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An Improvement Science Study on the Impact of Community Building Circles on Teacher Efficacy and Discipline Referrals for African American Males

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AN IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF COMMUNITY BUILDING CIRCLES ON TEACHER EFFICACY AND DISCIPLINE REFERRALS FOR AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

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ABSTRACT

African American males receive a disproportionate number of referrals that result in punitive and exclusionary consequences. These referrals are often more subjective and include reasons such as disrupting class, disrespect, and refusal to obey. In- and out-of - school suspensions lead to a loss of instructional time for students, as well as a disengagement and lack of belonging for African American males. This dissertation in practice used an improvement science design to examine the problem of practice as related to discrepancies in referrals in a rural district in the southeast. This study aimed to determine the role that Community Building Circles, which are a component of Restorative Practices, could play in making all students feel included, in building positive student-teacher relationships, in helping educators better understand their students' experiences and perspectives, and in building positive classroom cultures. Results revealed that teachers did observe student vulnerability and demonstrated an increase in student empathy, increased sense of community, and positive relationship-building. Recommendations include intentionally implementing CBCs in more school settings as a proactive approach to classroom management using PDSA cycles through improvement science. The goal of this intervention is to reduce reactive and exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools and to replace them with proactive approaches that provide the opportunity to build positive relationships. Policy makers, colleges and universities, and local schools should create an expectation of teachers to intentionally build positive relationships with students and learn to proactively address discipline issues in lieu of writing referrals for minor offenses.

DEDICATION

This work of research is dedicated to all students who feel unheard, misunderstood, or unappreciated in the classroom setting, particularly African American males who receive referrals that result in being removed from those classrooms. May you encounter teachers who truly get to know you to better channel your wisdom, energy, personality, talents and insights into a successful educational journey.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

Middle school is often a tumultuous time for students, and disciplinary incidents tend to be higher in this educational setting. Researchers Losen and Martinez (2013) explain, "[t]here is explicit evidence that suggests that middle school students accrue more discipline infractions (e.g., office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions) than their elementary and high school peers" (as cited in Williams et al., 2020, p. 3). This research indicates that the middle school setting is an area of need for reflecting on how discipline is handled since it is a significant problem. Knowing that middle school students receive more referrals than other grade levels puts middle school students, particularly those of color, at a disadvantage (Erickson & Pearson, 2022). The punitive consequences associated with middle school behavior are often detrimental to adolescents, ranging from academic to emotional effects (Osher et al., 2010).

During my twenty-two years in education, I have experienced firsthand the challenges teachers and students face regarding discipline. As a classroom teacher, I fortunately did not have many discipline issues. I attribute this success to building relationships and providing quality instruction. I also used culturally relevant and diverse materials to engage my students. As I moved into leadership roles, I was able to observe teachers in various grade levels and subjects. One essential observation that I made was that teachers who had clear expectations, provided engaging and quality instruction, built positive relationships, and were culturally aware not only achieved the most academic growth with students but also had far fewer discipline issues in the classroom. As an

administrator in a high-poverty district where disciplinary referrals and consequences are inequitable for African American male students, I must be aware of the existing data in my school, the implications of the inequity, and the responsibility to implement research-based interventions to address the inequity. My role in my school and district setting is an opportunity to help my colleagues implement best practices when it comes not only to instruction but also to culture, relationships, and classroom management. Suppose I continue to be a part of the traditional approach and system. In that case, I am not serving as an advocate for all students and am contributing to an inequitable systemic problem.

The state of South Carolina is not exempt from the concern of increasing discipline incidents and the effects that consequences have on student learning, school culture, and school-family relations (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022). Data from the Office of Civil Rights in 2017-2018 shows the discrepancies in instructional days missed due to discipline issues, as well as discrepancies in the number of days students spent in in-school suspension (ISS) (US Department of Education, n.d.). Table 1 shows the percentage of days missed by African American students versus White students in the neighboring southern states of Georgia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. Table 2 shows the percentage of days spent in ISS. Both data sets indicate the apparent discrepancy in exclusionary consequences received by African American students in various local states, particularly in South Carolina, where this research study was conducted.

Table 1.1

Percentage of School Days Missed by Students

State	Percentage of African American Students	Percentage of White Students
Georgia	68.3	18.3
North Carolina	56.3	24.7
South Carolina	62.6	27.9

Table 2.1

Percentage of Days in In-school Suspension

State	Percentage of African American Students	Percentage of White Students
Georgia	52.5	29.8
North Carolina	42.6	35.5
South Carolina	53.5	25.3

The South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE, 2019) makes recommendations for various stakeholders to encourage best practices for discipline and positively impact behavior. Unfortunately, punitive and exclusionary consequences are still often used, and much research is available that discusses the adverse effects of punitive discipline (Bondy et al., 2007; Crawford & Burns, 2022; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2017; Erickson & Pearson, 2022; Osher et al., 2010; Rosenbaum, 2020; Scott, 2021). Punitive consequences focus on removing privileges, and exclusionary consequences include removal from the academic setting, such as in and out-of-school suspensions (Hwang et al., 2022). Rather than positively impacting and changing behavior, punitive and exclusionary discipline outcomes can harm behavior and are cited by various entities,

including the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), as a "perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline" (2018, p. 1).

When addressing student behavior, the consequences should not outweigh or worsen the actual behavior (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Various components should be examined regarding discipline referrals, including the social context and equity. Reasons for discipline referrals resulting in ISS and out-of-school suspensions (OSS) vary and derive from contributing factors at the school, teacher, school, administration, and community levels. School climate, home-school relations, teacher competency (cultural and classroom management), socioeconomics of schools, and structures and procedures, or a lack of them, are just a few factors for inflated discipline referrals (Ksinan et al., 2019). Disciplinary practices also bring to light questions of equity as more students of color, who are economically disadvantaged, and students with disabilities tend to receive more referrals and ultimately more punitive consequences (Williams et al., 2020). Research has shown for years that preventative and positive interventions positively impact student behavior and student-teacher relationships (Bear et al., 2017; Bondy et al., 2007; Chamberlin, 1983; Mitchell et al., 2017). Multiple research studies and entities have concluded that positive behavior supports, social-emotional lessons and development, and restorative practices are the most effective, healthy, and impactful interventions for disciplinary issues (Ksinan et al., 2019; NASP, 2018; Smith & Harper, 2015).

As educators, we must serve the needs of our students in all capacities. Discipline approaches that hinder academic success, are rendered ineffective, and are inequitable

should be addressed (Bastable et al., 2021). An abundance of research shows that punitive disciplinary approaches are not best for students (Bear et al., 2017; Bondy et al., 2007; Crawford & Burns, 2022; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2017; Erickson & Pearson, 2022; Osher et al., 2010; Rosenbaum, 2020; Scott, 2021). An awareness of the inequities and lasting adverse effects of punitive and exclusionary disciplinary practices leads to a responsibility for educational leaders to provide the appropriate training and resources to empower students and teachers to make better decisions concerning behavior, social-emotional awareness, and restorative practices that provide opportunities for positive growth, rather than negative impacts (Osher et al., 2010; Teaching Tolerance, 2016). In the next section, I will describe the context of the research site and my role at the research site. I will discuss why the research site was an appropriate setting to research the problem of practice. Then, I will present the various tools used to understand the root causes of the problem of practice.

Research Questions

Discipline referrals, particularly those resulting in ISS and OSS, are a concern at Clearview Middle School (CMS). There are various contributing factors; the following research questions helped direct this study to identify and analyze information leading to improved behaviors and disciplinary approaches. Specific questions around the problem of practice included the following:

1. How do teachers' competencies of culture, restorative practices, and relationships with students impact discipline referrals and consequences?

2. How does implementing Community Building Circles affect student behavior and teachers' attitudes toward discipline?

These questions were designed to gather a range of information for this problem of practice. The first research question focused on gathering information about teachers' beliefs and practices related to discipline. By gathering data about teachers' beliefs and knowledge related to discipline, improvements targeting teacher competency can be more data-driven and specific. The information gathered from this question leads to the second question because the information has the potential to drive differentiated professional development for teachers and identify faculty and staff who want to be leaders in mentoring and relationship-building activities with students.

The second research question focused on how CBC affects teachers and students, ultimately leading to classroom culture. The findings from this question had the potential to indicate a need for more consistency, implementation, and vision for a shared school climate. This information can guide decisions and the allocation of resources that will be most effective in improving school climate and discipline practices. This research can also lead to potential challenges and obstacles in growing teacher competency in discipline and classroom management.

Negative student behavior and suspensions often negatively affect skill acquisition and academic performance (Luiselli et al., 2005). While all students can benefit from academic and social-emotional learning, there is value in determining whether there is a correlation between the students with repeat referrals and their

academic and social-emotional skills. Without proper systems with clearly defined expectations for faculty and students, there is an opportunity for misunderstandings, inconsistencies, and frustrations. Not only must these systems and approaches be in place, but they must also be communicated to all stakeholders.

Research Site

Discipline issues have risen at CMS, the only middle school in our rural, southeastern district. The district serves 2,827 students through one high school, one middle school, three elementary schools, and one 4K center (South Carolina Department of Education, 2021). Discipline issues at the middle school can cause anxiety and discontent among students, parents, and the community. As evidenced by decreasing enrollment trends over the past few years, parents are pulling their children from (or not enrolling in) the public middle school and opting for other options in the area, such as a local private school or a local charter school. Enrollment numbers for CMS have trended as follows: 695 (2018), 710 (2019), 675 (2020), 637 (2021), 670 (2022), and 648 (2023) (State of SCDOE, 2021). For small districts with competing schools, losing students is detrimental due to a loss in per-pupil funding, which causes a decrease in resources and possible district consolidations (Bard et al., 2018). Additionally, on surveys given by the administration, teachers repeatedly express the need for the consistent and appropriate handling of discipline issues. Teacher survey data is essential because teacher turnover rates are often a result of frustrations with leadership and behavior management within schools; therefore, interventions have the potential to positively affect the school

environment, academic progress, social-emotional development, and home-school relations (Grissom, 2011).

I am a scholar-practitioner in studying CMS discipline data. I have worked as an educator for twenty-three years; this is my thirteenth year in this district. This is my second year serving as CMS's 6th grade assistant principal. In addition to instruction, data gathering and interpretation, and day-to-day supervision, the most significant part of my role as an administrator is handling discipline issues and working with teachers. My discipline and instructional duties allow me to see teacher, grade, and school-wide patterns in discipline and classroom management. My experience and research allow me to recognize inequitable and ineffective approaches to discipline and classroom management. Because I am in a position to foster change in punitive and exclusionary discipline practices, I am responsible for identifying issues and implementing interventions to address inequitable discipline practices.

The problem of practice at CMS was that many referrals result in exclusionary discipline practices, and African American students disproportionately receive those referrals. This study aimed to identify specific interventions needed to reduce discipline referrals and subsequent punitive consequences, particularly for students receiving recurring referrals. Traditional disciplinary practices, particularly punitive disciplinary consequences, are ineffective and can cause long-term adverse effects. The research literature provides various discipline approaches that are more appropriate and effective, such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), social-emotional learning, and positive

behavior intervention and support (PBIS) (Kervick et al., 2019). I conducted this research study at CMS in a rural town in the southeast. For the 2021-2022 school year, there were 2,916 discipline referrals in a population of 678 students. According to the school's PowerSchool/ABE reports, 60.93% of students received a referral, and 294 had three or more discipline referrals. The average number of referrals per student was 3.77. As shown in Table 3, the reasons for referrals varied.

Table 3

Number of Referrals at CMS for Various Offenses

Referral Code	Number of Referrals
Cell phone violation	532
Inappropriate behavior	295
Disrupting class	243
Refusal to obey/defiant	238
Tardy	218
Horseplay	170
Fighting	141

Inappropriate language	128	

Note. While not an exhaustive list of referral codes, these represent the top referral categories.

While cell phone violations constituted many referrals school-wide, other top behaviors were inappropriate behavior, disrupting class, refusal to obey/defiant, tardiness, horseplay, fighting, and inappropriate language. According to the SCDOE report card for CMS, during the 2020-2021 school year, 123 students were given ISS, and 94 received OSS (2021). PowerSchool/ABE reports show that 53.91% of the discipline referrals were for African American students, more than all other ethnicities combined. Table 4 provides discipline data by ethnicity for the 2021-2022 school year. Figure 1 shows discipline data for the top ten students receiving the most referrals by ethnicity and gender. Zero intentional interventions were provided for students who received discipline referrals and subsequent consequences. No set system or approach existed to provide disciplinary interventions or restorative practices.

Table 4

CMS Referrals by Ethnicity

Ethnicity	Number of Referrals	%
Black or African American	1572	53.91

White	974	33.4
Two or More Races	208	7.13
Hispanic/Latino	144	4.94
Asian	18	0.62
Total	2916	100

Figure 1

Top 10 Students with Most Referrals

Number of Office Referrals by Ethnicity and Gender
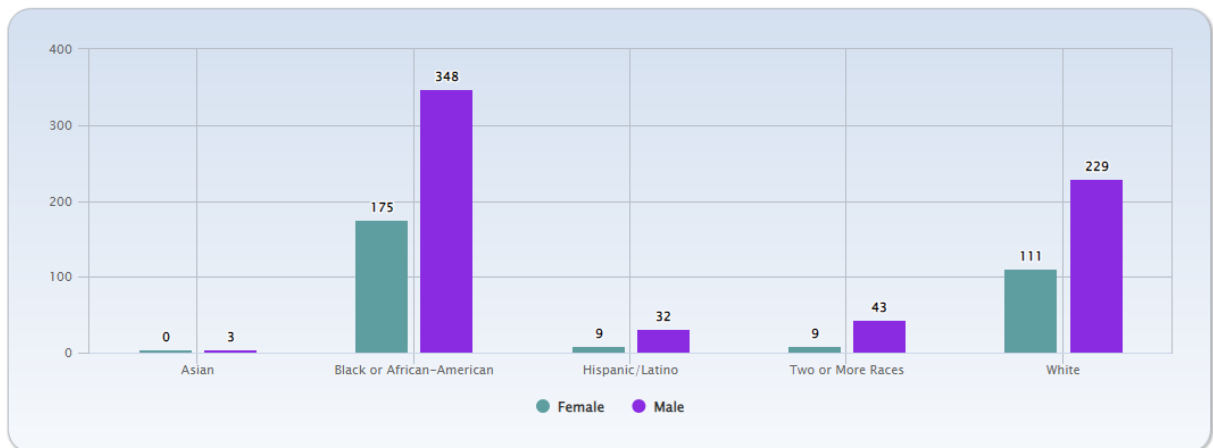
Note. Adapted from a report provided in the ScholarChip/Alternative Behavior Educator (ABE) database (2022) used by Clearview School District.

As educators, classroom management is foundational to student success and learning; however, many teachers and administrators need to develop skills related to

classroom management (Moore et al., 2022). All students suffer when teachers and students focus more on behavioral issues than instruction. These adverse outcomes particularly damage African American students, who receive more discipline referrals and, thus, more ISS and OSS (Williams et al., 2020). Additionally, recurring referrals often result in ISS and OSS, negatively impacting teacher-student and sometimes school-parent relationships (Bear et al., 2017). There were no structured systems exist for improvement with discipline at CMS.

Additionally, students at CMS are overwhelmingly economically disadvantaged, which makes them even more vulnerable to inequitable disciplinary practices (Hwang et al., 2022). In 2021, the median household income of Clearview households was $35,462, and 22.1% of households in Clearview live in poverty (Carney & Morales, 2023). CMS had 648 students; fifteen were officially listed as McKinney-Vento, and three were in foster homes (School Data Leadership, 2022). McKinney-Vento was an act passed to provide educational rights to students who are considered homeless including sharing housing, staying in motels, campgrounds, and shelters. Due to our district's poverty, all students receive free breakfast and lunch. Before all students received free breakfast and lunch (2015), the free and reduced lunch was around 78%. According to informedsc.org, Clearview County School District has a poverty index (as measured by the SC Department of Education) of 81.0, which ranks us as 17th in the state (Schumacher, 2023). The statewide average is 61.5 (Schumacher, 2023).

Due to the apparent inequitable distribution of discipline referrals, combined with the added risk factor of poverty in my school district and school, classroom management and discipline interventions can potentially change the culture at CMS by focusing on a more relationship-based approach to discipline rather than a punitive approach. A literature review of restorative practices, including CBCs, indicates that this proactive approach to relationship building can prevent issues through a focus on building trust, community, and relationships (Lodi et al., 2021).

Conclusion

In conclusion, CMS was an ideal place to research the problem of practice related to disciplinary practices because these outdated practices affect minority students and economically disadvantaged students. I am in a position to implement interventions, monitor related data, and influence teacher professional development in this area. Additionally, the gradual implementation of any intervention or change idea throughout grades 6-8 provided the opportunity to monitor and adjust the intervention as needed. The leadership team at CMS was open to the use of proactive discipline approaches in order to help our school culture and to help our students grow academically, socially, and emotionally. CMS is in my locus of control; therefore, it was an appropriate site to research this problem of practice.

Literature Review

Reflective educators are keenly aware of the direct relationship between classroom management and student success, both academically and socially (Alderman &

Green, 2011). Despite this awareness, students with challenging behaviors continue to fall behind academically and socially, primarily due to exclusionary consequences for discipline referrals (Mitchell et al., 2017). Additionally, there is an equity gap between referrals received for white students versus referrals (and consequences) for students of color (Gregory et al., 2016). In this section, I will discuss research findings related to this problem of practice outlined in the following categories: disciplinary practices issues, racial inequity, the importance of classroom management, positive behavioral interventions, and an improvement science approach for change. Figure 2 provides a fishbone diagram I used to explore the factors contributing to the high number of referrals. The highlighted factors on the fishbone diagram are the specific areas I chose to focus on for my research and intervention. Following Figure 2, some contributing factors are discussed in detail through a research-grounded literature review. The factors that I chose to explore in more detail were those that were more within my sphere of influence as an administrator, and they were factors that the school could immediately implement interventions to address.

Figure 2

Fishbone Diagram for Discipline Referral at CMS
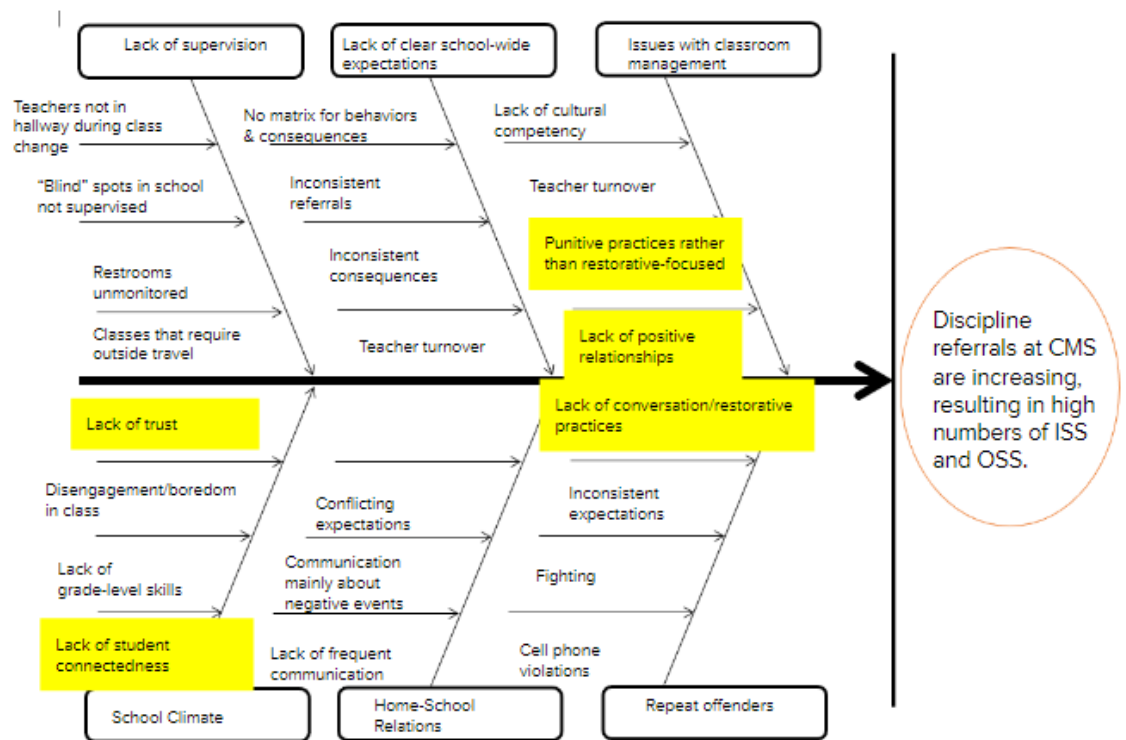
Punitive Practices

Discipline issues persist in many school settings, particularly at the secondary level. According to Losen and Martinez (2013), "[t]he likelihood a student will be suspended out of school increases from about 2.4% in elementary school to 11% in middle school" (p. 7). Punitive disciplinary approaches are still commonly used, even though "[t]hey simply suppress unwanted behavior temporarily increasing negative

consequences, such as reduced perceptions of safety and connectedness among students and the perpetuation of the school-to-prison pipeline" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2018, p.1). Our educational system is responsible for improving our discipline systems, knowing that the current approach is not best for students' or educators' motivation and well-being (Alderman & Green, 2011). Discipline issues continue to negatively impact educators because they "require a large amount of school resources, including time of teachers and administrators, and still account for the largest percentage of workplace stress" (Cornell & Mayer, 2010, p.11). The need for appropriate discipline approaches is even more critical given my problem of practice with discipline inequity. Disciplinary practices in public schools have changed over time, but those changes have yet to be rapid or universal (Moreno, 2021).

