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# Speaking Through My Tears: A Critical Exploration Of Black Students' And Parents' Perceptions Of School Discipline

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**SPEAKING THROUGH MY TEARS: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF BLACK STUDENTS' AND PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE**

by

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Submitted to the Graduate School

of Wayne State University,

Detroit, Michigan

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

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MAJOR: SOCIOLOGY

Approved By:

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Advisor

Date

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## **DEDICATION**

Writing a dissertation is a monumental task and I am grateful for the support I received.

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to God for providing access to opportunities that I did not know existed. Despite my potential, it never seemed realistic that I would achieve at this level because of the circumstances I lived in throughout my childhood and early adult life. However, God opened many doors me for and I am very grateful.

Dr. David Merolla is one of the most helpful and caring professors I have ever met. Thank you for your dedication to my development and the independence you provided me.

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My first child, Lailah, provided the motivation I needed to make substantial progress on my dissertation. You may not remember this, but you watched me write my dissertation from the moment you were born. Thank you for listening to me read my dissertation, playing with my laptop, and showing me how important my actions are in your life. I worked endlessly to be the best father I can be for you and to inspire you to achieve at the highest level. Successfully matriculating through my doctoral program and providing you with the resources you need to access the higher education setting early in your life makes me so proud.

My second child, Maya, provided the motivation I needed to finish my dissertation. I wanted to spend as much time as possible with you and your sister without any interruption. You inspire me to be great. I expect nothing less than excellence from you.

To every child, niece (Alecia), nephew (Amir), grandchild, and generations to come, I dedicate this dissertation to you. In the history of the Bell Family no one has earned a masters or doctoral degree besides myself at this point. I am the first and I challenge you to be the second, third, fourth, and so on. I challenge you to leave a legacy of GREATNESS in our family and in your respective communities. Never give up! When self-doubt presents itself, I challenge you to dig deeper. When pain and problems present, I challenge you to dig deeper. Successful people experience many challenges but what makes them successful is their decision to never QUIT!

To my sister I challenge you to be great. Thank you for supporting me as I constructed my identity as a scholar. Through activism, scholarship, and political engagement you were there and I will never forget it.

To my parents, I thank you for life. I did the best I could to make you proud.

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Nanny (Grandmother) I miss you and I would not have made it without your support

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Early studies show the United States public school system has encountered several problems in its attempt to provide an equitable education to students from diverse cultural backgrounds. The disproportionate use of school discipline (i.e. suspension and expulsion) in African American K-12 populations, represents one of the most noteworthy social problems to plague public education in the United States. In 1975, the Children's Defense Fund analyzed national school suspension data and concluded that black students were suspended nearly three times more often than white students across elementary, middle, and high school grade levels (Children's Defense Fund 1975). Additionally, subsequent studies have consistently shown African Americans are disproportionately represented in school discipline settings (Civil Rights Data Snapshot 2014; Losen and Gillespie 2012). In 2009, a federal study of the Chicago Public School system found African American boys represented 23 percent of the school age population, 44 percent of students who were suspended, and 61 percent of students who were expelled within the 2007 school year (Anderson 2009).

The systematic removal of African American students from the education environment has led many researchers to argue this practice poses one of the greatest civil rights challenges of the twenty-first century. Several scholars attribute the racial disparities in school suspension and expulsion rates to zero tolerance policies (Losen & Skiba 2010; Stone-Palmquist 2004). Zero tolerance policies were initially implemented during the war on drugs to create strict prison sentences for drug possession and distribution. However, studies show zero tolerance policies adversely affected racial minorities and led to a drastic increase in incarceration rates observed in African American and Latino populations (Drucker, 2002). Despite evidence documenting how zero tolerance policies adversely affect African Americans, these policies were adopted into K-12

education systems throughout the United States in the early 1990's. Current data shows black students are suspended and expelled at three times the rate of white students throughout the country (CRDC 2014). Thus, as school administrators continue to embrace this widely criticized practice researchers have been tasked with exploring the relationship between race, school discipline, state school code provisions, and federal legislation.

Zero tolerance policies are notorious for providing strict punishments for criminal offenses and are often considered racially biased. For example, research shows between the years 1974 and 2002 the Rockefeller Drug Laws increased New York State's prison population from 14,400 to over 70,000 inmates with nearly 90 percent of the inmates comprised of black and Hispanic males (Drucker 2002). As zero tolerance policies were incorporated into the K-12 education system similar racial disparities were documented. A 2015 Civil Rights report found school districts in the State of Michigan collectively had the 4<sup>th</sup> largest disparity in school suspension rates between black and white students (Losen et al. 2015). Additionally, several school districts in Michigan led the nation with the highest percentage of students who were suspended in the 2011 – 2012 academic year (Losen et al. 2015).

As thousands of black students in Michigan are suspended and expelled from school every year due to zero tolerance policies it is important for education stakeholders to understand how black students perceive zero tolerance policies. McNeil & Dunbar (2010) explored minority student perceptions of zero tolerance policies and found students did not feel safe in school due to an inequitable system of discipline. Caton (2012) explored the educational experiences of ten black males who dropped out of school and the respondents reported being the target of intense scrutiny from security guards. Considering the potential harm zero tolerance policies may cause in the

academic environment, it is important to explore black students' perceptions of school discipline in K-12 settings.

Although it is important to explore black students' perceptions of school discipline, research shows parents play a vital role in a child's education. Specifically, research consistently shows parents assist in school selection, peer group monitoring, and aid school personnel when addressing problematic behavior (Hill & Tyson 2009; Ferrara & Ferrara 2005). Despite the key role parents have in fostering student development, parental perceptions of school discipline have not been explored. The absence of black parental perceptions in the literature creates a void in our understanding of how parents of black students perceive school discipline. Considering the significance of the parent-child relationship, it is important to understand how parents perceive school discipline and how school discipline shapes parental interaction with K-12 schools.

#### *Purpose*

The purpose of this study is to explore black student and parental perceptions of school discipline and its impact on academic achievement, social status, parental employment, and perceptions of metal detectors and school guards. Since black students are disproportionately affected by school discipline, it is important for education stakeholders to understand how black students and parents perceive out-of-school suspension, expulsion, metal detectors, and school guards. Additionally, as research continues to highlight the counterproductive nature of zero tolerance policies, it is important for policy makers to consider the unintended consequences of adopting these policies in the K-12 education setting (American Psychological Association 2008).

The participants in this study include black high school students who have been suspended or expelled and parents of black high school students who have been suspended or expelled from Detroit Public Schools and Southfield Public Schools between January 2016 and September 2017.

Participants will be interviewed and asked semi-structured questions using a qualitative design guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do black students perceive school discipline?
- 2) How do parents of black students perceive school discipline and its impact on student's life trajectory?
- 3) How do black students and their parents perceive school safety measures?

### *Theoretical Framework*

It is important to place school discipline policies and their role in perpetuating black school discipline disproportionality in a theoretical framework to provide an in-depth understanding of this social problem. Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework developed from legal scholarship that provides insight into the role race has in shaping criminal justice and educational outcomes (Bell 1995). CRT is deeply rooted in a scholarly tradition that seeks to challenge mainstream hegemonic ideology and the slow pace of racial reforms (Bell 1995). As scholars explore social problems using CRT as a lens it is important to acknowledge the five tenets that are pronounced within critical race theory. CRT's main tenets are the permanence of racism, whiteness as property, the critique of liberalism, interest convergence, and counter-storytelling. Each tenet focuses on the structure of race in our society and the scenarios that would promote racial equity.

First, CRT asserts racism is a permanent component of American society and highlighting the experiences of racial minorities is essential to understanding racial inequality (Delgado 2001; Bell 1995). CRT describes racism as a pervasive ideology that controls the political, social, and economic structures in American society (Ladson-Billings 1998). Moreover, race is acknowledged for the inherent privileges it bestows upon white people in nearly all areas of life, including employment, criminal justice, and in the American education system (Delgado, 1995). For



example, as scholars investigate the structural effects of race in education they argue the criminalization of racial minorities by a predominately white teaching force via the school to prison pipeline perpetuates institutional racism (Wright, 2015; Monroe, 2005). Therefore, this framework is useful when exploring racial inequality in school discipline because it helps conceptualize the power and racial dynamics situated in our education system.

CRT's second tenet explores the socio-historical context that shaped racism in America and highlights the social construction of whiteness as property. Considering the permanence of racism, critical race theory argues that whiteness can be considered the ultimate property (Ladson-Billings 1998). During slavery Africans were treated as property, but could not own property themselves. Furthermore, the notion of whiteness as property has been characterized as an asset that only whites can possess. Scholars assert the value of whiteness has been situated in unequivocal access to social institutions, inalienable civil rights, and the right to exclude others (Ladson-Billings 1998; Bell 1995). Sugrue (1996) sheds light on whiteness as property as he discusses the construction of a wall by whites to create an exclusive white community with the complicity of the Federal Housing Administration (FHA). Thus, the nature of racism in America constructed whiteness as the ultimate property to possess due to the privileges bestowed to whites.

The third tenet of critical race theory focuses on its critique of liberalism. Critical race theory can be traced back to critical legal studies (CLS); a movement that challenged the perceived neutrality of the law, liberalism, and the belief that every case had one correct outcome (Delgado 2001). As lawyers, activists, and legal scholars across the country realized the gains from the civil rights era were being eroded they concluded that different strategies were needed to combat novel forms of racism (Howard 2008; Delgado 2001). According to CRT scholars, ignoring the role of race in social outcomes perpetuates the status quo and ensures the continuation of racial injustices

in our society. For example, affirmative action legislation was touted as a benefit primarily for racial minorities however, data suggests white women were the greatest beneficiaries (Wise 1998). Thus, CRT scholars argue liberalism has failed to address racial inequality because whites have gained the most from liberal reform.

Directly tied to CRT's critique of liberalism is the notion that the gains from favorable court decisions were eroded over time by conservative interpretation and delay (Howard 2008; Delgado 2001). As legal and social institutions tout claims of objectivity, color-blindness, meritocracy, and race neutrality, CRT argues these claims act to conceal the power held by the whites. CRT also builds on radical feminism and explores how power constructs social roles. Specifically, CRT acknowledges that hidden social forces work collectively to construct white male hegemony. Upon its inception, CRT scholars focused exclusively on the civil rights movement with the intent to establish a firm commitment to social justice, a transformative curricular, and a pedagogical response to race, gender, and class oppression (Solorzano & Yosso 2001). While theorists argue modern society is designed to perpetuate inequality the goal of CRT is to eliminate poverty, racism, sexism, and empower racial minorities.

The fourth tenet of critical race theory, which is interest convergence, acknowledges that whites are the primary beneficiaries of legislative reforms and argues racial equity will only be pursued when the interests of racial minorities converge with those of whites (Milner 2008). It is important to understand that CRT scholars view social change, such as racial integration into the education system and affirmative action, as interest convergence because both were achieved in a manner that benefitted whites. For example, several scholars described the tactical precision of urban deindustrialization and the white flight that followed racial integration into public schools, which ultimately re-segregated public K-12 settings. Thus, interest convergence argues that change

is intentionally slow, proceeds at the pace that whites deem appropriate, and when the interests of black people are in opposition to those of whites it becomes very difficult to achieve racial equity (Milner 2008; Leigh 2003).

Over the last twenty years CRT has contributed a novel perspective to research in several disciplines. While its contribution to criminal justice has been noteworthy its application in K-12 education research has opened many doors for researchers who study racial disparities in academic achievement and school discipline. As CRT argues that race is a social construction and racism is endemic in American society it provides a framework to study the experiences of those who are marginalized in education institution (Solorzano & Yosso 2001). Additionally, it provides insight into how racial stigmas shape educators' and school administrators' perceptions of racial minorities and how racial minorities respond. Howard (2008) used counter storytelling, which is a methodology associated with CRT, to explore black students' perceptions of the role race and power played in their educational experiences. Counter-storytelling allows marginalized racial minorities to discuss their experiences while challenging the narrative conveyed by those in power. The results revealed black students were aware of negative stereotypes and were dedicated to challenging them through their success. For example, one respondent stated,

“I play football, so you know they expect you to be good in sports. But when you are on the ASB (Associated Student Body) council, like I am, and being a school leader, have good grades, and talking about going to college on an academic scholarship, then they look at you like Whoa!! I didn't think that they (Black males) were into those kind of things. One teacher even told me once, ‘You're not like the rest of them’. I didn't ask her what that meant, but believe me, I knew what that meant” (pg.17).

Thus, critical race theory has been useful in exploring the experiences of racial minorities in the education setting and could be very beneficial when used to study racial disparities in school discipline.

*Significance of Present Study*

The current study seeks to explore black student and parental perceptions of school discipline. Research shows parents play a significant role in shaping a child's educational experiences given their role in school section, peer mediation, and interaction with school personnel (Hill & Tyson, 2009). Considering the role parents have in the K-12 education process exploring parental perceptions of school discipline policies could provide novel insight into how black families navigate school discipline. While prior studies have focused on investigating black student perceptions of zero tolerance policies in relation to their overall effectiveness and the impact of discipline on student learning, the current study would be the first to explore how school discipline impacts social status, parental employment, as well as perceptions of metal detectors and school guards. In light of the documented evidence associated with the school to prison pipeline it is important to investigate black students' perceptions of school discipline and how school discipline impacts parents of black students.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

### *History of Zero Tolerance Policies*

Zero tolerance policies can be defined as a legal doctrine that mandates specific punishments for illicit offenses. Within the last two decades researchers have worked diligently to document the relationship between school discipline and zero tolerance policies. Zero tolerance policies were originally used by several states, such as New York and Michigan, to deter crime in urban areas. The concept of “order maintenance” as emphasized in zero tolerance policies can be traced back to broken windows theory, which claims that allowing minor infractions to occur encourages criminals to commit more serious offenses. According to Drs. James Wilson and George Keeling the perceived notion of less social control that is evident by the presence of dilapidated properties creates an environment that attracts serious crime because criminals believe they can avoid being caught (Wilson and Keeling 1982). This concept has been widely accepted by sociologists and is deeply rooted in social control theories that intend to deter serious offenses. The application of broken windows theory has led to strict state and federal legislation on drug distribution, gun possession, and several other criminal offenses. While the United States has adopted a strict stance on narcotics distribution and gun possession it should be noted that legislation varies significantly across different states and at the federal level.

One of the first documented zero tolerance policies in the United States was established by Governor Nelson Rockefeller in 1973. Governor Rockefeller championed a change in New York state law that would provide mandatory 15 years to life sentences for drug dealers and addicts (Drucker 2002). Specifically, under the Rockefeller Drug Laws (RDLs) selling at least two ounces of heroin, cocaine, or cannabis or possessing at least four ounces of these substances warranted a minimum 15 years to life prison sentence (Drucker 2002). Facing a serious heroin problem and

escalating homicide rates in the city of New York, Governor Rockefeller proposed a strict zero tolerance policy for drug use and distribution due to the perceived failure of the most rigorous rehabilitative efforts (Drucker 2002). The evident shift in Governor Rockefeller's perception of drug trafficking and addiction as a medical problem to a criminal offense has influenced drug sentencing throughout the nation for much of the last 40 years (Drucker 2002).

Although zero tolerance policies were becoming very popular in drug legislation implemented by several states it took nearly 10 years for similar policies to be adopted by their federal government. Due to the development of illegal drug enterprises and the increasing availability of semi-automatic assault rifles in the United States the federal government passed the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts. Specifically, the Anti-Drug Abuse Acts of 1986 and 1988 established a minimum 5-year prison sentence for selling five grams of crack cocaine, while selling five hundred grams of power cocaine warranted the same prison sentence (Mauer and Huling 1995). In 1988 US Attorney General Edwin Meese adopted zero tolerance policies as a national model and ordered US customs agents to seize the property of anyone carrying trace amounts of illegal substances. Thus, as illegal narcotics trafficking gained popularity zero tolerance policies spread rapidly throughout the local, state, and federal government in an effort to maintain social control.

While zero tolerance policies were implemented under the notion of colorblindness, research shows these policies disproportionately affect poor African Americans. Between 1974 and 2002 the state of New York prison population increased from 14,400 to 70,700 inmates which is the highest incarceration rate in the state's history (Drucker 2002). New York state prison demographic data from the year 2000 shows over ninety percent of the inmates who were incarcerated due to the Rockefeller drug laws were black or Hispanic males. Additionally, the rate of incarceration for black males under the Rockefeller drug laws was the highest of any group with

1,516 inmates per 100,000 black individuals in the general population compared to 34 inmates per 100,000 whites in the general population (Drucker, 2002).

While studies have documented a racial disparity in the arrest and incarceration rates between black and white men few have explored the effects of the RDLs on incarceration rates between black and white women. Nakdai (2001) found 54.3 percent of women incarcerated for drug offenses in New York were black while white women incarcerated for drug offenses in New York comprised only 8.4 percent of the prison population. Additionally, between 1986 and 1991 the number of black women incarcerated in state prisons throughout the U.S. for drug offenses increased by more than 800 percent (Maur & Huling 1995). Studies also show that mandatory sentencing laws prevented judges from considering the reasons women were involved in the narcotics trade or chose to remain silent regarding a family member's involvement. Vagins and McCurdy (2006) argue women are often victims of domestic abuse or they find themselves dependent on the revenue from trafficking illegal narcotics due to their comparatively low earnings. Thus, the lack of judicial discretion in drug sentencing forces judges to distribute the same mandatory minimum prison term to all offenders without considering their level of involvement.

While research shows African American men and women are disproportionately affected by zero tolerance policies it is important to understand how criminality and race are intricately linked and used to legitimize the harsh prison sentences African Americans receive. Nunn (2002) argues that the focus on African Americans during the war on drugs was not an accident and that it serves as an example of the role race and criminality play in the perpetuation of white social control. Furthermore, Nunn stated the behaviors and activities that are defined as crime determines who is oppressed in our society and legitimizes their oppression by masking it as a proper response

to wrongdoing. For example, the disparate punishment for crack cocaine compared to powder cocaine determined African Americans would receive harsher prison sentences in most cases and few questioned the appropriateness of the harsh sentences because of the racial imagery tied to crack cocaine use. Reeves and Campbell (1994) showed how racial imagery was used by the media during the war on drugs. Specifically, in the early 1980's typical media coverage on cocaine focused on white users, drug treatment, and the possibility of recovery (Reeves & Campbell 1994). However, as crack cocaine emerged news coverage adopted a punitive approach and emphasized the role of poor nonwhites as drug distributors rather than users who could be treated medically (Reeves & Campbell, 1994). Consequently, scholars must shed light on the relationship between race and criminality due to their collective function in the political landscape to legitimize racial inequality.

### *School Discipline in K-12 Settings*

As zero tolerance policies spread through local and federal government K–12 institutions were desperately seeking a deterrent to violent offenses committed on school grounds. In 1989 school districts in several states including California and New York mandated expulsion for violent offenses and drug activity (Skiba 2000). In 1994 the Clinton Administration signed the Gun Free Schools Act which required a 1-year expulsion for students in possession of a firearm, thereby creating a pipeline between the Department of Corrections and K–12 institutions (Skiba 2000). Directly following the implementation of the Gun Free Schools Act zero tolerance policies in K–12 institutions expanded to include a variety of undesired behaviors, such as fighting, tardiness, and insubordination. Furthermore, zero tolerance policies initiated the widespread use of metal detectors and the visible presence of armed guards and police officers in K-12 schools across the U.S.



In 1996, social scientist Dr. John Dilulio warned policymakers that groups of teenage “superpredators” would emerge in American society (Bennett et al. 1996). According to Dr. Dilulio a super-predator was characterized as a new breed of juvenile delinquents that had no respect for human life or hope for the future. Furthermore, in his research Dr. Dilulio and his colleagues described super-predators as “radically impulsive, brutally remorseless youngsters, including ever more teenage boys, who murder assault, rob, burglarize, deal deadly drugs, join gun-toting gangs, and create serious disorder” (Bennett et al. 1996). Dr. Dilulio’s warnings regarding the emergence of super-predators and the tragic Columbine High School shooting in 1999 sparked fear of young men, which served as a catalyst in the effort to increase the prevalence of zero tolerance policies in public schools. In the 1996–1997 school year, approximately 79 percent of schools had adopted zero tolerance policies for violence (Kang-Brown et al. 2013). In addition, between 1997 and 2007 the number of US high schools with armed security guards tripled (Kang-Brown et al. 2013).

Although zero tolerance policies were intended to be a deterrent for all offenders, research shows African Americans have been suspended and incarcerated at higher rates than their white counterparts for over three decades (Civil Rights Data Snapshot 2014; Wu et al. 1982; Children’s Defense Fund 1975). While socioeconomic status was initially used to explain racial disparities in school discipline, studies have controlled for socioeconomic status and still found black students were suspended at higher rates than their white counterparts (Skiba et al. 2000; Wu et al. 1982). This finding has been consistent in the literature and has led to concerns regarding the practicality of zero tolerance policies. Current research shows black males are four times more likely to be suspended than their peers and an alarming percentage of black male suspensions are for subjective offenses (Crenshaw, Ocen, Nanda, 2015; Skiba et al, 2000). Specifically, studies show black

students are suspended at disproportionate rates for subjective offenses such as “disrespect” and “insubordination”.

