhibit different externalizing behaviors, certain demographics are commonly identified among children who are reported to exhibit behavioral problems. Male children are significantly more likely to be reported by their parents and teachers as displaying deviant behavior than their female counterparts. Externalizing behaviors exhibited

by boys are also perceived as occurring more frequently and with greater severity than those among girls (Mitchison et al., 2020; Horn et al., 2021). Although this yields the presumption that boys are inherently more behaviorally deviant than girls, this is likely not the case. More plausibly, this disparity is the result of the different ways in which adults relate to and perceive female children compared to male children. Parents and teachers alike tend to consider girls more agreeable and compliant, thus more likeable and easier to get along with. Girls also tend to be more socially and emotionally adept at a younger age, reinforcing this dynamic (Horn et al., 2021).

Children who are of lower socioeconomic status are also more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors (Pickren et al., 2024). Additionally, children residing in single-parent households have a greater propensity for behavioral problems (Offerman et al., 2022). White children are reported to exhibit slightly more externalizing behaviors than Black, Hispanic, or Asian children; however, Black children are diagnosed with emotional or behavioral disorders more often than their White peers and are disciplined for their behaviors at rates higher than any other race (West et al., 2023). Additionally, Black children whose teachers are White are also more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors compared to Black children whose teachers are of the same race (Caldarella et al., 2021). Lastly, children in foster care are found to exhibit higher rates of externalizing behaviors than children residing with their biological families (West et al., 2023).

Emotional Dysregulation

Externalizing behaviors are often rooted in emotional dysregulation (Paulus et al., 2021). Conversely, children with poor emotional regulation tend to exhibit more externalizing behaviors (Mitchison et al., 2020). Emotional regulation is defined as a child's ability to manage behaviors,

thoughts, and feelings appropriately and to effectively identify and express emotions in response to and in alignment with their environment (Mitchison et al., 2020; Paulus et al., 2021). Self-regulation skills are acquired early in life through interactions with caregivers and are solidified between ages two and five in typically developing children (Mitchison et al. 2020; Paulus et al., 2021). Emotionally dysregulated children are unable to identify, modify, and appropriately cope with changes in their emotions or environment and struggle to manage intense or complex feelings (Crockett et al., 2018; Paulus et al., 2021). These deficits often result in intense, unfettered emotional displays accompanied by externalized and disruptive behavior (Crockett et al., 2018; Paulus et al., 2021). Additionally, poor emotional regulation in children is associated with poor attention and increased hyperactivity (Crockett et al., 2018)

Children with poor emotional regulation are quick to anger and express anger that is disproportionate to the context (Mitchison et al., 2020). They are described as having an adverse temperament, which is characterized by irritable moods, becoming easily frustrated, and exhibiting intense emotions (Crockett et al., 2018). As a result, behavioral outbursts among emotionally dysregulated children are often triggered by frustrating tasks because these children lack the skills to manage their emotional shift in response to the demand (Mitchison et al., 2020). Emotional dysregulation is also strongly associated with many of the behavioral, emotional, and mood disorders that are found to correlate with the presence of externalizing behaviors in children, such as anxiety and depression (Mitchison et al., 2020).

Psychopathology of Externalizing Behaviors

Externalizing behaviors are associated with a number of behavioral and mental health diagnoses in childhood and adolescence (Paulus et al., 2022; Wang & Liu, 2021). In fact, nearly half of all elementary-aged children who exhibit externalizing behaviors have at least one

cooccurring diagnosis (Wang & Liu, 2021). Perhaps the most common behavioral diagnosis among young children with externalizing behaviors is oppositional defiant disorder, or ODD, which is converted to conduct disorder if behaviors persists past the age of 10 (Paulus et al., 2021). Behaviorally deviant children are very likely to receive this diagnosis by or around the time they begin kindergarten (Mitchison et al., 2021). Signs of ODD are prominent in early childhood and include tantrums, anger outbursts, irritability, defiance, vindictiveness, emotional dysregulation, and interpersonal problems (Mitchison et al., 2021). The presentation of this disorder exclusively comprises externalizing behaviors, making obvious the reasons as to why children presenting with these behaviors often receive this diagnosis (Mitchison et al., 2021).

A second diagnosis that commonly cooccurs with ODD and externalizing behaviors is attention deficit/hyperactive disorder (ADHD) (Paulus et al., 2021; Pickren et al., 2024). Children with ADHD may present as hyperactive, inattentive, or have a combined presentation (Paulus et al., 2021). Problems associated with working memory and impulse control make it difficult for children with ADHD to inhibit socially inappropriate or harmful behavior and effectively moderate their emotional response to environmental stimuli (Paulus et al., 2021). A diagnosis of ADHD is strongly linked to poor academic performance, difficulty in recognizing emotions in others, and problems developing relationships (Pickren et al., 2024).

Other mental health diagnoses that are commonly seen alongside externalizing behaviors in childhood and adolescence are various mood disorders, including bipolar disorder, depression, and disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (Paulus et al., 2021). Children exhibiting externalizing behaviors may have histories involving acute or chronic trauma which predisposes them to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and behaviorally deviant children with or without trauma are likely to experience anxiety disorders, although these behaviors tend to be more

internalized (Patwardhan et al., 2023; Paulus et al., 2021). In adolescence, children who have or are exhibiting externalizing behaviors may go on to engage in self-harm or develop eating disorders, personality disorders, or substance use problems (Paulus et al., 2021).

Social/Emotional Competence

Children who exhibit high rates of externalizing behavior tend to have poor social/emotional competence (Wang & Liu, 2021). Social competence comprises a child's knowledge and aptitude surrounding interpersonal relationships, getting along with others, initiating friendships, interacting with peers, and behaving in socially acceptable ways (Wang & Liu, 2021). Similarly, emotional competence pertains to a child's ability to identify and regulate their emotions and to identify and appropriately respond to the emotions of others (Horn et al., 2021). Together, social/emotional skills enable children to develop and maintain friendships, avoid negative or harmful behavior, and engage prosocially with adults and peers (Hutchison et al., 2020).

Students with low levels of social/emotional competence display more externalizing behaviors in the classroom and create a hostile and unsafe environment (Santamaria-Villar et al., 2021). Socially incompetent children lack the prosocial skills necessary to appropriately engage with others in ways that promote and sustain healthy relationships, and as a result they are excluded from peer interactions, are involved in fights or peer conflict, and receive disciplinary referrals at exceedingly high rates due to their behaviors (Ho et al., 2022; Offerman et al., 2022). These behaviors also have social consequences for children which further alienate them from positive relationships and supports (Ho et al., 2022). Ogelman et al. (2020) found that young children prefer to play with peers who are kind, share, and take turns as opposed to those who are aggressive, rude, and behaviorally deviant. Because positive peer relationships are a crucial

source of emotional support and identity development among children, students devoid of these interactions have lower self-esteem and suffer worsened social/emotional and behavioral outcomes (Santamaria-Villar, 2021; Wang & Liu, 2021).

Executive Functioning

Like emotional dysregulation, poor executive functioning is associated with the incidence of externalizing behavior among children (Pickren et al., 2024). Executive functioning is defined as a child's ability to retain and access information, moderate external distractions, switch tasks, make decisions, and develop goals (Pickren et al., 2024; Patwardhan et al., 2023; Wang & Liu, 2021). It comprises aptitudes in the areas of inhibition, working memory, attention shifting, planning, and verbal fluency and is a common deficiency among children diagnosed with ODD and ADHD (Pickren et al., 2024).

A primary domain of executive functioning is cognitive flexibility, which is notably low among children with behavioral problems, especially at the kindergarten level (Patwardhan et al., 2023). Cognitive flexibility enables children to abandon behavioral strategies that are ineffective or harmful in favor of more socially acceptable alternatives. This ability to shift one's perspective and "think outside the box" supports self-driven behavioral modification and the progression toward more prosocial problem-solving approaches (Patwardhan et al., 2023). Children with low levels of cognitive flexibility struggle to adapt to environmental change and are reluctant to adopt different methods of achieving a goal, even if it's apparent that their current strategies are unsuccessful or detrimental. This inability to shift focus causes a child to become "stuck" in maladaptive patterns of behavior and renders them incapable of managing triggers (Patwardhan et al., 2023). As a result, children with low levels of cognitive flexibility

and executive functioning overall are likely to engage in externalized problematic behavior (Wang & Liu, 2021).

Learning Deficits

Learning disabilities often cooccur with externalizing behaviors (Jordan et al., 2020). Children who are diagnosed with learning disabilities are also prone to displaying aggressive, disruptive, hyperactive, and inattentive behaviors (Jordan et al., 2020). Conversely, children with behavioral problems are more likely than their peers to have learning difficulties and underperform academically (Jacobson, 2021). Both specific learning disabilities and general academic underachievement are associated with the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary-aged children (Fernandez et al., 2020; Kulkarni & Sullivan, 2022). Children exhibiting externalizing behaviors are three times more likely to repeat a grade, have a lower IQ, and achieve lower grades than their peers (Jacobson, 2021; Puchner & Markowitz, 2023).

Deficits in the areas of reading and writing are especially correlated with externalizing behaviors (Jordan et al., 2020; Pickren et al., 2024). Jordan et al. (2020) saw a significant increase in externalizing behaviors among early elementary children with a writing disability. These increases were especially conspicuous during second grade when writing-related curriculum becomes more intensive for students (Jordan et al., 2020). Elementary-aged children with reading delays are more than four times more likely than their peers to exhibit externalizing behavior, and this correlation is especially strong for boys (Pickren et al., 2024). Children with reading delays are also more likely to exhibit hyperactivity and to be diagnosed with ADHD (Pickren et al., 2024). Children struggling with reading and writing tend to have more social deficits than their typically developing peers and are more likely to have experienced trauma, compounding their behavioral problems (Jordan et al., 2020; Offerman et al., 2022; Pickren et

al., 2024). Because of these intersecting challenges, children with learning deficits in addition to behavioral problems are very likely to be placed in special education programs early on in their elementary years (Offerman et al., 2022).

Maternal Health

The physical and psychological health of a mother pre-, during, and post-pregnancy has notable impacts on her child's behavior. Women who have experienced high levels of prenatal stress, for instance, are more likely to have children who exhibit externalizing behaviors. Prenatal stress is defined as any event or circumstance experienced during pregnancy that places strain on the mother and subsequently her unborn child. Psychological distress is the most pervasive form of prenatal stress and is strongly associated with high rates of hyperactivity, impulsivity, and reactive and aggressive behaviors in children who are born to women affected by it (Tung et al., 2024). Thyroid problems during pregnancy are also associated with externalizing behaviors in young children, which is likely due to the large role that a mother's thyroid function plays in promoting healthy fetal brain development (Ben-Harush et al., 2021). Children whose mothers experienced anxiety or depression while pregnant and postpartum are more likely to have behavioral problems and to receive a diagnosis of ODD and ADHD (Tung et al., 2024). Additionally, there is a positive correlation between parental rejection and child behavioral problems, whereby many children exhibiting maladaptive behavior have cold, hostile, unaffectionate, and indifferent parents, particularly mothers (Ben-Harush et al., 2021)

Trauma

Early exposure to traumatic or adverse events is a paramount predictor of behavioral problems among elementary-aged children (Tung et al., 2024). Traumas, also known as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), can include physical, sexual, or emotional abuse, neglect,

exposure to violence, natural disasters, sudden loss of a loved one, family stressors, serious accidents, or life-threatening illnesses, although definitions are subjective and may vary (Felitti et al., 1998; SAMHSA, 2024; Zarei et al., 2021). Approximately 1 in 4 children in the United States have experienced some form of trauma by the time they enter kindergarten, and more than two-thirds of children will have experienced at least one traumatic event by their sixteenth birthday (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023; SAMHSA, 2024).

Traumatic events occurring in childhood have profound impacts on children's development, health, and wellbeing that are linked to a child's ability to regulate their behavior (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). A key way in which traumatic events are linked to behavior is through the adverse impacts it has on brain development (Cai et al., 2023). Experiencing trauma prompts physical and chemical alterations in the regions of the brain that are associated with executive functioning, decision-making, reward processing, and communication (Cai et al., 2023). These impacts are intensified if trauma is experienced during the first three years of life when the brain is rapidly developing and most susceptible to environmental influences (Berger et al., 2023).

