School as a Potential Support System: The K-12 Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated People

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Educational Studies

Vassar College

Poughkeepsie, NY

Spring 2024

Abstract

Schools do not support all students and sometimes contain policies that actively harm them. It is known that the school-to-prison pipeline, zero-tolerance policies, and other punitive measures impede students' school experiences. At the same time, there are alternatives such as restorative justice and alternative education that aim to remedy some of the faults of the education system. In light of this, I aimed to see whether schools supported formerly incarcerated people when they were in traditional K-12 schooling since there is a lack of research regarding this population. I used a mixed methodology of surveys and interviews to analyze and answer the questions: In what ways, if any, did school create a support system for people who were formerly incarcerated when they were in K-12 schools? Were formerly incarcerated people's experiences in schools characterized by aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline? Did formerly incarcerated people experience any aspects of alternative education or discipline, and if so, did these positively or negatively affect their schooling experience? I found that schools as a whole do not support students, but individual people such as teachers or administrators sometimes do. I argue that participants did experience aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline, especially in regard to suspension and expulsion. I also found that participants did not experience any forms of alternative discipline or education. My findings led me to conclude that schools did not create support systems for the participants of my study. These findings show the need to change school policies and practices to ensure that students feel supported and benefit from the schools they attend.

Keywords: formerly incarcerated, support system, school-to-prison pipeline, alternative education, alternative discipline

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Chapter 1: Introduction

I have always wondered why, as a required part of society, so many people dislike school. Growing up, I loved school, learning was intriguing, my teachers were enthusiastic and cared for me, and I usually had fun. The school I went to was a small private school that took pride in having a unique curriculum and teachers who had extensive training. In high school, despite it also being a small, private, parochial school, much of that changed as the curriculum was standardized, grades became a central focus, and teachers had more students so they could not always devote time to each one. I was left feeling frustrated and not wanting to be there, I lost my desire to learn, and my love of school. As I have reflected on my K-12 experience and the difference in how I felt at each school, I have wondered how other people felt when they reflected on their school experiences. If my own, extremely privileged experience was fraught with negativity and frustration, it would seem easy to guess that those with less privilege than me did not fare any better.

I knew in doing this project that I wanted to combine my interest in education and my belief in the need for prison abolition as the U.S. education and prison systems are inextricably connected. I also believe that lived experience (your understanding of the world based on your experiences living in it), is an underrated form of knowledge and thus wanted to center this form of knowledge in my work. My own lived experience tells me that schools can be a place of support and education can be a tool for change. My studies at Vassar tell me that the U.S. education system is not currently a place of support or a tool for change and that education outcomes differ greatly based on race and class. My studies also have shown that the U.S. over-relies on prisons and the criminal justice system as solutions to conflict in society and schools. This leads to schools being punitive and alienating places. I do not think that one should

have to be privileged to experience the positive aspects of education, excitement, intrigue, and community. With that being said, I wanted to explore ways schools can be improved to support more people, especially those on the margins. I believe that collaborative, nonpunitive education can be one tool for breaking ties with our overreliance on prisons, but to do that, we need to understand the educational experiences and needs of those who have been incarcerated.

We often turn to the so-called experts in the field when looking for these solutions, and we often forget that those who live through whatever we are trying to improve, in this case, a broken education system, can provide valuable insight as they have the lived experience and knowledge to back up their beliefs. Because the voices of people who are impacted by the justice system are often ignored, the objective of my thesis is to understand the experiences that formerly incarcerated people had in their K-12 schooling. I kept the school grade range open as I did not want to limit participation based on what grade someone had completed.

My research aims to answer the following questions: *In what ways, if any, did school create a support system for people who were formerly incarcerated when they were in K-12 schools? Were formerly incarcerated people's experiences in schools characterized by aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline? Did formerly incarcerated people experience any aspects of alternative education or discipline, and if so, did these positively or negatively affect their schooling experience?*

To answer these questions, I begin with my theoretical framework and a review of the pertinent literature. I explain my methodology and justification for doing a mixed methodology study and the coding process I used to analyze the data. I share my findings from surveys and interviews and conclude with a discussion of the findings, limitations of the study, and recommendations for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Capitalism is an economic and social system under which the world, especially the United States, functions. Merriam-Webster (2024) defines capitalism as characterized by private or corporate ownership of goods where prices are determined by competition in a free market. While this seems good because it eliminates the possibility of the government having complete control over the economy, and allows for competition which is supposed to keep prices down, the reality is that capitalism is rooted in inequality, colonialism, slavery, and power.

As Boike Rehbein (2020) explains in his piece *Capitalism and Inequality,* the purpose of capitalism is for a small group of people to maintain power over the rest of the population. He explains that this is done through the accumulation of wealth, but clarifies that this is how a small group sustains domination, but not the purpose of capitalism itself. This means that we (citizens of the world), live within a system where a select group of people maintain power over others primarily through wealth accumulation. As I will explain in the following paragraphs, wealth is not the only way power is maintained.

Rehbein (2020) adds that capitalism developed at the same time as colonialism making it inextricably linked to slavery and racial hierarchy, specifically white supremacy. This means that the system the United States uses to maintain social and economic power over others is the same system that killed people to take over land and enslaved people to work the land. The system we live in today is a system that was designed for few to succeed despite narratives of working hard and being successful. Furthermore, as Jodi Melamed (2015) explains: "[As] The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology" (p. 77). This means that society developed along racial lines to maintain white

supremacy, thus ingraining racial subordination in the social hierarchy. This hierarchy continues today as we live in the same capitalist society founded on racial subordination.

Another way that capitalism thrives is by the dominant class dividing people along economic or class lines. Since the purpose of capitalism is for a small group to dominate the rest of society, one way to do this is through dividing people based on wealth. By doing this, those at the bottom will always want what those at the top have and those at the top will always pity those at the bottom. As a result, those in power will retain their power because everyone is so focused on their own wealth that they do not stop to question those at the top. As Dave Hill et al. (2008) explain, "class is central to the social relations of production and essential for producing and reproducing the cultural and economic activities of humans under a capitalist mode of production" (p. 63). Class is essential to capitalism because it creates a social hierarchy and pits people against each other. Class is what allows some people to be the boss of others and for people to be rich and poor. It is a means by which the dominant class remains dominant.

All of this is to say that capitalism divides people on racial, class, and gender lines. Capitalism makes distinctions between groups of people to prevent community and enable those in power to retain their power. Melamed (2015) explains this division as humanity being separated so that it may benefit capitalism and production but not create community or allow humans to be interconnected. It is with this division in mind that I approach this project. If it is not along racial lines that people are divided, it is along economic lines, and if not economic then on gender lines, and sometimes a mix of all three. As I will explain in the following section, schools mirror society. And since society is based on a system of domination, marginalization, and division, schools also perpetuate this marginalization and division.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

My research looks at formerly incarcerated people's experiences in the education system. As such I begin this review by looking at the education system and its connections to the prison system. I look at alternative education and discipline methods to see how alternative methods might change people's relationship to school. I also look at research that uses the voices and perspectives of formerly incarcerated people to see what aspects of their experiences have previously been researched.

