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School-based Mental Health Professionals' Perceptions of and Role in Disciplinary Practices

Related to the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Specialist in School Psychology Thesis

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### **Abstract**

The school-to-prison pipeline is a process in which school children are funneled out of the school system and into the criminal justice system through suspension and expulsion, both forms of exclusionary discipline. Suspension and expulsion are ineffective disciplinary policies that have harmful effects on school children, contributing to grade retention, drop-out, involvement in the juvenile justice system, and higher unemployment and incarceration rates as adults. These damaging practices occur in the presence of school-based mental health professionals (school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors) who are trained to promote the overall wellbeing and success of school children. In the current exploratory study, 341 school-based mental health professionals completed The Perceptions and Role in Disciplinary Practices Survey (PRDPS). Results indicate that school-based mental health professionals typically have perceptions of the disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline that are aligned with the current literature and favor disciplinary programs/practices that were preventative, rather than exclusionary in nature. Participants reported generally inadequate levels of graduate/professional development training in effective behavior management strategies, effective disciplinary policies, and training regarding the school-to-prison pipeline. Despite participants reports of advocating for best practices in school discipline, only 50% of participants felt they played a valuable role in school disciplinary practices. There were significant differences among school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers on their perceptions of the school-to-prison pipeline, role in disciplinary practices in their schools, and in their reported levels of graduate and professional development training.

*Keywords:* school-based mental health professionals, school-to-prison pipeline, exclusionary discipline, zero tolerance policies, racial disproportionality

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## **School-based Mental Health Professionals' Perceptions of and Role in Disciplinary Practices Related to the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

In 2018, the United States Education Department Office of Civil Rights (OCR) reported that more than 2.7 million public school students received at least one out-of-school suspension and over 120,000 students were expelled in the 2015-2016 school year (OCR, 2018). Though Black students only made-up 16 percent of enrolled students in the 2015-2016 school year, they accounted for 39 percent of those students suspended and 33 percent of those students expelled during the school year (OCR, 2018). Suspension and expulsion, both forms of exclusionary discipline, are ineffective disciplinary policies that have harmful effects on school children, including an increased likelihood of repeating a grade, dropping out, and encountering the juvenile justice system (Losen et al., 2014). Specifically, students who have experienced a suspension or expulsion are eight times as likely to be incarcerated than students who have not been suspended or expelled (Castillo, 2013). This process, as outlined above, in which school children are funneled out of the school system and into the criminal justice system has been coined as the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP). The STPP is driven by harsh and ineffective disciplinary policies which disproportionately punish Black students (American Civil Liberties Union, 2008). These harmful effects occur in the presence of school-based mental health professionals (e.g., school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors) who play a vital role in promoting the overall wellbeing and success of school children. Ideally, these school-based mental health professionals (S-BMH professionals) should be fierce advocates against any policies or practices that harm students. However, their perception of factors that maintain the STPP is not well understood. Thus, the present study aims to assess S-BMH professionals' perceptions and reported levels of training regarding school disciplinary practices



that advance the STPP as well as their actual role and practice in disciplinary matters in their current school setting. The development and nature of the STPP is discussed in depth next.

## **Review of Literature**

### **School Disciplinary Policies and Their Consequences**

#### ***Zero Tolerance Policies***

Zero-tolerance policies can be defined as disciplinary policies used to apply mandatory punishment for student disciplinary infractions without regard for the severity of the misconduct (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). Historically, borrowing rhetoric from the War on Drugs, these policies became integrated into U.S. schools in the late 1980s to combat what the nation perceived as increasing levels of violence and behavioral issues in schools (Heitzeg, 2009). High-profile school shootings, like the tragedy at Columbine High School, frightened the public and escalated the need to end the perceived increase in violence immediately (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009). In response, the Gun-Free Schools Act was passed in 1994, which mandated that any student who brought a firearm or weapon to school would be expelled for at least one year (Birkland & Lawrence, 2009; Heitzeg, 2009). Skiba and Knesting (2001) noted that state legislatures and local school districts quickly expanded these policies to cover a broader scope of violations, including drugs and alcohol, fighting, threats, swearing, and disruptive behavior. The core assumption of these policies was twofold: harsh sanctions would deter future student misconduct and removal of the most serious offenders from schools would improve the school climate (Skiba et al., 2011).

Heitzeg (2009) reported that zero-tolerance policies have generally included harsh disciplinary consequences like long-term suspension, expulsion, or arrest/referral to juvenile or adult court. Though these consequences may be considered fitting for a serious offense like

bringing a gun into school, zero-tolerance policies often lack the discernment between serious and non-serious offenses (Skiba & Knesting, 2001; Skiba et al., 1999). Heitzeg (2009) listed examples of incidents of harsh consequences given for non-serious offenses that are summarized below:

- A Pennsylvania kindergartener told her friends she was going to shoot them with a Hello Kitty toy that makes soap bubbles. The kindergartener was initially suspended for two days before the incident was reclassified as a threat to harm others.
- Two 10-year-old boys from Arlington, Virginia were suspended for three days for putting soapy water in a teacher's drink. At the teacher's urging, police charged the boys with a felony that carried a maximum sentence of 20 years. The children were formally processed through the juvenile justice system before the case was dismissed months later.
- In St Petersburg Florida, a 5-year-old girl was handcuffed, arrested and taken into custody for having a tantrum and disrupting a classroom.

(Heitzeg, 2009)

Skiba and Knesting (2001) noted that serious punishments for non-serious infractions were, like the situations Heitzeg (2009) reported above, are an unfortunate characteristic in zero tolerance policies. Though serious infractions (weapons and drugs) were the primary target of zero tolerance, school disciplinary data at the district level (Skiba et al., 1997) and national level (Heaviside et al., 1998) showed that these infractions occur relatively infrequently. Instead, most infractions subjected to zero tolerance policy include tardiness, class absence, disrespect, and noncompliance (Skiba & Knesting, 2001).

Since the introduction of the Gun-Free Schools Act, approximately 94 percent of U.S. public schools have adopted zero tolerance policies (Skiba et al., 2011). Despite the widespread

adoption of these policies in schools, zero tolerance policies are not effective. To further understand the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance policies, the American Psychological Association Division of School Psychology commissioned a task force to seek out the impact of zero tolerance policies on elementary and secondary school settings. This task force, entitled the American Psychological Association Task Force on Zero Tolerance conducted a thorough literature review to compile the existing evidence and provide recommendations for reforming zero tolerance policies. By examining this research, the APA Task Force came to several conclusions. Some key findings of this literature review include that zero tolerance policies have entirely failed to achieve the goals of an effective system of school discipline. The Task Force found that students who were suspended once were more likely to experience an influx in the frequency of suspensions. Additionally, instead of improving safety, these policies were correlated with an increase in both problem behaviors and dropout rates (APA Task Force, 2008). Therefore, this evidence suggests that zero tolerance policies have no deterrent effect on student behavior.

Despite zero-tolerance policies sounding neutral on the surface, research has shown that zero tolerance policies are applied significantly more to students of color, particularly Black students (Gregory et al., 2010; Heitzeg, 2009; Hoffman, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011). Though data show that Black students do not exhibit higher rates of disruption or violence (Skiba, 2002), Black students are overrepresented in school discipline practices, like suspension and expulsion (APA Task Force, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010). Additionally, Black students are disciplined more severely than their White peers and often for more subjective reasons. Skiba et al. (2002) conducted a study analyzing the disciplinary data from a large, urban midwestern public school district for the 1994-1995 school year. Specifically, Skiba et al. (2002) examined data from the

19 middle schools in this district, which included 11,001 middle school students. With this data, Skiba et al. (2002) analyzed district data on office referrals, suspensions, expulsions and how these numbers differed based on gender, race, and socioeconomic status. Skiba et al. (2002) found that Black students were referred to the office, suspended, and expelled at a higher rate than White students, even when controlling for socioeconomic status. Of the 4,513 office referrals Skiba et al. (2002) analyzed, 66.1% of these referrals were made for Black students compared to 32.7% of office referrals made for White students. In addition, White students were referred to the office for more objective reasons (e.g., smoking, vandalism, and obscene language) whereas Black students were more likely to be referred for more subjective reasons (e.g., disrespect, excessive noise, and loitering; Skiba et al., 2002). These racial disciplinary disparities are also apparent in exclusionary discipline which is discussed next.

### ***Exclusionary Discipline***

Exclusionary discipline is defined as any discipline strategy that excludes students from regular instruction, including in-school suspension (ISS), out-of-school suspension (OSS), and expulsion (McCarter, 2017). Skiba, Arredondo et al. (2014) reported that exclusionary discipline, particularly OSS, is one of the most commonly used responses to disciplinary infractions and has increased substantially in frequency over time. According to data collected by the US Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Civil Rights Data Collection, the rate at which students across the US had been suspended and expelled almost doubled between the years 1974 (3.7% of students) and 2010 (6.6% of students; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba, Chung, et al., 2014). In addition, Shollenberger (2015) reported that over a K-12 career, 35% of all students were suspended at least once.

Despite increasing rates of exclusionary discipline, the evidence support for this practice is lacking. As mentioned previously, the APA Task Force (2008) found that students who were suspended once were more likely to experience an increase in suspension, suggesting that there is no remedial effect. Shollenberger (2015) conducted a 13-year national longitudinal study based on data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics' National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1997, which included a cohort of about 9,000 youth born between January 1, 1980 and December 31, 1984. In an analysis of this data, Shollenberger (2015) found that youth suspended for at least 10 days were less likely to graduate high school and more likely to be arrested and incarcerated by the end of the study. In a similar study, Balfanz et al. (2015) conducted a 7-year longitudinal study in Florida following about 49,000 youth who had been suspended in 9<sup>th</sup> grade. Results of this study indicated that these youth were less likely to graduate high school, graduate on time, enroll in postsecondary education, and that additional suspensions predicted worse outcomes. Rosenbaum (2018) compared the outcomes of 480 youth suspended for the first time compared to about 1,200 nonsuspended youth. Twelve years after suspension, suspended youth were less likely than nonsuspended youth to have graduated high school or earned bachelor's degrees and were more likely to be arrested and on probation at the end of the study. Based on other studies following outcomes of suspended students, suspended youth were found to be more likely to engage in antisocial behavior (Hemphill et al., 2013), use marijuana (Evans-Whipp et al., 2015), and use tobacco (Hemphill et al., 2012). The next section will discuss how these negative outcomes disproportionately impact Black students.