The physiological effects that childhood trauma has on the brain are particularly predictive of the incidence of externalizing behaviors among school-aged children. When exposed to acute or chronic stress, neural circuits in the brain remain activated to anticipate a threat and maintain a sense of safety (Porges, 2022). If activated frequently or for long periods of time, the nervous system struggles to downregulate and initiates a threat response even when confronted with benign stimuli (Porges, 2022). This causes children to exist in a heightened state of arousal, which reduces their resilience and narrows their window of stress tolerance over time (Minne & Gorelik, 2022; Porges, 2022). These autonomic adaptations also limit the emotional

range while simultaneously exaggerating the emotional response to stimuli that are perceived as threatening or stress-inducing, impairing children's capacity to moderate their stress response and increasing their vulnerability to triggers (Minne & Gorelik, 2022; Paulus et al., 2021; Porges, 2022). Additionally, Jacobsen et al. (2019) found that traumatic experiences outside of school are linked to aggression and displays of anger in the school setting among young children.

In response to stressful events, the nervous system evolves to ensure survival through evoking adaptive behavioral strategies (Porges, 2022). These strategies manifest as emotional dysregulation, social impairment, extreme displays of anger or frustration, aggression, and other deviant or disruptive forms of behavior (Dutil, 2020; Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). Thus, the presence of externalizing behaviors in young children with trauma histories can be explained as the byproduct of the impact that traumatic experiences have on children's cognitive processes as well as their ability to moderate responses to external stimuli (Paulus et al., 2021). For children who have experienced trauma, externalizing behaviors are often the result of these autonomic breakdowns which cause them to perceive innocuous cues as threatening and signal an exaggerated neurophysiological response (Porges, 2022). However, teachers are generally uneducated in the area of trauma and its effects, and instead of viewing behaviors as symptoms of trauma, they are more inclined to perceive them as willful defiance and an indication of a character or personality flaw within the child (Dutil, 2020).

In addition to behavioral problems, childhood trauma is also associated with learning difficulties in school, attention problems, poor interpersonal and social skills, and an increased likelihood of being diagnosed with a behavioral, neurodevelopmental, or mood disorder. Children with increased ACEs are significantly more likely to be diagnosed with an intellectual disability, learning disability, anxiety, depression, autism spectrum disorder, ADHD, or ODD

(Zarei et al., 2021). This is especially true for children with trauma histories who also exhibit problematic behaviors, especially in the school setting where they tend to be labeled as defiant or emotionally disturbed (Dutil, 2020). Because maladaptive behaviors are most prominent in early elementary years where they are being noticed for the first time by adults outside of the home, externalizing behaviors are the most common reason for young children to be referred to mental health services where they are often evaluated for and receive a mental health diagnosis (Tung et al., 2024).

Impacts of Externalizing Behavior

Externalizing behaviors are of growing concern in elementary schools due to their many adverse effects which impact the individual child, their peers, educators, and the school community (Caldarella et al., 2021; Petersen, 2024). The academic impacts of these behaviors stunt children's progress and increase the likelihood that they will drop out of school before graduation (Offerman, et al., 2022). Externalizing behaviors that are disruptive in nature often result in the child being removed from the classroom which limits their academic engagement and reduces their exposure to instruction time (Hendrickx et al., 2022). Not only do these behaviors infringe on the offending student's learning, but they are also disruptive to the learning process for the entire classroom (Hendrickx et al., 2022). Behaviors that are aggressive or violent in nature evoke fear or discomfort among non-offending peers in the classroom and disrupt the learning process which negatively affects other students' academic performance (Petersen, 2024).

Externalizing behaviors also create or exacerbate interpersonal problems for children (Castro et al., 2021). Children exhibiting behavioral problems are already in a social/emotional deficit given the intersecting factors associated with the onset of behavioral problems (Ben-

Harush et al., 2021). Inherently, these children struggle to identify emotions in themselves or others, adopt other perspectives, resolve conflict, and communicate effectively (Ben-Harush et al., 2021). Engaging in externalizing behaviors in school widens the social/emotional competence gap between these children and their peers which contributes to worsened interpersonal outcomes (Castro et al., 2021). Children displaying disruptive behaviors are often removed from the classroom which isolates them from peers and deprives them of opportunities to practice essential emotional recognition, labeling, and expression skills (Castro et al., 2021). These skills should be developed during the first five years of life, and their attainment is highly dependent on prosocial interaction (Castro et al., 2021). When children are regularly removed from the classroom setting, they are unable to observe and respond to others' emotional expressions and refine their social skills across various contexts (Castro et al., 2021). This prevents them from mastering the skills required to initiate and maintain healthy interactions and relationships with others, exacerbating their interpersonal challenges (Castro et al., 2021).

Externalizing behaviors also place significant strain on educators (Offerman et al., 2022). These types of behaviors are exceptionally difficult to redirect and occur frequently (Paulus et al., 2021). Teachers struggle to manage their students' externalizing behaviors, particularly those that are disruptive or aggressive, and perceive themselves as having little control over their classrooms (Aldabbagh et al., 2024). They also report a lack of training in the area of behavioral management and feel ill-equipped to respond to these problems (Aragon et al., 2024; Caldarella et al., 2021). This general lack of preparedness reduces teachers' sense of competency, increases feelings of overwhelm, and places them at risk for experiencing burnout (Aragon et al., 2024). Lastly, aggressive or violent behaviors directed toward educators threaten their safety, further

contributing to burnout and inciting teachers to leave the profession altogether (Aragon et al., 2024; Koch, 2024; McMahon et al., 2024).

The nature and frequency of these behaviors cause regular disruptions to the classroom and impede the teaching process (Aldabbagh et al., 2024). When behaviors occur, teachers are forced to pause instruction to intervene, infringing upon the time available for teaching and causing teachers to fall behind in their curricula (Aldabbagh et al., 2024). Teachers who have externalizing behaviors occurring in their classrooms also must dedicate more effort to attracting and maintaining students' attention, particularly for those who struggle with hyperactivity and inattentiveness (Crockett et al., 2018). These added challenges inflate teachers' workloads which creates more stress and decreases confidence and self-efficacy (Aldabbagh et al., 2024).

Externalizing behaviors also impair the student/teacher relationship which is fundamental to promoting children's social, emotional, behavioral, and academic success in school (Aldabbagh et al., 2024; Caldarella et al., 2021; Horn et al., 2021). Students who regularly exhibit problematic behaviors and struggle with emotional regulation tend to have poorer relationships with their teacher, especially when the student is male and the teacher is female (Crockett et al., 2018) (Horn et al., 2021). Externalizing behaviors cause teachers to feel negatively toward the offending student, resulting in more conflict and hostility between them (Horn et al., 2021). Teachers are colder and more critical toward students who are behaviorally deviant, and they tend to treat those children differently from the rest of their students which perpetuates a pattern of negative interactions (Aldabbagh et al., 2024; Hendrickx et al., 2022).

A reciprocal relationship exists between student/teacher conflict and externalizing behaviors whereby externalizing behaviors lead to a poor student/teacher relationship, and a poor student/teacher relationship exacerbate externalizing behaviors (Crockett et al., 2018). A

teacher's attitude toward a student is reflective of the student's behavior and temperament (Crockett et al., 2018). If a teacher perceives a student's behavior as poor or inappropriate, they are less inclined to hold the child in a high regard and instead facilitate interactions with that child which are charged with negativity and animosity. Conversely, a child's behavior is reflective of their relationship with their teacher and is influenced by how much support they receive (Crockett et al., 2018). Although the student/teacher relationship and student behavior are mutually reinforcing, negative relationships predict externalizing behavior more than behavior predicts conflict, underscoring the importance of teachers' establishments of positive relationships and rapport with their students (Hendrickx et al., 2022).

Challenges associated with externalizing behaviors in childhood persist in adulthood and lead to additional problems. The various adverse physical and mental health outcomes for these children are costly to treat and overwhelm the healthcare system (Peterson et al., 2023). High unemployment rates are likely to be experienced by this population and create economic disadvantages that can decimate communities (Berger, 2019). Children who exhibited externalizing behaviors in the school setting are at risk of engaging in criminal activity and being arrested as adults, placing strain on the nation's overburdened criminal justice system (Berger, 2019; Offerman et al., 2022). The prevalence of externalizing behaviors among elementary-aged children increases the utilization of social systems as they progress into adulthood, depletes resources, and incurs lifelong social and economic costs for these children, their families, and their communities (Berger, 2019; Peterson et al., 2023; Tung et al., 2024).

Traditional Discipline Practices

Throughout history, the United States public education system has shifted its approach in managing student behavior, especially at the elementary level (Hwang et al., 2022). In recent

decades, schools' behavior management practices have embodied a retributive approach by using punishment to deter undesirable behaviors (Hwang et al., 2022; Jacobson, 2021). These measures are derived from an operant conditioning framework which postulates that pairing unwanted behavior with an unpleasant stimulus will reduce the occurrence of the behavior (Hwang et al., 2022). The establishment of schools' current approach to discipline parallels the progression of the nation's criminal justice system, which emphasizes the reduction of crime through harsh punishments and epitomizes a "culture of control" (Jacobsen et al., 2019). The nation's fixation on controlling crime by punishing the deviant permeated the educational realm, which adapted this initiative by shifting its focus from crime control to behavior control (Jacobsen et al., 2019).

Today, schools implement a one-size-fits-all approach to responding to student behavior which originates from the adoption of zero tolerance policies (Lodi et al., 2022). Zero tolerance policies have been widely implemented in schools across the United States and have been the primary approach to discipline since the early 1990s (Dutil, 2020). Their aim is to enforce order and control behavior through the use of traditional discipline practices, or strict and inflexible punishments that do not take into account the context of the behavior and are delivered indiscriminately (Lodi et al., 2022; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022).

A common and highly problematic form of traditional discipline is exclusionary discipline, which exclusively aims to separate offending students from the school setting. These practices entail removing and isolating students whose behavior violates school rules in an effort to discourage the behavior from recurring (Lodi et al., 2022). One type of exclusionary discipline is an office discipline referral. An office discipline referral entails the removal of a student from the classroom by the teacher to be further addressed by and potentially receive additional discipline from the building principal (Welsh, 2024). When a student is sent to the office by their

teacher, their removal from the classroom and referral to the principal may be the sole consequence, or the administrator may choose to impose additional sanctions (Eddy et al., 2020; Welsh, 2024). A second type of exclusionary discipline is school suspension or expulsion. Suspensions may take place outside of school or be served in school in an area that is separate from all aspects of the school setting (Hwang et al., 2022). In addition to exclusionary discipline, other traditional discipline practices include teacher reprimands, after-school and lunch detention, and revocation of privileges (Caldarella et al., 2021).

Over the years, zero-tolerance policies have encouraged schools to become more stringent with discipline (Gomez et al., 2021). Nationwide, schools have installed more security cameras and surveillance systems to monitor student behavior (Gomez et al., 2021). School resource officers, or law-enforcement officers employed by a school district, have been utilized in recent years to detect and address violations to the school's conduct code, which has led to an increase in the number of student infractions reported each year (Gottfredson et al., 2020). As a result, students are being disciplined for behavior now more than ever (Gomez et al., 2021).

Since the vast implementation of zero-tolerance policies, the United States has seen a dramatic increase in the number of school suspensions and expulsions at every grade level (Dutil, 2020). Each year, approximately 2.6 million children are suspended from school. Of those, 40% are suspended more than once (Jacobsen et al., 2019). In addition to those receiving out-of-school suspensions, 2.7 million more students experience in-school exclusionary discipline, including in-school suspensions and removal from the classroom (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Annually, 111,000 children are expelled from school for the year (Jacobsen et al., 2019). At the elementary level, 1 in 10 children are suspended from school by the age of 9, and 2% of all elementary school children are expelled each year (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Additionally,

reprimands occur twice as often as verbal praise in elementary schools (Caldarella et al., 2021). Regardless of grade level, most traditional discipline occurs as a result of a minor infraction, such as disrespect or defiance toward a teacher or other staff person (Jacobsen et al., 2019). In fact, suspensions are most often delivered following nonviolent behavior (Dutil, 2020).

Problems with Traditional Discipline Practices

Despite its goal to maintain order, deter behavior, and facilitate a safe and productive school environment, there are several problems related to the use of traditional discipline to address externalizing behavior in schools. Of utmost concern are the racial disparities driven by the implementation of traditional discipline practices (Welsh, 2024). Discipline practices in all forms are disproportionately applied to children of color (Gomez et al., 2021; Welsh, 2024). Across all grade levels, Black and Hispanic students are suspended significantly more often than White students (Gomez et al., 2021). Black students receive out-of-school suspension more often than office discipline referrals, suggesting that teachers and administrators have a lower tolerance for behaviors displayed by children of color (Eddy et al., 2020). Furthermore, schools that have more Black students than White or non-White students have harsher discipline policies overall (Gomez et al., 2021). Discipline in schools with predominately Black students usually occurs as a result of subjective behaviors such as disrespect or defiance rather than severe behaviors like assault or possessing a weapon (Gomez et al., 2021).

