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Crossing the Suspension Bridge: Navigating the Road from School Suspension to College Success – How Some Students Have Overcome the Negative Implications of School Suspension to Bridge the Road to College

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Cover Page Footnote
The first three authors contributed equally to this work.

INTRODUCTION

Annually in our country, three million K-12 students will be suspended or put out of school for disciplinary consequences (Weissman, & NaPier, 2015). Urban schools, where students tend to be poorer and more culturally diverse, have the most suspensions, but students with lower socioeconomic statuses (SES) are suspended more often in all schools (Arcia, 2006; Rausch, Skiba, & Indiana Univ. Bloomington, 2004). African American students can expect to be suspended 3.5 times more often, be suspended longer, and incur suspensions for lesser infractions than their peers (Weissman, 2015, Rausch & Skiba, 2004). The Hispanic population follows African American suspension trends (Rausch, et al., 2004). Last year, in North Carolina, African Americans made up 26% of the student population but accounted for 51% of the its suspensions (Smith & Harper, 2015).

A plethora of research has associated out of school suspension with negative impacts on student education outcomes. Although suspension has *not* been proven to change or correct student behavior, it *has* been proven to adversely impact reading ability, increase potential for student dropout, and lower college entrance scores (Arcia, 2006, Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015). Research shows that history of suspension, more than any other student demographic, causes the greatest negative impact on student educational outcomes (Cobb-Clark, Kassenboehmer, Le, McVicar, & Zhang, 2015).

While much scholarship has attended to the harmful effects of suspension, little attention has been paid to students who achieve academic success despite suspension – and what educators can do to support the academic success of students with a history of suspension. More research is needed to identify these students who cross the suspension bridge from high school to higher education. Noltmeyer et al. (2015) contend that "more research on variables that might moderate the relationships between suspension and outcomes is recommended, considering that moderators can reveal how individual ecology affects outcomes" (p. 236). Our

research focused on students who have had a history of out of school suspension but have matriculated to higher education. By interviewing students who have interrupted the derailing effects of suspension, it is our hope to understand their lived experiences in order to identify and/or replicate conditions that made them successful in spite of the odds. Thus, our study focused on college students who have had a history of middle/high school suspension and have gone on to graduate high school and matriculate to higher education. Our study asked: What lived experiences in these students' lives enabled them to beat a history of suspension to matriculate to higher education?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between suspension and its academic impacts has been well documented (Arcia, 2006; Cobb-Clark, Kassenboehmer, Le, McVicar, & Zhang, 2015; Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015; Rausch & Skiba, 2004). As Cobb-Clark, Kassenboehmer, Le, McVicar, & Zhang (2015) note, suspensions are directly related to declines in academic achievement and lead to greater dropout rates. Further, suspension correlates directly to school drop-out more than any other variable, and suspension has a direct impact on a student's overall educational outcome (Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015). Costenbader & Markson (1998) show that suspended students are also more likely to be involved with the legal system outside of schools. Important to our study, Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin (2015) write that students with a history of suspension have lower rates of matriculating into institutions of postsecondary education, which can have broad implications for individual, family, and community development. In these ways, student suspension clearly has an impact that reverberates beyond the singular incident from which the suspension originates.

According to Arcia (2006), the overall number of suspensions increases in middle school during the years traditionally considered the most turbulent for emerging adolescents. The rate of suspensions peaks during sixth grade (rates that are five times greater than in fifth grade),

and middle-school suspension in general correlates with a greater probability that a student will be suspended in high school (Arcia, 2006). Overwhelmingly, students with low socioeconomic status are suspended at the highest rates, with minority or disadvantaged students having the most suspensions of any student group (Arcia, 2006; Cobb-Clark, Kassenboehmer, Le, McVicar, & Zhang, 2015; Noltemeyer, Ward, & Mcloughlin, 2015). Not surprisingly, the students with the highest rates of suspension may be those with the greatest need for academic support for achievement. Drakeford (2004) traces suspension and dropout rates back to *Brown v. Board of Education*, segregation, and Jim Crow Laws, which gave rise to zero-tolerance policies for discipline in schools. Out-of-school suspensions (and school dropout rates) reflect the socially structured, racial dimensions of schools and demonstrate how school environments are not isolated from the communities in which they exist.

Students who have been suspended are at a significant academic disadvantage. While Cobb-Clark, Kassenboehmer, Le, McVicar, & Zhang (2015) suggest no long-lasting impact of suspension on educational outcomes, they in turn note the reduced graduation rates of students with a history of suspension. Arcia (2006) finds that suspended students have lower reading rates when compared with students who have not been suspended and, further, finds a clear connection between reading achievement and suspension rates. The more a student is suspended, Arcia's (2006) study shows, the more percentage points the student loses in reading.

