Stakeholder Perspectives of School Discipline: A Social Ecological Exploration

Megan D. Grant

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Stakeholder Perspectives of School Discipline:

A Social Ecological Exploration

A Dissertation Presented

By

MEGAN D. GRANT

Submitted to the Graduate School of the University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

February 2023

College of Education
Stakeholder Perspectives of School Discipline:

A Social Ecological Exploration

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By

MEGAN D. GRANT

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ABSTRACT

STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL DISCIPLINE:
A SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL EXPLORATION

FEBRUARY 2023

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Directed by: Professor Sharron Rallis

This dissertation involved a mixed method study on discipline practices in a single urban school district. This was a novel investigation that engaged stakeholders (administrators, teachers, school professionals, and students) to view, analyze, and interpret discipline data from their district and to explore the underlying causes of discipline outcomes. I found disproportionate discipline of students of color and disproportionate discipline for minor offenses. Stakeholders views resulted in a model in which social ecological systems drove the discipline system and undergirded the disparate and discriminatory practices. Interpretations of the findings are discussed.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Over the past 25 years, the use of exclusionary discipline practices such as seclusion, suspension, and expulsion have increased dramatically (Mallett, 2016). As society embraced get tough on crime tactics to address rising violence crime rates in the 1990’s, schools began to adopt similar zero-tolerance policies to respond to student misbehavior (Krezmien, Leone, Achilles, 2006; Skiba, 2011). High profile school shootings in Arkansas and Colorado influenced the public perception that schools had become violent and unsafe places. No data supported the perception. Regardless, government and school officials were pressured to respond culminating in the passage of the Gun Free Schools and Safe and Drug Free Schools and Communities Acts in 1994, which ushered in the era of zero-tolerance policies in schools across the United States (Krezmien, Leone, Achilles, 2006; Skiba, 2011; Mallett, 2016). These policies were designed to increase school safety by mandating suspension or expulsion for violent offenses, such as fighting or bringing a weapon to school (Mallett, 2016). However, by the late 1990’s the use of exclusionary discipline had expanded to include virtually every misbehavior, including talking too loud, truancy, and breaking pencils (Smith, 2015). By 2002, researchers have estimated that up to 80% of suspensions were for non-criminal, non-violent behaviors (Allman & Slate, 2011).

There is now substantial agreement among researchers that the rise in exclusionary discipline has brought with it a number of troubling trends. These include, but are not limited to (1) disproportionate suspension of students from minoritized racial and ethnic groups and students with disabilities (2) negative educational and life
outcomes linked to suspensions and expulsion; (3) use of suspension for discretionary and subjective offenses; and (4) widespread inappropriate utilization of harsh and punitive discipline for minor incidents. This research, along with a rise in media attention about the so called “school to prison pipeline”, has brought increased scrutiny of school disciplinary practices by local, state, and federal authorities. In 2009, the federal Office for Civil Rights began mandating that schools and districts provide discipline data disaggregated by race/ethnicity, disability status, and English Learner status. Many State departments of education make discipline data for schools and districts publicly available on their websites. Some states have begun to enact policies aimed at limiting suspension for minor offenses (California) or for students in early grades (Arkansas, Maryland, and Texas) (Gregory, Skiba, 2017). While reforms aimed at reducing rates and disproportionality are critical for remedying problematic discipline practices, some efforts thus far have been short sighted and simplistic for an issue with such complexity.

Other reforms have included the introduction of school-wide behavior support systems and programs that offer alternatives to suspension. However, the switch to these programs has outpaced our knowledge about their effectiveness or how they are best implemented (Gregory, Skiba, 2017). Researchers have studied the two most popular alternatives, School Wide Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (SWPBIS) and restorative justice, and the results are far from conclusive (Gregory, Skiba, 2017). In fact, in a review of all SWPBIS studies, Gregory and Skiba (2017) found that while it did help reduce suspension rates in some schools, it was ineffective at reducing the overrepresentation of students of color and students with disabilities in disciplinary
referrals. Despite having strategies with theoretical merit, these interventions are not having the desired effect.

The mixed results of reform efforts point to a major gap in our current understanding of school discipline and the regulation of student behavior. The vast majority of studies and reform efforts have focused primarily on what is happening, but not why. The problem is not suspension in itself, a practice used since the development of the public education system. The problem is how schools have utilized suspensions in ways that are harmful, unjust, and result in the disproportionate removal of minoritized and marginalized youth.

School discipline reforms are likely to fall short until we expand our understanding of underlying conditions that have fed this issue. In order to understand why this is happening, we need to understand the phenomena in different ways that reveal why disproportionate suspensions are occurring. Only that answer will help researchers and practitioners develop responsible and effective remedies. To explore the root causes of these issues, researchers must get closer to schools and the individuals who make up school communities. Analyzing discipline data for a school or district and then speaking directly to the stakeholders involved in school discipline would provide the bridge between what is happening and why. Such an approach will allow researchers to explore a number of issues that are critical in the school discipline debate, including what influences student behavior and misbehavior from class to class, how their teachers perceive and react to misbehaviors, and how administrators decide which misbehaviors warrant suspension. The knowledge generated from this research will provide the education community with the contextual information needed to understand the “why”
driving disproportionate suspension and transform how schools regulate and respond to student behavior.

**Definitions of Terms**

For the purposes of this paper, it is important to provide operationalized definitions of key terms used in this paper. These definitions were developed from the body of school discipline literature.

**Exclusionary discipline:** Formal responses to student behavior that include the removal, or exclusion, of students from their typical learning environment. This exclusion can range from sending students to in-house or behavioral support spaces for part of a class period to the permanent expulsion of students from a school district. The most common exclusionary discipline practices are in school and out of school suspension.

**Discretionary infraction:** These are infractions that allow the school personnel to make decisions about the determination of a response to a referral. This means that the administrator may choose from a variety of disciplinary responses to an infraction. For example, an administrator may assign a conference, a parent call, or detention when a student is referred for talking loudly during class.

**Expulsion:** Long term disciplinary removal of a student from school. Usually an expulsion is for the remainder of a school year or for a full school year.

**Non-discretionary infractions:** These are behaviors that mandate a specific consequence. For example, if a student physically attacks a peer during class, the teacher must refer the student to discipline, and the administrator must assign a predetermined disciplinary response such as 5 days of out of school suspension.
School discipline: The regulation of student behavior within schools. This includes the behavioral infraction by students and the subsequent responses to misbehaviors.

School discipline system: The school discipline system includes the policies, practices, and people involved in school discipline. This system is unique to each school. It includes the federal, state, and district-level policies relating to discipline, school level rules and procedures governing student behavior, and any individual in the school community that is involved in a disciplinary incident.

School to prison pipeline: The theoretical school to prison pipeline refers to the direct and indirect connections between schools and the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Direct connection includes the placement of police officers within schools, school-based arrests of students, and referrals to court made by schools for student behavior. Indirect connections include practices, such as out of school suspension, that increase time out of school and that increase the likelihood that students will become involved with the justice systems.

Subjective infractions: These are infractions that cannot be objectively operationalized or observed and are subject to the varying views and perceptions of educators to determine. Common examples include class disruption and defiance.

Statement on Language

Throughout this paper, I chose language carefully and attempted to align with how people describe themselves as well as social discourse surrounding marginalized and minoritized identities. To refer to the racial or ethnic identities of individuals or communities, I used
the terms White, Latino, and Black. I capitalized White because to leave it uncapitalized while all other racial or ethnic identities were capitalized contributes to the concept that White is the default or normal race and skin color in the U.S. I used Black rather than African American based on its current prevalence and because I believed it acknowledged the anti-Blackness and colorism that permeates U.S. society. I used Latino because of emerging research showing it is significantly preferred by people with this identity over terms like Latinx, which is primarily used in academia. I acknowledge that the preferred language relating to issues of social and racial justice continue to evolve and that no terms are preferred by all people who share an identity.

**Brief Review of Trends in School Discipline**

The dramatic rise in exclusionary discipline was not the result of a rise in criminal or violent incidents in schools. In fact, school safety data show that student victimization has dropped 70% since its peak in 1992 (Carlton, 2017). The rise in exclusionary discipline occurred after declining crime rates and resulted from the overuse of suspension for minor offenses. Zero tolerance policies were initially enacted to allow schools to respond to serious incidents that threatened school safety (Mallett, 2016). However, researchers have repeatedly demonstrated that most suspensions are the result of non-criminal and nonviolent behaviors (Losen & Whitaker, 2017; Raffael, Mendez, and Knoff, 2003; Skiba, 2015). These findings contradict the common refrain that suspension is needed to ensure the safety of the school community. Black and Latino students are disproportionately affected by this trend, and are more likely to be suspended for minor offenses than for violent or criminal behaviors (Skiba et al 2015; Skiba et al. 2011).
The use of suspension for minor behavioral incidents is linked to another concerning trend in school discipline: the widespread use of subjective and often unclear terms like class disruption, defiance, and disorderly conduct (Losen & Whitaker, 2017; Nolan, 2011). There are no clear definitions for these terms, nor are there standards by which to measure the severity of individual incidents. For example, teachers do not have a shared understanding of disruption. Similarly, different teachers can tolerate different levels of disruption before referring a student for disciplinary action, making disruption something more closely associated with teacher behavior as opposed to student behaviors. The vagueness and subjectivity of these terms allows the conscious or unconscious biases of teachers, (Skiba et al., 2014) past experiences between teachers and certain students, or even the mood of a teacher on a specific day to drive the discipline system, moving it from a standardized process towards a subjective and reactive process. Intended or not, the subjective practices have placed students of color at particular vulnerability to suspension for offenses like class disruption (Skiba et al., 2014).

There is consensus among researchers that marginalized students, particularly Black students, males, and students with disabilities, are disproportionately subjected to suspension, expulsion, and school arrest. An exhaustive literature review of quantitative research examining disparities in school discipline completed by Camacho (2016) identified 61 studies conducted between 2004 and 2014. Black students, especially males, were consistently found to have the highest risk for disciplinary exclusion (Achilles, McLaughlin, & Croninger, 2007; Camacho & Krezmien, 2018; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Mendez & Knoff, 2003). Native American Indians have also
been found to be suspended at disproportionately high rates (Camacho & Krezmien, 2018; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997). Students with disabilities were also subject to disproportionately high levels of disciplinary exclusion (Achilles et al., 2007; Camacho & Krezmien, 2018; Krezmien et al., 2006; Mendez, 2003; Zhang, Katsiyannis, & Herbst, 2004), with Black students with disabilities particularly at risk for suspension and expulsion (Krezmien, Leone & Achilles, 2006; Camacho & Krezmien, 2018). These findings demonstrate the devastating impact of zero tolerance policies on minoritized groups who are disproportionately excluded from school for minor offenses such as class disruption, disrespect, and even tardiness and truancy.

Although it is not possible to draw a direct line from exclusionary discipline to future outcomes, a number of researchers have explored its relationship to a number of negative personal and education outcomes. Researchers have identified suspension as a risk factor for grade retention (Chu & Ready, 2018; Marchbanks III, Blake, Smith, Seibert, Carmichael, Booth & Fabelo, 2014; Rodney, Crafter, Rodney, & Mupier, 1999), falling behind in school work (Arcia, 2006; Chu & Ready, 2018) course failure (Chu & Ready, 2018), school disengagement or drop out (Arcia, 2006; Chu & Ready, 2018; Marchbanks et al., 2014; ), arrest (Healy, 2014; Hirschfield, 2018; Mittleman, 2018); and incarceration (Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). In addition to academic and personal outcomes, suspension has deleterious effects on the social and emotional well-being of students and their connection to school (Bottiani, Bradshaw & Mendelson, 2017). Given the high rates of suspension among students with disabilities and other marginalized groups, it is clear that school discipline is compounding the hardships already faced by many vulnerable students.
Statement of the Problem

School discipline is the system by which schools regulate and respond to student behavior. At surface level, school discipline can appear to be a concrete system within schools. It is generally guided by formal written policies and is described alongside other school rules and procedures in school handbooks. However, the school discipline system is far from a fixed entity. It is comprised of a number of nuanced and dynamic elements that interact and change on a daily basis. Its focus on the human interpretation of behavior makes it reliant on the experiences and relationships of the individuals within the school community. The complexity of this system calls for research methods and reform efforts that consider the individual and school level conditions influencing the system.

The literature on school discipline has demonstrated that exclusionary discipline is no longer used as initially intended and that marginalized youth are particularly vulnerable to its harmful effects. However, existing research has left a number of critical issues underexplored. The vast majority of existing studies have relied on large scale databases such as Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study and National Longitudinal Study of Youth, or district/state level discipline data (Camacho, 2017). While these studies have identified patterns and trends, they were not able to explore the specific school, teacher, and student level factors that contributed to specific disciplinary events, nor to follow specific disciplinary events to measure the intended and unintended consequences on the stakeholders involved. They were unable to uncover the process associated with a teacher’s decision to refer a student to the office for discipline or the administrator’s process for determining disciplinary consequences. Importantly, the
interpretation of the data is done by academics and researchers who have no relationship to the schools or the individuals who make up the school community. As a result, the research continues to more and more clearly establish the types and severity of disproportionate suspension but has not examined why suspensions are misused. We have identified the problems; future research must guide us towards solutions.

Our understanding of trends and patterns previously discussed would be improved with school and individual level participation in research studies. Direct input from those involved in discipline would provide deeper and more nuanced understanding individual incidents and overall trends. School level stakeholders could contextualize the findings and reduce incorrect assumptions that can occur when the interpretation is handled entirely by researchers removed from the schools.

There is a body of research within the school discipline field that has explored the perspectives and experiences of stakeholders with personal connection to school discipline, in particular, students, families, teachers, and administrators. Findings from these studies demonstrated that there were a number of personal, social, and cultural factors driving the overuse of exclusionary discipline and its disparate effect on certain groups of students. This literature review summarizes findings from these studies and identifies areas for future research.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework guiding my literature review and subsequent research study has three components: an adapted version of Brofenbrenner’s Social Ecological Model (SEM); my knowledge of existing research relating to school discipline and cultural differences in the school context, and 20 years of direct work, as a special
education teacher and community-based program director, with students impacted by school discipline.

**Social Ecological Model**

The Social Ecological Model (SEM) is an ideal framework for understanding complex social and educational issues such as how school discipline systems operate within schools and what underlying factors influence and contribute to disciplinary outcomes. The SEM was developed by Uri Brofenbrenner in the 1970’s, as a tool for exploring the social nature of human development. He asserted that human behavior and development did not occur vacuum, but rather were the result of continuous interactions with a complex array of social environments. The social environments, or ecologies, ranged from a person’s direct interactions with their friends and families to the broader sociological or political forces occurring at the societal level. Brofenbrenner utilized components of systems theory, which seeks to understand systems by identifying their individual elements and examining how these elements interact each other, to emphasize the dynamic and interdependent nature of the social ecological levels. He emphasized the importance of the social, institutional, and cultural contexts of each environment. As a visual, he created a model using a series of concentric circles meant to represent the personal, micro, meso, and macro level environments humans encounter though the lifespan.

In the past decade, the SEM has been widely adapted and utilized as a model for understanding and responding to a number of societal concerns, including public health, community violence, and climate change. Figure 1 displays a diagram of the SEM as I have applied to school-based practices. The figure shows a set of 4 concentric circles
representing the following environments: 1. Individual: A personal characteristics (age, racial and cultural identity) as well as their cumulative life experiences and interpersonal relationships with friends, family, etc.; 2. Micro: The school-level, including the physical space as well as school culture, the individuals that comprise the school community, and the various systems, policies and practices that govern school operations; 3. Meso: The community/neighborhood of the school, including the physical neighborhood as well as people, social and cultural norms, resources, and issues such as public health, community violence, and education; and 4. Macro: The social level.

![Diagram of Social Ecological Model for Schools]

**Figure 1.1 General Representation of the Social Ecological Model for Schools**

SEM is appropriate lens for study of school-based practices because it adequately addresses the complexity of the school environment and the behaviors within those environments. Schools are settings where societal issues across every domain converge and interact on a daily basis. On the macro level, our current education system is
inextricably linked to the historical foundations of public education in the US, the current economic and political landscapes, and our standing in the world on indicators like science and mathematics achievement. On a meso level, schools are highly influenced by the neighborhoods where they reside. Community characteristics like employment rates, housing, public health, crime rate, and the racial/ethnic/cultural demographics, have enormous impact on the functioning of individual schools. These issues affect the school climate, curricular choices, teaching practices, access to materials and technology, funding, and student achievement. Finally, on the micro level the school environment is influenced by the individuals in the school community. Administrators, teachers, and students bring with them their unique experiences, cultures, and values. These “hidden” aspects of the schools’ ecology profoundly affect the behaviors of each individual at school and how they react to the behaviors of others.

The multi-level framework of the SEM is an effective mechanism for understanding school discipline. For example, a simple model for explaining disproportionality in school discipline would place blame on individual factors, such as the racial or ethnic differences between school personnel and students, or the out of control behavior of today’s youth. While it is clear that there is a racial component to suspension, racial disparities cannot be solely explained by White teachers working with students of color. Similarly, student behaviors do not occur in a vacuum, but rather are influenced by the behaviors of those around them and multiple other factors. Second, the SEM recognizes the multi-level, dynamic nature of the discipline system. It helps capture the ways in which members of the school community behave and react to each other’s behaviors and are influenced by their own micro, meso, and macro level factors. It also
considers the cumulative effect these interactions have on the functioning of the system as a whole.

**Culture and the Hidden Curriculum**

The issues surrounding school discipline demonstrate the critical role that culture plays in the discussion. Racial disparities in discipline are the most heavily researched area within the school discipline field, and dozens of studies have focused on the racial component to suspension and other exclusionary practices. However, I have chosen to widen the perspective because the research has shown that the issues go beyond race and ethnicity to include characteristics such as socio economic status, English proficiency, living in urban versus suburban communities, and disability status. Additionally, race and ethnicity are treated as mutually exclusive categories in our society, where one either belongs to a specific group or does not. Culture allows us to capture the much more complicated reality of individuals belonging to multiple groups, with shared, overlapping social and behavioral norms. For the purpose of this paper, I define culture as the collective knowledge, values, behaviors, customs shared by a group of people. People in schools are linked by shared experiences, race, culture, neighborhoods, etc., and these connections help explain how they function in a discipline system.

My view of culture in the school context is informed by critical race theory and the concept of hidden curriculum as it appears in the work of Michael Apple. Critical race theory is rooted in the acknowledgment of the white supremacist foundations of our society and the design of our governing structures to support the continued domination of middle class, Eurocentric culture over other cultural identities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). The education system serves as a key governing structure in our society and as
such plays an important role in the reinforcement of dominant social and cultural norms. This premise is supported by Apple (2004) in his book *Ideology and Curriculum*. Here, he uses historical evidence to demonstrate the overt intentions of many early education leaders to design schools as agents of homogenization and social control. The curriculum was explicitly developed to enforce the knowledge, behaviors, and morals of a Eurocentric capitalist culture and produce a workforce that met the needs of a modernized industrial society.

Apple connects these historical foundations to present day practice in an analysis of the so-called hidden curriculum of schools. The hidden curriculum of a school is comprised of things that are learned without being explicitly taught or appearing official curricula of the school. These include the social and cultural norms governing the school. It legitimizes and emphasizes certain practices, values, and behaviors while others are devalued or neglected. The hidden curriculum is communicated through a complex socialization process that starts the first day children enter school. Teachers praise students who work quietly and neatly, are able to quickly adapt to the class routine, understand and obey rules and procedures, and who follow the prescribed norms of social interactions within the school setting. Spontaneity, conflict, and non-conformity are all either deemphasized or actively discouraged. The concept of the hidden curriculum is critical to the school discipline debate because the entire system is predicated on how well students adhere to the behavioral and social norms that govern the school.

**Personal Background**

My current understanding of school discipline and exclusionary practices is largely informed by 20 years of working with youth as a teacher and community-based
program director. My experiences give me a unique vantage point within the school discipline debate as I have at times been both a part of the problem and the solution.

For 10 years, I worked as a special education teacher in a series of severely under resourced, dysfunctional schools, primarily with students with emotional or behavioral disabilities. Early on, I viewed suspension as a tool for maintaining an environment that was, at least somewhat, conducive to learning. Suspensions provided respite from the near constant chaos and disruption that I felt made it impossible to teach or learn. However, over time I began to notice patterns that troubled me deeply as an educator. I saw similarities in students who were repeatedly suspended. They were “high risk” students who already had a number of adversities that put them at risk of academic failure or disengagement from school. They were students with learning, emotional or behavioral disabilities, youth in foster care, youth with court involvement, and youth who had experienced trauma. The students who were being pushed out and excluded were the ones who most needed educational, emotional, and social supports that school provided.

In my later teaching experiences within juvenile justice facilities, prisons, and community-based programming for “high risk” youth, I saw these same patterns play out over and over in ways that were harmful to learners. Through the combination of 1.) a lack of adequate support for high need youth and 2.) the use of punitive practices like school discipline, schools were pushing out our most vulnerable students. The consequences on the individuals I worked with were severe and long lasting. I saw that repeated exclusion from school led to academic failure and disengagement from school. For many youth, there was a clear line from being out of school to an increased involvement with criminal activity and gang involvement. These replacement systems
ultimately led youth to involvement with police and the justice system. I watched this cycle repeat over and eventually decided that the education system was essentially a racist structure that guaranteed certain students could not succeed.

However, since becoming a PhD student, immersing myself in the literature, and instructing a college level course on the school to prison pipeline, I have come to understand a few key truths. First, my previous role as a White female teacher who adhered to the prescribed discipline process made me complicit in the overuse of suspension and its disproportionate impact of youth of color. Second, to state that my race was the causal factor in my contribution to the overuse and disproportionality in discipline is overly simplistic. While race is part of the issue, race alone has been insufficient to understanding the causes of disproportionate discipline. Third, that to understand overuse and disproportionality in discipline we need to examine the discipline system and all of its individual elements.

Consequently, a multi-level ecological systems model serves as the foundation of my conceptual framework. It is through this lens that I examine the existing school discipline research, my own professional experiences, and the connection between culture, hidden curriculum and our current school discipline system. This framework allows me to explore “why” school discipline has become a devastating system of exclusion for minoritized and marginalized youth.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

To understand what researchers thus far have learned from members of the school community, I conducted a systematic review of existing literature relating to school discipline and suspension that included perspectives of students, caregivers, or school personnel. I used the databases Academic Search Premier and ERIC. I used both broad and targeted search terms. The broad terms, like “suspension and perspectives” ensured I would capture all studies that included the perspectives of stakeholders. I used more targeted terms in order to assist me in categorizing groups of studies that focused on specific topics areas, such as “suspension and bias”. In total, I used the following 14 search terms: 1) suspension and race 2) suspensions and disability 3) suspension and disproportionate 4) suspensions and bias 5) suspension and disparity 6) suspension and culture 7) suspensions and perspectives 8) school discipline and race 9) school discipline and disability 10) school discipline and disproportionate 11) school discipline and bias 12) school discipline and disparity 13) school discipline and culture 14) school discipline and perspectives. I used the following three qualifiers to limit the results to those relevant to my proposed literature review: 1) Publication Date- 2004 to 2018; 2) Peer Reviewed, and 3). Qualitative research/Qualitative study. I started with 2004 because that was the year of the last reauthorization of the IDEA. That reauthorization reduced the protections afforded students with behavioral disabilities through the manifestation determination process. While this didn’t affect all students, it does represent a substantial percentage of students excluded from school. Additionally, the IDEA of 2004 policy was developed to be more aligned to the policies in the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which had
ramifications for how general education and special education were implemented. Consequently, 2004 was a year in which both the revised education polices were in place at the same time.

This preliminary search yielded 255 articles. After reviewing the list to remove duplicate articles, I was left with 56 articles. I then reviewed the abstract, methods, and participants of each study to determine if they met criteria for inclusion in my literature review. Inclusion criteria were: 1.) study contains an original research; 2.) study includes qualitative component; 3.) at least one component of study addresses school discipline; 3.) study includes students, caregivers, or school personnel; and 5.) study occurred in the U.S. After this review, 21 articles remained.

I created a spreadsheet to record which groups were included in each study. Because race/ethnicity was such a prominent factor in nearly all of the 21 studies, I included the race/ethnicity of the stakeholders in each of the studies. Table 2.1 shows the studies I reviewed with the number of participants, stakeholder groups, and race/ethnicity/gender when available.
Table 2.1 Articles Included in the review and stakeholder categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Caregivers</th>
<th>Educators</th>
<th>Administrators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Allen</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>10 Black Males</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bracy</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brockenborough</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>11 Black Males</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caton</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>10 Black Males</td>
<td>2 White 3 Black 2 Indian (Asian)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deckman</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibson</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>30 Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gibson</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>10 Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haight</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>4 Black 4 Black 6</td>
<td>10 White 5 Black 1 Latino</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Haight</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>28 Black 25 Black</td>
<td>10 White 5 Black 1 Latino</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henderson</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>9 Black 3 Latino 1 White</td>
<td>11 White 7 Black 1 Latino</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kayama</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>30 Black 28 Black</td>
<td>11 White 7 Black 1 Latino</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td></td>
<td>27 Principals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kennedy-Lewis</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>11 Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kulkarni</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>No # Given</td>
<td>No # Given</td>
<td>No # Given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monroe</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>2 White 2 Black</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pane</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>3 White 1 Latino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peguero</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>18 Latino</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Smith</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td></td>
<td>5 Asst. Prin.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapp</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>31 LGBTQ</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>27 Black 9 White 3 Other</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>12 5 8 3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

I utilized a multi-step content analysis process consistent with Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017) to analyze the findings from the 21 studies. The first step involved a
careful reading of the articles to familiarize myself with scope of the methods and the findings of the 21 articles. Then, I read through each article and identified each discrete finding from the studies. I created an Excel Spreadsheet to list every article and record the associated discreet findings verbatim. I created a new row for each discrete finding for each article. These findings represented the meaning unit for the content analysis process. I identified a total of 147 meaning units across the studies.

After the meaning units were established for all of the articles, I condensed the meaning unit, a process of “shortening the text while still preserving the core meaning” (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). Sometimes this resulted in a more refined and generalized finding. In those cases, the condensed meaning unit was typed into a new column next to the meaning unit. Sometimes there were more than one condensed meaning units derived from the meaning unit. In these situations, I copied and pasted a new row in the table that included the reference and the meaning unit to correspond with each discrete condensed meaning unit. During this process, I also continued to reread each article to maintain my continuous understanding of each respective article.

After I identified all of the condensed meaning units, I read and reread all of the condensed meaning units and developed codes. Codes are short one or multiple word labels that represent the associated condensed meaning units (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). During this process, I continued to read through the condensed meaning units in a recursive process, constantly reviewing the discrete findings across the articles. This led to the development of 97 codes that occurred across articles.

Once I had identified 97 codes, I began the process of integrating the various codes into categories. I recursively reviewed the categories across the articles, combining
them to be more cohesive and reflective of the literature. I continued this process until was left with eight final categories. They were: Multiple factors influence behavioral incidents; Discipline is Inconsistent, Unfair, and Unjust; School discipline has led to the securitization of schools and criminalization of students; Exclusionary discipline has far reaching negative effects on the entire school community; Dominant ideologies permeate the school environment; Racial, ethnic, and cultural identities play a large role in the regulation of student behavior; Personal philosophies and values of school personnel are critical; and Race, culture, and student-teacher relationships. An example of the content analysis process for one meaning unit is displayed in Table 2.2.

Table 2.2 Example of content analysis process for one meaning unit.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Condensed Meaning Unit</th>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caregivers view suspension as morally problematic: unjust, harmful, do not help children with problems, are racially suspect, and underline their efforts to prepare their children for racial injustice.</td>
<td>Caregivers believe that suspensions undermine their efforts to prepare their children for racial injustice.</td>
<td>contribute to racial injustice</td>
<td>Marginalization and Discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregivers view suspension as racially suspect</td>
<td>Suspension is racial</td>
<td></td>
<td>Marginalization and Discipline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregivers do not believe suspensions are beneficial for students</td>
<td>suspensions are not beneficial</td>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline Effects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caregivers view suspension as unjust</td>
<td>Suspension is unjust</td>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline and Fairness</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2.3. Categories by Article

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>School Discipline System</th>
<th>Race, Culture, and Ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Multiple factors influence misbehavior</td>
<td>School discipline has led to securitization of schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Discipline is inconsistent, unfair, and unjust</td>
<td>Dominant culture permeates school environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School discipline is inconsistent, unfair, and unjust</td>
<td>Personal discipline philosophy is critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>School Discipline System</th>
<th>Race, Culture, and Ideology</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant culture permeates school environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal discipline philosophy is critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Race, culture, &amp; student-teacher relationships</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                |                          |                          |                          |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>School Discipline System</th>
<th>Race, Culture, and Ideology</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant culture permeates school environment</td>
<td>Role of race, ethnicity, and culture in regulation of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal discipline philosophy is critical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Race, culture, &amp; student-teacher relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                |                          |                          |                          |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Study</th>
<th>School Discipline System</th>
<th>Race, Culture, and Ideology</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Dominant culture permeates school environment</td>
<td>Role of race, ethnicity, and culture in regulation of behavior</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Personal discipline philosophy is critical</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Race, culture, &amp; student-teacher relationships</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                |                          |                          |                          |

These final categories were used to develop the structure of the literature review.