Defining a Support System Within Schools

Based on the theories provided in this section, I define a support system as: A support system is in place when students feel they can trust those around them, especially teachers and administrators, when students feel like they and their voice and opinion matter, when a student feels what they learning is relevant to them and their lived reality, and most importantly when there is a sense of community and safety felt by students.

The historical origins of schools, along with current practices, uphold systemic inequalities and contribute to a general lack of support in schools. Schools mimic a capitalist system that upholds the status quo. Paulo Freire, John Dewey, and Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis are some of the theorists who discuss historical and current models of education. Paulo Freire (2018), bases all of his work on the belief that society is made up of oppressors and the oppressed. What Friere means by this is that because of capitalism, people are systematically oppressed and dehumanized so that a few people remain in power. He adds that to evade becoming oppressors themselves, those in search of liberation must free not only themselves but their oppressors as well. This is to say that freeing yourself of oppression by oppressing others does not free one of oppression. In the context of education, Friere (2018) coined the term

"banking model" of education which describes how the teacher deposits knowledge into the student while the student sits passively and is uninvolved in their educational journey. Freire argues that this method of teaching students is detrimental to all involved because it causes a lack of critical thinking. This reinforces oppression because no one is given the tools to question their positionality or power dynamics in society. If a student is passively learning, they are not being supported because their voice and value as a human is not considered in the learning process.

In *The School and Society*, John Dewey (1976) argues that as labor became industrialized during the Industrial Revolution it moved from the home to the factory, meaning that children did not learn the same skills they historically had in their homes. He suggests that schools should provide the hands-on learning experiences lost at home. Dewey (1976) adds that because of education requirements, students must bend to the curriculum and listen passively en masse, losing any need for inquiry despite inquiry being essential to learning. In his pedagogic creed, Dewey (1897) explains that if learning is not relevant to students, as it currently is not, students will become disenfranchised, so learning must be true to students and reflect their real lives. Student-centered learning is described as essential to keeping students engaged and learning at their fullest. Since this is not currently happening, students are not being supported.

In describing the current model of education in the U.S. Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis (2012) explain how schools mirror society and as such reproduce inequalities within schools. Through their correspondence principle which states that school is deliberately similar to the workplace, Bowles and Gintis (2012) argue that schools follow a capitalist hierarchical system that reflects many negative aspects of society. Schools have hierarchies that place students at the bottom while they are rewarded for good grades in the same way that the workplace puts the working class at the bottom while rewarding work with money. This system

creates obedient citizens who do not challenge the world around them and are led by the myth of being able to change their position in society despite reality showing them differently. Because the capitalist, white, ruling class made the education system to fit their needs, students are being prepared to serve the ruling class. Once again, school is not creating support for students because it is mimicking a system that requires obedient workers who are not allowed to challenge their role or change their position. Students do not have agency and are cogs in a machine whose individuality and value are not taken into consideration. Our current school model is not creating support systems for students and is instead ignoring their needs while disenfranchising them and perpetuating inequalities.

While there may be a lack of support in schools, there are plenty of scholars who identify what needs to change for there to be support systems in schools. Nel Noddings, bell hooks, and Gloria Ladson-Billings are just a few of the many authors who write about the ways schools can be transformed to support students.

The work of Nel Noddings calls for care in schools and challenges the reader to rethink what care in schools might look like. Noddings (2005) explains how, in our current test-based education model, an ethic of care does not exist. She describes care as the act of listening attentively and responding as positively as possible to address a person's needs and argues that care must be seen and recognized by all parties. What this means is that if the cared for does not see the care, in this case, the student, then there is not a caring relationship despite the efforts of the carer, in this case, the teacher. Noddings (2005) argues that adults in schools often think they are caring for students by making decisions with students' best interests in mind, but because they do not consult students, the decisions usually do not meet students' needs and thus there is no ethic of care. The idea of an ethic of care shows how students should be supported because it

centers on valuing their voice and opinion and building relationships where the student's needs are the top priority.

Culturally relevant pedagogy is a term coined by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) which can be defined as: “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp.17-18). According to this definition, if students learn through culturally relevant lessons, they will be empowered and learn to challenge the status quo. Ladson-Billings (1995) acknowledges that culturally relevant teaching is not a mind-blowing idea, it is just good teaching, but because it is not happening in schools, there must be a call for it to happen. It is clear how culturally relevant pedagogy would contribute to support in school because it centers students and empowers them through the elevation of their culture and community.

Transgressing traditional power dynamics, nurturing students, and engaging students through relevant learning are some of the ways bell hooks (2014) proposes changing education to work toward freedom. hooks argues that education can be a transformative experience, but it usually lacks the nurturing and engagement needed to push students to think critically and transgress oppressive systems. Because all students are asked to fit into a white upper-class model of learning and existing in the world, students are unable to embrace their identity and build community based on their lived reality. Through hook’s ideas, it is clear that it is possible to build schools and classrooms that safely center students and that doing so would create support in a way that empowers students and changes power dynamics in schools and by association, society.

Because each author describes wrongs and potential improvements to the education system, but none offer a specific definition of a support system in schools, I used their ideas of

what is wrong in the school system and what should be done in schools to create my definition of a support system. Once again, this definition is: A support system is in place when students feel they can trust those around them, especially teachers and administrators, when students feel like they and their voice and opinion matter, when a student feels what they learning is relevant to them and their lived reality, and most importantly when there is a sense of community and safety felt by students. With this definition in mind, I explore the current state of schools, the problems they face, and possible solutions to these problems.

The Problem: School-to-Prison Pipeline and School Policies/Practices

Since all children and teens in the United States are required to attend school from somewhere between the ages of 5-18 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017) one would think that schools would be a place of nurture and learning where children thrive and become well-rounded people. However, according to research on education in the U.S., there are multiple policies and practices in place that limit students' possibilities to learn in a safe and positive environment (Sykes et al., 2015; Fuentes, 2022; Smith, 2015; Dancy, 2014).