Possible Moderating Influences

While it is clear that suspension is associated with negative outcomes, research shows that there are factors that may provide support towards student academic success (Finn, Fish, & Scott, 2008). School culture and the quality of school life impact student behaviors and success (Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis, & Schaps, 1999; Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, Schaps, 1995; Tangen, 2009). Researchers have identified positive school climate as a key

factor for promoting student learning and creating a sense of connection to the school environment (Cohen, Mccabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). Further, student motivation in school increases with a sense of belonging, or feeling respected, supported, and accepted within a school (Goodenow, 1993). Conversely, students who feel alienated – more often minority males – tend to have higher suspension and dropout rates (Schulz & Rubel, 2011).

A sense of belonging, often referred to as connectedness to one's school or perceived school membership, is an important factor of student success. Pittman and Richmond (2007) find belonging to be an important part of student development, especially in adolescence. A connection to school, teachers, and peers leads to "positive beliefs and emotions about one's learning (e.g., academic self-efficacy, self-consciousness, school-related effect) which then relates to higher academic grades and lower levels of behavioral problems" (Pittman and Richmond, 2007, p. 272). Further, this social and interpersonal process leads to a stronger sense of self and social identity (Goodnow, 1992). As Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis, & Schaps (1999) notes, schools have a responsibility to develop and support students beyond academic knowledge and skills. Home environment, family, and local community can significantly impact student outcomes through support of both students' academic progress and these environmental factors (Schulz & Rubel, 2011).

The factors of student resiliency may support students through difficulty towards academic success. Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock (1986) found that students who do not feel that life is within their control are more likely to drop-out. Resilient students are able to find elements of control in order to navigate to their goals (Gordon-Rouse, 2001). Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, and Kelly (2007) have defined the perseverance and passion for long-term goals as *grit*. In seeking to both reduce the rate of drop-outs and improve chances for academic success, understanding influences on academic achievement among these students is critical. As such, this study seeks to identify the lived experiences of students with a history of

suspension who have successfully persevered through high school and matriculated into higher education.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model has been used as a guiding framework in a number of studies examining students' school related outcomes (Lessard, Butler-Kisber, Fortin, & Marcotte, 2014; McDougall, DeWit, King, Miller, & Killip, 2004; Stewart, 2007). The bioecological model conceptualizes development as a dynamic interplay between the individual (student) and her/his surrounding environments over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1999: Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). Bronfenbrenner (1999) posits that the increasingly complex interactions individuals have with the persons and objects in their surrounding environment are the driving force behind developmental outcomes. The current study relies on the bioecological model as a means to conceptualize the various interactions a student has had within her/his home and school environments, which may have influenced her/his ability to overcome multiple suspensions and enroll in higher education. Given that educational researchers have claimed that both environmental and individual student characteristics contribute to positive academic outcomes and student success (e.g., Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis, & Schaps, 1999; Borman & Rachuba, 2001; Lessard, Johnson, Crosnoe, & Elder, 2001), the bioecological model provides a fitting framework to conceptualize the experiences of students who have successfully overcome a history of suspension.

The most developed form of Bronfenbrenner's theory includes a Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) design as a means to investigate the aspects of the bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1999). The 'Process' component of PPCT describes the increasingly complex interactions between a student and her/his immediate external environment (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998). These processes could include engagement in activities or interactions a student has with parents, teachers, and peers. Researchers have found that supportive relationships

with peers, teachers, and parents are positively associated with various types of motivational and goal-orientated outcomes (Wentzel,1998). Thus, it may be that students who have developed positive connections and experienced supportive relationships have been more likely to overcome the challenges of suspension.

The 'Person' component of PPCT describes the personal characteristics of an individual that are either biological (age, gender, race) or psychological (level of engagement, motivation, resiliency, self-efficacy). Educational researchers have also found that individual student characteristics have contributed to positive school related outcomes. For example, students who are less likely to drop out of school have been shown to be resilient, have an internal locus of control, and possess higher levels of self-efficacy (Lessard et al., 2014; Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). Our study will include an exploration of the person level psychological and/or biological characteristics that may have contributed to a student's success.

