

Examining the Impact of School Suspension on High School Students: Highlighting Student Perspectives and the Significance of Student Voice in the Literature on High School Suspension and Dropout Rates

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Abstract

The existing literature on the topic of high school suspension reveals that heightened suspension rates lead to heightened dropout rates. An extensive body of literature exists with statistical information to back up this finding; however, very little literature provides student voice on the topic. Students currently enrolled in an alternative school in a small city in central North Carolina were surveyed and interviewed about their experience with suspension. The results show that these students do not find suspension to be an effective means of punishment as it caused them academic setbacks and heightened their negativity towards school. Through the responses of these students some possible alternatives to suspension were revealed. This information should be shared with high school educators and administrators to encourage development of policies that have more potential to result in high school graduation for students at risk of failure.

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Examining the Impact of School Suspension on High School Students: Highlighting Student Perspectives and the Significance of Student Voice in the Literature on High School Suspension and Dropout Rates

Introduction

Out of school suspension is one of the most commonly used forms of discipline in American schools, with 3.3 million students being suspended per year (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). Subsequently, it is estimated that over 3 million children ages K-12 lost instructional classroom time in 2009-2010 because they were suspended from school (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Losen and Gillespie (2012) put this number into perspective stating “That’s about the number of children it would take to fill every seat in every major league baseball park and every NFL stadium in America, combined.” (p.1). The rate of suspension for demographic groups also varies heavily. Minority students and students with disabilities are suspended at a much higher rate than that of other students. National suspension rates also show that one out of every six black K-12 students was suspended at least once compared to one out of every twenty white students in 2009-2010 (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). National suspension rates also reveal that students with disabilities, regardless of race, were suspended at a rate two times that of non-disabled students. Schools referred students to juvenile courts at an increasing rate in recent years (Gonsoulin, Zablocki & Leone, 2012). There appears to be a high correlation of suspension rates to dropout rates in these studies. The demographic of students with high suspension rates is also the same demographic with high dropout rates.

These statistics are extremely alarming. According to Caton, with the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, schools shifted to a heavy reliance on disciplinary measures, and simultaneously lessened the focus on strong teacher-student relationships (Caton, 2012). These zero-tolerance policies were first introduced in public school systems by the federal government

as a result of the drug control legislations and a desire to increase safety in schools. With an increase in fatal school shootings, this legislation banned fire arms as well as drugs within school campuses. Safety of children in schools is of the utmost importance; however, according to Jones (2013) many school districts have extended these policies to include “disrespect, disruption, or non-compliance.” Since the implementation of these policies students are now given out of school suspension for minor infractions that likely, before the use of the policy, would have been dealt with by disciplinary measures within the school. These policies create a series of predetermined punishments for various infractions that do not take into account situational and circumstantial variables which are relevant to decide on the necessary punishment for the specific student (Gonsoulin, Zablocki & Leone, 2012). These policies have caused an increase in suspension rates and as a result of these heightened rates students miss instructional time.

In a study done by Caton (2012), interviews were conducted with male students who dropped out of school. The study revealed that many of these students felt that they were more likely to incur disciplinary action or suspension because of their reputations. So when a student has had discipline problems in the past, he or she carries a reputation with them for the rest of their high school (or educational) career. Teachers inform other teachers and kids receive labels: “This is the troublemaker, or this is the bad kid.” Caton’s study also revealed that these students were commonly sent to the office for reasons such as a “perceived threat”. The implication here is that students in trouble are likely to incur a reputation that makes them more vulnerable to additional sanctions based on suspicion rather than proof of misconduct (Caton, 2012).

The “school to prison pipeline” is a phrase used to refer to the common pattern of students coming out K-12 schools and going directly into the criminal justice system, whether it

be juvenile or adult (Heitzeg, 2009). A number of researchers (Hetzeig, Caton, & Gonsoulin, Zablocki, & Leone) suggest a connection between the “school to prison pipeline” and zero tolerance policies. Schools now have more sophisticated surveillance and security measures, which ironically, tend to make students feel less comfortable in the school environment. From 1997 to 2009 the number of School Resource Officers in United States schools increased from 9,446 to nearly 17,000 (Gonsoulin, Zablocki & Leone, 2012). This has had an alarming impact on students’ perceptions of school, making it a place for disciplinary measures rather than a place of learning. This blurs in their minds the difference between school and a juvenile detention center. Some of the students in Caton’s study revealed that they had this perception and they complained that their school was more like a prison than a place to learn. They didn’t like going into the building. They reported it was not a comfortable or positive environment. They were often yelled at by school security guards and treated harshly without having committed any sort of offense. One of the students in the study reflected on an experience in which he attended a basketball game at a higher income school in which the students were treated kindly and shook hands with school personnel (Caton, 2012). One of the findings of Caton’s (2012) study was that there is a link between students’ sense of belonging at the school and their outcomes.

Purpose

This study seeks to illuminate the correlation between suspension rates and students’ likelihood of dropping out. This will be accomplished by collection, reporting and analysis of student opinion and commentary that has been solicited from individuals who have been suspended from school. This study will also analyze the impact that “out of school suspension” has had on students’ attitudes towards school and academics. While previous studies have shown the negative impacts of suspension on a student’s ability to succeed, this study aims not to prove

or disprove that but to find more potentially beneficial alternatives if that is indeed the case. It will look at the effectiveness of suspension to avoid repeat behaviors and examine what other alternatives might help to decrease suspension rates, increase student achievement, and lower dropout rates.

Literature Review

Racial Discrepancies

In order to accurately analyze the impact suspension has on students, it is important to understand who is getting suspended. As previously mentioned, the racial discrepancies of suspension are quite large. Nationally, African Americans make up 17% of the students in public schools but 32% of students who receive out of school suspension (Vaurus & Cole, 2002). Black males are about four times more likely to be suspended than their peers (Caton, 2012). They are also expelled at rates six times that of white students and some districts had rates almost ten times that of whites. Nationally, American Indian, Hispanic, and Black students have about a 50% chance of receiving a high school diploma; however, Whites have about a 75% chance and Asians have a 77% chance (Heitzeg, 2009). A study done in Virginia of 289 high schools showed that African American students do indeed drop out at higher rates than White students. Sixty percent of the students in the Virginia sample were White and only 26% were Black; however, 40% of the dropouts were White and 39% were Black (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011).

In a previous study, with a sample of 161 middle schools, Christle found that schools with higher rates of suspensions are also the schools with larger percentages of minority students and students from low socio-economic backgrounds (Christle, 2004 as cited in Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). It is important to take into account that a school's demographics play a

role in the rate of suspension and dropouts. Research has shown that students with aggressive attitudes and a record for defiance of rules are more likely to be suspended and/or drop out (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011).

Additional research shows that suspensions do not have the desired effects and can often worsen behavior. In a study of 5,769 middle and high school students, it was shown that suspension increased the likelihood of violent behavior noting that suspended students were 70% more likely to engage in violent activity than their non-suspended peers (Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009). The study done by Christle noted that minority schools also receive significantly less funding than the majority white schools. In 31 states it was seen that districts with a high percentage of minority students received less per pupil funding than districts with a lower number of minority students (Christle, 2004 as cited in Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). This lack of funding has also been identified as a precursor for heightened suspension and dropout rates (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011).

The creation of zero-tolerance policies was not in direct response to the behaviors of black males, and yet is clearly impacting them more than other students (Caton, 2012). A previous study, involving nineteen middle schools in the Midwest, revealed that black males were sent to the principal's office more often than their peers for subjective things like "disrespect" or "perceived threat". This study was done to examine the impact of zero-tolerance policies on the educational experience and outcomes of black males. Interviews were conducted with ten males who had dropped out of high school. After completion of the interviews, one of the themes that arose was the impact of security measures on the environment of a school (Caton, 2012). Heitzeg (2009) discussed this issue briefly, stating that funding for low income schools decreases, yet funding for security measures increases. One of the participants in Caton's

(2012) study discussed the differences he noticed in his school and those of his peers'. He stated that one of his relatives attended a school that was majority White and Asian, and this school did not have cameras and body searches like his school did (Caton, 2012).

These racial discrepancies in suspension rates can also be clearly seen in the 2012-2013 Discipline Data Overview of the Chapel-Hill Carrboro County Schools. African Americans make up about 12.7% of the student population but yet they make up 47.6% of the students that received out of school suspension. On the other hand, Whites make up about 51.4% of the student population but only about 25.8% of the students that received out of school suspension (Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, 2013).