Suspending children of color more often than their White counterparts excludes these students from the school setting, alienating them from their peers and their education (Gomez et al., 2021). This phenomenon leads to what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline, or the pathway through which young people are ushered from the educational system into the criminal justice system (Dutil, 2020). This channel is initiated through harsh punishments imposed in the

school which typically lead to regular suspensions and even expulsion, predisposing these students to engage in crime and enter the juvenile justice system (Dutil, 2020). In general, receiving any form of traditional discipline in school increases the likelihood that children will engage in crime, be arrested, and experience incarceration later in life (Lodi et al., 2022; Welsh, 2024). This trend is attributable to reductions in the amount of time that students have in the classroom to engage with prosocial peers and their school community as a result of traditional discipline, particularly exclusionary discipline (Dutil, 2020). This subsequently deprives children of opportunities to develop social/emotional skills, restricts their access to education, and limits their upward mobility, all of which contribute to high dropout rates and criminal justice involvement in adolescence and adulthood (Dutil, 2020). Thus, traditional discipline effectively criminalizes youth, particularly Black youth, and predisposes them to future delinquent behavior (Dutil, 2020; Gomez et al., 2021).

Traditional discipline practices, mainly exclusionary discipline, also lead to poor academic outcomes for students (Gomez et al., 2021; Welsh, 2024). Students who receive one or more discipline referrals per school year achieve lower grades than their peers and are more likely to drop out before graduation (Eddy et al., 2020; Gomez et al., 2021). They also exhibit more frequent absenteeism and express fewer feelings of connectedness to the school community (Gomez et al., 2021). Students who are repeatedly suspended from school or removed from the classroom miss out on important instructional time, creating an academic disadvantage by restricting their access to the educational curricula (Gomez et al., 2021). Students who are repeatedly removed from the learning environment eventually disengage as a way to cope, contributing to their sense of disconnect (Gomez et al., 2021).

Although traditional discipline may temporarily suppress undesirable behavior in the classroom, they do not lead to sustained change (Caldarella et al., 2021). In fact, despite their aim to curb behavioral problems and maintain order, traditional discipline practices are ineffective and exacerbate the incidence of externalizing behaviors (Caldarella et al., 2021). Gomez et al. (2021) found that early exposure to harsh and exclusionary forms of punishment leads to an increase in maladaptive behavior over time. Repeated discipline lowers a child's sensitivity to consequences and desensitizes feelings of fear and guilt, rendering punishments less effective (Gomez et al., 2021). Additionally, traditional discipline, especially exclusionary discipline, is particularly harmful for elementary children. These practices are stressful for a child to experience, interrupt their structured routine which is crucial to physical, mental, social, emotional, and academic wellbeing, and place burdens on their caregivers who often must rearrange their schedules to accommodate suspensions (Jacobsen et al., 2019).

In particular, reprimands and exclusionary discipline have been found to amplify undesirable behavior and negatively impact student engagement, and exclusionary discipline is especially associated with increases in physically aggressive behavior (Caldarella et al., 2021; Eddy et al., 2020; Jacobsen et al., 2019). Students who are frequently suspended or removed from the classroom are more likely to develop feelings of anger toward authority and the school environment (Jacobsen et al., 2019). Harsh discipline spurred by zero tolerance policies is handed down indiscriminately and without discussion, depriving students of an opportunity to express their perspectives and any feelings of regret or remorse. Additionally, they are not given a chance to repair damage caused by their actions (Gomez et al., 2021). This may cause students to feel as though they are treated unfairly or misunderstood, leading to internalized feelings of guilt and shame. These feelings are later expressed as aggression and anger and become a means

to cope with repeated punishment, which is particularly true for children who lack adequate social/emotional skills (Gomez et al., 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2019).

Another major concern of traditional discipline practices is that they are disproportionately applied to children who have experienced trauma (Sanders et al., 2024). Like externalizing behavior, the likelihood that a child will be disciplined in school, especially through forms of exclusionary discipline, is heightened among children who have experienced trauma (Sanders et al., 2024). Because trauma causes substantial impairment in cognitive, social, and emotional development and functioning, children who have experienced trauma are more likely to engage in externalizing behaviors, and thus are disciplined more often (Dutil, 2020). In fact, students with trauma histories are almost always disciplined for behaviors connected to exposure to traumatic experiences, and the incidence of trauma predicts school discipline even more than racial demographics alone (Sanders et al., 2024).

The likelihood that a child will be suspended from school increases by 80% for every adverse childhood experience (Sanders et al., 2024). School-aged children who are the victim of or exposed to violence, have divorced parents, or have parents who struggle with mental health, substance abuse, or are incarcerated are suspended from school significantly more often than their peers (Sanders et al., 2024). Children of lower socioeconomic status or who live in impoverished neighborhoods are 25% more likely to be suspended, and children involved in child protective services are 50% more likely to experience exclusionary discipline (Eddy et al., 2020; Sanders et al., 2024). Additionally, students who are enrolled in alternative education programs due to behavioral problems in public school tend to have experienced violence, abuse, neglect, household dysfunction (Sanders et al., 2024).

Traditional approaches to discipline also risk retraumatizing children (Caldarella et al., 2021; Puchner & Markowitz, 2023; Sanders et al., 2024). Reprimands delivered in sharp tones or by raised voices trigger children with paralleled traumas which prompt a dysregulated response and precipitate additional problem behaviors (Caldarella et al., 2021; Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). Punitive approaches that exclude students from the regular classroom and ostracize them from positive peer interactions further disadvantage children impacted by trauma by inhibiting their social/emotional development and reinforcing negative self-image (Ho et al., 2022; Sanders et al., 2024; Santamaria-Villar et al., 2021; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). Harsh discipline also exacerbates feelings of shame and worthlessness in traumatized students by reinforcing the sense that they are “bad” and undeserving of connectedness through negative interactions and exclusion from the classroom environment (Gomez et al., 2021).

From a biological perspective, children who have experienced trauma may interpret traditional discipline as threatening or triggering, activating their autonomic alarm system which is perpetually poised to detect threats to safety and security (Porges, 2022). As a result, children may struggle to regulate their physiological and emotional responses to these types of punishment and react with verbal or behavioral aggression as a defense mechanism. In essence, traditional disciplinary practices that entail punishment and negative reinforcement may serve as an impetus for worsened behaviors, perpetuating the cycle of trauma and reinforcing the occurrence of externalizing behavior (Dutil, 2020).

The Role of Administrators and Teachers in Student Behavior and Discipline

Administrators

Both teachers and school administrators play an important role in how externalizing or problematic behavior is reported and addressed in the school setting (Welsh, 2024). Between the

two, administrators are primarily tasked with the responsibility of deciding on and enforcing discipline for student infractions, and their approaches to this are highly contingent upon their attitudes and philosophies regarding discipline (Eddy et al., 2020; Welsh, 2024). Their perspectives toward students who exhibit problem behaviors and their philosophy on discipline in general are key determinants of the outcomes of office discipline referrals (Welsh, 2024). Administrators' understanding of their job requirements influences their decisions on discipline whereby principals who feel it is their responsibility to adhere to policy and deliver consequences are more likely to deliver punishments indiscriminately (Welsh, 2024). On the other hand, those who believe that discretion is important to incorporate into their decision-making are more inclined to deviate from policy and approach discipline more subjectively (Welsh, 2024). Additionally, administrators' upbringings, past experiences with their parents and teachers, and their own parenting styles influence how they approach school discipline (Welsh, 2024). Because individual upbringings and philosophies regarding discipline naturally vary among administrators throughout a school district as well as among those within the same building, disparities in the delivery of discipline are inevitable (Welsh, 2024).

Teachers' and administrators' perspectives on the most appropriate method to address and manage student behavior are not always aligned, especially in elementary schools. For instance, most administrators in the United States believe that it is the teacher's responsibility to manage behavior in the classroom (Welsh, 2024). This is likely due to administrators' general overestimation of teachers' level of preparedness in behavioral management (Welsh, 2024). Furthermore, teachers and administrators often view disruptive behavior differently and are not always in agreement on classroom management and discipline protocols, leading to a disconnect between the two roles regarding how to address behaviors in the classroom (Welsh, 2024).

Teachers

Although administrators make the decisions regarding discipline and enforce the punishment, teachers have a weighty influence on student behavior and discipline outcomes (Eddy et al., 2020). A teacher's classroom management skills, for instance, significantly influence student behavior and the frequency at which her students receive an office discipline referral and subsequent consequences (Welsh, 2024). Teachers who are well-trained in the area of classroom management and have confidence in their ability to respond to student behavior are more proactive in preventing behaviors, experience fewer behavioral concerns among their students overall, and are less likely to refer a student to the office for further discipline (Eddy et al., 2020). However, teachers' lack of preparation and training in classroom management places them at a disadvantage in effectively addressing student behavior, leading to an increase in discipline referrals for those children (Caldarella et al., 2021; Welsh, 2024).

In addition to classroom management abilities, teacher characteristics, attitudes, and biases influence discipline referrals and subsequent disparities (Welsh, 2024). In determining how to respond to an externalizing behavior in the classroom, teachers judge the severity of the behavior and whether they can manage it based on student's past behavioral patterns, the context of the behavior, their tolerance level, their behavior management skills, and the supportive resources available to them (Welsh, 2024). Teachers' perceptions of a student impacts how likely they are to tolerate the behavior, and their classroom expectations influence whether they will refer for discipline (Welsh, 2024). Additionally, teachers' implicit biases may impact how they perceive and respond to behavior displayed by Black children, contributing to racial disparities (Gomez et al., 2021). Because teachers are the primary reporters of behavioral incidents in schools, their accounts of what happened directly influence discipline outcomes (Eddy et al.,

2020). Not all teachers will have the same perceptions and thus will respond to behaviors differently, leading to inconsistencies within schools on when, how, whose, and which types of behaviors are addressed (Eddy et al., 2020).

A teacher's level of emotional exhaustion also has significant impacts on student behavior and subsequent discipline. Emotional exhaustion is a symptom of burnout caused by stress and strain that is not adequately managed over time and is strongly correlated with negative teacher and student outcomes (Eddy et al., 2020). Emotional exhaustion decreases teacher motivation, lessens job satisfaction, negatively influences classroom climate, and impairs a teacher's ability to manage student behavior (Eddy et al., 2020). It also decreases teachers' sense of self-efficacy, which reduces teachers' tolerance for externalizing behaviors and causes them to be less persistent and consistent in redirecting behaviors, reducing the effectiveness of their behavior management strategies (Eddy et al., 2020). Low teacher efficacy is also associated with higher incidences of hyperactivity and defiance among students, particularly boys, and emotional exhaustion in general leads to poor academic achievement among students as evidenced by decreased test scores (Aldabbagh et al., 2024; Eddy et al., 2020).

Teachers who are emotionally exhausted have more negative interactions with their students and thus are less likely to have positive student/teacher relationships, which also influences student behavior and discipline outcomes (Caldarella et al., 2021; Eddy et al., 2020; Welsh, 2024). Poor student/teacher relationships that are characterized by high levels of conflict between the educator and are associated with worse behavioral and academic outcomes for those students (Crockett et al., 2018). Students who feel unsupported by and who are frequently in conflict with their teachers are significantly more likely to exhibit externalizing behaviors, specifically displays of anger and reduced impulse control, which further deteriorate the

student/teacher relationship (Crocket et al., 2018). Not surprisingly, teachers who cultivate positive relationships with their students experience fewer incidences of aggressive or disruptive behaviors in their classroom and are more likely to manage behavior proactively (Crockett et al., 2018)

Teachers experiencing emotional exhaustion tend to be more reactive to externalizing behaviors and thus are more punitive (Eddy et al., 2020). Students of emotionally exhausted teachers are more likely to receive out-of-school and in-school suspension and are removed from the classroom more often than their peers (Eddy et al., 2020). These forms of discipline provide temporary relief for the teacher, reinforcing these strategies despite their tendency to increase and aggravate behavior over time (Eddy et al., 2020). These teachers are also more likely to refer a child to special education testing for problem behaviors, leading to an increase in special education placements for these students (Eddy et al., 2020).