In the 2009–2010 school year, research shows nationally 31 percent of black boys in middle school were suspended at least one time (Kang-Brown et al. 2013). Although the disproportionate representation of black boys in school discipline settings is portrayed as a social phenomenon limited to urban settings research shows school suspension in many suburban areas demonstrate a similar pattern. The State of Maryland’s regional educational laboratory reported black students were suspended at twice the rate of white students in all its 24 school systems (Porowski et al. 2014). Moreover, for the same type of infraction black students were suspended or expelled at higher rates than Hispanic and white students.

While research shows zero tolerance policies have adversely affected black boys it should be recognized that these policies have also contributed to the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of black girls. Using data from the 1996-1997 academic year in a central Florida school district, Mendez and Knoff (2003) explored racial disparities in school discipline and found black females were suspended at higher rates than their white counterparts across elementary, middle, and high school. In addition, the Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) report for the 2011-2012 school year found approximately 12 percent of African American female K-12 students were suspended, which is six times the suspension rate for white female K-12 students (CRDC, 2014).

As research has continued to explore school discipline disproportionality in black female populations data has also showed that African American girls with dark skin tone are suspended at higher rates than those with light skin tone. Intersectionality and critical race scholars argue that colorism, which refers to a deeply rooted system of color discrimination that extends unearned social privileges to individuals who possess light skin tone, is deeply embedded within the black

school discipline disproportionality social problem (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015; Morris, 2012). Hannon, DeFina, and Bruch (2013) used the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth to explore color discrimination in black female school discipline and found African American girls with the darkest skin tone were suspended at 3 times the rate of those with the lightest skin tone. Furthermore, Bettie (2014) explores the lived experiences of girls and highlights the importance of how social class, race, and gender intersect to produce inequality in educational settings. Drawing from Bettie (2014) it is important to be aware of how girls navigate the K-12 education setting while taking into consideration how social class and race shapes their experiences. Consequently, researchers and education stakeholders should be aware that inequality in K-12 education settings is pervasive, multifaceted, and warrants urgent attention.

While zero tolerance policies are recognized for contributing to the disproportionate suspension and expulsion of black boys in adolescent populations research also shows black preschoolers are also suspended at higher rates than their white counterparts (Civil Rights Snapshot 2014). According to the 2014 Civil Rights Data Collection report, black children represented eighteen percent of the preschool enrollment population and forty-eight percent of the children who were suspended in the 2011–2012 school year. In addition, six percent of the nation’s school districts that contain preschools report suspending at least one preschool student (Civil Rights Snapshot 2014). This finding confirms racial disparities in school discipline begin much earlier in the education process and could adversely impact preparation for subsequent grade levels. In regard to the impact of school discipline on academic achievement, the co-director of the Advancement Project, Judith Browne Dianis, states, “We do know that schools are using zero tolerance policies for our youngest also, while we think our children need a head start, and schools are kicking them out instead” (Lee 2014).

Black students with disabilities were not an exception to this phenomenon with data showing nearly twenty-five percent of black boys and twenty percent of black girls with disabilities were suspended in the 2011-2012 school year (Losen and Gillespie 2012). Considering the increased risk of school suspension in minority special needs populations, it should also be recognized that students with disabilities are often suspended multiple times. Nationally African Americans with disabilities had the greatest risk of being suspended multiple times in the 2009-2010 school year, followed by American Indians and Latino students with disabilities (Losen and Gillespie 2012). Research shows more than ten states suspended over twenty-five percent of their black students with disabilities at least once. Furthermore, Illinois leads the nation in suspending black students with disabilities at rate of nearly forty-two percent followed by Delaware at thirty-eight percent (Losen and Gillespie 2012).

Surprisingly the data on school suspensions at the district level reveal a more disturbing pattern; particularly when gender and disability were considered. For example, the data from the one-hundred largest school districts shows the City of Chicago Public School District suspended over seventy-two percent of its African American male students with disabilities at least one time and only nineteen percent of their white counterparts in the 2009-2010 school year (Losen & Gillespie 2012). Additionally, Memphis City School District suspended nearly fifty-three percent of its African American male students with disabilities and thirty-five percent of their white counterparts. Among females with disabilities, Henrico County Public Schools, located in the state of Virginia, had the highest rates of school suspension in the 2009-2010 school year for African American and Hispanic students with rates of fifty-eight percent and twenty-six percent respectively (Losen & Gillespie 2012). Whereas the district suspended only eighteen percent of its white female students with disabilities during that year. Thus, it is evident that zero tolerance

policies have contributed to black school discipline disproportionality at all phases of public education and warrants urgent attention.

Bearing in mind zero tolerance policies and their role in perpetuating black school discipline disproportionality; researchers have employed qualitative methodology to investigate black student perceptions of these policies. For example, Caton (2012) interviewed ten black males who dropped out of high school due to suspension or expulsion within the past year. Throughout the interviews, the four primary themes that emerged were (a) the impact of security measures on school environment, (b) the need for strong teacher-student relationships, (c) impact of school exclusionary practices, and (d) the impact of disciplinary space on student learning. Counter-storytelling was employed as a method of gaining insight into the perspectives of black males that had previously been ignored. This technique was used to highlight each participant's real-world experience and unveil the reality of the school-to-prison pipeline. The results showed the participants believed school security measures created an unwelcoming and intimidating environment. They described frequent full-body and bag searches, metal detectors, and being the target of intense scrutiny from security guards. Some participants expressed the belief that their personal space was frequently violated while others described numerous similarities between their school and correctional facilities. For example, a participant identified as Cliff stated,

“I did not want to go to school because I felt uncomfortable in the environment. The cameras were always watching you. You felt like you were constantly under observation. At times, it appeared that the security guards were always breathing in your personal space. One of my relatives attends a high school with White and Asian students, and this school did not have cameras and the body searches. This school had security guards at the entrance of the building checking IDs. The guards did not shout at the students” (Caton 2012).

In regard to the need for stronger teacher-student relationships, the participants stated they would have liked their teachers to support them and offer encouragement to be successful in school. Some of the participants stated their teachers focused more on their misdeeds than on

developing their strengths. Participants reaffirmed the impact teachers could have in their lives by stating,

“A teacher can make or break you.” As one participant in the study, who was identified as Chris, stated, “I developed a reputation in the ninth grade that followed me throughout high school of being a troublemaker. Many times, I was isolated in the classroom and at times ignored by some teachers. Many of my teachers were not aware of my strengths because they did not spend time getting to know me. At times, I feel that I was singled out for punishment because of my reputation.” (Caton 2012).

Furthermore, the participant’s responses regarding the impact of the disciplinary space on student learning revealed a fundamental problem with zero tolerance policies that has attracted a lot of attention. Participants reported being behind on their classwork due to being suspended from school. As one participant in the study, who was identified as Troy stated,

“I did so poorly in school and had to repeat a grade because I was ordered to leave the class for different issues. I would sit in the Dean’s office with other students and socialize. Many of the other students were also Black males. I believe that my teachers should have covered my back; instead, they threw me under the bus. I was far behind with my schoolwork when I returned to class, and trying to catch up with the class work was an impossible task.” (Caton 2012).

Lastly, in regard to the impact of exclusionary policies on student outcomes category, participants recognized the need for order within the education infrastructure but questioned the benefits of school expulsion practices. Some participants reported school expulsion practices were harsh and their parents began to have doubts regarding the school’s commitment to providing a quality education for black students. As a participant identified as Tom stated,

“One day, I got into a fight with other students in the cafeteria, and I was suspended. When I returned from the suspension, I had other problems and then I was expelled. While I was out of school, I became friendly with the wrong people and got into trouble. I am now on probation, and I am trying to find a job. It is hard out here without a high school diploma and with a record.” (Caton 2012).

### *School Discipline, Race, & Subjectivity*

While it is important to understand how zero tolerance policies perpetuate racial inequality in school discipline at a macro-systems level, it is also important to understand how zero tolerance policies create racial inequality in school discipline on a human interaction level. Studies that

focused on racial inequality in school discipline typically attributed the disparate outcomes to low socioeconomic status and problematic behavior (Skiba 1997; Wu et al 1982). For example, Wu et al. (1982) explored school discipline data and found students whose father was not employed full-time were suspended at rates that were significantly higher than students whose father was employed full-time. Additionally, research shows African Americans have been arrested and incarcerated at higher rates than their white counterparts (Mauer 2011; Mauer & Huling 1995). Since research shows black students are disproportionately represented in low socioeconomic classes and are more likely to be perceived as criminals; researchers argue problematic behavior and social class explain black school discipline disproportionality (Skiba 2014).

Seeing the national notoriety surrounding zero tolerance policies Skiba (2000) explored school discipline records to determine if poverty and poor behavior explained black school discipline disproportionality. Using the discipline records of 11,001 students the results showed socioeconomic status had no effect on school discipline and disproportionality by race persisted despite using lunch status as a covariate. Furthermore, the study found black students were more likely to be referred for discipline due to nonviolent and subjective offenses such as disrespect, excessive noise, and loitering. The results of this study show socioeconomic status and behavioral differences fail to explain the racially disparate discipline outcomes in K-12 settings. Consequently, many researchers began to explore school discipline disproportionality by illuminating the micro-level dynamics that shape the academic setting.

Data from the 2012 – 2013 academic year in Ohio K-12 schools shows black girls were disproportionately suspended for several offenses with “disobedience and disruptive behavior” being the category for which most girls were disciplined (Smith-Evans et al. 2014). Several race and gender inequality theorists argue that African American girls encounter negative images and

stereotypes before they enter the academic setting, which adversely affects their self-image (Smith-Evans et al. 2014). As African American girls develop their racial and gender identities, scholars argue they experience difficulty navigating the education institution because of those negative stereotypes. Additionally, as educators view the stereotypical images that depict African American women as “aggressive”, “sexually promiscuous”, “loud”, and “disrespectful”, they assume that African American girls require more social redirecting than their white counterparts, which manifests in the form of school discipline (Smith-Evans et al. 2014; Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda 2015). Thus, it is imperative to recognize that subjective offenses such as “disobedience and disruptive behavior” could serve as code for a student’s failure to conform to middle-class notions of femininity.

In addition to the negative stigmas that adversely affect African American girls research shows African American girls who are more assertive, chew gum, and confront people in positions of authority are suspended and expelled at disproportionate rates (Smith-Evans et al. 2014). While studies show assertiveness is an attractive quality that leads many African American women into leadership positions this quality also increases the risk of school discipline. Critical race scholars have worked extensively to highlight serious social problems that harm black girls and women in our education system (Crenshaw, Ocen, Nanda 2015). Regarding how black girls are perceived in the school setting Crenshaw stated, “Blackness is associated with aggression and black girls and women are excessively sanctioned for gender-transgressive behavior” (Gordon, 2015). Archer-Banks & Behar-Horenstein (2012) explored African American girl’s educational experiences and one participant reported there was a different set of rules for black girls that targets them for subjective offenses. Thus, the numerous misperceptions regarding black girls’ assertiveness and expressions has contributed to the marginalization black girls experience via school discipline.



*School Discipline in Michigan K-12 Settings*

In 1995 legislators in the state of Michigan amended several school code provisions to mandate the expulsion of students who were in possession of a dangerous weapon or involved in the act of arson or rape (Michigan, 2003). Although the Gun Free Schools Act (1994) contained similar language it allowed for exceptions on a case-by-case basis whereas the legislation adopted in Michigan failed to do so (Stone-Palmquist 2004; Michigan 2003). By December of 1995 approximately two hundred and forty students in Michigan were suspended throughout the year for possessing dangerous weapons (Stone-Palmquist 2004). In 1999 Michigan legislators amended school code provisions to allow teachers to suspend students for a full day for “good reason”. The amendments also included provisions that required suspensions up to an academic year (i.e. 180 days) for physical assault of another student, permanent expulsion for physical assaults against school staff, and suspension or expulsion for verbal assaults against a school staff member (Stone-Palmquist 2004; Michigan 2003). While research shows there were less than five hundred expulsions per year in Michigan during the late 1990’s; in the 2001-2002 school year expulsions increased to nearly 1,600 (Stone-Palmquist 2004).

While school districts across the country were adopting zero tolerance policies research shows Michigan developed one of the harshest school discipline policies in the nation (Stone-Palmquist 2004). Specifically, Michigan mandated expulsion for a wider range of offenses than other states, discouraged the use of case-by-case discipline that was used by other states, and is one of the only states that placed the weight of finding an alternative school on the student and family (Stone-Palmquist 2004). Although these reforms were described as initiatives that would increase school safety and improve academic outcomes it should be recognized that these reforms also increased racial disparities in school discipline. According to Stone-Palmquist (2004) in the

2001-2002 school year approximately one thousand five hundred and eighty-eight expulsions were reported. Additionally, black students represented twenty percent of the school-age population and thirty-nine percent of those who were expelled. Therefore, Michigan's strict zero tolerance policies exacerbated existing inequities in school discipline and removed many students from the academic environment altogether.

In an effort to gather more information on the long-term effects of expulsion, Stone-Palmquist (2004) explored the post-expulsion experiences of forty-eight students who were expelled from Michigan public schools. Stone-Palmquist noted the difficulty in finding a sample of students who were expelled due to the lack of records held by the state of Michigan once a student is expelled. The study showed many students who are expelled from school in Michigan fell behind in their studies, were disconnected from the school environment, had trouble finding an alternative school, and eventually dropped out of school. The study also highlighted the lack of alternative educational options once a student is expelled and the lack of assistance many parents received from school personnel. Stone-Palmquist's study is one of the first to show the far-reaching consequences of school expulsion for families in Michigan and question the use of expulsion as the best solution for some offenses.

The implications of zero tolerance policies have been so drastic in the Michigan public school system that advocacy groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) have conducted serious investigations into the practices behind zero tolerance policies. In 2009 the ACLU released a detailed report on zero tolerance policies in the state of Michigan which documented the disproportionate suspension and/or expulsion of African Americans in several school districts (Fancher 2009). For example, in the 2006–2007 school year in the Ann Arbor School District black students represented eighteen percent of the secondary school student

population but received fifty-eight percent of the out of school suspensions. In addition, black students in the Ann Arbor School District received eighty-three suspensions for insubordination compared to twenty suspensions for white students for that specific infraction. Consequently, as research shows zero tolerance policies exacerbate racial disparities in school discipline researchers have been tasked with investigating the relationship between school discipline and academic achievement.

### *School Discipline Disparities & Educational Outcomes*

Considering the disproportionate application of school discipline in African American school-age populations and their tendency to remove students from the education environment researchers have explored the impact of school discipline on academic achievement. According to Arcia (2006) African American students that are subjected to school discipline miss critical instruction time that may contribute to disengagement and academic failure. To explore the effects of school discipline on academic achievement Arcia (2006) tracked two student cohorts that were similar in terms of race, gender, grade level, achievement, and socioeconomic status. After comparing the first cohort, which all students received at least one suspension, to the second cohort, which students did not receive any suspensions, over a one year period the results showed students who received at least one suspension were three grade levels behind in reading. Morris and Perry (2016) explored the relationship between school discipline and academic achievement and concluded out of school suspension was a strong predictor of achievement when comparing children at the same school. Specifically, Morris and Perry (2016) found on a one-hundred-point assessment, out of school suspension was associated with a complete standard deviation decline in reading scores. Bearing in mind the devastating impact school discipline has on academic achievement, the use of school discipline must be questioned.

In addition to its effect on academic achievement school discipline is also a predictor of school dropout. Specifically, nearly fifty percent of the students who entered high school with three suspensions or greater eventually went on to drop out of school (Balfanz et al. 2014; Fancher 2009). Social science research estimates nearly 20,000 students in Michigan drop out of school annually and notes their tendency to rely heavily on government welfare subsidies for support. Studies estimate the cost of Michigan's drop outs in terms of government assistance at nearly \$2.5 billion annually (Balfanz et al. 2014). Furthermore, the consideration of lost revenue when comparing high school dropouts to those who completed high school shows if the 21,185 students who dropped out of school in 2007 had completed high school, they could have added an estimated \$329 billion to the economy over the course of their lifetime. Thus, the implications of zero tolerance policies go far beyond the African American population into economic issues that potentially impact the entire country.

#### *School Discipline & Oppositional Culture*

Considering the focus on school discipline and school personnel it is important to consider the role oppositional culture may play in black school discipline disproportionality. According to Fordham and Ogbu (1986) oppositional culture is based on four tenets: a) School performance for involuntary minorities (i.e. African Americans) is associated with what children and their parents expect to gain from their education in adulthood, b) Involuntary minorities are more likely to resist traditional education endeavors than white students or immigrant minorities, c) Involuntary minorities that conform to the traditional norms of education or exhibit high academic achievement are scorned by their peers, and d) Resistance to middle class notions of education accounts for the racial disparities in academic achievement. Theorists have debated the validity of oppositional culture and the role it plays in achievement disparities; particularly due to its focus on black youth

as the root of this problem. Seeing the adversarial relationship Fordham and Ogbu (1986) describe between African Americans and traditional education norms researchers and practitioners must consider how conflict in the student-teacher relationship contributes to school culture. Specifically, when African American students perceive differences in how they are treated by school personnel members, this could lead to an oppositional culture within the school setting.

In addition to Ogbu and Fordham's focus on oppositional culture theorists have also highlighted how urban social norms may conflict with the norms of traditional mainstream settings. According to Anderson (2000) the interpersonal violence and aggression evident in street culture an informal set of rules that regulates interpersonal activity in urban social spaces, plays a critical role in the daily lives of urban youth. Moreover, Anderson described two social orientations, "decent" and "street", which manifest in impoverished urban communities. While factors, such as being raised in a middle-class household, may protect urban youth from community stressors Anderson (2000) describes knowledge of the street code as mandatory for navigating urban social spaces. The "code of the street" governs the use of violence, aggression, and the appropriate response to disrespect. As Anderson delineates the code of the street and its deep roots within the lives of urban youth, it is important to consider how this code manifests in school settings.

### *Parental Influence on Education*

While research has explored student and administrator perceptions of zero tolerance policies, education stakeholders should recognize that parents play a critical role in influencing a child's education. Collin et al. (2000) argues that education typically begins in the home setting and that parents often serve as their child's first teacher. Additionally, research shows household income and parental educational attainment influence a child's education (Hill and Tyson 2009).

Since the parent-child relationship serves as a building block for future relationships it is important to understand how parental perceptions of zero tolerance policies could directly or indirectly shape school and peer selection as well as parental involvement in their child's education.

During infancy and several years afterward, children depend on their parents to engage in activities that facilitate the child's cognitive and social development. Studies shows that parents report being involved in family projects, creating objects, playing games, and literacy development (Hill & Tyson 2009; Hill & Craft 2003). As children approach their third birthday, they begin to establish a clear method of communication that is critical in the parent-child relationship because children between the ages of three and five are entering social environments where peer relationships are formed (i.e. school or daycare settings). According to Collin et al. (2000) parents often influence their child's social interactions by actively steering them toward and away from certain peer groups. Thus, parental involvement takes numerous forms and plays a critical role in preparing a child for the academic setting.

Research consistently shows that parental involvement is associated with higher levels of academic achievement (Hill & Craft 2003). Specifically, children with higher levels of parental involvement are more engaged in school, intrinsically motivated, and have higher grade point averages (Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems 2005). Steinberg et al. (1992) conducted a study that explored the effects of parental involvement in a high school population of 6,400 students with diverse cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds. The study found children with higher levels of parental involvement had higher grade point averages and exhibited more effort in class across science, math, English, and social studies. Numerous researchers have conducted similar studies across multiple grade levels and reached similar conclusions (Hill & Tyson 2009; Jeynes 2007). Furthermore, education scholars argue that parental involvement is so important that they have

advocated for policy changes to increase parent engagement (Epstein & Sanders 2002). Thus, parental involvement plays a critical role in facilitating school attachment and high academic achievement.

Although parental involvement plays a significant role in the child's development there are numerous factors that can impact the quality of parenting a child receives. One major factor that affects the parent-child relationship is the parent-parent relationship. Researchers have found that marital discord causes disruptions in the parent-child relationship and can significantly influence the quality of parenting the child receives (Parke 2004). For example, consistent arguing between the parents may cause one parent to adopt a parenting style that features inconsistent and unreasonable discipline, which may lead to behavior problems during adolescence (Tolan et al. 2003). Marital discord could also cause emotional stress in the parent-child relationship and disrupt communication between the parent and the child. For example Parke (2004) states, "Factors such as affective changes in the quality of the parent-child relationship, lack of emotional availability, and adoption of less optimal parenting styles have been implicated as positive mechanisms through which marital discord disrupts the parenting processes (pg. 372)."

In addition to the effects of marital discord on the quality of parenting a child receives, researchers have found that the parent-parent relationship is associated with the child's coping ability. Parke (2004) states, "Considerable evidence indicates that marital functioning is related to children's short-term coping and long-term adjustment" (pg. 372). This is a significant finding because children that have coping difficulties may be more vulnerable to peer pressure and other outside influences. Children with coping problems may also have difficulties handling peer rejection, which is associated with aggressive behavior in early childhood (Cilleseen & Mayeux, 2004). Also, children that witness aggression within their household are more likely to become

aggressive individuals in the future (Carrol 1994). In light of the evidence on the effects of marital discord on children's long-term adjustment and short-term coping, it is evident that marital discord could play a role in school discipline .