Extensive research has shown that Black students are disproportionately represented in school disciplinary statistics. Following around one million seventh grader public school students from Texas in 2000-2002 in a multivariate analysis which controlled for 83 different variables to

isolate race, Fabelo et al. (2011) found that Black students had a 31 percent higher likelihood of school disciplinary action than White students. In the aforementioned 13-year national longitudinal study, Shollenberger (2015) found that throughout a K-12 school career, 67% of Black male students were suspended compared to 39% of White male students. In addition, 45% of Black female students had been suspended at some point throughout a K-12 school career, compared to 20% of White female students. With a strong association in the United States between socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, some have argued that findings of racial disproportionality could be associated with SES or potentially higher rates of disruptive behavior for Black children. However, multivariate analyses have demonstrated that race is the significant predictor of school disciplinary statistics, even when controlling for poverty (Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba, Chung, et al. 2014; Wallace et al., 2008). In addition, as mentioned earlier in this paper, there is no evidence that Black students exhibit higher rates of disruption or violence in schools, despite being overrepresented in exclusionary discipline statistics (APA Task Force, 2008; Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba, 2002). The connection between these pervasive racial disparities in school disciplinary statistics and the aforementioned zero tolerance policies, exclusionary discipline techniques, and involvement in the juvenile justice system has been termed the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The term “school-to-prison pipeline” (STPP) has become widely adopted in the literature and among advocates, researchers, and policymakers (ACLU, 2008). The idea of the STPP is that Black students are disproportionately subjected to exclusionary discipline practices, which makes them more likely to be involved with juvenile justice system, and ultimately increases the likelihood of ending up in the prison system as adults. According to Skiba, Arredondo, et al.,

(2014), the construct was created to describe the relationship between school disciplinary practices and the likelihood of student juvenile justice contact. When referring to the STPP, juvenile justice contact means a juvenile's arrest, referral to court, detention, charges filed, guilty finding, probation, and/or confinement in a correctional facility (ACLU, 2008). The themes previously discussed in this literature review—zero tolerance policies, exclusionary discipline, racial disproportionality—all play a vital role in the funneling of at-risk students through the pipeline.

Critics of the STPP have argued that there is no scientific validation of the construct, but rather that it was created as a political movement. To address the criticism, Skiba, Arredondo, et al. (2014) examined the strength of existing data of STPP and its surrounding themes. To accomplish this, Skiba, Arredondo, et al. (2014) conducted a thorough literature review of any published articles that contained reference to terms such as, “school-to-prison pipeline,” “suspension,” “expulsion,” and “exclusionary discipline” and were crossed with terms such as, “academic engagement,” “school climate,” “achievement,” “dropout,” “graduation,” “juvenile justice,” and “arrests.” After an extensive review of references to the STPP drawn from the literature, Skiba, Arredondo et al. (2014) found empirical data support through their review of literature that (a) school exclusion is increasing in frequency, (b) Black students are disproportionately represented in school discipline, (c) school exclusion has negative short- and long- term outcomes, and (d) that the current literature makes a solid case supporting the directionality of school policies leading to the pipeline, primarily related to the influence of suspension and expulsion. It is abundantly clear that the current disciplinary practices and policies that lead into the STPP have significant adverse effects on students and urgent change is needed. Therefore, what changes should be made to promote effective disciplinary practices in

schools? Who are the professionals equipped to implement effective discipline practices? The following attempts to answer these questions.

### **Effective School Disciplinary Practices**

To combat the ineffective practices related to the STPP, it is important to seek out evidence-based alternative practices of school discipline. The National Association for School Psychologists (NASP, 2020) detailed seven key components of effective discipline associated with a reduction in student suspension:

1. Behavioral expectations should be clearly defined, taught, and consistently reinforced.
2. Consequences should be instructional, rather than punitive, clearly understood, and equitably enforced.
3. A tiered system of behavioral supports should be put in place to meet the needs of individual students, including universal prevention, skills building, early identification, and intervention service.
4. Emphasis on data-based decision making within a multidisciplinary problem-solving team.
5. Positive adult role modeling of expected behavior.
6. Mitigating bias by implementing culturally responsive positive discipline techniques.
7. Professional development that is ongoing and job-embedded to increase school staff capacity to implement effective, positive, and equitable discipline.

(NASP, 2020, p. 3)

These general guidelines of effective school discipline listed by NASP (2020), include techniques integrated within two primary discipline approaches used as alternatives to exclusionary discipline practices, Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Justice Practices (RJP). These two practices, as well as the use of multidisciplinary



and data-based problem-solving teams, have been recognized as effective disciplinary practices within the STPP literature. Specifically, these two discipline approaches are regularly cited as alternative disciplinary approaches within the school-to-prison pipeline literature (Bouchein, 2015; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). These discipline approaches both fall under the theoretical framework that positive, rather than punitive approaches, are most effective for long-term change in behavior (Bear, 2011; Jean-Pierre & Parris, 2019; Skiba & Sprague, 2008). Rather than reactively punishing a behavior, discipline approaches like PBIS and RJP focus on preventative measures and teaching ways in which to develop desired behaviors (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gage et al., 2018; Karp & Frank, 2015). For students who are suspended or expelled, punitive measures do not provide a replacement behavior, only an ineffective consequence. On the other hand, positive behavior techniques reward desired behaviors along with teaching appropriate replacement behaviors, reducing behavior infractions overall. These positive behavior techniques will be seen in more detail below.

### ***Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS)***

Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports (PBIS) is a proactive discipline approach to teaching behavioral expectations and preventing unwanted behavior (NASP, 2020). Instead of a reactive, punitive approach to discipline, PBIS emphasizes a proactive and preventative approach of teaching and positively reinforcing behavioral expectations (Gage et al., 2018). Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports functions in a multi-tiered system of support, so that the intensity of intervention varies based on the needs of the student(s) (James et al., 2019). This multi-tiered system of support is typically conceptualized into three tiers: Tier I supports are provided universally and serve as a preventative measure for unwanted behavior, including teaching behavioral expectations, recognizing students for meeting these behavioral

expectations, and social-emotional skills teaching. Tier II supports address the needs of students who have not responded to Tier I supports and are in need of more targeted interventions, such as social skills group training and classroom behavior interventions. Tier III supports involve only those students with intense behavioral needs or those who have not responded to Tier I or Tier II supports. Tier III supports involve highly individualized evidence-based interventions, including functional behavior analyses and behavioral intervention plans (James et al., 2019). Sugai and Simonsen (2012) noted that throughout each tier, PBIS consistently relies on data to inform the selection, implementation, and progress monitoring of interventions. Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports is associated with improved outcomes for student behavior and school climate, gains in student socioemotional and academic functioning, and reductions in exclusionary disciplinary practices (i.e., suspensions/expulsions) and office disciplinary referrals (Bradshaw et al., 2010; James et al. 2019; Sugai & Simonsen, 2012).

### ***Restorative Justice Practices (RJP)***

Restorative Justice is a discipline approach where disciplinary practices are focused on building community through healing together after behavior incidents, shifting from an emphasis on punitive punishment (NASP, 2020). Restorative Justice Practices focus on repairing the harm caused by an offense and aims to prevent further offenses from occurring by promoting reconciliation of the parties involved: offenders, victims, and community members (Karp & Frank, 2015). Instead of focusing on exclusion and punishment, the RJP approach focuses on relationships, reconciliation, and community (Payne & Welch, 2018). In the school setting, RJP focuses on the coming together of all stakeholders—students, teachers, staff, and parents, as appropriate—to resolve issues and build relationships rather than relying on punitive approaches to address misbehavior (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). While some schools opt to apply RJP

strategies to current schoolwide practices, some schools take a whole-school, tiered approach (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020).

Restorative Justice Practices have been associated with several positive benefits in schools including large decreases in the use of exclusionary discipline, disciplinary infractions, office referrals, absenteeism, and overall delinquency as well as marked improvements in academic outcomes and school climate (Augustine et al., 2018; Gregory et al., 2014; Karp & Frank, 2015; Payne & Welch, 2018; Rideout et al., 2010). For example, Augustine et al. (2018) analyzed the impact of implementing RJP in the 2015-16 and 2016-17 school years in Pittsburg Public Schools, which served approximately 25,000 students at the time of the study. To accomplish this, Augustine et al. (2018) conducted a randomized controlled trial of the impact of restorative practices on suspension rates and school climate, where 22 schools implemented RJP for two school years and 22 schools did not. After comparing the RJP-implemented schools and the control-schools, students who attended schools where RJP were being implemented were less likely to be suspended and suspended for a shorter amount of time than students who attended the control-schools. In addition, the disparity rate between Black students and White students was lessened at RJP-implemented schools. Despite these positive impacts listed of RJP, the quantitative research backing is limited (Augustine et al., 2018; Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Currently, most studies assessing RJP are correlational studies involving single-school districts; thus, few causal conclusions can be made (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Gregory & Evans, 2020). In addition, due to the varied implementation of RJP across schools and the lack of consistent data collection (Gregory & Evans, 2020), more research is needed to determine the efficacy of RJP in the school system.

### ***Multidisciplinary Teams***

A key component in implementing effective school-wide disciplinary policies and frameworks (e.g., PBIS and RJP) is using a multidisciplinary team. Each school can have several different multidisciplinary teams, each targeting a different school-wide disciplinary effort (NASP, 2020). According to NASP (2020), these teams should emphasize (a) implementing school-wide, culturally responsive discipline policies and practices, (b) regularly evaluating school discipline policies by assessing school-wide discipline data, and (c) identifying the professional development needs of school staff related to school discipline. These multidisciplinary teams should include various stakeholders, including school administrators, teachers, family members, students, and other professional school staff. One group of school staff particularly relevant to school-wide discipline efforts and policies in schools is school-based mental health professionals (S-BMH professionals), which includes school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers. Their roles and responsibilities in school disciplinary policies and practices are discussed next.

### **School-based Mental Health Professionals' Role in Disciplinary Practices**

School-based mental health professionals promote wellness and provide school-wide prevention and intervention services to support school children's mental and behavioral health (NASP, 2020). School-based mental health professionals typically include school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors (NASP, 2020). Though the specific roles and training (i.e., ranging from 1-3 years) vary among the S-BMH professionals, all share the responsibility of advocating for school children and promoting best practices (Whitaker, 2019). Research has shown that schools that employ more S-BMH professionals have lower rates of disciplinary incidents, suspension, and expulsion, increased attendance and graduation rates, and

improved student happiness and school climate (Cleveland & Sink, 2018; Gilliam, 2005; Lapan et al., 2012; Tan et al., 2015). For example, Tan et al. (2015) analyzed the impact of the number of school social workers on the graduation rate for incoming freshman the school year 2008-2009 in the state of Illinois. The authors found that, even when controlling for poverty rate and district size, higher graduation rates were associated with a larger number of school social workers.