The environment, or 'Context', is another important element of the bioecological model. A student's immediate environment (microsystem) is the context in which he/she spends a large amount of time engaged in activities such as home, school, or peer group (Tudge, Mokrova, Hatfield, & Karnik, 2009). These environments are also interrelated and connected by the interactions between them (mesosystems), with potential influences from larger systems such as school board policies (exosystem) or the culture of society as a whole (macrosystem). Contextual environmental factors in a student's home and at school have received considerable attention by educational researchers, with growing attention on the importance of school climate and the impact of socioeconomic status on a child's academic outcome (Battistich et al., 1999: Berliner, 2006; Borman & Rachuba, 2001). Our study included an examination of various aspects of the students' environments that may have contributed to their success.

Finally, the last element of the PPCT design is 'Time.' While time is conceptualized at a number of levels, ranging from meso time (the consistency of interactions over time) to macro

time (historical time period in which an individual is situated), our study examined the timing of students' suspensions over the course of their educational experience. We explored how timing of disciplinary actions (i.e. middle school vs. high school) may be an important element among participant experiences.

Educational literature has revealed the relevance of various aspects of Bronfenbrenner's model, both at an individual and environmental level, which have contributed to student success (Battistich et al., 1999; Lessard et al., 2001). Therefore, the PPCT design of the bioecological model provides a grounding framework to explore the complexity of individual student characteristics, their surrounding environments, and the interactions between, that may have contributed to a student overcoming a history of suspension to success in higher education.

METHODS

Purpose and Methodology

Our research team examined the lived experiences of students who had a history of out of school suspension in middle and or high school but who had successfully matriculated to higher education. Our primary research question therefore was simply: What lived experiences and/or personal attributes in a student's life enabled her/him to overcome a history of suspension to matriculate to higher education? In approaching our research, the team utilized a general interpretivist approach and semi-structured interview protocol to allow our participants to explicate their own lived experiences. Interpretivism is a qualitative approach to research that contextualizes meaning as socially constructed (Hurworth, 2005). As a result, the goal of a general interpretivist approach is to attempt to understand the unique lived experiences of individuals (Hurworth, 2005). By listening and delving into the lived experiences of our participants we hoped to be able to interpret what influences in their personal and educational lives may have helped them to overcome the history of suspension, beat the odds and moved on to postsecondary education.

Data Collection and Analysis

Research team members conducted one-on-one interviews with eight participants in semi-private spaces, such as coffee houses, offices, and library study rooms. Semi-structured interview protocols were created and informed by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological Framework. The researchers developed questions that were connected to each component of the PPCT model in order to ensure a comprehensive interview that was aligned with our theoretical framework. Interviews were then conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed. Upon completion of the interviews, we came together as a research team to code our first interview. Once we had established a baseline of *a priori* codes from our theoretical framework and identified *a posteriori* codes through open coding, we then divided up the subsequent interviews among paired teams and coded them, making sure that each interview got a minimum of two researchers reviewing and coding the data. We utilized a coding matrix via Google Drive so that we could collaboratively add data from each respondent into the proper code grid. We also included open-coding and added to our coding dictionary when new codes emerged as we analyzed each transcript. When all of the interviews had been coded, we then came back together face-to-face to review all of the data on the coding matrix in order to discuss and derive the themes we saw emerging from the data we had collected.

Participants

Our study focused on college students and recent college graduates who had experienced out-of-school suspension during their middle and high school years, grades 6 through 12, and then successfully matriculated to post-secondary higher education. We focused on participants who had more than one instance of suspension or who had a longer term out-of-school suspension which we identified as four or more days so that we could be sure to avoid outliers and one-time fluke incidents. For recruitment of participants, we utilized a number of approaches and targeted both current college students and college graduates. In

order to recruit college students, we posted flyers around a large, diverse research university in the Southeast United States in high student traffic areas advertising our study with means of contacting the research team. We also offered a $10 Amazon Gift Card as a recruitment incentive. Some of the research team had contacts through family and friends through whom we were able to circulate our recruitment flyer and leverage a word of mouth recruitment strategy. The researchers also utilized personal social media outlets such as Facebook to advertise the study. However, we had difficulty with finding and recruiting participants who fit our inclusion criteria. This may speak to the smaller pool of students who have successfully matriculated to college after a history of suspension. As a result, despite these various recruitment strategies, we ended up with a total of eight participants for the study – each of whom has had different experiences with suspension during their school careers.