Subjectivity of Suspension

Suspension is viewed as a way to temporarily separate a disruptive or violent student from the rest of the student body until the student has changed the undesired behavior. Violent behavior is defined as fighting or the use of weapons (Vaurus & Cole, 2002). Heitzeg (2009) reflects on this type of violent behavior and states that under many state laws, if a student brings a dangerous weapon to school they are to be expelled; however, they do not define what a dangerous weapon is giving a large amount of discretion to school officials (Heitzeg, 2009). "Disruptive behavior", on the other hand, is even more difficult to define and ends up being extremely subjective (Vaurus & Cole, 2002). In a study done in 2001, Skiba found that African American students were punished more often for less serious subjective reasons, not because they acted out more than their peers (as cited in Brown, 2007).

In a previous study by Brown (2007), the experiences of thirty-seven students who were suspended or expelled from school were analyzed. When asked what they would change about district rules on suspension and expulsion one student stated, "We get suspended for dumb

things. Just change it so you can't [be] expelled so easily." (Brown, 2007, p. 448). Another student said he would make district rules on suspension so that "You could only get suspended for serious things." (Brown, 2007, p. 449). In another study done by Vaurus and Cole (2002), it was revealed that it is in moment-by-moment interactions that quick decisions are made by teachers about who can and cannot stay in the classroom. It was seen that teachers would often be worked up by a variety of situations and students, but for some reason, one student who made a silly comment, or asked a question at the wrong time was asked to leave the classroom or was written up. Suspensions, like the situation just described, often happen in the absence of physical violence (Vaurus & Cole, 2002). A report also indicated that students of both high and low income believed that zero tolerance policies unfairly target low-income students (Jones, 2013).

The Role of the Media

In considering possible reasons for the negative impact zero-tolerance policies have on minorities and African Americans in particular, it is important to note the role of the media. Heitzeg analyzed the media's impact a study completed in 2009. Television is one of the most far-reaching sources of public information and therefore television's messages can be very impactful to its viewers. The media constructs society's perceptions of crime and who is a criminal; however, the information they choose to air does not accurately reflect real life. Television and the media have led society to believe that the typical "victim" is White and the typical "offender" is African American or Hispanic, when in reality no research affirms this to be the case. Research shows that youth crime and crime involving White victims is over-represented, whereas African Americans and Hispanics are highly underrepresented as victims. Blacks are also four times more likely than Whites to be seen in a mug shot and two times less likely to be identified by name. All of these misleading representations of society create an

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unnecessary climate of fear, causing many people to overestimate crime rates, the likelihood of victimization, and making them more mistrustful of strangers particularly African American and Latino males. Consequently, African Americans represent 45% of juvenile arrests but only a mere 17% of the youth population. Research also shows that one in three African American and one in six Latino boys born in 2001 are at risk of imprisonment at some point during their lifetime (Heitzeg, 2009).

Similar to the labels the media places on people, school systems seem to place labels on students as well (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). A previous study done by Bowditch revealed that when students were sent to the office for some sort of referral they were usually asked about their grades, suspension history, attendance, etc. rather than asking about the incident at hand often giving them the label of “troublemaker” (Bowditch, 1993 as cited in Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). In the study done by Caton (2012), one of the participants said that they developed a poor reputation as the troublemaker in the ninth grade and that his reputation followed him throughout the rest of his high school career. Another participant in the same study said that when he arrived at the school he had been transferred to some of the teachers had already heard about him and their comments had a negative impact on their relationship with the student (Caton, 2012). This can often lead to overreactions to incidents and a defensive mentality of school personnel. In a school in Queens, New York a five year old boy was arrested and taken to a psychiatric hospital for getting upset and shoving the papers off of the principal’s desk. One seventeen-year-old boy was attempting to shoot a paperclip at a friend using a rubber band and he missed, hitting a cafeteria worker in the face breaking skin. This student was later expelled for the incident, because zero tolerance policies in no way distinguish between serious and non-serious offenses (Heitzeg, 2009). One study proposes issues with the

standardized punishment for the same crime. A teacher gave the example that if two students are to throw a pencil, one because of boredom but the other because he cannot read the directions to the assignment, they should not be dealt with in the same manner (Jones, 2013). In Thurgood Marshall High School in San Francisco, two small groups of students broke into what was said to be a “scuffle”. The kids were escorted to the office where their parents were required to pick them up. Upon arriving in the office one of the family members approached one of the others and another fight broke out. The School Resource Officer then proceeded to call the police to break up what he called a riot. Nearly sixty police officers arrived on scene, some even wearing riot gear. Students in the hallways watched the entire incident take place and reported the officers using batons and hitting students. Events like this one create terrible relationships between the community and the school as well as the students and the school personnel (Heitzeg, 2009).

The Punishment Doesn't Always Fit the Crime

The implementation of zero-tolerance policies asks schools to report all violations to the criminal justice system as a condition to receive funding. A study done in Kentucky revealed that most of these violations being reported were not enough to warrant a court referral (Jones, 2013). A report by the Council of State Governments Justice Center reported that 31% of students in Texas Schools received suspensions although only 3% of those infractions were for behavior that the state would require removal from school (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, & Leone, 2012). This trend of suspension for minor infractions can be seen in the 2013-2014 suspension statistics of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro County Schools. The most frequent infractions constituting out of school suspension were skipping class with fifty-six infractions, alcohol/drugs with twenty-five, and disrespect with twenty one (Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, 2013).

Heitzeg (2009) revealed that the number of suspensions and expulsions since 1974 has almost doubled with a significant raise in the mid-1990s with the adoption of the zero-tolerance policies. These zero-tolerance policies contribute to the increasing dropout rates because it has been said that the policies push out the low performing students. Due to No Child Left Behind, school funding is heavily tied to test scores giving schools an incentive to get rid of the low performing students rather than deal with remediation. In a recent study it has been shown that some school districts are improving their test scores by means of losing large numbers of their low academic achievers. In one particular Texas city, the scores of their schools improved vastly while tens of thousands of students were disappearing from school due to suspension. This study claims that the city's schools had taken advantage of exclusionary measures to hold back, suspend, or expel students (Heitzeg, 2009).

Pushing Students Out

So why is it that the increased use of suspension is “pushing” students out? Students are missing many days of school, falling behind academically, and ultimately becoming repeat offenders until they eventually give up and drop out (Arcia, 2006). It has been shown that the suspension of a student might lead to their disengagement in school and a lack of belonging (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). Studies have shown that almost 40% of school suspensions are repeat offenders, revealing just how ineffective suspension is at deterring students from certain misbehaviors (Brown, 2007). Of the 152 infractions in the Chapel Hill-Carrboro County Schools in the 2013-2014 year, 30 students had two or more (Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, 2013). In a study by Suh and Suh data was used from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to determine the key risk factors leading to student dropouts (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). One of the main risk factors, used as a predictor for dropping

out, was suspension. Caton (2012) also confirms this idea stating that class exclusion is one of the most significant factors leading to dropouts. A student's likelihood of dropping out of school increases by 78% if they had a prior history of suspension (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). Research also shows that only 10% of students who are suspended more than once remain in school (Jones, 2013). A study by Christle and colleagues in 2007 reviewed the dropout rates of students in Kentucky high schools and their findings gave clear evidence that high suspension rates are consistently associated with high dropout rates (Christle, 2007 as cited in Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011). They found that schools with higher suspension rates, higher percentage of students from low socio-economic backgrounds, and higher retention rates had a much higher dropout rates than other schools. Schools that suspended 22% of their students during a school year had 56% higher dropout rates than schools who only suspended 9% of their students (Lee, Cornell, Gregory, & Fan, 2011).

In Caton's (2012) study that included ten black males who had dropped out of high school in the past year, missing class time seemed to be a large problem among the participants. The participants said that being sent out of the classroom left them constantly behind on their academic work, with one participant stating "I did so poorly in school and had to repeat a grade because I was ordered to leave the class for different issues" (Caton, 2012, p. 1070). In Chapel Hill Carrboro County Schools, during the 2012-2013 school year it was reported that a total of 536 days were missed during the 152 out of school suspensions (Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, 2013). Of the thirty-seven students in Brown's (2007) study many of them reported missing between one and six months of school and in some cases has caused them to repeat a grade or fall significantly behind academically. Many of these students were not on grade level and had poor academic skills; some said that they got so behind and were struggling

academically that they would often refuse doing work rather than deal with embarrassment (Brown, 2007).