Summary

The increase in problematic behaviors among students, primarily elementary-aged children, in public schools across the United States in recent years had incited growing concerns among school administrators and educators (Long, 2024). The challenges and adverse outcomes associated with externalizing behaviors in particular are detrimental to children's academic progress, impair social/emotional skill development, contribute to increased mental health concerns, predispose children to future criminal justice involvement, and negatively affect educator wellbeing and school climate (Aldabbagh et al., 2024; Castro et al., 2021; Kulkarni & Sullivan, 2022; Offerman et al., 2022; Paulus et al., 2021). The implementation of zero-tolerance policies is the public education system's primary approach to address and manage undesirable behavior (Dutil, 2020; Lodi et al, 2022). Although they aim to deter behavior and promote

adherence to rules, these traditional discipline practices which emphasize exclusionary discipline and other harsh punishments further disadvantage students academically, socially, and emotionally, worsen behavior, and lead to many negative long-term outcomes that disproportionately impact children of color and those affected by trauma (Caldarella et al., 2021; Dutil, 2020; Gomez et al., 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2019; Sanders et al., 2024; Welsh, 2024).

The mutually reinforcing relationship that exists between externalizing behavior and traditional discipline practices is of particular concern given its likelihood to exacerbate the overlapping and adverse outcomes associated with both variables. This study aims to further explore the relationship between externalizing behavior and traditional discipline practices by achieving a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness which may provide direction for future research and lend suggestions on ways to improve the education system's current approach to managing and responding to student behavior.

Chapter Three

Methodology

Research Design

This correlational quantitative research study examines the relationship between the independent variable of externalizing behaviors implemented by elementary school educators and administrators and the dependent variable of traditional discipline practices among elementary students. A correlation design was used in this study because the independent and dependent variables are measured independently, and the statistical significance of their relationship is assessed without the manipulation of variables. Secondary data collection was used to explore the relationship through accessing the school district's student information system. This researcher is employed as a school social worker by the district and has credentials to access this system.

Sample

A census of all students who were reported to have exhibited externalizing behavior and received subsequent disciplinary action was used to collect data across three elementary buildings within a single public school district. A total of 1,262 students were enrolled in these elementary buildings at the time of data collection and were considered for inclusion in the study. Sapphire, the district's student information system, was used to obtain the frequencies of the variables of interest as reported by school staff. Except for data meeting exclusion criteria, all incidences of disciplinary actions and externalizing behaviors were measured and analyzed in this study.

Elementary administrators, teachers, and students did not directly participate in this study. Secondary data collection was conducted to gather all data necessary for analysis. This

school district was chosen as the subject for this study because the researcher was employed in district at the time of the research and had access to all relevant data. Census sampling was selected for this study to facilitate more widespread data collection and to avoid misrepresented or skewed data caused by participant concerns related to the nature of the data as well as their dual relationship with the researcher.

Inclusion Criteria

Externalizing behaviors and disciplinary actions occurring within the district's three elementary schools comprising kindergarten and grades first through fifth are included in this study. Externalizing behaviors are limited to infractions that include disrespect toward staff, defiance, work refusal, lying, stealing, profanity, unsafe behavior, physical confrontation (i.e., fights with peers, aggression), eloping, harassment/intimidation, and disruptive behavior and must be displayed by a student enrolled at one of the three elementary buildings. All subsequent disciplinary actions are included in this study with special attention being paid to actions entailing traditional discipline practices, such as verbal warnings, detention (after school and during lunch), in-school and out-of-school suspensions, parent pick-up from school, removal from class/activity, and revocation of privileges. All discipline must be handed down by an administrator or teacher assigned to one of the elementary buildings.

Data collected for this study must be entered into and obtained from Sapphire and must be reported by school staff. Data includes only those traditional discipline practices and externalizing behaviors occurring during the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years. Multiple cases involving the same student in the data set may be included in the analysis.

Exclusion Criteria

Any disciplinary action or externalizing behavior occurring within the district's middle school or high school is not included in this study. Disciplinary actions delivered in an elementary school building by administrators or teachers who are assigned to the middle school or high school is also excluded. Additionally, externalizing behaviors exhibited in elementary schools by students enrolled in middle school or high school are excluded. Disciplinary actions and student infractions that do not include those described within the inclusion criteria are not included in data analysis. Lastly, any data not entered into and obtained from Sapphire is excluded from this study.

Recruitment

No live participants were recruited for this study. Consent to access Sapphire for data collection was obtained from the district superintendent prior to conducting research (see Appendix A).

Instrumentation

Data in this study was collected from the district's student information system called Sapphire. Sapphire is a web-based student information system available to private and public school districts that tracks basic and advanced student demographic information, defines and consolidates student families and parents/guardians, tracks enrollment and attendance, generates report cards, assesses graduation progress, maintains student documents, tracks and share all student-related communications, and allows school staff to enter and monitor grades, student discipline, and student behavior. Information is entered into Sapphire by school staff and can be accessed by any employee possessing login credentials (Sapphire Software, 2024).

The system's Data Mining feature specifically was used in this study to generate a report containing information relevant to the research question. To perform this, the user first delineates the data of interest to be included in the report and gives the command for the system to generate the requested information. Data is provided in table form which may be converted into an Excel spreadsheet. For this study, the researcher generated a report in Sapphire including the following variables: disciplinary actions, employee delivering the discipline, student infractions, student demographics including grade, gender, and ethnicity, and building where the infraction and/or discipline occurred. See Appendix B for a list of types of disciplinary actions and student infractions. See Appendix C for a listing of the specific demographic characteristics that will be utilized. The researcher manually deleted from the data set any student infractions that are not considered externalizing behavior according to its operational definition described in Chapter 1, actions and infractions occurring outside of the 2023-2024 and 2024-2025 school years, and identifying student or staff information, such as name or student ID, that is automatically included in the report.

Procedure

The researcher requested permission from the Exempt Review Committee (ERC) at Marywood University to conduct the study. Permission to conduct the study was also obtained from the superintendent of the school district in which the study took place. Informed consent also obtained from the district superintendent (see Appendix A). Because secondary data collection was used, no contact was made with subjects throughout the study and additional informed consent of participants was not necessary.

All data in this study was collected from Sapphire. The researcher accessed the Data Mining feature within Sapphire where all student, staff, and building-specific data is maintained.

A single report was generated to collect information on student infractions (i.e., externalizing behavior), infraction reporter (i.e., teacher or administrator), gender of reporter, role and/or grade level of reporter (if a teacher), disciplinary actions, grade of offending student, gender of offending student, and ethnicity of offending student across all three elementary schools. Information was entered into an Excel spreadsheet and identifying student and staff information was deleted. Student behavior resulting in a disciplinary referral that was not considered an externalizing behavior for the purposes of this study was omitted. Data was analyzed using SPSS version 29.

Analysis of Data

The level of statistical significance used in the analysis will be $p \leq .05$. The following sub-questions will be addressed.

1. What are the traditional discipline practices used by elementary teachers and administrators?

The incidence of traditional discipline practices will be examined through frequency distributions and other descriptive statistics.

2. What are the externalizing behaviors exhibited by elementary students?

The incidence of externalizing behaviors will be examined through frequency distributions and other descriptive statistics.

3. What is the relationship between the use of traditional discipline practices by elementary teachers and administrators and the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary students?

The relationship between traditional discipline practices and externalizing behaviors will be explored by using a chi square test of independence.

Supplemental Analyses

The following questions of interest will be addressed. A chi square test of independence will be used to examine the differences between the variables.

1. What is the relationship between referral role and the type of behavior referred for discipline?
2. What is the relationship between referral gender and the type of behavior referred for discipline?
3. What is the relationship between referral gender and student gender?
4. What is the relationship between student gender and disciplinary action?
5. What is the relationship between student gender and incidence of externalizing behavior?
6. What is the relationship between student race and incidence of externalizing behavior?
7. What is the relationship between student race and disciplinary action?
8. What is the relationship between special education enrollment and disciplinary action?
9. What is the relationship between special education enrollment and incidence of externalizing behavior?

Chapter Four

Results

Introduction

After data was collected and cleaned, a review of the descriptive statistics revealed that a total of 3,411 cases met inclusion criteria for data analysis. Variables examined include the externalizing behavior exhibited by a student prompting a disciplinary referral, the disciplinary action that occurred as a result of the referral, the gender, ethnicity, grade level, and special education status of the students exhibiting the behaviors, and the role and gender of the staff members making the referrals. The building and school year in which each of the behaviors and disciplinary referrals occurred was also recorded.

Demographics

Male students (79%) comprised approximately four times as many externalizing behaviors exhibited and subsequent disciplinary actions received than did female students (21%). White students (66.8%) were referred for discipline twice as often as all other ethnicities combined. Black students (13.1%) and Hispanic students (12.3%) were referred at nearly equal rates, and biracial students were referred least often (7.8%) (see Table 1).

Second grade students comprised the most behavior referrals and disciplinary actions (28%), closely followed by third grade students (22.3%). Referrals originating from students in the remaining grades were relatively equally distributed with fifth grade students making up the slight minority of referrals at 10.6%. There was no notable difference between referrals made involving students who receive special education services (52.8%) and those who do not receive special education services (47.2%) (see Table 1).

Table 1
Student Demographics

Variable	<i>n</i>	Valid Percent
Gender		
Male	2,694	79%
Female	717	21%
Ethnicity		
White	2,277	66.8%
Black	448	13.1%
Hispanic	420	12.3%
Biracial	266	7.8%
Grade		
Kindergarten	537	15.8%
1 st Grade	422	12.4%
2 nd Grade	954	28%
3 rd Grade	760	22.3%
4 th Grade	374	11%
5 th Grade	360	10.6%
Special Education		
Receiving Services	1,801	52.8%
Not Receiving Services	1,610	47.2%

School staff referring students for discipline following an externalizing behavior included kindergarten through fifth grade teachers, specials teachers, guidance counselors, related service providers, life skills teachers, Title I staff, secretarial staff, administrators, and emotional, autistic, and learning support teachers. Administrators (43%) reported nearly half of the externalizing behaviors. Among grade-level teaching staff, second grade teachers referred students for discipline following behavior most often (13.1%). Guidance counselors, related service providers, learning support teachers, life skills teachers, Title I staff, and secretarial staff each comprised fewer than 1% of the referrals. There were 3 cases missing. Among the staff who made disciplinary referrals due to student behavior, there was no notable difference between male referrers (51.2%) and female referrers (48.7%) (see Table 2).

Table 2

Role & Gender of Referral Source

Variable	<i>n</i>	Valid Percent
Role		
Administrator	1,467	43%
Kindergarten Teacher	264	7.7%
1 st Grade Teacher	167	4.9%
2 nd Grade Teacher	448	13.1%
3 rd Grade Teacher	360	10.6%
4 th Grade Teacher	128	3.8%
5 th Grade Teacher	126	3.7%
Specials Teacher	70	2.1%
Guidance Counselor	13	0.3%
Related Service Provider	9	0.4%
Emotional Support Teacher	230	6.7%
Autistic Support Teacher	75	2.2%
Learning Support Teacher	10	0.3%
Life Skills Teacher	21	0.6%
Title I Staff	14	0.4%
Secretarial Staff	6	0.2%
Gender		
Male	1,747	51.3%
Female	1,660	48.7%

Externalizing behaviors and disciplinary referrals occurred at roughly the same rates during each of the school years examined, with 42.1% of referrals occurring during the 2023-2024 school year and 57.9% occurring during the 2024-2025 school year. Nearly half of the behavior referrals originated from Building 3 (43.9%), which consists of grades three through five. However, Building 1 and Building 2, which consist of kindergarten through second grades, had the most referrals when combined (56.1%) (see Table 3).

Table 3

Building and School Year in Which Behaviors/Discipline Actions Occurred

Variable	<i>n</i>	Percent
Building		
Building 1 (K-2 nd Grade)	1,109	32.5%
Building 2 (K-2 nd Grade)	805	23.6%
Building 3 (3 rd Grade-5 th Grade)	1,497	43.9%
School Year		
2023-2024	1,437	42.1%
2024-2025	1,974	57.9%

Subproblem One

Subproblem One, “What are the traditional discipline practices used by elementary teachers and administrators?”, was analyzed using descriptive statistics and other statistical analyses. Data analyses revealed disciplinary actions that consisted of both traditional discipline practices and non-traditional discipline practices. A conference with student (31.9%) comprised over a quarter of all disciplinary actions imposed as a result of a behavior referral. Revocation of privileges with the second most frequent disciplinary action imposed (16%). Parent notification, out-of-school suspension, and parent pickup each comprised 8% - 12% of the disciplinary actions imposed. The remaining disciplinary actions comprised less than 5% (see Table 4).