Our team interviewed eight participants[1] – Lucy, Sam, Bud, Khalil, Tony, London, Justin and William. Participants lived in various parts of the country. Three were interviewed by phone and five face-to-face. Participants ranged in age from 18-27 years old with a range of one-to-four suspensions. Most OSS were short term – 10 days or less, but one suspension was long term, lasting three weeks. Across the participants, a range of reasons for suspension were experienced: three participants were suspended for fighting; three for "inappropriate behavior"; one participant for vandalism; and one for drug possession on school campus. All eight identified as being middle class. Seven of our participants described themselves as strong students. Only one admitted he struggled. None of our participants referred to themselves as frequent behavior issues. In fact, for five of the participants, this was their one and only suspension. The participants were six white males, one Asian female, and one black female. While students of color and students from poverty are over-represented in suspension data, only two of the eight participants are students of minority groups, and all participants identify as

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[1] All participant names have been changed to pseudonyms.

middle class. We regret the lack of diversity in our pool. Despite our small sample size and

lack of diversity, this exploratory study has merit and is a topic worth pursuing into the future

with more students and diversity. Table 1 provides an overview of our participants.

Table 1

Overview of Study Participants

Name	Lucy	Sam	Bud	Khalil	Tony	London	Justin	William
Ethnicity	A	W	W	W	W	AA	W	W
Gender	F	M	M	M	M	F	M	M
University	4 yr. Public	4 yr. Private	4 yr. Public	4 yr. Public	4 yr. Public	4 yr. Public	4 yr. Public	4 yr. Public
En.Status	Student	Grad	Student	Grad	Grad	Grad	Student	Student
# of OSS	1	3	1	1	1 long term	4	1	1
Time of OSS	High-school	High-school	High-school	High-school	High-school	High-school	High-school	High-school

Researcher Subjectivities and Trustworthiness

Within the research team, we have backgrounds in teaching, school administration, and

school counseling, which gives us each perspective with the participants we interviewed. One

member of the research team also had personal experience with out-of-school suspension while

in middle school but then went on to have a successful academic career though high school and

post-secondary education. For trustworthiness we promised each participant confidentiality.

Throughout data collection and analysis, we asked clarifying and probing questions and re-

voicing when we needed to be sure that what we were hearing was what the participant meant

or when more information was needed. A senior researcher at our institution served as a peer

reviewer for our study to ensure rigor and trustworthiness. We also utilized member checking,

giving each participant the opportunity to review her/his interview transcript to be sure that the

data captured what the participant meant to communicate. Additionally, at the end of the study,

all participants were afforded the opportunity to review the study and findings.

FINDINGS

Existing research largely focuses on how out-of-school suspension (OSS) negatively affects students. Dense research shows that poor behavior, lower reading achievement, and increased risk of dropping out are just three potential casualties of suspension. We were interested in the shared life experiences of students with a history of OSS who beat the odds. Were there any similarities in their stories that may inform the efforts of educators, parents, or others who seek to help students to cross the suspension bridge into higher education? Overall our findings suggest three areas that impact how a person reacts to suspension: sense of belonging, family/home/school support and barriers, and strength of relationships. As discussed in upcoming sections, the stronger these three areas the less impacts students felt.

Sense of Belonging

The most frequent data code applied, *sense of belonging*, emerged as the most important research theme. Five participants spoke about feeling as if they belonged within their schools and peer groups. Many of these participants played sports ranging from track and field to football with three participants specifically mentioning their teams with comments like, "You know I think with sports that kinda drove me in that direction [feeling connected to school]…" and, "Oh yeah, absolutely through our athletic department we did a lot of programs as we tried to give back to our local community," or, "Yes, I was the team captain so I had a lot of people relying on me and that helped me be better." For two participants, it was a "good group of friends" that helped them feel connected. Tony, a participant with strong peer relations, was involved in tagging. Together with his friends, Tony was suspended for three weeks. He was the only participant to describe his suspension as enjoyable: "Suspension itself, it was kind of like a little vacation for me," and, "that was a fun three weeks, like I was out of school, and I was with my friends at Barnes and Nobles." In fact, a large part of Tony's interview involved him

discussing how exciting tagging was and not the resulting suspension. While it would appear being suspended with friends negated OSS consequences for Tony, unfortunately, for Khalil, who was also suspended with friends, it did not. Khalil reported,

> It was just difficult, like I never felt comfortable, I didn't know anybody, I changed schools going into high school, so I didn't really know anybody. All I had was that one friend and…kids were not…nice [pause] wasn't like connected to any groups or social activities or anything like that…any sports.

Another participant, Lucy, also reported feeling unconnected,

> They (teachers and administrators) didn't have sympathy for me at all. And I guess according to them, and myself, it was kind of my fault, and probably should have seen it coming...but I mean still punishment still sucks. And the fact that all the other kids are excommunicating with (sic) you.

