Differentiated Discipline for Special Population Students At-Risk: A Qualitative Action Research Study

Oscar W. Houchins III
Concordia University - Portland

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Doctorate of Education Program

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Oscar Wilbur Houchins III

CANDIDATE FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Chris Jenkins Ed.D., Faculty Chair Dissertation Committee

Charles Bindig, Ed.D., Content Specialist

Patricia Akojie, Ph.D., Content Reader

ACCEPTED BY

Joe Mannion, Ed.D.
Provost, Concordia University–Portland

Sheryl Reinisch, Ed.D.
Dean, College of Education, Concordia University–Portland

Marty A. Bullis, Ph.D.
Director of Doctoral Studies, Concordia University–Portland
Differentiated Discipline for Special Population Students At-Risk:
A Qualitative Action Research Study

Oscar W. Houchins III, M.Ed.
Concordia University-Portland
College of Education

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Concordia University-Portland
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctorate of Education in
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Committee Chair, Chris Jenkins, Ed.D.
Charles Bindig, Ed.D., Content Specialist
Patricia Akojie, Ph.D., Content Reader
Abstract

The one-size-fits-all approach used by public schools in the United States to reduce inappropriate behaviors known as In School Suspension (ISS) has proven to be ineffective and deleterious to at-risk special population students. This action research study, which utilized qualitative data, was designed to bring further understanding of this social behavioral problem. Most important to the study, was the specific examination of the use of art-related contingency contracts, whereby students were able to learn art-related skills, and by which rewards were given to students who were able to stay referral-free. There have been studies in a few of today’s most progressive schools, in which researchers and educators have shown improvements in at-risk students’ academic performance incorporating the arts in teaching the curricula. However, there have been no studies that this investigator has found, in which researchers make a connection between how an art-related program which utilizes contingency contracts affects at-risk students’ behavior. The focus of this study is therefore to explore the possibility of utilizing the arts and contingency contracts to improve at-risk students’ behavior. The data was drawn from interviews following each of two iterative action cycles, questionnaires, and member-checking forms over a period of five months, including a debriefing interview at the conclusion of the study. The study involved eleven teachers, one counselor, one administrator, and 13 student participants. The over-all consensus of the participants was that this type of art-related intervention, utilizing positive reinforcement instead of the punitive and exclusionary procedure known as ISS, clearly demonstrated an improvement in at-risk students’ self-esteem and self-image resulting in improved behaviors.

Keyterms: at-risk students, In School Suspension, positive reinforcement, extrinsic motivation, contingency contracts, school discipline issues, alternative discipline practices
Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work of love to my dear and sonorous mother, Jane Rule Houchins. Jane has passed from this earth, but I know she would be so very joyful to see that I have completed a work that prayerfully will be helpful to at-risk students. The old adage that no one really believes in you and loves you as completely as your mother, certainly holds true in my life. She was there for me always, no matter what the need. But, it was her spiritual guidance, that I will forever value more than all else. Despite some wayward years, when I was not accomplishing all she knew I could and should, she never gave up on me, and never wavered in her love. The simple task of dedicating this study to someone was without question, a heartfelt pleasure. Without her in my life, in all of those growing and struggling years, I am quite certain I would never be writing this now.
Acknowledgements

I would like to give a heartfelt thank you to Concordia University’s Program Director of Doctoral Studies, Dr. Marty Bullis first and foremost. Had it not been for his guidance, when I was in peril trying desperately to discover the correct methodology for my study, it would have been very likely that this work would have never been completed. He was not just a wonderful erudite of educational research, but was a spiritual mentor to me for all four years. He never wavered in his believe in me, and to the purpose of my study. More than anyone else, he understood and believed in my desire to use my artistic and musical background to improve the behavioral problems of at-risk students. Perhaps, because he has a son who is an accomplished musician, engendered his understanding and support given to the pathway of my study; but, for whatever reason, I will always be thankful!

Next, to my dissertation chair, Dr. Chris Jenkins, who took over midway to direct my study, I am truly grateful! He made the final leg of my research journey, a downhill and simply wonderful ride! He put together a perfect dissertation committee, one that also understood so well my topic. I was thankful to one member, Dr. Charlie Bindig, who was published on the topic of using the arts to help special need students, and from which, I gained valuable insights for my own study. Also, a thank-you goes to Dr. Patricia Akojie for her thoughtful and highly constructive feedback, right up through the end of my completed work. Thank-you!

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A heartfelt thank you to both! I would also like to thank my good friend, and executive assistant extraordinaire, Cynthia Milton, who assisted me greatly in the proper formatting of the paper. And then, there are my two brothers who without their assistance and encouragement, completing the final leg of this road would not have been possible. They reminded me of the coffee cup that sits on my desk which reads; “When things go wrong as they sometimes will—When the road you’re trudging seems all uphill—When the funds are low, and the debts are high—and you want to smile, but you have to sigh—When care is pressing you down a bit—Rest if you want, but don’t you quit!”

Finally, I cannot go without acknowledging my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and Father God for being with me each step of the way, providing spiritual guidance, comfort, and all other needs I may have had, one day at a time. Amen!
List of Figures

Figure 1. A visual presentation of educator perceptions and research question results........186
List of Tables

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of student participants...........................................85
Table 2. Student recidivism referrals rates.................................................................113
# Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................................. ii

Dedication ......................................................................................................................................... iii

Acknowledgments ........................................................................................................................... v

List of Tables ...................................................................................................................................... vi

List of Figures ..................................................................................................................................... vii

Chapter 1: Introduction to the Dissertation ....................................................................................... 1

   History and Conceptual Framework ................................................................................................. 3

   Problem Statement .......................................................................................................................... 5

   Purpose of the Study ....................................................................................................................... 6

   Research Questions ........................................................................................................................ 7

   Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study .................................................................... 9

   Definitions of Terms ....................................................................................................................... 13

   Assumptions, Delimitations, and Limitations ............................................................................. 15

   Summary of Chapter 1 .................................................................................................................... 18

Chapter 2: Literature Review ............................................................................................................. 20

   Conceptual Framework .................................................................................................................. 23

   Review of the Research Literature ............................................................................................... 29

   Review of Methodological Issues ................................................................................................ 35

   Synthesis of Research Findings .................................................................................................... 42

   Critique of Previous Research ..................................................................................................... 45

   Summary of Chapter 2 .................................................................................................................... 47

Chapter 3: Methodology ..................................................................................................................... 49

   Research Questions ....................................................................................................................... 56

   Purpose and Design of Study ......................................................................................................... 57

   Research Population and Sampling ............................................................................................ 61

   Instrumentation ............................................................................................................................. 63

   Data Collection .............................................................................................................................. 64

   Identification of Attributes ........................................................................................................... 67
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 3: Data Analysis and Results</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Research Design</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Validation</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expected Findings</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethical Issues of the Study</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Chapter 3</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Description of the Sample</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Methodology and Analysis</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of the Findings</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation of the Data and Results</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Chapter 4</td>
<td>116</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter 5: Conclusions and Discussion</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Summary of Results</td>
<td>119</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of the Results</td>
<td>125</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory</td>
<td>142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendations for Future Research</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>152</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>References</th>
<th>154</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix A: Elements of the Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts Project</td>
<td>165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix B: Sample Contingency Contract</td>
<td>167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix C: Interview Protocol</td>
<td>169</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix D: Research Codes</td>
<td>175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix E: Participant’s Consent Forms</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix F: Member Checking Form</td>
<td>186</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix G: Data Figure 1</td>
<td>187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix H: Statement of Original Work</td>
<td>188</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction to the Problem

I became interested in the topic of discipline back in 2006 when I was hired as a biology and chemistry teacher at Austin Can Academy (ACA), a charter school in Austin, Texas. ACA’s charter prevented them from having an In School Suspension program, so I needed to discover another way to deal with student behavioral problems. Prior to getting into education, I had years of experience in the music and entertainment business, and had always used my professional music background to help build relationships with my students. I located a music program started in Ireland and in association with an Austin based non-profit named “Grounded in Music,” students would compete with schools all across the country. They learned the business of music, as each school started their own music production company. They learned video and audio recording, and not too long after exposing my students to this program, I found that my student’s behavior and academics improved dramatically. I musically produced four students who had put together a rap group called “Team Next.” They ended up actually winning the local best musical group competition In Austin. Some of these students involved in the program had parole officers, and were from some fairly nefarious backgrounds; so it was truly wonderful to see improved behaviors and academics through what I believed was an improvement in their self-esteem and their self-image. However, I did not record any data during this time to formally substantiate my findings, so now this more formal research is something that I have desired to do for quite some time.

ISS has been shown to not only be ineffective in reducing the number of referrals received by vulnerable at-risk students, but according to Morris and Howard (2003), these students are psychologically affected as their self-esteem and motivation are often diminished.
Unfortunately, these are the students that receive the majority of ISS referrals (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). In many cases, school districts which are shown by Performance Based Monitoring Analysis Systems (PBMAS) to have issued too many referrals for these students can lose their Title I federal monies (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

Vulnerable at-risk students are those who exhibit low self-esteem due to any number of issues; including, those of color, those with special physical and mental needs, students from lower socio-economic status, Title I, and students performing at below grade level reading standards (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

The punitive model commonly referred to as ISS, which is typically used to solve most discipline problems in American schools, also fails to diagnose the source of the behavior; which may cause students to repeat the same behaviors and thereby continue to be placed in ISS (Howard & Morris, 2003). This cycle has proven to be detrimental as “repeated suspensions have been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for these students including academic failure, negative school attitudes, grade retention and school drop-out” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 31).

A review of the literature and the studies found herein reveals that the one-size-fits-all approach known as ISS has proven to be deleterious to vulnerable at-risk students who already have a fragile concept of themselves (Morris & Howard, 2003; Skiba & Sprague, 2008). I believe that these vulnerable at-risk students need to be reached in a very different manner. In response, I sought to discover how some less penal and perhaps even compassionate approach could blend together to engender a unifying solution. There are in fact several alternative discipline practices researchers have found which are displaying effective and positive outcomes in curbing inappropriate behaviors in vulnerable at-risk student populations (Wettach & Owen, 2014).
Background, Context, History, and Conceptual Framework for the Problem

Out-of-school suspensions (OSS) were used as the primary procedure for deterring inappropriate student behaviors as far back as the 1960s (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). The positive effect of OSS was it provided temporary relief to frustrated school personnel, and raised parental attention to their child’s misconduct. Too often it is reported that school personnel use it for much less serious offenses, and for many experts the negatives far outweigh the positives. Research has demonstrated that off campus suspension does not improve overall school safety, but rather leads to lower academic performance, higher rates of dropouts, failure to graduate on time, increased academic disengagement, and subsequent disciplinary exclusions (Arcia, 2006; Brown, 2007). In response to this realization, educators since the late 1970s began ushering in the idea of using in-school suspension programs as an alternative. This policy materialized into some of the same negative visages as seen in the out-of-school procedure. The research demonstrated that regardless whether the suspensions were on- or off-campus, the procedure still proved to be unproductive for academics (Otter, 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 2003). It was thought that students who frequently received out-of-school suspensions were less likely to have parental supervision at home. (Dupper, Theriot, & Craun, 2009; Kirk, 2009) Researchers indicated that these students were in fact in need of more adult supervision than students who were not typically suspended (Islin, 2010).

Additionally, it was found that some students would get suspended or receive ISS on purpose to get out of work or away from something they do not want to cope or deal with, so that in-school suspensions have not proven to be any more of a deterrent than out-of-school suspensions for inappropriate behavior (Otter, 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Many students say they do not see ISS as a significant consequence or negative stimulus (Otter, 2011). All too
often, these environments permit students to escape without addressing the changes needed by the student receiving the referrals, or by their teachers to actually address the problem (Chute, 2013).

In response to the perceived failure of ISS, a large amount of studies suggest a variety of alternatives to suspension. Many schools have already replaced harmful, exclusionary discipline policies with more effective discipline strategies (Wettach & Owen, 2014). Some of the more successful programs are Positive Behavioral Support Intervention, Safe and Responsive Schools, Restorative Justice, Community Service, and Positive Reinforcement, including the use of extrinsic rewards for on task engagement and improved behaviors (Premack, 2002: Stockdale & Williams, 2004).

One final approach which I will use in framing the study is educational programs used by educators who teach core curricula through the arts, and also encourage and introduce initiatives emphasizing participation in the arts. Educators report documented improved on-task engagement and academic achievement using the arts in the curricula. Programs such as KIDsmART, United Dance in Great Britain, the Get Lit program in Los Angles, California, the S.A.Y.S. program in Sacramento, and the Renew Cultural Arts Academy in New Orleans, all report success in reaching students who could not be reached in the traditional classroom (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Many of these students enrolling in these art schools and programs displayed rebellious and defiant attitudes at first; not so hard to understand, as many came from the most nefarious of backgrounds. However, through participation and learning the curricula through the lens of the arts, engagement, focus, and attitudes improved dramatically (Get Lit, 2016).
Although the use of the arts in teaching curricula has pleased educators as better on-task engagement and academic achievement, little research has been conducted to reflect its effect on behavior. The plan for the research study is to use the arts as positive reinforcement for vulnerable at-risk students who seem to have an innate interest in the arts. The possibility of improved behavior from art-related extrinsic motivational tools could be most relevant as an alternative approach to the failed discipline practices of ISS on vulnerable at-risk populations. My action research design seems to fit the sine qua non of an effective positive reinforcement program, which lends relevance and meaning to the learner's daily life and interactions (Get Lit, 2016).

**Statement of the Problem**

The one-size-fits-all approach used by almost all public schools in America to reduce inappropriate behaviors known as ISS has proven to be ineffective and deleterious to special population students (Skiba et al., 2011). This action research project is designed to bring further clarity to this social behavioral problem. I believe additional research is needed to examine alternative practices which may result in positive improvements in deterring unwanted behaviors among vulnerable at-risk students versus ISS. Specifically, I have found that many vulnerable at-risk students seem to be drawn to the arts in a connatural fashion. As an alternative to ISS, I am interested in having participant teachers and administrators from a mid-size district in central Texas offer vulnerable at-risk students free art-related gift cards and free participation in highly recognized art programs as rewards for successful completion of contingency behavioral contracts. I would like to discover if such extrinsic motivational programs could be helpful in reducing the number of behavioral incidents, and at the same time be less damaging to the students’ psychological makeup.
The data collected thus far on utilizing the arts, focuses on student’s level of engagement and academic success, but little data has been directed specifically on how the use of the arts as an extrinsic motivational tool may improve behavior (Gobitz, 2014). This study could prove to be significant if engendering improved behaviors and less ISS referrals after the cyclical interventions, as researchers have shown ISS as not helping behavioral problematic students improve; in fact, those assigned to ISS continue to repeat the same offenses (Otter, 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 2003).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore if the use of the arts and contingency contracts as extrinsic motivational tools can positively reinforce appropriate behavior and reduce unwanted behaviors among vulnerable at-risk students. The study will focus on assessments which educators and students at my research site will give in interviews which display a more positive and successful elimination of referrals versus the more punitive exclusionary practice known as In School Suspension. The action plan, which I am calling the Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts Project, will primarily use contingency art-related contracts which offer extrinsic motivational rewards in iterative cycles. Each action cycle will involve students meeting certain behavioral requirements as is depicted in their individual contracts with teachers and administrators. If successfully completing each cycle with advanced art-related training, and meeting a prescribed limit of referrals issued, students will be able to continue in the professional arts program of their choosing, resulting in gift cards and other awarded amenities.

Up-to-date discipline and academic records will be secured on student participants following each iterative cycle to analyze any improvements, or lack thereof, in the number of behavioral referrals. Using the arts as an extrinsic motivational tool will hopefully bring about
an improvement in behaviors among participating vulnerable at-risk students, who receive a disproportionate amount of ISS referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). There are several programs across America and in Great Britain which have documented better on-task student engagement and academic achievement by participating in the arts and using the arts to study basic core subjects (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). However very little data has been compiled to specifically reflect its effects on behavior; which is the purpose of this action research study.

The interviews and questionnaire used in the study ask detailed questions of educators and students, which will clearly describe their views, not only on In School Suspension, but on knowledge they possess of alternative discipline procedures. They are also asked to give their thoughts on the action plan of using of the arts as a motivational tool to improve behaviors among vulnerable at-risk populations. The observations of students in ISS should also be helpful in viewing how these students react to an ISS environment, and whether anything depicted from these observations would support the use of ISS for behavior modification and improved academic success. The participant interviews, observations, and questionnaires should serve to triangulate the data bringing credibility to the described intent of the study.

**Research Questions**

The primary research question is: In what ways do alternative discipline practices impact inappropriate behaviors among vulnerable at-risk students, in contrast to In School Suspension? In supporting this overarching central question, I propose the following more definitive research questions.

1. In what ways does ISS impact at-risk population students?
2. In what ways do utilizing differentiated discipline plans on a student-by-student
basis impact at-risk population students?

3. In what ways do art-related contingency contracts impact at-risk population students?

ISS has proven to be mostly ineffective in deterring unwanted student behavior especially with vulnerable at-risk students of low self-esteem, and those who are struggling to maintain on-grade level status (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Monroe, 2006; Skiba, et al., 2011; Staats, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008). My goal is to explore the participants’ views on ISS, so as to better understand the issue and thereby interpret and analyze their responses.

In regard to the second research question, my action research data is designed to discover if differentiated discipline plans based on individual students’ behavioral patterns and needs, will more positively impact vulnerable at-risk students versus ISS. So that, in the same manner in which teachers utilize differentiated teaching practices for at-risk students’ different learning styles, it also seems logical that a one-size-fits-all discipline procedure known as In School Suspension (ISS) would not work for all students with varying behavioral issues.

Finally, I have found in my 33 years as a public school teacher and administrator that many of these vulnerable at-risk students who receive an inordinate amount of ISS referrals, seem to have an innate interest and aptitude for artistic endeavors. I desire to seek opinions from the participants through questionnaires and interviews, and from evidence found in students’ observations as to whether they are benefitting and improving their behaviors when given the choice of successfully completing art-related contingency contracts versus spending time in ISS. Of course, they would be sent to ISS initially, but after agreeing to and signing up for the art-
related contingency contracts, they would not have to return to ISS if they successfully continue to meet the provisions set out in their contracts.

**Rationale, Relevance, and Significance of the Study**

I believe that the need for a 21st century approach to reduce inappropriate behavior among special student populations should be implemented on a student-by-student basis. Studies involving alternative programs such as Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) show improvements in student behaviors, but these programs are mainly targeted on a campus-wide proactive basis. And, those PBIS programs which do deal with the individual behavioral needs of students are limited to special education students. Unfortunately, other vulnerable at-risk students, such as minorities, English second language (ESL) students, below grade level students, and ‘Title I’ students, do not have access to programs like ‘Focus,’ which is a district program for SPED students needing academic and additional behavioral help. The study is relevant because it addresses behavior issues of all vulnerable at-risk students, not just SPED or African American students, which are typically prevalent in most studies centered on discipline and discipline referrals.

Behavioral Response to Intervention (BRTI) is used to assist special education students and their teachers with interventions which can lead to progress in deterring unwanted behaviors. In using the interviews of participant educators, I can attempt to find specific alternative discipline procedures which are reported to have worked successfully as an alternative to ISS. Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIPs) offer directives in dealing with the behavioral issues of SPED students, but lack innovative alternative programs as described herein. They also do not address the behavioral issues of non-SPED minorities, the at-risk Title I students, and others that may be identified as having low self-esteem. In the same manner in which educators use
differentiated learning techniques to reach students with different learning styles, I believe it also makes sense to use differentiated discipline techniques to reach students with a variety of behavioral issues. This action could also inform educators of the corresponding individual root causes of their behavioral issues.

The rationale for using the action research method lies in the fact that discovering the shared patterns and possible negative effects of ISS, as reported by participants, is one of the important elements of such a study. Action research studies first identify a problem, and then through a series of action iterative cycles, attempt to make needed improvements to a particular practice. Because the study is designed in part to uncover possible negative aspects of ISS, and the over-representation of vulnerable at-risk populations receiving ISS referrals, it does take on the essence and similarity of a critical ethnographical study, as it also attempts to surface perceived social inequalities (Creswell, 2013).

According to Sprague and Horner (2007) case studies that involve the effects of intervention programs, often do operate with a conceptual framework derived from theory, but do not offer control groups, so that statistical analysis is difficult. The drawback to this type of study is deciding if the case is too broad or perhaps too narrow in scope to adequately illustrate the point to be made. It also becomes difficult in deciding how many cases the researcher needs to make their point--too few or too many could be counter-productive to their research question (Creswell, 2013). According to Thomas, Bierman, Thompson, and Powers (2008) most of these intervention studies lack multilevel research designs and analyses that examine effects at the individual, classroom, and schoolwide levels. Studies that did examine multilevel effects on disruptive behavior report that schoolwide-level variance is substantially less than individual and classroom level variance (Bradshaw & Leaf, 2008).
The reality that schoolwide-level variance is substantially less than individual and classroom level variance, raises another important reason for the study. The purpose is to uncover reasons for behavioral problems not for an entire campus, but only for that segment known as vulnerable at-risk students. In the same manner that one discipline procedure does not solve all types of student’s behavioral issues, it would also seem true that neither would a universal campus-wide one-size-fits-all positive intervention policy.

School programs which use Behavioral Intervention Plans, or BIP’s, have shown promise in positively impacting behavior; however, such programs only address special education students (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Vulnerable at-risk students such as minorities, ‘ESL’ students, Title I students, and those who may be one to two grade levels behind their peers, are not covered by these individual programs. Unfortunately, these students also receive a disproportionate amount of discipline referrals. The action research study I proposed addresses all of these students.

I have found it very difficult to believe that any one code of discipline is effective for all students. The majority of school districts across America primarily use some sort of punitive exclusionary measure to handle discipline problems with little or no positive results. In my attempt to resolve this dilemma, I turned to noted theologian James Loder and his vision for transformative learning (as cited in Mezirow, 1991). I recognized that this dilemma was actually the conflict or first step described by Jack Mezirow (1991) in his analysis of the five steps of Loder’s transformative logic. Identifying a dilemma correspondingly represents the first step in initiating a successful action research plan as well. The second step in Loder’s resolution process is to scan the problem, wherein I found myself realizing that teachers and administrators
have been placing the same culture of students, and especially those from vulnerable at-risk populations, in ISS for years now with no positive results (Islin, 2010).

Learning disabilities and low self-esteem play a factor, but in addition, many of these students have layers of hurt, anger, and frustration and some are coming even from nefarious backgrounds. The method of continually subjecting them to punishment and throwing them in ISS only makes them more defiant (Howard & Morris, 2003). I decided that there must be something educators can try to assist these students of vulnerable at-risk populations who receive an over-representation of referrals (Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2002). In response, I will explore the responses of the participants on how some less penal, and perhaps even a more compassionate approach, could blend together to engender a unifying solution.

I believe that this study is most important as it will address the behavioral issues of all vulnerable at-risk students, and not just African American students; as is prevalent in most studies which concentrate on discipline and discipline referrals (Skiba & Peterson, 2003). I believe that the study is also significant in that the design will include interviewing special population students, and their teachers, counselors, and administrators to gain an understanding of their experience and thoughts on both ISS and alternative discipline procedures. Most studies found in the literature do not compare and contrast ISS to alternative discipline procedures.

I believe that these vulnerable at-risk students must be reached in a different manner. My action research design plan is similar to how educators utilize differentiated learning techniques or independent education plans (IEP’s) to reach special education students of contrasting learning styles. However, my study differs in that it will analyze how a differentiated discipline plan utilizing the arts as a positive reinforcement tool, may reach and successfully accomplish behavioral goals through individualized contingency contracts.
I have found in my 33 years as an educator that many vulnerable at-risk students seem to have an innate interest and aptitude for the arts. They were typically the ones that would sit at their desks and draw or thump their pencils on their desk while listening to some imaginary piece of music in their heads. So, I had designed the Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts Project to have site educators give free art-related gift cards and participation in select art programs, as a reward for successful completion of contingency behavioral contracts. The primary goal of the action research study is to discover if such a positive extrinsic motivational program could be more sanative in reducing the number of behavioral incidents for chronic behavioral problem versus ISS. This unique facet of the study should inform the literature in ways not shown before in studies on the topic of discipline.

I did locate a few schools in the literature which are proactively encouraging more focused academic achievement with vulnerable at-risk students through the use of the arts (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Those schools which are finding success by incorporating the arts are mainly schools which are classified as lower performing and have a significant number of vulnerable at-risk students. Programs such as “KID smART,” and the “Renew Cultural Arts Academy” in New Orleans, teach students’ curricula through a variety of arts; “United Dance” in Great Britain teaches dance, the “Get Lit” program in Los Angeles, California and the S.A.Y.S. program in Sacramento teach writing poetry and rap, and are but a few programs which have shown great promise in reaching students who perhaps could not be reached in any other manner except through the arts. Educators at these schools say that the success is directly attributed to the self-worth and confidence gained through participation in these arts related programs. Although these programs display marked increases in students’ academic achievement, very little data has been collected specifically displaying how the use of
the arts as a positive reinforcement tool may impact behavior, and thereby will make this study significant.

Definition of Terms

Alternative discipline procedures. Any program which has displayed success in preventing inappropriate behaviors and a reduction of discipline referrals issued (Otter, 2011).

At-risk students. Students who require temporary or ongoing intervention in order to succeed academically.

Behavioral intervention plan (BIP). Behavioral specialist evaluate students classified as special education with a history of behavioral problems, and write an individualized intervention plan to assist the student which is then implemented and adhered to by educational staff members.

Behavioral response to intervention (BRTI). A multi-tiered approach to early identification and support of students with behavioral needs.

Contingency contracts. Contingency contracts contain a description of the problem behavior of the student, with the sought-after replacement behavior detailed in simple written language that the student can easily comprehend (Vismara, Bogin, & Sullivan, 2010).

Discipline referrals. Students who violate district rules may receive a referral from a staff member which describes the incident, and results in a discipline procedure (Skiba & Peterson, 2003).

Extrinsic motivation tools. Motivation which is derived from rewards artificially linked to the behavior, such as; grades, stars, stickers, coupons, tokens, notes home, and privileges, which can be used to increase task engagement (Wettach & Owen, 2014).
**In school suspension (ISS).** A discipline procedure issued to a student from a referral document for the violation of a school or district rule which results in the punitive removal of the student from his or her regular classroom to an exclusionary setting (Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2002).

**Over-representation.** Vulnerable at-risk students who are seen to receive the majority of discipline referrals (Staats, 2014).

**Positive reinforcement.** An alternative discipline procedure which uses positive reductive procedures aimed at decreasing or eliminating unwanted behaviors through the use of reinforcement rather than the removal or loss of reinforcement or use of punishment Wettach and Owen (2014)

**Vulnerable at-risk populations.** Minority students, students in special education students who have been diagnosed as below grade level academically and students exhibiting signs of low self-esteem from a variety of physical and psychological factors (Stockdale & Williams, 2004).

**Title I students.** As implemented by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and as amended provides financial assistance to local educational agencies (LEAs) and schools with high numbers or high percentages of children from low-income families to help ensure that all children meet challenging state academic standards (U.S. Dept. of Education, 2015).

Assumptions, Delimitations and Limitations

**Assumptions.** Assumptions in a research study would be those statements and theories that the researcher presumes are true, but may be invalid as other factors may not have been taken into consideration (Wargo, 2015). In the study, the researcher is assuming that all participants have similar understandings and opinions of ISS, the use of the arts to reach
students, and in alternative measures to reach at-risk students. Interviews may result in participants actually voicing large and varying amounts of opinions on these topics. The researcher may also assume that participants are answering interview questions in an honest and unconditional manner. The fact may be that participants are answering in a manner that they think the researcher would like for them to respond, or the antithesis of that. Participants could perhaps also have an alternative motive for being in the study in the first place; which the researcher may not take in consideration when analyzing their responses.

**Delimitations.** Delimitations to any research study would be those ways in which the researcher attempts to limit the scope of the study, or set boundaries, so that the research is not too broad which could make it much more difficult to ensure trustworthy and dependable information. The scope of the research is limited by my desire to only study vulnerable at-risk students who receive ISS referrals, and not mainstream or regular student who receive ISS assignments. This group was chosen for the study, as previous research has shown that vulnerable at-risk students are those who receive the majority of ISS referrals (Staats, 2014; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Monroe, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Wallace et al., 2008).

I am most interested in this population, because in previous studies the research has found that vulnerable at-risk students have experienced adverse reactions to this type of punitive exclusionary discipline. I define vulnerable at-risk students as any student exhibiting low self-esteem due to any number of issues; including, those of color, those with special physical and mental needs, students from lower socio-economic status, Title I or at-risk students, and students performing below grade level reading standards. I am thereby delimiting the size of the population by looking exclusively at these vulnerable at-risk students. From these vulnerable at-
risk populations in the school district, I will seek to choose participant students who have a history of chronic behavioral issues. This action does also in fact reduce the size of the sample, and would be seen as a delimitation of the research design.

**Limitations.** As is the case in most qualitative designs, a certain amount of heuristic knowledge, or knowledge taken from the recorded experiences, is not in reality very scientific, as it does not offer provable facts. Rather, the best that can come from this type of design is simply opinions and where the information is limited and totally dependent on the set of questions asked. Such is the case with this study.

There are also limitations to the study due to time constraints. Student participants in the study were interviewed and observed in a discipline alternative placement center. In some cases students were there for as little as six weeks before being released. This could be considered less than a prolonged engagement as is recommended by qualitative research models. However, as was reported in his study on seXrs, Haenfler (2004) found himself drawing on many years of actually being in the seXrs fold, both as a participant and an observer (Haenfler, 2004). I too have spent many years both as a teacher and an administrator, with the latter years serving as an administrator in charge of discipline. This experience and serving as a Positive Behavioral Intervention Support and Behavioral RTI coordinator, has perhaps given me an extra measure of the prolonged engagement necessary to expertly analyze and interpret the results of the upcoming study. In response to interpreting the data, it must be said that I can only self-report the perceptions of the participants, which is simply the nature of a qualitative study. Again, because I bring much experience in dealing with vulnerable at-risk students with behavioral issues, I will no doubt add some of my own theoretical perspectives, which will make it
imperative that I practice the process of reflectivity in examining both myself as the researcher, and my relationship with the research itself.

**Summary**

The primary research question to be answered from the interviews is: What is the impact of alternative discipline practices on inappropriate behaviors among the vulnerable at-risk students in contrast to In School Suspension? In the same manner in which teachers utilize differentiated learning practices for vulnerable at-risk students, would it not also be logical and worth questioning if the one-size-fits-all discipline procedure known as In School Suspension (ISS) really works for all students?