Despite the aforementioned benefits S-BMH professionals have on students, students have inadequate access to S-BMH professionals nationwide according to their professional organizations, the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and the School Social Work Association of America (SSWAA). The National Association of School Psychologists Association recommends a ratio of 500-700 students per school psychologist varying on the comprehensiveness of services provided, yet federal data shows a national average ratio of 1,500 to one school psychologist (200-300% greater than the recommended ratio; NASP, 2017; Whitaker et al., 2019). The American School Counselor Association recommends a ratio of 250 students per school counselor, but national data indicated a student-to-school counselor ratio of over 400:1 (ASCA, 2012; Whitaker, 2019). The School Social Work Association of America recommends that social work services should also be at a ratio of 250 students per social worker, yet national data show a national average of over 2,100 students to one social worker, which is eight times greater than the recommended ratio (Frey et al., 2013; Whitaker et al., 2019).

There has been growing attention to this shortage of S-BMH professionals in the United States, particularly concerning harsh school disciplinary practices and the STPP (Swick & Powers, 2018; Whitaker, 2019). Instead of favoring school policing and punitive discipline,

experts and professional organizations have called to instead increase the number of S-BMH professionals and mental health services in schools to better care for school children. To address this call for more S-BMH professionals in schools, NASP (2020) laid out several qualifications S-BMH professionals should possess to play a vital role in school disciplinary practices. Firstly, S-BMH professionals should have specialized training in school-wide prevention and intervention, with emphasis on early identification and intervention in addressing student behavior. Secondly, training should include knowledge and understanding of the various influences of behavior and the ability to address systematic variables that may be contributing to student behavior. Thirdly, NASP (2020) reports that S-BMH professionals should be experts in developing and implementing evidence-based behavior screenings and effective disciplinary strategies, both valuable skills in collaborating with administrators and other school staff. Fourthly, S-BMH professionals should have specific training and expertise in data-based decision making. Lastly, S-BMH professionals should play a vital role in ongoing, high-quality professional development on disciplinary practices and classroom management in their school districts (NASP, 2020).

Given these skills, S-BMH professionals can play an important part in promoting and influencing change of ineffective disciplinary practices. Mayworm and Sharkey (2014) noted that school psychologists specifically are uniquely equipped to advocate for ethical approaches due to their graduate training in ethics as well as behavior, child development, educational law, etc. Though school psychologists could be useful in designing and implementing disciplinary policies, Mayworm and Sharkey (2014) reported their primary involvement in school discipline decisions relates only to their role in Manifest Determinations for students receiving special education services. Therefore, there is a need for more research to understand to what extent S-

BMH professionals are actually involved in their school disciplinary policies and practices, and to understand their perceptions of ineffective disciplinary practices that maintain the STPP despite its ill effects on school children.

### **The Current Study**

There is much work to be done in addressing the STPP and the ineffective disciplinary policies that disproportionately funnel students out of schools and into the juvenile justice system. Though there is an abundance of research demonstrating the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline, these practices continue to be implemented and hurt school children in the process. All S-BMH professionals share the vital role of advocating for students and promoting best practices in all areas, including school discipline policies. The current study aims to assess S-BMH professionals' perceptions of and training regarding effective disciplinary policies and practices, disciplinary practices that advance the STPP, and the role they play in school disciplinary policies and practices in their schools.

Though many professional organizations and groups have promoted the expertise and training S-BMH professionals possess related to effective disciplinary practices (Mann et al., 2019; ASCA, 2012, NASP, 2020) there is no research collectively assessing S-BMH professionals' perceptions of school disciplinary practices that advance the STPP. Likewise, though there is literature support for S-BMH professionals' involvement in school disciplinary practices (Augustine, 2018; Mayworm & Sharkey; NASP, 2020), there are limited studies exploring S-BMH professionals' actual role in the disciplinary practices at their respective school sites. Therefore, this exploratory study attempts to fill this gap. In the current study, the following questions are answered:

1. What are S-BMH professionals' perceptions of the disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline?

Given the likelihood of exposure to behavior management and evidence-based disciplinary practices in graduate training programs, it is predicted that S-BMH professionals have perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the STPP that align with the current literature including recognition of the negative impact of exclusionary discipline practices and zero tolerance policies, particularly on Black students (NASP, 2020).

2. What programs or practices do S-BMH professionals most support for maintaining discipline and promoting safety in their schools?

Based on backgrounds in evidence-based disciplinary practices, it is predicted that S-BMH professionals support programs/practices that are preventative (i.e., PBIS, RJP), rather than exclusionary (i.e., Expulsion, OSS) to maintain discipline and promote safety in schools (NASP, 2020).

3. Is there a relationship between reported levels of graduate and professional development training and S-BMH professionals' perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline?

It is predicted that S-BMH professionals who report having received adequate training (in graduate school or through professional development) regarding effective behavior management strategies, effective vs. ineffective disciplinary practices, and the STPP would have perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the STPP that align with the current literature including recognition of the negative impact of



exclusionary discipline practices and zero tolerance policies, particularly on Black students (NASP, 2020).

4. Do S-BMH professionals play a role in disciplinary practices at their respective schools?

Based on the limited number of S-BMH professionals in public schools and an already existing high workload, (NASP, 2020; Whitaker, 2019), it is predicted that S-BMH professionals would report having low involvement and a lack of role in school disciplinary practices and policies.

5. Are there differences between school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers' (a) perceptions of the STTP, (b) role in disciplinary practices at their schools, and (c) reported level of graduate and professional development training in effective disciplinary practices, effective behavior management strategies, and the STPP?

It is predicted that there would be differences among school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers due to differences in graduate training (from 1 to 3 years long), curriculum, and primary role in the school setting (Dixon, 2004).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

A total of 350 School-based Mental Health Professionals from the U.S. states of Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin participated in the study. Nine participants were excluded from the study because they held a position in the school that was not a target of the study, including positions such as special education director, behavior analyst, and superintendent. Of the 341 participants included in the study, 136 were school psychologists (39.9%), 105 were school social workers (30.8%), and 100 were school counselors (29.3%). Over 60% of these participants were from the state of Illinois. Most participants were women (88.9%), White (91.2%), had a post-Bachelor's

degree (98.8%), had 10 or less years of experience (56.3%) and were from suburban (43.1%) and rural (46.3%) areas. Regarding caseloads, 55.8% of school psychologists, 52.3% of school social workers, and 77.0% of school counselors met a caseload at or below their professional organization's guideline (NASP = 500-700, ASCA = <400, NASW = <250). For more details on demographic information, see Table 1 in the appendices.

## **Measures**

### ***Demographics Questionnaire***

Participants completed a 9-item demographic questionnaire (Appendix A) that assessed participants' role in the school, level of education, years of experience, years in current school site, caseload, type of practice, school setting (e.g., urban, rural, and suburban), and race/ethnicity.

### ***Perceptions and Role in Disciplinary Practices Survey (PRDPS)***

The Perceptions and Role in Disciplinary Practices Survey (Appendix B) was adapted in part from Skiba's (2004) Disciplinary Practices Survey, which was developed to assess the attitudes, values, beliefs, and practices of school principals toward discipline. It is made up of seven hypothesized subscales: 1) attitude toward discipline in general, 2) awareness and enforcement of disciplinary procedures, 3) beliefs concerning suspension/expulsion and zero-tolerance, 4) beliefs about responsibility for students' misbehaviors, 5) attitude toward differential discipline of disadvantaged students or students with disabilities, 6) resources available for discipline, and 7) attitude toward and the availability of prevention strategies as an alternative to exclusion. Within these, items are on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). Reliability for the scale was assessed by the overall internal consistency, which was good for the purposes of research,  $\alpha = 0.70$  (Skiba, Chung et al., 2014; Tavakol &

Dennick, 2011). In Skiba, Chung et al.'s (2014) study, a cluster analysis was conducted to sort the principals into two groups, one group more favorable to preventative measures of school discipline and a group with attitudes more favorable to exclusionary discipline and zero tolerance practices as disciplinary strategies.

For the purposes of this study, items were adapted from subscale 3 (beliefs concerning suspension/expulsion and zero-tolerance) and subscale 6 (resources available for discipline) to create the Perceptions and Role in Disciplinary Practices Survey. Based on the purpose of the study and the current literature, other themes included and added to this survey include (a) participants' role in student discipline in the school system, (b) training received on effective vs. ineffective disciplinary practices in both graduate training institution and professional development opportunities, (c) training received on the school-to-prison pipeline in both graduate training institution and professional development opportunities, and (d) perceptions of racial disproportionality in disciplinary practices. The scaling was kept consistent from the initial survey, i.e., 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*). However, due to the addition of new items and omission of many items from Skiba's original Disciplinary Practices Survey, the reliability and psychometric properties of the adapted survey, Perceptions and Role in Disciplinary Practices Survey, were unknown prior to its use in this study. However, for an exploratory study, such as this, designing a survey or modifying an existing one is an acceptable practice (Korb, 2012). However, after this adaptation, Cronbach's alpha was calculated to ensure internal consistency.

To measure the internal consistency of the PRDPS which was adapted in part from Skiba's Disciplinary Practices Survey, Cronbach's alpha was used to assess if the psychometric properties were sufficient. For the 30-item PRDPS scale, the Cronbach's alpha coefficient was

.86. The internal consistency of two subscores, Perceptions of the STPP and S-BMH Professionals' Reports of Training, were also measured. The Perceptions of STPP subscore was compiled from 18 items on the PRDPS that specifically referred to exclusionary discipline, zero tolerance policies, and school-to-prison pipeline on the PRDPS. To see the 18 items that were included in the Perceptions of STPP subscore, refer to Table 2. The Cronbach's alpha of the Perceptions of the STPP subscore was .87. The S-BMH Professionals' Reports of Training subscore was compiled from 6 items on the PRDPS that specifically referred to the graduate and professional development training of S-BMH professionals (see Table 3). The Cronbach's alpha of the S-BMH Professionals' Reports of training subscore was .84. According to Tavakol and Dennick (2011), the acceptable range for Cronbach's alpha is 0.70 to .95; therefore, the Cronbach's alpha coefficients of the PRDPS scale and the two subscores, Perceptions of the STPP and S-BMH Professionals' Reports of Training, were sufficient.