Interestingly, Lucy and Khalil gave more detailed and emotional recollections and spoke twice as long as their peers about their negative sense of belongings. Like Lucy and Khalil, London also felt disconnected at school. Having previously attended a predominantly African American middle school fed from her neighborhood, London found herself bussed across town, at her mother's request, to attend a predominately White high school outside of her neighborhood. London described the school closest to her neighborhood as in a lower-income area and the "worst" high school in the city. At her new school towards the outskirts of the city, difficult dynamics with peer resulted in her being suspended threes times for fighting. While she never threw the first punch, London is very clear that after watching a girl from her neighborhood be beat up the first week of school, she vowed that would never happen to her. Also interesting is how London saw her suspensions as unrelated to college. She was going to college – of that there was no doubt. She just had to survive to make it there. Thus, London's focus throughout her interview was on her self-efficacy rather than those around her, and London recalled how

she changed to increase her sense of belonging and reverse her feelings. "I was kinda lonely, and then I just did [changed] and I met so many great people and then I realized what I was missing out on by just being with just blacks (laughs) you know?" London's, "If you don't like it, change it," attitude separated her from the participant pool. All seven of the other participants described fixed recollections of belonging. Either they felt they belonged and had a positive school remembrance or vice versa. London recalled *not* feeling as if she belonged *and* a positive school remembrance.

Whether participants reported any long term effects of suspension seemed directly related to their sense of belonging. Six participants, those with the longest and most frequent suspensions, did not report any long-lasting effects. Lucy and Khalil, who each had only 1 suspension lasting 5 days or less, reported long term suspension effects. Khalil, who was suspended for drug possession, described feeling completely disconnected to his large school:

> There's no support, there's no discussion about drugs or anything for what I got caught
> for, I never met with the counselor like 'let's talk about this like drug use' or whatever,
> there was no drug or alcohol education after that….it was more of like you did this so we
> followed the book, you did this so we're suspending you.

Khalil, who was already struggling to find a place in a large school setting and in his studies, recalls missing five days only to return to school even further behind academically and less trusting of those in charge:

> But like my feeling of suspension is my mom was absolutely right...all you're doing is
> disciplining the student...but at the same time like hurting their ability to succeed. You
> can't succeed if you can't be in school for five days.

While Khalil went on to earn his GED and eventually graduate college, he dropped out of high school, which he directly relates to his suspension. Talking about his suspension 17 years after the fact still made Khalil so emotional that at one point in the interview he jokingly pleaded the

fifth in having to recall any more details. Additionally, after the interview recording he told the researcher, "That was rough."

At the end of her interview, claiming this was the first time she had ever spoken to anyone about her suspension, Lucy relayed how difficult those memories are to recall. Caught making out with her boyfriend, Lucy was suspended for three days. Lucy reported feeling humiliated upon her return to school, ignored by teachers when she would raise her hand in class and by friends who looked at her like she was, as she said, "the school whore." She described a prep- school environment unforgiving of mistakes and judging of actions – an environment she never adapted to and eventually transferred out of to a different school. While more positive about the school she transferred to, Lucy still reported feeling bad about herself and directly related those feelings of low self image to her suspension. In addition to school issues, it is important to note that Lucy's father died a few years prior to her suspension. She had moved states when her mother remarried and integrated into a family with step siblings. These circumstances, as well as her feelings of lack of belonging within her school, contributed to her difficulties in her high school years.

Family/Home/School Support and Barriers

Often times in their sense of belonging discussion, participants would reference the support or barriers provided by their families, homes, and schools. For six of our participants, they recalled supportive families who enabled them to succeed academically and expected them to go onto college. Sam, one of our participants with the most suspensions, suffered few OSS side effects. He credits this to friends who kept him connected to the school day, teachers, who provided him work to stay on track, and his parents, who touted the value of higher education his entire childhood. Asked to narrow down his biggest source of support, Sam said, "Yeah it would be my parents without a doubt without a question." Two of our participants, Bud and London, did not directly address home support or barriers but in early questioning about

their suspension experiences referenced mothers and/or fathers for whom their attending college was a forgone conclusion. Even Khalil, who has a very emotional and negative interview recalling his suspension, felt supported by his family. His family seemed to recognize and understand how damaging missing five days of school would be for Khalil. They then supported his decision to drop out and obtain a GED.

In addition to feeling emotional and academic familial support, several participants recalled supportive peers and school personnel. Our team expected to find that peer groups had a large influence on a student's decision to pursue higher education and that students who went onto college had friends who went onto college and vice versa. With the exception of London, we were correct. Only she had peers that were not college bound but knew she was. She remembers being teased but also states their life path never had bearing on her own:

> In middle school they would still pick on me like 'oh you're AG [academically gifted], you think you're so smart.' Then the same thing kinda happened when I got to high school cause I was in honors and I wasn't with the same people I was just with in middle school. I was split up from everybody, but they knew by senior year that I was going to college. Nobody said anything negative.