Although not a policy or specific practice, the first indicator of the damage the education system causes is the existence of the school-to-prison pipeline (SPP). The SPP is a metaphor (McGrew, 2016) that can be defined as the trend by which children are funneled out of schools and into the criminal justice system/prison (Dancy, 2014). While the SPP is a metaphor, it has material reality as seen by police in schools, partnerships between school districts and police departments, security cameras, and metal detectors to name a few. The SPP is characterized by an overreliance on police and law enforcement in schools (Brownstein, 2009; Smith, 2015) and the criminalization of student misbehavior resulting in increased interaction between students and the criminal justice system (Barnes & Motz, 2018). In my review of the literature and

confirmed by Ken McGrew (2016) in his piece critiquing the SPP, the origins of the SPP as a common term to describe the connections between schools and prisons are unclear. One of its first uses is from a conference entitled "Reconstructing the School to Prison Pipeline: Charting Intervention Strategies of Prevention and Support for Minority Children," held at Northeastern University in 2003 (McGrew, 2016). It has been used consistently in the news since 2004 (McGrew, 2016). The SPP has been described as a machine through which education and public safety policies place youth at an increased risk of ending education early while also increasing the likelihood of them going to prison (Sykes et al., 2015; Lustick, 2017). As the SPP is a broad term used to describe the connection between schools and prisons, both material and metaphorical, it is imperative to describe the specific policies and practices that make the SPP occur in the first place.

The first practice that contributes to large prison populations (Shigematsu, 2012), but also the relationship between schools and prisons is zero-tolerance policies. These policies began in the 1980s with President Regan as a result of his expansion of the War on Drugs (Fuentes, 2022; Sykes et al., 2015; Dancy, 2014). Zero-tolerance policies are laws that mandate predetermined sentence lengths and consequences for specific crimes without room for context or consideration of a person's circumstances (Brownstein, 2009; Smith, 2015). The Drug-Free School and Community Act of 1986 brought the War on Drugs to schools by mandating zero-tolerance for drugs or alcohol on public school property (Fuentes, 2022). President Clinton continued and exacerbated zero-tolerance in schools with the Safe and Gun Free School Act of 1994 which mandates a one-year expulsion for any student who brings a weapon to school (Fuentes, 2022; Smith, 2015; Sykes et al., 2015). Per the 1994 act, schools that did not enact zero-tolerance policies would lose all federal funding (Smith, 2015; Sykes et al., 2015; Lustick, 2017). It can be

generalized that we all want safe schools, and it is probable that these laws were enacted to make schools a safe environment by banning drugs and guns. Unfortunately, they have been used to implement harsh punishments for minor infractions (Smith, 2015; Sykes et al., 2015; Dancy, 2014; Abrams & Terry, 2017), such as bringing scissors (considered a weapon) to school (Brownstein, 2009) which has brought their effectiveness and validity into question. These laws have been taken to such extremes that students are excessively punished for typical adolescent behavior such as having an attitude or refusing to sit down in a class (Fuentes, 2022). Mikki L. Smith (2015) found that 75% of U.S. schools had zero-tolerance policies which shows the proliferation of these policies in schools no matter the socioeconomic makeup of the school.

Despite causing the greatest harm to a person's future and education, the most common forms of punishment resulting from zero-tolerance policies are suspension and expulsion (Smith, 2015). Suspension entails a student being prohibited from attending school for some time while expulsion bans a student from returning to the same school entirely. Smith (2015) demonstrates the damage caused by suspensions by stating that they found that a student being suspended one time triples the chance of involvement in the justice system which in turn increases the likelihood of a student dropping out. For example, one arrest doubles the chance of a student dropping out and a court appearance makes it four times more likely (Brownstein, 2009). As of the 2009-2010 school year, suspensions were increasing nationally despite crime rates dropping (Brownstein, 2009; Fuentes, 2022; Smith, 2015; Sykes et al., 2015) which shows a disconnect in the usage of suspensions as a punishment for actual crimes committed in schools. Of the suspensions nationwide in the 2009-2010 school year, 74% were for 5 days or longer which is problematic not only because suspensions increase the likelihood of a student acting out again

(Brownstein, 2009; Lustick, 2017), but also because students will fall behind and may not be able to catch up.

One of the oldest and most common forms of punishment is detention (Rosen, 2005). Since it is older than the SPP and zero-tolerance policies, detention is not a result of these policies, but it works well within the punitive system they create. For most students, detention entails either sitting in a room doing nothing or sitting in a room and being forced to do homework (Rosen, 2005). While detention seems less harmful than suspension and expulsion because it does not force the student to miss class time, I could not find any articles saying it has a positive impact on students or teachers. Simangele Mayisela (2021), and Xavier Shankle (2018), argue that detention harms students because it takes away from other aspects of their lives and harms teachers by making them work longer hours or lose their lunch break. I would even go as far as to say that the name detention implies involvement with the criminal justice system as it is the same name as some forms of formal detention. It appears that school detention is like an extremely short prison sentence. You are required to go, you must do exactly what the teacher says, and you can only leave when the teacher tells you your time is up. In this case, the teacher is forced to serve as law enforcement. The parallels between school and formal detention are uncanny and this shows that detention plays a key role in the SPP.

Another way that zero-tolerance policies have manifested in schools is in policing and surveillance practices. The logic for having police, or school safety officers in schools, is that they can enforce zero-tolerance policies and keep students safe (Fuentes, 2022; Sykes et al., 2015; Dancy, 2014). At times, these officers can be federally funded (Fuentes, 2022), but usually, they work in tandem with local police which normalizes the school's connections to the criminal justice system. Having police in schools shows the way that the SPP works in both directions.

Law enforcement is trafficked into schools where youth are criminalized and then trafficked into the criminal justice system. Despite school police officers being in schools for safety, Annette Fuentes (2022) found that they do not make schools safer. While policing is one way that students are surveilled in school, schools also use drug-sniffing dogs, metal detectors, and security cameras to police students (Smith, 2015; Sykes et al., 2015; Dancy, 2014). Hilary Lustick (2017) found that relying on police to enforce rules and take control of discipline makes teachers lose a sense of logic as to which issues in their classrooms they can resolve themselves and which require the police to be called so police are often called for minor rule breaks or common teenage misbehavior. This shows the ways criminalization can expand by deeming more and more behaviors as criminal and thus criminalizing more people. Lastly, it should be noted that the policing of schools is not limited to low-income urban areas as Bryan L. Sykes et al. (2015) found that 99% of students nationwide report some sort of security or surveillance measure in their schools. While whiter and wealthier schools may not have the same amount of police or surveillance measures, the fact that 99% of students experience some level of security shows the prevalence of the SPP in schools.

In addition to the harm zero-tolerance policies cause, as stated above, there are other ways that these policies affect schools. It is important to note that these impacts are greater in middle and high school (Sykes et al., 2015). First, the culture of a school suffers when there are more suspensions as students' fear of being punished is always present. This is unfortunate as there is no evidence that these policies make schools safer, so the culture and community of a school suffer without any added benefit (Lustick, 2017). Additionally, teachers feel pushed out of schools as their role becomes one of rule-enforcing and punishing students instead of educating and bonding with students (Brownstein, 2009). Lastly, it should be noted that zero-tolerance also

has greater consequences for students with disabilities (Sykes et al., 2015). This accentuates the ineffectiveness of zero-tolerance policies as they are made to have no leeway for the context of a person's situation and something like having a disability may need to be taken into account when discipline is involved. It is not surprising that people who are unable to be the ideal student according to these laws - quiet, still, and passive - are impacted more by its unforgiving nature.