As I developed the narrative associated with the categories, I identified two overarching topics that connected many of the categories. These were The School Discipline System
and Race, Culture and Ideology. After I aligned the categories under their respective focus areas, I was able to finalize the framework for the synthesis of research. Table 2.3 displays the categories and their respective presence across the studies.

**Findings**

The framework of this literature review was developed through a systematic synthesis of the findings through eight categories obtained through during content analysis. The categories reflected both the voices of the stakeholders and the authors of the articles describing the experiences of the respective stakeholders. The eight categories were aligned under two overarching areas of focus. The first is titled The System of School Discipline. The findings in this area relate to how the system of discipline functions in schools and the effects it has on students, families, and the school environment. The second focus area was Race, Culture, and Ideology. These findings relate to how issues of race, culture, and dominant ideology influence the overall school environments and the regulation of student behavior.

**Focus 1: The School Discipline System**

Analysis and deconstruction of the overall system of school discipline was one overarching focus of the literature. Findings were aligned with the Socio Ecological Model, demonstrating that the system of discipline is made up of a number of interacting and interdependent elements on multiple levels. The elements include the neighborhoods, various physical environments within schools, individuals in the school community, and school policies and practices. The literature demonstrates that stakeholders from every level of the school community had strong opinions about how student discipline is implemented in their schools. Findings in this area included underlying causes of
behavioral incidents leading to suspension, the inconsistent and often unfair ways that discipline policy is implemented, and the far reaching and long-lasting effects of school discipline on multiple levels of the school ecology.

**Multiple Factors Influence Behavioral Incidents**

A number of researchers explored the connections between behavior and discipline and the underlying causes of behavior (Gibson & Haight, 2012; Haight et al., 2014; Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2017; Snapp et al., 2015; West, Day, Somers, & Baroni, 2014). Importantly, while students and their caregivers have a general negative view of discipline, they acknowledge that student behavior plays a significant role in the issue (Gibson & Haight, 2012; West et al., 2014). Students and their caregivers recognized that students at times behave aggressively and act out of anger (Haight et al., 2014; West et al., 2014). Caregivers also discussed efforts they make at home to address behavioral challenges (Haight et al., 2014). In their study involving “frequent flier” students, or those who are persistently disciplined, Kennedy-Lewis and Murphy (2017) found that students acknowledged misbehaviors but view these incidents as momentary and “fleeting”, rather than fixed components of their character. Alternatively, students feel labeled by school staff and believe that teachers define the students by their poor behavior (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2017).

Only two studies specifically explored the root causes of challenging and externalized behaviors (Snapp et al., 2015; West et al., 2014;), and both found that a combination of personal, environmental, and school factors led to many behavioral incidents. The first study, conducted by West and her colleagues (2014), involved 39 court-involved female students. They reported that the main causes of “angry” or
“aggressive” behavior were out of school stresses and exposure to trauma. These students were able to identify triggers within the school often lead to behavioral outbursts. These triggers were most often connected to the words or actions of peers or school personnel. Snapp (2015) focused on LGBTQ students with multiple disciplinary referrals and suspensions. These students also reported that issues in their personal lives, such as mental illness, homelessness, and family problems were important contributors to their behavioral challenges at school. Additionally, LBGTQ youth reported that school was often a hostile and unsafe environment, and that some of their disciplinary incidents occurred after they were targeted and fought to protect themselves. Students from both studies were able to identify supports within their schools for personal challenges they experienced. However, both groups were also clear that teachers needed more training for how to recognize and respond to trauma in the classroom.

**Summary**

The findings in this section provide a glimpse into the complexity of student behavior and the differences in perceptions between students and school staff. Students and their caregivers recognize that students sometimes display challenging and aggressive behaviors. They also revealed significant insights into the connections between out of school challenges and in school behavior. They noted that better awareness of trauma among school personnel could reduce the triggers that lead to behavior incidents.

**Discipline is Inconsistent, Unfair, and Unjust**

Stakeholders expressed significant concern with the enforcement of school discipline policy in schools (Bracy, 2011; Gibson & Haight, 2012; Haight et al., 2014;
Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016; Kulkarni, 2017; Snapp et al., 2015). Overall, students and their caregivers viewed school discipline as an unjust and unfair system that often targets vulnerable students (Bracy, 2011; Gibson & Haight, 2012; Haight et al., 2014; Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016; Snapp et al., 2015). Teaching personnel also expressed frustration with the inconsistency in how rules were enforced and confusion among teachers and administrators about how discipline policy should be implemented (Kulkarni, 2017).

A number of researchers found that students and their caregivers perceived discipline practices to be fundamentally unfair or unjust (Bracy, 2011; Haight et al., 2014; Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016; Kulkarni, 2017; Snapp et al., 2015). Bracy (2011) found that students were frustrated by the lack of due process in school discipline. According to students, administrators routinely handed out disciplinary consequences without being fully apprised of the situation at hand, or without giving students the chance to explain their behaviors. This finding was confirmed in researcher observations of interactions between students and administrators. Students also reported preferential treatment for students who had better grades or had stronger relationships with administrators. They felt the legitimacy of the entire system was undermined because educators routinely broke rules that were meant to apply to the whole school community.

In Kennedy-Lewis and Murphy’s (2016) interviews with “frequent flier” students, they identified an iterative cycle of labeling and exclusion which led to perceptions that certain students were being singled out for discipline. These students reported that their misbehaviors led to being labeled as “bad students”. Students with this label described feeling constantly monitored by personnel across the school and being disciplined for
behaviors that were ignored in other students. One student stated, “I’m like a target . . . and they know when I walk into the office that I’ve done something that’s going to get me suspended.” (page 20)

The unjust effects of labeling also appeared in the study of persistently disciplined LGBTQ students (Snapp et al., 2015). Students and their advocates reported that LGBTQ students were labeled by school personnel for their sexual preferences or gender non-conforming identities. Similar to the previous study, students reported that these labels lead to increased monitoring by school personnel and disproportionately harsh discipline.

Students and teachers noticed inconsistency in how rules are enforced throughout the school community. In a fascinating ethnographic study in a Philadelphia charter school, Kulkarni (2017) used a severe disciplinary incident to examine the perceptions and viewpoints of students, administrators, and teachers. She found high levels of discord among teachers and administrators. She identified two groups in the school, one that viewed punitive discipline as necessary for teaching accountability and another that believed a softer, conversation-based approach was necessary due to the vulnerable nature of the student population. The first group felt unfairly burdened with rule enforcement because their colleagues were uncomfortable reporting misbehavior. This dissonance led to lack of uniformity in discipline practices which in turn led to confusion among students. The confusion resulting from inconsistency was mirrored in a study of Black students from highly securitized schools (Bracy, 2011). Students reported multiple instances of rules being enforced by some personnel and not others, of teachers enforcing a rule some days but not others, and of certain students being disciplined for rules that
others also violated. This inconsistency led to feelings of hopelessness and powerlessness for students.

Some of Kulkarni’s findings (2017) were unique in my review of the literature. The school that served as her study site employed a conversation-based discipline system that minimized punitive and exclusionary practices. Some educators found these policies to themselves be a form of racism and “soft bigotry”. These teachers believed that the lack of consequences in the discipline system denied the students the opportunity to take responsibility for their actions and thus did not prepare them for life outside of school. These low expectations for the low income African American students would perpetuate inequity rather than combat it. According to one of the educators, “It is the liberal democratic policies of providing help and protecting poor blacks which has resulted in oppressing and keeping the poor and blacks down. Have blacks been helped? It is the same liberal ideology that exist[s] in running this school.” This viewpoint complicates a standard narrative in the school discipline debate that the use of less punitive practices is more racially just. It also connects to the concept of the hidden curriculum of schools.

Summary

Researchers found that stakeholders had many critiques of school discipline and how it is practiced in schools. Most findings related to student perceptions of discipline as inconsistent and unfair, with a lack of due process and overly harsh punishments being key complaints. Students who were repeatedly suspended reported feeling labelled by staff and targeted for increased level of discipline. Educators also expressed frustration about inconsistency in rule enforcement, and findings illustrate the discord between educators and administrators when it comes to how to fairly and equitably enforce discipline standards. The statements of some educators about “soft-bigotry” reflects an
underlying problem that is associated with the hidden curriculum. Specifically, these educators purport that the students, who were students of color, needed to be taught to conform to disciplinary expectations. While they didn’t express this themselves, that notion underlies the classist aspects of the hidden curriculum that those teachers report to be essential to student success.

**School Discipline has Led to the Securitization of Schools**

In the 1990’s, a series of high-profile school shootings led to the perception that schools were unsafe places and schools were pressured to respond. This led to the institution of a number of security measures, such as metal detectors, security cameras, and the presence of armed police officers within schools. Findings show that Police often become the enforcers of the hidden curriculum, with far more serious consequences for violations. These practices, along with the arrests of students for school misbehavior has spread concern about the securitization of schools and criminalization of student behavior (Mallett, 2016).

Several studies have explored the perception of students who attend highly securitized schools (Bracy, 2011; Caton, 2012; Kayama, Haight, Gibson, & Wilson, 2015; Peguero et al., 2015). Students from these studies reported feeling monitored, surveilled, and targeted by practices such as bag and body searches, live feed security cameras, metal detectors, and ID card scanning. According to students, these practices have created prison-like atmospheres in many schools (Bracy, 2011, Caton, 2012; Peguero et al., 2015). Overall, students questioned the necessity of school police and other security practices and cause school to be an inhospitable environment (Bracy, Caton, 2012; 2011, Peguero et al., 2015).
Student Perception of Police and Security Measures

Researchers who asked students for their perception of police officers in their schools found that most did not object to their presence (Bracy, 2011, Peguero et al., 2015). However, students did not believe that the presence of police officers led to increased safety. In one study, (Bracy, 2011) students found their school to be a safe place, and thought that the many security strategies used by the school were unnecessary.

Nonetheless, the overall effect of securitization the on the school environment had a number of deleterious effects on these students. Students from three studies viewed the presence of police in schools as an extension of the surveillance and social control they experienced in their home communities (Bracy, 2011; Caton, 2012; Peguero et al., 2015). In Bracy’s study, students described how it felt to be in a highly monitored and securitized environment, using terms like, “cramped,” “caged”, “like you’re in some type of hole.” This exchange between the interviewer and a student paints a disturbing portrait of what life is like for students in these schools.

Student (White male): I mean I think . . . there should be a lot of safety, but to a certain point. Like stressing all these other rules and all this other stuff, it makes all the kids all frustrated, and they get off track with school, and it just throws everything off.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

Student: Like yesterday, they had hall sweeps and everybody was just all [flustered] because a lot of people didn’t have ID badges, which is their own fault, but everybody was all [flustered] and like running around, and I feel that a lot of people got distracted and didn’t even stay on task that
day, because they were all worried [about] if they were gonna’ get in trouble (page 377).

**Use of Criminal Justice Language**

A study by Kayama and colleagues (Kayama et al., 2015) examined the use of criminal justice language in narratives about disciplinary incidents leading to suspension. Researchers used social language analysis to examine the narratives of suspended students, their caregivers, and the teachers involved in the incidents. Criminal justice language appeared in the narratives of 95% of the educators, 65% of the students, and 75% of the caregivers. The authors found that participants often adopted the criminal justice perspective in their narratives. For example, school personnel referred to themselves as witnesses, while students took the perspective of criminal defendants, using terms like self-defense, victim, and prisoner. Eighty four percent of school personnel used terms like offender, offenses, infractions, crimes, criminals, and violations when describing students and their actions. Common throughout the narratives of all three groups was language referring to the police and the court system (police, law, interrogation, jail, legal), demonstrating the high rate at which these disciplinary incidents included police and court involvement. This language highlights the criminalization of school misbehavior and the securitization of schools. It also provides a clear example of Apple’s hidden curriculum. In this case, the norms of criminal justice have infiltrated public schools.

**Summary**

Researchers that explored the securitization of the education system demonstrated that the language and practices of the criminal justice system have permeated many
schools. Perspectives from students demonstrated that a number of prison-like practices have become commonplace in schools, including searches of their body and belongings, the presence of armed police officers, and surveillance cameras. Students found these practices to be unnecessary and felt that they negatively altered the school environment. Students did not specifically object to the presence of school resource officers, but did not believe that they improved school safety.

**Exclusionary Discipline has Far Reaching Negative Effects on the School Community**

Issues relating to the negative effects of school discipline on students, caregivers, teachers, and the school environment were by far the most common finding in the articles I reviewed for this paper. (Allen, 2017; Haight, Kayama, and Gibson, 2016; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, and Russell, 2015; Caton, 2012; Haight, Gibson, Kayama, Marshall, and Wilson, 2014; Gibson and Haight, 2012; Gibson and MGlynn, 2013; Peguero, Portillos, and Gonzalez, 2015; Bracy, 2011; Brockenbrough, 2015; Kennedy, Murphy, and Jordan, 2017). Most findings related to negative effects on students. However, caregivers and school personnel also reported experiencing stress and anxiety as a result of discipline.

Authors from nine studies reported that school discipline had negative effects on students (Allen, 2017; Haight, Kayama, & Gibson, 2016; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015; Haight, Gibson, Kayama, Marshall, & Wilson, 2014; Peguero, Portillos, & Gonzalez, 2015; Gibson & MGlynn, 2013; Caton, 2012; Gibson & Haight, 2012; Bracy, 2011). Each of these studies found that discipline had negative academic effects for students. For example, Haight and colleagues (2014) interviewed students who were suspended, their caregivers, and the teachers involved in the incidents to learn their
perspectives of school discipline. There was agreement among all groups that the time away from school that resulted from suspensions was harmful to students. Consistent with these findings, Caton (2012) found disciplinary suspensions had a negative impact on students’ ability to keep up with schoolwork. Students from multiple studies also reported about the nonacademic impacts of suspension. (Caton, 2012; Haight et al., 2014) Stakeholders reported that suspensions had a negative effect on their relationships with peers as well as their teachers. Students also discussed increased feelings of discord or disconnection from school which increased with additional suspensions (Allen, 2017; Caton, 2012; Haight, Kayama, & Gibson, 2016; Snapp et al., 2015). They also reported that discipline led to discouragement and feelings of powerlessness (Bracy, 2011).

Perhaps most concerning was the number of studies that found longer and more permanent negative effects on students. Students from these studies specifically identified that disciplinary practices contributed their school failure and decisions to drop out of school. (Bracy, 2011; Peguero, Portillos, & Gonzalez, 2015; Snapp et al., 2015).

The negative consequences of school discipline appeared to be a complex problem that had negative effects on caregivers as well. Gibson (2013) interviewed 10 grandmothers who were the primary caregivers for African American students who had been suspended. All of the caregivers reported that suspensions were harmful to their grandchildren. The grandmothers also discussed having to work to ameliorate the harm caused by school exclusion, an added and unexpected burden. Gibson and Haight (2012) found consistent perceptions from another set of caregivers. Those caregivers reported that school suspensions resulted in emotional strife for themselves and the children in their care. They also reported the disciplinary practices led to feelings of distrust with
schools, resulting in many of the caregivers considering transferring their children to different schools in an effort to reduce the feelings of mistrust and strife.

The development of negative school and home relationships were also reflected in the perceptions of the school climate overall. Students from a number of studies discussed significant negative effects on the overall culture and environment of schools as a result of discipline policies and practices (Allen, 2017; Bracy, 2011; Caton, 2012; Peguero et al., 2015; Snapp et al., 2015). Students described schools as being unwelcoming (Snapp et al., 2015), hostile (Caton, 2012, Snapp et al., 2015) and overly securitized (Bracy, 2011; Peguero et al., 2015). Students from each of these studies identified school discipline as the issue that alienated them from their schools (Allen, 2017; Bracy, 2011; Caton, 2012; Peguero et al., 2015; Snapp et al., 2015). For example, Caton (2012) examined the effects of zero tolerance policies on the education of African American male students by interviewing students who had dropped out of school. She found that their experiences with discipline caused them to view school as an inhospitable and hostile environment. Caton reported, “school personnel’s use of the most punitive measures of the policies, suspension and expulsion of students, led to their school failure.” Seven of the nine participants were expelled from school, resulting in a depth of marginalization that was associated with their decision to dropout, perhaps the most negative impact possible in a school. Similarly, Peguero et al (2015) found that Latino students felt discipline practices created a negative school climate and led to them feeling unwelcome and uncomfortable in their school. These students reported that the securitization associated with punitive zero tolerance as another mechanism of social control that resulted in disparate treatment because of their race. To compound the
problem, Peguero also found that the positive effects of certain strategies such as dropout prevention and social justice programs were negated once Latino students were suspended or expelled from schools, subsequently reinforcing the negative perceptions of schools by the students (Peguero et al., 2015).

There has been much less focus on how the disciplining of students affects school personnel. Only one study specifically explored this issue. Brockenbrough (2015) interviewed 11 Black male teachers at an urban high school about their roles as “the discipline stop” within their school. He found that the schools partook in the cultural stereotyping of Black males as disciplinarians. These teachers reported feeling pressured to assume an authoritarian approach to discipline even when that was not their preferred stance. This dissonance between their natural approaches and what was expected of them led to anxiety and discomfort among some of his participants.

**Summary**

Researchers identified significant effects of discipline on students’ academic performance, interpersonal relationships, and overall connection to school. They also demonstrated that students and caregivers were highly attuned to the negative effects of exclusionary discipline practices on youth and their families. Only one study found that educators acknowledged suspension was harmful to students. However, educators and administrators described discipline as a burdensome and at times emotionally draining.

There was a connecting theme within student narratives about the damaging effects of school discipline on the overall school culture. Students referred to school as a hostile, unwelcoming, and securitized environment. They attributed these feelings to disciplinary practices. Students who were repeatedly subjected to exclusionary discipline
also discussed the effects on their relationships to their peers, to teachers, and the school itself. These findings are a good illustration of the social ecological model. They demonstrated the interconnectedness of the various elements within the school discipline system and revealed the rippling effects of the system from the individual level to groups and to the surrounding community.

Focus 2: Race, Culture, and Ideology

Findings related to race, culture, and dominant ideologies were prominent in the literature. The role that cultural identity plays in the school discipline discussion is highlighted by the fact that every study reviewed either exclusively targeted individuals of a particular race, ethnicity, or cultural group or organized their findings in terms of these identities. Additionally, many authors chose to analyze their findings though lenses of racially or culturally focused theoretical frameworks, including Black Identity and Black Masculinity (Brockenbrough, 2015), Critical Race Theory (Caton, 2012), Stricture-Culture-Agency Framework (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016), Cultural-Ecological Theory (Monroe, 2009), and Critical Social Practice Theory (Pane et al., 2014).

Dominant Ideologies Permeated the School Environment

For many students, school was a place where expressions of their race, culture, or masculinity led to labeling, disciplining, and further marginalization (Allen, 2017; Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016; Peguero, et al., 2015). Some students attributed this to the demographics of school personnel, who were predominantly White and female (Allen, 2017; Peguero, et al., 2015). Allen (2017) found that the African American males in his study “perceive of school as a contested space where dominant ideologies are imposed.” These students reported that discipline was closely connected to issues of race
and culture. Researchers also found that students of color felt pressure to conform to the cultural expectations of their mostly White teachers (Allen, 2017; Peguero, et al., 2015), and felt labeled by teachers based on their perceived culture (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016; Peguero et al., 2015). Attempts to challenge the systems they view as unjust only heightened the power of their “badness” in the eyes of school personnel (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2016).

Pane and colleagues (2014) explored school discipline through the lens of cultural power. They defined cultural power as, “Distorted power relations…which are at play when a person acts, reacts, or interacts in ways that ignore others’ interests and provide false (i.e., unreal or oppressive) choices.” (page 301). The authors studied teachers with either high or low numbers of disciplinary referrals. They found that cultural power was more on display in classrooms with high numbers of disciplinary referrals. The authors also found in all classrooms, that dominant ideology influenced teachers’ classroom relationship expectations and that students were expected to conform to the prescribed norms for teacher-student interactions.

Deckman (2017) had consistent findings in a study of the disciplinary perspectives of White and Black teachers in a school. She specifically explored how teachers addressed race and culture in their work. In their personal narratives about disciplinary incidents, Black teachers were more likely to assume there was a racial component to incidents and acknowledged underlying racial dynamics within the school. White teachers adopted what they referred to as a ‘colorblind’ approach to their narratives, and focused solely on the facts of each incident rather than engaging in an exploration underlying issues. Interestingly, both groups of teachers reported that they
avoided any discussions of race within their classrooms. Teachers felt that acknowledgment of racial differences would lead to disciplinary incidents. Some White teachers specifically enforced colorblindness within their classrooms and discouraged any actions that called attention to race.

**Summary**

Researchers found schools and classrooms to be settings where issues of race, culture and dominant ideology permeated the school ecology and affected students and school personnel. They found that the race and culture of students affected disciplinary decisions of school personnel. Additionally, the race of educators was a factor in how they perceived discipline at their schools. Authors found that students were acutely aware of race and culture. Fewer school personnel demonstrated this awareness, and in some cases, school personnel worked to explicitly discourage any acknowledgement of racial differences.

**Racial, Ethnic, and Cultural Identities Play a Large Role in the Regulation of Student Behavior**

While the prior section showed how the dominant ideology established a school culture of disciplinary dominance, several authors also found that the racial, ethnic, and cultural identities of the stakeholders was important in understudying how race, ethnicity, and cultural identities functioned within schools and student discipline practices. In their respective narratives, students and caregivers repeatedly discussed the imposition of Caucasian, cis gender values on students from marginalized and minoritized groups and they consistently identified race and ethnicity as a key driver of suspension (Allen, 2017; Bracy, 2011; Caton, 2012; Haight et al., 2014; Haight et al., 2016; Gibson & Haight,
School personnel also discussed race as a factor in discipline, although it was far less frequent in the literature (Kulkarni, 2017; Deckman, 2015; Haight et al., 2014).

One important commonality occurred across studies that included student or caregiver perspectives. All of these studies were conducted in settings where the student population was predominantly Black or Latino and the teachers were predominantly White (Allen, 2017; Bracy, 2011; Caton, 2012; Deckman, 2015; Haight et al., 2014; Haight et al., 2016; Gibson & Haight, 2012; Peguero et al., 2015; Snapp et al., 2015). Authors from each of these studies found that students and their caregivers believed race and ethnicity played a significant role in how discipline is meted out (Allen, 2017; Bracy, 2011; Caton, 2012; Haight et al., 2014; Haight et al., 2016; Gibson & Haight, 2012; Peguero et al., 2015). Latino and African American students reported differential treatment from teachers and coaches at school, (Allen, 2017; Bracy, 2011; Peguero et al., 2015). They reported Black male students were stereotyped by teachers, (Allen, 2017), and their behaviors were misinterpreted as aggressive or defiant (Allen, 2017; Caton, 2012). Black students also reported that discipline perpetuated a negative perception of the Black male and contributed to the discord they felt while at school (Allen, 2017). Caregivers similarly reported that the racial aspect of school discipline undermined their efforts to prepare their children to manage racial injustice (Gibson & Haight, 2012). These findings demonstrate the importance of racial and ethnic differences between students and school personnel in the eyes of students and their families.

Findings relating to race were rare in studies examining perspectives of school personnel. As discussed in a previous section, educators in Kulkarni’s (2017) study of
discipline perspectives in a Philadelphia charter school specifically referred to the race of their students (predominantly Black) as a factor in their views about what types of discipline were most appropriate. Deckman’s (2015) studied disciplinary perspectives of Black and White teachers and found that only the Black teachers perceived race to be a factor in disciplinary incidents at their school. Haight and colleagues (2014) found that administrators acknowledged a lack of cultural understanding and stark differences in the demographics of the teaching staff (90% White) and the students (80% Black), contributed to disproportionate suspensions of Black students. One principal noted, “It doesn't sit well with me at all. As a Caucasian principal of a predominantly African American school, it's something I'm keenly aware of, and eats away at me.” Although uncommon, these findings show that some school personnel identify demographic differences between teachers and students as a possible contributor to disproportionality in discipline.

Only one study focused on students from the LBGTQ community. Snapp and colleagues (2015) interviewed a group of LGBTQ students and found that these students were disciplined in ways that led to further marginalization. For example, LGBTQ students and community advocates reported that LGBTQ students were disciplined for public displays of affection while similar behaviors from hetero-normative students did not result in disciplinary referrals. This is a clear demonstration of students being disciplined for violating gender norms and not for an aberrant suspendable behavior. LBGTQ students also reported being suspended for physical incidents in which they were targeted by other students and reacted in self-defense, in essence disciplining them for their own victimization.
Summary

A number of researchers found connections between school discipline and marginalized groups, most often Black and Latino students. Black and Latino students reported that the racial and ethnic differences between them and their teachers led to misperceptions of their behaviors and differential treatment of Black and Latino students. In some cases, students reported that they were disciplined for violating dominant cultural norms rather than for legitimate misbehaviors. Similar to the theme from the previous section, students and caregivers from every study discussed issues of race and culture while educators mostly ignored these issues.

Racial and Cultural Differences Contribute to Poor Student-Teacher Relationships

One of the key issues associated with disciplinary disfunction was poor student-teacher relationships. When students and caregivers discussed how to improve the current discipline system, improving and strengthening relationships between members of the school community was the most common recommendation (Haight et al., 2016; Haight et al., 2014; Caton, 2012). Students discussed the need for teachers to develop relationships with students that go beyond academics in order to increase student engagement in learning and decrease misbehaviors (Caton, 2012; Haight et al., 2014; Henderson & McClinton, 2016). Caregivers also emphasized the importance of building relationships and fostering understanding between educators, students, and families (Gibson & Haight, 2012). Both groups stated that stronger relationships would help teachers increase their sensitivity towards students and make it possible for teachers to affect the moral development of students (Gibson & McGlynn 2012; Henderson & McClinton, 2016; West et al., 2014).
However, a primary issue associated with poor teacher-student relationships were racial and cultural differences. The lack of teacher student connection was cited as a key factor in disproportionate suspensions for youth of color in three studies (Haight et al., 2016; Haight et al., 2014; Caton, 2012). In case studies of four suspensions of African American students, Haight and colleagues (2016) found that in each case the narratives of teachers focused solely on the “offense” and failed to explore underlying issues that were impacting the student’s behavior. Black students from Caton’s study (2012) reported that the mostly White female teachers at their school seemed to avoid developing deeper relationships or working individually with Black male students. The failure to work individually with Black males appeared to result in misunderstanding and conflict between teachers and students, resulting in disciplinary actions. This finding was mirrored in another study by Haight and Colleagues (2014), which found stakeholders from all groups agreed cultural differences made it difficult for Caucasian teachers to respond to the behavior of Black students. One teacher noted, “we have 95% of the people that work in this building are Caucasians.... [we] have significant cultural differences and sensitivity of what's going on and how student behaviors are taken.” Authors of these studies found that shaped teacher responses to student behaviors.

Summary

The relationship between teachers and students are critical in the school ecology and clearly had a large effect on how students and caregivers perceived the school environment. From their perspectives, the weak relationships between teaches and students were a prominent factor in disproportionate and unfair disciplinary practices. Multiple stakeholders identified racial and cultural differences as playing a role in
strained relations, and some students felt that White teachers were reluctant to develop strong relationships with students of color. Studies consistently found that improvement of the discipline system required remedies to teacher student relationships.

**Personal Values and Discipline Philosophies of School Personnel were Critical**

Several authors explored the discipline philosophies of teachers and administrators to determine how the philosophies related to their disciplinary decisions and views of their schools’ discipline process (Brockenbrough, 2015; Kennedy, Murphy, & Jordan, 2017; Monroe, 2009; Pane et al., 2014; Smith & Haines, 2012).

**Educators**

Researchers from three studies looked at the discipline philosophies of teachers (Brockenbrough, 2015; Monroe, 2009; Pane et al., 2014). Educators from all three studies acknowledged that, although they were required to work within a disciplinary framework set by school administrators, there were often conflicts between the disciplinary frameworks of their schools and their individual beliefs about discipline. A majority of teachers from the studies reported that they found ways to implement an individualized and flexible approach to discipline within their classrooms and that their negative feelings towards suspensions often influenced their decisions of whether to make discipline referrals (Monroe, 2009; Pane et al., 2014). A small number of educators reported that they stepped into their expected disciplinary roles despite moral misgivings (Brockenborough, 2015).

Monroe (2009) used a case study methodology to examine the discipline philosophies of four effective teachers, two White and two Black. She found that while all four teachers recognized that they operated under a disciplinary framework
determined by administrators, each used more dynamic, flexible, and responsive
approaches to discipline within their individual classrooms. All four teachers used the
degree and quality of student learning as a metric when deciding whether to refer a
student for disciplinary action. Student misbehavior or disruption was tolerated if the
student was still engaged in the classroom activity and other students were able to learn.

Pane and colleagues (2014) conducted a micro ethnographic study at a
disciplinary alternative school in Florida. They used classroom observations and
interviews to collect data on four teachers, two with high numbers of disciplinary
referrals and two with low referrals. Researchers also interviewed four students from
each teacher’s class. During observations, the researchers looked at routine social
interactions and cultural expectations to determine which types of power teachers used to
negotiate disciplinary incidents and promote positive behavior. They found that teachers’
discipline goals predicted the type of power used in interactions with students. The two
teachers with high numbers of referrals operated with firm rules and sent any students
who failed to meet expectations to the office. Both of these teachers also assumed a
traditional teacher student role, expecting passivity from students. These teachers
expressed a lack of confidence in students’ ability to change. The two teachers with low
rates of referrals were similar in their approach of each behavioral incident individually
and were more flexible in their adherence to rules. In contrast to the high referral
teachers, they did not seek passivity from students and instead encouraged student agency
and development. Consistent with the SEM, this revealed the importance of teacher roles,
experiences, and perceptions in disciplinary outcomes. In these examples, teachers used
their underlying beliefs of students and student behavior to determine their discretion to
wield or not to wield authoritative power in their personal interactions with students. These decisions affected the flow of students into the discipline system and the overall disciplinary outcomes for the school.