Only Lucy, who recalled a negative suspension experience, felt unsupported by her family:

> Every time I'd say, 'Oh, my life is terrible because, you know, my parents are divorced, my Mom remarried, that's so terrible and stuff.' And, obviously after the incident I kept saying my life is terrible. And then I started to believe it.

While a strong theme of familial support emerged, how participants felt about school support had much more variance. William recalled a teacher who made the difference by forging a relationship with his students and trying to understand those who were struggling. Other participants named athletic directors and guidance counsellors as people who supported them emotionally and academically, encouraging them to do better. Lucy and Khalil, however,

detailed strong negative recollections of school support. Lucy stated:

> Thing is something about prep schools that I didn't know about they were small, but because of that smallness there wasn't a single person who didn't know, and there wasn't a single person who wasn't judging and wasn't…yeah...(like), 'I have zero sympathy of any kind [for you].'

Khalil recalled feeling as if his education was not valued, "Like you're just, you're just a number in the system…more than like an actual person," and, "I guess my overall taste of my two years experience at Stone Hill High is like, probably the worst two years of my life. I hated it." Feeling devalued by his school but supported by his mother was a large theme in Khalil's interview:

> "This school is not good for you – you're not doing well." And that's definitely part of the reasons. Like my mom saw that, like we don't benefit his education, we don't, or value his education, we don't, we don't value him as a person.

> While Khalil experienced a stark lack of school support, Bud's experience was more complex. Intending to pull a teenage prank, Bud and a peer mooned a friend and unintentionally a group of teachers having a meeting. Suspended for three days for the stunt, Bud's recollection of school support is two sided. While lucky to have a track/history teacher who helped him through school by encouraging him to work harder, Bud was unlucky to pull his prank with the principal's kid. Describing the day he was suspended, Bud was very specific in his memory of how the principal made him feel:

> I felt that my principal wasn't very fond of me . . . He was eating his lunch in front of me, and he said, "What you did makes me want to throw this food up. It makes me sick." He said, "This is disgusting," and all this stuff.

Bud went on to say, "I feel like the teachers a lot of the time whenever they see a kid's troubled, they don't really want to help him. They just want to ignore him. They just want to label him as a delinquent." While Bud felt most of his teachers eventually got over his stunt, he never felt the

Principal looked at him the same way again and was relieved when he transferred the next year to a different school.

Strength of Relationships

The most individualized theme, strength of relationship, had the most variance. Participants reported strong relationships from all types of people—at home and school, singular and large groups. Sam remembered a coach:

I had a real good close relationship with him, and we joked back-and-forth, so if anything really bad came my way I bring it up to him and he'd do it in a lighthearted way but he'd say, "OK, well you need to wise up."

Overall, the five participants least affected by suspension were able to list close relationships with others in both the home and school environments. Justin recalled,

You know, I think that the core friends that I had in high school, you know, just the stupid stuff we always did—if it wasn't for the good core group of friends that I had I imagine a lot worse could've happened.

Those who only had relationships from home but could not identify anyone at school, like Khalil, were more affected. Khalil laments the dearth of relationships to educators in his high school:

Like I don't, I don't know what specific words, but….like hey we acknowledge you, we see you…you're not just like a trouble maker, or like a failed kid or whatever, like you have potential, or you know, how can we help you.

Lucy, who could not name anyone at school or home with whom she had a close relationship, fared the worst. Her interview was the longest and most emotional. Describing her family relationships, Lucy says,

My step dad was, well, they had just gotten married recently, so he was kind of like, he looked like he was disappointed and wanted to say something stern but, you know, when you're in the step position that's not really within your power.

She went on to describe her relationship with step siblings as, "not best friends, we're not like siblings-siblings." In describing how she felt about the strength of relationships at school, Lucy said, "I'm essentially a whore, known as a whore throughout the whole school." While she does admit to having one male friend who tried to get her, "to look on the bright side," Lucy's focus remains on those around her at home and school who let her down.

Lucy's case is particularly confounding, as she lacked belonging, supports, and close relationships. The bioecological framework outlines a myriad of factors that contribute to development. In Lucy's case, although the interactions of Proximal Processes and Contexts may have been negative, we wonder if her Person characteristics, such as her individual personal skills and strengths, may have helped offset her lack of supports and social belonging, ultimately leading to her success. We speculate that Lucy used her personal academic ability as a means to persist through high school and matriculate to the university. In asking about her sense of her academic self, she stated, "If there's something I can do, I can do academics and academics would help get my mind off things too." For her, we believe that the negative social atmosphere was mitigated by her academic skills and the sense of personal strength she derived generally from doing very well in school.