Considering the importance of the role parenting plays in a child's education, researchers and practitioners should also be knowledgeable of how gender influences parenting styles. According to Slavkin and Stright (2000), gender roles are beliefs about how individual, familial, and societal roles are defined. Traditional gender roles characterize men as aggressive, masculine, and the financial provider. On the other hand women are considered sensitive, feminine, and nurturing (Eagly 1987). Despite the foundation of traditional gender roles, many families have adopted non-traditional gender roles that involve women working outside of the home. According to the U.S Department of Labor, fifty-seven percent of women participate in the labor force and women make up forty-seven percent of the total U.S labor force. As more men remain in the household while women become the breadwinner researchers should be aware of how gender roles influence parenting.

While women are participating in the labor force at higher levels than at any point in history research shows women still perform a sizable portion of the child care duties. Hochschild (2003) highlights the "second shift" for women in the workforce by documenting the experiences of working mothers and fathers. Throughout Hochschild's study she documented instances where men refused to perform housework because it conflicted with their beliefs regarding masculinity. Additionally, when husbands shared household duties with their wives women often felt more responsible for performing housework. Hochschild found more often women were managing a child's doctor appointments, transporting children to school, and were more likely to check on their children throughout the day than men (Hochschild 2003). Furthermore, women were more



likely to engage in two child care activities at the same time. Specifically, women were more likely to clean the home while watching the children, wash clothes and make the grocery shopping list, and return phone calls. Consequently, women were more likely to report feeling the strain associated with balancing the duties of being a mother with those related to her employment. Thus, understanding how women perceive school discipline is important in light of the tension it may cause between mothers and their respective employers.

According to Craig (2006) fathers are more likely to spend time with their children by playing with them and engaging in recreational activities. Studies have also found fathers are more involved with their sons than their daughters (Harris & Morgan 1991). Zimmerman and colleagues (1995) found the amount of time African American boys spent with fathers was associated with higher self-esteem and less delinquency. Since boys often look to their father for guidance, it is important to understand how fathers perceive school discipline and how school discipline impacts the father-child relationship.

### CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study was to explore black student and their parent's perceptions of school discipline and school safety measures. The participants in this study included African American children in grades 9 – 12 who have been suspended or expelled and the parents of African American children in grades 9 - 12 that have been suspended or expelled in a southeastern Michigan school district. I interviewed sixty participants and asked semi-structured questions using a qualitative design guided by the following research questions:

- 1) How do black students perceive school discipline?
- 2) How do parents of black students perceive school discipline and its impact on student's life trajectory?
- 3) How do black students and their parents perceive school safety measures?

#### *Qualitative Methodology*

Qualitative methodology in the form of semi-structured interviews was selected for this study because it explores personal experiences, relationships, and is focused on increasing understanding (Denzin & Lincoln 2007). Semi-structured interviews rely on a set of developed questions, but also allow the respondents to discuss what is of interest to them (Hesse-Biber & Leavy 2011). According to Weiss (1994) qualitative methods typically involve establishing more rapport, deeper trust, and is more intimate as it seeks to understand the “what, how, and why”. Qualitative methods are typically inductive in that they navigate from general to specific and theory is generated from the data.

In light of the vast amount of quantitative research on African American school discipline disproportionality a qualitative approach would provide insight into the inner-workings of the urban education system and illuminate student and parental perceptions of school discipline. Qualitative methodology allows researchers to explore a social context from the perspective of the

participant and gain insight into lived experiences (Creswell 2013). Selecting the proper informants can give researchers insight into the quality of life in neighborhoods, schools, or other interior experiences (Weiss 1994). According to Weiss we conduct qualitative interview studies to develop detailed descriptions, integrate multiple perspectives, or describes processes. Thus, qualitative methodology provides additional insight into a social phenomenon that we are unable to obtain using quantitative methods.

### *Research Design*

This project was a critical qualitative study that focused on black student and parental perceptions of school discipline and school safety measures. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (1994), critical qualitative studies acknowledge social power and the interconnectedness of oppression. The purpose of critical qualitative research is to go beyond a description of the world in an effort to highlight what needs to be changed (Steinberg and Cannella 2012). As researchers explore the dynamics of race, class, gender, disability and school discipline it is important to be critical of the production of hegemony and the victimization of the oppressed. According to Steinberg and Cannella (2012) critical research was initially influenced by Marxist thinkers but has expanded to include a variety of theoretical perspective that are rooted in the focus on inequality (i.e. critical race theory, critical feminism, queer theory, etc.) According to Foster (1986) critical researchers do not seek to explore social phenomenon using the positivist approach, but instead seek to probe important foundational assumptions that are typically taken for granted. Thus, a critical qualitative research design was selected because this study seeks to explore foundational assumptions regarding the equity of school discipline.

### *Description of the Districts*

Detroit Public Schools is located in Detroit, Michigan and educates approximately fifty

thousand students ranging from pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Statewide data on teacher diversity shows ninety-one percent of Michigan's K-12 educators are white and approximately six percent are African American (MI School Data, 2016). As of 2016, the student population consisted of approximately 80% black, 13.4% Hispanic, 2% White, 1.5% Asian, .07% Arabic and .002% American Indian students. The gender distribution of the student population is 49.5% female and 50.5% male. Data from the 2016 district report shows 70% of the students enrolled in Detroit Public Schools were eligible for free and/or reduced lunch, with household incomes below the federal poverty line. Additionally, 17% of the school-age population in Detroit Public Schools were students with cognitive, physical, or behavioral disabilities. According to the U.S. Census, the median household income in Detroit was \$25,769 for 2016.

The Southfield Public Schools district is located two miles outside of Detroit in Southfield, Michigan and educates approximately 7,000 students ranging from pre-K to 12<sup>th</sup> grade level. As of 2016 approximately 96% of the Southfield Public School population were African American. The Southfield school district boasts numerous awards including the 2012 "Winners Circle Award" from the Michigan Association of School Administrators, the 2012 American School Board Journal "Magna Award" for Differentiated Instruction Curriculum, and the 2011 Michigan Association of School Boards Excellence in Education Award for Adler Community Garden. Approximately 50% of the students enrolled in the Southfield school district received free and/or reduced lunch. According to the U.S. Census the median household income in Southfield, Michigan was reported as \$49,548 for 2016.

### *Sampling*

I employed snowball sampling to recruit African American parents and students. According to Dattalo (2008) snowball sampling involves sampling from a network and is used to

locate participants when they are difficult to find. Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2010) define snowball sampling as a sampling methodology that explores a network for referrals and each research contact leads to another. I selected two local parent advocates in southeast Michigan to serve as the initial gatekeepers for the current study. Greig and Taylor (1999) define gatekeepers as those that provide access to a population that is difficult to locate. The parent advocates agreed to provide referrals to African American students and parents who had direct experience with school discipline and school safety measures. Each parent advocate had approximately twenty years of experience advising parents on the state and federal regulations regarding school suspension and expulsion. Additionally, they played a pivotal role in aiding students with their transition from out-of-school suspension or expulsion into the classroom setting. They were willing to identify participants for the study because we share a mutual interest in promoting the best academic outcomes for students in southeast Michigan. As the parent advocates located participants for this study I used purposive sampling to establish an even distribution of participants across gender and social class. Marshall (1996) defines purposive sampling as a technique utilized by researchers to select the most productive sample to answer the research questions.

### *Recruitment*

I provided each parent advocate with a script to aid in the recruitment process. The recruitment script provided a brief introduction of the study and informed each potential participant that they would receive a \$25 gift card at the completion of the study. The parents of each student participant as well as each parent participant were asked explicitly if their child received an out-of-school suspension or expulsion and questions regarding household income. In this study thirty black students and thirty parents of black students were recruited for a total of sixty participants. In regard to the student participants, fifteen were boys and fifteen were girls. Additionally, fifteen

students were from low socioeconomic households that had total incomes between fifteen thousand and twenty-seven thousand dollars. Also, fifteen students were from middle-class households that had total incomes between fifty-five thousand and seventy-five thousand dollars. Furthermore, nine student participants were diagnosed with cognitive or behavioral disabilities such as attention-deficit-hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), oppositional defiant disorder (ODD), and specific learning disabilities in reading. Student participants stated they received between one and thirty out-of-school suspensions as well as between zero between and two expulsions.

Twenty-five of the parent participants were women and five were men. The sampling criterion did not require student and parental interviews to be matched, however there were parent-child sets in the study. Fifteen parents were from low socioeconomic backgrounds with total household incomes between fifteen and twenty-seven thousand dollars and fifteen parents were from middle-class backgrounds with total household income between fifty-five thousand and seventy-five thousand. Three parents disclosed cognitive and behavioral disorder diagnoses, such as a specific learning disability in reading and ADHD.

<b>Student Participant Table: Figure 1</b>					
<b>Name (Pseudonym)</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Social Class</b>	<b>School District</b>	<b>#of Suspensions or Expulsions</b>	<b>Disability Status &amp; Diagnosis</b>
Nicole	Girl	Low SES	Detroit	5 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Jerome	Boy	Middle SES	Southfield	4 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Tracey	Girl	Low SES	Detroit	30 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Chris	Boy	Low SES	Detroit	5 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
DeAndre	Boy	Middle SES	Southfield	4 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Marcus	Boy	Low SES	Detroit	20 Suspensions & 2 Expulsions	Specific Learning Disability
Eric	Boy	Low SES	Detroit	9 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Kimberly	Girl	Middle SES	Southfield	15 Suspensions	Non-Disabled

Donovan	Boy	Low SES	Detroit	20 Suspensions & 2 Expulsions	Non-Disabled
Thomas	Boy	Low SES	Detroit	3 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Willie	Boy	Low SES	Detroit	3 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Anthony	Boy	Middle SES	Southfield	7 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder
Sandra	Girl	Middle SES	Detroit	3 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Cierra	Girl	Low SES	Detroit	5 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Crystal	Girl	Low SES	Detroit	10 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Angel	Girl	Low SES	Detroit	5 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Justin	Boy	Low SES	Detroit	20 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder
Kendra	Girl	Low SES	Detroit	20 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Alexis	Girl	Low SES	Detroit	6 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
David	Boy	Middle SES	Southfield	3 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder
Joseph	Boy	Middle SES	Southfield	5 Suspensions	Conduct Disorder
Derrick	Boy	Middle SES	Southfield	12 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Matthew	Boy	Middle SES	Southfield	10 Suspensions	Oppositional-Defiant-Disorder
Dominique	Girl	Middle SES	Southfield	1 Suspension	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder
Michael	Boy	Low SES	Detroit	2 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Tiffany	Girl	Middle SES	Southfield	4 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Samantha	Girl	Middle SES	Southfield	5 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Jennifer	Girl	Middle SES	Southfield	2 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Kelly	Girl	Middle SES	Southfield	7 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder

Michelle	Girl	Middle SES	Southfield	9 Suspensions	Specific Learning Disorder
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<b>Parent Participant Table: Figure 2</b>					
<b>Name</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Social Class</b>	<b>School District</b>	<b>#of Suspensions or Expulsions for Child</b>	<b>Disability Status &amp; Diagnosis</b>
Clarence	Man	Middle SES	Southfield	3 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder
Vanessa	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	3 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder
Tangie	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	6 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Clara	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	5 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder
James	Man	Low SES	Detroit	30 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder
Patrice	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	30 Suspensions	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder & Oppositional Defiant Disorder
Lisa	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	1 Suspension	Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity-Disorder
Mike	Man	Middle SES	Southfield	15 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Tina	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	4 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Shontell	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	1 Suspension	Non-Disabled
Destiny	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	5 Suspensions	Non-Disabled



Shanice	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	4 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Joanna	Woman	Middle SES	Detroit	3 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Lashonda	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	Six Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Raquelle	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	3 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Sherice	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	2 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Latoya	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	2 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Ava	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	3 Suspensions & 1 Expulsion	Non-Disabled
Janice	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	4 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Terri	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	7 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Latrice	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	3 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Steven	Man	Low SES	Detroit	10 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Quentin	Man	Middle SES	Southfield	9 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Gertrude	Woman	Middle SES	Southfield	5 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Tenisha	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	5 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Courtney	Woman	Middle SES	Detroit	2 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Cindy	Woman	Low SES	Southfield	7 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Wiloma	Woman	Low SES	Detroit	4 Suspensions & 1 Expulsion	Non-Disabled
Serena	Woman	Middle SES	Detroit	8 Suspensions	Non-Disabled
Stephanie	Woman	Low SES	Southfield	3 Suspensions	Non-Disabled

### *Data Collection Procedures*

In order to ensure the respondent's identity and data were protected I obtained verbal informed consent from each participant, discussed the participants involvement in the research,

purpose of the research, risks and benefits, the voluntary nature of the research, their right to cease their involvement at any time, and the procedures used to protect their confidentiality (Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2011; Holloway 1997). Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) define confidentiality as protecting the names of the respondents, using pseudonyms in any written material or discussions that relate to the study, and storing the data in a safe location.

I tape recorded and transcribed the interviews in their entirety to capture the details of each response. Additionally, I assigned each participant a pseudonym to protect their identity and ensure confidentiality. I asked each student participant forty-two semi-structured interview questions to obtain insight into their perception of school discipline and school safety. Each of the student interview questions were carefully designed to explore student perceptions of school in the following areas: a) perceived fairness, b) perceived safety and deterrence of violence, c) social status, d) impact on academic achievement, e) race and schooling, f) perceived consequences, g) parental response, and h) perceptions of law enforcement. Parent participants were interviewed separately and asked thirty-nine semi-structured interview questions to obtain insight into their perceptions of school discipline. The parent interview questions were designed to explore parental perceptions of school discipline in the following areas: a) perceived fairness, b) perceived safety and deterrence, c) impact on academic achievement, d) perceived consequences, e) race and schooling, f) discipline style, g) employment, and h) parental relationship dynamics.

In the current study “perceived fairness” was defined as the degree to which students and parents believe discipline was distributed in a biased or unbiased manner. It was important to explore perceived fairness regarding the distribution of school suspensions and expulsions because research shows black boys and girls are disproportionately represented in school discipline settings. “Perceived safety and deterrence of violence” was defined as the degree to which students

perceive school discipline tactics as a mechanism that protects them from harm and deters undesired behavior. Since school discipline policies were constructed with the goal of improving school safety and discouraging undesired behavior, it was important to determine if school discipline policies are achieving the intended results. “Social status” was defined as the degree to which being suspended affects a student’s popularity within or outside of the educational settings. Considering the research on oppositional culture it was imperative to explore social status to determine if students are explicitly seeking school discipline or if there were a set of social norms that reward certain behaviors. “Perceived consequences” refers to the outcomes and/or future life pathways that students and parents believe are associated with being suspended or expelled from school. These include contact with law enforcement, impact on academic achievement, and the impact school discipline may have on the student-teacher relationship. In light of the racial disparities in achievement and incarceration it was important to determine if school discipline was contributing to those social problems. “Discipline Style” and “Parental Response” were intended to explore aspects of the parent child relationship and how they were affected by school discipline. Considering the different discipline styles employed by mothers and fathers, it was important to determine how being suspended or expelled impacts parental discipline style and how students perceive their parents’ response to school discipline. “Employment and Parental Relationship” refer to the manner in which school discipline affects parental employment and the mother-father relationship. It was important to understand how school discipline affects relationships outside of the school environment. Since school discipline has the potential to impact working mothers or fathers it was imperative to determine how discipline issues are navigated by working mothers and fathers.

Each interview was conducted in a setting that was quiet, free from interruptions, and of the participant's choosing to maximize comfortability. I asked interviewees to place their phones on silent for the interview. Upon completion of each interview I assigned each student a code such as "Student Participant DPS 1, May 2017". I recorded each interview and placed it on a digital drive for storage purposes. Spare batteries, digital storage drives, and a backup recorder were available at all times to protect against equipment failure. Immediately after each interview I listened to the recording and transcribed it.

### *Data Analysis Procedures*

I used the qualitative data analysis program NVivo to analyze the data obtained from the semi-structured interviews. I selected NVivo because of its user-friendly interface and the ease in which documents can be imported from a word processing application. Semi-structured qualitative interviews will provide insight into how black parents perceive schools that adopt zero tolerance policies. While previous studies explored student perceptions regarding the effectiveness of zero tolerance policies the current study also explored how students perceive school discipline and its impact on academic achievement, social status, parental employment, parental discipline, and perceptions of law enforcement officers. Each interview lasted 60-90 minutes and responses were open and focused coded for emerging themes. Open coding consists of studying every segment of the interview, summarizing what was stated, and labeling it with an appropriate code (Boeije 2002). According to Saldana (2009) codes in qualitative research are most often a word or phrase that assigns an overall meaning to a segment of written or visual data. I selected open coding because research shows this technique helps construct a detailed conceptual data model from which categories and themes can emerge (Saldana 2009). After the initial coding process was complete I used focused coding. Saldana (2009) states focused coding consists of searching for

the most frequent or important codes to develop the most relevant categories and determine which initial codes best describe the data. Focused coding is defined as a method that constructs categories without attributing attention to their properties or dimensions. Glaser (1974) states that data should not be forced to fit pre-existing categories or discarded because it does not fit a specific theory. It is important that categories emerge directly from the data and highlight the voices of the participants. The selected coding methods ensured the participants' voices were represented in a standardized manner.

In addition to coding the interviews memos were also included in the data analysis process. According to Saldana (2009), memos are sites of conversation with ourselves in reference to our participants, phenomenon, or the research process. They promote reflexivity in the research process by encouraging critical thinking in relation to the research topic, how the research is being conducted, and challenging your own assumptions. Saldana (2009) also states the purpose of analytic memo writing is to transcribe and reflect on the construction of codes, the emergence of themes, and how it leads to theory generation. Since researchers can become absorbed into the research process they should document the events to reflect upon at a later date. Additionally, Miles and Huberman (1984) argue that memos should be dated to help the researcher reflect upon them with an exact date in mind. I recorded information in relation to the setting, time, date, and relevant information regarding the research process as memos.

### *Emergent Themes*

Perceived Fairness of School Discipline	Social Status
Substance Abuse	Perceived Consequences of School
Parental Employment	School Absenteeism
Perceptions of School Safety Measures	Targeting

Perceptions of Law Enforcement Officers	Race & Education
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After coding the interviews and memos the following themes emerged from the data: social status, substance abuse, perceived consequences of school discipline, perceived fairness of school discipline, perceptions of law enforcement, targeting, parent employment, school absenteeism, and perceptions of school safety measures. In this study, the emergent theme *social status* was defined as instances where school discipline influenced a participant's popularity in a positive or negative manner. *Perceived fairness of school discipline* was defined as cases where a participant stated he or she perceived school discipline as fair or unfair. *Perceptions of law enforcement officers* refers to occurrences where student or parent participants discussed positive or negative beliefs regarding law enforcement officers. *Targeting* refers to cases where a participant stated themselves or their child was singled out for school discipline by a school personnel member due to observable characteristics. *Parent employment* was defined as instances in which a parent participant discussed how school discipline impacted their employment in a positive or negative manner. *School absenteeism* was defined as cases where a participant discussed how school discipline influenced a student's attendance. *Perceptions of school safety measures* refers to cases where a student or parent participant voiced positive or negative feelings or beliefs regarding metal detectors, school guards, or security cameras.

### *Reflexivity*

Several studies highlight potential ethical dilemmas that coincide with qualitative research. Patton (2002) states that respondents are beginning to challenge their research confidentiality rights particularly when telling their story serves as a mechanism of empowerment or a substance for social change. Considering the nature of this study and its potential to serve as a catalyst for education reform, I thought respondents may have considered challenging their confidentiality

rights. However, this did not occur therefore it was not an issue in this study.

As an African American man, I believed it was important to consider how my race and gender may affect the study. Scholars argue that a common culture between interviewers and interviewees provides a rich opportunity to gain access to a population, establish rapport, and propose meaningful questions that explore a social phenomenon (Temple and Edwards 2002). Additionally, scholars argue that insiders, which refers to researchers who study a group in which they belong, typically have an advantage because they can use their existing knowledge to gain further insight into their interviewee's opinions (Hill-Collins 1990). On the other hand, scholars also argue that outsiders, which refers to researchers who study a group in which they do not belong, have a greater sense of objectivity and are more likely to seek clarity in an participants' responses (Fonow and Cook 1991). Researchers should not presume to understand the meaning of the interviewee's responses because of shared race or gender. Lastly, several scholars argue that transparency in the research process is essential for dissemination and the researcher must be explicit about the procedures employed (Seale et al. 2004). Thus, disclosing my previous experience as a mentor in southeast Michigan is a key element of providing transparency.

## **CHAPTER 4: STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE**

Student perceptions of school discipline in the U.S. K-12 education system have become an important social concern over the last decade. While school districts across the U.S. have utilized out of school suspension and expulsion as punitive measures for undesired classroom conduct researchers have questioned how students perceive school discipline. Several organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the Children's Defense Fund (CDF) have expressed serious concerns regarding the use of school discipline in black school-age populations (Fancher 2009; Children's Defense Fund 1975). This dissertation is focused on exploring perceptions of school discipline, with a focus on black students who have been suspended or expelled from primarily black high schools (PBHSs) and parents of black students who have been suspended or expelled from PBHSs. In this chapter I ask: a) how do black students perceive school discipline, b) how do perceptions of school discipline differ by gender, social class, and disability status.