Punitive consequences such as ISS and OSS negatively impact students, including academics, self-efficacy, and overall success (Osher et al., 2010; Rosenbaum, 2020; Scott, 2021). One out-of-school suspension can negatively affect a student's life success and outcome (Whitford et al., 2016). Rainbolt et al. (2019) found that punitive discipline practices do not improve school climate, academic achievement, dropout rates, or behavior. Many exclusionary discipline practices derive from zero-tolerance policies. Zero-tolerance policies in schools are disciplinary approaches where the most severe punishment is given for students who break specific rules, such as ones usually related to safety or illegal activity (Skiba, 2008). Originally designed to protect students from drugs and weapons on campus, zero-tolerance policies have been extended to automatic suspensions and expulsions for lower-level discipline issues (Rainbolt et al., 2019).

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Research even indicates that the use of police officers in schools to enforce zero tolerance policies influences teachers to "assume more of a police mentality toward their own students" and treat incidents as criminal for infractions that would have previously been treated as "teachable moments" (Lustick, 2021, p. 1273). Adapting zero-tolerance policies to include violations perceived as threatening now may include "swearing at a teacher or minor disruptions such as cutting the line in the cafeteria," which results in extreme punitive consequences (Lund et al., 2021, p. 15).

Lack of Cultural Competency

Traditional, punitive practices dominate school settings and affect all students, particularly students of color, students in poverty, and students served through special education services (Blake et al., 2020; Scott, 2021). The discipline inequity gap happens across all levels of schooling, but it is more prevalent at the middle and high school levels (Welsh, 2022). One study shows that Black students are suspended "two and three more times than White students," which "directly contributes to the racial achievement gap and in the long term is related to school dropout and increased involvement in the juvenile justice system" (Lund et al., 2021, p. 2). Disparities in discipline referrals are related to other future setbacks for students of color, particularly Black males (Smith & Harper, 2015), as evidenced by nationwide data that shows students who are suspended are more likely to fall behind in reading levels, be retained, and be incarcerated later in life (Skiba & Losen, 2015). These adverse outcomes are present despite students' achievement levels or socioeconomic status (Heilbrun et al., 2018). According to Andrews and Gutwein (2020), the discrepancy "includes both the frequency at which students are disciplined as

well as severity of punishment for particular infractions" (p.31). This inequity is observed

nationwide and was an area I felt compelled to explore further as I examined CMS

discipline data. From existing data, it was clear that African American males receive a

disproportionate number of referrals, and it was necessary to analyze discipline data

further to see if there were discrepancies in the severity of consequences for similar

referrals as students of color's white counterparts.

Need for Positive Relationships

To address the adverse effects of traditional discipline approaches, various

organizations, such as the SCDOE (2019), promote the use of restorative and positive-

based approaches as a more effective way to hold students accountable for their actions

while also building social-emotional capacity. Restorative practices are more

relationship-based and less punitive-focused than traditional disciplinary practices, with

the goal being for students to reflect on and change their behavior (Zakszeski &

Rutherford, 2021). The benefits of restorative practices are far-reaching. Restorative

practices allow students to develop skills for conflict resolution, conversation, and peer

mediation (Gable et al., 2005). Additionally, restorative practices "aim[] to transform

how students and adults interact with one another, thereby creating a more positive

school climate" (Gregory et al., 2016, p. 326). Restorative practices can change educators'

and students' mindsets about misbehavior and discipline; this approach had the potential

to cause positive change at CMS.

A significant component of the restorative practices approach is the Community

Building Circle (CBC). The premise of CBC is to allow all students to listen and be heard

by their peers and teachers. A talking piece symbolizes that only one person speaks at a time, and the other group members will listen. Klevan (2021) explains this approach by stating that "[a] circle can be used for a wide range of purposes, such as building community, helping students connect their experiences to academic content, or welcoming a student back to school after an extended absence" (p. 3). Educators can also use CBC to discuss classroom issues and behaviors interrupting the classroom environment.

Research indicates that students' behaviors often indicate a need that they are ineffectively trying to communicate (Teaching Tolerance, 2016). Teachers can develop positive relationships and help students grow behaviorally by focusing on understanding the behavior. In a study, Farmer et al. (2004) found identifiable characteristics of repeat and high-level discipline offenders. While this research included African American students in a southern rural setting, it provides a framework for categorizing students based on interpersonal competencies, teacher ratings of social adaptation, peer interpersonal assessments, sociometric status, and social cognitive maps that could serve as a screener for students of all backgrounds to implement preventative measures as related to discipline (Farmer et al., 2004). There is a need for more research and focus on identifying risk factors for youth with repeat disciplinary issues and interventions to address the social-emotional gaps. Other researchers, such as Mitchell et al. (2017), assert that students should be taught social skills in a positive classroom and school environment to progress academically and socially.

Positive Behavioral Interventions

Multiple research studies over many years suggest the need for positive behavioral interventions instead of punitive disciplinary approaches (Alderman & Green, 2011; Bear et al., 2017; Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Evanovich et al., 2020; Gomez et al., 2021; Kervick et al., 2019). One of the practical approaches is restorative practices (Fronius et al., 2019). Restorative practices include various relationship-building, community-building, and social skills-building processes, such as community-building circles and restorative conferences (Dhaliwal et al., 2023; Lund et al., 2021; Mansfield et al., 2018). Research indicates that there is a belief among rural administrators that relationships are a strength in the rural school setting, especially when teachers have positive relationships with students and can handle minor infractions without administrative involvement (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022). Through intentional professional development, student-teacher relationships can be extended throughout schools rather than be on an individual-teacher basis.

Rural administrators report knowing about restorative practices; however, there is a range in the depth of their knowledge (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022). Therefore, there is a need for a standard definition and training for rural and urban administrators (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022). A final theme in restorative practice research suggests that even though rural administrators see the benefits of restorative practices, those procedures are challenging to implement due to a shortage of resources (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022). These findings are even more evident among students with disabilities (SWD) in rural schools who are less likely to receive ISS than in urban schools; however, SWD rural students are more likely to receive OSS than in urban

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schools (MacSuga-Gage et al., 2022). Rural administrators often need more staff support and are often tasked with more roles and responsibilities than administrators in larger schools or more central settings; therefore, these administrators often have to choose efficiency in their decision-making processes. Restorative practices can be time and resource-consuming, which is an obstacle in settings where resources are already limited (Brushaber-Drockton et al., 2022).

Further research needs to be conducted in rural settings about using restorative practices to address the equity gap in discipline. This research is necessary because there is no common understanding of the principles of restorative practices, and there are discrepancies in the implementation and frequency of use in rural schools. Milner and Tenore have studied immense amounts of research and repeatedly find that classroom discipline referrals are often "for students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds" (2010, p. 5). This trend is evident at CMS, and the negatively affected students deserve the system to invest in ways to encourage student success. Punitive discipline practices do not improve school climate, academic achievement, dropout rates, or behavior (Rainbolt et al., 2019). Culturally responsive classroom research indicates that an essential component of classroom management is "building caring classroom communities" (Weinstein et al., 2004, p.3). Research in this area can change classroom cultures, student behavior, classroom management, and, ultimately, disciplinary approaches at CMS.

Implementing CBCs at CMS and analyzing relevant discipline and classroom management data can improve education systems within the district and other rural

districts serving students of color and impoverished students. Suppose the

implementation of CBCs decreases inequitable disciplinary practices. In that case, other

schools and districts can utilize this beginning stage of restorative practices to foster

positive relationships within schools and to provide a proactive discipline approach with

students and teachers. This study can demonstrate success locally, such as the success of

such strategies has been documented in other settings (Mansfield et al., 2018). This

study's findings can show the successes and challenges associated with implementing

CBCs to decrease punitive discipline practices. These findings can be shared at our

district's board meetings and local conferences, such as the South Carolina Association of

School Administrators.

Theory of Improvement

A theory of improvement is an essential component of improvement science

because it moves the researcher from analyzing the problem of practice to determining

interventions based on the drivers and change ideas (Perry et al., 2020). Perry et al. state

that developing a theory of improvement "requires that a scholarly practitioner blend

their observations with the literature and with their own practice knowledge" (2020,

p.90). In other words, the scholarly practitioner must synthesize all of the information and

experience related to the problem of practice to determine the next steps. The theory of

improvement explains why and how an intervention is appropriate for a problem of

practice, given the research and literature surrounding such issues and interventions

(Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The driver diagram in Figure 3 provides a visual of how the

primary drivers, secondary drivers, and related change ideas were analyzed for this particular problem of practice. In this section, I will discuss the drivers highlighted in yellow on the driver diagram, which includes the primary driver of teacher competency, the secondary drivers of professional development and the implementation of CBCs, and the change agent of building a culture of trust and growth. I will then discuss the other identified drivers and why I chose the drivers that I did as I completed a causal analysis of the problem. I will then explain how my proposed intervention of implementing CBCs can influence the identified problem of practice.

Figure 3

Driver Diagram

Teacher Competency and Relationships

      Teacher competency and positive student-teacher relationships are intertwined

primary drivers because a teacher who is competent in classroom management

understands that building relationships with students is essential, particularly in diverse

student populations (Milner & Tenore, 2010). Given the problem of practice with

discipline discrepancy for African American males at CMS, it is essential to realize that

the decrease in African American teachers and administrators has been happening since

desegregation (Madkins, 2011). At the same time, student populations continue to become more diversified (Milner, 2020). Research shows that students of color are often "faced with directives from the teacher, [and] they resist or cooperate, ignore or acquiesce–and the key factor determining which option they choose is often their perception of the teacher's caring" (Weinstein et al., 2004, p. 10). Therefore, it is crucial that pre-service and currently employed teachers be competent in culturally responsive teaching, particularly in building positive relationships with students instead of responding to every behavior through a discipline referral (Hoffman, 2014; Losen & Martinez, 2013). A lack of teacher competency in handling insignificant behaviors through conversations and relationship building is a primary cause of referrals that result in exclusionary and often inequitable disciplinary practices.

Community Building Circles and Culture of Trust and Growth

Knowing that teacher competency and relationships correlated to classroom management are essential for the success of all students, and even more so with students of color, establishes a need to intentionally build trust within classrooms and schools (Alderman & Green, 2011; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). It is not enough to prepare teachers to deliver content; teachers must build a positive climate to serve the emotional and behavioral needs of students (Bear et al., 2017; Delale-O'Connor, 2017). It is the responsibility of teachers to set clear expectations and hold students accountable without creating negative dynamics and power struggles (Bear et al., 2017). As indicated on the driver diagram, the change idea of the implementation of CBCs is a way to build teacher

competency in building a culture of trust and growth with their students while addressing behavioral concerns (Evanovich et al., 2020). By implementing proactive strategies, such as CBCs, teachers can move away from more traditional, punitive discipline practices that have repeatedly resulted in inequitable outcomes for students of color (Gomez et al., 2021; Gregory et al., 2016).

Drivers Not Chosen

As evidenced in the driver diagram, there are various primary and secondary drivers, as well as a multitude of change ideas that could have been chosen when looking at change concepts and possible interventions. While all of these components were important and could potentially have a positive effect on disciplinary practices and school climate, some of the interventions had already started, such as a matrix for clear expectations throughout the school and the implementation of some Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). While those strategies are beneficial, I wanted to choose an area that was being newly implemented so that I can more effectively track progress data. CMS is also in the early stages of forming behavioral intervention teams and identifying strategies for helping students with multiple, ongoing referrals; however, we are still in the early stages of implementation, and it is not consistent across grade levels, which would complicate analyzing data. CBCs was a good option because all three grades are at different stages of implementation; therefore, it provides the opportunity to evaluate the effectiveness of CBCs as each grade level is introduced to the intervention.

Theory of Change

By implementing CBCs in classrooms at CMS, I expected classroom climates to become more positive and inclusive (Klevan, 2021). An improvement in discipline and relationships will lead to fewer discipline referrals and punitive consequences because the goal will be to address behaviors in a proactive manner (Gable et al., 2005). CBCs will encourage teachers to address minor infractions through conversations and discussions during CBCs, and the process should also help students feel more connected in the classroom (Kervick et al., 2019). Positive classroom climates and improved relationships can lead to student inclusion and success. The ultimate result of this theory of change was expected to result in fewer discipline referrals that result in students, particularly African American males at CMS, receiving exclusionary consequences such as ISS and OSS (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). This impact should be evident in the discipline data collected from the discipline recording system.

Rationale for Implementing Community Building Circles

As Ginott (1972, p. 16) explains, teachers have the ability to "decide[] whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or dehumanized." This concept speaks directly to why CBCs are an appropriate intervention for building relationships and to ultimately reduce disciplinary issues resulting in negative consequences. CBCs provide the space and conversation to humanize children by placing important on their voice as various topics are discussed. Teachers and students can hear each other's opinions, experiences, and personal stories, which allows everyone in the

classroom setting to see others as humans, rather than just characters in a school setting. CBCs allow teachers and students to talk through issues in a trusting and de-escalating manner. CBCs also allow experiences to build what Hilliard (2006, p. 91) refers to as "democratic human values," "community responsibilities," (p. 93), and "inclusive aims and relationships" (p. 93). The author cites these important skills and values as missing from the educational setting. Hilliard (2006, p. 99) also discusses the importance of "the recognition of the need for a social and spiritual bond of belonging and collaboration among students and teachers." CBCs have the potential to build these bonds and allow teachers to "be connected, not aliens" (Hilliard, 2006, p. 101). Figure 4 shows the projected outcomes of CBC implementation.

Figure 4

Visual Theory of Improvement
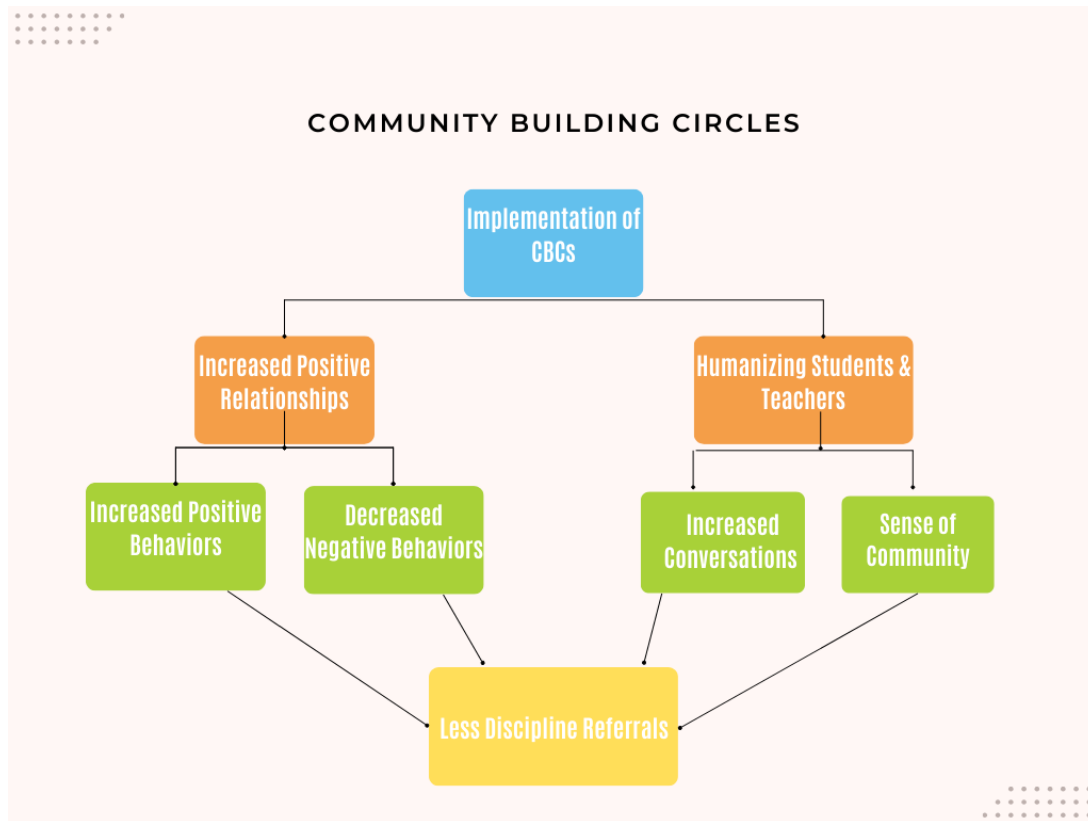
Implementation of Community Building Circles

     Teachers were trained on the key components of implementing CBCs. Teachers were trained by being immersed in a CBC as part of the training. After the CBC was finished, I, as the trainer, debriefed and labeled the intentional steps that were taken to conduct the CBC. Generally, the time that a CBC takes to complete depends on how many people are involved, how many people decide to speak, and whether the focus of the CBC is more superficial or more involved. For example, a CBC about the participants' favorite food (which would be in the earlier stages of implementation)

would possibly only take five minutes because the topic is superficial and is sufficed by one-word answers. However, a more complicated or deeper question, such as "when is a time that you were proud of yourself" would most likely result in longer, more involved responses and could take twenty to thirty minutes. Teachers have the autonomy to choose topics or questions that align with their purpose and classroom schedule. CBC facilitators may use their discretion to determine if they want to more than one pass around the circle during the discussion. In addition to teacher-generated questions, I have also witnessed teachers successfully utilizing student-requested questions during CBCs. This is generally done by having students submit questions that they would like to discuss, and then the teacher incorporates the student-generated questions when appropriate. This is another way to build student confidence and voice with CBCs. It is important to form a physical circle during CBCs so that everyone can see others, to build the concept of an actual circle of community members, and to physically demonstrate that everyone is an equal part of the circle. All students are expected to join the circle; however, it is also important to allow anyone to not participate in any given CBC to respect students' boundaries and comfort.

The first step of implementation is to explain to students that CBCs will be used in the classroom to build a sense of community, foster trust, and build positive relationships. Teachers should explain that the topics of the CBCs will vary and may include discussions about classroom routines, behavioral issues in the classroom, themed questions related to the content of the day, personal experiences, get to know each other topics, personal opinions, and a host of other topics or questions. After the introduction

of the concept of CBCs, the class works together to build agreements about the expectations for CBCs. While the agreements should be unique for each class, the facilitator should ensure that the agreement includes the expectation that the process remains safe, respectful, and responsible. The introduction of CBCs should also include the presentation of a talking piece, and students should understand that only the person who has the talking piece is allowed to speak. Anyone not holding the talking piece should not speak. I have seen success with teachers using a fidget disc as a talking piece because it also gives students something to fidget with, which can help with nervousness to talk. When everyone has had a chance to speak, the facilitator should close the circle by affirming the conversation, summarizing the conversation, or celebrating the connections among the circle participants. To support teachers during implementation, teachers had the opportunity to reflect through the CBC self-reflection form, as well as through the grade-level focus group. Teachers were also given a chance to visit other teachers who had been facilitating CBCs in order to watch the process live and to talk to their peers about their learnings and findings with CBCs.

Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) Plan

As part of the Plan phase, this study aimed to look at discipline data at CMS and identify changes that helped teachers build relationships with students, which is crucial to classroom management (Bondy et al., 2007). During the Do phase of the PDSA cycle, interventions were implemented, and data was collected about the implementation. For the Study phase, the leadership team analyzed data to determine the effectiveness of the

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current intervention(s). Finally, the Act phase allowed for reflection on the process, and decisions were made about the continued implementation of the interventions while allowing for minor or major adjustments to be made to see a change in the problem of practice related to discipline referrals. This process of monitoring outcomes after interventions is crucial because "[a]ll improvement requires change, but all change does not lead to improvement" (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p.126). The PDSA cycle is depicted in Figure 5 and includes dates for each part of the cycle.

