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The Socioemotional Impact of Disparate Student Discipline: An Examination of Racial Bias and Out-of-School Suspensions

Amelia Barbadoro

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THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL IMPACT OF DISPARATE STUDENT DISCIPLINE:
An Examination of Racial Bias and Out-of-School Suspensions

by

AMELIA BARBADORO

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy,
The City University of New York
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Amelia Barbadoro

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Urban Education
in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

THE SOCIOEMOTIONAL IMPACT OF DISPARATE STUDENT DISCIPLINE:
An Examination of Racial Bias and Out-of-School Suspensions

by

Amelia Barbadoro

Advisor: Nicholas Michelli

Most schools find it challenging to effectively manage disruptive student conduct such as violent outbursts, antisocial behavior, bullying, talking back, and truancy. One management tool utilized by teachers and administrators attempting to quell unruly behavior is exclusion through the use of suspension. Out-of-school suspension rates within the United States have been rising since the 1970’s, with a dramatic increase evident after 2002, with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act. The higher use of out-of-school suspensions reflects the growth of zero-tolerance policies which mandate predetermined, typically harsh consequences or punishments (such as suspension and expulsion) for a wide degree of rule violations, regardless of accidental mistake, ignorance, or extenuating circumstances. These policies have resulted in student suspensions for a broad array of school code violations, ranging from serious infractions such as violent behavior, to less serious infractions such as truancy and dress code violations.

Research reveals gross disparities in the number of out-of-school suspensions experienced by male students, students with disabilities, and students from historically disadvantaged racial and ethnic subgroups, with race representing the most significant factor in determining such inequity. This dissertation will specifically examine disciplinary inequity
based upon race, to determine how inequitably applied disciplinary policies, which result in a disproportionate percentage of out-of-school suspensions applied to the conduct of black students, affect the social development and emotional advancement of black high school students attending New York City public schools.\(^1\) This research is intended to raise awareness regarding implicit bias and the prejudicial application of high school disciplinary policies, as well as bring attention to the social and emotional impact of such disparity. These findings will support advocates as they push educators and policymakers to develop and implement equitable alternative methods of addressing student misconduct so as to reduce suspensions while maintaining safe and orderly schools.

\(^1\) For the purpose of this dissertation, the term “black,” when used to describe students, teachers, administrators, and community members, refers to persons who are perceived to be dark-skinned, compared to other given populations. Although within the United States, many associate African-American with the term “black,” there are people of other ethnic backgrounds who are also perceived as “black.” This dissertation therefore uses the term “black,” instead of African-American, so as to include individuals of all ethnic backgrounds who would be perceived as being dark-skinned.
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CHAPTER I

Overview

Introduction

Out-of-school suspensions have been steadily increasing over the last four decades, and so too has the racial gap between those who are suspended. Racial disproportionality in out-of-school suspensions is a persistent social-justice issue. Nationally, black children are almost three times more likely than white children to be suspended, yet black students are no more likely than other students to engage in unsafe or rule-breaking behaviors at school.

Out-of-school suspensions involve removing children from school, often for relatively minor misbehaviors such as fighting, noncompliance and disrespect. They are largely ineffective in their goal of deterring inappropriate student behaviors, but they do harm the well-being, health, and academic achievement of students, as well as facilitate entry into the juvenile justice system. Suspension often exacerbate academic deterioration, and when students are provided with no immediate educational alternative, student alienation, delinquency, crime, and substance abuse may ensue.

Suspensions act as a barrier to upward mobility and meaningful employment through school success. This research explores the experiences and meanings of suspensions for those who are directly involved, and provides an important lens for considering how students are emotionally impacted by harsh academic discipline and either experiencing or observing racial injustice within the school setting.
**Statement of the Problem**

Research shows that black students, especially black boys, are disciplined more often and more harshly than white students. Most relevant to this study, is the disproportionality for which black students receive out-of-school suspensions. Research demonstrates that students are routinely suspended from schools for minor infractions such as cell phone use, dress code violations, disruptive behavior, displays of affection, and talking back to teachers. Although the arbitrary and over-zealous application of zero-tolerance policies, made especially popular after the 2001 passage of the No Child Left Behind Act, can be partially credited for increased suspension rates, the racial disparity in discipline results from far more complex reasons.

Contrary to the prevailing assumption that black students act up more than white students and are disciplined based upon higher rates of misconduct, research shows that black students do not misbehave in the classroom any more than their white peers. They are disciplined more harshly for identical misconduct – especially when the behavior requires a subjective analysis of whether it constitutes misconduct.

Cultural deficit thinking is a process that creates the perception that poor black students and their families are disconnected from the education process. Consequently, teachers and other school personnel may harbor negative assumptions about the ability, aspirations and work ethic of these students based upon the assumption that they do not value education in the same way middle and upper white students do. This perception creates a stereotype of black students as unruly, disruptive and disrespectful.
Implicit bias is a significant causal factor in the racial disproportionality exhibited in school discipline statistics. When teachers and school administrators harbor negative feelings and attitudes about people based on characteristics like race, it supports the stereotype of black youth as angry, irresponsible, deceitful, and dangerous, and causes them to react more harshly to perceived misconduct. Because this cognitive process functions in the unconscious mind, individuals are typically not consciously aware of their own negative racial biases. It is therefore difficult to self-correct without training, guidance, and evidence to demonstrate the pattern.

Positionality Statement

I am a civil rights attorney, currently holding the position of Assistant Commissioner / Director of the Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Development (EODD) at the New York State (NYS) Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS). When I began my education at the CUNY Graduate Center, I worked for the New York City (NYC) Department of Education (DOE), within their Office of Equal Opportunity and Diversity Management (OEO). While working for the NYC DOE, I investigated allegations of discrimination and sexual harassment filed against NYC DOE employees, and I conducted equal opportunity trainings to inform employees of their rights and responsibilities under the Chancellor’s Discrimination Prevention Policy. Complaints could be filed against staff members by students, parents, and other employees, and I have investigated all types. The complaints that stood out most to me were the complaints filed by students against teachers and administrators. Although some were retaliatory for poor grades and discipline, other complaints were justified. Upon completion of my investigation, the allegations were substantiated, meaning that, based upon the evidence
gathering, I determined that there was a preponderance of the evidence that the misconduct had occurred (i.e. It was more likely than not that the employee had violated our non-discrimination policy.) Disciplinary action would follow the submission of my final report. The seriousness of the discipline depended upon the respondent’s disciplinary history and the level of misconduct for which they engaged in.

OEO investigated a variety of student complaints, including the use of racial slurs, isolation of homosexual students, and better treatment of one race over another. I have substantiated complaints that involved stereotypes of Asian students as being more intelligent as well as complaints involving teachers who pulled black male students aside and, when counseling them regarding an assignment, informed them that if they did not get their act together, they were going to end up “just another wasted kid in the hood” who would “probably end up in jail.” One of the more egregious behaviors that was substantiated, was when a teacher, who disapproved of a student wearing his pants sagging to class, wrote on the chalkboard, “SAGGIN.” She instructed the class to read the word backwards and then stated to the class that that is what kids who wear their pants sagging really are. I have investigated complaints filed by black staff and students that alleged racial discrimination by other black people. One substantiated complaint involved a black woman who made reference to another black woman (who was friendly with the new white principal) as a “porch monkey.” She also placed a picture of a monkey in her colleague’s mailbox.

My investigative experience at the NYC DOE gave me insight into the explicit racism that was occurring on a daily basis within our hallways and classrooms. Some teachers believed
that they were helping black students by guiding them with “real talk” about the projects, poverty, prison, single parenthood, and drug abuse. It was often provided with good intent, but without understanding that providing such guidance to only one group of students, based purely on their race, was a reflection of prejudicial stereotyping, their behavior continued and the impact of was devastating. There are white students living in subsidized housing, living with single parents, and experiencing family members in prison. Why not provide the guidance universally? The answer: Implicit bias and negative racial stereotyping.

OCFS oversees all juvenile detention facilities in the state. As part of my job, I travel to these detention facilities to conduct investigations and observe my staff conduct theirs. What struck me most about the male facilities in particular, was the overwhelming racial dynamic. The vast majority of residents are black, with a lot of Hispanic residents as well. At the first two facilities that I visited, I could not find one white resident. To date, I have never observed an Asian resident and I have only see a couple of residents who appeared to be of Middle Eastern descent. Although television, the internet, and various other media outlets have introduced us to the reality of the racial disparity within our prison systems, it was not until I visited my first facility that I could feel it. I was overwhelmed by feelings of sadness, anger, disappointment, and frustration. How could our country allow this? How can our state throw away so many young lives, placing them behind bars – as if they were a problem that was best left hidden rather than solved.

My husband is African-American. I have an African-American step daughter who graduated from a NYC public high school last year and a two-year-old biracial daughter. I have
seen the prejudice experienced by my husband first hand. He has been picked up in police sweeps while walking to the store to buy milk, and arrested for falling asleep on the train – only to be processed and released because he had no record and had done no wrong. We have a black male friend who was wrongly accused of murder based upon a general description of a black male in the area in which he was walking. He has a large scar on his face, and the description included no such scar, but he was still arrested and charged. He was held for almost a year before being released with the charges dropped. His life was impacted tremendously, as one could imagine. I could tell countless stories of blatant racism which has victimized my close friends and extended family, but the implicit racial biases that have impacted their lives cannot be so easily identified.

I feel responsible, as a professional who addresses prejudicial behavior on a daily basis, a friend to many African American people, and a mother of a biracial child who may someday face explicit and implicit racial bias, to do what I can to make a difference. For every explicit racist act that I can address through an investigation, there are 10 (probably more) prejudicial acts that are made as a result of implicit biases. The perpetrator, in this case teachers and school administrators, often is not aware that their subconscious stereotypes are impacting their ability to provide a racially just learning environment for their students. It is my opinion that the only way to address such behaviors is to raise the consciousness of our educational leaders and present fair and reasonable approaches to decrease the actions that can allow implicit racial bias to most impact students. Discipline, and most specifically out-of-school suspensions, appears to me to be the most urgent issue at the moment. I see school discipline as one of the most influential factors in a student’s long-term social and emotional success. If we can raise
awareness regarding implicit bias and provide alternative disciplinary measures that do not remove students from the classroom and set them on the path towards incarceration, we will have impacted the lives of many. This dissertation is my way of addressing the school-to-prison pipeline that I have witnessed first-hand as I moved from one governmental position to another.

Research Questions

1. What are the long-term social implications of inequitably applied disciplinary policies for students attending New York City public high schools?

2. What are the emotional implications of inequitably applied disciplinary policies for students attending New York City public high schools?

Significance of the Study

Racialized disproportionality in the administration of school discipline is now a national crisis. In January 2014, The U.S. Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division and the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Civil Rights issued a national “guidance” to assist public schools in meeting their obligations under Federal law to administer student discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin. Today, many teachers and school administrators are frustrated by seemingly insurmountable problems education system, especially in racially isolated, under-resourced, low-performing urban school districts.

Too often, teachers get a disproportionate share of the blame for problems like high dropout rates, the racialized achievement gap, and the school funding crisis. When these problems are compounded by growing animosity toward teacher unions and a teacher evaluation/compensation system based heavily on standardized test results, it is not difficult to
understand why a growing sense of frustration among public school teachers, counselors and other personnel exists. These pressures, coupled with growing classroom demands, may leave inadequate time for teachers to voluntarily reflect on their own racial biases and how conscious and unconscious stereotypes might impact their students. Research such as this raises awareness of the racial injustices taking place within our schools, and demonstrates the long term social and emotional impact that harsh discipline and inequitably applied disciplinary policies have on students’ lives, from dropout rates, to incarceration rates, to socioeconomic status and even health, the implications are serious.

**Definition of Terms**

1. **Discipline**: The practice of training people to obey rules or a code of behavior, using punishment to correct disobedience.

2. **Out-of-school Suspension**: Mandatory leave assigned to a student as a form of punishment that can last anywhere from one day to a few weeks, during which time the student is banned from being on school grounds during school hours and not allowed to attend regular lessons.

3. **Effective**: Successful in producing a desired or intended result.

4. **Fair**: In accordance with the rules or standards / legitimate.

5. **Reasonable**: Appropriate and sensible.

6. **Implicit Bias**: The attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions and decisions in an unconscious manner. These biases, which encompass both favorable and unfavorable assessments, are activated involuntarily and without an individual’s awareness or intentional control. Implicit biases are different from known biases that
individuals may choose to conceal for the purposes of social and/or political correctness. Rather, implicit biases are not accessible through introspection.

7. Zero-tolerance Policies: Policies that apply penalties to minor increments of a code in order to reinforce the policies overall importance and enhance deterrence.

8. School Climate: The quality and character of school life, based upon the experiences of students, parents and school personnel.

9. School-to-Prison Pipeline: A term used to describe the increasing pattern of contact students have with the criminal justice system as a result of the recent practices implemented by educational institutions, specifically zero tolerance policies and the use of police in schools.

Conceptual Framework

Research studies have identified specific groups of students as receiving more disciplinary referrals, and harsher disciplinary responses, than other students, for similar or identical behavior. Race, gender, socioeconomic status and disability status are included in the factors impacting whether a student is more likely or not to receive harsher and more frequent discipline. The conceptual framework for this study is centered on implicit racial bias and out-of-school suspensions. The racial discipline gap in public schools nation-wide is impacting our wider society and the equity of our democratic system. What begins with a single out-of-school suspension, can end in high school dropout, juvenile and/or adult incarceration, lower socioeconomic status and the social and health implications that come with poverty. Figure One provides the systematic process for which out-of-school suspensions can impact the social and emotional development of a student.
Figure One: Conceptual Framework

Implicit Racial Bias
Zero-tolerance Discipline Policies
Inequitably Applied Discipline
Out-of-School Suspensions

Poor School Climate
Academic Disengagement
High School Dropout
Non-enrollment in College
Low Socioeconomic Status
Health Issues / Life Span

Antiestablishment Attitude
Juvenile Delinquency
Adult Incarceration
CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Introduction

Most children experience their first form of non-parental discipline upon becoming a student and entering the public-school system. Academic policing does not result in incarceration, where freedom is restricted, but rather detentions, suspensions and expulsions, where students are removed from their regular academic and/or extracurricular activities and thereafter prohibited from returning for a mandated period of time. Although there is no question that teachers and school administrators must use all effective means available to maintain safety within their schools in order to promote an optimal learning environment for their students, there is serious debate over what constitutes effective, fair, and reasonable discipline. Supporters of zero-tolerance policies argue that out-of-school suspensions are critical to maintaining order and ensuring that well-behaved students can learn without distractions (Ewing, 2000); this philosophy has led to national increases in the use of suspensions and expulsions, recent examinations of which have raised serious questions about the long-term impact of such policies, the fairness in which they are applied, and the effectiveness of this punitive approach (American Psychological Association, 2008; Skiba & Rauch, 2006).

Studies have found that the vast majority of school suspensions within the United States occur as the consequence of minor infractions of school rules, such as disrupting class, tardiness, and dress code violations, rather than for serious violent or criminal behavior (Edelman, et al., 1975); serious incidents are rare and result in expulsions rather than suspensions (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Research further indicates that serious incidents are rare, and result in
expulsions rather than suspensions (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Despite the low-level infractions that may initiate a suspension, the ultimate price paid by students who experience such discipline can be quite high. Data indicates that suspensions increase the likelihood that students will misbehave in the future, become truant, fail to graduate, develop substance abuse issues, and/or encounter the juvenile justice system (OSSE, 2013). Contrary to the belief of zero-tolerance advocates, research has found no evidence to support the assertion that a school’s frequent reliance on removing misbehaving students from the classroom improves school climate, school safety, or student behavior (APA, 2008). Actually, school suspension has been associated with negative consequences for suspended students, including a higher risk of academic failure and school dropout (Moskowitz, Schaps, Condon, Malvin, & Martin, 1979), disengagement from school (Butler, Bond, Drew, Krelle, & Seal, 2005), and failure to graduate on time (Arcia, 2006), as well as student alienation, alcohol and drug use, and future antisocial behavior (American Academy of Pediatrics Committee on School Health, 2003).

Concerns about lost instructional time and the other harmful long-term socioemotional effects of suspension are amplified by consistent findings that black students are significantly over-represented in school suspensions, and the increased use of suspensions has been largest in communities of poor and minority children. Racial disparities in the application of school disciplinary policies are well-documented, and the examination of such information allows us to identify implicit racial bias, institutional discrimination, and racial learning gaps that result from disciplinary inequity in order to more effectively advocate for equal access to educational opportunities for all students.

Findings also indicate that male students and students with emotional disabilities also receive a significantly higher number of suspensions; this study, however, will focus on disparities related to race.
The long-term social and emotional impact of students excluded from the educational mainstream due to inequitably applied suspension policies is severe. This literature review will examine existing research regarding the racial disparities associated with out-of-school suspensions in public high schools to demonstrate the severity of such inequity and the resulting emotional impact on students.

**Who is Suspended?**

In the 1970s, removing students from school as punishment was relatively rare. According to an analysis of United States Education Department data by the Southern Poverty Law Center, fewer than 4% of students were suspended in 1973 (Losen & Skiba, 2010). The perspective on school discipline changed over time, however. Growing concern about crime and violence in schools, followed by the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, led states and school districts to adopt zero-tolerance policies that resulted in mandatory student suspensions for infractions that never before would have led to a disciplinary action that required such removal. As a result, suspensions across the United States have more than doubled since the 1970s, with an astonishing 3.45 million public school students having received at least one out-of-school suspension during the 2011-2012 school year (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

As the implementation of out-of-school suspensions has increased in America, so too has the racial gap between the students who are being suspended. In the 1970s, black students had a suspension rate of approximately 6%, twice the likelihood of suspension as white students,
which was approximately 3% (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010). By 2013, however, black students were being suspended at a rate three of times greater than white students. During the 2012-2013 school year, 4.6% of white students, as compared to 16.4% of black students, received at least one suspension in 2013. The data indicated that black students represented only 16% of the student population, but 32-42% of the students suspended or expelled. In comparison, white students represented 51% of the student population, yet constituted almost the same percentage (31-40%) of students who were suspended or expelled. When examining race and gender, it was found that black boys and girls have higher suspension rates than any of their peers, with 20% of black boys and more than 12% of black girls having received at least one out-of-school suspension (CRDC, 2014).\(^3\) Although disparities in student discipline rates in one particular school or district may be caused by a range of factors, research suggests that the substantial racial disparities represented by federal data collections are not explained by more frequent or more serious misbehavior by students of color, and the significant and unexplained racial disparities in student discipline give rise to concerns that schools may be engaging in racial discrimination that violates the Federal civil rights laws.

A 2012 national survey of more than 70,000 schools, conducted by the Office for Civil Rights, examined the relationship between socioeconomic status, student conduct, and race-based disciplinary disparities. The study found that the racial disparity demonstrated by national education data could not be justified by racial differences in socioeconomic status or in student misbehavior (OCR, 2012) thereby implicating race-based discrimination and implicit bias by

\(^3\) The United States Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights tracks data related to disciplinary equity using the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRCD), a mandatory data collection authorized under Title VI, Title IX, and Section 504, the regulations implementing those statutes, and the Department of Education Organization Act, 20 U.S.C. § 3413.
teachers and administrators as a basis for the inequitable application of out-of-school suspensions. In January 2014, in an effort to combat disciplinary bias, the federal government, in the form of a “Dear Colleague letter,” warned every school district in the country that they faced legal action if their disciplinary policies had a disparate impact (i.e. disproportionate and unjustified effect) on students of a particular race, and offered guidance to assist public schools in meeting their obligations under Federal law to administer student discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin. The letter stated, unequivocally, that “racial discrimination in school discipline is a real problem,” (US Department of Justice and US Department of Education, Dear Colleague Letter, 2014, p. 4) and warned school districts that, as part of their regular compliance monitoring activities the US Departments of Justice and Education will initiate investigations of student discipline policies and practices based upon complaints received about possible racial discrimination in student discipline as well as public reports of racial disparities in student discipline. The letter added that investigations have already revealed racial discrimination in the administration of student discipline, with specific cases of black students being disciplined more harshly and more frequently because of their race than similarly situated white students.