### **Procedures**

After approval was obtained from Eastern Illinois University's Institutional Review Board, school special education directors from the states of Illinois, Indiana, and Wisconsin received an email (Appendix D) requesting district school-based mental health professional's participation in the study. Special education directors' email addresses were obtained from school district website. If the special education director agreed, the study was forwarded directly to these professionals from the special education directors themselves. Other means of recruiting participants included direct emails to school-based mental health professionals by collecting emails from district websites and Facebook advertising from the EIU School Psychology page and the primary researcher's personal Facebook account (Appendix E).

School-based mental health professionals completed the PRDPS and the demographic questionnaire, using the online software tool, Qualtrics. Qualtrics has been successfully used to gather survey responses while maintaining the anonymity of participants. Before beginning the study, participants were informed (via the Informed Consent document; Appendix C) that participation was confidential, no personally identifying information would be collected, and that they could discontinue participating in the study or filling out the survey at any time without penalty. After reading the Consent Form, participants who declined participation could click on “EXIT,” which closed the survey. To ensure confidentiality, access to the Qualtrics study data were protected by a secure password known only to the primary investigator and thesis advisor.

### **Data Analysis**

1. Question 1 (What are S-BMH professionals’ perceptions of the disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline?) was analyzed using descriptive statistics.
2. Question 2 (What programs or practices do S-BMH professionals most support in maintaining discipline and promoting safety in their schools?) was analyzed using descriptive statistics.
3. Question 3 (Would reported levels of graduate and professional development training be related to S-BMH professionals’ perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline?) was analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson’s  $r$  correlation between training and perceptions.
4. Question 4 (Do S-BMH professionals play a role in disciplinary practices at their respective schools?) was analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson’s  $r$  between high caseload and low participation in disciplinary practices.

5. Question 5 (Are there differences among school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers' (a) perceptions of the STTP, (b) role in disciplinary practices at their schools, and (c) reported level of graduate and professional development training in effective disciplinary practices, effective behavior management strategies, and the STPP?) was analyzed using several one-way analysis of variance tests to reveal any significant difference in these areas among the S-BMH professionals.

### **Results**

A total of 341 participants completed the demographic questionnaire and the PRDPS survey to assess S-BMH professionals' perceptions of and role in school disciplinary policies and practices that contribute to school-to-prison pipeline. Details of the psychometric properties of the PRDPS survey and various data analyses to answer the five research questions are discussed below.

#### **Research Question 1**

To answer the first research question, (What are S-BMH professionals' perceptions of the disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline?), descriptive statistics from questions in the PRDPS regarding S-BMH professionals' perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices and the school-to-prison pipeline were analyzed.

Regarding exclusionary discipline practices (Table 4), over 90% of surveyed S-BMH professionals reported support of prevention programs to reduce exclusionary discipline and that exclusionary discipline practices hurt students by taking away academic learning time. Over 80% of S-BMH professionals agreed that exclusionary discipline practices (a) do not solve discipline problems, (b) do not reduce likelihood of future misbehavior, (c) do not serve a positive purpose by allowing students time to think about their behavior, and (d) are not effective for improving

student behavior. Over 60% of S-BMH professionals agreed that suspension, regardless of effectiveness, is virtually the only option when disciplining disruptive students and when students are not gaining anything from school and are disrupting the learning environment. School-based mental health professionals were more divided on whether suspension is unnecessary if a positive school climate and challenging instruction are provided (45% agreed, 30% disagreed).

For perceptions regarding zero tolerance policies (Table 5), over 70% of S-BMH professionals did not believe that zero tolerance policies make a significant contribution to maintaining order at their schools. Over 60% of S-BMH professionals did not agree that zero tolerance sends a clear message to disruptive students about appropriate behavior in school.

For the impact of race/ethnicity on disciplinary policies (Table 6), over 80% of S-BMH professionals agreed that students of color were at greater risk of becoming part of the school-to-prison pipeline. These professionals were more varied in their response to the idea that suspension and expulsion are unfair to minority students (56.1% agreed) and that race/ethnicity play a role in the likelihood a child will need to be disciplined at school (50.5% disagreed).

For their perceptions of the school-to-prison pipeline (Table 7), over 80% of S-BMH professionals agreed that (a) students who have been subject to exclusionary discipline practices have a higher likelihood of involvement with the criminal justice system, (b) there is a connection between disciplinary methods used in school systems and juvenile justice systems, and (c) that they were familiar with the concept of the “school-to-prison” pipeline. The participants showed varied response on whether the school-to-prison pipeline had an adverse effect on students at their respective schools (43.1% agreed, 44% did not agree or disagree, 12.7% disagreed).

## Research Question 2

To answer the second research question (What programs or practices do S-BMH professionals most support in maintaining discipline and promoting safety in their schools?), descriptive statistics from Question #29 of the PRDPS was analyzed (see Appendix B). Overall, S-BMH professionals were most in support of the use of PBIS (58.9%), Counseling or Therapy (44.6%), and Data-Based Decision Making (45%) and least in support of the programs/practices Expulsion (1.2%) and Zero-Tolerance Policies (2.3%). For more details, refer to Table 8.

Table 8

### *S-BMH Professionals' Support of Programs/Practices to Maintain Discipline & Promote Safety*

Program/ Practice	%Almost Always Used	%Often Used	%Sometimes Used	%Occasionally Used	%Never Used	%Unfamiliar Program Practice	<i>M</i>
PBIS <sup>a</sup>	58.9	25.5	10.3	4.1	1.2	—	4.37
ISS <sup>b</sup>	7.0	16.7	25.2	42.8	8.2	—	2.72
Alt Sch <sup>c</sup>	1.8	7.3	24.6	58.7	7.3	0.3	2.37
Therapy <sup>d</sup>	44.6	38.4	12.9	3.8	0.3	—	4.23
IST <sup>e</sup>	37.8	20.2	17.9	16.1	7.3	0.6	3.63
Expulsion	1.2	1.8	5.3	44.0	47.5	0.3	1.64
RJP <sup>f</sup>	33.7	17.0	20.5	15.2	9.4	4.1	3.38
OSS <sup>g</sup>	3.2	12.3	15.0	56.9	12.3	0.3	2.36
ZTP <sup>h</sup>	2.3	9.1	16.1	32.0	38.1	2.3	1.99
MDTeam <sup>i</sup>	45.5	19.6	12.0	12.0	9.1	1.8	3.75
D-BDM <sup>j</sup>	50.1	22.3	11.1	12.0	3.2	1.2	4.01

a. Positive Behavior Intervention Supports

b. In-School Suspensions

c. Placement in Alternative Schools

d. Counseling or Therapy

e. In-service training and workshops for school staff covering discipline strategies and classroom management.

f. Restorative Justice Practices

g. Out-of-School Suspensions

h. Zero Tolerance Policies

i. Multidisciplinary Teams (including School-Based Mental Health Professionals) for addressing school discipline practices

j. Data-Based Decision Making

k. “—” means no participant indicated this option on the survey



### Research Question 3

To answer the third research question (Would reported levels of graduate and professional development training be related to S-BMH professionals' perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline?), descriptive statistics for reported levels of training were first analyzed. Participants reported receiving adequate training in graduate school in effective behavior management strategies (52.2%) and effective v. ineffective disciplinary policies and practices (40.1%). However, 53.3% of respondents disagreed that they had received adequate training in STPP (Table 9).

Table 9

#### *S-BMH Professionals' Reports on the Adequacy of Graduate Level Training*

<i>"At my graduate training institution, I received adequate training regarding..."</i>	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	% Disagree <sup>b</sup>	% Neither Agree nor Disagree <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>
Effective Behavior Management Strategies	52.2	31.7	16.1	3.24
Effective v. Ineffective Disciplinary Policies and Practices	40.1	41.4	18.5	2.96
The School-to-Prison Pipeline	27.0	53.3	19.6	2.65

a. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Agree or Agree.

b. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Disagree or Disagree.

c. Percent of items that were rated as Neither Agree nor Disagree.

Participants rated their professional development training similar to their graduate school training. They agreed that their professional development in effective behavior management strategies (65.1%) and effective v. ineffective disciplinary policies and practices (52.5%) were adequate, but they disagreed their STPP training was adequate (53.6%; Table 10).

Table 10

*S-BMH Professionals' Reports on the Adequacy of Professional Development*

<i>"I have received adequate professional regarding..."</i>	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	% Disagree <sup>b</sup>	% Neither Agree nor Disagree <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>
Effective Behavior Management Strategies	65.1	21.7	13.2	3.57
Effective v. Ineffective Disciplinary Policies and Practices	52.5	32.9	14.7	3.23
The School-to-Prison Pipeline	26.9	53.6	19.4	2.65

a. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Agree or Agree.

b. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Disagree or Disagree.

c. Percent of items that were rated as Neither Agree nor Disagree.

To assess the relationship between reported levels of graduate and professional development training and perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline, a Pearson  $r$  correlation coefficient was computed between the two subscores, Perceptions of the STPP and S-BMH Professionals' Reports of Training. For the Perceptions of the STPP subscore (see Table 2), in reflection of the literature, several items within this subscale (denoted by \*\*) were recoded to reflect higher scores when S-BMH professionals' perceptions were more aligned to the research body regarding the STPP, including perceptions such as more favorable attitudes towards preventive rather than exclusionary disciplinary policies, an acknowledgement on the impact of race/ethnicity on the STPP, and a familiarity with the STPP as a whole. For example, an item such as, "18. Exclusionary discipline (suspension and expulsion) practices are effective for improving student behavior," which does not align with the STPP literature, was recoded to where participants who disagreed with this statement were assigned a higher score than those who agreed with this statement.

Higher numbers on S-BMH Professionals' Reports of Training (see Table 3) represented more agreement to statements about receiving adequate graduate and professional development

training in effective behavior management strategies, effective vs. ineffective disciplinary practices, and the STPP.

At an alpha level of .01, there was a significant positive relationship between the perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline scores ( $M = 70.19$ ,  $SD = 9.48$ ) and the reported levels of overall graduate and professional development training scores ( $M = 18.31$ ,  $SD = 5.15$ ),  $r = .19$ ,  $p < .001$ , two-tailed).

To get a more in-depth look at what types of training were related to the perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline, Pearson correlation coefficients were also computed between the Perceptions of the STPP and the specific types of graduate and professional development training assessed in this study (see Tables 9 and 10).