Table 4

Disciplinary Action Taken Following a Behavior Referral

Discipline Action	<i>n</i>	Valid Percent
Alternative Discipline (non-report)	5	0.2%
Anger Management	1	0%
Bus Suspension	21	0.7%
Change Clothing/Apparel	1	0%
Conference with Student	995	31.9%
Confiscate Materials	6	0.2%
Lunch Detention	44	1.4%
Midday Detention	7	0.2%
After-School Detention	136	4.4%
Documented/Observed, No Discipline	24	0.8%
Guidance Counseling	11	0.4%
In-School Suspension	10	0.3
None	27	0.9%
Other	6	0.2%
Out-of-School Suspension	276	8.9%
Parent Notification	376	12.1%
Parent Pickup	232	7.4%
Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution	3	0.1%
Removal from Class/Activity	276	8.9%
Restitution	8	0.3%
Retraining/Behavior Modification Plan	87	2.8%
Revoke Privileges	527	16.0%
Student Assistance Referral	4	0.1%
Verbal Warning	24	0.8%
Written Warning	8	0.3%
Missing	296	

Subproblem Two

Subproblem Two, “What are the externalizing behaviors exhibited by elementary students?”, was analyzed using descriptive statistics and other statistical analyses. Data analyses revealed a variety of externalizing behaviors resulting in referrals for discipline that ranged from disruptiveness to physical confrontations. Inappropriate behavior (37.2%) spurred the majority of behavior referrals at a rate twice as high as insubordination/defiance (12.7%), which was the second most reported behavior. Disrespectful behavior (10.5%) and bus misconduct (9.4%) comprised the third and fourth most reported behaviors, respectively. All other behaviors comprised fewer than 5% of referrals (see Table 5).

Table 5
Externalizing Behavior Prompting a Disciplinary Referral

Reason For Referral (Behavior)	<i>n</i>	Percent
Aggravated Assault on Student	4	0.1%
Bus Misconduct	322	9.4%
Cafeteria Rules Violation	17	0.5%
Disrespect to Staff	102	3.0%
Disrespectful Behavior	358	10.5%
Fighting	4	0.1%
Horseplay	2	0.1%
Inappropriate Behavior	1,268	37.2%
Inappropriate Behavior w/ Unintentional Injury	5	0.1%
Initiating/Instigating a Fight	2	0.1%
Institutional Vandalism	5	0.1%
Insubordination/Defiance	434	12.7%
Leaving Building w/o Permission	7	0.2%
Obscene/Profane/Offensive Language	119	3.5%
Physical Confrontation	151	4.4%
Possession of Cutting Instrument	5	0.1%
Possession of Weapon	3	0.1%
Refusing to Work	94	2.8%
Running in the Halls	3	0.1%
Simple Assault on Staff	6	0.2%
Student Disruptions	128	3.8%
Threatening School Official/Student	31	0.9%
Throwing Objects	19	0.6%
Uncooperative with Staff	78	2.3%
Unsafe Behavior	238	7%
Verbal Altercation	6	0.2%

Subproblem Three

Subproblem Three, “What is the relationship between the use of traditional discipline practices by elementary teachers and administrators and the incidence of externalizing behaviors among elementary students?”, was analyzed using a chi-square test of independence. To further define the data and to facilitate chi-square analyses, disciplinary actions and externalizing behaviors were first grouped into six new variables. The three most frequently occurring disciplinary actions – conference with student, revoke privileges, and parent notification – were kept as individual variables. Variables comprising a form of exclusionary discipline were grouped and redefined as “exclusionary discipline”. A “positive support” variable was created to include all disciplinary actions in which school staff referred a student to a service or implemented a positive in-school support. An “other” variable was created to include all other disciplinary practices occurring a frequencies of less than 5% (see Table 6).

Table 6
Grouped Disciplinary Actions

Variable	<i>n</i>	Valid Percent
Conference with Student	995	31.9%
Revoke Privileges	527	16.9%
Parent Notification	376	12.1%
Exclusionary Discipline	845	27.1%
Positive Support	106	3.4%
Other	266	8.5%

Inappropriate behavior, the most frequently coded behavior, was kept as an individual variable. Any behavior involving a physical or verbal altercation was grouped into one variable labeled as “fighting/assault”. The variable “disrespectful behavior” was modified to include any behavior that entailed defiance, insubordination, or uncooperativeness exhibited by a student. The variable “unsafe behavior” was modified to include any behavior considered threatening or unsafe in nature. The variable “student disruptions” was redefined as “disruptive behavior” and

included any behavior that could be considered disruptive to the classroom or other school setting. An “other” variable was created to include all other variables occurring a frequencies of less than 5% (see Table 7).

Table 7
Grouped Externalizing Behaviors

Variable	<i>n</i>	Percent
Inappropriate Behavior	1,273	37.3%
Fighting/Assault	173	5.1%
Disrespectful Behavior/Defiance	1,228	36%
Unsafe Behavior	251	7.4%
Disruptive Behavior	147	4.3%
Other	339	9.9%

Using the grouped variables for externalizing behaviors and disciplinary actions, a chi-square test of independence was calculated comparing whether behaviors and disciplinary actions were independent. Before interpreting results, assumptions were checked for violations. One cell (2.8%) had an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count was 3.37. Following a chi-square test of independence, a significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(25) = 403.268, p < .001$). Externalizing behaviors and disciplinary actions were dependent on each other. Cramer’s V (.161) indicates that 2.5% of the variance is shared.

Statistical analyses revealed that there is a relationship between inappropriate behavior and the types of discipline it evokes. Students who exhibit inappropriate behavior are more likely to receive a conference with student (36.5%) and revocation of privileges (20.6%) and are less likely to receive exclusionary discipline (23.5%) and parent notification (9.4%). Among students exhibiting inappropriate behavior, positive support (2.7%) was implemented the least. Fighting/assault most often resulted in exclusionary discipline (56.5%) and was least likely to evoke a conference with student (16.5%) and revocation of privileges (5.9%). As with

inappropriate behavior, positive support (2.4%) was implemented the least among students exhibiting fighting/assault.

A relationship was also present between disrespect/defiance and the types of discipline these behaviors evoked. Students exhibiting disrespect/defiance were more likely to receive positive support (5%) and exclusionary discipline (30.9%) and were less likely to receive a revocation of privileges (12.6%) than students exhibiting other types of behaviors. Approximately half (51.9%) of positive support actions were implemented following referrals for disrespect/defiance. Unsafe behavior was more likely to evoke parent notification (30.4%) and was least likely to result in a conference with student (19.4%) or revocation of privileges (6.5%). Behaviors categorized as “other” led to parent notification in 35.8% of cases and led to exclusionary discipline in only 5.2% of cases.

Supplemental Analyses

Student Gender and Behaviors/Discipline

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to explore the relationship between student gender and the types of externalizing behaviors exhibited. A significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(5) = 79.855, p < .001$). Male students were more likely to be referred for disciplinary action following disrespect/defiance (38.4%) and unsafe behavior (8.5%) and less likely to be referred for discipline-following inappropriate behavior (35.2%) and disruptive behavior (3.5%). Conversely, female students were most likely to be referred for inappropriate behavior (45.3%) and disruptive behavior (7.3%) and less likely to be referred for defiance (26.9%) and unsafe behavior (3.2%).

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to explore the relationship between student gender and the types of discipline received. A significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(5) =$

105.973, $p < .001$). The most frequently occurring disciplinary actions received by male students were a conference with student (30.1%) and exclusionary discipline (29.5%). Male students received exclusionary discipline and “other” discipline action (9.5%) more often than expected, and they received a conference with student (30.1%) and revocation of privileges (14.6%) less often than expected. A conference with student (40%) was the most frequently occurring disciplinary action among females, and this action was implemented more often than expected. Female students also received a revocation of privileges (14.6%) more often than expected and received exclusionary discipline (16.9%) and “other” disciplinary action (4.2%) less often than expected. Only 2.4% of female students and 3.6% of male students received positive support following an externalizing behavior.

Student Ethnicity and Behaviors/Discipline

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to explore the relationship between student ethnicity and the types of externalizing behaviors exhibited. A significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(15) = 147.917, p < .001$). Nearly half of Black students receiving disciplinary actions were referred for discipline following disrespect/defiance (45.8%), which occurred more often than expected. Referrals following fighting/assault (10%) also occurred more often than expected, and inappropriate behavior (21.2%) was reported less often than expected. Among White students, 40% were referred for discipline following inappropriate behavior, which was reported more often than expected. Referrals following fighting/assault (3%) occurred less often than expected among this population. Inappropriate behavior (41%) was the most frequently reported behavior among Hispanic students. These students were referred following fighting/assault (10%) more often than expected and were referred for unsafe behavior (4.3%) less often than expected. No significant deviations from the expected value were found among

Biracial students. Disrespect/defiance (37.2%) and inappropriate behavior (35.7%) comprised the majority of reported behaviors among this population. Biracial students were referred least often for disruptive behavior (1.9%).

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to explore the relationship between student ethnicity and the types of discipline received. A significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(15) = 94.451, p < .001$). Compared to other ethnicities, Black students were most likely to receive exclusionary discipline (35.2%) and less likely to receive a revocation of privileges (8.3%). Out of all disciplinary actions, Black students received positive support least often (5%). A conference with student (32.7%) was the most frequently occurring disciplinary action among White students. These students were more likely to receive a revocation of privileges (19%) and were less likely to receive positive support (2.3%) than other ethnicities. Hispanic students were more likely to receive positive support (5.8%) and were least likely to receive parent notification (7.1%). Biracial students slightly deviated from the expected value in that they were more likely to receive positive support (6%) than other ethnicities.

Special Education and Behaviors/Discipline

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to explore the relationship between special education enrollment and the types of externalizing behaviors exhibited. A significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(5) = 134.363, p < .001$). Students receiving special education services were more likely to be referred for disrespect/defiance (41.8%) while students not receiving special education services were more likely to be referred for “other” behaviors (14.7%). A chi-square test of independence was also calculated to determine the relationship between special education enrollment and the types of discipline received. A significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(5) = 55.637, p < .001$). Students receiving special education services were more likely to

receive positive support (5%) while students not receiving special education services were more likely to receive a revocation of privileges (19%).

Referral Source and Student Gender/Behaviors

A chi-square test of independence was conducted to explore the relationship between referral source gender and the types of externalizing behaviors they referred for discipline. A significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(5) = 391.925, p < .001$). Male staff were more likely to submit a discipline referral for students exhibiting behaviors in the “other” category (19.1%) while female staff were more likely to refer students for disrespect/defiance (42.3%) or disruptive behavior (6.7%). Another chi-square test of independence was conducted to explore the relationship between referral source gender and student gender. A significant interaction was found ($\chi^2(1) = 100.632, p < .001$). Male staff were more likely to refer male students for discipline (85.8%) and female staff were more likely to refer female students for discipline (28.2%).

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

This study examined the relationship between the incidence of externalizing behaviors and teachers' and administrators' use of traditional discipline practices across three elementary buildings ranging from kindergarten through fifth grade within a single school district. It was hypothesized that externalizing behavior and traditional discipline practices would be dependent on one another. Results indicated that the null hypothesis was rejected, as there were several significant relationships. Additionally, other demographic factors including student gender, student ethnicity, special education enrollment, referral gender, and referral role were also examined through supplemental analysis to determine their relationship with discipline practices and externalizing behaviors.

Discussion

Data analyses revealed several discipline practices that are implemented by administrators in response to students' externalizing behaviors within all three buildings. While this study was particularly interested in examining the use of traditional discipline practices and their relationship to externalizing behaviors, it is noteworthy that the most frequently applied disciplinary action discovered was a conference with student, which is not considered a traditional discipline practice. This disciplinary action comprised one-third of the responses to externalizing behavior, suggesting that administrators take an interest in problem-solving with students through discussion surrounding their behaviors rather than immediately delivering a consequence. This is a deviation from the literature regarding traditional discipline practices, specifically zero tolerance policies, which indicates that discipline is typically applied

indiscriminately in the education system without lending consideration to the students' perspectives or other variables involved in behavioral incidents (Lodi et al., 2022; Sedillo-Hamann, 2022).