The racial gap in school discipline widens when the data analysis narrows from a national perspective to a regional perspective, with southern states revealing the most egregious data. A 2015 study conducted by the Center for the Study of Race and Equity in Education (Smith & Harper, 2015) examined this racial discipline gap in 13 southern states. The study, which analyzed public schools from 3,022 districts, concluded that black students were being

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4 Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia.
suspended at disproportionately high rates, with an even higher level of disparity than that
demonstrated by the national data. In 132 of southern school districts examined, black students
were suspended at rates of five times or higher than their representation in the student
population. In 84 districts, black students constituted 100% of the students suspended; in 346
districts, black students constituted 75% or more of the students suspended; and in 743 districts,
black students were 50% or more of the students suspended. Mississippi and Florida stood out
amongst the others when examining state-wide data as compared to district data, with black
students comprising 74% of the suspensions in Mississippi (which was the highest proportion
among the states), and Florida schools suspending the highest number of black students of all of
the states.

Some argue that minority children, particularly male students of color, tend to misbehave
more frequently in school than do white children, thereby explaining their overrepresentation in
school suspension data. Research on student behavior, race, and discipline, however, has found
no evidence to support that theory (McCarthy and Hoge, 1987; McFadden et al., 1992). Russell
Skiba and fellow researchers (2002) reviewed racial disparities in school punishments in an
urban setting and found that white students were referred to the office significantly more
frequently for offenses related to objective documentation (such as smoking, vandalism, leaving
without permission, and obscene language), whereas black students were referred to the office
more often for behaviors that require more subjective judgment on the part of the referring agent
(such as disrespect, excessive noise, threat, and loitering). In short, there is no evidence that
racial disparities in school discipline can be explained through higher rates of disruption or
misbehavior among black students. In contrast, correlation studies involving thousands of
schools across the United States have consistently found that teachers are inclined to disproportionately discipline students as a function of race (Skiba et al., 2002), with data specifically indicating that racial disparities in discipline can occur when black and white students behave in the same manner (Okonafua & Eberbarndt, 2015).

**The Psychology of Racial Bias and Inequitable School Discipline**

According to Stanford Psychologists Jason A. Okonofua and Jennifer L. Eberhardt (2015), it is negative racial stereotypes associated with black students that make it more likely for teachers to view the infractions of black students, over time, as a problematic pattern rather than isolated incidents of disobedience. The psychologists explained that when teachers are interacting with misbehaving students, “the first infraction informs how the second infraction should be read – heightening teachers’ concerns and escalating harsh disciplinary treatment” (p. 5). Teachers may be especially likely to respond harshly to a black student misbehaving over time, as compared to a white student, “because black students are frequently stereotyped as troublemakers in school contexts” (p. 5).

Implicit bias is heavily implicated as a contributing factor when the causes of racial disproportionality in school discipline are assessed. Implicit bias can be defined as “a positive or negative mental attitude towards a person, thing, or group that a person holds at an unconscious level” (Stanford School of Medicine, n.d.). Relevant to this dissertation, is implicit racial bias, which causes people to have negative feelings and attitudes about people, students in particular, based upon their race. Research suggests that most individuals harbor stereotypes that affect, often unknowingly, their perceptions of the character and qualities of different races and ethnic
groups. The most sophisticated test of implicit bias, the Implicit Association Test (IAT),\(^5\) can be used to measure racial bias by calculating the ease and speed with which test participants can match concepts such as “violent” or “peaceful” with photos of people of different races. Results show that both white and black test takers match black faces more quickly than white ones with words representing violent and aggressive concepts, and the pattern of bias exists both among those who express explicit prejudices as well as those who deny them.

Because the cognitive process of implicit bias functions in the unconscious mind of human beings, people are typically not consciously aware of the negative racial biases that they have developed over the course of their lifetime. In the general population, implicit racial bias often supports the stereotypical caricature of black youth - especially males - as irresponsible, dishonest, and dangerous. In an ideal world, teachers and school administrators would be immune to these unconscious negative attitudes and predispositions about race, but, of course, they are not. For example, a 2003 study found that teachers perceived students with African American culture-related movement styles, such as a “black walking style,” as lower in achievement, higher in aggression, and more likely to need special education services than students with standard movement styles (Neal, et. al., 2003).

Research conducted by the Kirwan Institute for the Study of Race and Ethnicity (2014) suggests that “implicit bias is implicated in every aspect of racial and ethnic inequality and injustice” (p. 2). Kirwan researchers have found that “one of the most powerful consequences of implicit racial bias is that it often robs us of a sense of real compassion for, and connection to,

\(^5\) The IAT is a computer-based test that measures how rapidly people are able to categorize various words and images, and it capitalizes on the fact that most of us identify words and images more rapidly when they come from closely related categories than when they come from unrelated categories.
individuals and groups who suffer the burdens of racial inequality and injustice in our society” (p. 3). Existing research suggests that implicit racial bias may influence a teacher’s expectations for academic success. For example, a 2007 meta-analysis of research found statistically significant evidence that teachers hold lower expectations, either implicitly, explicitly, or both, for black and Latino children as compared to white children (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). The results of this study align with previous research investigating this issue. In a 2002 study of elementary school children, researchers sought to determine whether a student’s race or ethnicity played a role in their susceptibility to teacher “expectancy effects,” and found that black children were more likely than white children “to confirm teacher underestimates of ability and [were] less likely to benefit from teacher overestimates of ability” (McKown & Weinstein, 2002, p. 176).

Lowered expectations in the classroom tend to result in differential treatment for students of color, including less praise and more disciplinary action from teachers. Research suggests that when given an opportunity to choose among several disciplinary options for a relatively minor offense, teachers and school administrators often choose more severe punishment for black students than for white students for the same offense. A 2010 study demonstrated that, during the 2008-2009 academic year, black students in North Carolina public schools were suspended at rates that were significantly higher than white students for identical offenses: eight times higher for cell phone use, six times higher for dress code violation, two times higher for disruptive behavior, and ten times higher for displays of affection (Losen & Skiba, 2010).
Research also shows that teachers commonly perceive black students to have more negative demeanors, to have a longer history of misbehavior, and to earn lower grades than white students (Neal, McCray, Webb-Johnson & Bridgest, 2003). Other research shows that the label “troublemaker” is based upon teacher assessments of the same student characteristics: demeanor, previous misbehavior, and academic performance (McCarthy & Hoge, 1987). Taken together, to the extent that black students are viewed as troublemakers, isolated infractions across time may more readily signal a pattern for black students than for white students. Even different types of infractions may be grouped together, understood as “repeated” misbehavior, and seen as indicators of the same underlying characteristic – i.e. “This student is prone to make trouble.”

A 2010 study found that among students who were classified as “overly aggressive,” black students were more likely to be disciplined than any other group. However, this trend varied based upon the racial background of the teacher. Researchers have found that once black students and white students are placed with same-race teachers, the classroom behavior of black students is rated more favorably than is the behavior of white students (Rudd, 2014). This perception of disinvestment often creates a stereotype that poor black students are unruly, disruptive and/or disrespectful. Not surprisingly, research suggests that, generally, black teachers rate the behavior of black students more favorable than white teachers rate the behavior of black students (Kirwan Institute, 2014).

**Zero-Tolerance Policies**

A zero-tolerance policy is “a policy that applies penalties to even minor infringements of a code in order to reinforce the policy’s overall importance and enhance deterrence”
(Legaldictionary.com, n.d.). Zero-tolerance policies usually fail to take into account accidental mistakes, ignorance, or extenuating circumstances; thereby grouping individuals guilty of intentional inappropriate behavior with individuals found to have unintentionally engaged in misconduct, and disciplining them with equal severity. Zero-tolerance policies are promoted as preventing drug abuse and violence in schools, and supporters of zero-tolerance policies claim that strict policy enforcement is required to create a safe learning environment (Scaringi, 2008). Critics, however, argue that zero-tolerance in schools result in egregiously unfair punishments, especially within schools with poorly written policies. Critics further argue that zero-tolerance policies are often implemented arbitrarily and are frequently inappropriately used to justify harsh discipline for minor misconduct (Achilles, et al. 2007).

The arbitrary implementation of zero-tolerance policies is most quantitatively identifiable in the inequitable application of excessive punishment based upon implicit racial biases. When black students “act out” in the classrooms in relatively benign ways, zero-tolerance policies provide the opportunity for teachers and administrators to apply excessive punishment, not just as a consequence of the minor infraction, but also as a reflection of implicit racial bias and a reprisal for the student’s perceived cultural deficiency. Reducing suspension and expulsion rates will not solve the multidimensional crisis facing students of color, especially those who live in neighborhoods of concentrated disadvantage, but will reduce the long-term impact of inequitably applied disciplinary policies on these students by limiting the suspensions and expulsions that can victimize them. Rethinking school disciplinary policies is a concrete, manageable way for educators and the communities that they serve to untangle, and begin to dismantle, the complex system of inequitable access within the United States.
A review of studies that examine the misconduct for which school suspensions are applied reveals that suspensions, especially those administered within zero-tolerance schools, are not reserved for serious or dangerous behaviors. Although fights or physical aggression are most commonly disciplined with suspension, the majority of offenses for which students are suspended are non-violent, less-disruptive offenses; behaviors such as use of abusive language and attendance issues such as cutting class, tardiness, and truancy (Skiba & Losen, 2010). Other common reasons for school suspension include disobedience and disrespect (Raffaele Mendez & Knoff, 2003); behaviors that are judged subjectively rather than objectively. During a single state analysis of out-of-school suspensions, it was reported that “only 5% of all out-of-school suspensions were issued for disciplinary incidents that are typically considered serious or dangerous, such as possession of weapons or drugs” (Skiba & Losen, 2010).

It is essential for children to form positive attitudes towards fairness and justice, and student perspectives on the fairness of their school’s rules and implementation of punishment can seriously impact their perspective on reasonableness and equity – especially with the implementation of zero-tolerance policies (Harvard University Civil Rights Project, 2000). By subjecting students to automatic punishments that do not take into account extenuating or mitigating circumstances, zero-tolerance policies take a “do as I say – not as I do” approach to discipline. Students are taught that adults are not being sincere when they speak of the need for justice and fairness, and do not take circumstance, fairness, or extenuating factors into consideration when punishment is subjectively meted out. Regardless of whether the student is the one actually receiving the punishment, there is an emotional toll rendered when students feel
that the discipline applied by their school does not match the behavior being punished (Harvard University Civil Rights Project, 2000). Feelings of distrust, fear, inequality, anger, and resentment become associated with student perceptions of academia and authority which impacts school climate, and ultimately leads to academic disengagement.

In June 2005, in response to the controversy over zero-tolerance policies and their impact on students’ social & emotional development and long-term academic success, the American Psychological Association (“APA”) convened a Zero-tolerance Task Force, organized to examine the research conducted on the effects that zero-tolerance policies have on students. The task force reviewed relevant research to determine whether these policies have made schools safer without taking away students' opportunity to learn. The study further examined whether these policies incorporate children's development as a factor in types of discipline administered and whether educators refer juveniles to the justice system too often with costly consequences. The task force also examined how families and communities are affected by zero-tolerance policies. In August 2008, the APA Zero-tolerance Task Force issued their report, Are Zero-tolerance Policies Effective in the Schools? The report affirmatively concluded that “zero-tolerance policies have not been shown to improve school climate or school safety” (p. 852). The task force found that “the application of suspensions and expulsions has not been proven as an effective means of improving student behavior nor has it resolved the serious issue of minority over-representation in school punishments” (p. 860). The Task Force also concluded that schools with higher rates of suspension tend to have lower academic quality, pay less attention to school climate (social, cultural, academic, ethical), and receive lower ratings on school governance measures. When examining child development with regards to zero-tolerance
policies, the APA Task Force asserted that “zero-tolerance policies, as applied, appear to run
counter to our best knowledge of child development” (p. 860).

The No Child Left Behind Act

The No Child Left Behind Act (“NCLB”) was passed in 2001. It was a federal law that
supported standards-based education reform based upon the premise that setting high standards
and establishing measurable goals can improve individual outcomes in education. The Act
required states that receive federal school funding to develop assessments in basic skills and give
those assessments to all students at select grade levels. The NCLB significantly expanded the
role of the federal government in public education through the implementation of annual testing,
annual academic progress evaluations, school report cards, teacher qualification requirements,
and funding changes (Endless Learning Center, 2013).

Washington, D.C. released a report in 2011 that stated, in part, “No Child Left Behind’s
‘get-tough’ approach to accountability has led to more students being left even further behind,
thus feeding the dropout crisis and the school-to-prison pipeline” (Advancement Project, 2010).
The “school-to-prison pipeline” describes what many across America consider to be a systemic
and institutional approach to depriving at-risk youth – particularly children of color – a right to
an equitable and quality education by pushing children out of their schools and into the juvenile
justice system. Although there is considerable debate as to where fault lies when it comes to the
school-to-prison pipeline, there is substantial agreement that the results of zero-tolerance
policies, unjust suspensions and expulsions, high-stakes testing, a consistent lack of educational
resources and special education services within lower income minority neighborhoods, and the
overuse of police, security guards, suspensions, and arrests as a method of controlling students, mentally prepares children for prison by creating prison-like environments within schools. As stated by Lange and Sletten (2002), “A series of suspensions, missed classes, disciplinary actions, and academic failures leave this group of students weary of the school experience and distrustful that the education system can be a tool for their success” (p. 11).

The Every Student Succeeds Act

On December 10, 2015, the NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which empowers individual states with control over their own curriculum and standards. The NCLB was replaced because of its inability to improve education standards and quality. Although test scores improved, the improvements were marginal, and the ethnic score gap did not improve. In signing ESSA, President Obama shared his goal of ensuring that students who graduated from high school were prepared for college or a career. He also signed ESSA in an effort to uphold high standards for everyone, regardless of background, and to fix the one-size-fits-all approach of NCLB. According to the 2010 White House Report on ESSA, the ESSA:

- Ensures that states set high standards so that children graduate high school ready for college and career.

- Maintains accountability by guaranteeing that when students fall behind, states target resources towards what works to help them and their schools improve, with a particular focus on the lowest-performing 5 percent of schools, high schools with high dropout rates, and schools where subgroups of students are struggling.
• Empowers state and local decision-makers to develop their own strong systems for school improvement based upon evidence, rather than imposing cookie-cutter federal solutions like No Child Left Behind (NCLB) did.

• Preserves annual assessments and reduce the often onerous burden of unnecessary and ineffective testing on students and teachers, making sure that standardized tests don’t crowd out teaching and learning, without sacrificing clear, annual information parents and educators need to make sure our children are learning.

• Provides more children access to high-quality preschool, giving them the chance to get a strong start to their education.

• Establishes new resources to test promising practices and replicate proven strategies that will drive opportunity and better outcomes for America’s students.

All school districts are required to report certain discipline data to the U.S. Department of Education’s Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) for each school. The CRDC data collection includes statistics on the number of students (by race and disability status, as well as for English learners) receiving in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and expulsions. For out-of-school suspension only, districts are required to report counts of students who were disciplined only once, and the number of students disciplined more than once, separately. Under ESSA, this information must also appear on school report cards, which is critical to tracking disciplinary trends and identifying possible issues of inequity at the school-level. The implementation of the ESSA at the federal, state, district and school level, has empowered parents and community members to join the discussion on how to strengthen school climates and foster more nurturing environments for our students. Due to the relative newness of the ESSA,
there is insufficient data to show the impact of the law in regards to equitable discipline. Many, however, are hopeful that change will come.

**Understanding the Adolescent Mind**

The human mind develops with age, and adolescence is a time where “youth can be expected to challenge authority, whether at home or at school, and not consistently exercise good judgment” (American Psychological Association, 2008). The adolescent brain is in a critical stage of development, and it is important that parents and educators be aware of the physiological changes that are occurring within teenage students so as to understand the biological backdrop to their behavior. By understanding that many adolescent behaviors occur as a direct or indirect result of identifiable bodily changes, addressing misbehavior with patience, tolerance and empathy becomes a more tangible option.

The prefrontal cortex is the region of the brain that is responsible for skills such as time management, organization, short-term memory, goal setting, initiation, and, most relevant to this discussion: self-restraint (Houlihan & Houlihan, 2011). The prefrontal cortex is the last part of the human brain to fully develop, with full development not occurring until individuals are in their 20s. By understanding that the region of the brain that controls self-restraint has not yet become fully developed, it becomes more understandable why teenagers may struggle to adhere to strict school policies and refrain from inappropriate conduct. Their brains are, literally, unable to fully understand and respond to adult-mandated rules and regulations.
In addition to a developing prefrontal cortex, teenagers are also going through extreme hormonal changes. The adolescent brain pours out adrenal stress hormones, sex hormones, and growth hormones, which, in turn, influence brain development (Harvard Health Publications, 2005). The hormones of puberty not only begin to change the body, but also the brain. Because of these hormonal surges, everyday upsets can erupt into bigger problems for adolescents; at this time of life their brains are simply more sensitive and confused by the stress of emotional pain caused by raging hormones.

Teenage sleep cycles also go through a radical shift during these years, which causes them to fall asleep much later. Whereas in elementary school, students may have been falling asleep by 9 or 10 p.m., adolescent brains will often not allow them to fall asleep until 11 p.m. or midnight. The National Sleep Foundation recommends that adolescents get at least nine hours of sleep to experience optimal performance during their day. With many schools starting at 7 a.m., adolescents are in a continuous state of tiredness. Over time, as adolescents are chronically sleep-deprived, the connections between the emotional part of their brain and the prefrontal cortex suffer, adding to their already moody dispositions (Houlihan & Houlihan, 2011) and making misconduct within school more likely to occur.

School Disciplinary Climate and Student Engagement

School climate refers to the quality and character of school life. It is based upon “patterns of students', parents' and school personnel's experience of school life and reflects

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6 Some school systems have responded affirmatively to these research findings, and initiated later start times. In Minnesota, Kentucky and Rhode Island, the results are noteworthy. After altering the school day to begin around 8:30 a.m., educators witnessed decreased absences, increased grades, fewer school nurse visits and fewer suspensions. The students in those schools reported feeling more alert and happy during the school day (Houlihan & Houlihan, 2011).
norms, goals, values, interpersonal relationships, teaching and learning practices, and organizational structures” (National School Safety Center, 2014). Educators play a critical role in creating a safe and positive learning environment that promotes a healthy school climate. Although researchers have defined school disciplinary climate with slight variation, it is typically measured by student perceptions of the policies and practices associated with school rules (i.e. the clarity, fairness, consistency, and effectiveness of school rules), how strictly school rules are enforced, disciplinary harshness, and the frequency of disciplinary incidents among students at school (Dempsey, 2008). When examining school climate, the term “school safety” most commonly refers to the rules and procedures that are put into place to ensure student welfare with respect to their physical safety (National School Climate Center, 2014). Safety, however, also includes emotional and psychological safety.

Emotional safety within a classroom enables students to feel secure, feel safe to express their emotions, feel confident enough to take risks, and feel challenged and excited to try new things (Safe Supportive Learning, n.d.). Psychological safety addresses the concept of students feeling comfortable enough to acknowledge their own weaknesses, voice their gaps in knowledge, and ask for help when they need it (Still, 2010). Feelings of physical, emotional and psychological safety have intrinsic differences, but all three states of mind are equally essential to a healthy school climate and productive learning environment for students. Despite how physically safe students may be, their psychological and emotional safety is essential to their academic success, and consistent and fair discipline is a critical element of feeling psychologically and emotionally safe. Common staff behaviors that can negatively impact school climate include public critique, yelling, threatening to punish students, the issuance of
public discipline, and the inconsistent application of rewards and/or consequences for classroom behavior (Gardner Center, 2010). When students fear discipline and perceive punishment as an unpredictable repercussion that is enforced with bias and/or prejudice, students’ psychological safety becomes severely decreased and their feelings of emotional safety are impacted negatively. The ultimate consequence is academic disengagement and future poor behavior.

