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LEVERAGING RESULTS-DRIVEN ACCOUNTABILITY TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC AND BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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LEVERAGING RESULTS-DRIVEN ACCOUNTABILITY TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC AND

BEHAVIORAL OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

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The Office of Special Education Programs' (OSEP's) vision for Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) is that OSEP will target its work and investments to best support States in improving results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. State Education Agencies (SEAs) are accountable to OSEP regarding Results Driven Accountability reporting and supporting school districts in the process of improving outcomes for students in special populations. RDA is an accountability system to report data to district and campus leaders related to academic achievement, postsecondary readiness, and disproportionate analysis of students who are Bilingual Emergent/English as a Second Language Learners (BE/ESL), experiencing homelessness, in foster care, or military-connected also called Other Special Populations (OSP), or who are receiving special education services (SPED). The achievement gap is widening between students in general education and special education, among various

racial and ethnic groups, and within other special populations of students. Disproportionality is analyzed in the areas of identification, placement, and discipline for each ethnic student group in special education. Leaders seeking to improve student academic performance and behavior can engage in learning more about transformational leadership with an equity focus, teacher professional development, fidelity of implementation, Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), and Social Emotional Learning (SEL). District and campus leaders who include analysis of RDA data into the continuous improvement process in their schools to examine identification, placement, instructional, and disciplinary practices, procedures, and strategies can improve student outcomes for students with disabilities.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

Chapter 1

Introduction of the Problem of Practice

Public school districts and charter schools across the nation are held accountable for student outcomes as reported through the annual Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) process. In Texas, the report is published in the fall of each year and includes data from the previous fall or even two school years back. School administrators typically have little to no awareness of RDA reports and the implications of the data related to continuous improvement. Ratings are assigned based on the academic performance and rate of disciplinary placements by race/ethnicity of students with disabilities which may result in targeted support from the State Education Agency and required allocation of funds for improvement. As a result, administrators are not informed of how-to best approach potential problems in their school related to student outcomes, specifically those receiving special education services.

Background of the Problem

Over nearly four decades, the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education has been a constant and consistent concern (Hosp & Reschly, 2004). A significant and ongoing challenge many school districts across the State of Texas face is the academic performance and disciplinary disproportionality among special education students when compared to their peers. The disproportionality of disciplinary placements among certain ethnicities in special education and academic performance among all English Learners, other special populations, and students with learning disabilities receiving special education services are areas reported annually to all school districts (Texas Education Agency, Results Driven Accountability Manual, 2021). The ultimate purpose of Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) for school improvement is for school district leadership teams to analyze the data to evaluate

student outcomes for special population students' academic and disciplinary outcomes and to

identify and implement effective programs and practices for improvement. Many school district

leaders across the state lack the knowledge and understanding of the Results-Driven

Accountability Report and how the data impacts their schools. Since the RDA data is specific to

special populations of students, many district leaders have expectations for Special Programs

Directors to review the data and plan for improvement with their team. Most of the data reported

relates to the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) performance, the

academic placement of students, and disciplinary placements, which are all directly impacted by

district and campus leaders' decisions and guidance. Therefore, one problem with this practice is

that Special Programs Directors typically do not have a direct impact on instructional or

disciplinary decisions on campuses. RDA data reports are published in the fall of each school

year. The first year in which Texas schools transitioned from the Performance-Based Monitoring

Analysis System (PBMAS) to Results-Driven Accountability reporting was the Fall of 2019

(Texas Education Agency, 2019). Texas is currently in its third year of RDA reporting to Local

Education Agencies (LEAs). A lack of awareness exists among district and campus leaders

regarding Results-Driven Accountability data, its purpose, and its impact on special education

student outcomes and organizational continuous improvement efforts.

Purpose of the Study

Through observation and discussion with many east Texas area Special Education

Directors, it is apparent that many campus and district leaders have little to no awareness of

Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) data and its impact on their schools and districts. The

purpose of the study is to bring a greater level of awareness and understanding to district and

school leaders to effectively analyze RDA data to implement effective research-based strategies

to improve student outcomes. The goal is to engage in outreach to school leaders across the eastern region of Texas specifically in the areas of academic achievement and disproportionality of disciplinary placements among special education students.

The System

The systemic forces at work within the problem of RDA data analysis shown in Figure 1 include the big ideas of knowledge, culture, instruction, and discipline. All of these aspects are the responsibility of the campus principal. The knowledge of the report's existence, where to gain access to the data, and what the data tells us about our school is the primary barrier to the implementation of improvement efforts. When a school leader is unaware a specific set of data exists, as a result, it is not reviewed, analyzed, or implemented as part of continuous improvement planning on the campus or within the district. The second force in play is the culture within the campus and across the district. Many school leaders view the RDA data as a problem for special education directors and staff to improve since the data is focused on students in special education. There is also a lack of accountability for campus leaders to analyze data above and beyond academic data related to state assessment outcomes. A campus and/or district with an A rating tends to focus on this success and does not see a need to dig deeper into other forms of data, specifically Results-Driven Accountability as it is related to academic outcomes, identification and placement of students, and disciplinary placements. Each individual within a school tends to have their own philosophy regarding the discipline of students and how the system should be managed. This leads to the specific area of discipline and how the code of conduct and current practices established and implemented by campus leadership impact student outcomes regarding behavior and consequences. The development of a Positive Based Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Plan is also instrumental in helping students improve their

behavior, but many school leaders have not developed this foundational piece of support for all

students and students with behavior needs.

Figure 1

Problem of Practice Systems Map
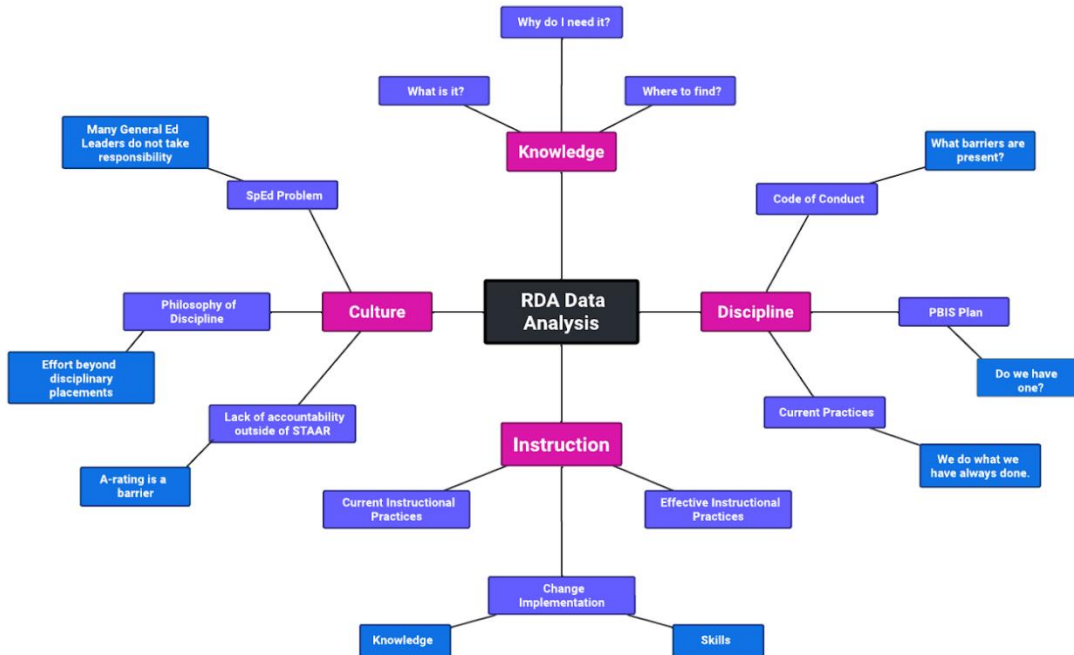
Root Cause Analysis

Improvement Science includes looking past the first symptom of the problem. Identifying

the exact problem with a Root Cause Analysis helps to clearly define problems of practice

(Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). A multi-disciplinary team is important to have at the table when

conducting a root cause analysis to include different perspectives and expertise. When the problem

is correctly identified, the solution is much more effective. A cause-and-effect diagram, also

known as the fishbone diagram, was developed to advance quality control. It is helpful in

identifying various causes that may fall into specific categories like structural, historical, resource, and policy (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

The lack of knowledge of Results-Driven Accountability data among campus and district leaders is a result of many potential root causes shown in Figure 2. One of the first causes relates directly to the timing of the release of the first RDA report in the fall of 2019 and the recent COVID-19 Pandemic resulting in school closures from mid-March 2020 through December 2020 in the area. The pandemic catapulted most school leaders into a crisis mode of providing instruction and continuing students' education through virtual learning management systems, via the Internet and digital devices. Many of the challenges faced by teachers during this time included student engagement, a lack of adequate professional development and training for teaching online, and a decrease in student collaboration with each other (Leech et al., 2020). The digital divide became even more evident during this time. The term digital divide refers to the lack of digital devices available for students as well as the ability to effectively navigate technology. It can also be applied to teachers having varying levels so comfort using technology specifically for teaching (Saad & Sandaran, 2020). At this time, school leaders shifted their focus to the technology needs aspects of continuing the education process for their staff and students, thus making it possible to completely miss the fall 2019 release of Results-Driven Accountability which may not be analyzed until spring or summer when planning for the next school year. As the 2020-2021 school year began, many schools across Texas were continuing to offer online versus in-person instruction, which may have contributed to the lack of knowledge of the RDA release in the fall of 2020. It was not until the fall of 2021 that some school leaders began to have more of an awareness of RDA and how the data should be integrated into school improvement efforts.

Figure 2

Fishbone Diagram of Problem of Practice Root Cause Analysis
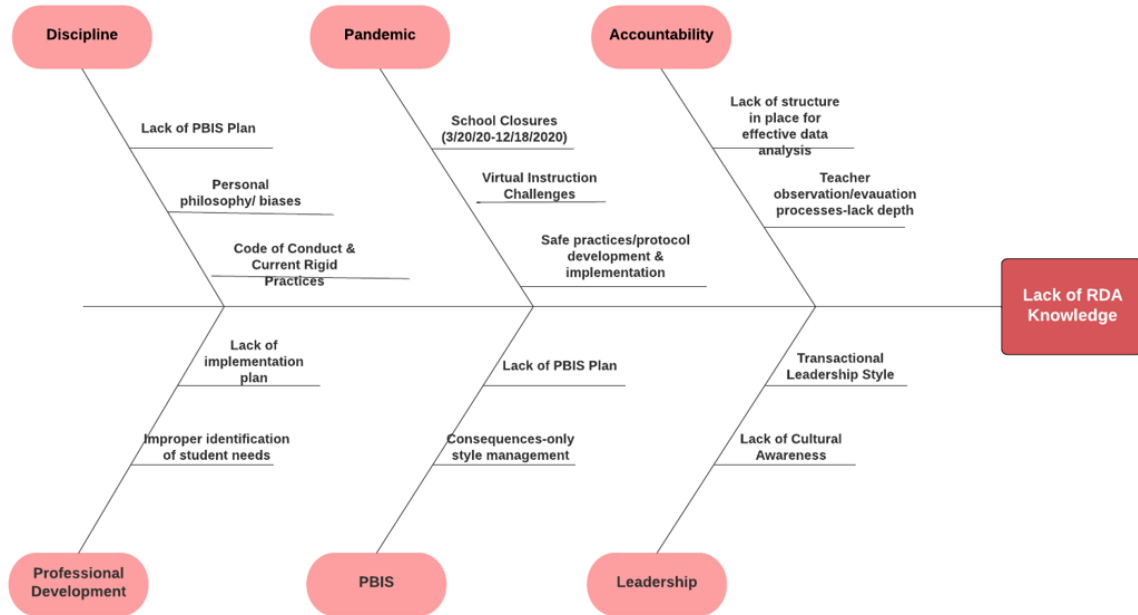
School leaders, particularly principals, are regarded as having a significant influence on the social and academic outcomes of their students (Robinson & Gray, 2019). It is common for school leaders today to continue the practice of transactional leadership within their schools as a result of previous success and reinforcement from upper administration. A transactional leader clarifies, explains, and implements the status quo requirements, roles, and rewards (Lambrecht et al., 2020). In some cases, there is also a lack of cultural awareness among school leaders and how policies, practices, and procedures in place can inhibit the success of various students. Cultural awareness is important when considering placement, instruction, and discipline of special education students, specifically linguistically and culturally diverse students. Culturally responsive teaching and learning is, therefore, a joint effort between school leaders and teachers,

and it is an aspect of transformational leadership (Khalifa et al., 2016). Transformational leaders challenge the status quo and motivate followers by engaging them to develop and follow a common vision for improvement (Vidic & Burton, 2011).