Figure 5

Plan-Do-Study-Act Cycle

Plan (September, 2023)	Do (September, 2023-May, 2024)
• Leadership Team analyzed discipline data to identify trends • Teachers completed a survey about classroom management and self efficacy • Leadership Team completed ELEOT observations and analyze the data	• Grade T teachers were trained on CBCs and began regular implementation. Grade E teachers were trained on CBCs in the spring of 2024.
Act (January, 2024-April, 2024)	Study (January, 2024-April, 2024)
• Modified intervention as needed	• Conducted semi-structured

	interviews in a focus group during 6th, 7th, and 8th grade level meetings
• Shared the findings with the educational community	• Analyzed discipline data
	• Analyzed teacher CBC self-check & survey data
	• Adjusted intervention or teacher support as needed

For the Plan stage of the PDSA cycle, the leadership team gathered data about the students receiving the highest number of referrals, the teachers writing the most referrals, the types of behaviors recorded for these referrals, and the consequences of referrals. The leadership team used discipline reports from PowerSchool to determine whether particular behaviors should be targeted in the social-emotional lessons and if there were particular grade levels where referrals are above average. Additionally, I asked teachers to complete a survey about discipline and classroom management. The goal of the teacher survey was to determine how effective teachers feel in terms of classroom management and handling student behaviors. The leadership team completed observations using excerpts from our accreditation program, Cognia's, Effective Learning Environments Observation Tool (ELEOT) (AdvancEd, 2023). Finally, in spring of 2024, I conducted empathy interviews with Grade S teachers in April and Grade T teachers in March,

including teachers associated with high and low to no referrals, to gather data about discipline and CBC perceptions at CMS. This information will continue to guide resources, professional development, and discussions with faculty regarding disciplinary practices.

For the Do stage, the leadership team provided a refresher session for Grade S teachers during grade-level meetings in September. In September, the leadership team also provided the first training for Grade T teachers during grade-level meetings. In February, 2024, Grade E teachers were introduced to CBCs. These grade level teachers had the opportunity to learn about and discuss the benefits of CBCs in order to encourage buy-in (Evanovich et al., 2020). Teachers were expected to implement CBCs on a regular basis appropriate for their class schedule and to share when they were implementing them. CBC self-reflection forms were completed by the twice during the spring semester. This data provided information about the amount of CBC implementation, as well as information about the topics being discussed. CBCs and Respect Agreements were implemented in Grade S and CBCs were implemented at Grades T and E so that teachers were not overwhelmed with the entire Restorative Practices process at once (Gomez et al., 2021). The training for CBCs included a discussion of why CBCs are important and included a component about the relationship to discipline. The importance of basic structures of CBCs were introduced, including a signal to begin the CBC, the use of a talking piece, a norms poster, and the importance of standing or sitting in an actual circle. The Leadership Team discussed this data and used it to plan for further professional development and conferences with teachers and students. Student discipline data was

regularly monitored through referrals and consequences. The Leadership Team discussed discipline data monthly. This data drove decisions about the implementation of CBCs and the possible need for further professional development and teacher support.

For the Study phase of the PDSA cycle, the data were more formally analyzed monthly. This data included discipline data (from ABE/PowerSchool originally and then it was changed to Simplidiscipline/PowerSchool), and I conducted semi-structured interviews in a focus group with Grade S and Grade T teachers during grade-level meetings. It is important to hear teachers' voices about their experiences and learning as a result of implementing CBCs (Dhaliwal et al., 2023). These conversations exposed the need for further CBC training and opportunities for teachers who are struggling with CBCs to observe teachers who indicate seeing value in CBCs. The semi-structured interviews also drive training for Grade E teachers during second semester. The Leadership Team used this data to determine if progress is being made regarding student behavior and teacher disciplinary practices. Progress would be indicated by fewer office referrals, fewer in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and improved teacher views about relationships and discipline.

During the Do Phase, the leadership team discussed data findings with individual teachers, as needed, and with grade-level teams. The Leadership Team analyzed data and then adjusted as needed and planned for interventions for the second semester and for next school year. The Plan-Do-Study-Act cycle was used throughout the 2023-2024 school year to continue addressing the problem of practice with discipline at CMS.

Conclusion

The problem of practice at CMS is that African American males receive substantially more discipline referrals, ultimately resulting in exclusionary consequences. This affects the student's academic and social/emotional development and success. The root causes of the discipline discrepancy must be acknowledged and addressed through interventions grounded in research. CMS leaders and teachers are responsible for addressing discipline inequities to provide more effective and equitable learning environments for all students, particularly African American males. By engaging in this improvement science process, I hoped to provide data showing decreased disciplinary disparities and increased positive learning environments and student relationships, particularly among males of color. Any data supporting progress with these goals that are accomplished through this improvement science process, should be shared locally and throughout South Carolina to be considered in various settings, including professional development, school policies, and pre-service teacher training.

This study will improve educational practices for teachers, which will, in turn, improve educational experiences for teachers and students. By implementing CBCs, the information presented and the conversations stemming from the training, implementation, and reflection on the process and outcomes will naturally create an awareness of the relationship between positive classroom practices and discipline outcomes. If teachers can evaluate their relationships with students and the resulting disciplinary practices, they will observe the relationship between them. This will allow teachers to begin to see discipline issues as a need for students to feel connected rather than an opportunity for disciplinary action that results in exclusionary consequences. Suppose a student needs

help to read at grade level. In that case, educators and the school system must provide interventions to work towards that goal and provide more intensive professional development for educators to teach the necessary skills for reading. Likewise, suppose a student needs to meet behavior expectations. In that case, it is the school's responsibility to teach students appropriate contextual behaviors and provide professional development on addressing behaviors appropriately rather than always taking a punitive approach. This study can give teachers the tools to address the problem of discipline inequities, which is an empowering process for teachers and students alike.

The research from this study will add to current knowledge and provide new insights about CBCs in various ways. First, this research will add to the existing literature on the importance of relationship-building in discipline related to African American students who often feel disconnected from the school environment (Liang et al., 2020). This research will also provide a new perspective on classroom management in diverse classrooms because it is in a rural, high-poverty setting, as opposed to the research of Milner and Tenore (2010), which focuses more on urban settings. Additionally, since CBCs were being implemented at different stages for grades sixth through eighth at CMS, this research offered new research because it indicated different discipline trends based on CBC implementation within the same school setting. During the initial stages of research, sixth-grade teachers were in their second year of CBC implementation, seventh-grade teachers were in their first year, and eighth-grade teachers were not yet implementing. While there are some structural differences among the grade levels, there was still the opportunity to analyze discipline patterns among the grade levels. Finally,

this process provided research on CBCs and the specific impact on discipline for African American males. This research provides more targeted information than previous studies.

Finally, improvement science aims to identify interventions that address specific problems of practice in an authentic setting. This was an essential goal because the information discovered can positively impact decisions made and policies implemented at various levels, including the classroom school, district, school board, state representatives, the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDOE), and the state superintendent. While the SCDOE provides guidelines for administrators about positive behavioral interventions, such as restorative practices that include CBCs, these interventions need to be more widely taught and implemented in teacher preparation programs or during statewide professional development (2019). This study can inform policymakers at various levels about the specific impact that this positive intervention can have for all students in terms of connectedness and behavior, precisely the positive outcomes that CBCs can have on disciplinary practices as related to the effects of disciplinary practices for African American males. Since discriminatory discipline practices are a national trend and concern, policymakers must understand the implications of such practices and be informed of interventions that can address these issues (Whitford et al., 2016).

CHAPTER TWO

METHODS

Improvement Team

To have a vested interest in improving the disciplinary approaches at CMS, some key people in the school needed to be involved. The improvement team for this study included the principal, two other assistant principals, and at least one teacher from the sixth and seventh grades. The leadership team was comprised of the principal, assistant principals, and the instructional coach. We periodically analyzed discipline data, which was essential throughout this study. The leadership team was often in classrooms, completing observations of instruction and CBCs when applicable. Additionally, as administrators, we received referrals and administered consequences based on the school handbook. These various degrees of engagement allowed my fellow leadership team members to provide insight into their observations about relationships, classroom management, and classroom culture. I included teacher voices from Grade S and Grade T because they were the demonstration class for other teachers to observe as they began implementing CBCs. It was essential to have teachers' perspectives about the implementation of CBCs.

Causal Analysis

My initial awareness of an equity problem with discipline at CMS was based on informal observations, such as seeing the students suspended each day or walking into the

ISS room and noticing the disproportionate number of African American males sitting there. The second round of data I began examining was ABE discipline data, which allowed me to look at discipline referrals by race, gender, teacher, time of day, and location. The ABE data quickly highlighted a discrepancy in the number of referrals African American students received compared to other groups, as evidenced in Figure 6.

Figure 6

Number of Office Referrals by Ethnicity and Gender

Number of Office Referrals by Ethnicity and Gender
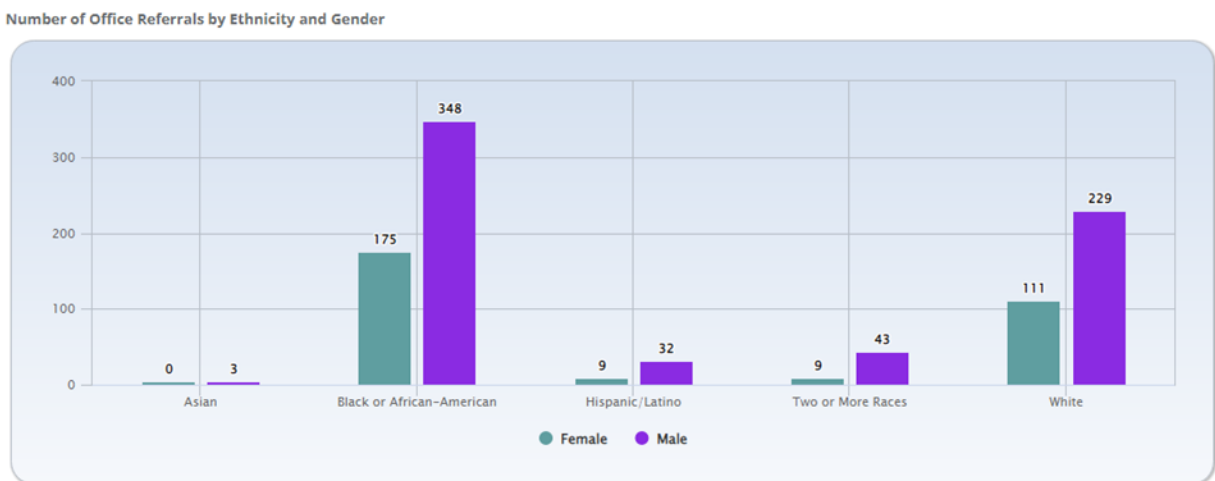
Depiction of ScholarChip/ABE's Number of Office Referrals by Ethnicity and Gender

Note. The image was a report provided in the ScholarChip/Alternative Behavior Educator (ABE) database (2022) used by Clearview School District.

CMS's discipline data is consistent with national data that students of color, particularly African American males, receive more discipline referrals (Anyon et al.,

2018). African American students received 54.55% of disciplinary referrals during the 2022-2023 school year, with 126 referrals given to African American males. "Refusal to Obey/Defiant" and "Disrupting Class" were the main referral categories behind "Phone Violation" and "Bus Discipline." Expulsion data shows that African American females and males were recommended for expulsion at a slightly higher rate per the proportion of their total population, with six African American females and one African American male being recommended for expulsion, as compared to three white females and five white males. African American and white females' expulsions were not upheld at the rate of males. Females were allowed back into school or placed in a virtual setting instead of expulsion, whereas males were often placed in the on-campus alternative school. These findings indicate that we are not serving our students due to exclusionary disciplinary practices and referrals most likely related to cultural differences.

In addition to the discipline data, I looked at mental health referrals and teacher demographics as part of an equity audit to determine various factors that could be contributing to the disproportionate number of referrals that African American males had received. As evidenced in Figure 7, African American males were significantly less likely to be referred to mental health services provided on campus. This finding was concerning because, as research shows, students who receive exclusionary discipline consequences are more likely to suffer depression symptoms (Rushton et al., 2002), and such consequences can also negatively affect their non-excluded peers (Eyllon et al., 2022). In essence, the disproportionate referrals in discipline and mental health referrals for African American males is a double negative consequence to that group of students.

Figure 7

Mental Health Referrals

Mental Health Referrals

Hispanic male
8.3%

Black females
16.7%

White males
25.0%

Black males
8.3%
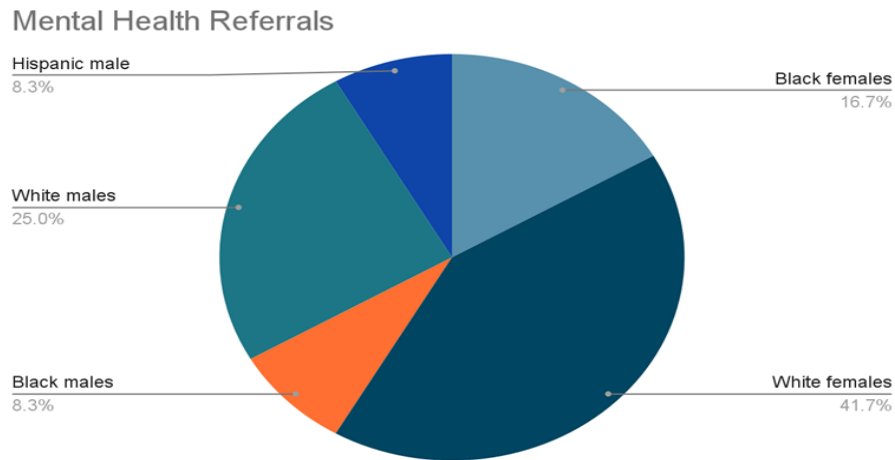
White females
41.7%

Figure 8 includes teacher demographic data for the 2022-2023 school year, another pertinent data to this study. Teacher demographics also showed the absence of racial diversity in the staff, with 70.2% of the faculty being white females. Research shows that students of color, particularly African American males, have the potential to be more successful when their white educators are culturally sensitive and able to build positive relationships with students (Liang et al., 2020). Cultural differences and implicit biases often make African American males feel unwelcome in specific classrooms (Liang et al., 2020). This indicated a need for professional development as an intervention because the faculty demographics may contribute to discipline disparities.

Figure 8

Faculty Demographics

Faculty Gender and Demographics

Asian Male 2.0%
Black Male 6.3%
Black Female 8.5%
White Male 13.0%
White Female 70.2%
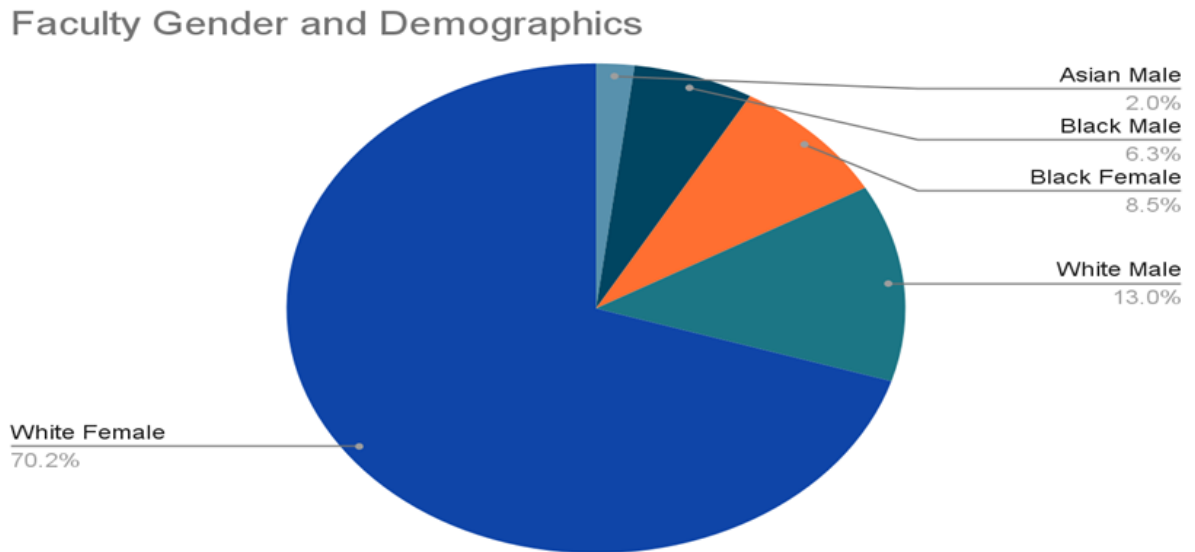
After considering the data, I developed a fishbone diagram (included previously in Figure 2) to identify anchor issues with discipline at CMS and sub-issues within those significant areas. The major contributing factors identified through observation, informal conversations, leadership team conversations, and ABE date included lack of supervision, lack of clear school-wide expectations, teacher issues with classroom management, school climate, home-school relations, and repeat discipline offenders. Since some of these areas were starting to be addressed, I looked for the patterns where we still needed to put interventions into place. I identified the following subcategories with commonalities: punitive practices rather than restorative-focused, lack of positive relationships, lack of conversation/restorative practices, lack of trust, and lack of student

connectedness. The fishbone analysis confirmed what the various pieces of data had led me to believe–that discipline discrepancies were partly due to the disciplinary approaches of some classroom teachers and the lack of positive relationships between some teachers and African American male students.

Practical Measurement System

My dissertation is an improvement science design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This research design allowed me to examine the impact of my interventions through survey data, discipline data, observational data, teacher self-checks, and semi-focused focus group interviews with teachers. This research design allowed me to measure how teachers' behavior management competencies affect discipline referrals by comparing discipline data to teacher survey results. The research design also allowed me to measure how implementing CBCs affected teachers' attitudes about discipline and relationships as measured through observations and interviews. Additionally, this research helped determine if teacher efficacy with classroom management and teacher-student relationships is related to discipline referrals and how student behaviors are addressed in the classroom. Specifically, I used this research approach to examine how teachers' competencies of culture, restorative practices, and relationships with students impact discipline referrals and consequences and how implementing Community Building Circles affects student behavior and teachers' attitudes toward discipline.

As part of the practical measurement system for this study, it was essential to include various measures, including balance, process, and outcome, to determine if the

intervention led to improvement in the problem of practice at CMS (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Process measures are completed frequently to observe trends in the fidelity of the implementation of an intervention (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). These frequent measures allow for changes to be made to the intervention during the implementation process, rather than waiting until an outcome measure indicates improvement (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). Balance measures are essential in improvement science because they allow the improvement team to ensure that the intended results are happening and that unintended consequences from the intervention are not taking place. Finally, outcome measures are the final measure of the intervention and can only inform the results of the intervention at the end of the research cycle (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). While outcome measures are necessary and determine the final impact of the intervention, scholarly researchers would do a disservice to their organizations to wait until the end of the PDSA cycle to measure change. For each section below that describes the measurement tool being used, I have included what types of measure(s) each tool was used for in the PDSA cycle.

I chose to conduct research at CMS because I am an administrator and can access teachers, classrooms, students, professional development, and discipline records. Additionally, the discipline data indicated a discrepancy between African American male referrals and their peers. CMS is the best place to study this topic because there is a problem, and I had influence on implementing strategies designed to address the problem. Many of our teachers were committed to improving discipline approaches at CMS.

Interviews

I conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with Grade S and Grade T teachers at CMS. These two grade levels were expected to implement CBCs from the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year. I conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with ten Grade T teachers in March, 2024 and with eight Grade S teachers in April. These semi-structured interviews served as process measures to gauge variations in CBC implementation and a balance measure to ensure that negative or unintended consequences were not happening due to CBC implementation. This data helped determine whether any changes or additional training needed to be conducted for more successful implementation for Grades S and T.

Additionally, the data from these semi-structured focus groups provided important information and insights as CBCs were implemented in Grade E during the second semester. Interviews lasted between twenty to thirty minutes, and I recorded and transcribed them. The same protocol was used with Grade E teachers in April, 2024 after they had been implementing CBCs for two months. I used a semi-structured interview protocol (Cresswell & Cresswell, 2018) to ask teachers to voluntarily talk to me about the intervention during grade-level meetings because those were natural times during the school day for these conversations. These teachers provided insight into their attitudes and beliefs about discipline, and they also gave feedback on the implementation of CBCs in their classrooms. With these semi-structured interviews, I hoped to understand how teachers viewed the impact of CBCs on classroom culture and relationships between

teachers and students.

The leadership team conducted observations throughout the year (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). The leadership team for this study included me, the principal, and two other assistant principals. The observation protocol is listed in Appendix D and includes excerpts from our accreditation program's ELEOT (AdvancEd, 2023). During ELEOT walkthrough observations, I and the other administrators were non-participant observers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). We conduct these observations as part of our district's accreditation process; therefore, I used parts of the two more relevant sections to the study's focus on classroom culture and relationships. These two sections are Supportive Learning and Well-Managed Learning (AdvancEd, 2023). The ELEOT has ratings for the different observational statements that include "Very Evident," "Evident," "Somewhat Evident," and "Not Observed." One important note is that "Not Observed" is not a negative rating; instead, it just means that the practice was not observed during the window of time that the observer was in the classroom. Each administrator is asked to complete around four to six ELEOT observations a week; however, that is only sometimes feasible. All administrators generally can complete at least two to four observations; therefore, a wealth of data will be analyzed monthly and in April, 2024. These observations are at least twenty minutes, but observers can stay longer. The ELEOT observations served as a process measure because they are conducted continuously across all three grade levels. Interrater reliability is ensured as part of

gaining access to conduct ELEOT observations. Cognia, who provides the ELEOT database, requires that observers complete an online training course, observe a twenty minute classroom video segment, and rate the indicators with at least ninety percent accuracy as compared to their experts' ratings in order to become an ELEOT observer. The leadership team also analyzes ELEOT data because it is used as a walkthrough follow up to professional learning groups. The data about what the improvement team was observing in classrooms was considered as we discussed CBC implementation in grade-level meetings and helped determine if any changes needed to be made.