The Affect Theory of Social Exchange explains that exchange relationships, such as the relationship between student and teacher during the school day, produce emotions that are used as an internal source of reward or punishment for developing human connection (Koofers, 2014). Successful exchanges, such as a teacher offering praise to a student for a correct answer or good student conduct, produce positive emotions and result in a positive school climate. Less successful exchanges, such as bias-based student discipline or negative student conduct, produce negative emotions and result in a negative school climate. To avoid the negative emotions that result from these “less successful exchanges,” school administrators must require that teachers demonstrate strong classroom management skills and implement fair and appropriate discipline. Organization and equity are essential to successful teacher-student relationships and healthy learning.

Student perceptions of school discipline and teacher compassion are essential to psychological safety. In 1995, Professor of Education Russell W. Rumberger investigated the influence of school disciplinary climate and school social climate on student disengagement in school and dropout rates. Rumberger’s study (1995) found that the students who reported having more caring teachers, as well as those who felt that they were viewed more positively by their
fellow students, were significantly less likely to dropout. The study additionally found the fairness of a school’s disciplinary climate to be significantly associated with lower dropout rates.

Not surprisingly, many minority students perceive racial bias in the disciplinary practices of their teachers and school administrators (Sheets, 2002), which impacts school climate. As demonstrated by the data provided earlier, these student perceptions are not unfounded. For minority students, this perceived bias commonly translates into a symbol of the barriers to mainstream success that minority students often endure outside of school. Disciplinary disparities then impact these students’ perspectives on authority, academia, justice and equity. The perception of academic barriers to success, and a lack of fairness with regards to access and opportunity results in the adoption of an “anti-establishment” code of conduct (Verdugo, 2002), which can ultimately disengage students from academia and a professional career path.

A 2000 study, conducted by Researcher Helen Marks on the relationship between school discipline and school climate, concluded that there is substantial evidence to indicate a significant association between school disciplinary climate and student engagement at all academic levels and grades. A similar 2003 study, conducted on school discipline and school climate within middle schools (Ma, 2003), offered additional evidence of a positive association between school disciplinary climate, school social climate, and student engagement. The school disciplinary climate items that were measured in the 2003 study were fairness and clarity of school rules, harshness of punishment, and incidence of problem behavior among students. The study concluded that a student’s sense of belonging is significantly higher in schools with a more
positive school disciplinary climate, and student engagement was significantly higher when students had a stronger sense of belonging.

Counter to the belief of many, especially those in favor of zero-tolerance policies, research indicates that purging a school of misbehaving students does not improve school climate. Schools with higher rates of school suspension have been found to pay significantly less attention to school climate and have lower ratings in academic quality and quality of school governance (Skiba and Rausch, 2006). Perhaps most importantly, emerging data indicates that schools with higher rates of school suspension and expulsion have poorer outcomes on standardized achievement tests, regardless of the economic level or demographics of their students (Losen & Skiba, 2010).

Throughout her tenure as Chief Judge of the State of New York, Judith S. Kaye, a known student advocate, supported a host of innovative reforms on behalf of children and families, ranging from problem-solving within the court system to advocacy-based adoption practices. Upon her retirement from the bench in 2008, Judge Kaye continued her role as the Chair of New York State’s Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children, working with judges and leaders throughout New York State and the nation to support positive changes for children. In 2013, the Commission, “intent on improving life outcomes for children before New York State’s courts,” united with New York State children advocates and sponsored the New York City (NYC) School-Justice Partnership Task Force. The Commission ultimately issued report *Keeping Kids in School and Out of Court*, intended to address educational outcomes for NYC youth involved with the courts, with a focus on the school-justice connection.

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7 Judge Kaye passed away in 2016.
The report concluded that students in NYC public schools with lower suspension rates “have better academic outcomes than students in schools with high suspension rates, irrespective of student characteristics” (p. v). The data revealed that students and teachers in schools with lower rates of suspension and arrest feel safer than students and teachers at schools with higher rates. The students interviewed by Task Force members during their school visits echoed these findings, expressing that the best approach to keeping schools safe and improving academic outcomes is to support a positive school climate where students and teachers feel respected and valued.

Research indicates that some of the variability in out-of-school suspension rates can be attributed to differences in principal attitudes towards the disciplinary process. The Civil Rights Project’s national report *Opportunities Suspended* (2000) suggested that school principals used out-of-school suspensions in direct proportion to their stated support for zero-tolerance policies and procedures. A comprehensive study of the relationship between principal attitudes and disciplinary outcomes echoed these findings after a survey of 325 principals concluded that principal attitude towards zero-tolerance policies and violence-prevention strategies were directly correlated to disciplinary outcomes (Skiba et al, 2003). The survey demonstrated that rates of out-of-school suspension were lower, and the use of preventative measures more frequent, at schools led by principals who believed that suspension and expulsion are unnecessary given a positive school climate.

School climate can be improved by stabilizing student emotions through the development of emotional intelligence skills that place an emphasis on emotional management, self-esteem
development, and well-being projects (Zembylas, 2014). This must be done, however, in partnership with the development of reasonable school disciplinary policies and an equitable application of said policies by staff members. Evidence-based interventions, like restorative justice, positive behavioral supports, and social-emotional learning are giving teachers and school leadership the tools that they need to deal with school misbehavior and help build the type of positive school climate that will keep students in a safe learning environment.

**Interactive Ritual Chains and Student Suspensions**

Sociologist Randall Collins, in his book *Interaction Ritual Chains* (2004), provided a thorough analysis of the Interactive Ritual Chain Theory, a perspective “focusing on the interactions and emotional input and feedback of individuals within those interactions.” Collins describes rituals as interactions that are constructed from a “combination of ingredients that grow to differing levels of intensity, and result in the ritual outcomes of solidarity, symbolism, and individual emotional energy” (p. 47). He refers to an interaction ritual as an “emotional transformer” whereby social experiences – i.e. “situations” – take emotional energy and convert it according to the experience. That newly transformed energy is referred to by Collins as a *situational emotion*. A successful social ritual, such as making a group of friends laugh or giving a successful presentation in school, may impact an individual positively, thereby leaving them feeling strong, confident, and ready to take initiative. On the other hand, an unsuccessful social ritual, such as getting into a disagreement with a teacher or a failed attempt to become a member of a school team or committee, may impact an individual negatively, thereby lowering the confidence of that individual and decreasing their readiness to take initiative – especially in any realm associated with the rejection that they have experienced.
Collins’ Interactive Ritual Chain Theory is exceptionally applicable to student discipline and children’s emotional relationship with their teachers, school administrators, fellow-students and the overall system of education. According to Collins, individuality is something derived from the theory of interactional ritual chains, because individuals are only unique to the degree that their experiences with varying situations, i.e. “their mix of situations across time,” differ from other individuals’ paths and experiences. Collins urges his reader to view individuals as fluid energy charged up by situations. He proposes that the energy, emotions, intensity and focus of human consciousness arise from the face-to-face interactions of human situations. In school, students are shaped by the face-to-face interactions that they experience with their teachers, the school administrators and their fellow classmates. According to the Interactive Ritual Chain Theory, positive interactions within a school setting will result in positive emotional energy felt by a student with respect to school and educational advancement. And vice versa, negative interactions within a school setting will result in negative academic emotional energy.

Suspensions can be the beginning of an interactional ritual chain founded by depleted emotional energy, lowered self-esteem and an apprehension to take initiative within academic environments. If a student feels unfairly disciplined, or they observe inequitably applied disciplinary policies based upon race, that experience with injustice, according to Collins’ theory, will impact their overall emotional energy towards academia and justice. Their feeling will not be contained to the specific instance of pain or inequity, but rather it will be the beginning of a series of negative chain reactions.
Negative emotional energy experienced by youth as the result of an adverse experience with authority often transforms into defense mechanisms that will eventually target larger-scale social structures. (For example, students who feel unfairly targeted by their teachers with regards to discipline will often distrust police and other authority figures. The feeling of vulnerability to inequity and injustice at the hands of authority remains with them as they age.)

Negative emotional energy is accelerated when two of the most powerful transactional needs are not met – self-confirmation and exchange payoffs (Stets & Turner, 2008). In reaction to unfair disciplinary practices and teacher biases, students will attempt to protect themselves by immediately activating ego defenses; they will generally see the failure to receive fair treatment in terms of codified norms/beliefs about social equity and justice. The resulting emotions will, in turn, activate feelings of anger on top of the shame and disappointment felt from the initial disciplinary act.

In power situations, as well as social situations, gains of emotional energy by one person and loss of emotional energy by another person are reciprocally related. Collins explains that, in some situations, an individual will act as an “energy drainer”; they will bring the other person’s emotional energy down while dominating the situation and increasing their own emotional energy during the “interaction ritual.” School suspensions are often the result of just this. Poor student conduct can decrease the emotional energy of a teacher who is attempting to control and educate the students within his or her classroom. That disobedient student, however, may feel increased emotional energy from their misconduct, gained through attention from their peers and fulfilled rebellious feelings resulting from their changing hormones and brain development. After several interactions with misbehaving students, teachers and school administrators feel
compelled to address the misconduct. How and when such misconduct is addressed, however, is what makes the difference between successful and unsuccessful school discipline.

A frustrated teacher, emotionally drained from their interactions with misbehaving students and administratively supported by zero-tolerance policies, may use discipline as a means of regaining their own emotional energy. Masked by notions of keeping schools safe and ensuring that the students who are behaving have access to a solid academic experience, teachers often utilize out-of-school suspensions as a means of regaining their own emotional energy. Upon removing a misbehaving student from their classroom, the teacher’s authority is regained, their emotional energy increases, and they become empowered by their ability to remove what they view as the source of their emotional void. Unfortunately, however, educators do not equitably apply these disciplinary measures. Their tolerance for the misconduct of some, and intolerance for the misconduct of others, combined with implicit prejudices and favoritism, results in the unfair application of school disciplinary measures such as out-of-school suspensions.

The interaction ritual chain does not end with a student’s suspension. After experiencing a suspension, the student’s emotional energy decreases. The student views their disciplinary experience as a failed attempt at education. Their academic self-identity is injured and their ability to take initiative in the educational atmosphere becomes lessened. This impacts their self-confidence, their self-identity, and their feeling of inclusion with peers at school. This emotional injury, unless repaired with restorative academic initiatives, will impact that student throughout their entire academic career and possibly throughout their entire life. This is one reason why
there is such a dramatically high dropout rate amongst students who have experienced an out-of-school suspension. It is not surprising that these students would also be more likely to engage in deviant behavior, become involved in the juvenile justice system, use drugs, and commit criminal acts.

**New York City Department of Education Suspension Policies and Data:**

The New York City (NYC) Department of Education’s (DOE) *Citywide Standards of Discipline and Intervention Measures* outlines the “Standards of Behavior” for all NYC public school students, grades K-12 and describes, in detail, school infractions and the ranges of possible disciplinary responses for such infractions. There are five levels of infractions, ranging from uncooperative / noncompliant behavior to seriously dangerous or violent behavior (See Attachment A). Each level contains possible guidance interventions, as well as a minimum to a maximum range of possible disciplinary responses that may be imposed by a teacher, principal, the Office of School and Youth Development (OSYD), or another designee of the Chancellor or Superintendent.

The NYC DOE admittedly allows for administrative discretion and subjective interpretation of student misconduct and warranted disciplinary action. The Citywide Standards (p. 8) state, “Student misbehavior must be handled on a case by case basis. In all cases, implementation of appropriate interventions and/or disciplinary consequences must take into account a number of factors including the nature and severity of the misconduct. In some cases, the use of primary consequences and/or the use of guidance interventions may be most suitable. In others, a student’s misconduct may require or be most appropriately addressed by a targeted or
significant disciplinary response along with guidance interventions.” It must be acknowledged that this latitude, although understandably permitted, allows implicit bias to influence disciplinary discretion and, as data shows, can lead to inequitably applied disciplinary policies.

Level 3 infractions, which can lead to Principal or Superintendent Suspensions, are vaguely described as “disruptive behavior,” and the non-inclusive list of possible misconduct that would fall under this category, such as defying / disobeying school authorities, provides vast room for subjective interpretation of student behavior. This type of discretion can mean the difference between a Superintendent Suspension, which will carry a more punitive discipline, and a Principal’s Suspension, which will be much shorter. School staff members will also have room to interpret whether defiant / disobedient behavior rises to the level of an infraction, thereby leaving room for some student misconduct to be handled at the classroom level, and other student misconduct, similar in nature, to rise to a suspension level.

Between 2001 and 2011, the NYC DOE suspension rate more than doubled, from less than 29,000 in 2001 to nearly 70,000 in 2011 (Pownell, 2013). Despite small declines between 2011 and 2013, dramatic racial disparities continued to persist. An October 2013 report, A, B, C, D, STPP: How School Discipline Feeds the School-to-Prison Pipeline, issued by the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU), documented that, during the 2011-2012 school year, black students, who made up less than a third of all NYC public school students (29%) constituted half (50%) of all students who received one or more suspension. The report also found that black students with special needs served 14% of overall suspensions, yet represented only 6% of total
enrollment. In comparison, white students served only 7% of overall suspensions, yet made up 14% of the NYC public school system’s total enrollment.

According to the NYC School Justice Partnership Task Force (Task Force), despite a very slight documented decrease (less than 1%) in suspensions from the 2010-2011 school year to the 2011-2012 school year, the number of suspensions in NYC public schools during the 2011-2012 school year was still 40% greater than during the 2005-2006 school year. Although these numbers would appear to suggest that NYC has a growing problem with school misconduct, disruption, and violence, the data actually indicates the opposite. As reported by the NYC DOE in November 2012, over the last several years, violence in schools has dropped dramatically, down 37% between 2001 and 2012 (Task Force, 2013). With violence decreasing, but suspensions increasing, a new approach to disciplining lower-level infractions is clearly in effect. Upon review of the 2011-2012 school year by the Task Force, "the overwhelming majority of school-related suspensions, summonses and arrests [were] for minor misbehavior that occurs on a daily basis in most schools" (p. iii).

It is important to note that the Task Force’s suspension findings do not reflect a city-wide epidemic as many may think. Instead, it was found that a small percentage of struggling schools are generating the largest number of suspensions, thereby impacting the overall number of suspensions within the city. The finding that this is a school-specific issue rather than a city-

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8 Convened in June 2011, the NYC School Justice Partnership Task Force is a multi-disciplinary task force, organized by the New York State Permanent Commission on Justice for Children, which includes government officials, experts, and key stakeholders dedicated to studying the school-justice connection and tasked with making recommendations for systemic, attainable reform, based on strategies that have been used in New York City, elsewhere in the state, and across the nation regarding positive approaches that hold students accountable for their behavior while keeping them engaged in school (New York State Unified Court System, n.d.)

9 In addition, there were 882 school-related arrests (more than four per school day on average) and another 1,666 summonses issued during the 2011-2012 school year (more than seven per school day on average).
wide problem has a significant implication: suspensions are “less a function of student misbehavior than a function of the adult response” (p. iii). When faced with the same type of low-level student infractions, NYC public schools with lower-suspension rates have demonstrated their preference to utilize counseling and positive disciplinary options, such as peer mediation and restorative justice, instead of the more punitive alternatives such as suspension.

Racial inequity does not go unrecognized by NYC DOE students. In 2011, Cheyanne Smith, a 15 year old student attending the Bushwick School for Social Justice and serving as a youth leader with the Urban Youth Collaborative, stated during an interview, “The day, place, and time I see students stop being harassed and suspended unlawfully in our schools, is the day I will believe that there was an actual decrease in the number of suspensions. Suspensions are at an all-time high in NYC public schools, with black and Latino students disproportionally impacted. The numbers have to go down substantially. We have a crisis on our hands; we need positive alternatives to suspensions in all schools” (Dignity in Schools, 2011).

According to a NYC DOE Suspension Data report, there was a very minimal increase (.07%) in the number of student suspensions between the 2011-2012 school year and the 2012-2013 school year. The percentage of black students who represented suspended students did not increase minimally, however; the percentage increased by 3%. During the 2012-2013 school year, black students increased from 50% (during 2011-2012) to 53% of all students suspended, whereas white students, continued to represent only 7% of all suspended students.  

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10 Hispanic students were documented as receiving 36% of all student suspensions.
According to the New York Civil Liberties Union (2014), the data for the 2013-14 school year indicates that NYC school suspensions, and the racial disparities in school suspensions for black and Latino students, did not change from the previous year (2012-2013). During the 2013-2014 school year, black students made up only 26% of enrolled students (7% less than during the 2010-2011 school year), but received 53% (1% more than during the 2010-2011 school year) of all school suspensions. Combined, black and Latino students received 89% of all school suspensions, while white students received less than 7%. The New York Civil Liberties Union (2013) issued the following statement in response to the above data:

A change in New York City’s punitive education culture will not happen without dramatic policy shifts. There is an immense amount of work to be done to ensure [that] New York City children get their right to an education,” said Donna Lieberman, NYCLU executive director. “The de Blasio administration inherited a school system that oversaw unprecedented increases in exclusionary school discipline – suspensions, arrests and summonses. Ten months into the new administration and two months into the new school year, it’s time for the de Blasio administration to end the overreliance on destructive and discriminatory practices and undertake the systemic, common sense reforms that will make schools a conducive environment for learning.

New York City Political Influence on Student Suspensions

The 2003 disciplinary plan, Impact Schools, implemented by NYC’s former mayor, Michael Bloomberg, was an initiative that brought increased police and security presence into 22 NYC middle and high schools to introduce more stringent enforcement of the Department of
Education’s discipline code. The plan called for an immediate response to even the most minor violation of a school’s disciplinary policy and attached harsh penalties to low-level infractions. According to City Hall, the schools targeted for inclusion in the Impact Schools initiative were selected by the New York Police Department and the NYC DOE for their higher than average number of criminal incidents, transfers of students due to safety violations, and what the DOE terms “early warning problems,” such as low school attendance and disorderly behavior. A June 2005 report, conducted by the Drum Major Institute for Public Policy, however, found that high levels of crime and disorder were not the only characteristics that distinguished the Impact Schools from the rest of the NYC schools. Based on an analysis of the 2003-2004 Annual School Reports released by the DOE, the report found that the 22 selected Impact Schools were more overcrowded than the average city high school, were far larger than most city high schools, received less funding per student for direct services, had more students over-age for their grade, and served a student body that was disproportionately comprised of poor and black students as compared to the average NYC public high school. Zero-tolerance policies such as those associated with Mayor Bloomberg’s Impact Schools Initiative have been widely discredited as discriminatory and ineffective; the NAACP Legal Defense Fund referred to these policies as “among the most aggressive and explicit school-to-prison pipeline policies in the country” (Pownell, 2013).

NYCLU Advocacy Director Johanna Miller asserted that “The [Bloomberg] administration [took] the disciplinary power out of the hands of educators and put it into the hands of ill-equipped police personnel. As a result, flashpoints of confrontation between students and police over minor infractions too often escalate[d], resulting in students being
ticketed, handcuffed, suspended or even arrested” (NYCLU, 2013). Advocates looked to the next administration to implement change, and when Mayor Bill de Blasio ran for office, he vowed to drastically change the NYC DOE’s disciplinary policies in an effort to reduce suspensions and “empower principals by giving them the resources and tools to deal with student misbehavior.”

After being sworn into office on January 1, 2014, Mayor de Blasio did, in fact, implement changes to the NYC DOE Student Discipline Code. He did not, however, please student advocacy groups who campaigned for a total prohibition of the use of suspensions as a punishment for students. In February 2014, Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carmen Fariña announced their revisions to the NYC DOE student discipline policy. Their plan, which was rolled out in spring 2014, included a new review process for suspensions for insubordination, restrictions on handcuffing students, and expanded training for the city’s School Safety Agents. Rather than forbidding student suspensions, the de Blasio administration’s new rules require that principals must get approval from the DOE’s central office before a student can be suspended. The new disciplinary code also has reduced the types of punishment available for low-level infractions thereby eliminating a number of infractions from the list of misconduct punishable by suspension.