Many minority and special education students have many layers of hurt, anger, and frustration. Some in fact, come from some unbelievably nefarious backgrounds. The discipline method of continually subjecting these students to punishment and assigning them to the exclusionary ISS room, in many cases makes them even more defiant. I believe there are better ways that educators can assist these vulnerable at-risk populations who receive an over-representation of disciplinary referrals. I believe that these students need to be reached in a different manner.

Perhaps schools could move forward and progressively toward new and innovative discipline programs with the hope that such efforts can contribute specifically to the prevalent discipline problem which our vulnerable at-risk students experience across the country. I hope to take these theoretical and visceral underpinnings from the study and synthesize them into a well-designed conceptual framework. This synthesis will represent an ‘integrated’ way of looking at the problem (Creswell, 2013). If in finding the resultant data from the action research study to be positive for the use of art-related contingency contracts, I would advocate for schools to
orchestrate differentiated discipline plans for students where mutually agreed contingency reward contracts would be put in place resulting in positive reinforcement of appropriate behaviors on a student-by-student basis. In the same manner in which educators utilize differentiate learning to reach the varied learning styles of students, perhaps educators should also employ differentiated discipline practices for that variance which exists in individual student’s backgrounds and psychological make-ups.

Following this introductory chapter, I offer a review of the literature in Chapter 2 which examines the topic of discipline procedures in America today. The emphasis is on In School Suspension along with alternative procedures, and art-related programs which are gaining increasing focus from educators world-wide. The chapter looks at many studies depicting the attributes and vices of ISS, and studies reporting the successful utilization of alternative practices with the goal of reducing inappropriate behaviors of at-risk students.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction to the Literature Review

Throughout the United States schools most frequently punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs by sending them to an exclusionary suspension room called In School Suspension (ISS) (Howard & Morris, 2003). Students who are sent to ISS are in many cases negatively affected psychologically, as their self-esteem and motivation is diminished (Howard & Morris, 2003). Further, a review of the literature reveals little or no evidence that suspension makes any significant contribution to reducing disruption or violence (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). In the same manner in which teachers utilize differentiated learning practices for special education students, many scholars believe educators should also employ alternative discipline practices (Wettach & Owen, 2014).

The study topic. In searching the literature specific to the topic of current procedures used in deterring inappropriate behaviors, the research turns up studies examining what is working and what is not. Overriding in all scholarly reports was the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the most common discipline procedure used in American schools, that being ISS. The vast majority of the research, as will be noted below, displays evidence that ISS does not accomplish its goal in deterring inappropriate behaviors, especially among vulnerable at-risk students. At-risk vulnerable populations include, minority students, students in special education, students who have been diagnosed as below grade level academically, and students exhibiting signs of low self-esteem from a variety of physical and psychological factors.

Many studies, including one by Skiba, Michael and Nardo (2002) entitled “The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment,” show that there is a disproportional administration of discipline toward minority students in American
schools. Others like Sugai and Horner’s (2002) “The Evolution of Discipline Procedures,” describes the failure of current discipline procedures to include students in special education, who are also over-represented in discipline referrals. The over-used and failed remedy of ISS to deter inappropriate behavior among these students of vulnerable at-risk populations is a topic in need of additional research from many researchers strategically searching for better answers.

There are some studies disclosing the positive effects of ISS (Wheelock, 2014) there are many more which cite the negative effects ISS has on a student’s behavior, and on their academic, social and psychological well-being (Howard & Morris, 2003). The limited studies supporting ISS argues that most programs are not set up correctly with certified teachers, behavioral psychologists, and are not implemented with rules and procedures which will ensure success (The Children’s Defense Fund, 2014). As an alternative to ISS, many schools have already started replacing harmful exclusionary discipline policies with more effective strategies, including PBIS which often use positive reinforcement and extrinsic motivation tools to improve student behaviors (Wettach & Owen, 2014).

**The context.** In the review of the literature, I summarize the history and context of the punitive exclusionary procedure known as ISS. Since the late 1970s, in-school suspension programs have been used by school districts as an alternative to out-of-school suspension. It was thought that students who frequently received out-of-school suspensions were less likely to have parental supervision at home (Dupper, Theriot, & Craun, 2009; Kirk, 2009). Researchers indicate that these students were in fact more in need of adult supervision than students who were not typically suspended (Islin, 2010). Out of School Suspensions (OSS) were used as the primary procedure as far back as the sixties. The positive effect of OSS was that it provided
temporary relief to frustrated school personnel, and raised parental attention to their child’s misconduct.

Since the school shooting in Columbine, Colorado left 15 dead in 1999, the zero tolerance policy of districts mandating predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses has been more prominent. These offenses often lead to suspension or expulsion because of the seriousness of the behavior, (Dupper, Theriot, & Craun, 2009; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005). Too often it is reported that school personnel use it for much less serious offenses, and for many experts the negatives far out-weigh the positives. According to Mendez and Knoff’s research, “most out-of-school suspensions across the country are for infractions of school rules rather than for dangerous or violent acts” (2003, p. 32). Research has demonstrated that out-of-school suspension does not improve overall school safety, but rather leads to lower academic performance, higher rates of dropouts, failure to graduate on time, increased academic disengagement, and subsequent disciplinary exclusions (Arcia, 2006; Brown, 2007).

In response to this realization, educators began ushering in the idea of utilizing in-school suspensions. However, this policy has materialized into some of the same negative visages as seen in the out-of-school suspension. The research demonstrates that regardless of whether the suspensions were on or off campus, the procedure still proved to be unproductive for academics (Otter, 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Additionally, it was found that some students get suspended on purpose to get out of work or away from something they do not want to cope or deal with; and in-school suspensions have not proven to be any more of a deterrent than out-of-school suspensions for inappropriate behavior (Otter, 2011; Skiba & Peterson, 2003). Many students say they do not see ISS as a significant consequence or negative stimulus (Otter,
When students are sent to ISS, it is important that the environment continues with academic instruction and that some of the focus is on solving the problem which resulted in the student receiving the referral. All too often, these environments permit students to escape without addressing the changes needed by both the sending teacher and the student so that, in actuality, addressing the problem never occurs (Chute, 2013).

The problem statement. The literature review and studies found herein reveal that the one-size-fits-all approach of exclusionary punitive discipline procedure known as ISS has proven to be mostly ineffective in deterring vulnerable at-risk students with low self-esteem from recurring inappropriate behaviors (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, J. 2012; Morris & Howard, 2003; Pokorski, 2010; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). The literature reveals that ISS is also deleterious to these vulnerable at-risk students who already have a fragile concept of themselves (Skiba & (Sprague, 2008). In addition, many studies demonstrate that there is an over representation of discipline referrals issued to minorities and to special education students. One such study by Skiba, Michael and Nardo (2002) entitled “The Color of Discipline,” displayed this disproportionate administration of discipline toward African American students. Further, there is also a problem found in the literature of an over-representation of Latinos and special education students receiving ISS referrals (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Monroe, 2006; Skiba, et al. 2011; Staats, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Wallace et al., 2008).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework will frame the study by the interplay of the truth-seeking activities of former researchers coupled with my own distinct perspectives on the subject, engendering a unique conceptual framing and investigation of the problem of discipline in America today.
In school suspension. This practice is perhaps the single most important concept responsible for my desire to study discipline practices in American schools, as it is the primary method used to deter inappropriate behaviors among students. Research studies report that this punitive exclusionary procedure known as ISS, has many negative effects on students. Such findings include the statistic that 49% of students who entered high school with three suspensions on their record eventually dropped out of school, (Balfanz, Byrnes, & Fox, 2012). Also, according to Morris and Howard (2003), regardless if it is an OSS or ISS referral, students are negatively affected psychologically because their self-esteem and motivation is diminished. When students are excluded from the classroom, they feel unwanted and unmotivated to change the opinions their teachers and peers have developed about them (DiMino, 2013).

There are a few studies where researchers have found successful ISS programs, which actually succeed in curbing inappropriate behaviors, and at the same time assist students with academic engagement. The main benefit of ISS is the removal of the disruptive student allows the learning in the classroom to continue so that teachers are better able to focus on delivering the content successfully when behavioral issues have been eliminated from the room. One such successful ISS program actually has been renamed and is called, Positive Alternative to School Suspension (PASS) which operates as its own class, with explicit requirements and expectations (Wheelock, 2014). The program is located in Lynne Haven, Florida and was the brainchild of its teacher Jim Lawson (Wheelock, 2014).

As it is with Lawson’s program, all ISS success stories found in the literature have strict requirements, rules and procedures for the program which must be followed rigidly if success is to be found. In addition, successful ISS programs are staffed with licensed teachers trained in behavioral analysis, and not by the typical untrained paraprofessional. In spite of this isolated
program success, in the overwhelming amount of studies found in the literature, the depiction of in-school suspension ranges from its ineffectiveness to the harm engendered by its use (Osher, Sprague, Weissberg, Axelrod, Keenan & Kendziora, 2008; Martinez & Sandomierski, 2010; Otter, 2011).

**Alternative discipline procedures.** The concept of trying various alternatives is really nothing new. One study conducted in the late seventies by Diling, T W. (1979), describes that school counselors, administrators, teachers and parents surveyed in Salinas, Kansas, decided it was not a deterrent at all to isolate a student for various infractions when that was exactly what the young person was hopeful of, i.e., getting out of class for a few days. Instead, they decided to use what they entitled an “Alternative to Suspension,” or ATS placement for these offenders. The program hailed as a huge success, incorporated a designated location for the ATS, but where counselors, teachers and parents would meet with the students on a regular basis, one on one, to work with the students in motivating them to stay on track academically, and on modifying their behaviors and attitudes. This program is quite different from the ISS as is known today; where students rarely see their teachers, and where no behavioral support professional is involved.

In response to the perceived failure of ISS, a large amount of studies in the literature suggest a variety of alternatives to suspension. Many schools have already replaced harmful, exclusionary discipline policies with more effective discipline strategies (Wettach & Owen, 2014). Wettach and Owen’s (2014) have found:

- They can choose from a variety of approaches, most of which have been extensively researched and shown to be effective. When implemented to the program model, these alternatives can simultaneously diminish the negative outcomes of harmful discipline policies, boost student achievement, and achieve the purposes of school discipline.
Schools and school districts committed to reducing suspension have experienced dramatic positive changes after implementing some of these alternatives. (p. 37)

An example of an alternative program displaying success in proactively preventing inappropriate behaviors and a reduction in referrals is Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS). PBIS’ positive approach is taken to create specific behavioral expectations for all students. An important element of the program requires that data is kept and monitored to allow for even more effective and targeted implementation (Bear, 2009). Another is Safe and Responsive Schools (SRS). This program utilizes as an alternative to office referrals, behavior support classrooms where students are explicitly taught skills, such as conflict resolution, to give them problem-solving ability. In addition, Restorative Justice (RJ) refers to a group of practices that aims to hold an offender accountable for his or her actions often by requiring the offender to face the victim and a peer jury and engage in some type of restoration of what was lost (Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier & Battistich, 2006).

Another program receiving accolades from administrators, teachers and parents is known as the Community Service Program (CSP) which involves various opportunities for students to engage in meaningful community activities and community-school partnerships, and provides high-needs and at-risk students and their families with supports to improve school-family engagement, student learning, student behavior, and overall student outcomes. Partnerships between schools and communities are developed to deliver educational, medical, and social programs (Owen, 2016). This program, like the others has seen remarkable success in building students’ intrinsic desire to perform better academically and behaviorally.

**Positive reinforcement and extrinsic motivation.** Positive reinforcement is a specific type of alternative discipline technique which encourages behavior that is incompatible, or is an
alternative to the problem behavior; and when used regularly and supported within the learner's natural environment enables the learner to acquire better behavioral skills (Ferster & Skinner, 1957). The schedule of reinforcement should be delivered on a continuous schedule to initially strengthen the new behavior, followed by a gradual thinning intermittent schedule of reinforcement. The program should also hold relevance and meaning to the learner's daily life and interactions, whereby teaching a skill that cannot be supported by the learner's natural environment is setting up for a failed plan and a frustrated learner (Ferster & Skinner, 1957).

Perhaps one of the more interesting methods of encouraging on task and appropriate behaviors, and another major concept affecting the conceptual framework, is the experimental work conducted using extrinsic reinforcement. Extrinsic motivation is a specific type of positive reinforcement which seeks to reward students for successfully completing a pre-assigned objective. Researchers have demonstrated that because of the positive social feedback students derive from attaining extrinsic rewards, they perceive themselves as competent, or at least gaining in competence, which are the common building blocks for intrinsic motivation and ongoing success (Eccles, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002).

The motivational literature in the broad areas of psychology and education mainly address the role of consequences in promoting student engagement in academic tasks (Stockdale & Williams, 2004). However, particularly salient to this issue comes from researchers who display in their studies the positive impact of extrinsic rewards on task engagement and therefore improved behaviors (Premack, 2002; Stockdale & Williams, 2004).

**Contingency contracts.** Contingency contracts contain a description of the problem behavior of the student, with the sought-after replacement behavior detailed in simple written
language that the student can easily comprehend. Research across several decades has shown that contingency contracts work well with groups and individuals of all ages and ability levels. Researchers have shown that contingency contracts work well with general education students, special education students, and in home settings, with an emphasis on data collection (Vismara, Bogin, & Sullivan, 2010). Such contracts can be used to teach new behaviors, help maintain learned behaviors, or decrease inappropriate behaviors. When contingencies are set up, students are more likely to complete less preferred activities (Vismara, Bogin, & Sullivan, 2010).

In this study, I hope to discover teachers and other staff members who may have used contingency contracts and individualized them to a student’s particular challenges and motivation areas; thus, increasing the chances of success and increasing the student’s ability to accept responsibilities (Vismara, Bogin, & Sullivan, 2010). I am also hopeful that interviews with the participants will produce valuable discussions of other alternative discipline procedures, and in doing so, deliver an in-depth understanding of each one utilized.

**Participation in the arts.** One final concept located in the literature, which is used in the framing of this study, is educational programs which teach core curricula through the arts, or programs which at least encourage and initiate participation in the arts. Such art instructed programs have documented better on-task engagement and academic achievement, helping low-performing schools succeed as part of comprehensive school reform effort (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Analysis of this art-related academic success was made possible by scientist using MRI equipment, which studied the brain when it was engaged in music. The data led scientists to conclude that when students were engaged in performing music, the pre-frontal cortex of the frontal lobe of the brain opened up and cognitive skills, such
as problem solving, rapid learning and memory consolidation were measured and were shown to be greatly enhanced (Limb, 2008).

Researchers have shown that participation and learning the curricula through the lens of the arts increased engagement, and students’ focus improved dramatically (Get Lit, 2016). The “Get Lit” and the S.A.Y.S. programs teach and mentor students in the skills of writing poetry. The results are seen in testimonials from students and parents heralding the students who participated as having positively transformed them by giving them the faith that they can accomplish anything (Get Lit, 2016). Although the use of the arts in teaching curricula has seen documented better on-task engagement and academic achievement, little research data has been compiled to reflect its direct effect on behavior.

One program which has tracked improvements on behavior is the KIDsmArt schools in New Orleans. “KIDsmArt blends core curricula with different art forms to make classrooms joyful and effective places to learn” (KIDsmART, p. 1. 2016). The program demonstrated overall reductions in referrals of 33% after the first semester. Some of those students with the highest level of behavioral referrals displayed the most improvements. “One young man went from receiving 17 referrals in the first period (August–October) to only one in the second, (November–January); and another young man from seven to one, and a young woman from four to none” (Gallinot, 2014).

**Review of Research Literature**

Veteran researchers studying the topic of discipline in American schools have primarily used quantitative or systematic methods to present the dilemma of In School Suspension, and the need for alternative discipline procedures. Sugai and Horner’s (2002) used a stratified quantitative method, as the research was specifically looking at which type of student receives
the majority of referrals on America’s public school campuses. By definition, stratified sampling is taking the sample of an independent sub-population; in this case, students who receive discipline referrals, and thereby ensuring a proportionate representation of the minority subgroup.

In these quantitative discipline studies, the overwhelming empirical results displayed a large disproportionate representation of male minorities and special education students, as recipients of discipline referrals (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Monroe, 2006; Skiba, et al., 2011; Staats, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Wallace et al., 2008). Researchers have found that in-school suspension programs actually target students with disabilities (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Dickinson & Miller, 2006; Fetter-Harrot, & Steketee, 2009; Mendez & Knoff, 2003; Skiba, Michael, & Nardo, 2000; Vavrus & Cole, 2002; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004). Researchers have demonstrated that there is a high concentration of disciplining students with disabilities due to the challenging behaviors that these students typically display (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007). Due to this behavior, the rate of suspensions for students with special needs is greater than students without disabilities (Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004).

Students with disabilities are overrepresented in suspension rooms because, “students with disabilities are more likely to commit offenses resulting in exclusion because of poor social skills, judgment, and planning as well as being less adept in avoiding detection” (Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004, p. 337). The research strongly suggest that punitive exclusionary discipline, such as ISS, undeniably deprives them of their right to an appropriate education (DiMino, 2013). The 1997 Amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act brought together all of the disciplinary provisions pertaining to students with disabilities.
attempting to guarantee a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students in special education while preserving a safe school environment for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

**Failure of in school suspension.** A review of the literature reveals little or no evidence that suspension and expulsion makes any contribution to reducing disruption or violence (Skiba & Sprague 2008). Behavioral scientists, like John O. Cooper, suggests that more credence should be given to training teachers and administrators in the skills of behavior analysis instead of using ISS as a dumping ground, and thereby avoiding having to deal with these students in a productive and meaningful manner (Cooper, 2009).

Pokorski (2010) found that because most ISS monitors are not certified, that this in itself negatively impacts student progress. For example, in regard to the students’ futures, “the likelihood of at least one suspension decreases the likelihood of completing high school by 17 percentage points; the likelihood of attending college by 16 percentage points, and decreases the likelihood of being a college graduate by nine percentage points” (Bertrand & Pan, 2011, p. 62). According to Morris and Howard (2003), students are negatively affected psychologically because their self-esteem and motivation is diminished. The punitive model as analyzed through quantitative lenses, fails to diagnose the source of the behavior which may cause students to repeat the same behavior and continue to be placed in ISS (Howard & Morris, 2003).

This cycle can be detrimental, as “repeated suspension has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for students, including academic failure, negative school attitudes, grade retention and school drop-out” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 31). When students are excluded from the classroom, they feel unwanted and unmotivated to change the opinions their teachers and peers have developed about them (as cited in DiMino, 2013).
Reported success of ISS. ISS success stories found in the literature have strict requirements, rules and procedures for the program which must be followed rigidly if success is to be found. In addition, successful ISS programs are staffed with licensed teachers trained in behavioral analysis, and not by the typical untrained paraprofessional. Also, the assigned work received from teachers must be completed; with no sleeping and students cannot leave ISS until all work is completed. “Sounds somewhat punitive . . . says Jeanette Tendai, an ISS teacher in a middle school in Missouri, but, at least you don’t have kids wanting to go there” (as cited in Wheelock, 2014, p. 1). Pokorski writes, “If students are provided with the instruction they need while serving in school suspensions, we have broken the cycle of sending them back to classes and feeling lost in the content” (2010, p. 58).

I found in my review of the literature that successful ISS programs are not only staffed by licensed teachers, but they have also received training in behavioral analysis. In addition, many of the successful ISS programs have qualified mental health professionals to explore the root causes of student’s misbehavior. Successful ISS programs engage the student’s parents which allows for conversations that may reveal additional risk factors for the student or provide important context for the student’s misbehavior. ISS can be a way to mediate the situation and resolve issues that precipitated the need for disciplinary intervention (The Children’s Defense Fund, 2014).

Alternative discipline procedures. There are studies that examine the use of alternative procedures to deter behavioral problems versus the punitive exclusionary procedure of ISS. One such study, Wettach and Owen’s (2014) “Alternatives to school suspension are more effective at changing student behavior,” displayed great promise in dealing with discipline problems through a technique known as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports.
Positive Behavioral Interventions Support is more commonly used in a campus-wide proactive manner. PBIS practitioners have shown that by using positive reinforcement of good behaviors among student populations, a reduction in inappropriate behaviors has been manifest (Wettach & Owen, 2014). The methods, tools, and analysis procedures used for these studies were very similar to quantitative studies which revealed the over-representation of referrals given to minority males. They also used school records and discovered positive trends in a decrease of the number of referrals written following the implementation of the PBIS programs. One such program in many school districts uses a program called ‘Focus,’ which is not intended to be disciplinary or punitive, but rather is designed to facilitate special education students’ development and learning skills in recognizing and replacing undesirable behaviors with alternative behaviors that lead to success in academic and social settings.

**Extrinsic motivation.** A wealth of research based on B. F. Skinner's behavioral model has shown that a variety of extrinsic rewards, e.g., grades, stars, stickers, coupons, tokens, notes home, and privileges, can be used to increase on-task engagement, academic performance and improved behaviors (Urlaub, 2002). Ratings from middle school students have shown that both exceptional and non-exceptional students rated good grades and free-time privileges as their most preferred classroom rewards (Urlaub, 2002). “Although all motivational camps acknowledge that extrinsic rewards can affect academic targets while the rewards are in effect, the two major camps behavioral and cognitive strongly disagree as to what happens to the targeted behaviors after the rewards are removed” (Stockdale & Williams, 2004 p. 1). Psychology behaviorists using meta-analyses on academic motivation suggest that external rewards often promote continued involvement in targeted activities, whereas cognitivists' meta-
analyses indicate that external rewards typically undermine future engagement in targeted activities (Stockdale & Williams, 2004).

Randall Sprick, who is repeatedly invited to speak on the topic of discipline to school districts all across America, argues in one of his articles that, ‘No, it is not bribery, it works’ (1996, p. 1). Sprick (1996) agrees with the behaviorists and contends that in fact extrinsic rewards and reinforcements lay the foundation for students becoming intrinsically motivated. Dickinson (2005) has reported that individuals with the highest level of intrinsic motivation for a task, maintained an assiduously high interest in the task following the cessation of extrinsic reinforcement for task engagement.

The arts as an extrinsic motivational tool. Turnaround Arts is a program started by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities [PCAH] with participating campuses all over the United States. A White House advisory committee of the PCAH including Michelle Obama, found that math, reading, and social studies teachers who began incorporating music, visual arts and theater into their lesson plans saw a dramatic increase in student’s academic success (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Turnaround Arts schools also began seeing attendance increase by a wide margin, and student suspensions decreasing by almost 70 percent (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Students started participating in school-wide performances for audiences packed with families and community members ((President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). If a study were conducted specifically examining the effects of the arts and the resultant data it has on discipline, it seems plausible that it would also display a positive effect. Such will be the focus of my action research study.
**Review of Methodological Issues**

In looking at the procedures used in deterring inappropriate behaviors in American schools, researchers used both quantitative and qualitative methods of reporting data on the topic of discipline. Where their studies were in a general sense looking at entire populations and examining which students receive the most discipline referrals, the literature finds that most were quantitative and were examples of random and stratified samples of discipline records. Such was the case of Skiba, Michael and Nardo’s (2002) study, “The Color of Discipline,” where the researchers examined referrals from 11,001 students from 19 middle schools in a populous Midwestern city. The results of the quantitative statistics displayed a probability of disproportionate administration of discipline referrals given to African male students.

Most of the studies involving school discipline are derived from probability assessments. The tools and instruments used in these studies primarily have come from these documented records of discipline referrals found on students, including a record of the type of infraction as coded by administrators; be it for fighting, vandalism, etc. These records contain detail information on each student including their ethnic background, special education and gender classification from high schools and middle schools across America. In addition, many of these studies use researcher constructed questionnaires of administrators, teachers, and students to gain additional insights into why inappropriate behaviors existed. These studies were preempted by the need to obtain appropriate human subjects and district clearance, and in so doing remove individual identifying information; important in maintaining ethical standards. Disciplinary incident files were then cleared for transfer from the district’s mainframe computer to the computers used by the researchers in the study (Skiba et.al., 2002).
**Quantitative studies.** In analyzing the quantitative study, “The Color of Discipline,” (Skiba, Michael & Nardo, 2002) the statistical analysis procedures began with two theoretical hypotheses. The first was the theory that male minorities may be over-represented in school discipline records. The second alternative hypothesis suggested that perhaps socio-economic factors would also contribute to the disparities in race and gender. These theoretical perspectives were confirmed by using a technique known as discriminant analysis. Discriminant analysis is specifically designed to clarify the relationship between the response variable, such as the types of infraction, and a grouping variable with a small number of categories (ethnicity), by creating a linear combination of the response variables that best identify the differences among groups (Skiba et al., 2002) The results verified that male gender, minority race, and lower socio-economic status led to a higher number of discipline referrals.

In ensuring that quantitative studies were feasible, maintained ethical standards, and were beneficial to all stakeholders, several issues were dealt with by these researchers in a careful manner. For one, when they began to make guesses about the larger population from samples collected from the sub-population, quantifying the accuracy of those guesses had to be justified by determining their significance. What must be determined is how closely their sample represented the entire population. If the measurement of a sample is likely to have the same value as the same measurement of the population, called a parameter, then the measurement is determined to be significant (Adams & Lawrence, 2014).

One can see that it is not enough that the researcher records their findings from a simple sample. Much more painstaking work needs to be done to give the audience a valid and reliable picture of the research question as applicable to the whole population. A skilled quantitative researcher needs to be able to use samples in order to make assumptions about the larger
populations from which the samples come. This is the study of inferential statistics. Most information that is taken from data is done using technology, such as statistical programs, spreadsheets, or other tools such as web-based programs and mobile applications (Skiba et al., 2002). Developing a comfort level with technology that can analyze data is essential (Adams & Lawrence, 2014).

Another important step in the process is determining which cause-effect relationships should these researchers investigate. “Causation is defined as the relationship between cause and effect; or how one variable is shown to have caused the observed change in another variable” (Adams & Lawrence, 2014, p. 21). This is very important in research which deals with the effects of positive behavioral support interventions programs. The manner in which the data is collected and analyzed is called the design procedure (Adams & Lawrence, 2014). All of these statistical procedures are carried out in a manner which is applicable, so that all results are clearly interpreted (Adams & Lawrence, 2014).

Also, the study must determine if a pretest should be given to the two groups before the treatment in order to measure the dependent variable in each group. The researchers must identify the results of the pretest in the study. The researchers should also compare the pretest scores of the two groups. And, if a pretest was given to both the control and experimental groups before the treatment, it must be decisive that a statistical test was used to determine if there was a statistical difference between these two.

Finally, the quantitative studies found in the literature and the models I have reviewed, made sure that the work was credible and valid; including those that examined the failures of “In School Suspensions” (Bertrand & Pan, 2011; Morris & Howard, 2003; Pokorski, 2010; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Using data to inform these decisions does not make a researcher a cold or
indifferent person. The researcher should correctly use data to drive his or her decision-making process (Adams & Lawrence, 2014). A study should always be designed to find a difference between treatments, groups, and so on, and thus to reject the null hypothesis. Many novice researchers will mistakenly design a study to support their null hypothesis, which means that they will try to show that there is no difference between the sample and the population. “Such studies will not further our knowledge, because we do not learn anything new about the variable(s) of interest” (Adams & Lawrence, 2014, p. 190).

**Qualitative studies.** Qualitative non-probability research studies regarding discipline procedures in American schools such as, Longworth’s (2012) study, “Lost: An Ethnographic Study of At-Risk African American Youth” displayed some of the same results that the quantitative studies yielded. The ethnographic qualitative methodology used by Longworth produced much more than statistics; rather it gave much needed in-depth reasons for the student’s improper behaviors. Such aspects can be discovered when using a ‘purposive’ non-probability qualitative study such as the Ogbu (2003) study.

Ogbu stated, “students’ ability level, poor teaching, and low teacher expectations were not the only factors contributing to student disengagement; peer pressure to underachieve to conform to the group played a significant role as well, as seen in Lee’s (1999) study” (as cited in Ogbu, 2003, p. 191). This type of information is not so easily attained through a purely statistical quantitative study, but is made possible through the use of in-depth interviews and observations over an extended period of time through a qualitative ethnographic methodology.

Lee’s (1999) study consisted of ethnographic interviews in which five student researchers interviewed 40 low achieving students at an inner-city high school in the San Francisco Bay Area. The students who were chosen to participate in the study met certain criteria: a grade point
average less than 2.0, two or more suspensions or expulsions from school for delinquent behavior and excessive absenteeism from classes. (as cited in Ogbu, 2003)

According to Lee (1999), “absenteeism, perceptions of racism, and personal relationships with teachers were the major themes permeating the students’ dialogue” (p. 61). Because the rationale for this design was to gain a better understanding of the behavior, language, values and beliefs of the culture of at-risk African American males, the ethnographic design was clearly the best approach to take. Ethnographers can gain information about the behaviors of an identifiable group from the inside, so interpretation of data can benefit all stakeholders.

Ethnographic studies like “Little Boys Lost: An Ethnographic Study of At-Risk African American Youth,” by Lisa Oliver Longworth (2012) are by design able to examine the shared perspectives, beliefs and behaviors of the group, and thereby uncover the real issues that negatively affect their success. In her book, Bad Boys: Public schools in the making of black masculinity, Ferguson (2001) documented her experiences in completing a two year ethnographic study at “Rosa Parks,” an intermediate school in Los Angeles. Ferguson’s study found that through her role as a participant observer in the school, as well as through conducting interviews with students and school staff, Ferguson offers a rich account of the daily interactions between teachers and students. She noted that there were several African American students who were identified as “unsalvageable” by their teachers, as early as the age of 8-years-old, “boys for whom there is no hope.” (p. 9)

As a process, ethnography entails extended observations of a group where the researcher may become immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people being studied, as well as conducting interviews with the group participants (Creswell, 2007). Qualitative research requires a researcher to explore many different areas, synthesize them, and bring them together in a
meaningful and credible way. McMillan (2012) defines credibility as the extent to which the data, data analysis, and conclusions are accurate and trustworthy. Credibility or trustworthiness in the qualitative world is a big deal. In order to approach it, there is a need to be descriptive, that is, record accurately and paint a picture that relates the description to the context, enabling readers to see for themselves that interpretations and conclusions are accurate and trustworthy. Such was the case in the Lee’s (1999) study, as it was similar to the literary term verisimilitude which Creswell (2013) defines as “the writing seems real and alive,” transporting the reader directly into the world of the study (Richardson, 1994, in Creswell, 2013, p. 302).