The impacts of the SPP are also vastly exacerbated if a student is low-income or a person of color. For example, in a study on the impacts of zero-tolerance policies on urban schools, Smith (2015) found that Black students are 3x more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts. Additionally, in the year 2000, while African American students made up 17% of the student population in the U.S., they accounted for 34% of those suspended (Smith, 2015). In 2015-2016, African American males accounted for 8% of the school population but represented 25% of those suspended (Morgan, 2021; Morgan, 2021a) which shows that a trend of disproportionate punishment for students of color has not subsided. This disproportion is in line with societal disproportions as Black and Latinx individuals comprise 57% of prison populations while only being 27% of the population (Alcatraz, 2021). It is important to note that despite being punished and suspended more than their white counterparts, T. Elon Dancy (2014) found that there is no evidence that African American students act out more, they are simply given harsher punishments. Teachers also play a role in the unequal punishment and discrimination of minority students in the classroom. Many teachers who teach in low-income urban areas where the majority of African American and Hispanic students attend school (Smith, 2015; Morgan 2021) are white and not from the communities they teach in. This creates a disconnect between them and their students where biases (whether conscious or not) often result in increased calls to campus police as teachers are unsure how to interact with their students because they are from

different backgrounds (Fuentes, 2022; Dancy, 2014; Jeffers, 2017; Morgan, 2021a). Through a study looking at national-level data, J.C. Barnes and R. T. Motz (2018) found that bias and disproportionate punishment were so extreme that if discipline were to be equal among black and white students while in school, it would be possible that racial inequality in arrest could drop as much as 16% when students become adults. This shows not only the racial inequality in schools today but also that what happens in school will affect a person later in life.

The inequality of the impact that SPP has on a student depending on their race and socioeconomic class is not a coincidence. Multiple authors discuss how schools are designed to reproduce social inequality and prepare students for their place in society (Sykes et al., 2015, Dancy, 2014; 7, Lustick, 2017). Through their idea of the correspondence theory, Bowles and Gintis (2012) argue that school replicates the workforce. A few people have power, in this case, the administrators and teachers, and the majority must follow what those in power demand of them, students following rules and teachers. What this means in the context of the SPP is that by suspending and criminalizing students of color at far higher rates than other students and causing them to be in and out of school, they are being prepared for adult life where they will be criminalized and likely spend time in and out of society. Additionally, Barnes and Motz (2018) found that there is a self-fulfilling prophecy where students are labeled troublemakers, so they act out, which gets them in trouble which only reinforces the idea that they are troublemakers causing the cycle to begin again. Since I have already established that schools are representations of society, this means that the same prophecy is fulfilled outside of schools as well.

In addition to the ways in which the SPP creates inequalities in education outcomes and disproportionately affects low-income students of color, some other factors influence these unequal outcomes. The unequal distribution of funds resulting from schools primarily being

funded by property taxes is a leading contributor to the inequalities in education (Walters, 2001). Because schools are funded by property taxes and properties reflect the wealth in a given area, wealthier areas receive far more funding than poorer areas, which results in disproportionate funds. If schools have unequal resources, it is no surprise that they have unequal educational outcomes. Furthermore, the ways school districts are formed exacerbate societal inequalities. Because school districts are formed at a local level, it has been found that the way that boundaries are drawn is often intentional to ensure that people whose properties might be of different values, and thus pay different amounts of taxes, are not part of the same districts (Walters, 2001). This also increases inequalities and at times brings intentions of segregation into question. Because property taxes fund districts disproportionately, those in poorer areas receive less funding and thus fewer resources, which further contributes to educational inequalities.

Throughout this section, I have shown how the SPP negatively affects students and in addition to causing excessive and unnecessary punishments, also unequally impacts students based on race and economic status. Based on my definition of a support system, the SPP causes schools to not be systems of support. Students cannot trust those around them because they are surrounded by police and administrators and teachers who rely on said police, which creates a disconnect between students and teachers. Students' voices are not valued as their side of a story is not considered when dealing with discipline, nor do they get a say in what they learn. Students' learning is based on state-based curricula that do not take their lived experiences or community context into account. And lastly, a community cannot be built because students are constantly being surveilled and monitored and cannot speak or act freely, or, in the worst case, they are not even at school to build relationships with peers and teachers. Support systems are destroyed in

the name of safety and protection. The SPP makes schools increasingly unsupportive of students and does not offer an avenue for support to be built.

Possible Solutions: Alternative Education and Discipline Methods

Since the knowledge that the U.S. school system is broken is not new, much research and action have been taken to try alternative methods to education and discipline practices in schools. The following section will examine some of these methods.

First, it is essential to define what is meant by alternative schools and alternative education. Generally speaking, an alternative school is any type of school that does not follow the traditional comprehensive model of education (Loomis, 2011). What I mean by this is any school that is not your local public school that all of the kids in the area are eligible to attend without any application. These schools can still be public, such as charter schools, continuation schools designed to help at-risk students, or magnet schools, but they can also be private schools or schools that follow a unique curriculum or pedagogy such as Montessori (Loomis, 2011). Alternative education is any type of education that differs from the typical state-mandated curriculum or standards and often pushes against tradition and the "norm." As these definitions are broad and give no insight into what alternative schools or education might look like, I will define some of the alternatives that I found to be the most relevant to my research questions.

One alternative education practice that can occur in a comprehensive or alternative school is democratic education. Stemming from the fact that the United States prides itself on being democratic, democratic education aims to create a school environment where all parties, students, teachers, parents, and administrators, have a voice and a role in deciding what is taught and what happens in their schools (Apple & Beane, 1995). The idea is that through democratic practices, students will have increased agency, and there will be an equal distribution of power

within a school (Apple & Beane, 1995). Additionally, since the role of schools has often been defined as an institution to prepare children to be good citizens (Sykes et al., 2015; Lustick, 2017; Loomis, 2011), teaching and practicing democracy is essential to preparing them to be successful citizens (Apple & Beane, 1995). Curriculum in democratic education is tailored towards the interests of students and critical thinking skills that ask why we are taught what we are taught (Apple & Beane, 1995). Some issues with this form of education are that there is always the risk that the majority is wrong so there must be checks and balances within a democratic education system. One argument against democratic education is that children are too young to make large decisions affecting their education (Apple & Beane, 1995). It seems to me that many schools attempt to implement some aspects of democracy in schools via student government, or voting on things like prom themes, but these choices are usually surface-level and irrelevant to the learning and classroom aspects of school. They give the illusion of choice without giving students any actual power to control their education.