As the largest school district in the country, New York City is uniquely poised to serve as a national model for dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. With a new mayor who has publicly recognized the need to implement policy changes to eliminate the racial inequities within the public school system’s use of suspension as a form of discipline, the city must now
wait for the data to reveal whether the changes that have thus far been implemented are sufficient to achieve the administration’s stated goals, or whether further efforts must be made. Many argue that far more effort must be made to address implicit racial biases that impact teacher and administrator responses to student misconduct, because the changes that have been implemented thus far do not address cultural deficit thinking, which lies at the root of inequitable student discipline.

In education, cultural deficit thinking is defined as “the practice of holding lower expectations for students with demographics that do not fit the traditional context of the school system” (Simone, p. ii, 2012). In attempting to explain the widespread underachievement among students of color and students from lower socioeconomic divisions, many teachers, administrators, and school agents attempt to classify the problem as existing within the students, their families, and their communities rather than as school-based issues. The cultural deficit model “attributes students' lack of educational success to characteristics often rooted in their cultures and communities…Research grounded in a deficit perspective blames the victims of institutional oppression for their own victimization by referring to negative stereotypes and assumptions regarding certain groups or communities” (Irizarry, p. 1, 2009). Deficit thinking overlooks the root causes of oppression, and frames the problem as one of students and families. Academic remedies suggested by such perspectives fail to meaningfully address problems within schools, because they shift blame from the school system to students, their families and their cultural communities. Deficit thinking allows for schools to discourage the academic advancement of certain student groups and, at least in part, absolve educators and school systems of their responsibilities to educate all students fairly and appropriately.
Long-Term Social Impact of Out-of-School Suspensions

Several researchers suggest that out-of-school suspensions may be linked to several negative educational outcomes including continued academic failure, grade retention, negative school attitudes, and increased drop-out rates (Oppenheimer & Ziegler, 1988). Suspending students for truancy may actually have the unintended effect of increasing, rather than decreasing, truancy (Massachusetts Board of Education, 1991). In addition, students with multiple out-of-school suspensions tend to participate in fewer extracurricular activities, are more than likely to placed in special education programs, receive poorer grades on average, and have poorer school attendance than do one-time suspendees or students who have never been suspended (Oppenheimer & Ziegler, 1988). A growing number of educational researchers maintain that out-of-school suspension is strongly linked to school failure, non-promotion, continued disciplinary problems, and may contribute to delinquent behavior in the community (Alpert & Dunham, 1986; Oppenheimer & Ziegler, 1988). The majority of efforts that focus on disciplinary consequences may be the most powerful message of rejection contributing to student disengagement from school (Felice, 1981; Wheelock & Dorman, 1988) with most of these strategies having been shown to be ineffective in changing disruptive student behavior (Comerford & Jacobson, 1987).

Research demonstrates that schools with higher out-of-school suspension rates reap no gains in achievement, but result instead in higher dropout rates and an increased risk that students will become embroiled in the juvenile justice system (Balfanz, Byrnes & Fox, 2013). According to the 2000 United States census, students who receive academic suspensions are often those who are least likely to have supervision at home, households near or below the
poverty level, and children of single parents (Advocates for Children and Youth, 2006). Data suggests that students who experience just one out-of-school suspension are as much as ten times more likely to ultimately drop out of high school than those who have never been suspended, and recent findings by the American Academy of Pediatrics (2013) indicate that students who are involved in the juvenile justice system are likely to have been suspended at least once.

For a growing number of students, the path to incarceration (i.e. the school-to-prison pipeline) includes several “stops” along the way. Suspension is viewed by many as one of those “stops.” In 2008, the American Civil Liberties Union had this to say about school suspensions:

Suspensions, often the first stop along the [school-to-prison] pipeline, play a crucial role in pushing students [out of] the school system and into the criminal justice system. Research shows a clear correlation between suspensions and both low achievement and dropping out of school altogether. Such research also demonstrates a link between dropping out of school and incarceration later in life. Specifically, students who have been suspended are three times more likely to drop out by the 10th grade than students who have never been suspended. Dropping out in turn triples the likelihood that a person will be incarcerated later in life. In 1997, 68 percent of state prison inmates were school dropouts (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2008).

Research also indicates that young adults with a history of school suspension are less likely than others to vote and volunteer in civic activities, suggesting that suspension negatively
impacts the likelihood that suspended youth will engage in future political and civic activities. A 2014 study, conducted on the long-term effects of suspension and school security on the political and civic engagement of youth (Kupchik & Catlaw, 2013), found that “a history of suspension is related to decreased odds of future civic participation” (p. 116). Research reveals that suspensions are administered in ways that alienate students from their school and from their school’s authority structure, thereby leading them to view school staff as unfair, arbitrary, and uncaring (Kupchik, 2010). That practice then teaches students a lesson about authority and their powerlessness relative to governing bodies. As stated by the 2014 study, to the extent that students learn this lesson and apply it to their future roles as citizens, “they may be less likely to vote and volunteer because they see little opportunity to actively shape governance or community life. School punishment, thus may socialize students into cynicism, disengagement, and apathy” (p. 204).

Suspensions not only have a serious social and emotional impact on students, but because of the long-term implications involving higher rates of incarceration, suspensions inflict a high economic toll on families and communities. As stated by the APA Zero-tolerance Task Force (2008), “By changing the relationship between education and juvenile justice, zero-tolerance may shift the focus of discipline from relatively inexpensive actions in the school setting to the highly costly processes of arrest and incarceration” (p. 860). Longitudinal studies have found that suspensions may, in some cases, be used as a tool to “cleanse” schools of students who are perceived by school administrators as troublemakers (Bowditch, 1993). Students do not disappear though. This “cleansing” process often pushes this group of students away from academia and professional development and towards criminality and civil rejection, the cost of
which is much greater than the cost of addressing student misconduct with a more restorative approach.

Racial disparities in discipline are particularly problematic, because they contribute to the racial-achievement gap (Townsend, 2000), and increase the probability that students of color will be incarcerated (Fenning & Rose, 2007), thereby contributing to the disproportionate representation of people of color who are incarcerated. Although the disparities have been well documented, the socioemotional impact of such disparities has not. Studies have found that inequitable disciplinary removal has negative effects on student outcomes and school climate (American Psychological Association, 2008), but only limited data exists to document the types of negative emotional responses students have to such inequality, and what the long-term social impact of such emotions can be.

Alternatives to Out-of-School Suspensions

There are a variety of alternatives to using out-of-school suspension as a means of addressing poor classroom behavior and disciplining students. Academic leadership can choose from a variety of approaches, most of which have been extensively researched and proven effective. When implemented with commitment 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” (Wettach & Owen, 2014). The evidence-based interventions currently available include responses such as restorative justice, positive behavioral support, and social-emotional learning; when implemented, these methods have been proven to not only be effective tools for teachers when addressing student misconduct,
but tools for building a positive school climate. Innovative school districts throughout the country, encouraged by the federal government, are increasingly moving away from out-of-school suspensions, summonses, and arrests, in favor of these more positive and effective approaches to discipline. Not all school districts, however, have embraced these alternatives.

When possible, it is preferred that educators create a classroom learning environment that optimizes the likelihood of avoiding the need for disciplinary action altogether. The chances of fostering such an atmosphere increase when a school is administratively well-managed, pedagogues are well-trained in classroom management, and teachers are provided with the support staff needed to assist students with learning and behavioral challenges – such as one-to-one paraprofessionals assigned to struggling students whose behavior repeatedly disrupts their own academic progress as well as the education of other students.

Restorative justice is based upon a set of principles that guide an individual or group response to conflict and harm. When implemented within schools, the process empowers students to resolve conflicts on their own; essentially, the idea is to bring students together in peer-mediated small groups to talk, ask questions, and air their grievances. Schools may involve a wide range of people in the restorative justice process, including the victims, who are often teachers, school staff, bystanders, and other students, and the school community. “For the growing number of districts using restorative justice, the programs have helped strengthen campus communities, prevent bullying, and reduce student conflicts. Early adopting districts have seen drastic reductions in suspension and expulsion rates, and [the] students [who are
enrolled in schools that implement restorative justice techniques] say they are happier and feel safer” (Edutopia, 2013).

Positive behavioral support (PBS) can be defined as a “comprehensive, research-based proactive approach to behavioral support that endeavors to generate comprehensive change for students with challenging behavior” (Ruef, et al., n.d.). PBS involves identifying the cause or purpose of inappropriate behavior, teaching appropriate alternative responses that serve the same purpose as the challenging behavior, consistently rewarding positive behaviors, and minimizing the rewards for challenging behavior. The goal of PBS is to minimize the physiological, environmental, and curricular elements that trigger student misconduct. The implementation of PBS strategies within schools has shown to improve school climate and improve students’ feelings of emotional and psychological safety (Osher, et al., n.d.). Proven PBS strategies include “altering the classroom environment, increasing predictability and scheduling, increasing choice making, adapting the curriculum, appreciating positive behaviors, and teaching replacement skills” (Ruef, et al., n.d.).

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a learning process through which students acquire, and effectively apply, life skills, knowledge, and attitudes that assist them with dealing with their own emotions and the emotions of others, while helping them understand how to interact in relationships. Essential to SEL, is learning how to manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. SEL programming is “based on the understanding that the best learning emerges in the context of supportive relationships that make learning challenging,
engaging, and meaningful” (CASEL, 2015). Research shows that SEL can have a positive impact on school climate and promote a host of academic, social, and emotional benefits for students. A 2011 meta-analysis (Durlak, et al., 2011) examining the impact of enhancing students’ social and emotional learning through school-based universal interventions, found that students receiving quality SEL instruction demonstrated better academic performance (achievement scores an average of 11 percentage points higher than students who did not receive SEL instruction), improved attitudes and behaviors (greater motivation to learn, deeper commitment to school, increased time devoted to schoolwork, and better classroom behavior), fewer negative behaviors (decreased disruptive class behavior, noncompliance, aggression, delinquent acts, and disciplinary referrals), and reduced emotional distress (fewer reports of student depression, anxiety, stress, and social withdrawal).

The fair and consistent application of classroom-level consequences for low-level rule infractions can also deter the types of student behavior that often leads to suspension-level disciplinary action. Revising disciplinary policies to provide clear definitions of infractions will help to prevent misconduct. When rules are clearly articulated in writing, as well as explained to students in an age-appropriate, easily-understood manner, students become empowered by the understanding of the consequences of misconduct. This will also help to ensure that consequences are implemented in a fair and consistent manner.

Many schools throughout the nation have begun to implement Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support (PBIS) practices and interventions in an effort to avoid out-of-school suspensions. PBIS is a “decision making framework that guides selection, integration, and
implementation of the best evidence-based academic and behavioral practices for improving important academic and behavioral outcomes for all students” (PBIS, 2013). Schools that successfully implement PBIS are “found to have teaching and learning environments that are less reactive, aversive, dangerous, and exclusionary, and more engaging, responsive, preventive, and productive” (PBIS, 2013). It is critical that schools designate one school official as their discipline supervisor so as to ensure that disciplinary policies are administered fairly, consistently, and equitably. School discipline officials should be recognized for their impartiality and motivation to keep kids enrolled in, and engaged with, their school community. A conscious effort such as this will help reduce racialized disproportionality in the administration of school discipline.

When faced with misconduct that must be addressed immediately, there are a variety of direct responses available to replace a systemic dependency on suspensions. Possible consequences include: Calling parents or holding parent-teacher conferences, placing the student on a co-curricular activity suspension (which allows them to continue attending school, but restricts them from participating in afterschool sports or clubs), restitution (financial or social - such as a written apology), community service around the school, and Saturday school (teachsafeschools.org, 2014). For more serious violations of a school’s code of conduct, or when students have demonstrated that the aforementioned consequences are insufficient to deter misconduct, schools can institute learning-based consequences as an alternative to out-of-school suspensions. Generally, learning-based consequences consist of in-school suspension programs or alternative site suspension programs.
An in-school suspension is a disciplinary technique designed to penalize problem students for their behavior while still ensuring that they participate in the academic community. When a student is disciplined with an in-school suspension, he or she is removed from the traditional classroom environment and placed into a special suspension classroom, led by a teacher or team of teachers. The suspension may last a few days or weeks, depending on the student's offense. For the length of the suspension, the student reports for all of their classes in the suspension room; the student is expected show up daily to complete all of their assignments; and the student must submit all homework assignments, work on all assigned projects, and engage in productive academic discussions with the other students in their assigned room (WiseGeek.com, 2014).

In January of 2014, the Civil Rights Division of the United States Department of Justice (DOJ) and the United States Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (OCR) issued national guidance to assist public elementary and secondary schools with meeting their obligations under federal law to administer student discipline without discriminating on the basis of race, color, or national origin. With this issuance, the OCR provided a national overview of racial disparities in the administration of school discipline and articulated a long list of remedies to be implemented in cases where a school is in violation of federal law in their administration of discipline. To ensure compliance, the OCR and the DOJ now investigate complaints of bias in the application of school discipline, and compliance reviews are conducted nationwide (United States Department of Justice; United States Department of Education, 2014). With this newly developed federal oversight, schools must take extra precaution to avoid discriminatory disciplinary practices, whether intentional or unintentional. Providing training to school staff
and administrators is one important step that has been taken to raise consciousness related to bias-based discipline. These trainings expose teachers and school administrators to information about the causes and consequences of implicit racial and ethnic bias, especially in the form of cultural deficit thinking.

Conclusion

A major responsibility of school administrators is to ensure the safety and well-being of all of the students and staff within their school. There are a few special circumstances in which the removal of a student from school property is necessary, such as when criminal violence is involved, but, in general, out-of-school suspensions are very much avoidable. Research reveals a nationwide overreliance upon suspensions as well as race-based biases that impact the equity of how suspension policies are administered. Data also indicates that, despite the belief of advocates for zero-tolerance policies, suspensions do not increase school climate or the effectiveness of the learning environment.

By empowering educators with knowledge regarding cultural bias, the ineffectiveness of out-of-school suspensions, the long-term impact of suspensions, and the alternatives that are available to such disciplinary measures, there lies great potential for at-risk students to remain engaged in their academic environments and maintain positive emotional relationships with their peers, their educators, and their community. Although an out-of-school suspension may appear to simply take a student out of the classroom for a specified period of time, the socioemotional impact is much more significant and long-lasting. Suspensions can be the beginning of an interactional ritual chain founded by depleted emotional energy, lowered self-esteem and an
apprehension to take initiative within academic environments that concludes with student dropout, incarceration, and social disengagement.
CHAPTER III
Methodology

Introduction

This study combined secondary research of existing data with small scale in-depth qualitative interviewing. A documented review of existing research on student suspensions nationwide was used to illustrate the long-term social impact that out-of-school suspensions have on students throughout their lives. Individual student interviews were conducted with New York City public high school students, at the Brooklyn Public Library, to gain insight into present-day student perspectives on academia, school discipline, out-of-school suspensions, and racial equity. Conclusions drawn by within this study are based upon data research and student answers provided in reply to open-ended interview questions through oral responses.

Focus group interviews followed a semi-structured format thereby allowing students the freedom to express their views comfortably, in a private forum, while also providing reliable and comparable qualitative data. The interviews were conducted with open, but guided, questions; as students responded, the natural conversation that emerged guided the interview so as to encourage a high-level of student participation while promoting an open atmosphere for participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and experiences related to the topic. Focus groups consisted of 4 to 5 students. Groups were intentionally small due to the sensitive nature of this research topic. It was theorized that students would feel more comfortable discussing their personal disciplinary history, and emotional responses to said discipline, in a small group setting.
The goal of conducting student interviews was to obtain honest student responses to questions regarding their school’s disciplinary climate, their experiences related to out-of-school suspensions, their emotional response to racial inequity within their school (if such is perceived), their social perspectives on fairness, and their overarching perceptions of education and authority. Individual student interviews are felt to be the best research tool available to obtain such sensitive information from youthful research participants. Students were given ID cards so that their names were not used during the focus group interviews. Confidentiality and sensitivity were emphasized throughout the recruitment and interview process.

**Participant Overview**

30 New York City Department of Education high school students, ages 14-18, from Brooklyn, NY, from ten different Brooklyn public schools, were interviewed regarding their experiences with, and feelings about, school climate, school safety, disciplinary equity, and out-of-school suspensions. Seven focus group interviews were conducted, and four or five students participated in each group. Students were provided with letter identification cards and names were never used during the interview sessions; students referred to each other by their assigned letter. Students were asked to provide truthful answers, and to encourage truthfulness they were assured that their names would not be included in this dissertation. The student participants who reported having been suspended indicated that said suspensions were Principal Suspensions and not Superintendent Suspensions.\(^{11}\) No student who participated in this research study reported having ever received a Superintendent Suspension.

\(^{11}\) There are two types of suspensions at the New York City Department of Education: Principal Suspensions and Superintendent Suspensions. A Principal Suspension, applied to less serious infractions, can last from 1-5 days, and a Superintendent Suspension, which is reserved for more serious offenses, can last for up to one year.
Participant Recruitment:

Focus group participants were recruited using recruitment flyers (See Appendix B) and word-of-mouth referrals. Nineteen students responded to the recruitment flyers and 11 students were recruited by word-of-mouth referrals. Recruitment flyers were posted throughout New York City, primarily Brooklyn, because that is where the interviews were conducted. They were primarily placed in front of schools and outside of stores that were frequented by high school-age youth. A couple of students were recruited while at the library preparing for focus group interviews. All participants submitted signed parental consent forms and completed a Student Information Form (providing personal background information) before participating in the focus group (See Appendix A). They received $20 compensation for their participation.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Focus Group Interviews:

A focus group interview is a form of qualitative research that, since introduced in the 1940’s, has increasingly been utilized as a research tool in the social sciences. The focus group format has several advantages. It is useful to obtain detailed information about personal and group feelings, perceptions, and opinions; it produces a broader range of information as compared to individual interviews and/or surveys; and it enables researchers to look beyond hard data to gain a deeper understanding of the research topic. By providing research participants with the opportunity to explain their feelings, opinions, and experiences, and then compare and contrast their feelings with those of other group members, researchers are able to gain a more complete understanding of the subject matter, and learn or confirm the meaning behind existing hard data and facts.
The focus group methodology has limitations. The focus group relies heavily on assisted discussion to produce results; consequently, the facilitation of the discussion is critical. While a focus group format prevents the dangers of a nominal group process, outspoken individuals can “hijack” and dominate a discussion; skilled moderation is therefore essential. There is also the issue of truthfulness; although participants are promised anonymity, and asked to be truthful, there is no guarantee of such honesty. A further weakness inherent to the focus group format is its participant selection system; participants are self-selected (i.e. they are volunteers), and therefore study results are harder to generalize to the larger population.

The racial and gender data provided for this study’s research participants is not offered as a representation of the larger New York City public high school population, but rather intended to offer general information about the background of the students who elected to participate in this research study. With only 30 students interviewed for this research study, one cannot look to the experiences reported by this narrow group as an overarching representation of the larger population.

Role of the Researcher

A researcher utilizing a qualitative methodology has a multifaceted role. The researcher must formulate appropriate research questions that artfully avoid being both too broad and too narrow and be vigilant in reducing any personal biases that may impact the outcome of the study. Maintaining a high-level of bias-consciousness is especially important when asking follow-up questions related to statements made by the research participants. One must be careful not to influence participants in such a way as to force responses that the researcher believes a given
person should have, based upon that person’s characteristics relevant to the research topic. In this study, those factors include, but are not limited to: Race, gender, socioeconomic background, personality type, and disciplinary history. The researcher is responsible for promoting objectivity and impartiality within their study.