Traditional policies, practices, and procedures regarding student discipline tend to be restrictive with little to no Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) included. Traditional policies, practices, and procedures consist of punitive, exclusionary disciplinary placements where students are isolated from staff, students, supports, and services that may be imperative to academic success. Traditional punitive approaches to dealing with problem behavior are often the first line of defense and involve "getting tough" or "zero tolerance" policies. These approaches can affect short-term removal of problem behavior but have little long-term benefit (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). Sugai et al. (2012) suggest, a zero-tolerance policy does not consider the cultural contexts in which children and adolescents learn and develop, which heavily influences their behavior and perceptions of expectations. Schools often engage in disproportionate exclusionary disciplinary practices because of this lack of understanding.

Positionality

I am a white middle-class 50-year-old female with extensive educational experiences as a classroom teacher, campus administrator, and district administrator in a school district with student enrollment of 4,000 students. I am currently serving as a Special Education Liaison at a Region Education Service Center and work directly with special education directors and school administrators across the region to increase awareness of Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) and its implications for school improvement. Observations included in the research are first-hand experiences of the researcher while engaged in the school improvement work related to RDA and students with disabilities. As an outside consultant for Local Education Agencies (LEAs) I have

limited access to strategies and practices implemented across the LEA related to special

education programs, policies, and procedures to the degree of what has been shared through

various staff members. All details of the structure, staffing strengths and needs, current daily

practices, and the like are unknown.

Theory of Change

If school leaders are willing and make it a priority to learn more about Results-Driven

Accountability (RDA) while integrating it into the school improvement process, student

outcomes will improve. Levenson and Cleveland (2016) found many students with special needs

and struggling students spend most of their day in the general education classroom. A focus on

improving instruction in general education classrooms yields benefits for all students, as well as

special education students. It is extremely valuable for school leaders to become skilled and

knowledgeable of their RDA data before significant problems arise, which will allow them to

implement improvement strategies and begin the improvement process. The longer school

leaders lack awareness of their data, the more likely it will be for disproportionality scenarios to

surface resulting in mandatory funds allocation, direct consultation monthly with the Texas

Education Agency, and engagement in a long road of improvement efforts before evidence of

improvement is recognized (Texas Education Agency, Differentiated Monitoring and Support

Guide, 2021).

Research Questions

The following research questions have been developed to learn more about the positive

impact school leaders can make regarding outcomes of students with disabilities in the areas of

academic achievement, post-secondary readiness, and disproportionality.

Q1: Is there a relationship between exclusionary disciplinary placements, academic achievement, and school size among special education students?

Q2: What is the current practice of including RDA data in continuous improvement efforts in a district?

Background

"The special education movement can be characterized as having three major phases, exclusion and isolation, access and inclusion, and accountability and empowerment" (Dray, 2008, p.2). Beginning May 17, 1954, with the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision through December 3, 2004, when Congress amended the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, many laws and requirements have been implemented to provide equal education for students with disabilities. The last update in 2004 called for early intervention for students, greater accountability, improved educational outcomes, and raised standards for instructors who teach special education classes (*Timeline of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA),* 2019). Since this final revision in 2004, accountability for the academic and disciplinary success of special education students has grown into a primary area of focus for schools across the nation. As a result of these changes, the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System (PBMAS) was developed to monitor compliance with the new requirements in the educational process of students with disabilities. In a letter from the United States Department of Education (USDOE) dated May 21, 2014, to each State Education Agency (SEA), the announcement of a revised accountability system under the IDEA known as Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) was communicated. The rationale for the revision consisted of a shift from compliance to a framework that focuses on improved results for students with disabilities while continuing to ensure compliance with IDEA's requirements. The USDOE letter also indicated RDA would

emphasize child outcomes such as performance on assessments, graduation rates, and early

childhood outcomes. "Despite the continual revisions to the law, the academic and social

outcomes for students with disabilities lag behind those of their regular education peers"

(Hickman, 2020, p. 1).

Legal Requirements

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, Public Law 94-142 was passed by the

United States Congress in 1975 as Public Law 94-142 and was reauthorized in 1990 as the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and again in 2004 (USDOE, 2020, A History

of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, para. 1). IDEA is a law ensuring education

and services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. The act also governs how states

and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to more

than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities. IDEA authorizes

federal funding to states for Early Intervention (EI) services for infants and toddlers with

disabilities and developmental delays (part C) and special education and related services for

school-aged children with disabilities (part B) and relates principles for providing such services.

IDEA has several key requirements, as follows: free appropriate public education (FAPE),

identification and evaluation, individualized education program (IEP), least restrictive

environment (LRE), due process safeguards, and parent and student participation (USDOE,

2017, About IDEA section).

In Texas, special education rules are established by the State Board of Education (SBOE)

and the Commissioner of the Texas Education Agency (TEA). SBOE and the Commissioner's

Rules are a collaboration of state agency rules compiled and published as the Texas

Administrative Code (TAC). Special-education-related Commissioner's Rules are found in the

Texas Administrative Code (TAC), Title 19, Chapter 89. In accordance with Texas

Administrative Code, §97.1005 (a), the purpose of the Results-Driven Accountability (RDA)

framework is to evaluate and report annually on the performance of school districts and charter

schools for certain populations of students included in selected program areas. "The performance

of a school district or charter school is included in the RDA report through indicators of student

performance and program effectiveness and corresponding performance levels established by the

commissioner of education" (Chapter 97 Accountability and Performance Monitoring Manual,

TEA, 2021, p.3). State Education Agencies (SEAs) hold Local Education Agencies (LEAs)

accountable for the outcomes of students in special populations, just as the Office of Special

Education Programs (OSEP) holds SEAs accountable for the overall performance state-wide of

students in special education. Along with the requirements of student performance, the US

Department of Education (USDOE) is committed to providing support for states, districts,

schools, principals, and teachers necessary to improve the academic and functional achievement

of youth with disabilities (Rowe et al., 2021). Likewise, the Texas Education Agency has

organized a Review and Support team to provide support to districts in need of assistance in

improving outcomes for students receiving special education services.

Framework

The mission of RDA is for the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to target its

work and investments to best support States in improving results for infants, toddlers, children,

and youth with disabilities (Rhodes, 2019). The State Performance Plan/Annual Performance

Reports (SPP/APR) measures results and compliance as related to students with disabilities.

Rowe et al. (2021) explain the new accountability system included 17 Part B (i.e., Special

Education) indicators in which states would collect data and include in their SPP/APR. The

SPP/APR is a comprehensive multi-year State Systemic Improvement Plan (SSIP, Part B

Indicator 17) focused on improving results for students with disabilities (Rowe et al., 2021).

States are currently developing State Systemic Improvement Plans (SSIPs), designed to improve

outcomes in targeted areas. The SSIP process follows a "plan, do, study, act" (PDSA) model,

which is an iterative cycle for improvement. Langley et al. (2009) describe PDSA as an

"efficient trial-and-learning methodology" (pp. 24-25). The PDSA cycle allows change on a

small scale to determine if a strategy is successful before change on a large scale is implemented.

Each subsequent cycle aims to build new knowledge of what works and what does not, against

whom, and under what conditions (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020).

Determinations are the second component that reflects state performance on results and

compliance as well as Local Education Agencies (LEAs) across each state. Differentiated

Monitoring and Support (DMS) is provided for all states and LEAs especially those that are low

performing. The seven core principles that underlie and guide OSEP's RDA work include:

"developing partnership with stakeholders, communication is transparent and understandable to

educators and families, efforts driving improved results, all actions protect children and families,

providing differentiated incentives and supports to states, encouraging states to target resources

and reduces the burden and to be responsive to needs of the States" (*Results-Driven

Accountability Core Principles*, n.d.).

Purpose of RDA

According to Title 34 of the Code of Federal Regulations, accountability for effective and

meaningful implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is

fundamental to achieving its intent that "all children with disabilities have available to them a

free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services designed

to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living" (*Federal Register:: Request Access, n.d.*). The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) implemented a new system for this accountability in a framework known as Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) in 2014. The framework's purpose is to balance focus on improving educational results and outcomes for students with disabilities. RDA provides greater support to local education agencies using the accountability framework to provide states with incentives and support to implement evidence-based strategies to improve results and outcomes for children and students with disabilities (USDOE, 2014a, para.9).

In Texas, three programs of special populations monitored and reported through the Results-Driven Accountability system include (a) Bilingual Education, English as a Second Language, and English Learner (BE/ESL/EL), (b) Other Special Populations (OSP) students in Foster Care, experiencing homelessness, or are Military-Connected, and (c) Special Education (SPED). Academic achievement and postsecondary readiness are domains in which student data is reported in all three areas and analyzed for improvement by LEAs and ESCs directly providing support. One additional domain, disproportionate analysis, is included in the Special Education domain only and is also reported further on the Significant Disproportionality report provided directly to LEAs for analysis and improvement planning. In Texas both reports are released to LEAs through the TEA Login system in the Accountability application. The reports released through this avenue are confidential and considered 'unmasked' or include all student numbers and data. A few weeks after the reports are released to LEAs, the Results-Driven Accountability District Summary is released to the public in a 'masked' format omitting the specific student numbers to avoid any possibility of identification.

Academic Achievement

The reporting of academic achievement in all three areas includes the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) passing rate in grades three through eight and End-of-Course (EOC) exams for high school students. Results from the STAAR Alternate 2 (STAAR ALT 2), which assesses students in the same grades and content areas who have significant cognitive disabilities and are receiving special education services. The STAAR is the standardized state assessment administered to students in Texas in all core content areas, according to their grade level, encompassing students in grades three through eight and four core content areas throughout high school. The RDA report contains multiple indicators to assess student achievement, specifically by the program indicated. Cut points to measure the status of academic achievement among special populations are established by the State Education Agency (SEA), which is the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in Texas. The cut points for each RDA indicator are evaluated each year to determine if an adjustment is needed. Factors considered include "the performance of the state on each indicator at the time cut points are set, the RDA system's guiding principles, and internal and external input" (Texas Education Agency, RDA Manual, p. 10). Cut points are established and divided into four Performance Level (PL) Assignments. The higher the PL, the lower the LEA's performance. A Determination Level for each population reported is calculated using the performance level scores and a few other federal reporting requirements. An LEA's Determination Level can be found on the last page of the RDA District Summary.

One of the eighteen indicators in the Special Education category from an LEA's 2021 RDA District Summary Report reports the percentage of students in special education who scored Approaches (passing) on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness, the

annual standardized assessment. Figure 3 shows the passing percentages by subject area for all

special education students in grades three through eight for one LEA taking both STAAR and

STAAR ALT 2.

Figure 3

Results-Driven Accountability Special Education Domain I: Academic Achievement Indicator 1

1. SPED STAAR 3-8 Passing Rate						
		PL 0 Cut Points	**Rate**	**Passed**	**Tested**	**Performance Level**
Math	2021	70.0-100	34.2	116	339	3
Reading	2021	70.0-100	29.0	99	341	3
Science	2021	65.0-100	31.1	37	119	3
Social Studies	2021	65.0-100	31.9	15	47	3
Writing	2021	70.0-100	25.4	32	126	3

The RDA Manual provides the performance level cut points for 0-4 based on the

performance of the students in the LEA. In this example, all content areas are rated a

performance level of three based on student performance and using the cut points determined and

found in the RDA Manual. The performance level that indicates the best performance is

performance level zero. Once an LEA reviews the performance of the students and the

correlating performance level assigned improvement planning begins. Table 1 below shows the

STAAR 3-8 performance level assignment cut points from the 2021 RDA Manual.