A second alternative method that I found relevant to my research was community education as it calls into question the ways schools tend to overgeneralize what is important to learn without context to a student's experiences or positionality. As the name would suggest, community education is education that occurs within and for communities based on the interests and needs of the people within that community (Tett, 2010). There is no set definition of what community education looks like in practice as every community will have different needs (Tett, 2010), but it often involves establishing group norms, the teacher as a facilitator rather than the one imparting knowledge (Freire, 2018), and the use of real-world based projects and discussions with the idea being to learn from the community to help the community (Davis & Roswell, 2015). Community education originated as a reaction to the inequalities exacerbated by

capitalism and the Industrial Revolution and the efforts of the working class to demand social change (Tett, 2010). This makes community education especially relevant in the efforts to change an education system that is against low-income and historically marginalized students.

One example of a school that uses democratic education and some aspects of community education is Humanities Preparatory Academy in Manhattan New York. The school states in its mission that they are a democratic community whose primary values and goals are mutual respect, cooperation, creativity, and inquiry (Humanities Preparatory Academy, n.d.). This demonstrates the importance of critical thinking, everyone having a voice and centering community, all aspects of democratic or community education.

While it is acknowledged that we need to change the education system to better meet the needs of students, there is also a need to change discipline practices. One such alternative to current forms of discipline is restorative justice (RJ) and its companion restorative practice (RP). RJ is already used in some districts across the U.S., such as the Oakland Unified School District (OUSD, 2023). RJ originates from indigenous communities around the world who had no concept of police, jails, lawyers etc., and instead centered on community and the interrelatedness of life to resolve conflict (Davis, 2019). RJ is, at its core, a radical deconstruction of our current punitive framework (Lustick, 2017). The central idea of RJ is that it centers people and communities and negates the belief that there is a victim and a perpetrator in every crime or harm inflicted on a person (Lodi et al., 2021; Watts & Robertson, 2022). Instead, those practicing RJ believe that when a crime occurs, there is a violation of trust and community and that both people must be healed, albeit in different ways, as opposed to someone violating the state and paying for their sins (Lodi et al., 2021; Vincent et al., 2021; Watts & Robertson, 2022). In practice, this looks like having conversations and reflecting about why harm occurred and how it

can be prevented in the future to not only build relationships but hold accountability within a community. In RJ, each person is valued and respected and while harming others is never right, harm is resolved by rebuilding trust and community instead of removing someone from the community (Lodi et al., 2021; Vincent et al., 2021; Watts & Robertson, 2022; Lustick, 2017; Morgan, 2021). Scholars have described RJ as a way to address the root causes of crimes in a community because it educates and heals to transform a person into a better version of themself while developing their social and emotional learning (Morgan, 2021a; Lodi et al., 2021; Vincent et al., 2021; Watts & Robertson, 2022) without ostracizing them from society or stunting their life path. There are questions as to how one will repair trust in a community or accept a person into the community depending on the severity of the harm caused. Most of these concerns stem from a challenge to imagine the world without prison and not evidence that some people are too far gone to be healed and be a part of the community (Lustick, 2017). Because capitalism frames people as disposable if they are not useful to production, and we have internalized capitalism since it is the system we live in, it is challenging for some people to see another person's value if they are not feeding the capitalist system.

One discipline practice that is already being done in schools is Multi-tiered support systems (MTSS) (Brownstein, 2009; Fuentes, 2022; Vincent et al., 2021). The idea behind MTSS is to support students at different levels, individual, group, and universal levels to meet their needs and intervene in negative behavior situations (Branching Minds, 2023). One of the core values is to keep students in school while still keeping discipline present. This manifests in behavior contracts, community service, after-school detention, loss of privileges, and in-school suspensions (Vincent et al., 2021). The effectiveness of this practice is questionable as it is most useful in elementary schools and it does not address the root cause of why children act out, but

scholars have described this practice as a potential steppingstone between current discipline practices and RJ (Fuentes, 2022; Vincent et al., 2021). The American Institute for Research states that it has trained hundreds of professionals in at least 40 states on how to implement MTSS in schools, which suggests that MTSS is becoming a common practice (Arden, 2024).

A combination of alternative education methods along with alternative discipline practices could create systems of support based on my definition of a support system in school. In democratic education, community education, and RJ, trust is built because the relationship between members of the school community is the central focus. The voices and opinions of students are also at the center of these alternative methods as they have a say in what they learn, and how they learn, and are involved in resolving conflicts. Learning what is relevant to students is at the center of both democratic and community education as the curriculum is made with students' lived experiences in mind and with their input. Lastly, community and safety are built as empowerment, equality, and nurture are at the center of everything these alternative methods aim to accomplish.

Point of View: Formerly Incarcerated Individuals and the Value of Lived Experience

Since my research focuses on the voices of formerly incarcerated people, I must explain why and how I plan to center their voices. To begin with, there is a lack of research that uses the experiences and voices of people who are formerly incarcerated. I found one piece that looks at the stigma people who are formerly incarcerated face once they are released from prison (Sinko et al., 2020). In this piece, Rebecca Sinko et al. (2020) found that formerly incarcerated people face internal and external stigmas, meaning that some of the stigma comes from an internalization of stereotypes and other stigmas come from what people and family believe and tell those who are formerly incarcerated. While there are a few people (Jeffers, 2017; Weissman,

2017) who have looked at the experiences of youth who are involved in the justice system, and how their experiences as adolescents led to their criminal involvement, these studies focus on people who were incarcerated as youth, not adults.

The lack of research that centers the voices of formerly incarcerated people is the primary motivation for why my work focuses on their perspectives. This lack of research can be understood first, in that it simply does not exist, but second in that when it does exist, it often tells a master narrative or the story of those dominant in society (rich, white, men). Daniel G. Solórzano and Tara J. Yosso (2002), argue that unacknowledged white privilege and the normalization of all types of privilege are why these narratives are so dominant. They also mention how the stereotypes of people of color are perpetuated by master narratives, so even when they are talked about, they are not a true reflection of their perspective or lived experience.

The second reason why the point of view of people who are formerly incarcerated is the center of my work is to show the importance of experiential knowledge. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) explain how Critical Race Theory "recognizes that the experiential knowledge of people of color is legitimate, appropriate, and critical to understanding, analyzing, and teaching about racial subordination" (p. 26). While my work is not exclusive to people of color, given the ways incarceration unequally impacts people of color and is, either way, a form of subordination, the value of experiential knowledge remains valid. Solórzano and Yosso (2002) add that this lived experience can come from storytelling, family histories, biographies, narratives, and more. That is to say, experiential knowledge can be shared by many different means.