Another type of qualitative method found in the literature is what is known as grounded theory. This approach found in Corbin and Strauss (2007) study applied primarily to the theory which educators and social scientists call the pipeline to prison pipeline. Among other factors, a growing number of concerned citizens see that the current discipline system involving the punitive exclusionary procedure known as ISS bears much of the blame for this theoretical trend, especially among minority men. The challenge is to make sure the researcher is looking at all other factors within the theory, as it would be paramount to the credibility of the study to gain these perspectives as well (Corbin & Strauss, 2007).

The qualitative method known as the case study, aided me in constructing my conceptual framework. One such case study, Project SMARTart (2005) demonstrated the positive effects of teaching the core curricula through the arts. There were several others which described specific events which took place on school grounds and resulted in punitive exclusionary discipline procedures and a description of the negative resultant aftermaths. The drawback to the case study is deciding if the case is too broad or perhaps too narrow in scope to adequately illustrate the point being made. There is also the problem of deciding how many cases the researcher
needs to conduct to make their point; either too few or too many, could be counter-productive to their research question (Creswell, 2013).

As a reaction to the ineffectiveness and anachronistic views of ISS, another type of qualitative method known as an action research study, has also been conducted on the use of alternative discipline procedures. “Educational action research is an enquiry which is carried out in order to understand, to evaluate and then to change in order to improve some educational practice” (as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 15). The intended change in an action research educational project typically involves re-education, or changing patterns of thinking and action which are presently well-established in the system being studied. It challenges the status quo of this system from a participative perspective, which is congruent with the requirements of effective re-education and a Participation Action Research (PAR) study (as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2015).

It is important that participants in an action research study come to know the reality of the problem in order to transform it. The degree to which the research process reorients, focuses, and energizes participants toward this goal, the better the study will be (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The research must be done in collaboration with all parties who have a stake in the problem under investigation, and will continue to ask to what extent the problem is framed, and solved in a manner that permits ongoing learning of the individual or system (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

Action research scientists Sugai and Colvin, displayed great promise in dealing with discipline problems through a technique known as positive behavioral interventions and support (Sugai, & Colvin, 2004). PBIS is more commonly used on a campus-wide and proactive manner. PBIS has shown that by using positive reinforcement of good behaviors among student
populations, a reduction in inappropriate behaviors has been manifest. The methodology, tools and analysis procedures used for these qualitative action research studies are very similar to those quantitative studies found in the literature which revealed the over-representation of referrals given to minority males (Skiba et al., 2002). These PBIS studies used student discipline records, and by so doing, discovered positive trends with a significant decrease of referrals following the implementation of the PBIS program. “Action research is an approach which has proved to be particularly attractive to educators because of its practical problem-solving emphasis” (as cited in Herr & Anderson, 1999, p. 10).

The summary of methodological issues. There are many experienced quantitative researchers who sometimes criticize qualitative research as being nonscientific and thus invalid (Berg, 2001). They prefer quantitative research designs as they believe that statistics and numerical data do not lie. Their critics would say that they tend to lose sight of the probability factor inherent in quantitative practices; that there are problems with sample numerical data as it can only be used to make “guesses” about populations. Either way, quantitative, qualitative, or even a mixed method, there are inherent challenges in all of these methodologies that only the very experienced researcher would be able to advise the novice of which to choose for their particular study (Berg, 2001).

Synthesis of Research Findings

In integrating the literature on the relevant theories of discipline, beginning with punitive exclusionary discipline practices versus the more positive alternative procedures of today, a history of discipline in American schools could perhaps serve as a worthwhile outline. I will start with In-School Suspension, even though what engendered its beginnings in school districts was a program which actually began a decade earlier. I have found reports many of the same
dates and much of the same information regarding ISS’s creation; but to understand its origins, one must go back to the sixties to one of the first means of dealing with inappropriate behaviors in America’s classrooms which was expulsion (Skiba, Peterson, & Reece, 2000). Skiba, Peterson, and Reece (2000) find that expulsion, or what is now termed Out of School Suspension (OSS), was the only means in which administrators had to deal with inappropriate behaviors of students.

Because of complaints from parents and the results of research studies displaying the ills of expulsion and the ineffective results of missing school, it became a central issue to the literature and an insistent recommendation in the early seventies to begin suspending students from their classrooms, but not altogether from school, thereby ushering in In School Suspension. The result would be that students would find it easier to keep up with their school work, and be in closer proximity to their teachers when needed (Islin, 2010). Notwithstanding, it was not long thereafter that even ISS found itself under attack for the negative effects it had on students. Also, it was found that there was a disproportionality of In School Suspensions being received by students of color and of other vulnerable at-risk populations (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Monroe, 2006; Skiba, et al. 2011; Staats, 2014). According to Mendz and Knoff, the rancorous cycle of being thrown into ISS can be detrimental, as “repeated suspensions have been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for students, including academic failure, negative school attitudes, grade retention and school drop-out” (2003, p. 31).

In 1994, Rob Horner, George Sugai, and Anne Todd, focused on research to guide effective practices for behavior management (Wettach and Owen, 2014). They would name it, Positive Behavioral Intervention Support. PBIS was and is a proactive and interactive approach to establish a social culture in a school that supports social, emotional and academic success.
PBIS uses data-based decision making to align curriculum and behavioral supports for students and staff. It is aimed at supporting safe and effective school environments while preventing behavior problems with students. Data exhibited that schools implementing PBIS with fidelity see an increase in attendance, a more positive and calm environment, reduced behavioral disruptions, increased academic time, and student achievement (Wettach & Owen, 2014).

In addition to PBIS, there are other programs which have made it into current and relevant theories of how to curb inappropriate behaviors. Some have found success in the 21st century helping vulnerable at-risk students develop a more focused and studious mindset, inclusive of better behaviors which support their studies. The literature names as some of the most prominent, the Safe and Responsive Schools (SRS) program, the Restorative Justice (RJ) program, and the Community Service Programs (CSP) (Berkowitz, Sherblom, Bier, & Battistich, 2006; Owen, 2016).

Another program to deter unsuitable student behaviors includes the use of a technique known as Positive Extrinsic Reinforcement. Although not a new concept, as it had its beginning as far back as Skinner’s operant conditioning box of the thirties, followed by Premack’s experimentation with primates in the fifties, it is being used in limited schools across America in the form of offering rewards to students for doing the right thing (Premack, 2002; Stockdale & Williams, 2004). The literature offers a debate over whether it engenders or deters intrinsic motivation, but one of the foremost disciplinary gurus of the 21st century, Randall Sprick, believes that not only does it work, but that it lays the foundation for intrinsic motivation for students (Stockdale and Williams, 2004; Sprick 1996).

Finally, the literature introduces a program which utilizes the creative arts to successfully reach students with behavioral problems who have not been reached in traditional classrooms.
The literature names several programs across America and in Great Britain which have documented better on-task engagement and academic achievement by participating and using the arts to study the basic core subjects. Nonetheless, the literature offers no research studies which directly reflect how the use of the arts might affect the behavior of vulnerable at-risk populations who habitually receive the bulk of ISS referrals.

**Critique of Previous Research**

In the review of the literature on the subject of exclusionary discipline procedures, I have discovered a few problematic issues in the research. For one, I found a large amount of the research was dated. That is to say, that studies and data regarding the ineffectiveness and disservice to students receiving in-school suspension had been the target of much research in the 1990’s and early part of the turn of the century such as the Skiba, Peterson, and Williams’ (1997) study entitled, “Office Referrals and Suspension.” In response to these studies, researchers began seeing the problems associated with exclusionary discipline procedures as a forgone conclusion. The primary focus of newer studies in the first decade of the 21st century was to look at alternative devices to curb inappropriate behaviors such as PBIS. But, as is the vicissitudes of educational paradigms, I am finding that even PBIS is being regarded as a program that has not been as effective as was once thought, and could thereby be considered dated as well. One reason for this is that PBIS has programs that assist Special Education Students (SPED) but, it does not target all vulnerable at-risk populations who receive the majority of discipline referrals. Instead, PBIS delivers a very proactive and positive behavior message, but is aimed mainly at the student body as a whole. PBIS does not offer a student to student individualized alternative to ISS when behaviors are problematic. Most PBIS program’s policies state that they do not desire to replace disciplinary policies; so, that even though they do
identify problematic behavioral students and offer services to correct their behavior, they still support administration’s decision to send students to ISS, instead of offering some more innovative and less punitive way of dealing with the infraction. The lack of more current studies utilizing more innovative means of dealing with the chronic misbehaviors of vulnerable at-risk students is what is needed, and what is missing in much of the current research literature.

In support of ISS, Pudelski (2014) reports that American Association of Superintendents are advocating in fact a return to ISS programs, but with a renewed mission. Many school districts are moving away from viewing ISS as a punitive and exclusionary tool, and towards seeing it as an opportunity to support students with varying social, emotional, and behavioral needs in a positive and proactive environment (The Children’s Defense Fund, 2014).

My critique of the research lies in the fact that it appears there are many contrasting views which suggest a wide variety of so called optimal means in which to deal with students exhibiting inappropriate behaviors. No one method has proven to be a perennial practice. I believe that more studies should be conducted utilizing positive reinforcement methods, inclusive of extrinsic motivational tools and the use of the arts to reach the most problematic behavioral populations. I would advocate for both qualitative action research studies, as well as quantitative studies in the future.

As it is with the current predominate theories on how to curb undesirable behaviors of students on campuses across America, the literature and studies seem to also have the problem of being predicated by certain flaws in the research designs used. One common shortcoming of universal prevention studies as discussed by Osher, Sprague, Bear, and Doye, (2010) is that they rarely demonstrate whether certain program effects last or generalize across settings. In addition, evaluating intervention programs have relied primarily on case studies without control groups
(Sprague, & Horner, 2007). Two measures used in evaluating intervention programs, namely teacher ratings of student behavior and office disciplinary referrals, may in fact inflate evidence of a program’s effectiveness as often it is the case where schools may believe that negative reports could result in a loss of resources. Thereby, the resultant action is a change in referral practices and not actual decreases in problem behaviors (Bear, 2009).

Most intervention studies lacked multilevel research designs and analyses that examine effects at the classroom and individual level. Studies that did examine multilevel effects on disruptive behavior (Thomas et al., 2008) and school climate (Bradshaw & Leaf, 2008) report that schoolwide-level variance is substantially less than individual and classroom level variance. This raises an important question with respect to school-wide discipline: Are schools likely to have a greater impact on reducing disruptive behavior and improving school climate by focusing on universal schoolwide interventions, or rather on interventions at the classroom and individual levels? I am supportive of the latter, and the study design, as outlined in Chapter 3, is reflective of this belief.

**Summary of Chapter 2**

The literature covers the history of discipline procedures and further chronicles the researchers’ efforts over the last 50-plus years to improve disruptive behavior in schools across America. There exists a myriad of debates in the literature encompassing the topic of school discipline. Hundreds of studies involving quantitative, qualitative and mixed methods have been used to better understand student’s behaviors, and to experiment with varied theoretical programs looking to find the best answers to this problem which devoted educators have put forth as best practices.
The literature covers much of what has failed, and directs readers to programs that seem
to offer positive solutions to the dilemma. This is in fact the researcher’s most seminal job—to
continue seeking answers through carefully chosen epistemological methods of recording
accurate and revealing data in hopes of making clear and decisive recommendations. The goal
for my study was for such recommendations and interventions to result in the realization of new
ideations and paradigms for improved behaviors and academic success for vulnerable at-risk
students.
Chapter 3: Methodology

The following Chapter 3 discusses the manner in which the study will be conducted. Included are the procedures and measures to collect the data necessary in attempting to answer the main research question, which is: What is the impact of alternative discipline practices, such as the use of art-related contingency contracts on inappropriate behaviors among vulnerable at-risk students in contrast to In School Suspension? In the third chapter, the reader will also find a discussion of the specific tools of discovery; including interview questions to be asked of the educators and students, a questionnaire for the educators, and observations of the students serving their assignments in ISS. Finally, I have detailed the necessary protocol to be followed in conducting all of these measures.

The Chapter 2: Literature Review provided an analysis of research that has been conducted on discipline procedures. The synthesis of this literature supports that not all students respond favorably to a set uniform practice of discipline. Most notably, the punitive exclusionary discipline procedure known as In School Suspension (ISS) is routinely used to deter inappropriate behaviors with little positive effect, particularly among vulnerable at-risk students who receive the majority of discipline referrals (Goodkind, Wallace, & Bachman, 2008; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Monroe, 2006; Skiba, et al., 2011; Staats, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Not only do previous studies show ISS to be ineffective in reducing the number of referrals received by vulnerable at-risk students, but according to Morris and Howard (2003), these students are negatively affected psychologically as their self-esteem and motivation is diminished. The punitive model also fails to diagnose the source of the behavior which may cause these students to repeat the same behavior and continue to be placed in ISS (Morris &
Howard, 2003). This cycle can be detrimental, as “repeated suspension has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for vulnerable at-risk students including academic failure, negative school attitudes, grade retention and school drop-out” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 31). When these students are excluded from the classroom, they feel unwanted and unmotivated to change the opinions their teachers and peers have developed about them (as cited in DiMinio, 2013).

In response, I designed this purposeful action research study to better understand the research site community’s perception of ISS, and to identify alternative and perhaps more successful methods of dealing with inappropriate behaviors among vulnerable at-risk students. Finally, I was specifically interested in knowing the educators’ thoughts on using the arts as an extrinsic motivational tool and a proactive positive reinforcement deterrence to inappropriate behavior. Programs such as KID smART, United Dance in Great Britain, the Get Lit program in Sacramento California and the programs at the Renew Cultural Arts Academy in New Orleans, are but a few programs which have shown great promise in reaching special population students who perhaps could not be reached in any other manner than through the arts (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Music therapy is recognized by the U.S. Department of Education and states that related services may be required for a student to benefit from his or her educational program (Lazar, 2014). The President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities introduced a program which is displaying amazing results, named Turnaround Arts, which helps low performing schools use the arts as part of a comprehensive school reform effort. Schools participating have reported math and reading scores rising significantly, attendance up by a wide margin and student suspensions decreasing by almost 70 percent (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016).
Although these programs display marked increases in academic achievement, very limited data has been specifically collected displaying how the use of the arts as a positive reinforcement tool could impact behavior. In response, collecting data on the use of the arts for improving student behavior was an important aspect of this study, which I believe will add significantly to the knowledge of discipline practices among vulnerable at-risk populations.

**Alternative approaches.** Alternative approaches to discipline, including positive behavioral intervention and supports (PBIS) and those utilizing extrinsic motivational tools such as those described by the “Premack Principle” (2002) have shown marked improvements in behavioral dysfunctional students (Wettach & Owen, 2014). Readers must be informed that very little research has been conducted in discovering educators’ experiences using alternative approaches to discipline and specifically using contingency reward contracts to improve behavior among vulnerable at-risk students. In cases where educators have not, or are not currently using contingency contracts, it was one of the goals of the action research to gain an understanding whether such contracts will be more effective and sanative in deterring inappropriate behaviors than ISS, and thereby reverse attempts to surface perceived social inequalities manifested in vulnerable at-risk populations students receiving a disproportionate amount of ISS referrals (Creswell, 2013). Further, I have not found within the literature, studies which incorporate the use of the arts as an extrinsic motivational tool.

This action research study utilized a program named the “Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Project,” which involved introducing vulnerable at-risk students who had a history of ISS referrals to various art programs of their choosing; poetry, dance, musical instruments, songwriting, recording, and art. After adequate instruction was received, and where art-related gift cards were awarded along the way for successful completion of iterative phases, the program
culminated with presentations and performances by students, displaying their learned artistic skills and creations for school and civic audiences. In addition, those students who participated in the music program received a trip to one of the finest recording studios in the area to record their own compositions.

Of course, participating students had to successfully abide by provisions of their contingency contracts to remain in the program and receive the rewards. Contingency contracts were constructed and tailored to students on a one-by-one assessed basis, and agreed to by the student, their artistic teacher, and where the campus principal also signed off on the agreement. I was interested in analyzing how differentiated discipline plans could successfully accomplish behavioral goals in much the same manner that differentiated learning techniques and independent education plans (IEP’s) achieve learning goals (see Appendix A).

The district where I am doing my study does utilize several programs to reduce unwanted behaviors. The Behavioral Response to Intervention program BRtI, implements Behavioral Intervention plans (BIPs) to identify and address students in need of extra help with behavioral issues. However, such measures do not offer alternatives to ISS if the student is in fact in violation of school or district rules. Special education (SPED) students with behavioral issues can be assigned to a district program called ‘Focus,’ which is a pull out program assisting BRtI students who are sent outside their normal classroom to receive help with behavioral and academic issues.

The research site also offers positive reinforcement measures at its Discipline Alternative Education Placement (DAEP) center, where through extrinsic motivation techniques students can earn rewards for good behavior. The more mentally and emotionally challenged SPED students can receive assistance from facilities which offer services including, music therapy and an
extrinsic positive reinforcement reward program based on a point system where students can purchase items for the school’s store with reward tickets they have earned.

The campus principal, where the study was conducted, had already been experimenting with alternative means of reaching behavioral problem students by incorporating such activities as the martial arts, yoga, art therapy and poetry therapy. The goal was to improve student behaviors through an improvement in students’ self-esteem. In addition, the research district was one of only four percent of districts across the country to receive the prestigious, “Best Communities for Music Education for its outstanding commitment to music education by the NAMM Association. Because the research district had implemented such programs and is progressively moving toward addressing the needs of behavioral problematic vulnerable at-risk students, I was confident in receiving excellent cooperation, feedback and reflective perceptions from the district regarding the goals and purposes of this action art-related research study.

*Chosen methodology.* I chose the qualitative ‘action research’ methodology because this method has as its purpose to understand, evaluate, improve or reform an organizational practice; and in this studies’ case an educational one (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The methodology allowed me to gather rich data from questionnaires, interviews and observations of vulnerable at-risk students and educators both prior to the intervention action plan being set in motion, and then again after each repeated action cycle with changes to the program following reflective observations and learning. Mezirow (1991) defines reflective learning as “learning that involves assessment or reassessment of assumptions” (p. 60). According to Mezirow (1991), “Reflective learning becomes transformative wherever assumptions and premises are found to be distorting, inauthentic, or otherwise invalid” (p. 6).
Typically, action research is pursued with these iterative cycles including, plan–act–observe–reflect (as cited in Herr & Anderson, 2015). One must not stop at thinking they necessarily have the correct new perception, but rather, the perception must continue to be assessed and reassessed. This on-going reflective thinking will show whether or not there is a problem in a newfound belief, or an error in the problem solving. The continuum then is as follows: reflect, validate claims, effectively act on those claims, and reflect again Mezirow (1991). This process is done in relation to the larger body of literature that helps illuminate the findings, deepen the understanding, and suggests directions for the next iteration (Herr & Anderson, 2015).

The use of this process enabled me to gain a more complete understanding of the social behavior of vulnerable at-risk students who receive a disproportionate amount of ISS referrals, as well as a referenced criterion for improved discipline procedures. The research included open-ended interviews following each iterative cycle and a questionnaire at the beginning of the study which was directed at research site vulnerable at-risk students, teachers, ISS monitors, counselors, and administrative staff member to explore their opinions of ISS and specific reasons for student’s inappropriate behaviors. I was able to identify from the observations of students assigned to ISS, and from site educators, what type of student they believe was most benefitting, or least benefitting from ISS, for example, regular mainstream students, or vulnerable at-risk students. The resultant data could lead educators in the future toward differentiated discipline plans, where alternative discipline practices such as positive extrinsic rewards could successfully be utilized with contingency contracts.

**Chapter topics.** In the first part of the chapter, I discuss why I believe my chosen methodology is superior to other methodologies, and how it better supported the gathering of
information, and made it possible to draw from the data positive conclusions to the research questions. I will begin by defining the research questions, followed by the above referenced rationale for choosing action research as my qualitative research methodology. Also included in the first half of the chapter, I discuss the actual limitations of my research design. Further discussion will concentrate on the study’s credibility, or trustworthiness, and its dependability, or its consistency in reporting the correct sort of information.

I discuss the ethical issues of minimizing risks versus the benefits of conducting such a study, including how participants were informed and provided consent. I also provide any possible conflicts of interest which I thought I may have in conducting and analyzing the data. Following, I describe the research population and the method used to choose said population. In addition, I detail the instrumentation used in gaining the rich and descriptive information from the population, with an emphasis on questions which I believed would yield credible and dependable information. Finally, I give a detailed step-by-step description of the manner in which I collected all data.

In the second half of the chapter, I identify the procedures used to discover the information analyzed, such as the measurement of prescribed attributes, which in the study is targeted for improved behaviors in the classroom by vulnerable at-risk students. Finally, I summarize this chapter by discussing what I expected to find, which at its conclusion suggests a new paradigm in the way school discipline is addressed, consisting of the gained insights and knowledge from the study’s participants. There were many challenges in conducting such a study. My goal was to tread steadfastly in a manner that is first and foremost aimed at conveying the findings in an accurate and meaningful fashion, and designed to benefit all stakeholders.
Research Questions

1. In what ways does ISS impact at-risk population students?

2. In what ways do utilizing differentiated discipline plans on a student-by-student basis impact at-risk population students?

3. In what ways do art-related contingency contracts impact at-risk population students?

School districts do not typically offer differentiated discipline practices to special population students, but rather routinely offer ISS to all students as the first recourse for inappropriate behaviors (Skiba, et al., 2011). In anticipation of the expected findings of the study as related to the above first research question, previous researchers have displayed that ISS has proven to be mostly ineffective in deterring unwanted student behavior, especially with vulnerable at-risk students of low self-esteem. This type of student could be students with special educational needs (SPED), minority students, lower socio-economic students, and those who struggling to maintain on-grade level status (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Monroe, 2006; Skiba, et al., 2011; Staats, 2014; U.S. Department of Education, 2014; Wallace et al., 2008).

In regard to the second research question, if the resultant data from the research is positive for alternative differentiated discipline practices, then one of the transferable recommendations from this study will be that in the same manner in which special population students are in need and accustomed to differentiated learning strategies, perhaps they should also have discipline administered differently and individually. Educators are trained to discover and really uncover the various learning styles of their students from school records, through their own observations, and assessment data. The main categories of learners include those who learn best from hearing instruction, or auditory learners; seeing instruction or visual learners, or those
who learn best by manipulation of instructional materials with their hands and bodies, or kinesthetic learners. In the same manner in which teachers utilize differentiated learning practices for vulnerable at-risk students, would it not also be logical and worth questioning if the one-size-fits-all discipline procedure known as In School Suspension (ISS) works for all students.

Finally, I have found in my experience as a public school teacher and administrator that many of these vulnerable at-risk students who receive an inordinate amount of ISS referrals, have an innate interest and aptitude for artistic endeavors. Therefore, I desired to seek opinions and evidence as to whether these students could benefit from and improve their behaviors if given the choice of successfully completing art-related contingency contracts versus spending time in ISS.

**Purpose and Design of the Study**

In searching the literature specific to the topic of current procedures used in deterring inappropriate behaviors in American schools, the hunt turns up studies examining, as suspected, what is working and what is not. Overriding in all scholarly reports is the discussion of the advantages and disadvantages of the most common discipline procedure used in American schools, that being In School Suspension (ISS).

The need for a 21st century approach to reduce inappropriate behavior among special student populations on a student by student basis is eminent; and discovering a more positive and effective replacement for the exclusionary and punitive practice of ISS is hopeful. Studies involving programs such as PBIS show improvements in student behaviors, but such programs are mainly targeted on a campus-wide proactive basis. PBIS programs that do deal with the individual needs of students are limited to special education students. These BRtI programs are
used to assist special education teachers with interventions which can lead to progress in deterring unwanted behaviors of their students. Other vulnerable at-risk students, such as minorities, English second language (ESL) students, below grade level students, and Title I students, do not have access to programs like ‘Focus,’ which is a campus site program for SPED students needing additional help. My study is significant from the standpoint of addressing behavior issues with all vulnerable at-risk students, not just SPED students or African American students, as is prevalent in most studies on discipline referrals.

The research is significant in that I interviewed participant students and educators to find those who have had positive experiences utilizing alternative discipline procedures, such as contingency reward contracts. I was able to ascertain if they found such alternative differentiated discipline practices to be more or less effective in deterring inappropriate behaviors than ISS. In the same manner in which educators use differentiated learning techniques to reach students with different learning styles, it made sense to use differentiated discipline techniques to reach a variety of student behavioral issues. The research was designed to uncover corresponding individual root causes of behavioral problems. In addition, the study had the unique purpose of discovering if participants found whether or not vulnerable at-risk students in fact reduced the number of behavioral incidents, by successfully completing the art-related contingency behavioral contracts.

The rationale for my using a qualitative ‘action research’ method lay in discovering the shared patterns and effects of ISS as reported by participants, and discovering if there is a need for an alternative practice in dealing with behavioral issues among vulnerable at-risk students. In response, my implementing such an action which offers an alternative procedure, including observing and reflecting as to its effectiveness, is in fact what a qualitative action research study
entails (Herr & Anderson, 2015). This study was designed to uncover possible negative aspects of ISS, and also attempted to surface perceived social inequalities of vulnerable at-risk populations; so that its name, to be more exact, is known as participatory action research (PAR).

“Some experts see the goal of ‘action research’ as improving practice or developing individuals, whereas others see its goal as transforming practice and participants” (Herr and Anderson, 2015, p. 9). Debates continue with action researchers around these issues, but I see my study as incorporating both goals.

**Challenges of a research study.** PAR differs from some action research studies in that it has a vision of social events as contextualized by macro-level social forces (Herr & Anderson, 2015). The treatment or lack thereof of vulnerable at-risk students who receive an inordinate amount of ISS referrals, with little or no positive effects seems to call for, if not demand such a study. Therefore the goal of this study included not only suggestions to change the practice of using ISS to deter inappropriate behaviors among at-risk vulnerable at-risk populations, but also to engender a degree of transformative thinking on behalf of the participant educators necessary for such a change to take place. The meaning perspectives that I expected so many of my participants would hold, typically is so engrained and embedded in their lives that to change these perspectives is not something that can necessarily happen overnight, and was another significant challenge I faced (Mezirow (1991).

Perhaps the biggest challenge any qualitative action researcher faces is the need to have an understanding of the group studied. It was paramount to have a good working knowledge of the social cultural system of these special student populations as seen in my own observations, and through the lenses of the educators at the research site (Creswell, 2013). I could best answer the research questions by espousing to an ‘interpretivist’ standpoint, by
conducting unstructured interviews and observations, and by focusing in on the distinctive nature of improved perennial behaviors and the realization of academic success among vulnerable at-risk students. Because I served the district as a guest teacher, I had access to the students’ culture, and acquired valuable understandings specific to the behavioral problems they faced.

I was hopeful that the design of the study offered participants a more complete picture of the problems associated with the use of the punitive exclusionary practice of ISS, which routinely confronts the special population student. Many studies such as the one conducted by Skiba, Michael and Nardo (2002) entitled “The Color of Discipline,” only display through a quantitative statistical lens the disproportionate administration of discipline toward African American students in American schools. This data may answer the hypothesis that researchers had prior to initiating the study, but it does little to guide them with a conceptual design toward truthful insights as to why such data was revealed. Critical reflection according to Mezirow, is more concerned with the why, and, “the reasons for and the consequences of what we do” (1990, p. 5). PAR studies do ask these inquiring questions designed to bring deepened understandings of a particular problem, which can lead to organizational improvement (Costello, 2003).

**Why not conduct a case study?** Case studies that involve the effects of intervention programs, according to Sprague, Sugai, Horner and Walker (1999, 2007) often do operate with a conceptual framework derived from theory, but the drawback to this type of study is deciding if the case is too broad or perhaps too narrow in scope to adequately understand the questions and answer correctly. In addition, it is difficult to decide how many cases the researcher needs to make their point—too few or too many, could be counter-productive to their research question (Creswell, 2013). According to Thomas, Bierman, Thompson, and Powers (2008) most of these
intervention studies lack multilevel research designs and analyses that examine effects at the individual, classroom, and schoolwide levels. Studies that did examine multilevel effects on disruptive behavior reports that schoolwide-level variance is substantially less than individual and classroom level variance (Bradshaw & Leaf, 2008).

The reality that schoolwide-level variance is substantially less than individual and classroom level variance raises another important reason for my using the qualitative PAR study, as the purpose is to uncover reasons for behavioral problems not for an entire campus, but only for that segment of the study known as vulnerable at-risk students, as reported by site educators. In the same manner that one discipline procedure does not solve all types of student’s behavioral issues, it would also seem true that neither would a universal campus-wide one-size fits-all positive intervention policy.

This action research study went beyond uncovering reasons for behavioral problems, and beyond the understanding of the participants’ views on ISS, but also explored the use of contingency contracts involving extrinsic motivational rewards, and how they might curb unwanted behaviors. In this regard, I drew upon the practical what-works studies of extrinsic motivational theorists, B. F. Skinner (1957) and David Premack (2002) to determine success or lack thereof of the actions cycles I utilized.

**Research Population and Sampling Method**

Qualitative Studies such as DiMino’s (2013) “Best Practices for In School Suspension Programs,” tend to mainly be qualitative in nature because the participants are not selected by random. DiMino selected his in a most homogeneous manner as identified by the commonality of all having served the exclusionary punitive procedure known as ISS. Such studies are known
as purposive sampling, as members of a particular group are specifically sought after in the researcher’s study.

The sampling method I used is also purposeful in this qualitative action research study. Like DiMino’s (2013) this study used observations of a select sample population, which in my case, was vulnerable at-risk students. Interviews and questionnaires of vulnerable at-risk students and educators were used to examine ways in which ISS affects this identifiable group, and how alternative discipline procedures may assist in improving these students’ behavior, which is by definition of a ‘purposeful sampling’ method why such students and their teachers were chosen.

I selected from the most important group of educators, teachers who had a concentration of vulnerable at-risk students, and invited them to participate in the study. Next in importance, and thereby less in numbers needed, was my desire to interview at least one counselor and one administrator as participants. In addition, with the assistance of research site personnel, I finalized the selection of 13 vulnerable at-risk student participants who had a history of ISS referrals and were currently assigned to the research site campus, which houses the Discipline Alternative Education Placement center, and another program which primarily caters to students who are behind grade level because of excessive absences, or course failures. The study’s sample had a good representation of students from most special population categories, including various minorities, SPED students, Title I and at-risk students, and students whose reading levels and academic achievement was below grade level reading standards. I was able to secure student records to inform the study as to how the district classifies these students; e.g., regular student, SPED, ESL, or minority. I also include a look at participant students’ academic and discipline
records for comparison when analyzing the before and after schemata in relation to the results of the action research program.