In addition to a conference with student, other discipline actions not characterized as traditional discipline practices were also identified. Anger management, guidance counseling sessions, peer mediation/conflict resolution, retraining/behavior modification plan, and a referral to the school's Student Assistance Program were other responses occasionally utilized by administrators when addressing student behavior. However, these responses were infrequently applied and altogether comprised less than 5% of all disciplinary actions. This suggests that despite having multiple positive supports accessible when considering a consequence, administrators involved in this study are still more inclined to opt for punitive disciplinary action and thus systematically neglect to connect students with supports or services which target any underlying needs contributing to the behavior.

Administrators' preference to address undesirable student behavior with punishment rather than to connect them to positive support aligns with the literature which indicates that schools favor a retributive approach to managing behavior through zero tolerance policies (Jacobson, 2021; Lodi et al., 2022). This protocol embodies an operant conditioning framework whereby it relies on punishment to deter behavior and enforce order and control through applying a negative stimulus (i.e., traditional discipline practice) in response to unwanted behavior (Hwang et al., 2022). These policies, however, fail to take into account the context of the behavior and other variables involved, such as student need, which is likely to exacerbate behavioral incidents.

Like discipline practices, results revealed several externalizing behaviors exhibited by students across all three buildings. However, the most commonly reported behavior, defined as inappropriate behavior, creates confusion surrounding the nature and specific types of actions committed by students that most often generated referrals for discipline. Despite being the most frequently reported behavior by school staff, it is unclear what constitutes inappropriate behavior, or why and when school personnel would code an action as inappropriate behavior in the student information system. These infractions may vary in severity, and this coding may include behaviors that would not be considered externalizing.

A potential explanation for this reporting methodology is that teachers and administrators lack clarification on which behaviors the code of “inappropriate behavior” entails, thus using it as a catch-all for behaviors they are otherwise uncertain on how to report. Staff may also have different opinions on which types of behaviors are considered inappropriate, further contributing to any disparities among the nature of behaviors encompassed by this label. Lastly, administrators may elect to code a certain behavior as inappropriate to encourage a more favorable appearance regarding student behavior within their building. Devising and implementing a district-wide policy which specifies the behaviors encompassed by each code may help to alleviate any inconsistencies related to data reporting.

Unsurprisingly, the incidence of student externalizing behaviors and subsequent discipline practices were closely related. While it is clear that externalizing behavior occurs prior to a disciplinary action in a chronological sense, it cannot be ascertained to what degree each variable influences the other, or whether traditional discipline practices exacerbate the incidence of externalizing behavior. The literature supports the supposition that traditional discipline practices, which are inherently punitive in nature, worsen the occurrence of student externalizing

behavior because these practices prioritize punishment and behavior control over collaboration and the facilitation of need-based support (Caldarella et al. 2021; Gomez et al., 2021; Jacobsen et al., 2019). While this may be the case in this study, any degree of causation involved is ambiguous and impossible to definitively define.

In this study, it was found that student behaviors and disciplinary actions occurred at approximately the same rates in the 2023/2024 school year and the 2024/2025 school year, with the former having slightly fewer referrals. However, data collection was completed two months prior to the end of the 2024/2025 school year, suggesting that the number of behaviors and disciplinary actions for 2024/2025 would be even higher had data collection commenced following the end of the school term. Several variables could be responsible for this disparity, ranging from changes to the student population, staff turnover, and other demographic or environmental factors which may increase the incidence of behaviors and subsequent referrals for discipline.

Results revealed that administrators referred students for discipline more than any other staff role, which insinuates that administrators referred students for discipline more than any other staff role. However, this finding is an inaccurate portrayal of who is referring students the most given the way in which data entry occurs in this school district. Administrators of the elementary schools involved in this study are the primary enterers of data into the student information system. When they receive a referral for discipline from a teacher in response to student misconduct, they assume the responsibility of recording that incident in the data system. In doing so, they code themselves as the referral source even if the behavior was reported by a teacher. This creates the illusion that administrators in this study refer students for discipline following behaviors the most, when it is likely the teachers who are initially bringing student

behavior to the attention of an administrator. Implementing district-wide staff training on who should enter data into the student information system and how that data should be reported would ensure that this information is recorded accurately and consistently across all buildings.

Male students were referred for exhibiting externalizing behaviors and subsequently received a discipline at significantly higher rates than female students. Of note, male students were most often referred for discipline following behaviors related to disrespect/defiance, and referrals following this specific type of behavior were disproportionately high compared to what would be expected. Conversely, almost half of the behaviors exhibited by female students in this study were defined as inappropriate behavior. Regarding discipline, over a quarter of all disciplinary actions applied toward male students consist of exclusionary discipline, which is arguably the harshest punishment available to administrators. This form of discipline was also delivered in cases involving male students more often than would be expected. When juxtaposed with the number of female students receiving exclusionary discipline, which was approximately half the number of male students who received exclusionary discipline, the disparity is stark.

These findings are aligned with the literature which indicates that male students tend to display more externalizing behavior than female students, and they are disciplined more frequently and more harshly than female students (Mitchison et al., 2020; Horn et al., 2021). However, it begs the question of whether male students are truly more apt to exhibit more externalizing behaviors than females or teachers and administrators are simply more likely to refer male students for discipline following behaviors than female students. In other words, do male students appear to exhibit worst behaviors only because female students are less likely to be reported for behavior? It is unknown how much of a role teacher and administrator perception and sentiment regarding male and female behavior plays in this study, but the literature suggests

that the findings may be more representative of reporter bias than the manifestation of student behavior (Horn et al., 2021). The literature supports that teachers' attitudes toward students and their perception of the severity of behavior in the context of the students committing it influence how they interpret and respond to infractions (Eddy et al., 2020; Welsh, 2024). In other words, teachers judge behaviors differently based on their preconceived notions about the students exhibiting them which in turn impacts how they manage them. School staff in this study may tend to view male students as more disrespectful, defiant, or otherwise unruly and more deserving of discipline for their behavior than female students. Staff's tendency to code female behavior under the ambiguous label of "inappropriate behavior" may be a representation of how teachers and administrators view infractions committed by females differently than how they view those committed by males. For instance, school staff may feel less threatened by female students and their behavior which makes them more likely to minimize the severity of those actions. This sentiment may subsequently be reflected in their choice of how to report and rectify these behaviors.

This study's findings indicate that male and female staff reported student behavior and referred students for discipline at equal rates. However, this is likely due to administrators, who are exclusively male in each of the three buildings examined, coding themselves as the referral source even if the behavior was reported to them by a teacher. Given that the majority of teachers within all three buildings are female, this finding is likely inaccurate. Had administrators recorded the referral source as the staff member who reported the behavior, it is likely that female staff would be found to refer students for discipline more often than male staff. When paralleled with the finding that male students are reported to exhibit more externalizing behavior

and are referred for discipline more often than female students, this hypothesis is considerably more substantial.

Disparities in behavior reporting and discipline were also evident among student ethnicities. Overall, White students were referred for discipline following externalizing behaviors most often, which aligns with the distribution of ethnicities across the student population involved in this study. However, Black students were found to be disproportionately referred for behaviors defined as disrespect/defiance and fighting/assault compared to White, Hispanic, and Biracial students. Conversely, White students were more likely to be referred for discipline following inappropriate behavior and less likely to be referred for discipline following fighting/assault. A finding consistently seen throughout the literature is that discipline, especially exclusionary discipline, is disproportionately applied to students of color, and this pattern was evident in this study (Gomez et al., 2021; Welsh, 2024). The fact that Black students were more likely to be referred for discipline following more severe behaviors and received exclusionary discipline at rates higher than expected suggests that teachers and administrators have less tolerance for behaviors exhibited by Black students and view those behaviors as more harmful and threatening in nature than students of other ethnicities. According to the literature, this leads to Black students receiving more discipline than their White peers which tends to be harsher and is often implemented in the form of exclusionary discipline, particularly suspension (Gomez et al., 2021).

These patterns are problematic given the harmful effects that exclusionary discipline has on children, especially elementary aged children, such as decreased academic performance, disengagement from the school community, impaired social/emotional wellbeing, the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline, and the exacerbation of externalizing behaviors

(Caldarella et al., 2021; Dutil, 2020; Gomez et al., Jacobsen et al., 2019; Welsh, 2024). The more children are excluded from the school setting through exclusionary discipline, the worse their short- and long-term outcomes both during school-aged years and post-graduation, especially among children of color.

Factors such as race, home stability, and socioeconomic status correlate with the incidence of externalizing behaviors (Pickren et al., 2024). The community in which this study took place is primarily comprised of lower income households and is home to a large Black and Hispanic population. A portion of the student population involved in this study belongs to families of migrant workers who travel seasonally for employment, creating significant disruption and change to the children's home life and academic trajectory. It is also noteworthy that the majority of teachers and administrators in this school district are White and non-Hispanic. According to the literature, although White children tend to exhibit slightly more externalizing behavior than other ethnicities, children of color are most often referred for and receive the most discipline, especially when their teachers are White (Caldarella et al., 2021). The student and staff demographics involved in this study are likely connected to the incidence of externalizing behaviors and suggests an explanation for the frequency and type of behaviors reported and disciplinary actions implemented.

The literature makes clear that adverse experiences in childhood are linked to externalizing behaviors (Cai et al., 2023; Hutchinson et al., 2020; Mitchison et al., 2020; Tung et al., 2024). Externalizing behaviors are further exacerbated by the implementation of harsh discipline aimed at deterrence through punishment, and children with trauma histories tend to receive more discipline in school (Caldarella et al., 2021; Sanders et al., 2024). Given the community demographics involved in this study, it can be expected that a heightened number of

externalizing behaviors would occur among the students in this district. However, administrators respond to these behaviors primarily with punishment and rarely with the implementation of positive support. For instance, the most common response to fighting behavior was some form of exclusionary discipline. Limiting the use of harsh discipline, specifically exclusionary discipline, and implementing more positive support would aim to reduce externalizing behaviors and adverse outcomes, and would support students' academic, social, and emotional wellbeing.

Implications for Practice

An important implication for practice underscored by the findings in this study entails the implementation of a policy outlining a protocol for data entry in this school district to facilitate consistent and accurate documentation of behaviors and disciplinary incidents. This may include providing definitions for each behavior and discipline code to provide clarification of which behaviors and disciplinary actions are encompassed by each code, as well as designating which staff members should be entering the data and how the reporter of behavior should be recorded. Disparities in this reporting may lead to a misrepresentation of the types of behaviors exhibited by students as well as any disciplinary action that is subsequently issued. Data contained in the student information system may be accessed by upper administration in the district and state entities to better understand student behavior and the ways in which building administrators hold students accountable. If these incidents are not accurately reflected through the data, any modifications made to policy and practice as a result of data reports are unlikely to effectively address any shortcomings or areas of need.

Another implication for practice considering the findings of this study in relation to its sample population is to implement more trauma-informed practices in the elementary school setting. Trauma-informed practices consist of strategies or protocols within schools that are

rooted in the understanding of how trauma affects children and their behavioral, social, emotional, and academic functioning (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). They are shown to decrease the incidence of externalizing behaviors over time by increasing educators' and administrators' understanding of how experiencing trauma impacts children and their development through targeted training and provide strategies for managing undesirable behaviors in the school setting without the use of harsh discipline practices (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). These practices are especially effective among students who have experienced any degree of childhood trauma, which may be of concern among the student population served by this district (Rishel et al., 2019). By perceiving students through a trauma-informed lens, educators and administrators can identify emotions and aggravating factors underlying behaviors and respond with support rather than reprimands or traditional discipline (Jacobson, 2021). Similarly, training in the area of cultural awareness would serve to better inform educators and administrators of the relationships between diversity, trauma, and externalizing behaviors, and the ways in which traditional discipline practices in the school setting exacerbate academic and social disparities.