In chapters one and two I reviewed critical race theory (CRT), literature on zero tolerance policies, school discipline policies in Michigan, peer selection, and parental mediation. In chapter three I discussed the focus of the critical qualitative research design featured in this study and the importance of exploring the foundational assumptions associated with school discipline. After conducting thirty in-depth interviews with black students in southeast Michigan high schools my findings suggest black students perceive school discipline as a harsh response to relatively minor infractions, as a barrier to educational attainment, and as a precursor to school dropout and incarceration. While majority of the students were eager to share their perceptions of school discipline they often appeared to be frustrated by the circumstances that led to their suspension or expulsion.



*Perceived Fairness of School Discipline*

The findings in this chapter are consistent with previous research that highlights the negative implications associated with school discipline. In the initial stages of each interview I asked the student participant's a variety of questions to explore their perceptions of school discipline. Twenty-six of the thirty student participants suggested they perceived school discipline as unfair or excessive in relation to the infraction. Ten participants suggested their voices were marginalized and they were subjected to school discipline without the opportunity to explain their position. When student responses were compared across gender and social class there were no differences in the perceptions of school discipline or types of infractions that resulted in out-of-school suspensions or expulsions.

Sandra, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student from middle-class background status, presents as an eager participant and expressed interest in pursuing a career as a homicide detective due to the death of her younger brother. She received three out-of-school suspensions in her lifetime, and each suspension was for a nonviolent offense. One of Sandra's most pronounced experiences with school discipline was a situation in which she attempted to de-escalate a conflict between one of her associates and two other girls. As Sandra advised her associate to backdown to avoid retaliation from other girls a school administrator perceived Sandra's verbal warning as a threat, which resulted in Sandra being suspended for five school days.

Oh ok so that time I was in class and we were going over some math work and it was these two girls, they was about to fight, so one of them was, well she wasn't like my friend but I was cool with her and she was arguing with three other girls so I was like uhhhh calm down cause if you argue with one of them they all going to jump in and my principal thought that was like a threat, I don't see how that was a threat to her cause I was trying to help her but I guess my principal thought I wasn't her friend and saying I was going to help them jump her. I think that's what she saw it as but I was actually trying to help her.

**[Sandra, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Background, Suspension: 5 School Days]**

Immediately after discussing the situation that led to her school suspension I asked Sandra and other students to describe how they felt about the discipline they received. As Sandra articulates feeling disregarded by school administrators she states:

“I feel like they didn’t hear me out because like I told my mom and my dad and they was like yea I don’t see why they suspended you and even when I went to school the next week after we went back for the meeting, they was like we feel like you threatened her, and I’m like I didn’t and the girl even said I didn’t threaten her, like when I came back to school she was like why did you get suspended and I was like cause they said I threatened you and she was like how did you threaten me. I’m like exactly. So I just felt like they should have listened to me and let me explain the whole situation.” **[Sandra, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Background, Suspension: 5 School Days]**

Sandra’s statements suggest the voices of black girls from middle class backgrounds may be marginalized by administrators in instances of school discipline. In this study four girls from middle-class backgrounds suggested their voices were disregarded at the point in which school discipline was administered. Furthermore, Sandra’s statements suggest a disconnect may exist between how black girls perceive their actions and how school administrators perceive the actions of black girls. The absence of an opportunity to explain her behavior followed by immediate school discipline characterizes the experiences of black boys and girls in school settings. Instead of functioning as a gendered experience, six boys also suggested their voices were marginalized as they were subjected to swift school discipline for nonviolent offenses.

Similarly, Willie, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student from low socioeconomic background status, cites experiences with school discipline. He asserts that he was caught in the hallway with his friend during their lunch period, which resulted in an out-of-school suspension that lasted three days because:

“every time it was a fight and they held the kids in there for like a couple hours so like me and a couple of people snuck out, we was actually standing outside of our teachers class but they took it as skipping so I just say skipping cause they say I wasn’t supposed to walk out the lunch room.”

**[Willie, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Suspension: 3 School Days]**

Willie's statements suggest black boys from low socioeconomic status backgrounds also receive school suspensions for nonviolent offenses. In this study nine boys and seven girls received at least one out-of-school suspension for nonviolent infractions such as dress code violations, tardiness, skipping class, and insubordination. Similarly, Willie's statements suggest black students may not agree with the designated infraction and only adhere to it because of the power dynamics that shape the student-school administrator relationship.

When asked how he felt about the school suspension he received Willie also describes how his voice was marginalized by school personnel members. Similarly, Willie states he may not have been suspended if he could have explained his side of the story.

Willie: I don't know cause we had a umm....they should have just let us talk cause they didn't let us say nothing they just suspended us. They aint let us tell the story or nothing. Maybe if they let us tell the story I wouldn't have gotten suspended.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the length of the suspension?

Willie: I think it was too long.

**[Willie, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Suspension: 3 School Days]**

Willie and Sandra's statements describe the rush to remove students of color from the academic environment. Although Willie left the lunchroom to avoid a physical altercation and Sandra attempted to de-escalate a physical altercation, they were suspended immediately. Willie and Sandra's statements support the notion that a rush to suspend students of color, particularly African American boys and girls, exists and is consistent with findings in previous studies (Caton 2012; Fancher 2009). However, their statements provide insight into how students' voices may be disregarded by school personnel and how the marginalization black students may experience contributes to their removal from school.

Jerome, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student from middle class background status, discusses his experience being subjected to school discipline for being late to class.

Jerome: Well the first time, it was a hall sweep. If you get caught in the hallway, uh, you know, you're gonna be in trouble for a day. But what they don't understand is that my class is all the way across the hall. It's like, it's a huge campus. My class,

the one I came from, it's all the way across the other side of the building. And they expect me to get on the other side of the building in five minutes. That's why I was late. And they didn't listen to me either. So I was kinda upset.

Interviewer: And they didn't ask you or anything? They just suspended you?

Jerome: Nope, they just say, "I need you to come with me," and they wrote me up. Suspending me.

**[Jerome, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 4]**

Like Sandra and Willie, Jerome's statements illuminate how he was silenced by school personnel and subjected to immediate out-of-school suspension for a nonviolent offense. As Sandra and Willie's statements suggest the marginalization of black students voices prior to rendering school discipline may not function as a gendered experience, Jerome's statements suggest social class may not sufficiently explain black student's experiences with school discipline. Despite the differences in social class Willie and Jerome's statements suggest their voices were disregarded by school personnel and that they were subjected to abrupt school discipline.

### *Students Feel Targeted*

Throughout this study feelings of being targeted for discipline by school personnel emerged as an important theme. The following participants provide examples of student feelings of being targeted by school personnel and insight into how school discipline may initiate student detachment from the academic environment. The student participants discussed who they perceived as targets for school suspensions and expulsion and how they felt school personnel targeted students based on physical characteristics. Four boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds and two girls from middle-class backgrounds reported feelings of being targeted for school discipline by educators.

Upon interviewing Kimberly, a 9<sup>th</sup> student from middle-class background status, she presented as a very open individual who was losing interest in school. Kimberly stated she received fifteen school suspensions for insubordination, dress code violations, hugging a boy, and fighting

on school grounds. As Kimberly describes the characteristics of the individuals she feels are targeted for school discipline she states:

“The kids who listen to rap music or fights or dress like they got a lot of money, come into the school with designer clothes on, True Religions, like all of that, they would target them kids the most. They target me and my friends a lot to where they had to break us up, put us in separate rooms because they thought we was a distraction to school or we was focused more on the things you was getting from our parents, so they suspended us a lot for that.

**[Kimberly, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 15]**

Kimberly’s statements suggest social class, as it manifests in style of dress, may play a role in explaining why black students are referred for school discipline. Smith-Evans et al (2014) argues subjective offenses, such as style of dress and hairstyle, have the potential to serve as “code” for a black girl’s failure to conform to white middle-class notions of femininity, which the authors define as “passive” and “modest”. The authors also suggest style of dress and hairstyle may be used to establish a profile for students who need more social redirection, which is administered via school discipline. Kimberly’s statements suggest listening to rap music may also function as a factor that school personnel employ to target students for school discipline.

Thomas, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student from low socioeconomic background status, cites feelings of being targeted for school discipline. During our interview Thomas recalls a time where he was in the lunch room and he was suspended for standing to pull his pants up.

I feel I am [targeted]and a group I be with cause we always get suspended for little little stuff. Like one time in the lunch room, you know how like you sit down and your pants come up and my pants was down and they was under my heels and I didn’t want to step on them so I got up to pull them up and I got suspended for that because we was supposed to sit down but I needed to pull my pants up.

**[Thomas, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 3]**

Thomas’ statements illustrate how style of dress may also be used to target black boys for discipline. Moreover, Thomas’ statements also suggest black students who are targeted by school personnel may be viewed under a punitive lens, which subjects the student’s behavior to unwarranted and intense scrutiny.

As Kimberly and Thomas' statements suggest style of dress and listening to rap music may be used to target students for school discipline regardless of gender or social class Marcus' statements provide insight into how hairstyle may be used to target students. Throughout his childhood Marcus experienced academic challenges due to a specific learning disability. After receiving twenty out-of-school suspensions and repeating two grades because of an expulsion Marcus is older and looks bigger than most of his peers in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade. Also, Marcus' hairstyle features long dreadlocks, which he believes contributes to his feelings of being targeted by school personnel for discipline.

People with like, dreads, the ones ... I say people with either like, dreads or the little nappy fros. You know, some of them. If they dress real nice, or if they hang around a certain group of people, you know. So, I had to understand some of the stuff wasn't, the reason I was getting suspended is half the time it wasn't me, but half the time I see it was-they was just profilin me as and labeling me as, a certain bad person. Like, you know.

**[Marcus, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Specific Learning Disability, Lifetime Suspensions: 20, Expulsions: 2]**

Marcus statements suggest group affiliation, style of dress, and hair style may also be used to target students for discipline. His statements also highlight the notion that feelings of being targeted for discipline are not gender or class specific.

Throughout our interview Marcus expresses feelings of being targeted by his math and marketing teachers, which led him to skip class to avoid interaction with them. In one example Marcus states his math teacher told him he was a failure and this led Marcus to begin skipping class:

Yeah, I was doin my work. In um, Math, certain classes they made me feel like I didn't belong in there. So, I was skippin. Um. I skipped Math sometimes. I really didn't want to skip Math, she made me wanna skip it. She told me I was a failure one time. Ever since then I'm like, "Man, forget her class." You know. But I went, when I knew I needed something. But other than that, you know, I wasn't goin to her class. And I had stopped going to- one of my- what was the class? Marketing. Cause she said something like that to me too. She was sayin like, " I don't care about you." And all this, and all that. She was like, " I don't care who you are." And all that, and all this, and I'm like, "Where did this come from? I ain't comin to your class with no problems. I can't even sit down like you told me to do the last time we had a talk."

**[Marcus, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Specific Learning Disability, Lifetime Suspensions: 20, Expulsions: 2]**

Marcus' statements suggest feelings of being targeted by school personnel for discipline may influence students' self-esteem and sense of belonging. Scholars argue the need and meaning of belonging is different for students who are targeted because of negative stereotypes (Murphy and Zirkel 2015). Research shows, particularly for African American students, school belonging plays a vital role in academic performance and is strongly correlated with teacher support (Booker 2006). Additionally, as educators engage in the process of targeting students for school discipline based on physical characteristics and style of dress, educators may be conditioned to actively *exclude others* as exemplified in the "Whiteness as Property" tenet embedded within CRT. Regardless of the teacher's race, it is important to recognize that overzealous school discipline policies permit school exclusion for subjective offenses, school discipline policies are often crafted by whites given their disproportionate representation in state legislatures, and racial minorities are disproportionately excluded from academic environments by school discipline policies.

In addition to the emphasis Marcus' statements place on his sense of belonging in the academic environment, his statements also suggest "skipping class" may be a tactic employed by black students to avoid educators who target students based on style of dress, hair style, or group affiliation for school discipline. This finding is consistent with research that shows school climate, discipline practices, and relationships with teachers play a key role in school absenteeism (Wilkins 2008). As CRT emphasizes "Whiteness as Property" and the privilege whites have to exclude others Marcus' statements suggest black school discipline disproportionality may function as a bidirectional social phenomenon that involves a) how educators and school administrators utilize observable student characteristics to target students for suspension or expulsion and b) how

students initiate a process of self-detachment from the education environment in response to being to being targeted for school discipline.

### *Illegal School Discipline*

During our interviews student participants mentioned unwritten discipline practices that operate in violation of state law and further facilitate a student's detachment from the academic environment. According to the Michigan State Board of Education Model Code of Student Conduct long-term suspensions call for a more formal due process in which the student and parent will be notified of the allegation, disciplinary recommendation, date and location of the hearing, and their right to attend (Michigan 2014). Despite provisions in the Model Code of Student Conduct that acknowledges the harm associated with long-term school discipline and that long-term suspensions would be reserved for the most severe offenses; four students from three different PBHSs suggested a policy existed that called for students who were suspended for any reason in the months of May or June, to remain excluded until the following school year. Further investigation into this practice suggests students may have been suspended informally, and documentation of the alleged offense or length of the suspension may not have been provided to the student or parent. Willie, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student who was suspended three times, provides insight on how this process unfolds.

Interviewer: Do you believe you will be suspended again in the future for any reason?

Willie: I hope not because if we get suspended anytime soon we can't come back to school.

Interviewer: Why not?

Willie: They do that, like if you around like May and June they don't let you come back.

Interviewer: So if you get suspended around May or June....(he interrupts)

Willie: So if I get suspended around like May or June I won't be able to come back.

Interviewer: So you won't be able to come back this school year...(he interrupts)

Willie: Until next school year.

Interviewer: The school year ends...(he interrupts)

Willie: June 20

Interviewer: So you would miss at least 20-30 days of school. Who told you, you could not come back?

Willie: The assistant principal

Interviewer: So how do you feel about that?



Willie: I guess it's fair because its not no reason to really come back  
**[Willie, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 3]**

Willie's statements suggest a practice exists in his school that calls for students who receive suspensions in the months of May or June to remain suspended until the following school year. As studies continue to show school discipline is associated with school dropout, contact with law enforcement, and incarceration the dangers of illegal school discipline practices may be devastating.

While Willie's statements suggest school discipline practices that run counter to state and federal guidelines exist in PBHSs, Marcus' experience serves as an example of the dangers associated with this social phenomenon. Throughout my interview with Marcus I learned he was suspended in April of 2017 due to an emotional outburst he attributes to derogatory comments a teacher made that characterized him as a "failure". Marcus stated in response to his outburst, which led him to punch a wall, he was suspended in early April of 2017 and informed verbally that he could not return to school until an official hearing was held. I was later informed by Marcus that a formal hearing was not scheduled until May 30 of 2017. During our interview, which was held at Marcus' home in a notoriously dangerous neighborhood, law enforcement officers were parked across the street after finding a deceased body in a nearby vacant field.

Uh, the neighborhood I live in, shoot, everybody either locked up or dead now, so, it's pretty decent. It's not safe though. It's just quietly- it just quiet, it's not safe because shoot, believe it or not they just found a body over there the other day. And, that's probably why that charger [law enforcement vehicle] over there, just sittin there.

**[Marcus, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Specific Learning Disability, Lifetime Suspensions: 20, Expulsions: 2]**

Marcus' statements exemplify the dangers associated with school exclusion and the importance the education environment serves for students from impoverished communities. Considering the state and federal protections afforded to students diagnosed with special needs, which include a speedy hearing, the reservation of long-term exclusion for "only the most serious

offenses” that are not a manifestation of his disability or the failed implementation of the provisions in his IEP (Michigan, 2014); Marcus’ statements suggest school discipline practices in PBHSs may operate illegally and counter to the betterment of black students.

In addition to being suspended for extended periods of time, which emerged exclusively in the interviews of black boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds, Marcus also cited instances in which he was suspended without proper verbal or written notification as mandated by Michigan State law.

They don't even tell us, they don't give us no paper or nothin. It was a couple times, where I came to school, it was like, twice to where I came to school and they were like, "You suspended." And they ain't give us no paper or nothin to notify that. You know.

**[Marcus, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Specific Learning Disability, Lifetime Suspensions: 20, Expulsions: 2]**

Marcus’ statements shed light on how black boys from low socioeconomic status backgrounds may be suspended without proper documentation and for lengthy periods; both of which operate in violation of Michigan State laws that are designed to protect students.

#### *Black Student Perceptions of School Guards and Metal Detectors*

As our interviews progressed perceptions of school safety measures, such as school guards and metal detectors, emerged as a prominent theme. The presence of school guards and metal detectors in K-12 education settings has sparked considerable debate regarding their benefits and potential drawbacks. On one hand, scholars argue metal detectors and school guards are necessary to ensure school safety and discourage violent offenses. On the other hand, several organizations have raised concerns regarding the psychological implications of potentially criminalizing young children by subjecting them to schools that resemble prison institutions. The findings of this study suggest black students overwhelmingly hold negative perceptions of school guards and metal detectors particularly due to their inoperability, failure to deter violence, and intrusion into personal space.

Throughout the second stage of the interview, the participants remained engaged and were genuinely eager to discuss their perceptions of school guards and metal detectors. In each of the four cases below, the student participant's statements suggest school guards may not conduct thorough searches therefore, they missed illegal substances, guards conduct potentially illegal strip searches on black female students suspected of carrying weapons, metal detectors may be inoperable, and students may be forcibly removed from classrooms by guards.

Throughout our interview Donovan presented as a humorous young man who has been suspended and/or expelled from several PBHSs in low socioeconomic communities. In his experience navigating school discipline Donovan cites the power dynamics that shape the student-school guard relationship and how school guards may be too aggressive.

Donovan: I don't like the security guards because they're too rough and they got the power so they can make anything up to add to your suspensions.

Interviewer: When you say school guards are too rough, what do you mean?

Donovan: Like if you're like ... It's not supposed to like ... If you're late in the classroom and the teacher's like, "Get out," and you're getting your stuff together, and you're getting out the classroom, the security guard will grab all your stuff, grab you by your arm and literally like toss you out the classroom. They're just too rough like. They're really rough.

**[Donovan, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Suspension: 20+ Suspensions, 2 Expulsions, Not Enrolled In School At Time of Interview]**

Donovan's statements suggest school guards may initiate aggressive interactions and black boys may feel vulnerable to hostile encounters because of the power dynamics that shape the student-school guard relationship. Three boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds cited similar feelings of being subjected to harsh treatment by school guards.

When Tracey, a very vocal 10<sup>th</sup> grade student who has been suspended several times for fighting, began discussing her perceptions of school safety measures I could sense feelings of uneasiness in her voice. Tracey appeared to be very concerned about her safety in school as she states:

They're just not protecting. Like, they really not. They are but they're not because as soon as you walk in, the metal detectors aren't on and then when they check your bag they just move the stuff, they don't really check it. Like, I have like ten zippers on my thing that open and they only check that one, that one big one. I could probably hide stuff in it and they wouldn't notice. But like they only like push it over and like "OK go". When there's fight, they don't move fast enough. When there is a problem going on, they're never actually there.

**[Tracey, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 30]**

Tracey's statements suggest black girls from low socioeconomic status backgrounds may not feel protected in PBHSs. Specifically, Tracy highlights how inoperable metal detectors and lax bag searches make her feel unsafe in the school setting. In this study feelings of being unsafe in school were expressed exclusively by black girls therefore, black girls may feel more vulnerable to harm when school safety measures are perceived to be ineffective.

Further exploration into Tracey's experiences suggested a few weeks prior to our interview two students were involved in a fight and a weapon was used by one of the students. At the point in which the weapon was considered to be hidden on school grounds, law enforcement officers were contacted and the school was placed on "lockdown" until the weapon was found. Tracey and five other students also described instances in which school guards and metal detectors were only situated at the front entrance of the school, leaving side and rear entrances vulnerable to intrusion by anyone in the community.

Interviewer: Are you worried about somebody coming in that door, that they go out? Or?  
 Tracey: Um, yes. Sometimes. Because people, students wouldn't know the danger like they would push the door open so they could come in. And they should really just come through the front door.

Interviewer: Um, has anyone ever brought a weapon into your school?  
 Tracey: Yeah, a couple weeks ago. They was fighting, they had a teacher that said a weapon and came up missing and was going through all the school and we were on lockdown.

Interviewer: Oh. Was the weapon a knife or a gun? Or?  
 Tracey: They didn't say. But the teacher was still here after the cops and everybody had went home, because we were on lockdown and couldn't leave the classrooms.

Tracey's statements suggest PBHSs may be dangerous environments and traditional school safety measures may fail to protect black students. Thus, the perceived failure of school safety measures may have long-lasting consequences on student well-being.

While Tracey's concerns suggest the school environment may not be a safe place and school guards may conduct superficial searches; Kimberly's statements suggest school guards may also conduct searches that are potentially invasive and make students feel uncomfortable. When Kimberly, a fourteen-year-old 9<sup>th</sup> grade student who admittedly does not like school because she feels she is targeted by school staff, states she was forced to remove her shirt, pants, socks, and shoes her voice began to crack and tears rolled down her face.