I exclude educator’s perspectives on ‘main stream’ or regular students, and rather I focused my attention on these vulnerable at-risk students who receive the majority of disciplinary referrals. Studies have consistently shown that these students are the ones exhibiting low self-esteem due to any number of issues, including those of color, those with special physical and mental needs (SPED) and students performing below grade level standards. Many are from other unfortunate backgrounds, including lower socio-economic status, and some are even from nefarious backgrounds. The research questions was best answered by this qualitative purposive method because in fact I had a specific purpose in mind, and only observed vulnerable at-risk students and selected educators who were more directly involved in special population at-risk student’s educational lives.

The varied representation of educators both to experience, gender and age, ensured that I collected a more complete and in-depth understanding of the topic of discipline procedures as seen from these several perspectives. In addition, a questionnaire was made available to all educator participants at the research site high school and at the DAEP campus. An action research PAR study was most appropriate because I was interested in studying participant students’ behavior as perceived by educators who were working daily with this identifiable group.

**Instrumentation**

I used a triangulation validation of data which ensured the above criterion through a cross-verification of sources including: observations, questionnaires, and interviews of research site staff members and students. The primary instrumentation used in action studies was the use
of open-ended interview questions such as those used in similar qualitative studies on discipline like Brown’s (2007) study, “Lost and Turned Out: Academic, Social, and Emotional Experiences of Students Excluded From School” (see Appendix C).

**Data Collection**

I collected data from multiple sources following each action intervention to support triangulation validation including: student observations in ISS, educator questionnaires on discipline, and multiple interviews of both students and educators, which were recorded and transcribed. Included were follow-up member-checking data, which ensured changes to the actions of the iterative cycles which they thought would engender the greatest amount of insight into the perceptions of the school’s current disciplinary procedures, including ISS. In addition, I looked for insights from member checking forms which would encourage the greatest amount of credibility, honesty and dependability, including those perceptions which may not have supported the purposes or claims of the study, but would thereby produce the least amount of researcher bias.

This collaborative process also secured the greatest amount of protection for the ethical rights of all parties and ensured that the study was meaningful for all stakeholders. This kind of collaboration between researcher and participants engenders important ongoing feedback, which was vital to my action research study from all of the stakeholders at the setting, as it ensured a democratic outcome, and provided alternative sources of explanations (Herr and Anderson, 2015). I thereby had confidence that the answers and responses to my interview questions would assuredly answer in depth my research questions.

Important to the triangulation of data was acquiring pertinent school discipline and academic records on the student participants as provided and communicated to me by authorized
school personnel, so that improvements or lack thereof of behavior and grades could be noted and duly analyzed. I set up interviews with teachers, counselors, and administrators who are typically more involved and adept in working with special population students, through my outside secured email account, and in some cases through in-person recruitment. I orchestrated interviews and observations of the vulnerable at-risk students by contacting them through the offices of school administration.

Staff members received a letter of introduction to the study from a staff meeting, inviting them to participate in the interactive cycle interviews. The letter explained the purpose of the study and their potential role, and asked that the educators respond to the invitation within five days. I also asked the educators to complete a questionnaire, which ascertained their opinions of ISS and of alternative discipline practices. The letter asked the staff members to complete the questionnaire within five days, even if they decline the interview process. The questionnaires were anonymous, as the educators were not asked to identify themselves in this, or in any other subsequent data.

In the staff meeting, I further explained the purpose of research, describe their potential role and expectations as participants, and scheduled their interviews’ time and location. I emailed a schedule of the study to each of the candidates with a thank you letter for participating, and a review of the research study, and a reminder of the details of the first interviews’ date, time, and location. Participants were asked to bring the Consent to Participate form handed to them at the staff meeting to the first interview for signing.

A reminder phone call/text message or email went out to each of the participant educators the day before each interview, verifying the meeting date, time, and location with rescheduling of meeting time and place to be completed as needed. I arrived at the interview site 15 minutes
early to set-up and greet each interviewee. The following were interview materials: fully charged audio recording device and an external power source for charging as needed throughout the interview day, blank “Consent to Participate” forms, note paper for observations and all field notes. I took notes before, during, and immediately after each interview. Each participant was assigned a number to be utilized in documentation. I transcribed the recording(s) within two weeks of the interview(s), including all observations and field notes. Each transcription was subsequently proof read for any errors.

I used member-checking interviews with negative case analysis questioning with both students and educator participants, to compare and contrast any possible inconsistencies in the data following each implementation of action and interview cycles. This discovery technique included what participants saw as credible, or not credible in the other participants’ responses to the interview questions. The student member-checking were conducted in person, whereas the educator member-checking were administered by sending the educators a member checking form through a follow-up email. The educator member checking forms and email contained the anonymous responses of other participants, and a preliminary analysis of the themes which I drew from the study. A copy of the transcribed interviews and member checking form were sent to the educator participants within two weeks of the interview so they offer their comments, feedback, and suggestions for revisions of the data collected. The student transcribed interviews were hand delivered to the students, and the collection of their member checking comments, feedback, and revisions regarding the data was collected and conducted in person. I asked that the educator participants return their member-checking forms in five days after receiving them (see Appendix F).
The observations of students who were assigned to ISS took place on an intermittent basis, as I was made aware of their assignment by school administration. I then retrieved data from the interviews provided which was helpful in analyzing how vulnerable at-risk students reacted to the environment of ISS, and whether anything depicted from these observations supported the use of ISS for behavior modification and improved academic success.

The themes derived became saturated from the observations, questionnaires, cyclical in-depth interviews following each action intervention, member checking, and follow-up debriefings. These descriptions covered the setting of the group, past and present issues as were reported by school personnel, and details involving exactly what had been observed by participants involved in the educational lives of these vulnerable at-risk students. The recorded data was followed by transcribing all of the interviews, observations and responses through a coding system which organized the data into categories, from each separate iterative action cycle. This method engendered conceptual information which I placed in a computer file. Patterned regularities and thematic units found in the data were identified by a particular code or category, which assisted in making sense of the data, and greatly helped in the analysis process (see Appendix D). Finally, up-to-date discipline and academic records were secured on student participants following each iterative cycle, to analyze any improvement, or lack thereof, of the number of behavioral referrals, and of student’s academic standing.

Identification of Attributes

The primary attributes used to frame my conceptual framework and drive the study are described and listed in the following:

Alternative discipline procedures. Programs other than ISS or OSS which have displayed success in preventing inappropriate behaviors, and a reduction of discipline referrals
issued (Otter, 2011). I consider the alternative discipline procedure named the “Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Project,” as an attribute to the success of the study, as it is an alternative procedure which was found to improve at-risk student behaviors.

**Contingency contracts.** Contracts which can be used to teach new behaviors help maintain learned behaviors, or decrease inappropriate behaviors. When contingencies are set up, students are more likely to complete less preferred activities (Vismara, Bogin, & Sullivan, 2010). My “Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Project,” utilized extrinsic motivation by rewarding students with gift cards for not receiving any discipline referrals with each new action research cycle.

**Extrinsic motivational tools.** Motivation which is derived from rewards artificially linked to the behavior, such as; grades, stars, stickers, coupons, tokens, notes home, and privileges, which can be used to increase task engagement and seen by many as the building blocks for intrinsic motivation (Wettach & Owen, 2014). My action research methodology, and the designed “Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Project,” utilized extrinsic motivation by rewarding students with gift cards for not receiving any discipline referrals with each new action research cycle.

**Positive reinforcement.** An alternative discipline procedure which uses positive reductive procedures aimed at decreasing or eliminating unwanted behaviors through the use of reinforcement rather than the removal or loss of reinforcement or use of punishment, (Wettach & Owen, 2014). My action research methodology, and the designed “Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Project,” principally utilized positive reinforcement by rewarding students for not receiving any new discipline referrals with each new action research cycle.

**Vulnerable at-risk populations.** at-risk minority students, students in special education.
students who have been diagnosed as below grade level academically and students exhibiting signs of low self-esteem from a variety of physical and psychological factors, and who need temporary or ongoing intervention in order to succeed academically, and thereby avoid dropping out of school (Stockdale & Williams, 2004). I consider these types of students attributes to the study, as they have been found to possess a connatural connection to art. The use of art-related contingency contracts was in fact, the principal way in which I was able to reach many of these students, and improve their behaviors.

**Data Analysis Procedures**

The analysis procedure I utilized was designed to successfully answer the research questions. One of those questions, and a primary aspect of the study, is to acquire in-depth information from the participants concerning ISS. I looked for and analyzed information from participants as to whether they believe ISS is an effective deterrence for inappropriate behaviors for all students.

Another important question to be answered, was analyzing educator experiences utilizing alternative discipline programs, including positive reinforcement techniques, and how they may have successfully deterred unwanted behaviors compared to the use of ISS. Finally, because I believe that many of these vulnerable at-risk students have an innate interest and aptitude for artistic endeavors, I was attempting to discover if the extrinsic motivational intervention of rewarding students for successfully completing art-related contingency contracts would engender a reduction in unwanted behaviors.

The data analysis was very similar to the procedures used by (Haenfler, 2004) in that I described the participants in terms of their ideas and opinions. As did in his study, I had positioned myself directly in this at-risk culture over many years both as a teacher and an
administrator before I began my study, and I continued to position myself in this culture as an investigator and observer in my research. I believe that the past and current experience of working with this type of student assisted me greatly in providing my analysis of the data.

The coding system I used to discover patterned regularities and thematic units included information that I expected to find, like participant’s negative views of ISS; which I coded such data as NVISS. In cases, for example, where data revealed surprising content which suggested that although the participants reported that students disliked ISS they still thought it was a better way of handling discipline problems than using extrinsic motivational tools to encourage proper behavior, I coded those as a positive view of ISS, or PVISS. The negative view of extrinsic motivational tools, were coded with NVEMT. It is important to note, that with each iterative cycle, coding reflected responses apart from previous or futuristic ones with a numerical value, so that for the second cycle for the above code on negative view of extrinsic motivational tools were reflected with 2-NVEMT. From a visual standpoint a listing of codes are found in the appendices (see Appendix D) along with pictorial tables displaying analysis of all data (see Appendix G).

In all cases in the analysis, I coded from all field notes, displayed thematic units which surfaced, my past experiences, including the thesis I advanced regarding my support for alternative discipline procedures, and my conceptual framework on the topic to build a complete narrative and thorough interpretation of the study. The goal was that the interpretation of the data would be of significant value to educators and other researchers, specific to best practices of positive and productive approaches in disciplining vulnerable at-risk populations, while maintaining key ethical features of research confidentiality.
Limitations of the Research Design

In qualitative action research studies, researchers do not choose a sample to represent the whole population, as is the case with a quantitative study. As it was in my study, I only desired to study vulnerable at-risk students who received ISS referrals, and therefore, I was delimiting the size of the population by looking exclusively at these vulnerable at-risk students. Because I had no control of those who received ISS referrals, or were assigned to the Discipline Alternative Placement Center (DAEP) identifying these students ahead of time and the perceptions educators may have of them, would be seen as a delimitation of the research design.

I was able to complete the study in a little over five months, which could be considered less than a prolonged engagement, considering the succession of participating action research cycles needed for such an action research study, Herr and Anderson (2015). As it was reported in his qualitative study on seXrs, Haenfler (2004) found himself drawing on many years of actually being in the seXrs fold both as a participant and an observer, thereby assisting him in being able to draw quicker conclusions to the analysis phase of his study (Haenfler, 2004). I have spent many years, both as a teacher and an administrator, with my latter years serving as an administrator in charge of discipline. This experience and serving as a ‘Positive Behavioral Intervention Support’ and ‘Behavioral RTI’ coordinator, had perhaps given me a measure of prolonged engagement necessary to expertly analyze and interpret the results of this study. In response to interpreting the data, it must be said that a researcher can only self-report the perceptions of the participants, which is not a limitation, but rather is simply the nature of a qualitative study.

Because I do bring these years of professional experience in dealing with special population ‘at-risk behavioral students, I no doubt added some of my own perspectives making it
imperative that I practiced the process of continued reflectivity in examining both myself as the researcher, but also my relationship within the research itself.

Validation

Qualitative researchers strive for a complete understanding of their study made possible in part by in-depth interviews of their participants, and by observing sometimes overlooked important information garnered by purposefully spending extensive time in the field. I used several measures to ensure that the study engendered this type of understanding, and that it contained transferability in respect to both credibility and dependability. It is important that similar studies can take from this work important information which is deemed accurate, and will also serve to enhance previous works and bring new perspectives for future works on the topic of discipline. I am presenting my analysis of the data by primarily using three measures which ensure the input and thoughts of all participants concerning all reported information, namely: member checking, peer debriefing and negative case analysis.

Credibility. I desire that my work is credible; and that in the study process, I sought to uncover trustworthy information. I sincerely attempted to accomplish this by cross checking, or member checking the views of participants at the end of each iterative cycle by presenting them with a preliminary analysis of themes which I drew from participants in the study. This technique is most critical in establishing credibility (Creswell, 2013). I was interested in what participants saw as trustworthy information, and anything which they believed was missing in the written analysis. This could include findings which they may have seen as credible or perhaps not credible in the responses of other participants to the interview questions. I was able to discover this information by submitting to all educator participants a member checking form, which was sent from my password protected email account. I was also able to acquire this type
of information from the student participants, but through private in-person interviews. In addition to the participants in the study, I gathered impartial views from colleagues, including key personnel at the research site. The opinions drawn from peers regarding what they saw was credible in the research, also greatly assisted me in eliminating personal bias in both my observations and analysis.

**Dependability.** I also sought to maintain dependability in the study by consistently and reliably providing the correct kind of information needed from participants in describing In School Suspension and their experiences with alternative discipline procedures. I was confident, and was not disappointed that my dissertation committee would ask hard questions along the way regarding my methods and interpretations, and thereby serve as debriefing agents in checking that my study was honest. I believed that dependability was also made possible through a technique known as negative case analysis. This involved a process in which I searched for patterns of information that did not support the majority of information or the expected results of the study. Creswell stated, “Not all evidence will fit the pattern of a code or a theme…it is necessary then to report this negative analysis, and in so doing, the researcher provides a realistic assessment of the phenomenon under study (Creswell, 2013, p. 251).

I anticipated finding perhaps only some negative case findings when it came to participants’ views of ISS, but I did, as expected, receive more diverse thoughts and opinions regarding the use of alternative discipline procedures to curb unwanted behaviors among at-risk students used to reduce the number of ISS referrals. In response, my data reflects all opinions of the participants; both those that supported themes which I believe will change for the better discipline practices for vulnerable at-risk students, and those that did not support this purpose of
the study. The result of this in-depth and comprehensive reporting, I believe ensures the dependability of this study.

**Expected Findings**

As was the case in most of the studies I reviewed, I anticipated finding negative feedback from site participant educators regarding the use of the punitive exclusionary procedure known as In School Suspension (Morris & Howard, 2003). These expected findings support that ISS lowers student’s self-esteem, reduces motivation, and does little to reduce disruption, and concurs with the evidence of most studies on school discipline procedures completed prior to mine (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

I also expected to discover from school discipline records, a disproportional administration of discipline and ISS referrals to minorities and other vulnerable at-risk populations from interviews with school personnel. I expected to reveal that it is not just minorities that receive the majority of ISS referrals, but students of all vulnerable at-risk populations; inclusive of special education students, Title I students, students who are entered ‘Response to Intervention’ (RtI) programs, where students are a grade level or two behind other students, and in general, students who suffer from low self-esteem from a variety reasons.

I also expected the study to reveal educator’s positive experiences with alternative discipline procedures, such as contingency rewards contracts, and how they found them to be more effective than ISS in deterring inappropriate behaviors and thus reversing attempts to surface perceived social inequalities (Creswell, 2013). School personnel’s perspectives provided vital insights into student’s experiences of exclusion, which were informed by the questionnaire and educator interviews.
Following each action intervention, I expected to discover that participants had found that the incorporation of art-related contingency contracts made a positive impact on special population at-risk students’ behavior, and their academic engagement. My analysis thereby supports using the arts as an extrinsic motivational tool as a positive and seminal alternative to ISS in significantly deterring inappropriate behaviors among vulnerable at-risk students. The use of the arts has been found to have a combination of intrinsic and extrinsic values (Dickinson, 2005). I expected to find that such creative activities often thought to be only intrinsically motivated, would attract high extrinsic praise from others, thus blurring the case for purely intrinsic motivation (Dickinson, 2005). The above unique facets found in my study I believe will inform the literature in ways not shown before in studies on the topic of discipline.

**Ethical Issues**

In looking at the ethical policies which a researcher must adhere to in conducting a research study, it was important for me to assess any conflict of interests that I would have both to personal and possible financial matters. I would also appraise any pre-set position which I felt I might bring forward to the study which could be identified by participants and others as a bias. Finally, it was paramount that I evaluate all other concerns and procedures as outlined by the American Psychological Association’s Standards for ethical research (American Psychological Association, 2017).

**Conflict of interest assessment.** I was critical that I examine my position within the district, and look for any possible personal conflicts that I could see might interfere with my ability to execute a trustworthy and dependable research project. I took off this year as a high school administrator to have more time to concentrate on this research. I served the district, in the capacity of a guest teacher in instructing songwriting, musical instrumentation, and recording
aspects of the study. I believed that serving in this role versus that of an administrator, actually allowed me to conduct the study in a manner which did not impede an openness from the participants, but rather encouraged more honest and transparent responses. As might be the case if I were entering the study as an administrator, participants could have felt some fear of reprisal with certain answers because of the authority that comes from that office. This possible fear could have led to a lack of openness with all answers being more restrictive in nature. As it was, serving only as a guest teacher and researcher, I believe the responses I received were in fact very open and honest.

In another respect, because some participants were aware that I had administrative experience, I was somewhat fearful that this could actually lend a certain amount of respect to the study; versus seeing me as only a guest teacher. I believed it actually gave me credibility as someone qualified to conduct such a study. In any case, there were no financial considerations, nor was there any authority enlisted over any of the participants, including no coercion of any kind on the participants to involve themselves in the study. In short, I did not see that there was any conflict of interest whatsoever.

**Researcher’s position.** Serving as a guest teacher gave me the flexibility to conduct needed fieldwork, including interviews with administrators, teachers, Behavioral Response to Intervention (BRtI) inclusion professionals, and counselors of vulnerable at-risk students who receive the majority of ISS referrals. It was essential that the fieldwork should be conducted in such a way that respected the daily lives of the individuals at the site, and where the focus would be on presenting myself in an honest manner in describing the purpose of the study, and making sure that all participants saw me as giving back something of worth to the community (Creswell, 2013).
I believe it actually was an advantage conducting the research as a guest teacher; in that I believe, it was again, less likely that coworkers who were uninformed of my administrative past, would see me as having pre-set views on the topic of discipline. In fact, I believe that serving as a guest teacher only aided my ability to be both transparent in observations and reporting, and to some extent, prevented my having personal bias or a preconceived agenda. This positionality is described as participatory or collaborative research, and is one that is considered to be an insider/outsider team research (Barunek & Louis, 1996). My position as a guest teacher in many ways fits this description; as I saw myself, as did others, as being both inside, and yet in many respects outside of the system. The complexity of the notion of inside/outside is captured in the following discussion of being an “outsider-within.” Costello suggests, one’s location in an organization or community makes for varying vantage points and differing lenses of reality. Some people are outsiders-within, residing in the margins and observing the contradictions between the dominant group’s actions and ideologies. Outsiders-within offer a specialized, subjugated knowledge; a peculiar marginality, that provides a unique standpoint on self and society. This specialized knowledge can foster organizational learning or can be seen as a threat to the maintenance of the culture of an institution (as cited in Collins, 2003, p. 44). This position can thereby contribute to the knowledge base with a critique of practices, leading to improvements in ways which could not be as easily realized if not for this positionality, described as participatory action research or PAR (Costello, 2003).

It was crucial that I remained cognizant of the fact that I would bring to the study preconceived ideas about the need for alternative discipline practices to deal with unwanted behaviors, including my own aversion to In School Suspension as the predominate method in dealing with problem behaviors among vulnerable at-risk students. Other than informing the
participants of my interest in the study, I did not inform participants of my personal recommendations and thoughts on ISS, nor did I refer to any experiences that I have had in regard to discipline issues in my past. These actions on my part were important in eliminating bias or assumptions which may have had a tendency to enter the study with impaired objectivity. I succeeded in this plan by conducting weekly cross-checking meetings with colleagues and peers from the district to weigh-in on problems that they saw in the study including, overemphasized or underemphasized points, vague descriptions, general errors in the data, and any bias or assumptions they saw I made in the writings (American Psychological Association, 2017).

In addition, as the dissertation reached its final stage, I conducted a debriefing of all participants to look at such items as transcripts, recorded interviews, the final report, and my general methodology. As APA Standards of Research states, researchers should provide a prompt opportunity for participants to obtain appropriate information about the nature, results and conclusions of the research, and take reasonable steps to correct any misconceptions that the participants may have of which the research is aware (American Psychological Association, 2017).

**Ethical issues in the study.** For this particular study involving research site educators’ thoughts on discipline procedures for vulnerable at-risk populations, the following procedures were adhered to in a most rigorous manner. Firstly, it was vital to gain institutional approval and provide accurate information about the research proposal in order to conduct the research—both to satisfy the institution’s International Review Board, but also the district committee which reviewed the documents at the site where I conducted the study. This included conducting the research in accordance with the approved research protocol as required by

One very important expectation is protecting the confidentiality of the participants. The researcher therefore provided participants with consent forms (see Appendix E) which used language that was reasonably understandable, including translations where needed, and assured them that their name and likeness would not be used in any of my field notes, interviews, questionnaires, reports, or in the final analysis of the dissertation. Of course no researcher can ever guarantee that the information will remain absolutely confidential, but it was my sworn duty to use every possible resource to ensure that any leak of said personal and private information will be highly unlikely.

The APA ethics standard states that researchers should not disclose confidential information unless they have obtained the prior consent of the person or organization. The standard goes on to say that the researcher should only include in written and oral reports and consultations, that information which is germane to the purpose for which the communications is made, and only for appropriate scientific or professional purposes; and only with persons clearly concerned with such matters (American Psychological Association, 2017).

Chapter 3 Summary

One of the goals of the research was to show that vulnerable at-risk students need to be reached in much different manner than ISS to curb unwanted behaviors. In choosing to use an action research methodology, I felt confident that I would successfully be able to show that in the same manner in which teachers utilize differentiated learning practices for students’ varying learning styles, educators could also support employing differentiated discipline practices for the array of possible student behavioral and motivational needs, as well. The cyclical action steps I
used to support this theme, and answer the research questions, were saturated from a triangulation of data. This cross verification of sources, including: interviews, observations, and questionnaires of participants in the study, ensured that the criterion was valid.

One purpose of the study was to confirm if site educators agree with previous research conducted on ISS, which demonstrates a disproportionate administration of ISS referrals given to minorities and other vulnerable at-risk populations. In addition, that they would agree that ISS has been shown to be mostly ineffective in deterring unwanted behaviors, and that it lowers student’s self-esteem, reduces their motivation, and in general, is detrimental to the mind set of vulnerable at-risk students (Skiba & Sprague, 2008)

The study’s primary purpose was to explore site educators’ and students’ findings as to the effectiveness of art-related contingency contracts, utilizing positive reinforcement and extrinsic motivational rewards, in improving behaviors and academic engagement of at-risk students.
Chapter 4: Data Analysis and Results

Contingency contracts have been used at all levels in education to motivate students for many years. As a positive reinforcement tool, their success is well documented in the research literature (Wettach & Owen, 2014). In addition, several programs have been identified in the literature across America and in Great Britain which have documented better on-task student engagement and academic achievement by participating in the arts. However, very little research has been conducted to specifically reflect whether either of these strategies have had a positive effect on behavior. I chose to employ both contingency contracts and students’ exposure to the arts in answering my primary research question which is: In what ways do art-related contingency contracts impact at-risk population students?

I also sought to discover what educators and students thought about the effectiveness of “In School Suspension” as a deterrent to inappropriate behavior; and whether any of the participants in my study had realized success with an alternative discipline practice. In recent years, ISS has found itself under attack for the negative effects it has had on students (Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Researchers have found that there is a disproportionality of ISS being received by students of color and of other at-risk populations. Researchers have linked ISS to a variety of negative outcomes for students, including academic failure, negative school attitudes, grade retention and school drop-out (Mendez & Knoff, 2003).

As an alternative to ISS, I was interested in having participant teachers offer the at-risk student population free art-related gift cards and free participation in highly recognized art programs. This extrinsic reward program would serve as positive reinforcement for students successfully completing contingency behavioral contracts. I wanted to evaluate whether an art-
related extrinsic motivational program could be helpful in reducing the number of behavioral incidents, and at the same time be less damaging to the students’ psychological makeup.

The contingency art-related contracts were individualized, so that in the same manner in which educators tailor instruction through ‘differentiated teaching’ for students with different learning styles, it seemed plausible to tailor discipline practices for students with different behavioral issues. A review of the literature revealed that this was due to the fact that many at-risk students have an above average interest and aptitude for the arts, and, therefore, individualized behavioral contingency contracts were designed to include a specific educational art program which the student wished to enroll in to receive instruction. Most of the research site students chose music, either guitar, keyboard, bass, songwriting, or studio production. There were ten who chose the music program, and the other three participant students decided on jewelry making and canvas art.

I chose the methodology known as “action research” to discover the effect of the contingency art-related contracts on the participant students, because this method has as its very purpose to understand, evaluate and improve an organizational practice, such as discipline (Herr and Anderson, 2015). This methodology allowed me to gather rich data from questionnaires, interviews and observations of special population at-risk students and their educators, both prior to the intervention plan being set in motion, and then again after each repeated action cycle with changes to the program following reflective observations and learning (Costello, 2003).

My role in this study’s data collection and analysis was recording answers to my questions, and observations on the topic of discipline from 13 educators, and 12 behavioral problematic students. The participant students were assigned to the research site campus which housed the DAEP center, and the center for students who were behind in their grade level
studies. I succeeded in securing the data from a questionnaire I submitted to the educators, and from interviews of staff members and students following each iterative action cycle. The opinions drawn from peer educators regarding what they saw was credible and authentic from member checking forms following the interventions greatly assisted me in my analysis.

The data was collected using an audio tape recorder, which was followed by transcribing all of the recorded interviews, and responses through a coding system, which organized the data into categories from each separate iterative action cycle. This method engendered conceptual information, which was placed in designated files in a personal computer. Patterned regularities and thematic units found in the data were identified by a particular code or category, which assisted in making sense of the data in the analysis process. (A listing of the codes can be found in the Appendix D) Finally, up-to-date discipline and academic records were secured on student participants following each iterative cycle, to analyze any improvement, or lack thereof, in the number of behavioral referrals, and of student’s academic standing.

The coding system I used to discover thematic units, patterned regularities or irregularities, in which irregularities would suggesting possible negative case analysis, greatly assisted me in the analysis process. I coded all field notes, including those from interviews and observations, to build a complete narrative and thorough interpretation of the study. The overall consensus of the participants was that this type of art-related intervention, which utilized positive reinforcement through students successfully completing contingency contracts, clearly demonstrated an improvement in at-risk students’ self-esteem and self-image resulting in improved behaviors.

In this chapter, I will follow a suggested technique of a qualitative study, and offer illustrative quotations from participants to provide readers primary source evidence regarding my interpretations (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2012). I also offer details to the sample population with
a thorough understanding of the research methodology I used, and how it relates to the data. The narrative sections offer a more complete summary of the findings and a presentation of the data. The chapter is organized in a manner that addresses the following three research questions, and the data is presented to facilitate answering these questions.

1. In what ways does ISS impact at-risk population students?
2. In what ways do utilizing differentiated discipline plans on a student-by-student basis impact at-risk population students?
3. In what ways do art-related contingency contracts impact at-risk population students?

**Description of the Sample**

The study involved both students and educators. They both served as participants in the study and each answered the above research questions. I began the study with 13 educators, consisting of 11 teachers, one counselor and one administrator. The sample consisted of seven of females and six were males of varying ages. Eleven of the educators were Caucasian and two were of Hispanic descent. Their experience ranged from one beginning teacher to some who had 20 or more years of experience. All of the educators participated in the program during the entirety of the study.

The 13 students who started the program were all in high school at the research site, but in two separate programs; the DAEP program and a program for students who were behind in their grade level studies. At my research site, students who have had behavioral problems, and have committed more serious violations of district rules, or Chapter 37 Texas Education Laws and codes, are sent to the Discipline Educational Alternative Center, or DAEP program. Seven of the 13 students who started the program were in that program. The program consists of
students who are either given discretionary or mandatory assignments to the program. Discretionary assigned students are those who are assigned to DAEP, not because of an infraction of state law and a violation of Texas educational code Chapter 37, but rather a violation of school rules at their home campus. However, the infractions are serious enough that they may be assigned anywhere from 15 to 30 days in the program before they can go back to their regular campus. Out of the seven DAEP participants in my study, there were no discretionary students listed, so that all seven were classified as mandatory placements, or those in violation of Texas educational code Chapter 37 state laws. Of these students all were male, with five of them being of Hispanic decent and two were of African Americans heritage. Two of the students were classified as Special Education students (SPED) and one was Limited English Proficiency (LEP).

The other six students in my study were in the program for credit recovery. These students were either behind in their grade level due to excessive absences, course failures, or in a few cases, there are some in the program simply because they desire to complete their high school in an accelerated time frame. However, all students who volunteered for the study were screened by its administrator, and were in fact behind in their school work, and also had a history of behavioral problem. The administrator screened for students with behavioral problematic backgrounds, as those student characteristics were obviously important to the study’s data and intent. The credit recovery students consisted of three males and three females, with five of them being Hispanic, and one Caucasian. The ages of these students ranged from 15 to 19 years old, including one freshman, one junior, and four seniors. The 19 year old student qualified as an adult, and did not need parental permission, so he signed the student assent form for himself.
However, this student graduated before the end of the program, and was not available past the third week of the program.