Brockenbrough (2015) examined the perspectives of Black male teachers from an urban district with high rates of suspension. He specifically explored issues of Black masculinity and the stereotype of Black males as disciplinarians. All of the participants discussed the common perception in their school that Black male teachers were ideal for handling disciplinary incidents. This was a source of anxiety and frustration for many of these educators. Those who tried to operate in an alternative manner to stern and authoritarian described feeling discredited and looked down upon by school personnel and students. One teacher described this experience,

For some Black men, that stern, real hard-core approach works, but you can’t force it. You can’t force something that’s not there. That rigid structure, drill sergeant approach is not me. The approach of organized chaos is more my style. But then the question becomes now, particularly as a Black man, people say, “Oh, you’re a Black man and these are Black kids.” So now my colleagues and peers are like, “Oh, by his room is a mess, he’s out of order. What’s going on in there?”

Their perception is like, the kids are running things!

Brockenborough’s participants also reported that they were disproportionately relied upon to handle disciplinary incidents regardless of where in the school they occurred. They described other teachers sending disruptive students to their classrooms to be disciplined. They felt limited in their roles and felt their other talents were overlooked because they were viewed as the enforcers of discipline.
Administrators

Two studies examined the discipline philosophies of school administrators. Smith and Haines (2012) used a multiple case study design to examine the philosophies of administrators from five schools in an urban district. They found that the disciplinary philosophies of the administrators were largely influenced by their personal beliefs and value systems. Two administrators used humanitarian approach of empowering students and teachers and promoting agency. These administrators were less supportive of zero tolerance policies and sought alternatives to suspending students. One administrator said, “If it were my ideal school, I would like to spend more time counseling students about correct behavior, rather than assigning consequences for incorrect behavior, because I personally don’t believe that punishment works.”

In contrast, the other three administrators adopted a punitive approach, with firm adherence to school rules and use of rewards for positive behavior and punishment for misbehavior. According to one principal, “These are our expectations for our school. If [students] cross these expectations, then they may not be going to school here anymore.”

The administrators varied in their use of power regarding the disciplinary expectations of teachers. The administrators who used a punitive approach to discipline viewed themselves as the ultimate disciplinarians of the school. Those who used a humanitarian approach viewed the role of student discipline as a shared process between teachers and administrators.

Kennedy, Murphy, and Jordan (2017) used a grounded theory design to explore disciplinary decisions of 27 administrators from Florida schools allowing corporal punishment. All schools were Title 1 middle schools. Of the 27 participants, 16
administrators approved of corporal punishment. Administrators acknowledged working within parameters set by outside forces, usually federal, state and local government policies. Within these parameters, administrators had a range of options and some flexibility disciplinary decisions. Consistent with the findings of Smith and Haines (2012), the authors found that discipline philosophies were shaped by upbringing, personal and moral beliefs, institutional requirements, and infrastructural limitations. The authors found two key considerations used by administrators to make disciplinary decisions: the need to teach students that actions have consequences, and the desire to work proactively to develop internal motivation to behave well. However, uncertainty of disciplinary decisions caused stress for administrators, and they reported having to juggle the wishes of educators, students, parents, and district officials. The authors summarized this dilemma in this comment, “The emotional dimension of administrators’ work resulted from the containment of contradictions and failures of a system in which administrators had to balance supportive and punitive approaches to student behavior and negotiate tensions between parental and bureaucratic orientations.” The experiences of these administrators are ideal illustrations of the interconnectedness of both the individual elements within the school discipline system and the system with larger governing structures.

Summary

Consistent with the SEM, researchers who explored the discipline philosophies of teachers and administrators consistently found that values, experiences, and beliefs about cultural/social norms played a critical role in school discipline. Administrators and educators felt obligated to work within existing disciplinary frameworks, and some
struggled to align their personal discipline philosophies with the established protocol. Researchers found that educators and administrators who demonstrated flexible and individualized approach to behavior were less likely to use exclusionary discipline. Consistent in a number of studies were the competing priorities among school personnel of prioritizing student growth and development or emphasizing accountability and responsibility.

**Summary of Important Themes from the Review of Literature**

This review included a systematic synthesis of the existing 21 qualitative and mixed method studies that examined school disciplinary practices from stakeholder perspectives. The studies included a broad range of stakeholders, including students, teachers, administrators, and caregivers from various backgrounds and racial and cultural identifies. Across each of the studies, the authors reported that school disciplinary practices affected minoritized students in ways that were viewed as unjust and harmful by multiple stakeholders. The primary group of students examined in these studies were Black and Latino students, but a study of LGBTQ students revealed these students and their advocates had similar perceptions. However, these perceptions varied across different stakeholder groups. The differences in perceptions between students and caregivers and school personnel underscored the racial and cultural divide between these groups. Findings reveal an educational system that appears to promote a dominant ideology and discipline systems that appears to discriminate against students from non-dominant racial and cultural identities. Across the studies, five key themes were critical to developing a cohesive understanding of stakeholder perspectives of school discipline.
First, schools as systems, do not adequately acknowledge or address racial and cultural differences within their school communities and in particular between school personnel and students. This theme represents a systemic issue for two reasons. First, it was consistent throughout all 12 studies that included student participants. These studies included the perspectives of over 200 students from every major region in the United States. While these findings cannot be generalized to all schools in all regions, they are indicative of a trend in schools that serve high numbers of minoritized youth. Additionally, the narratives of students demonstrate that the effects of racial differences go beyond relationships with individual school personnel. Students consistently described schools as unwelcoming settings where dominant cultural norms were imposed and students from other racial and cultural identities were disproportionately disciplined for violating those norms. These findings demonstrate the systemic effect of the schools’ failure to appropriately respond to the needs of marginalized and minoritized students.

Second, students and caregivers are keenly aware of and concerned with the racial and cultural differences between school personnel and students. Students of color believe these differences affect how they are educated, monitored, disciplined, and labeled. For some marginalized students this is their defining school experience. Similarly, caregivers of students of color believe that race plays a large role in how their children are viewed by teachers and how often they are suspended. This theme in the literature demonstrates that the unwillingness of school officials to directly address issues of race and culture is actually exacerbating the problems.

Third, few White school personnel are willing to acknowledge or explore issues of race and culture and their impact on school discipline. There were patterns
in the responses of different stakeholder groups. White teachers were least likely to discuss race or identify racial and cultural differences as an issue in their schools. When prompted to explore race, White teachers reported that they viewed themselves as enforcers of “color blindness” and actively discouraged any acknowledgment of racial differences within their classrooms. A small number of school administrators acknowledged the racial and cultural differences between staff and students affected disciplinary actions. These administrators acknowledged stark demographic differences between the predominantly White teaching staff and the students and articulated these differences as a potential factor in disproportionate suspension. Most Black teachers acknowledged a racial component to school discipline. These teachers regarded racial and cultural differences as an important factor in disproportionate disciplinary outcomes of students of color and in how they were expected to handle disciplinary incidents. These patterns further support the finding that racial and cultural divides permeate the school discipline systems.

**Fourth, teachers were unlikely to consider the underlying causes of misbehavior or demonstrate awareness of the personal circumstances of their students.** In narratives of disciplinary incidents, teachers consistently focused solely on the specific behaviors of the student involved and step by step accounts of the incidents. In addition, teachers did not acknowledge playing any role in disciplinary incidents or discuss alternative responses that may have prevented escalation of the incident. This contrasts sharply with the accounts of students and caregivers, who consistently linked disciplinary events and misbehaviors to in and out of school factors such as peer
relationships, trauma histories, and past negative experiences with certain school personnel.

**Fifth, students were acutely aware of and affected by the disciplinary practices and security measures that have become ingrained in school practice.**

Students viewed schools as places that were focused on surveilling and monitoring their actions and behaviors in an effort to “find” misbehavior and to exert social control or to impose dominant ideologies. Their narratives show they were highly sensitive to the school environment and could identify specific practices that led to harm and mistrust. When incidents occurred, students did not trust that the processes would be fair nor that their individual circumstances would be considered.

**Social Ecological Model for School Discipline**

These findings demonstrate that race and culture operate in schools and school systems in ways that inform but are also inseparable from the school discipline debate. The findings necessitate a revisiting of the social ecological model to more accurately illustrate how race and culture function within a school’s ecological system. Figure 2.1 shows the Social Ecological Model as presented previously.
This model does not adequately capture the complex intersections of race and culture within the schools from the studies reviewed. The primary shortcoming of this model is that it does not portray what happens when people from other communities and cultural backgrounds (Meso levels) join the school community.

Figure 2.2 Social Ecological Model representing students and teachers as separate ecological systems
Figure 2.2 shows teachers and students who exist in two different Meso systems. Teachers in these studies often came from different communities and racial or cultural backgrounds than the students in their schools. This model illustrates that teachers and students exist in separate ecological systems.

Figure 2.3. Social Ecological Model representing students and teachers from distinct Meso levels who share a Micro level

Figure 3 provides a more accurate reflection of the school’s ecological levels. Teachers and students from different communities and racial backgrounds come together at the school level. This model reflects that teachers, at minimum, work within the communities of their students, and thereby become part of that community. Similarly, students, at minimum, are exposed to the Meso level of teachers by interacting with the teachers who reflect the values and norms of their respective communities.
Figure 2.4. Social Ecological Model representing how the school discipline system interacts with Racial and Cultural Differences

Figure 2.4 shows the version of the SEM that best represents the perspectives of stakeholders, who consistently reported that the disciplinary process reflected a system of power and dominance of the societal majority (both racially and culturally) over minoritized learners. In Figure 4 we see that the school environment does not represent a balanced merging of the distinct social, racial, and cultural backgrounds of teachers and students. Rather, students are expected to adapt to the cultural norms of the school personnel. Although the school is located in the student’s community, the social and cultural norms of that community are not reflected in the school environment.

The SEM model shows that the educators in schools serving primarily minoritized students, failed to acknowledge or respond to the needs or identities of their students. Instead, it appears that educators responded to students with an expectation that students operate within norms and expectations of the dominant culture associated with the
teacher’s cultural background. This played out in unfair discipline that reflected the racial and cultural dissonance between the educators and the students they serve.

**Conclusion**

This review of the literature revealed multiple important implications for educators and researchers interested in school discipline and school disciplinary reform. These qualitative studies represent a critical component of the research that is leading to a comprehensive understanding of the school discipline system. The studies reviewed represented the full body of qualitative or multi method studies that examined school discipline from stakeholder perspectives. The unfair practices revealed in these studies represent a major concern for all stakeholders. The underlying racial and cultural tensions between students (and their families) and educators appear to be a major underlying issue associated with the disproportionate discipline of minoritized students. One of the major challenges in trying to reform school discipline is the lack of consistent understanding of these racial and cultural tensions by the various stakeholders. While authority is a necessary component to the successful functioning of a school, the failure of educators to acknowledge the racial and cultural differences has led to the imposition of dominant cultural norms and values within schools. Thus, school discipline functions as a system dominated by disciplinary control rather than disciplinary leadership.

More information is needed to determine the relationship between the findings from this body of research and specific trends in school discipline, such as over use of subjective or discretionary infractions and disproportionate referrals for students of color. It may not be possible for research to identify the precise factors that lead a teacher to discipline Black students for behaviors that are ignored in White students. However, it is
clear that a greater number and variety of stakeholder perspectives are needed to expand our understanding of disciplinary trends.

These findings also reveal an intervention point for reform efforts. Across the studies reviewed, there was evidence that the dominant ideology governed the school climate in ways that created unfair disciplinary systems. A recognition that the integration of cultures within school has been unbalanced is the first step towards remedying the inequity and creating a more racially and culturally responsive discipline system.
CHAPTER 3

METHOD

The purpose of my study was to expand our understanding of school discipline by exploring the complex, and often hidden, underlying factors that influence how school discipline systems function in U.S. schools. Over three decades have passed since the widespread enactment of zero tolerance discipline policies fueled an exponential rise in suspension rates in U.S. schools. There is now a large body of literature demonstrating that exclusionary discipline practices do not improve student behavior, cause harm to students, and disproportionately affect students from marginalized and minoritized groups, including Black and Brown students, and students with disabilities. As I argued in Chapter 1, movements to develop and sustain school discipline reform require a better understanding of the complex array of factors that influence how schools identify and respond to student misbehavior. Improved understanding of these factors will enable schools to design reforms that respond to the unique needs and challenges of their individual ecosystems.

My Study

I chose to explore these issues by focusing on school discipline system practices in a small, urban district in the Northeast. The district at the center of my study had the highest suspension rates in the state for every year since the state Department of Education began publishing select disciplinary outcomes in 2013. I utilized a mixed methods sequential research design (Morgan, 2014). I collected and analyzed data in two phases. In phase one, I collected and analyzed selected school discipline data from the school district and for the state. I synthesized key findings into a 12-slide power point
presentation and conduct semi-structured interviews to review the findings with students and school personnel from the target district. These stakeholders helped interpret the quantitative findings and provided their perspectives of factors that influence school discipline rates within their schools.

**Research Design: Mixed Methods Research**

In mixed method designs, researchers examine phenomena through the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. According to Morgan (2014), there are three main purposes for the use of these designs: (1) to increase certainty in findings by determining if both methods produce similar results; (2) to fulfill separate goals within a study that are better met with different types of data collection; or (3) to use the results of one method to inform the design or enhance the performance of the second method. The present study aligns with the third purpose, also referred to as a “multi method sequential” design (Morgan, 2014).

The integration of quantitative and qualitative design was critical for my study for two key reasons. First, my literature review revealed that there were no studies linking the perspectives of stakeholders to the specific school discipline data of their school or district. As a result, the body of literature consists of quantitative studies discrete from the stakeholders within the associated schools and districts, and qualitative studies discrete from the quantitative disciplinary data of their respective schools and districts. The integration of quantitative discipline data into the multi method sequential design grounded the interviews in actual data rather than relying solely on the perceptions and opinions of participants to understand the extent of the disciplinary problem.
Second, a key criticism in my literature review of school discipline research in the United States was the disconnect from the actual people, systems, and schools responsible for the data. This separation increases the opportunity for oversimplified or incorrect interpretations of the data. My analysis of the target district’s discipline data was not based only on my interpretation but instead was integrated with the perspectives of people with first-hand knowledge of the how the school discipline system functioned within the school district.

**Mixed Methods Sequential Design**

As stated above, the mixed method sequential design is appropriate when the results from one type of data collection will be used to inform the collection and interpretation of a second phase of data collection (Morgan, 2014). According to Creswell (2009), mixed method sequential design must consider the following four procedural factors: *timing, weighting, mixing, and theorizing.*

The *timing* relates to sequence in which the different data collection methods are used. Researchers can collect the quantitative data first and then qualitative, or vice versa. In addition, the data collection can occur in a more simultaneous manner, which allows researchers to use results from both types of data to inform each other and make changes as new patterns or questions emerge. While I believe that the simultaneous method data collection would have been beneficial in a study with this level of complexity, the time constraints caused COVID 19 restrictions prevented me from using this model. Instead, I completed the quantitative school discipline data collection and analysis first. I then used the results of the quantitative analysis to inform interviews with students and personnel from the district.
**Weighting** refers to how the quantitative and qualitative data are weighted, or prioritized. Either the quantitative or qualitative can be prioritized, or they can be weighed equally. In Creswell’s mixed method sequential design, the data collected first are prioritized. However, although the quantitative data were collected first, in my study the stakeholder perspectives of the district’s discipline data and the underlying causes were most important and were weighted more in my analysis.

The *mixing*, or merging, of the quantitative and qualitative data is a critical and complex component of mixed method research. In my study, data from the quantitative and qualitative components were analyzed individually and then merged after these initial analyses were complete. The mixing of the data formed a key component of my interpretation process and the development of findings. The perspectives of stakeholders enabled me to provide a more rich and comprehensive explanation of the quantitative school discipline data as well as an exploration of the underlying contextual factors that influence the district’s school discipline system.

**Theorizing** relates to the theoretical frameworks that informed my research design. As I reviewed in Chapter 2, the social ecological model (SEM) created by Bronfenbrenner (1973) served as the theoretical framework guiding my research design. The purpose of my study was to explore the underlying factors that help explain Preston’s school discipline outcomes and influence how the school discipline system functions. I utilized an adapted SEM framework as a way to identify and explore the individual, school, community, and societal level factors that played a role in Preston school discipline system. This model allowed me to organize and contextualize the extremely complex data provided by participants. It also provided the ideal lens through which to
explore how factors from different ecological levels interacted and affected each other and the discipline system as a whole.

**Research Questions**

The research questions driving my study questions were designed to: (1) expand our understanding of how school discipline by individuals from a school community explain and interpret their district’s school discipline data; and (2) explore the underlying factors that influence how school discipline systems function within schools. There were two primary research questions guiding this study.

1. How do stakeholders from a small, urban school district, including students and school personnel, interpret school discipline data from their school, district and state?
   a. What patterns do they identify?
   b. How do they contextualize these patterns?
   c. How do their personal experiences inform their contextualization?

2. According to stakeholders, what are the individual, school, district, community, and societal factors that influence the policies and practices of their district’s school discipline system?

**Sub Questions**

Before I could explore the social ecology of Preston’s school discipline system and address the primary research questions, I had to identify the district’s disciplinary outcomes. To accomplish this, I completed quantitative analyses of Preston’s school discipline data. The research questions guiding this component of the study were:
1. What are overall suspension rates in the district, the state, and selected schools within the district?

2. What are suspension outcomes disaggregated by ethnicity (White and Latino) district, the state, and selected schools within the district?

3. Of students who were formally disciplined (who received at least one in or out of school suspension) in the district, the state, and selected schools from the district, how many were disciplined for 1.) violent, criminal, or drug related offenses? or 2.) non-violent, non-criminal, non-drug related offenses?

Setting

Description of City

My study focused on a public school district located in “Preston”, a small city in the Northeast. The city is an example of mid-sized postindustrial cities throughout the United States whose economies have struggled since the collapse of the manufacturing industry. Through the 1950s and 1960s the city had a thriving manufacturing economy and a high demand for factory workers. This led to a large influx of workers, primarily from Puerto Rico. While these newcomers were initially welcomed in the city to cover critical labor demands, tensions arose in the 1970s and 1980s when the manufacturing industry declined and factories closed. The jobs that had previously offered economic stability and a pathway to homeownership for incoming Puerto Ricans disappeared.

The population is approximately evenly split between White and Latino residents. The White residents are primarily of Irish and Polish heritage. The Latino residents are predominantly Puerto Rican.
The city was rated as the most “at risk” community in the state according to the state’s Department of Public Health, with 28% of the population living in poverty. In September 2017, an independent study revealed that the city was ranked 59th among the most dangerous cities in America, placing higher than any other city from the state (Neighborhood Scout). In 2019, the Wall Street Journal identified the city as the most dangerous city in the state, with violent crimes three times the state rate.

**Description of School District**

Latino students make up the vast majority of students in the district, comprising 81% of the population. White students represent 13% of students. The demographics of teachers in the district are almost the exact inverse of the student population, with 82% White and 12% Latino. Tables 3.1 and 3.2 demonstrate student and staff demographics for the school district.

The school district has been deemed “chronically underperforming” by the state department of education for over a decade and was placed into state receivership in 2015. Four years into state receivership, the district continues to be among the lowest performers on statewide assessments, (17% of 10th graders passed Math and 27% passed ELA), and graduation rates, with only 62% of youth graduating with a diploma (MA DESE, 2019).

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1 From Neighborhood Scout’s yearly report of the 100 most dangerous cities in America. Retrieved from: https://www.neighborhoodscout.com/blog/top100dangerous

Table 3.1: Racial and Ethnic Characteristics of Students in District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>% of District</th>
<th>% of State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>20.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>1.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2: Racial and Ethnic Characteristics of School Personnel

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Race</th>
<th>% Administrators</th>
<th>% of Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>15.4</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>12.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native American</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>76.9</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islander</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multi-Race, Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The district has a substantially higher percentage of students who belong to “selected populations”. As Table 3.3 shows, almost all students are labeled as “High Needs”, meaning they fit into one or more of the selected populations. Additionally, the district has one of the highest percentages of students with disabilities, representing one in four students in the district, substantially higher than the state average.

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3 Selected populations are students who fall into one of the following categories:
**First Language not English:** Indicates the percentage of enrollment whose first language is a language other than English.

**English Learners:** Indicates the percent of enrollment who are English learners, defined as "a student whose first language is a language other than English who is unable to perform ordinary classroom work in English."

**Special Education:** Indicates the percent of enrollment who have an Individualized Education Program (IEP).

**High Needs:** Calculated based on the number of high needs students, divided by the adjusted enrollment. A student is high needs if he or she is designated as either economically disadvantaged, or ELL, or former ELL, or a student with disabilities.

**Economically Disadvantaged:** Calculated based on a student's participation in one or more of the following state-administered programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Transitional Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC); the Department of Children and Families' (DCF) foster care program; and MassHealth (Medicaid).
Table 3.3 Special Groups of Students in District

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>% of District</th>
<th>% of State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First Language not English</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>21.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learner</td>
<td>22.4</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students With Disabilities</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Needs</td>
<td>83.8</td>
<td>47.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>77.8</td>
<td>31.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Outcomes for the Latino students reveal significant inequities in student achievement. In every outcome category tracked by the state Department of Education, White students achieve higher outcomes than Latino students. For example, in 2017, the graduation rate for White students was 78% compared with only 57% for Latino. In 2018, the percentage of White students who met or exceeded expectations on statewide assessments in ELA and Math were 40% and 28% respectively. For Latino students, only 12% and 7% met these standards. Enrollment data for AP courses, and advanced Math demonstrate that White students participate in significantly disproportionate numbers. For example, data from 2015 show that while White students made up only 15% of the student body, they accounted for 43% of students enrolled in Chemistry, 59% of students in AP Math, and 54% in AP Science (Office of Civil Rights, US Department of Education).

Research Procedures

Note on the Effects of COVID 19 Pandemic

The COVID 19 pandemic had a number of impacts on my research study. The primary impacts were related to recruitment. My initial plans were to begin recruiting and interviewing in March 2020 and continue both through August 2020. The period of
simultaneous recruitment and interviewing would have allowed me to utilize data from early interviews to target my recruitment and ensure I included individuals from a variety of roles, responsibilities, and perspectives. The sudden closure in March, 2020 of the district led to an extended period of uncertainty and difficulty as the district struggled to transition to remote instruction. I was forced to delay and adapt my plans for in person recruiting and interviewing. I was unable to begin interviewing until after the school year had ended. This shortened the 5-month period to approximately 10 weeks and hindered my ability to utilize data from early interviews to inform recruitment efforts.

The shortened time period also affected aspects of my data collection and analysis procedures. An important factor in my selection of the mixed methods sequential design the potential for simultaneous quantitative and qualitative collection and analysis. This would have allowed me to conduct additional quantitative analyses and add to the slide presentations based new information or issues identified by participants during interviews. For example, one participant asked how Preston compared to other districts with similar demographics and how Preston’s suspension rates differed for male and female students. A five month time period for interviewing would have allowed me to collect these additional data and add them to the slide presentation.

**Recruitment**

To identify participants for this study, I utilized purposeful sampling and network sampling procedures. Purposeful sampling is common in qualitative research studies that seek participants who represent specific communities and have knowledge the phenomena of interest (Patton, 2002). For this study, I sought members of the Preston Public School community aged 18 and over to participate in interviews about the
district’s school discipline outcomes and practices. I sought participants from two specific groups within the school community, students and school personnel. School personnel could include any individual whose role involved the education or support of students, such as teachers, paraprofessionals, administrators, social workers, and behavior specialists.

I used network sampling procedures to identify potential participants. In network sampling, also referred to as snowball sampling, researchers identify early participants who can then identify and refer other individuals who meet the criteria for participation (Patton, 2002). I began by recruiting two individuals from my professional network who worked in Preston schools. At the end of these interviews, I provided each participant with an email that included a written description of my study and my phone number and email. Individuals who were interested were able to contact me directly. Each of these individuals referred students and other school personnel. These referrals resulted in an additional 8 school personnel and 4 students. In total, I conducted 14 interviews, with 4 students and 10 school personnel. See Table 3.4 for participant demographics.
Table 3.4: Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Current/Former</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Jerry</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Former</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Kelly</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Amanda</td>
<td>Student Support Professional</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Student Support Professional</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Former</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Student Support Professional</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Carla</td>
<td>Student Support Professional</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>Administrator</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Former</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Elise</td>
<td>11th grade Student</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Ethan</td>
<td>12th grade Student</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Deirdre</td>
<td>12th grade Student</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Oscar</td>
<td>11th grade Student</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Current</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Phase 1: School discipline data

Data Collection

Phase one of my study involved collecting quantitative school discipline data for my target district. The data were publicly available on the state’s department of education website. A total of 7 years of discipline data were available at the time of my data collection (March, 2020), which spanned from the 2012/2013 through 2018/2019 school years.

For each of the 7 years, I collected the following data:

1. Overall out of school suspension (OSS) rates for the district, selected schools, and state
2. Overall In school suspension (ISS) rates for district, selected schools, and state
3. Rates of students suspended (ISS or OSS), disaggregated by ethnicity (White and Latino) for district and state

4. Total number of students suspended disaggregated by type of offense (drug/violent/criminal offenses or non-violent/non-drug/non-criminal offenses) for district, selected schools, and state

5. Total student enrollment for district, selected schools, and state

6. Student enrollment disaggregated by ethnicity (White, Latino) for district, selected schools, and state

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed the discipline data in multiple ways.

**Step 1:** I used the enrollment data and the OSS data to calculate the percentage of OSS for each ethnic group (White, Latino) for the state, the districts, and selected schools. I will present these graphically to the participants so the participants can see the relationship of the rates across the ethnic groups and the sites (state, district, selected schools).

**Step 2:** I used school discipline data for the district and the state to calculate the number of students who received out of school suspensions for the offense category “non-violent, non-criminal, non-drug related offenses” as well as those for all of the violent, drug, or criminal related offenses combined.

**Step 3:** I conducted risk ratios and relative risk ratios for White and Latino ethnic groups within each of the sites (State, district, selected schools). Because the White group is the largest group in the state, I used this group as the comparison group for each of the analyses. This ensured that each of the analyses had a consistent comparison group. I
presented relative risks graphically so the participants could see the relationship of the relative risks across ethnic groups (White, Latino) and the sites (state, district, selected schools). Because the White group is the comparison group, I presented the relative risks for this group as 1.0 in the visual representation the relative risks for the comparison group.

**Phase 2. Slide Presentation and Semi-Structured Interviews**

**Data Collection**

During the second phase of my study, I synthesized the findings from phase one into a 12 to 15-slide presentation. I then created a semi structured interview template to accompany the slide presentation during interviews with participants.

**Instruments**

I created a slide presentation, a semi structured interview template, and an interview guide for this study. All instruments were created in both English and Spanish.

**Slide Presentation.** I synthesized key findings into a core set of 12 slides. The slides graphically depicted findings from the analyses of school discipline data from the state and the school district. I created tables and graphs that presented the data in a manner that was clear and comprehensible to a variety of participants. The slide presentation included the following slides:

1. Percent of students who received an out of school suspension during each school year (2013 through 2019) in the school district and the state
2. Percent of students who received an in-school suspension during each school year (2013 through 2019) in the school district and the state
3. Percent of White, Latino students who were disciplined (in or out of school) during each school year (2013 through 2019) in the school district and the state

4. Relative risk of out of school suspension for Black, Latino students during each school year (2013 through 2019) in the school district as compared to White students

5. Relative risk of out of school suspension for Black, Latino students during each school year (2013 through 2019) in the state as compared to White students

6. Number of students suspended for 1.) non-violent/non-criminal/non-drug related offences and 2.) violent, criminal, or drug-related offences during each school year (2013 through 2019) in the state.

7. Number of students suspended for 1.) non-violent/non-criminal/non-drug related offences and for 2.) violent, criminal, or drug related offences during each school year (2013 through 2019) in the school district

8. – 12. Discipline outcomes for individual schools within the school district during each school year (2013 – 2019)

In addition to these 12 slides, I created a selection of other slides with data relating to specific schools that were only presented to individuals with had attended or worked in those schools, as well as some slides with information relating to demographics, national trends, other districts within the state, and gender. I created the additional slides in response to questions I received from participants as I was conducting
interviews. I did not include them in the main presentation, but instead kept them available to present when they became relevant to individual interviews.

For example, one of the first teachers I interviewed asked what discipline rates were like at comparable districts in the state. They felt that only showing a comparison to the state was skewed, as the district had very different demographics (higher rates of low income, high need, and ELL students) than the state as a whole. In response, I used the data comparison tool on the Civil Rights Data Collection website to create a table that included rates for 8 districts in the state with similarly high numbers of low income, high need students.

**Interview Template.** I developed an interview template to accompany the slide presentation. The interview consisted of four sections: Introduction; Discipline data presentation and interpretation; Exploration of underlying factors and personal experiences; and Conclusion.

**Interview Guide.** I created an interview guide for a research assistant I hired to assist with my study. I recruited a student I knew from my work in Preston. This student was an 18-year-old Latino female who had just completed her junior year.