Table 1

Results-Driven Accountability Manual Special Education Domain 1 Indicator 1: Performance Level Cut Points

Subjects	Grade Level	PL 0 %	PL 1 %	PL 2 %	PL 3 %	PL 4 %
Math	3-8	70.0 - 100	55.0 – 69.9	40.0 – 54.9	20.0 – 39.9	0 – 19.9
Reading	3-8	70.0 - 100	55.0 – 69.9	40.0 – 54.9	20.0 – 39.9	0 – 19.9
Science	5, 8	65.0 - 100	50.0 – 64.9	40.0 – 49.9	20.0 – 39.9	0 – 19.9
Social Studies	8	65.0 - 100	50.0 – 64.9	40.0 – 49.9	20.0 – 39.9	0 – 19.9
Writing	4, 7	70.0 - 100	55.0 – 69.9	40.0 – 54.9	20.0 – 39.9	0 – 19.9

Postsecondary Readiness

Postsecondary Readiness reported through the Results-Driven Accountability system includes indicators reporting on the LEA's graduation rate and the annual dropout rate for all three groups. Evidence suggests the current diploma in most states today is not designed to signify or assure college and career readiness (Finn et al., 2015). Special Education students typically graduate from high school; however, they have not completed higher-level courses that would indicate properly their level of postsecondary readiness. The Texas Education Agency has established multiple factors to determine an LEA's postsecondary readiness success or College Career Military Readiness (CCMR) within the state accountability system. Therefore, students from the three groups reported through RDA are included in the LEAs accountability data and ratings as well. For RDA, the reporting of graduation rates and dropout rates of students in special populations is the only area reported for postsecondary readiness measures.

Disproportionate Analysis

The special education population is the only area where disproportionate analysis occurs as part of the Results-Driven Accountability reporting. In the seminal work of Oswald et al. (1999), special education disproportionality is defined as the extent to which membership in each group, such as gender, race/ethnicity, or socioeconomic strata, differentially affects the probability of being labeled as having a disability and placed in special education. The areas of focus reported through RDA include identification, placement, and discipline of special education students. RDA disaggregates the data in ninety-eight required categories with considerations of race/ethnicity and the three areas of focus. Disproportionality is a measure of educational equity. Risk and risk ratios are set to identify areas where an LEA may have significant disproportionality among a certain ethnicity of students. Some LEAs are faced with reviewing and revising their evaluation procedures and practices for proper identification as well as determining factors of the placement of students in general education for more than 80% of the school day. Overidentification of students from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds for special education has been documented in the past, implying bias in referral, evaluation, and placement methods (Cruz & Rodl, 2018). The special education population is the only category where disproportionate analysis is included for more than one indicator as part of the Results-Driven Accountability reporting.

The most challenging area of disproportionality identified among special education students in Texas is disciplinary placements. According to Voulgarides et al. (2013), the contributing factors of racial disproportionality in special education for culturally and linguistically diverse students are discipline policies and practices, interventions and referrals, instruction and assessment, differential access to educational opportunity, family and community

partnerships, teacher expectations and misconceptions, cultural dissonance, and district sociodemographics. Exclusionary policies are practiced widely in schools for culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities despite being associated with extremely poor outcomes (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014). Exclusionary disciplinary placements reported through the Results-Driven Accountability System are out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension, and placements in a District Alternative Education Program (DAEP) and a Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program (JJAEP).

The RDA Determination Level, an aggregate of the data from all indicators, determines a school's Special Education Determination Status as reported on the Texas Academic Performance Report for the district. Determination Levels are aligned with specific monitoring and support activities. LEAs with a Determination Level of two, three, or four are required to analyze the Results-Driven Accountability Reports, identify areas of highest need, clarify the problem, conduct a root cause analysis, develop a plan for strategy implementation for improvement, and submit it to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Figure 4 shows the four Determination Levels with an indication of the level of assistance or intervention needed.

Figure 4

RDA Framework Determination Levels - Differentiated Monitoring and Support System Guide

RDA Determination:	Meets Requirements	Needs Assistance	Needs Intervention	Needs Substantial Intervention
Determination Level:	DL1	DL2	DL3	DL4

Figure 5 identifies the level of intervention and support, universal, targeted, or intensive, provided by TEA for each Determination Level. Universal supports are designed to assist LEAs in continuously improving educational outcomes for students. Targeted supports are designed to address the needs identified through RDA indicators and to assist LEA efforts to improve educational outcomes for students. LEAs participating in intensive supports benefit by prioritizing improvement activities that directly address needs, build capacity to identify and address the root cause(s) of performance gaps, and establish a culture of continuous improvement (Texas Education Agency, Differentiated Monitoring and Support Guide, 2021).

Figure 5

RDA Interventions and Differentiated Supports

RDA Determination:	Meets Requirements	Needs Assistance	Needs Intervention	Needs Substantial Intervention
Determination Level:	DL1	DL2	DL3	DL4
Differentiated Supports:				
Universal	🔵	🔵	🔵	🔵
Targeted		🟢	🟢	🟢
Intensive				🔴

The current process established by The Texas Education Agency with oversight provided by the Review & Support team is shown in Figure 6 below. A common challenge for schools is the improvement process timeline developed by TEA. By the time an LEA has a revised plan in place for improvements, it is the end of the school year. While improvement efforts continue into the next school year, the LEA may not achieve the level of improvement by the date of the next published RDA report, thus resulting in the continued implementation of the improvement

process. TEA provides guidance in the Differentiated Monitoring and Support (DMS) Guide for

LEAs to know what is required based on their Determination Level (DL). Region Education

Service Centers (ESCs) employ Special Education Liaisons to support LEAs with all DMS

activities related to RDA. Figure 4 shows the process developed by TEA related to required

monitoring activities of LEAs with a DL of 2, 3, or 4. Figure 7 shows the same TEA

communicated process with ESC Liaison support embedded.

Figure 6

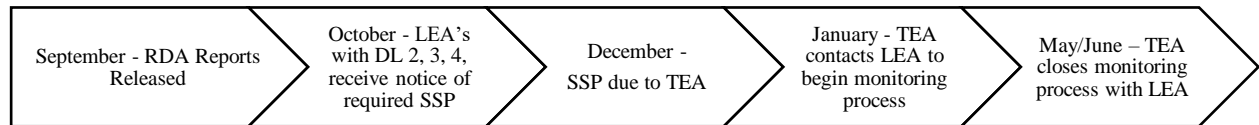*RDA Strategic Support Plan – TEA Improvement Process*

Figure 7

RDA Strategic Support Plan – Liaison Support from Education Service Center (ESC)

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September –
RDA Reports Released

September – ESC Liaison
reaches out to notify LEA
Special Education Directors
Reports are posted

October – ESC Liaison
provides RDA overview
workshop for all LEAs
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October – LEAs with DL 2,
3, 4 receive notice and
outreach for support from
ESC Liaison

October – LEAs with DL 2,
3, 4 receive notice of required
SSP from TEA

October – ESC Liaison
reaches out to offer support
and information to LEA
related to SSP requirements
and process
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October-December – ESC
Liaison provides
individualized support for
LEA leadership teams in
reviewing RDA and
developing SSP

January – June – ESC Liaison
participates in monitoring
conferences and activities
with LEAs related to the SSP

LEA continues
implementation of successful
improvement strategies into
the next school year
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Evaluation Plan

In some cases where improvement is identified around exclusionary disciplinary placements, LEAs may implement practices to improve the data, but do not improve student experiences in school and outcomes. Others implement research-based effective practices with an equity focus to improve student experiences and outcomes. Quantitative analysis will be conducted through data collection of thirty schools showing the disciplinary placements percentages among students with disabilities and academic achievement data as shown on the STAAR Reading grades 3-8 assessments. A correlation study will be conducted to determine if there is a relationship between disciplinary placements, academic achievement, and school size of students with disabilities. Qualitative data will be collected by the researcher through observations and professional development support of campus and district leaders related to

RDA data review, a root cause analysis of identified areas of need, and the development and implementation of intervention strategies for improving student outcomes.

Limitations of Current Research

The current state of research specifically targeted to Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) what it measures, how it impacts schools, and its implications are minimal to non-existent. One researcher, Barbara Hickman (2020), has published work on a case study of one State Education Agency and its success with the RDA large-scale initiative. All other research or information available is provided by federal and state agencies. Currently, there is a plethora of research focused on disproportionality in special education in the areas of identification, placement, and discipline (Cooc & Kiru, 2018; Cruz & Rodl, 2018; Kramarczuk-Voulgarides et al., 2021; Losen et al., 2014). The term shadow discipline, the use of informal disciplinary strategies that are not coded in the data systems and reported but are harmful to students and an inconvenience for parents is a new term regarding disciplinary practices (Mae, 2020). Placements and discipline that are not coded in data systems and reported provide schools an avenue to improve the data, but do not result in improved student experiences and outcomes. Another limitation of current research is the lack of availability of information providing examples of informal disciplinary strategies that have harmful effects on students and the frequency they are being utilized.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Research has identified an excess of negative consequences children and young adults experience because of exclusionary disciplinary practices in schools (Cruz et al., 2021; Muniz, 2021; Rafa, 2019; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014; Skiba et al., 2002). Exclusionary discipline refers to suspensions, expulsions, and other actions that result in a student being removed from the typical educational environment (Noltmeyer & McLoughlin, 2010). Despite federal laws designed to ensure disciplinary protection, students with disabilities are disciplined at disproportionately higher rates (Hurwitz et al., 2021). Exclusionary discipline policies, procedures, and practices are the primary sources of the disproportionality of disciplinary placements among special education students. Christie et al. (2004) conclude while suspension may temporarily solve a behavior issue, it can negatively affect academic performance and cause lifelong consequences. These policies continue to occur regularly in schools across the United States amidst decades of evidence and research "despite the association with extremely poor outcomes for linguistically and culturally diverse students, particularly African American males with and without disabilities" (Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014, p.1). Disciplinary practices in schools often resemble the strategies used to punish adults in society, relying on some form of exclusion or ostracism to control student behavior (Noguera, 2003). Clear patterns emerge demonstrating exclusionary practices such as in-school suspension, out-of-school suspension, and expulsion have a particularly negative impact on students receiving special education services as it removes them from their regular educational placement to an isolated, typically resource-poor learning environment. Learning more about the harmful effects of exclusionary discipline practices on students and the research-based strategies that positively impact behavior

while investigating personal biases and assumptions can lead to a successful shift in disciplinary practices, thus improving student outcomes.

Background

Students with disabilities are entitled by law to receive special education, which includes individualized supports and services, including behavioral supports if needed, to help them succeed in school. Issues concerning the discipline of students with disabilities are faced routinely by school administrators (Horton, 1999). Statutory requirements for discipline have been in place since the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) amendments in 1997. IDEA asserts that despite a historical legacy of legally sanctioned exclusion from schools, students with disabilities fundamentally deserve access to high-quality educational services and opportunities (Kramarczuk-Voulgarides et al., 2021). Racial and ethnic disproportionate representation was designated as one of the top three priorities by Congress in the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA (Albrecht et al., 2012). In 2014, the United States Department of Education (USDE) issued a letter to all Chief State School Officers introducing the revised accountability system under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), known as Result-Driven Accountability (RDA). A shift from compliance to a framework focused on improved results for students with disabilities while ensuring compliance was the stated rationale. As part of the Special Education RDA reporting requirements, disproportionate analysis is provided to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) regarding identification, placement, and discipline to help identify groups of students who may be overrepresented in these areas by race and ethnicity. Unresolved issues in our public education system include the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education, overrepresentation in more restrictive placements, and disproportionality in disciplinary placements (Albrecht et al., 2012). The

combined conclusions that arise through the review of federal and state laws and policies reflect

the lack of attention to students with disabilities and their outcomes by local school leaders,

therefore resulting in the abundance of policies to guide their decisions and actions.