The following table represents the above characteristics of the students participating in the study. However, because the number of participants in this study was small, to protect the confidentiality of the participants, final results of the success or failure of each participant and thereby the efficacy of the study as a whole, as reported in Appendix G, does so without identifying students’ ethnicity.
Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Student Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Program</th>
<th>Completed study</th>
<th>Type of student</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Title 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>A-A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Title 1</td>
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<tr>
<td>9th</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>9th</td>
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<td>9th</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>SPED</td>
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<td>9th</td>
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<td>C</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
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<td>Title 1</td>
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<td>11th</td>
<td>A-A</td>
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<td>SPED</td>
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<td>C</td>
<td>Title 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>D</td>
<td>Title 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>Title 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12th</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>Title 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals

9th- 6   | H- 10   | A-7     | C- 12            | Title 1-10      |
12th-4   | C- 1    | D- 1    | LEP- 1           

*Note.* A-A-African-American. Program A represents those students who were serving a 30–45 day suspension from the main campus. Program B students were students with behavioral problems who were behind in their grade level work. C-completed the study. D-dropped form the study. Sus-suspended. Title 1-free and reduced lunch. SPED-special education. LEP-limited English proficiency.

**Research Methodology and Analysis**

**Action research.** This action research study sought to understand the perceptions of educators of at-risk students with chronic behavioral problems, and also that of the students’ perceptions of themselves. The study sought to establish an on-site intervention program that supported improved behaviors. As discussed in previous chapters, the design of this program seemed to fit the sine qua non of an action research study. The goal of an action research study
through a series of iterative cycles, is to make needed improvements to a particular practice (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In the case of my study, the goal was improve discipline practices. The perceptions sought included those of ‘In School Suspension,’ the use of the arts as a means to build self-esteem and thereby improve behaviors, and that of alternative discipline procedures, including the use of contingency contracts with extrinsic motivational rewards built into the program. This intervention supported positive reinforcement of improved behaviors. The perceptions noted by participants directly provided the context necessary to answer my research questions.

I identified through my initial interviews with educators and students that the study site did in fact have a problem with ISS not serving its intended goal of preventing and improving inappropriate behaviors. I therefore developed a plan for intervention utilizing the arts and contingency contracts, implemented this action plan, and then gathered data regarding the effects of the practice. The research design as described in Chapter 3, allowed my investigation to successfully continue through two subsequent iterative cycles. The study covered a period of five months.

**Thematic procedures.** The data from the ‘Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts Project,’ was derived from student records, educator’s questionnaires, observations of students in ISS, and interview transcripts of both educators and students. All data was coded, which enabled me to categorize the responses from participants into thematic units, engendering a representation of discoverable answers to each of three research questions (see Appendix G). I examined educator’s reports from tables and graphs, which represented behavioral and academic progress of each of the students in my study. These reports were invaluable, as it was the purpose of the study to examine the efficacy of the project. Prior to the implementation
of the action cycle project, I asked educators to fill out a questionnaire which answered and addressed the research questions with a total of eight questions.

Other forms of data compiled included daily checking and monitoring of the ISS room of students assigned there, where I observed and noted student’s behavior, work accomplished, and perceived attitudes over the period of the five month study. In addition, I recorded all interviews with students and educators, and carefully transcribed all information into thematic units, which gave the answers necessary to my research questions. The interviews of educators and students were primary sources of data, which followed each iterative cycle.

The transcribed data consisted of 14 hours of interviews with teachers, and 19 hours of interviews with students. This summary of time spent with participants does not count the hours of check-in conversations with teachers, counselors and administrators, or the hours of check-in conversations during instructional time that my art teacher and I spent with the participant students during instructional time of the project. I used these discussions with students and corresponding experiences to reflect upon the program, and viewed them as indicators of what was working, and what aspects of the interventions could be improved upon.

One of the goals of the research was to discover if vulnerable at-risk students need to be reached in a much different manner than ISS on order to curb unwanted behaviors. I wanted to discover if in the same manner in which teachers utilize differentiated learning practices for students varying learning styles, would educators also support employing differentiated discipline practices for the array of student behavioral causes and needs as well. The cyclical action steps I used to support this theme and answer questions, was saturated from the triangulation of data. The data obtained from observations, questionnaires, and interviews of all participants ensured that the criterion was valid through these cross verification of sources.
Included was follow-up member-checking data, which ensured suggestions to the actions of the iterative cycles, which participants may think would engender the greatest amount of insight into the perceptions of disciplinary procedures. I would note here, that no suggestions were made to the intervention itself, as all participants thought that the art-related intervention design was working well. However, suggestions were made to include in the contingency contracts verbiage about students needing to also show improvements in academics and attendance. I thought these suggestions were good, but because there have been studies using the arts to improve academics and attendance, but no known studies showing its effects on behaviors, it was important to me that the contracts wording would specifically cover only improvements in behavior as a requirement. In addition, I looked for insights from the member checking forms which would encourage the greatest amount of credibility, honesty, and dependability; including those perceptions which may not have supported the purposes or claims of the study, but would thereby produce the least amount of researcher bias (see Appendix F). Some of this was also accomplished by gathering impartial views from colleagues, including key personnel at the research site, and from current and former supervisors at Concordia University with a technique known as peer debriefing.

During this research program, I did not alter anything from the design that would be considered substantial to the protocol or procedures found in the method described in Chapter 3 of this dissertation. However, I did decide that instead of rewarding each student with gift cards for successfully complying with requirements in their contingency contracts following each iterative cycle that it would perhaps be more successful to wait and award the students at the end of the project. I decided that this would be more meaningful and ceremonious to wait for the completion of all cycles, and present these gift cards at the end of the study. I also thought that it
could engender students actually staying the course and successfully observing the elements of
their contingency contracts right up through the end.

In addition, the only other change in the protocol was the elimination of the trip to the
studio and the awards assembly. This was due to the fact that some students in the DAEP
program who successfully met their disciplinary obligations, were released back to the main high
school before the end of the study. This action resulted in a systematic problem of transporting
said students located in two separate campuses to and from the studio, and to and from the
research site campus where the assembly was to be held. However, all awards were given to
qualifying students, and arrangements were made to take qualifying students to the
recording studio outside of district transportation. Details concerning the research protocol were
explained in Chapter 3, and can be reviewed in Appendix A.

Summary of the Findings

I gathered both empirical and primary data, and from which I was able to conclude that
none of the participant educators or students believed that In School Suspension was a successful
or viable way to handle discipline problems. The empirical data investigated from school
records, and from those records found in school districts across the United States, as was detailed
in Chapter 2, revealed that the same type of students found in my study, that is, at-risk students
from Special Education status, Title I, and those of minority decent, receive the majority of
referrals with seemingly no end to their recidivism. The primary source data that this study
produced from the coding of observations, questionnaires, and interviews, revealed similar
patterns of information, that none of the participants felt that ISS was an effective way to handle
discipline. Participants reported that ISS did not effectively deter inappropriate behaviors, but
also they felt it was damaging to the student psyche. The educators all agreed in interviews, and
in check-in conversations, that perhaps ISS only served as a means by which a teacher could be relieved from the disruptive behavior of a particular student for a period of time, so that proper uninterrupted instruction could go forward in the classroom. In addition, other identified patterns of data emerged from clusters of information, which fit themes important in answering parameters all of the research questions.

Both teachers and students, felt strongly that alternative methods of approaching discipline in a differentiated manner, that is, student by student, should be tried as opposed to the “one size fits all” practice of ISS. In my pre-program questions directed at students, only one student out of 13 thought that ISS was a good deterrent for misbehavior. Many students even said that they liked going to ISS, as it allowed them to get out of their regular classrooms, and thereby out of much of the work that was being assigned there. Only one student answered that they thought ISS was good for redirecting student behavior. This was the same student who thought that ISS was also good for academic engagement. Negative case analysis could be revealing that this student perhaps thought that I was looking for this sort of answer in support of ISS. The other students were very direct in saying that they got absolutely nothing done in ISS for a variety of reasons, including most notably: teachers not bring them work, monitor not able to help them understand the assignment, and not enough resources, including computers.

In those observations of students in ISS at the research site, I found many of the same behaviors that I had seen in my 33 years serving as an ISS monitor, teacher and administrator. Students were not working for the most part, due to either not being monitored closely, or because teachers that did provide them with work, did not provide enough work; which is a common occurrence. Most were listening to music on their phones attached with ear buds, which actually is not a common practice in most ISS rooms. In all ISS rooms that I have worked
or observed, phones are turned into the monitor upon arriving at ISS. However, at this campus, perhaps it is felt that students would actually stay quiet and work better if allowed to listen to music. However, this was not what I observed. They simply listened to their music and from my observations, very few actually worked on any assignments. I also observed students who were forced to turn their desks towards a wall so as not to interact with other students, which is another aspect of a punitive exclusionary piece of ISS.

Finally, from all qualitative data, including pre-program open-ended questionnaires of educators, pre-program interviews of students, and the transcribed interviews of participants following each intervention cycle, it was found that a strong motivational factor used to successfully eliminate unwanted behaviors was the use of the contingency contracts involving the arts in this study. At the conclusion of the study, a full analysis of the intervention program, including all member-checking and debriefing interviews, revealed that participants and colleagues believed that the use of the arts and of contingency contract rewards offered as positive reinforcement for good behaviors was a more successful alternative, versus the more prevalent exclusionary and punitive practice of ISS. The check-in conversations I had with participant educators and students following the study, revealed an over-whelming support for the program. Parents and relatives of students who I spoke with during the study were also complimentary of what their students were learning in the program. The reactions were very positive, with many offering a thank-you, and commenting how they had seen improvements in their child’s attitude and behavior.

**Presentation of Data and Results**

I chose to utilize an iterative qualitative coding process which I transcribed manually. The data obtained in this manner through recorded open-ended questions and in-depth
interviews, and then coded to fit categorical themes, proved to offer rich and descriptive information (Herr & Anderson, 2012). I display two comparison tables, one from students, and one from the educators, which directly reflects the responses gathered from each of my three research questions following each action intervention cycle (see Appendix G). The following is data I obtained from the questionnaires of educators from the research site, and a narration of their responses to those questions which closely aligned to my research questions.

**Educator opinions on ISS as a deterrent.** I first sought the opinions of teachers as to whether they thought ISS improves a vulnerable population student’s behavior. All 13 educators answered that ISS did not improve at-risk students’ behaviors. Some offered that it was good for getting the student out of the classroom for some period of time, so that a diffusion of tensions and disruption could subside. I then asked all teachers in pre-intervention program questionnaires, if ISS was a better deterrent for at-risk students, or regular main stream students. The answer was again unanimous, with the opinion being that they saw ISS only serving those who, as one educator put it, “valued their education . . . and did not get in trouble very often.” I determined that what the educators were saying was simply that those who are ‘at-risk,’ get in trouble more often, and in most cases, do not understand the value of education or school. Another teacher remarked that many at-risk students seem to be more hyperactive, and that “some need more freedom to move about, and so being in an isolated and confined room is the worst thing you could do to them.” Many of the educators answered that it is common for at-risk students to purposefully get into trouble so they can be sent to ISS. One teacher said, “they do this so they do not have to do as much work as they would if they were in their regular classes.” Another teacher said, “ISS is not good for attention seekers, and a lot of at-risk students are attention seekers.” The reality of at-risk students needing and desiring more attention, more
‘one on one’ instruction, and additional behavioral help, becomes very clear when discovering that those same responses were cited repeatedly when participating students were asked what they most disliked about ISS.

**Educator opinions on alternatives to ISS.** Another question which I believe was most relevant to my second research question, was whether educators believed that they should try alternative and differentiated practices in deterring inappropriate behaviors among at-risk students. Educators were asked to compare any alternative approaches they were familiar with to the one most commonly used by school districts across America to curb inappropriate behaviors, that being ISS. The educators were asked if they thought that in the same manner in which educators utilize ‘differentiated learning’ practices for vulnerable at-risk students with different learning styles, should teachers also employ ‘differentiated discipline’ practices for vulnerable at-risk students with varying behavioral issues? The answer from all educators was “Yes.” One educator reasoned that, “it is because they feel incompetent, and therefore they act out more.” I understood this to mean, and I verified in check-in conversations, that educators were convinced that this is exactly why they need to be reached in a different manner than most students. A teacher said, “Most of them can’t see hope, and they can’t see how learning at school is relevant to their future . . . so, they find themselves not caring . . . and it shows in their behavior.” Another teacher blamed their home life, by saying, “They don’t value school, as there is no support for education at home.” All teachers, and the one administrator and counselor who answered this question on the questionnaire, agreed that at-risk students act up for a variety of reasons, but that each one needs to be reached individually by establishing a personal relationship with them, and then one can more easily go about deciphering just how they should provide a tailored individual plan for intervention. As one educator participant put it, “But, it
can be a trial and error type deal . . . you just have to keep trying different things until you find something that works.”

Further responses to the second research question, regarding whether an alternative approach, like the use of contingency contracts works better than ISS is found in the following interviews with educators and students. Also found in these interviews are those responses which ask if educators and students thought that tying compliance to student contingency contracts to the successful completion of a chosen art program accomplished better or worse behavior than ISS. The results of all three research questions, including the educators’ and students’ thoughts on the efficacy of ISS are found in Appendix G: Table G. The initial questionnaire, followed by the subsequent interview questions corresponding to these tables can be found in Appendix C. The following is a narration of student interviews which took place before the intervention program began. Interview scripts for these initial interview questions of students, can be also found in Appendix C.

**Student opinions on ISS.** Most relevant to my research questions was pre-intervention question number six which asked students if ISS in their opinion helped improved their behavior. All but one of the 13 participant students replied that they did not think ISS improved their behavior. Reasons cited ranged from, “no, because I don’t care if we are sent there,” and, “it’s just a regular thing I get used to,” and, “it’s better than being in the regular classroom, as we can get away with much more, like being on our phones and stuff.” Other students said that they did not like ISS and that it does not help them with their behavior, because as one student put it . . . “we’re not respected there . . . the teacher is rude, and sometimes I just walk out.” When ask if the students thought that ISS helps them with their academics and learning, only one student thought that . . . “Yes, I get more stuff done there . . . but the teacher doesn’t know the subject
matter.” All others felt that ISS does not promote good learning, and one student thought that, “it’s just that it is a negative environment.” Others exclaimed that the ISS monitor does not always turn in their work. However, having worked as an ISS monitor, I know that many times this is the ISS student’s excuse for the core teacher asking what happened to the assignments I gave you? The single biggest factor that students cited concerning ISS not promoting learning was that “there is no support from the ISS teacher . . . I mean, we get no help from her.”

**Number of referrals.** When at-risk students were asked how many referrals they had received in the last year, and for how long were those assignments, the totals reflected what national research has shown and as is found in Chapter 2. It is at-risk students who receive a disproportionate amount of ISS referrals. Most of the students said they received at least four to six ISS referrals last year, ranging from one to three days and many said that they had received 10-15 ISS referrals, ranging to upward of two weeks in ISS. One student said he just “basically stayed in ISS,” and that he knows he had received at least 50 referrals last year.

**Type of referrals.** When asked, what was the most common infraction that they were accused of, most said it was normally “talking back to the teacher, or disrupting class.” However, the infractions cited ranged from “copying other student’s work,” and, “being on my cell phone,” and, “not working.” Some of the more serious offenses listed were texting inappropriate messages, skipping class, fighting, and those that were drug related. When asked if they thought the referrals given were fair, most thought as one student said, “Well yes, I was guilty.” However, others thought that some were of minor offenses, and that they should not have been punished, like one female student remarked that, “I don’t think it’s any of their business if I change the color of my hair to whatever color I want.”
Student opinions on the importance of education. When students were asked if they thought school and their education was important, only one mentioned the goal of college. Most of the rest said “Yes,” but as one student put it, which summed up the majority, “It’s only because you can’t do hardly anything without that diploma.” There were two students who said that they saw their school work not relevant to their future. Or, as one of them said, “School is not important . . . I will not use it when I go to work for my uncle in his tattoo shop.”

Students opinions on self-esteem. When students were asked if they thought ISS improved their self-esteem, there was one student, the same one that always put a positive spin on ISS throughout the interviews, who thought she felt better about herself after spending time in ISS. The rest of the students were quite negative about ISS helping their self-esteem, or as one student said, “it really doesn’t make any difference one way or the other…I feel good about myself the way I am.” Other responses ranged from, “it makes me paranoid, and brings me down,” and, “it makes me feel bad about myself.” Another student said, “The teacher puts me down . . . talks down to me.”

Student opinions on improving ISS. I asked the students if they could make improvements to ISS, what they would recommend. Most answered that they thought that their regular teachers should come by more often to check up on them, and help with the assignments. One student commented that, “all they do is drop off our assignments in the ISS box in the teacher’s lounge or they come by for a second just to give it to us.” The other main suggestion was that they believe the ISS monitor is not very helpful. A student said, “They need to be real teachers . . . you know trained and everything.” Another student said, “There needs to be more computers . . . one for each of us…so, we do not have to just sit there with nothing to do until one becomes open.” Almost all of the students, said that most teachers do not send anything for
us to do, and as one student said, “If you’re not on a computer, the only other thing left to do is work crossword puzzles . . . there needs to be more activities.”

**Student opinions on the type of student ISS benefits.** The answer from students as to which type student is most likely to see some benefit to their behavior from being assigned ISS (i.e. the regular mainstream students or the “at-risk ones) and just like their educator co-participants, the answer was the same for most. The participant students said that it is the regular students that benefit the most. Out of 13 responses, nine felt that the mainstream student would benefit the most, for as one student remarked, “It’s because they are scared to get ISS . . . knowing that their parents will find out . . . and, that they will get grounded or something like that.” One said that neither would benefit, one thought that at-risk students would benefit the most, and one student said, which I thought displayed acumen, “I think it depends on the student.”

**Student opinions on alternatives to ISS.** Students were next asked what their opinion would be about using alternative methods, as opposed to ISS to curb unwanted behaviors, such as contingency contracts with built-in rewards. All of the students liked this idea. One student said, “This would be amazing . . . there needs to be other ways to do this.” All commented in similar ways that they would be more motivated, as one student said, “To do what’s right.” When asked in a following question, if they would like the idea of receiving free art instruction, or free instruction on guitar or keyboard, and studio production, all of them were really excited about that possibility. One student exclaimed, “We don’t ever get these kinds of opportunities,” and the students expressed that they were fine with tying their contracts to conditions of receiving no referrals during the intervention program, and showing ample progress in their chosen art-related instruction.
**Student opinions on the effect of the arts on self-esteem.** Students were then asked specifically how the arts could improve their behaviors and self-esteem. The answers ranged from, “I know I will try much harder to stay out of trouble, knowing that I may get to go to a recording studio and record an original song,” to another saying, “Music will help me get forward and somewhere . . . where I can feel proud of myself, and not worry so much what others think about me.” Another said, ‘I will look better to others…by playing an instrument, I will feel better about myself . . . maybe even have a future.” A couple of the students commented that music was a stress reliever for them. The students were asked what other possible improvements the intervention program could make on their lives, and one said, “This will take a negative and turn it in to a positive.” The students cited careers that they wanted to pursue, and most saw themselves in the arts of some kind. One student said, “I want to go into fashion designing and have my own line of clothing.” Six of the 13 wanted to be rap artists, three wanted to be canvas artists, one desired to be a music producer, and the others wanted to be singers. In most cases, I heard the word “focus” many times in describing what the students thought the program would do for them; as in helping them to ‘stay focused.’ All 13 students agreed that the arts could make a positive difference in their lives.

Next, the initial data from educators following the first cycle of intervention is presented. (see Appendix C). This data comes from interviews I conducted with each participating educator about the students under their guidance. The 13 educators responded to these questions from observations and conversations which they had with their students during the first four weeks of the intervention, and shared with me in check-in conversations.

**Educator opinions on contingency contracts versus ISS on behavior.** Two elements agreed to in the signed contracts were that that student would remain referral-free, and that they
would display continued progress in their chosen art-related program. Educators were asked if they thought the contingency contracts accomplished better or worse behaviors than ISS after just the first four weeks of the intervention. Five of the 13 educators felt it was too early to tell. One teacher said, “With some of them I see better, and then with others, not so much.” Another said, “I see a real change for the better with one of my students, the rest are still about the same, and one is worse.” One more teacher said something similar, “One is far better, the rest I see no real change yet, but for one, it seems that the music is now a distraction for him.” It appears that these two teachers could have been referring to the same two students as far as one improving, and one not. So, the total responses yielded, five too early to tell, four are better behaved, three about the same, and one is worse after this first intervention cycle.

**Educators on academics.** The responses here were similar to the above question on behavior. Five of the educators thought it was too early to see any difference, and three said they saw no difference. However, three educators saw two of their students more engaged. One said, “Definitely, I see more output from two of my students than I did before the program started.” Another said, “Yes, I see some positive effects already.” There were two educators who felt that the program had thus far led to less academic engagement for two of their students. One commenting, “They seem to be actually too excited about the music, and not enough now toward their school work.”

**Educators on self-esteem.** Ten of the participant educators felt they observed students displaying improved self-confidence and worth. One educator said, “With two of my students in particular, I see a real psychological boost.” Another, “Yes, I have heard them talking about what they are learning and doing, and I feel that because this is something they like and can excel in [music and art], then certainly it is helping their self-esteem.” Another participant
educator said, “Some of these students are already quite good at drawing . . . or in the case of one student, his rapping . . . so yes, being it is something they are good at, they have shown improved confidence.” There were three educators who commented that it was still too early to notice any improvements in their student’s self-esteem.

**Educators on student difficulty in fulfilling contracts.** Eight educators felt that it should not be hard at all for the students to continue being successful in meeting just the two criterions for completing the program successfully. “After-all, they should look at the program as a privilege which they are getting to experience . . . and that should be sufficient motivation.” Another educator cited the “Hawthorne Effect” as a probable cause for some of them being more successful. The teacher was alluding to the famous study which demonstrated a higher likelihood for increased productivity from workers, when they know they are being observed (Monahan and Fisher, 2010). There were three educators who felt that some of the students would actually have a difficult time keeping referral-free. One cited, “Bad days are going to happen for some of these kids . . . it just depends on how they handle things…with some of these students, it’s literally an hour to hour proposition,” as one teacher phrased it.

**Educators on the use of the arts.** Educators were asked specifically their opinion on the use of the arts in the contingency contracts, and whether it made a difference in the lives of the students. Almost all agreed that the arts were making a positive influence on the students. Only two educators thought it was too early to tell how it may affect them. One said, “Because they are interested in learning these skills, and they like it so much . . . the program can’t help but be good for their future . . . I see already that two of my students seem to be more positive.” A teacher thought that there had been studies showing that learning an instrument, can significantly
stimulate the brain, and I agreed and cited the studies of Limb (2008). Another teacher added, “The arts fits these kinds of kids . . . it’s the perfect extra curricula experience for them.”

Data from the student participants following the first cycle of their intervention follows below. Please see Appendix C for student interview questions following first cycle. The 12 participant students responded to these questions by reflecting upon this experience following the first four weeks of the intervention.

**Second student interviews following the first action intervention cycle: Students on difficulty in complying with contingency contract requirements.** When students were asked how difficult had it been to keep the requirements of the contingency contract, and remain active and eligible to continue in the program, there was, as could be expected a mixture of individual responses. For this study, the only two requirements of the students’, were 1) to show the art and music instructors continued progress in their learning of the skills being taught, and 2) that they would not receive any discipline referrals during the program. As the investigator of the study, I had asked the campus site principal before initiating the intervention if she had any other criterion that she would like to add to the contracts, and none were suggested.

Seven of the 12 participating students thought that the requirements were easy to fulfill. Four students believed that it was somewhat difficult, and only one remarked that they were having a tough time staying referral-free. Comments of those who thought it was easy included, “I feel I am developing better patience . . . learning the keyboard is teaching me this.” In regard to this keyboard student, I observed first-hand his dedication, even upon the first day of instruction, he demonstrated a relentless effort to go over and over again the musical phrase he had been taught until he got it right. His response to this first question thereby seemed very believable and valid. Another student said, “It’s been easy . . . I look forward to the class each
Friday, and I don’t want to lose this opportunity.” “It gives me something to look forward to,” said another student, “And it gives me a purpose.” In relation to the first question, students were asked if they thought the requirements of the contingency contracts were fair. All 12 students agreed that the requirements were fair. “To have the opportunity to record our songs in a studio... it’s the least we can do,” was the response of one of the students. “It’s helping me stay out of trouble, so yeah, I think it’s okay,” said another student. All of the students seemed to understand, and as another student offered, “This is just doing our part.”

Second student interviews following the first action intervention cycle: Students on the use of the arts. Students were then asked what they liked or disliked about using the arts and the contracts as motivational tools for better behaviors. One offered, “The music helps me release anxiety built up in me... and helps me stay out of trouble.” “It helps keep me interested in all of it... like sort of a game to see if I can do it,” said another. There were a couple of students who simply answered that they just liked getting out of their regular classes to come to the music class. “It’s a lot more fun than being in Mr. [D’s] class. However, most students were seemingly very positive about the program in general. “I see an opportunity for a... you know... a career by taking these lessons,” said one aspiring young rapper. “It’s what we want to do... so it’s fun,” said another. “It does help me with my anger management,” said one of the students. “I think learning the bass is cool, it fits my passion,” offered still another. All 13 students indicated that the art instruction was making a positive difference in their lives.

Second student interviews following the first action intervention cycle: Students on behaviors. When I asked the students if the program so far had led to worse or better behaviors, only one student thought that is had no effect on his behavior. All others felt that it had helped, with some commenting to greater or lesser degrees. “I feel I am making better decisions now...
and have more patience dealing with difficult situations,” said one of the interviewed students. Another student responded by saying, “I’m more motivated now . . . to stay out of trouble . . . so that I stay in the program . . . I feel it [program] distracts me from other problems I have, so yes . . . it does help me to walk away when someone gets in my face, or somethin’ like that.” Another said, “I’m more focused on a music career now, so it’s helping me stay away from wrong influences . . . bad friends” (see Appendix G).

**Second student interviews following the first action intervention cycle: Students on academic engagement.** Five of the 12 students thought it was too early to tell if they had realized any improvements in their course work. Three participant students commented that they did think the program was helping. “I think learning the chords to the songs we are playing is helping me with my memory,” said one student who is learning the keyboard. Another, “I feel like I have more confidence now to do better in earning points in my classrooms.” “My motivation to do better . . . to study harder is better now,” said still another student. Only four students felt that the program was not really helping them in their academics following this first cycle.

**Second student interviews following the first action intervention cycle: Students on self-esteem and life improvements.** I then asked the students if they thought the program has helped them with their self-esteem, and if it had made any other improvements in their lives. Five of the students thought it was too early to tell, with only one that thought it had not really helped. One student on self-esteem said, “I’m not worried about what other think about me so much now,” whereas, another one said, that “opinions of me matter more to me now.” Perhaps, both saying the same thing, but in a different way? “I feel a sense of accomplishment in learning an instrument . . . my family is proud of me,” commented one learning the keyboard. “I don’t
think no one know so much about my free style rap…I feel now they do…so yes, I feel better ‘bout myself,” exclaimed one student. One student put it this way when describing how the program has made a difference in his life, “The most crazy thing I feel it has done for me, is to help me slow down . . . look at what I really want to do with my life, so yes . . . it is helping improve myself.”

**Educators on better or worse behaviors of students following the second action intervention cycle.** After the second cycle, or another four weeks into the program, educators were once again questioned about the program, and their students’ progress. This time around, 10 educators felt that the program had improved their student’s behaviors. One teacher reported that with one of her students had not changed, and two educators reported worse behaviors. Of those two teachers reporting students’ worse behaviors, they were alluding to the two students under their charge who had been suspended. Unfortunately, both of those students were no longer able to participate in the program due to these infractions, which violated their compliance to the contingency contract which they had signed. On teacher commented on one of the students, saying, “It’s too bad about [B] he wanted so much to participate in the program, and I know about his home life . . . not good . . . but he is like a loose cannon . . . that is what led to the problem.” Comments on improved behaviors included, “Myself, I actually see a slight improvement in all of my kids,” said one teacher. On the one teacher who was recorded as saying that there had been no change in one of his students, he remarked, “I have written a referral on him, but have not turned it in . . . I am holding it over his head.” “I want to let him be warned that any more trouble and it will be turned in, and he will lose the privilege of attending any more music classes.” “One student who I reported as not improving last time, has now shown much better behaviors in my classroom,” said one teacher. Another teacher commented,
“All of the students that I have who are in the program . . . seem much more motivated . . . excited to be in the art or music classes.” I have also noticed better attendance from many of the students, commented another educator who had seen improvements.”

**Educators on academics following the second action intervention cycle.** Aside from one student who was reported as getting worse in his academic engagement, nine educators reported better engagement with program participant students in their classrooms. Three teachers reported no change in three of their students. On those commenting on better engagement, one teacher said, “Definitely more engagement . . . more work is being done . . . I see more initiative taken with these students . . . some are now asking for help, where they did not do so before,” said another teacher. “One student in particular has stopped walking out of my class, and is now turning out more work,” commented another. Another educator remarked, “I just see in general, more focus on the part of most of the students who are in the study.”

**Educators on self-esteem following the second action intervention cycle.** When asking the educators if they thought the program had helped the participating students with their self-esteem, seven educators thought that their respective students had improved in their self-image, and five thought that some of the students were already fairly confident about themselves. Of those five, two educators did comment that they were not sure if it was good self-esteem or arrogance? “I guess there is in fact a thin line between the two, and hard to tell, but [M] for example is not lacking in his love of self,” said one teacher. “I see that most of the students are really excited about the program . . . they see that program may help with their dream careers . . . so, it is adding to the self-image that they have about themselves,” said another. One educator commented about one student by saying, “It’s like she has found herself . . . she was one of the worse that I reported on last time, but now she is calm, and has stopped goofing around so
much.” “In general,” one teacher continued, I see it as being that they like the program so much, that it is central to their progress.” Another teacher had this to say about one of her students, “I see a real improvement in [S] . . . where she used to be so reserved, she is now saying hello to me as she enters my classroom, where she used not to . . . and in the hallways, and when I see her in the cafeteria also.”

**Educators on the difficulty of contingency contracts following the second action intervention cycle.** When asking educators how difficult it has been for these students to comply with the requirements of their contracts, nine said they did not think it was very difficult. One commented, “Well I guess you know about [B] and [J] . . . they didn’t make it.” Two other educators remarked that for some of the students it is difficult. “I mean it is a real challenge for some to stay referral-free . . . they can be one way one minute, and then turn 180 degrees the next,” exclaimed one of these teachers.