In a previous study done by Arcia (2006), the academic achievement of suspended students was compared to a group without suspensions from a large urban school district over the course of three years. The difference in reading levels increased as the number of days of suspension increased showing that the suspended students were having delays in reading achievement. After the three years was over, one fourth of the participants in the study had dropped out of school. The study revealed that the more days students were suspended the more likely they were to drop out. Twenty-one percent of the students who were suspended 1-10 days dropped out, 32% of the students who were suspended 11-20 days dropped out, and 43% of the students who were suspended 21 or more days dropped out (Arcia, 2006). This study clearly demonstrates that the more time a student is suspended, the higher their likelihood to drop out.

Suggestions for Improvement

According to Lee, Cornell, Gregory, and Fan (2011), “Schools with low suspension rates were more likely to use prevention strategies to reduce inappropriate behavior, include parents in developing a school-wide discipline plan, or place more emphasis on addressing students’ needs and treating students with respect.” (p. 187)

The ten male participants in Caton’s (2012) study expressed a need for better student-teacher relationships, saying that teachers often focus on their misbehavior rather than their strengths. The participants also expressed a desire for teachers to care about their lives outside of the classroom. They also said that their constant suspension and expulsion from school made their parents distrustful of the school system and its commitment to the education of their child, thus creating a negative school-community relationship (Caton, 2012). Caton claims that there is

a direct link between the outcomes of students and their sense of belongingness in school; creating a positive environment for all students in school is necessary. Hemphill and Hargreaves agree with this stating “Suspensions are associated with student and teacher reports of feeling less safe at school and a less appealing school environment” (p.5). They suggest working collaboratively with parents when issues arise, and treating it as a shared problem rather than placing blame on anyone (Hemphill & Hargreaves, 2009).

Some areas, including Connecticut, have made changes to encourage schools to use out of school suspension as a last resort. Similarly, the Maryland State Board of Education has passed new regulations to make suspension a last resort and to keep kids in school by using a rehabilitative philosophy that focuses on positive behavior support. These new regulations also take into account the issue of racial disparities in suspensions monitoring districts and designing plans to eliminate disparities (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). One method of improvement that many researchers agree is necessary is an increase in professional development (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, Leone, 2012; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Losen & Gillespie (2012) suggest that Federal and State policy makers need to allow more funding for teacher training in classroom management and professional development; they also suggest that they should provide more research on evidence-based interventions. Learning communities, which are collaborative efforts where teachers continually engage in conversation and evaluation of their practice, can also be very beneficial. These learning communities give teachers the chance to learn from one another and they provide opportunities for trying out and learning about new teaching practices. In a five-year study done by Newman and Wehlage data on 1,500 schools that were in the process of restructuring was analyzed (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, Leone, 2012). This study found that professional learning

communities were commonly associated with lower rates of absenteeism, higher academic achievement, and lower dropout rates (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, Leone, 2012).

Gonsoulin, Zablocki, and Leone (2012) strongly believe in a three-tiered model to staff development that will help foster a more positive school environment, increase achievement, and lower suspension and dropout rates. Tier I is universal staff development and is used to create open lines of positive communication between the school and the community. Tier II is targeted staff development and is designed to provide supports for students, focus on changing behaviors rather than punishment, implement alternatives to out of school suspension and expulsion, and provide school wide training on the behavior plan. Tier III is intensive staff development and involves training and creating a crisis team, providing ongoing reviews of these disciplinary data, and provide ongoing staff development focused on behavior management (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, Leone, 2012).

The Denver Plan is a similar model used in the Denver School System that has proven positive results. In an attempt to change school culture, it established a need for students to assume responsibility for their actions, and instead of suspension and expulsion they have students work on repairing relationships that might have been affected by their misbehavior. This model involves the use of early identification, interventions appropriate to students' needs, progress monitoring, and feedback. Using the Denver Plan, the Denver School System saw a 60% decrease in the number of police tickets being issued to students (Gonsoulin, Zablocki, Leone, 2012).

Heitzeg (2009) also gives a series of suggestions to lessen the negative impact of zero tolerance policies, many of which align with the aforementioned staff development models. Schools should deal with trivial behaviors using traditional disciplinary measures, and should

avoid harsh automatic punishments that do not consider individual circumstances. Schools should also take advantage of mental health experts to research and develop new discipline strategies for positive behavior (Heitzeg, 2009). Educators should also seek to change school policies where suspension rates are high (Losen & Gilespe, 2012).

In the cases that suspension might be deemed necessary it is also still important that we keep these students on track (Caton, 2012). Brown (2007) noted that in many cases, students that are suspended, whether it is short or long term, often do not receive alternative placements and are therefore at home for the duration of their suspension. This study concluded that it is essential that schools provide better support to students who are either not in school or have been placed in an alternative placement. In Caton's (2012) study of males who had dropped out of high school, many of the participants reported getting involved with illegal activity and law enforcement after dropping out. Situations like this only contribute to the School to Prison Pipeline Theory that students are being pushed out of the school systems and into the criminal justice system (Heitzeg, 2009).

According to the Advancement Project in 2005, "Zero tolerance has engendered a number of problems: denial of education through increased suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to inadequate alternative schools, lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and racial profiling of students." (Heitzeg, 2009 p. 11)

Ample literature reveals detrimental effects of unnecessary suspension that are greatly hindering children's ability to succeed in school. This study will attempt to provide further evidence that suspension impairs students' ability to learn and succeed in school and to provide alternative actions to suspension to keep children in school so that they can continue learning.

Methodology

Research Design

This study seeks to determine the correlation between suspension rates and students' likelihood of dropping out through student opinion. This study will also analyze the impact out of school suspension has on students' attitudes towards school and academics. While previous studies have shown the negative impacts of suspension on a student's ability to succeed, this study aims not only to prove or disprove that but to find more conducive alternatives if that is indeed the case.

Students from the alternative school, Sanders, in a small city in central North Carolina will be given the opportunity to complete a survey. This school serves students in grades nine through twelve in an alternative setting. All students of age 18 or older were provided with a recruitment letter in which they provided their informed consent to complete the survey. Completion of the survey was completely voluntary and no identifiable information from the surveys was released. Upon completion of the survey, students were given the option to participate in a more in depth one-on-one interview by simply initialing. If a student expressed interest in further interviewing the student was be asked to provide informed consent. Prior to the recruiting of any students, all survey and interview questions were reviewed by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Institutional Review Board. Upon approval, the researcher contacted the school to begin the recruitment of participants.

Survey Participants and Setting

The sampled population consisted of students, age 18 or older, currently attending the alternative school Sanders in a small city in central North Carolina. After receiving permission from the principal the students were provided with the recruitment letters and surveys in class.

They were directed to complete as much or as little of the survey as they chose and place it in a designated pile upon completion. A copy of the survey questions can be found in Appendix A. Participation in both the survey and interview was completely voluntary and no rewards or incentives were given. Twenty-seven students participated in the survey, fourteen males and thirteen females. Twenty-six of these students were in the 12th grade and 1 was in the 11th. The majority of the survey participants, 70.4%, were age eighteen, five were nineteen, two were twenty, and one was twenty-one. Participants were given the opportunity to self-identify their racial or ethnic heritage with the opportunity to select multiple or “other” if no options applied. Nine participants identified as Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American, ten identified as Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American, two identified as other, two identified as East Asian or Asian American, two identified with multiple, one identified as Latino or Hispanic American, and one identified as Native American or Alaskan Native.

Table 3.1

Racial or Ethnic Heritage, n = 27

Racial or Ethnic Heritage	27 Respondents
a. Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American	9 (33.3%)
b. Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American	10 (37%)
c. Latino or Hispanic American	1 (3.7%)
d. East Asian or Asian American	2 (7.4%)
e. South Asian or Indian American	0 (0%)
f. Middle Eastern or Arab American	0 (0%)
g. Native American or Alaskan Native	1 (3.7%)
h. Other	2 (7.4%)

Multiple (<i>Identified as both a and b</i>)	2 (7.4%)
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Interview Participants and Setting

Upon completion of the survey, students were given the opportunity to initial expressing their interest in a further interview. By initialing they were simply showing interest and if randomly selected to participate in the interview they would initial a consent form. Of the fifteen students who expressed interest in the interview, a random sample of seven students was selected. These seven students were identified by their initials so that no names or identifiable information needed to be given. Of the seven interviewees, four were female and three were male; six were eighteen years old, one was twenty-one and all were enrolled in the 12th grade. Two of the interviewees identified as Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American, two identified as Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American, one identified as other, one identified as Native American or Alaskan Native, and one identified as both Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American and Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American.