To prepare her for this study, conducted the interview with her, and then had her observe me conducting interviews with other participants. I also created an interview guide for her to use while conducting interviews. The guide expanded on the interview template by including a script to accompany each slide and a comprehensive list of potential probes for each component of the interview. I did not require her to read the script word for word, but provided it to enable her to get familiar and comfortable with the slides and questions, and then make adjustments using her own language.
Description of Interview Stages

1. Introduction. During the introduction I restated the purpose of my study, reviewed key terms, and asked two or three questions to establish rapport and get an understanding of the participant’s views of how schools manage behavior and the use of suspension as a consequence.

2. Discipline data presentation and interpretation. During this stage, I showed a slide presentation with the results of discipline data analyses and solicited the reactions and interpretations of the participants. I asked questions designed to help the participants talk through what they saw in the data, get their reactions, and use their personal experiences and observations to explain and interpret the data. My goal during this stage was to ask simple and direct questions and keep the conversation focused, as much as possible, on the findings from the analysis of Preston’s school discipline data. The interpretations participants provided during this stage of the interview were used during the data merging process in Phase 3, detailed below.

3. Deeper exploration of the underlying factors influencing school discipline in Preston. During this stage of the interview I followed up on the factors and experiences participants brought up during the previous interview stage. For example, if they mentioned cultural differences between teachers and students as an explanation for suspension inequities, I asked questions like, ‘Do you think White teachers find it more difficult to work with Puerto Rican students? Do Puerto Rican students react differently to White teachers than they would a teacher of color?’
4. Conclusion. In the final section reviewed the timeline and follow up procedures and asked the following concluding questions:

1. What advice would you give to someone trying to make positive changes to school discipline in your school?

2. Is there anything I didn’t ask that you think is important for me to know about discipline in your school?

3. What is something you wish people understood better about being a (teacher, student, administrator) in your district?

Description of the Interview Procedure

All interviews were conducted via Zoom as a result of COVID 19 restrictions on in-person research at University of Massachusetts. The interviews lasted between 45 and 85 minutes, based on the participants. In most cases, the interviews were conducted in a single session. In 3 cases, the participants and I decided to stop after 60 minutes and continue on another day because the initial stages of the interview took so long.

For each Zoom interview, I kept my camera on and gave participants the option of leaving the cameras on or off. All of the participants chose to keep their cameras on. I shared my screen with participants at two stages of the interview. First, while we reviewed the consent form together, and then again during the slide presentation.

For each interview I followed the following procedure:

1. Introduced myself, described the purpose of my study, and shared my screen to review the consent form with the participants. At this time, I also informed participants that the interview was being recorded, and that I would provide a transcription for them to review within 30 days of the interview.
If the participant agreed to continue, I reviewed the structure of the interview, and described each of the three sections: introduction, slide presentation, and conclusion.

2. I then conducted the four stages of the interview.

3. After the interview was completed, I reviewed the timeline and process for sharing the transcript and ensuring that it was accurate. I reminded participants that they would have the opportunity to make changes to their answers if they wished, and to withdraw from the study at any point. I then thanked them for their participation and asked provided my contact information if they knew anyone who might be interested in participating.

4. In alignment with my IRB and consent forms, I transcribed each interview and sent the transcriptions as word documents to participants for them to review. I instructed each participant to review the transcription and inform me of any errors. They were also able to add to or remove responses. None of the participants had edits or additions beyond grammatical errors.

**Data Analysis**

I utilized a multi-step content analysis process consistent with Erlingsson & Brysiewicz (2017) and to analyze the interview data. This content analysis included reading, coding, categorizing using the following steps: (1) I printed out the transcriptions of the 14 interviews; (2) I read the entire set of interviews multiple times to familiarize myself with the data and form a generalized idea of the interviews. I continued to read reread the entire interview set throughout the analysis process; (3) I created informal “analytic memos” (Charmaz, 2014) to track my initial reactions, patterns, and themes.
Over the course of the data analysis process, I repeatedly revisited and updated these memos; (4) To prepare for the coding process, I transferred interview transcriptions from Word documents to Excel Spreadsheets. I created separate spreadsheets for each interview; (5) For each interview, I broke responses into individual meaning units. The meaning units were segments of the text (words, phrases, or complete sentences) that related to a single concept or feeling. Each meaning unit was pasted verbatim into a separate box. See Table 3.5 for an example; (6) I created condensed versions of each meaning unit by “shortening the text while still preserving the core meaning” (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017). See Table 3.6 for an example; (7) I conducted the initial coding of the condensed meaning units. Codes are short one or multiple word labels that represent the associated condensed meaning units (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2017); (8) I continued to read through the condensed meaning units in a recursive process, constantly reviewing and recoding across the interviews; (9) I sorted, connected, and categorized codes into conceptual categories; and (10) I recursively reviewed the categories across the interviews until I was able to create a cohesive set of categories reflective of the interviews. These categories provided the organizational framework for my presentation of findings in Chapter IV.

The final categories were:

1. School Discipline Data Analysis and Interpretation. This category included the merging of quantitative discipline data with stakeholder interpretations relating to:

   a. Overall rates of suspension

   b. Rates of suspension for Latino and White students
c. Number of students disciplined for 1.) non-violent/non-criminal/non-drug related offences, and 2.) violent, criminal, or drug-related offences

d. Distrust of the accuracy of quantitative discipline data

2. Dysfunction in the School Discipline System

3. Student-related Factors in School Discipline

4. Educator-related Factors in School Discipline

5. School/District Level Factors in School Discipline

6. Community Level Factors in School Discipline

7. Societal Level Factors in School Discipline

8. The Story of 2015: The Year of Attempted Reform
CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

I present findings in two sections. They are organized in alignment with mixed methods sequential design of my study and the format of the stakeholder interviews. Section one of findings includes the results of quantitative analyses of Preston’s school discipline data and data from the initial stage of stakeholder interviews. During this stage, I showed a slide presentation with the results of discipline data analyses and solicited the reactions and interpretations of the participants. I asked questions designed to help the participant’s talk through what they saw in the data, get their reactions to the findings, and use their personal experiences and observations as members of the school community to explain and interpret the data. My goal during this stage was to ask simple and direct questions and keep the conversation focused, as much as possible, on the findings from the analysis of Preston’s school discipline data.

School Discipline Data Analysis Interpretation

The quantitative findings displayed are the same graphs and charts presented to the participants during the interviews. They are presented in the following order: Overall rates of out-of-school and in-school suspension for Preston and MA; Rates of exclusionary discipline for Latino and White students in Preston and MA, and Number of students disciplined based on the type of offence in Preston, MA, and selected schools. For each area I present the stakeholder perspectives in the following order: 1. Preliminary reactions to seeing the slide(s); and 2. Personal experiences or observations that could help explain and interpret the data.
Overall Rates of Out of School Suspensions

“The easiest thing to do is to say, ‘You did this, you're out,’” – Carla, school personnel

I examined the percent of students with out of school suspensions (OSS) in the district and in the State from 2013 to 2019. As Figure 4.1 shows, OSS rates were substantially higher in the district than in the state for all years. In 2013 and 2014, the district OSS rates were about five times the OSS rates in the state. During these two years, approximately 20% of students received at least one out of school suspension. In 2015, the OSS rate dropped substantially in the district, from about 20% in 2013 to 5.3% in 2015. Even with this drop, the rate remained 1.8 times higher than the State’s rate of 2.9%. During the 2016 school year, OSS rates increased substantially to 11.7%, and remained within a percentage point of this rate for 2017 and 2018. In 2018, the rate decreased to 8.9%. Over the same time-period, rates in the State remained virtually unchanged at 2.9-3.0%. In 2016, 2017, and 2018, the District OSS rates were about four times the OSS rates in the state. In 2019, the District OSS rates were about three times the OSS rates in the state.
The initial reaction of many participants to viewing the suspension rates in their district compared to the suspension rates in the state was surprise. Even school staff members closely involved with school discipline at their schools were not aware that the district’s rates of OSS were so much higher than the rates in the state. For example, Carla, a staff member in a student support role who was responsible for responding to and managing a range of behavioral incidents stated, “I’m shocked. I mean, this is the first time I’ve seen this. I’ve seen data from our building, you know, but…I’m shocked.” Kelly, a teacher, commented, “Wow. That’s totally crazy because that’s 20% of students (in 2013 and 2014). And then looking at it compared to the state, obviously it’s much, much higher.” Another teacher, Jerry, stated simply, “I think it’s crazy”. Some staff
members were not aware of the scope and scale of the suspension practices but were not surprised at the rates. For example, Larry, a staff member responsible for responding to discipline issues, stated, “I don’t know why Preston has to be such shit, but it always is.”

Students expressed both surprise and frustration about the OSS rates. For example, Deirdre said, “Wow, I had no idea it was like that.” Ethan stated, “Wow. I’m upset. I’m upset.” Oscar articulated both surprise and concern about the rates of suspensions and the disparities with the state. Oscar stated, “I’m surprised. I feel like I don't know understand. it's just like, it's a lot of inconsistency, like how inconsistent my district is versus way versus the entire state. It's very like it's very confusing.”

I asked participants to explain the high rates of suspension in Preston. The students consistently attributed suspension rates to the actions of teachers who routinely sent students out of class for misunderstandings or minor misbehaviors. Ethan stated, “You can get sent out for every little thing. For anything.” Oscar gave a similar comment, saying “I've seen like people get in like really big trouble over like little things. Students described some behaviors that could lead to class removal. For example, Deirdre commented:

We were like constantly in in house all the time and I would be in in house for like talking to one of my friends in class, or if the teacher doesn't feel like she's getting respected or she's getting like her way of classroom. I feel like then there's like some teachers who just like just have it with students like if they just have like one issue or one miscommunication.

Students also stated that annoying a teacher could result in disciplinary action. Ethan recalled, “I remember I got suspended once for crying. In 4th grade, because, I
guess I was being annoying or something like that.” Deirdre mirrored Ethan’s statement when she talked about a teacher who sent her out repeatedly for “being annoying.” When asked what types of behaviors annoyed her teacher, Deirdre responded, “usually asking too many questions because I never understand what she’s teaching and she’s always getting annoyed.”

These students saw teachers employing systematic use of “sending out of class” for minor misbehaviors that resulted in patterns of formal disciplinary exclusion, and they viewed these practices as the primary explanation for the high rates of suspensions in the district.

Elise, a White student who had never received a suspension, articulated her perspective related to the adversities faced by many Preston students and the district’s inability to support these students. Elise stated,

I think that like I don't know if Preston is well equipped to deal with like the students behavior. So then suspension would probably be inevitable Preston has like a high poverty rate I know a lot of students that I went to school with an elementary school were homeless like living in like shelters I think stuff like that can affect the way students behave in class The school doesn't really take into account stuff like that, especially, like I at least noticed that in middle school.

In this statement, Elise correctly identified the socio-economic and other high needs experienced by many Preston students. She reported the inadequate supports for these students contributed to high discipline rates. Her linking of student level factors (e.g., student needs) and school level factors (e.g., inadequate resources and staff knowledge
and skills) reflected a complex understanding of a failing discipline system in Preston and the systemic issues she identified reflect elements of the social ecological model.

School personnel had varied perspectives on the reasons for the rates of exclusionary discipline. Many personnel concurred with the students’ perspective that the ease of teachers’ ability to send kids out of class contributed to high rates of exclusionary discipline. Carla articulated this succinctly, “The easiest thing to do is to say, ‘you did this, you’re out,’” School personnel had different ideas as to why teachers in Preston relied so heavily on class removal. Some felt the underlying motivation was exertion of power. Lauren commented, “I just see it as this like desperate fight for power and control on the part of everyone, right, the adults and the students. But especially the adults.” Carla also commented on teachers’ use of power:

Like, that's just the easy way to solve a problem. To utilize the power that you have to fix something that you think is wrong. And so I think that, the first go to is like, oh you swore to teacher, you're out for three days.

Teachers also leveraged their power over specific students. Robert reported that some of his colleagues took student disruption or disrespect personally, which led to them having animosity towards certain students. He commented, “You can't take it personally. It's part of the gig, you know? So I hear teachers have these negative feelings and of course they affect how they respond. And then it snowballs and you end up with a teacher who hates a student.”

Unlike students, school personnel discussed underlying factors that influenced how teachers responded to student behavior. Some noted that the overall climate in the district supported exclusion as the default response to misbehavior. Kelly commented,
“Maybe it was, what’s the word I'm looking for, you know, the district culture. Not just on a school level but the districts culture, you know, ‘you act up, goodbye!’” Staff members also agreed that sending kids out replaced working with students to support their behavioral development. This was succinctly articulated by Jerry who stated, “we really didn't think that our job was to support students or their mistakes. It was to get rid of students so that the ones who quote unquote ‘wanted to learn’ could be there uninterrupted.”

This climate influenced how many teachers handled misbehavior in their classrooms, even those who might have preferred more positive behavioral techniques. According to Larry:

Even teachers with good intentions or school leaders with good intentions, like it's extremely difficult to do things in the way that you would want to do them. There’s not necessarily the time to really respond the way you would want to, so you wind up kind of doing the thing that just seems like a knee jerk reaction. They just use it to, like, kind of like quickly remove a problem. But the problem just comes back.

Teachers provided direct evidence to support Larry’s comment. Kelly and Jerry both began at the district as novice teachers and described how district norms made removal the easiest response. Kelly commented, “I was new then. Just in my own defense, I guess, I did sort of take the path of least resistance.” Jerry echoed this comment and in a telling statement, described the pressures new teachers in the district felt to maintain order:
While you're trying to figure out the content and how to be a teacher, you also don't want to get fired. And so, if your classroom appears to not be running well, which I was given some fairly tough classes, my first year. And I think that just, you know, I didn't want to not have a job. So, if I felt that asking some kids to leave was going to make things look more orderly…

Aspects of the district’s discipline policy also fueled high suspension rates, according to school personnel. For example, several personnel talked about the discipline policies that resulted in exclusionary removals from school for attendance issues. For example, school personnel reported prior to 2015, schools utilized suspension for unexcused absences, late arrivals, and “cutting class”. In that policy, students were given one day of out of school suspension after three days of being tardy. Additionally, the policy articulated that three unexcused absences would result in an out of school suspension. Regarding these practices, Larry said:

Back in 2013 14 they were like suspending for things, like, you get a certain number of tardies, you get a detention and if you don’t go, you get a suspension. I knew kids frequently who would just be like, “Oh, I'm not going to be in school tomorrow because I'm doing my suspension so that I don't have to do detentions. While it is not possible to determine to tell how many suspensions fell into this category, school staff remembered a high number of students being suspended over attendance. Larry reported, “I had students who were never in trouble, but they’d have, like, 15 days (of suspension) a year because of tardies.”

Some school personnel also reported that high rates of suspensions increased because of progressive discipline policies in place. In their interpretation of the
progressive discipline system, the consequences became more severe the more a behavior occurred or if a student failed to serve a lower level consequence. In the years before the state began pressuring the district to lower its rates, school personnel indicated this policy was applied liberally and resulted in extreme increases in disciplinary removals. Furthermore, two school personnel reported that increases in consequences were given in real time in the midst of an escalating situation between a student and a staff member. This resulted in a consequence for a single incident doubling, tripling, or quadrupling in the span of minutes if the student did not respond in a timely manner to a direction. Larry explained it like this, “Give me your phone. No? That’s a 1-day suspension. Give me your phone. No? That’s 2 days. Give me your phone. No? That’s three days.” Jerry concurred, and provided a concise explanation of his view of progressive discipline. Jerry stated:

That's the progressive discipline policy, right? That's ‘you've been late six times you're going to get a suspension. You've been sent to the office three times in a week or you were assigned this consequence or a detention. You didn't show up, you're getting suspended.

While this practice has declined in recent years, students and school personnel still reported that detentions were upgraded to suspension if they were not served and minor misbehaviors such as talking in class could result in a suspension if a student was referred multiple times by the same teacher.

**Interpretations of 2015 Data**

As Figure 4.1 shows, rates of out of school suspensions dropped 75% for the 2015 school year, from 20% of students in 2014 to 5% in 2015. All of the participants
commented on the drop, and most noticed that rates rose again in 2016, more than
doubling to 11.6%. The students I interviewed were all in middle school during the 2015
school year, and could not explain the drop. All of the school personnel who were
working in Preston during that time attributed that drop to significant changes that
occurred in 2015. Most critical to suspension rates was a moratorium on out of school
suspension put in place by new district leadership. School personnel spoke at length
about factors leading to the moratorium, how the policy change was enacted, and what
the results were within the schools. As this year was an anomaly in the discipline data
and in the interpretations of participants, I present findings from 2015 as a separate
section later in this chapter.

**Discipline Rates for Latino and White Students.**

*“This is the school to prison pipeline. That’s what I see.”*

To determine if there were disparities in discipline rates based on student ethnicity, I
examined discipline rates (either OSS or ISS) for White and Latino students in Preston
and MA from 2013 to 2019, as displayed in Figure 4.3. (Note: I did not include other
ethnicities as White students and Latino students combine make up about 98% of the
student population in Preston.) Figure 4.3 demonstrates that in both Preston and MA,
Latino students were disciplined at substantially higher rates than White students. The
percent of Latino students with OSS and ISS in the district was substantially higher than
the percent of White students in the district in each of the seven years. The percent for
Latino students decreased from a high of 24.9% in 2013 to 11.5% in 2019. The percent
for Latino students dropped dramatically in 2015. The percent of OSS / ISS for Latino
students in the district was as much as six times the rate for White students in the state (2013), and was about four times higher in 2019, the last year data were available.

Figure 4.2 Percent of Students with OSS and ISS by Ethnicity and Year

I also looked at the relative risk indices (RRI) of OSS by ethnicity in both the state and in the district for 2013 to 2019, as shown in Figure 4.4. The RRIs for Latino and Black students were above 2.0 for all years in both the district and the state. This means that Latino and Black students were more than twice more likely to get an OSS than White students each year. The RRIs were for both Latino and Black at the state level were higher in the state than in the district, although the RRI for Latino students was highest in the district in 2015.
Figure 4.3 Relative Risks of OSS by Ethnicity and Year

**Stakeholder Perspectives on Rates for Latino and White Students**

In contrast to the shock many participants expressed regarding the overall discipline rates, none of the participants expressed surprise at seeing the ethnic disparities in disciplinary exclusions. Most explicitly stated that they were not surprised by the disparities. Initial comments were nearly identical among a number of participants. Examples of responses to the data displaying ethnic disparities in disciplinary data included:

“"I mean, I'm not surprised” – Carla (School Personnel)
“it's not a surprise” – Robert (School Personnel)
“it's not surprising” Jerry (School Personnel)
“I guess I'd say I'm not even surprised” Ethan (Student)
“I don't consider it a surprise, to be honest” Oscar (Student)
“unfortunately, it's not a surprise.” Deirdre (Student)

Although the participants were not surprised, some articulated that others likely would be surprised. For example, Deirdre said, “I feel a lot of people would be really would be very surprised”.
The lack of surprise at the findings was in stark contrast to the deep levels of negative feelings all participants had about the findings. The participants were universally upset, concerned, troubled, and disturbed, about the findings. They often expressed a resignation to the disparity as a function of the district they were a part of. Ethan articulated this perception,

I want to say, I’m not surprised because, I don’t know, basically being a part of that. You know, it's not surprising, but it's still pretty upsetting. Seeing as though, like, most students that I've seen get suspended are usually people of color. Yeah, from white teachers.

Robert, a teacher at the high school, concurred:

Deeply disturbing. Not really a surprise. I think people work in Preston, and they can sort of like think that means that they don't have inherent biases and use it as a little badge of honor. You see it play out.

When I asked what they thought could help explain the disparities in their district, the participants expressed a range of views. All of the students felt that bias was the main cause and described differential treatment of Puerto Rican students by teachers. School personnel agreed that some of their colleagues exhibited bias and fear when it came to their interactions with Puerto Rican students. Some also discussed the differences in cultural backgrounds between school personnel and the student population, and reported general lack of cultural responsiveness and ignorance of Latino culture. A selection of students and personnel drew links between their school’s discipline disparities and larger societal issues.

Cultural Differences, Bias, and Fear
A majority of participants reported ethnic bias resulted in discriminatory treatment leading to disproportionate suspensions of students of color. This position was clearly articulated by Deirdre, a Latino student who viewed disparate treatment as a function of the student ethnicity. Deirdre stated, “Well, I do know when it comes to students of color, we just get it more harshly. I seen students of color getting in trouble or just things you hear a lot from other students of color.” This was a position also held by Jerry, a teacher, who viewed the disparity as a function of racism, Jerry said, “There's, I mean all the if there's different outcomes for different students based on race, like how could it be anything other than racism, right, like how could it be anything else?” The participants (both students and school personnel) viewed the disparities in the discipline data as a function of the differences between the racial and ethnic backgrounds of the students and the school personnel. This position was succinctly articulated by Oscar, a Latino student:

It's not a surprise to me because the majority of our, the majority of our school staff is White, for the most part, the teachers are more White and the custodian or office and kitchen staff, they're more Latino.

Oscar regarded the inequities as something beyond just the discipline issues. His articulation of the ethnic disparities in the position of school personnel reveal the ways that many of the students viewed their school as a place that did not reflect their own cultures.

This view of disparate treatment was pervasive among the students, who reported White teachers as a source of differential treatment of students of color. Elise, a White student, recalled one of her previous White teachers. Elise stated:
I had this one teacher my freshman year who had issues, like his behavior was so like inappropriate. He was hostile and antagonistic toward students who were not White.

There are teachers, especially older teachers at the high school who have been there for a while seemed to be less welcoming to, like, nonwhite students. This aligned with Ethan’s position stated earlier, “Seeing as though, like, most students that I've seen get suspended are usually people of color. Yeah, from White teachers.”

Many school personnel also reported the stark differences in the racial and cultural makeup of the school personnel and the students played a major role in disparate treatment of students of color. As Jerry stated,

There's the really obvious explanation, maybe it's not obvious to everybody. But there's obviously the race component right with a primarily White Administration and teaching body, middle class. And then a student population that by and large doesn't reflect that.

The cultural differences between the school and students led to differential treatment of students of color who paid the price through disparate likelihood to be sent out of class and suspended.

School personnel explained that the disparate treatment of students of color was a function of racism, cultural bias, and fear. Robert described this issue in an assessment of the racial tendencies of some of the school personnel. Regarding the teaching staff, Robert stated, “Non scientifically, I would say 20% are anti-racist and 20% are racist. then the other 60 are just like trying to get through.” Some of the school personnel explained that the failure of many educators to try to understand the cultures of their
students led to fear, and ultimately differential treatment and to the oppression of non-White individuals through disciplinary mechanisms. Lauren stated,

There's a lot of fear in the teaching staff. That kind of feeds into that dynamic of "I feel a loss of power and a loss of control" it's even more important for me to have power and control over dangerous violent brown people.

Robert concurred with this view, articulating a range of discriminatory treatment due to the absence of cultural understanding of teachers. Robert stated,

Teachers brings their own biases. And they are not culturally aligned. “I see young boys of color as men because they have a better beard” “They're tall so I am going to treat them differently than I might treat that little, little blond guy” I can feel, I can perceive how my coworkers have a fear response to of some of the boys of color. It's a big scary dude walking down the hall.

The school personnel consistently reported that the lack of racial and cultural knowledge and understanding were central to the disparate treatment of students. The views of these school personnel were succinctly reported by Lauren, “There’s a complete lack of cultural understanding.”

**Community and Societal Connections**

Not all the school personnel believed that disparities in discipline were primarily the result of racism, cultural differences, or a lack of culturally responsive educators.

When examining the disparate disciplinary outcomes for students of color, Sean stated:

I think in Preston 100%, like, it definitely if you look at the numbers, it's gonna look like it is very much dependent on race. I think that's to the larger point around socioeconomics and lack of resources and lack of education and all that.
Sean points to larger community problems as points of concern, specifically the socioeconomic status of the students and a lack of general resources available in the community. Sean provided further contextualization of the ways that the community played a role in the lives of some students of color and in the discipline data. Sean stated:

There are cycles they get in whether it’s gangs or other violence, or drugs, or lack of education. It can become a sort of self-sabotage and then out of school suspension becomes a way not to face it I think that's to the larger point around socioeconomics and lack of resources and lack of education and all that.

Sean’s perspective reflected a sense that the community issues were intruding into the school. But it also hinted that the schools and district were not culpable for how these needs affected disparate outcomes. Ken also spoke about the needs of students and the community while he viewed discipline data for White and Latino students. Ken stated:

One aspect is, and one thing we're trying to do, it trying to engage the families more. How much were families really engaged? What kind of family life do these kids have? Looking at percentage of White kids, you'd have to see, what are their socio-economic levels? What is their family life?

Ken appeared to link disparities to differences in SEC and family life of Latino and White students. But in this and further statements, he also appeared unwilling to do so explicitly. When I asked him to explain the ethnic disparities, Ken provided number of statements and questions that, again, appeared to be about Latino students, while never explicitly naming them. These statements included:

Also, the poverty, the single-family households, and I know it's not lack of love—but down at Kelley, Morgan…(two high need schools in the city)
And then, how do you classify? Because some of these kids, the races are blended, so they might look White but be more Hispanic.

But that's not the only reason. I think those White families that stayed in Preston, they tend to be more professional.

In many ways, Ken’s perspective reflects the critique that Carla places on uninformed White educators in the district. Carla stated:

I think if I was going to speak generally, experience has a lot to do with it. You know what White children experience, it's completely different from what Latino students experience, especially in relation to language. I think that there's a notion that students that can't speak the language fluently must not be as intelligent smart, capable, as others. so what I what I've seen, personally, is that that's the complete opposite. But I think that when you're in a classroom of White teachers who are teaching those students, there's room for that mindset.

Many of the participants viewed the disproportionate disciplinary outcomes as functions of larger societal issues playing out in the day-to-day activities in the district. Carla stated:

It's telling of what really happens every day and in America. Like, it's not even just, oh yeah, I know we're talking about Preston, but that's exactly what I would expect to see in many urban cities that are majority students of color.

Deirdre extended this perception into a more concrete representation of the macro-level school-to-prison pipeline construct affecting her school. She stated, “This is the school to prison pipeline. That’s what I see. It’s just like how many people of color are in prison.” Carla agreed with Deirdre’s view that the district’s discipline issues reflected the larger
issues of the link between disparate treatment of students in school discipline and disparate involvement in the nation’s courts. Carla stated:

    It is very, very similar to the relative risk of students and people ending up in jail. That's pretty much how that graph would look, like the chances of Whites, of a White person being arrested and being incarcerated versus Black and Latino, would look just like that.

Jerry’s views extended the disparities in the district beyond the school to prison pipeline. He expressed a conviction that the patterns in the data reflected the systemic racism taking place in the nation. Jerry stated:

    There’s the bigger sociological issue of White supremacy… the fact is that like, schools are institutions that hold up the status quo for the most part the status quo is Whiteness and White Supremacy. And most schools are set up to replicate that.

    I, that's not a good answer for why Preston isn't is unique, but I don't know.

Jerry’s views represented a consistent view from participants that the discipline issues in Preston were directly influenced by contemporary and historical forces that originated far beyond their schools. Macro level issues of racism in palpable ways that affected district students and school personnel in their day-to-day experiences.

**Number of Students Disciplined by Offense Category**

“It's almost as if like, you know, the system or school, it's like trying to have us believe that, you know, us people of color, getting mostly suspended for just drugs and violence and all that stuff.”

I also examined the types of offenses resulting in discipline for students in the state and the district. Figure 4.4 displays the numbers of students with disciplined by
category of offense. For the state, each bar shows the number of students disciplined in MA. The blue part shows the number disciplined for drug / violent / criminal offenses and the orange part shows the number disciplined for non-drug / non-violent / non-criminal offenses. In 2013 about one third of the offenses resulting in OSS in the state were for drug / violent offenses, and in 2019 about half of the OSS were for drug / violent offenses. In contrast, in 2013 in the district, less than one fifth of the OSS were for drug / violent offenses, and in 2019 just over one quarter of the OSS were for drug / violent offenses.

**Numbers Disciplined by Offense: Comparison Holyoke and State**

![Bar chart showing numbers of students disciplined by category and year for the state and Holyoke.](image)

**Figure 4.4 Numbers of Students Disciplined by Category and Year**

Figure 4.5 displays the numbers of students with OSS by category of offense in one of the district high schools and one of the district elementary schools that some of the participants worked in or attended. The numbers of students disciplined varied by year in both schools, but the overall numbers were generally decreasing by
year. In both schools, the numbers of students disciplined for drug / violent offenses was substantially lower than the numbers for non-drug / non-violent offenses. However, the proportion of suspensions for drug / violent / criminal suspensions to non-drug / non-violent / non-criminal suspensions was substantially lower in the high school than the elementary school. In 2013, just 2% of suspensions were for drug / violent offenses. The proportion increased in 2019, with just over 10% of the suspension occurring for drug / violent offenses. In 2019, almost 20% of suspensions in the elementary school were for drug / violent offenses. These percentages were substantially lower than the in the state or the district more broadly.

![Figure 4.5 Numbers of Students Disciplined by Category and Year](image)

**Stakeholder Interpretations of Types of Offenses leading to Discipline**

The data on the types of offences that led to suspensions in the district caused the strongest reactions in participants of any of the data I presented. Participants expressed awe, shock, and outrage. None of the participants expected that the majority of suspensions were for non-violent, non-drug, non-criminal related incidents. In fact, many
initially misunderstood the graph and assumed that the smaller portion of the bars represented the non-violent / non drug / non-criminal offences. Even with this misunderstanding, they still expressed surprise at the proportion of discipline that was not the non-serious offences. Jerry’s reaction offers a perfect example of this. As he first looked at the graph, he stated, “This is disappointing. Yeah, I think that that blue bar should be much, much lower. If it exists at all, which is something I have to think about.”