**Educators on art being a motivating factor following the second action intervention cycle.** In the opinion of all educators participating in the study, without exception, all expressed their belief that art education was providing a good way to reach, motivate and improve the lives of these students. “Art is good for them . . . it has a broad appeal and reaches the heart of most students,” said one of the educators. The gift cards are a great way to motivate the students, but I do think that most of the positive effects are coming from their wanting to stay in the program . . . you know . . . go to the studio.” Another offered, “Art offers a very positive extra-curricular activity . . . I have always thought that it is good therapy for all.” One teacher who informed me that he was a songwriter, said,” Music is very important to me, and I feel that these students see it the same way . . . they need to be supported in these efforts . . . it is really such a good deal for them.” I have seen such a positive improvement in [B] . . . she has come to me and shown me
her art work . . . I sense she is really proud of it,” said one teacher. Another commented, “Most are really excited about Friday’s (the day the students come for instruction) I’ve heard them say several times how much they are enjoying the music classes.” One teacher told me about one student who is dismayed by having to perform one song for the school-wide assembly that he does not want to do it, and wants only to do the rap song he wrote for the studio. She said, “I told him that this was good for him . . . he needs to know that he could be asked by future producers and others to do the same, and he needs to know how to cooperate.” The final interview of the students following the second cycle intervention consisted of the same questions asked of them following the first intervention cycle.

**Students on difficulty in complying with contingency contracts following the second action intervention cycle.** Of course for the two students who were suspended, obviously, it was difficult for them to remain referral-free. However, for all others there were no referrals issued, and they still maintained that, as one student said, “it was easy.” Other responses ranged from, “not so much,” to, “not so hard.” Still others, like one student in the art program answered, “It’s somewhat hard . . . as I have, you know, my good days and my bad days.” One student knowing that compliance included displaying progress in the art-related programs, said, “My problem was not staying out of trouble, but learning how to play the guitar . . . now that was tough.” All of the students thought, once again, that the requirements of the contracts were fair. “I like it . . . it taught me that to get something, you have to give something . . . to get what you want,” as one student phrased it.

**Students on the use of the arts following the second action intervention cycle.** “The only thing I didn’t like about it, is having to perform in front of everybody, ‘cause I’m shy, and I fear that they will laugh at me,” was a comment I heard in from one student. Many other
students also shared this sentiment. However, most really liked the use of the arts, as one student said, “Art is something I really enjoy a lot . . . I love it.” Another said, “I think it has built my confidence . . . by learning how to play the guitar, it has given me the motivation to try just about anything.” “I love to draw, said another student, so, I am really excited about the stuff I am creating . . . and, can’t wait to show it at the awards assembly.” “More than anything, so said another student . . . it’s keeping me out of trouble.” “I like the art class so much . . . we do something different each time . . . new stuff, not ever the same thing twice . . . except for the last main project we are doing . . . it’s taking more time,” said an art student. Another student said, “Yes, this is helping me, as this is what I want to do with my life . . . I have learned new techniques for drawing, and the teacher is really nice,” said even another art student. A music program student said,” I really never expected to learn this much on guitar . . . I’m learning a lot more than I thought I would.” He continued by saying, “I think I can transfer this to other work that I am doing in school, like taking notes . . . and, getting better at other stuff in class . . . the environment here is bad here . . . so, the music has given me a release from that . . . the stress and all,” said one of the music students.

**Students on behaviors following the second action intervention cycle.** As already documented, two students are no longer in the program due to their suspensions. So, of the 10 student left in the program, seven were very confident about saying that the program has help them stay out of trouble, with three claiming it has not made that big of a difference. Those who believed the program did help them, found one such student saying, “Goin’ to the studio means too much to me . . . I don’t want to lose out on that.” In all cases the main reason the students gave for the program helping their behavior, is that they wanted to keep on being a part of the
classes. “I think about it all the time now . . . that I don’t want to be kicked out of the program,” said another student.

**Students on academics following the second action intervention cycle.** Students were mixed on the question of whether they thought they had seen improvements in their engagement within the classroom. About half of them thought that the program had not really helped them that much with their school work, or only somewhat, and the other half were quite adamant about saying that it has helped them. “Yes, said one student, I am completing more work now that I used to.” And another said, “I am keeping up with my work, ‘cause I fear that if I don’t they might not let me go to the music class.” Although school work was not a requirement of the contingency contracts, still some students thought that perhaps it was, so because of, they did seem to try harder. Another participant student said, “I am trying harder . . . I want to show my art instructor that I am a serious about my future . . . so, I am more involved in my classes that I used to be.” This improvement in academics is not surprising as the students were aware that I was checking with their teachers, and interviewing them, to find how they are doing in their respective classes.

**Students on self-esteem following the second action intervention cycle.** Many of the students seem to already have a pretty good opinion of themselves. However, it was generally understood, that perhaps after they go to the studio and record their compositions, that they would then have a product, which could earn them kudos from friends and relatives, and with such, engender some true self-esteem. Also, one student said, “Perhaps after they hear me sing in the school program, some will think I’m pretty good.” Another said, “With the art work I have made, I have felt that I have accomplished something.” One music student remarked, “I do remember feeling good about myself back when I was in choir, I feel that way again now.”
Another said, “Only once did I perform in front of an audience, and that was in elementary... I was asked to read a poem I wrote in front of the whole school... it did make me feel proud.” A music student remarked, “Learning the guitar has made me feel good about myself, the more I learn the better and better I feel.” “I draw more now than I used to... I got down on myself, ‘cause I didn’t like what I drew... I mean I didn’t like it... wasn’t that good... so I quit drawing, but now I am feeling better about my art, and am drawing more,” said one of the art students.

**Students on improvement in other areas of their lives following the second action intervention cycle.** When asked this question of how the program may have had a positive influence on other aspects of the students’ lives, the most frequent answer pointed toward either their relationship with their parents, or friends, or both. Some of these responses were: “My parents seem to be so much more supportive of me now,” said one student. “My mom is really happy for me... she knows I am doing something that I really enjoy,” said another student. A music student said, “My friends, I think, think it is really cool that I am gettin’ to go to the studio and record my songs... they say I am good at it, so I deserve it.” “My dad is so proud of me, he has even been hanging my art work up in our house,” said one of the art program students.

**Check-in conversations and discussions.** During the course of the study, there were many verbal exchanges with students and educators. When I would check-in with the art teacher’s room I observed that the students were totally engaged working on their art pieces. They would want to show me their work, and they seemed proud of what they were creating. Two of the art students did also want to be part of the music program, so I tried to accommodate them with allowing them on a couple of occasions to join my class in the music room. However, most of the time, they were so inundated and enjoying their art class, that they did not break
away to come down to the music room but a couple of times. One of those students did say, “Mr. Houchins I sing at church, so I could sing if you want me to.” I did allow her to do so, and so she sang a duet with one of the boys from the music class.

There were some music students who during class, and in the hallways, conveyed their sincere interest in my helping them get somewhere in the music world. “I hope that this leads to something good happenin’ for me,” said one student. The students had knowledge of my background in the music “biz,” and of course if any of them displayed exceptional talent, then I told them I could present them to contacts I have made through the years. However, because I wanted the emphasis to stay on showing me first improved behavioral practices, I would use this as motivation to have them understand that this is a big part of what potential future producers would be looking for in them, that is, humility, cooperation, and proper behaviors.

There were also teachers check-ins, when if I did not find then, they themselves might stop me in the hall to give me updates on certain students; both positive, and negative reports. But, for the most part, they were as one teacher I remember saying, “[J] is so excited about your class, he talks about it all the time, and can’t wait until Fridays when you come.” One of the problems I faced in the study was just that; it was only on Friday’s that I would teach. The Principal did not have any more time slots available for me, so one time a week was all I was afforded. It only made it difficult from the standpoint of not being able to remind the students of their obligations to the contingency contracts but just that one time a week. As far as the students learning the instruments and songs they would perform, they were so naturally inclined toward music and so motivated, that they picked it up very quickly. So, this being the other criterion for complying with the contingency contracts was thereby never an issue. One student said,” I always saw myself playing the bass . . . and watch this.” He then proceeded to show off
the licks he had been learning, with showmanship to the rest of the class. One of the students in learning the keyboard had an insatiable desire to get the chords perfectly correct on the songs they were learning. He would go over and over it until he had it, saying “I like this . . . it’s kind of like a video game I’m playing, you know, tryin’ to get it right.”

One music student was not so interested in performing or playing an instrument, but rather saw himself as he put it, “I really rather be a songwriter and producer . . . I know I don’t have a good voice and talent for paying an instrument so much . . . but I like putting it all together.” Perhaps, he saw what I was doing in putting the students in musical roles which I thought best fit them, and he saw himself doing the same kind of thing one day. I am so glad I had this student in the class. He was very helpful in organizing things for me, and helped me load and unload equipment to and from my car. He ended up receiving a new guitar for being the best student in my class.

On a final check-in note, I was very encouraged along the path of the study to have some teachers stopping me in the hallways, or emailing me and asking when the next scheduled interview was, or as one of those educators said, “I’ve got some new things to tell you about [P]and if you have a moment.” Of course I would take the moment to talk, so that in-between interviews, I would get a feel for how things were going.

**Student recidivism referral rates.** Table 2 on the next page displays the recidivism rates for participating students in the study. Only two students were suspended from the program due to their behavior. Eleven students graduated through the program and fully participated in all aspects of the program. At the end of the study, students received graduation certificates, and were rewarded gift cards and musical instruments for their efforts in the study.
Table 2

**Student Recidivism Referral Rates**

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<tr>
<th>Program</th>
<th># of referrals prior to study</th>
<th># of referrals after first cycle</th>
<th># of referrals after second cycle</th>
<th>Total % of decrease in referrals</th>
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<tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
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</tr>
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<td>0</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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<td>100%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Totals</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

% Change – 42% decrease 58% decrease 75% decrease

*Note*. PAS-Program A students—serving a 30–45 day suspension from the main campus. PBS-Program B students—students with behavioral problems who were behind in their grade level work. (s)—suspended student. % change—represents the total percentage of decreased referrals following each intervention cycle, and then the total decrease in referrals for the entire program.

Program A students were sent to the DAEP center because they had a history of referrals from the previous year. Their referral history is thereby so denoted in the Prior to Study column, where I listed one referral prior to the study commencing. In some cases, these same students received additional referrals during that time frame, and those are also reflected. Students not having any referrals issued to them in the previous year, although still known to have behavioral problems in their past, were shown not to have any referrals prior to the study, or zero referrals in said column. One student left the program, as he graduated early from the credit recovery
program. 10 of the 13 participating students, or 77% displayed improved behaviors during the intervention. Two students did not improve, were suspended in separate incidents. Only one of the 13 students had no significant change in their behavior.

The action research method is an approach that attempts to understand problems of practice and develop interventions that result in an improvement in that practice. Action research is a cyclic methodology, and with each new cycle if the researcher determines the intervention is not working, then suggestions from participants and others may result in improvements necessary for the intervention to be made successful. In my study, suggestions were made by educators to add the criteria of attendance and academic improvement to the contingency contracts. I did agree that this suggestion would be very worthwhile and measureable criteria to add to a future study, but because my study was principally concerned with improving behaviors, I did not add these criterions to the intervention contingency contracts. In addition, the contingency contracts as written and the art programs, improved the behaviors of student participants.

**Chapter 4 Summary**

I was able to successfully discover patterns taken from primary source data, and from the coding thereof I was able to identify themes related to my research questions. The qualitative coding process used to analyze the data can be found in Appendix D. The qualitative data acquired during the research, engendered the basis for a rich and thick description of the findings. In this chapter I present data which displays educators’ negative views of ISS, which reflects the majority of national research on the topic. The educator views at the research site thereby conformed to those author’s views I found in the research literature as described in Chapter 2, such as Belfanz, (2012), Chute, (2013), and Skiba, (2011).
The member checking forms which were distributed and returned by educators revealed that the interview data collected in the summary of the study was credible and trustworthy. Educators collectively agreed that there was nothing missing in the summary, and that the information given did not negate the expected results of the study (see Appendix F.)

In the final analysis, peer debriefings with the educators in this study, and with former and current colleagues of mine supported the intervention of using art-related contingency contracts to improve student behaviors as an alternative approach to In School Suspension. Educators and students in the study reported favorably to the intervention program, both as to the concrete evidence of improvements in behaviors for most of the participating students, but also to the abstract benefits associated with the program in regard to the art and music skills learned, and to the strong perceptions of participants of increased self-confidence and self-esteem realized by the students.

In the final chapter, I will include a further summary and discussion of the results, and in addition, I will attempt to discern how those results relate to the previous literature on the topic of discipline practices in American schools. A discussion of the implications of my results on possible future practice, policies and theories related to this topic are also included. A discussion of the limitations I faced in the research will be included, followed by recommendations for future research on the topic.
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

In this chapter I will discuss the implications of the results in regard to theory, future practice, and policy making. I will also provide a discussion of any inferences or credible conclusions as it relates to the previous literature, which when drawn from the study can then be transferred to other interested researchers and settings. Finally, I conclude the chapter with recommendations for further research that might be advantageous in bringing a more complete understanding of the problem.

In this chapter, I will interpret the data acquired at the research site, and attempt to draw logical meanings from those results. One of the goals I have set for this chapter is to reveal how the findings not only answer my research questions, but also demonstrate how they align to the over-all purpose of my study. The conceptual framework which served to drive the purpose of my study, included topics and studies I was most interested in exploring and were described in Chapter 2 of this dissertation. Another goal of this chapter is to explain how more innovative discipline practices have shown promise as alternatives to ISS. I utilized the Arts Differentiated Discipline Project as an alternative to ISS. The efficacy of using the arts in contingency contracts proved to be a successful intervention, as it engendered improved academic engagement and discipline behaviors among at-risk students.

The final goal for this chapter is that the intervention and meanings drawn from the results of the research will continue to be utilized, and that it will positively serve the community where I conducted my study. I believe that his chapter informs the existing literature on the topic of discipline among at-risk students, and adds to the knowledge of those scholars pursuing its understanding.
Summary of the Results

The following research questions, and related interview questions guided this study.

In what ways does ISS impact at-risk population students?

1. How does ISS impact student’s behaviors, self-esteem and academics? (as described by educators)
2. How does ISS impact student’s behaviors, self-esteem and academics? (as described by the students)
3. How did these perceptions inform a possible school intervention?

In what ways does utilizing differentiated discipline plans on a student by student basis, impact at-risk population students?

1. How did educators view the individualized contingency contracts as impacting at-risk population students?
2. How did the students view the use of individualized contingency contracts, as to impacting aspects of their lives?

In what ways do art-related contingency contracts impact at-risk population students? 1.

1. How did educators view the use of the arts in improving behaviors, academics, and self-esteem of participant students?
2. How did students view the use of the arts as to improving their behaviors, academics, and self-esteem?

The above research questions answered in this study support the assumption that there must be better ways to successfully handle behavioral issues of at-risk students. The study is significant as no previous study had explored the effects of art-related contingency contracts on the behavioral patterns of at-risk students. There have been studies in which researchers have
shown positive effects of using the arts to improve academic engagement, but such studies did not focus directly on behavior. It could be inferred that improvements in academics using the arts in the curriculum were derived in part from improved behaviors, but there is a scarcity of data collected until this study which displays such findings. However, this qualitative study cannot be generalizable to all at-risk students. Location and population sampling must be taken into consideration when attempting any kind of comparison.

**Seminal literature.** In Chapter 2, I cite authors and researchers studying discipline issues, and discipline practices utilized on at-risk students. The literature review reveals the disproportionate amount of discipline and ISS referrals issued to at-risk students. The literature primarily focused on minorities and special education students. One of the first studies I found on this topic was a report issued by the U.S. Department of Education (2014) which revealed a sizable amount of data on discipline practices in the U.S. What stood out was the data displaying the amount of in school suspension referrals received by minorities and special education students. The researchers involved in this study found that even though African American students represent only 18% of the total population of students in the United States, they however receive 32% of all ISS referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The same disproportionate data was found on special education students with disabilities who make up only 12% of the total population, yet receive 58% of ISS referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). This and other negative data regarding the disproportion of discipline referrals for all types of at-risk students, was an important aspect of my study. The data affirmed the need for a different and a more successful approach to discipline practices for at-risk students. Most studies were overwhelmingly opposed to the use if ISS. Skiba and Sprague (2008) revealed little or no evidence that ISS made any on-going significant contribution to reducing disruption or
violence. In fact, students who were sent to ISS are in many cases negatively affected psychologically, as their self-esteem and motivation is diminished (Morris and Howard (2003).

I therefore concentrated on reviewing articles and studies that dealt with alternative and innovative approaches to improving discipline practices of at-risk students. Wettach and Owens (2014) displayed great promise in dealing with discipline problems through a technique known as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports or PBIS. The program centers on rewarding students for good behavior instead of punishing them for bad behaviors. PBIS practitioners have shown that by using positive reinforcement of good behaviors among student populations, a reduction in inappropriate behaviors can be achieved (Wettach & Owen, 2014).

I have always believed that at-risk students needed to be reached in a different manner. In response to my primary research question, I wanted to explore the effects of using the concept of rewarding students for good behavior, but wanted to add to it the incorporation of the arts in a contingency contract. I believed that the rewards coming from successfully completing the contracts could serve as positive reinforcement for good behavior, and would be a compelling way of reaching these at-risk students. The research conducted by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities (PCAH) would serve to foster this theory of using the arts to improve student focus, and thereby lead to improved behaviors. ‘Turnaround Arts’ is a program that was started by the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, with participating campuses all over the United States (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). A White House advisory committee of the PCAH found that math, reading, and social studies teachers who began incorporating music, visual arts and theater into their lesson plans saw a dramatic increase in student’s academic success (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). If a study were conducted specifically examining the effects of the arts on
the discipline patterns of at-risk students, it seemed plausible that incorporating the arts could impart positive effects on behavior with fewer ISS referrals. This theory became the focus of my action research study.

**Current literature.** There continues to be a large amount of research covering the disproportionate amount of referrals issued to students from special populations. I have described special populations in this study to include minorities, students receiving services from Special Education, Title 1, or students with limited English language skills. Lindsay and Hart (2017) document this social problem, and explore an understanding of the problem in their study. They used data from the state of North Carolina’s education department, to explore whether black students who have black teachers, receive more or less discipline referrals than if exposed and instructed by teachers from a different race. The results of the study provided significant evidence that black students taught by same race teachers received fewer referrals than from those teachers of a different race. The researchers provided data that was reliable across all grade levels, genres, and socio-economic classes.

Other studies published recently examine not just the concern for the over representation of referrals received by special populations, but also examined the negative effects of the exclusionary discipline practice known as In School Suspension. A study by Petrosino, Fronius, Goold, Losen, and Turner (2017) attempted to answer questions raised by policy makers, parents, and community stakeholders regarding the equity of discipline practices, and whether there has been any effort employed to use alternative procedures. The negative effects of ISS and other exclusionary practices have been repeatedly documented in this dissertation, but few studies involving the success of alternative procedures other than PBIS are found in the literature. However, this topic was the focus of the Petrosino, et al. (2017) study, and what the
researchers said was most needed was alternative practices. Other than the Positive Behavioral Intervention Support (PBIS) programs, such as “Champs,” the above study reports mixed opinions regarding the efficacy of PBIS. The study also reports that very little information exists regarding the success of other alternative types of discipline approaches.

One such study conducted in a school district in Texas by Davis (2017), asked the stakeholders in the community to weigh in on what could be done to lessen the percentage of black students of being suspended. Davis (2017) reported that the consortium of stakeholders suggested improvements in teacher instructional techniques, and also recommended professional development for not only educators, but for the parents as well. In other efforts searching for alternative procedures for special populations, Okilwa, Nathern, and Robert (2017) suggest acquiring thoughts and ideas of educators from all across America. They suggest that educators use Kingdon's (2003) book "Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies," to garner ideas, and thereby uncover a potential convergence of efforts, which should create an opportunity for school discipline reform to gain momentum. Kingdon's (2003) three critical streams for problem solving, i.e., the problem, political, and policy, are suggested in the article to guide these educators in their attempt to find successful alternative discipline practices.

As my study is most interested in exploring alternative approaches to discipline, an article by Hilary Lustick (2017) provides a current view of utilizing a practice known as restorative justice. Restorative type discipline is a concept taken from an approach found in the criminal justice system. The program involves conferences in which conflicts are resolved through individuals meeting with an arbitrator. The participating parties agree to the reasons for the conflict, and further identify steps that can be taken to bring restoration to the relationships. Because school leaders are under increasing pressure to use non-punitive, and more positive
discipline practices, Listick’s (2017) findings’ reveal that using restorative discipline results in a reduction of suspension rates, and leads to improved staff and student relationships. Some school districts, like San Antonio ISD have a full time Restorative Discipline Coordinator. Michale Gilbert of the National Association of Community and Restorative Justice (2017) located in San Antonio, reports that such programs are working successfully in deterring inappropriate behaviors, and resolving issues which exist between students and those with their teachers.

Another alternative practice is Safe and Responsive Schools (SRS). As an alternative to office referrals, the program utilizes behavior support classrooms where students are explicitly taught skills, such as conflict resolution, to give them problem-solving ability. Another program receiving accolades from administrators, teachers and parents, is called Community Service Program (CSP). This endeavor involves giving students various opportunities to engage in meaningful community activities and community-school partnerships. The program provides high-needs and at-risk students and their families with supports to improve school-family engagement, student learning, student behavior, and overall student outcomes.

There are but a few current articles in the literature which relate to my primary research question of how the incorporation of the arts in the school curricula may lead to increased success for at-risk students. Although a growing number of studies suggest that arts-integrated lessons enhance learning, one particular study examined the effect of an arts-integrated curriculum on student memory of academic content. Hardiman, Bull, Ranjini, and Carran, (2017) reported significant increases in the retention of science content by those students in the experimental group. Although, this study and others report improved academic skills with the
incorporation of the arts in the curriculum, these improved academic skills could be directly linked to improved behaviors.

A documentary produced by Cabedo-Mas, Nethsinghe, and Forrest (2017) analyzed written documents provided by educators from around the world regarding the importance of teaching and learning the arts in schools. The responses focused on the contributions the arts have made to the building of peaceful and sustainable societies. The authors found this opinion to be voiced by all who were interviewed; and of particular interest to me, was the correlation of how the arts can lead to an improvement in student behaviors.

**Discussion of the Results**

The participants in this study were willing to discuss their opinions related to all three of the research questions. It was my assessment that both educators and students, welcomed the action research as a non-threatening and much needed dialogue on the issue of discipline practices. However, the findings reflect only those of participants from one Discipline Alternative Educational Placement (DAEP) center study site, and findings should not be considered as generalizable to all special population students with behavioral problems. The extant literature contains few examples of alternative discipline strategies, and no studies were found which demonstrate the intervention success of art-related contingency contracts as related to improving the behaviors of at-risk students. I believe that the study is therefore innovative and the results are uniquely important to the discourse on discipline practices for special population at-risk students; as in fact, I did demonstrate the efficacy of utilizing art-related contingency contracts in improving the behaviors of at-risk students.

**General findings.** The intervention program at the study site was successful. The primary goal was to reduce the amount of referrals received by the participating students.
Seventy-five percent of the students remained referral-free after the second intervention cycle, or completion of the intervention program. There was a cumulative decrease in each of the two intervention cycles, including a 48% decrease in referrals following the first cycle, and another 58% decrease following the second. In the following analysis, I will evaluate the findings in relation to each of my three research questions

The first research question posed to both the educators and students at the DAEP center centered on how ISS impacted behavior, self-esteem, and academics of at-risk population students. All 13 educators who answered both questionnaires and interview questions reported that ISS did not improve at-risk students’ behaviors. Many of the educators replied that it is common for at-risk students to purposefully get into trouble so they can be sent to ISS. The teachers felt that the students do this so they will not have as much work as they would if they were in their regular classes. It is not surprising then that the educators expressed the opinion that ISS is harmful to the student academic progress. The teachers almost unanimously remarked that many at-risk students seem to be more hyperactive, and that they actually need more freedom to move about. The educators, including the counselor and administrator, expressed that the practice of keeping them in an isolated and confined room is the worst thing you could do to them. The educators felt that going to ISS only kept the students in a continual cycle of discipline problems. They believed that this pattern only manifested into more anger and hostility, and contributed to their negative opinions of school and of themselves. This cycle can be detrimental, as “repeated suspension has been linked to a variety of negative outcomes for vulnerable at-risk students including academic failure, negative school attitudes, grade retention and school drop-out” (Mendez & Knoff, 2003, p. 31). When these students are excluded from
the classroom, they feel unwanted and unmotivated to change the opinions their teachers and peers have developed about them (as cited in DiMino, 2013).

The student impressions of ISS were no different than the educators. They did not think ISS improved their behavior. Many of the students commented that they did not care if they were sent to ISS; that it is just a regular thing, and that they are used to it. Most students agreed that they liked it better than being in the regular classroom. They felt they are able to get away with much more, like being on their cell phones. When asked if the students thought that ISS helped them with their academics, almost all felt that ISS did not promote learning. They cited primarily that the ISS monitor never helped them, and that they did not know the subject matter. The students were also quite negative about ISS helping their self-esteem. A few students said that when sent to ISS, they felt disrespected and that the ISS teachers were rude to them. Some felt it made them paranoid, and brought them down. In almost all cases, the students said that ISS makes them feel bad about themselves, as other students would make fun of them. The majority felt that the ISS teacher would regularly put them down and be disrespectful.

The negative opinions expressed at this research site on the efficacy of ISS are quite common in my own experience. As a former Assistant Principal in charge of discipline, Behavioral Response to Intervention Specialist, and a Positive Behavioral Intervention Coordinator, I have heard similar views of stakeholders at all campuses where I served. I felt it important however to scientifically acquire qualitative data that would demonstrate that these views of ISS were also the norm at my DAEP campus study site.

The perceptions of educators and students in this study clearly produced evidence that ISS is ineffective in deterring inappropriate behaviors. The results of the study also demonstrated that ISS delivers negative consequences to both academic success and students’
self-esteem. The study reverberated the thoughts of many scholars who have addressed this topic in the past. The one-size-fits-all approach known as ISS has proven to be deleterious to vulnerable at-risk students’ who already have a fragile concept of themselves (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

The perceptions of the participants, along with many of the studies and articles found within this dissertation, informed the need for an alternative exploratory intervention. The need to more successfully ameliorate behaviors, self-esteem, and engender academic engagement among at-risk students was the intent of my qualitative intervention. I have believed for many years that these vulnerable at-risk students need to be reached in a very different manner. In response, I sought to discover how a more compassionate and positive approach could blend together to engender a unifying solution.

I thought it relevant and helpful to know whether the participants agreed with the theory of using some kind of alternative method of discipline. Specifically, I was interested in knowing if they thought using some alternative discipline practices would be more successful than ISS. In response, I made it the purpose of my second research question to ask the participants in what ways they thought utilizing differentiated discipline plans on a student by student basis, could impact at-risk population students. The answer from all educators was that they thought that individualizing discipline procedures for each at-risk student was necessary. They cited that at-risk students act up for a variety of reasons, so that each one needs to be reached individually by establishing a personal relationship. The teachers opined that establishing this relationship enables the teacher to better understand the student’s problems and perhaps even discover the cause of the student disruptions. The educators reasoned that one can then go about deciphering how to provide a tailored individual plan for intervention. Many of the educators felt that these
students feel incompetent, without much hope for their futures, and therefore they act out more. The educators were convinced that these students need to be reached in a different manner than most, and that a differentiated discipline practice is exactly what is needed.

The students had many of the same thoughts as did the educators regarding the need for an alternative method of curbing unwanted behaviors. The students liked the idea of using contingency contracts as an alternative to ISS. My interpretation is that the students liked the idea of being rewarded for good behavior as was required in their contingency contracts, as opposed to being punished for improper behavior. The students were made aware that successfully completing their contingency contracts without receiving any referrals, would result in their being rewarded with art related gift cards, musical instruments, and a trip to the recording studio to record their original songs penned during the program. Students commented that the contingency contracts gave them motivation to stay out of trouble and thereby earn the rewards being offered. The teachers reported not only better behavior from the use of the contingency contracts, but better attendance and academic engagement as well. They attributed the academic success to improved focus, and cited that there was clearly more initiative taken by the students to turn in work during the program.

My third research question asked how study participants viewed incorporating the arts as part of the contingency contracts. The teachers and students cited that the incorporation of the art and music lessons was a significant factor in the success of the contingency contracts. Both educators and students reported that the gift cards and other rewards were a nice way to motivate the students, but that the desire to stay in the art and music classes was actually more of what motivated them to stay referral-free. I concurred with this thought, as it was also my judgment
that the most significant contributing factor to the over-all success of the intervention was the incorporation of the art classes.

In addition to improved behaviors, educators and students commented that after the art classes were initiated, they started noticing an improvement in student academic engagement. Studies such as those conducted by the White House advisory committee of the President’s Council on Arts and Humanities, found that math, reading, and social studies teachers who began incorporating music, visual arts and theater into their lesson plans saw a dramatic increase in attendance and student’s academic success (2016). Another interesting scientific study demonstrated that learning a musical instrument can significantly stimulate the brain, which can manifest improved cognitive learning (Limb, 2008).

Improved behaviors and academic success were reported by the teachers, but they also observed that the art related contingency contracts most definitely made a positive difference in the personal lives of the participating at-risk students. All 13 participating educators expressed their belief that the art education provided a good way to reach, motivate, and improve the lives of the students. They reported noticing that some of students had gained more confidence and self-esteem. They expressed that because students were feeling better about themselves, that this in itself was a significant contributor to their better behavior. Some of the educators said that they thought the art and music classes provided good therapy for the students, resulting in a release of stress, and providing calmer, more focused behavior of the students in their regular classrooms.

The educators also cited that at-risk students were very interested in learning art related skills; and it was their opinion, that this desire was more inclusive of at-risk students than the typical main stream student. I believe that by the educators expressing this opinion, were
agreeing with my assumption that at-risk students are drawn to the arts in a seemingly connatural manner. As a classroom teacher, I remember noticing that many at-risk students were often at their desk drawing something on a piece of paper, or thumping their pencils while listening to some imaginary piece of music in their heads. I did not notice this nearly as much with mainstream students. They were typically much more attentive to the lesson. In any respect, the data derived from this study, revealed that at-risk students were noticeably more motivated toward achieving success while involved in the art related intervention program.

The students also reported that the program made a positive difference with respect to their self-esteem. They cited that learning a musical instrument resulted in a sense of accomplishment and pride. They reported that this pride was realized internally, but was compounded by accolades which they received from parents and friends. The students reported that because art, in one form or another, was actually going to be a major part of their career goals, they were thankful for the intervention program as it afforded them the opportunity to have a head start toward those career aspirations.