Teacher CBC Checklists

A teacher CBC checklist is provided in Appendix A, and this tool aimed to capture several vital pieces of information about CBC implementation from the teacher level. Since teachers are the actual people implementing the CBCs, their voices, insights, and opinions were vital to monitoring and making necessary changes to the intervention. The checklist asked teachers to indicate the topics included in their CBCs, the student participation trends, the integrity of an introduction and closing of topics, and the strengths and challenges teachers faced as they implemented CBCs in their classrooms. Teachers were asked to complete these periodically during grade-level meetings. These checklists were analyzed for trends in CBC implementation across the school. The teacher checklist is a valuable balancing measure because it provided insight into CBC trends and teachers' perceptions of CBCs. This tool let the improvement team know if teachers were not seeing the benefits of CBCs, thus allowing us to provide the necessary

support.

Discipline Data

　　As part of the data collection for this study, I used baseline discipline data from Alternative Behavior Educator (ABE) and PowerSchool because these two programs are already used at CMS for documentation of referrals, behaviors, and consequences for referrals. PowerSchool is a Software and Intelligent System (SIS) used by the South Carolina Department of Education to collect student data, including attendance, grades, demographics, and discipline records. ABE allows reports to be produced about the frequency of referrals by each teacher, location, classroom subject area, time of day, gender, and race. This discipline-related data allowed me to determine whether implementing CBCs and other non-punitive discipline practices changes referral patterns. ABE discipline data aimed to serve as a balance, process, and outcome measure because the system provided ongoing, as well as historical, discipline data. I used these reports at the end of each nine weeks throughout the study to determine trends. I also used this data to compare referral trends from the 2022-2023 school year to the 2023-2024 school year. Additionally, if the South Carolina School Report Card data is published in time after the 2023-2024 school year, I will use the Student Perceptions of Social-Physical Environment rating to compare to previous ratings by students. If this data is available in time to include in my research, the student response data will have already been de-identified by the state and made available publicly online through the South Carolina State Department website. If this data is unavailable by the end of this study, that data

will not be included.

Finally, I used Teacher Self-Efficacy surveys for this study (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001). This survey, found in Appendix C, was given at the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year for Grades S and T teachers and at the end of the data collection period in the spring of 2024. For Grade E teachers, the survey was given in February, 2024 and again in April, 2024. Teacher survey data was part of the process measurement for this study because it can indicate changes in teacher self-efficacy before and after the implementation of CBC. The goal was for teachers to become more confident in their classroom management skills as positive classroom cultures are built through CBCs. These surveys were given to all content area teachers, not activity teachers. Activity teachers will not be included because they did not implement CBCs during this study. Since these results are anonymous (besides identifying factors such as gender and years of teaching experience), I aimed to have at least a seventy-five percent completion rate for both administrations. From this survey, I aimed to determine teacher efficacy in classroom management, teacher-student relationships, and the ability to deal with problem behaviors appropriately. By surveying as a pre-and post-tool, I aimed to determine the impact of CBCs on teacher self-efficacy.

Table 5

Measurement System

Outcome Measure	• ABE discipline data	• April, 2024
Process Measure	• Semi-structured teacher interview • ELEOT walkthrough observations	• January, 2024 and March, 2024 • 8 per month
Driver Measure	• ABE discipline data • Teacher survey data	• Monthly • March, 2024
Balance Measure	• Semi-structured teacher interview • ABE discipline data • Teacher CBC self-check	• January 2024, and March, 2024 • Monthly • Monthly beginning January 2024-March 2024

Data Analysis

Data collection for this study included focus group interviews by grade level, CBC self-reflections, teacher surveys, discipline records, and ELEOT observations. Interviews, which included focus groups, were beneficial for this study because the grade-level focus groups were "advantageous [because] the interaction among interviewees will likely yield the best information" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 164). This data collection allowed teachers to hear about their peers' experiences, which had the potential to help others remember experiences that they wanted to share. The focus group interviews included all teachers who were present and who agreed to be part of the research study, which could have potentially been eight teachers in Grade S, ten teachers in Grade T, and eleven teachers in Grade E. The interviews were conducted in person and

were recorded and transcribed through Google Meets. The Google Meets transcription is sent to the meeting host in a Google doc. Google Drive automatically saves the transcript for three months; however, I moved the transcript to a password protected file during the data analysis time to maintain confidentiality. Once the transcriptions were completed and I checked them for accuracy, I read through the data initially to become familiar with the data and to inductively begin open coding. During the second reading, I coded the information deductively through the lens of CBCs in light of the literature reviews that I have conducted. Based on my understanding of CBCs, I expected teachers to discuss experiences in terms of relationship building, students sharing personal information, and how CBCs have impacted the classroom. I also counted the frequency of codes to determine if certain themes were more prominent as teachers discuss CBC implementation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I also looked for contrasts and comparisons of themes at the different grade levels (Creswell & Poth, 2018). During the third level of coding, themes were finalized that were directly related to my research questions. This process included selective coding and served to provide information that answers the research questions. The protocol in Appendix B was used, and the focus group interviews took between twenty and thirty minutes. These took place during normally scheduled grade-level meetings, and I reminded all participants about their right to not participate, as well as the importance of maintaining confidentiality among the group.

   A second piece of data that was collected was the CBC self-checks, which are located in Appendix A. Teachers in all grade levels were asked to complete these twice between February and April. The number of potential respondents were the same as the

focus group interviews. These CBC self-checks were completed by teachers during regularly scheduled grade-level meetings. I tracked the number of responses for the CBC criteria being in place or not in place. I again used an inductive coding approach like the one used in the focus group transcriptions during the first reading as I familiarized myself with the data from the CBC self-checks. As Creswell and Poth (2018) explain, this is the point where researchers "apply codes, develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation in light of their own views or views of perspectives in the literature" (p. 189). During the second reading, I deductively generated codes based on trends in CBC research and literature, as well as themes that have emerged from the focus groups. During the final reading, I began to use selective coding to finalize themes that were directly related to my research questions and themes that arose that warranted further research. This process allowed me to eliminate and reduce data that was not related to the study as I began writing the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I coded each round of reflections separately to determine if there were differences in the themes and CBC content as implementation time went by. This allowed me to look for patterns that were specific to the point in time of implementation, as well as trends that emerged for the different grade levels.

The third piece of data that was collected was Teacher Beliefs about Classroom Management Surveys that is located in Appendix C. This survey was given as a pre- and post-survey for the study in February, 2024 and April, 2024 for Grade E and in August, 2023 and April, 2024 for Grades S and T grade teachers through a Google Form. There are nine questions pertaining to teacher self-efficacy about classroom management. The

options for teachers range on a scale from one to nine, with the continuum of responses being "Nothing," "Very Little," "Some Influence," "Quite a Bit," and "A Great Deal." Additionally, the following two open-ended questions were included:

1. What are some effective strategies that you implement for positive classroom management and environment?

2. Is there anything else that you would like to include about your teaching style in relation to classroom management and environment?

While teacher names and emails were not collected, some identifiable information was, including grade level, years of experience, gender, and highest level of education (options of Bachelors, Masters, Masters +30, EdS, or EdD/PhD). Once the post-survey data was collected, it was compared to the pre-survey means.

A fourth piece of data that was collected was discipline data. This was pulled from Simplidiscipline, which is the new discipline database that the district recently began using. This site is linked to PowerSchool and allowed me to determine the number of discipline referrals by grade. No student-specific data was used, rather the data will be collected in terms of number of referrals, gender, and ethnicity for top offenders. This data was recorded on a spreadsheet that did not include student names or any other identifying information. I analyzed the data over the course of the study to determine if the implementation of CBCs results in less referrals for Grade E.

Finally, the ELEOT observations were conducted using the form in Appendix D. These observations were recorded through the online ELEOT site. Each administrator completed these observations weekly for about four to seven teachers. In order to

complete an ELEOT, the observer is expected to observe in the classroom for a minimum of twenty minutes but may choose to stay longer. There are more statements for observers to rank on the ELEOT site; however, for this study I chose to only include ones more specific to the problem of practice and related areas. The data that was collected for this study included four statements related to supportive learning and two statements related to well-managed learning. For each statement, the observer responds to a likert scale that includes 4-Very Evident, 3-Evident, 2-Somewhat Evident, and 1-Not Observed. This data analyzed monthly to see if there were differences in the average scores.

Following the analysis of teacher surveys, CBC self-checks, and focus group data, I used these individual data points as a source of triangulation. This allowed me to look at trends within the teacher survey ratings versus what the CBC self-checks indicate actually happened versus what teachers shared during the interviews. This triangulation can indicate convergence and divergence among the three data sources, which can serve as a "validation strateg[y]" across different measures (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 53). As Creswell & Poth (2018) explain, triangulation helps ensure validity in the process of determining themes.

Ethical Considerations and Limitations

Improvement science is beneficial because it allows the researcher to address a problem of practice in his or her setting (Perry et al., 2020). The caveat is that this personal connection with the setting necessitates that the researcher reflects on the ethical issues and challenges during the PDSA cycle (Perry et al., 2020). One consideration of

this process is that the leadership team, including me, holds supervisory roles with the teachers being asked to implement the CBC. While this expectation is research-based, teachers ultimately needed to see the benefits of CBCs and the role that they can play in student-teacher relationships in order to implement CBCs with integrity. Teachers had the potential to feel pressure to implement CBCs and to identify only the benefits because of the expectations coming from the leadership team. To try and refute this dynamic, we used teachers' voices to share their observed benefits within their classrooms. By encouraging teacher feedback, I wanted to make the shareholders feel more involved in the process.

Another consideration was teacher perception. While the leadership team provided other professional development in instruction, relationship-building, and classroom management, we risked that teachers would interpret these resources as saying not to address or document student behavior. While we wanted teachers to be more proactive through CBCs, we still expected students to be held accountable for the expectations set within the classroom and school. Grade-level and one-on-one conversations with teachers helped mitigate a possible interpretation that misbehavior should not be addressed. Instead, part of the goal for CMS was to be more proactive and restorative in disciplinary practices. CBC implementation is a part of various efforts to improve the school climate.

Additionally, another consideration with implementing CBCs was the degree to which students are willing to share. As students become more comfortable sharing with

classmates and teachers, sensitive subjects were likely to surface during CBC

discussions. There were various parts of this type of disclosure to consider. During grade-

level meetings, discussions included teachers' amount of comfort in dealing with

potentially emotionally charged or personal stories that students would possibly share.

For this reason, school counselors were aware of the implementation of CBCs and were

available as a resource for teachers should difficult conversations or information arise

during CBCs. Teachers knew that they could contact administrators and counselors to

disclose any concerning or alarming information students shared. As mandatory

reporters, information regarding student safety or possible abuse must be reported

appropriately to the administration and counselors to determine what further attention

needs to be given to such information.

Finally, because CBCs were not the only change factor happening in the school

setting where the goal is continual improvement through multiple changes, it was not

easy to attribute any measured improvement to specifically CBC implementation. In

order to precisely determine the effectiveness of CBC implementation, the data collection

for this study was designed to gain information regarding CBCs. The discipline data

allowed me to more specifically look at the pre and post-discipline referrals associated

with the teachers who were newly implementing CBCs. The CBC teacher self-checks and

the semi-structured interview in focus groups gathered teacher perception and efficacy

data specific to CBCs and their impacts in their classrooms. The ELEOT data collected

by administrators during walk-throughs provided information on the specific indicators of

"Supportive Learning" and "Well-Managed Learning" across the school and for the

teachers who were implementing CBCs. Finally, the teacher self-efficacy survey indicated whether the CBC training and implementation affects classroom management efficacy. The chosen data points all connected to the ultimate goal of CBC implementation: to encourage student-teacher relationships, address minor behaviors through non-exclusive ways, and build positive classroom climates.

CHAPTER THREE

FINDINGS

Introduction

This research was conducted using an improvement science approach by
implementing the PDSA cycle. Improvement science involves a practitioner identifying a
problem of practice within their organization, conducting a causal analysis to identify
root causes, identifying secondary and primary drivers, and selecting an intervention to
implement. As part of the PDSA process, various measures are utilized to track the
success of the intervention, including process measures, driver measures, balance
measures, and outcome measures (Perry et al., 2020). These different measures are
designed to not only track the effectiveness of the intervention, but also to ensure that the
intervention is not causing unintended outcomes and to make appropriate adjustments to
the intervention to aid in the intended outcome (Perry et al., 2020). A problem of practice
was identified within my context using discipline data, specifically the discrepancy in
discipline referrals for African American males. I completed a fishbone diagram to
identify all the contributing factors to the problem of practice, and then I identified the
factors that were in my sphere of control and that I thought could potentially have the
most impact on discipline referrals. The fishbone diagram and the driver diagram
indicated that relationship-building and teacher capacity in relationship-building had the

potential to decrease discipline referrals resulting in exclusionary disciplinary practices for all students, particularly for African American males. To address the problem of practice, I chose to focus on the implementation of CBCs and their impact on discipline referrals and teachers' self-efficacy pertaining to classroom culture, building relationships, and classroom management.

Through this improvement science process, I found that CBCs build a sense of community in the classroom, develop empathy among students and teachers, encourage teacher reflection, and help build teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships. Along with these findings, data collection revealed the challenges associated with implementing CBCs including time constraints in the instructional day, students' reluctance to participate, teachers' issues with being vulnerable, students' negative reactions during CBCs, and oversaturation of the intervention. A promising theme that emerged was teachers planning to implement CBCs at the beginning of the year and being more intentional about the implementation of the intervention. The findings from the data collected can guide the future Act portion of the PDSA cycle and give insight into elements that need to be continued, as well as changes that should be made in CBC implementation to better achieve the desired outcomes.

Implementation Journey

The implementation of CBCs was staggered at Grades E, S, and T. Grade S teachers were in the second year of implementation at the 2023-2024 school year. Grade T teachers began implementing CBCs at the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, and Grade E teachers were introduced to CBCs in February of 2024. As the 6th grade assistant

principal, I meet bi-weekly with the team and we always begin our meeting time with a CBC to model the strategy, to reinforce the need for CBC implementation in the classroom, and to build positive relationships within the team. I was concerned that the Grade E teachers would not be as receptive to implementing CBCs due to the time of year that CBCs were introduced; however, the Grade S and T teachers had shared some positive experiences and outcomes from their implementation of CBCs, which had created a positive image of CBCs.

As I tracked discipline data, it became obvious that teachers who implemented the CBCs with fidelity and chose to discuss inappropriate behaviors in the classroom had far fewer discipline issues and wrote significantly fewer referrals. As a leadership team, we did not want teachers to feel that they could not write referrals; rather, we wanted them to use CBCs as a proactive intervention that could lessen the occurrence of discipline issues. I coordinated with teachers to cover their classes while they visited colleagues during CBC time because it was important to provide teachers with the support they need to feel comfortable implementing CBCs.

The original goal was to introduce CBCs to Grade E teachers at the beginning of next school year; however, I did a training session with Grade E teachers in February in response to teachers' concerns about apathy and behavioral issues that were hindering instruction and student success. To prepare for the training, I researched the main components of CBCs, discussed implementation with the leadership team, and sought feedback and input on the training from the leadership team. The training included a Google Slides presentation that outlined how to set Respect Agreements for CBCs to

establish expectations for students during the discussions. We discussed the main components of CBCs. I then did an activity where teachers identified various disciplinary approaches that they use or can use divided into "in teacher control" and "out of teacher control." The purpose of the activity was to help teachers see that referrals resulting in exclusionary consequences, such as ISS and OSS, ultimately take addressing student behavior out of their control and generally have a negative impact on the student-to-teacher relationship.

During the training, teachers were asked to fill in the blanks for statements such as, "When a student can't read, we ___," and "When a student can't behave, we ___." I included this activity to illustrate that our approach with behavior is often not aligned with content instructional approaches; however, students do need to be taught school-appropriate behaviors rather than always being punished without a teaching component. We discussed the benefits of proactive approaches and positive relationships on student behavior. Then, I included two online videos of CBCs in practice. Finally, we engaged in a CBC and then took any teacher questions. Teachers were given a schedule of when other teachers implement CBCs, and I offered to cover Grade E teachers' classes so that they could visit a colleague to see CBCs in action. Two of the teachers were already implementing CBCs and were able to provide their personal experiences so far, as well as benefits and observations of their implementation. I provided CBC prompts and went into classrooms at teachers' requests to help implement the first round of CBCs. Even some of the teachers who were hesitant about how their students would respond to CBCs were positively surprised by how willing students were to participate.

As with any intervention, there were challenges and unexpected findings. In this study, those challenges were expressed by teachers in the following ways: teachers being hesitant to be vulnerable, teachers being concerned about what students could potentially share, students forming a group mentality that set students against the teacher, and the overuse or oversaturation of CBCs. The very teachers who explicitly expressed concerns about a hesitancy to be vulnerable and students becoming protective of classmates towards the teacher are the same teachers who often send students out of class, who write a high number of referrals, and who often have students and parents contact administration with teacher complaints. Additionally, these two teachers were both in the teachers with the most referrals for the year with one teacher writing the most referrals (79) and the other teacher being fourteenth for writing the most referrals (26). Both teachers regularly call for an administrator to remove students from their classrooms, and these students are often African American males. I appreciated their honesty in their responses during focus groups, and this indicates a need for additional support and coaching with these teachers with the implementation of CBCs and their approach with classroom management.

Process measures were used to monitor the effectiveness of the intervention during the implementation process. Semi-structured interviews and ELEOT observations served as process measures as CBCs were implemented. For this study, process measures included semi-structured interviews that were conducted in focus groups with each grade level of teachers. The semi-structured interviews were conducted during grade level meetings, and I used a protocol (Appendix B) to provide consistency among the different

focus groups. The protocol helped guide the interviews, but each focus group conversation went differently; therefore, my follow up questions varied somewhat to cater to the direction of each conversation. Grade level S and T focus groups were conducted earlier than the grade level E focus group, which allowed the insights shared from the earlier groups to be communicated to Grade E teachers as they were in the early implementation stage of CBCs.

CBCs Increased Student Empathy

Although there were similarities among the findings from the focus groups for each grade level, there were also differences in the experiences that teachers shared. One theme that emerged in all grade levels was the success of community building among students and teachers within classrooms as a result of CBC implementation. Teachers at all levels reported that CBCs fostered relationship building among students and between teachers and students. Another promising common theme was that teachers reported that the use of CBCs increased empathy and understanding within the classroom. During the focus group interviews, teachers repeatedly state that the students were much more empathetic to them and that CBCs helped students see teachers as humans, which led to a better relationship. Grade S teachers shared similar experiences about empathy and kindness through various stories. One teacher reported that students "do have empathy for each other…and they are kinder and more accepting of others that are different." A novice teacher shared "I appreciate…how gracious they can be…very accepting of my mistakes." Her experience was related to teaching the material for the first time and being honest with students after reflecting on lessons that did not go as well as planned. An

experienced teacher stated, "I think this group is the first group I've ever had that had this level of care for me." In telling a story about a personal situation she went through she said, "I've never had that level of empathy shown towards me. They usually do love me but not to the extent to which they do this year. I've never had that before." Grade T teachers spoke more about relationship building among students because of CBCs. One teacher shared that students began to "feel more comfortable sharing with each other, therefore feeling more comfortable sharing in class." This group of teachers were pleased to see that students became more tolerant and accepting of their peers, even those who might typically act out or be marginalized. Grade E teachers also reported that CBCs humanized teachers for students. One teacher said, "It's a good way to get to know your kids but also for them to get to know you. So, it helps with building relationships." The fact that teachers within and across grade levels reported similar success in building relationships and empathy shows that CBCs positively affect classroom dynamics and culture.

CBC Humanizes Students to Teachers

Another common theme among the focus groups was classroom dynamics and behavior; however, this conversation differed among the levels. Grade S teachers indicated that CBCs have helped with behavior and that they have witnessed students caring for each other and trying to lead their peers in a positive way. One teacher also reported seeing students remove themselves from drama or negative situations after having circle discussions about behavior. Grade T teachers shared different experiences with CBCs and their impact on behavior. Several teachers indicated that they were able to

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address common issues such as bullying and gossiping during CBC time, which has helped their students grow in those areas. One teacher spoke about one student who is a behavioral challenge and said that "he is surprisingly vulnerable with his answers…it's kind of given me an insight into him…if I did not have that insight, I think he would be a student that I can probably write up for something every single day. But because he's let me in a little bit, I realized that just getting to school is an incredible thing for him every day." This speaks positively to CBCs humanizing students for teachers, which in this case has resulted in the teacher trying to mentor the student, rather than writing referrals that will result in exclusionary consequences.