When I informed him that the non-serious offences were represented by the orange bar, he reacted, “Yeah, so there's a crap ton of kids here who should not be getting suspended that's what that says to me, yeah.”

Even an administrator responsible for making disciplinary decisions at his school, Sean expressed confusion at the high proportion of low level offenses in some years of suspension data. Sean stated:

I would say, like it surprises me a little bit more like 2016, 2017. The two earlier years, 2013 and 14, I wish it surprised me. But, like, we were suspending kids for being tardy to school, kids for you know refusing to hand over their cell phone. So in that way I wish it was a bit more. I think, you know, the jump in 2016 surprises me a little bit, you know, because the overall numbers went way down.

Sean’s comment also offers some explanation as to why of the 540 students suspended in 2013, only 13 were being disciplined for a serious behavior.

In addition to surprise, many participants were angered by the revelation that so few suspensions were the result of serious offences. Lauren, a student support
professional, stated, “So, just like, what is the purpose of this type of discipline? What is the purpose of exclusion of good kids from school, which is their public and civil right?”

Ethan, a Latino student, also expressed frustration at the findings. His comments reflect the findings from discipline research literature that people in schools erroneously believe that suspension is usually used for serious offences. He articulated the inconsistency between the data (mostly comprised of low-level discretionary offenses) and the district’s public story that equated suspensions with serious offenses. After examining the offense data, Ethan stated:

I feel annoyed now. Because it's like they make, you know, suspension has this philosophy about, you know, you get suspended for violence or something like that, drug use. And I kind of see that like, I look back and think, you know, is that really the case? When no, it never really was like that. And it's almost as if, you know, the system or school is, like, trying to have us believe that, you know, us people of color are getting mostly suspended for just drugs and violence and all that stuff.

Ethan’s profound statement provided insight into two issues in the district. First, he revealed the false narrative about discipline that obscured the fact that the majority of students who are excluded from school as a consequence for minor misbehaviors. Second, that false narrative perpetuated the perception that students of color were suspended more often because they engaged in more violent and criminal behavior at school. Ethan’s statement provided a valuable example of how students of color internalized the biased perceptions that they were inherently more violent and therefore, more deserving of punishment.
Ethan’s frustration about the incorrect perception that kids of color were
dangerous and violent were echoed by Deirdre. She stated:

I'm not that surprised because a lot of suspensions do happen at school for no
reason, or in how suspensions, like I was explaining earlier. To be honest, I'm not
that surprised because not a lot of times you'll have someone bringing a weapon
or a serious fight. Because word gets around and we would know about it.

Deirdre’s lack of surprise comes from her experience in the schools where students know
about the serious offenses because they are high profile events. The few high profile
events don’t align with the data. Deirdre further explains that these data should be shared
with the teachers in an effort to counter their views of students of color as bad kids.

Deirdre stated:

I think teachers should see this. Yeah. Because I feel like the way that they look at
their students is with a very strong image and a lot of teachers just have this
impression that we're really bad students. I feel like they just look at some, some
students as thugs. Or what they do outside of school like who they associate with.

It's just, it's sad.

Deirdre’s view that school personnel should be viewing the data was shared by many of
the participants. Larry stated, “I would love to see some of the people doing the
disciplining looking at this, see if they're surprised because I don't think they think that
they're doing that.”

The participants’ shock at the disproportionate rates of suspensions for minor and
discretionary offenses led to a range of insights into the systemic problems in the
disciplinary system. They discussed the purpose of school discipline and the issues they identified in the data. For example, Carla stated:

I am a little bit shocked, because I would think it would be the inverse, like I would think that there would be higher numbers of kids getting suspended for those drug and violent offenses. I would think that the graph would be upside down. And so I'm kind of surprised that that we're suspending so much for nonviolent or drug offense.

Similarly, Elise stated:

I think like it's kind of crazy that the like non drug nonviolent things are being punished more than the drug and violent offenses. If it was not a very big offense I think that you would want to veer away from sanctions and discipline.

Robert who stated, “I want to go like a 2013 and slap everybody. That's horrible. Oh my god, close to 1200 kids not in school for some dumb crap.”

The administrators generally reported that they followed district policies and procedures when making disciplinary decisions. With the exception of instances of severe behaviors, personnel involved with discipline reported that decisions were made simply to adhere to school and district policies and expectations. Sean, an administrator at the high school, expressed frustration that school discipline policies required him to implement practices that he didn’t personally support them. He commented:

When I first started in Preston as an assistant principle, students who were tardy X amount of times were being suspended. So, as an assistant principal, I felt like I was in a really difficult position. Because I was saying, like, this is crazy. I don't agree with this. But it's still the expectation.
Sean described trying to find ways to manipulate the system in order to avoid, or delay, suspensions, particularly those related to attendance violations. He stated: “I was, like, manipulating tardies and working with kids to get a parent note just so then I could be like, ‘OK, you’re not suspended now’. It would just sometimes be pushing it off a day or three days. But I think oftentimes it was just pushing it back until something else happened.”

**Distrust of Data Accuracy**

“The numbers are lies, lies, lies.” - Lauren

An unanticipated and important finding of the school discipline data interpretations was the lack of confidence among many participants that the data were accurate. All of the participants who expressed a lack of confidence reported that the official data I shared (drawn from the state reports) were an underestimate of the actual discipline events.

For example, while reviewing the graph representing in school suspension rates, Deirdre reported that the numbers could not be accurate based on her personal experiences as a student in the ‘in-house’ room. Deirdre stated, “I just don’t feel that’s completely accurate. Every day that I’ve had in-house room, no matter what block, it’s filled with 12 to 15 students on a regular day. On a bad day it’s 15 to probably 20.”

Other participants felt that the system for tracking was unclear or that the individuals responsible for entering discipline data at schools did not do so accurately. Ken stated,

And so we used to have a form, then we had to do it online, but how do they account for them?....There should be a discipline tracker, because I know I've sent
kids out and they don’t end up on the list. Part of that is a change in philosophy, and some of it is a question of reporting, as to what is submitted.

Larry stated, “I don't really trust the data, because it's like reported by people who are totally subjective and overworked.” Lauren also believed that a major problem was with data tracking, and reported that a major issue was that data tracking was secondary to responding to constant crises that were taking place in real time. Lauren stated, “because the people who were supposed to do to a data entry, you're actually on the floor, putting out fires like 100% no doubt.”

Participants believed that the pressure from the district and state department of education to keep suspensions low incentivized school leaders to not report all instances of disciplinary exclusion. Robert discussed how the data were intentionally lowered in order to reflect a more positive representation of the actual discipline problem. He stated, “The number of kids on the list is highly variable. It's like a classic way to defend statistics.”

While other participants were less explicit about potential causes of inaccurate tracking and reporting, Lauren reported that her school intentionally underreported disciplinary incidents. Her position allowed her to have insight into both the responses to student behavior as well as insight into the disciplinary process, including the data tracking. Lauren presented a comprehensive perspective of a system that struggled to support students, utilized disciplinary exclusion inappropriately, and intentionally altering discipline data. Lauren described school personnel who resorted to sending students out when they “felt helpless or out of control of the situation, when the student was monopolizing staff time, basically
when pushing the kid out, even temporarily, would give staff a break.” Lauren explained that this process of temporary removal generally resulted in a worsening of the situation and the student behaviors. Lauren stated, “but it almost always just kicked the can down the road and the student would come back repeating the same behavior or even more escalated.” This practice resulted in students with unmet needs who became seriously dysregulated in school. However, administrators reluctant to suspend students sent the students home without reporting the exclusion from school in any data system. Lauren stated, “Admin would often just send dysregulated students home, assuring the student and parent that it was "not a suspension" but that they should just take some time to settle and stabilize before they returned.” Finally, Lauren reported that the intense pressures to lower suspension rates led to intentional destruction of discipline records. Lauren stated:

Schools often did not want negative or disparaging data to accumulate, especially after the moratorium on suspensions was imposed. I saw piles of paper discipline data accumulate on administrators desks and on more than one occasion saw an administrator dump a pile in the trash rather than enter it into the electronic discipline record system that goes to the district.

Fundamentally, Lauren’s perspective on the findings is summarized in her own words about the discipline data, “the numbers are lies, lies, lies.”

**Student-Related Factors in School Discipline**

“They’ve learned that the system doesn’t work for them. So, they learn how to work the system.”

Participants agreed that students affected discipline practices in the district in straightforward and complex ways. Straightforward ways were primarily associated with
student behaviors that violated behavioral codes, resulting in disciplinary responses. More complex ways included the level of adversity among many students, and how these affected student/staff interactions and led to disciplinary incidents. Participants also discussed the connections between the experience of racism, self-advocacy, and discipline for Latino students.

**Student Demographic Factors**

Educators described ways that student demographic factors affected discipline practices. As previously described, student ethnicity was a risk factor for suspension, with Latino students being suspended at twice the rate of White students. Participants primarily connected the elevated risk for suspension to the explicit or implicit biases of educators. For example, Carla reflected on how cultural ignorance among some district educators led to cultural differences in discipline. She stated:

> Some people are still oblivious. Some people are still like, ‘what does that have to do with anything?’ That’s part of the reason why our Puerto Rican kids are not making it is because of the micro aggressions and discipline and all of these things that play a small part in into a big problem.

The failure on the part of some White educators to attend to cultural differences paved the way for misinterpretations and misunderstandings. According to Carla, students who were newly arrived from Puerto Rico were particularly susceptible to inappropriate discipline. She commented, “They come in and they're boisterous, all sorts of escalated, and not in a negative way. But that’s their environment, its loud, yelling out the window. You know, that just a personality, and as a culture, you've got it all.” Carla
observed that she has seen Puerto Rican students struggling to adapt to the more rigid classrooms of White educators. She continued, “They come into our district from other places where they felt comfortable in their nature. And they come here and all of a sudden you can't really express yourself. That can be really dangerous too because being misunderstood can lead to so many other things.”

**Student Risks, Needs, and Adversities**

Educators discussed a range of student risks, student needs, and student adversities that were associated with negative discipline practices in the district. Many participants discussed the abject poverty of many Preston students and the ways this poverty affected the student’s social interactions in school. Elise stated, “Preston has like a high poverty rate. I know a lot of students that I went to school with an elementary school were homeless like living in like shelters. That can affect their behavior.” Kelly expanded on the impact of poverty on student behavior, stating:

> It can be very hard to focus on, like, a child's education. While its super important, on Maslow's needs, if you’re thinking about the roof over your head and food and other immediate needs, there's no getting to the, like, self-actualization.

Sean agreed that Preston’s students had a multitude of challenges that affected their behavior and school engagement. Sean stated:

> I can see why in Preston it looks like it’s about race and class, and I think the thing that people get wrong is, it’s also about like poverty and socioeconomics, Which schools play a role in, but it's so much of a bigger picture in these students. There are cycles they get in whether it’s gangs or other violence, or drugs, or lack
of education. It can become a sort of self-sabotage and then out of school suspension becomes a way not to face it.

Sean described how personal adversities intermingled with school-based stresses for many students in Preston. Critically, he reported that some students found ways to utilize the district’s punitive school exclusion to serve their own purposes. Robert also commented on the phenomena of students causing their own suspensions. He stated, “Our kids are smart and they’ve learned that the system doesn’t work for them. So they learn how to work the system.”

Larry reflected extensively on the ways that racism, poverty, and their entire existence in the community impacted students in ways that fundamentally affected their self-perceptions in negative and derogatory ways:

I mean, racism is their lived experience. You know what I mean? But then, do they have a framework for understanding it as something that's not necessarily their fault? Because it can be so internalized and just be like, well, ‘my family's down’ or the shame and all the stuff that goes along with poverty. The internalized inferiority stuff. So, I don't know that they've had a chance, had an opportunity to, like, develop an analysis that would help them locate the problem outside of themselves and their families and their communities. So, but do they know that there's injustice and they experienced that? Yeah.

Larry’s description revealed the complex ways that the students lived experiences resulted in treatment in schools that fundamentally diminished their perceptions of self-worth, reinforced the system of oppression, and alienated the students from being a part of a school community. Robert and Lauren added that many Preston students experienced
complex and acute trauma that affected their ability to function within the rigid and often discriminatory school discipline system. When school personnel demanded adherence to inflexible behavioral standards, some students responded with an escalation. As Robert stated, ‘If someone is behind you screaming, ‘why are you in the hallway,’ if you have a traumatic background, you have a trauma response.” The experiences of the students, coupled with extensive exposure to trauma, played out in a discipline process that functioned as an exclusionary system to many students of color.

**Types of Student Behaviors**

Educators and students agreed that many students engaged in discrete behaviors that were classified as violations of behavior codes, sometimes leading to suspensions. Similar to the results of my data analysis, the most common violations reported by participants were minor. Many students and educators indicated that students engaged in disruptive and disrespectful behaviors, including cursing at teachers. While no one argued that swearing at teachers was acceptable, most did not feel that it warranted suspension. Oscar stated, “the first go to is, like, ‘oh, you swore to a teacher, you're out for three days.’” Carla agreed on the inappropriateness of the consequence, stating, “I would never condone a student swearing at a teacher, but I think being out of school for three days for swearing at a teacher is It illogical. It doesn't make sense.”

Other behaviors were more severe and created legitimate disciplinary challenges for educators and peers alike. For example, Oscar stated, “Sometimes there’ll be fights. Or heated arguments.” Ken and Oscar commented on gang issues from the community that sometimes infiltrated the schools, including a high publicity incident in 2019. Kelly explained behaviors she observed in the first week as a teacher:
I had a kid get into a fight with another kid because they were throwing the last breakfast snack back and forth to one another. And one of them wanted it. And the other one was like playing keep away and he literally picked up a desk and threw it at the wall at the collapsible wall. Many days where class would empty due to destruction.

At times, behavioral violations increased in severity as a result of teacher behaviors. Kelly provided an example from her first year of teaching. A group of four students “commandeered” a table in the back of the classroom, where they spent each day speaking loudly and disrupting the class. After multiple days of unsuccessfully trying to get the students to move and participate in class, Kelly had the table removed from the classroom one afternoon. When the students returned to class in the morning and saw that their table was gone, “some of them just turned around and left. I had one kid who became so dysregulated that he threw a pencil sharpener at me.” She then reflected “It was a terrible mistake, and I had made it more tense.”

Several other students and educators also reported that some student behaviors were functions of escalating interactions between students and teachers with educators. A focus of many of these discussions was in students exhibiting disrespectful behaviors to teachers. Elise stated, “One thing I see a lot is just people being disrespectful towards the teachers. A big thing is, for some of the teachers, the behavior that they're giving the students causes the students to be very hostile towards teachers.” Ethan confirmed Elise’s observations with an example from his own experience as a Latino student. He reflected:

I've talked back to teachers a lot. You're feeling like, you know, ‘What you're doing is wrong, you know, what they're saying to me is wrong. But back then it
was like, you know, I kind of just listened, regardless if I talk back to this, they’re always gonna be right and I’m not gonna win. So what’s the point?”

Ethan offered an example of disrespect moving back and forth between students and teachers. He also appeared to view his disrespect towards teachers as an ill-fated attempt to confront unjust treatment by teachers.

**Student Positionality and Self-Advocacy**

“*While I’m at school, I shouldn’t be having to fight those battles at the same time.*” - *Deirdre*

Ethan’s articulation of the interactions between teachers and students as a mechanism leading to student misbehavior was associated with a system within the district that failed to acknowledge, appreciate, or regard student voice or viewpoints, leading many students to advocate for themselves. Many of the educators and students reported that student advocacy and student voicing of their positions was a problem for many educators resulting in discipline problems for those students. Robert stated, “There's no mechanism for that, for them to demand respect. So if they call out a White teacher being racist, then they get sent to the office or whatever.” Robert also noted that many students of color lacked the capacity to communicate their own experiences of discrimination in a manner that educators found acceptable, stating:

They might not have the vocabulary to say, ‘you're discriminating against me.’ Some of my kids who experienced that have become extremely political and it's beautiful. But a kid a kid who doesn't have the vocabulary, who just knows that he’s being treated differently than his White peers might lash out and give up and feel overwhelmed.
Ethan and Deirdre spoke about their personal journeys towards developing the awareness and vocabulary Robert referenced above. Ethan described interactions with teachers that confirmed Robert’s perceptions. He recalled:

Sometimes, like, you know, we will get attitude from teachers. Then it's like ‘you're not supposed to be talking back to us.’ And then in our head, it's like, ‘You talk back to us! You know? This is my flight or fight.’ They show disrespect and then we give it back. It's like, ‘Instead of fighting you, I'm gonna talk back to you.’”

Ethan’s description of his reactions to being disrespected by teachers was revelatory on many levels. He displayed an understanding of the connection between trauma and behavior that appeared to surpass some of his teachers. He identified disrespect from teachers as a potential trigger for him and his peers. He acknowledged his disrespect towards teachers, but rightfully asserted that disrespect was superior to aggression. Critically, his comments illustrated the connection between his self-education and changes to both his behavior and his understanding of interactions between teachers and students.

Deirdre spoke at length about her painful but critically important personal journey towards understanding the racism, biases, and microaggressions she was exposed to throughout her schooling. Her personal story offers a poignant lens through which to examine how these issues affect students at different stages of their self-education. Deirdre reported that she sensed racism even before she understood the concept. She stated, “I mean, I feel like I noticed racism when I was younger. Like, I've always noticed it. I just never been able to put like a name to it.” As she grew older, Deirdre began to
connect the differential treatment she experienced to her skin color. Sadly, as her awareness of racism increased, the emotional harms it caused her also increased. She remembered:

I noticed when I hit middle school that I started maturing and life just got more difficult. School got more harder. Things got more real… and when I, like, realized that it just came down to the color of my skin, I'm like, ‘Wow. They don't look at me as a person.’ And I look at my situation, my life. It's just, it comes down to my color and it sucks.

As Deirdre discussed her middle school experiences, she drew a connection between her frustration at not being able to confront discrimination and her escalating behavioral issues.

And so I was kind of, like, rebellious to see what limits that I pushed. It was so frustrating because I didn't know what to do or what to say. I felt like I had to go off in order to get peoples’ attention. But I realized that rebelling wasn't doing anything but digging myself in deeper hole.

Deirdre’s description of her middle school years provided the clearest example of how exposure to racial and cultural bias at school was connected to behavioral issues and led increased school exclusion. Deirdre acknowledged that she almost ceded, saying, “I was like, ‘Fucking might as well, like just shoot your net, whatever.’” But she refused to yield to the oppressive structures around her and sought other ways to confront them. She stated, “And then I was like, You know what? No. Like, I put my foot down and it's not like that. And there's other ways. Like, sometimes you have to lose a battle to win the war.”
As a freshman, Deirdre refused to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance and was unjustly disciplined by a White teacher. The incident demonstrated that even when she asserted her rights in a way that was non-confrontational and did not violate rules, Deirdre was still subjected to discipline. Deirdre described her transition to high school as a seminal experience in her development. Deirdre stated, “I was thinking, ‘well I can't ignore it. It's like, this is an issue that I need to learn more about that I want to focus on and a movement that I want to be a part of.’”

While troubling, this incident had the benefit of connecting Deirdre with her school’s restorative justice program. In her role as a peer leader, she deepened her understanding of how oppressive structures function in society and how these connected to the system of disciplinary power employed by educators. She described the effects of her advocacy at her high school:

(If I call a teacher out) They get frustrated if it's a White teacher. I don't know if you've ever heard of this concept called ‘White fragility’ before, but I feel like that comes into play. And when I see them getting all sensitive and whatever, like, I know when to push and when to stop pushing. And sometimes, I don't care. I'll push to the full extent. And if I get sent out then I get sent. I’m a peer leader. I see it as I’m here to support my peers, my family, my community. That's why I know better. And that's why I'm speaking upon what I'm speaking, because I have that vocabulary.

Regardless of the outcomes of her advocacy, Deirdre’s self-identity and self-education provided her with the voice and capacity to confront those challenges from a position of personal strength. Deirdre also articulated the grave threat that her articulation of the
discriminatory structures had on the White educators who relied on that system to function. Deirdre asserted in the powerful statement below, Deirdre should not bear the burden of educating her teachers.

And so, they get frustrated and then that White fragility comes in and they feel like I'm attacking their whole world. I'm just like, you know what, let me just leave you over there. While I'm at school, I shouldn't be having to fight those battles at the same time.

**Educator Factors in School Discipline**

The participants shared a consensus that educators were a central component affecting discipline in the district in ways that highlighted their role as the primary contributor to discipline outcomes. Participants reported that some educators lacked the behavior and classroom management skills necessary to maintain a positive classroom and school environments. Many participants discussed ways educators instigated or escalated student behaviors in ways that led to disciplinary removals. Participants specifically highlighted the extensive challenges faced by new teachers in the district. Finally, participants discussed the ways that racism, bias, and labelling contributed to caustic school climates. Importantly, most participants identified teachers as the individuals most responsible high suspension rates in the district.

**Classroom Management Approach**

Students and school personnel identified classroom and behavior management as an important factor in school discipline. When students exhibited challenging behavior in the classroom, the response of the teacher determined whether the behavior resulted in disciplinary removal from class. Students spoke of their experiences with teachers with
high levels of disciplinary referrals. Teachers contrasted the problematic management
techniques of their peers with their own approaches.

Students provided many examples of teachers who appeared to utilize
exclusionary discipline as one of their main tools for behavior management. Deirdre
noted, “it will just get to the point where if they couldn't deal with you, they will just send
you out. Like, ‘I don't want to talk to you.’ They just have enough with you. Like, they're
fed up.” Deirdre spoke about a specific teacher who repeatedly sent her and her
classmates out of class. This teacher used exclusionary discipline as a response to
“getting annoyed” with students or when she “feels like she's not getting respected or
she's not getting her way of classroom.” Ethan also had experiences with teachers who
used the discipline system as a primary behavior response. He recalled, “I guess the
teacher was, like, getting upset. You know, even though we were doing work, we were
talking, but at least we were doing the work and stuff. And then like, you know, instead
of talking to us, this teacher’s way of stopping us…he kicked Jamal out.”
Ethan astutely noted that that his teacher chose class removal “rather that talking to us,”
to resolve the behavior. His inclusion of the detail that he and Jamal were completing the
assigned classwork, signified that this teacher prioritized a quiet classroom over student
learning or engagement. This incident aligned with Deirdre’s experience being removed
from class for asking to many questions about a lesson.

School personnel spoke at length about the relationship between classroom
management approach and disciplinary referrals. Their statements revealed potential
explanations for the types of teacher behavior described by Deirdre and Ethan. Multiple
participants identified the desire for control and need for order in the classroom as a
primary characteristic of teachers who make high numbers of referrals. Robert stated, “It ultimately boils down to teachers desperately wanting to wield authority.” Lauren shared a similar belief. She stated:

> What I see is a lot of adults, some well-intentioned and some not, desperately trying to gain control. So, when you asked me, like, what do I think of school discipline, I just see it as this desperate fight for power and control on the part of everyone, right, the adults and the students. I think a big response to that power struggle has been like, how do we control behavior?

Control replaced classroom management for these teachers, eventually leading to classroom removal and suspensions. Carla, Jerry, and Robert used terms like “rigid,” “black and white,” and “inflexible” to describe the mindsets of some teachers. Robert expressed confusion with that mindset, saying, “They set boundaries that actually promote power struggles. They end up sabotaging the thing they're trying to protect. I don't understand why these people are so fragile. If a kid is rude to me, I don't need to get vengeance.” His comment commented rigid classroom management with a punitive discipline philosophy, where the goal of discipline is to punish students for their behavior. While classroom management and discipline philosophy are distinct, participants clearly perceived that teachers who were more authoritative and inflexible in their management were also likely to use punitive disciplinary responses to behavior. Jerry contrasted his approach with his peers who support punishing students for misbehavior. He stated, “I'm not a punitive person. I think if there's any place in the world, you should be allowed to make some mistakes and learn from them without it ruining the rest of your life, it should definitely be school.”
When I asked Robert, Jerry, and Ken how they managed student behavior, all three reported preferences for keeping students in the classroom using positive behavior approaches such as ignoring minor misbehavior, using proximity control, and pulling aside students who seemed dysregulated. Ken stated, “The only time I'll send a kid out is when I can’t do anything else. You use all the things like proximity, given them the nod, talk to them a little.” Robert and Jerry also expressed reluctance to refer students to behavior specialist. Robert stated, “I tend to be the only person every kid interacts with in his discipline.” Jerry stated, “I try to keep administration out of my business as much as possible.” Robert described the techniques he used in place of making referrals, stating:

If kids are talking too much, I just stopped teaching. I just stand there and I wait. I actually appeal to the other kids and I thank them for being quiet. Typically what I do is give a couple warnings and I'll have private conversations with kids. I'll ask a kid to come to my office, which is, like, sitting in the hall, having a conversation. Most of it is just a check in, like, what's happening for them that they can't behave.

Jerry and Robert stressed the interpersonal aspects of teaching and emphasized teacher-student relationships while discussing classroom management and discipline. Their relationships with students served to both prevent misbehavior and intervene when incidents did occur. When I asked about his role with discipline, Jerry stated, “I was lucky. I don't want to take credit for it, but I was somebody who really didn't refer many students. I think I one of my strengths as a teacher was I'm pretty good at solving things interpersonally. And that got me by pretty well.” Similarly, Robert described a basic belief about working with students, saying, “I think that teachers are not taught that if
you're nice to people, they're nice to you. A preschool idea. I'm nice to my kids. And so they listen to me and when they're not listening, I can be like, ‘Come on,’ and they stop.”

**Labelling of Students**

Participants reported that labelling of students by school personnel led to assumptions, bias, and disparate disciplinary outcomes. Students felt they were labeled based on who they socialized with, previous negative interactions with certain staff members, and disability status. Labelling was associated with negative perceptions across school personnel and increased likelihood of disciplinary involvement. Deirdre articulated this association, stating, “I feel like they just look at some students as thugs. Or what they do outside of school, like who they associate with.” Ethan provided unique and powerful insights into labeling in Preston because he experienced the effects of both negative and positive labeling during his K-12 schooling. His comments revealed of how targeted students experience labeling and how these practices had unintended and unacknowledged consequences. Ethan reflected on his experiences with school discipline in elementary in middle school. During those years he was placed in the Therapeutic Intervention Program (TIP), a segregated program for students with emotional disturbance, where he experienced a recurring cycle of school exclusion through class removals, suspensions, and even restraints. He recalled how he and his peers felt that they were perceived negatively by other students and adults in the building. He stated, “When we were in TIP classes, you know, we're kind of like separated from the normal kids. Well, that's what TIP kids used to call them, ‘normal kids’. Being in a TIP program we were like portrayed as bad students or troubled students. So, I feel like that's one of the reasons why we would get suspended for, you know, misunderstandings.”
He also related a particularly disturbing incident from his 4th grade year in which he was suspended for crying. He recalled,

“I remember got suspended for crying. Yeah, because I guess I was being annoying or something like that. Or like they thought or I'm assuming that they thought that I was going to do something because, like, I had, like, anger problems too. So, if I start crying, you know, or getting frustrated, I'm assuming they thought that I would do something. So they just suspended me.”

This incident is concerning at every step. In a program for students with emotional or behavioral challenges, Ethan’s crying should have elicited a therapeutic rather than punitive response from his teacher. Furthermore, his teacher removed him not for the behavior he exhibited but for what they assumed might happen next. Last, the administrator who received the referral not only condoned the teacher’s response but then made the inexplicable decision to increase the consequence and keep Ethan out of school the following day. All of these actions were purportedly because Ethan was labelled as a ‘bad kid’.

Ethan’s change from ‘troubled student’ to ‘good student’ occurred when he entered high school and transitioned to mainstream classes. When I asked why he felt his teachers considered him a good student he responded, “maybe because I’m in High Honors.” He discussed how this change affected his treatment by school personnel, stating, “I look back and I kind of compare myself to my friends. I do try and do all the work and stuff. Even when I try and have a good time, you know, joke around with my friends, I would always be portrayed as the good kid by teachers. And my friends would always get kicked out before I would.”
Ethan recalled that the positive differential treatment he received from teachers led to strain with classmates at times. He spoke about a close friend, who was Black, who was repeatedly targeted for differential disciplinary treatment by school personnel. He recounted:

We're both doing work and, you know, we're being obnoxious, loud, and annoying. And then he sent him out. I said, ‘why are you sending him out only if I was also being loud. Like, I'm tired of y'all doing that’. And at the time, you know, he kind of never understood it, and there were times where, like, he would, blame me. And I'd be like, ‘Yeah, exactly’. You know, I wouldn't never be like, ‘No, no, that's not true.’ Like ‘yeah exactly, I don't know why you're kicking only him out.’

Ethan’s experiences elucidated the link between labels and disciplinary outcomes and demonstrated that often the label takes precedence over the behavior in determining personnel response. The incident from his time in the TIP program depicted a school discipline system that operated from the top down with an intent to punish rather than improve behavior. It also illustrated how Preston’s discipline system operated to magnify the existing vulnerabilities, such as placement in a segregated program, and further marginalize vulnerable students.