**Participant Profiles**

After the interviews, a profile of each participant was constructed using demographic data collected from their Student Information Forms and information gathered during the interview. These profiles included general student information such as name, identification letter, age, race, gender, number of suspensions, whether the student has observed a student suspension, perception of equity in school discipline practices, and perception of school safety. The limited number of research participants makes a percentage analysis less applicable to the wider public, but the information is provided here in an effort to enable the reader to formulate an image of the individuals who were willing to allow for their experiences to be analyzed through in this study.
Figure Two: Percentage of Participants Who Have Been Suspended - by Race

Six white students; 16 black students; seven Hispanic students; and one Asian student volunteered to be interviewed for this research study. 83% of white students (five students) interviewed had never been suspended; 17% (one student) had been suspended one time; and 0% had been suspended twice. 44% of Black students (seven students) interviewed had never been suspended; 56% (nine students) had been suspended one time; and 19% (three students) had been suspended twice. 43% of Hispanic students (three students) had never been suspended; 57% (four students) had been suspended one time; and 0% had been suspended twice. Only one Asian student was interviewed; that student had never been suspended.
13 female students and 17 male students were interviewed. 77% (10 students) of the female students reported never having been suspended and 23% (3 students) reported being suspended one time; no female students reported having been suspended more than one time.

35% of male students (6 students) interviewed reported never having been suspended; 47% (8 students) reported having been suspended one time; and 18% (3 students) had been suspended twice.
Figure Four: Percentage of Female Participants Who Have Been Suspended - by Race

Four white female students; four black female students; four Hispanic female students; and one Asian female student were interviewed. No white or Asian female participants reported having been suspended and no female participants reported having been suspended more than one time. 50% of black female students (2 students) reported having been suspended one time and 25% of Hispanic female students (1 student) reported having been suspended one time.
Two white male students; 12 black male students; three Hispanic male students; and zero Asian male students were interviewed. 50% of the white male students (1 student) reported having never been suspended and 50% of white male students (1 student) reported having been suspended one time. 42% of black male students (5 students) reported having never been suspended; 33% of black male students (4 students) reported having been suspended one time; and 25% of black male students (3 students) reported having been suspended twice. All three Hispanic male students (100%) reported that they had been suspended one time.
Assumptions

My research assumed that, in general, the participants were thoughtful, forthright, and honest in providing accurate statements. It also assumed that statistical data obtained from governmental websites was accurate.

Concluding Remarks

The reader is cautioned against assuming that the qualitative research findings from this study can be broadly generalized. Although when coupled with the national data analyzed throughout this study, it is reasonable for one to believe that the qualitative findings from this study would extend beyond the small student groups interviewed here, the findings are based upon too small a number of participants to make any generalization possible. Although technically adequate for triangulation of data, the limited number of participants interviewed for this study prevented findings that could be reasonably generalized to a wider population.
CHAPTER IV

Findings: The Long-Term Impact of Out-of-School Suspensions:
An Examination and Analysis of Existing Data

Introduction:

The long-term social impact of out-of-school suspensions is most commonly discussed in terms of the school-to-prison pipeline. As discussed earlier, the school-to-prison pipeline describes local, state and federal education policies that operate to push students out of school and into the criminal justice system. Inequities in areas such as school discipline, policing practices, and high-stakes testing contribute to the pipeline and, as discussed throughout this dissertation, this system disproportionately victimizes specific student groups, with black students (and more specifically black male students) impacted the most.

The school-to-prison pipeline ends with incarceration; however, data indicates that the impact of unfair and ineffective school disciplinary culture reaches beyond juvenile incarceration. It is a socioeconomic domino effect that begins with out-of-school suspensions and can end with adult incarceration, poverty, and health implications. By acknowledging the complexity and significance of the school-to-prison pipeline, such as the impact of inequitable and unreasonably harsh discipline upon school climate and academic engagement, as well as issues such as graduation rates and college enrollment, and then looking beyond the pipeline to adult incarceration, socioeconomic status, and health, one gains a more comprehensive understanding of the hazardous impact of out-of-school suspensions.
Despite providing a more complete picture of the long-term social impact of out-of-school suspensions, this explanation of implications is still limited. There is a vast number of social factors that can be impacted by experiencing an out-of-school suspension and result in deprivation and social inequality, including increased rates of substance abuse, divorce, violence, and homelessness.

**School Climate and Academic Engagement**

School climate is a multi-faceted concept that describes the extent to which a school community creates and maintains a safe school campus, a supportive academic, disciplinary, and physical environment, and respectful, trusting, and caring relationships throughout the school community (Safe Supportive Learning, n.d.). A safe, caring, participatory, and responsive school climate fosters a greater student attachment to school and provides the optimal foundation for social, emotional, and academic learning (Blum, McNeely, & Rinehart, 2002; Osterman, 2000). One of the fundamentally important dimensions of school climate involves how “connected” students, teachers and administrators feel to one another while in school, because school connectedness is a powerful predictor of adolescent health (Shochet, et. al, 2006), academic outcomes (Whitlock, 2006), violence prevention (Karcher, 2002), and participation in high-risk adolescent behaviors (Catalano, et. al., 2004).

The importance of school climate and academic engagement is not a new topic. For almost a century, educators have acknowledged the relevance of these elements of academia, with early educational crusaders such as Arthur Perry, John Dewey, and Emile Durkheim declaring that school culture *significantly* influences the learning capabilities of students. The
rise of a methodical and practical study of school climate grew out of organizational research, coupled with the observation that school-specific processes account for a great deal of variation in student achievement (Thapa, et. al., 2012). In 1908, Perry was the first educational leader to explicitly write about how school climate affects students and their learning process. Although Dewey did not write explicitly about school climate, his focus on the social dimension of academia, and the notion that schools should focus on enhancing the skills, knowledge and dispositions that support engaged democratic citizens (Dewey, 1927) implicitly touched upon the impact of school climate on successful learning.

Early academic writings about school climate were, in essence, case studies, with documented examinations of learning environments conducted over varying time periods. Empirically grounded school climate research began in the 1950's, when Andrew Haplin and Don Croft (1963), pioneers in the field of school climate, initiated a systematic approach to studying the impact of school climate on academic engagement, student learning and scholastic development. Haplin and Croft introduced the Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire (OCDQ); a 64-item questionnaire used to assess teacher-to-teacher and teacher-to-administrator interactions found in elementary schools. Their pioneering analysis, The Organizational Climate of Schools, has had a significant impact on the study of school climate, and their OCDQ has been used by researchers across the globe.

Over the past three decades, researchers and educators have become increasingly aware of the importance of a positive school climate, with a growing interest in school climate reform and data-driven school improvement strategies intended to promote safer, more supportive and
civil academic environments. A growing body of research indicates that positive school climate is a critical dimension linked to effective risk prevention and health promotion efforts, as well as teaching and learning efficacy (Berkowitz & Bier, 2005).

Interest in the correlation between student discipline and school climate emerged when a series of studies, conducted in the 1980’s, concluded that a positive school climate directly correlates to student suspension rates (Wu, Pink, Crain, & Moles, 1982; Purkey & Smith, 1983; Skiba, R. J. & Rausch; M. K., 2006) and student absenteeism (DeJung & Duckworth, 1986; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1989). As recognition of said correlation emerged, a growing body of research followed, with findings indicating that positive school climate is critical to effective risk prevention (Berkowitz & Bier, 2006; Catalano, Berglund, Ryan, Lonczak, & Hawkins, 2002), and effective risk prevention relates to lower suspension rates. These studies have confirmed that a school’s failure to address school disciplinary issues, coupled with a poor school climate, will lead to a destructive cycle whereby increased suspensions result in poor school climate, and poor school climate results in increased suspensions. Detrimental effects on the families of suspended students have also been reported, including parents’ feelings of powerlessness and anger as a result of being excluded from the decision-making process impacting their child (McDonald & Thomas, 2003).

Academic disengagement has a harmful effect on students’ relationships and communications with adults and their peers at school, which can impact the student receiving the discipline as well as his or her classmates by negatively impacting school climate. Such disciplinary practices prevent teachers and school administrators from developing meaningful
relationships with students that will encourage open communication that allows them to find out
from the student what is causing their misbehavior. A substantial number of research studies
have found that a large number of high school students do not feel physically and/or emotionally
safe in their schools (New York Civil Liberties Union, 2008). Findings indicate that in schools
without supportive policies, practices, and relationships, students are more likely to experience
violence, peer-victimization, and punitive disciplinary actions, often accompanied by high levels
of absenteeism, and reduced academic achievement (Astor, Guerra, & Van Acker, 2010). In
2010, a study, which used a statewide sampling of over 7,300 ninth-grade students and 2,900
teachers randomly selected from 290 high schools, concluded that “consistent enforcement of
school discipline (structure) and availability of caring adults (support) were associated with
school safety” (Gregory et al., 2010, p. 4).

Creating a positive school climate can help schools, school districts, and teachers boost
student achievement (Fenzel & O’Brennan, 2007), close achievement gaps (MacNeil & Busch,
2009; Becker & Luthar, 2002), increase high school graduation rates (Christle, Jolivette &
Nelson (2007), and increase teacher satisfaction (Weiss, 1999). Positive school climates also
enhance safety within schools and surrounding communities by increasing communication
among students, families, and faculty, and reducing violence, bullying, and criminal misconduct
(Steinberg, Allensworth & Johnson, 2011).

In 2012, the National School Climate Center released a School Climate Research Survey
with socioemotional safety, school engagement, and school climate included amongst the topics
addressed. Upon review of existing data, the Climate Center found that “extensive research
shows school climate [as] having a profound impact on students’ mental and physical health” (Climate Center, 2012, p. 3).

In 2015, researchers from the University of California conducted a study examining the effect of socioeconomic, racial, and linguistic segregation on academic engagement and student behavior in American high schools (Palardy, G.J., Rumberger, R.W., Butler, T., 2015). Using survey data from the Educational Longitudinal Study of 2002, the study found that highly segregated high schools are strongly associated with negative school behaviors and academic disengagement, with black, Hispanic, and low-income adolescents most significantly impacted in the United States, because they are much more likely to attend segregated schools. The study found that school practices that improve school climate, reduce disorder and disruption, and emphasize academics, strongly mediate of the effects of segregation. It was further concluded that adopting positive behavioral practices to reduce behaviors that interfere with learning, without increasing suspension and expulsion, are most critical for ameliorating the effects of segregation.

In 2016, researchers from Stanford University, interested in gaining an increased understanding of how educators and researchers collaborate to address a positive learning environment, conducted a one-year study focused on improving school climate. These researchers examined student responses to a school-wide school climate survey and conducted a comparative analysis of said responses with each student’s administrative records. A logistic regression model was utilized to determine the extent to which students’ school climate perceptions were associated to their educational outcomes, and the study concluded that male
students, students with at least one suspension, and non-white students, all reported fewer positive experiences on campus relative to their peers.

**Multiple Suspensions**

According to the United States Department of Education (School Climate and Discipline: Know the Data, 2012), of the 49 million students enrolled in United States public schools in 2011-2012, 1.9 million students received out-of-school suspensions and 1.55 million students received more than 1 out-of-school suspension. This means that students who received 1 out-of-school suspension had an 81.6% chance of receiving 1 or more additional suspensions after their first.

In 2013, the Center for Civil Rights conducted a study, *Out of School & Off Track: The Overuse of Suspensions in American Middle and High Schools*, which examined the 2009-2010 data from over 26,000 United States middle and high schools. The study, based upon a sample of nearly half the nation’s school districts and roughly 85% of all public school students in the country, found that “well over two million students were suspended during the 2009-2010 academic year.” The study found that 1 out of every nine secondary school students had been suspended at least once during that year, with 2,600 secondary schools having suspended over 25% of their total enrollment at least one time. The study further found that black students were more likely to be suspended at least once and more likely to be suspended multiple times than any other student group (Center for Civil Rights, 2013).
Taken as a whole, white students in the United States account for the largest share of one-time suspensions. Black students, however, account for the largest share of multiple suspensions. And, when looking at enrollment, black students have a higher percentage chance of being suspended once than white students. The Center for Civil Rights found that while black students represented only 16% of the United States student population in 2009-10, they accounted for 32% of all students who were suspended one time, and 42% of students who received multiple out-of-school suspensions. In comparison, white students accounted for 51% of the population and represented 31% of students who received multiple suspensions.

Figure Six: Students Receiving Suspensions and Expulsions, by Race and Ethnicity
Over the past several years, research from several states\textsuperscript{12} and several large city school districts\textsuperscript{13} across the country have identified multiple out-of-school suspensions as one of the primary indicators of high school dropout (Balfanz, et. al., 2011; MacIver, et. al., 2009), and all available evidence indicates that frequent student removal is associated with a host of negative outcomes, including a significant greater risk of dropping out of school (American Psychological Association Zero-tolerance Task Force, 2008). Students who are repeatedly suspended (or expelled) are likely to fall behind their peers academically, thereby paving the way to their eventual dropout (Teaching Tolerance: A Project of the Southern Poverty law Center, 2016).

In 2012, researchers from John Hopkins University conducted a study to examine the consequences of 9\textsuperscript{th} grade student suspensions in Florida (Balfanz, et. al., 2013). The study examined a cohort of 181,897 students, and found that 27\% were suspended out-of-school at least once in the 9\textsuperscript{th} grade. Students who were suspended in the 9th grade were found to have been suspended, on average, twice during the year, and missed, on average, a total of seven school days due to suspension. Their findings revealed that approximately \(\frac{3}{4}\) of Florida students who never received an out-of-school suspension in 9\textsuperscript{th} grade graduated from high school, compared with a 52\% graduation rate for those suspended once, and a 38\% graduation rate for those suspended twice in their first high school year. Although the research focused on students in Florida, Robert Balfanz, the lead researcher, asserted his belief the results are “representative of the entire nation.”

\textsuperscript{12} Arkansas, Colorado, Florida, Tennessee
\textsuperscript{13} Indianapolis, Nashville, Philadelphia
Balfanz found that many students who were suspended as freshmen, but were not failing courses or otherwise chronically absent prior to their suspension, ended up missing school repeatedly or failing courses as they continued through high school. “This suggests that for about 20 percent of the students suspended in 9th grade, efforts to find alternatives to suspensions alone could have a significant payoff in terms of reducing dropout and increasing postsecondary attainment rates,” the study stated.

When discussing these 2012 research findings at national conference about the effects of disciplinary policies that remove students from school, Balfanz spoke about the need for schools to “find out what is at the heart of the behavior problems triggering the suspensions…especially for students with multiple out-of-school suspensions.” He emphasized that teachers and school administrators must develop strategic methods for engaging students in the learning process, because “multiple suspensions only add to the students’ disengagement and likelihood of quitting school altogether.” Balfanz added, “If the first suspension isn’t working, suspension isn’t a very effective strategy.”

Another 2012 study, conducted by the Center for Civil Rights Remedies (Losen & Gillespie, 2012), echoed the John Hopkins findings of disproportionately high drop-out rates for students suspended more than one time. The study was based upon K-12 data from the 2009-10 school year, a sample of nearly half the nation’s school districts, and roughly 85% of all public school students in the country. The research found that black students and special education students were more likely to receive single as well as multiple suspensions (Losen & Gillespie, 2012) and therefore more likely to drop-out of school.
Decreased academic determination and lowered self-esteem have been identified as direct consequences of suspensions, particularly when students receive multiple suspensions (Wettach & Owen, 2014). Although one suspension can, and often does, impact a student dramatically, research has found that, after more than one suspension, a shift in identity is more than likely to occur. Lowered regard by peers and teachers, whether actual or perceived, severely impacts a student’s academic self-worth. Combined with a feeling of alienation from school, academic disengagement, and failing grades due to missed classroom instruction, a student’s identity shifts away from academia, often to an unproductive and dangerous direction.

**High School Graduation**

Data retrieved from the National Center for Education Statistics (2014), the Child Trends Database (2015) and the United States Census (2014) reveal that the proportion of high school dropouts among 16 to 24-year-olds in the United States has declined dramatically, from 17% to 7% between 1967 and 2014. Although with this overall decrease has also come a decrease in the racial divide amongst high school graduates, wide disparities by race continue to persist and the basis for the decrease is concerning. In 1972, the dropout rate for white students was 12%, for black students was 21%, and for Hispanic students was 34%. Rates have since declined substantially for each group. In 2014, the dropout rate for black and Hispanic youth reached historic lows of 7% for black students and 11% for Hispanic students. However, the long-term decline is, at least in part, related to increased incarceration rates among young black and Hispanic males, which more than doubled between 1980 and 1999, and disproportionately affects dropout rates due to required enrollment in prison education programs.
A range of factors have been shown to increase a student’s risk of dropping out, including high rates of absenteeism, low levels of school engagement, low parental education, work or family responsibilities, and problematic or deviant behavior. The exclusion of students from school for disciplinary reasons is directly related to lower attendance rates and increased course failures, and can set a student on a path of academic disengagement that will keep them from receiving a high school diploma (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Research has found that inequitable disciplinary policies and practices by teachers and school administrators constitute a significant factor in student dropout rates and the disproportionate rate of minority student dropouts (Okonofua, J. A. & Eberhardt, J. L., 2015). Student suspensions exacerbate a negative self-image and can cause emotional problems that, in turn, increase devious and deviant attitudes and behaviors. Overtime, these feelings can lead to student disengagement from academic and social interactions at school and eventual withdrawal from school.

Studies have found that schools with higher suspension and expulsion rates are more likely to have low academic achievement and parental involvement (Fanion, 2013), less qualified teachers, poor teacher-student relationships, an unwelcoming school climate (Dempsey, 2008), high absenteeism, limited resources, and repeat offenders (Losen & Martinez, 2013; Marks, 2000). These are all variables that are consistently associated with high student dropout rates. Rather than reducing the likelihood of disruption, school suspensions have been found to predict higher future rates of misbehavior and suspension among those students who are suspended (Costenbader & Markson, 1998; Raffaele-Mendez, 2003), and, ultimately, increase the likelihood of school dropout and failure to graduate on time (Bowditch, 1993; Wehlage & Rutter,
An overreliance on traditional disciplinary practices by academic institutions (such as using rewards and punishments to counter misbehavior, exerting administrative power and control, and excluding students from the learning process) may temporarily control misbehavior; however, they do not reengage the student in classroom learning and thereby undermine the intrinsic motivation for learning at school.

Research confirms that the consequences of zero-tolerance practices cause students to develop a distrust of teachers and school administrators and experience a sense of alienation and disengagement from the learning process (Skiba & Rausch, 2006). These feelings can, and often do, lead to low self-esteem, feelings of academic inadequacy, and ultimately result in students falling behind academically and, for some, dropping out of school. Researchers affirm that once these negative feelings start to spiral, dropping out is usually the next choice that students will make (Fanion, 2013).

An often-stated assumption is that stopping a student's misbehavior using social control practices, such as suspensions, will encourage proper classroom conduct, thus increasing students’ academic engagement and reducing their likelihood of dropping out. In a few cases, this may be so; however, the assumption ignores the prevailing research that demonstrates the importance of maintaining a sense of self-determination and esteem in order to productively engage in the learning process, embrace academia as part of one’s own self-identity, and thrive as an active learner (Skiba, 2003). Repeatedly, out-of-school suspensions have been found to produce exactly the opposite.
College Enrollment

A college degree has become increasingly important over the past two decades, with many higher paying jobs requiring at least some college education. Due to the social and economic implications of earning a postsecondary degree, any factor impacting college enrollment can have a serious impact on an individual’s life-long earnings in addition to a number of factors related to personal growth attained from the college experience. Receipt of a high school diploma is a strong predictor of college enrollment (Thompson, n.d.) and, as discussed above, out-of-school suspensions impact high school graduation rates.

There are a variety of benefits to attending and graduating from a postsecondary institution. Top of this list is lifetime earned income. Because a college degree tells employers that the applicant has the self-discipline, work ethic, and intelligence to get the job done, not only is the applicant more likely to land the job, but they will probably make significantly more money than their peers who do not have a college education. On average, college graduates make significantly more money annually than high school graduates. According the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), college graduates earn almost twice the income of high school graduates who have not attained a college degree and more than twice the income of individuals who have not obtained a high school diploma.
As technology has advanced, higher-paying jobs that were once available to high school graduates now require some form of higher education and/or certification. Although some professions require an advanced, graduate-level degree, data indicates that earning a college degree opens up many more professional avenues than having only a high school diploma. Factory and manufacturing jobs, which were once at the center of the American job market, have shifted overseas and jobs in the United States now tend to require more specific skill sets. With so many people competing for jobs in today's job market, employers are likely to look at candidates with more training and education.