In terms of how I will center the voices of formerly incarcerated people in my work, I turn to counter storytelling, a "method of telling the stories of those people whose experiences are not often told (i.e., those on the margins of society)" (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 32). As

the authors point out, “the counter-story is a tool to expose and challenge the dominant narrative of privilege” (Solórzano and Yosso, 2002, p. 32). Counter-stories serve the purpose of building community among those on the margins, challenging the perceived expertise of those at the center of society, changing the reality of those on the margins by showing they are not alone, and teaching others the reality of the world in a manner different than they are used to (Solorzano and Yosso, 2002). In this sense, counter-storytelling will be at the center of my work because I aim to dismantle dominant narratives while exposing a perspective ignored and undervalued in academia and society at large.

Alternative Education Methods as They Apply to the SPP and Current School Practices

The following section will define how alternative education and discipline methods do or do not work to minimize or eliminate the existence of the SPP. I begin with an overview of practices that have been described as key to minimizing the SPP and follow with how the aforementioned alternative methods might minimize the SPP. It should be noted that none of these options suggest the elimination of punitive practices, specifically zero-tolerance policies, so they can only minimize connections between schools and prisons, not eliminate the relationship. To break this connection, there needs to be a radical change in schools.

Using the definition of alternative education provided above, I begin with general school practices that must be altered to reduce the SPP. First, many people have proven that a culturally relevant curriculum is necessary to reduce the number of students leaving schools (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Both students and teachers have said that when the curriculum is relevant to their lives, they are more engaged, eager to learn, and feel their education has a purpose (Ladson-Billings, 1994; hooks, 2014). Creating a culturally relevant curriculum is an alternative because education as it currently stands follows one general curriculum that does not

take students' backgrounds or communities into account. To implement a culturally relevant curriculum, teachers must be trained in how to teach the curriculum, and students must be involved in the process which would mean using aspects of democratic and community education.

There is a lack of research that directly explains how democratic or community education minimizes the SPP. Since we know that students at alternative schools experience many positive outcomes compared to comprehensive schools, it is safe to infer that alternative education would decrease the impacts of the SPP and thus increase support systems in schools. Since Corey C. Loomis (2011) found that students at alternative schools benefited most from having supportive teachers, relevant material, and feeling a sense of community, which fall into my definition of a support system, it is safe to say that alternative education methods would increase support systems of students while minimizing the harm of the SPP.

RJ can also create support systems for students by minimizing aspects of the SPP in the following ways. First, because it does not remove a person from the community, it would minimize suspensions and absences which would negate some of the exclusion caused by the SPP. Researchers found that RJ reduces punitive discipline practices because it gives students the tools to solve problems and improves behavior and mental health (Lodi et al., 2021; Watts, 2020). Students in the justice system often become involved multiple times, and RJ minimizes repeat offenses by developing students' social and emotional processing skills to give them tools to better react and reflect in the future (Lodi et al., 2021). It should be noted that while RJ has the potential to change discipline practices in schools, it is impossible to do this without buy-in from all parties within a school (Lustick, 2017). Furthermore, because RJ represents a paradigm shift that has no place in discipline as we know it, it is nearly impossible for it to be effective without

a complete change in laws or the elimination of zero-tolerance policies. However, it has been documented that even implementing aspects of it in schools increases support for students (Watts, 2020; Lustick, 2017). For example, when students are better able to communicate to solve problems without punitive consequences, relationships between teachers and students improve, and there is a greater sense of community (Watts, 2020).

What Formerly Incarcerated People Have to Say About School

In my search for work regarding the perspective of formerly incarcerated people and what they have to say about the school, I came upon one book that detailed this perspective. From talking to many different people who had been involved in the criminal justice system at some point during their academic career, Adam R. Jeffers (2017) found a few trends that were common among all participants. The first trend was that these students felt that there were contradictions between what they learned at home and school. The participants saw school as a place where they were supposed to learn mainstream American culture and due to their positionality, this did not always make them feel valued so they often felt out of place. Jeffers (2017) also found that these students showed equal potential as their peers who did not end up involved in the criminal justice system when they were in elementary school, but paths began to diverge in middle school. Because elementary schools tended to be more nurturing, students felt welcome and valued. Middle school represented a shift where school became a place to hang out instead of to learn, and as discipline became more extreme, students felt pushed out. In an academic sense, students felt unprepared for high school which caused them to explore what they perceived to be more interesting things such as drugs and gangs instead of their education. The participants said that they did not see school as a means to a better future or a training ground for life, so they did not see a point in attending or succeeding in school. Furthermore, the

participants explained that teachers did not support or challenge them and the lack of relationships between students and teachers contributed to their lack of motivation in school. Lastly, the participants, who were mostly people of color, explained that there was no space provided to explore race in the school so they felt they could not learn about themselves or their culture (Jeffers, 2017).

What Formerly Incarcerated Individuals Have to Say About Alternative Methods

In trying to find work discussing formerly incarcerated people's views on alternative education, I found one article that looked at formerly incarcerated people who returned to an alternative school as adults post-incarceration and their experience in this school. In that article, Charles H. Lea et al. (2020) found that most participants enjoyed and succeeded in the alternative school because they felt the curriculum was relevant to their lived experience and thus more truthful and accurate. Additionally, the participants described having issues with traditional education because they were unsuccessful and unsupported there, so they describe support and encouragement as key components to their success and the key difference between their education experiences (Lea et al., 2020). Lastly, the participants explained that the teachers at their school look like them and relate to them which creates a better understanding as both parties see each other as human and can build relationships (Lea et al., 2020).

Formerly Incarcerated Individuals' Voices as They Apply to School/SPP and Alternative Education Methods

Based on my research, I believe there is a paucity of work that has been done in this area. While there are no questions that schools are riddled with issues, and that there are many alternatives that would reduce the SPP while increasing student success and enjoyment of school, there is a lack of research on what formerly incarcerated people have to say about both the SPP

and alternative education. While some work uses the perspectives of justice-involved people, much of this work involves people under 18 or looks at people currently involved in alternative education. My study will look at adults who are formerly incarcerated and are not limited by what kind of school they attended. Instead, it looks to see if within the schools they did attend, the participants experienced aspects of the SPP or alternative education. As such I restate my research questions to conclude this chapter: *In what ways, if any, did school create a support system for people who were formerly incarcerated when they were in K-12 schools? Were formerly incarcerated people's experiences in schools characterized by aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline? Did formerly incarcerated people experience any aspects of alternative education or discipline, and if so, did these positively or negatively affect their schooling experience?*

Chapter 4: Methodology

This section will detail the methods and instruments used to collect and analyze the data. It explains who the sample population is and how they were recruited and goes into detail about the making and distribution of the interview and survey instruments. It concludes with an explanation of how the analysis was conducted.