**Academic Stratifying of Students**

Participants also discussed the multiple ways that schools stratify students based on their academic levels. Deirdre, Elise, and Ethan specifically linked ethnic disparities in suspension to the stratification of students based on their enrollment in high honors or Advanced Placement (AP) courses at the high school. Elise described an unofficial
separation between students in high honors and those in “standard classes.” Elise reported that the standard level classes tended to be mostly Latino while honors classes were predominantly White. There was consensus among students that teachers had different expectations and more respect for honors students. Elise stated, “I think that teachers seem to respect the honors more than they, like, do with the standard class.” She recalled an incident where a teacher approached her friend, who was White, during a standard level class and said, “You need to get out of this class.” Ethan also discussed this stratification and contrasted this with standard classes:

Because we're high honors, we have like a lot of expectations from the teachers. So, we feel like we get more respect because of those high expectations. But then, from those same teachers, when they teach the lower academic or like the average classes, they're like, completely different.”

Deirdre and Ethan noticed that certain White teachers behaved differently in classes with predominantly White students. Ethan stated, “For me, I see the difference because I’m in a few high honors classes and there’s a lot of White students in the high honors. And they can make, I noticed, they can make jokes and comments with the teacher and the teachers are all laughing and happy.” Deirdre made similar observations when she patrolled hallways as a TA. She passed the classrooms of some of her teachers and at times noticed differences when they were teaching mostly White students. She described the realization, saying, “So when I walked by their classrooms and I saw how they acted and looked at the blocks that they're teaching and the groups of students they were teaching. It just made me question a lot and it put a lot of things into perspective. It
was, like, wow. This, like, this is what we're talking about. And most people like don't even see it.”

**Realities of the Job**

Educators spoke in depth about day-to-day realities of working in Preston and acknowledged that challenging work conditions affected the behavior of educators. Within the classroom, Teachers discussed the effect of large class sizes on the amount of time they could spend working to diffuse behavioral incidents within the classroom or to follow up after they have referred a student to behavioral support to learn the resolution. Kelly recalled a challenging school year, “All I remember from (the elementary school is something bad would happen, I would call the office and they would send somebody down and the kid would go away for a little while and like once they were out of the room., I couldn't even, because there were 22 other students, and 12-14 were heavy hitters.” While Kelly was upset about the situation, she relied on disciplinary removal of students. She acknowledged, “I know what I think is the right answer, but, like, when I was at (elementary school), there were times when I was like, ‘oh thank god.’”

Some school personnel reported that job realities were particularly challenging for educators in their first two years of teaching, leading to increased disciplinary referrals. Three experienced educators discussed their own first year in the district and their subsequent utilization of disciplinary referrals students to be disciplined. Kelly described the challenges she had in her first two years, “Those first two years, One adult in the classroom, just me. You know, and if something happens like you automate. You just felt like you, you needed like another person.” Jerry agreed with Kelly’s perspectives and linked his inexperience to his reliance on class removals to manage student behaviors:
You know, while you're trying to figure out the content and how to be a teacher, you also don't want to get fired. And so if your classroom appears to not be running well, which I was given some fairly tough classes, my first year. And I think that I just, you know, I didn't want to not have a job. So, if I felt that asking some kids to leave was going to make things look more orderly. And I also didn't really have a lot of strategies.

Sean expressed that his inexperience as a beginning administrator led to employing punitive approaches that were not aligned to his own values. Sean stated, “I don’t think I totally stayed true to my own personal core values. But, I also don't know that I had other mechanisms to use.”

Jerry reported that an important factor in the challenges faced by new educators was a lack of sufficient training in their preparation programs. Jerry commented, “So management was touched on very, very briefly, and I just kind of assumed that was the thing you were going to figure out on the job.” Sean identified how the inexperience of the teachers led to reliance on disciplinary referrals and suspensions as a primary response to student behaviors. Sean stated, “teachers like every other human being - you get frustrated. And it's the same thing and it's over and over and over and it's like, I don't know what else is gonna work. I think like out of school suspension was where it led.”

Unfortunately, in this district with its myriad challenges, the lack of adequate training and inexperience led to increased disciplinary exclusion.

**Racism and Bias**

All but two participants identified race and ethnicity as factors in disciplinary outcomes. As I noted earlier, the first statement most participants made to explain
disparities between Latino and White students was about the demographic differences between the student body, which is 88% Latino, and the education staff, who are 85% White. Latino and White students reported many instances of racist or biased behavior against students of color. School personnel described numerous ways that the cultural dissonance between staff and students was a major contributor to discriminatory discipline.

Some teachers demonstrated subtle forms of racism in their language, often within their instruction. Elise said, “Sometimes the words the teachers use when they're talking about things especially in my history classes.” Elise reflected ways that the language of White teachers and especially older White teachers demonstrated a lack of understanding of their own oppressive tendencies. Elise viewed the language of teachers as critical to understanding their views, and articulated ways in which that language revealed underlying racism and bias. Elise stated:

Almost like backwards almost calling Native Americans savages and having that be the narrative. I think my teacher like said like the N word with like the hard R and everyone in the class was like, ‘you could have just said you know the N word instead.’

Several participants described the discriminatory culture of the schools by describing covert types of racism and bias. Often these covert statements are evident in the ways that educators refer to parents and community members of color. For example, Lauren stated:

There are things that I hear that I interpret as racist. ‘I care so much about more about these kids’ education than they do,’ ‘Their parents don’t care about their education.’ ‘These people’ right, you hear a lot of ‘these people’ So people have
learned to, like, repress the racist comments but they are everywhere, in action and in language and just like couched ways.

Lauren sees the statements made internally among the school personnel as deeply reflective of their divisive and discriminatory views. While Lauren’s comments demonstrate a covertness to the racism, they also reveal a depth and breadth to the racist perspectives of educators that extend out of the school and into the community of color in ways that are perhaps more pervasive and more harmful.

Most participants discussed the ways that racism and educator bias played a role in defining their school culture and in the way discipline was utilized in their schools. Some of the statements from participants addressed overt types of racism. Kelly noted, “someone who had been at another school ended up at mine and got fired for being outright racist. But yeah, people use that all the time. ‘They don't care.’” Jerry discussed ways that educators “bring their own biases and their own, you know, conception of what school is. The White supremacist society that we live in suggests that they might see disrespect where there is none or disproportionately see it among non-white students.” Jerry’s views reflect the complex ways that societal issues of oppression are played out in teachers’ disciplinary responses to behaviors. Of particular note is his identification of disrespect as something that is primarily applied with students of color.

Robert reflected on a number of ways in which teacher actions or inactions reflected the underlying racism pervasive in the school. Robert stated:

Some students were speaking Spanish in class and this White student told them to speak American, okay, the teacher didn't do anything. There's a lot of active racism, inherent bias that goes unchecked. The whole idea of random searches
was pretty bad. The doo rag policy was racist. A guy across the hall from me had a sign on his door “No baggy pants”. You know some of its subtle some of it isn't. Like Deirdre, Robert articulated racism that was overt to those who were attending to issues of bias, cultural differences, and racism in their daily lives. In a relatively brief statement, Robert revealed that bias and racism was so pervasive in his school that a teacher posted clearly racist signs and White students engaged in racist talk without any correction.

Elise’s’ comments about dated and dehumanizing language reflected an underlying problem with the educator cultural competence. This cultural dissonance was described in detail by Robert, who viewed this as a major cause of disparate disciplinary treatment of students of color. He stated:

When a teacher is given free latitude to send a student out for disrespect. Then it's so open to interpretation. Your own biases come in. If I’m with a kid and they won't look at me, that is a mechanism to keep your eyes away from something stressful. Right? So, if I'm like, ‘Look at me!’, that is psychologically bad. But it’s also not culturally aligned. It’s not what they’re comfortable with. Because eye contact can be seen as a challenge.

Robert articulated ways in which cultural norms of the students of color were perceived by White teachers as disrespectful. Furthermore, his articulation demonstrated how teacher demands for compliance that are not culturally aligned with the student’s culture could result in escalations of behavioral incidents. His statements provided further indication of the underlying levels of oppression occurring within the disciplinary referral process.
Deirdre also identified a divide between the White teachers and students of color. Deirdre views the discriminatory treatment of peers of color as a function of differences in lived experience. Referring to her White teachers, Deirdre said:

They've never experienced what we've experienced. We've never really had it easy. It's always been, like, the hard way. Not a lot of people look at things from our perspective, they look at things from their perspective. It's like you can't speak for us or upon us if you aren't us or you haven't been with us.

Deirdre perceived that her school did not value student voice and lived experience. She also shed light on some of the invisible factors that cause a schism between White teachers and students of color. Deirdre saw extensive forms of racism coupled with a lack of cultural awareness, leading to a school system that replicated historical and contemporary forms of oppression. This viewpoint was shared by Jerry, who stated:

It's easy for a White students to see ‘if I behave a certain way, school is going to work out for me because society in general is going to work out for me.’ And I think the kids of color in Preston are really smart and they've already figured out that the system isn't there for them. And I think that the students of color, even if they can't articulate it, have kind of figured out that.

All of the comments from students and school personnel demonstrate that issues of race, ethnicity, and culture permeated every aspect of the school environment and, in many cases, defined the school experiences of students of color. Regardless of whether these issues were officially recognized by school and district leadership, they appeared in door signs, comments from White students, History classes, and demands that students stop speaking Spanish.
School/District Level factors in School Discipline

“It takes a village and I don’t think this village has enough resources.” - Sean

“There's a hell of a lot of unpacking of the situation here to do.” - Jerry

Many of the contributing factors identified by participants stemmed from characteristics of the district, some deeply rooted in Preston’s history. Students and personnel discussed demographic and training concerns with the district workforce. It was evident that the working environments within Preston schools had significant influence on the behavior of staff and students. Some participants also referenced disturbing behaviors by school personnel that were not adequately addressed by the District.

The school and district level of Preston’s social ecology was the most challenging to categorize. This level represented the environment in which stakeholders interacted and it was difficult parse factors related to individual behaviors and beliefs from those that were functions of the District itself. However, the blurred lines between these ecological levels was a defining characteristic of the proposed Social Ecological Model for Preston’s School Discipline System, providing strong support of my theoretical framework.

Racial and Ethnic Demographics of Educators

While individual biases were an issue at the educator level, most stakeholders expressed concern with the overall effects of a mostly White workforce and a mostly Latino student population. There was agreement from students and personnel that the District should prioritize the recruitment and retention of Black and Brown educators. Ethan, Oscar, and Deirdre explicitly stated that they felt more comfortable with teachers
of color. For example, when I asked Oscar if there were general differences in the discipline or teaching styles of White teachers versus teachers of color, he responded, “Oh, absolutely. Like most White teachers won't, wouldn't consider, you know, digging into what’s going on with a student or just going out of their way for a student.” I asked Oscar if he remembered specific examples and he recalled one of his high school teachers:

I have my English teacher, a Black woman. She's very supportive of the students. Like, she goes out of her way for the students. Like, if you looked up, she'd stop you and ask, ‘how you doing?’ She made her classroom, you know, a safe space for students, like LGBTQ. She’s really gone the full mile.

Oscar’s example was a clear delineation from his description, included in Section 1, of older White teachers who typically did not show concern and ignored underlying causes of behavior.

Carla stated, “Our kids need to have teachers in their building that look like them, that speak, you know, both languages. That they don't just see those particular people in positions like paraprofessional. Those people need to be in the classroom as well.” Many personnel also acknowledged that the recruitment of Black and Brown educators, in particular Spanish speaking Latinos, was not a simple task. As Larry noted, “The effort needs to be more than just, like, hoping some people of color apply and then maybe if you have two good candidates picking the person of color. There needs to be, like, systemic, intentional, long-term planning to create pathways for people of color.”

School personnel described the complex and multi-layered natures of race, ethnicity, and culture in schools. Carla, Lauren, and Kelly acknowledged that while the
district needed more educators of color, there was no guarantee their presence would disrupt injustices in the school discipline system. Carla stated, “I don't think you can hire teachers of color who are not invested in this population. Just because you’re a person of color doesn’t mean you’re a good teacher, that's not the key.” Lauren provided some examples that illustrated Carla’s view. She stated:

This is not by any means simple. There was a Black male teacher who called the police on a student. There was also an administrator of color who would use the same kind of language that I would hear from White folks, ‘These parents don't care about their education.’ I interpreted it as internalized racism. In some ways, I felt she gave permission to the White staff to perpetuate those ideas.

The District’s recent attempts to facilitate conversations about race and equity had also revealed that staff of color were not necessarily prepared or comfortable exploring the topics. Kelly attended a meeting with a video depicting problematic police interactions with young Black males and recalled that a Latino paraprofessional commenting that the issue was a lack of respect from the youth to the police. Lauren recalled the reactions of Latino personnel (primarily paraprofessionals) at meetings about race and equity, saying:

There was a lot of confusion. I think they were struggling with understanding themselves that there's students getting victimized by nature of their identity but also sharing the belief that, well, these parents aren't showing us that they care about their kid’s education. Almost holding them to an even higher standard. So that’s the tension. What does it mean to not reduce expectations? You know, like, ‘Let’s try harder, don’t tell me you can’t try.’ But it also ignores the structural realities that are presenting barriers to that.
Lauren and Kelly recognized the diversity of thought within the Latino community. However, their inclusion of these examples appeared to hint at underlying assumptions that many White individuals hold regarding the people of color and their knowledge, experiences, and viewpoints of racism. In initiating staff conversations about racial and social justice topics, White educators might also fail to consider other dynamics, such as the power imbalance between paraprofessionals and professional staff, and the discomfort at being one of the few people of color in a conversation about race.

None of the respondents contended that White educators should not work in Preston nor that all White educators contributed to disciplinary outcomes for Latino students. A few participants addressed general characteristics or behaviors that tended to help or hinder the success of White educators. The most important factors appeared to the level of awareness about cultural differences and their own inherent biases, and the level to which they were willing to demonstrate their commitment to students. Robert commented:

I think people work in Preston, and they can, like, use it as a little badge of honor that they work in an urban school and think that means that they don't have inherent biases. But you see it play out. Kids in my classes talk about how differently teachers respond. Like, the White girls are ‘sweetie’. The Latina girls all have attitude…they're not supposed to look angry…or have anger in their voice.”

Carla spoke at length about her role as a bridge between the mostly White teachers and Administrators at her school and the Puerto Rican students and families. She
provided insights into the large role culture and ethnicity play the behavior of students and educators. She said:

I've seen teachers who are White who get defensive because they feel like they're doing their job the way they're supposed to. Or they feel like they’ve tried everything. So, if I was to speak generally, I think that it comes from lack of communication. Like if teachers don't, are not explicit about their role and their investment in students, if a White teacher is not really invested teaching students of color, which in Preston is Puerto Rican students, then there’s gonna be issues. If they're not explicitly invested in the student and the family, there will be discipline issues.

Jerry echoed Carla’s belief that White educators needed more than a personal commitment to working in Preston. He stated, “I don't think it's impossible for a White teacher to be a good teacher. But I think you got to earn it. And I think you got to really kind of show them that you're in it for the right reasons and earn their trust.”

**Preston Insiders/Veteran Teachers**

A number of participants spoke about the benefits and drawbacks of having people from Preston work in the district. A common recommendation for creating a more diverse workforce involved recruitment from the student body. Jerry said, “I would intentionally recruit current students, to which I know there's been some effort to do, to come back and work with us in some capacity.” Carla agreed that graduates of the district would relate to the students and be valuable resources. However, she expressed concern that too much of a burden had been placed on former students that had come to work in the district in recent years. She commented:
Sometimes we find people from Preston who have what it takes. But then they burn out. So much is put on their plate because they were, you know, from Preston. The expectation is out there that they're bringing to the table knowledge and ability. Rather than taking it slow with them and saying, ‘Okay, you're going to impact a smaller group, but don't try make a big impact until we see how you do’.

Ken and Carla commented on the value being from Preston brought their work with students. Carla arrived from Puerto Rico as a child and therefore understood the challenges of trying to learn English in school. Carla noted, “Because I grew up in Preston, went to HPS. I think I reflect the students.” Ken’s Irish Catholic family had been in Preston for five generations, a fact he used to connect with students and instill a sense of community pride. He commented, “I have better perspective, I connect to them. My family is here five generations. I've talked about it, telling kids, I grew up on Chestnut Street, delivered papers to Appleton.”

The concern about Preston insiders was connected to cultural tensions within the White teaching force. It appeared that most participants linked veteran teachers to the old guard of the school system and the years when 40% of students were suspended or as Jerry described it, “the last gasp of a philosophy where we really didn't think that our job was to support students or their mistakes. It was to get rid of students so that the ones who quote unquote wanted to learn could be there uninterrupted.” For some participants, veteran teachers also represented the White community of Preston, which had dominated the political, law enforcement, education, and other power structures and which had, historically, tied the influx of Puerto Ricans in the 1970s and 1980’s to the City’s demise.
Robert described a cultural partition between educators who supported Preston’s shift away from punitive discipline and efforts to be a ‘antiracist’ school and those who adhered to more traditional methodologies and stressed the need to hold students accountable for their actions. Robert described the traditional educators as “anybody who thinks, like, that doesn't think that they need to work on that stuff. A lot of times there are people on one side and people on the other. He went on to estimate the breakdown of the different mindsets. He stated:

In my completely unscientific view, I would say 20% are anti-racist and 20% are racist. Then the other 60 are just, like, trying to get through. Setting up these Zoom meetings and they’ll be like two groups who are fighting each other in the middle of the screen.

Jerry and Larry also explored the complexities surrounding White educators who grew up in Preston. As Ken and Carla reported, being from Preston provided unique opportunities to connect with students. Larry and Jerry emphasized the positive of having grown up around people of color and having been exposed to diverse cultures. However, Larry stressed need for educators from outside Preston, who could bring fresh outlooks and be more open to exploring culture, bias, and systemic inequities. He believed that educators from more progressive towns “have their own way of being racist, as we all do. But like, there's a little more openness, a little more exposure… a sharper political analysis than a White person from Preston.” Jerry also explored the topic:

I think there's pros and cons to a White teacher not from Preston. But I think one of the cons…would be there's a there's a hell of a lot of unpacking of the situation
here to do. If you're not game for doing that, while figuring out how to be a
teacher, could be a hell of a lot to ask somebody.

Other participants also expressed their wish for an influx of new teachers. Elise
suggested, “I think making an effort at bringing in newer, younger teachers and more
diverse backgrounds. I think that, like, turnover with new people would be really good
for the school.” Kelly, who had expressed concern about high turnover in the district,
acknowledged the downside to having too much experience. She noted, “I hate to say it,
but experience is, it's like two edges of the same sword, right? With too much
experience, are you jaded? Are you willing to change?”

Training and Job Preparation

Lauren and Robert expressed concerns related to ongoing professional
development needs and the qualifications of some staff members. Lauren was primarily
concerned with the “one-off” format of most trainings and the need for professional
development in the areas of behavior regulation and trauma. She stated, “Attempts at
solving the problem are corrupted continuously because you can't bring in a one-off
solution. You have to repair those structural problems.” According to Lauren, the
teachers require professional development that includes deep and meaningful exploration
of trauma from multiple angles. She continued, “learning how awareness of triggers can
prevent activated students, finding better ways to react to student behavior, coregulation
between teachers and students, surveying your own attachment style to be more
effective.”

Robert spoke specifically about the staff members who were responsible for
dealing with behavioral incidents (whom I label Behavior Specialists) and noted that they
did not appear to have training in behavior management and de-escalation techniques. He commented,

A lot of the people working in behavioral support don’t seem to have an education or social work background. I don’t know if there are any requirements for that job. But the stuff they say to kids, like calling someone a crybaby. I've seen them behave in ways that don't make sense. I see them have favorites in how things are handled. There are definitely administrators who do not de-escalate. This (admin) has escalated every situation I've ever seen her involved with. She even escalates situations with me.”

Robert’s comments, while obviously connected to the actions of specific personnel, revealed a failure on the part of school and district leadership to ensure that the individuals in charge of monitoring and responding to student behavior are professionals with the necessary expertise. Robert’s statements demonstrated that the personnel in that role often were not capable of providing that support, with detrimental effects.

Robert stated:

If I send someone BST and there are met with, ‘Why are you here’” of course they're going to be disrespectful, because she was disrespectful to them. So, I've seen that so many times I would rather have a kid throwing stuff in my classroom than have them come in and try to help me.”

Behavior specialists play a critical role in school discipline systems and should provide a layer of support both students and personnel. Robert’s decision not to utilize their support signified that this component of his school’s discipline system was not functioning.

**Working Conditions**
Many school personnel reported that, at times, working conditions within the schools negatively affected classroom and behavior management and contributed to disciplinary outcomes. In some circumstances, educators resorted to exclusionary discipline because they lacked the time, resources, or emotional bandwidth to implement more responsive interventions. These challenges affected teachers as well as support staff and administrators, and often caused individuals to work against their values. As a teacher who rarely removed students from the classroom, Jerry acknowledged, “I think when you're going through that whiplash of a day and feeling drained…, it's really easy to slip into ‘I just need this to happen’, and ‘we should hold students accountable’ And I definitely have caught myself in my more tired moments.”

Jerry also recognized the strain on administrators of dealing with behavioral incidents, saying, “I think, it’s really easy to get to a point in the year where you're just putting out 700 fires a day and you're just like, ‘You need to go.’” Sean confirmed Jerry’s impression as he described his experience during the year of the moratorium, stating, “Just based on pure volume, it became difficult to say, like, ‘how do we create these systems’ when we're, like, running around a mile a minute.” As the individual ultimately responsible for maintaining safety and order in the school, Sean attempted to balance his personal beliefs about suspension with his need to respond to chronic behavior problems. He stated:

But I think you're put in a position where you're limited in terms of what your options are. And limited with resources. Either it’s something egregious or it’s a chronic problem and what we've been trying to do in terms of intervention hasn't been effective. I mean, at my core, in terms of personal values, I knew it was not
an effective approach. But it was kind of like, ‘well, what other options do I have at this point’?

Kelly and Lauren’s experiences at one Preston school over a three-year period were emblematic of the effects of school conditions on the job performance and emotional well-being of educators. For her first three years working in a classroom, Kelly was assigned classes where over half of her students were at the highest level of academic and behavioral need. Her first year coincided with Hurricane Maria which left large portions of Puerto Rico uninhabitable and led to an influx of students, many of whom did not speak English, in the middle of the school year. Kelly said, “That first year. Oh my god, that first year that I was there as a sub. It was it was crazy. We had kids going out in crisis, like, all the time. Half of them were from my class.” She went on to assign responsibility to the decisions school and district leaders, asserting:

Nobody was being thoughtful about where to place the students. The people downtown are like, ‘oh, look, we have a child with like emotional disturbance, brand new from Puerto Rico’. There was probably more to it on their end, but, like, it didn't feel that way. In my class we had 14 kids on IEPs out of 17. 10 of them were Level 1 English language learners. Everyone one of them had a story, like, had at least three ACES (Adverse Childhood Experiences), if not more”

Kelly described her mindset during that year, stating, “And I remember basically thinking like, ‘Okay, I just have to just have to get through’, like, ‘I've just got to get though these two and a half months. My experience that year was insane.’” The struggles Kelly was experiencing were demonstrative of conditions throughout the school. Lauren, a student support specialist at the school, reported that school personnel were expected to
take on multiple jobs, beyond their job description, filling in for whatever was needed for that day. Teachers were struggling to control student behavior and were repeatedly asking school leadership to provide more supports for students with the highest levels of need. Lauren recounted what she witnessed during that school year and recounted her efforts to mitigate some of the harms caused by the school:

Many, many days we would have to empty a classroom because a kid was tearing it up. That repeated kid losing control, destroying the entire room, coming apart in front of other students. And even seasoned teachers who thought they had competencies were suddenly in over their head with a kid or had multiple kids in their class who were at the extreme level of need. I can’t have six super high needs kids in my class, there no way I can teach them and the other kids who wanted to learn. It led to teachers crying, leaving the building, literally quitting on the spot.

While it was not her official role at the school, Lauren serve came to serve a key role in the disciplinary system by providing space for students to deescalate. As the environment in the school grew more chaotic and stressful, the emotional toll on teachers grew more severe.

Lauren started a support group for teachers. They participated because Lauren presented as a compassionate listener and was willing to acknowledge “the deficits and systems issues and frustrations they were feeling with leadership with on the school and also the district.” However, Lauren realized quickly that the support group was, in her words, “like opening pandora’s box.” She stated:
A lot of my work has been helping teachers put themselves back together when they are at the brink of storming off campus. In the end it backfired, the principal regretted allowing me to create that space. They did not want me to validate their concerns.

As the school year progressed, however, teachers began to show signs of severe stress. The principal grew concerned and asked Lauren to restart the support groups. Lauren detailed some of the issues teachers were experiencing in the following powerful but depressing statement:

- We saw staff members who were visibly stressed. We had staff who turned to substance abuse, and at times had that substance abuse affect their job performance. We had a teacher have a heart attack and he clearly attributed that to his work stress.

Lauren and Kelly’s stories provided invaluable glimpses into the inside workings of their school during an extremely challenging period. The connection between the discipline system and school and district level issues was clearly displayed in their comments.

**Inaction on Problematic Incidents**

Participants recalled serious incidents involving staff members who were not fired by the District. As I touched upon earlier, Latino students were subjected to racist remarks from their White classmates and White teachers about speaking Spanish during school. Kelly discussed a teacher who reprimanded staff members for speaking Spanish, which would clearly amount to workplace harassment. Deirdre detailed an instance which she reported teacher to administration:
I was sent out a class for speaking Spanish before. And, like, I was being screamed at by a White teacher saying that I live in America, I should be speaking English. ‘So many people have fought for our country for us to be here’ and she just started going on about this whole book. And I was like, ‘You know what? forget you. I'm leaving this classroom before I slip and flip out.”

The teacher was still at the school as of our interview and Deirdre expressed frustrated by the school’s inaction. She stated, “yeah, nothing happened because it's not like they were going to do anything. They don't want to get new teachers. They don't want to hire, like, new staff.”

Ethan recalled a similar incident while he was in middle school involving a White teacher who repeatedly told Latino students to stop speaking Spanish. He remembered, “she even one day brought the law and read it to the class. Saying, like, ‘oh, your student is supposed to learn English that they're not supposed to be speaking Spanish in class’.”

This was a flagrant misrepresentation of the state law (since repealed), which mandated that students receive all their instruction in English. These experiences verified participant perceptions that teachers used the discipline system to exert power over students and to enact clearly biased and racist practices.

Lauren provided details of flagrantly abusive behavior by school personnel who were not suspended or fired. In one event an adjustment counselor was reported for lifting a student off the ground by their feet. She stated, “In the end, they ended up getting protected by the school leadership because they were valued as somebody who was incredibly good at upholding rituals and routines and ran a tight ship.” Lauren detailed
another incident with a White staff member and Puerto Rican student which took place in her office.

He entered my office where I was sitting alone with the student. He held up his arm and showed him his muscle and was flexing his muscle. Threatening the kid in front of me by literally pulling up his sleeve, flexing his muscle, and saying, ‘If you want to take this outside, we can take this outside. This is how you play the game, I can beat you in your own game.’ So the White teacher is saying this and the Brown student is looking at him, wide eyed and terrified. That Brown student never having made any threat of violence. And so, while there was nothing explicitly racist being said the implicit racism was just like palpable. And I reported that to the principal and the principal did nothing about it. And that person is still in our school system.

These incidents provided a glimpse of the aspects of the school system that are typically hidden from outsiders. Taken together, these represented a pattern of anti-Latino bias that has been tolerated by school and district leadership and has contributed to the perception of Latino students that their schools represented dominant and oppressive forces.

**Community Level Factors**

“I don’t know if you heard of ‘White Flight’” - Deirdre

“Those kids down there. They're awful. They don't want to learn.”

– Kelly, quoting friends

Every individual I interviewed identified ways that the community of Preston contributed to school discipline outcomes in the district. As I detailed in Section 1,
participants identified community challenges, such as homelessness, gang activity, and concentrated poverty, that affected student behavior and therefore the discipline system. Respondents also discussed the role Preston’s economic and cultural history has played in shaping the school district’s culture and approach to discipline. Almost every comment was connected in some way to ethnic and cultural differences between the White (mostly Polish and Irish) and Latino residents and long standing tensions between the two communities.

**Tensions between White and Latino Communities.**

Deirdre, Ethan, and Oscar, all Latino students, connected disparities in disciplinary outcomes for Latino and White students to similar issues in the City of Preston. For example, Oscar commented, “I think it’s based on, where White is the dominating race in Preston.” Ethan and Deirdre felt similarly and provided poignant observations about the White community’s relationships with the public schools. Both students commented on the low number of Preston’s White youth who attend the District. Deirdre commented, “I don’t know if you heard of White Flight’. ” Ethan offered this observation:

I mean, looking back at, like, Preston history. It was a White, rich place. There are some areas of Preston, especially in, like, in the lower communities, where there are areas that look pretty rich in a poor community. And it's, you know, run by like White owners. And what's funny is that, like, they don't send their kids to Kelly or even in the more White neighborhoods, near McMahon, it’s predominantly Puerto Rican or people of color in McMahon. And it bothers me.
Deirdre contended that White residents in Preston had historically held negative views of Puerto Rican students. As she discussed the discipline in Preston, she said, “I feel it has to do with our community because I’ve seen videos from way back when, like, veteran teachers were there.” Deirdre referenced a news clip from the 1990’s she had seen during a lesson with a local Puerto Rican cultural historian and storyteller that related to an attempt to override the property tax cap to increase funding for the school system. In the clip, some White Preston residents expressed their opposition to funding education of Puerto Rican students. She stated:

And so, I just feel like that image is still presented about our students and whenever teachers come into Preston, I feel like they just get this image. Like, I don't feel like they see us as students. I think they see us as robots or subjects that they can deal with for a certain amount of time and then send us off. And they don’t care what happens after.