Commonly, disciplinary practices in schools include zero-tolerance policies resulting in

automatic expulsion or placement in some type of exclusionary placement such as in-school

suspension, out-of-school suspension, or the District Alternative Education Program (DAEP). As

a result of the passage of the Gun-Free Schools Act (1994) in which federal policy adopted a

zero-tolerance approach for firearms, requiring expulsion for one year for possession on school

ground. Many states extended the federal policy, in an effort to maintain control, by including

less serious violations including fighting, off-campus behavior, and other less serious behaviors

(Skiba & Peterson, 2000). School administrators justify using exclusionary practices to maintain

order and control based on several popular assumptions: (a) school violence is on the rise, (b)

zero-tolerance deters students from acting out, (c) zero-tolerance provides students with a

consistent message regarding expectations and consequences, (d) removing disruptive students

creates a conducive learning environment for others, and (e) zero- tolerance is supported by

students, parents and people in the community (Gregory et al., 2010; Krezmien et al., 2006;

Noguera, 2003; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014; Skiba et al., 2006). Currently, many school

leaders implement zero-tolerance policies and practices to address the most current social issues

among youth while in attendance at school rather than providing programs and education to

prevent harmful choices and behaviors.

As school-wide exclusionary discipline policies and practices are scrutinized through

disproportionate analysis, the role of teacher perceptions and stereotypes impact the response to

small disciplinary infractions and allow for many subjective disciplinary moments which lead to

office referrals and exclusionary placements. According to Skiba et al. (2002), the differential

pattern of treatment wherein African American students are referred to the office for infractions

subjective in interpretation originates at the classroom level. Disparities in disciplinary outcomes

may have more to do with the behavior of teachers and principals than with student

characteristics such as misbehavior, poverty, or race (Welsh & Little, 2018). Administrators rely

on teachers to implement strong classroom management strategies in order to reduce the

occurrences of disruptive or harmful behaviors in the learning environment that oftentimes result

in disciplinary action. Classroom management refers to the various skills and techniques that

teachers use to keep the classroom running smoothly without disruptive student behavior

(Mulvahill, 2018). Gaias et al. (2019) noted behavioral and academic outcomes of students have

been associated with effective classroom management strategies, but some concerns have been

raised about whether current classroom management strategies are responsive to the backgrounds

of students of color in US public schools. Preservice teachers find it difficult to learn how to

manage a classroom effectively due to the lack of attention classroom management is given in

many teacher preparation programs and in the field of education in general (Eisenman et al.,

2015). Classroom management is not only challenging for new teachers, but it is also identified

as the most challenging aspect of experienced teachers' work (Kritsonis & Badgett, 2015). While

it is common for administrators to make assumptions that teachers, they hire have effective

classroom management skills and abilities, the implementation of ongoing professional

development as part of the support included for all teachers could provide a strong foundation for

effective classroom management and result in the decrease of students placed in disciplinary

settings.

Cohen et al. (2009) identify the school leader, the principal, as one of the single most important influential factors in the development of the quality and character of the school. Part of the principal's responsibility is to maintain order in the school by creating a positive, safe school culture and climate for the majority, without consideration of the costs to those students who are removed from school. The foundational components of providing a safe environment in the school are the adopted discipline policies, practices, and procedures developed and implemented by the leadership team. "Nationwide, school principals are given wide discretion to use disciplinary tools like suspension and expulsion to create a safe learning environment" (Sorensen et al., 2021, p.2). Principals have different attitudes toward this responsibility, which is reflected in their behavior and in the disciplinary decisions they make for each student. (Sorenson et al., 2021). Bacher-Hicks et al. (2019) found that even though the school principal is only one member of the leadership team, principal change in a school substantially reduced the year-to-year correlation between suspension rates at the school level.

Interventions

In many cases, disproportionality is viewed as a technical issue that can be solved through interventions or programs without properly identifying root causes and working to address possible historical, contextual, and structural factors. The tendency for educators to jump to conclusions about the best solution without fully defining the problem is referred to as 'solutionitis' (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 45). Bryk (2015) adds that 'solutionitis' often lures decision-makers into unproductive strategies. The root cause of a problem must be identified, otherwise, the efforts in place are only addressing the symptoms and the problem will continue to exist (Doggett, 2005). School leaders should begin with a root cause analysis process using strategies like a cause-and-effect diagram, the Five Whys method (Serrat & Serrat, 2017), or any

other selected process that will aid in identifying the root causes of the problem. Potential

sources of disproportionality "practice-based factors include: (a) a cultural mismatch between

middle class, White teachers, and school administrators with low-income and/or racial and ethnic

minority student populations and (b) gaps in the development and implementation of

interventions and other referral systems, which cause disproportionate outcomes" (Kramarczuk-

Voulgarides et al., 2017, p.64). Kramarczuk-Voulgarides et al. (2017) also identify gaps in

district and/or school-level educational practices and policies as "feeding the problem". Schools

are inundated with data through every aspect in the work of educating students. To adequately

identify, acknowledge and address the problem of disproportionality of disciplinary placements,

one strategy to utilize is an equity audit. Equity audits are tools to help uncover where inequities

may exist within a school and have "a deep and significant history in civil rights enforcement"

(Skrla et al., 2004, p. 138).

Equity-Focused Leadership

To effectively improve disciplinary practices within a school, leaders must engage in

deep conversations and reflection on their values and beliefs and become more equity-focused in

their decisions impacting students. "Educational equity requires the examination and revision of

tightly held beliefs about how schools are structured and operationalized, for what purpose, and

to what end" (Radd et al., 2021). Radd et al. (2021) also shared that the challenge and urgency of

leading for equity are complicated by the levels of systemic inequity which impact our day-to-

day interactions with other individuals who are also challenged by these same levels. A

foundational understanding of the levels of systemic inequity embedded in our culture is needed

for any school leader working to enhance their equity focus for the benefit of the students and

staff in their school. The four levels of systemic inequity span historical, structural, institutional,

and individual or interpersonal levels (Radd et al., 2021). For decades policymakers and

practicing educators have been universally concerned about the inequitable treatment of diverse

groups of children in schools (Leithwood, 2021). School staff, leaders, community members, and

policymakers are usually aware of inequities in various aspects of their schools but have rarely

systematically examined these areas with action toward devising ways to eliminate the inequities

(Skrla et al., 2004). An equity audit is a minimally invasive first step for a leader to move toward

an equity focus, which leads to collaborative conversations with various leadership teams,

parents, and students, resulting in a platform to move forward with rethinking the school-wide

behavior management or discipline policies and procedures. Alternatives to traditional school

discipline strategies strive to address the root causes of misbehavior by building strong and

healthy relationships with students and improving their engagement with the learning

environment (Rafa, 2019). "As schools systematically learn about the needs of students in their

care, it is essential to acknowledge and address the harm inflicted when those in power hold

biased perceptions of race, culture, gender, ability, and other identities (Folsom et al., 2021, p. 5).

Transformational Leadership

Research has determined that principal leadership has a significant impact, whether direct

or indirect, on student outcomes (Allen et al., 2015; Braughton & Riley, 1991; Hallinger & Heck,

1996; Marzano et al., 2001; Robinson et al., 2008). Burns (1978) and Bass (1990) compare and

contrast common transactional leadership with visionary transformational leadership and the

impact of each on the culture and success of the organization. Bass and Riggio (2006)

characterize transactional leaders as those who lead through social exchange, "exchanging one

thing for another" (p.3). Through coaching, mentoring, and providing both challenge and

support, transformational leadership enables followers to commit to shared visions and goals for

an organization or unit, challenges them to be innovative problem solvers, and builds followers'

leadership capacities (Bass & Riggio, 2006). Transformational leadership in an uncertain

environment, or one with unique challenges of academic and disciplinary crisis, enables the

group to share a vision of what may be possible and to work to its fullest capacity to meet the

challenge ahead due to the increased meaning attributed to their work (Philbin, 1997). The

implementation of any program or set of practices within a school is defined and supported by

the campus principal and leadership team. Kennedy et al. (2012) posit that active leadership and

ongoing support from administrators creates a sense of urgency with the implementation of

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS). Therefore, the leadership style and

innovation capacity of the campus principal is crucial in developing, implementing, and

supporting a school-wide mindset shift to correct and improve the academic and behavioral

culture and priorities for the benefit of all students.

Principals with transformational leadership styles are viewed by teachers as role models

who inspire trust among staff (Anderson, 2017). Transformational leaders focus on building and

strengthening new organizational norms and attitudes and in contrast, transactional leaders

concern themselves with the things to be carried out and the goals to be attained (Simsek, 2013).

Simsek (2013) also concludes that while transactional leaders practice within the already

established norms, transformational leaders break norms and set them. In a 2013 study, Valentine

and Prater found three transformational leadership factors that most frequently explained

variance in student achievement scores. They concluded that when the principal developed a

collaborative direction, modified leadership behaviors, and generated support to move forward in

new directions it resulted in higher student achievement (Valentine & Prater, 2013). In a

relatively comprehensive empirical study of national US survey responses regarding the effect of

leadership on student achievement, Seashore Louis et al. (2010) concluded trust in the principal

and a number of leadership variables are positively correlated with student learning. Based on

much of the research conducted on school leadership and its impact on student outcomes, it

seems that school leaders who are able to foster collaborative processes, increase teacher

capacity, create a strong instructional focus, and maintain a positive school climate can achieve

these qualities by combining various leadership styles and establishing trusting relationships with

staff and students (Lambrecht et al., 2022; Robinson & Gray, 2019; Simsek, 2013; Valentine &

Prater, 2011). Leaders with a willingness and ability to set new norms and foster collaborative

processes bring a new perspective to school discipline policies and procedures and have the

courage to find new ways to support students with behavior challenges. Shields (2009) argues

that transformative leadership is the essential form of leadership for substantive change in

societies where racism persists - leadership that recognizes and addresses inappropriate use of

power and authority; leadership that is rooted in concepts of equity, democracy, and social

justice; and recognizes the central role of dialogue and moral courage.

Teacher Professional Development

Teachers' professional development (PD) is crucial to improving student outcomes

(Sancar et al., 2021). No Child Left Behind (NCLB) 2001 and Every Student Succeeds Act

(ESSA) (2015) both include the specificity that professional development is not one-day short-

term workshops or conferences (Zepeda, 2012). According to Zepeda (2018), for professional

development to be effective, it must be ongoing, embedded, coherent, and collaborative. A

model of teacher change found in Guskey (2002), suggests once a teacher engages in

professional development a change in classroom practices occurs from the learning which causes

changes in student learning outcomes as a result of the implementation of new learning, thus

resulting in a change in the teacher's attitudes and beliefs. Effective professional learning

characteristics include a shared vision, reflection, collective responsibility, and collaborative and

group learning (McKendree & McKim, 2021; Stoll et al., 2006). Teachers' learning is influenced

by school leaders' ability to respond to the challenges and needs of their communities while

working within curricular, technological, and pedagogical contexts (Stevenson et al., 2016). To

develop and implement a culture of continuous professional learning, school leaders should

identify the needs of teachers, provide ongoing job-embedded professional learning

opportunities, and engage in long-term accountability of the implementation of learning in the

classrooms across the campus.

Fidelity of Implementation

Fidelity of Implementation can be defined as "the extent to which an enacted program is

consistent with the intended program mode" (Century et al., 2010). According to Harn et al.

(2013), it is assumed that evidence-based practices with high fidelity result in improved

outcomes, while low fidelity results in poorer outcomes. When analyzing the fidelity of

implementation of a specific intervention in education, it is important to address both structural

and process dimensions of fidelity (Gersten et al., 2005; Harn et al., 2013; Odom, 2009;

O'Donnell, 2008;). Structural dimensions of fidelity also referred to as surface fidelity, focus on

whether the important pieces of the intervention were delivered and can include measuring (a)

central components, (b) time allocation, and (c) intervention completion (Harn et al., 2013).