Research Design

With the understanding that those on the margins are often left out of the narrative in academia, I used a mixed-method approach of surveys and interviews to answer the research questions. The research took place in the Hudson Valley, New York with the sample population being formerly incarcerated individuals. The purpose of this study was to gain qualitative and quantitative data that is useful in the field of education to inform others of the experiences formerly incarcerated people had in K-12 schools. This information is helpful because it shows a perspective not often heard in education research and can influence future policy decisions.

Sample

The sample population is formerly incarcerated individuals. The population was accessed through the researcher's internship at a reentry nonprofit in the Hudson Valley, New York that works with justice-impacted people. The only parameter on the population was that they must be formerly incarcerated, people of any age, race, gender, or other demographic factor were eligible. Participants were recruited in person when they came into the nonprofit's office and were given the option to complete the survey on paper or online. Participants for the interview were recruited through an optional question on the survey asking if they were open to participating in an interview and contacted if they said yes.

Formerly incarcerated people were chosen for the sample because they are underrepresented in education research as demonstrated in the literature review. Additionally, because the research question inquires about the experiences of formerly incarcerated people, it would be impossible to answer the research question if they were not sampled. I chose to work with the nonprofit to access the population because they directly work with justice-impacted people and because I had a relationship with the organization so I felt it was less intrusive.

The sample analyzed consisted of 18 males with an age range of 25-62 years old. While having participants of one gender identity was not intentional, as a result of random sampling, the participant pool yielded only male identifying participants. The average age of the participant pool was 45.78 years old and the median age was 49. 100% of the participants went to school in New York State while three also attended school in Italy, Arizona, and Ohio respectively. The racial demographic of the participant pool consisted of eight participants who identified themselves as Black or African American (used interchangeably moving forward as respondents used both to identify themselves), six people who identified as white, three who identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino, and one who identified as Black, Spanish, and Italian (mixed).

Methods

The research was conducted through a mixed methodology of surveying and interviewing. A mixed methodology was chosen because I felt that neither method alone would provide enough information to formulate an argument. As explained by D. R. Krathwohl (2009), mixed methodologies can complement each other, catch potential flaws in an instrument, and reinforce a researcher's findings, so by using a mixed methodology, the data becomes more sound and reliable. A survey allows for a greater number of participants, collection of general information in regards to the research question, and standardization of responses and data

resulting from responses, but it is limited in that it cannot provide detailed information or the personal experiences of the participants and there is always the risk that a question might be interpreted differently than intended (Orlich, 1978). An interview, on the other hand, allows for great detail as the participant can elaborate on their responses and the researcher can ask probing questions when more information is needed or there is confusion about a response. The respondents' personal beliefs and emotions can be captured, and the interview can be compared to a survey, but because interviews are more time consuming, fewer people can participate which limits the number of perspectives and experiences that can be studied (Orlich, 1978). Because of the advantages and disadvantages of both surveys and interviews, it made sense to use both. The survey provided an overview of the data and came from a larger participant pool, while the interviews give details and explanations of the survey responses but are limited in the number of participants. I believed that if only one instrument was used, the data would be incomplete but by using both methods to complement each other, the data was well rounded, and thus an argument could be formed by analyzing the findings.

To develop my survey instrument, I asked questions that would lead to answers that would address my research questions. I used a combination of multiple choice, Likert scale, and optional fill-in-the-blank questions to get demographic information, quantifiable information, and if provided, personal anecdotes. I used the survey to indirectly ask if subjects felt supported, if they experienced aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline, and if they experienced any aspects of alternative education. By indirectly asking these questions, I received information that could be analyzed and coded to see how it answered my research questions. If I simply asked my research questions, I would have had yes/no answers that could not be analyzed.

To develop the semi-structured interview instrument, I began by elaborating on the optional survey questions and creating follow-up questions to responses on the survey. I made sure to ask questions that would lead to personal stories and anecdotes as opposed to general sweeping statements. The interview questions also gave insight into participants' childhood, background, and school experiences with detail and specific questions that I was unable to ask on the survey because they warranted a detailed response, such as discussing whether participants had a favorite teacher and what made said teacher stand out.

Analysis

To analyze my data, I completed multiple phases of coding of both the survey responses and interviews. I began with some parent codes to gauge the general themes and then subcoded them to get specifics and measure patterns in my data that could be used for analysis. I coded the surveys to see whether there were correlations or trends between people of similar demographics. The codes from the survey were used for general themes and to find potential numerical patterns. I then coded the interviews and did a preliminary analysis of the data resulting from them. I then compared the codes of both instruments to synthesize the data and form an analysis that took both instruments into account.

I also checked in with my advisor(s) to make sure my analysis made sense and was a true reflection of the data. I think, as the researcher, it is easy to see patterns in the data that one thinks are there due to inherent biases, and by checking with others, I made sure that I had eliminated as much bias as possible in analyzing my data.

Chapter 5: Survey Findings

Demographic information

The survey yielded results from eighteen participants. The participant pool ended up being 100% male, after random sampling. While this was unintentional, it does mean that the data cannot be analyzed based on gender. On the other hand, it does mean that there is a greater number of people of the same gender than initially expected which makes the data more convincing because there are fewer demographic variations. It should be noted that as in society, gender plays a significant role in how people experience school, and this study does not mean to diminish the importance of the female experience in school, it was simply by random sampling that the population was only male. The age range of participants was 25-62 with the average age being 45.78 years old and the median being 49 years of age. 100% of the participants went to school in New York, while three different people also spent time in school in Italy, Arizona, and Ohio respectively. The racial demographic of the participant pool consisted of eight participants who identified themselves as Black or African American, six people who identified as white, three who identified themselves as Hispanic or Latino, and one who identified as Black, Spanish, and Italian. Based on these demographics, the data lends itself to being analyzed by race and age.