Kimberly: They will check you like in areas you don't want to be touched. If they still feel like you are hiding something, they will make you take off your clothes in the bathroom and give them your clothes, and they'll shake them or they'll take your purse. Dump everything out that's in your purse, and they'll check your purse. So it made me feel very uncomfortable.

Interviewer: So you're saying that they made you take off like pants and stuff like that?

Kimberly: Yeah. They made me like, when I went to [Tres Academy] the detectors didn't work, I was able to slide in with my phone still. So when they checked me, they thought I had a weapon on me or something, and so they made me go to the bathroom. It was a good four girls. They made me take my shirt, my pants, my sock, my shoes. Everything. Like they made me take everything off so they can like check my clothes. Then, they gave it back to me, and then they took my purse, and I didn't get it back until the end of the day. They wouldn't even let me get my purse.

**[Kimberly, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 15]**

The combination of anger, sadness, and helplessness appeared to overwhelm Kimberly as her statements suggested she was subjected to a "strip-search" because the guards mistook her cell-phone for a weapon. While Tracey's statements suggest black girls from low socioeconomic backgrounds may feel unsafe in school due to the perceived failure of school safety measures, Kimberly's statements suggest black girls from middle-class backgrounds may be subjected to invasive body searches. In this study only Kimberly mentioned being subjected to invasive searches however, as scholars advance the conceptualization of black girls' experiences navigating school discipline this should be further explored.

### *Substance Abuse*

In addition to concerns of aggressive school guards, personal safety, and invasive body searches, substance abuse was a prominent theme in student interviews. Seven students in this study suggest illegal substances such as marijuana, cocaine, and a dangerous beverage known as “lean” are consumed by students on school grounds. Moreover, the student statements suggest traditional school safety measures are not be able to prevent illegal substances from entering school grounds.

Crystal’s statements suggest students can bring dangerous drugs into the school setting despite metal detectors and school guards. Crystal, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student who has received ten suspensions for fighting and insubordination describes her experience seeing students bring marijuana and cough syrup into the school setting. When asked to describe what the students do with the cough syrup Crystal states students mix the cough syrup with cream soda and drink it.

Interviewer: How do you feel about the metal detectors and guards?

Crystal: It’s really pointless because people can still bring stuff in they little bookbags, like they don’t even check the front of your bookbag or the little bottom sides cause you could put anything in there.

Interviewer: Have you seen anyone get like weapons past the metal detectors?

Crystal: No, but people brought weed, cough syrup and all that and even when they check the bookbags, they aint see it because they don’t really look.

Interviewer: You said they bring cough syrup, what do they do with the cough syrup?

Crystal: Well, last year a girl brought cough syrup and she got suspended for, I think, one or two weeks for bringing it because you know, they put it in cream soda and drink it, and the people with weed, they brought dogs here and then they got caught, but somebody in my class had it and I said don’t be by me with that because I’m not trying to get in trouble for that.

**[Crystal, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Suspension: 10 Suspensions]**

Crystal’s statements suggest students are consuming a dangerous drug on school grounds. Formally known as lean, purple drank, or by its original name “sizzurp” this dangerous concoction typically consists of cough syrup with codeine and/or promethazine, soda, and jolly rancher candy. It was popularized by southern hip hop artists in the early 2000s such as infamous producer DJ Screw; who created a genre of music called “chopped and screwed” which features significantly

slower beats that mimic the intoxicative and sedative effects of codeine on the central nervous system (Sonny 2015).

Codeine, a naturally occurring narcotic, is used widely for pain and as a cough suppressant agent whereas promethazine is used in cough syrups as an antihistamine and sedative (Hickson, Altemeier, and Clayton 1990). Despite the common use of codeine and promethazine in household medications the dangers associated with their recreational use stem from quantities that exceed the recommended dose by as much as twenty-five times and medical properties that situate promethazine and codeine as central nervous system and respiratory depressants respectively. In recent years more than a few southern rappers including DJ Screw, “Lil Wayne” and several football players have experienced life-threatening events or have died from consuming “lean” (Sonny 2015; Saraceno 2010). Upon exploring the prevalence of “lean” in PBHSs throughout subsequent interviews four students from low socioeconomic backgrounds suggested this potentially deadly concoction is readily available in PBHSs and has been consumed by students.

Throughout our interview Marcus, a 10th grade student from low socioeconomic background status, suggests he has seen students consume lean and other drugs on school grounds.

Some of the school, the school so big, you can kinda do anything in there, for real. Like, people be smokin in the bathrooms. Drink- well, not drinkin. I seen people drink lean in the lunch room before. And stuff like that, um. I seen people roll up blunts in the lunch room, all types of stuff in that school.

**[Marcus, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Specific Learning Disability, Lifetime Suspensions: 20, Expulsions: 2]**

While interviewing Cierra, who presented as an aggressive student and has been suspended for physical altercations with girls and boys, she admitted to bringing a bottle of cough syrup to school which she suggests was later used by her peers to make “lean”.

Interviewer: What happened when you brought the Robitussin to school?

Cierra: Umm, I gave it to this girl and I went into my class to sit down and do my work. Next thing you know I'm getting called to the ummm assistant principal's office saying that they made some type of liquor or drink on the stairs. And that's when

they went up there to check my locker and found out that the person...the girls that had it put it back in my locker.

**[Cierra, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 5]**

Considering the dangers of lean and its glorification in hip hop music, it is important for researchers to understand that lean consumers have established new ingredients to circumvent recent measures prescription drug companies have taken to reduce codeine and promethazine abuse. Instead of using prescription based cough syrups that often contain codeine some individuals are using over-the-counter (OTC) cough syrups that contain dextromethorphan, which produces hallucinogenic effects instead of the sedative sensation of the traditional drink (Swartz 2005).

Subsequent studies that focused on lean consumption in young African American populations have found the drug is associated with elevated levels of sexual activity, the use of other drugs such as marijuana and alcohol, and listening to hip-hop music (Amos et al. 2007; Peters et al., 2003). Despite the harmful effects associated with lean consumption most of the studies have focused exclusively on young students in Houston, Texas (Peters et al. 2010; Peters et al. 2003). Thus, the dangers of lean coupled with the propensity for its use among African American school-age populations warrants further investigation.

#### *Perceived Consequences of School Discipline*

While removing students who exhibit problematic behavior from school may appear to be an effective strategy for improving school climate several researchers have argued against such practices. For example, Skiba (2014) asserts, “No data exist to show that out-of-school suspensions and expulsions reduce disruption or improve school climate” (pg. 29). Additionally, the American Psychological Association (2008) argues zero tolerance policies may exacerbate minority disproportionate presentation in school discipline and have unintended consequences on the overall well-being of students. In this study twenty-eight students discuss the perceived



consequences of school discipline with a focus on the impact of school discipline on academic achievement and relationships with school personnel. Two student participants suggested school discipline had no impact on their lives. There were no gender differences in the perceived consequences of school discipline. However, there were differences in social class as students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds reported difficulty obtaining makeup work post school suspension due to transportation barriers or lack of parental availability to obtain the work during school hours.

While interviewing Jerome, a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student from middle-class background status who had been suspended four times for fighting and tardiness, I found him to be eager to participate in the study. He was dressed in black jeans, Nike Air Jordan gym shoes, and a grey hooded sweatshirt. When asked about the potential consequences of being suspended from school Jerome immediately discussed how being suspended affected his grades.

Jerome: Like, I had, like, a B in one class, and next thing you know it was an F.  
 Interviewer: Wow.  
 Jerome: So I had to make it up. I had to make up all the assignments.  
 Interviewer: And this is when you were suspended for a day?  
 Jerome: Yes, just a day.  
 Interviewer: Wow, okay.  
 Jerome: Yeah, cause it was a quiz that day. They're worth, like, 100 points and I missed it, so she had to put in an F.

**[Jerome, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 4]**

Jerome's statements suggest school discipline has dire consequences on middle-class black student's academic achievement. Additionally, as Jerome states he was suspended for one school day his statements suggest the impact of school discipline on academic achievement may begin immediately. Thus, as students in this study were suspended on average nearly eight times, the cumulative effects of school discipline on academic achievement may be profound.

Marcus presented as a student from low socioeconomic status who was diagnosed with a specific learning disability in reading and was frustrated by his experience navigating school

discipline issues. Throughout our interview Marcus stated being suspended had a tremendous impact on his grades because he was unable to obtain assistance with completing his school work and he missed important instruction time.

Marcus: Uh, it affected my grades a lot. I go up there to get my work but, I know it's hard to do the work when you outside of school. You get where the, you not, you not receiving the you know, proper you know, guidance to do the work. Like, you're not getting, you know, help. Especially me. Like, certain students, like me, if you put them outta school and they really need help with the work.

**[Marcus, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Specific Learning Disability, Lifetime Suspensions: 20, Expulsions: 2]**

Marcus' statements suggest the inability to obtain assistance with completing assignments coupled with missing instruction time may compound the negative impact of school discipline on academic achievement; particularly for students with special needs. Specifically, Marcus' statements suggest students with special needs may require additional support to complete assignments and without such support school discipline may adversely affect academic achievement. Marcus' statements also suggest he was required to obtain his makeup work during his suspension and that he had the means to do so. Five student participants with special needs made similar statements about the importance of obtaining makeup and how school discipline interfered with critical instruction time.

However, Tracey, a student participant from low socioeconomic background status who was suspended at least thirty times for fighting stated she was unable to obtain makeup work due to transportation barriers. Throughout our interview she spoke openly about the financial struggles her mother endured to provide for her siblings.

Interviewer: Okay. So when you get suspended, can you take work with you that you miss?

Tracey: Uh, you can get somebody to come up with it, come up to the school. But I didn't really have that much people at the house that have cars...so nobody actually came up to get the work.

**[Tracey, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 30]**

Throughout our interview, Tracey also suggested school discipline may have negatively impacted her grades because a parent or guardian was required to obtain her makeup work from the school. Tracey's statements suggest the inability to obtain makeup work may play a vital role in how school discipline impacts academic achievement for students from low socioeconomic background status. Additionally, it suggests transportation problems and poverty may function as structural barriers that compound the negative implications of school discipline in low socioeconomic status school-age populations.

While some students highlighted the implications of missing exams, instruction time, and the inability to obtain makeup work due to transportation barriers as important consequences that may be associated with school discipline, more than a few students suggested they had difficulty obtaining makeup work from specific teachers because of potential friction in the student-teacher relationship. Kimberly presented as an outspoken student from middle-class background status and was very concerned about her grades.

Interviewer: Okay. How did being suspended or expelled affect your grades?

Kimberly: It affect them a lot to where I was getting like a 1.0, a 2.0. I had nothing higher than a 3.0. So it affected my grades a lot.

Interviewer: Which subjects did it affect the most?

Kimberly: All of them.

Interviewer: All of them. Okay. Were you able to get makeup work when you were suspended?

Interviewer: Yeah. I was from a lot of my classes except one, which was my math class because my math teacher didn't like me so he didn't give me any of my work. So I failed that class throughout the whole year.

**[Kimberly, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 15]**

Kimberly's statements suggest school discipline may have far reaching academic consequences that extend beyond one or two courses. Moreover, Kimberly's statements suggest problems in the student-teacher relationship may exacerbate the negative impact of school discipline on academic achievement. Five students discussed how problems in the student-teacher relationship may impact the willingness of the educator to provide makeup work for students who

miss class due to school discipline. Thus, Kimberly's statements suggest the student-school personnel relationship is an important dynamic that warrants exploration given its potential to function as a barrier to high academic achievement.

Eric, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student from low socioeconomic status background status was very outspoken about his perceptions of school discipline and how it made him feel about his teachers. Eric cites how school discipline made him form strong negative perceptions of his teachers, which led him to refuse to complete his assignments.

Eric: 'Cause every time I get suspended I'm like "man I hate these teachers," or "I hate this school." Like, the typical thing you hate everything, but, so I started just hating everything. So every time the teachers, like, even when I get s- when I get suspended I'm still in the school cause my dad don't pick me up, and so every time they try to talk to me I'd be ignorin' 'em. I just, they be like "um, hey, do your work." I'd be like, I just be lookin' And I don't do my work at all. I just push it away cause I'm mad.

**[Eric, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 9]**

Eric's statements suggest school discipline may harm the student-teacher relationship and encourage students to initiate a process of emotional withdrawal from the academic environment. The process of emotional withdrawal is indicated by Eric's refusal to complete assignments and his disregard for his teachers. The propensity for school discipline to disrupt the student-teacher relationship and lead to student withdrawal from the academic environment, as Eric's statements suggest, is similar to Marcus' statements regarding self-detachment from the school setting. However, Marcus' statements describe student withdrawal as a process in which a student may physically remove themselves from the academic environment for extended time periods, which is formally recognized as truancy, while Eric's statements describe student withdrawal as an emotional process in which students may become expressively disinvested in the academic environment altogether. Eric and Marcus' statements suggest school discipline may influence student absenteeism therefore, future studies should explore the relationship between school discipline and chronic absenteeism.

## CHAPTER 5: PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

School discipline has emerged as an important social issue among students and education stakeholders. While research has focused on student perceptions of school discipline parent perceptions remain unexplored. Studies show parents play an key role in shaping a child's educational experience through neighborhood selection, mediating peer relationships, assisting with school activities (Hill and Tyson 2009; Gonzalez-DeHass & Willems 2005). Given the significance of parent involvement in a child's educational experiences it is important to understand how parents perceive school discipline.

### *Perceived Fairness of School Discipline*

I found parents to be both eager to speak and exhausted due to the seemingly combative relationship they developed with school personnel as parents advocated for their children. Several parent participants stated they encountered barriers as they navigated the school bureaucracy to advocate for their children; particularly in relation to ensuring school personnel abided by the provisions in the individualized education plan (IEP) for students diagnosed with special needs. I asked parent participants a variety of questions to explore their perceptions of school discipline, how they believed the incident should have been resolved, and which students they believed may be targeted by school personnel for suspensions or expulsions. Twenty-seven of the parent responses suggested they perceived school discipline to be excessive, a barrier to educational attainment, or a precursor to school dropout and incarceration. In the following interviews the parent participants describe a variety of incidents, such as hugging a student of the opposite sex, failing to return a cellphone to its owner, and self-defense, that resulted in their child's removal from school via an out-of-school suspension.

Throughout our interview Mike stated he was recently released from prison and was deeply committed to prison reform and combatting the school-to-prison-pipeline. Mike cites an instance in which his daughter, Kimberly, was suspended for five school days because she hugged a boy on school grounds.

The most recent time she was suspended. So there was a young boy in her school she has a crush on. I met this young man. Highly intelligent young guy. After school, they met up right there in front of the school, gave each other a hug, and they suspended her. Yeah, I thought that was ridiculous too. For five days, to suspend a child for five days for giving a person a hug is ... It was so many other things that we could've paid attention to in the school. For example, having fifth graders in the same building with tenth graders. But we were focused on a child giving another child a hug. And then even with that, they explained to the security guard their relationship, and the security guard, she was just being tough, you know? And I raised my voice about it many times to their policies around suspension is very unnecessary and it hinders not only the child, but myself because for those five days, I have to figure out what to do with her as I go to work.

**[Mike - Father of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Kimberly), Middle Class Background, Suspension: 5 School Days]**

Mike's statements suggest a five-day suspension for hugging a boy may be inconsistent with black fathers' expectations for how the situation should have been handled. As Mike discusses the nature of the suspension he highlights other aspects of his daughters' education that he believes warrant more attention, such as permitting high school students to share a building with middle school students. Similar to student experiences, Mike's statements suggest he explained the nature of his daughters' relationship to the security guard and spoke out about school discipline policies yet his voice was ignored. Thus, in the context of navigating school discipline, the marginalization of an individual's voice may not be unique to student experiences.

Lisa, a child advocacy worker, presented as a very knowledgeable parent who was frustrated by her son's experience with school discipline. Her child advocacy work provided tremendous flexibility in her work schedule to advocate for her son. With her eyes looking toward the ceiling Lisa lets out a brief sigh as she describes a situation in which her son was held accountable for a lost cellphone. Instead of taking payment for the phone Lisa states her son was handcuffed at school, suspended for five school days, referred to juvenile court, and she was

compelled to enroll her son in a court-ordered program for three to six months to prevent the incident from appearing on his academic record.

Um when he was suspended it was due to him getting a young man's cellphone and not returning it, another young man took the phone from my son and my son was held accountable. I heard about it two weeks after this incident happened. They said they didn't have a phone number for me. That wasn't true. When I got there my son was handcuffed to the umm to like a banister. We just recently went to court for it. That was Tuesday I want to say and he was put in a program and in this program he has to go three to six months, completion of the program then it won't be on his record.

**[Lisa – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Special Needs Student, ADHD, Low Socioeconomic Status Background Suspension: 5 School Days]**

Lisa's statements in conjunction with Mike's suggest communication barriers with school personnel may not function as a gendered or social class experience. Similar to Marcus' experience which is specified in the previous chapter, Lisa's statements also suggest proper documentation may not be provided when black students with special needs are suspended from school. Lastly, her statements suggest school discipline may function as a pathway to the juvenile justice system for black students with special needs.

Clara, a mother of three boys who have all been suspended from school suggests the recommendations she made during her son's IEP meeting were ignored by school personnel. Clara cites an instance in which she explained the nature of his son's disability to school personnel, but the guidelines were not followed which led to a behavioral outburst and his removal from school.

Well actually, he's an IP student. When we did the IEP, he don't like people staring at him. He just self-conscious. When we did the IEP, we told him that once he feels somebody staring at him or he can't do something, he doing work and he can't get it, he'll walk out the class. I told the teacher, let him walk out. He'll get his composure back. Just don't bother him. They kind of got upset with him, and he threw a chair. We were talking. He gotta get his self together so he can focus back. He'll jump back where he's supposed to be, but you just gotta give him time. Since they changed the classroom size, it's so big now, and he can't catch up, he get frustrated. I told him just call me. When you feel that he's getting ready to have an episode, call me before because you can see it before. You can see it happen since the classrooms and things is so big. A lot of kids, not just my son, a lot of kids, they can't function, and they can't understand it because the class size is so big. That was one of my concerns. I argued over that, and they excluded him. He wasn't even supposed to be excluded. I told them, how could you exclude him and he an IP student? You know this? He's not supposed to be excluded at all, but they did it.

**[Clara – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Special Needs Student, ADHD, Middle Class Background  
Suspension: 5 School Days]**

Clara’s statements suggest parents of black students may have their voices disregarded by school personnel regardless of the parents or child’s gender or their child’s disability status. Specifically, twenty parents cited feelings of being ignored or disregarded by school personnel. The structural barriers and pervasive marginalization described by parents of black students further demonstrates the privilege to *exclude others* as indicated in the “Whiteness as Property” tenet of CRT.

Although the circumstances for school removal are unique; the statements made by parents of black students suggest they believe repeat instances of discipline signify school personnel’s’ failure failure to protect their child. In this study six parent participants suggest they plan to remove their child from a PBHS or the school district due to school discipline. Lisa, a mother of two boys, describes how feelings of the school failing to protect her child prompted her to begin searching for a different school.

I just feel at that time they failed him. Again, he is asking to be transferred so I am looking into another school for him.

**[Lisa – Mother of 10th Grade Student, Low Socioeconomic Background, Child  
Lifetime Suspensions: 1, Duration: 5 School Days]**

Lisa’s statements suggest black mothers who are employed in child advocacy settings may possess a heightened awareness of how school discipline impacts their child. Moreover, mothers of black students may initiate a process of “black educational flight”, which I define as a process in which black families physically withdraw from seemingly punitive PBHSs in search for schools that are perceived to be safe havens for their children. This notion is supported by statements from Patrice, a mother of three boys who is also employed in a child advocacy setting, which suggest she removed her son from a school because of “a lack of communication and too much suspension.”



He is actually going to another school this year. But we're just going to stick with the one I'm talking about. How are you going to have an IEP and not follow through with what's on the IEP. That's a big issue, yea its fine and dandy look real good when you say what he suppose to have but actually following through.... there's another thing so I'm working on that to make sure you get what he's supposed to get when he's supposed to get it as we speak. It's just a lack of communication and too much suspension.

**[Patrice – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Low Socioeconomic Background, Attention-Deficit-Hyperactivity Disorder & Oppositional Defiant Disorder, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 30]**

Similarly, Patrice and Lisa's statements focus on how the perceived punitive nature of the school coupled with communication problems prompted them to remove their child from a PBHS school. Moreover, Patrice's statements suggest "black educational flight" extends to parents of black students who have been diagnosed with behavioral disabilities.

Mike, a returning citizen and criminal justice reform leader, discusses his intentions of transferring Kimberly into a different school. During our interview he describes Kimberly's discipline profile and how persistent issues with school staff prompted his decision to search for a different school.

I'm hoping that her file won't dictate her future within the school. I'm hoping the school don't open up her file and say, "Oh, you have been suspended five, six times for this, this, this, and that. You have failing grades from here to here." I'm hoping that they don't hold that against her. I'm really hoping that it's a fresh start. You get off into the ninth grade. It's a newer school. It's more diverse. It's just, fresh start. See what education would, and what school is really about. Southern Academy made school rough. It made school really rough. That was all the way around. School, staff, security, the peers, the school setting, the whole nine yards.