In these comments, Deirdre linked veteran teachers, many of whom grew up in Preston, to the White residents who spoke with open disdain for Puerto Rican students. While her assumption may be incorrect, Deirdre’s perception that some members of her school community were hostile towards her people and her culture, is critical for understanding the school experience for Latino students. Equally revealing was Ethan’s obvious sensitivity to wealthy White families who resided in his neighborhood but sent their children to the public schools. Taken together, Ethan and Deirdre’s comments demonstrated how issues from the community permeated and damaged the school experiences and emotional lives of students.
Multiple school personnel, including three who grew up in Preston, validated the perceptions of students regarding the White community’s negative views of Latinos and the schools. Kelly, a White teacher, stated that White acquaintances from the community often made disparaging remarks about the students and families from her school. She recalled:

People in the community all the time say, ‘That must have been so hard for you. How did you ever deal with them? How did you deal with those parents? Oh, I can't even imagine how hard it must have been for you. Those kids down there. They're awful. They don't want to learn. They don't care’. That was the narrative.

**Historic Roots of Cultural Tensions**

Jerry, a teacher who grew up and attended public schools in Preston, reported long standing antipathy towards Puerto Rican residents from segments of the White community and connected the cultural dynamics in Preston to the district’s culture and school discipline system. He described the historical roots of the tensions:

You've got a postindustrial city that holds on really tight to its glory days. You know, you talk to older people and they talk about, you know, when the industry was here and how presidents used to come and stay here. And that’s a part of it. I mean, there's the general issue of, like, White supremacy. But there's also, I think, an undercurrent of, often not directly stated, but implied, that as the Puerto Rican culture and people moved in, that's when the City started its fall from grace. I don't think people think about the larger industrial issue.

According to participants, Preston’s history continued to have an outsized effect on the district in part because of the number of residents, particularly within the White
community, who had lived in Preston their entire lives and came from families that had been there for generations. According to some participants, this singularity has resulted in a community with strong ties to the past, and a strong resistance to change. Larry commented:

Preston is like a little more isolated than Boston or other places. Then, like, the whole district is more isolated and it just has this, like, really intense White culture, a very insular White community that hasn't had a lot of like new ideas coming and going. You know what I mean?......I don't live where I grew up. I got the fuck out. You know what I mean? Many people have been there for generations. And all their family still lives there.

Larry also recalled comments from a colleague from California who had stated that “coming here was like traveling back in time,” and that “many movements in education apparently never happened in Preston when they were happening in other places.” Larry questioned the effects of the insularity on progress and reforms. He stated,

There is a way that, like, new ideas aren’t really welcome. And expertise from quote ‘outsiders’ isn't really welcome. I wonder if there's been kind of like a head in the sand blocking, like, defensive posture to, you know, forward movement.

Jerry drew direct lines between the cultural values of Preston’s residents to the district’s approach to education and discipline. He stated, “It’s a former industrial city with a lot of hard-nosed, working-class people who really think, honestly, that the best way to approach educating kids is punitively because that's going to teach them.”

**Community Strengths**
Some participants also described the positive effects that came from Preston’s strong sense of community and the number of multi-generational families. Larry said, “there’s also pros to navigating Preston’s culture. There's, like, a community feeling in Preston.” The neighborhoods surrounding the schools are often supportive of the schools and are extremely important resources for the school community. Lauren commented on the neighborhood surrounding Kelly school, “I think there’s always a stereotype of The Flats and South Preston as being the bottom of the barrel. I think that Kelly School, despite its adversity, has a pretty wonderful sense of community and community bonds.” Carla described the benefits of having multiple generations of families attend the same schools, saying, “I've seen kids that I had when they were in seventh and eighth grade who are now bringing in their kindergarteners. And, you know, there are some parents who are, like, thrilled that their kid is going to the same school that they went to.”

**White Flight & Parochial Schools**

A unique community factor for White and Latino students was connected to the ‘White flight’ from the public schools discussed by Deirdre and Ethan. Elise and Jerry both referred to the number of White students at the high school who attended parochial schools for grades K-8 as a factors in disproportionate suspension rates for Latino students. Jerry, who did not attend private or parochial schools stated, “I think one other phenomenon in Preston is that a lot of White students come from the parochial schools. Yeah, which is pretty, I mean, I didn't go to one, but from what I understand, that's pretty compliance based.” Elise also commented on the number of White students at the high school who came from private schools rather than Preston Public elementary and Middle
Schools. When she viewed the discipline data relating to the inequities in discipline rates, she discussed the topic of honors classes and private schools:

When I was in honors, it was a majority of private school students and the private school students were almost all White, I think I had one kid who went to a private school that was not White. But they are very well behaved. I don't know if going to private school instead of public school, I thought maybe it might have something to do with it.

Jerry and Elise posited that students who attended parochial schools for the first eight or nine years of schooling entered the high school accustomed to the compliance-based behavioral expectations of teachers. This created a behavioral advantage over those who attended public schools. Elise’s comment also hinted at the clear academic advantage these students had coming into the school, resulting in their placement into honors classes. This was an observation also made by Deirdre, Ethan, and Kelly.

Elise also connected the parochial school attendance to general differences in attitudes toward Latino students and social justice topics. She recalled a conversation with a student who appeared to represent an instance of ‘White flight’. She stated, “One girl was talking to me and was like, ‘I used to go to MacMahon but I had to get out of classes with all the bad Puerto Rican kids’, you know, switching to a private school.” As she discussed how White students at the high school were generally not open to learning about Puerto Rican culture and did not believe in White privilege, she noted, “I think definitely varies between whether someone went to public school or went to private school.” Elise’s observations demonstrate the complex ways that historical tensions
between the White and Latino communities get passed down through generations and manifest themselves in the thoughts and attitudes of students.

**Societal Factors in School Discipline**

“You're getting the outcomes that you're designed to achieve here.”

Participants also explored the ways that societal level forces influenced the Preston’s school discipline system. All of the students and most personnel linked differential outcomes for Latinos in Preston in some way to broader issues of racial, ethnic, and cultural oppression in the U.S. Participants also drew a number of connections between the U.S. criminal justice system and Preston’s school discipline system. Some school personnel contended that Preston’s disciplinary outcomes were indicative of deeply ingrained, structural characteristics of the U.S. public education system.

**Contemporary Movements for Racial and Social Justice**

I conducted the interviews during the Summer of 2020, when nationwide protests and rallies were occurring in response the murder of George Floyd by police officers in Minneapolis. While terms like White supremacy, explicit and implicit bias, and systemic racism had become common within academia and social justice circles, the eight minute forty-six second video of Mr. Floyd’s death at the hands of police pushed these concepts into the national vernacular. Multiple participants referenced the protests and associated movements during their interviews. Lauren directly referenced the national conversations about race as she spoke about the effects of racial and cultural bias in school discipline. She stated, “I'm being informed and my thinking is so influenced by the Black Lives Matter movement and what’s happening right now. For so many reasons, White students are set up for success. We assume the best of them, are kinder in our response, don’t go
as quickly to assuming the worst.” Carla noted that she had recently participated in organized conversations about race and culture at school for the first time and cited the national movements as the impetus. She stated:

Like, I think now because of what's happening in the country, I mean, we've had conversations about race. And I've been in the district for 14 years that's never happened before. Before, it was one of those things where you assumed good intentions, ‘Teachers are coming here to teach, you know, and it doesn't matter who's in front of them.’ But it actually does matter. What's going on in this country has really made it so that people are aware that these conversations need to happen.

Deirdre and Ethan spoke of their advocacy work at school as part of the national movements for racial and social justice. Deirdre stated, “When I got to high school, I was like, ‘This is an issue that I need to learn more about, that I want to focus on. It’s a movement that I want to be a part of.’” Ethan described similar motivation, saying, “Like even before high school, you know, I felt like I had the constant urge to fight for what I believe in.”

Outside of the influence of contemporary racial justice movements, some participants asserted that Preston’s disciplinary structures replicated societal racial and cultural oppression. As Jerry discussed the influence of the City of Preston’s ethnic tensions on the discipline system, he situated this struggle within the broader issue of White supremacy. He commented:

It feels weird for me to say that Preston is more racist than other places. Just because then it's like a contest where you like earn points. But the fact is that like,
schools are institutions that hold up the status quo for the most part the status quo is Whiteness and White supremacy.

**Criminal Justice and School Discipline**

A number of students and personnel discussed the relationship between school discipline and the U.S. criminal justice system. For example, Deirdre’s first comment upon seeing Preston’s suspension rates was, “I feel like it’s the school to prison pipeline. At the bottom of everything that's what it is.” Similarly, Oscar referenced the school to prison pipeline and drew comparisons between suspensions and arrests. He commented, “I feel it has to do a lot with the prison pipeline. I feel like that since Hispanic people in general have a higher risk of getting arrested.” Carla made similar observations as she examined the graph depicting suspension rates for White and Latino students. She commented:

So, my reaction to that is that it is very, very similar to similar to the relative risk of people of color ending up in jail. That's pretty much how that graph would look, like, the chances of a White person being arrested and being incarcerated versus Black and Latino- it looks just like that.

Elise expressed shock that the majority of suspensions were not non-violent, non-criminal, non-drug related behaviors, and stated, “I think it's like when people go to jail for nonviolent offenses. It doesn't make sense to give them jail time if it's nonviolent. I don't think students should be suspended unless their behavior is a threat to the school. There should be other resources. It just seems crazy.” Lauren also drew comparisons between mass incarceration and the types of behaviors that led to most suspensions in
Preston, contending that the offense data offered confirmation that the ‘school to prison pipeline’ existed. She commented:

I can't get out of my head right now, having recently rewatched 13, how insidious and how intentional it was to use drug sales and arrests as a tool of mass incarceration. This is just like completely being mimicked here in the schools, right? So, like, if ever there's a doubt about this idea of schools as part of the school to prison pipeline, as part of mass incarceration, like, here it is.

**Systemic Issues in Public Education**

Some school personnel felt that Preston’s approach to school discipline was emblematic of deeper, structural issues in public education. Ken, Carla, and Larry spoke about problematic funding structures which resulted in districts like Preston having significantly fewer resources than more affluent and less needy neighboring communities. Participants noted that nearby districts had smaller class sizes and more social workers than Preston, and many had paraprofessionals in every classroom. These and other resources allow wealthier districts to truly meet the needs of their students, something which no participants felt Preston was able to do.

Larry, Jerry, and Lauren repeatedly connected Preston’s disciplinary outcomes to systemic issues in public education. Larry felt that school discipline system was inextricably linked to the founding of public education as a tool to create the future workforce. He stated, “I feel like discipline is a project of social control. Like, schools are manufacturing people to fill the needs of capitalism. So, taking it as the bigger picture, discipline is just to keep everybody in their place and doing what they're supposed to be doing.”
Jerry spoke about the maintenance of White Supremacy as part of the early design of public education in the U.S. and how contemporary practices continue to uphold this ideology. For Jerry, this was the key explanation for the inequities in Preston’s discipline system. He stated, “I think just schools being places where, you know, Whiteness is enforced and Whiteness is the dominant, driving ideology. You know, like, you're getting the outcomes that you're designed to achieve here.” Lauren agreed that White Supremacy was woven into the fabric of public education and contended that this influenced current disciplinary practices and the Whiteness of the education workforce nationwide. For Lauren, White educators in districts like Preston should engage in continuous self-reflection by asking:

What does it mean when you have a majority White leadership and educators in a majority Brown district and school? What about our own racism and bias and misunderstanding? What are the structural inequities impacting our relationships?

Participants acknowledged that structural issues were so ingrained in public education that most educators were unaware. Larry noted, “I don't think, like, the school leaders or the teachers or anybody thinks they're there for that purpose. And, like, you can blame the individual, but it's more of a systemic problem.” Furthermore, neither teacher training programs nor typical teaching schedules encouraged the level of reflection needed to critically examine these issues. As Jerry commented, “I don't think that the teaching profession and the teaching day is set up in a way that encourages people to be thoughtful and reflective.” The result, according to participants, was that even “good people” with “good intentions” acted in ways that harmed students and replicated the societal inequities and oppression they sought to combat.
Dysfunction in the School Discipline System

Outside of the myriad social and cultural factors that influenced school discipline in Preston, some issues identified by personnel were the result of how the system functioned in their schools. Most of the complaints involved inconsistency and unpredictability in many components of the school discipline system.

Rule Enforcement

It was clear that there was wide variance in how and when rules were enforced, leading to frustration for teachers who consistently followed expectations. Ken stated, “If the community has defined rules, and I'm ok with whatever rules are defined, if it's consistently and equally enforced across the board. So the responsibility doesn’t fall on someone who actually tries to do it.” Ken was in agreement with other personnel that school leadership sometimes chose to target behaviors (that were not serious, not necessary). Three staff members and two students spoke negatively about a decision made by the principal at the high school to include doo-rags in the ‘no hats’ policy. Some teachers clearly chose not to enforce the rule in their classrooms. He commented, “So, last year they had a thing about hoods and hats. Now, I don’t care if a kid wears a hat or not. But whatever rule it is that you want enforced, I'll enforce it. That’s one of the bad things about HHS, they'll come up with a rule, and the 'cool' teachers won't enforce it. Then it comes to me to be the 'bad guy'.”

Consequences for Infractions

Teachers and student support professionals had little knowledge of what consequences would result from behavioral infractions. Robert voiced his frustration, saying, “At my old school (school name), I knew the consequence for every type of
behavior. Like, ‘hey, if you're doing this, the consequences are XYZ’.” The unpredictability contributed to his hesitancy to refer students because, “I don't always know what's going to happen. Like, sometimes a person could be suspended for swearing at the teacher,” which he felt was “absurd”.

There also appeared to be a connection between the individual who handled a disciplinary referral and the ultimate consequence. Carla observed that the discipline philosophies of personnel influenced the consequences, stating, “Who’s in that position and how they handle situations, how they approach discipline, it’s going to make a difference.” There was also a perception that favoritism and labelling of students contributed to how referrals were processed. Larry commented, “the good kids go to the support room and the bad kids go to in-house. I’m just using the language that I think it actually accurate. They would say that the behavioral stuff goes in house and the social emotional stuff goes to the support room.” Robert echoed Larry’s comment, reporting that consequences depend on “whatever admin they end up falling into the hands of,” and noting that favoritism often affected that process as well behavioral specialists responded behavioral infractions in the hallways.

**Changes to Policy**

Students and personnel criticized the practices used by school leadership to create, communicate, and enact changes to discipline policy. Ken expressed his frustration, saying: “I don’t think they have clear written policy. That's what we keep asking them, what is the policy?” As a long time teacher in Preston, Ken provided valuable insights into the changes over time in discipline policy as administrators decided to target certain behaviors.
He stated:

Like every couple of years things blow up and then they're like, 'Oh, we're gonna be tough again' And they'll be tough for a little while and then go back to doing things the way they were before. One year they'll say, 'Let them take a lap.' Next year you don't let them. Then we also used to have a thing where if a kid put his head down, then we'd get in trouble for that. Then another principal comes in and says, ‘Well if a kid puts their head down, let them put their head down. Keep them in class, because we're having too much chaos in hallways.’ So when you've been around for as many years, you can see how crazy it is.

Other participants supported Ken’s assertions that policy changes were made at the impetus of individual administrators and were not student centered or culturally informed. Students spoke passionately about the decisions by their principal to institute a random search policy in the middle of the school year. According to one teacher, the precipitating incident was the principal smelling marijuana in one of the bathrooms. None of the participants supported the policy. Elise contended that the searches were not random, reporting that the first students searched under the new policy “pretty obviously smoked weed.” Deirdre felt the policy was used as a tool to target labelled students.

Some teachers and admin just have it out for some students because they already know what it is. Like, when they started doing the randomized searches. It wasn't really randomized…but because I seen the same students getting pulled out of class over and over.

Communication
School personnel identified some challenges with communication. There appeared to be no standard channels of communication between teachers who refer students and the behavior specialists who respond to those students. Ken noted, “The problem is, when they're sent to the Vice Principal, does the VP even know why they're getting kicked out?” Robert confirmed that there was no requirement that teachers communicate with behavioral support about why a student has been referred. Teachers also were not informed of the results of their referrals. Kelly reported her colleagues grew frustrated when students were returned quickly or without formal consequences. She commented, “there’s a disconnect. teachers are feeling like nothing's happening when it really is. There's a lot of stuff around that happens that doesn't always get communicated back.” Robert described the lack of communication with a restaurant analogy, “It’s like a separate system from me. Like, if I'm a waiter, I don't know what's happening in the kitchen. So, if I send someone out…I just don’t see them again.”

Ken also addressed how changes to discipline policy were communicated to the school community. He reported that on one occasion the principal read what turned out to be a controversial a new policy to students over the loudspeaker during homeroom. This was problematic for multiple reasons—many students do not arrive until after homeroom, many students do not pay attention to or talk during announcements, and not all intercoms work. He also described a recent instance where administrators unveiled a new (and ultimately unpopular) policy to teachers during morning meeting and then tasked them with informing students during homeroom. As Ken described it, “Administration said, ‘This is our new policy, here teachers, now you go explain it to your classes.’”

**Issues Lead to Structural Dysfunction**
Stakeholders identified areas of dysfunction in Preston’s school discipline system. While individual students and personnel clearly contributed to aspects of the dysfunction, the level of inconsistency and unpredictability described by participants was suggestive of deeper flaws in the design and oversight of the system. While it would be impossible to ensure that all teachers and behavioral specialists responded identically to behavioral infractions, school discipline systems should be guided by comprehensive discipline policies that ensure personnel operate from the same framework. For example, discipline policies should detail the behavioral expectations for various school activities and include potential consequences for violations. This would limit the amount of variance and reduce the effects of favoritism, bias, or bad moods.

In addition, it did not appear that the changes to the school discipline policy followed any formalized processes. In fact, Ken’s assertions that personnel were often not provided with written versions of new policies could indicate that some changes were not even official. Further, the administration enacted search policy suddenly and without collecting input from students or teachers. This search policy and the decision to include doo-rags in the ‘no hat’ policy both led to significant, and public, outcries from students, and both were ultimately reversed by administration. Input from stakeholders might have minimized some of the pushback; for example, someone would likely have informed the administration of the cultural significance of doo-rags. These issues illustrated the need to: 1) use structured and transparent processes, 2) include input from students, personnel, and other relevant stakeholders, and 3) be thoughtful about how policies are communicated.
The Story of 2015: The Year of Attempted Reform

As the school discipline data detailed in the Interpretations section of my findings demonstrated, 2015 was an anomaly in Preston’s suspension rates. Rates decreased by 75% in the district, and it was the only year that Preston suspended students at rates close to the state average. Disparities also decreased, as did the proportion of students suspension for non-serious. According to school personnel, the changes were the result of a ‘do not suspend’ mandate put in place by the new administration that took control of the district. School district personnel spoke at length about that school year. I have synthesized their recollections to provide chronological description of the mandate and the subsequent effects on the discipline system and the overall school, environment.

Factors leading to the Moratorium

As I previously reported, in the two years prior to 2015, Preston had the highest suspension rates in the state. The district was suspending up to 20% of the student population each year, with one high school surpassing 70%. Lauren reported hearing from colleagues that the state Department of Education had included Preston on its so called ‘naughty’ list of school districts with concerning school discipline data. While she was not clear on the specifics of this list nor the resulting directives, she commented, “The state was definitely putting the heat on.” Larry also referred to external pressures to reduce out of school suspension. He stated,

The steam was already coming down on Preston, which is why when I with others like approached [name of prior principal], the previous principle, to do like some RJ stuff she was open, because I think she knew that times were changing.
Because that's when the shit hit the fan. That's when they….the state came down on, I’m imagining [the receiver].

Larry’s refers to his initiation of a restorative justice program as part of a reform of the high school discipline system in 2014. Sean also provided insight into reform efforts at the administrative level, Sean said,

I think like we got to the point where we saw this isn't effective, this just doesn't work. These kids are tardy for some reason and maybe it's really beyond our control. And suspending and sending them home for a suspension isn't effective.

The conversation about discipline reform at the school coincided with a major change in district leadership. After being deemed a ‘chronically underperforming district’, in June 2015, a new district leader was appointed by the state Department of Education with additional authority outside the typical scope of superintendent. This major change in the district had notable effects on the school community as they started the 2015 school year. The change also had a profound impact on the district’s approach to discipline. Jerry articulated the ways that he viewed this time period as he identified the large drop in suspension in 2015. Jerry stated, “I can take a pretty good stab at that dramatic drop in 2015. That's when, that's when receivership happened. That was like the sword of Damocles hanging over our heads.” Jerry’s poignant insight into what he viewed as impending disaster associated with unilaterally dictated reforms were also shared by Sean, an administrator. Reflecting on the mood in the high school, Sean stated:

In some ways, it was a blur because so much changed. Not like just local control versus receivership, but you were looking at MCAS, you're looking at discipline, you're looking at this…Then you know, you come in, you just lost local control,
you know that this new person coming in has the power of the superintendent and school committee and you're hearing these directives.

One of the new directives was a moratorium on out of school suspension. While none of the participants could recall the language of the dictum, personnel agreed that school administrators were directed to stop using out of school suspension. Sean stated:

- I could have missed it, but I don't know that [the receiver] ever said to me or to other principals, maybe privately, there's a moratorium on suspension. As you can see, we were still above the state average so yeah right, it was still happening. But I do think, like, we started to say like unless it is about safety like, personal, physical, or mental health safety, then it was a last resort. I think we had to be a little bit more cautious on, like, what steps we were taking before.

At the elementary school, personnel remembered a clear moratorium. Lauren stated, “So I do remember him [the receiver] saying, like, putting the kibosh on it. Being like, ‘You're not allowed to suspend anymore’.” Kelly recalled similarly, stating “As far as what happened in 2015, it was just a non-negotiable like we're not doing, we’re not allowed to do suspension anymore.”

There was consensus among school personnel working in the schools in 2015 that schools operated under a ‘do not suspend’ mandate. There was also consensus about the immense challenges the moratorium created for schools. In response to my question, “What was the 2015 school year like?”, participants had universally negative responses. Kelly stated, “It was awful, awful, awful.” Lauren stated, “Incredibly stressful, traumatic, and difficult.” Sean stated, “It was really, really challenging year.” Larry reported, “It was really bad.” While the participants all agreed it was challenging, they
also agreed that disciplinary reform was needed. Many of the participants expressed the receiver’s intentions were positive. However, the participants agreed the form of the dictum, as an executive decision, was not informed by the local contexts and was ultimately doomed to fail.

**Lack of Readiness**

Fundamentally, the school personnel agreed schools were woefully unprepared to fulfill this mandate. They reported the mandate arrived without additional resources, training, or time for schools to develop alternatives to suspension. Even school personnel who were strongly in support of reducing or eliminating out of school suspension agreed that the mandate was not an effective attempt at reform. Jerry stated, “that drop is an attempt, and I'm not blaming anybody, right, it was an attempt at trying to fix the problem. But without proper support or preparation, it did kind of veer into negligence every now and again.” Kelly recognized the receiver’s intent to reduce the overuse of suspension but agreed that implementation plan was inadequate. Kelly stated:

I feel like I feel like [the receiver’s] intention was probably really noble and really good…but there was no plan for, like, if we're not suspending then what are we doing right? Or if there was a plan it was one of those things again happens in schools, like, you’re gonna have this mandate without any training or support to go along with what to do, you know, or how to do it.

The lack of preparation meant schools were suddenly left without their default response to misbehavior, leading to confusion and stress among those making disciplinary decisions. Sean described the challenges the new mandate created for him as he tried to respond to disciplinary incidents. Sean stated, “I think looking at it now, we took this tool
that we were using, effective or not, it was a tool. And we removed that tool and then we didn't replace it with anything.” Instead of having a positive impact on disciplinary exclusion, the mandate pushed administrators to create and implement alternatives without preparation or planning.

At the elementary school, the mandate also led to fear and exasperation among the student support and administrative personnel. Carla stated, “People were like, ‘Okay, what's going to happen? Like, am I going to lose my job if I suspend a kid?’” Similarly, Lauren stated,

I remember working under a principal at that time who got so gripped by this mandate to stop…this moratorium on suspensions. And I remember her often coming into my office and just being like, ‘Lauren, I know you believe that we shouldn't be suspending. I know you know exactly what just happened. What do you think I should do? What, what's the answer?’

Lauren’s comment exemplifies the stress of the school personnel who lacked the knowledge, resources, or capacity to implement the mandate, as a principal with extensive experience managing discipline asking a school support person (with no experience with discipline) what the principal should do.

The moratorium on suspension in 2015 revealed two fundamental problems within the district. First, it revealed what the participants had been describing in their interpretations of high numbers of suspensions, that excluding students from class or school was the default response to student misbehavior. Second, it revealed that many personnel in the district lacked classroom and behavior management skills to utilize
alternate strategies to respond to misbehavior. These two factors led to a school system gripped by an inability to manage student behavior.

Larry concurred with Sean’s position, and reported a climate in which most teachers didn’t know how to operate in a model in which classroom and school removal was the standard response to all misbehavior. Larry stated:

The teachers, a certain percent who were like literally loved students, but then you had like these old school ones who I think they liked some students, but they didn't like the ones that they couldn't kick out of their classes anymore. And they didn't have the relationships to, Like, it was trying to move from like a punitive model to like a relationship model and you didn't have relationships.

Sean extends this position by pointing out the ways that the moratorium also eliminated the tools available to administrators struggling to respond to a range of previously suspendable behaviors. Sean stated, “We didn't have really anything that looked like that tool to go to.”

Sean identified the lack of effective tools or practices that could be employed when disciplinary exclusions were removed as an option, and attributed this to a school and district that were fully in crisis. Sean stated:

It felt like in many ways like the Wild West. Are we losing control? Again like, without the appropriate resources and systems in place, just based on pure volume it became difficult to say like how do we create these systems when we're like running around a mile a minute.

The moratorium on disciplinary exclusions as a top down mandate implemented without the necessary training, preparation, and supports was impossible to implement. This view
was shared by Lauren who stated, “So just stopping suspension on its own without doing anything else to support all the staff or the students is so ridiculous.”

**Effects on School Environment**

The participants reported that the mandate resulted in an unintended explosion of student misbehavior, which led to perceptions among some teachers that the students were out of control. Because students were no longer suspended for tardies, attendance issues, class disruption, or missing detention, these behaviors increased. School personnel attributed the increases in problem behaviors to students learning to operate in a new system. Larry remembered:

Yeah, I mean, there was just, like, no accountability for students. And it was so it was, like, okay, you're not doing this thing that's really harmful. That's good. But like, yikes! There were, like, 50 million tardies. And then there was just, like, a lot of kids in the hallways, because it was like there was no accountability for being late.

Sean offered a similar description of the change in behavior, stating:

Honestly, for some kids the threat of suspension was effective…..if you missed detention X number of times you could be suspended. So now you would give a detention and they wouldn't show up. There was a void, and I think some students, to be honest, took advantage of it.

Both of these viewpoints articulate a position that reinforces the benefit of disciplinary removals of students as a system of accountability. Their language implies a condition in which they viewed the students as the individuals responsible for outcomes that they had already articulated as a result of a dictum from the district.
The resulting challenges to implement the moratorium on suspension led to feelings of chaos and lack of control within schools. Participants described the feeling in schools using terms like: Kelly: “just absolute chaos” Larry: “a mess ” Sean: “the wild west” Jerry: “a breakdown.” Kelly, who was in her first year of teaching in 2015, provided a visceral description of her classroom environment:

I remember just shutting the door, thinking like, ‘oh my god.’ You’d just hear these noises and, you know, open up the door and you’d see, there were these two kids in particular, and you’d see them run by, throw a chair or bang down the bookcases. And at one point they were, they would collect other kids with them as they went along. And then there'd by five or six of them. I mean, I know how I was feeling. Like, a door would slam and we'd all go like this (flinches), you know? I just remember thinking, like, at some point, thinking, ‘this is so unsafe, someone's going to get hurt. It might be me’.

Lauren offered additional disturbing details, saying, “My memory of that year is that it kind of just pushed chaos inward. We were making a ton of calls to crisis, ambulances came frequently. And by the way, when an ambulance comes a police officer or more, more than one, comes. So much disruption.”

Kelly also described changes to teacher behavior as a result of the mandate. She remembered:

“And another thing was that people called out so frequently. This one day and they had no building subs left no subs left, and my next door neighbor was out, so they took her class and divided it between me and another teacher. So I had 30 kids, and half of them are kids I didn’t even know. And I’m trying to cobble
something together because now I don’t have the right number of materials, I just have to completely change gears and do something totally different.

Lauren and Kelly were visibly emotional as they recounted these experiences. Taken together their comments offered stark evidence of potential consequences of district-level mandates made without consideration of the readiness for the dictum, the supports needed to achieve the goal of the mandates, or the potential impact on the well-being of students, educators, and administrators in the midst of implementation. Their emotional responses are made more poignant by the fact that five years had passed between these experiences and the interviews.