The students who were selected met with the researcher in a private classroom in their school to ensure that the interview was conducted in private. The participants were also asked for consent to audio record the interview; all seven participants consented. The participants were informed prior to beginning the interview that they could stop at any point or refuse to answer particular questions. The participant interviews were recorded as “Interview 1”, “Interview 2”, and so on. An entire list of the interview questions can be found in Appendix B.

Data Coding Procedures

The survey data was placed into an excel document so that the responses could be coded and sorted. Respondents’ open-ended answers were organized by grouping them based on

similar themes, thus making it possible to analyze the responses. Survey responses to non-open-ended questions were simply coded and sorted based on their answer choice.

Seven of the fifteen students who expressed interest in a further interview were randomly selected to complete the interview. The participants' interviews were transcribed allowing the researcher to find common themes among the answers. A "Grounded Theory" approach was used to find themes among the survey and interview responses. Based on the responses given, the researcher let the data speak for itself and create various themes and theories that would then be analyzed. The themes and theories that arose from the data were then compared to the existing literature on the topic to see if it aligned.

Obtaining Institutional Review Board Approval

This study was ruled exempt by the non-biomedical University of North Carolina Institutional Review Board (IRB) on May 16th, 2014. The IRB number is 14-1174. Both the faculty and the researcher completed the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative's Group 2 Social and Behavioral Research training along with the requisite conflict of interest disclosures. All of the collected pencil and paper surveys were stored in a secured together in a secured location. In compliance with the IRB's data security requirements, interview audio recordings were stored on the researcher's password-protected computer.

Results

This research study aimed to look at whether or not a limited study of a group of students yields information consistent with that of existing literature. In the process of exploring this question student voice and perspectives were highlighted. This study gained student insight into the effectiveness of suspension and what could be done differently to keep students at risk of failure engaged and enrolled in school.

This section will provide the survey results first, going through each question asked and reporting the various responses. The responses will be reported in the manner that they were written or spoken without acknowledgement of error of grammar or spelling. Then the six themes that arose during the interviews will be discussed while providing the interviewees' responses.

Survey Results

A survey was given out to students of age eighteen or older currently attending an alternative school in a small city in the southeast. For purposes of this research study the alternative school will be referred to by the pseudonym Sanders School. The students attending this school represent a wide variety of public schools in the city the research study took place. When answering the survey questions they were reminded that their responses should be in regards to their "home" school, or the public high school they attended prior to coming to Twilight. These students received the survey while at school in their class beginning at five o'clock pm. They were asked to complete as much of the survey as they felt comfortable; therefore, not all of the participants answered every question. Twenty-seven students completed the survey, fourteen males and thirteen females. Nineteen of the participants were age eighteen, five were age nineteen, two were age twenty, and one was age twenty-one. Twenty-six of the students were currently in the twelfth grade when completing the survey and one was in eleventh grade.

In Life and School: Happy vs. Unhappy. Question 2 through 5 were fill in the blank questions that aimed to ease them into the survey questions as well as gain insight into their interests and general feelings toward school. Question 2 stated "In life, I am happiest when I am ____." All twenty-seven survey participants answered this question. Ten of the responses dealt

in some way with family and friends. One participant completed the statement with “when I am with my son.” Eight respondents stated that they are happiest when doing something they love, for example “playing music”, “hunting”, “volunteering”, “high/messing with cars”, and “doing what I love.” Five responses referred to relaxing or being in a relaxing place, for example “on the beach”, “cooling”, and “peaceful and there is no drama.” Four of the responses were categorized in the theme of success and/or money including responses like “wealthy” or “have money”.

Question 3 stated “In life, I am least happy when I am_____.” All twenty-seven participants answered this question. Six of the respondents stated they were least happy when they were bored or not doing what they love, for example “not doing anything.” Five of the responses dealt with negative relationships, like “when I’m picked on”, “in an argument with someone”, and “having to handle everyone’s problem.” Five responses referred to being under stress or disappointing themselves; for example one response stated “In life, I am least happy when I am not successful as I should be.” Three responses dealt with lack of money; all three students filled in the blank with “broke”. Two responses referred to be tired or hungry and 2 responses dealt with physical location (“at home” and “at school”). One respondent filled in the blank with “stripped of my freedom”.

Question 4 stated “At school, I am happiest when I am_____.” All of the survey participants completed this question. Nine of the students’ answers fell into the category of succeeding and/or making good grades; for example, “passing” and “getting my work done.” Seven of the responses referred to something social, like “on lunch break” or “with my friends and women.” Four of the participants’ answers referred to having fun like “having fun in class” and four responses referred to learning like “learning something new.” Three responses referred to not being there and/or not doing work, i.e. “leaving.” One response, “doing whatever I do”,

did not fall into any of these categories and one respondent provided two answers that fell into two different categories: “enjoying friend’s companionship and learning something new.”

Question 5 stated “At school, I am least happy when I am ____.” The responses for this question fell into six categories: nine responses fell into Category 1: Failing/Lack of Success and Understanding, five responses fell into Category 2: Bored/Not Learning, four fell into Category 3: Being in School or A Class, three fell into Category 4: Stressed, three fell into Category 5: Sleepy/Bad Day and three fell into Category 6: Negative Relationships. Category 1 examples include “not making good grades”, “not understanding a subject”, and “failing.”

Question 6 asked students to fill in the blank to the statement “When I think of school the first word that comes to my mind is ____.” One participant did not answer this question. Ten of the responses dealt with learning or future success (i.e. graduating); for example, “success, better jobs” and “learning.” Ten responses involved negative words or phrases such as “long”, “prison”, and “I don’t want to go.” Five responses fell into the “other” category, including responses like “friends”, “lunch”, and “grades.”

Relationship with Administration. Question 7 asked on a scale of 1-5, one being negative, three being neutral, and five being positive to rate their relationship with the administration (principal and assistant principals) at their school. Seven respondents circled either a one or a two, seven respondents circled a three, and thirteen respondents circled either a four or a five.

Table 4.2

7. My relationship with administration (principal and assistant principals) at my school was (please circle a number on the scale)

	Negative (1)	(2)	Neutral (3)	(4)	Positive (5)
Number of Responses:	2	5	7	9	4
Percentage:	7.4%	18.5%	26%	33.3%	14.8%

$n = 27$, Mean = 3.3, Variance = 1.32, Standard Deviation = 1.15

Suspension History. Question 8 asked students how many times they have been suspended, if any. Four students responded that they did not know or it was too many to count, three gave no answer, five students reporting being suspended once, six students reported being suspended between two and nine times, three reported being suspended between ten and twenty times, three reported being suspended over thirty times and one reported only attending In School Suspension.

Question 9 asked the survey respondents to provide a few examples of why they were suspended. Sixteen students reported fighting or violence as a reason for their suspension, six reported skipping as a reason for suspension, and four reported drugs as an example of why they were suspended. Four students did not answer. Responses include “other students, SMOD, other students”, “fighting, smoking, recording fights, stealing”, “skipping mostly, not giving up my phone”, and “drugz [sic], fighting, skipping, and weapons.”

Question 10 asked respondents who have been suspended to fill in the blank to this sentence “When I returned from suspension I felt_____.” Of the twenty-seven respondents four did not answer this question. Nine students filled in this blank with “the same” or “same as I did before”. One student responded with “I should not get in trouble.” Three filled in the blank with

“happy” or “good.” One student filled in the blank with “like the 1st day of school”, another responded with “as if I got behind and needed making up for”, and one responded with “I should avoid getting in trouble.” Two students filled in the blank with “pissed” or “pissed off.” The other responses include “enslaved”, “nothing”, “I had more respect from students”, “stupid”, “like a rebel” and “like not coming back.”

Question 11 states “On a scale of 1-5 how effective do you feel suspension is in keeping you enrolled in school (and not getting suspended again) when you return?”, 1 being “Doesn’t Work At All”, 3 being “Kind of Works”, and 5 being “Works Well.” Four of the twenty-seven students did not answer this question. Six students circled 1, five circled 2, eight circled 3, three circled 4, and one student circled 5.

Table 4.3

On a scale of 1-5 how effective do you feel suspension is in keeping you enrolled in school (and not getting suspended again) when you return?