**[Mike - Father of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Kimberly), Middle Class Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 15]**

Mike's statements suggest fathers who have experience with the criminal justice system may also exhibit a heightened awareness of how school discipline impacts their children and engage in "black educational flight". However, unlike Lisa and Patrice, Mike statements suggest fathers of black students may be aware of how persistent school discipline portrays black children in a negative manner and how this could function as a barrier to entering a new educational institution. Thus, fathers who have experience with the criminal justice system may have unique

insight into how discipline infractions possess the propensity to trap black students in punitive educational institutions.

Kierra, a mother of an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student from middle class background status, describes an instance in which her daughter, Dominique, was involved in a physical altercation with another girl in the locker room. At one point during the fight several other girls joined the fight and attacked Dominique. Despite the absence of school personnel to break up the fight and protect Dominique she was suspended for eight days, which is commensurate with the punishment the aggressor received.

I guess there was an incident with another young lady...um...they were Having some issues...some words were said and they were in a gym class And a girl confronted my daughter and umm for whatever reason the girl ended up leaving the locker room and coming back with a group of girls and it escalated an umm...there was no teachers in the locker room. They got in each other's faces and they started fighting. I guess my daughter was getting the best of the girl and the other girls jumped in.

**[Kierra – Mother of 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Middle Class Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 1, Duration: 8 School Days]**

When I ask how this incident and the suspension made her feel about Dominique's school,

Kierra states:

“I didn't like that school...I did not like that school...I did not like anything about it and I was kind of blind to the fact until I said enough is enough we gotta go...even though it's in what they call the suburbs...it's...it..we gotta go.”

**[Kierra – Mother of 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Middle Class Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 1, Duration: 8 School Days]**

Kierra's statements suggest black mothers from middle class backgrounds may also remove their children from PBHSs in local suburbs when faced with school discipline issues. Thus, black educational flight has the potential to extend to mothers of black children who are enrolled in PBHSs in local suburbs.

### *Parent Perceptions of School Safety Measures*

As parent participants discussed school discipline, perceptions of metal detectors and school guards emerged as a key theme. I found parents of black students to hold positive

perceptions of school safety measures. Specifically, parent's statements suggest they perceive metal detectors and school guards as a protective barrier that prevents community violence from entering PBHSs. However, parent's statements also suggest metal detectors were often inoperable and overly situated in PBHSs that educated low income students.

Throughout our interview, Mike, a returning citizen and national advocate for prison reform, highlights the conflicting nature of school safety measures in relation to their appropriateness in the school setting to protect students and how school safety measures can be perceived as criminalizing black students.

I mean the metal detectors, I'm not really bent about because I kind of get it a little bit that you have students that will bring weapons in the school. You want to protect. So I kind of understand that a little bit, but then I also understand that it sets this narrative that we're like criminalizing our children before they can actually commit a crime.

**[Mike - Father of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Kimberly), Middle Class Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 15]**

Mike's statements suggest fathers who have been incarcerated may hold conflicting opinions about school safety measures. In this case, Mike's statements suggest he agrees with the need to protect students from harm, but is hesitant to completely embrace metal detectors and guards due to concerns of criminalizing students before they commit a crime.

Tangie, a mother of an 11<sup>th</sup> grade student from low socioeconomic background status, cites similar feelings about school discipline. In our interview Tangie describes herself as a former gang member who has a keen interest in uplifting black communities because of her experience being incarcerated. When I ask Tangie to discuss her perceptions of school safety measures she states:

Unfortunately, it's two sides to it. I feel like it's needed, but unfortunately, I feel like our children is being how can I say it, they being psychologically trained as far as in their minds they are in prison. Does it make any sense to you. If I'm seeing a police standing in a place of learning because you know get that out there. You all get that shit out in Bloomfield Hills they free to walk out the door, and come in. It's a sense of freedom and entitlement that they have and our children don't have that they already on lockdown. They already on been lock when they go to school they see this shit and I think it's a psychological thing. So how I feel about it is a catch 22 it's needed but at the same time if the parents including myself have our motherfucking children in check, this shit

and these motherfucking teacher, these goddamn principals and all that shit, this shit we don't need. We need metal detectors for our children but it's a catch 22.

**[Tangie - Mother of 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Low Socioeconomic Status Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 6]**

Similarly, Tangie's statements suggest mothers who have been incarcerated may hold conflicting perceptions of school discipline. However, Tangie's statements suggest black mothers who have been incarcerated may associate school safety measures with the transformation of the learning environment into a setting that prepares black students for prison. Thus, Tangie's statements propose harboring ambivalent feelings about school safety measures may not be confined to a specific gender or social class and may be better explained by prior experience with the criminal justice system. In this study only two parents self-disclosed prior experience being incarcerated, therefore this finding should be further explored with a larger population of returning citizens who have school-age children that have been experienced out-of-school suspension or expulsion.

As Mike and Tangie's statements focus on the ambivalence returning citizens may experience in relation to school safety measures, Vanessa, a mother of a 10<sup>th</sup> grade student from middle class background status was very vocal about the negative implications of school safety measures. In our interview I found Vanessa to be very energetic, highly educated, and deeply engaged in her son's education. As Vanessa discusses her perceptions of school safety measures she reflects on her schooling and states how she believes metal detectors affect the school setting.

We didn't have that. I don't recall ... When I was in high school we had guards. We had security guards at our school, and I think that we had ... We didn't have a lot of fights, but I think that it always seems like it's in the minority schools. I never see them in the white schools. I think that what that does is it fosters the type of environment that ... You breed that. It's as if the children sees those guards, they're just automatically just kind of go along with having negativity ... That's the culture that they breed. If that wasn't there, if they didn't have all of that, if they didn't have those guards, and if they had positive in that environment, I don't think there would be so much negativity. But if you have that there all the time, what do you think you're gonna get? What type of result do you think you're gonna have?

**[Vanessa – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Anthony), Middle Class Background, ADHD, Child Lifetime Suspensions]**

Vanessa's statements suggest middle-class mothers may draw on their schooling experiences to make determinations regarding the appropriateness of school safety measures. Additionally, Vanessa's statement suggest middle-class black mothers may perceive school safety measures as overly situated in black schools. Four mothers from middle-class backgrounds cited references to race and the presence of metal detectors in schools. Lastly, Vanessa's statements suggest middle-class black mothers may perceive metal detectors or school guards as a negative component of education that leads to other negative outcomes. Three middle-class black mothers made similar statements regarding metal detectors and their propensity to lead to negative outcomes.

Although Vanessa was very open about her negative perceptions of school guards and metal detectors her husband Clarence's statements suggest fathers of black students may be supportive of such measures. Clarence presents as a supportive husband and stepfather who is less involved in Anthony's education than Vanessa, but feels strongly about school safety.

It's a necessity. Not necessarily for what's in the school, but what's coming to the school. You know, that massive shooting at columbine, different things of that nature, stuff like that. A buffer between outer and inner, yes. Someone to monitor, chaperone so to speak, things that happen in the school, I think you need that. Are they always qualified and trained the best? That's another question, another story for another day. To have someone in place, you do need some type of mechanisms, yes.

**[Clarence – Father of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Anthony), Middle Class Background, ADHD, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 3]**

Clarence's statements are consistent with Mike's concerns regarding students bringing weapons into the school setting. Furthermore, Clarence and Mike's statements suggest PBHSs may be situated in dangerous environments, which necessitate the presence of a "buffer" between the school and surrounding neighborhood. The environmental concerns Clarence and Mike's statements highlight are consistent with Tracey's statements in the student section of the previous

chapter regarding the dangers that exist near school grounds. Lastly, Clarence, Mike, and Vanessa's statements suggest gender differences may exist in parental perceptions of school safety measures; particularly among parents from middle-class backgrounds.

While Vanessa was vocal about her negative perceptions of school safety measures due to their seemingly disproportionate presence in PBHSs Patrice's statements suggest school metal detectors are often unplugged and inoperable. Patrice presents as a visibly upset parent from low socioeconomic background status. As I ask Patrice to discuss her perceptions of school safety measures she leans back in her chair, shakes her head, and takes a deep breath.

Interviewer: Are there metal detectors and guards at his school?

Patrice: Yes. But. I feel it is useless! Most of the time they don't work they always unplugged....Never work out. I asked once. Last school year. like why these not plugged up, they not working maam they always not working and so what's the purpose of having a right here just for show..... To make it seem like it's a secure thing and not what they seem at these high schools.

**[Patrice – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Low Socioeconomic Background, ADHD & ODD, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 30]**

Patrice's statements suggest PBHSs that serve low income communities may fail to situate functioning metal detectors in the school setting. Patrice's statements highlight what many parent and student participants consider to be an important problem throughout PBHSs in low income communities. Specifically, seven additional mothers from low socioeconomic backgrounds stated metal detectors are often unplugged and inoperable. Most notably Patrice's statements are consistent with student statements regarding feelings of not being protected in school. When taken into consideration both Patrice and Tracey's statements suggest the operability of school safety measures is often problematic in PBHSs that are situated in low income communities and this may impact how students perceive the academic setting.

### *Perceived Consequences of School Discipline*

Twenty-eight parent participants suggested school discipline harmed their child's

academic performance. Regardless of gender, social class, or disability status parent participants reported school discipline had a profound impact on their child's academic achievement; resulting in full grade level declines after missing only class day. However, four parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds reported difficulty obtaining makeup work from teachers. The findings suggest school discipline has severe academic consequences for black students and the negative impact of school discipline on achievement may begin immediately upon a student's removal from school.

Throughout our interview Mike, a returning citizen and statewide community activist on the school-to-prison-pipeline reported school discipline harmed his daughter's grades. As I ask how school discipline affected his daughters grades Mike states:

Interviewer: How did being suspended affect her grades?

Mike: Oh, tremendously. Wow. So her grades are based upon how much work she does in the class and also her attendance, and since she has been here, she's been suspended quite a few times. A lot of them has been some really petty suspensions. She's received multiple low grades due to the lack of attendance, and then the lack of attendance comes from the suspensions

**[Mike - Father of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Kimberly), Middle Class Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 15]**

Mike's statements suggest school discipline had a negative impact on his daughter's grades because she was unable to complete in-class assignments. Since student's grades may depend on completing in-class assignments, Mike's statements suggest school discipline may create an insurmountable barrier to high academic achievement.

Lisa's statements suggest the inability to obtain makeup work post suspension may play a key role in how school discipline leads to poor academic achievement. Throughout our interview Lisa presents as a concerned parent who was employed in a child advocacy position that provided her with extensive knowledge on school discipline issues. Lisa's statements also provide insight into the impact school discipline has on academic achievement.

- Interviewer: You said he was a B student, where are his grades now?  
 Lisa: I mean being suspended, not being there and missin work, he was a B, C student before the suspensions started and he ended up a D, F student.  
 Interviewer: So there was a full two grade level decline after his suspension.  
 Lisa: Yea...Umm it did affect em, he was a B student, it knocked him down because he was out that week and then I want it to say it was around the holiday time so that took it a little further so by the time he got back a test was being given and he missed it.  
 Interviewer: You said when he was suspended the school did not give him his makeup work.  
 Lisa: Mmmhmm (affirmative).  
 Interviewer: None of the teachers?  
 Lisa: No  
 Interviewer: Did they say why?  
 Lisa: No and I sent a letter asking for it and I called the school, spoke to the secretary in the office on several occasions asking them and they said he would get it. By the time his report card came it showed the effect of him not being able to have that makeup work. My questions was being unheard.  
 Interviewer: So they didn't give it to him and no explanation as to why?  
 Lisa: Nope.  
**[Lisa – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Special Needs Student, ADHD, Low Socioeconomic Status Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 1]**

Lisa's statements suggest one suspension that resulted in missing *one week* of school may have led to a full two grade level decline in her son's academic achievement. Lisa's statements also suggest the impact of school discipline on student's grades may be immediate and exacerbated by the unwillingness of educators to provide makeup work. Specifically, Lisa's statements suggest black parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds experience structural barriers when navigating the school bureaucracy and those structural barriers may adversely impact black student's academic performance.

Considering the potential for school discipline to adversely affect academic achievement, it is important to understand how school discipline may harm vulnerable populations, such as students diagnosed with severe behavioral disabilities. While Lisa's son was diagnosed with ADHD James admits his son experiences "episodes of extreme anger" that may be indicative of an undiagnosed impairment. According to James, his son has been suspended at least thirty times for fighting, setting fires, and other instances of school violence. Also, as a substitute middle school



educator James states he has taken a keen interest in his son's schooling. James' statements suggest the instruction his son missed due to his repeat suspensions had such a negative impact on his son's grades that James' advanced education and teaching credentials were not sufficient to compensate for the instruction his son missed.

Interviewer: How did being suspended effect his grades?

James: Tremendously, only because you know, you can only do so much at home when you know, you're not in the classroom to hear what your teacher is saying, to go over a notebook, get in a book and say he's got to do you know what I'm saying. I don't know what your curriculum is, you know what I'm saying? I think it really it was probably the type of parent I was, he would have most definitely been behind, most definitely, if it wasn't for me as a type of parent I am. I stay on it, meaning the school. I stayed on him, if he had to go to summer school. Some of the times I had to pay, you know what I'm saying? I did that, you know. Actually, this is the first year probably since my son been in the sixth grade where he didn't have to go to summer school because of the effect of him getting kicked out effecting his grades. Yeah, this is the first year.

**[James – Father of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Special Needs Student, ADHD, Low Socioeconomic Status Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 30]**

James statements suggest being in the classroom is vital for black students from low socioeconomic backgrounds; particularly those diagnosed with special needs. Additionally, James' statements suggest his ability to aid his son was limited because James does not know the exact curriculum his son is learning, which reinforces the critical role classroom instruction may play in the lives of black students. Lastly, as James suggests school discipline may have played a "tremendous role" in his son's academic achievement and that he was compelled to pay for summer school on several occasions, the consequences of school discipline may be compounded for black students with severe behavioral disorders.

Although more than a few parent participants suggested school discipline adversely affected their child's grades, twenty of the parent participants suggested their employment was harmed by their child's school suspension and/or expulsion. In one instance, Mike, a returning citizen who experienced considerable difficulty finding employment upon his release from prison

states his daughter was suspended for *hugging a boy* on school grounds and he informed the school that her suspension may impact his employment.

Interviewer: How did her suspensions impact your employment?

Mike: I missed a couple of days of ... You know, just the last one, I remember like they called me, and I told them, "How important is this?" They said, "Well, it's important." And I get up to the school, and they're suspending her for that hug. I told them. I was like, "Nah. Not only am I missing out on some hours at work. I'm missing out on some important meetings, and also commitments that I have made, to come up here and talk about suspensions, a five-day suspension for giving somebody a hug." That's one of the things that every time they call me, I always raise my voice about that. It's been times where the school has suspended her, and I told the school, "Well, she can't stay home with me. She doesn't have nowhere else to go, so she has to stay at the school, and you will have to accommodate some space for her to sit," and then it worked. It worked a couple of times. The principal said, "All right. She has to just stay in my office." That's cool. She can't stay home with me.

**[Mike - Father of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Kimberly), Middle Class Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 15]**

Mike's statements suggest the infraction for which his daughter was suspended was not urgent enough to warrant being removed from school for five-days and that it may cause conflict in his work schedule. Furthermore, Mike statements suggest the potential for school discipline to harm his employment was so great that at times he has informed school personnel members that his daughter did not have a place to go and encouraged the school to keep her on their grounds. Thus, his statements suggest in the event of a school suspension fathers of black students may feel compelled to place the responsibility of watching their children on school personnel members because of the tendency for school discipline to cause disruption in parental employment.

Whereas Mike's statements focus on the potential for school discipline to cause disruption in current employment opportunities Vanessa's statements suggest school discipline functions as a barrier to full-time employment opportunities; particularly for single mothers. Throughout our interview Vanessa presents as a highly educated mother who feels compelled to maintain a very high level of involvement in her son's school, which includes a position in the local parent-teacher association (PTA). She discusses the difficulties she experiences with navigating school discipline

issues because of the school's failure to implement her son's Individualized Education Plan (IEP), which was established to provide the best resources available to help her son considering his ADHD diagnosis.

Interviewer: It seems like you have to be very involved to make sure he gets what he needs. How does that affect your employment situation?

Vanessa: That's another thing. For me, I had to get a job that would accept the type of ... I had to get a job that would accept that ... I've been working with my employer for four years now. I worked for the state of Michigan for ten years, Adult and Family Providing. That's why I'm so you know ...and I decided that I had to get a job that had the same type of scheduling that my son had and would accept that if the school called, I had to leave. If they could not accept that, I would have to quit. There was no ...My son's education was priority over everything. That was it. When I would go on an interview, I would explain that to them. I told them that was one of the stipulations of me being hired at any job, because of what was going on with my son. I had to get part time work. My job is 26 hours. That's my job, 26-30 hours, and I have flexibility. If anything happens, I can leave, I can make up hours, and things of that nature, because they know how important it is for me to make sure that my son is okay at his school.

**[Vanessa – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Anthony), Middle Class Background, ADHD, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 3]**

Vanessa's statements suggest middle-class mothers of black children may feel compelled to maintain an elevated level of involvement in their child's school to protect their child from discipline practices. Additionally, her statements suggest mothers of black children with high education levels may possess a heightened level of awareness of the structural factors that adversely affect black children in PBHSs and may feel compelled to prioritize their child's education over employment opportunities. In this study eight middle-class mothers of black children suggested school discipline harmed their employment.

Additionally, Vanessa also discusses how household discord created a situation in which she was forced to care for her son without the support of his father or her husband. At this time Vanessa worked full-time as a social worker at a local hospital and earned over seventy-five thousand dollars annually. However, when placed in a situation in which her son was at-risk for

being suspended Vanessa states her supervisors advised her that if she left her job to advocate for her son she would be fired.

Interviewer: How many jobs ... This is very interesting. How many jobs would you say you had to turn down or that you were denied based on that stipulation [job must be flexible to accommodate child's school schedule?

Vanessa: Oh, my goodness. I was working at Blaineville as a social worker before this job and at that time....I was making \$37 an hour. My husband is not my son's father, but I married my husband when he was two. My husband and I were going through a little difficulties. We were separated at that time. My son was, I think, eleven. He was twelve, or ... Just before I got this job, because I was preparing for him to go to high school ... I had just got that job because I was preparing for him. I asked his dad, I said, "I have to ... " It was right before Christmas. It was during Christmas break, right before Christmas break. I said ... He was at MacArthur because he was getting ready to go to a new school. I said, "I need you to watch him." He told me, "Nope. I cannot do that." I said, "I have to ... " It was right before ... They were calling me from the school because he was having a rough time. He was gonna get suspended. He said, "I can't do it. I'm not going up there." I said, "Well, I have to leave." When you're a social worker at that job, you can't keep calling on the floor. They said, "If you leave, don't come back." I left. I left. I was making \$37 an hour, sir. I left. I'll never forget that. I told them, I said, "I have to leave. My son is more important ... " I was so disappointed because ... I said, "We're social workers, so you should understand that." They said, "Well, you have to have a job, and you should understand that this is a job." I said, "Well, I also love my son, and my son has complications at school." I'll never forget that. I had to lose that job. Yes, sir.

**[Vanessa – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Anthony), Middle Class Background, ADHD, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 3]**

Vanessa's statements suggest mothers who possess advanced education may be very knowledgeable about the adverse effects of school discipline and feel compelled to prioritize their child's education to protect their children from punitive discipline practices. Furthermore, her statements suggest school discipline may not solely cause disruption in current employment, but has the potential to sever employment opportunities. Lastly, Vanessa's statements suggest the adverse impact of school discipline on parental employment extends to mothers, fathers, middle class families, and parents of children with behavioral disabilities.

Considering the potential for school discipline to cause disruption or sever parent employment, it is important to highlight occupations that may function as a protective factor for parents of black students. Specifically, four parent participants suggested their employment was

not harmed by school discipline because they were employed in child advocacy positions and their employer possessed a unique understanding of childhood educational issues. This finding was unique amongst mothers from low socioeconomic background status. At the time of our interview Patrice's son was in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade and he was diagnosed with ADHD and ODD, and suspended at least thirty times.

Interviewer: How did him being suspended impact your employment?

Patrice: It didn't because they understand, like when things going on cause like they advocate for children.

**[Patrice – Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Low Socioeconomic Background, ADHD & ODD, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 30]**

Although Mike and Vanessa's statements suggest school discipline may have harmed their employment opportunities Patrice's statements suggest being employed in a child advocacy position protected her from the adverse impact of school discipline on parental employment. Specifically, her statements suggest child advocacy employment opportunities may function as a protective factor for parents who seek flexible employment opportunities that would enable them to maintain an elevated level of involvement in their child's education. Patrice's statements also suggest the protections her child advocacy employment provide extend to parents from low socioeconomic backgrounds and parents of students who are diagnosed with behavioral disabilities and are subsequently suspended multiple times.

## CHAPTER 6 – THE CODE OF THE SCHOOL

According to Skiba (2000) school discipline policies were designed to deter severe conduct violations, such as weapons use, physical altercations, and drug possession on school grounds. However, the Center for Disease Control's Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) found nearly eight percent of students have been involved in a physical fight on school property at least once and approximately six percent of students skip school because they feel unsafe (McManus et al. 2015). Additionally, recent incidents have captured school guards and law enforcement officers physically restraining, throwing, slamming, and arresting students. The recent videos of school guards and/or law enforcement officers engaged in physical altercations with students has raised concerns about the appropriateness of such tactics. Considering the prevalence of school shootings and violent conduct offenses throughout the U.S. K-12 public education system, researchers should question the ability of school suspensions, expulsions, and safety measures (i.e. metal detectors and guards) to function as deterrents to undesired school conduct. In this chapter, I explore black student and parental perceptions of school discipline as a mechanism to deter undesired conduct and promote school safety. Specifically, I am interested in, a) how school discipline deters black students from committing severe offenses, and b) how school discipline impacts social status.