**Teacher Pushback**

All of the school personnel agreed that the overall teacher response to the moratorium was negative. Larry reported, “Teachers were just like, irate. So it was bad.” Teachers who continued to rely on making disciplinary referrals rather than managing behavior within their classroom grew frustrated when students were returned to class without formal disciplinary consequences. Ken commented,

You just had to eat it. Even if the kid was pushing it, I've got 45 minutes to deal with the 25 kids I have and I've got to do everything I can to try to sneak in what I can. You're trying to use any tool that you can, because if you sent them out, they'd come right back. And some kids would come back and they'd feel like superman.

Ken articulated the continued use of sending kids out as a classroom management tool, but noted out that sending kids out contributed to worsening conditions in the classroom. Like many teachers, Ken laid the responsibility of this phenomenon with the students.
Kelly echoed the sense of futility felt by teachers, “Teacher’s sent students out and they would be right back. And there was never any, like, communication about if anything had happened.” The result of the dictum became an issue of assigning responsibility to others. As Sean recollected, “And the teachers started being like so ‘you're not doing anything basically like so you're just ignoring it.’ And we were like, ‘No, we're trying to work with them.’” Sean articulates that the teachers blamed the administrators for failing to act, and that the entire system led to deepening vexation. Sean stated, “it frustrated teachers and I think it frustrated administrators.”

A number of participants also placed responsibility on school personnel who were unable or unwilling to adopt more student-centered responses to behavior. Their comments demonstrate that some educators were ignorant of or indifferent to the harms caused to students by being excluded from school. Jerry described teachers who participated in unjust systems without taking time to reflect on their merit or effectiveness. He stated:

When you're a teacher and you're in the weeds, for lack of a better term, and sometimes you can't see the forest for the trees. And I think what people saw was a breakdown. Some people equate order with learning, And I think that people seeing the systems that they have leaned on to support them in their practice that they hadn't critically examined and thought were good systems, they saw those kind of breaking down. I feel like a lot of people felt like we weren't doing our job of educating students because you know, we couldn't get the time for one on time, if that makes sense.
Echoing earlier comments by some students that ‘veteran teachers’ were often less responsive to students, Larry and Sean reported that many of the teachers who struggled the most were ‘veteran teachers’ who had been in the district for years and were accustomed to removing students they did not want to deal with. Larry stated,

It was, like very crappy moment because teachers were so mad and angry. So, it's like before teachers had the had the control and the climate sucked because they could just be like, “Don't speak Spanish” or whatever. And nobody would do anything. There was no accountability for teacher’s behavior. And then you move to this kind of like no accountability for anyone's behavior.

Sean noted that many of the teachers who complained voiced support for the district culture that existed under an earlier long-term superintendent. He commented:

But some of those teachers held on to those [previous superintendent] days, where it was “my way or the highway”. Some veteran teachers were holding onto this idea, literally, ‘you're not gonna be in school if, like, you're not acting in this type of way.’ Or kids getting pulled out of class because they had their head down and like things like that. Teachers who were there for that- they could then teach only the kids that wanted the education in front of them.

Sean’s comment provides a concerning view into previous mindset in the district where students were responsible for managing their own behaviors and conforming to the culture dictated by educators.

**Participant Reflections on 2015 and the Return to Suspension**

The rise in suspensions that occurred in the following school year offered clear evidence that the mandate was a failed effort at reform. As Kelly noted while reviewing
the data, “But in terms of, like, why they couldn't stay there. I think it's still speaks to like the turnover and then the end there was a lot of backlash.” In their discussions about 2015, most personnel noted that, while the drop in rates appeared to be a positive thing, the reality was more complicated. Larry commented, “I like this visual. But I know what was happening and it was an improvement, but it was still not good.” Lauren provided a powerful statement that encapsulated the sentiments of participants regarding 2015. She stated, “it looks like success when you see this dip, but I did not experience that year as a success. I experienced that year as incredibly stressful traumatic and difficult year.”
CHAPTER 5
DISCUSSION

This study was the first investigation of school discipline in which quantitative discipline data were interpreted by stakeholders in the district. The mixed method investigation yielded diverse findings consistent with prior research as well as novel findings that deepen the understanding of the ways that discipline systems operate within schools and districts and how they are interconnected with individuals in the school community. I showed each participant a slide presentation with the results of my quantitative analyses of the district’s discipline data. Participants viewed and interpreted the quantitative discipline data for their district and provided robust and analogous interpretations of disciplinary outcomes. Their interpretations included in depth explorations of (1) their personal experiences with school discipline, (2) how the discipline system functioned in their schools, (3) how the beliefs and behaviors of students, teachers, and other school personnel contributed to discipline outcomes, (4) how the working conditions in schools, the past and current community challenges, and the broad and systemic issues in the U.S. society, affected the disciplinary systems in their district and, (5) how issues of race, ethnicity, and culture permeated every aspect of the school environment for most students.

Major Findings

I identified several major findings that contribute to the current knowledge base. Some of these findings confirmed existing research. Others were novel and represent new findings in the field.

School Discipline Data Analysis
My analyses of school discipline data revealed that the District’s disciplinary outcomes were aligned with the trends and issues identified by researchers over the past 30 years. Like many urban districts, Preston served predominantly students of color, students from low social economical level, and students who are English Learners. Suspensions in the district were substantially higher than suspensions in the state average. This finding was surprising to most of the stakeholders who did not know that the discipline problems in their district were unique and profound. There was a pattern of disparities between White and Latino students in school suspensions. Latino students, who are primarily Puerto Rican, were subjected to higher rates of disciplinary suspensions, consistent with prior research (Skiba et al 2015; Skiba et al. 2011).

Importantly, none of the participants expressed surprise about these data, which was a novel finding. There were disproportionately high rates of disciplinary suspensions for minor and subjective infractions, such as “disrespect”, as compared to suspensions for serious and more objective infractions, such as fighting or possession of illegal substances, consistent with prior research. (Smith, 2015; Allman & Slate, 2011; Losen & Whitaker, 2017; Raffael, Mendez, and Knoff, 2003; Skiba, 2015). Novel to this study was that this finding elicited the most surprise from participants, including those with extensive knowledge of discipline in Preston.

The school discipline system functioned in inconsistent and unpredictable ways (Bracy, 2011; Haight, 2014; Gibson, 2013; Snapp, 2015; & Kulkarni, 2019). The system was not designed to meet the needs of students, did not result in improved student behaviors, and harmed students and some school personnel, consistent with prior research (Bracy, 2011; Haight, 2014; Caton, 2012; Brockenbrough, 2015; Gibson, 2013; Gibson,
School personnel could not identify the goals of the discipline system, the basic components of the discipline system, nor how the discipline system functioned. Students also had no consistent understanding of the discipline system, viewing discipline as a harsh and malicious tool used by teachers to kick students out of class that they did not personally like. Fundamentally, the word “system” is inappropriate to describe the district or the schools when referring to the ways that discipline operated. Discipline was comprised of discrete disciplinary actions employed by school personnel in unique ways when trying to manage students. Disciplinary suspensions were also not administered in a cohesive or consistent manner. Suspensions were meted out differently for different students and for different behaviors. Fundamentally, no stakeholder could predict the outcome of any disciplinary incident.

The lack of communication among different components of the discipline system was a factor in a variety of issues identified by participants. There was no cohesive thread following behavioral incidents from beginning to end. This prevented accountability for the teachers who had high rates of disciplinary referrals, the behavior specialists who often escalated rather than deescalated behavioral incidents, and the administrators who ultimately made the disciplinary decisions. Fundamentally, no stakeholders could predict the outcome of any disciplinary incident.

There was extensive student harm caused by unfair and discriminatory discipline practices. Students were repeatedly removed from class for unfair and unjust reasons. In the most basic form of harm, students spent substantial time out of class, missing critical time in instruction, consistent with prior research (Arcia, 2006; Chu & Ready, 2018). For
some students, this led to students giving up on that class or giving up on school altogether, consistent with findings from prior studies (Arcia, 2006; Chu & Ready, 2018; Marchbanks et al., 2014). At a more complex level, the cycle of repeated removals led to student perceptions that school was a hostile environment. The overt and covert racism associated with the patterns of removal led to a compounding of student experiences further cementing their perceptions that did not belong in their school. This led to further disengagement with school and with learning.

Students also internalized the effects of systematic disciplinary exclusion in a manner that heightened their sense of alienation from school. A particularly important finding was the shared perception of Preston’s discipline system as inherently ingrained with racism and bias among White and Puerto Rican students and White and Puerto Rican school personnel. The importance of White educators acknowledging that their school’s discipline system is racist should not be overlooked. This finding is important for this district as it may be indicative of the gradual shift in mindset among educators in Preston that some school personnel reported.

The ways that schools labelled and stratified students, especially students of color, resulted in extensive discriminatory disciplinary treatment in the district. Consistent with prior research (Kennedy-Lewis & Murphy, 2017), students of color were subjected to systemic profiling through labeling. Students were labeled as “troubled” and “bad”, and were subsequently targeted as students who were expected to be engaging in negative behaviors and subjected to disciplinary actions. Labels were established by school personnel. These labels were based on the peers a student associated with, the language they spoke, prior behaviors from the past, and the way that they carried themselves and
represented themselves consistent with the white dominant cultural norms of the school. Academic standing was critical to achieving high status among the educators. Students with lower level academic status were subjected to more rigid and strict disciplinary structures. Students in higher level academic status received less rigid disciplinary responses. However, students of color who shed their labels through social conformity and/or academic performance could quickly lose this status by engaging in observed behaviors such as speaking Spanish or engaging with non-conforming peers.

A critical and novel finding was that disproportionate discipline of students of color was caused by cultural differences between the staff and the students. Prior quantitative research identified correlations between discipline and racial differences between staff and students (Peguero, et al., 2015). Consistent with prior qualitative research, I found that cultural differences between students and staff were an issue for students subjected to repeated disciplinary removals (Allen, 2017). The cultural differences between educators and students resulted in systematic discriminatory treatment that led to disproportionate discipline of students of color across the district. There were overt discriminatory practices because of racial differences. There was evidence that White teachers were hostile to students of color. Puerto Rican students were consistently targeted and disciplined for speaking Spanish. Some White educators posted signs that discriminated against students of color.

There were also covert discriminatory practices that arose because of the predominant White culture of the school personnel. School personnel reported that their colleagues were often motivated by fear of students of color who they viewed as inherently aggressive. There were extensive examples of the misinterpretation of benign
socially contextualized behaviors (e.g., eye contact, posture) that led White educators to discipline students of color for disrespect or defiance. White teachers also had different forms of communication with White students and students of color. For example, White teachers joked around with White students but not students of color. White teachers also used terms like “sweetie” for White females but not for female students of color. These differences in communication did not necessarily result in increased discipline for students of color, but did create protections from discipline for those White students who received these forms of preferential treatment. These occurrences demonstrated how covert racism and implicit bias manifested in teacher behavior.

These issues of discrimination based on race and culture permeated the school experiences of students but were seldom if ever addressed by the schools or the district leaders. This had an adverse impact on discriminatory discipline of students of color. Despite clear and systematic disciplinary discrimination, there was never an examination, evaluation, or investigation of biased treatment or discriminatory practices. Instead, students of color were expected to comply with the cultural norms of the White dominant culture of the staff. When they did not, they were subjected to disciplinary actions. There were no systems in place for students to contest discriminatory or biased treatment. In fact, students who did attempt to advocate for themselves for discriminatory treatment against them were disciplined for the advocacy. Even when there were systems such as restorative practices in the school as a remedy, teachers were allowed to refuse to participate, so that the issues of discrimination based on culture were left unaddressed. I learned furthermore, there were White teachers who consistently articulated that cultural
differences were unimportant, taking a “color blind” argument that resulted in a denial of cultural differences and a perpetuation of a culture of discrimination.

Educators’ strict adherence to rigid discipline structures typically resulted in classroom climates that were confrontational and led to power struggles between teachers and students. Many educators used the discipline system as a primary tool in their classroom management system. For example, many teachers set up strict classroom rules (e.g., sit in your seat and remain quiet) and violations of those rules resulted in disciplinary referrals. Many teachers needed to exert power and control over their class environment at all costs. When students questioned these referrals or questioned redirections, teachers responded with escalating requirements for students to comply with their rules. This established a power struggle in which teachers (intentionally or unintentionally) utilized the disciplinary system to maintain control. These power struggles led to high rates of discipline and disproportionate discipline for minor infractions such as disrespect, insubordination and disruption.

Teachers did not apply the rigid discipline structures equally across classes. For example, teachers in advanced placement classes applied a flexible discipline structure, even though they applied rigid discipline structures in standard classes. This resulted in less rigid disciplinary requirements for White students in predominantly White advanced placement and high academic level courses and more rigid disciplinary requirements for students of color in predominantly non-White standard classes.

In contrast to educators employing rigid discipline-oriented classroom management systems, educators who relied on relationship building as the critical feature of their classroom and behavior management systems had fewer disciplinary issues.
Teachers who prioritized engagement and learning over order and who employed interpersonal approach to behavior management experienced fewer incidents in general and more positive classroom environments. This interpersonal approach was able to break through the distrust between White educators and students of color that resulted from years of exposure to bias in the district.

**Social Ecological Model of Discipline**

Disparities in school suspensions and disciplinary treatment of students, especially students of color, were driven by student and teacher factors, school and district factors, community factors, and societal factors. These factors worked in ways that consistently oppressed students of color and undervalued or denied the cultures, rights and needs of students of color and their community. The school discipline system was driven by factors outside of the discrete interactions between individuals involved in any single disciplinary incident. The system was instead a reflection of the social ecological factors that dominated the school culture and the disciplinary system.

*The teachers and the students are located within the center of the social ecological model.* Teachers were perceived to be primarily responsible for discriminatory discipline, but the discipline outcomes were driven by a complex social ecological system. These teachers were embedded in a district that had historical and current structures that determined much of the system guiding their punitive and rigid disciplinary practices. The tensions between the Latin and White individuals in the community were replicated in the school discipline system in multiple ways. The insular nature of the White community in Preston resulted in White dominant educators who lacked cultural competence of the majority of the students they served. Racial segregation
in the community was also replicated in the school in segregated classrooms with preferential treatment for White students in high achieving classes. Societal and community racial structures led to a school discipline system in which the White staff (the majority of educators) dominated all power structures in the school discipline system, forcing students of color (the majority of students) to comply with White cultural norms and standards and resulting in disproportionate disciplinary treatment of students of color.

One of the primary issues identified in the study was a consistent discussion of the roles of individuals in the discipline system. While the findings across stakeholders revealed an underlying social ecological model of discipline driven by complex interactions of societal, community, district, and individual factors, most participants focused their discussions on the behaviors and actions of individuals (particularly teachers) as the primary drivers of high discipline rates and disproportionate discipline. This view led to a misconception that changing individual actions was the path toward changing a flawed and discriminatory discipline system.

An exemplar of this misconception is evident in the 2015 moratorium on suspensions, which was an attempt of the administration to change the actions of individuals by removing the authority of educators to suspend students. Because this initiative was not informed by the social ecological factors undergirding the discipline system, it failed. In fact, the moratorium demonstrated the ways that the social ecological model re-exerted itself, resulting in a different but equally draconic discipline system that produced equally disproportionate discipline outcomes. Instead of high rates and disproportionate suspension, there were extraordinarily high rates and disproportionate
sending of students out of class. In fact, because the most common disciplinary tool used by educators (disciplinary removals) was eliminated, there was a worsening of classroom and school climates, and a deepening of racial tensions in the school.

This edict also demonstrated what occurs when districts initiate policy changes that are responses to the symptoms of a discipline issue, and not the underlying causes associated with the perpetuation of longstanding ineffective and inappropriate discipline systems. In many ways, 2015 reveal how critical it is to conduct a systematic evaluative review of the discipline system (including SEM factors) in order to identify the underlying root causes of the discipline outcomes (e.g., high rates of suspensions, disproportionate suspensions) and how moving forward with top down discipline reforms without an understanding of these root causes leads to expanding discipline problems, discontent amongst the staff, and a discriminatory school culture and climate leading to students distrust of schools and school personnel.

**Implications for Research**

This study builds on the growing body of qualitative and quantitative research investigations that have established a robust literature base on school discipline. Researchers should continue to expand the quantitative studies investigating the magnitude of discipline outcomes, disproportionality in discipline outcomes. Such studies will provide a more complete and comprehensive understanding of the landscape of school discipline at the school, district, state, and national levels. At the same time, research needs to expand the qualitative research base, exploring the myriad issues associated with school discipline at the various levels of the discipline system.
Importantly, researchers should conduct additional mixed method studies that solicit input from stakeholders about underlying factors that contribute to disciplinary outcomes in a range of districts. This could include utilizing mixed method studies to identify the various pathways to suspension and expulsion, as well as potential interventions to remedy disproportionate disciplinary exclusions. Researchers should also consider conducting mixed method studies at the state level, including a range of stakeholders such as superintendents, state education administrators, members of the NAACP, members of special education advocacy organizations, members of parent action committees, and students. Such studies can help expand the understanding of larger disciplinary issues across states.

**Implications for Practice**

Prior to undertaking any reforms to the school discipline system, districts should complete a thorough examination of each component of the discipline system. Districts should convene discipline committees which include representatives from various stakeholder groups, including school leadership, mental health professionals, behavioral support staff, teachers, and students. The committee should collect and analyze school discipline data for at least 5 years period to identify problem areas such as: 1) disproportionality in discipline rates for students from various marginalized groups; 2) identify ‘hot spots’ or the activities/personnel that generate higher than average disciplinary referrals. The committee should examine the design of the school discipline system and how it actually functions.

Districts should solicit input from stakeholders to identify the individual, environmental or systemic factors that play a role in school discipline in the district. It is
critical that reform efforts first identify how individuals in the school community and
their interactions influence school discipline. It is just as critical that these efforts identify
how the environments within schools, within the community, and from society as a whole
influence individuals’ behaviors and the school discipline system.

Consult school discipline research to identify the necessary components of
effective and culturally responsive school discipline systems. These components should
at a minimum include: codes of conduct which outline behavioral expectations for
various school activities (classroom, cafeteria, hallways, special events, etc.); data
management systems that track all disciplinary incidents and record the referring staff
member, the responding staff member, and the resulting consequence; and structured
evaluation activities that can identify disproportionality (by race/ethnicity, gender,
disability status, etc.), identify “hot spots” (specific personnel, students, activities, or
settings with high levels of disciplinary incidents).

Districts should develop formal systems for students to address issues of
racial/cultural bias by fellow students or school personnel, perceived disrespect or other
inappropriate behavior by personnel. These systems should be intentional in their designs
to ensure the process is non intimidating and responsive for all students, regardless of
self-advocacy skills. An important finding from my study was that students had no path
for confronting bias and injustice directly in their schools, and thus were often disciplined
for demanding respect and advocating for themselves and others.

It is unfortunate that the acknowledgment of racial and cultural differences and
importance of cultural responsiveness have become intertwined with the ideological and
political divides in the U.S. My findings supported existing literature that explored how
race, ethnicity, identity, and culture permeate every aspect of student experience. In my study, this finding was consistent for both White and Latino students and demonstrated that students were acutely aware of, interested in, and affected by race and culture regardless of whether schools openly address these topics nor whether a large segment of District educators denied that race and culture matter at all. These findings support the value of open and transparent recognition, acknowledgment, and exploration of culture and identity. Perhaps more critically, my findings demonstrated the harm potentially caused by the failures of the District and individual educators to meet any of the above recommendations.

Districts are responsible for their workforce and should ensure that educators are culturally fluent and culturally responsive to the student body served by the district. Districts should set an expectation for all school personnel that they be culturally fluent about the communities and cultures of students they serve and utilize culturally responsive instruction, classroom management, and behavior management pedagogies. While it may be challenging to get some existing personnel to engage with the material in a way that would meaningfully impact their practice, districts should integrate the training materials into the onboarding process for all new personnel. Districts should collaborate with members of the school community to develop workshop/training materials relating to specific cultures represented in the student body which highlight the social and behavioral norms that might impact student behavior. Districts should identify cultural historians and storytellers from the community to facilitate workshops for school personnel, students, and the broader school community. This would create or expand the relationships between schools and the communities they serve and give
students the chance to learn about their community directly. It could also help create genuine connections between school personnel the culture and history of the surrounding community.

**Social Ecological Model of School Discipline for Preston Public Schools**

The Social Ecological Model is theoretical framework underlying this dissertation and I adapted the framework to better represent the complexity of the findings from this study. This model represents myriad factors that influence disciplinary practices and outcomes. It also depicts the interdependent and dynamic nature school discipline, with individuals being affected by each other and the school their environments. The qualitative data from my interviews with students and school personnel assisted my efforts to contextualize Preston’s disciplinary practices and identify the complex array of personal, school, community, and societal factors that contributed to disciplinary outcomes.

This process can lead to identify potential intervention points for the District to exploring and reforming the school discipline system. Based on my findings, it is clear that we cannot reform school discipline until we understand why the issues leading to disproportionate discipline are occurring. As was evident in the failed 2015 mandate, targeting disciplinary outcomes will not result in a sustained change to the discipline system. Fundamentally, the problem is not suspensions, which have a historical place in schools. The problem is the ways that disciplinary practices have become integral to the basic structure of schools, and are fundamentally maintained by social ecological factors at all levels of the social ecological model. In order to remedy disciplinary problems and disproportionate disciplinary exclusions, it is necessary to
understand the individual, district, community, and society factors at play within the
school discipline system. At the center of the system are interactions between educators
and students – but those individuals are affected by their own the respective social
ecological factors driving their actions. The individuals exist in a school system with its
own set of historical and contemporary factors. That school system resides in a
community – which affects the individual actions and the school system practices. All of
these factors reside within a societal systems with changing pressures that affect each
level of the social ecological system both directly and indirectly.

Improving punitive discipline, disproportionate suspensions, and discriminatory
discipline can only be accomplished by identify as many of the underlying associated
issues, identifying the complex ways that the issues function across the social ecological
levels, and identifying intervention points that are malleable to change. Then, it is critical
to develop targeted interventions that address as many of the intervention points as
possible within a single intervention approach. Counter to conventional thinking, many of
the intervention points and subsequent interventions will not be discipline specific. For
example, in Preston, some of the factors that were undergirding the discipline problem
included; (a) teacher communication with students, (b) relationship building, (c)
structural academic racial inequities associated with tracking (e.g., segregated Honors /
AP courses), (d) cultural dissonance between staff and students, (e) inflexible and
traditional veteran teachers, (f) punitive discipline structures, (g) inadequate behavior
management and classroom management training, (g) White dominant culture, (h) long
standing tensions between White and Puerto Rican Preston communities, (h) community
member mistrust of school, (i) high mobility of Puerto Rican students, (j) anti minority
rhetoric at the national level, (k) historical national racism, (l) backlash to Black Lives Matter in the Preston community, and (m) the School to Prison Pipeline.

The societal issues can only be addressed through societal change, making them static as opposed to malleable factors. Some of the factors such as the long standing tensions between White and Puerto Rican communities can be considered in the development of interventions, but may not be directly impacted by interventions. Other factors are malleable and can be directly targeted. Finally, many of the intervention points may not appear to be directly linked to the discipline outcomes. However, based on the findings from this study, these intervention points can result in changes to practice, climate, and culture in ways that will change the underlying factors leading to disproportionate suspensions. By targeting these intervention points through a systematic and comprehensive intervention efforts, the underlying malleable factors can be changed resulting in a system that depends less on punitive disciplinary practices.

Using findings from this investigation, one potential intervention would target the structural segregated academic inequities associated with the tracking system in the district. Such an intervention would target multiple intervention points at the same time, and also involve proximal and distal components to address short term, medium term, and long term changes. I propose the development of two integrated classes that combine honors and standard learners in a single classroom. This would require the utilization of Universal Design for Learning components that would allow teachers to provide all learners with meaningful learning opportunities appropriate to their skills and needs. To implement the classes, it would be necessary to identify teachers who are likely to take advantage of the learning opportunity and open to changing practices. Teachers would be
trained to develop relationships initially and throughout the year and would be trained to utilize effective communication strategies derived from evidence based practices. Teachers would be part of school-wide training on behavior management and introduction to applied behavior analysis to help them understand the functions of behaviors and to employ evidence-based interventions to promote prosocial behaviors. Administrators and teachers would also participate in training on the Puerto Rican culture, including the norms of interpersonal communication (e.g., including perception of adult to child and teen perceptions of respect). This should also include training on the differences between recent arrivals from Puerto Rico and those who are stable members of the Puerto Rican community. Administrators would also work with the two teachers to handle any serious behavioral challenges through non-discipline interventions whenever possible to limit time out of class.

Parallel to this process, the middle schools would initiate pilot programs to better prepare learners for rigorous high school academic coursework. This would start as once a month exploratory course that provide students with meaningful authentic learning experiences, and would transition to weekly courses. These courses would better prepare students to engage in high school content and to engage in discourse in appropriate and meaningful ways, paving the way for their increased capacity to be successful in high school courses, honors courses, and even AP courses.

All components of these practices would involve extensive outreach to the community to explain the intervention, to explain the goals of the intervention, and to get support both directly and indirectly from community stakeholders. For example, community member knowledgeable about their respective cultures could be asked to
provide training sessions on their culture and community. Additionally, parents in the pilot courses would be invited to visit the class and would receive regular updates on the class activities and their child’s participation and performance. This outreach would not only begin to address some of the cultural tensions in the community, but would also begin to decrease the levels of school distrust held by many parents and families.

To be effective, all of the intervention components would need to be monitored to ensure the components are implemented with fidelity. The school will also need to monitor outcomes associated with each component as well as outcomes associated with the broader range of activities as a whole. For example, teachers and students in the pilot classes should be observed to identify the amount of communication taking place, to determine the extent to which all students are given equal voice and opportunity to participate, and findings should be used to improve the intervention. Additionally, discipline data in these classes should be tracked separately to determine the differences in discipline outcomes as compared to students in traditional classes. Again, data should be used to improve the intervention. In all classes, the school should identify ways that teachers are employing evidence based behavioral interventions and provide support to improve teacher practice. The school should also track the relationship between increased use of effective behavior management strategies and discipline outcomes. At the end of the first year, the school should review all practices in a comprehensive way, and revise or refine practices based on those data. Furthermore, they should conduct climate assessments to identify ways that the interventions are changing the climate form perspectives of all stakeholders.
Limitations

The findings from this study should be considered within the scope of the investigation. There are a number of topics and issues that this study did not address, which limit the generalizability of some of the findings. First, my data analysis included suspension rates disaggregated by ethnicity. There are other identities and characteristics that marginalize students and subject them to disproportionate discipline, including disability status, English Learner status, and LGBTQ+ identities. Additionally, I utilized the state as the comparison group. My study may have benefited if I included districts with similar demographics in the comparison groups. However, adding additional comparisons might have created more confusions for the participants who struggled comprehend tables that required interpretations or comparisons of multiple items. Additionally, as my findings demonstrated, demographics are just one aspect that defines a district, and comparisons based on demographics could be spurious and could create dissonance in the interpretations.

This study was conducted with a limited sample. This was part of my research design, and the COVID 19 pandemic limited my recruitment efforts. However, my study may have benefitted the inclusion of other stakeholder groups, such as caregivers and district-level administrators. A larger sample might also have provided a greater variety of perspectives. For example, it is possible that the study could benefit if there was representation from district-level administrators, additional White students, and school personnel who subscribed to more traditional behavior management and discipline philosophies.
My analysis of school discipline data utilized publicly available data from the state Department of Education website. Access to discipline data tracked by schools and districts would have provided a more robust understanding of trends and inequities. For example, I analyzed data relating to numbers of students suspended for “non-violent, non-drug related, non-criminal” infractions. School data would provide breakdown of specific infractions included in this category, such as classroom disruption, defiance, and disrespect, which would offer a more comprehensive view of the behaviors leading to suspension. School-level data Additional data may have revealed new and novel findings.

My study involved a single public school district located in a small, post-industrial city in the Northeast. As findings demonstrated, the district and city had a number of characteristics, including demographic breakdown of 50% White and 50% Latino and the City’s history as a former hub of industry, that influenced the school discipline system and how data were interpreted. My research design focused on contextualizing school discipline in Preston and identifying specific factors from the schools, community, and society that influenced outcomes. As a result, some of the findings are specific to Preston and may not be generalizable to other schools or settings.

**Conclusion**

This study took a deep dive into the school discipline system of a single district and was the first study to include stakeholders from the school community in the interpretation of the data. The depth and breadth of the findings validated the mixed method design as a critical means for understanding the underlying factors driving disproportionate and discriminatory discipline as well as the impact of these practices on educators and students. Existing research has, for the most part, identified the trends that
make up the “what” of school discipline or has explored the perceptions of discipline practices by stakeholders. There is wide agreement among researchers that exclusionary discipline has no benefits for students, is linked to a variety of negative outcomes, is mostly used for minor infractions, and is racially and culturally biased. This study explored why disproportionate discipline occurred by systematically exploring the experiences and perceptions of the individuals involved in the discipline system. The mixed method design functioned as intended, and revealed the scope of the discipline problems, the impact that discriminatory discipline practices had on the stakeholders, and the underlying causes of the disproportionate discipline outcomes. Furthermore, The study revealed that discipline systems are driven and maintained by social ecological factors in a complex manner that can be used to identify problems in a comprehensive manner, and develop interventions that target the underlying factors at the various levels of the social ecological model. Such an approach is critical if the field is to move away from simply identifying that punitive and discriminatory discipline is bad and toward the development of interventions that change draconic discipline systems in a manner that fundamentally alters the underlying systems and culture that maintain those practices.
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