Another benefit of attending college after high school is that it provides students with an opportunity to further their education at a higher level in a field of their choice. With access to
libraries, academic advisors, and experienced professors, students are able to immerse themselves in an area of interest that may have been accessible through only one or two high school courses. This accessibility empowers college graduates to gather the expertise in their chosen area in order to become a professional in the field. Going to college after high school teaches students invaluable lessons outside of the classroom as well. Exposure to new peer groups, cultures, and social situations provides students with the opportunity to expand their social circle and experience new things. All of these experiences allow college students to grow and evolve as an individual as they move from youth to adulthood.

Of the 17.3 million undergraduate students enrolled in fall 2014, approximately 56% were white, 17% were Hispanic, 14% were black, and 6% were Asian\(^\text{14}\) (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). According to the United States Census (2015), approximately 48.8% of youth age 18-19 years old enrolled in college following their spring 2014 graduation from high school. The college enrollment rate of Asians (66.8%) was higher than for white (49.7%), black (41.3%), and Hispanic (44.1%) graduates.

Understanding college admission requirements is very important when examining the difference between high school graduates, high school dropouts who have earned a GED, and high school dropouts who have not earned a GED. A majority of 2-year community colleges will allow potential students who have dropped out of high school without a GED to enroll in their school upon completion of the SAT exam and the school’s requisite math and English placement tests. Some colleges, however, will not allow applicants to enroll in classes for credit until they have completed their GED. Almost all 4-year colleges and universities have such a

\(^{14}\) List is not inclusive of all racial categories.
requirement, and, despite the GED being defined as a high school equivalency diploma, many postsecondary institutions place a higher value on a high school diploma than a GED. When considering an applicant for admission, a student with a GED has no GPA or academic background to assess. Although an SAT can provide some general academic competency information, a high school diploma provides more of a history to consider, including strength in particular academic areas. Financial aid funding may also be impacted by one’s high school diploma attainment. Although having a high school diploma, GED, or taking a correct test to determine financial aid will enable students to receive the Federal Pell grant of $5,350/year, a high school diploma will make applicants eligible for additional grants and scholarships (Choitz, V., Strawn, J. & Foster, M., 2012).

**Juvenile Delinquency and Adult Incarceration**

One of the prevailing findings from studies conducted on the causes of juvenile delinquency is the relationship between a lack of school success and school disengagement, and a child’s involvement in the criminal justice system. On average, states spend approximately $88,000 per year to incarcerate one young person; this number must be compared to the approximately $10,000 per year spent on educating one (Dignity in Schools, 2014). Suspensions, often the first stop along the school-to-prison pipeline, play a crucial role in pushing students out of the school system and into the criminal justice system. Research shows a clear correlation between suspensions, low achievement, and dropping out of school. Specifically, students who have been suspended are three times more likely to drop out by the 10th grade than students who have never been suspended (Goertz, et. al., 1996). Dropping out in
turn triples the likelihood that a person will be incarcerated later in life (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2001).

Research has consistently found that America's standard of living and international competitiveness would be strengthened if high schools were improved. A basic cost-benefit analysis conducted by the United States Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2015) indicates that the current juvenile justice system is not optimal: “If juvenile incarceration either enhanced human capital accumulation or deterred future crime and incarceration, a tradeoff could be considered. Rather, we find that for juveniles on the margin of incarceration, such detention leads to both a decrease in high school completion and an increase in adult incarceration.”

According to a report from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2006), Saving Futures, Saving Dollars: The Impact of Education on Crime Reduction and Earnings, which examined research on educational attainment and arrest / incarceration rates, “Increasing the graduation rate and college matriculation of male students by only 5% could lead to a combined savings and revenue of almost $8 billion each year.” The report found that 75% of America's state prison inmates, almost 59% of federal inmates, and 69% of jail inmates had not completed high school. “The nation needs to focus dollars and efforts on reforming school climate to keep students engaged in ways that will lead them toward college and a career and away from crime and prison. The school-to-prison pipeline starts and ends with schools.” said Bob Wise, president of the Alliance for Excellent Education and former governor of West Virginia. The Alliance for Excellent Education report concluded that to achieve savings and additional revenue, the nation's
schools, especially its high schools, must initiate policies at the national, state, and local levels that will support effective reforms and innovative teaching practices. Said policies must include methods of intervention that bring struggling students up to grade-level, and integrate teaching and learning experiences that bring real-world relevance into classrooms.

According to the United States Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2014), law enforcement agencies refer approximately two-thirds of all arrested youth to a court with juvenile jurisdiction for further processing. One issue which has come under scrutiny is that juvenile court judges have wide discretion over sentencing, with some judges consistently handing down longer sentences and others opting for alternative methods of behavior control, such as residential schools and community-based sanctions. As with law enforcement, the court may decide to divert some juveniles away from the formal justice system to other agencies for service whereas some students do not even stand before the juvenile court judge for such a decision to be made, because the prosecutor files their juvenile case directly to the adult criminal court system. Juvenile courts formally process more than 1 million delinquency and status offense cases annually. They then adjudicate these cases and may order probation or residential placement, or waive jurisdiction and transfer certain cases to adult criminal court. While their cases are being processed, juveniles may be held in secure detention facilities for over one year.

The impact of judicial discretion on juvenile incarceration was evaluated in a study published in The Quarterly Journal of Economics (Aizer & Doyle, 2015). The study analyzed 10 years of data on approximately 35,000 juvenile offenders in Chicago. Their analysis of random
judicial assignments for juvenile cases concluded that there are significant “differences in [sentencing] outcomes” based upon which judge is assigned to the case. When looking at the long-term impact of this inequity, the data suggests that “assignment to a judge with a high incarceration rate in other cases leads to a significantly lower likelihood of high-school completion and a significantly higher likelihood of incarceration as an adult, including incarceration for violent crimes.” Juvenile incarceration was found to decrease the chances of high school graduation by 13 to 39 percentage points and increase the chances of incarceration as an adult by 23 to 41 percentage points, as compared to the average public school student in the same area. The researchers note that, “although incarceration of these juveniles is intended to be short in duration (one to two months), it can be very disruptive. Once incarcerated, juveniles are unlikely to ever return to school.”

According to the United States Department of Justice (2014), approximately 70,000 juvenile criminal offenders in the United States live in residential detention facilities, and about 68% of these juvenile inmates are racial minorities. Many thousands of others are held in detention centers awaiting trials – sometimes for over one year. The overall number of juvenile offenders in such facilities has declined since 1997, when the figure was 116,000, but tens of thousands of juveniles are still detained for the first time each year, often beginning a long-term pattern of contact with the criminal justice system. In 2010, high school-age juveniles made up 83% of the delinquency caseload. Black youth constituted 16% of the juvenile population, but 33% of the delinquency caseload.
In addition to increasing federal, state and local investment in education, social scientists and researchers have offered a number of methods for promoting youth rehabilitation and avoiding youth incarceration. Providing additional support and resources for at-risk juveniles has been found effective in reducing the negative impact of incarceration on juveniles, such as the low rates at which juveniles return to school upon release. Electronic monitoring and enforced curfews have been widely recommended over juvenile incarceration – especially for non-violent offenses. Many states have adopted policies of increasing police presence in schools, which has led to an increase in juvenile arrests for relatively mild infractions. This leads to an increase in juvenile detention, and therefore researchers suggest that the continued expansion of this policy, which has been seen with the expansion of zero-tolerance policies, has the potential to reduce high school graduation rates for those directly affected and increase future juvenile delinquency, juvenile incarceration, and adult incarceration. Policies that make increased contact with police a near certainty must be revisited to assess whether the ends justify the means.

**Figure Eight:** Percent of Young Adults Ages 20-24 in Prison or Jail, by Gender and Race/Hispanic Origin, 2010

![Figure 8: Percent of Young Adults Ages 20-24 in Prison or Jail, by Gender and Race/Hispanic Origin, 2010](image)
Socioeconomic status

30 years ago high school dropouts could find jobs that paid enough to support a family, but the job market is different now, and less manual labor positions are available to provide employment opportunities for uneducated people. Young people who leave school today face a lifetime of economic hardship. Young adults who do not finish high school are more likely to be unemployed than those who complete high school, and when they do find employment, they usually earn less than high school graduates (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). In addition to the personal and family impact of academic withdrawal, high dropout rates produce social and economic woes for communities. Dropouts are far more likely to become unemployed, receive public assistance, commit crimes, and become incarcerated. At the same time, they are less likely to receive job-based health insurance and pension plans, to stay healthy
and live full lives, to pay taxes, and to vote and make other kinds of civic contributions (Rouse

According to the United States Department of Labor (2013), among adults age 25 and
older, a lower percentage of dropouts are now in the labor force than adults who have earned a
high school credential; between October 2013 and October 2014, the labor force participation
rate for recent high school dropouts (41.2%) was much lower than for recent high school
graduates not enrolled in college (72.7%). In 2013, the median income of persons ages 18
through 67 who had not completed high school was roughly $25,000. By comparison, the
median income of persons ages 18 through 67 who completed their education with at least a high
school credential, including a General Educational Development (GED) certificate, was
approximately $46,000 (US Department of Commerce, 2013). Over a person’s lifetime, this
translates into a loss of approximately $670,000 in income for a person who did not complete
high school compared to a person with at least a high school credential.

According to the US Department of Labor (2015), the unemployment rate for high school
graduates, at 18.4% in October 2014, was more than twice the rate for college graduates (7.3%).
Labor force participation rates for unenrolled men (93.5%) and women (91.8%) were highest for
those with a bachelor's degree or higher and lowest for men (68%) and women (54%) with less
than a high school diploma. Among unenrolled youth who did not have a high school diploma,
unemployment rates in October 2014 were 24.6% for young men and 32.1% for young women.
In contrast, the jobless rates of young men and women with at least a bachelor's degree were
8.0% and 7.8%, respectively. Black youth not enrolled in school had an unemployment rate of
23.7% in October 2014, which was significantly higher than the rates for their white (11.4%),
Asian (12.8 %), and Hispanic (12.8%) counterparts. One of the largest factors impacting that statistic is incarceration and felony records.

According to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, the 2012 dropout rate for students living in low-income families was greater than the rate of their peers from high-income families (5.9% versus 1.3%), which indicates a cyclical poverty reality for low-income families and high school dropouts. Low-income families are more likely to have a child who drops out of high school, and high school dropouts are more likely to be low-income as an adult. How can one break this cycle? Staying in school is an important step.

Young people who drop out of high school are unlikely to have the minimum skills and credentials necessary to function in today’s increasingly complex society and technology-dependent workplace. The completion of high school is usually required for accessing post-secondary education, and is a minimum requirement for most jobs. A high school diploma is associated with higher incomes and occupational status, and young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty and receive government assistance. High school dropouts are also more likely to become involved in crime. Further, dropout status has been linked with poor health, including poor mental health. Such negative outcomes, along with diminished labor force participation, exact a high economic toll on society. According to the Alliance for Academic Advancement (2011), if the dropouts from the nation's class of 2011 had graduated, the United States economy would benefit by about $154 billion dollars over their lifetimes.
Health

Student dropout rates directly relate to socioeconomic status and socioeconomic status directly relates to physical health, thereby systemically linking high school completion to a person’s long-term physical health and mental well-being. Dropout rates are often linked to general public health concerns, such as arrests, incarceration, unemployment, and an overreliance upon public assistance, but there is a significant physical health impact that must be acknowledged separate and apart from the general public health concerns. Socioeconomic status is one of the most powerful risk factors for poor health outcomes, and people of lower socioeconomic status suffer disproportionately from nearly all diseases, and have higher rates of mortality than people of higher socioeconomic statuses (Hughes & Simpson, 1995). Socioeconomic status underlies three major determinants of health: health care, environmental exposure, and health behavior, and the chronic stress associated with lower socioeconomic status increases morbidity and mortality.

Economic hardship is associated with lower levels of mental well-being and a lower life expectancy (Mirowsky, J., & Ross, C. E., 1989) along with a wide range of physical health problems, including low birthweight, cardiovascular disease, hypertension, arthritis, diabetes, and cancer (Adler & Newman, 2000). While socioeconomic status is clearly linked to morbidity and mortality, the mechanisms responsible for the association are not well-understood or fully acknowledged. Identifying these mechanisms provides more options for policy remedies; however, identifying some mechanisms means acknowledging the existence of social inequities and failed social programs that some prefer to ignore. One such mechanism is education, and the most important associated policy remedy would focus on student retention.
A 2010 analysis of high school dropouts age 25 and older, conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Center for Disease Control and Prevention, found that adults who had dropped out of high school reported being in worse overall health than adults who had graduated (Pleis, Ward, and Lucas 2010). By improving school climate, eliminating out-of-school suspensions, addressing innate biases that result in disparate disciplinary actions, and developing alternative methods for addressing poor student conduct, dropout rates would lower, graduation rates would increase, and the long-term socioeconomic statuses of struggling students would improve thereby improving their overall mental and physical health.

In early adolescence, a positive school climate is predictive of better psychological well-being. Studies examining the connections between school climate and student health have found that the socioemotional climate of a school is significantly related to the frequency of students’ substance abuse and psychiatric problems (LaRusso, Romer, & Selman, 2008; Ruus et al., 2007). A positive school climate is also linked to less self-reported psychiatric problems among high school students (LaRusso et al., 2009).

According to a study conducted at the University of California, Los Angelos (Losen & Martinez, 2013) that examined the overuse of suspensions in middle and high schools, efforts to reduce suspensions would not only improve graduation rates and achievement scores, as well as decrease juvenile and adult incarceration rates, but also improve life outcomes, including increased health and longer lifespans. In 2013, the Young-HUNT study (DeRidder, K., et. al., 2013) was published in BMC Public Health, a peer-reviewed journal focused on the epidemiology of disease and the understanding of all aspects of public health. The study examined high school dropouts and long-term sickness and disability in young adulthood, and
concluded that dropping out of high school and long-term sickness and disability in young adulthood are strongly associated. In their findings, the researchers stated:

Young people dropping out from school and never being included in or leaving the labor market due to health problems or disability represent an individual hazard and a society challenge. Prospective studies of health and social functioning in young adulthood among dropouts are rare, although there is evidence to suggest a substantially higher risk of sickness and disability among high school dropouts compared to school completers. Hence, a better understanding of the complex role of adolescent health and socioeconomic factors underlying the association between school dropout and subsequent sickness and disability may provide important information for social welfare strategies and for public health policy.

The study revealed the importance of early prevention of dropout where possible, combined with increased attention to labor market integration and targeted support for those who fail to complete school.

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15 The difference for long-term sickness or disability for a school dropout compared to graduate was 21%.
CHAPTER V
Findings: The Emotional Impact of Out-of-School Suspensions
Focus-group Interviews

Student Perspectives on School Climate:

Each focus group interview session started with a warm up activity intended to promote student comfortability in the focus group environment. After introducing themselves, students were asked about what school climate means to them. Students were mostly unfamiliar with the term “school climate.” They were therefore provided a broad definition, describing the term as one that refers to factors that contribute to the tone and attitudes of staff and students in school, and asked to speak about those factors. Students unanimously acknowledged the importance of a positive school climate, and each focus group spent a significant amount of time talking about the types of attitudes, actions, and activities that they feel foster a positive (or negative) school climate. When speaking about a positive school climate, students spoke about factors such as positive relationships with teachers, clean schools, friendly administrators, physical safety, emotional support, and compassionate security guards. Factors contributing to a negative school climate included angry teachers, strict and unfriendly administrators and security officer, harsh and unfair discipline, lack of emotional support, academic apathy and frustration amongst students, fights, and dirty schools.

After a general discussion on the topic of school climate, students were asked to describe their feelings about the school climate of their own schools. Students were asked to go around the circle and state one or two words that describe their feelings about their school. Words of positivity included: Fun, challenging, nice teachers, good grades, motivating, interesting, smart
people, good friends, and positive messages. Words of negativity included: Boring, unfair, mean teachers, hard tests, like jail, frustrated kids, no understanding, angry people, and stupid rules.

After providing one or two word descriptions of their own school’s climate, students were asked to expand upon their statements as well as the statements of other students for whom they agreed with or could relate to. When describing their positive experiences at school, students discussed the teachers they liked, the sports they enjoyed playing, the opportunities they saw for their future, the value of the information learned, the friends they have made, the afterschool programs they valued, and the preparation for college they appreciated (such as college tours, SAT preparation, and teacher encouragement). When discussing their negative feelings about school, students described their interactions with angry teachers, administrative aggression, unfair and unnecessary discipline, perceived disrespect, teacher favoritism, rude and/or racist teachers and administrators, poor building quality (including odors, broken desks, broken water fountains, dirty bathrooms, etc.), and overcrowded classrooms.

When asked whether they felt that their school climate impacted their opinion of school and feelings about academia, students unanimously replied, “Yes.” Some students spoke about having attended different schools, with different school climates, and having different feelings about academia when studying in each type of learning environment. The students consistently concurred that a positive school climate encourages students to excel academically and “act better” in the classroom. They talked about the cyclical effect of positivity and negativity within a school, noting that “when teachers are [positive towards] students, students act better and start less problems,” whereas “when teachers have a [negative] attitude [towards] their students, their
students act worse which makes the teachers more mad and more mean.” Student I summarized the cause and effect phenomenon very well, stating:

It is a never-ending cycle. Teachers want students to act better, but they yell and use criticism and punishment to get it. It doesn’t work. Kids get more mad and discouraged from all the anger, and punishments, and phone calls to parents... The more bad they feel about their school, the less kids care about how they act. Then they act up more and get the teachers more mad. Then the teachers punish kids more. It’s crazy.

Student H added:

I have seen it happen in a lot of my classes…I’ve done it too. When a teacher yells at me or kicks me out of class, it doesn’t make me want to do better. It makes me never want to go to that class again – especially if I think they were unfair when they yelled at me.

Student F agreed, adding that he has witnessed a decline in overall attitude and attendance amongst students who have been repeatedly yelled at, removed from class, and suspended from school. He noted that although these students had behavioral issues, the response from teachers and administrators “didn’t seem reasonable.” He felt that teachers and administrators often overreact, and their responses “make students rebel from school instead of change their behavior to act better.”
One measure of school climate is the level of harassment felt by students. During our focus group interviews, we talked about the different types of harassment that students have felt or observed, such as verbal bullying and physical attacks. Most students reported having witnessed verbal harassment, participated in verbal harassment (only a few admissions of this were made), and/or having been verbally harassed by students, teachers, and/or administrators.

Name-calling, teasing, and threats (of discipline by school staff and violence by classmates) were the most common forms of verbal abuse reported by the students. When asked about the basis of this harassment, students talked about victims being singled out based upon personal characteristics, such as physical appearance (including weight, clothing, and skin color), race/ethnicity, religion, income level, physical or intellectual ability, and sexual orientation. Some students felt that the staff members at their school made a notable attempt to prevent this harassment or address it when observed, but other students felt that staff members often turned a blind eye to such harassment, or were participants in the abuse. Student U reported witnessing one teacher refer to her class as stupid and lazy, and Student X said that she witnessed a teacher tell a student that he was never going to go anywhere in his life, because he talked too much in class. Student H, a Hispanic student, talked about teachers who are impatient with students who are English Language Learners. She noted that one teacher told a student that he “needed to talk right” if he wanted to go to college and another teacher told Student H that she was not like the “other Spanish kids” because she “could talk right.” Student M spoke about a few instances where teachers ignored inappropriate student comments and behaviors. Included in the examples provided, were instances of students using the “n-word” and students making fun of kids based upon the brand of clothing they were wearing (bullying based upon socioeconomic status). He said that it appeared to him that some teachers had given up. He described them as “burnt out”
and “done with trying.” When asked how this made him feel, he said spoke about the challenges of staying motivated as a student when teachers had “checked out” and demonstrated a lack of interest in student success.