As already documented, two of the students did not make it through the program. Both of these students were suspended, as unfortunately they became involved in an argument, which led to a fight. I was somewhat surprised, as one of the students I had opined was the best rapper in the music class. He not only had written exceptional lyrics, but he was able to quickly repeat those lyrics in sync, and faster than the other students. He had expressed many times his unwavering desire to become a professional rapper, and to make it through the program so that he would have the opportunity to go into the studio to record his songs. He knew that this was only possible if he remained referral-free for the entire study. However, as one teacher assessed, many of these students are literally in control of their behaviors only on a minute by minute
basis. The teacher continued her discourse by commenting that most anything could upset them, resulting in a disruption, and thereby a referral was always eminently possible. As a teacher of special population students with behavioral problems for many years, I was in agreement with her analysis. Although, I knew how important it was for this particular student to complete the program without a referral, I was also aware that something could happen to interrupt his goals.

The contingency contract rewards were substantial including the presentation of the student’s art and music to family and peers at the school wide assembly, and a trip to the studio to record their original songs. Students were also rewarded gift cards, and a certificate for the completion of the Differentiated Discipline Project. I do believe that these rewards had much to do with the students’ desire to continue their instruction and complete then program.

**Discussion of the Results in Relation to the Literature**

For the last decade, educational leaders in the United States have been engaged in a national conversation about how to fix our failing schools. There have been many reports of schools that grapple with low test scores, toxic school climate, chronic student behavior problems, discouraged parents and teachers, and disengaged students. Central to these issues, and the foci of most of the research previously conducted, pertained to the subject of discipline. The most prevalent topic of these extant studies has been on the behavioral problems of special populations. I have defined special populations herein, as any student exhibiting low self-esteem due to any number of issues; including, those of color, those with special physical and mental needs, students from lower socio-economic status or Title I, students performing below grade level reading standards, or in general students classified as, ‘at-risk.’

I believe my study adds to this current research and to the search for more successful discipline practices for at-risk students. I am hopeful that my study can continue to positively
impact the community I served during the study. I am also hopeful that my study will add to the community of scholars’ existing works, and to the devoted time, resources and expertise they have given in looking for successful approaches to address the behavioral problems of at-risk students.

I found myself agreeing with the researchers and scholars who have voiced the axiom that improving the behaviors of special population students could be very productive in ‘fixing’ some of what contributes to the failing schools in America today. Many studies have been conducted which shows that there is a disproportionate administration of discipline toward at-risk students in American schools. at-risk students of all types are receiving discipline referrals resulting in placement in punitive isolation rooms known as ISS on a regular basis, with no positive results. (Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

As an administrator in charge of discipline, I grew tired and frustrated seeing these same special population students in my office week after week. I found that the typical approaches to discipline were doing very little to deter these student’s behavior. From the following articles, and research studies, I began to reaffirm my conceptual framework, which led to not only the action research methodology which I would utilize, but also the procedures and measures I used in my study. In researching the literature, I found studies showing the success of using alternative procedures. Ryan and Zoldy (2011) report powerful data which revealed that student behavior is better controlled by incorporating progressive discipline techniques, emphasizing positive reinforcement measures instead of the negative consequences that come with ISS. By utilizing alternatives, including conflict resolution sessions, advisory centers utilizing behavioral and diagnostic specialists, students responded much better than placing students in ISS again and again, with no positive results.
Brendtro, Brokenleg, and Bockern’s (2007) found the positive effects that come when educators use proactive preventative measure to improve student behavior, and one of which was the old, but still effective “Premack Principle.” This approach successfully rewards proper behavior instead of punishing inappropriate behavior, and is still notably successful in preventing poor behavior. From these studies, I began to reaffirm my conceptual framework, which led to not only the action research methodology which I would utilize, but also the procedures and measures I used in my study.

I liked the idea of rewarding at-risk students for good behavior instead of what previous research has demonstrated about the unproductive procedure of sending them to the punitive and isolated room known as ISS. I also liked the idea of incorporating the arts in a contingency reward’s program. The “Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts Project,” the name I gave to my intervention program, clearly displayed a powerful and positive effect on at-risk students. In believing that these students needed to be reached in a different manner, I created a program which taught more popular musical instruments, like guitar, keyboard, bass and percussion. I also included lessons in songwriting, and studio production, and offered dance and art lessons.

The concept tied to a book I read entitled “Shine,” (Hollowell, 2011). In his book, Hollowell expresses the importance of persons ‘connecting’ to themselves, in what he terms the ‘Cycle of Excellence.’ The whole idea, as he describes it, is to encourage people to be who they are. As previously stated, I have found that many at-risk students have a noticeable tendency to express themselves in creative ways. When providing the participant students the opportunity, to do what they were innately good at, and what they liked doing, I found a remarkable improvement in behaviors, academic engagement, and in their self-esteem as reported by their teachers.
The teachers reported that participant at-risk students were also experiencing a noticeable degree of happiness in the program. Nass (2012) describes in his book, that better performance stems in work related tasks, when one is happy in their work or experiencing what Nass calls the ‘valence axis.’ It does seem plausible that some of the success which the students achieved was in part due to the enjoyment and happiness which they experienced while in the program.

Discussion of the results as related to the community of practice. The research site participants was very receptive to the study. Not unlike any other American district, they too were interested in discovering any new possible paradigm that may lead to better behaviors, and improved academic engagement for at-risk students. However, I believe what especially interested them in my study was the incorporation of the arts. The district had recently received the Best Communities for Education designation from the National Association of Music Merchants, and its NAMM foundation. The award recognized that the district is leading the way with music learning opportunities as outlined in the new federal education legislation, the “Every Student Succeeds Act” (ESSA). The district was one of only four percent of districts across America that received the prestigious award in 2017. I believe that this commitment to music education led strongly to the cooperation I received at the district, and the success of the at-risk students.

When speaking to district school officials about my desire to conduct the study, they were already aware of the Northwestern University study which demonstrated that music education continues to improve cognitive and social skills for students who make music. In the study conducted by scientists and researchers at Northwestern University, a link was found between students in the community music programs and life-long academic success, including high school graduation rates and college attendance. The study demonstrated that exposure to
music education improved how the brain processes and assimilates sounds, which laid the foundation for creative problem solving, and flexibility in work related situations (Hurd, 2014).

Schools across the globe are finding success in using the arts to promote positive student behavior. ReNEW Cultural Arts Academy in New Orleans is realizing this success through music, art, drama, and mixed media. The school was one of eight schools nationwide to receive the Turnaround Arts Awardee designation from First Lady Michelle Obama. Many other such programs including, the “Get Lit,” and “S.A.Y.S.” programs in California, the “Steam” program in Florida, and the “Right Brain Initiative” in Portland Oregon, are showing outstanding gains in standardized test scores, motivation, engagement of the learner to use inquiry, experimental thinking, and discovery through improved critical thinking skills.

This academic success and engagement of the students is resulting in much improved behavior, and far fewer referrals being written. The success is resulting in positive student outcomes in some of the toughest schools in our country. Decades of research show that used strategically, the arts are an effective tool for improving school culture and climate, and building parent and community involvement (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Yet, music, theater and other arts programs have been disappearing from public schools, often the first victims of budget cuts. Almost 6 million elementary students, and overwhelmingly in our highest poverty schools, have no art or music classes (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Far too often, the schools that need the arts the most are getting them the least (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016).

The research site has a large population (46.2%) of at-risk students has made a substantial effort to keep art in the school curricula. The Executive Director of Secondary Education met with me in the beginning, and offered to assist me with all details of my study. Again, this
cooperation and support was instrumental in the success I found at the research site campus, and in working with those students. This support helped demonstrate the positive effects of the arts used in contingency contracts with at-risk students in my study. The action research study I conducted resulted in 84.6% of the participant students improving in their behavior and academic engagement, as was reported in interviews with their teachers, and in academic and behavioral data provided to me by administration at the research site campus.

Discussion of the results as related to the community of scholars. A powerful series of films entitled “Arts and Minds,” written and produced by Leo Eaton, which have aired on the Public Broadcasting System, substantiates the value of arts in the success of students. Throughout these films, experts provide scientific context to support the continued use of the arts in public schools. Each expert weighed in on the positive effects of the arts on students through the individual research which they conducted. Researchers such as Dr. Limb revealed his findings on the impact of the arts on students, with a particular focus on human development (Limb, 2008). Dr. Limb’s research is of particular interest, as it demonstrated the positive effect of the arts on student’s brains and cognitive learning, with supporting evidence through the latest in medical imaging techniques (Limb, 2008). The series of films authenticate why the arts improve children’s learning and achievement in school, and provides evidence to confirm how the arts keep middle-aged and older brains agile and alert (Eaton, 2014). I am, of course, hopeful that the positive results of my study will add to this extant research on the positive effects of the arts on more specifically, at-risk students.

Kerry Washington writer, actress, scholar, and activist, is another who has seen, as I did in my research, the importance and successful use of the arts in education. Washington followed the path of students in the Anacostia neighborhood of Washington D.C., and found that less than
20% of students there were reading at grade level, and that they ranked in the bottom 5% of all D.C. schools. However, the district became a part of a group of schools that participated in the Turnaround Arts program, which was started by the President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities. In two short years of incorporating the arts into the curriculum and in the culture of the schools, students improved in both math and reading, with scores being raised significantly. Attendance was up by a wide margin, and Washington found that suspensions went down by 70%. She reports that it was a miraculous transformation of both students and teachers (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2014).

Renowned astrophysicist and scholar Neil deGrasse Tyson, defended the arts in public education on his National Geographic television show “Star Walk.” He argued that the arts contribute to the betterment of scientific pursuits by encouraging creativity, and that art programs should not be cut from the school curriculum. He also brought up the very worthy pursuit of proponents who are looking to bring the arts to the STEM programs across America, and re-titled them STEAM. He makes the point that this movement has been developing for years, but that it is past due in coming to fruition (Decker, 2016).

The above scholars, including the other writers and researchers I have mentioned in this discussion section, argue adamantly for keeping the arts in the curriculum of schools across America. They have validated, as I have in my research, the success of students participating in the arts as a regular component of their school day. Most studies have principally looked at how the arts positively impact academic success. My study was in contrast, focused mostly on ameliorating at-risk student discipline problems. I believe that future research on how the arts may improve the discipline of at-risk students will be an emerging topic. I am hopeful that my
study will be one of many that follow, which will attest to an improvement in inappropriate behaviors, and a reduction of referrals among at-risk students through the utilization of the arts.

**Limitations**

The study was subject to three important limitations; sampling size, time constraints, and locations. The sampling size was limited by the district official in charge of approving my study, who only allowed my study to be conducted at the DAEP center. This location contained fewer students, and thereby fewer possible participants. I intended to conduct my study at the main high school campus, where I could have had as many as 20–25 participant students. Instead, I only had 12 participant students in the study. As it turned out, I was in some ways satisfied with this limitation, as I was able to work with students who had some of the most serious behavioral problems and offenses in the district. Thereby, I believe this limitation gave the action research intervention a more pronounced test as to its described accompanied theory.

I did however, have an ample number of educators at the research site campus. However, some were from the DAEP portion of the research site, and some were from the portion of the site which provided services for those students behind in their course credits. The reason for this was that there were only six teachers employed and assigned to the DAEP section, and only another six who were employed and assigned to section of the campus devoted to helping students catch up with their needed credits. I determined that I needed at least 12 educator participants in the study, so I needed to draw from both sections to have an ample number of educator participants.

However, the DAEP section of the campus specifically housed behaviorally problematic students, which in relation to my specific intervention with at-risk behavioral problematic students, should have been the principal target of my student sampling. These students were
assigned DAEP by their administrators for behavioral offenses committed back at their main high school campus. But, because some educators and students participants did not come from just the DAEP section, this could be seen as a limitation.

However, the administrator at the other section of the research site, which again housed students who were typically behind in their graduation credits, did assist me in picking six students from her purview who also had a documented history of behavioral problems. Thereby, all participating students were classified as at-risk with behavioral problems. In the final sampling, I ended up with six teachers from the DAEP section who participated and reported on their behavioral problem students, and five from the credit recovery section. In addition, I had one administrator, and one counselor who rounded out the total number of participant educators at 13.

Another limitation was manifest by having to work exclusively at the DAEP campus. This limitation had to do with the fixed time constraints which accompanied both sections of the campus. Albeit students were assigned to the DAEP section or the credit recovery section, both had fixed times when they were to be released. For the credit recovery students, some were already in their last semester, and even in their last class of catching up with necessary credits to graduate. I was faced with their possible departure, perhaps even before the already limited amount of time to work with them was completed. I did in fact lose one student from this section of the research site whom did graduate and was thereby dropped from the study.

The main time constraint dictating a more serious limitation was attributed to the DAEP program. Here students were assigned to the DAEP section of the campus for typically only four weeks to six weeks, and sometimes less. I was able for the most part to choose students who were assigned for at least six weeks, but which in itself, limited the time of the intervention
program. If given permission to conduct the study at the regular high school campus, I was planning to spend a whole semester, or at least twelve weeks, or twice as much time as I did at the research site.

There were three of the seven DAEP student participants who in fact did get released to their main high school campus before I had a chance to complete all of the intervention cycles and interviews with them. I was thereby forced to complete the program with them in other locations. Location then became the third limitation of my study, as having to deal with a completely different campus to complete the intervention with these three students, became an arduous task. Communications with the regular high school staff, and providing and distributing information to those returning students in my research study, proved to be an enigmatic process. I actually ended up having to meet with these students after school and on weekends to complete their interventions and interviews.

Another problem associated with time constraints, was the fact that the principal at the DAEP campus only allowed us to teach and interview the students once a week. This would always mean that I would meet with half of the students on Thursdays, and the other half on Fridays. I believe that students possibly lost the effects of the intervention, and missed our supporting influence in the gap between sessions, by our only being there once a week. The teachers did say that they would remind the students of losing their chance to stay in the program, and not receive the rewards as outlined in their contingency contracts. However, without our direct influence but that one time a week, I think it was easier for the students to mismanage their behaviors. This could explain in part, the failure of the two students who were suspended for fighting. In summary, if I would have been able to conduct this study at the regular high school, it would have strengthened the research greatly, as it would have eliminated
much of the limitations of time, smaller sample size, and the problems associated with two locations.

**Implications of the Results for Practice, Policy, and Theory**

**Implications of the results on theory.** The assumption, which I have stated throughout this paper, is that a 21st century approach to reduce the inappropriate behaviors among at-risk student populations, should be a positive and more effective replacement for the exclusionary and punitive practice of ISS. I have found that this intellection is eminent among scholars and discipline practitioners within the education community in America today. It was on this premise that I discovered in their literature and accompanying research, a clear depiction of the negative and ineffectiveness of ISS in numerous works which I have cited herein. I began my work to discover for myself if there was an alternative approach which could deliver better results with fewer negative psychological impacts on at-risk students, who already have a fragile concept of themselves (Morris & Howard, 2003; Skiba & Sprague, 2008).

A factor which should encourage school districts to examine their current discipline practices is the impact that their failed policies may have Title 1 funding. Many workshops are offered on this topic, and specifically for those districts experiencing a high number of referrals issued to minorities. After experiencing first-hand the ineffectiveness of ISS, I decided to experiment with an alternative approach.

Because of my background in musical production and recording, I offered eight young African American boys, who were all rappers, and whom where in and out of my office on a consistent basis for referrals, the option of writing their rap songs next to my office instead of serving time in ISS. I promised them that if they would go an entire six weeks without a referral, I would let them record their songs in my home studio. Seven of the eight were not only
successful during that current six weeks, but four of them went the rest of the entire year without a referral; and these were students who before, could hardly go a week without receiving a referral. Teachers would stop me in the hallways and ask me what I had done, as their student had not caused them any trouble for some period of time.

It was from this experiential approach that I decided that one day I would like to conduct a formal study which would hopefully display with accompanying scientific data that this alternative approach could actually work. This study has confirmed that assertion. The theory first informed my future results, and the results assuredly informed the theory through the use of art related contingency contracts.

**Implications of the results for practice.** A wealth of research based on B. F. Skinner's behavioral model has shown that a variety of extrinsic rewards, e.g., grades, stars, stickers, coupons, tokens, notes home, and privileges, can be used to increase on-task engagement, academic performance and improved behaviors (Urlaub, 2002). It was from these studies, and my readings discussing the Premack Principal while studying education at the University of Texas, that also was responsible for leading me toward the alternative approach of using extrinsic rewards to engender better behaviors among at-risk students. My study, like others before, displayed the positive impact of extrinsic rewards for on task engagement and therefore improved behaviors (Premack, 2002; Stockdale & Williams, 2004). The use of gift cards, free studio time, and the continued enrollment in the art related classes, served my study well, as teachers and students alike documented these rewards as being a significant motivation which led to the success of the program.

The use of extrinsic rewards within the context of contingency contracts empowered those rewards to accomplish the goals of my program. In all contingency contracts, educators
find that they contain a description of the problem behavior of the student, with the sought-after replacement behavior detailed in simple written language that the student can easily comprehend (Vismara, Bogin, & Sullivan, 2010). Research across several decades has shown that contingency contracts work well with groups and individuals of all ages and ability levels. Researchers have shown that contingency contracts work well with general education students, special education students, and in home-schooled students, with an emphasis on data collection (Vismara et al., 2010). Such contracts can be used to teach new behaviors, help maintain learned behaviors, or decrease inappropriate behaviors. When contingencies are set up, students are more likely to complete less preferred activities (Vismara et al., 2010).

Contingency contracts were responsible in my study for detailing the requirements of each student in the program. However, for my study, the requirements were only that the participating students would not receive any referrals during the course of the intervention program. I would use, and would recommend for future practice, additional requirements, such as improvements in attendance and grades, in order to receive the rewards. Educators in the program had suggested in my interviews with them these additional items in particular to be used in subsequent interventions.

The use of the arts in the contracts were cited by students and participating educators, as being the most significant of all factors for the success of the program. The music students could not wait until they had the chance to record their songs in one of the nicest studios in the area, which was associated with Texas State University’s music business program. The art students were excited to display their work to a school wide assembly before their peers and family members. There, the art students would receive their gift cards and certificates of completion. The music students would see their work come to fruition in the reward of free studio time. But,
it was the actual composing and arranging of the music and the choosing of the brush and the colors that teachers and students alike referenced as the main reason that they wanted to stay in the program and be successful.

The “Get Lit” and the S.A.Y.S. programs are art programs which teach and mentor students in the skills of writing poetry. The results are seen in testimonials from students and parents heralding the students who participated as having positively transformed them by giving them the faith that they can accomplish anything (Get Lit, 2016). I believe my program accomplished much of the same. Using the Premack principle, and rewarding students for appropriate behavior with enrollment in songwriting, poetry, and dance classes as Robinson (2011) describes is an effective way to address behavioral problems, especially in regard to at-risk students, who are shown to have an inherent interest in the arts (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Repeat offenders being introduced to a professional British contemporary dance company, named “Dance United,” has shown very positive results, and is now being seen as a deterrent to disruptive behavior (Robinson, 2011).

Implications of the results for policy. I believe that the use of alternative disciplinary policies, such as contingency contracts, will become more pronounced in educational research in the near future. I believe that the use of the arts to ameliorate at-risk student behaviors, and thereby academic engagement, will also be an emerging topic in future educational research for school related disciplinary policies. In looking at just the role the arts can play, without including them in contingency contracts, some schools are already finding significant success in using the arts by embedding them into their curricula. This policy has proven to be a successful approach to academic and behavioral success for at-risk students (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). Never-the-less, the use of the arts in school curricula in districts
across America have been disappearing, and are often the first victims of budget cuts. Far too often, the schools that need the arts the most are getting them the least (President’s Committee on the Arts and Humanities, 2016). School officials in those districts need to be provided with the research conducted by the President’s committee on the arts and humanities. One of the goals of my research, which corroborated the same positive effects of the arts as did previous research, is to encourage school officials to see the importance of including those disappearing art programs back into their annual budgets, and placing them back in their schools.

I am hopeful that more schools like the ReNEW Cultural Arts Academy in New Orleans, which is realizing remarkable success through music, art, drama and mixed media, would be established to better serve our struggling at-risk students (Gobitz, 2014). A few schools, like the ReNEW Cultural Arts Academy, go beyond just including an art class as a one hour elective in the curriculum, but embed the arts in the actual teaching of math, science, and other subjects. Perhaps not all public schools can take this sort of action, but certainly the superintendents and school boards need to better understand the effective benefits of including the arts in the curricula, and in as many extra-curricular activities as possible.

The argument for the use of the arts to ameliorate the academic and behavioral success of at-risk students is an important part of the formula; but for me, is only half of the equation. I also believe that there is a need for a more successful policy of handling discipline problems among at-risk students than ISS. The one-size-fits-all ISS policy of assigning all at-risk students to a punitive and exclusionary room, has proven to be ineffective and deleterious (Skiba & Sprague, 2008). More so, it does not identify the individual behavioral problems of each student, nor does it address the causes of those inappropriate actions. I found in analyzing the results of my study, that the use of contingency contracts which incorporate the arts is a much better alternative than
ISS. The policy not only addresses the individual behavioral problems of each student, but targets an extrinsic motivational remedy, which by utilizing an art form, specifically removes the negative behavioral patterns of the student. Instead of punishing the at-risk student for bad behaviors, the policy rewards them for good behaviors with participation in an art form they enjoy.

However, using contingency contracts, even without the use of the arts, is certainly not at the forefront of current educational disciplinary policies. The common use of ISS, which I understand all too well, is the removal of the misbehaving student from the classroom so that other learners can receive the important elements of the lesson being taught. But, I believe that if put in place, the proactive measure of introducing at-risk students to art-related contingency contracts will result in fewer repeat offenders. The Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts Project, which I used for my action research intervention, is not intended for mainstream students. Those students do not want to be placed in ISS. They are typically fearful of ISS, due to their parents being called, and the assignment usually results in their falling behind in their course work. For them, I see ISS serving as a deterrent for improper behaviors. My program is for at-risk students who are continuously in and out of ISS, and where it is obvious that the practice is not serving its intent. For those students, I foresee teachers finding, as I adduced in my study, meaningful improvements in behaviors, manifesting in enhanced academic engagement as well.

**Financial and human capital considerations.** I understand that many policy makers would argue that it is hard enough to find the budget for art programs within the context of the regular curriculum, much less specialized art classes and rewards that would come from extrinsically motivated contingency contracts. However, the benefits of reducing the amount of
discipline referrals, and the time and budgetary considerations that go with behavioral ARD
meetings, special education manifestation meetings, and the building and staffing of disciplinary
alternative placement centers would be well worth the implementation of the program.

The Positive Behavioral Intervention Support team on most campuses usually consists of
not only the administrator(s) in charge of discipline, but also the PBIS coordinator, the
Behavioral Response to Intervention (BRTi) coordinator, and a district behavioral specialist, or
counselor. If these parties work together, I am confident that the program would be well
organized, and not excessively time consuming or burdensome on any one member. Again, the
emphasis would be on what the BRTi model describes as tier three students, or those at-risk
students who are in the most need of support. The Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts
program could easily fit into the targeted small class work, as is described in the Tier 3 BRTi
system.

The makers of policy for the district may also be interested in knowing that the staffing of
the specialized art classes was not a problem for me, nor was having the rewards donated. There
are many after school music programs, including so called schools of rock, where owners of
those establishments are happy to provide volunteer music teachers for their proclivity toward
earning community goodwill, and possible future clientele. There are also many qualified art
teachers who are willing to volunteer their time, and can easily pass volunteer screenings
applications for the school district.

I also found that acquiring art related supplies and gift cards was not a problem. These
items were donated to the program by a national arts and crafts company. The musical
instruments were donated to the program vis-a-vis a national retail music store. Further, in my
need for a recording studio, Texas State University was happy to give studio time at their state of
the art facility, and supply the engineers for what they viewed as a very worthwhile program.

Granted, the program would not work so easily in an isolated rural setting, where these resources would be hard to garner; but in urban settings, these resources can be acquired. I found that the suppliers and volunteers saw the program as a worthwhile cause, positively impacting the lives of at-risk and underprivileged students. A PBIS coordinator at a urban district should only have to ask, and like it was for me, the help will be there.

Although the results of my study support the use of art-related contingency contracts, again it must be said that this is the result from one study, one location, and one sampling of students and educators. Qualitative research studies such as the one I conducted are context based, and entirely dependent upon the population, the situation, and the environment where the study was conducted. I do believe, however, that if a future study was conducted in a site with similar characteristics, the results and implications could be similar.

I am hopeful that the community of scholars representing the field of school discipline and the practices thereof, may be willing to confirm my theory as having potential to inform both policy and practice on school discipline. Because I have not found in the literature a study such as mine which displays the use of the arts and of contingency contracts to ameliorate the behaviors of at-risk students who are repeatedly finding themselves assigned to ISS, I am hopeful that my study is seen as offering new knowledge, and is thereby significant to the field of school discipline.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Although the use of the arts has shown documented better on-task engagement and academic achievement, little research data has been compiled to reflect its direct effect on behavior. Studies such as those conducted by the President's Committee on the Arts and the
Humanities, involved Turnaround Arts program schools which incorporate music, visual arts, and theater into their lesson plans to teach math, social studies, science, and language arts (President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities, 2016). The Renewal Arts Academy in New Orleans is very similar, as they also teach the curricula through the utilization of the arts (Gobitz, 2104). Both of these programs display improvements in academics, attendance, and behaviors, but neither program’s data is specifically directed at the behaviors of at-risk students who repeatedly receive referrals.

I would like to see future studies not only include art to teach the curricula, but to use art as part of a contingency rewards program. I found that utilizing the arts as a positive reinforcement for good behaviors, was a confident way of reaching at-risk students who perhaps would not have been reached through typical disciplinary measures. I recommend conducting a similar action research study as mine, but with the following improvements and changes to the procedures.

A participatory action research study, like the one I conducted, can be administered over a few weeks, to a few months, or, over two or more years (Whyte, 2018). I justified a shorter period of time for my study by the background and knowledge I have had in working with at-risk students for many years, and by my having conducted two separate, but similar informal studies while serving as an assistant principal at two other districts. Both of the prior informal studies lasted for an entire semester, and like my current study, both used music to motivate behavioral problematic students. Although both of these prior studies displayed similar results to my current study, as they both resulted in deterring unwanted behaviors, in neither one did I collect, or analyze the data in a scientific manner.
It would be prudent, in my judgement, to conduct an action research study where scientifically collected data would be gathered over longer intervention cycles. I would recommend using at least three separate intervention cycles, conducted over a full semester or, even a full school year. I would also strongly recommend that the study be conducted at a mainstream general population school, where facilitation of this increased time would be made possible. This procedure would allow for additional students to participate in the study, with expanded interviews, and would amplify the analysis of the results. In addition, if the researcher(s) desired academic and attendance data, the increased time frame would allow for this data to be collected as well.

I would also recommend that the researcher(s) collect behavioral data on all participating students prior to the study, going back even to these students’ middle school records. This data, coupled with tracking the student’s progress into the year after the interventions, would give a more complete picture of the efficacy of the program. I was provided with some prior data on my students, but only for the last six weeks prior to the interventions; and because of the switch in locations back to the regular high school, I was not allowed to track those student progress going forward.

Had I been able to track the students further, and thereby test the efficacy of the program for a longer term, the data would have also served to determine whether extrinsic motivation rewards used, led to intrinsically better behaviors on behave of the students going forward. Psychology behaviorists using meta-analyses on academic motivation, suggest that external rewards often promote continued involvement in targeted activities, whereas cognitivists’ meta-analyses indicate that external rewards typically undermine future engagement in targeted activities when they disappear (Stockdale & Williams, 2004). The argument for the case of
whether the extrinsic motivation of receiving awards will promote on-going involvement in targeted activities is an important element that should be analyzed in a similar future study.

Conclusion

The goal of my study was to discover if some less punitive and more compassionate approach could blend together to engender a unifying solution to the behavioral problems of at-risk students. When realizing the backgrounds of at-risk students, it is no wonder that they make up the largest portion of ISS and DAEP rosters. These students typically have layers of hurt, anger, and frustration, due to learning disabilities, physical disabilities, lower socio-economic status, and language barriers. Some at-risk students experience some unbelievably nefarious home life situations throughout their childhood, which plays a significant role in their negative attitudes. The method of continually subjecting them to punishment to correct their behaviors, by assigning them to the punitive exclusionary ISS room, only serves to make them that more defiant and rebellious. The proof that ISS is ineffective for these students can be found in their discipline records going back as far their elementary grade levels.

The time has come for administrators and educators to realize that the one code of discipline, namely ISS, is not effective for all students. In the same way in which educators use differentiated teaching strategies to reach students with different learning styles, I believe it also prudent that educators should use differentiated discipline techniques to reach students with varying behavioral problems and backgrounds.

In the final analysis of all data which I collected, including peer debriefings with the educators in this study, and with former and current colleagues of mine and the students, I found a powerful conviction that ISS is not effective for at-risk students. I found that all participants, both educators and students, supported the idea of trying some alternative approach to improve
behaviors, and curb the number of referrals the students receive. The action research intervention of using art related contingency contracts and positive reinforcement to improve student behaviors was welcomed and appreciated by all educators and students in the study. All participants responded favorably to the intervention program. They all realized the concrete evidence of improvements in behaviors, but participants also perceived abstract benefits associated with the program. They cited that in learning the art and music skills, a strong perception of increased self-confidence and self-esteem was also discovered by the students.

In conclusion, I believe in rewarding at-risk students for good behavior, instead of punishing them for inappropriate behaviors. I also believe in the arts as a positive and productive manner to reach and connect with at-risk students. I ascertained that because of this study, they became more interested and engaged in their school work and in future goals. I am thereby grateful for the opportunity and experience I had in working with these students.
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APPENDIX A: Elements of the Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts Project

1. Research site officials would assist in identifying special population high school students who have a history of receiving ISS referrals and could potentially benefit from the program. Students could be referred to the project from the PBIS program, and Level II or Level III of the Behavioral Response to Intervention program (BRTI) or, from students who have been sent to the DAEP center for excessive referrals.

2. Research site officials would assist in identifying to which vulnerable at-risk students belong; i.e., minorities and English second language (ESL) students, below grade level reading students, Title I students, and SPED students. The goal would be to have a balance of these categories represented in the study.

3. Students and educators who have agreed to participate will be introduced to the program by researcher with an explanation of how the new program could potentially better serve both the student and the educator. The initial meeting would also include the protocol for interviewing, including the signing of consent forms (see Appendix A and E).