	Doesn’t Work At All (1)	(2)	Kind of Works (3)	(4)	Works Well (5)
Number of Responses:	6	5	8	3	1
Percentage:	26%	22%	35%	13%	4%

$$n = 23, \text{ Mean} = 2.5, \text{ Variance} = 1.29, \text{ Standard Deviation} = 1.14$$

Question 12 states “If you do not think that suspension is an effective punishment, then what do you think would work better?” Ten out of the twenty-seven survey participants did not answer this question. Three students thought removing the student from the school would be a better alternative, with responses “I think kicking them out of school or suspend them for longer”, “having to leave the school”, and “expelled.” Two thought that In School Suspension (ISS) would be a good alternative stating “ISS is better because it makes the students grade drop

and at the same time their [*sic*] not learning nothing”, and “if they made you sit in ISS.” The other twelve respondents gave a wide variety of alternatives. All responses to this question are found in Appendix C Table C1.

Question 12 asks “What is your idea for helping students like yourself be successful in school?” Of the twenty-seven survey participants three did not answer this question. Eleven respondents gave personal advice for students like themselves, including “stay focused and watch out for crap”, “school 1st party on the weekends”, “finding their own personal motivations/family”, and “value education before it’s too late.” Eleven respondents gave advice for the school and teachers as to how to help students be successful, including, “guiding them and encouraging them to succeed”, “don’t suspend for skipping defeats purpose, make school not as much as an option”, “make it into a game, make things fun and interesting”, and “mentoring.” Two students gave suggestions for how they could help the students themselves including “try to help them with anything the best I could” and “because some students think different and I went through stuff that might help them out.” All responses are recorded in Appendix C, table C2.

Question 14 states “How many people do you know that have dropped out of high school?” Twenty-six out of the twenty-seven survey participants answered this question. The responses are recorded in the table below.

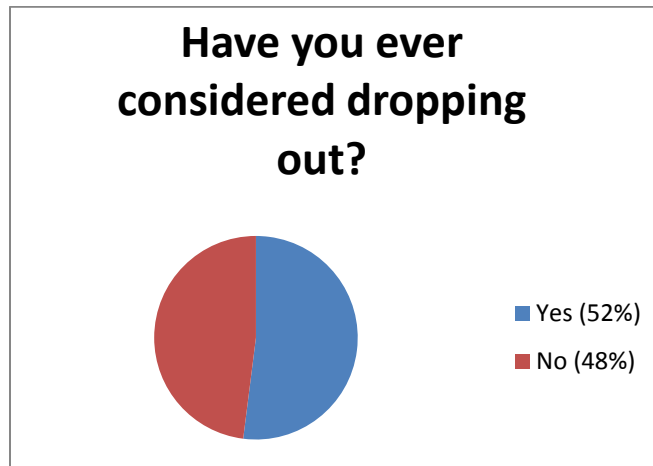
Table 4.5

How many people do you know that have dropped out of high school? n = 26

	0 (a)	1-5 (b)	6-10 (c)	10-15 (d)	more than 15 (e)
Number of Responses:	0	14	3	4	5
Percentage:	0%	54%	12%	15%	19%

Question 15 asked “Have you ever considered dropping out?” Of the twenty-seven survey respondents thirteen said no they had not considered it and fourteen said that they had. Figure 4.1 shows the percentage of survey participants that have considering dropping out.

Figure 4.1 *Considering Dropping Out*



Students were then asked to provide reasons for why they have or have not considered dropping out. Three students provided no reasons. Six gave reasons for why they have considered dropping out, for example “so I can start working and provide for my family”, “I felt like I was getting picked on or watched all the time and when I was suspended I just did whatever I wanted” and “I never thought I would graduate.” Eleven gave reasons for why they have not considered dropping out, for example, “I want a career and to be able to provide for myself”, “I knew it was in my best interest to stay asides[sic] I would be one of few that actually graduated in my fam”, and “to have a good life.” Seven respondents gave reasons for both why they have considered it *and* why they have not. All responses are recorded in Appendix C Table C4.

Interview Results

An interview was conducted with a random sample of survey respondents who indicated they would be interested in a further interview. This interview allowed for a more in depth

discussion of the topics addressed in the survey. It provided another opportunity to gain candid student voice. Of the fifteen students who expressed interest in a further interview, seven were selected at random. The researcher conducted these interviews the same day as the surveys so no contact information was given. The interviews were conducted in a classroom in Twilight School. Participant characteristics are listed in Table 4.5.

Table 4.5

Demographic Characteristics of Interview Participants, n=7

Participant Identifier	Age	Sex	Grade	Racial/Ethnic Heritage
F1	18	F	12 th	Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American
F2	18	F	12 th	Native American or Alaskan Native
M3	18	M	12 th	Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American
M4	18	M	12 th	Non-Hispanic White and Black
M5	18	M	12 th	Other
F6	18	F	12 th	Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American
F7	21	F	12 th	Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American

A grounded-theory approach was used when transcribing and analyzing the surveys.

From this analysis, six themes arose from the interview responses.

- I. Student's felt that suspension was ineffective.
- II. Suspension made students feel as if they got behind in school.
- III. Suspension caused or heightened negativity towards school.
- IV. Students felt targeted by teachers and/or administration.
- V. Students value school and see it as a means to a successful life.
- VI. Students want to feel cared about by teachers and administrators.

Theme I: Student's feel that suspension was ineffective. Five of the seven interview participants stated that they do not feel suspension is effective. The other two students said that it

is sometimes effective depending on what the suspension is for. Many of the participants' responses reverted back to the ineffectiveness of suspension, even when that was not directly asked in the question. When asked what they think the purpose of suspension is most students seemed to agree that it was to teach them a lesson; however, five of the seven interview participants referred to their suspension time as a vacation or a time when they relaxed at home and watched TV. Student F7 stated that "[The purpose of suspension is] to teach you a lesson. No [it is not effective] because I came back and I did the same thing over and over, I didn't care what anybody told me." This interviewee continued on to say that "No [there are no situations where I feel like suspension is the right punishment] 'cause at the end of the day it makes you lose your education, and for most kids it's a vacation."

A second student agreed saying "[The purpose of suspension is] to give me vacation time. That's what I felt like, vacation, I was on vacation (F1)." Interviewee M4 also agreed that suspension is similar to vacation saying, "[The purpose of suspension is] I guess so we like...I don't really know...they just give us a vacation. And then once I got to high school it wasn't 2-3 day suspensions it was 5-10 day vacations (M4)."

The interview participants also seemed to think that suspending for skipping has a negative impact on their education.

"[The purpose of suspension is] to teach a kid a lesson...it really depends on what it's about [if it is effective or not], if it's toward skipping...like if a kid's not going to school and you suspend them...like me I didn't go to school for probably fifty days straight and then they suspended me for two weeks and I was like 'Okay now I'm really not gonna [*sic*] learn'." (F2)

Some even claimed that their suspension and/or skipping school played a crucial role in their need to repeat a grade. They were consistently being suspended and missed large amounts of school work, putting them more and more behind. For example, one student said, “[If I had to give one reason for my need to repeat a grade I would say] fights, I got into a lot of fights and ended up missing a lot of work (M3).” Another student agreed stating “[If I had to give one reason for my need to repeat a grade I would say] because of skippin’ and getting suspended (M4).” A third student also attributed her need to repeat a grade to skipping school, stating “[If I had to give one reason for my need to repeat a grade I would say] skippin’ school (F6).”

Overall, the interview participants claimed that their suspension had a negative impact (if any) on their academic success and attitudes towards school.

Theme II: Suspension made students feel as if they got behind in school. Although heavily interrelated with Theme I, this was a clear theme that arose from the interviews. Six of the seven interview participants claimed that when they returned from suspension they felt behind on their work. The students also seemed to express feelings of defeat and hopelessness when it came to catching up on the missed work.

For example, one student stated, “[When I returned from suspension] I felt like I was behind in everything and I had to catch up and it was just a lot on me (F1).” Another student expressed similar feelings saying “Whenever in English they give you a book and they read five chapters and when I came back they were talking about Shakespeare and I didn’t know a word of what was going on (F2).”

Many of the interviews mentioned they felt significantly behind even if they only were suspended for a couple of days. One student stated, “[I felt like I had missed] everything that was taught that day it felt like I got weeks behind just by missing that one day (F1).”

Some interviewees expressed a lack of teacher willingness to keep suspended students up on the work that they missed while out. Student M4 stated, “[I felt like I had missed] everything, I didn’t know what was goin’ on. None of my teachers sent me any work so when I got back they were like ‘you’re failin’ and I was like ‘Well you didn’t give me anything to do’.”