DISCUSSION

As noted earlier, the results of this study identified three areas contributing to the success of students who experienced out-of-school suspensions during high school: sense of belonging, family/home/school support, and strength of relationships. Of these, the participants' sense of belonging appeared to most meaningfully impact how each of them handled the suspension(s) and the lasting effect it had on their academic and life experiences. Both Goodnow (1992) and Goodnow & Grady (1993) acknowledge the central importance of a student's sense of belonging as a basic human need as noted within Maslow's (1962) theories of motivation. Goodnow & Grady (1993) write, "[M]eeting the need for belonging is a necessary

precondition to higher needs such as the desire for knowledge" (p. 68). In our study, many of the participants articulated strong relationships with adults and peers within the school, such as Sam, who discussed his role on the football team, his relationship with the coaches, and the positive rapport he had with teachers throughout the school. In discussing his relationship with his coach, Sam described how he could talk about bad experiences with him and would receive a "lighthearted" but stern reply, such as "you better wise up." The stronger the relationships participants formed with others within the school community, the more connected they felt, and the more easily they recovered from their suspensions. The more relationships participants had from home and school, the more confident they were. Feeling more confident and connected to those around them increased participants' sense of belonging. A sense of belonging, such as Sam's, further helps to bridge the negative attributes typically attached to suspension and to support academic success.

As Pittman & Richmond (2007) write, "According to the belongingness hypothesis, although attachments to parents and positive relationships with friends are important in individuals' adjustment, those who do not have a sense of connection to a larger group or community likely will experience increased stress and emotional distress" (p. 272). Both Lucy and Khalil experienced a lack of belonging within their school during the time of suspension, producing stress and emotional distress. Lucy felt ignored and judged by those around her after her suspension. As did Khalil. Whereas Lucy transferred to a new school the lack of attention from anyone in his school community led Khalil to drop out of school. Most poignantly, Khalil described his school experience as one where "you're just a number in the system…more than like an actual person." Importantly, students need to be viewed not just as learners of academic content but "whole persons with manifold needs and interests who actively seek to belong to a community" (Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Lewis, & Schaps, 1999, p. 421). With students like Sam and Bud experiencing very strong sense of belonging and Lucy and Khalil experiencing

very little belonging, the strength of these relationships carries with them the unique power to determine the quality of a student's experiences in schools and potentially may impact academic outcomes long term.

In terms of support for students within schools, families, and homes, Weiner (1990) writes, "School motivation cannot be understood apart from the social fabric in which it is embedded" (p. 621). Using Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, we sought to understand what influences students to overcome the negative aspects of out-of-school suspensions. While socioeconomic status plays a strong role in the environmental impacts of students' academic success, students who feel themselves to be part of a supportive family or caring community can be shown to have stronger academic motivation and positive academic outcomes (Battistich, Solomon, Kim, Watson, Schaps, 1995). Most of the participants described strong family support to pursue education after high school. The expectations from family to pursue higher education often influence a mindset in which pursuing education after high school becomes easy to imagine. Although she speaks about her mother, their close relationship, and her mother's college expectations, London stands out from our participants because her description of her time in high school speaks to a more autonomous existence. As our other participants' recollections often involved others who influenced them, London usually spoke only about herself and her control to make her own decisions about the direction her education would take. Gordon-Rouse (2001) notes that students like London are supported within their environments to navigate through potential social and academic obstacles and to thrive, mature, and increase competence.

All of the participants acknowledged that out-of-school suspension was an ineffective tool towards managing their behaviors. In many cases, the suspension had little to no effect on behavior and provided the participants with time out of school away from academic content. For students like Khalil, however, the suspensions functioned only to exacerbate an already intense

sense of lack of belonging within the school. Further, all participants noted that their suspensions went unacknowledged by the school administration when they returned to the school from suspension, potentially missing a true opportunity to justify the suspension or to provide counseling – such as in the case of a drug-related suspension – that would further help support the student at that time.

CONCLUSION

The current study adds to the literature by identifying three interrelated components that were found to contribute to student success after suspension: Sense of Belonging, Family/Home/School Support and Barriers, and Strength of Relationships. In keeping with the suspension bridge metaphor, our findings suggest that Sense of Belonging is the foundation upon which all other areas rest. Family/ Home/School supports provide structural posts for reinforcement. Strength of Relationship is the rope one clings to when crossing the bridge. When these three areas are reinforced positively, the bridge is sturdy, allowing for relatively easy passage. However, if one area is weakened negativity, the entire structure is at risk.
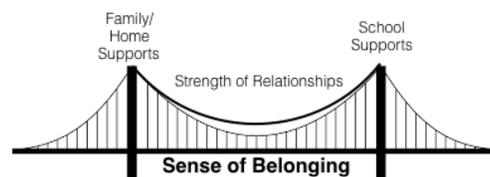
Figure 1. Illustration of the interrelated influences that inform students' journey across the "suspension bridge" from suspension to college matriculation.