### *School Discipline & Social Status*

The findings present a novel outlook on the social factors that govern the use of violence, the ability of school discipline to function as a deterrent to undesired conduct offenses (i.e. school violence), and insight into how parents of black students advise their children to navigate PBHSs. Several student statements suggest the informal social norms that govern interpersonal communication in “the street” may pervade PBHSs to establish a “code of the school”. Moreover, student statements suggest school discipline may function as an ineffective deterrent to school

violence because the “code of the school” may encourage black students to seek physical altercations and school discipline as a strategy for gaining respect and an elevated social status within PBHSs. Furthermore, data suggest parents of black students in PBHSs may be aware of the “code of the school” and instruct their children on how to navigate the “code” by advising when it is appropriate to participate in a physical altercation.

Nicole, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student from low socioeconomic status background who attends a PBHS in New Post, presents as a soft-spoken individual and expresses interest in attending an Ivy League university to study law. Nicole states she has five out-of-school suspensions on her disciplinary record, which she received due to fighting other students. As we discuss why Nicole feels it is important for her to defend herself in school, she states:

Nicole: It’s just like you know, I’m the type of person where like if you hit me or something then I have to do the same back even though it shouldn’t be that way but it’s like you gotta keep your guard up.

Interviewer: Why do you have to keep your guard up?

Nicole: To not...to not let people like keep messing with you. It’s like you giving people keep hitting you and touching you or something. And if you just sit a pass to there more people will just gonna keep horsing around and getting you in trouble and stuff and yea.

**[Nicole, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 5]**

Nicole’s statements suggest issues of respectability play a key role in interpersonal communication within PBHSs in low socioeconomic communities. As Anderson (1999) argues a set of informal social norms govern interpersonal communication in “the streets”; the statements made by Nicole suggest the informal norms Anderson (1999) describes may pervade PBHSs and influence peer relations. Additionally, Nicole’s statements suggest the failure to retaliate may be perceived by her peers as “weakness” and potentially functions as an invitation for future confrontations.

Angel, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student from low socioeconomic background status who attends a PBHS in New Post and received five out-of-school suspensions for fighting, presents as a friendly and

talkative individual. Throughout our interview Angel seems to be proud of her reputation for violence in school. As she discusses the physical altercations that resulted in school discipline, she smiles, laughs, and speaks with remarkable confidence about the harm she inflicted upon other students. Concerning how being suspended or expelled would influence the likelihood of a repeat conduct violation, Angel states:

It [school discipline] probably makes it more likely for me to fight because getting suspended people feel like they want to test or push my buttons. So if you push my buttons or press me the wrong way, I will end up fighting you and I told my mom this, and she said if you fight...ok...just let me know

**[Angel, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 5]**

While Angel's statements support the notion that black girls from low socioeconomic backgrounds may feel compelled to retaliate when provoked, her statements also suggest being suspended is associated with an elevated social status in the school context. Furthermore, Angel's statements suggest within the informal rules and regulations that govern interpersonal communication in PBHSs, or the "code of the school" being suspended or expelled functions as a sign of strength, which may be contested by those who seek an elevated status. This finding is a unique attribute of the "code of the school" and it is supported by eight students who suggested being suspended made them appear *stronger, tougher, and more popular* in the eyes of their peers and was associated with a greater level of "respect". Moreover, Angel's statements are consistent with Anderson (1999) in that "respect" is very difficult to obtain and easy to lose, therefore it must be continuously earned. As Anderson (1999) highlighted the importance of "respect" in impoverished African American communities, several students' statements suggest the informal norms of "the street" pervade PBHSs, transcend gender, and extend to PBHSs in middle-class communities.

DeAndre attends a PBHS in Fullerville and presents as an easygoing individual who seems shocked by my interest in studying school discipline because being suspended seems normal to



him. While conducting the interview with DeAndre at his home, he stats he received four out-of-school suspensions due to fighting and tardiness. When discussing how school discipline would impact the likelihood of him repeating an undesired offense, DeAndre states:

I'd say as with the fighting wise, I'm always going to protect my people, like my friends and stuff because so many times a fight could cause a death, and I would not want to say, "I could have been there to stop it, or just help", and see my mans or friend or something dead. But, I say some mistakes, being at school early and stuff like that, okay. But I'd probably fix just, try to stay out the way if I can, but in certain situations I'm going to have to because, at the same time, I'm going to have to.

**[DeAndre, 12<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 4]**

DeAndre's statements suggest PBHSs in middle-class communities may be dangerous environments and black boys from middle-class backgrounds engage in physical altercations to protect their friends. Despite the presence of metal detectors and guards at his school, DeAndre's statements suggest failing to aid his friends when an altercation ensues could lead to severe injury or death. Thus, DeAndre's statements suggest the failure of school guards and metal detectors to create a safe environment within PBHSs, may place black students in a position in which they feel compelled to use violence to protect themselves.

While interviewing Jerome, a student at a PBHS in Fullerville who had been suspended four times for tardiness and fighting, I found him to be a laidback participant. Jerome expresses keen interest in mathematics and science and states he is serious about pursuing his education. As Jerome discusses his approach to academics he states he was bullied by a classmate. In one instance this individual punched Jerome, took his shoes, and threatened to jump Jerome and his cousin after school. Despite the presence of law enforcement officers on school grounds via the Fullerville officer liaison program Jerome did not feel safe. Facing the possibility of being jumped by several individuals after school, Jerome called another cousin who brought a group of boys to the school and a large physical altercation followed. However, after the fight Jerome was suspended for ten

school days and subsequently advised by a school administrator not to return to this school because school officials believed Jerome would not be safe.

Interviewer: Why did they make you transfer?

Jerome: Cause they claimed that I was ... I mean, okay, I was involved in the attack. But they think it was gang association. But it wasn't a gang associating ... okay, okay, so it was the day after I got jumped on.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerome: Me and my cousin heard that people was gonna jump on us after school. My dad and his mama came up there, right? And let me tell you this. School got out around 3:00. And almost everybody in that school drives, except for the freshmen. So when we got out of the parking lot, it was cars left, but it was only, like, teachers' cars. And people from like after-school activities. And we see a gang ... a gang of people just looking at us soon as we walk out of the building. And then we like, "Those are probably the ones that was gonna jump on us." And we was right, cause they were staring at us the whole time.

Interviewer: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Jerome: So ... but when we heard that, we made a call to my cousin, and he said that he got us, so he came over here with a bunch of people, and, you know, that happened. They [school administrators] was basically telling me not to come back cause it might not be safe for me.

**[Jerome, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 4**

Jerome's statement support DeAndre's as he suggests PBHSs may be dangerous environments and traditional school safety measures may fail to protect black students. Jerome's statements also suggest school administrators in middle class PBHSs may be aware of their inability to protect black students from bullying or gang-fights and advise students to seek alternative options for their education.

After the gang-fight concluded Jerome returned to school for one week before transferring schools for the third time in as many years. When we discuss how being suspended affected his popularity in school prior to his transfer, Jerome states:

Jerome: When we got back, everybody was giving us respect... it kind of boosted it. I don't know why, but it kinda boosted it.

**[Jerome, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Middle Class Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 4]**

Jerome's statements, like Nicole and Angel, suggest being suspended elevated his social status and prompted his peers to give him *respect*. Additionally, Jerome's statements suggest the

importance of respect in interpersonal communication is not limited to impoverished African American communities or girls as it extends to middle-class boys in PBHSs. Furthermore, Jerome's keen interest in mathematics and science suggests "respect" may be important to "decent" students who adhere to mainstream values.

Tracey presents as an easygoing participant who attends a PBHS in New Post and received over thirty out-of-school suspensions for fighting. Throughout our interview, Tracey expresses concern about school safety due to instances where the rear and side entrances were left unsecured. She mentions several instances in which students used the rear and side entrances to bring knives into the school. When discussing how being suspended impacted her social status, Tracey states:

It made me like more tough and popular. Because they'd be like "well we can be friends because I know you have my back no matter what. If they don't think you're tough enough they will bully you. So you have to kind of show your toughness at some point, because if you don't, I feel like they just going to bully you and push you around.

**[Tracey, 10<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 30+]**

Tracey's statements suggest black girls' *popularity* and *toughness* may be elevated by school discipline. Additionally, Tracey's statements suggest black girls in low socioeconomic environments may establish friendships based on perceived toughness and willingness to participate in physical altercations when one her of friends was attacked. Tracey's statements are consistent with Jerome and DeAndre's in that they suggest black students may form friendships that provide protection and help them navigate PBHSs in a safer manner.

Throughout my interview with Eric, a student who attends a PBHS in New Post, I found him to be very open about his experiences with school discipline. Eric stated he received nine out-of-school suspensions due to fighting, insubordination, and dress code violations. Regarding how school discipline affected his popularity, Eric states:

I don't think it makes anybody popular but it gives, do give you some type of respect or somethin'. Like, let's say you beat the kid up, like nobody's gonna really try to mess with you cause you just beat the kid up.

**[Eric, 9<sup>th</sup> Grade, Low Socioeconomic Background, Lifetime Suspensions: 9]**

While Jerome and Tracey's statements highlight the relationship between school discipline, peer relationships, and respect, Eric's statements suggest winning a physical altercation may also be associated with respect which potentially deters future confrontations. This finding is consistent with Anderson (1999), which argues when an individual's "street credibility" is earned it works to deter future confrontations. Considering the propensity for "school credibility", a reputation for dominance, aggression, and a prominent level of respect in the academic setting, to function simultaneously as a deterrent and invitation for physical confrontations, as in Eric and Angel's cases, the student statements suggest a social hierarchy exists in PBHSs that situates black students in competition for respect and school credibility.

Additionally, black students may perceive "school credibility" as a deterrent or invitation for physical altercations depending on their position in the hierarchy. Furthermore, the student statements suggest black students whose social position is high in the school hierarchy due to multiple out-of-school suspensions may be more likely to seek additional physical confrontations and school discipline – all as a tactic to maintain elevated school credibility.

*Black Parents, School Safety, & Navigating the Code*

While school discipline was designed as a tactic to promote positive behavior within the school context, it is important to consider the environmental factors that shape student behavior and parental expectations regarding conduct in urban settings. At the time of our interview, Angela was a single mother of two children who were enrolled in a PBHS in New Post. Angela's voice cracks as she gazes around the room with a sense of helplessness and concern regarding her son's interaction with older students due to his small physique. Angela's son Thomas, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student at a PBHS in New Post presents as a thin young man. He was shorter in stature than other 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, withdrawn, and disinterested in school. In addition to living in subsidized housing, auto

insurance premiums that average \$3000 annually in New Post force Angela to rely on public transportation to transport her children to and from school. As Angela describes a fight that involved her son, she states:

The one before that one was a fight and somebody smacked him so he hit him back and they got into a fight so I don't get mad about that neither as long as he fight back.

**[Angela – Mother of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Low Socioeconomic Status Background Suspension: 3 School Days]**

Angela's statements suggest mothers of black students encourage their children to use force to defend themselves if a physical altercation occurs. When I ask if she expects her son to fight back Angela states:

“Yea, he hit you first. It aint like he provoked it or nothing, just defending himself”.

**[Angela – Mother of 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Low Socioeconomic Status Background Suspension: 3 School Days]**

Angela's statements suggest she is aware of the *code* and instructs her son to defend himself when a physical altercation occurred. Four black mothers made references to the incongruent behavioral expectations that exist between school discipline policies and parent expectations for black students, particularly in relation to self-defense. Angela's statements are consistent with Anderson (1999) in that parents of black children may be aware of the dangers that exist in urban settings and instruct their children to defend themselves when necessary.

Joanna presents as a concerned parent and appears to be frustrated by her daughter's experience within the New Post school district. Joanna expresses a strong desire to remove her daughter from New Post school district due to what she considered, “excessive school discipline”.

Regarding how she perceives out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, Joanna stated:

“A lot of times people get expelled when they are in a fight for defending themselves, you know and if you got this student that you know is a bully you know or been suspended three or four times for fighting, I don't think that both of the students should get expelled or suspended all of the time. If I'm defending myself, why am I suspended? I'm just suppose to sit here and let somebody beat me up? So you know I think a lot of times these kids getting uh uh suspended for fighting when sometimes, it's necessary to fight, especially when you are being bullied, and you

told your mama, you told the principal, and the teacher, and this person is still bullying you. What are you suppose to do?

**[Joanna– Mother of 10<sup>th</sup> Grade Student (Sandra), Middle Class Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 3, Expulsion 1]**

Joanna’s statements suggest awareness of the *code* extends to middle class mothers of black students and they may instruct their children to “fight back” when a physical altercation occurs. Additionally, her statements suggest mothers of black students may hold behavior expectations for their children that are incongruent with school conduct and discipline provisions. Furthermore, her statements suggest mothers of black students may be aware of the dangers that exist in PBHSs and stand in opposition to school discipline for self-defense.

Kierra presents as a parent that is very committed to finding a good school for her daughter. Kierra’s daughter was initially enrolled in the New Post school district but relocated to the Fullerville school district in pursuit of a better education. Despite the academic advantages Fullerville school district offered Kierra’s daughter was subjected to incessant bullying until she fought back and received her first out-of-school suspension. Due to the suspension, Kierra states she plans to transfer her daughter back into the New Post school district. Concerning school conduct policies that suggest students “walk away” rather than fight, Kierra states:

“That’s not reality, it’s not... that’s not logical to say..to tell a child just to walk away especially when a child has already told someone like what’s kinda going on and her and the other girl kept having words.”

**[Kierra– Mother of 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Student, Middle Class Background, Child Lifetime Suspensions: 1, Days Suspended: 8]**

While Angela and Joanna’s statements suggest mothers of black children may be aware of the “code”; Kierra’s statements illustrate the disconnect between school discipline policies and the social environment black students navigate. Specifically, Kierra’s statements suggest mothers of black children may be aware of the consequences associated with walking away from a physical altercation, such as the invitation of future confrontations, and the significance of “respect” among

peers in PBHSs. Furthermore, Kierra's statements suggest the failure of school personnel to deescalate altercations places black children in dangerous situations where fighting becomes necessary. Joanna and Kierra's statements suggest parents of black children may support their child's decision to fight, but only when the school bureaucracy fails to protect their child from physical harm.

## CHAPTER 7 – DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

This study explored black student and parent perceptions of school discipline in primarily black high schools (PBHSs). Specifically, this study focused on understanding how black students and parents perceived school discipline and its impact on academic achievement, social status, parent employment, and perceptions of metal detectors and school guards. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the main findings and how they contribute to the existing literature.

### *Study Limitations*

While the findings of this study contribute novel information to the literature on school discipline, there were limitations that should be acknowledged. First the study investigated parent perceptions of school discipline but included twenty-five mothers and only five fathers. Several studies have documented the gender distribution of work and how mothers often assume a larger portion of childcare duties (Bianchi 2011; Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006). Thus, the difficulty in finding fathers of black students who have experience navigating school discipline issues with their children is not unexpected. The findings of this study may better describe the perceptions of school discipline held by mothers of black children and provide preliminary insight into the perceptions of school discipline held by fathers of black children.

Secondly, the findings of this study only provide insight into the perceptions of school discipline held by black students and parents of black students whose children were suspended or expelled from PBHSs. As research continues to show black students are suspended and expelled at high rates in primarily black middle schools (PBMS) and elementary schools as well as primarily white school districts, a follow-up study that focuses on exploring black student and parent perceptions of school discipline within the aforementioned contexts is necessary (Civil Rights Data Snapshot 2014; Kang-Brown et al 2013).



Thirdly, research shows school discipline issues have the propensity to adversely impact academic achievement and lead to school dropout prior to high school (Morris and Perry 2016; Balfanz, Byrnes, and Fox 2013). By focusing exclusively on black high school students the findings of this study may not be consistent with the perceptions of students or parents of students who dropped out prior to high school because of school discipline. Moreover, the findings of this study may not be consistent with the perceptions of students or parents of students who were arrested and incarcerated after receiving school discipline. As research argues out-of-school suspensions and expulsions may situate students within the school-to-prison-pipeline, future research should also focus on exploring the perceptions of students and parents who have direct experience with the criminal justice system post school discipline.

#### *Black Student Perceptions of School Discipline*

The current study explored black students' perceptions of school discipline. Although school discipline policies were intended to protect students by deterring school violence, weapons possession, and drug use on school grounds, the data featured in this study suggests black students hold overwhelmingly negative perceptions of school discipline. Specifically, the findings suggest black students perceive school discipline as unfair and excessive in relation to the infraction, the product of targeting students based on their style of dress, hair style, or social group, and as a barrier to high academic achievement. When student responses were compared across gender and social class there were no differences in the perceived fairness of school discipline. This finding suggests black students' perceptions of fairness in school discipline may not be explained by differences in gender or socioeconomic status. As studies argue school discipline functions as a racialized experience that disproportionately affects black students (Wallace 2008; Fenning, Pamela, and Ross 2007); future work should compare black and white students' perceptions of

school discipline to determine if a students' race better explains perceptions of fairness in school discipline.

While there were no differences in students' perceptions of fairness, there were gender and social class differences in students' feelings of being targeted by school staff. In this study boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds reported feelings of being targeted based on their style of dress, hair style, and social group. The findings suggest feelings of being targeted among boys from low socioeconomic backgrounds may initiate a process of self-detachment from the academic environment. This finding contributes novel information to the literature because studies have not conceptualized physical withdrawal from the academic environment (i.e. chronic absenteeism) as an issue that may be associated with school discipline. The U.S. Civil Rights Data Collection (CRDC) considers students "chronically absent" when they miss at least 15 school days in an academic year (CRDC 2014). Data from the CRDC report found over six million children, or one in seven in the U.S., were chronically absent in the 2013-2014 school year. Moreover, approximately twenty percent of black school-age children were considered chronically absent in the same year. Future research should explore the relationship between school discipline and student withdrawal to understand why students may physically withdraw from school post out-of-school suspension or expulsion. Additionally, studies should explore if physical withdrawal post school discipline is a gendered or class specific phenomenon. Lastly, research should explore student perceptions on how to prevent student withdrawal and maintain their active participation within the school setting.

In addition to perceptions of school discipline, this study also explored the perceived consequences of school discipline on students' lives. In this study twenty-eight students cited examples of how school discipline harmed their grades. While there were no gender differences in

the perceived consequences of school discipline on students' academic achievement, there were differences in social class as students from low socioeconomic status backgrounds reported difficulty obtaining makeup work post school suspension due to transportation barriers or lack of parental availability to obtain makeup during school hours. This finding suggests low socioeconomic status may compound the adverse impact of school discipline on black students and create additional barriers to high academic achievement. Furthermore, this finding suggests educators in PBHSs in middle-class communities may be more willing to provide makeup to students who receive school discipline. As Morris and Perry (2016) shows school discipline accounts for as much as one-fifth of the achievement gap between black and white students, data on the perceived consequences of school discipline provides insight into how school discipline harms academic achievement and highlights the distribution of makeup work post school discipline as a critical focal area for intervention. Education stakeholders should establish a formal and consistent process for distributing makeup work post school discipline to address the additional barriers students from low socioeconomic backgrounds may experience. Also, education stakeholders should establish provisions that encourage a holistic evaluation of a student's disciplinary infraction before a student is removed from the academic environment considering the negative impact of missed instruction time on achievement.

### *Illegal School Suspensions*

In the midst of exploring black student perceptions of school discipline, several student participants suggested undocumented practices existed that mandated suspension for extended periods of time. Further investigation into these policies revealed data that suggests schools that primarily educate low income black students may suspend students illegally. Specifically, my findings suggest discipline practices exist in several PBHSs that call for students who are

suspended for any reason in the months of May or June to not be allowed to return to school until the following academic year. Additionally, my data suggests students may not receive documentation to support their suspension as required by Michigan state law. According to the Michigan State Board of Education Model Code of Student Conduct, long-term suspensions call for a more formal due process in which the student and parent/guardian will be notified of the allegation, disciplinary recommendation, date and location of the hearing, and their right to attend (Michigan 2014). Furthermore, my findings suggest students diagnosed with special needs may be suspended for extended periods of time, denied speedy hearings, and resources that are mandated by state and federal laws. This finding is a novel contribution to the literature because current research has not established the potential illegality of school suspensions or their potential to adversely affect black youth. Considering the protective factors associated with a positive attachment to the school setting, illegal school discipline practices have the potential to place students in dangerous environments at times where parental supervision may be very limited. Thus, future research on school discipline should focus on establishing the prevalence of undocumented and potentially illegal policies that keep students out of school for unlawful periods of time, the types of schools that may utilize such policies, and the students who may be harmed.