Results of this analysis indicated that there was a significant positive relationship between Perceptions of the STPP and (a) graduate training regarding the school-to-prison pipeline ( $r = .31$ ,  $p < .001$ , two tailed), (b) professional development training regarding the school-to-prison pipeline ( $r = .26$ ,  $p < .001$ , two tailed), and (c) professional development in effective vs. ineffective disciplinary practices ( $r = .12$ ,  $p < .03$ , two tailed).

#### **Research Question 4**

To answer the fourth research question (Do S-BMH professionals play a role in disciplinary practices at their respective schools?), descriptive statistics for the roles S-BMH professionals play in disciplinary practices were first analyzed. Over half of participants (53.4%) said they play a role in decision-making for student suspensions or expulsions, while 32.8% had no role (Table 11).

Table 11

*S-BMH Professionals Reported Role(s) in Disciplinary Practices*

Items	<i>n</i>	%
Developing and/or adapting school-wide disciplinary practices	66	32.8
Providing professional development trainings on effective disciplinary practices	61	17.9
Providing professional development trainings on classroom management	81	23.8
School-wide prevention and intervention services focused on discipline (ex. PBIS or RJP)	76	22.3
Decision-making for student suspensions and/or expulsions	182	53.4
I do not play a role in disciplinary policies or practices at my school site.	112	32.8

Regarding S-BMH professionals perceived role and value in disciplinary practices, only 31.4% agreed they play a valuable role, 49.8% agreed school administrators value their opinions, 73.9% strongly agreed that they would advocate for evidence-based practices, and 52.8% strongly agreed that they wish for a larger role (Table 12).

Table 12

*S-BMH Professionals' Reports on Perceived Role/Value in Disciplinary Practices (from PRDPS)*

Items	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	% Disagree <sup>b</sup>	% Neither Agree nor Disagree <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>
I play a valuable role in the school disciplinary policies and practices in my school.	31.4	42.5	26.1	2.80
My school administration values my opinion and views me as a resource regarding the school-wide disciplinary practices.	49.8	24.4	25.8	3.32
I am involved in a multi-disciplinary team regarding disciplinary practices at my school.	39.0	46.6	14.4	2.87

Table 12 Continued

Items	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	% Disagree <sup>b</sup>	% Neither Agree nor Disagree <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>
If my school were implementing an ineffective or harmful disciplinary strategy, I would feel comfortable advocating for evidence-based disciplinary practices in my school.	73.9	10.6	15.5	3.79
I wish I could play a larger role in disciplinary policies and practices at my school	52.8	21.4	25.8	3.41

a. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Agree or Agree.

b. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Disagree or Disagree.

c. Percent of items that were rated as Neither Agree nor Disagree.

Next, a Pearson  $r$  correlation was conducted between S-BMH professionals' reported caseloads and their perceived role in disciplinary practices at their school site. At an alpha level of .01, there was a significant positive relationship between their wish to play a larger role in disciplinary practices at their respective school and caseload,  $r = .17, p < .001$ , two-tailed). At an alpha level of .01, there was no significant relationship between those who reported they play a valuable role in the school disciplinary policies and practices in their school and caseload,  $r = -.06, p = .30$ , two-tailed).

### Research Question 5

For the fifth research question (Are there differences between school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers on their perceptions of the STPP, role in disciplinary practices at their schools, and reported levels of graduate and professional development training in effective disciplinary practices, effective behavior management strategies, and the STPP), a one-way analysis of variance test was performed to reveal any significant difference in these areas among the S-BMH professionals. First, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to test for differences among school psychologists, school counselors, and school

social workers regarding their perceptions of the STPP. At an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences among S-BMH professionals on their perceptions of the STPP,  $F(2, 338) = 28.86, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .15$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists ( $p < .001$ ) and school social workers ( $p < .001$ ) had significantly higher scores on Perceptions of the STPP than school counselors. All other pairwise comparisons were not found to be statistically significant.

Second, a one-way ANOVA was conducted to test for differences among school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers on their perceived role in disciplinary practices at their school site. At an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences among S-BMH professionals on their desires to play a larger role in disciplinary policies and practices at their schools (Item #22),  $F(2, 338) = 21.62, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .11$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists ( $p < .001$ ) and school social workers ( $p < .001$ ) reported wishing to play a larger role in disciplinary policies and practices at their schools more than school counselors. At an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were no significant differences between S-BMH professionals on their beliefs that they play a valuable role in disciplinary policies and practices at their schools (Item #5),  $F(2, 338) = 1.23, p = .29, \eta^2_p = .007$ .

Third, several one-way ANOVA tests were conducted to test for differences among school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers on their reported levels of overall training and in the specific areas of graduate and professional development training in effective behavior management strategies, effective vs. ineffective disciplinary policies and practices, and the STPP.

For reports of overall graduate and professional development training, at an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences in training among S-BMH professionals,  $F(2, 338) = 18.98, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .10$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists reported having more adequate levels of graduate training and professional development than school social workers ( $p = .002$ ) and school counselors ( $p < .001$ ). School social workers reported having more adequate levels of graduate training and professional development than school counselors ( $p = .03$ ).

For reports of graduate training in effective behavior management strategies, at an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences among S-BMH professionals,  $F(2, 338) = 25.39, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .13$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists reported having received more adequate graduate training in effective behavior management strategies than school social workers ( $p < .001$ ) and school counselors ( $p < .001$ ).

For reports of graduate training in effective vs. ineffective disciplinary policies and practices, at an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences among S-BMH professionals,  $F(2, 338) = 14.93, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .08$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists reported having received more adequate graduate training in effective vs. ineffective disciplinary policies and practices than school social workers ( $p < .001$ ) and school counselors ( $p < .001$ ).

For reports of graduate training regarding the STPP, at an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences among S-BMH professionals,  $F(2, 338) = 7.70, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .04$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists ( $p = .001$ )

and school social workers ( $p = .002$ ) reported having received more adequate graduate training regarding the STPP than school counselors.

For reports of professional development training in effective behavior management strategies, at an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences between S-BMH professionals,  $F(2, 338) = 11.00, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .06$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists reported having received more adequate professional development training in effective behavior management strategies than school social workers ( $p = .02$ ) and school counselors ( $p < .001$ ).

For reports of professional development training in effective vs. ineffective disciplinary practices and policies, at an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences among S-BMH professionals,  $F(2, 338) = 4.14, p = .02, \eta^2_p = .02$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists reported having received more adequate professional development training in effective vs. ineffective disciplinary practices and policies than school counselors ( $p = .01$ ).

For reports of professional development training regarding the STPP, at an alpha level of .05, results indicated that there were significant differences among S-BMH professionals,  $F(2, 338) = 11.11, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .06$ . Results of a Tukey's HSD test indicated that school psychologists ( $p < .001$ ) and school social workers ( $p = .005$ ) reported having received more adequate levels professional development training regarding the STPP than school counselors.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this study was to assess S-BMH professionals' perceptions and reported levels of training regarding school disciplinary practices that advance the STPP as well as their actual role and practice in disciplinary matters in their current school setting. The literature



collectively assessing school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers perceptions of STPP and the actual role these professionals are playing in disciplinary practices at their schools is limited. A total of 341 S-BMH professionals completed the Perceptions and Role in Disciplinary Practices Survey (PRDPS), adapted in part from Skiba's (2004) Disciplinary Practices Survey. This included 136 school psychologists, 105 school social workers, and 100 school counselors.

For the *first research question*, S-BMH professionals' perceptions of the disciplinary policies and practices related to the STPP were analyzed. It was predicted that S-BMH professionals would have perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the STPP that aligned with the current literature. In alignment with the current literature, the majority of S-BMH professionals (at least more than 70%) favored preventative disciplinary practices rather than exclusionary discipline practices, acknowledged the ineffectiveness of exclusionary discipline practices and zero tolerance policies, acknowledged the impact of race/ethnicity on the likelihood of becoming part of the STPP, recognized the connection between disciplinary methods used in school systems and the criminal justice system, and reported familiarity with the STPP as a whole. Though promising that a large majority of our S-BMH professionals support preventive, evidence-based practices, it is concerning that there are still a group of S-BMH professionals remaining (about 30%) whose perceptions did not align with the current literature. The literature has demonstrated that the use of ineffective disciplinary policies and practices (e.g., zero tolerance policies and exclusionary discipline) are harmful to school children (APA Task Force, 2008; Balfanz et al., 2015; Hemphill et al., 2013; Rosenbaum, 2018; Shollenberger, 2015), particularly Black children (Gregory et al., 2010; Heitzeg, 2009; Hoffman, 2014; Skiba et al., 2011; Shollenberger, 2015). Therefore, these S-BMH professionals whose perceptions are

not aligned with the current literature could be contributing to disciplinary practices that hurt school children, despite their responsibility of advocating for best practices (Mayworm & Sharkey, 2014; Whitaker, 2019) and promoting overall student wellness (NASP, 2020; Tan et al., 2015).

In addition, within S-BMH professionals' reports, there were two items in which over half of S-BMH professionals had perceptions unaligned with the literature including: indicating suspension is the only option and/or last resort for disruptive students and that race/ethnicity did not play a role in the likelihood of a student being disciplined at school. Research has indicated that Black students are far more likely to be disciplined in school compared to their White counterparts (Fabelo et al. 2011, Shollenberger, 2015; Skiba et al., 2002; Skiba, Chung, et al. 2014; Wallace et al., 2008) and that exclusionary discipline practices like suspension, regardless of the type of student behavior, were associated with an increase in future problem behaviors (APA Task Force, 2008). However, despite deviations from the STPP literature on these two items from the PRDPS, the vast majority of responses indicated that S-BMH professionals' perceptions of the disciplinary policies and practices related to the STPP were aligned to the current literature—therefore, the first prediction was supported. Future research could explore why S-BMH professionals were more divided on their viewpoints regarding the impact of race/ethnicity in disciplinary practices and the STPP, despite the wealth of literature demonstrating this negative impact on Black students. This future research could include whether perceptions of the STPP and the impact of a student's race/ethnicity on discipline are different for S-BMH professionals who work in districts with more diverse student demographics.