Challenges and Opportunities

In contrast to the positive results previously mentioned, there were also indications of challenges that teachers faced. One teacher shared that CBCs had a negative impact on his classroom. He observed that students were "forming a bond and they have formed a group mentality." He described the group as becoming "protective" of each other, particularly when he addresses behavior. This same teacher regularly writes referrals and sends students out of class. He also reported not wanting to be vulnerable with his students and struggles to share personal information during CBC time.

A Grade E teacher shared similar negative sentiments about behavior during CBC time and expressed that "I just had a lot of bad apples" and that "more of the disrespect has happened [by peers] towards kids that refuse to participate." This teacher is among the top number of referrals written. These negative reports indicate a need for further

training, modeling, and assistance with implementing CBCs. The Grade E teacher did attribute some of the issues to implementing CBCs mid-year and expressed hope that beginning at the start of the next school year had the potential for a more positive experience.

Process Measures

ELEOT observation data was also used as a process driver (Appendix D). Six indicators specific to a supportive learning environment and well-managed learning were identified for this study. Under the heading of supportive learning, the indicators included ratings for classroom observations that centered on positive sense of community, students taking risks, learners being supported by the teacher and their peers to understand content, and learners having a congenial and supportive relationship with the teacher. The indicators under well-managed learning focused on students speaking and interacting respectfully with the teacher and other students, as well as demonstrating knowledge of behavioral expectations and working well with others. The ELEOT requires the observer to rate each indicator from 1-4, with 1 being "Not Observed," 2 being "Somewhat Evident," 3 being "Evident," and 4 being "Very Evident." Scores for each indicator were analyzed by teacher, by quarters one, two, three, and four, and by grade level. Figures 9, 10, and 11 show the mean scores for all quarters by grade level for each indicator on the ELEOT. Since CMS has on average eight to eleven teachers per grade level, I randomly assigned grades a letter S, E, or T to anonymize the grade levels when I report the findings, so they are not easily identifiable. Grade level S shows higher mean scores than

the other two grade levels on the indicators relevant to congenial and supportive

relationships, learners speaking and interacting respectfully with the teacher and peers,

and a sense of community that is positive. Interestingly, grade S is in the second year of

implementing CBCs.

Figure 9

Mean ELEOT Scores for Grade E

Figure 10

Mean ELEOT Scores for Grade S
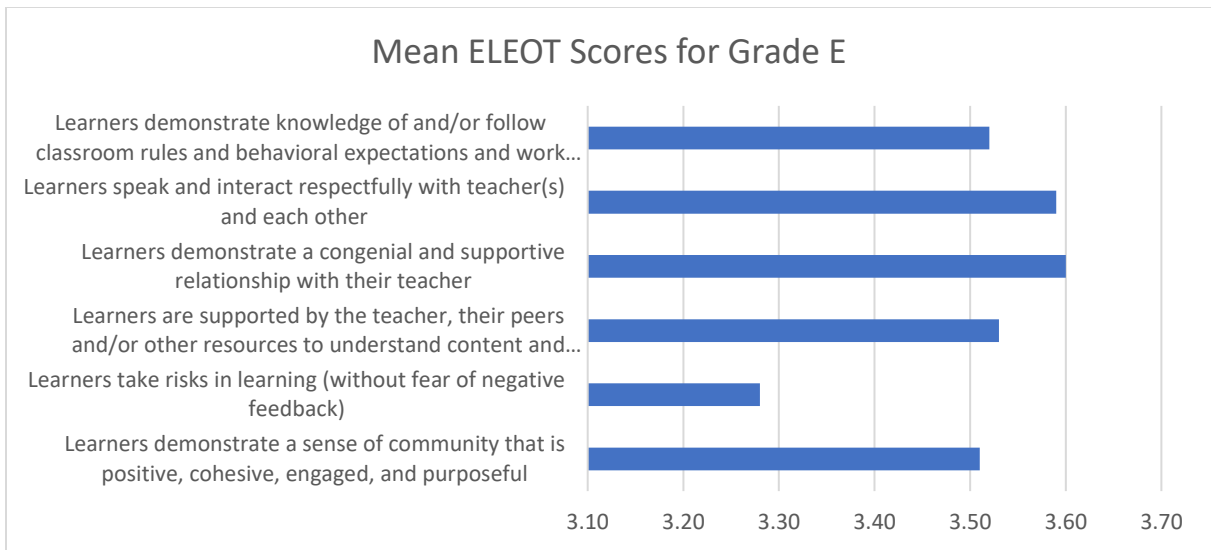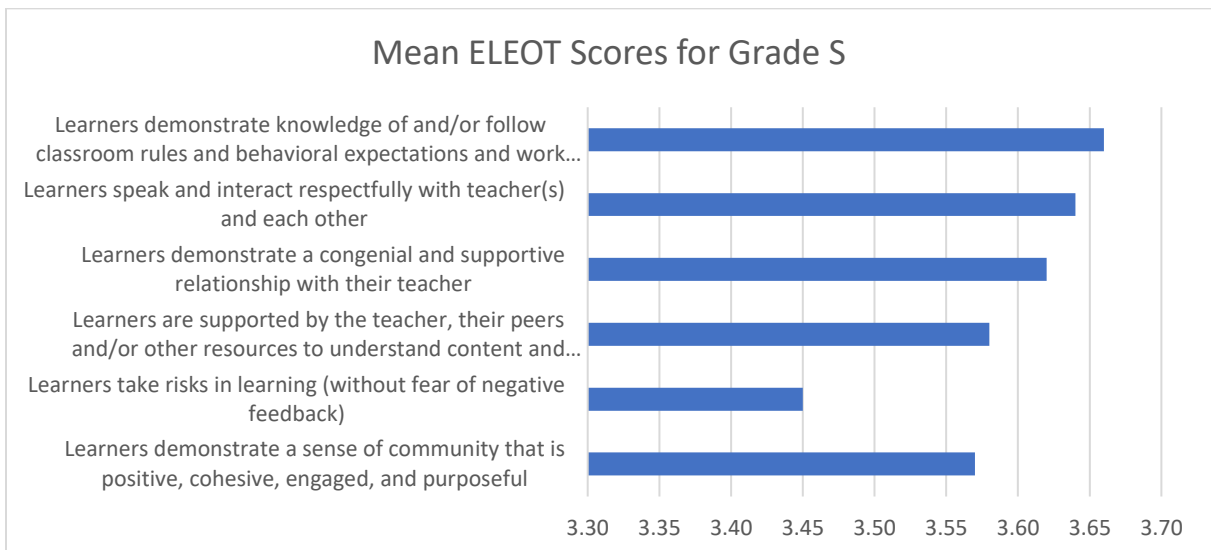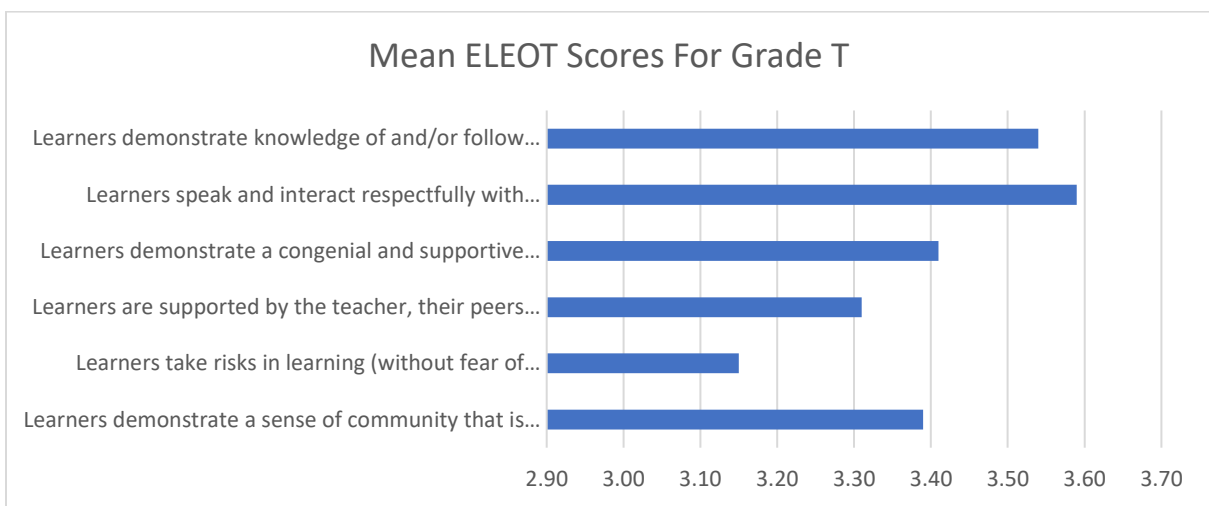
Figure 11

Figures 12, 13, and 14 show the overall ELEOT mean scores by teacher by quarter for the different grade levels. Figure 12 shows Grade E teacher mean scores on the ELEOT by quarter. CBCs were introduced to this grade level approximately halfway into the third quarter. Teachers who do not have a quarter four mean score were not observed during that quarter when the data was collected. In looking at quarter three and four mean scores, there are teachers whose mean scores dropped and teachers who showed an increase in their mean scores. Teachers 309 and 331 both showed a decrease in mean scores for quarter three, and both of these teachers did not share during the focus group. However, on the CBC self-check, teacher 309 reported that students seemed to get

along better after participating in CBCs. Teacher 331 reported that she mostly used CBCs in her first period class but that she often did not in her other classes because she did not feel that she had time. Teacher 325 showed an increase in mean scores during quarters three and four. This teacher had positive feedback about implementing CBCs. On the CBC self-check, teacher 325 reported that:

> The kids love doing the CBC's. They always ask to do them and a lot of them love sharing, talking, and laughing together. Even the ones that don't typically share seem to enjoy being in the circle and listening to their classmates. It has been a positive addition to my class.

This teacher's referrals dropped from fifty-eight in quarter three to six during about halfway through quarter four when discipline data was collected. Grade levels S and T were both implementing CBCs since the beginning of the school year and seem to have maintained more consistent mean scores over the course of the year.

Figure 12

Figure 13

ELEOT Mean Grade S

Figure 14

ELEOT Mean Grade T
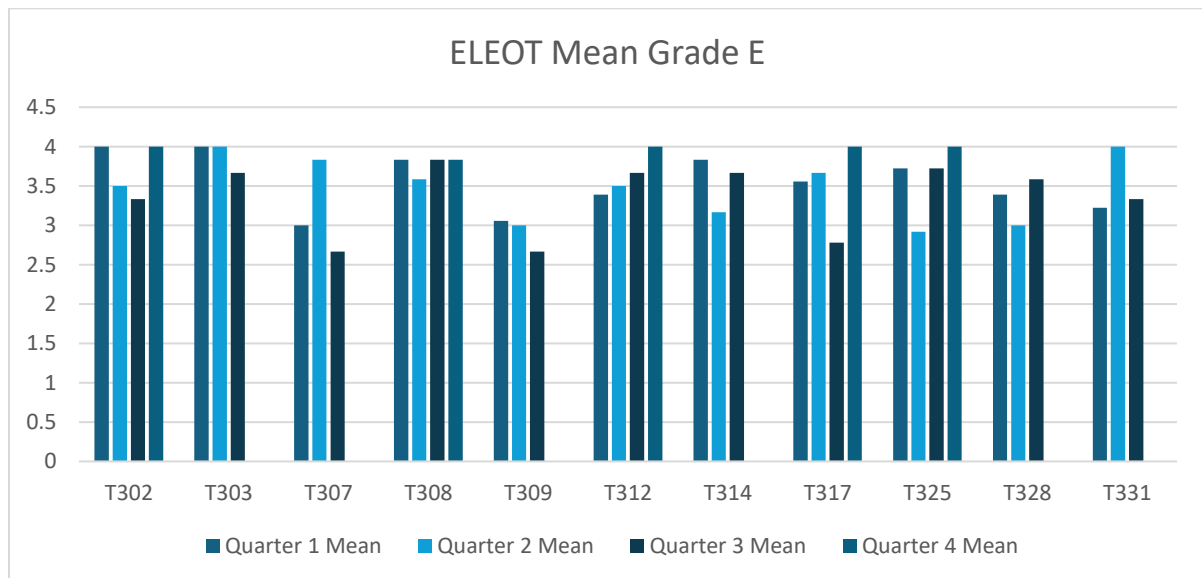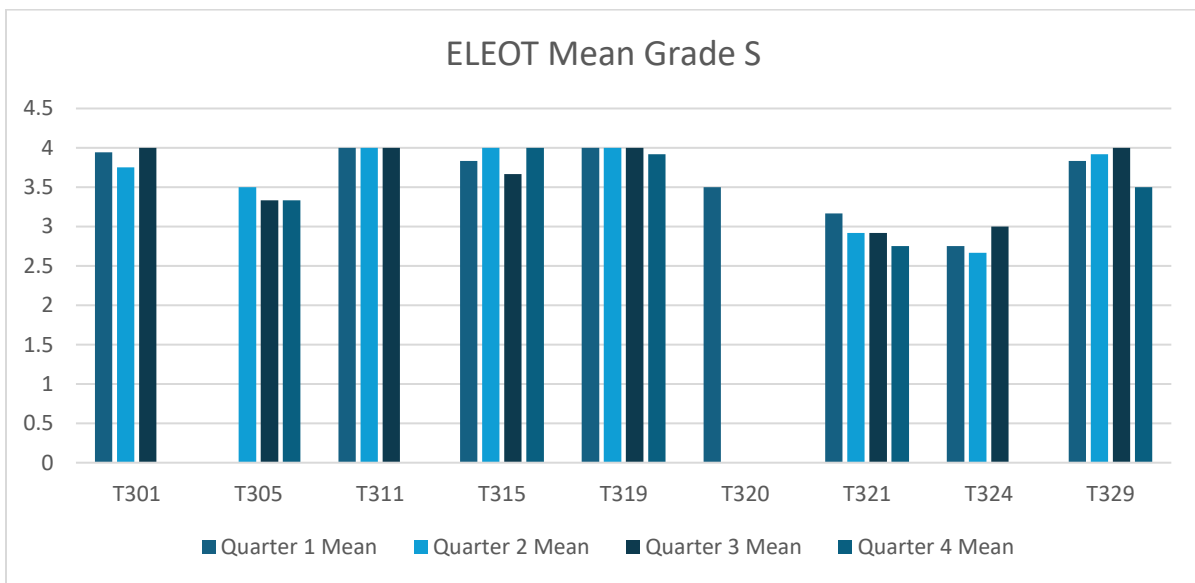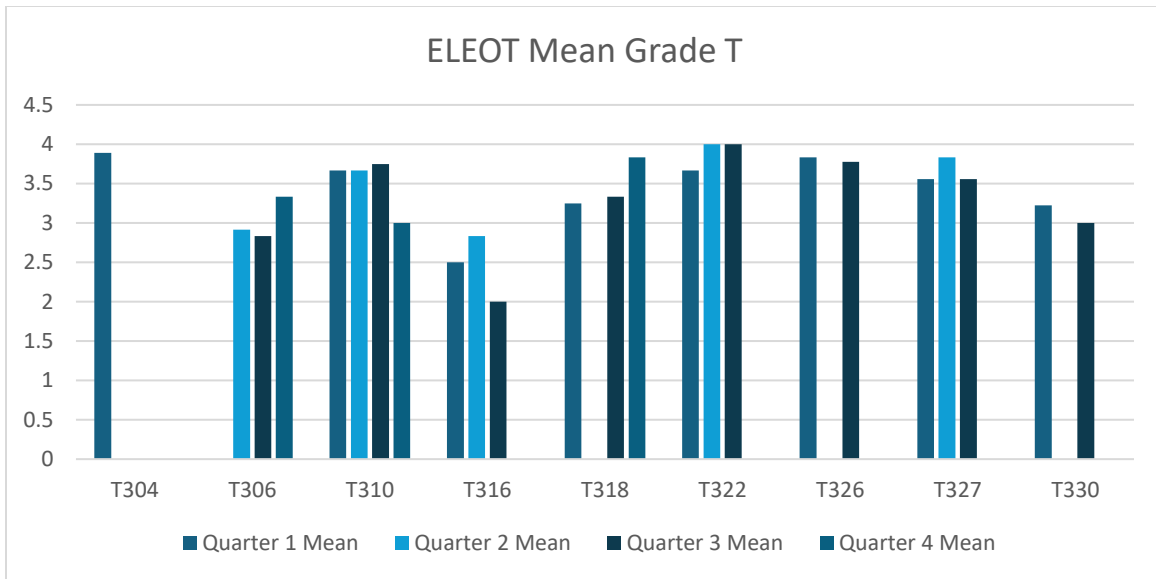
Overall, CBC implementation was a success at CMS. The majority of teachers reported positive results and outcomes in their classrooms. Teachers reported an increase in empathy, understanding, humanizing each other, and building relationships. Grade E teachers expressed a hope that their CBCs will be more effective next year when they begin from the first day of school and when they have students who have participated in CBCs previously. Teachers were reflective about moving forward and identified changes they would make including being more intentional with planning for CBCs; tying the CBC topics to current events; classroom issues, and content; providing a journal option for responding for students who regularly choose to not share; navigating when a CBC is not as effective due to the group, the mood of the class, or the topic; and staying consistent with implementation. Teachers being reflective about the process and making plans to modify their CBC implementation is an indicator of success because it shows that teachers value the process and want to make changes for even more success.

Several unexpected issues or challenges emerged during the focus groups. One concern was oversaturation or overuse of CBCs. For Grades E and T, students go to four different core teachers, which could lead to an oversaturation of CBC times. To negate this effect, teachers at those grade levels must determine how to best implement CBCs in all core classes without overusing them. During this year's implementation, teachers began to develop a schedule where each teacher was only implementing CBCs once or twice a week and tried to have different content teachers implement them on different days.

Another unexpected revelation was teachers' own issues with being vulnerable with their students. While only two teachers shared this dilemma, there may be other teachers who chose not to share their personal struggles with talking about personal things with students. This indicates that the leadership team needs to intentionally implement more CBCs and trust-building activities among faculty members to model vulnerability. The leadership team can also continue to support teachers who struggle with CBCs by visiting classrooms to model personal sharing, as well as by providing coverage for teachers to continue visiting classrooms where CBCs are effective. Seeing the potential can motivate those teachers who have not seen the benefits of CBCs to push through the process even when it is uncomfortable.

Another unexpected challenge was that some teachers had behavioral issues during CBCs or did not have positive experiences with the implementation. The four teachers who shared the most negative experiences are also all in the list of teachers who write the most referrals. Two of these teachers are ranked number one and two with

eighty-one and seventy-six referrals, respectively. Additionally, there were four teachers who did not share much or at all during focus groups. I noticed that three of those teachers are also ranked as having the most referrals for the school year. It is important to note that while there was an increase in referrals for these teachers during the third quarter, overall they have all shown a decrease in referrals for the fourth quarter. The link between challenges implementing CBCs and high numbers of referrals indicate the need for the leadership team to research and provide these teachers with interventions that can help with both discipline issues, as well as CBC implementation.

Driver Measures

In addition to discipline data, a Teacher Beliefs Classroom Management Survey (Appendix C) was given as a driver measure. Teachers took this survey twice. Grade S and T teachers completed the survey in August of 2023 and again in April of 2024. Grade E teachers completed the survey in February of 2024 and again in April of 2024. Completion of the survey was optional, and no names or emails were collected. I only analyzed complete data, which meant that I only included respondents who completed both the pre and post surveys. I was able to determine completion of both surveys and pair the pre and post surveys by teacher by using other reported information, such as grade level, years of experience, gender, and level of education. Twelve surveys were not used because there was not a post survey completed, and three surveys were not included because the teacher completed the post survey but not the pre survey. This resulted in

sixteen respondents who had completed both the pre and post surveys. To protect

confidentiality, grade levels were randomly assigned the letters of L, T, and E.

Respondent percentages by grade level were the following: 31% for grade-level L, 31%

for grade-level T, and 38% for grade-level E. Figures 15, 16, and 17 show the

demographic data for survey respondents.