#### *Student Perceptions of School Safety Measures*

Despite the intention to promote safety, the data featured in this study suggests black students hold negative perceptions of metal detectors and school guards. Several students and suggested metal detectors were often inoperable, and guards failed to search bags. Furthermore, the findings suggest the inoperability of school safety measures has the potential to disrupt black children's learning and place them in dangerous situations. Specifically, several students suggested weapons and potentially deadly substances have been found in PBHSs despite the presence of

metal detectors and school guards. Thus, student statements suggest school safety measures potentially fail to protect black students and leave them vulnerable to harm.

The data featured in this study on black student perceptions of school safety measures contributes novel information to the literature on school discipline. As school safety measures were designed to enhance school security and deter violent offenses, it is important to recognize that black students may be harmed by inoperable metal detectors and school guards that potentially fail to conduct thorough bag searches. Given the dangers associated with school shootings, researchers and policymakers must work to ensure the safety of students in PBHSs. Thus, future research and policy should work to ensure security measures are functional within PBHSs because the failure of school safety measures may have grave consequences on school safety, student attachment to the academic environment, and gang formation within PBHSs.

#### *Substance Abuse & School Discipline*

While exploring black student's perceptions of metal detectors several students from low socioeconomic backgrounds suggested bag searches were potentially too lax which allowed students to sneak deadly substances into PBHSs. Specifically, my findings suggest students in PBHSs that serve predominately low-income populations may be consuming "lean", which is a dangerous mixture of cough syrup that contains codeine and promethazine, sprite or cream soda, and jolly rancher candy, on school grounds. Thus, my findings on the potential prevalence of "lean" throughout PBHSs contributes novel information on the ability of traditional school safety measures to prevent dangerous drugs from entering the academic setting. As students suggest bag searches may be too lax and metal detectors may be inoperable, policymakers should consider more effective methods to prevent dangerous drugs from entering school settings. Future research should also explore black student perceptions of "lean" in order to understand why students

consume this substance, if lean consumption is associated with routine usage of other substances, if lean is consumed solely on school grounds or within other contexts, and if a relationship exists between student and parent consumption of lean.

Although research documents the prevalence of codeine and promethazine as well as their use for pain and as an antihistamine respectively, the dangers associated with “lean” stem from their recreational use in amounts that exceed the recommended dosage by as much as twenty-five times (Hickson, Altemeier, and Clayton 1990). While recognized under the contemporary name “lean”, this substance was originally known as “sizzurp” and its origins have been traced to rap artists in Houston, Texas. Specifically, a southern hip-hop producer, DJ Screw, created a genre of music formally known as, “chopped and screwed” which features slow beats that are designed to mimic that effects of “lean” on the cardiovascular and central nervous systems (Sonny 2015). The dangers of lean may be increased as southern hip hop artists, within the “chopped and screwed” music culture often create songs that advocate mixing lean consumption with alcohol and marijuana. Considering codeine’s tendency to depress central nervous system functioning and the documented dangers of mixing lean with alcohol or marijuana, it is important to recognize that research shows several individuals have died due to consuming “lean”. Also, studies show when codeine-based cough syrups are unavailable, over the counter (OTC) cough syrups may be used. Research shows OTC cough syrups contain dextromethorphan, which produces a hallucinogenic effect rather than the sedative sensation associated with codeine. Whereas nearly of the studies that focused on “lean” or *codeine-based cough syrup abuse* (CBCSA) focused on participants in Houston, Texas, the findings in this study may be among the first to document the prevalence of lean consumption in cities and schools outside of Houston, Texas. Thus, the dangers associated with CBCSA and its potential use amongst black school-age children warrants urgent attention by

policymakers and in future research.

### *Parents' Perceptions of School Discipline*

In addition to exploring student perceptions this study also investigated parents' perceptions of school discipline. The findings suggest most of the parent participants perceived school discipline to be excessive, a barrier to educational attainment, and a precursor to school dropout and incarceration. Parents overwhelmingly reported feelings of being disregarded by school personnel when navigating school discipline. When compared across gender, social class, and child disability status there were no differences in how parents perceived school discipline. This finding suggests parents' negative perceptions of school discipline may not be explained by the parents' gender, social class, or their child's disability status.

While there were no differences in how parents perceived school discipline, there were differences in how parents' response to school discipline. Specifically, parents who possessed a unique awareness of school discipline through their direct experience with the criminal justice system or employment within a child advocacy organization were more likely to withdraw their child from a PBHS in response to school discipline. This finding was consistent across parent's gender and social class. As parents engage in what I call "black educational flight" in response to school discipline; future research should explore the types of school's parents select post flight from punitive a PBHS. Also, future research should explore if parents relocate their families into a new district, remain within the same district, or are able to enter a new school district by another means. Considering the potential implications of black educational flight on urban communities, it is important to understand the factors that lead parents of black students to withdraw their children and how black educational flight influences commitment to a neighborhood.

### *Parents Perceptions of School Safety Measures*

In the midst of investigating parent's perceptions of school discipline, parental perceptions of school safety measures emerged as a prominent theme in this study. Specifically, my findings suggest parents of black students hold mixed perceptions of school safety measures. On one hand fathers were more likely to perceive metal detectors and school guards as a necessary measure to protect students from threats that may originate outside of the school. Whereas on the other hand mothers were more likely to suggest metal detectors were often inoperable and failed to protect black students. Lastly, parents with direct experience with the criminal justice system were more likely to perceive school guards and metal detectors as a component of the "school-to-prison-pipeline". The findings suggest parental perceptions of school safety measures may not be well explained by social class or the parents gender. Instead future work on parents' perceptions of school safety measures should focus on parents experience with the criminal justice system and employment background to understand their perceptions of school safety measures. Moreover, as several mothers from low socioeconomic background status suggested metal detectors were often inoperable education stakeholders must work ensure students are safe in PBHS.

### *The Code of the School*

In addition to exploring black student and parent perceptions of school discipline, this study investigated how school discipline potentially impacted black students' social status. My findings suggest being suspended may be associated with an elevated social status, regardless of gender or socioeconomic status. Specifically, several student participants suggested being suspended was associated with higher levels of respect, toughness, and popularity. The student statements also suggest the informal norms that govern interpersonal communication in "the streets", may permeate PBHSs to become the *Code of the School*. Under the *Code of the School*, the data in this study suggests school discipline may function as an ineffective deterrent to physical altercations



due to the prevalence of interpersonal violence and the importance of *respect* and *school credibility* in PBHSs. As a result, black children may seek physical altercations and school discipline as a strategy to gain and maintain *respect*. Although metal detectors and guards were intended to promote security and comfortability in the learning environment, researchers should consider how the potential failure of school safety measures has the propensity to encourage students seeks physical altercations as a strategy for gaining high respect in order to navigate PBHSs.

The data featured in this study contributes novel information on the significance of respect and credibility in the daily interactions of black youth. Drawing from Anderson (2000), the *Code of the Street* is conceptualized as informal social norms that govern interpersonal communication in “the street”. The *Code of the School* builds upon the *Code of the Street* by first establishing the potential for the informal norms that govern interpersonal communication in the street to permeate PBHSs and regulate the distribution of violence in academic settings. Secondly, the *Code of the School* provides insight into how black females, regardless of socioeconomic status, may also be deeply entrenched in this system of violence due to the importance of respect and credibility in the interpersonal communication among black girls in PBHSs. Although the *Code of the Street* conceptualizes the “the street” as a space that is occupied primarily by black men from low socioeconomic backgrounds, the data in this study suggests the *Code of the School* includes black boys and girls from middle class and low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Lastly, the *Code of the School* provides novel insight into the potential role black parents play in aiding their children as black students navigate the potential dangers that may be situated within PBHSs. My findings suggest parents of black students are aware of the “code” and may provide guidance on when it is appropriate for their children to engage in a physical altercation. My findings also suggest mothers of black students may be aware of the potential consequences

of failing to fight back and that school safety measures may not protect their children from violence. Thus, as the findings in this study suggest school discipline may exacerbate violence in PBHSs and school safety measures may fail to protect black students from school violence; future research should explore the effectiveness of traditional school safety measures in PBHSs throughout the United States.

Considering the importance of student conduct and safety in the academic setting, the *Code of the School* presents a fundamental dilemma for education stakeholders. On one hand discipline practices and traditional safety measures are deemed vital to protecting students from harm throughout U.S. K-12 schools. On the other hand, the Code of the School suggests discipline practices and safety measures work in opposition to their intended purpose in PBHSs. To rectify this issue and address the *Code of the School* education stakeholders should work to create an educational environment that is inclusive, democratic, and embraces student development. Research shows schools can reduce discipline infractions and improve school culture by establishing an educational environmental in which students perceive they are involved in shaping school policies, the schools reward positive behavior, schools provide instruction on conflict resolution, and students perceive the rules to be clear and fair (Gottfredson 2001). Additional recommendations include situating functional security measures within PBHSs to ease concerns of outside threats and provide a safe environment for students. By adhering to best practices that promote a positive academic and social environment for students education stakeholders can address the “code” and reduce discipline infractions in PBHSs.

**APPENDIX A  
RECRUITMENT FLYER**

**RECEIVE \$25 EACH FOR COMPLETING THE  
STUDY**

(Responses Are Anonymous)

**HAS YOUR CHILD BEEN  
SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED FROM HIGH  
SCHOOL?**

**PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY AND HAVE YOUR VOICE HEARD!**

**WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?**

- **PARENTS OF SOUTHFIELD HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED BETWEEN JANUARY 1 2016 AND SEPTEMBER 2017**
- **SOUTHFIELD HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED BETWEEN JANUARY 1 2016 AND SEPTEMBER 2017**
- **PARENTS OF DETROIT PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED BETWEEN JANUARY 1 2016 AND SEPTEMBER 2017**
- **DETROIT PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS WHO HAVE BEEN SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED BETWEEN JANUARY 1 2016 AND SEPTEMBER 2017**

**PLEASE EMAIL: [CHARLES.BELL@WAYNE.EDU](mailto:CHARLES.BELL@WAYNE.EDU) OR CALL  
(313) 953-6772 IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE  
ABOUT THIS STUDY**

## **APPENDIX B RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET**

Title of Study: An Exploration of Black Student and Parental Perceptions of School Discipline

Principal Investigator (PI): Charles Bell  
Sociology  
(313) 953-6772

### **Purpose:**

You are being asked to be in a research study of race and school discipline because you have been suspended or expelled or are the parent of a child who has been suspended or expelled. This study is being conducted at Wayne State University.

### **Study Procedures**

If you agree to take part in this research study, you will be asked questions regarding your experiences and beliefs on school suspension and expulsion as it relates to your child.

1. You will be asked several questions about your beliefs and experiences on school suspension and expulsion. Questions will explore how your (or your child's school suspension or expulsion) affected your employment, relationship with your child's teacher, the discipline style you selected for your child, and your relationship with your child.
2. Each interview is expected to last 90 – 120 minutes.
3. Your participation in this study is voluntary and you are able to cease your participation at any time.
4. Your identity and responses are entirely confidential. A fake name will be used in place of your name on all written documents and in all communication. Recordings will be kept on the researchers password protected computer.

### **Benefits**

As a participant in this research study, there be no direct benefit for you; however, information from this study may benefit other people now or in the future.

### **Risks**

By taking part in this study, you may experience the following risks:  
Being upset or saddened by interview questions.

### **Costs**

- There will be no costs to you for participation in this research study.

**Compensation**

For taking part in the research study, you will receive a \$25 gift card for your time and inconvenience”.

**Confidentiality:**

- You will be identified in the research records by a code name or number. There will be no list that links your identity with this code.

**Voluntary Participation /Withdrawal:**

Taking part in this study is voluntary. You are free to not answer any questions or withdraw at any time. Your decision will not change any present or future relationships with Wayne State University or its affiliates.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about this study now or in the future, you may contact Charles Bell or one of his research team members at the following phone number (313) 953-6772. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call the Wayne State Research Subject Advocate at (313) 577-1628 to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input.

**Participation**

By completing the interview you are agreeing to participate in this study.

**APPENDIX C**  
**CHILD PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (AGES 13-17)**

**Title: An Exploration of Black Student and Parental Perceptions of School Discipline**

**Study Investigator: Charles Bell**

**Why am I here?**

This is a research study. Only people who choose to take part are included in research studies. You are being asked to take part in this study because you are an African American child who has been suspended or expelled from school. Please take time to make your decision. Talk to your family about it and be sure to ask questions about anything you don't understand.

**Why are they doing this study?**

This study is being done to find out how being suspended or expelled affected your grades, relationship with your teachers and friends, your parents, and your beliefs about how it could affect your future.

**What will happen to me?**

You will be asked questions about your school suspension or expulsion and how it affected you. In addition, you will be asked questions about how you think your race impacted these things.

**How long will I be in the study?**

You will be in the study for 1 ½ to 2 hours.

**Will the study help me?**

- “You may not benefit from being in this study; however information from this study may help other people in the future by helping people understand how being suspended or expelled affects students.

**Will anything bad happen to me?**

There is the chance that some of the questions might make you sad or upset. Let the interviewer know if this is the case and you will receive a referral sheet.

**Will I get paid to be in the study?**

For taking part in the research study, you will receive a \$25 gift card for your time and inconvenience.

**What about confidentiality?**

Every reasonable effort will be made to keep your records and/or your information confidential. We will keep your records private unless we are required by law to share any information. The audio recordings will be typed without identifiers and then destroyed.

**What if I have any questions?**

For questions about the study please call Charles Bell at (313) 953-6772. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, the Chair of the Institutional Review Board can be contacted at (313) 577-1628. If you are unable to contact the research staff, or if you want to talk to someone other than the research staff, you may also call the Wayne State Research Subject Advocate at (313) 577-1628 to discuss problems, obtain information, or offer input.

**Do I have to be in the study?**

You don't have to be in this study if you don't want to or you can stop being in the study at any time. Please discuss your decision with your parents and researcher. No one will be angry if you decide to stop being in the study.

## **APPENDIX D**

### **STUDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE**

#### *General Questions*

- 1) Tell me about yourself. Do you like school?
  - a. (Possible Probe) Why/not?
  - b. What is your favorite subject?
- 2) What is your favorite television show?

#### **Perceived Fairness of School Discipline**

- 3) Have you ever been suspended or expelled?
- 4) How many times have you been suspended or expelled?
- 5) Tell me about a time when you were suspended or expelled from school.
  - a. Follow up: How do you think the incident should have been resolved?
    - i. How many days did the suspension last?
    - ii. What are your thoughts regarding the length of the suspension?
- 6) How are school suspension or expulsion fair or unfair?
  - a. Why/why not?
- 7) Which groups of people, if any, do you think school discipline policies target?
  - a. Why do you think school discipline policies target this/these groups?

#### *Perceived Social Status In Relation to School Discipline*

- 8) How did being suspended or expelled policy affect your friendships in school?
- 9) How did being suspended or expelled affect your popularity?
- 10) How many friends do you have in school?
- 11) How many of your friends have been suspended or expelled?
- 12) How did girls/boys treat you after you were suspended?

#### *Perceptions of School Discipline as a Deterrent*

- 13) How does being suspended or expelled affect the likelihood of you repeating the behavior that resulted in suspension or expulsion?



14) How does the threat of being suspended or expelled affect your behavior?

***Perceptions of School Discipline & School Safety***

15) Why do you believe there are metal detectors and guards at your school?

16) How do the metal detectors and guards make you feel?

17) How do the metal detectors promote safety in your school?

***Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety***

18) How do you get to school?

19) How do you feel about the neighborhood you live in?

20) How do you feel about the neighborhood your school is located in?

21) How does the neighborhood your school is in make you feel about school?

***Perceived Impact of School Discipline on Achievement***

22) How has being suspended or expelled affected your grades?

23) How has being suspended or expelled affected how you feel about being in school?

24) How has being suspended or expelled affected how you feel about your teacher(s)?

25) How has being suspended or expelled affected how you feel about your principal?

***Perceived Consequences of School Discipline***

26) What are the long-term consequences of being suspended or expelled?

27) How does being suspended or expelled lead to those long-term consequences?

***Perceptions of Parental Response to School Discipline***

28) How did your mother respond when you informed her of your suspension or expulsion?

29) How did your father respond when you informed him of your suspension or expulsion?

30) How did your mother's response to your suspension make you feel?

31) How did your father's response to your suspension make you feel?

***Perceptions of Law Enforcement***

32) How did being suspended or expelled affect how you feel about school guards or police officers?

33) How do you feel about police officers?

34) How does race affect how police officers treat people?

***Race & Schooling***

35) How does your race affect your education?

36) How does race affect how teachers treat students?

37) How does your school compare to schools in other school districts like Bloomfield Hills or Grosse Pointe?

38) How do you feel about the equipment and books your school has for projects?

39) How do you feel about school?

40) How will school help or hurt you in the future?

41) Where do you see yourself in five years?

42) How will your school help you accomplish your goals?

## **Parent Interview Guide**

### ***General Questions***

- 1) In regard to the child that you permitted to participate in this study, how would you describe him/her?
- 2) Where do you see your child in five years?
- 3) Why is school important to you?

### ***Perceived Fairness of School Discipline***

- 4) Have you ever been suspended or expelled?
- 5) Tell me about a time when your child was suspended from school.
  - a. How many days did the suspension last?
- 6) What are your thoughts regarding the duration of the suspension?
- 7) What do you think the school should have done regarding this incident?
- 8) How is the use of school suspension and expulsion fair or unfair?
- 9) What groups of people, if any, do you believe are the most frequently suspended or expelled?
  - a. Why?

### ***Perceptions of School Discipline & Safety***

- 10) Why do you believe there are metal detectors and guards at your child's school?
- 11) How do the metal detectors and guards make you feel?
- 12) How do the metal detectors promote safety in your child's school?

### ***Perceptions of Neighborhood Safety***

- 13) How does your child get to school?
- 14) How do you feel about the neighborhood your child lives in?
- 15) How do you feel about the neighborhood your child's school is located in?
- 16) How does the neighborhood your child's school is in make you feel about that school?

***Perceived Impact of School Discipline on Achievement***

- 17) How has being suspended or expelled affected your child's achievement?
- 18) How has being suspended or expelled affected how your child views the school environment?
- 19) How has being suspended or expelled affected how your children feels their teacher(s)?
- 20) How has being suspended or expelled affected how you feel about your child's principal?

***Perceived Consequences of School Discipline***

- 21) What are the long-term consequences of being suspended or expelled due to a zero tolerance policy?
- 22) How does being suspended or expelled lead to those long-term consequences?

***Perceived Impact of School Discipline on Discipline Style***

- 23) How did your child's suspension or expulsion impact your discipline strategy?
- 24) How did the change in your discipline strategy impact your child's behavior?

***Perceived Impact of School Discipline on Parental Relationship Dynamics***

- 25) How did your child's suspension or expulsion impact your relationship with your child's mother or father?
- 26) How did your child's suspension or expulsion impact your relationship with your relationship partner?

***Perceived Impact of School Discipline on Parental Employment***

- 27) How did your child's suspension or expulsion impact your employment?
- 28) How did you feel about leaving your child at home unsupervised while you were at work?

***Race and Law Enforcement***

- 29) How do you feel about police officers?
- 30) How does race affect the way police officers treat people?
- 31) What, if anything, do you tell your child about the police?

***Race & Schooling***

- 32) How does your child's race affect their education?
- 33) How does race affect how teacher(s) treat your child?

- 34) How does your child's school compare to schools in other school districts like Bloomfield Hills or Grosse Pointe?
- 35) How do you feel about the equipment and books your child's school has for projects?
- 36) How do you feel about your child's school?
- 37) How will this school help or hurt your child in the future?
- 38) Where do you see your child in five years?
- 39) How will this school help your child accomplish their goals?

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**ABSTRACT****SPEAKING THROUGH MY TEARS: A CRITICAL EXPLORATION OF BLACK STUDENTS' AND PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE**

by

**CHARLES A. BELL****May 2018****Advisor:** Dr. David Merolla**Major:** Sociology**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy

Research shows African American students are disproportionately suspended and expelled in K-12 institutions throughout the United States due to zero tolerance policies. Additionally, several scholars argue that the most restrictive school discipline policies were implemented in the state of Michigan. The purpose of this study is to investigate African American student and parent perceptions of school discipline in primarily black high schools to determine the following: a) How do black students and parents perceive school discipline, b) How do black students and parents perceive school safety measures, and c) How do black student and parent perceptions of school discipline differ by social class, gender, and disability status. Thirty black students and thirty parents of black students who were suspended or expelled in the 2016-17 school year participated in this study. The results show black students and parents perceive school discipline as an impediment to academic achievement, a hindrance to parental employment, a contributor to “black educational flight”, and as a precursor to undesired social outcomes (i.e. school dropout, police contact, and substance abuse).



### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL STATEMENT**

Charles Bell received his B.A. in psychology from Wayne State University and his M.A. in school psychology from Michigan State University. He has received several awards included the 2017 American Society of Criminology's Ruth D. Peterson Fellowship, the Wayne State University Thomas C. Rumble Fellowship (2017 & 2018), and the Initiative for Maximizing Student Development (IMSD) graduate assistantship. Charles' work has been featured in local and national media outlets such as Detroit PBS, Atlanta Black Star, and Al Jazeera America. Charles' research and community engagement focus on exploring black student and parent perceptions of school discipline, identifying solutions to the school to prison pipeline, and leading prison reform. Charles accepted a tenure-track professorship in the Criminal Justice Sciences department at Illinois State University.