For the *second research question*, it was predicted that S-BMH professionals would support programs/practices that were preventative, rather than exclusionary in nature based on likely exposure to effective disciplinary strategies in graduate and professional development training. This prediction was supported: S-BMH professionals favored preventive practices such as PBIS, Counseling or Therapy, Restorative Justice Practices, Multi-Disciplinary Teams (including School-Based Mental Health Professionals), and In-service training and workshops for school staff covering discipline strategies and classroom management vs. exclusionary practices such as Zero-Tolerance Policies, Expulsion, In-School and Out-of-School Suspensions, and Placement in Alternative Schools. Preventative programs, like those most supported by S-BMH professionals, are associated with better outcomes for school children including reduction in exclusionary discipline practices, more positive school climates, higher graduation rates, and better overall academic outcomes (Bradshaw et al., 2010; Gregory et al., 2014; James et al. 2019; NASP, 2020; Karp & Frank, 2015; Payne & Welch, 2018; Rideout et al., 2010). Though RJP have been shown to improve student outcomes (Augustine et al., 2018; James et al. 2019; Gregory et al., 2014; Karp & Frank, 2015; Payne & Welch, 2018; Rideout et al., 2010), S-BMH professionals were least familiar with Restorative Justice Practices (4.1% ranked as unfamiliar program/practice). In future studies, it is worth exploring why S-BMH professionals were least familiar with Restorative Justice, and the role of training institutions for training future S-BMH professionals on evidence-based practices.

For the *third research question*, the reported levels of graduate and professional development training as well as the relationship between this training and S-BMH professionals' perceptions of the STPP were analyzed. It was predicted that S-BMH professionals who reported having more adequate training (in graduate school or through professional development)

regarding effective behavior management strategies, effective vs. ineffective disciplinary practices, and the STPP would have perceptions of disciplinary policies and practices related to the STPP that aligned with the current literature. This prediction was supported. However, overall, there were reported deficits in training in behavior management, effective vs. ineffective disciplinary policies, and the STPP in both graduate and professional development training. Despite researchers like NASP (2020) and Maywood and Sharkey (2014) touting the level of training these S-BMH professionals have in these areas, S-BMH professionals' self-reports indicate that much more training is needed. Reports of the adequacy of training regarding the STPP were consistently the area reported as needing the most training, across both graduate and professional development training. Further research is needed to determine why S-BMH professionals report overall deficits in training in these areas, particularly training regarding the STPP specifically. School-based mental health professionals should be leaders in these areas in their school settings (NASP, 2020).

Results indicated that there were significant positive relationships between perceptions of the disciplinary policies and practices related to the STPP and reported levels of training. This meant that the more training S-BMH professionals reported receiving, the more their perceptions aligned with the current literature. Though no causal interpretation can be made, it is worth noting the potential impact of graduate and professional development training on understanding the STPP. Participants who reported having specific training on the STPP in graduate school or professional development had perceptions more aligned with the literature on the PRDPS. Therefore, it would be expected that increased training in behavior management, effective vs. ineffective disciplinary policies, and the STPP in both graduate and professional development

training for S-BMH professionals could contribute to S-BMH professionals' ability to promote best practices of school children.

For the *fourth research question*, S-BMH professionals' reported role(s) in school disciplinary practices, their perceived role/value in disciplinary practices, and how these perceived roles were related to S-BMH professionals' caseloads were analyzed. The most commonly reported roles that S-BMH professionals endorsed were decision-making for student suspensions and/or expulsions and developing and/or adapting school-wide disciplinary practices. A further analysis of open-responses associated with endorsement of decision-making for student suspensions and/or expulsions indicated that S-BMH professionals were playing a role specifically in manifest determinations, which echoes Mayworm and Sharkey's (2014) report that manifestation determinations are school psychologists primary (or sometimes only) role in discipline practices. Though S-BMH professionals, particularly school psychologists, can serve as a vital team member in a manifest determination review due to their knowledge of disabilities, evaluation practices, and special education law (Allen, 2021), S-BMH professionals are surely equipped to play a variety of other roles in school disciplinary practices. However, in this study, less than 25% of S-BMH professionals endorsed providing professional development on effective disciplinary practices, classroom management, or endorsed playing a role in school-wide prevention and intervention services focused on discipline, such as PBIS or RJP. Though it is recommended in the literature for S-BMH professionals to play a role in multi-disciplinary teams to implement effective school wide disciplinary policies and frameworks (NASP, 2020), only 39% of S-BMH professionals reported being a part of such a team. Most notably, 32.8% of S-BMH professionals reported playing no role at all in disciplinary practices at their schools. Therefore, based on data collected from the current sample, it appears S-BMH professionals are

not used to their full potential to positively influence school discipline and improve student outcomes (NASP, 2017).

This study found that although over 70% of S-BMH professionals reported feeling comfortable to advocate for evidence-based disciplinary practices at their school, only about half of S-BMH professionals felt their opinion regarding discipline was valued and/or utilized. Even though our S-BMH professionals are trying to advocate for best practices, nearly half feel their efforts to advocate are in vain. Though efforts are being made to increase the number of S-BMH professionals in schools (Mann et al., 2019; 2008, Maywood & Sharkey, 2014, NASP, 2020; NASP, 2017; Swick & Powers, 2018; Whitaker et al., 2019), our efforts may also be in vain if S-BMH professionals' opinions are not valued and respected by their school administrative teams. Future studies could explore the role S-BMH professionals could play from the perspective of school administrators, including superintendents, principals, special education directors, etc.

There is a relationship between school-based mental health professionals' perceptions of their role in discipline practices and their caseloads. Only about half of these professionals met a caseload at or below their professional organization's guideline (NASP = 500-700, ASCA = <400, NASW = <250). When the relationship between caseload and S-BMH professionals' desire to play a larger role in disciplinary practices was assessed, there was a significant positive relationship. This indicated that as S-BMH professionals' caseload grew in number, so did their reports of wishing to play a larger role in disciplinary practices at their school. Of the S-BMH professionals in this study, over half reported wishing to play a larger role in their schools' disciplinary practices. Continued efforts are needed to address the shortage of S-BMH professionals in our schools, as well as continued advocacy for their ability to promote positive change in disciplinary practices (Swick & Powers, 2018; Whitaker et al., 2019). If all S-BMH

professionals had caseloads at or below their recommended size, they would be better positioned to lead more comprehensive roles in school disciplinary practices.

The *fifth and final research question* addressed whether there were differences among the types of S-BMH professionals, school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors on their perceptions of the STPP, their role in disciplinary practices, and in their reported levels of graduate and professional development training in effective disciplinary practices, effective behavior management strategies, and the STPP. It was predicted that there would be differences among school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers in all these areas.

Results revealed statistically significant differences among these professionals in several areas. For their perceptions on the STPP, school psychologists and school social workers were found to have significantly higher scores on perceptions of the STPP than school counselors. Therefore, school psychologists and school social workers had perceptions that were more aligned to the current body of STPP research than school counselors. In addition, school psychologists and school social workers were also found to have statistically significant differences among school counselors on their desires to play larger roles in disciplinary practices at their schools.

In reports of the adequacy of their training, school psychologists had significantly higher reported levels of overall graduate and professional development training in all facets of behavior management and disciplinary policies than school social workers and school counselors. In addition, school psychologists had better training in the STPP than school social workers. Thus, the prediction was supported.

Notably, school psychologist and school social workers had perceptions of the STPP more aligned with the literature and a desire to play a larger role in disciplinary practices in their schools than did school counselors. In reported levels of training, school psychologists consistently differed from school social workers and/or school counselors in every report of the adequacy of training. Of the three professions, school psychologists typically have at least one more year required within their graduate programs (Whitaker, 2019), than do school counselors or school social workers, which likely contributed to their views of having received more adequate training. Future research is needed to explore why school counselors consistently differed from school psychologists and school counselors in reported levels of training, their perceptions of the STPP, and their role in disciplinary practices. Specifically, the American School Counselor Association could analyze their curriculum and program requirements to assess where potential gaps in training may lie. Future studies could also explore whether school counselors' interpretation of their prescribed role in discipline differs from other S-BMH professionals.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This study focused on S-BMH professionals' perceptions and reported levels of training regarding school disciplinary practices that advance the STPP as well as their actual role and practice in disciplinary matters in their current school setting. Although there were significant results found, several limitations of this study must be noted to improve future research on this topic. First, conclusive statements cannot be made based on an exploratory study such as this. Despite acceptable internal consistency on the adapted PRDPS and subscores, these surveys/scores have not been empirically validated. The subscores were created solely by face validity on how the items grouped together. Future research could evaluate the usability of an



adapted survey such as this, particularly on how this survey could be validated to apply to other school professionals.

A second limitation of this study is the reliance on self-report data. Within all surveys, the researcher risks that survey questions may be interpreted differently by different participants and are subject to the social desirability bias (Holden & Passey, 2009), where participants give responses that appear socially desirable rather than those that most accurately represent them or their thoughts. In future studies, additional methods of data collection, such as an examination of the disciplinary practices these professionals are currently using at their schools and/or adding scenario-based questions to assess perceptions of the STPP could be helpful in addressing what the participants' true perceptions of these practices are.

A third limitation is the demographic make-up of the study, as most participants were only from the state of Illinois. Future studies could look at how perceptions of the STPP and disciplinary practices could differ from region to region, and state to state. In addition, most participants were White women, which is not representative of the population. Though White women predominate the fields of S-BMH practice, future efforts should be made to obtain a more diverse sample of participants.

### **Implications and Conclusion**

In conclusion, the harmful disciplinary policies and practices that contribute to the STPP occur in the presence of S-BMH professionals, who are tasked in promoting the overall well-being and success of school children. However, prior to this study, research was limited on how S-BMH professionals perceived these disciplinary policies and played a role within these disciplinary practices. Though many professional organizations and groups had promoted the expertise and training S-BMH professionals possess related to effective disciplinary practices, S-

BMH professionals' reports of their adequacy of their training in these areas was unknown. Results of this study indicated that S-BMH professionals generally possess the perceptions of the STPP that align with the literature and therefore could advocate for better practices within their schools. These professionals support preventative, rather than exclusive disciplinary practices, and are cognizant of the impact of ineffective disciplinary policies on the funnel to the juvenile justice system. These highly trained professionals are equipped to help within school disciplinary practices, including implementing evidence-based services, sharing input on a multi-disciplinary team, providing professional development on the STPP, and more. However, with high caseloads, feelings of inadequacy of their training within these areas, and a desire to play a larger role in these practices, much work is needed to be done to involve these professionals in disciplinary policies and practices in schools.