Figure 15

Figure 16

Percentage of Respondents by Years of Experience

■ 1-5 years ■ 6-12 years ■ 13-18 years ■ 19 years & above

Figure 17

Percentage of Respondents by Level of Education

■ Bachelors ■ Masters ■ Masters +30
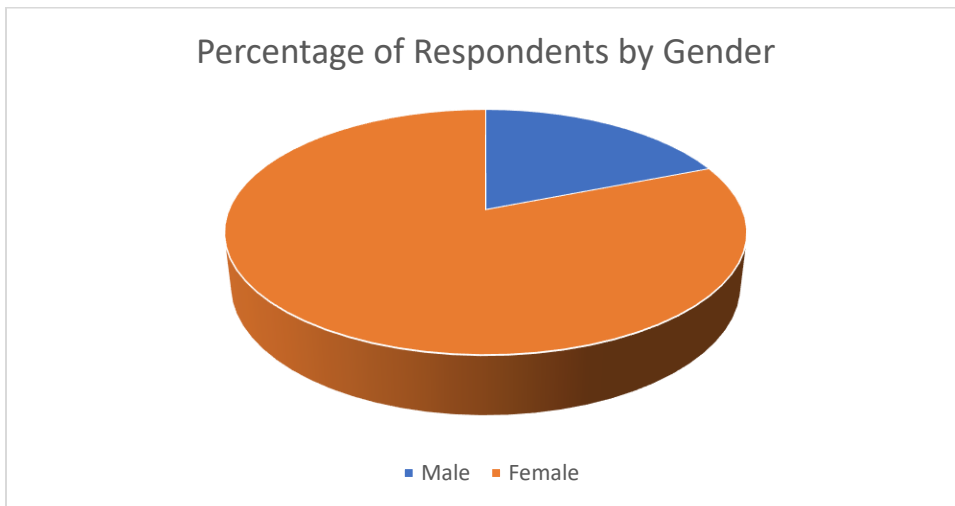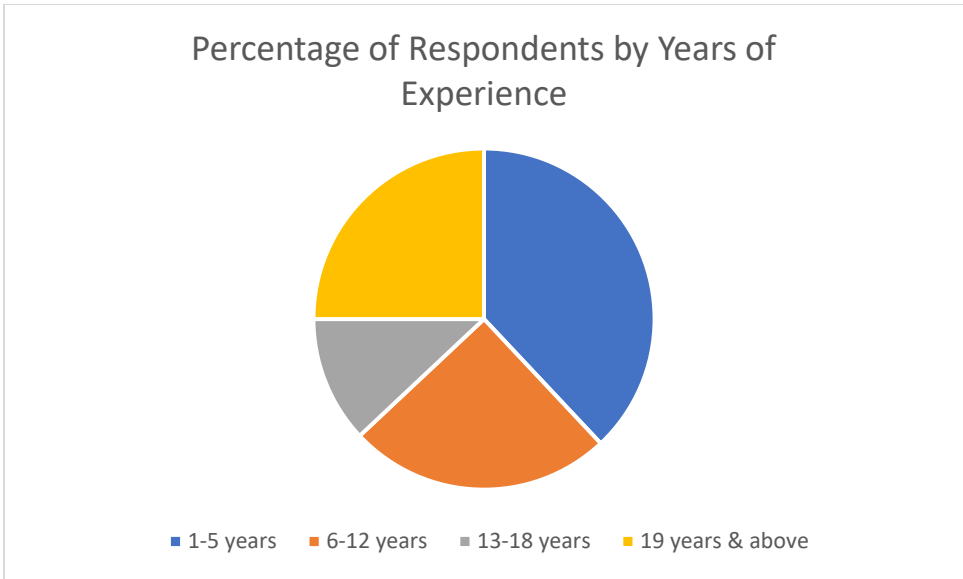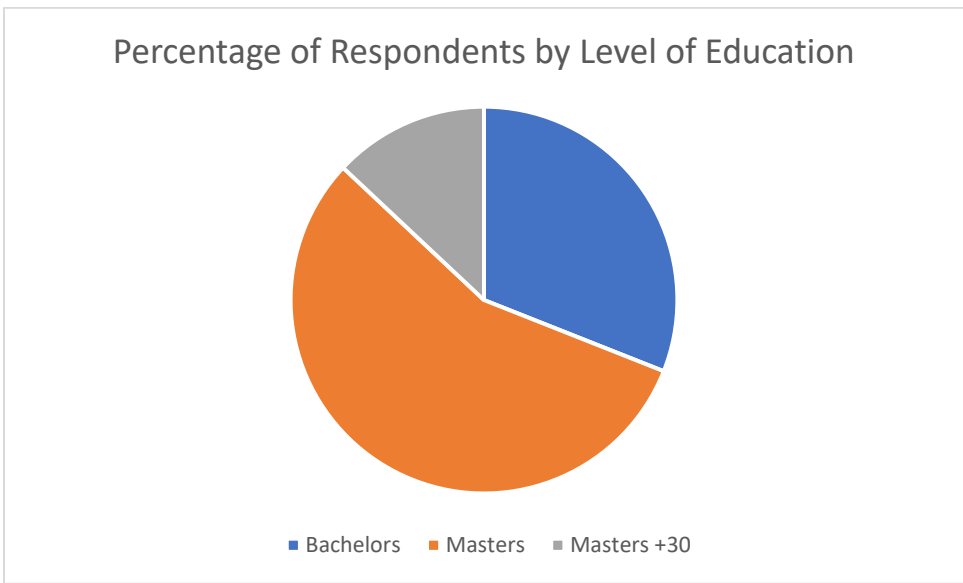
On the survey, two open-ended questions were asked that included, "What are some effective strategies that you implement for positive classroom management and environment?" and "Is there anything else that you would like to include about your teaching style in relation to classroom management and environment?" Common themes that arose in these responses were the need for clear expectations and consistency, respectful dialogue and relationships, utilizing reward systems and positive reinforcements, community building activities, communication with parents, modeling expected behaviors, consistent expectations, progressive and individualized discipline approaches, and student voice and choice. Promising teacher responses were "I am of the belief that if a teacher builds relationships with students and creates a calm and respectful culture there is nothing that those students can't learn," "Just remember we are all human. We get upset at times too. If you are wrong, admit you are wrong and apologize," and "I try not to write referrals unless I have to. I do not want students outside of the classroom and getting in trouble outside of the school building." These were among other positive approaches that teachers reported.

The Teacher Beliefs Classroom Management survey did not show a significant overall increase for grade level E teachers when comparing pre- and post-intervention survey mean scores as shown in Figure 18. However, when asked "How well can you respond to a defiant student," the pre- and post- scores showed an increase in teacher efficacy as show in Figure 19. The results from this survey suggest that teachers report knowing how to effectively manage the classroom. While there was not an observed significant increase in teacher self-scores on the various questions, teachers did report a

slight increase in handling students viewed as defiant between their pre-intervention and

post-intervention responses.

Figure 18

Grade E Pre and Post Survey Mean Scores

Figure 19

How well can you respond to defiant students?
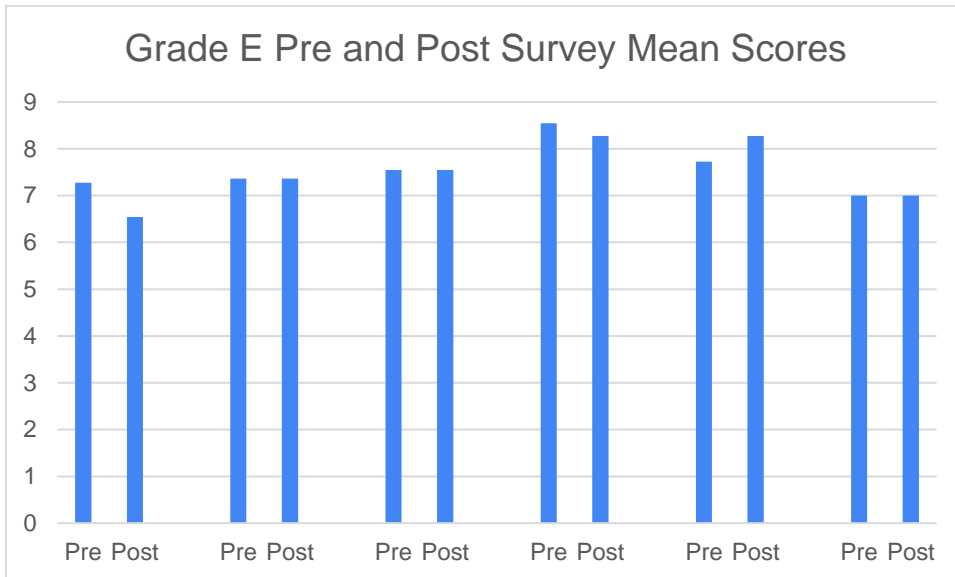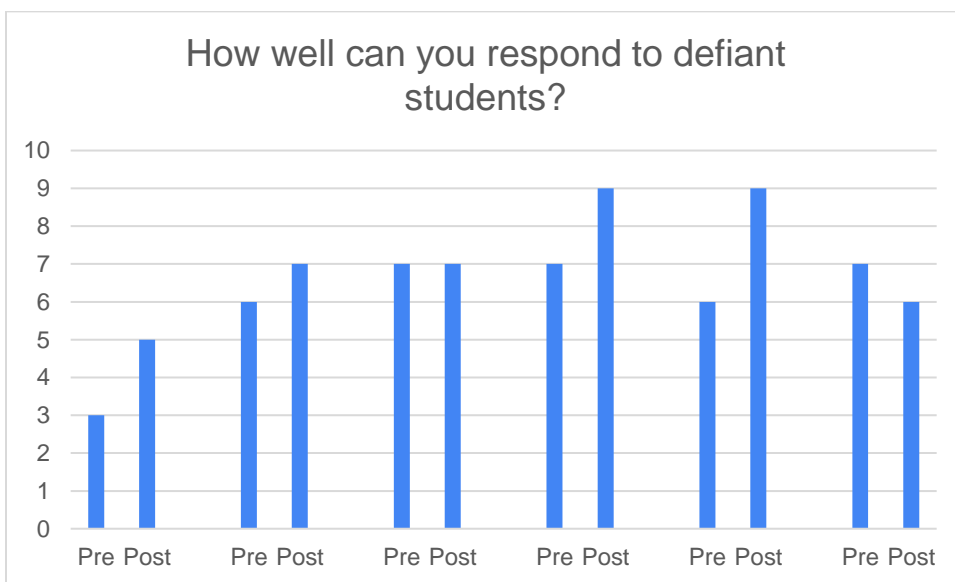
Balancing Measures

Balancing measures are used in improvement science to monitor the effectiveness of the intervention and to ensure that the intervention is not having unintended or negative effects. For this study, balancing measures included semi-structured interviews with grade levels, Simplidiscipline data, and teacher CBC self-checks. The results of the semi-structured interviews were discussed in-depth earlier because the interviews were also used as a process measure. Those results showed that overall teachers had positive experiences with the intervention and reported increased relationship building among students, as well as between teachers and students. As a balancing measure, the semi-structured interviews did reveal challenges and unintended consequences in the form of teacher struggles to be vulnerable, finding the time to implement CBCs, and behavioral issues during CBC time.

The teacher CBC self-checks (Appendix A) were completed by twenty-four teachers with 17% of respondents being Grade S teachers, 41 % of respondents being Grade T teachers, and 42% of respondents being Grade E teachers. When asked about the frequency of CBC implementation, 58% of teachers said that they do CBCs one to two times per week, 21% said three times a week, and 21% said daily. Some of these variations are due to scheduling differences among the grades. For example, Grade S students have two core teachers, whereas Grade T and E students report to four core teachers. If all four core teachers implemented CBCs daily, there was the potential for overuse, which was a topic that emerged on other measures. The CBC self-check asked teachers about their implementation of an introduction of the topic and a conclusion to

CBCs. Only two teachers reported not introducing topics well, and six teachers reported

not providing a closing or summary to conclude CBC time. When asked about

participation, most teachers reported that most students participated in CBCs, and only

two teachers reported half of students participating. These two teachers also discussed

issues with successful CBC implementation in their classroom and blamed that on student

dynamics. The self-check asked teachers to choose the types of topics that they included

during CBCs. Eleven respondents only chose "community building" from the list

provided, but thirteen respondents chose multiple topics. These topics included

"connecting to content," "social-emotional strategies," "conflict resolution," and

"discussion about behavior or procedural issues happening in the classroom." Teachers

were also provided an opportunity to report their specific topics used during CBCs, and

teachers reported topics such as "What did you do over holiday, break, etc.," "Debrief of

projects," "Interests and problems they see in the world, favorite things (childhood toy,

TV show), and their strengths," "This or that topics," "Favorite place to eat, favorite

sports team, favorite movie," and "Talking about procedures (why no cell phones)."

These responses show the wide range of topics, as well as the range of depth that teachers

ask students to share during CBCs.

Additionally, the self-check asked teachers to reflect on CBCS and to include

challenges, celebrations, observations, questions, etc. Teachers were also asked what

impact, if any, have CBCs had on behavior, referrals, and/or relationship-building in the

classroom. Common themes within the CBC self-check included a positive impact on

relationships and behavior. One teacher wrote that "CBCs have decreased overall

behavior issues in my classroom. They give students an opportunity to move and to speak every day in class." Multiple teachers reported that students ask to do CBCs and one comment said, "CBCs usually make the class time pass by quicker and smoother. When class started with a community circle, students loosen up and get ready to learn." Several respondents mentioned that CBCs have led to increased student engagement and participation among students during CBC time, as well as during instructional time. These observations indicate that CBCs help students feel connected and that they look forward to having a voice and listening to their peers.

On the CBC self-checks, there were different findings among teachers. Despite the overall positive impact that teachers reported, there were some teachers who found challenges with getting students to participate. While the option to not participate is explicitly a part of the CBC process and respect agreement, some teachers viewed nonparticipation as a negative outcome and reported that nonparticipation led to frustration or tension among classmates and teachers. This finding was a surprise and is worth considering in terms of helping teachers and students understand that nonparticipation is the right of each student and should be honored, rather than addressed or viewed negatively. Trust is built through voluntary involvement, not through forced participation.

Another finding from the CBC self-check was the varied levels of seriousness that students demonstrated during CBCs. Teachers reported that some classes or take CBCs seriously and benefit from them, while other classes or students may make jokes or say inappropriate things during the circles. This is an area that needs to be researched further

to provide teacher and student support. However, the reality is that middle school students may be developmentally immature and that has the potential to show during CBC time, especially if the topic is sensitive or serious and causes discomfort to students who are not ready to be vulnerable in front of their peers. Finally, a common theme from many teacher responses was the challenge of taking the time to implement CBCs in their class time, particularly with "tight schedules" and the pressure to cover required curriculum before state testing. These comments, which were also echoed in the focus group interviews, show that teachers want to promote student growth and well-being through CBCs, but that the attention and pressure on achievement data at the federal, state, district, and school levels creates a challenge for teachers to give up instructional time for their content.

Outcome Measures

The outcome measure for this study was discipline data because the ultimate goal was to decrease the number of referrals resulting in exclusionary discipline practices, particularly for African American males who have historically received a disproportionate number of referrals at CMS. This trend is also seen at the national level. The numbers in the figures below were assigned to teachers to provide anonymity. Simplidiscipline data by teacher and by student demographics showed that only four of the eleven Grade E teachers' referrals dropped during quarter three. This is significant with school-wide referrals which indicated much higher numbers of quarter three referrals. However, quarter four referrals dropped significantly for Grade E. This data was collected about halfway through quarter four, but the number of referrals is still

much lower. Grade E shows a decline in referrals written in quarter four compared to the previous three quarters. This is promising given that this grade level of teachers began implementing CBCs about halfway through quarter three. The teachers who wrote the highest number of referrals in quarter three were also the teachers who either shared some struggles with CBC implementation or who did not readily share anything during the focus group conversation. Grade S's data shows that overall, these teachers wrote fewer referrals over the course of the entire year. This was the second year that these teachers have implemented CBCs. It is interesting to note that in Figure 21, teachers 321 and 324 reported not regularly implementing CBCs, and teacher 329 was a first-year teacher who reflected on CBCs and said that she needed to be more intentional with CBC implementation. Grade T data shows fewer referrals throughout the year than Grade E. This was Grade T's first year of CBC implementation, and they began CBCs at the beginning of the year as opposed to Grade E beginning mid-year. The outlier for Grade T, teacher 306, was honest during the focus group conversation and shared that he was not comfortable with being vulnerable and sharing personal information with his students; therefore, he did not regularly implement CBCs. Figure 23 indicates that Grade E showed an increase in overall referrals for African American males for quarter four; however, there was a decrease in school-wide referrals for this group of students. Figure 24 shows that over the course of the year, the discrepancy between referrals for African American versus White students decreased. The outcome measure of discipline referrals overall indicates that positive, intentional, and routine implementation of CBCs may play a role in decreasing discipline referrals school wide.