Several frameworks have been developed and are empirically supported as effective systems to reduce externalizing behavior by supporting students experiencing trauma. One such framework is Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, or PBIS (Elrod et al., 2022). PBIS is commonly implemented in schools and utilizes a tiered approach to improve behavioral, social, emotional, academic, and mental health outcomes for all students by providing targeted support in a safe and encouraging environment (Elrod et al., 2022). Additionally, several evidence-based social emotional learning curricula exist that are accessible and simple for schools to use in their classrooms (Blewitt et al., 2020). Restorative justice practices are other approaches that yield promising outcomes for students and comprise a trauma-informed

approach to discipline that promotes inclusion, communication, relationships, and the reparation of harm (Sedillo-Hamann, 2022). All these frameworks and others like them provide consistency and safety, emphasize the development and implementation of self-regulation and interpersonal skills, and provide greater opportunities for all children to access the school curriculum (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023). School districts may consider adopting one or more of these modalities through the development of policy requiring and providing guidance for their implementation. This would ensure that every building within the district is embodying trauma-informed practices and would facilitate consistency in practice and fidelity to empirically supported frameworks.

Given the clear connection between trauma and externalizing behaviors among elementary-aged children, providing more professional development opportunities for staff in the area of trauma, its effects on behavior, and how to manage them is another key implication for practices. These measures would aim to reduce the incidence of undesirable behaviors in the school setting and improve administrator response. Trauma-focused professional development for staff should be collaborative and evoke teacher empowerment, and specific content should include practical strategies for behavioral management and the ways in which the effects of trauma manifest within the educational context (Berger et al., 2023; Koslouski & Chafouleas, 2022). Training programs facilitated by behavioral analysts or technicians would be especially useful for practical application and would support teachers in addressing externalizing behaviors (Berger et al., 2023; Garay et al., 2024).

In addition to instituting trauma trainings for staff, other specific trauma-informed practices that may be beneficial for school districts, particularly in their elementary schools, include the implementation of more positive support following the exhibiting of externalizing behaviors such as student assistance program referrals, guidance counseling sessions, clinician-

facilitated individual or group therapy, daily check-ins, and enrollment into a mentor program. The application of prosocial classroom management strategies by teachers is another practice that can lessen the incident of externalizing behaviors and curb their recurrence. Although this practice was not explored in this study, schools without positive classroom management procedures may benefit from their implementation.

Limitations

The method of data collection limits the internal and external validity of this study in that it relies on accurate data entry by school personnel. Each elementary school may have different protocols for addressing behavior and logging disciplinary actions in the student information system, if any at all, which may result in inconsistent data across the three buildings and skew results. Additionally, no method consistent across all three buildings exists to which teachers and administrators may refer when coding behaviors and disciplinary actions in the student information system. For instance, “inappropriate behavior” was overwhelmingly the most commonly coded behavior; however, there is no clear criteria regarding the types of behaviors that this code entails. Thus, the nature of student behavior coded as “inappropriate behavior” may vary significantly across buildings and among staff, potentially impacting the accuracy of the findings in this study. This study’s convenience sampling also limits the generalizability of the findings. Lastly, this study involved only male administrators, which may also limit generalizability when applied to districts where there is greater gender diversity within its administration.

Future Research

Recommendations for future research suggested by the findings in this study include replicating the study in a district that has a policy which dictates how student behavior and

discipline data should be entered into the student information system and by whom. Systematic reporting protocols that are consistent within and across buildings in school districts would ensure that data is entered and tracked uniformly and accurately. Examining externalizing behavior and discipline practices among elementary students in a district where direction and oversight regarding student behavior and discipline data entry are provided may yield different results.

Future researchers might also consider exploring classroom management practices and whether they impact the prevalence of student externalizing behavior. The application of classroom management strategies is empirically supported to reduce the frequency and severity of externalizing behaviors and decrease disciplinary actions when implemented consistently. It is unknown to what extent, if any, educators in the district involved in the current study implemented classroom management strategies to prevent or dilute the incidence of externalizing behaviors among their students, nor were differences examined between teachers who actively implement these strategies and those who do not. Had this variable been considered, more insights into the type and frequency of behaviors and subsequent discipline practices in this study may have been revealed.

Similarly, future research in this area should compare student discipline referrals made by staff who implement classroom management strategies and other trauma-informed practices before reporting a behavior between referrals made by staff who do not. These practices lessen the incidence and intensity of externalizing behaviors and entail the implementation of positive support rather than harsh discipline in response to a behavior. Thus, it may be inferred that students who have teachers that apply these strategies may experience fewer referrals to administration for disciplinary action. Examining the outcomes among students whose teachers

embody trauma-informed practices juxtaposed with those whose teachers automatically refer for discipline may contribute to the growing body of literature supporting the use of these practices.

Given that this study involved only male administrators, examining the relationship between student externalizing behaviors and discipline practices in districts with only female administrators or a blend of male and female administrators would reveal whether administrator gender impacts student behavior and the type and frequency of disciplinary actions applied. Lastly, conducting longitudinal studies involving students who receive traditional discipline practices, especially exclusionary discipline, and students who have received positive support more often in response to externalizing behaviors would shed light on whether the type of discipline that students receive influence future behaviors and long-term outcomes.

Conclusion

The current study revealed a clear and significant relationship between students' externalizing behaviors and disciplinary practices implemented by administrators among the three elementary buildings examined. Although it is unclear to what degree these variables influence one another, they are likely mutually reinforcing as supported by the literature which indicates that behaviors initiate discipline action while certain types of discipline are known to exacerbate externalizing behavior. Multiple disciplinary actions were implemented by school administrators, with the most frequently applied action consisting of a non-traditional discipline practice. Other non-traditional discipline practices were identified in this study but were used very infrequently in favor of more punitive discipline.

Many types of externalizing behaviors also emerged in this study and were reported equally among male and female staff, with administrators being the most frequent reporters, which is likely due to the way in which data is reported in this district. Differences between

genders and ethnicities and behaviors and discipline were apparent. Male students were referred for discipline following behaviors more often than female students, although it is questionable whether males truly exhibit more behaviors or if this finding is representative of biases among staff. White students received more discipline and exhibited more behaviors than other ethnicities, but Black students were referred for more severe behaviors and received harsher forms of discipline, which aligns with the literature and is potentially impacted by teacher ethnicity. The incidence of trauma may also influence the type and frequency of externalizing behaviors exhibited by the students in this population which invites future research and provides implications for practice in how school districts manage student behavior among trauma-impacted populations.

Several implications for practice are recommended to assist schools with effectively addressing student behavior and better supporting their students. These include policy development and implementation regarding data entry to ensure consistency and accuracy in reporting student behavior and discipline, widespread implementation of trauma-informed practices such as classroom management strategies and trauma training for staff along with a policy guiding its application, and more liberal use of positive supports in response to a behavior rather than harsh discipline. Limitations of this study include the method of data collection, the lack of consistent data reporting protocols within the district, and the type of sampling, all of which limit its internal and external validity and generalizability.

The findings of this study and its limitations yield suggestions for future research to better understand the relationship between externalizing behaviors and discipline practices in elementary schools. These include replicating the study in a district where there are data reporting protocols in place, exploring classroom management practices and whether they impact

the prevalence of student externalizing behavior, comparing student discipline referrals made by staff who implement classroom management strategies and other trauma-informed practices with referrals made by staff who do not, and examining the relationship between student externalizing behaviors and discipline practices in districts with only female administrators or a blend of male and female administrators. Although the current study supports the hypothesis that student externalizing behavior and discipline practices in elementary schools are related, future research examining additional variables using alternative approaches will reveal more insights and further contribute to the growing body of literature which provides guidance to schools on how to effectively manage behavior and support their students' holistic wellbeing.

References

- Aldabbagh, R., Glazebrook, C., Sayal, K., & Daley, D. (2024). Systematic review and meta-analysis of the effectiveness of teacher delivered interventions for externalizing behaviors. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 33*, 233-274.
- Aragon, K. M., Mullin, A. C., Felix, E. D., Appel, O., & Sharkey, J. D. (2024). Identifying what educators need to support trauma-informed practices in the schools: A community assessment. *School Psychology*. Advance online publication.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/spq0000621>
- Ben-Harush, A., Schiff, M., Sulimani, N., & Pat-Horenczyk, R. (2022). Postpartum depression, complications during pregnancy, and offspring behavior problems in early childhood. *Child & Youth Care Forum, 51*, 347-368.
- Berger, M. W. (2019, November 6). *Childhood exposure to trauma costs society \$458 billion annually*. Penn Today. Retrieved on October 3, 2024 from
<https://penntoday.upenn.edu/news/childhood-exposure-trauma-costs-society-458-billion-annually>
- Berger, E., O'Donohue, K., La, C., Quinones, G., & Barnes, M. (2023). Early childhood professionals' perspectives on dealing with trauma of children. *School Mental Health, 15*, 300-311.
- Blewitt, C., O'Connor, A., Morris, H., Mousa, A., Bergmeier, H., Nolan, A., Jackson, K., Barrett, H., & Skouteris, H. (2020). Do curriculum-based and emotional learning programs in early childhood education and care strengthen teacher outcomes? A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Environmental Research & Public Health, 17*(3). <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph17031049>

- Caldarella, P., Larsen, R. A. A., Williams, L., Wills, H. P. & Wehby, J. H. (2021). "Stop doing that!": Effects of teacher reprimands on student disruptive behavior and engagement. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 23(3), 163-173.
- Castro, V. L., Cooke, A. N., Halberstadt, A. G., & Garrett-Peters, P. (2018). Bidirectional linkages between emotion recognition and problem behaviors in elementary school children. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 42(2), 155-178.
- Chan, M. K., Sharkey, J. D., Lawrie, S. I., Arch, D. A. N., & Nylund-Gibson, K. (2021). Elementary school teacher well-being and supportive measures amid COVID-19: An exploratory study. *School Psychology*, 36(6), 533-545.
- Crockett, L. J., Wasserman, A. M., Rudasill, K. M., Hoffman, L., & Kalutskaya, I. (2018). Temperamental anger and effortful control, teacher-child conflict, and externalizing behavior across the elementary school years. *Child Development*, 89(6), 2176-2195.
- Dutil, S. (2020). Dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline: A trauma-informed, critical race perspective on school discipline. *Children & Schools*, 42(3), 171-178.
- Eddy, C. L., Huang, F. L., Cohen, D. R., Baker, K. M., Edwards, K. D., Herman, K. C., & Reinke, W. M. (2020). Does teacher emotional exhaustion and efficacy predict student discipline and sanctions? *School Psychology Review*, 49(3), 239-255.
- Elrod, B. G., Rice, K. G., & Meyers, J. (2022). PBIS fidelity, school climate, and student discipline: A longitudinal study of secondary schools. *Psychology in the Schools*, 59, 376-397.
- Felitti, V.J., Anda, R.F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A.M., Edwards, V., Koss, M.P., & Marks, J.S. (1998). Relationship of childhood abuse and household dysfunction

- to many of the leading causes of death in adults: The adverse childhood experiences (ACE) study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-58.
- Fernandez, E. P., Costa, L. C., & Hooper, S. R. (2020). Internalizing and externalizing behaviors of children with writing disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*, 35(2), 72-81.
- Finch, J. E., Akhavein, K., Patwardhan, I., & Clark, C. (2023). Teachers' self-efficacy and perceptions of school climate are uniquely associated with students' externalizing and internalizing behavior problems. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 85, doi:10.1016/j.appdev.2023.101512.
- Frawley, C., Babb, K., & Lambie, G. W. (2023). Predictors of trauma symptoms among children referred for behavioral school-based mental health counseling. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, 16, 597-605.
- Garay, B., Lasarte, G., Correst-Medrano, I., & Santamaria-Goicuria, I. (2024). Why should educators receive training in childhood trauma? *Trends in Psychology*, 32, 307-334.
- Genealogical Society of Pennsylvania. (2024). *Northeast region*. Retrieved on October 7, 2024 from <https://genpa.org/public-collections/pennsylvania-resources/pennsylvania-regions/northeast-pennsylvania/>
- Gomez, J. A., Rucinski, C. L., & Higgins-D'Alessandro, A. (2021). Promising pathways from school restorative practices to education equity. *Journal of Moral Education*, 50(4), 452-470.
- Gottfredson, D. C., Crosse, S., Tang, Z., Bauer, E. L., Harmon, M. A., Hagen, C. A., & Greene, A. D. (2020). Effects of school resource officers on school crime and responses to school crime. *Criminology & Public Policy*, 19(3), 905-940.