4. Following, participating students and teachers would agree to contingency contracts outlining expectations of behavior for an agreed length of time. This policy would be mandatory for students to proceed in the program. If a student does not adhere to the requirements of their contracts, then they can either be warned of being dropped from the program on their first offense, or immediately be dropped from the program, as is decided and detailed by teacher and/or Assistant Principal in individual contracts. The goal is a fade out of extrinsic rewards as a behavioral momentum is established, whereby students see the value of good behavior and will futuristically be intrinsically motivated. (see sample contract, appendix B)

5. Within the contracts, students would identify the art program of their choice, i.e. (poetry, dance, musical instrument, songwriting, recording, or art canvas). Instruction for these programs will be made available by researcher, and will include professional experienced teachers in these areas. (see resources below)

6. Classes and preparation for presentations, performances, and recordings will take place during regular school hours. Researcher is a certified teacher and administrator, and as a guest teacher would appropriately and professionally monitor all classes.

7. Facilities to be used will be determined by the time slots decided upon, but could include any unoccupied available space. Where transportation is needed to an outside facility, researcher will seek to use a bus of the districts where liability issues would be covered.

Note * It will be the goal of the program for researcher to find in educator interviews, and from school discipline records, a reduction in referrals for participating students, and improvements in academic engagement in their classes resulting in an improvement in grades.
Planned Resources to be utilized by researcher include:

**Lessons**

1. Art and jewelry making lessons provided by Marcy Young (Kyle, Texas) Ms. Young is a professional teacher who has worked with troubled youth cultivating their artistic canvas and jewelry making talents.

2. Poetry and songwriting lessons provided by Oscar Houchins (Kyle, Texas)

3. Music and studio recording lessons provided by Oscar Houchins (Kyle, Texas) Oscar Houchins is a Grammy voting songwriter, musician and producer who was inducted into the Gulf Coast Music Hall of Fame in 2008.

**Facilities**

1. Moonhouse Studios (P. O. Box 41021, Austin, Texas 78704)

2. Fire Station Studios (224 N. Guadalupe St., San Marcos, Texas 78666)

**Referenced programs and possible usage of facilities, services or personnel**

1. Austin School of Music (2428 W. Ben White, Austin, Texas 78704)

2. The Window, Riley Webb (209 W. 27th St. Austin, Texas 78705)

3. Fine Arts Academy, Lamar Middle School (6201 Wynona Ave. Austin, Texas 78757)

4. Kids in a Groove (2906 S. First St. Austin, Texas 78704)

5. Kealing Middle School Recording Studio (1607 Pennsylvania Ave. Austin, Texas 78702)

6. Tapestry Dance Company (4544 S. Lamar Austin, Texas 787450).
Appendix B: Sample Contingency Contract

Differentiated Discipline Inquiry Arts Project Contract

Date_____________

(Student’s name)__________________ enters into the agreement with (administrator’s name) ________________ for the purposes of encouraging outstanding behavior on the part of the named student. The student will check next to the art program they wish to enter.

Canvas art and Jewelry making ______

Dance ______

Music (guitar or keyboard) ______

Songwriting (Recording) ______

First Phase of the Project

The provisions call for the student to receive no more than one referral in the first 20 school days of this contract, and thereafter no referrals are permitted if student is to maintain their place in the project. If the named student accomplishes the above behavioral goals and can show competency in their chosen art program for the first 20 days as determined by their chosen art teacher, they will have successfully completed the first phase of the project and will receive a $50 art-related gift card.

Second Phase of the Project

If the named student successfully completes the second phase of the project which lasts another 20 school days without a referral, and continues to display competency in their chosen art program, they will once again qualify for a $50 art-related gift card and entrance into the presentation and performance, or third phase of the project.
**Third Phase of the Project**

The presentation and performance third phase of the project will last approximately 15 school days, for rehearsals and completing program projects. Each art program will display learned skills in a campus-wide assembly, which will range from a professionally choreographed stage dance, to students’ canvas art and jewelry creations being presented at area art galleries and for school audiences, to recording time of original music in a professional recording studio, to student performances of music instruments learned for school and civic audiences. Students successfully completing this third stage, will once again receive $50 gift cards of their choice, and be recognized appropriately by school and district officials, and by the area community.

Signed and agreed to by: 

_________________ Student’s name
_________________ Teacher’s name

Witnessed by:

_________________ Grade Level Assistant Principal
APPENDIX C: Interview Protocol

Introductory Information

The interview process begins with the selection of research site vulnerable at-risk students, educators; consisting of teachers, ISS monitors, counselors, administrators, who are instructional personnel working with special education students in need of additional help during the school day. Informed consent forms will be issued to all students and educator participants selected. The interviews will be conducted in a one-on-one manner following each of the first two action intervention cycles, as described above.

In follow-up interviews, and as part of cross-checking techniques, I would especially be looking for changes which educators think would engender the greatest amount of insight into the perceptions of the school’s current disciplinary procedures, including ISS; and encourage insightful perceptions of any alternative discipline procedures they may have used in the past. I would make changes in my interview questions which they think would result in the greatest amount of credibility and dependability. I would also review changes that participant educators may suggest which would secure the greatest amount of protection for the ethical rights of all parties, and changes which they think would better ensure that the study is meaningful for all stakeholders. Finally, I would make changes which they think would produce the least amount of researcher’s bias. In so doing, this process will ensure a collaborative effort important to a Participation Action Research (PAR) Study (Costello, 2003). I will seek to let the participants know that I like and appreciate their responses, but will always be probing for longer responses where needed.

Interview Protocol Project: The research site reaction to ISS and Alternative Discipline Practices

Time of Interview: (during participant’s conference period, or other available time)

Date: Beginning in August, 2017

Place: (an unoccupied quiet space)

Interviewer: Oscar W. Houchins III, M.Ed.

Interviewee: Research site educators

Position of Interviewee: Teachers, ISS monitors, counselors, administrators, and SPED staff.
Description of Project:

The study is designed to obtain educator’s opinions of the advantages and disadvantages of: In School Suspension, alternative discipline practices, extrinsic motivational tools, and the use of the arts as a contingency contract reward for improved behaviors for vulnerable at-risk students. I am identifying vulnerable at-risk students as any student exhibiting low self-esteem due to any number of issues; including those of color, those with special physical and mental needs, students from lower socio-economic status (Title I students) and students performing below grade level reading standards.

Introduction

Thank you for your participation today. I selected to speak with you today as I know that you have a great deal of knowledge regarding the needs of vulnerable at-risk students, and the disciplinary practices used to curb their inappropriate behaviors. The research project focuses on the improvement of discipline techniques for these vulnerable at-risk populations and your thoughts on involving differentiated discipline techniques for each student. The study does not evaluate your techniques or experiences, but rather is looking for information which hopefully will assist the district and elsewhere of practices which will help deter unwanted behaviors among vulnerable at-risk populations students.

Introductory Protocol

I will use an audio tape recorder for our interview today. I will be the only one who will be privy to the tapes, and after transcribing the data, the tapes will be destroyed. I am asking you to sign this informed consent form which states that: (1) Strict confidentiality of your data is assured. (2) Your participation is voluntary and (3) we will stop the interview if at any time you feel uncomfortable, or in harm’s way. The interview should not last more than 15-20 minutes. A copy of the study will be available to you.

Educator Questionnaire (distributed to educators before first interview)

1. Do you see ISS being effective for all students? If not; what type of student do you see ISS being more effective in curbing unwanted behaviors? (e.g., regular students, or vulnerable at-risk students, such as: (minority students, SPED students, and Title I students?) And, why do you think so?

2. In the same manner in which educators utilize differentiated learning practices for vulnerable at-risk students with different learning styles, should not teachers also employ differentiated discipline practices for vulnerable at-risk students with different behavioral issues? (e.g., Minorities, SPED, ESL, and below grade level students) Why or Why not?

3. Do you agree with the research that has shown that vulnerable at-risk students (minorities, at-risk, SPED, and Title I students) receive an over-representation of ISS referrals?
4. What type of infraction(s) is most common for In School Suspension (ISS) referrals for vulnerable at-risk students?

5. What type of information do you receive in advance that may help explain why a special population student has trouble with his/her behavior?

6. Does Behavioral Intervention Plans received by BRtI teachers assist them in improving student’s behaviors? Why or why not? And, do you have any recommendations to improve that program?

7. How do you think vulnerable at-risk students who are assigned ISS on a regular basis view school and their education? Why do you think so?

8. What sort of recommendations would you suggest making to improve ISS?

Educator Interview Questions following initial intervention cycle, or ‘Phase One.’

1) Did you find that contingency contracts accomplished better or worse behaviors for vulnerable at-risk students than ISS? And, why?

2) Did you find that contingency contracts accomplished better or worse academic engagement for vulnerable at-risk students than ISS? And, why?

3) Do you believe that contingency contracts could be instrumental in improving a special population at-risk student’s self-esteem compared to being assigned to ISS?

4) How difficult was it for the students to fulfill their contingency contracts?

5) What changes would you recommend making to those contracts?

6) Do you believe that art-related contingency contracts made a positive or negative difference in vulnerable at-risk students in their receiving instruction and art-related gift cards? And what differences did they make?

7) What are some improvements that you would suggest making to this program?

Educator Interview Questions following second cycle, or Phase Two.

1) Did you find that contingency contracts accomplished better or worse behaviors for vulnerable at-risk students than ISS? And, why?

2) Did you find that contingency contracts accomplished better or worse academic engagement for vulnerable at-risk students than ISS? And, why?

3) Do you believe that contingency contracts could be instrumental in improving a special population at-risk student’s self-esteem compared to being assigned to ISS?
4) How difficult was it for the students to fulfill their contingency contracts?

5) What changes would you recommend making to those contracts?

6) Do you believe that art-related contingency contracts made a positive or negative difference in vulnerable at-risk students? And what were they?

7) What are some improvements that you would suggest making to this program?

**Initial Student Interview Questions**

1) How many ISS assignments have you had this past year? In past years?

2) What was the average length of those assignments?

3) What were the infractions?

4) How fair did you think those ISS assignments were?

5) How important is having success in school?

6) Does ISS help improve your behavior? If so, in what ways?

7) Does ISS help your learning? If so, in what ways?

8) Does ISS help your self-esteem? If so, in what ways?

9) What sort of recommendations would you make to improve ISS?

10) What type of student do you see ISS being more or less effective in curbing unwanted behaviors? (e.g., vulnerable at-risk students, such as minorities, SPED students, or, regular students who do not belong to a special population).

11) What would you think of trying an alternative approach to ISS; such as entering into a behavioral contingency contract between you and the assistant principal, where if you were successful in completing the contract you would receive art-related gift cards, like I-Tunes, and be given the opportunity to participate in specialized professional art Programs?

12) What requirements and conditions would be fair to place in your contingency behavioral contracts with your assistant principal and your teachers?

13) Do you have any interest in art-related careers? Such as: music, songwriting, recording, dance, poetry, or canvas art?

14) Could this kind of program lead to better behavior on your part? Or, worse behavior? And, why?
15) Could this this kind of program lead to better learning on your part? Or, worse? And, why?

16) Could this this kind of program lead to better self-esteem? Or, worse? And, why?

17) What other improvements do you see this kind of program could make in your life?

**Student Interview Questions following first cycle, or Phase One.**

1) How difficult was it for you to fulfill your contingency behavioral contract?

2) Were the requirements and conditions of the contract fair? And, what changes would you recommend making to your contract?

3) In general, what did you like or dislike about trying the behavioral contingency contract using the arts as a motivational tool?

4) Did you like the art instruction you received?

5) Do you look forward to presenting and/or performing your art in front of a school audience?

6) Did you the program lead to better or worse behavior on your part? And Why?

7) Did the program lead to better learning engagement on you part? And, how?

8) Did the program help you gain better self-esteem? And, how?

9) Did you find that this program made any other improvements in your life? If so, what where they?

10. Are there any suggestions you would like to make to improve the program?

**Student Interview Questions following second cycle, or Phase Two.**

1) How difficult was it for you to fulfill your contingency behavioral contract?

2) Were the requirements and conditions of the contract fair? And, what changes would you recommend making to your contract?

3) In general, what did you like or dislike about trying the behavioral contingency contract using the arts as a motivational tool?

4) Did you like the art instruction you received?

5) Do you look forward to presenting your talent in front of a school audience?
6) Did you the program lead to better or worse behavior on your part? And Why?

7) Did the program lead to better learning engagement on you part? And, how?

8) Did the program help you gain better self-esteem? And, how?

9) Did you find that this program made any other improvements in your life? If so, what where they?

10) Are there any suggestions you would like to make to improve the program?
APPENDIX D: Codes

I will use the following codes to categorize the data as to both the questionnaire and to the interview questions.

Questionnaire Codes

QYAS-Yes, ISS is effective for all students (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QNAS- No, ISS is not effective for all students (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QRS- regular students (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answer
QSPS-special population student-(Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QDD-Yes, differentiated discipline should be used (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QNDD-No, differentiated discipline should not be used (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QYO-RSP- Yes, there is an over-representation of vulnerable at-risk students receiving ISS
QNO-RSP- No, there is not an over-representation of vulnerable at-risk students receiving ISS
QFISS- Referral to ISS for fighting
QBISS- Referral to ISS for Bullying
QDISS- Referral to ISS for disobedience
QCISS- Referral to ISS for Cheating
QMDISS-Referral to ISS for missing detention
QTISS- Referral to ISS for Texting
QBIP/SPED- Behavioral Intervention Plan which identifies student as Special Education
QBIP/ESL- Behavioral Intervention Plan which identifies student as a English Second Language Learner
QYBIPH- Behavioral Intervention Plan helps (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QNBIPDH- Behavioral Intervention Plan does not help (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QRto BIPPV- Recommendations to BIP Program vary OEA- Open Ended Answer
QDLS- Likes School and thinks it is important (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QDNS- Does not like school and does not think it is important (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
QRto ISSP-Recommendations to ISS Program OEA- Open Ended Answer
Educator Interview Codes Following First Cycle

1-CCBISS- Contingency contracts worked better than ISS for behavioral issues (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-CCWISS- Contingency contracts were worse than ISS for behavioral issues (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-CCBA- Contingency contracts resulted in better academic engagement (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-CCWA- Contingency contracts resulted in worse academic engagement (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-CCBSE- Contingency contracts resulted in better self-esteem than ISS (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-CCWSE- Contingency contracts resulted in worse self-esteem than ISS (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-FCCE- Fulfilling contingency contracts was easy (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-FCCH- Fulfilling contingency contracts was hard (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-RCto CC- recommended changes to contingency contracts OEA- Open Ended Answer

1-ACPI- The art-related contracts were seen as a positive impact on vulnerable at-risk students (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-ACNPI- The art-related contracts not seen as a positive impact on special population Students (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

1-RC to P-Recommended changes to the program OEA- Open Ended Answer

Educator Interview Codes Following Second Cycle

2-CCBISS- Contingency contracts worked better than ISS for behavioral issues (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

2-CCWISS- Contingency contracts were worse than ISS for behavioral issues (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

2-CCBA- Contingency contracts resulted in better academic engagement (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

2-CCWA- Contingency contracts resulted in worse academic engagement (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

2-CCBSE- Contingency contracts resulted in better self-esteem than ISS (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers

2-CCWSE- Contingency contracts resulted in worse self-esteem than ISS (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
2-FCCE- Fulfilling contingency contracts was easy (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
2-FCCH- Fulfilling contingency contracts was hard (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
2-RCto CC-recommended changes to contingency contracts OEA- Open Ended Answer
2-ACPI- The art-related contracts seen as a positive impact on vulnerable at-risk students (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
2-ACNPI- The art-related contracts not seen as a positive impact on special population Students (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
2-RC to P-Recommended changes to the program OEA- Open Ended Answer

**Initial Student Interview Codes**

- SNISSA-number of ISS assignments
- SLISSA-length of ISS assignments
- STof-IF-type of Infraction- fighting
- STof-IF-type of Infraction-Bullying
- STof-IF-type of Infraction-disobedience
- STof-IF-type of Infraction-Cheating
- STof-IF-type of Infraction-missing detention
- STof-IF-type of Infraction-Texting
- SRUF-Referral was unfair
- SRWF-Referral was fair
- SSSis-I-Success in school is important
- SSSis-NI-Success in school is not important
- SISSDHB-ISS does help behavior
- SISSDNHB-ISS does not help behavior
- SISSDHL-ISS does help learning
- SISSDNHL-ISS does not help learning
- SISSDHS-E-ISS does help self-esteem
- SISSDNHS-E-ISS does not help self-esteem

SRfor ISS- Student recommendations for ISS OEA- Open Ended Answer
SRS- regular students OEA- Open Ended Answer
SSPS-special population student- OEA- Open Ended Answer
SWLACC- Would like art-related contingency contract
SWNLACC- Would not like art-related contingency contract
SRfor ACC- Student’s view of what requirements should be placed in art-related contingency contracts OEA- Open Ended Answer
Slin-ArtM- interest in art-music
Slin-ArtSW- interest in art-songwriting
Slin-ArtR- interest in art-recording
Slin-ArtD- interest in art-dance
Slin-ArtCA- interest in art-canvas art
SYPBB-Yes, the program would lead to better behavior
SNPNBB-No, the program would not lead to better behavior
SYPBL-Yes, the program would lead to better learning
SNPNBL-No, the program would not lead to better learning
SYPBS-E-Yes, the program would lead to better self-esteem
SNPNBS-E-No, the program would not lead to better self-esteem
SOAofP-Other attributes of program as seen by students

**Student Interview Codes Following First Cycle**
1-SFCCE- Student fulfilling contingency contract was easy
1-SFCCH- Student fulfilling contingency contract was hard
1-SCCwereF-Contingency contracts were fair (changes)- OEA- Open Ended Answer
1-SCCwereNF-Contingency contracts were not fair (changes) OEA- Open Ended Answer
1-SLabout CC-students likes about contingency art-related contracts
1-SDLabout CC-students dislikes about contingency art-related contracts
1-SLartI-students liked art instruction (how?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
1-SDLartI-students disliked art instruction (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
1-SLFtoPP-students look forward to presenting and/or performing art
1-SLDNFTP-students do not look forward to presenting and/or performing art
1-SPBB-students thought the program led to better behavior
1-SPDNBB-students thought the program did not lead to better behavior
1-SPBL-students thought the program led to better learning engagement
1-SPDNBL-students thought the program did not lead to better learning engagement
1-SPBS-E-students thought the program led to better self-esteem
1-SPDNBS-E-students thought the program did not lead to better self-esteem
1-SO1ofP-students found other improvements that the program made in their lives (what?)
OEA- Open Ended Answers
SSfor P-students make suggestions for improving program OEA- Open Ended Answers

**Student Interview Codes Following Second Cycle**

2-SFCCE- Student fulfilling contingency contract was easy
2-SFCCH- Student fulfilling contingency contract was hard
2-SCCwereF-Contingency contracts were fair (changes)-OEA- Open Ended Answer
2-SCCwereNF-Contingency contracts were not fair (changes) OEA- Open Ended Answer
2-SLabout CC-students likes about contingency art-related contracts
2-SDLabout CC-students dislikes about contingency art-related contracts
2-SLartI-students liked art instruction (how?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
2-SDLartI-students disliked art instruction (Why?) OEA- Open Ended Answers
2-SLFToPP-students look forward to presenting and/or performing art
2-SLDNFtoPP-students do not look forward to presenting and/or performing art
2-SPBB-students thought the program led to better behavior
2-SPDNBB-students thought the program did not lead to better behavior
2-SPBL-students thought the program led to better learning engagement
2-SPDNBL-students thought the program did not lead to better learning engagement
2-SPBS-E-students thought the program led to better self-esteem
2-SPDNBS-E-students thought the program did not lead to better self-esteem
2-SO1ofP-students found other improvements that the program made in their lives (what?)
OEA- Open Ended Answers
2-SSfor P-students make suggestions for improving program OEA- Open Ended Answers
Appendix E: Consent Forms

Research Study Consent and Assent Forms, and Parent Permission Letter

CONSENT FORM (05)

Research Study Title: Differentiated Discipline for Special Population Students at-risk: An Action Research Study
Principal Investigator: Oscar W. Houchins III
Research Institution: Concordia University-Portland
Faculty Advisor: Dr. Chris Jenkins

The purpose of this study is to discover if at-risk students receiving the intervention of reward oriented art-related contingency contracts will successfully complete these contracts, and thereby receive less In School Suspension (ISS) referrals. We would like to have 12 students and 12 educators from the research site to participate in this action research study. The student participants will be observed and interviewed regarding their assignments to ISS and on their views of the action intervention process and the results. The educators will be interviewed on their assessment of ISS, and also on their views of the action intervention process and the results with the hope that this alternative discipline practice will result in improved behaviors among at-risk vulnerable population students.

No one will be paid to be in the study or coerced in any way to participate in the program. Researcher has no authority over grades, or any other authority which would in any way influence a students’ decision to participate or not. Further, if they do decide to participate Researcher will not influence in any way how they may answer certain questions, nor will Researcher promote or diminish their success in the program. We will begin enrollment when participants have received and signed this consent in August of 2017, and the program will end in November of 2017.

To be in the study, students will agree to a contingency contract between themselves and their teacher and/or administrator outlining their expected behaviors for a specific period of time. If they successfully complete each intervention cycle, or phase they will receive the reward of being able to stay in the art-related program, and receive art-related gift cards along the way. There are no costs to the participant educators other than the time to be interviewed. It is estimated that this will require approximately 1 & 1/2 hours total including a debriefing for the entire duration of the study. Student participants will spend approximately 45 minutes in interviews, but will be expected to receive a minimum of 12 hours of art-related instruction during school hours, after school, or on Saturdays, whichever is most convenient to them and their parents.
Risks:
There are no risks to participating in this study other than providing your information. However, we will protect your information. Any personal information you provide will be coded so it cannot be linked to you. Any name or identifying information you give will be kept securely locked inside a file cabinet. When we or any of our investigators look at the data, none of the data will have your name or identifying information. All tape recorded interviews will be destroyed immediately after the data is accurately transcribed. We will only use a secret code to analyze the data. All answers you give to interview questions and all observations will not in any way be connected to you and will be presented in an anonymous manner. We will not identify you in any publication or report. I do not anticipate that my study will be distributed in any manner to the general population, or to professionals in the education field. Your information will be kept private at all times and then all study documents will be destroyed 3 years after we conclude this study.

Benefits:
Students who successfully complete their contingency contracts will receive as extrinsic motivation, gift cards and exposure to audiences where they will display their developed artistic talents. We hope that this program will increase their self-confidence and self-esteem, resulting in increased academic engagement and better behaviors with fewer ISS referrals. Educators will hopefully see the potential of using alternative discipline practices such as contingency contracts and the positive reinforcement that comes with those contracts, and that improvements in student’s behavior is actualized than what was previously realized with assigning students to ISS.

Confidentiality:
This information will not be distributed to any other agency and will be kept private and confidential. The only exception to this would be if you allow us to photograph you. This will not take place until the very end of the program when students are displaying their developed artistic talents before a school and/or civic audience. A separate photo release document will be provided you if you choose to waive your right to confidentiality.

Right to Withdraw:
Your participation is greatly appreciated, but we acknowledge that the questions we are asking are personal in nature. You are free at any point to choose not to engage with or stop the study, and you may skip or retract any questions you do not wish to answer at any time and for any reason they may deem necessary This study is not required and there is no penalty for not participating. If at any time you experience a negative emotion from answering the questions, we will stop asking you questions for any reason they may deem necessary.
Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I asked questions if I had them, and my questions were answered. I volunteer my consent for this study.

_______________________________                   ___________
Participant Name                   Date

_______________________________                   ___________
Participant Signature              Date

_______________________________                   ___________
Investigator Name                  Date

_______________________________                   ___________
Investigator Signature             Date

Investigator: Oscar W. Houchins III M.Ed
c/o: Professor Dr. Chris Jenkins
Concordia University – Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon
LETTER OF ASSENT

Dear Student:

I am doing a research study about how contingency contracts using the arts could improve student’s behaviors and academic engagement. If you decide you want to be part of this study, you will be asked to participate in a series of two to three interviews with me. The interviews will be conducted during school hours, or before or after school, depending on which is most convenient for you and your campus administrators and teachers. I will also be observing your participation in In School Suspension (ISS) if you are assigned to such class. There are no costs to the student other than their time. Student participants will spend approximately 15 minutes in each of 3 interviews, or 45 minutes, and will be expected to attend 20 hours of art-related instruction during school hours, after school or on Saturdays, whichever is most convenient to them and their parents.

There are some other things you should know about this study. Your name will not be revealed in the study, but I will be asking you questions about how you personally feel about ISS, and about my alternative discipline strategy of contingency art-related contracts. I will be making an audio recording for each interview so I can make sure to get your wording exact.

When I am finished with this study, I will write a report about what was learned. This report will not include your name or that you were in the study. The information will be published in the hopes that the research will help teachers and schools do a better job of understanding the academic and behavioral needs and desires of students. It may even help your school do a better job in the future of educating students like you.

You do not have to participate in this study and not participating will not affect your grade, your relationship with your teacher, or anything else about what you do at school. If you decide to stop after we begin, that is okay, too.

If you decide you want to be in this study, please sign your name.

I, _______________________________________________________, want to be in this research study.

_____________________________________________________
(Sign your name here)
(Date)

Thank you for your attention in reading this form and your consideration in if you want or do not want to be in this study.
LETTER OF PERMISSION

Dear Parent:

I am doing a research study about how contingency contracts using the arts could improve student’s behaviors and academic engagement. If you decide you would like your child to be part of this study, please indicate with the signing of this letter of permission below. Your child will be asked to participate in a series of two to three interviews with me. The interviews will be conducted during school hours, before or after school depending on which is most convenient for you and your child. I will also be observing your child’s participation in In School Suspension (ISS) if he/she should be assigned to such a class. There are no costs to the student other than their time. Student participants will spend approximately 15 minutes in each of 3 interviews, or 45 minutes, and will be expected to attend 20 hours of art-related instruction during school hours, after school or on Saturdays, whichever is most convenient to you and your student.

There are some things you should know about this study. Your child’s name will not be revealed in the study, but I will be asking questions about how your child personally feels about ISS, and about my alternative discipline strategy of contingency art-related contracts. I will be making an audio recording for each interview so I can make sure to get your child’s wording exact.

When I am finished with this study, I will write a report about what was learned. This report will not include your name or that of your child’s, or that he/she was in the study. The information will be published in the hopes that the research will help teachers and schools do a better job of understanding the academic and behavioral needs and desires of students. It may even help your school do a better job in the future of educating students like your child.

Your child does not have to participate in this study, and not participating will not affect his/her grade, or their relationship with their teacher, or anything else about what they do at school. If your child decides to stop after we begin, that is okay, too.

If you decide, and are okay with your child being in this study, please sign your name.

I, _____________________________________________, want my child ___________________________ to be in this research study.

__________________________________________________________________________

__________________________________________________________________________
(Sign your name here)

(Date)

Thank you for your attention in reading this form and your consideration in if you want or do not want to be in this study.

________________________________________

Investigator: Oscar W. Houchins III M.Ed.
c/o: Professor Dr. Chris Jenkins
Concordia University – Portland
2811 NE Holman Street
Portland, Oregon  97221
APPENDIX F: Member-Checking Form

Instructions:

After reading the analysis of responses and themes drawn from participants from the study, please comment below as to what you see is credible, or not credible in the responses from other participants. I am interested in what participants see is trustworthy information, and anything that they believe may be missing in the written analysis.

In addition, if you have any information that could suggest patterns of information which does not support the majority of information, or what you see may be the expected results of the study, please make note of those negative case themes below.

In response, I will report all opinions of the participants, both those which support themes which I believe will change discipline practices for the better for vulnerable at-risk students, and those which do not support the purpose of the study. The result of this in-depth and comprehensive reporting should ensure the dependability of the study. Thank you once again!

Questions/Comments

What do you see is credible, or not credible in the responses of other participants?
What do you see that may be missing in the written analysis?
Please note any information which you see does not support the majority of information, or what you see may not fit the expected results of the study?
APPENDIX G: Figure 1

Educator Perceptions and Research Question Results

![Bar Chart]

First Bar represents - # of educators reporting ISS as having a negative impact on at-risk students.

Second Bar represents - # of educators reporting an improvement in students’ behaviors using differentiated discipline contracts following the first four weeks of the intervention cycle. *Note: Five (5) educators reported it was too early to tell if intervention had helped; Three (3) reported no change in students’ behaviors, and one (1) educator reported worse behaviors in one student.

Third Bar represents - # of educators who reported an improvement in students’ behaviors following an additional four weeks of the intervention. *Note: Two educators reported no change in students’ and one reported worse behaviors in two students.

Fourth Bar represents - # of educators who reported art and music as being a positive method of reaching at-risk students, and in curbing inappropriate behaviors.
Appendix H: Statement of Original Work

The Concordia University Doctorate of Education Program is a collaborative community of scholar-practitioners, who seek to transform society by pursuing ethically-informed, rigorously-researched, inquiry-based projects that benefit professional, institutional, and local educational contexts. Each member of the community affirms throughout their program of study, adherence to the principles and standards outlined in the Concordia University Academic Integrity Policy. This policy states the following:

Statement of academic integrity.

As a member of the Concordia University community, I will neither engage in fraudulent or unauthorized behaviors in the presentation and completion of my work, nor will I provide unauthorized assistance to others.

Explanations:

What does “fraudulent” mean?

“Fraudulent” work is any material submitted for evaluation that is falsely or improperly presented as one’s own. This includes, but is not limited to texts, graphics and other multi-media files appropriated from any source, including another individual, that are intentionally presented as all or part of a candidate’s final work without full and complete documentation.

What is “unauthorized” assistance?

“Unauthorized assistance” refers to any support candidates solicit in the completion of their work, that has not been either explicitly specified as appropriate by the instructor, or any assistance that is understood in the class context as inappropriate. This can include, but is not limited to:

- Use of unauthorized notes or another’s work during an online test
- Use of unauthorized notes or personal assistance in an online exam setting
- Inappropriate collaboration in preparation and/or completion of a project
- Unauthorized solicitation of professional resources for the completion of the work.
I attest that:

1. I have read, understood, and complied with all aspects of the Concordia University-Portland Academic Integrity Policy during the development and writing of this dissertation.

2. Where information and/or materials from outside sources has been used in the production of this dissertation, all information and/or materials from outside sources has been properly referenced and all permissions required for use of the information and/or materials have been obtained, in accordance with research standards outlined in the *Publication Manual of The American Psychological Association*.

Name: Oscar Wilbur Houchins III

Signature: [Signature]

Date: April 25, 2018