These dimensions can be measured by direct observation or self-report by the individual

implementing the intervention. As part of the process dimensions of fidelity, the nature and

quality of teacher-student interactions during an intervention can be assessed and tends to be

more directly related to student outcomes (Justice et al., 2008; O'Donnell, 2008; as cited in Harn

et al., 2013). Century et al. (2010) conclude it is impossible to distinguish between programs that

fail due to poor program theory and those that fail due to poor or wrong implementation without

measurement of Fidelity of Implementation. Consequently, school leaders should plan for the

monitoring of implementation when working to begin a new program or when working to refine

a program in place to determine its effectiveness prior to discontinuing.

School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports

As stated in Simmons-Reed and Cartledge (2014) a positive, proactive approach targeted

toward consistently teaching, reinforcing, and applying consistent behavioral consequences,

while monitoring the performance of expected behaviors and collecting data for the benefit of

school-wide data-driven decisions, is called School-Wide Positive Behavior Supports (SWPBS)

(Gresham et al., 2001; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

(PBIS) is an evidence-based three-tiered framework to improve and integrate all the data,

systems, and practices affecting student outcomes every day (Center for PBIS, 2022). The three-

tiered framework is like the academic Response to Intervention (RTI) tiers where the levels of

support move from universal to targeted to intensive based on student behavior needs. The

Center on PBIS is supported by the U.S Department of Education's Office of Special Education

Programs (OSEP) and states the five inter-related elements embedded into PBIS are: (a) equity,

(b) systems, (c) data, (d) practices, and (e) outcomes. RTI and PBIS are both common models of

multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) implemented in schools throughout the United States

(Castillo et al., 2022). As a proactive, systemic alternative to the use of exclusionary discipline,

MTSS-B, specifically PBIS, has evolved (Fallon et al., 2021; Sugai & Horner, 2020).

As a result of the disproportionality of disciplinary placements among culturally and

linguistically challenged students, "a growing number of schools are adopting restorative justice

practices that de-emphasize exclusionary discipline and aim for racial equity" (Davison et al.,

2021, p.1). In lieu of exclusionary disciplinary practices, restorative justice (RJ) practices

promote an equitable and relational learning environment by supporting students through

conflicts (Davison et al., 2021). Restorative practices build on social capital by emphasizing the

importance of relationships which marks a shift away from punitive practices, resulting in

isolation, to relational practices following wrongdoing which brings individuals together

(Morrison et al., 2005). The implementation of restorative justice challenges the school culture or

altering shared assumptions, values, beliefs, and practices among stakeholders can be viewed as

both the challenge and the impact (Zakszeski et al., 2021). As young people become increasingly

aware of injustices and critical of structures that constrain their sense of choice and freedom,

adolescence is a prime time in the life course for rebellion and questioning of social norms and

practices (Oosterhoff et al., 2018). The thought process and philosophy of restorative practices

completely oppose educators' beliefs and historical approaches to disciplinary decisions over the

past several decades. According to Velez et al. (2020), a key component of restorative practices

in schools is a reorientation of the relations between students, between students and adults, and

between adults and students. Student behavior may be reduced if relationships between students

and staff are improved and a sense of community is built in classrooms and schools (Augustine

et al., 2018). By proactively building relationships between adults and students, practitioners can

repair relationships rather than enact exclusionary discipline in response to behavior infractions

(Kervick et al., 2019).

Social-Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a promising intervention to promote cultures and

relationships promoting positively inclusive school cultures and relationships, while also

accounting for the realities of racial disparities (Legette et al., 2022). SEL is premised on

building five core SEL competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness,

relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. The Collaborative for Academic, Social,

and Emotional Learning (CASEL) is an organized group of researchers and practitioners who

work to help make evidence-based social and emotional learning (SEL) an integral part of

education from preschool through high school. SEL is a systemic approach that emphasizes the

importance of establishing equitable learning environments and coordinating practices across key

settings of classrooms, schools, families, and communities to enhance social, emotional, and

academic learning for all students (CASEL, 2022). According to the 2015 Handbook of Social

and Emotional Learning, a positive school climate and fair and equitable discipline are integral

to school wide SEL (Durlak, 2015). "Schools working to improve the SEL and restorative

practices throughout schools' different levels and community members' varying roles should: (a)

Build principals' capacity to lead with emotional intelligence and move toward greater racial

equity, (b) Co-power and equip educators who work directly with students to teach our curricula,

(c) Help school leaders and staff implement restorative interventions effectively, and (d) Create

opportunities for student and parent leadership around school climate and culture" (Manassah et

al., 2018, p. 38). One example of a research based SEL curriculum, Conscious Discipline (CD),

promotes resiliency in children by strengthening caregiver support and enhancing self-regulation

in caregivers and children (Darling et al., 2019). Dr. Becky Bailey designed the CD program that

supports first teaching oneself about self-control and self-regulation and then teaching children

(Cotter, 2020). CD emphasizes the principles of safety, connection, and problem-solving and

shifts the focus away from a culture of reward and punishment (Darling et al., 2019). A review

of four meta-analyses studies focused on SEL revealed that SEL interventions show the largest

effect size when the intervention is designed with a specific context or culture in mind, thus

supporting the idea that SEL is not a 'one-size-fits-all' intervention (CASEL, 2022).

Conclusion

As Lloyd Dunn brought to educators' attention in 1968 that students of a particular

ethnicity were overrepresented in special education, countless research studies and reports have

documented the various factors contributing to this overrepresentation (Fergus, 2010). African

American male students have been overrepresented in our most exclusionary discipline

consequences since 1975, according to research (Children's Defense Fund, 1975, as cited in

Fenning & Rose, 2007). School suspensions are inversely related to academic achievement for

individual students and broader systems (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). In addition to grade retention,

dropouts, school disengagement, arrests, and incarceration, school removal can lead to many

negative academic and social outcomes (Brooks et al., 1999 as cited in Rausch & Skiba, 2004).

Leithwood (2007) offers that "in order to positively impact student outcomes school leaders must

build a shared vision, set goals to guide action, and hold high-performance expectations for all"

(p. 56). As part of the shared vision development, school leaders and staff members must explore

research-based interventions to determine the best course of action for improvement in their

school and community. In addition to Positive Behavior Intervention Supports, professional

development for staff, Restorative Practices, and Transformational Leadership, additional

interventions include Community-school partnerships and Community Service Programs that can

provide positive opportunities for students to develop skills outside of the school campus they

may not normally have (Wettach & Owen, 2015). In a school with an equity-focused leader, a

shared vision, and a commitment to engaging in learning and the work of improvement, students

are the direct beneficiaries of the improvement efforts, thus potentially changing their life

trajectories.

Chapter 3

Evaluation of the Problem of Practice

Improvement science, as pioneered by Anthony S. Bryk, has emerged as a powerful approach to drive meaningful and sustainable change in educational settings. The six principles of Improvement Science are (a) make the work problem-specific and user-centered, (b) focus on variation in performance, (c) see the system that produces the current outcome, (d) we cannot improve at scale what we cannot measure, (e) use disciplined inquiry to drive improvement, and (f) accelerate learning through networked communities (Bryk et al., 2015). The first goal of this research is to bring Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) into the areas of school leadership and continuous improvement to help make the work problem-specific and user-centered. Improvement beyond the first principle of improvement science is impossible without beginning here. Through consistent communication and support to area special education directors the goal is to build capacity to equip and encourage them to organize opportunities for campus and district leaders within their LEAs to learn more about RDA data, implications for their campus and district, and identify research-based strategies through professional development opportunities.

Problem of Practice

Public school districts and charter schools across the nation are held accountable for student outcomes as reported through the annual Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) process. In Texas, the report is published in the fall of each year and includes data from the previous fall or even two school years back. Researchers have found that, despite having access to a wide range of data, educators are unable to use that data in a way that leads to improved student outcomes. (Heritage et al., 2009; Marsh & Farrell, 2015; Oláh et al., 2010). East Texas area

Special Education Directors agree with these findings related to Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) data. Many school administrators have little to no awareness of annual RDA data and its implications for their schools and districts related to continuous improvement. RDA reports include ratings assigned to the LEA based on the academic performance, representation by disability, and disciplinary placements by race/ethnicity of students with disabilities which may result in targeted support from the State Education Agency and require allocation of funds for improvement. As a result, administrators are not informed of how-to best approach potential problems in their school related to student outcomes, specifically those receiving special education services.

The purpose of the study is to bring a greater level of awareness and understanding to district and school leaders to effectively analyze RDA data to implement effective research-based strategies to improve student outcomes. The goal is to engage in outreach to school leaders across the eastern region of Texas specifically in the areas of academic achievement and disproportionality of disciplinary placements among special education students.

Research Questions

Q1: Is there a relationship between exclusionary disciplinary placements, academic achievement, and school size among special education students?

Q2: What is the current practice of including RDA data in continuous improvement efforts in a district?

Theory of Change

Student outcomes are the primary focus and foundation of all efforts put in place by national, state, and local agencies directly impacting teaching and learning. The factors impacting student outcomes are consistently changing based on leadership decisions regarding

staffing, professional development, instructional and physical resources, policies, procedures, and practices. The factors influencing individuals in decision-making roles are also ever-changing. This study will explore if there is a relationship between disciplinary placements and academic achievement. It is the responsibility of the school leader to analyze all data and related factors and communicate them to all members of the organization. The analysis of disciplinary data and its relationship with academic achievement is merely the beginning of the process to identify how policies, procedures, and practices currently in place impact student outcomes. An investigation of current strategies in place, along with an analysis of research-based practices to improve student outcomes both academically and behaviorally, should take place to identify effective practices to implement applicable and appropriate for the students in the school. This study may assist school leaders with the process of determining if current disciplinary practices are positively or negatively correlated to academic achievement. Curriculum alignment, aligned instructional resources, and teacher knowledge of effective instructional practices are also components that may positively impact academic achievement. While disciplinary practices are a primary factor that can have a negative impact on student academic achievement, the leader should also investigate all other factors associated with academic achievement.

Target Population and Participants

Thirty rural and suburban schools in the East Texas area were selected using simple random sampling for this study. The method uses a single step to select each subject independently from the other members of the population, so each member has an equal chance to be selected as a subject (Sharma, 2017). Schools were listed in alphabetical order and assigned a number of one through one hundred. An online random sampler tool was used to select thirty numbers. The corresponding school to each number was selected for the quantitative data

analysis. Sharma (2017) includes the pros of simple random sampling as providing an ease of assembling the sample, its representativeness of the population, and as an unbiased random selection generalization can be made to the population. Quantitative data related to disciplinary and academic outcomes for students with disabilities served through Special Education for three years were collected for analysis. Qualitative data through observations and direct support from the researcher was collected as well as quantitative data of outcomes as part of support provided for campus and district leaders in one LEA identified with significant disproportionality of disciplinary placements through Results-Driven Accountability.

Current Intervention

During the 2022-2023 school year, opportunities for all four schools in the area with a significant disproportionality designation in disciplinary placements of special education students were communicated and promoted. One LEA requested to participate in the opportunity. Training and support were provided to campus and district administrators to increase their level of awareness of Results-Driven Accountability data and identify areas of focus for improvement. Once areas of focus were identified, a root cause analysis was conducted with the same group of campus and district leaders along with any other key stakeholders identified by the LEA. A Strategic Support Plan was developed to establish goals, identify research-based activities for implementation, and set timelines for progress monitoring toward the goals. Disciplinary placements data was included in the progress monitoring process to determine if student outcomes were impacted by a greater level of awareness and knowledge of RDA among campus and district leaders and its integration into continuous improvement planning and work.