One interviewee attributed dropping out of school to the amount of work she missed while being suspended repeatedly, stating “I did [drop out]. I wasn’t doin’ too good on my grades, I kept getting suspended and expelled and bounced back and forth and I just finally missed so much work I just gave up (F7).”

Another student, who had been suspended more than thirty times, mentioned that he considered dropping out due to his lack of success in school and inability to pass. He said “[I considered dropping out] because I was so far behind after failing grade after grade I didn’t want to go there no[sic] more cause I figured I’d never pass and graduate (M3).”

One interview participant even suggested the following alternative to suspension, and stated that it would be a good alternative “because it doesn’t take away from the person’s school work and making them feel behind (F1).”

“If it’s a student on student type of suspension they should be able to be set down [sic], counseled, talked over, do activities together to solve the situations or figure out an agreement for both of them to feel safe or feel better about coming to school ‘cause no one should be afraid to come to school or nobody should be stopped from coming to school.” (F1)

Student F6 had a unique experience and was the only one to claim that she did not feel behind after returning from suspension. She stated that she did not feel behind on any work upon her return because “they let [her] take [her] work home.”

Theme III: Suspension caused or heightened negativity towards school. Four of the seven interview participants provided clear statements that revealed suspension either created negativity towards school or heightened pre-existing negativity toward school. For example, one student said “[Being suspended] made me hate [school] a little more (F7).” Another student agreed saying “[Being suspended did] not really [change the way I feel at or towards school] I still didn’t like it. It made me dislike it more (F2).”

Two of the interviewees mentioned that suspension made them feel defeated academically and/or made them not care about school anymore. Student M4 said “[When I returned to school after being suspended, I felt like] a rebel, cause I was really tryin’ and then the first time I got suspended after that I was just like forget it. I just didn’t care at all.”

Student M3 agreed stating,

“[When I returned to school after being suspended] I felt stupid. I felt that what I’d done was stupid in my opinion and for no reason. I felt like I was fallin’ further and further behind so therefore I didn’t really care no [*sic*] more.”

Theme IV: Students felt targeted by teachers and/or administration. Six of the seven interview participants felt as if they were targeted and/or labeled by teachers and administration. When asked if they were given an opportunity before they were suspended to explain their side of the situation and what they thought happened, one student responded “No, I was more of the criminal instead of the victim...It was just like ‘Oh, you’re wrong, you’re wrong’ instead of listening (F1).” When asked if she felt like her side of the story was truly listened to and respected this student said “No, because I was the so called criminal.”

Student F2 agreed that her side of the situation was not listened to stating, “A lot of the time they don’t even listen to my side or what happened and then I just stopped caring because I was like they don’t even listen or give you a chance.”

Student M3 had a similar experience saying, “Maybe the first couple times I got suspended [my side of the story was respected and listened to] but then after that it’s kinda like okay we know he’s a trouble maker, go ahead and get rid of him. So I felt like they just kicked me out and wouldn’t let me tell my side.” This student also

Another student expressed similar feelings of being labeled when describing the alternative program he was sent to while suspended saying, “I had to go to this daylight program and Scales. You walk through metal detectors because you’re considered a criminal child (F7).” When this same student was involved in fights and claimed self-defense, he stated “I’m a [*sic*] fight back but I always got suspended more than the other person cause my past history.”

Student M5 suggested that giving students an opportunity or activity would be a better alternative to suspension. When asked why, he said, “Cause it’ll prevent them from having low self-esteem and stuff, usually when people get suspended they get low self-esteem and feel like they can’t do nothin’ right.”

Theme V: Students value school and see it as a means to a successful life. Six of the seven interviewees made statements suggesting that they recognized school as a stepping stone in being successful and/or having a job. When one female student was asked why she plans on graduating high school she responded, “Yeah I’m graduating, because I plan on making money and taking care of my family like I’m supposed to.” Another student agreed responding to the same question with “Because I refuse not to be successful.”

When asked why she has never considered dropping out another student replied, “I mean I want to be successful one day, I want to have a job.” This same student also provided some advice for a student in a similar situation stating, “Go to school, I mean it’s just not worth it. If you don’t graduate, it’s not that you’re not going to be successful but it is harder to get a job and you have your whole life ahead of you.” When another participant was asked if they she had considered dropping out she responded saying “No, because I know if I drop out of school I won’t have a bright future.”

Two different students agreed that graduating high school can lead to a brighter future. When asked what form of punishment might work better than suspension this student said, “Talkin’ to them about their future and saying life isn’t a game, when you’re older you gotta [*sic*] pay for a whole lotta [*sic*] stuff. You might as well try to stay in school and get the best job you can.” The other student gave a piece of advice to the younger high school version of himself stating, “Think of the future, think of who you could be, and what you could do if you don’t have a diploma. Personally I know people that are homeless now that I went to school with.”

Theme VI: Students want to feel cared about by teachers and administrators. One of the most common themes that arose from a variety of questions is that students want to feel cared about and/or listened to. One female interviewee seemed to feel like she was looked over in her school and did not get the type of attention she needed. When asked how she felt at school she responded, “I hated school. [I felt] left out and ignored, it’s hard to get the attention you need. I have ADHD and I need small classes and one on one attention.” This same student continued on to say that she would like to feel “like somebody cared” when she is at school. When asked if she respected her teachers she said “No, because I’m in a class of thirty people, they don’t care. No one cares, they give you the work and you sit down and you’re supposed to do it.”

This was the only student in this research study who has dropped out and returned to complete school. When asked to name the factors that led to her dropping out of high school she said, “I would say my living situation. The drug use, the no sleep at night. I just feel like no one paid enough attention to even care. The counselors that are supposed to be counselors and check into your home life, the social workers, they didn’t do anything.” When asked if something could have been done differently in school to keep her from dropping out she responded, “Yeah, they could’ve worked with me a little more. They coulda [*sic*] tried to understand my home situation.”

Another participant said that he has considered dropping out, and when asked why he said “Depression really.” This same student was then asked if something could have been done differently in his school to keep him from thinking about dropping out and he said, “Yeah I guess I coulda [*sic*] talked to the social workin’ or somethin’.”

Students were asked to name a few people at their school that they think played a positive role in their experience there, and what they did to build such a positive relationship with the student. Unlike the female interviewee who dropped out, this student felt like one person at the school cared about him. This male participant replied, “Just my assistant principal really, he always tried to help me out. Like if I was in trouble he tried to help me out the best way possible so I wouldn’t get further and further behind.” Another student stated that the counselors and coaches played a positive role in her experience at school because “they just encourage you not to give up and that you can do it.” One of the students that said she respected her principal and assistant principals said it was because “they were never negative, they were always positive.”

Student participants were asked to provide an alternative to suspension that they think would work better. One female interviewee responded, “if it’s like a student on student type of

suspension they should be able to be set down, counseled, talked over, do activities together to solve the situations or figure out an agreement for both of them to feel safe or feel better about coming to school cause no one should be afraid to come to school or nobody should be stopped from coming to school.” A male interviewee agreed saying that schools need to “try to find a better alternative than havin’ them sit at home, like give em [*sic*] an opportunity or activity.”

A different male participant answered the same question saying, “Talkin’ to them about their future and saying life isn’t a game, when you’re older you gotta [*sic*] pay for a whole lotta [*sic*] stuff. You might as well try to stay in school and get the best job you can.” He said this alternative would work better than suspension because, “suspendin’ them they just feel like they’re in trouble but if somebody sat down and talked to them about why you shouldn’t be doin’ that or why you should care about your school more would make them think about it differently.”

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to gain student voice regarding the topic of suspension in high school. There were no preconceived expectations for the responses of participants. A vast literature exists revealing the statistical analysis of this topic; however, this study aimed to gather student opinion. The existing literature is mostly large scale administrative data that views students simply as numbers. Students are the ones suffering the consequences of this punishment system and yet they are rarely ever asked to give their opinion. The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the thoughts of the students being affected by suspension.

Students’ Thoughts on the Effectiveness of Suspension

Interviewing and surveying this sample population revealed how students feel about suspension and what they think could be done to improve their educational experience if

suspension is not the most conducive option. It was revealed that this population does not feel that suspension is the most effective form of punishment. The majority of the participants expressed negative feelings upon returning from suspension. Many of the interviewees claimed it did not teach them any type of lesson. Survey respondents' quotes indicated they felt suspension caused high school students to miss school, fall behind, lose interest, and often causes negative feelings towards school.