Students in Focus Group Six spoke at length about teachers who ignored student-on-student bullying. All five students in this group said that they had witnessed a significant amount of student-on-student bullying, but teachers “rarely” did anything about it because they had “given up.” Two students said that they had friends who were “scared to go to school sometimes because of bullying,” and one student reported feeling angry that one student who was being bullied because of his sexual orientation was “not protected like he should [have been]” by his teachers. Students also mentioned inappropriate race-based language used regularly by students, such as “nigga,” that goes unaddressed by school staff members. Some students said that the word doesn’t bother them, but others said that they felt “mad” or “sad” or “disgusted” that such language was permitted within the classroom. Student Y stated:

It is not about disciplining kids for using the ‘n-word,’ it is about educating them on why they shouldn’t use it…Kids have to learn more than math and science at school. They need to learn about life, and teachers don’t try hard enough to teach kids about life and prepare them for the real world, where when you use words like that you are looked at badly by society…Kids aren’t often talked to by their parents about this stuff because their parents don’t know or aren’t educated. It is a school’s job to make us better than our parents and have more intelligence about this stuff.
Student Z added:

Teachers are quick to send you to the principal’s office. All they want to do is get you out of the class so they can go on with their lesson. It is all about punishing kids and never about teaching them the difference between right and wrong. It’s sad.

**Student Perspectives on School Safety:**

School safety was introduced to each focus group in terms of physical safety, emotional safety, and psychological safety. Students expressed a clear understanding of what constitutes physical safety, but an explanation of what constitutes emotional and psychological safety was needed in order for most students to feel confident that they fully understood both concepts. It was explained that emotional safety refers to an emotional state achieved in relationships when individuals feel trustful of one another and comfortable to be open and vulnerable with each other. In an emotionally safe relationship, the parties trust each other and routinely give each other the benefit of the doubt in questionable circumstances. If members of a group or team perceive other group members to be trustworthy and reliable, they are likely to feel emotionally safe. However, if one or more group members perceive others to be untrustworthy and undependable, emotional safety will likely be lost. Students were told that psychological safety refers to a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking; in psychologically safe groups, members feel accepted and respected, which empowers them to feel motivated to share their thoughts and ideas. It was further stated that, within these research focus groups, it is
important that participants feel physically, emotionally and psychologically safe and it was my hope, as the moderator, that I was successful in making everyone feel safe.

Students were told that, for the purpose of this research, students, staff, and administrators are considered to be one team. Although this team could be divided into subgroups, there is a broader team within the academic environment that includes all who participate in the learning process. It was agreed amongst the students in each focus group that in order for an academic environment to be effective, physical, emotional and psychological safety must be had by all team members. When asked, however, only a few students reported feeling physically, emotionally and psychologically safe within their schools. Most students reported feeling physically safe (despite reports from many students who said that they had either participated in or witnessed physical fights within their school or on school grounds), but several students said that, after having learned the definition of each type of safety, they would not say that they feel emotionally and/or psychologically safe.

Before students were afforded the opportunity to talk about their feelings and experiences related to physical, emotional, and psychological safety, they were asked to provide a number value, zero through ten, to represent:

1. How safe they feel while at school (no type of safety was specified; students were asked for an overall number that encompassed all three types); and

2. The fairness of student discipline at their school, including the use of out-of-school suspensions.
Table One: Student Perspectives on School Safety - by Race & Gender

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<th>School Safety Rating 0-10</th>
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<th>Hispanic Students M/F</th>
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Student answers differed widely, with four students answering 0 or 1, and four students answering 9 or 10. Black students were the only students to respond with a number of 0-3 (low) and white students (and the one Asian student who was interviewed) were the only students to respond with a number of 8-10 (high). Four of the six white students (3 females & 1 male) rated their feelings of school safety as between 8-10 (high). The other two white students (1 male and 1 female), rated their feelings as between 4-7 (average). No black students rated their feelings as “high,” and only one Hispanic female rated her experience as “high.” Nine students, all who were black, rated their feelings of school safety as between 0-3 (low). Eight of these nine
students were black males and one student was a black female. Six of the seven Hispanic students rated their feelings of school safety as between 4-7 (average). One Hispanic female student offered a rating of 9 (high).

Students were each asked to explain why they selected the number value that they chose to represent their feelings about school safety. Several of the students who rated their feelings about school safety as high told the group about positive interactions with teachers and administrators, who had supported them during times of need, helped them to learn challenging subjects, rewarded them for positive behavior, recognized their accomplishments, and encouraged them to succeed. They also talked about the positive relationships that they have had with classmates, and how important such relationships were to feeling safe and secure. None of these students reported having witnessed a physical altercation between a staff and student, and only a couple talked about having witnessed a verbal altercation (Verbal altercations were described as arguments between students and staff - not teacher reprimand for student misconduct in the classroom.) between staff and students. These altercations were described as minor, with minimal emotional response by either participant. These students said that while in high school, they have enjoyed a positive learning environment within their school, which has provided them with a comfortable place to learn and express their points-of-view. These students, who all reported wanting to go to college upon graduating from high school, consistently emphasized the importance of getting good grades in high school in order to prepare them for college. They talked about the connection between feeling safe and getting good grades, and acknowledged that if they did not feel safe, then they, as stated by Student Z, “probably would not get as good of grades” as they do.
The students who rated their school safety experience as high also spoke about feeling comfortable with school safety procedures, such as fire drills, and they spoke about the trust that they have in the capabilities of their school’s security officers, hall monitors, and administrators (such as deans, assistant principals and principals). A couple of students mentioned that they feel comfortable enough to approach teachers and administrators about personal issues, such as learning disabilities and arguments with classmates or family members, which increased their feelings of safety. One student spoke about how she felt comfortable to speak to her guidance counselor about a death in her family, and another student spoke about the competency of his school’s security guard who broke up a physical fight between two students before anyone was hurt.

The students who rated their feelings of school safety as average (over half of the students interviewed), had mixed experiences with, and perceptions of, their school’s efforts and ability to provide a physically, emotionally and psychologically safe learning environment for students. Some students said that they gave an average rating because some teachers and administrators are “good” and some are “bad.” Other students said that they gave an average rating because, as a whole, their school “does an okay, but not great, job” at providing a safe environment. Generally, the students who gave an average rating felt that, although there were some noteworthy efforts made by some school staff members to provide a healthy learning environment that encourages feelings of physical, emotional, and psychological safety, there was significant room for improvement. These students remarked that fairness and equity are definitely areas in need of improvement. Multiple students noted that it was “impossible” for
students to feel emotionally and psychologically safe when student misconduct was handled inconsistently by teachers and student discipline was administered inequitably, with favored students receiving lighter punishment for the same poor behavior exhibited by other students who received harsher discipline.

All of the students who rated their feelings on school safety as average said that they had either experienced or witnessed negative interactions between students and teachers/administrators at their school. All of them had witnessed at least one physical altercation between students, and most of them reported having witnessed strong disciplinary action taken in response to student misconduct that did not warrant the reaction (such as speaking in class, joking around “like kids do,” chewing gum, and not wearing proper attire). Seven of these students had never been suspended, six had been suspended one time, and two had been suspended twice. Some felt that their own discipline was applied fairly in relationship to the level of their misconduct, but many felt that the discipline was either too harsh for the misbehavior that was being addressed. Three students remarked that they had seen the same behavior handled differently and one student remarked that although he had not observed the same exact student behavior that he was disciplined for (fighting), he was “absolutely positive” that others would have been treated differently under the same circumstance because he had witnessed the inequitable handling of other behaviors.

Three of the students who rated their school safety level as average reported either presently having metal detectors in their schools or having had metal detectors in past schools. These students all rated their feelings about school safety as a four or five, the lower of the
average ratings. When asked about the impact of metal detectors on their feelings of school safety, these students reported that, although they did make them feel “sort of physically safer,” they had never witnessed an incident that they felt would warrant metal detectors. Student D, a Hispanic male student, and Student I, a black male student, were students in separate focus groups who rated their feelings of both school safety and disciplinary fairness as low to low-average. These students also spoke about having had metal detectors within their school, and both relayed that “metal detectors make school seem like jail,” and several students in each group agreed, adding comments such as, “They are treating kids like criminals,” “School shouldn’t feel like jail,” and “All schools don’t have metal detectors, which is not right. Either everyone should have them or no one should…Why do some kids seem more like they would bring danger? I haven’t seen anyone bring a gun or other weapon to school.” One student remarked, “I think that they put metal detectors in schools with more black kids, which is racist.” Student S, who shared that he has an older brother and an uncle in jail, said that he “works hard to get good grades and do right,” but feels “like [he’s] in [prison] too” because of metal detectors and “mean security guards” who appear to look at him distrustfully every morning.

Every focus group discussion, without leadership guidance, transitioned from the topic of school safety to the topic of equity and fairness of discipline. It is recognized that such a transition may have occurred so consistently due to the known topic of this research, but the transitions were remarkably smooth and surprisingly required absolutely no transitional guidance. Student C, a black female, said that, although she feels physically safe at her school, her feelings about unfair disciplinary policies make her feel vulnerable (emotionally unsafe) – which “probably [impacts her] psychologically.” Student C stated:
I’m not scared of school in a way like I’m going to get hurt, but I do feel targeted because of the color of my skin and that makes me feel unsafe and upset…I’ve seen a lot of prejudice teachers acting rude to some students and not rude to other students when they were doing the same thing. They definitely yell at some kids more and do not send kids to the principal’s office equally.

When asked what types of kids are targeted, Student C replied, “black kids.” Student A agreed with Student C asserting that she was suspended “because [she was] black.” Student D, a Hispanic male, however, rebutted, asserting that he too had been suspended unfairly and therefore “You can’t just say that its black kids that are targeted. Hispanic kids are treated unfair too – especially boys.”

Student B, a Hispanic female who had been suspended, relayed that she understood why she was suspended, and did “not think that the punishment was totally unfair” for what she had done; however, she feels that suspensions are given out unfairly, which creates an unsafe environment due to student frustration and insecurities surrounding appropriate behavior and the repercussions of poor behavior. She relayed that she was suspended for one day after arguing repeatedly with a teacher and then yelling disrespectfully at the principal. She noted that she had already received detention a few times and understood that “they were trying to make a point about [her] behavior.” Her frustration resulted not from the response to her behavior, but from the fact that she had witnessed other students who had yelled at teachers and principals and were not suspended. She added that she has observed suspensions and detentions applied unfairly
“almost all the time,” because for every student she saw disciplined in that manner, she had observed other students behaving similarly and not disciplined in that manner. When asked by a black male student in her group whether she agreed that it was black males who were targeted unfairly the most, she replied:

Some kids act up and only get a warning. Some don’t get any warning. They just get sent to the office or something. I can’t say that it is only skin color that determines how kids are treated, but it does seem like more black kids and more boys are kicked out of class more than anyone else...I think it’s a culture thing, because the black teachers do not seem to kick the black kids out of class as much. Same thing with Hispanic teachers and students who speak Spanish – they’re more patient because they know what the kids are going through. They can relate to them. White teachers...not all but some of them... understand less. They love Asian students and white kids, and they give them the benefit of the doubt over black and Hispanic students. It’s unfair and racist.

Students G and T, the two students who had been suspended twice and rated their safety level as average (levels of 4 and 5) participated in two separate focus groups, but had similar characteristics, made several analogous comments, and expressed parallel viewpoints regarding safety and disciplinary equity. Both are black male students in the 10th grade who had been suspended twice and witnessed at least one classmate be suspended. They both reported earning poor grades, although Student T said that his grades have improved since being assigned a one-to-one paraprofessional. When discussing their rating of average as related to school safety, both
students spoke a lot about physical safety, but had a difficult time discussing feelings related to emotional and/or psychological safety. Student T repeatedly connected feeling emotionally and/or psychologically unsafe to being “afraid” or “weak,” feelings that he clearly did not want to acknowledge. Student G talked a lot about the dangers of the streets and how no threat of danger at school could even compare to the dangers experienced outside of school.

After a few students in Student G’s focus group responded to his assertions regarding physical fear, Student H, a Hispanic female in Student G’s focus group, asked Student G about his feelings with regards to emotional and psychological safety at school. A very thoughtful conversation emerged thereafter. Student G paused for a moment before answering, appearing uncertain as to how to answer the question. He eventually stated:

Yeah. That’s a hard question. I know you said what it means to be safe besides physically, but it’s hard to think about fear like that. When I think about it, and know things aren’t fair, then I think it can’t be a safe place emotionally. To say that tough, feels strange. I don’t go to school and cry – which is what I picture when you say emotionally safe.

Student E, a black male student in the same focus group who rated his feelings of safety, and his opinion on disciplinary equity, both as zero, told Student G that he understood what Student G was saying, but that it would be “impossible” to feel emotionally or psychologically safe “if you don’t think that teachers use rules fairly,” and it is “okay to admit” this – “especially for this kind of research project, because it will show people how we really feel.” After several
students agreed, Student E continued, “I don’t feel safe. I know that no one can really hurt me physically in school, but they can hurt me real bad with injustice. Remember G – it’s not only about physical safety.”

Students E and G both rated their feelings about disciplinary equity as zero. When Student E was asked what he meant when he said that he can be hurt by injustice, he replied that inequitably applied disciplinary policies “target certain students” and those students are then “treated bad[ly] by other teachers after the one teacher has already picked them out.” Student E said that, although he has never been suspended, he has witnessed several classmates be suspended, and “they were all black.” He said that his grades are okay, and he hasn’t felt targeted himself so much, “but knowing that black kids are treated unfairly makes [him] feel not safe, because [he] know[s] that, at anytime, [he] could be targeted.” Student E expressed that he feels like the fact that he is kind of quiet in class, gets “okay” grades, and has a mom who comes to the parent-teacher meetings, keeps him from getting targeted. He said that, in addition to race and gender making young black males susceptible to unfair treatment, students in this group who do not have a supportive family “get targeted the worst.”

Nine students rated their school safety level as low. All students were black males except for one black female. Five of these students, including the one female, had been suspended at least one time, and four of them had never been suspended. All but one student had witnessed a classmate be suspended. Seven of these students also rated their feelings of disciplinary equity as low, with five offering a rating of zero or one. When asked to explain the basis of their low ratings, several students talked about the emotional and psychological impact of yelling teachers,
mean administrators, unfair grades, and unfair treatment. Unfair treatment included inequitable discipline. Students spoke about targeted groups of students being yelled at, removed from the classroom, given detention, suspended, and arrested more than other students. These students, who were all black, participated in six of the seven different focus groups, yet consistently indicated that they felt that black kids – mostly black males - were treated the most unfairly. Several Hispanic males, however, indicated that they too were targeted unfairly and that black students don’t understand the prejudices that Hispanic students deal with. Several students, who did not provide the same low safety rating, did agree that black and Hispanic male students tend to be disciplined the most; however, a few students said that it was fair, because they were the students who were acting up the most in class. Some healthy debate erupted in several of the focus groups when this comment was made by participants.
Table Two: Student Perspectives on Disciplinary Equity

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Student Perspectives on Disciplinary Equity

When asked, those who rated their feelings about school safety as high also expressed feelings of perceived equity with regards to school discipline and grading. These students consistently reported getting good grades and said that they were rarely disciplined and never suspended. Two of these students admitted that if they received lower grades, they may not think that the grading policies at their schools were as fair, but because they do, it never concerned them. When asked whether they were aware of whether other students received fair grades, some students said that they thought others were graded fairly; some reported not
knowing how fair others were graded; and a few reported having observed unfair treatment by
teachers towards other students. One student said that she was aware of one “troublemaker” who
she thinks got a lower grade on his paper because his teacher “does not like him,” and another
student said that her teacher “definitely plays favorites” – she is just “lucky enough to be one of
the ones [her teacher] likes.”

In two different focus groups, black students who had rated their feelings of school safety
as low responded to assertions of fairness with anger, frustration and/or disgust. Comments
included, “Of course you don’t feel targeted. You’re not black” and “Really? You think that
everyone is treated exactly the same by teachers? I cannot believe that. That’s ignorant.” Black
students asked their fellow group members how many black friends they had and whether these
students “even know what racism is.” When the students responded affirmatively, these students
replied with heartfelt statements regarding their perceptions of, and experiences with, racism –
both in and out of school. Student E commented:

Racism exists. It just does. If you don’t see it, then you’re not looking or you
don’t really understand it. Racism is a part of America and any black student in
your school will tell you that it exists and they’ve been a victim from it at some
point in their life.

Student G added:

I have three brothers and we’ve all been [targeted] because we’re black. In school
and in the streets…By cops and teachers and principals. We are here because this
lady’s writing a paper about racism and how kids are suspended unfairly. Sometimes it looks like a student deserves to be yelled at or suspended, but if other students who are white or Asian do the same thing, and aren’t punished the same as the black kid – then that is racism. And that happens. It happens. You can’t say it doesn’t. It just does.

As indicated by Student G, several students, mostly white students and Hispanic females, expressed their position that, although some groups of students (black males in particular) may be punished more, those same groups of students “deserve it” because they are “always misbehaving.” When asked whether they felt that students who are misbehaving in the same way were consistently disciplined with the same harshness, several of the students who said that kids deserved the punishment that they received replied that yes, kids are punished consistently. Other students, however, despite stating that they believed students were punished appropriately for their behavior, acknowledged that students are not disciplined consistently and that some students are disciplined more harshly than others for the same behavior.

Student P, a white male student who had never been suspended, said that he has been sent for detention “a few times” and he “always deserved it.” He noted that, although he has seen black students disciplined, he did not “feel like it was ever unfair,” because “they were always acting up.” Student Q, a black male participant in Student P’s focus group, countered that, asserting that, although many kids did deserve the punishment that they were given, there were often “other kids who deserved it too, but did not get it.” Student Q spoke about five students who were all involved in a fight on the playground. Two of the students, both black males, were suspended; one student, a white male who allegedly instigated the fight, was given detention, and
the other two students, one a black male and one a Hispanic male had their parents called. Student Q said that the two students who had their parents called “did not do as much in the fight,” and therefore their punishment was reasonable, but the white male who got detention, however, was the one who started the fight and acted the most violent, yet received a less severe punishment than the two black males who participated in the fight. Student Q stated:

Those kids deserved to get in trouble. I’m not saying that they didn’t. But you can’t feel emotionally safe – like we’ve been talking about – if you know that they are black and getting into more trouble than the white kid who acted the worst.

Student AA, the only Hispanic student who rated her feelings about school safety as well as her feelings about disciplinary fairness as “high,” stated that, if asked to provide a number value to represent her feelings about fairness with regards to grading (students were not asked for this), she would not have rated it as high as her feelings about safety and disciplinary. She said that she may have chosen an average score of around 5, because although she feels that her grades are fairly earned, she did see some inequity with regards to Hispanic students who did not speak English as well as her – especially male students. She noted that, although this inequity did not impact her own feelings with regards to safety, she could “understand how some Hispanic students may not feel emotionally safe because they are upset about receiving bad grades when they try really hard and only get bad grades because English is not their first language.” Student AA mentioned that a student who is an English Language Learner (ELL) and misbehaves, is often disciplined more harshly than other students, which Student AA believes is
due to frustration by the teacher. She admitted that this is not fair, and therefore “maybe [she] shouldn’t rate discipline fairness so high,” but she did “think that discipline is fair most of the time from what [she] can see.”

Student A, a black female senior, talked about the dialogue between teachers and students in her classroom. Having rated her feelings of safety as zero, and her perspective on disciplinary fairness as four, Student A noted that feelings of emotional and psychological safety extend beyond disciplinary equity. Student A said that, although those who have been suspended, including herself, usually acted up in a way that warrants such discipline, the daily inequity that exists within student-teacher interactions creates an atmosphere of hostility between targeted students that, in her opinion, “cause students to act up more.” Student A said that she has witnessed teachers offer “more support and patience and kindness to white kids and Asian kids and Indian kids in [her] class than black kids…especially when the teachers are white,” though “some black teachers act that way too.” She noted that expectations also seemed lowered for black students, with less focus on them during discussions related to college planning and career goals. She added that such disconnect from teachers impacts drastically lowers her feelings of emotional and psychological safety.