A student's sense of belonging emerged as the most crucial influence related to his/her success. Participants who did not experience belonging in school seemed to have more negative recollections and descriptions of long-lasting negative impacts from their suspension experiences than those who felt like they belonged in school. We also found that the importance

of relationships cannot be overstated, as support was needed not only in the home but in the school context as well. Home supports included parental acceptance and encouragement to attend postsecondary education. In regards to school supports, although participants varied in their positive or negative experiences, those who had positive experiences named teacher or adult relationships as key components. Finally, given the social nature of belonging that participants described, we found that strong personal relationships may be a prerequisite of belonging. This includes relationships with both peers and adults that emerged as either a support or barrier to students feeling accepted and connected to the school setting. The interconnected nature of these aspects closely aligns with the complexity of student development as outlined by Bronfenbrenner's Bioecological model. The PPCT model outlines the interplay between individual and contextual aspects that impact a student's development. Our findings highlight the importance of Process (strength of relationships) with the Person (individual student) over time in particular contexts (home and school) that promotes or hinders the key influences of belonging and success. This was evident in the unique interconnections of belonging and environmental supports (or lack thereof) that impacted individual students in different ways. It is therefore important for both researchers and practitioners to incorporate a multidimensional view when conducting research and working with students and families.

The findings and limitations of the current study provide important directions for future research. Although the current study shed light on important elements that emerged related to student success, additional research should incorporate a larger and more diverse sample in order to expand the examination of student success and piece out additional aspects that may contribute to students' ability to overcome suspension. In addition, a more diverse sample will be important to reveal additional nuances or differences that may be important factors related to students' race, class, culture, or ethnicity, especially considering the inequalities that exist in rates of suspension for minority students. Furthermore, mixed methods or quantitative studies

might build off of these findings to assess the degree to which these factors can be generalized across student populations. Finally, researchers should also attempt to uncover the specific strategies and ways in which schools can foster and promote sense of belonging, strength or relationship, and school support among various groups of students.

The current study also revealed a number of important implications for policy and practice, specifically for administrators and educational leaders. As a whole, schools need to implement intentional strategies to foster supportive relationships among students and adults in the school setting. This intentionality extends to the implementation of disciplinary practices. It is important for administrators and school staff to respect students as human beings, foster relationships, and attempt to understand the underlying influences that drive student behavior. In order to do this, more collaboration between school leaders and school counselors could help ameliorate the disciplinary process. This collaboration should address the social and emotional needs of students, such as sense of belonging and strength of relationships, while also addressing behavioral concerns. For example, disciplinary policies and procedures should incorporate conversations with students and families in order to convey the reason behind the suspension, and involve students and families throughout the entire process. In addition, a student's re-entry into the school setting after out of school suspension should be an intentional process rather than simply a haphazard routine. For example, if a student is suspended for drug use, a reentry plan should be created and could incorporate scheduled meetings with the school counselor, drug education, and academic planning to prevent the student from falling behind. Suspensions and other disciplinary practices, when approached in this manner, have the potential to strengthen relationships with students and families and be a collaborative learning experience rather than a process that ultimately alienates and isolates the student.

Finally, we urge teacher education and educational leadership programs to teach the importance of sense of belonging and supportive relationships as core components related to

students' behavior and academic success. Non-cognitive factors related to student success are not typically emphasized in the era of accountability and testing. However, these factors are important components related to student success that emerged in the current study, as well as in previous literature. As a result, teacher education and educational leadership programs do an injustice if they fail to incorporate these factors into the curriculum when training emerging teachers and leaders. Additionally, collaboration between administrators and school counselors should start in education programs. Educational leadership and school counseling departments could partner together for courses and training opportunities, in order to teach and promote this collaborative process for their practitioners-in-training.

The concept of student success is highly complex and multidimensional. In an effort to continuously strive for the success of *every* student, despite the barriers of suspension, administrators, researchers, and education programs should examine the many layers and interconnections that relate to student success from a bioecological perspective when approaching both research and practice. In so doing, we have the potential to identify areas that educators can impact and continue to make critical strides forward in fostering the potential of each and every student.

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