Exclusionary policies across the board cause students to miss large amounts of instructional opportunities while they are home on suspension. As a result of this lost instructional time, frustration tends to increase as students get more and more behind academically thus causing them to act out more, often leading to repeated suspensions. Of the twenty-seven students interviewed and surveyed in this study, seventeen of them were suspended more than once. This trend of repeat offenders can be seen in the study done by Hemphill and Hargreaves (2009) suggesting that suspensions do not have the desired effect and often worsen behavior.

Relationships Viewed as Valuable

One of the main findings that emerged from this research was that students desire relationships with teachers and administration. They want to feel cared about. The participants in Caton's (2012) study revealed similar information, expressing a desire for better student-teacher relationships and a need for teachers to focus on their strengths rather than their misbehaviors. The study done by Lee, Cornell and Gregory (2011) also placed focus on a need for emphasis on addressing individual student needs and treating students with respect. The participants in this study recognized the school personnel who actively developed positive relationships with these students. Those were the few people who they claimed made a positive impact on their

educational experience. Many of these students have few high school graduates in their family and therefore they need school personnel to encourage them to stay in school. While this situation does not apply to all students who are suspended, these are typically the students who drop out or consider dropping out. Unfortunately, these are the students we are sending home from school, rather than giving them the support they need. The participants in this research study revealed that they did little to no academic work while at home on suspension, and then they received little help upon their return.

The large problem with suspension is that its sole purpose is to give a punishment for poor behavior but the punishment is to stay home from school, often without adult supervision, which is, in many cases, what the child wanted. Similar to Brown's (2007) study, none of the participants in this study received alternative placements while suspended. This punishment system is not providing students with any support as to how to improve upon their behavior. This also reverts back to the lack of teacher-student relationships that Caton (2012) referred to. Since teachers are not administering any type of tangible advice for misbehaviors, students are more likely to repeat poor behaviors. Repeating poor behaviors often leads to more suspensions and a greater likelihood of dropping out. Gonsoulin, Zablocki, and Leone (2012) suggest that instead of suspending and expelling students schools should focus on repairing the relationships that may have been affected by their misbehavior. This study revealed similar findings, as the students wanted to be counseled rather than suspended, and given the opportunity to work out the problems that caused their misbehavior.

Similar to the study done by Caton (2012), this study revealed that students often feel targeted by teachers and/or administration. Many feel that they gain a reputation that follows them throughout their educational career and makes them more susceptible to punishment if that

reputation is negative. Educators must be very cautious about this type of labeling because it can have severe impacts on students. In middle and high school especially, students are working to construct their own social identities and find some sort of belonging and place. They are already receiving a wide variety of messages through the media and society that impact them as they try to form a sense of self. By unjustly and or preemptively treating students as if they are expected to act out or misbehave, they can be led to believe that's exactly what they should do. This aligns with the study done by Heitzeg (2009) which revealed that television and the media have impacted who society views as the typical "victim" and the typical "offender." Teachers and school personnel play a significant role in molding students into their self-identities and therefore they must be careful not to force certain identities upon them.

Sometimes educators can forget that students are constantly comparing their situations with those around them. High school students are at an age where they are trying to make sense of their situations and often comparison is their means of personal placement. Educators and administration should look at students as individuals, and this study has revealed that is what students want. They want to be viewed as individuals with individual needs and desires.

Students View School as Valuable

One unexpected finding of this study was that the student participants recognize the value of school and see it as a means to a better and more successful life. This finding was quite interesting because the common assumption is that the students who are repeatedly being suspended and/or expelled do not value or appreciate school. There is plenty of existing literature that reveals which students are being suspended and dropping out at high rates; however, these statistics show little about the voices of the students that make up these statistics. This study disproved the assumption that the researched population does not value school, revealing that

even students who drop out, or consider dropping out, see school as a valuable part of their life. Therefore there must be other factors that lead them to give up or lose interest in school. Perhaps it is not a lack of students' innate desire to learn and appreciation of school but rather something the school is or is not doing to help these students be successful.

Implications for the Field

Based on the statements made by the students in this research study, a possible alternative to suspension could be to have students assigned to a particular counselor. This counselor's sole job would be to build a relationship with the student and be a system of support for them. They would need to help the student keep up academically and provide them with academic and community opportunities that otherwise would not be easily available to them. While school counselors are always available at schools, some students have a hard time building relationships with them because there is one counselor for a large number of students. This more individualized one-on-one approach would hopefully alleviate the issue of this ratio and allow the students who are acting out in school and class to have someone looking out for them.

Another implication for the field of education that arose from this research is to make more use of in-school suspension rather than out of school suspension. This would provide students with a space to continue their school work while still pulling them out of their classes. However, if in school suspension is to be used more often than it would need to be revamped. It should be a space where students can receive instruction and assistance on school work rather than a place where they sit and complete packets of assigned work.

This study also revealed that there is a need for more professional development for teachers and administrators. Through an increase in professional development, schools could enhance the possibility that teachers and administrators are positive forces that keep students not

only enrolled in school but engaged in the classroom. It would be valuable to teach educators how to handle situations on an individual basis rather than resort to standardized punishment.

Areas for Further Research

This study revealed an incidental finding that in retrospect seems extremely relevant. In the first few questions of the survey the participants were asked to state when they are happiest and least happy both in life and school. These simple questions revealed that these students have a wide range of interests, hobbies, and passions. Some of these include hunting, volunteering, working on cars, and playing music. The students, who are often suspended, such as the students in this sample population, are often regarded as lacking drive and passion. This would be a great area of research to further pursue. Taking advantage of students' strengths and interests could possibly heighten their interest in school and even increase their success. Further researching what interests students and excites them about learning could be very beneficial in the study of suspension and dropout rates.

Another possible area of further research is the finding that students view school as a necessary component of a successful life. Many of the students in this study have been suspended more times than they can count and yet they still say without question that they want to graduate because they want to have a job and be successful. If these students have a desire to graduate and view a high school degree as valuable then there must be a way to help them stay in school. It would also be beneficial to further explore if students actually value the education they receive during high school or if they only value the degree. This was not taken into consideration in this study so a possible avenue for future research would be to explore if it is just the degree that holds value.

The participants in this study seemed to struggle when asked to provide alternatives for suspension that they feel would be effective. Many of the participants quickly stated that suspension was ineffective but when given the opportunity to provide an alternative they hesitated. It was as if the students did not feel their opinion was valid, or had simply not been asked their opinion enough. This could be an area to further pursue and see if and how schools and educators are encouraging all students to think creatively and as valued individuals.

Limitations

The literature reviewed refers to a wide variety of schools across the entire country, whereas the research participants in the present study are from one particular alternative school in a small city in central North Carolina. The students enrolled in this school are now in a school setting where they are finding success as they are all close to seeking a high school degree. The surveys and interviews were completed with hindsight and reflection on the past since the students were asked to discuss the traditional public high school that they attended prior to coming to the alternative school. The research is also limited to the number of students that consent to participate in the surveys and interviews. The surveys and interviews were only completed by students of age eighteen or older and therefore the participant pool was limited.

Another possible limitation is that this study seeks to report the student perspective and does not take into account the perspectives of parents, teachers, or administration. This study sought out to find beneficial alternatives to suspension based solely on student voice; however, teachers and administration play a pivotal role in the suspension and mediation of students. This research serves as a case study for the topic of suspension and dropouts, since a very specific population was targeted.

Conclusion

This study aligned with the existing literature which suggested that exclusionary policies like suspension are ineffective; however, this study provided additional information based on student opinion. The findings revealed possible alternatives, or additional measures, to help all students remain enrolled and engaged in school. This study showed that administrators and educators need to implement policies that are more geared toward individual student success. The result of policies and practices that punish behaviors and result in school suspension is likely to be less detrimental to young people in the long run if they more conscientiously take into account the voices of those students.