Research Methodology

Through the individualized training and support with the LEA who elected to participate in the current intervention, the work was problem-specific and user-centered based on the LEA's data, root cause analysis findings, and goals established for improvement. The root cause analysis process is an essential step to identifying the true problem before selecting strategies for improvement. "Solutionitis is the tendency for educators to jump to conclusions about the best solution without fully defining the problem" (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 45). Bryk (2015) adds that 'solutionitis' often lures decision-makers into unproductive strategies. The root cause of a problem must be identified, otherwise, the efforts in place are only addressing the symptoms and the problem will continue to exist (Doggett, 2005). School leaders should begin with a root cause analysis process using strategies like a cause-and-effect diagram, the Five Whys method (Serrat & Serrat, 2017), or any other selected process that will aid in identifying the root causes of the problem. Through the analysis of the LEA's current practices, the team sought out any areas where variation in performance was evident. Hinnant-Crawford (2020) defines two types of variation in complex systems as process variation related to flawed or variable implementation and outcome variation as variation in desired outcomes. In order for educational systems to be equitable, awareness of process and outcome variation is crucial. An area of focus for improvement such as discipline requires the stakeholders focused on improvement to see the system. Setting goals and including a scheduled plan for monitoring progress is an integral part of improvement. Measuring alone isn't enough to improve, but it can provide direction and guide your actions (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The LEA Strategic Support Plan includes dates for progress monitoring, data review of the implemented strategies, and individuals responsible for ensuring the strategies are implemented with fidelity.

Research Design

In mixed methods research, qualitative and quantitative approaches are collected, analyzed, and mixed in a single study or series of studies (Creswell et al., 2006). The triangulation design multilevel model will be utilized to evaluate complementary data on the same topic. The quantitative data will determine if there is a relationship between disciplinary placements, academic achievement, and school size. The qualitative data includes direct support and observations of the researcher of one LEA's journey utilizing RDA data to identify needs and develop a plan for improvement of student outcomes during the 2022-2023 school year. A correlational study identifies a relationship between variables without considering any extraneous factors. It is a non-experimental method for predicting and explaining variables' relationships (Seeram, 2019). This design can help the researcher recognize patterns and trends in the feedback gathered. The relationship between the variables will reflect their relationship's direction and/or strength. Researchers cannot determine if one variable causes a change in another variable using this type of research, as it can only be used to determine if variables are related (Asamoah, 2014).

Data Collection: Quantitative

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought from the University of Texas at Tyler. Once approval was given, the data for the study was collected from sources available to the researcher and public reports available. No subjects were necessary for participation in the study. Confidentiality of the data was maintained by removing school names and assigning numbers to each school prior to the data analysis. A quantitative approach, as outlined by Creswell et al. (2003), is appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand relationships between variables.

Longitudinal data in the areas of academic achievement and disciplinary placements will be collected for three school years and analyzed in the study. The data sources utilized to collect the data for this study are Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR), On Data Suite[TM], and DMAC Solutions. The Texas Academic Performance Reports (TAPR) pull together a wide range of information on the performance of students in each school and district in Texas every year. Performance is disaggregated by student groups, including ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Extensive information on school and district staff, programs, and student demographics is also included. On Data Suite[TM] is a suite of user-friendly online tools to help schools visualize and report data. It allows schools the ability to compare their PEIMS and Student Assessment data to other Texas districts. Various forms of district data, including but not limited to disciplinary placements, are available through this subscription-based resource. Data Management for Assessment and Curriculum (DMAC) includes many tools, specifically the ability to analyze state and local data and the administration of local assessments. The State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) data is available through this resource for all schools in the area and was utilized to pull the academic achievement data for this study. All academic achievement data utilized for all schools will be the passing percentage for the 3-8 Reading STAAR scores for special education students. The total disciplinary placements among special education students' data will be utilized for all schools in the study. The consistency in longitudinal data utilized for all thirty schools will provide accurate results to determine if there is a relationship between disciplinary placements, academic achievement, and school size of special education students.

Data Collection: Qualitative

During the 2021-2022 school year, the campus and district leaders in the LEA had little

to no awareness of RDA data and its implications for the district and were not involved in

receiving support or professional development for improvement based on this data related to

special education student outcomes. Qualitative data includes direct support and observations of

the researcher of one LEA's journey utilizing RDA data to identify needs and develop a plan for

improvement of student outcomes during the 2022-2023 school year. A qualitative study is

appropriate when the goal of the research is to explain a phenomenon by relying on the

perception of a person's experience in a given situation (Stake, 2010). Professional development

and support will be provided by the researcher to the LEA including RDA data analysis, root

cause analysis, strategic support plan development, and a review of data to determine the impact

on student outcomes. Brantlinger et al. (2005) emphasize successful observation studies take

place in an appropriate setting, there is sufficient time spent in the field, the researcher fits into

the site and is accepted, respected, and unobtrusive, include research with a minimal impact on

the setting. The individualized support and engagement by the researcher will help answer the

question specifically focused on how one LEA integrates RDA data analysis into continuous

improvement efforts through the collaborative process.

Data Analysis Plan

Multiple linear regression is the best technique to utilize to investigate the relationship

between student achievement and disciplinary placements of special education students for thirty

school districts using data from three different school years, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, and 2021-

2022. Data from the 2019-2020 school year was not analyzed due to COVID-19 pandemic

school closures in the Spring of 2020 and the lack of academic achievement data due to the State

of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) administration cancellation. The

researcher has first-hand observations and direct involvement through professional development

and support to the LEA including RDA data analysis, root cause analysis, strategic support plan

development, and a review of data to determine if improved student outcomes were evident.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is the lack of access by the researcher to student level

academic achievement and disciplinary placements data. Also, disciplinary placements data was

not available by specific placement of In-School-Suspension, Out-of-School Suspension, or

District Alternative Education Program (DAEP). Academic achievement may be impacted more

significantly if analyzed at the student level and by type of disciplinary placements or frequency

of placement among specific students. Also, the academic achievement data included grades 3-8,

however, in schools most disciplinary placements occur in grades 7-12. The premise of utilizing

these two data categories was that in a school system, practices and philosophies are commonly

shared across all campuses. Behaviors may not be addressed in the same manner in elementary

grades as they are in secondary grades, however, most students in disciplinary placements had

behavior concerns prior to enrollment in the secondary grades within the school system. Bias of

the researcher may be present due to the direct involvement in the improvement efforts of the

LEA in the study. Another limitation in this study was time. Due to job changes of the

researcher, the research was completed in a shorter period of time than originally intended.

Through the intervention process, an area of focus was to identify research-based strategies to

implement with elementary students that may potentially help students avoid repeated

disciplinary placements in middle and high school. A focus on Positive Behavior Interventions

and Supports was provided through the improvement efforts.

Chapter 4

Evaluation of the Intervention

The Intervention

The focused intervention for improvement in the lack of awareness of Results-Driven

Accountability (RDA) begins with professional development targeted to campus and district

leaders within a Local Education Agency (LEA). An RDA overview is essential to develop a

foundational level of knowledge of the purpose, guiding principles, and components through

review of the manual and current LEA reports and data. Data sources, performance levels cut

points, and calculation methodology for disproportionality are also crucial to the understanding

of RDA data and its implications for schools. Other populations are monitored through RDA,

however, Special Education data has the largest number of indicators included in the analysis

and it is more likely for schools to engage with TEA in monitoring of improvement efforts. Once

the campus and district leaders within an LEA understand RDA data, the collection years

reported, and the data sources utilized to extract the data, a review of indicators with the highest

performance level assignments should be reviewed. From the areas identified, the LEA team

should identify about two or three areas to focus improvement efforts. Once the areas of needed

improvement are identified, a root-cause analysis is conducted to reveal the root cause of the

problem for adequate identification of strategies for improvement. Fishbone diagrams can be

used to identify and systematically list the different root causes that can be attributed to a

problem (Slameto, 2016). Once the root causes of the identified problems for targeted

improvement have been identified, the LEA team develops a plan to target each root cause

identified. A driver diagram is successful in finding solutions to problems. LeMahieu et al.

(2017) conclude the driver diagram identifies specific interventions for making continuous

improvements and reaching the goal. It maintains the focus of the work of the team focused on

improvement efforts and monitoring of progress over time. The LEA with a Determination Level

2, 3, or 4 will also develop and submit a Strategic Support Plan (SSP) to the Texas Education

Agency (TEA) to begin monitoring of improvement efforts of the LEA staff. For each indicator

identified for improvement, the team establishes a measurable, time specific goal along with

activities and research-based strategies to implement intended to directly impact the root causes

identified. Staff responsible for implementation and supervision of implementation are identified

and a plan is established to schedule the cadence of accountability of progress monitoring. Plan-

do-study-act (PDSA) is a framework for rapid cycles of learning from practice that is a core

component of improvement science. It includes three fundamental questions that drive

improvement work. It is important to clarify what we are trying to accomplish, how we will

know a change is an improvement, and what changes can be made to help improve the

organization. The PDSA cycle is an effective way to test the efficacy of interventions or changes

that are hoped to lead an improvement (Lewis, 2015). Leadership teams must evaluate if the

intervention is working and determine actions related to the outcomes. Once the Strategic

Support Plan with strategies for improvement and activities for implementation is developed by

school leaders and other key stakeholders, it must be communicated with all individuals within

the school who will be involved in implementation of activities and progress monitoring efforts.

Often times LEAs are observed developing an improvement plan due to requirements for

submission to TEA and the teachers and support staff responsible for implementation may never

have knowledge of the plan. Campus and district leaders must communicate the improvement

plan throughout the organization. Personnel responsible for implementation and progress

monitoring monitor timelines and collaboratively made decisions regarding the effectiveness of

the interventions. A review of STAAR performance and disciplinary placements among special

education students to determine improvement should be conducted regularly and at the end of the

school year to provide comparison data from the previous year. Adaptations as needed should be

made to continue improvement efforts into the next school year based on needs revealed through

PDSA cycles.

Research Methodology

Through the individualized training and support with the LEA who elected to participate

in the current intervention, the work was problem-specific and user-centered based on the LEA's

data, root cause analysis findings, and goals established for improvement. The root cause

analysis process is an essential step to identifying the true problem before selecting strategies for

improvement. The tendency for educators to jump to conclusions about the best solution without

fully defining the problem is referred to as 'solutionitis' (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020, p. 45). Bryk

(2015) adds that 'solutionitis' often lures decision-makers into unproductive strategies. The root

cause of a problem must be identified, otherwise, the efforts in place are only addressing the

symptoms and the problem will continue to exist (Doggett, 2005). School leaders should begin

with a root cause analysis process using strategies like a cause-and-effect diagram, the Five

Whys method (Serrat & Serrat, 2017), or any other selected process that will aid in identifying

the root causes of the problem. Through the analysis of the LEA's current practices, the team

sought out any areas where variation in performance was evident. Hinnant-Crawford (2020)

defines two types of variation in complex systems as process variation related to flawed or

variable implementation and outcome variation as variation in desired outcomes. In order for

educational systems to be equitable, awareness of process and outcome variation is crucial. An

area of focus for improvement such as discipline requires the stakeholders focused on

improvement to see the system. Setting goals and including a scheduled plan for monitoring

progress is an integral part of improvement. Measuring alone isn't enough to improve, but it can

provide direction and guide your actions (Hinnant-Crawford, 2020). The LEA Strategic Support

Plan includes dates for progress monitoring, data review of the implemented strategies, and

individuals responsible for ensuring the strategies are implemented with fidelity.