Implications for the field include a need for increased graduate and professional development training specifically focusing on the STPP, as this was an area that S-BMH professionals reported receiving the least adequate training. Increased overall training, specifically for the school counseling field, would assist in S-BMH professionals' ability to advocate for effective disciplinary practices that do not disproportionately hurt school children of color. In addition, increased awareness of the skillset that S-BMH professionals possess in effective disciplinary policies and behavior management is vital in getting buy-in from school administrators to include S-BMH professionals in system-wide disciplinary practices. Along with this, continued efforts to meet professional guidelines regarding caseloads would allow S-BMH to provide more comprehensive services and use the full capabilities of their skillset regarding disciplinary practices. When S-BMH can play a larger role in school disciplinary practices and policies, they can provide best services to those students who are

disproportionately impacted by ineffective school disciplinary practices and the STPP. With increased efforts to involve S-BMH professionals and to continue advocating for effective, preventative disciplinary policies, it is within reach to end the funnel between our schools and the juvenile justice system.

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**Appendix A**  
Demographic Questionnaire

**Directions:** Please tell us about yourself and your role in the school you currently work at. Please answer each item below and check all options that apply to you.

1. Please indicate your role in your school.

- School Psychologist
- School Counselor
- School Social Worker
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

2. What is your highest degree earned?

- Bachelor's
- Master's (ex. MSW, M.S., M.A.)
- Specialist (ex. SSP, EdS)
- Doctorate (ex. PsyD, Ph.D.)

3. How many years of experience do you have in your current role? Please write in.

4. How many years have you worked in your current school? Please write in.

5. What is your caseload, i.e., how many students do you serve each year?

- Over 2,000 students
- 1,500 to 2,000 students
- 1,000 to 1,500 students
- 500 to 700 students
- Up to 400 students
- Less than 250 students

6. What state do you work in? Please write in.

7. What is the setting of the school you work in?

- Urban
- Suburban
- Rural

8. What is your race or ethnicity?

- White
- Black
- Latino/Latinx
- Asian
- Pacific Islander
- Native American
- Multiple Races
- Other \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer Not To Say

9. Please indicate your gender(s). Select all that apply.

- Woman
- Man
- Transgender
- Non-binary
- Another option not listed here (please specify): \_\_\_\_\_
- Prefer Not To Say

### Appendix B

#### Perceptions & Role in Disciplinary Practices Survey

**Directions:** For the following questions, please select one response that best reflects your opinion on the item. Each item has five responses, Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neither Agree nor Disagree (3), Agree (4), and Strongly Agree (5).

Question Items	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree Nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree
1. Out-of-school suspension make students less likely to misbehave in the future.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Race and ethnicity play a role in the likelihood a child will need to be disciplined in school.	1	2	3	4	5
3. Zero tolerance policies make a significant contribution to maintaining order at my school.	1	2	3	4	5
4. Suspension and expulsion do not really solve discipline problems.	1	2	3	4	5
5. I play a valuable role in the school disciplinary policies and practices in my school.	1	2	3	4	5
6. Zero tolerance sends a clear message to disruptive students about appropriate behavior in school.	1	2	3	4	5
7. I believe suspension is unnecessary if we provide a positive school climate and challenging instruction.	1	2	3	4	5
8. There is no connection between disciplinary methods used in school systems and the juvenile justice system.	1	2	3	4	5
9. My school administration values my opinion and views me as a resource regarding school-wide disciplinary practices.	1	2	3	4	5

**Appendix B Continued**

10. Suspensions and expulsions hurt students by removing them from academic learning time.	1	2	3	4	5
11. Regardless of whether it is effective, suspension is virtually our only option in disciplining disruptive students.	1	2	3	4	5
12. Certain students are not gaining anything from school and disrupt the learning environment for others. In such a case, the use of suspension and expulsion is justified to preserve the learning environment for students who wish to learn.	1	2	3	4	5
13. I am involved in a multi-disciplinary team regarding disciplinary practices at my school.	1	2	3	4	5
14. I believe suspension and expulsion allows students time away from school that encourages them to think about their behavior.	1	2	3	4	5
15. I have the adequate knowledge and training to advocate for effective disciplinary strategies and practices in my school.	1	2	3	4	5
16. Suspension and expulsion are unfair to minority students.	1	2	3	4	5
17. I believe that putting prevention programs (e.g., restorative justice practices, school-wide positive behavior and intervention supports) in place can reduce the need for suspension and expulsion.	1	2	3	4	5
18. Exclusionary discipline (suspension and expulsion) practices are effective for improving student behavior.	1	2	3	4	5

**Appendix B Continued**

19. If my school were implementing an ineffective or harmful disciplinary strategy, I would feel comfortable advocating for evidence-based disciplinary practices in my school.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Students who are suspended or expelled have a higher likelihood of future involvement with the criminal justice system.	1	2	3	4	5
21. The school-to-prison pipeline has an adverse effect on the students at my school.	1	2	3	4	5
22. I wish I could play a larger role in disciplinary policies and practices at my school.	1	2	3	4	5
23. I am familiar with the concept of the “school-to-prison pipeline”.	1	2	3	4	5
24. Students of color are at greater risk of becoming part of the school-to-prison pipeline.	1	2	3	4	5
25. At my graduate training institution, I received adequate training in effective behavior management strategies.	1	2	3	4	5
26. At my graduate training institution, I received adequate training in effective vs. ineffective disciplinary policies and practices.	1	2	3	4	5
27. At my graduate training institution, I received adequate training regarding the school-to-prison pipeline.	1	2	3	4	5
28. I have received adequate professional development in effective behavior management strategies.	1	2	3	4	5
29. I have received adequate professional development in effective vs. ineffective disciplinary practices.	1	2	3	4	5



**Appendix B Continued**

30. I have received adequate professional development regarding the school-to-prison pipeline.	1	2	3	4	5
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**Directions:** For question number 31, please rank the extent to which you believe the following programs and practices should be used in maintaining discipline and promoting safety in your school. Each item has six responses, ranging from Never Used (1) to Almost Always Used (5) and Unfamiliar Program/Practice (6). If you are unaware/unfamiliar with any of the disciplinary practices listed below (#31 a-k), please select the option #6, Unfamiliar Program/Practice.

Question #31:	Never Used	Occasionally Used	Sometimes Used	Often Used	Almost Always Used	Unfamiliar Program / Practice
a. Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports	1	2	3	4	5	6
b. In-School Suspensions	1	2	3	4	5	6
c. Placement in Alternative Schools	1	2	3	4	5	6
d. Counseling or Therapy	1	2	3	4	5	6
e. In-service training and workshops for school staff covering discipline strategies and classroom management.	1	2	3	4	5	6
f. Expulsion	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Appendix B Continued**

g. Restorative Justice Practices	1	2	3	4	5	6
h. Out-of-school Suspensions	1	2	3	4	5	6
i. Zero Tolerance Policies	1	2	3	4	5	6
j. Multidisciplinary Teams (including School-based Mental Health Professionals) for addressing school discipline practices	1	2	3	4	5	6
k. Data-Based Decision Making	1	2	3	4	5	6

32. If you play a role (or roles) in disciplinary practices at your school site, please select all roles that apply:

- Developing and/or adapting school-wide disciplinary practices
- Providing professional development trainings on effective disciplinary practices
- Providing professional development trainings on classroom management
- Decision-making for student suspensions and/or expulsions
- School-wide prevention & intervention services focused on discipline (ex. PBIS or Restorative Justice Practices)
- Other role or roles not listed here (please briefly describe): \_\_\_\_\_
- I do not play a role in disciplinary policies or practices at my school site.

**Thank you for your participation in this study! Your participation will help advance knowledge in the impact of school-based mental health professionals in school disciplinary policies related to the school-to-prison pipeline. Again, thank you for your time and assistance in this project... it is truly appreciated!**

### Appendix C

#### Consent to Participate in a Study

Thank you for your willingness to participate in a graduate thesis research study being conducted by Ashlyn Wingate, a graduate student in the Specialist in School Psychology Program at Eastern Illinois University. The research aims to understand the disciplinary policies and practices of public schools and the experiences of school-based mental health professionals in student discipline in general. This research project has been approved by the Eastern Illinois University Institutional Review Board, which assures the protection of the rights and welfare of research participants.

Participation in this study involves completing an electronic survey, which will take about 15 minutes to complete. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary and you can stop participation at any point without penalty. This study is also entirely confidential, meaning no personally identifying information will be collected and only aggregate data will be reported.

By completing this survey, you are giving consent to participate in the study (please check, 'AGREE to Participate' below). If you decline to participate, please click on 'EXIT' below, and the survey will close.

If you have questions or concerns, you may contact me, Ashlyn Wingate, at [akwingate@eiu.edu](mailto:akwingate@eiu.edu); my thesis supervisor, Dr. Assege HaileMariam at [ahailemariam@eiu.edu](mailto:ahailemariam@eiu.edu), or the EIU Institutional Review Board at [eiurb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiurb@www.eiu.edu).

In addition, if you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board  
Eastern Illinois University  
600 Lincoln Ave.  
Charleston, IL 61920  
Telephone: (217) 581-8576  
E-mail: [eiurb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiurb@www.eiu.edu)

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

Thank you for your participation and for contributing to knowledge in the field, and for helping me meet the thesis requirement of my program! I sincerely appreciate your help!

Sincerely,

Ashlyn Wingate

AGREE to Participate

EXIT

**Appendix D**

## Letter to School District – Invitation to Participate in a Study

Administrator's Name  
Position  
School Name  
Address Date

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Ashlyn Wingate. I am a third-year graduate student in the Specialist in School Psychology program at Eastern Illinois University. I am writing to request your permission for your school-based mental health employees (e.g., school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors) to participate in a study I am conducting to fulfill my program thesis requirement. The input of these specific professionals will advance knowledge of school-based mental health professionals' understanding and training regarding school disciplinary practices regarding the school-to-prison pipeline and their actual role in these practices in the school setting.

With your permission, I will ask your school-based mental health professionals to complete two brief surveys that will take about 15 minutes to complete. All school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors are invited to complete the online survey and their responses will remain anonymous, i.e., their name of the school they work at will never be identified. Upon your approval, I will send the link to the survey to you so that you can share the link with your district's mental health professionals.

I look forward to hearing from you. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me, Ashlyn, at [akwingate@eiu.edu](mailto:akwingate@eiu.edu); my thesis supervisor, Dr. Assege HaileMariam at [aHaileMariam@eiu.edu](mailto:aHaileMariam@eiu.edu), or the EIU Institutional Review Board that approved my study at [eiuirb@eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@eiu.edu).

Thank you for your consideration and assistance!