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Appendix A

Examining the Impact of School Suspension Survey

Age:

Grade Level (Circle One): 9th 10th 11th 12th

Gender (Circle One): M F

1. Which of the following best represents your racial or ethnic heritage? (Choose all that apply)

- a. Non-Hispanic White or Euro-American
- b. Black, Afro-Caribbean, or African American
- c. Latino or Hispanic American
- d. East Asian or Asian American
- e. South Asian or Indian American
- f. Middle Eastern or Arab American
- g. Native American or Alaskan Native
- h. Other

2. In life, I am happiest when I am _____.

3. In life, I am least happy when I am_____.

4. At school, I am happiest when I am _____.

5. At school, I am least happy when I am_____.

6. When I think of school the first word that comes to my mind is _____.

7. My relationship with the administration (principal and assistant principals) at my school was (please circle a number on the scale)

Negative		Neutral		Positive
1	2	3	4	5

8. How many times have you been suspended, if any?

9. Why were you suspended? If you have been suspended multiple times, provide a few examples of why.

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10. If you have been suspended at any point then fill in the blank to this sentence.

When I returned from suspension I felt _____.

11. On a scale of 1-5 how effective do you feel suspension is in keeping you enrolled in school (and not getting suspended again) when you return?

<i>Doesn't</i>		<i>Kind of Works</i>		<i>Works Well</i>
<i>Work At All</i>				
1	2	3	4	5

12. If you do not think that suspension is an effective punishment, then what do you think would work better?

13. What is your idea for helping students like yourself be successful in school?

14. How many people do you know that have dropped out of high school?

- a. 0
- b. 1-5
- c. 6-10
- d. 10-15
- e. more than 15

15. Have you ever considered dropping out of school? (circle one)

YES NO

If yes, why?

If no, why are you determined to graduate?

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* If you are interested/ willing to do an additional interview please write your initials below and the days and times that would work best for me to talk with you. We will schedule the interview time in person, after turning this survey in and showing your interest, so I will not need any contact information from you. The interviews will be held at your school at the time we decide on. By giving me this information you are in no way promising to do an interview, it is just to show that you would be willing.

Initials: _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol: Examining the Impact of School Suspension

General Questions

I'm just going to start off by asking you a few questions about your everyday life and your goals...

What classes are you taking?

What after-school activities do you participate in?

What activities do you like to do outside of school?

Name a few people at your school that you think play a positive role in your experience there (if any)? What are their jobs (or roles) at the school?

What do they do/say that helped build such a positive relationship with you?

Who are some people outside of school that play a positive role in your education?

What do you see yourself doing in the next few years? What are your short term goals?

-What do you like about these goals? What do you not like about these goals? That is, are there other goals that you would rather see yourself doing?

What do you see yourself doing ten years from now? What are your long term goals?

--What do you like about these goals? What do you not like about these goals? That is, are there other goals that you would rather see yourself doing?

School Background

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about your school background...

How do you feel when you are at school? Try to give me at least two adjectives and tell me why you chose them.

How would you like to feel when you are at school?

Have you ever had to repeat a grade? If so, which grade?

If you had to give one reason for your need to repeat a grade what would it be?

What makes school enjoyable for you?

Taking friends and social lives out of the picture, what is something that makes going to school enjoyable? [Is it a class you get to take, a teacher you have, a sport you play, etc.? Or is there anything?]

Did you feel respected by your principal and assistant principals? Why or why not?

-Did you respect them? Why or why not?

Did you feel respected by your teachers? Why or why not?

-Did you respect them? Why or why not?

If you could change one thing about your high school what would it be and why?

Do you plan to graduate high school?

-If so, why? Are you doing it for you, for a job, for a family member, etc.?

-If not, why not?

Suspension History

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about your past experience with suspension...

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What do you think the purpose of suspension is? Do you feel that it is effective?

In your survey, you said that you were suspended X times for X. Before you were suspended, do you feel that you were given an opportunity to explain your side of the situation and what you felt like happened?

Do you feel like your side of the story was truly listened to and respected?

What did you do during the time that you were suspended? [Did you stay at home? Go to some sort of alternative program? Etc.]

-If you went to an alternative program, tell me some of the things you did there.

-Do you feel that the alternative program was more helpful for your learning than you staying at home all day?

How did you feel when you returned to school after being suspended?

Were you behind on any work when you returned? What did you feel like you had missed, if anything?

Did your suspension keep you from doing the same thing again that you got suspended for? Why or why not?

Did being suspended change the way you feel at school or towards school?
Why do you think that it did or did not?

Do you think the reason for your suspension/expulsion was fair or unfair?

-Are there situations where you feel that suspension is the right punishment? If so, what are these situations and why?

-What situations do you feel like suspension/expulsion is the wrong type of punishment?

If you do not feel that suspension is the best form of punishment than what do you think would work better?

Why do you think this would be a good alternative to suspension? What effect do you think this alternative to suspension would have on students?

Would it keep them in school? Would it help avoid repeat suspensions?

Have you ever considered dropping out of school? If so, what led you to consider this?

Could something have been done differently in your school or life to keep you from thinking about dropping out?

-Why do you think this would have been helpful?

If you have never considered dropping out, why do you think you have never thought about it?

Additional Questions:

If you could name the factors that led to you consider dropping out of high school what would they be?

Now that you look back on your past experience in high school, what are your feelings towards your suspension(s)? Do you feel differently than you did at the time?

-Do you blame anyone for your suspension? Why?

What/who encourages you to get your high school degree?

If you could give a piece of advice to the younger high school version of yourself (or someone in a similar situation), what would you say?

Appendix C (survey results)

Student Voice on Suspension Survey Results

11. If you do not think that suspension is an effective punishment, then what do you think would work better?

Table C1

Alternatives to Suspension, n = 17

-
- “jail”
 - “suspension was fair”

- “detention and making students work such as scrubbing gum under the desks after school”
 - “I think that they could give the students one more chance and if the chance doesn’t work then contact parents and switch classes”
 - “sometimes I did not want to be at school so I purposely got suspended”
 - “take away what kids look forward to”
 - “beating the kids”
 - “in school punishment, (for example if I skipped, do make up)”
 - “finding a solution where the situation would solve an issue but not take away from my education”
 - “to take you out of class and let you sit in office for that remaining of class”
 - “a conference”
 - “idk”
-

12. What is your idea for helping students like yourself be successful in school?

Table C2

Ideas for Helping Students be Successful

Category/Theme	Responses
<i>Personal Advice</i>	“stay focused and watch out for crap”
	“finding their own personal motivations/family”
	“to keep their heads on straight and to not let people bother them”
	“school 1 st party on the weekends”
	“having positive vibes, and getting along with people even if they don’t like me”
	“do your work and show up”
	“stay focused and determined”
	“let them know that suspension isn’t a good punishment, and that you miss out on a lot”
	“don’t get in trouble”
	“value education before it’s too late”
	“let them know it’s not worth acting stupid with your friends an stay focused on your work”

<i>Advice for School and Teachers</i>	
	“guiding them and encouraging them to succeed”
	“being patient but not too lenient”
	“make it into a game, make things fun and interesting”
	“helping specifically teach them the way they need”
	“make school more free”
	“have a set of rules for everyone”
	“don’t suspend for skipping defeats purpose, make school not as much as an option”
	“make classes fun”
	“more one on one help and tutoring for ones who are having a hard time understanding what is being taught”
	“mentoring”
	“talk to them about their future”
<i>Other</i>	
	“try to help them with anything the best I could”
	“because some students think different and I went through stuff that might help them out”

15. Have you ever considered dropping out?

Table C3

If yes, why?

<i>Reasons students considered dropping out</i>
A whole lot of bull crap
I did
in the past
it didn't feel like a thing for me
I have considered it, if I had to go back to my old school
because the math teacher wasn't being fair and also it was a waste of time when I had no classes to really take
just got bored with school
so I can start working and provide for my family
couldn't deal with the people
I was working and I thought I was making a lot of money for my age
never thought I would graduate
The school was terrible. The teachers did not teach. They were too busy being friends w/ their students.
I felt like I was getting picked on or watched all the time and when I was suspended I just did

whatever I wanted

Table C4

If no, why not?

<i>Reasons for NOT considering dropping out</i>
For my family and my future
I have come this far and not willing to give up
I want a career and to be able to provide for myself
graduating high school is the first step to getting your life together
because it's my life
I want to graduate, for me so I can move on to the next step and for my family that's counting on me
I knew it was in my best interest to stay asides I would be one of few that actually graduated in my fam
to have a good life
eager to achieve my dreams
I'm the youngest in my family, I've watched all my cousins walk, now it's my turn; and for myself and future
I'm determined to graduate because I have a family to support and I want to make something out of my life.
to get an education
I am determined to graduate because I want to be a better person and I have a child to raise
Because I refuse not to be successful
because I want to be an achiever in life, I want life changes for myself and to be able to become something good in life
to better my future
I promised my moms I could