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was sought from the University of

Texas at Tyler. Once approval was given, the data for the study was collected from sources

available to the researcher and public reports available. No subjects were necessary for

participation in the study. Confidentiality of the data was maintained by removing school names

and assigning numbers to each school prior to the data analysis. A quantitative approach, as

outlined by Creswell et al. (2003), is appropriate when a researcher seeks to understand

relationships between variables. A qualitative study is appropriate when the goal of the research

is to explain a phenomenon by relying on the perception of a person's experience in a given

situation (Stake, 2010). The quantitative approach is appropriate for this study as an analysis of

available data was conducted to determine if there are relationships among the predictors of

disciplinary placements and school size on the outcome of student achievement. Multiple linear

regression was conducted to investigate the relationship between student achievement,

disciplinary placements, and school size for thirty school districts using data from three different

school years, 2018-2019, 2020-2021, and 2021-2022. Data from the 2019-2020 school year was

not analyzed due to COVID-19 pandemic school closures in the Spring of 2020 and the lack of

academic achievement data due to the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness

(STAAR) administration cancellation.

A correlational study identifies a relationship between variables without taking into account any extraneous factors. It is a non-experimental method for predicting and explaining variables' relationships (Seeram, 2019). This design can help the researcher recognize patterns and trends in the feedback gathered. The correlation between the two variables will reflect their relationship's direction and/or strength. Researchers cannot determine if one variable causes a change in another variable using this type of research, as it can only be used to determine if two variables are related (Asamoah, 2014).

Results

Q1: Is there a correlation between exclusionary disciplinary placements, academic achievement, and school size among special education students?

Academic achievement in Reading of special education students in grades three through eight with no categorization by disciplinary placements, race, ethnicity, disability, or gender was used as the dependent variable for all three years 2019, 2021, and 2022. Disciplinary placement data for special education students without analysis by type of exclusionary placement in each school district in grades K-12 was provided as one independent variable. Disciplinary placements included in the discipline data for this study include In-School-Suspension (ISS), Out-of-School Suspension (OSS), Expulsion, and Disciplinary Alternative Education Program (DAEP). Actual school size (enrollment) for each entire school district for all three years was provided as another independent variable. The school size (enrollment) among the thirty school districts in the study ranged from 804 students to 19,104 students.

Multiple linear regression was conducted using JASP to investigate the relationship between student achievement, disciplinary placements, and school size. The results of the analysis of 2018-2019 data displayed in Table 2 indicate that the independent variables are not related to the

outcome of the dependent variable, student achievement, $F_{(2,27)} = 1.859$, $p = .175$, R2 = .12.
The p-value of the overall model is greater than .05 which shows the disciplinary placements and
school size were not a significant factor explaining the variance in student achievement. The
results of the analysis of 2020-2021 data displayed in Table 3 indicate that the independent
variables are not related to the outcome of the dependent variable, student achievement, $F_{(2,27)}$
= 1.798, p = .185, R2 = .11. The p-value of the overall model is greater than .05 which shows the
disciplinary placements and school size were not a significant factor explaining the variance in
student achievement. The results of the analysis of 2021-2022 data displayed in Table 4
indicated that the independent variables are not related to the outcome of the dependent variable,
student achievement, $F_{(2,27)} = 4.220$, p = .260, R2 = .23. The Overall Model has a p-value of p
= 0.02, which is less than .05 resulting in rejection of the null hypothesis indicating disciplinary
placements and/or school size does account for a significant amount of variance in student
achievement. Further evaluation of the test of significance for the slopes reveals the 2021-2022
disciplinary placements are related to 2022 reading achievement (β = -.48, p =.008), however,
2021-2022 school size was not statistically significant (p = .71).

Table 2

Regression Coefficients of 2019 Reading, 2018-2019 Discipline, 2018-2019 Size

Variable	b	SE	R^2
Constant/Intercept	39.14	4.67	.12
18-19 Discipline	-.17	.09	
18-19 Size	1.518×10^{-4}	6.606×10^{-4}	

Note. *$p < .05$; $F_{(2,27)} = 1.859$, p = .175

Table 3

Regression Coefficients of 2021 Reading, 2020-2021 Discipline, 2020-2021 Size

Variable	b	SE	R^2
Constant/Intercept	38.56	4.78	.11
2020-2021 Discipline	-.23	.12	
2020-2021 Size	-4.194×10^{-5}	5.307×10^{-4}	

Note. $*p < .05$; $F(2,27) = 1.798$, p = .185

Table 4

Regression Coefficients of 2022 Reading, 2021-2022 Discipline, 2021-2022 Size

Variable	b	SE	R^2	β
Constant/Intercept	53.40	5.02	.23	
2021-2022 Discipline	-.25	.08		-.48
2021-2022 Size	-1.720×10^{-4}	4.598×10^{-4}		-.06

Note. $*p < .05$; $F(2,27) = 4.22$, p = .025

Q2: What is the current practice of including RDA data in continuous improvement efforts in a district?

The LEA participation in professional development to increase awareness of Results-Driven Accountability (RDA) data among campus and district leaders and engaged in improvement planning and implementation processes resulted in improved outcomes for students. The leadership team in the LEA gained a better understanding of data reported regarding outcomes of students with disabilities both academically and behaviorally. The team identified priority areas for improvement, engaged in a root-cause analysis (Five Whys) process and established goals related to improving specific areas identified. Two priority areas identified

were related to improving student performance measured by STAAR Grade 8 Social Studies and

Grades 5 and 8 Science and are not related to this study.

The area of improvement selected by the LEA related to this study was disciplinary

placements among African American special education students. The LEA 2022 RDA Report

identified significant disproportionality year three in the area of Special Education Total

Disciplinary Removals Rate. The LEA had experienced significant disproportionality in this

indicator for five consecutive years. Once an LEA receives significant disproportionality year

three, consecutive years beyond that are identified as SD Year 3. Requirements for the LEA

related to the SD Year 3 include targeted monitoring engagement from a TEA monitoring

specialist like a targeted desk review of student IEP documentation and a possible targeted on-

site visit from TEA which involves student observations and interviews of teachers, principals,

appropriate support staff, the special education director, and the Superintendent. SD Year 3

LEAs also are required to set aside 15% of IDEA, Part B funds to provide comprehensive

coordinated early intervening services (CCEIS) to address factors contributing to the significant

disproportionality. The LEA utilized CCEIS funds to add Behavior Specialist staff to the

elementary, middle, and high school campuses.

The root-cause analysis revealed the following potential root causes of the

disproportionality of disciplinary placements among African American special education

students: (a) Lack of strong relationships between staff and students, (b) Lack of consistency

related to consequences within the campus and across the district, (c) Lack of clarity and

consistency between state and local mandatory vs. discretionary disciplinary placements among

campus administrative staff (d) Insufficient professional development in cultural responsiveness,

and (e) Failure to monitor discipline data effectively. The LEA identified student/educator

relationships, consistency in how disciplinary action is applied, and data monitoring as the areas they have the ability to address. The goal developed related to improvement of disciplinary for African American special educations will decrease from 40.2% in 2022 to 38% in 2023. One activity for implementation established was that a discipline matrix would be implemented at the middle and high school to ensure consistency among campus administration when applying consequences as related to code of conduct violations. This strategy is designed to prevent inconsistency for students among various campus administrators and identified as a root cause. The LEA also identified a need for professional development for staff members responsible for coding disciplinary placements in the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS), which is the source TEA utilized to collect the data included in the RDA reports. The LEA wanted to ensure correct coding to eliminate this factor from data reported for accountability. The development of discipline committees on each campus and at the district level were formed to monitor disciplinary placements data on a monthly basis. The LEA identified a need in summer 2022 to house their District Alternative Education Program (DAEP) within their district instead of a cooperative serving multiple LEAs. The credit recovery academy campus was utilized for the LEA's DAEP, and the staff was strategically selected to design a supportive, restorative culture within the DAEP and beyond disciplinary placements when students return to their regular campus.

All of these efforts combined have resulted in positive student outcomes. Through a review of projected data to be reported on the 2023 RDA report, the LEA has improved related to the disproportionality of disciplinary placements among African American special education students and will not have a designation of significant disproportionality. This will result in the removal of the requirements related to the SD Year 3 designation.

Figure 8 shows the SPED Total Disciplinary Removals data as reported on the 2022 RDA report and the projected data to be reported on the 2023 RDA report. The data indicates a decrease in African American disciplinary placements, but an increase of all other ethnicities. The LEA experienced a decrease in African American disciplinary placements from 97% in 2022 to 69.4% in 2023.

Figure 8

LEA Improvement related to SPED African American Total Disciplinary Removals
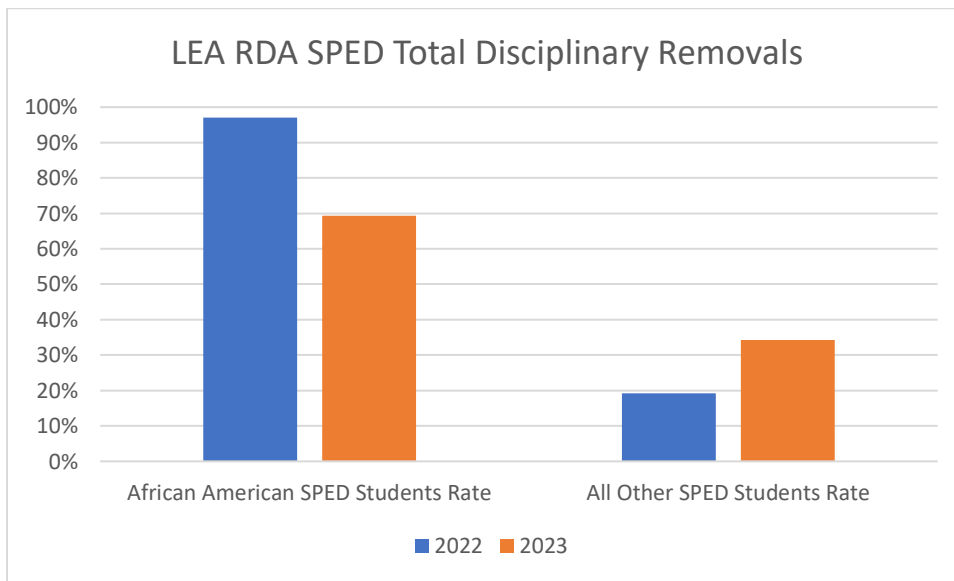
Note. Disproportionate Analysis of African American SPED Students vs. All Other Race/Ethnicity SPED Students in 2022 and 2023.

Figure 9 shows the analysis of the risk ratio calculation based on disproportionate analysis of African American SPED Disciplinary Removals compared to All Other Disciplinary Removals. In Texas, an indicator with a risk ratio greater than 2.5 is identified as significant disproportionality. The LEA decreased the risk ratio for the SPED Total Disciplinary Removals for African American SPED students from 5.1 to 2.0.

Figure 9

African American SPED Total Disciplinary Removals Disproportionate Analysis
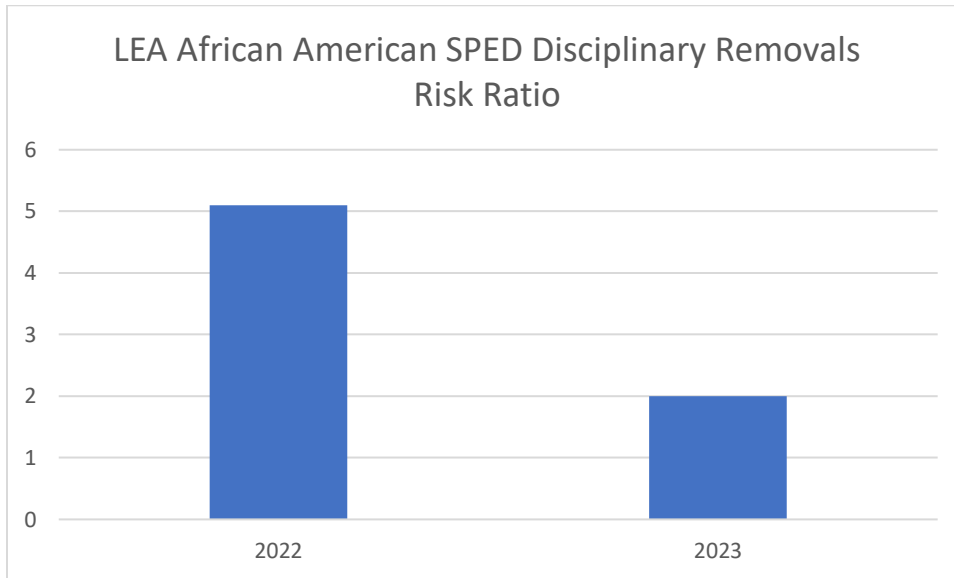
Note. Significant Disproportionality is identified with a Risk Ratio greater than 2.5.