Sincerely,

Ashlyn Wingate  
Candidate in the Specialist School Psychology Program  
Eastern Illinois University  
Email: [akwingate@eiu.edu](mailto:akwingate@eiu.edu)

**Appendix D Continued**  
FB/Professional Organization Advertising

Hello! My name is Ashlyn Wingate. I am a third-year graduate student in the Specialist in School Psychology program at Eastern Illinois University. I am seeking school-based mental health employees (school psychologists, school social workers, and school counselors) to serve as participants in a study I am conducting to fulfill my program thesis requirement.

The study is entitled, "School-based Mental Health Professionals' Perceptions of and Role in Disciplinary Practices Related to the School-to-Prison Pipeline." The purpose of the study is to assess school-based mental health professionals' perceptions and reported levels of training regarding school disciplinary practices that advance the school-to-prison pipeline. In addition, the study will assess school-based mental health professionals' actual role and practice in disciplinary matters in their current school settings.

Participation in this study involves completing an electronic survey, which will take about 15 minutes to complete. This study is also entirely confidential, meaning no personally identifying information will be collected and only aggregate data will be reported.

I would greatly appreciate your help in participating in this study! If you would like to participate and contribute to knowledge in this field, the link is \_\_\_\_\_.

If you would like more information or have any questions about the study, please contact me, Ashlyn Wingate at [akwingate@eiu.edu](mailto:akwingate@eiu.edu); my thesis supervisor, Dr. Assege HaileMariam at [ahailemariam@eiu.edu](mailto:ahailemariam@eiu.edu), or the EIU Institutional Review Board that approved the study at [eiuirb@www.eiu.edu](mailto:eiuirb@www.eiu.edu).

Thank you!

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Gender</i>		
Woman	303	88.9
Man	35	10.3
Non-Binary	1	0.3
Prefer Not To Say	2	0.6
<i>Race/Ethnicity</i>		
White	311	91.2
Black	7	2.1
Asian	5	1.5
Latino/Latinx	8	2.3
Native American	2	0.6
Multiple Races	4	1.2
Prefer Not To Say	4	1.2
<i>Role in School</i>		
School Psychologist	136	39.9
School Social Worker	105	30.8
School Counselor	100	29.3
<i>Degree Earned</i>		
Bachelor's	4	1.2
Master's	211	61.9
Specialist	108	31.7
Doctorate	18	5.3
<i>State</i>		
Illinois	210	61.6
Indiana	31	9.1
Wisconsin	100	29.3
<i>Setting</i>		
Rural	158	46.3
Suburban	147	43.1
Urban	36	10.6

Table 1 Continued

	<i>n</i>	%
<i>Caseload</i>		
Less than 250 students	91	26.7
Up to 400 students	99	29.0
500 to 700 students	76	22.3
1000 to 1500 students	46	13.5
1500 to 2000 students	22	6.5
Over 2000 students	7	2.1
<i>Years of Experience</i>		
0-5 Years	117	34.3
6-10 Years	75	22.0
11-15 Years	55	16.1
16-20 Years	39	11.4
21-25 Years	25	7.33
26-30 Years	20	5.87
Over 31 Years	10	2.93

Table 2

*PRDPS Questions Related to Disciplinary Policies/ Practices and The STPP*

Items	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	<i>M</i>
**Out of school suspensions make students less likely to misbehave in the future.	0.3	5.0	10.6	41.9	42.2	4.21
Race and ethnicity play a role in the likelihood a child will need to be disciplined at school.	7.0	19.9	22.6	23.2	27.3	2.56
**Zero tolerance policies make a significant contribution to maintaining order at my school.	0.6	8.5	20.8	31.1	39.0	3.99
Suspension and expulsion do not really solve discipline problems.	39.3	45.2	8.2	5.3	2.1	4.14
**Zero tolerance sends a clear message to disruptive students about appropriate behavior in school.	1.2	13.8	18.8	40.2	26.1	3.76
I believe suspension is unnecessary if we provide a positive school climate and challenging instruction.	11.7	33.7	23.8	29.3	1.5	3.25
**There is no connection between disciplinary methods used in school systems and juvenile justice systems.	0.9	4.7	13.2	43.1	38.1	4.13
Suspensions and expulsions hurt students by removing them from academic learning time.	37.5	53.1	5.3	2.6	1.5	4.23



Table 2 Continued

Items	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	<i>M</i>
**Regardless of whether it is effective, suspension is virtually our only option in disciplining disruptive students.	1.8	13.5	11.1	43.7	29.9	3.87
**Certain students are not gaining anything from school and disrupt the learning environment. In such a case, the use of suspension and expulsion is justified to preserve the learning environment for students who wish to learn.	2.3	14.7	17.9	36.4	28.7	3.74
**I believe suspension and expulsion allows students time away from school that encourages them to think about their behavior.	0.9	4.4	12.9	38.4	43.4	4.19
Suspension and expulsion are unfair to minority students.	23.5	32.6	30.2	10.3	3.5	3.62
I believe that putting prevention program (e.g., restorative justice practices, school-wide positive behavior and intervention supports) in place can reduce the need for suspension and expulsion.	60.7	33.1	5.0	0.9	0.3	4.53
** Exclusionary discipline (suspension and expulsion) practices are effective for improving student behavior.	0.6	4.1	15.0	43.7	36.7	4.12

Table 2 Continued

Items	Strongly Agree (%)	Agree (%)	Neither Agree Nor Disagree (%)	Disagree (%)	Strongly Disagree (%)	<i>M</i>
Students who are suspended or expelled have a higher likelihood of future involvement with the criminal justice system.	39.0	47.5	11.7	0.9	0.9	4.23
The school-to-prison pipeline has an adverse effect on the students at my school.	11.7	31.4	44.3	10.9	1.8	3.40
I am familiar with the concept “the school-to-prison pipeline”.	36.1	43.4	7.6	9.1	3.8	3.99
Students of color are at greater risk of becoming part of the school-to-prison pipeline.	41.6	43.1	11.7	2.9	0.6	4.22

a. \*\* refers to a recoded item

Table 3

*PRDPS Questions Related to S-BMH Professionals' Training*

Items	% Strongly Agree	% Agree	% Neither Agree Nor Disagree	% Disagree	% Strongly Disagree	<i>M</i>
<i>At my graduate training institution, I received adequate training in...</i>						
Effective Behavior Management Strategies	12.0	40.2	16.1	23.5	8.2	3.24
Effective v. Ineffective Disciplinary Policies and Practices	6.7	33.4	18.5	32.0	9.4	2.96
The School-to-Prison Pipeline	7.9	19.1	19.6	37.2	16.1	2.65
<i>I have received adequate professional development regarding...</i>						
Effective Behavior Management Strategies	17.6	47.5	12.2	17.9	3.8	3.57
Effective v. Ineffective Disciplinary Policies and Practices	9.4	43.1	14.7	27.3	5.6	3.23
The School-to-Prison Pipeline	6.7	20.2	19.4	38.4	15.2	2.65

Table 4

*S-BMH Professionals' Perceptions of Exclusionary Discipline Practices*

Items	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	% Disagree <sup>b</sup>	% Neither Agree Nor Disagree <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>
I believe that putting prevention programs (e.g., restorative justice practices, school-wide positive behavior and intervention supports) in place can reduce the need for suspension and expulsion.	93.8	1.2	5.0	4.53
Suspensions and expulsions hurt students by removing them from academic learning time.	90.6	4.1	5.3	4.23
**Out-of-school suspensions make students less likely to misbehave in the future.	5.3	84.1	10.6	4.21
Suspension and expulsion do not really solve discipline problems.	84.5	7.4	8.2	4.14
**I believe suspension and expulsion allows students time away from school that encourages them to think about their behavior.	5.3	81.8	12.9	4.19
**Exclusionary discipline practices (suspension and expulsion) are effective for improving student behavior.	4.7	80.4	15.0	4.12
**Regardless of whether it is effective, suspension is virtually our only option in disciplining disruptive students.	15.3	73.6	11.1	3.87
**Certain students are not gaining anything from school and disrupt the learning environment. In such a case, the use of suspension and expulsion is justified to preserve the learning environment for students who wish to learn.	17.0	65.1	17.9	3.74
I believe suspension is unnecessary if a positive school climate and challenging instruction is provided.	45.4	30.8	23.8	3.25

a. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Agree and Agree.

b. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Disagree and Disagree.

c. Percent of items that were rated as Neither Agree nor Disagree.

d. \*\* refers to a recoded item

Table 5

*S-BMH Professionals' Perceptions on Zero Tolerance Policies*

Items	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	% Disagree <sup>b</sup>	% Neither Agree Nor Disagree <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>
**Zero tolerance policies make a significant contribution to maintaining order at my school.	9.1	70.1	20.8	3.99
**Zero tolerance sends a clear message to disruptive students about appropriate behavior in school.	15.0	66.3	18.8	3.76

a. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Agree and Agree.

b. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Disagree and Disagree.

c. Percent of items that were rated as Neither Agree nor Disagree.

d. \*\* refers to a recoded item

Table 6

*S-BMH Professionals' Perceptions on the Impact of Race/Ethnicity and Disciplinary Practices*

Items	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	% Disagree <sup>b</sup>	% Neither Agree Nor Disagree <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>
Students of color are at greater risk to of becoming part of the school-to-prison pipeline.	84.7	3.5	11.7	4.22
Suspension and expulsion are unfair to minority students.	56.1	13.8	30.2	3.62
Race and ethnicity play a role in the likelihood a child will need to be disciplined at school.	26.9	50.5	22.6	2.56

a. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Agree and Agree.

b. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Disagree and Disagree.

c. Percent of items that were rated as Neither Agree nor Disagree.

Table 7

*S-BMH Professionals' Perceptions of the School-to-Prison Pipeline*

Items	% Agree <sup>a</sup>	% Disagree <sup>b</sup>	% Neither Agree Nor Disagree <sup>c</sup>	<i>M</i>
Students who are suspended or expelled have a higher likelihood of future involvement with the criminal justice system.	86.5	11.7	9.9	4.23
**There is no connection between disciplinary methods used in school systems and juvenile justice systems.	5.6	81.2	12.2	4.13
I am familiar with the concept "the school-to-prison pipeline"	84.7	3.5	11.7	3.99
The school-to-prison pipeline has an adverse effect on the students at my school.	43.1	12.7	44.3	3.40

a. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Agree and Agree.

b. Percent of items that were rated as Strongly Disagree and Disagree.

c. Percent of items that were rated as Neither Agree nor Disagree.

d. \*\* refers to a recoded item