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Figure 20

Grade E Discipline Referrals by Quarter

Figure 21

Grade Level S Discipline Referrals by Quarter

Figure 22

Grade Level T Discipline Referrals by Quarter

Figure 23

African American Male Discipline

Figure 24

School-wide Discipline Data by Quarter and Subgroup
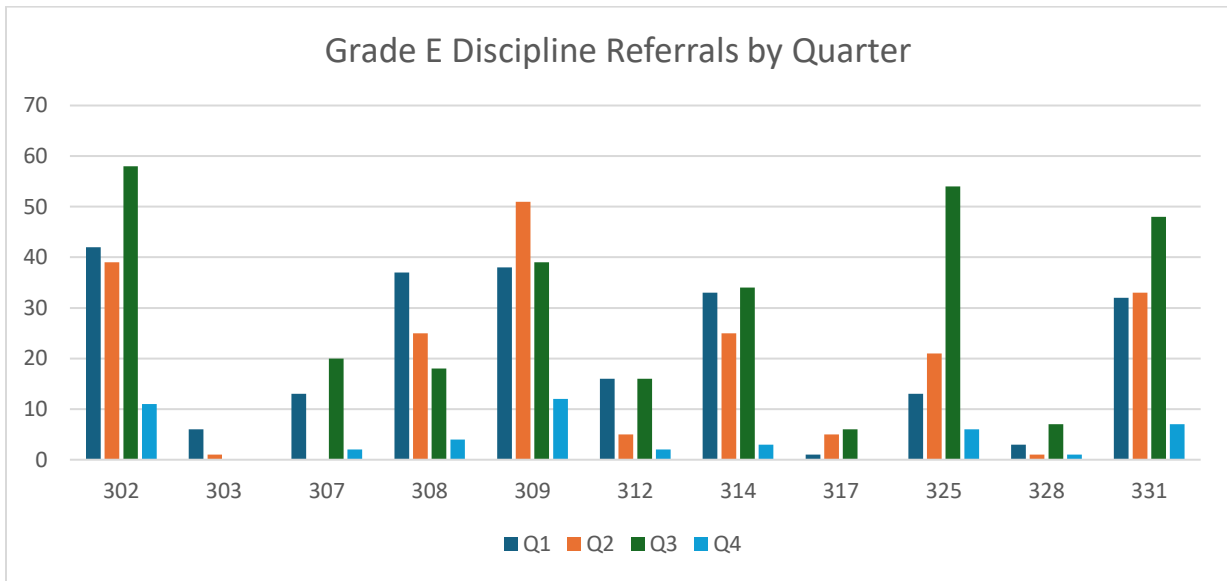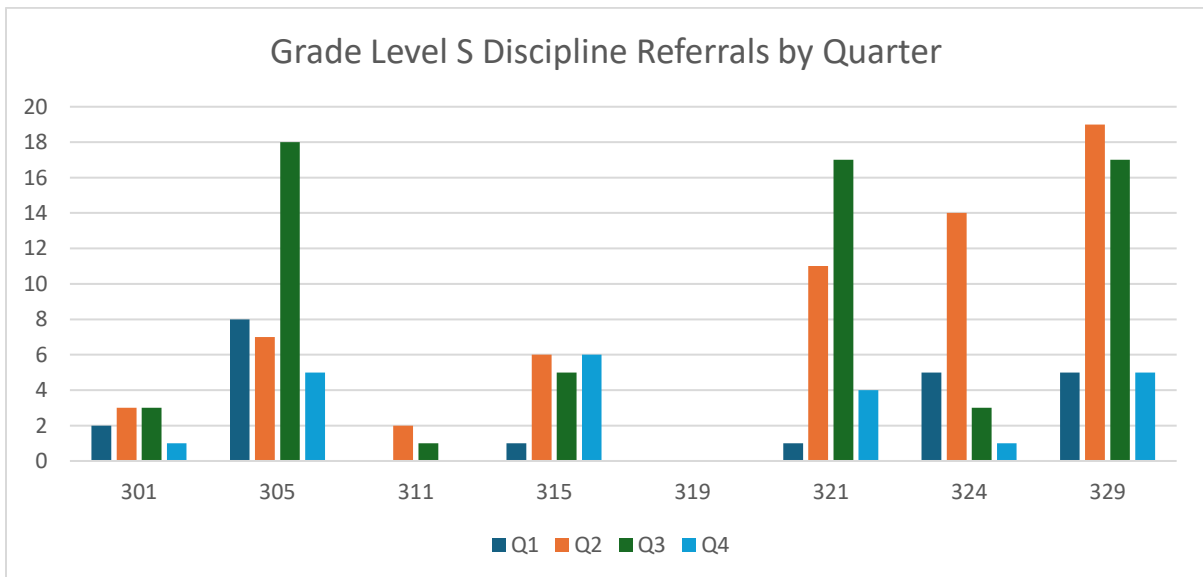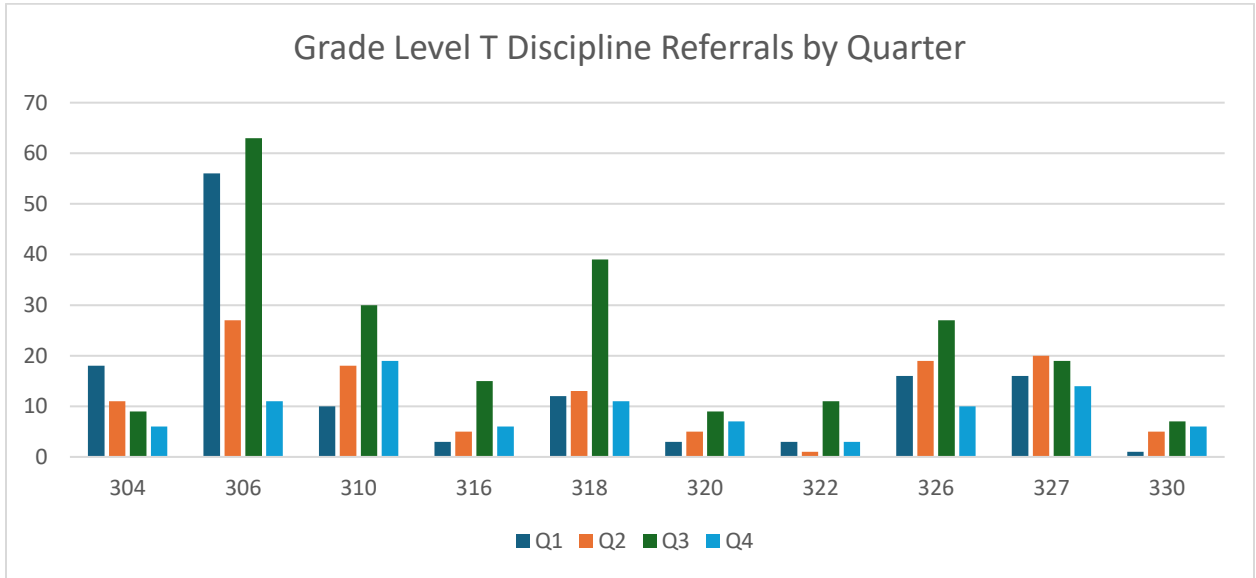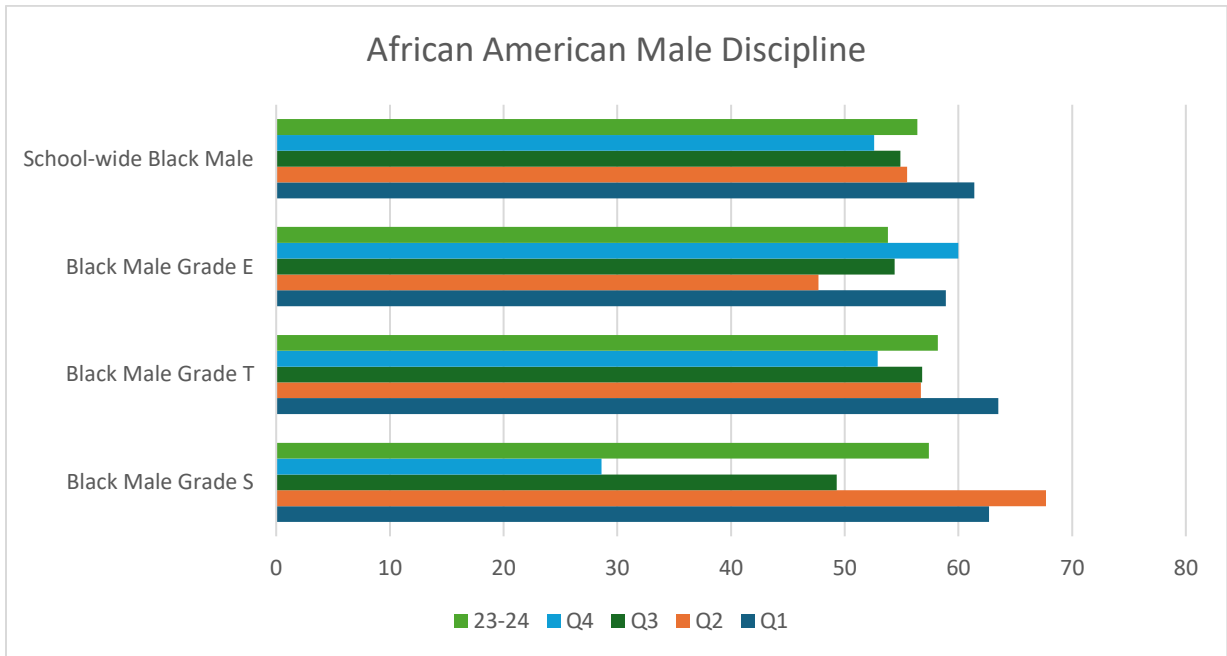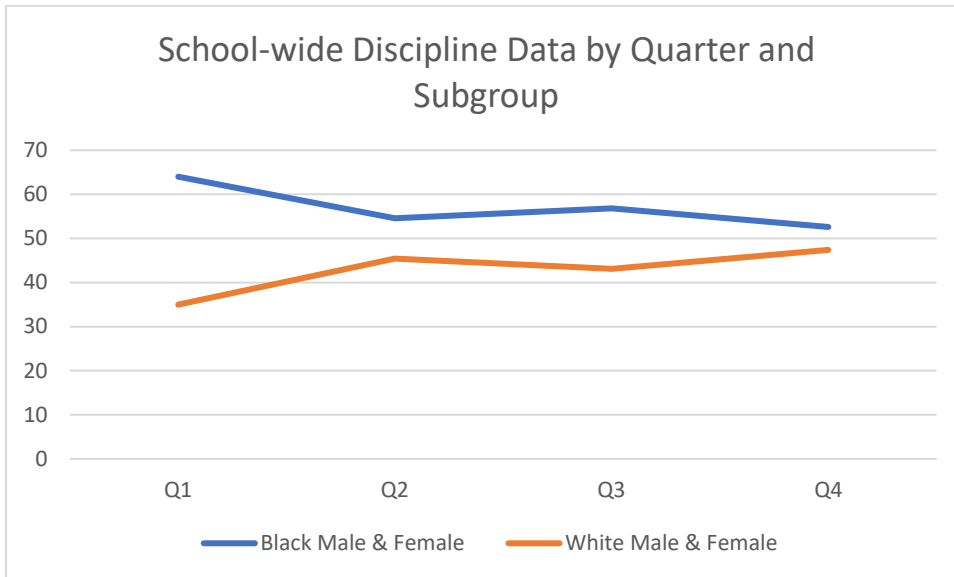
Theory of Improvement Reflection

Overall, I would say that this collaboratively developed theory of improvement played out well when put into practice. Most teachers reported positively about the implementation of CBCs regarding building community, building trust, building empathy, increasing positive relationships, increased knowledge about students and teachers, and student requests to regularly conduct CBCs. One of the biggest challenges for implementation with Grade E was the timing. There was not as much resistance against beginning implementation mid-year as I had anticipated. I think this was largely due to two factors—teachers' trust in administration in asking teachers to begin implementation and positive reports from their peers who were already implementing CBCs. However, since CBCs were implemented during the second semester rather than

at the beginning of the year, teacher feedback during focus groups and on the CBC self-

check indicated that some Grade E grade classroom dynamics had already been created

that caused obstacles in students being as open to participating in CBCs. Fortunately,

these teachers seemed optimistic that CBC implementation would be more smooth next

year. Additionally, Grade E teachers acknowledge that their current students had not

previously been introduced to CBCs, and the teachers were optimistic that the rising

Grade E students would be more open to CBC discussions due to their prior experiences

as Grade T students. The positives of Grade E teachers beginning implementation mid-

year were that the teachers will have a foundation facilitating CBCs next year.

The drivers identified for this study were building teacher competency, particularly in the areas of building positive relationships using CBCs. The professional development provided the training needed for most teachers to successfully implement CBCs. The fourth driver of professional development was successful related to CBCs, but there is still a need for further professional development and support in the areas of more restorative practice approaches, proactive classroom management, and cultural competency. The feedback and lessons learned during this study can inform how to sequence, present, and measure the outcomes of future professional development. The intended change ideas for this study included cultural competency, creating a culture of trust and growth, and students' social-emotional development. The results from the various measures in this study indicate that there was improvement in those areas. When teachers reported getting to know and understand students better, that is a step towards building better cultural competency. Through CBCs, teachers learned student preferences, opinions, thoughts, and obstacles. Teachers repeatedly highlighted the benefits of increased community, empathy, and trust because of CBCs, which all contribute to a class-level and school-level culture of trust and growth. The final change concept was social-emotional development, which was increased by students having a voice and feeling comfortable sharing with their teachers and peers. While this study did not include a student measure on social-emotional development, I would infer that those results would have shown an increase based on the observations that teachers shared.*Limitations and Lessons Learned*

Improvement science utilizes the PDSA cycle to monitor the effectiveness of an

intervention. With the implementation of an intervention, there are likely to be limitations

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and lessons learned throughout the PDSA cycle. During this study, there were unexpected outcomes, challenges, and lessons learned. One unexpected outcome was having two teachers share their own discomfort with being vulnerable and sharing personal information with their students. I naively assumed that all teachers were confident and comfortable sharing their personal experiences and preferences with students. I did not consider that teachers also bring their unique personalities, fears, and issues to the classroom environment. While I appreciate the difference among teachers and their varied backgrounds, it did not occur to me that this could impede some teachers from confidently or successfully implementing CBCs in the classroom. To build positive relationships in the classroom, teachers need a certain level of comfort, well-being, and standard of self-efficacy as an educator. This is an area for future consideration and research.

Another unexpected challenging outcome was that certain classes seemed to form a group mentality against the teacher as they created stronger bonds throughout the year and with the implementation of CBCs. Interestingly, the teacher who reported this outcome was one of the teachers who shared that he was not comfortable with sharing during CBC time. It seems that the students were aware of the teacher's unwillingness to be open, so their sense of community and relationship-building excluded the teacher and created a divide. While this is not surprising in hindsight, it was not a foreseeable outcome. Knowing this dynamic, it will be important to support this teacher in implementing CBCs at the start of next school year to provide feedback and coaching for a more successful implementation. In contrast, another teacher reported that she was

willing to share during CBC time but that her students got frustrated with peers who would not share. The teacher also shared her frustration with students who did not share and reported that the CBC time created tension in her classroom. She also shared that "this year's students have not gotten on board with me like students in past years." This shared experience combined with the fact that she writes a high number of referrals highlights the importance of a positive classroom environment. For this teacher, it is important to talk through the core components of CBCs to ensure that she appreciates the necessity for student choice in CBC participation. Since this teacher did not begin CBCs until the spring when her classroom culture had already been established, it will be interesting to see if there is a difference when she implements CBCs from the start of the school year. The desired outcome would be for the classroom culture to be positively established from the beginning with CBCs playing a crucial role in that.

A final challenge that teachers reported was the time allotted to CBCs and the loss of instructional time. This is a valid concern, but I also think about the importance of student well-being and voice as discussed by researchers such as Leren (2006). The balance of academic time and relationship-building time is an important factor to consider. My observational data indicates that teachers who regularly implement CBCs and have positive classroom cultures can demonstrate student growth and increased achievement according to standardized testing. The use of teacher voice to share their CBC implementation success paired with student achievement data can help overcome the concern about a loss of instructional time.

These challenges, unexpected outcomes, and resulting lessons learned contribute to the broader understanding of improvement science. The measures used throughout this improvement science study allowed the improvement team to "see[] interrelationships and [] processes" (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 97). By including various measures, the improvement team was able to document the unexpected outcomes and how they were affected by different factors, including teacher and student interactions. The ability to observe the interconnectedness of the CBC process and the outcomes continues to drive the PDSA cycle so that additional components and considerations become a valuable tool in the next phase of planning and implementation. Other studies designed to implement CBCs in a school setting can learn lessons from this study.

Spreading Changes/Next Cycle

Based on the findings from this study, our team will continue to expect CBC implementation in all core classes for all grade levels. Some activity teachers began implementing CBCs without it being an expectation, but next year they will receive more training and be expected to implement the intervention. Additionally, Grade E and T teachers will be formally trained on Respect Agreements, which is another component of restorative practices. Respect Agreements provide a community-based approach to setting classroom expectations and uses students' voices and input to create the expectations. It also encourages conversation among students and teachers to say, "When people _____, it makes me feel _____." These statements are another way to form community and understanding to foster positive relationships. Respect Agreements and CBCs will be implemented from the beginning of the school year, which has the potential

to make the intervention more effective, particularly for Grade E teachers. It is important to provide intentional training and support for teachers who are new to CMS next year, rather than expecting them to implement CBCs with a shortened or condensed training.

During focus groups teachers asked that administrators join CBCs more often and that we encourage student leadership by having students from across grade levels visit other classrooms to lead a CBC. This student-centered approach could be a resource for teachers who struggle with facilitating CBCs. This approach has the potential to inadvertently impact the student-teacher relationship because at least the students sharing may humanize them more for the teachers. It is imperative moving forward that the leadership team continue to provide support for CBC implementation by sharing various topics with teachers and by providing release time for teachers to observe their peers. Rather than relying on teachers to request coverage and set up a time to observe their peers, the leadership team should intentionally plan for these opportunities to take the responsibility from teachers who are already busy. Finally, further research needs to be conducted to provide professional development for teachers in classroom management. The leadership team plans to differentiate professional development next year for teachers using *Get Better, Faster* (find name and check title) approach. One tier of teacher support and coaching focuses on classroom management, so we will be able to help teachers who struggle with discipline issues that also affect CBC implementation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the leadership team at CMS used the PDSA cycle and expanded the CBC intervention to Grade E and T teachers after analyzing discipline data and after

seeing success with teachers who were already implementing CBCs. Teachers completed a pre- survey on classroom management self-efficacy as part of the Plan phase, as well. CBC training was provided during the Do phase and teachers were offered various forms of support including topics for discussion and opportunities to visit other classrooms to observe CBC implementation. The Study phase included data analysis using multiple data sources including semi-structured interviews, teacher surveys, discipline data, and observational data. These measures helped identify where teachers were having issues, such as being vulnerable, handling behavioral issues during CBCs, and ensuring that the intervention was not being overused. The Act part of the PDSA cycle allowed the leadership team and teachers to reflect on successes, challenges, and modifications associated with CBCs to cycle back to the Plan stage. Additionally, the Act phase consisted of sharing the findings of this improvement science approach through outlets such as this dissertation. The power of the PDSA cycle is that it encourages ongoing analysis of the problem of practice and the effectiveness of the intervention to determine if the intervention had the intended effects, if the intervention should be modified, if the intervention should be continued or abandoned, and how to best move forward. An important part of improvement science is sharing the findings and implications of the study to add to future research, practice, and policy. Chapter 4 will provide a reflection about the improvement science process, revisit the theory of improvement, reflect on the aim, discuss the implications of the findings, explore the contributions that the study can provide to research and practice, and provide recommendations for practice and policy as related to CBC benefits and considerations.

CHAPTER FOUR

DISCUSSION

The problem of practice at CMS was that African American males were receiving a disproportionate number of discipline referrals that resulted in exclusionary disciplinary consequences. There was a need to determine what factors were contributing to the disproportionate number of referrals and to identify an intervention to address the problem of practice using improvement science and the PDSA cycle. This chapter will provide a reflection on the improvement science process, revisit the theory of improvement, reflect on the aim, discuss the implications of the findings, highlight the contributions of this study to research and practice, provide recommendations for practice, and policy, and share concluding remarks about the study.*Reflection on the Improvement Science Process*

This research journey began with me identifying a problem of practice at CMS, creating a fishbone diagram to identify root causes for the problem, completing a driver diagram to identify possible change agents, and choosing an intervention to implement. I had participated in restorative practices training and believed that there were many positive components of the approach and outcomes that could occur from using restorative practices. For the problem of practice of disproportionate discipline referrals resulting in exclusionary consequences for African American males, I looked to research that highlighted the role that positive teacher-student relationships and positive classroom

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cultures plays in discipline. My role as an administrator who handles discipline puts me in a unique role with the problem of practice because I am often dealing with negative teacher-student interactions after the situation has occurred. While research shows that exclusionary practices do not change student behavior and have negative effects on students (NASP, 2018), I also know that teachers must feel supported by administration and that classrooms need to be spaces that allow for an instructional focus (Moore et al., 2022). Therefore, the improvement team and I chose to implement CBCs as a proactive approach to building positive relationships and decreasing discipline referrals. Throughout the research journey, there were key moments, challenges, and insights.

Some of the highlights in this process were when teachers shared their success stories about implementing CBCs. These positive experiences were repeatedly shared during focus group interviews and on the CBC self-checks. Teachers shared that students enjoyed CBCs and looked forward to participating in them. Various teachers also shared how CBCs had allowed them to get to know more about their students and some of the challenges that students face at home. Another theme that repeatedly appeared was how CBCs helped to develop empathy in the classroom among teachers and students. Finally, it was rewarding to see teachers encourage their peers to implement CBCs by sharing the positive effects that they had witnessed because of CBCs. These were all desired outcomes that have the potential to increase positive classroom cultures, improve teacher-student and student-student relationships, and authentically create an expectation for implementing CBCs.

Along with the positive observations and outcomes during CBC implementation, there were also some challenges. There were teachers who struggled with CBC implementation for various reasons. Some teachers reported that students were unwilling to share during CBCs, which created tension in the classroom. This was an unforeseen issue that raised my awareness of the need to more effectively communicate during training that CBC participation is voluntary, and that nonparticipation should be respected. Teachers who were bothered by nonparticipation could benefit from understanding that CBC participation should be authentic, rather than about compliance. These same teachers have ongoing discipline issues in their classrooms and write a significant number of referrals. While CBCs can help build positive classroom cultures, teachers who struggle with classroom management most likely need other interventions in addition to CBCs to improve relationships. Another unexpected challenge was that a few teachers reported reluctance to be vulnerable with their students. This honest reflection from teachers gave insight into the work of building trust and openness among the faculty that needs to be cultivated. The improvement team needs to model and provide more opportunities for building relationships among the adults in the school as a step towards making teachers feel comfortable showing their humanness with students. These challenges and insights are important as our school moves forward in CBC and other restorative practices implementation.

Improvement science is an iterative process that allows for ongoing measures of the impact of an intervention (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). During this study, the feedback from teachers about CBC implementation allowed the improvement team to determine

changes and tweaks that needed to be made in the process. For example, one concern that teachers voiced was possible oversaturation of CBCs and the loss of instructional time. These valid concerns resulted in a different CBC approach and implementation schedules at different grade levels that was more appropriate for their different class schedules. For the grade level that students only have two core teachers, it was appropriate for the two teachers to conduct CBCs daily or three times a week. However, for the grade levels where students rotate to four different core teachers throughout the day, it was necessary for teachers to coordinate and determine a CBC schedule that would allow all teachers to implement CBCs throughout the week. Improvement science allows teachers to provide feedback on the intervention and to make changes, rather than follow a regimented approach that does not factor in the participants' needs and voices. As Hinnant-Crawford (2020) explains, the inability for participants to understand the reasoning for an intervention or to make changes based on observations can lead to "initiative fatigue" and does not appreciate that educators "do not have time to waste" (p. 25). The improvement science process is effective because it generates input and change from within and specific to the organization.

Throughout the study, themes and outcomes arose that I had anticipated and hoped to see. It was rewarding to observe teacher and student buy-in with CBCs. Teacher reflection was important, especially when it led teachers to discuss how student voice and empathy-building caused them to respond to students in more proactive and positive ways. There were also moments in the study where I had to be reflective and view negative teacher feedback as an important part of the PDSA cycle instead of becoming

frustrated with the feedback. As a former classroom teacher, I wrote very few discipline referrals and handled most behavioral issues through conversations with students and their parents. During this study, I realized that some teachers view discipline referrals and resulting exclusionary consequences as an effective form of classroom management. Rather than being frustrated or judgmental, I had to change my perspective to the lens of, "What do these teacher attitudes and reflections indicate that needs to happen as we continuously move forward in the PDSA cycle?" The improvement science approach has changed my mentality to see "problems" as an important guiding principle in the improvement approach. The findings of this study have given insight into deeper and more complex needs that can be addressed through professional development and coaching of teachers.