Student C, a black female who originally rated disciplinary equity as a six, admitted that, after listening to Student A speak, she “hadn’t thought about it like that.” Student C said that when she rated disciplinary equity, she “only thought about suspensions and detentions.” She didn’t “think that things were totally fair,” which is why she rated disciplinary equity as a six, but she hadn’t considered general student-teacher interactions. She asserted that, once she
thought about equity more broadly, her opinion of fairness lowered, and her rating “goes down.” Student C said that she has witnessed teachers “of all races” yell at black and Hispanic male students (and one white male student who acts up a lot) more than any other student group. She noted that “the more teachers yell at these students, the more they act up…They kind of lose their connection to the class because they don’t feel like the teachers care about them.” Student C said that she “think[s] it’s more about being a boy than race, but [she] can see how black kids would feel targeted, because sometimes it does seem to be like that.” Student C concluded her statement with:

Yeah, now that I think about it, school is definitely more unequal than it seems when you first think about it. Not everything is about being suspended or sent for detention. We have to look at the way people interact, and when I think about it like that I definitely see a lot of ways in which some kids are treated more unfair than other kids. Then when those kids are treated unfair they get mad and will act up more and get disciplined more. If they hadn’t been treated unfair to begin with though, they probably wouldn’t have acted up like that. It’s sad.

The students who rated their school safety experience as high, also consistently rated their perception of fairness with regards to suspensions and discipline as high. None of these students had ever been suspended, and they also reported never having witnessed a classmate be suspended. They all felt that discipline was meted out fairly to students in their classes, although they admitted that they had either never or rarely received discipline themselves. These students all reported having witnessed some form of disciplinary action taken within their classroom
and/or school; however, the incidents that were observed were minor infractions, such as talking in or being late to class, wearing inappropriate clothing to school, talking on cell phones, and chewing gum. These students had little to no experience with serious student infractions or administrative discipline. The most serious disciplinary action reported by them was afterschool detentions, which the students believed had been rightly earned by the students who were so punished. These students reported never having witnessed a student arrest, never having witnessed corporal punishment by a teacher or administrator, and rarely witnessing verbal abuse by teachers. (One student mentioned a teacher who called a student stupid and lazy, and another student mentioned a teacher who unnecessarily yelled loudly at their class when they did poorly on their Regents Exam.)

**Student Perspectives on Suspensions**

After a more general discussion of student discipline and disciplinary equity, each focus group was asked about their perspectives on out-of-school suspensions, specifically. Of the 30 students interviewed, 16 students had never been suspended and 11 students had never witnessed a classmate be suspended. Ten of the students who had never been suspended were students who had never observed another student receive a suspension. Only Student V, a black male, reported having been suspended but never observing another student receive an out-of-school suspension. Student V measured his feelings on school safety as low and his feelings on disciplinary fairness as average. When asked to explain his ratings in relationship to his experience with out-of-school suspensions, Student V told the group that he deserved the suspension that he received because he “had gotten into a lot of trouble before the suspension” and “had gotten a lot of warnings too.” Student V reported that students were “not suspended
very much at his school,” which is “good,” but “because [he had] already [been] suspended once, teachers looked at [him] different and targeted [him] when a group of kids were misbehaving and they should have all gotten yelled at.” Student V said that because he feels targeted in the classroom, his feelings about safety are low. Student V explained:

I’m always afraid that I’m going to be picked on by teachers and get in trouble again. I’m thinking about that a lot and it distracts me from class. It’s not good. It makes me want to not come to school or cut class. Even though I haven’t acted bad like I was before I got in trouble, teachers treat me like I’m a criminal and will always be a bad kid. It’s not fair. I feel targeted because I got into trouble already, which is unfair because you’re never treated the same again or given a chance to be better.

Student W, a black male participant from Student V’s focus group, rated his feelings of safety and disciplinary equity as low. Student W, who had been suspended one time and had witnessed several classmates be suspended, asked Student V if he thought that teachers only targeted him because he had gotten in trouble or for another reason too. Student V replied that he thought that it was because he had gotten into trouble. Student W then retorted, “Did you ever think that it might be because you’re black?” Student V replied that he truly felt that he was being targeted because he had gotten in trouble, but he did understand what Student W was saying and agreed that “black kids do get targeted in school.” Student V stated:
Even black teachers target black kids. Sometimes it is black teachers that say the most rude things. They think they’re helping us by putting us down to make us think about our behavior, but it isn’t helpful. I think they also feel more comfortable saying rude things because they’re black. Like they get a pass or something. They can be just as prejudice as white teachers.

Student W told the group that almost every student he had witnessed be suspended in his school was a black male. He admitted that the student body of his school is predominantly black, but asserted that there “are kids of other races and they do not get in trouble when they are acting disrespectful.” Student W said that he believes that non-black students in his school are “targeted in a positive way.” He explained:

Black kids are just looked at as one big group of misbehaving kids. We are not treated like individuals. We are clumped together and just seen as trouble. The other kids in the class – especially the white and Asian kids – are assumed to be smarter and better behaved than us. They are given the benefit of the doubt and black kids, and sometimes Spanish kids aren’t. Mostly black kids though – especially poorer ones without parents who come to school all the time and get involved with their kid’s lives.

Students AA and BB, two female participants, one white and one Hispanic, who both rated their feelings about school safety and student discipline as high, agreed with each other about the relationship between teachers and students in their schools. Both students agreed that
“kids get what they deserve” when it came to discipline and, though neither had been suspended nor witnessed a student be suspended, said that they felt that students who do get suspended “must deserve it or else they wouldn’t get it.” Student AA said that she felt bad for teachers when kids misbehaved, because “there is only one of them and so many kids to keep track of.” She spoke positively about the way her teachers had treated her and her classmates and has “always hated when kids were rude because it just held up the lesson and kept everyone from learning.” Student BB added that she did not think that her teachers were racist, but could understand why some kids feel that way, because “there is racism in the world and everywhere.” She added, however, that students “should not just assume that everything is done because someone is racist. Sometimes kids just deserve to be punished. They need to be punished.”

Student DD, a Hispanic male in Student AA and Student BB’s focus group, told Students AA and BB that he both agreed and disagreed with what Students AA and BB were saying. Student DD explained that he agrees that “no one should just assume people are racist,” however, “you cannot assume that every student who gets suspended deserves it either.” Student DD has been suspended and has witnessed other students be suspended and, although he acknowledged that the suspensions that were given for fighting were fair, he “saw a lot of suspensions that were not fair.” Student DD spoke about the inequity that he has witnessed with regards to detentions and suspensions. When asked if he believed race played any role in that inequity, Student DD stated:

Yes, but it is doesn’t start with the suspension. It starts before that, with how teachers talk to students and build relationships with them. They treat students
different in the beginning. They have favorites and I think that how they choose their favorites is racial sometimes. Not all the time, but sometimes…There is a group of Asian students who all sit together in my science class. Before the first week of school ended, they were the teacher’s favorite and our teacher had made comments about smart they were and how good they behave. I think that teacher made those kids her favorite before she got to know anyone because she saw that they were Asian and assumed they would be smart and good in class. That’s racism, because it shows that other kids who aren’t of that race are going to be automatically looked at in a certain way too and it isn’t good with some groups.

Implicit Bias

Students were unfamiliar with the phrase implicit bias. They were told that implicit bias refers to the attitudes or stereotypes that affect our understanding, actions, and decisions in an unconscious manner. With some added discussion, they soon felt comfortable with the term. It was agreed that many of the students had, without knowing it, already discussed implicit bias when discussing their experiences with and perceptions of equity and discipline. When asked if they had ever experienced a situation in school where it appeared that implicit bias had an impact (other than those already described), one student discussed an interesting experience within his honors English class. Student F shared that, on the first day of class, the teacher asked the black students to show him their schedule when they entered the classroom. Student F spoke about how strange the behavior appeared, and how clearly uncomfortable the students (including himself) felt when asked this. Student F said that as he watched students entering the classroom, he noticed that the teacher was only asking black kids to see their schedule. The teacher, who
was white, apparently assumed the black students were lost and in the wrong room, and the gesture made them feel unwelcome and humiliated.

Student V circled back to his comments regarding black teachers. He first asked whether black people can have implicit biases about black people, and when it was confirmed for him that yes, such was possible and probable, because everyone has some implicit biases, he spoke about feeling sad to know that “it is not just white people who are prejudice against black people…black people are prejudice against black people too, because we are in a racist society.” Student Y agreed, but added that:

…not everyone is like that…some black teachers understand you more and are more patient with you because they understand you and are like you. Some black teachers are prejudice and don’t even know it. Some white teachers will be more patient because they care. Some will act certain ways because they’re prejudice. It’s person to person…but black kids are always the target. That’s what’s always the same. Yeah – and Spanish kids too. I know that they are treated unfair sometimes too, but not like black kids. It’s just true.

Most students found it challenging to provide examples of behaviors that they felt resulted from implicit bias, seemingly due to a lack of familiarity with the phrase. They also struggled when asked about their own implicit biases, many reacting by stating that they were not prejudiced at all and did not have any such biases. They did, however, come to respect the fact that implicit biases are unconscious stereotypes; therefore, they
may not recognize their own implicit biases. When asked how they felt knowing that their teachers held implicit biases, students had mixed reactions. A couple of students expressed their opinion that unfair treatment based upon subconscious thoughts, feelings and stereotypes are more acceptable than conscious prejudice and less deserving of blame. Others adamantly rejected that notion, asserting that it was the responsibility of school leaders to identify their own biases and enter the classroom free from biases at any level – conscious or subconscious. The one consensus that emerged from every focus group was the understanding that this is a complex topic that must be addressed by all involved – teachers, students, administrators, parents, and all other interested parties. When asked, students relayed that they found the discussions interesting and felt that they were walking away from the experience having learned a lot about the topic. Students mentioned several times that they felt that discussions such as this should include teachers and administrators. They stated that such open dialogue may help to make people aware of their own implicit biases and change the interactions between students and teachers in schools.

Conclusion

This dissertation explored the social and emotional impact of implicit bias and out-of-school suspensions. The findings from this research support the hypothesis that implicit bias exists within our school systems and is impacting the social and emotional lives of students well beyond their classroom experiences. Students of color often bear the brunt of pervasive implicit racial biases and decisions related to school discipline. This trend is concerning in light of
current demographic projections for a further diversifying population, particularly among youth. The domino effect of deprivation starts with implicit bias and harsh disciplinary policies, leads to inequitably applied disciplinary policies and practices, and results in poor school climate, academic disengagement, lower graduation rates, disinterest in higher education, juvenile delinquency and incarceration, adult incarceration, lower socioeconomic status, and even health issues and a lower life expectancy. Though not fully understanding of the concept of implicit biases, students demonstrated that they are acutely aware of the inequities within their schools, and it is clear that their daily experiences with teachers and school administrators are constantly shaping their perceptions of fairness, equity, justice and academia.

The consequences of unjust discipline were not lost upon these students. They understood the significances of being removed from school and they identified the academic and social outcomes that can result from being disciplined in such a manner. Many students, particularly students of color, were keenly aware of inequities within their schools. From academic expectations to suspensions, the majority of students recognized that students are not all treated identically by teachers and staff. Many recognized the wide social scope of racial bias and others demonstrated a more limited understanding based solely on their observations within the classroom and the discussion they engaged in within their focus group. Regardless of how vast their comprehension, it was clear that inequitable disciplinary decisions had impacted many students and will continue to do so unless formally addressed. This research revealed that students need not be targeted by the discipline to feel the consequences of prejudice – one’s observation of inequity can have just as harsh an effect upon their feelings of emotional and psychological safety.
The *school-to-prison pipeline* is no longer just a figurative reference to the increasing contact students are having with the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems as a result of harsh disciplinary practices supported by zero-tolerance policies and the increased presence of police in schools. This is a literal path, walked by thousands of students each year, which takes them out of school and into the criminal justice system thereby depriving them of their fundamental right to an education. Most college-level and graduate-level education programs provide aspiring teachers, principals, and superintendents, insufficient information and guidance related to disproportionality in school discipline and its racist undercurrents. The good news is that the information *is* available and there are clearly identifiable methods for addressing these issues related to inequity.

Biases are inherent attributes that all humans possess and form naturally through the course of everyday interactions and exposures. These biases become very harmful when beliefs about groups lead to unquestioned assumptions about individuals within those groups, especially when those who hold such beliefs have power and influence over those they are stereotyping. Racialized disproportionality in the administration of school discipline is a national crisis, and out-of-school suspensions prevent too many children, particularly children of color, from exposure to the educational opportunities that they are entitled to. Students’ experiences with racial inequity impact their own social perspective and can aid in the development of their own implicit biases and deficit thinking. As identified by a few of the students interviewed, a person of color is not immune to prejudicial biases and constant exposure to deficit thinking related to black youth can lead these students to duplication of such perceptions and inequitable treatment
of other people of color. When implicit biases lead to important decisions regarding how we choose to educate students or deny educational opportunities through suspensions, the potential for lasting harm is significant.

It is the goal of this research to help advance efforts amongst school leaders, pedagogues, students and their families to raise awareness regarding implicit bias and the prejudicial application of high school disciplinary policies, bring attention to the social and emotional impact of such disparity, and ultimately dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. School discipline is a powerful tool which can have a deep impact on students' academic, personal, and professional futures. Our nation cannot address disciplinary disparities within its public schools until educators are willing to directly address the issues of race, disadvantage, and stereotype that are bound up in those disparities. There is movement towards this consciousness and hopefully this research aids in the advancement of that movement.
CHAPTER VI

Recommendations and Implications for Future Research

Summary of Recommendations

School administrators and pedagogues have a variety of positive and effective approaches to student conduct and school discipline to choose from which reduce disciplinary inequities and improve school climate. Restorative justice, positive behavioral support, and social-emotional learning all provide methods for creating a classroom learning environment that aids in avoiding the need for disciplinary action altogether. The need for discipline is also decreased when school administrators are well-managed, pedagogues are well-trained in classroom management, and teachers are provided the support staff needed to assist students with learning and behavioral challenges. The fair and consistent application of classroom-level consequences for low-level infractions is essential, as is the issuance of disciplinary policies that clearly define infractions and consequences. When student discipline becomes a necessity, there are plenty of alternatives to out-of-school suspensions. Calling parents or holding parent-teacher conferences, placing students on a co-curricular activity suspensions, requiring student restitution (such as a written apology), and mandating community service or attendance at Saturday school are all approaches proven effective by schools that use them. When it becomes necessary to remove a student from the classroom, schools may use in-school suspension or alternative site suspension programs rather than out-of-school suspensions so as not to halt the student’s learning process and put them on the path to the school-to-prison pipeline.

It is critical that federal and state government leaders work with educational institutions and other stakeholders to eliminate out-of-school suspensions (except for under rare
circumstances when a student poses a reasonable risk of death or serious injury to themselves or others) by supporting legislation that promotes student growth through positive school discipline reform models. Educational policymakers should recognize the significant contribution of school engagement to school disciplinary outcomes by implementing strategies for improving student experiences and connections with school. Implementing school-based programs that are designed to promote positive schooling experiences and school connectedness will promote higher levels of student engagement, which will in turn reduce suspensions and disciplinary referrals. The promotion of parental involvement and cultivation of mutual respect between teachers and students will also promote this positivity.

State policymakers must respond to the unforgiving truth of racial disparities in school discipline and commit to change. They should abandon zero-tolerance policies that disproportionately push students of color and students with disabilities out of school, and promote new alternatives to school discipline aligned with restorative justice practices and positive forms of school discipline. Policymakers must also encourage schools to use alternatives to out-of-school suspensions, provide discipline guidance to school districts as they establish processes and practices aimed at preventing out-of-school suspensions, and discourage schools from arresting students for minor offenses such as classroom disruption and fighting.

School districts must evaluate their current disciplinary policies to identify the modifications that are needed in order to reduce the likelihood of disparate treatment and the overuse of out-of-school suspensions for minor infractions. It is critical that all schools reduce any existing ambiguities within their school codes, which often lead to racial disparities when
enforced, and implement in-school Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support practices to promote environments that are less reactive, aversive, dangerous, and exclusionary, and more engaging, responsive, preventive, and productive. Administrators must also implement in-school disciplinary measures that temporarily separate serious offenders from the general student population while still keeping them in school. They should establish consistent systems for monitoring at-risk students and designate a school official as a discipline supervisor to ensure that their school implements its discipline policies fairly, consistently and equitably with data-based accountability systems that provide information to the public about school climate with regard to how much lost instruction is incurred by students,

Finally, it is essential that all school personnel receive training that will enhance their awareness of their own implicit or unconscious biases and expose them to information about the causes and consequences of such biases, especially in the form of cultural deficit thinking. Trainings must include lessons in cultural competency and provide information regarding the long-term impact of out-of-school suspensions and the alternatives that are available to such disciplinary measures.

**Implications for Future Research**

This was not a study of alternative methods of discipline. Although alternative methods of discipline have been suggested, future research on the efficacy and impact of these alternatives is recommended to supplement the findings of this study. Such research may also yield additional alternatives that would improve the disciplinary climate within schools. Research on the impact of out-of-school suspensions and alternative methods of discipline on
teachers, administrators and parents is also suggested to bring greater context to the findings from this study. Finally, a study on the impact of the ESSA on disciplinary inequities and the school-to-prison pipeline is recommended to determine whether the changes made to the No Child Left Behind Act have been successful in their goals of improving our nation’s public education system and reducing academic inequities such as those identified within this dissertation.
APPENDIX A: Student Information Sheet

STUDENT INFORMATION SHEET

Student Name: ___________________________________

Student Grade: ___________________________________

Student Age: ___________________________________

Student Race: (Check One)

☐ Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American
☐ Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American
☐ Latino or Hispanic American
☐ East Asian or Asian American
☐ South Asian or Indian American
☐ Middle Eastern or Arab American
☐ Native American or Alaskan Native
☐ Other ________________________________

Have you ever received an out-of-school suspension? Yes or No (Circle One)

If yes, how many times have you been suspended? ______________________________

Explain briefly why you were suspended: ______________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________

Student ID: (To be assigned by researcher)

Student _____
Have you ever observed a high school classmate receive an out-of-school suspension?
   Yes or No (Circle One)

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = Very Unfair / 10 = Very Fair), how safe do you feel while at school?

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
   (Very Unfair) (Very Fair)

On a scale of 1 to 10 (1 = Very Unfair / 10 = Very Fair), how fair do you believe your school is when deciding which students are disciplined and how harshly students are disciplined? This includes out-of-school suspensions. (Circle One)

   1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
   (Very Unfair) (Very Fair)
Are you a **high school student age 14-17?** I want your input!

I am a graduate student at the CUNY Graduate Center. For my dissertation I am conducting research on racial bias and out-of-school suspensions.

As part of this study, I will interview NYC high school students regarding their perspectives on, and experiences with, out-of-school suspensions. All student names will be kept confidential.

**Male and female participants of all ethnic backgrounds are encouraged to participate.**

*You do NOT have to have been suspended to participate in this study.*

Students will receive $20 for participating in a student focus group of 3-5 students for approximately 2 hours (depending on the number of students in the group). Interviews will be conducted at the Brooklyn Public Library located at 10 Grand Army Plaza, Brooklyn, NY 11238.

A signed parental consent form is required to participate in this research study. If interested, please send an email to: [Researchfocusgroup1@gmail.com](mailto:Researchfocusgroup1@gmail.com) and request a parental consent form. You will receive a reply email that includes the parental consent form and further information regarding how to participate.

*This research is conducted under the direction of Dr. Nicholas Michelli, CUNY Urban Education Department.*

(IRB number: #555-SB13-111)
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