Summary of Results

The Texas Education Agency (2019), states students with disabilities who have been removed from their current placements because of suspension or expulsion must continue to receive education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). As a result, they can continue to participate in general education, even in another setting, and work toward meeting their Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals despite being in another setting. Local Education Agencies (LEAs) must report discipline data through the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Disciplinary placements are coded and reported to TEA annually for all students through the PEIMS system. Education and training for campus administrators and PEIMS professionals are necessary to ensure all individuals are correctly coding and entering the disciplinary placements data. The PEIMS coding system

entered at the campus level is how disciplinary placements are reported through TEA's Texas

Student Data System (TSDS) for accountability reporting.

According to the results of this study, there are no significant relationships among the

thirty schools analyzed, between disciplinary placements and academic achievement for 2018-

2019 and 2020-2021. However, one year, 2021-2022 showed a significant relationship between

disciplinary placements and academic achievement. The relation of the two variables for this one

school year does not indicate causality. School size has no correlation to academic achievement

in any of the three-year data analyzed. The results of a meta-analysis of 24 studies published

from 1986 to 2012 suggest that the influence of suspensions on academic outcomes may be less

causal than other differences between suspended and non-suspended students, which were not

considered (Anderson et al., 2019).

The journey of one LEA through the intentional actions of learning more about Results-

Driven Accountability data, integrating improvement science into the process, and the

implementation of targeted interventions resulted in improved student outcomes for African

American special education students related to disciplinary removals. The leadership team

engaged in a PDSA cycle in May 2023 related to the discipline matrix implemented for

consistency. The team observed the discipline matrix accomplished the goal of providing

consistency for students among all campus administrators. However, a modification for the next

school year will be implemented. The revision identified through evaluation of the

implementation during the 2022-2023 school year revealed a need to have some variability

within the discipline matrix steps. The new discipline matrix will provide a minimum and

maximum number of days for disciplinary placements to all campus administrators and some

flexibility when individualizing support for students. This will allow consistency related to

mandatory and discretionary offenses while providing flexibility within the consistency.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that alone, disciplinary placements do not directly

predict the academic achievement of students with disabilities. Teachers and leaders should

review the data for the students in their school and work to identify the needs of each student.

Perhaps the schools included in this study are working diligently to provide a continuation of

education services for students in special education while placed in exclusionary disciplinary

settings resulting in continued academic achievement. The results should not be applied in

isolation without considering other student factors and needs regarding behavior intervention and

other strategies to prevent exclusionary disciplinary placements. Student learning is most optimal

in the general education setting with peers and where instruction is provided by a certified

teacher in the content areas assigned.

In many cases like the scenario of the LEA that had a decrease in African American

Special Education disciplinary placements, also had an increase in all other race/ethnicity Special

Education students, which impacted the decrease in the risk ratio where significant

disproportionality was identified. Strategies to improve student outcomes for all race/ethnicity

groups should be considered in the school-wide disciplinary procedures and practices.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this study is the lack of access by the researcher to student level

academic achievement and disciplinary placements data. Also, disciplinary placements data was

not available by specific placement of In-School-Suspension, Out-of-School Suspension, or

District Alternative Education Program (DAEP). Academic achievement may be impacted more

significantly if analyzed at the student level and by type of disciplinary placements or frequency of placement among specific students. Also, the academic achievement data included grades 3-8, however, in schools the majority of disciplinary placements occur in grades 7-12. The premise of utilizing these two data categories was that in a school system, practices and philosophies are commonly shared across all campuses. Behaviors may not be addressed in the same manner in elementary grades as they are in secondary grades, however, most students in disciplinary placements had behavior concerns prior to enrollment in the secondary grades within the school system. Bias of the researcher may be present due to the direct involvement in the improvement efforts of the LEA in the study. Another limitation in this study was time. Due to job changes of the researcher, the research was completed in a shorter period of time than originally intended. The primary role of the researcher was to provide support and guidance through the process and there was no opportunity to implement research-based interventions included in the literature review.

Chapter 5

Discussion of the Results

The findings through the quantitative analysis to find a correlation or relationship through multiple linear regression resulted in little to no relationship between disciplinary placements and student academic achievement of special education students. According to the results of this study, there are no significant relationships among the thirty schools analyzed, between disciplinary placements and academic achievement for 2018-2019 and 2020-2021. However, one year, 2021-2022 showed a significant relationship between disciplinary placements and academic achievement. The relation of the two variables for this one school year does not indicate causality. School size has no correlation to academic achievement in any of the three-year data analyzed. The results of a meta-analysis of 24 studies published from 1986 to 2012 suggest that the influence of suspensions on academic outcomes may be less causal than other differences between suspended and non-suspended students, which were not considered (Anderson et al., 2019). Perhaps linguistic and cultural challenges or socioeconomic status impact disciplinary placements or academic achievement more significantly than the variables analyzed in this study. I anticipated the data would indicate a negative impact on student achievement when disciplinary placements increase, or a positive impact on student achievement when disciplinary placements decrease. There was no relationship between academic achievement and school size. Larger schools tend to have access to more resources like expertise of personnel, funding, and facilities to support student learning which caused me to hypothesize school size would have an impact on academic achievement of special education students.

The LEA experienced growth among the campus and district leaders related to Results-Driven Accountability, specifically targeted to academic achievement and disciplinary

placements of special education students in the school. The increased level of awareness has resulted in the inclusion of RDA data into school-wide continuous improvement efforts at the campus and district level. The results of targeted efforts for one semester related to academic achievement and disciplinary placements for special education students were positive.

The aspects of the study that went well include the initial RDA Overview and professional development to raise the level of awareness related to RDA among campus and district administrators in the LEA. The root cause analysis process was somewhat challenging, as this is not a common practice among this team. They were hesitant at first to verbalize root causes, but once a few individuals began to share ideas and speak up, the rest of the group joined right in. One of the root causes, lack of cultural responsiveness, was not identified by the team as an area of focus for improvement efforts. I would like to see this included in the improvement process as they continue the work into the next school year. I hope to be able to continue supporting the team as their improvement efforts continue. If allowed, I plan to guide smaller teams, Network Improvement Communities, through PDSA cycles related to the discipline data analysis process and providing support to increase evidence of cultural responsiveness among staff. Sustainability of purposeful strategy and implementation of research-based interventions will be a need for future practice.

Recommendations for Practice and Future Study

The implications for the organization itself are categorized into review of data from goals established during the 2022-2023 school year and the identification of other areas of need to continue the improvement process into the 2023-2024 school year. The LEA included two academic achievement goals in the Strategic Support Plan related to Science and Social Studies STAAR performance among special education students at first, but all students once the need

was identified. The data from the 2022 STAAR assessments will need to be analyzed for

improvement when scores become available. At that time, the leadership team focused on these

efforts should determine the effectiveness of the strategies implemented and adjust as needed.

This could be accomplished through a PDSA cycle with a plan in place for progress monitoring

through common assessments throughout the school year for all grade levels in the areas of

science and social studies, not just the grade levels assessed through STAAR. The disciplinary

placements data for the 2022-2023 school year have been reviewed globally, however, each

campus team should review disciplinary placements through various lenses such as location,

time of day, staff members initiating referrals, and student demographics. Some of what is

learned through this process may result in revisions of individual student Behavior Intervention

Plans, goals and support for teachers, and revisions to the campus-wide code of conduct. These

findings could be integrated into changes for the 2023-2024 school year as part of improvement

efforts. Each of these continuous improvement categories can be facilitated through the PDSA

cycle. The routine of the process could become a part of the culture after a couple of years and

PDSA cycles could potentially be embedded in all continuous improvement efforts within the

LEA. As a result of participating in various activities with the LEA, I observed a strong Positive

Behavior and Interventions Supports (PBIS) plan in place at the Primary campus. I would like to

see these practices expanded across the district. Each campus has pockets or pieces of PBIS in

place, but a solid plan developed and implemented consistently by teachers and staff on each

campus could continue to result in even more positive outcomes for students related to behavior

and discipline.

Other schools or districts who wish to attempt this intervention can apply the

characteristics and strategies of improvement science in any other context or targeted areas

where improvement is needed. Through intentional planning, a shared vision, and a commitment to the work, the process the LEA worked through can be replicated and apply to any type of data analysis, identification of areas where improvement is needed, and commitment to the design and structure of improvement science. Other schools can provide the RDA Overview to campus and district leaders to increase awareness of RDA data and how to understand the implications and needs for their school related to special education student outcomes in the areas of academic achievement and disciplinary placements. The root cause analysis to identify areas to target improvement efforts can be conducted by anyone at any time, and a structure and plan for implementation and progress monitoring can be replicated.

Future research opportunities include analysis of disciplinary placements and academic achievement among specific students both within the LEA and across general contexts. Categorization of the data could be organized by the number of disciplinary placements each school year related to performance on state assessments during the same school year. A comparison over school years could be analyzed to identify any common findings to determine if there is a relationship between the two variables differently than utilizing global district level data. Difficulties encountered through this study are related to access to student level data and positionality to have the ability to engage in the PDSA cycles and continuous improvement expectations and adjustments within the organization. Future researchers could address these issues by strategically selecting research where access is available for what is needed, or permission to access individual student data could be obtained. The purpose of this study is related to campus and district leaders' awareness of RDA data and the potential positive impact for special education students. We also found that as school leaders implement improvement efforts to support special education students, all students benefit. Most special education students

are in the general education setting for instruction (academic achievement) and enforcement of

school rules (discipline). These are the two main factors that make it imperative for school

leaders to understand Results-Driven Accountability and its implications for schools and

districts.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that alone, disciplinary placements do not directly

correlate to the academic achievement of students with disabilities. In practice, teachers and

school leaders should establish a regular schedule of data review for students in school and work

together to identify the needs of each student. Perhaps the schools included in this study are

working diligently to provide a continuation of education services for students in special

education while placed in exclusionary disciplinary settings resulting in continued academic

achievement. The Results-Driven Accountability data indicators specifically related to Out-of-

School Suspension (OSS) and In-School Suspension (ISS) for the thirty schools in the study

indicate very few placements in OSS, where students are suspended from school for a designated

period of time, compared to ISS, where students continue to attend school in an isolated setting

while continuing their learning. School leaders who provide a system of documentation related to

services and support special education students continue to receive while placed in ISS have

additional data to support the continuation of student learning while placed in an exclusionary

discipline setting.

The development and implementation of a school-wide Positive Behavior Interventions

and Supports (PBIS) plan also provides additional support and behavior coaching for students to

improve their behavior over time potentially resulting in fewer exclusionary disciplinary

placements throughout their K-12 school years. Fewer exclusionary disciplinary placements

result in greater academic achievement when partnered with guidance related to appropriate behaviors. It is important to balance improvements implemented for student behavior and disciplinary placements by maintaining a positive classroom culture for learning with minimal disruptions. School leaders who avoid or refrain from placing special education students in disciplinary placements to improve the data without providing alternatives and coaching for behavior may create a culture where the academic achievement of other students declines from continued classroom disruptions.

The results of this study should not be applied in isolation without considering other student factors and needs regarding behavior intervention and other strategies to prevent exclusionary disciplinary placements. Student learning is most optimal in the general education setting for most students with disabilities where the individual child's potential can be accessed (Kauffman et. al, 2022). Educators, policymakers, and politicians all believe school leaders, particularly principals, have a direct impact on the social and academic success of students (Robinson & Gray, 2019). Equitable school leadership partnered with the implementation of successful, research-based strategies can lead to a successful school where all learners belong, grow, and achieve (Leithwood, 2021).

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