- Hendrickx, M.M.H.G., Kos, J.G., Cillessen, A.H.N., & Mainhard, T. (2022). Reciprocal associations between teacher-student relations and students' externalizing behavior in elementary education? A within-dyad analysis. *Journal of School Psychology, 90*, 1-18.
- Ho, L. C., Bierman, K. L., Jacobson, L. N., Welsh, J. A., Hall, C. M., & Lee, D. L. (2022). Linking intervention experiences to child outcomes in a school-based social skills training program. *Psychology in the Schools, 60*, 1855-1876.
- Horn, E. P., McCormick, M. P., O'Connor, E. E., McClowry, S. G., & Hogan, F. C. (2021). Trajectories of teacher-child relationships across kindergarten and first grade: The influence of gender and disruptive behavior. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 55*, 107-118.
- Hutchison, M., Russell, B. S., & Wink, M. N. (2020). Social-emotional competence trajectory from a school-based child trauma symptom intervention in a disadvantaged community. *Psychology in the Schools, 57*, 1257-1272.
- Hwang, N., Penner, E. K., Davison, M., Sanabria, T., Hanselman, P., Domina, T., & Penner, A. M. (2022). Reining in punitive discipline: Recent trends, in exclusionary school discipline disparities. *Sociological Research for a Dynamic World, 8*, 1-8.
- Jacobsen, W. C., Pace, G. T., & Ramirez, N. G. (2019). Punishment and inequality at an early age: Exclusionary discipline in elementary school. *Social Forces, 97*(3), 973-998.
- Jacobson, M. R. (2021). An exploratory analysis of the necessity and utility of trauma-informed practices in education. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 65*(2), 124-134.

- Jordan, R. L. P., Fernandez, E. P., Costa, L. C., & Hooper, S. R. (2020). Internalizing and externalizing behaviors of children with writing disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice, 35*(2), 72-81.
- Koch, J. G. (2024). Help wanted: Next steps in addressing the United States teacher shortage. *Open Journals in Education, 9*(1), 42-53.
- Koslouski, J. B. & Chafouleas, S. M. (2022). Key considerations in delivering trauma-informed professional learning for educators. *Frontiers in Education, 7*, Article 853020.
- Kulkarni, T. & Sullivan, A. L. (2022). Academic achievement and relations to externalizing behavior: Much ado about nothing? *Journal of School Psychology, 94*, 1-14.
- Lodi, E., Perrella, L., Lepri, G. L., Scarpa, M. L., & Patrizi, P. (2022). Use of restorative justice and restorative practices at school: A systematic literature review. *International Journal of Environmental Research & Public Health, 19*, 96-130.
- Long, C. (2024, August 6). Breaking the cycle of bad behavior. *National Education Association*. Retrieved on November 30, 2024 from <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/breaking-cycle-bad-behavior>
- Lyngstad, M. (2023). At home with the Mavericks: Student and teacher perspectives of the transformative potential of Glasser's Choice Theory at an alternative secondary school. *Journal of Transformative Education, 21*(3), 391-408.
- McMahon, S. D., Worrell, F. C., Reddy, L. A., Martinez, A., Espelage, D. L., Astor, R. A., Anderman, E. M., Valido, A., Swenski, T., Perry, A. H., Dudek, C. M., & Bare, K. (2024). Violence and aggression against educators and school personnel, retention, stress, and training needs: National survey results. *American Psychologist*.
<https://dx.doi.org/10.1037/amp0001348>

- Minne, E. P. & Gorelik, G. (2022). The protective role of trauma informed attitudes on perceived stress among teachers and school staff. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma, 15*, 275-283.
- Mitchison, G. M., Liber, J. M., Hannesdottir, D. K., & Njardvik, U. (2020). Emotion dysregulation, ODD and conduct problems in a sample of five and six-year-old children. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development, 51*, 71-79.
- Mowen, T. J., Brent, J. J., & Boman, J. H. (2021). The effect of school discipline on offending across time. *Justice Quarterly, 37*(4), 739-760.
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2023). *School district boundaries*. Retrieved on September 30, 2024 from <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/Geographic/DistrictBoundaries>
- Offerman, E. C. P., Asselman, M. W., Bolling, F., Helmond, P. Stams, G. J. M., & Lindauer, R. J. L. (2022). Prevalence of adverse childhood experiences in students with emotional and behavioral disorders in special education schools from a multi-informant perspective. *International Journal of Environmental Research & Public Health, 19*, 1-28.
- Ogelman, H. G., Goktas, I., & Aytac, P. (2020). The reasons for young children to like and dislike playing with their friends. *International Online Journal of Primary Education, 9*(2), 316-326.
- Ogundele, M. O. (2018). Behavioral and emotional disorders in childhood: A brief overview for pediatricians. *World Journal of Clinical Pediatrics, 7*(1), 9-26.
- Patwardhan, I., Gordon, C., & Mason, A. W. (2023). Trajectories of cognitive flexibility through kindergarten and first grade: Implications for externalizing and internalizing behavior problems in the second grade. *Developmental Psychology, 59*(10), 1794-1806.

- Paulus, F. W., Ohmann, S., Mohler, E., Plener, P., & Popow, C. (2021). Emotional dysregulation in children and adolescents with psychiatric disorders: A narrative review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry, 12*, 1-32.
- Petersen, I. (2024). Assessing externalizing behaviors in school-aged children: Implications for school and community providers. *Scanlan Center for School Mental Health*. DOI:10.17077/rep.006639
- Pickren, S. E., Torelli, J. N., Miller, A. H., & Chow, J. C. (2024). The relation between reading and externalizing behavior: A correlational meta-analysis. *Annals of Dyslexia, 74*, 158-186.
- Porges, S. W. (2022). Polyvagal theory: A science of safety. *Frontiers in Integrative Neuroscience, 16*, Article 871227.
- Puchner, L. D. & Markowitz, L. J. (2023). Elementary teachers' experiences with trauma-informed practice. *International Journal of Elementary Education, 15*(4), 321-332.
- Rappaport, N. & Minahan, J. (2024, January 30). Breaking the behavior code. *Child Mind Institute*. Retrieved on November 28, 2024 from https://childmind.org/article/breaking-behavior-code/#top_of_page
- Rishel, C. W., Tabone, J. K., Hartnett, H. P., & Szafran, K. F. (2019). Trauma-informed elementary schools: Evaluation of school-based early intervention for young children. *Children & Schools, 41*(4), 239-248.
- Santamaria-Villar, M. B., Gilar-Corbi, R., Pozo-Rico, T., & Castejon, J. L. (2021). Teaching socio-emotional competencies among primary school students: Improving conflict resolution and promoting democratic co-existence in schools. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, 659348.

Sanders, J., Joseph-McCatty, A., Massey, M., Swiatek, E., Csiernik, B., & Igor, E. (2024).

Exposure to adversity and trauma among students who experience school discipline: A scoping review. *Review of Educational Research*, 94(5), 699-742.

Sapphire Software. (2024). *Student information system*. Retrieved on October 27, 2024 from

<https://sapphirek12.com/software/student-information-system/>

Sedillo-Hamann, D. (2022). Trauma-informed restorative justice practices in schools: An opportunity for school social workers. *Children & Schools*, 44(2), 98-106.

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2024). *Understanding child trauma*. Retrieved on September 10, 2024 from <https://www.samhsa.gov/child-trauma/understanding-child-trauma>

Tung, I., Hipwell, A. E., Grosse, P., Battaglia, L., Connova, E., English, G., Quick, A. D.,

Llamas, B., Taylor, M., & Foust, J. E. (2024). Prenatal stress and externalizing behaviors in childhood and adolescence: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin*, 150(2), 107-131.

Wang, Y. & Liu, Y. (2021). The development of internalizing and externalizing problems in primary school: Contributions of executive function and social competence. *Child Development*, 92(3), 889-903.

Welsh, R. O. (2024). Administering discipline: An examination of the factors shaping school discipline practices. *Education and Urban Society*, 56(7), 847-880.

West, D., Luys, E., Gypen, L., Van Holen, F., Vanderfaeillie, J. (2023). Behavior problems in foster care: A systematic review of associated factors. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 155, 107240.

Zarei, K., Xu, G., Zimmerman, B., Giannotti, M., & Strathearn, L. (2021). Adverse childhood experiences predict common neurodevelopmental and behavioral health conditions among U.S. children. *Children*, 8(9), 761.

22 Pa. Code § 4.21. (2024). Retrieved on November 10, 2024 from

[https://www.pacodeandbulletin.gov/Display/pacode?file=/secure/pacode/data/022/chapter55/chap55toc.html&d=#:~:text=\(GRADES%201%20TO%208\),-SCHOOL%20PLANT](https://www.pacodeandbulletin.gov/Display/pacode?file=/secure/pacode/data/022/chapter55/chap55toc.html&d=#:~:text=(GRADES%201%20TO%208),-SCHOOL%20PLANT)

Appendix A

February 16, 2025

Re: Exploring the relationship between traditional discipline practices and externalizing behaviors in elementary schools

Dear Marywood University Exempt Review Committee:

This letter confirms that as an authorized representative of Shikellamy School District, I am aware of Carly Slivinski's research project and protocol.

I will allow the investigator access to data stored in Sapphire, the district's student information system. **However, activities may commence only after the investigator provides evidence of final approval from Marywood University's IRB or ERC for the proposed project.**

If you have any questions, please contact me at 570-286-3721.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jason Bendle
District Superintendent

Appendix B

Disciplinary Action Codes (Ungrouped)

This appendix contains a list of all traditional discipline practices included in this study and their numerical codes for analysis.

Traditional Discipline Practice	Code
N/A	1, 14
Alternative Discipline (non-report)	2
Anger Management	3
Bus Suspension	4
Change Clothing/Apparel	5
Conference with Student	6
Confiscate Materials	7
Detention – Lunch	8
Detention – Midday	9
Detention – After School	10
Documented – Observed, No Discipline	11
Guidance Counseling	12
In-School Suspension	13
None	15
Other – Report	16
Out-of-School Suspension	17
Parent Notification	18
Parent Pick-Up	19
Peer Mediation/Conflict Resolution	20
Removal from Class/Activity	21
Restitution	22
Retraining/Behavior Modification Plan	23
Revoke Privileges	24
Student Assistance Referral	25
Verbal Warning	26
Written Warning – Principal	27

Appendix C**Disciplinary Action Codes (Grouped)**

This appendix contains a list of all grouped disciplinary practices included in this study and their numerical codes for analysis.

Disciplinary Action	Code
Conference with Student	1
Revoke Privileges	2
Parent Notification	3
Exclusionary Discipline	4
Positive Support	5
Other	6
Missing	7

Appendix D**Externalizing Behavior Codes (Ungrouped)**

This appendix contains a list of all externalizing behaviors included in this study and their numerical codes for analysis.

Externalizing Behavior	Code
Aggravated Assault on Student	1
Bus Misconduct	2
Cafeteria Rules Violation	3
Disrespect to Staff	4
Disrespectful Behavior	5
Fighting	6
Horseplay	7
Inappropriate Behavior	8
Inappropriate Behavior w/ Unintentional Injury	9
Initiating/Instigating Fighting	10
Institutional Vandalism	11
Insubordination/Defiance	12
Leaving Building w/o Permission	13
Obscenity/Profanity/Offensive Language	14
Physical Confrontation	15
Possession of Cutting Instrument	16
Possession of Weapon	17
Refusing to Work	18
Running in the Halls	19
Simple Assault on Staff	20
Student Disruptions	21
Threatening School Official/Student	22
Throwing Objects	23
Uncooperative with Staff	24
Unsafe Behavior	25
Verbal Altercation	26

Appendix E**Externalizing Behavior Codes (Grouped)**

This appendix contains a list of all grouped externalizing behaviors included in this study and their numerical codes for analysis.

Externalizing Behavior	Code
Inappropriate Behavior	1
Fighting/Assault	2
Disrespect/Defiance	3
Unsafe Behavior	4
Disruptive Behavior	5
Other	6

Appendix F

Demographic Codes

This appendix contains the numerical codes assigned to the demographic characteristics of the students and staff involved in each case.

Student and Staff Gender

Male = 1

Female = 2

Student and Staff Race

Caucasian = 1

Hispanic = 2

African American = 3

Other = 4

School Building

Kindergarten - 2nd grade (Building 1) = 1

Kindergarten - 2nd grade (Building 2) = 2

3rd grade - 5th grade (Building 3) = 3

Student and Staff Grade/Role

1st grade = 1

2nd grade = 2

3rd grade = 3

4th grade = 4

5th grade = 5

Kindergarten = 6

Administrator = 7

Specials Teachers = 8

Related Service Providers = 9

Guidance Counselors = 10

Emotional Support = 11

Learning Support = 12

Secretarial = 13

Title I Staff = 14

Autistic Support = 15

Life Skills = 16

Not Available = 0