Theory of Improvement

The findings of this study indicate that CBCs can positively impact classroom culture, teacher-student relationships, and student-student relationships. For the grade level that began CBC implementation in February 2024, teacher self-efficacy scores for classroom management did not indicate an increase; however, discipline referrals for those teachers did decrease when the data was collected for fourth quarter. The most positive data about CBCs came during CBC self-checks, focus group discussions, and open-ended questions on the self-efficacy survey. Based on insights gained during the study, CBC implementation should continue at CMS. The improvement team needs to provide ongoing and intentional training with CBCs, and the team should also differentiate future professional development based on where teachers are with CBC

implementation. For teachers who are effectively implementing CBCs, the team should

introduce other restorative practices. For teachers who are still struggling with CBC

implementation, the team should provide additional training and support at the beginning

of next school year. Findings from this study indicate that the theory of improvement

needs to allow for more check-ins with teachers about CBC implementation and obstacles

for successful implementation.

The theory of improvement was effective in guiding the intervention because it

allowed for feedback on both successes and issues with implementation. CBC

implementation is sustainable and will be continued at CMS. To sustain this intervention,

new teachers need to receive full training, rather than being given a short explanation.

The integrity of CBC implementation is dependent upon the training and support given to

teachers. Teacher challenges with the intervention were varied; therefore, teachers need

to be supported in different ways with CBC implementation. For example, teachers who

expressed concern about the loss of instructional time when implementing CBCs need

support in tying CBC topics in with their instruction so that both goals can be

accomplished. This could consist of the CBC topic being related to themes in an English

class or tied to building background knowledge in science or social studies. Another

finding in the improvement theory was that CBCs are most effective when implemented

from the beginning of the year. Once classroom cultures, teacher-student relationships,

and classroom management styles have been established, it seems that it is more difficult

to see the positive effects of CBCs. Teachers shared their reflections about how they

would more intentionally plan for CBCs next year. Finally, the intervention will continue

to spread because next year students at all grade levels will have participated in CBCs, and they will continue to ask teachers to implement them if this year's findings are indicative of future student responses to CBCs.

Reflection on the Aim

The aim of this study was to implement CBCs as a proactive approach to classroom management. By implementing CBCs, the goal was to improve teacher-student relationships to decrease discipline referrals. The theory of improvement focused on helping teachers intentionally build positive classroom cultures and positive relationships with students to handle discipline issues through means other than writing referrals. While discipline referrals are still slightly disproportionate for African American males schoolwide, Grade S's discipline referrals do not indicate a discrepancy. This is the grade level that began implementing CBCs during the 2022-2023 school year. Grade level T, which began CBC implementation at the beginning of the 2023-2024 school year, shows less of a discrepancy in African American male referrals than grade level E. This trend indicates that while CBCs may not immediately impact the discrepancy in referrals, the intervention has the potential to positively affect the problem of practice over time. Continued PDSA cycles will provide the opportunity to monitor and adjust the intervention as needed. Additionally, last year the alternative placement at CMS was higher for African American males. When data was collected for this study, only two of the eight students in the alternative placement (Success Academy) were African American males. Perhaps the biggest indicator of success with CBC implementation is

not yet evident in the outcome measures, but it is evidenced in the other measures such as CBC self-checks, open-ended teacher efficacy feedback, and focus group findings.

By continuing to implement CBCs and using the PDSA cycle to measure its impact, CMS can share the findings of the improvement science approach with other schools in the district, as well as across South Carolina. These findings and the data to support the effectiveness of CBCs can be shared with other administrators and teachers at conferences, through further publications, and through social media forums. If other educators focus on proactive approaches to discipline and building relationships, there is the potential for a shift in mindsets about behavioral issues and classroom management. The goal of all educators should be to help students learn how to be successful, rather than excluding students from the classroom, and thus from instruction, when students misbehave (Girvan et al., 2017). As presented in the CBC training, when students do not know how to read or divide, we teach them. However, when students do not know how to meet the behavioral expectations in the classroom, we send them to ISS or home. These punitive and exclusionary consequences even further reduce students' opportunities to build relationships and feel included, which leads to a cycle of exclusion and acting out (Heilbrun, 2018). Exclusionary discipline practices are antiquated and do not serve students in an equitable manner (Milner, 2020). By sharing different and proactive approaches with other schools and with pre-service teachers, meaningful change can happen that can positively impact schools and students.

Implications of Findings

The implications of the findings in this study are applicable to other educators who choose to identify interventions to address disciplinary discrepancies, which may extend beyond African American males to other populations such as students of poverty, other minority groups, or students receiving special education services. Educators and schools that implement CBCs or similar interventions should plan for varied levels of support for teachers, particularly those who struggle with or who are reluctant to be vulnerable with their students. These groups should also be intentional in the timing of the implementation so that CBCs are utilized from the beginning of the school year. From the findings in this study, people who are focused on building positive teacher-student relationships should consider offering congruent training with CBCs that includes professional development about the reasons for common subjective behaviors that often result in referrals, such as sleeping in class, refusal to obey, and defiance. By pairing CBC implementation with knowledge about adolescent development and common causes for misbehaviors, teachers could see patterns within what students share during CBCs and the behaviors that students demonstrate in class. Rather than addressing these behaviors with referrals, teachers can use CBCs and conversations with students to identify and possibly address underlying causes for misbehaviors. Guidance counselors are also an effective resource in understanding why students demonstrate certain behaviors (NASP, 2018). These approaches can help students identify what is bothering them and how to proactively deal with the issues. Teachers who implement CBCs or similar interventions need the opportunity to be a participant in the intervention with their peers before introducing the intervention to students. Teachers also need the opportunity

to see other teachers implement CBCs to see how other teachers approach the implementation.

During this study, some teachers used CBCs to address issues and behaviors in the classroom, while other teachers mainly focused on building community. Both of these purposes are important; therefore, it is worth helping teachers intentionally plan for a balance in CBC topics and purpose. Finally, an important piece that was missing from this study was student voice. Schools that choose to implement CBCs should build in student feedback throughout the PDSA cycle to determine student perspectives of both students who participate in CBCs, as well as students who choose not to participate. Student reflection can provide insights into what makes CBCs effective.

Furthermore, there are implications for educational leaders. During this study, it became apparent that teacher voice and promotion of interventions such as CBCs carries a lot of weight with other teachers being willing to implement CBCs. Rather than seeing the intervention as a directive, teachers heard the success stories of their peers and were more willing to try the intervention in their classrooms. Improvement teams should include teachers because they are the closest to the work of classroom culture, building relationships with students, and classroom management. Their insights provide a different perspective than administrators'. Additionally, I learned that teachers have different ideas of what constitutes effective classroom management. When implementing an intervention, it is beneficial to start at foundational understandings. For example, moving forward I will have conversations with teachers and gather teacher reflections about their idea of what constitutes effective disciplinary practices. Teachers who boast about the

number of referrals they write need the opportunity to research the effectiveness and effects of punitive and exclusionary practices as compared to the benefits and possible outcomes of more proactive disciplinary approaches. An effective first step with such teachers would be for administrators to display and discuss school-wide discipline referral data with teachers. To provide anonymity, teachers could be assigned specific letters or numbers so that only they could recognize their discipline data in relation to their peers' data. The goal would be for teachers who write an extreme number of referrals to see their referral numbers as outliers among their peers. This opens the door for data-driven discussions with teachers about the link between ineffective classroom management and high numbers of referrals. We often have instructional data conversations with teachers at CMS, and it is equally important to focus on discipline data. The PDSA cycle allowed me to uncover more root causes for high numbers of discipline referrals from certain teachers. As an educational leader, it is important that I realize the mindset that teachers have about different parts of their pedagogical approaches as a first step in developing a common school culture and organizational expectations. Finally, as an educational leader, I must balance teachers feeling supported in discipline issues while continuing to work towards an approach and mindset that is best for students. This is an area for future improvement and research.

As educators, we have a major responsibility to provide equity and justice in education for all students, especially those who have historically or who continue to be marginalized. Sevon (2022) discusses how bias impacts students of color and results in higher levels of referrals for students, as well as harsher and more exclusionary

disciplinary practices. This problem of practice is evident nationwide, and educators have the responsibility to address the issue. While there is much work needed in schools to provide more equitable school experiences, CBCs is a promising piece of improvement. The basic benefits of CBCs include humanizing teachers and students, building positive teacher-student relationships, fostering empathy among teachers and students, and providing an equal opportunity for student voice (Kervick et al., 2019). All these benefits are a step in the direction of including and understanding people of different backgrounds. At CMS, teachers report evidence of all these benefits of CBCs. Teachers reported seeing higher levels of student empathy toward teachers, as well as towards peers. Teachers reported working with students about behavioral issues due to knowledge of what they were experiencing outside of the classroom due to things shared during CBCs. Continued CBC implementation, combined with future interventions such as cultural awareness and underlying causes for student behavior will lead to increased equity and justice within the school, which ultimately creates a better community and society.

The findings presented in Chapter Three are consistent with the literature concerning teacher-student relationships, classroom management, disciplinary practices, and equitable disciplinary approaches. The theory of change for implementing CBCs was based on the recommendations of various researchers to have proactive disciplinary approaches and to make students feel connected in the classroom (Gable et al., 2005 & Kervick et al., 2019). Based on data collected from teachers in this study, those two goals were observed at CMS with the implementation of CBCS. Multiple studies have found

that exclusionary consequences do not change behavior and have long-lasting negative effects on students (Mitchell et al., 2017; NASP, 2018; Rainbolt et al., 2019). Additionally, discipline issues cause work-related stress, burnout, and a loss of instructional time for teachers and administrators (Cornell & Mayer, 2011). This knowledge, combined with the evidence of discrepancies in referrals and consequences for African American males calls for a change at CMS and across the nation (Gregory et al., 2016). This study is a starting point for making changes in disciplinary approaches, which is long past due (Moreno, 2021). The findings of this study are consistent with Klevan's (2021) discussions of the different purposes of CBCs. Teachers at CMS reported many of the positive outcomes that restorative practices and nontraditional discipline research highlights including relationship-based approaches that focus on changing behavior (Zakszeski & Rutherford, 2021), the various benefits of restorative practices (Gable et al., 2005), taking advantage of "teachable moments" (Lustick, 2021, p. 1273), and providing culturally responsive teaching by cultivating classroom communities (Weinstein et al., 2004). CBCs, when implemented effectively, demonstrated these outcomes at CMS. By appropriately handling discipline and creating a sense of belonging, educators are more likely to humanize children rather than exclude them (Ginott, 1972 & Hillard, 2006).

Contributions to Research and Practice

This study highlighted findings about CBC implementation and provided additional areas of research that can be conducted to learn more about CBCs. This study of CBC implementation contributes to the existing body of knowledge because it

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provides evidence of teacher and student buy-in to the process. The data also indicated that teachers repeatedly reported CBCs as having a positive impact on their relationships with students and on the level of empathy that students demonstrated after participating in CBCs. These positive outcomes contribute to existing literature that shows the benefits of CBCs and the need for positive teacher-student relationships. Teachers shared that they better understood students and were more likely to have conversations with them about behavior because of knowing more about students' challenges and home situations due to CBCs. This adds to existing research about the school to prison pipeline which calls for teachers to "[e]ngag[e] in practices that further teachers' knowledge of their students in building relationships with them [and] understanding [] the contexts in which their students reside (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2017, p. 184). Teacher feedback in this study also confirmed that "[w]hen students see teachers as individuals who are there to listen, to provide additional help with academic and personal issues, and to support them in tough times, they are more likely to comply in the classroom" (Alderman & Green, 2011, p. 42). The benefits of CBCs and the role that teacher-student relationships play in classroom management and discipline were both reiterated in the data collected from teachers during this study.

Alternately, this study uncovered some challenges and considerations that I did not encounter when researching CBCs. This study brought up issues such as how to respond when CBCs cause tension or more misbehavior in the classroom. While this was not consistently reported, it does provide the opportunity to research negative CBC implementation experiences to delve deeper into the possible root causes. Further

research could be conducted to specifically have students and teachers complete a classroom culture or teacher-student relationship survey to determine if negative classroom cultures result in less successful CBC implementation. Additionally, the issue of teacher vulnerability was an unexpected finding in this study that constitutes further research. Specifically, research related to teacher vulnerability and classroom management styles could provide insight into why some teachers struggle with management and write a significant number of referrals, while other teachers do not. Practitioners would benefit from research on how to help teachers become comfortable with being vulnerable and building relationships with students. These research areas could have a positive impact on teacher efficacy, teacher retention, better classroom management strategies, and less discipline referrals for teachers who have difficulties connecting with students.

Finally, there are practical implications from this study for teachers and practitioners. This study highlights the correlation between positive CBC implementation experiences and low discipline referrals. The teachers who provided the most positive feedback about CBC implementations were also the teachers who consistently wrote less than five referrals during a school year. This would suggest that the ability to build relationships with students, the ability to successfully implement CBCs, and the ability to handle classroom management without writing referrals is the desired outcome for teachers and students. The finding that students asked teachers to have CBCs implies that students want to be heard and want to learn more about their teachers and peers. CBCs

are a low-cost and low-effort intervention that can easily be implemented in the school setting.

Recommendations for Practice and Policy

This study provides suggestions and a reference point for educators and practitioners who are beginning CBC implementation in their schools or classrooms. CBCs and other relationship-building strategies should be more widely used and expected in school settings. CBC implementation is more effective if it begins at the beginning of the school year and is consistently used, rather than being introduced after the classroom culture has already been established. Teachers need specific training on the components of CBCs, the desired outcomes, and the various types of topics that can be discussed. Teachers also need support and the opportunity to visit peers, particularly if teachers are having a difficult time facilitating effective CBCs. Educational leaders need to model CBCs during faculty meetings or other times that teachers come together. Teachers need to feel safe expressing their personal weaknesses in sharing personal experiences and information with students, but those teachers also need support in relationships with students.

Organizations such as the NASP encourage teachers and schools to implement positive behavioral interventions, restorative practices, and relationship-building strategies. This message needs to be more consistently shared and expected among all educators, rather than be viewed as an option. Teacher pre-service programs at colleges and universities would serve future educators well to introduce them to CBCs, restorative practices, and other proactive classroom management approaches. As part of pre-service

teacher training, Education students should be provided with more authentic

opportunities to analyze and discuss how to handle behavioral issues. This could include

actual classroom videos with a student or multiple students misbehaving and then a

discussion about various reasons for the behavior and the most appropriate ways to deal

with the behavior. Effective classroom management requires teacher reflection and

creativity in how to reach all students. Pre-service teachers should learn more about the

negative consequences that traditional, punitive, and exclusionary discipline practices

have on students. Finally, local and state policy should provide training and discussion

times for educators to develop a more progressive and appropriate mindset regarding

classroom management and disciplinary practices. By providing ongoing training, we can

make the necessary shift that addresses students' behavioral needs in a more appropriate

and equitable manner.

Conclusion

　　Improvement science allows practitioners to identify problems of practice within

their organizations, identify the root causes of the problem, and identify drivers and

change agents to determine an intervention to address the problem of practice. This study

provided insights about disciplinary practices and problems at CMS, and it also provided

insights about the types of interventions that could be used moving forward. CBCs gave

students the chance to share their experiences and to have a voice in the classroom. CBCs

gave teachers the platform to build community and foster positive relationships, which

ultimately increases trust and empathy in classrooms. These findings are significant in the

broader context of improvement science and education because they give other educators insights into the benefits and challenges of implementing such an intervention. By using the findings of this study, other educators can plan for the obstacles and challenges so that their implementation journey addresses these proactively, rather than discovering them during the PDSA cycle. By sharing findings from various interventions, improvement science practitioners can build on each other's findings and knowledge. In the case of CMS, CBCs will continue to be implemented, along with future interventions, to continue to address the problem of practice with African American males receiving disproportionate numbers of referrals. Building teacher efficacy and knowledge about more progressive and appropriate classroom management strategies, such as restorative practices, will help address the inequities that students face daily in classrooms across the United States.

In conclusion, CBCs were seen as beneficial to building relationships and positive classroom cultures. Some teachers immediately see the beneficial results of CBCs, while others struggle with implementation for various reasons. While outcome measures, such as referrals, may not be immediately impacted, teacher reflections and feedback indicate the different benefits of CBCs in their classrooms. Students deserve to have their voices heard, to feel included, to be and receive empathy, and to build positive relationships with their teachers and peers. CBCs provide that opportunity on a regular basis when they are implemented with fidelity. The fact that teachers reported having students request and look forward to CBCs is an indication that while middle schoolers may appear withdrawn and unwilling to be vulnerable, they are looking for opportunities to share their stories,

preferences, opinions, and experiences. While this study uncovered interesting findings about CBCS and challenges associated with implementing them, it also leaves questions and avenues for further research around CBCs, as well as other practices that can reduce disproportionate discipline referrals and increase equity within classrooms and schools. Our students deserve nothing less.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Community Building Circle Self Check

Date: _____   **Subject:** _____ **Staff Member:** _____

What types of content do you generally discuss during Circle Time? Circle/highlight all that apply and use the space provided to give other topics and/or to provide a description of your Circle Time topics. (building community; connecting to content; social-emotional strategies for conflict resolution, etc.; discussing procedures; discussion about behavior or procedural issues happening in the classroom)

_____
_____
_____

Component	In Place	Not in Place	Comments/Notes
Introduction of Topic			
Participation of Students (can include number of students who regularly participate)			
Closing			

Reflections on Community Building Circle (may include challenges, celebrations, observations, questions, etc.). What impact, if any, have CBCs had on behavior, referrals, and/or relationship-building in your classroom?

_____
_____
_____

Adapted from "Proactive Circles: A Practical Guide to the Implementation of a

Restorative Practice," by L. Evanovich, S. Martinez, L. Kern, and R. Haynes, 2020,

Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 64(1), 28–

36. https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988X.2019.1639128

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Interview Protocol
Thank you for agreeing to implement Community Building Circles in your classrooms. Before we get started, I would like to confirm that you are comfortable with the informed consent document you have received and to see if you have any questions. This interview/discussion should last about 30 minutes and will be recorded for later transcription. If at any time you wish to contribute to the conversation or to not answer a question, you are completely free to do so. I will be sure to protect your anonymity, the anonymity of your school district, school, and students. After the interview is transcribed, I will blind any identifying information before including the findings and data in my study. Are there any questions before we begin the interview?

Qualitative Interview Questions

1) How would you define Community Building Circles?
2) Talk to me a little about the CBC training that you received and whether it helped you with implementing CBCs.
3) How are CBCs used here and how are you involved with CBCs?
4) Describe experiences you have had with implementing CBCs.
a. Tell me about any positive of successful experiences you have had with implementing CBCs.
b. Tell me about any challenges you have experienced with implementing CBCs.
5) What impact, if any, have you observed that CBCs have had in your classroom including behavior, referrals, and/or relationship-building?
6) Is there anything else you would like to say about CBCs, including future needs for effective implementation?

After asking all interview questions:
Thank you again for helping me to better understand CBCs. This interview will be transcribed over the next several weeks and I will be in touch soon to get your feedback on some of the information I am gathering from the interview for you to check and provide feedback.

After the Interview:
● Save audio/video file to Zoom
● Complete field notes
● Type and check transcript for errors

Appendix C

Teacher Beliefs Classroom Management Survey

How much can you do? Directions: This questionnaire is designed to help us gain a better understanding of the kinds of things that create difficulties for teachers in their school activities. Please indicate your opinion about each of the statements below. Your answers are confidential.

	Nothing		Very Little		Some Influence		Quite a Bit		A Great Deal
How much can you do to control disruptive behavior in the classroom?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
To what extent can you make your expectations clear about student behavior?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
How well can you establish routines to keep activities running smoothly?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
How much can you do to get children to follow classroom rules?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
How much can you do to calm a student who is disruptive or noisy?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
How well can you establish a classroom management system with each group of students?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
How well can you keep a few problem students from ruining an entire lesson?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
How well can you respond to defiant students?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
How well can you respond to behavioral issues in the classroom as opposed to writing a referral?	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

Open-ended questions:

1. What are some effective strategies that you implement for positive classroom management and environment?

2. Is there anything else that you would like to include about your teaching style in relation to classroom management and environment?

Adapted from:

Tschannen-Moran, M., & Woolfolk Hoy, A. (2001). Teacher efficacy: Capturing an elusive construct. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 17*, 783-805.

Appendix D

Selected Observational Components from ELEOT Observational Tool

Supportive Learning

1. Learners demonstrate a sense of community that is positive, cohesive, engaged, and purposeful.

Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
4	3	2	1

2. Learners take risks in learning (without fear of negative feedback).

Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
4	3	2	1

3. Learners are supported by the teacher, their peers and/or other resources to understand content and accomplish tasks.

Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
4	3	2	1

4. Learners demonstrate a congenial and supportive relationship with their teacher.

Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
4	3	2	1

Well-Managed Learning

1. Learners speak and interact respectfully with teacher(s) and each other.

Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
4	3	2	1

2. Learners demonstrate knowledge of and/or follow rules and behavioral expectations and work well with others.

Very Evident	Evident	Somewhat Evident	Not Observed
4	3	2	1

Additional Notes/Observer Reflections:

AdvancEd (2023). *eProve AdvanEd and Measured Progress.* https://www.advanc-ed.org/eprove/#/