Schooling Information

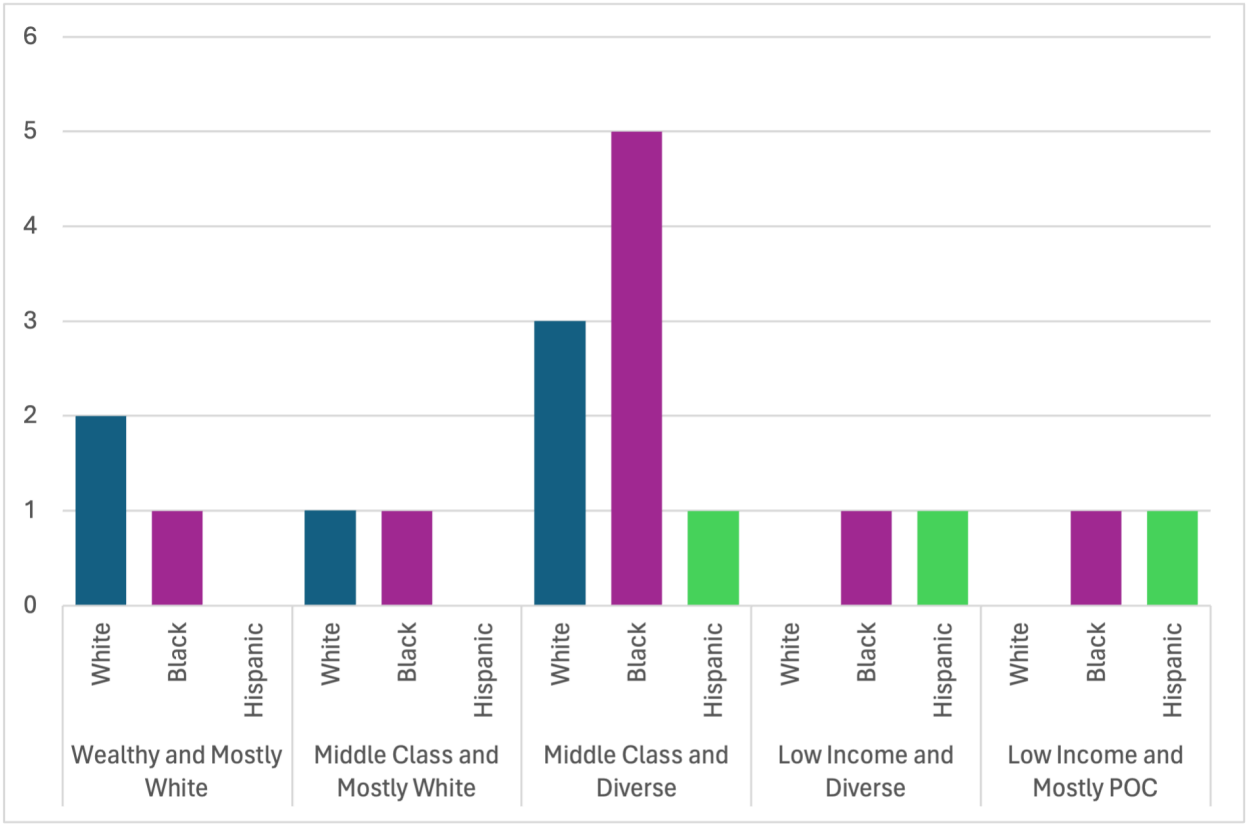
While it became apparent that the question was poorly worded as it was intended to yield the result of what age the participant stopped attending traditional school, the question “What age did you stop attending school” had answers ranging from age twelve to thirty-nine. 38.9% of participants stopped attending school before age eighteen, signaling either drop out or expulsion. Seven participants completed a grade level of some college or more. Along racial lines, an equal percentage of white and African American participants completed some college. All participants

who went to college did so in prison, which shows the importance of offering education in prisons. Three people completed 12th grade. Eight did not complete high school and 50% (9/18) did not complete high school in one go which shows the brokenness of the education system.

94% (17/18) people attended public school, while one attended a parochial school. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the number of participants by school makeup and race. There was a relatively even distribution of African American participants among all school categories, while white participants went to wealthy and middle-class schools and Hispanic participants went to middle-class and low-income schools.

Figure 1

Number of Participants by Race and School Makeup

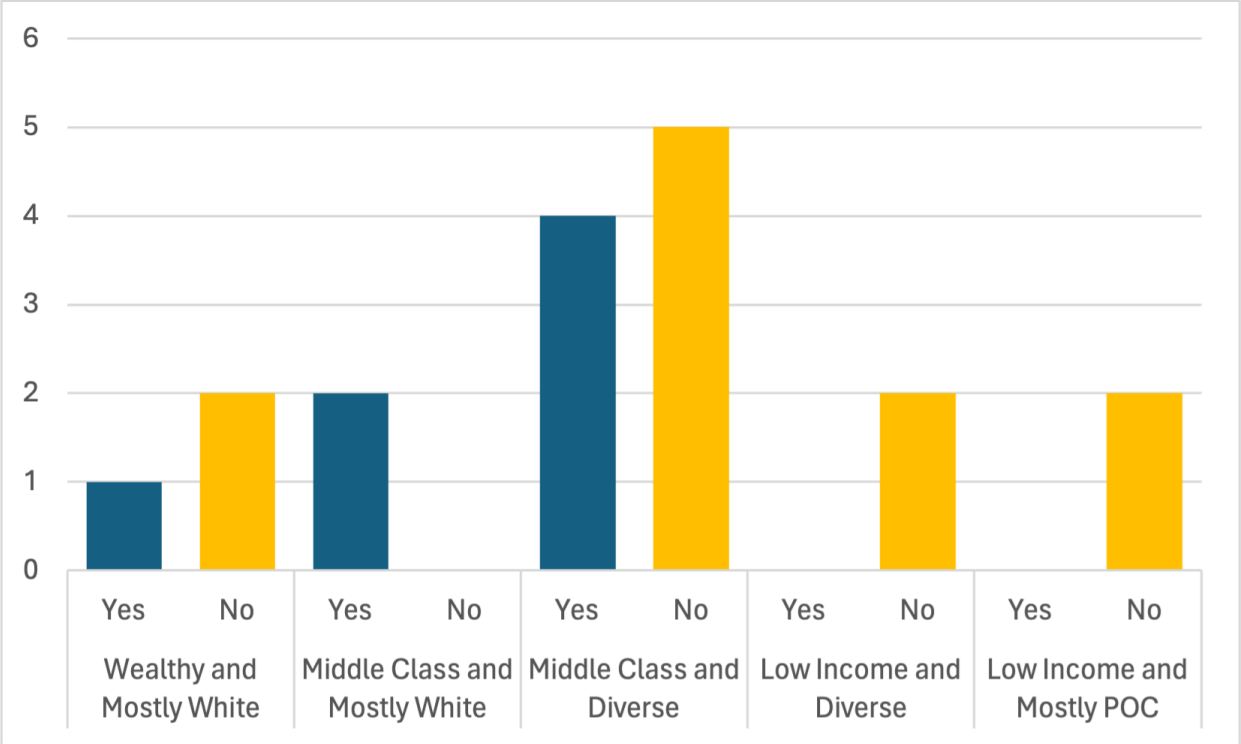


Note: POC stands for People of Color

Figure 2 shows whether participants completed high school in one go (graduated without a break/gap in their education). 38% of participants completed high school in one go. Middle-class and mostly white followed by middle-class and diverse had the best outcomes in terms of completion which suggests that where there is the most diversity (economically and racially), there are the best outcomes. Given that all four participants who went to low-income schools either did not complete or attend high school, it seems that economic status has a significant impact on educational outcomes.

Figure 2

Did Participants Complete High School in One Go?



Note: POC stands for People of Color

Of the 61% (11/18) who did not complete high school in one go, 73% (8/11) went back to school and 50% (4/8) who returned to school received a GED or other degree. Two people noted that they did not receive a degree because they were transferred in prison, which suggests that

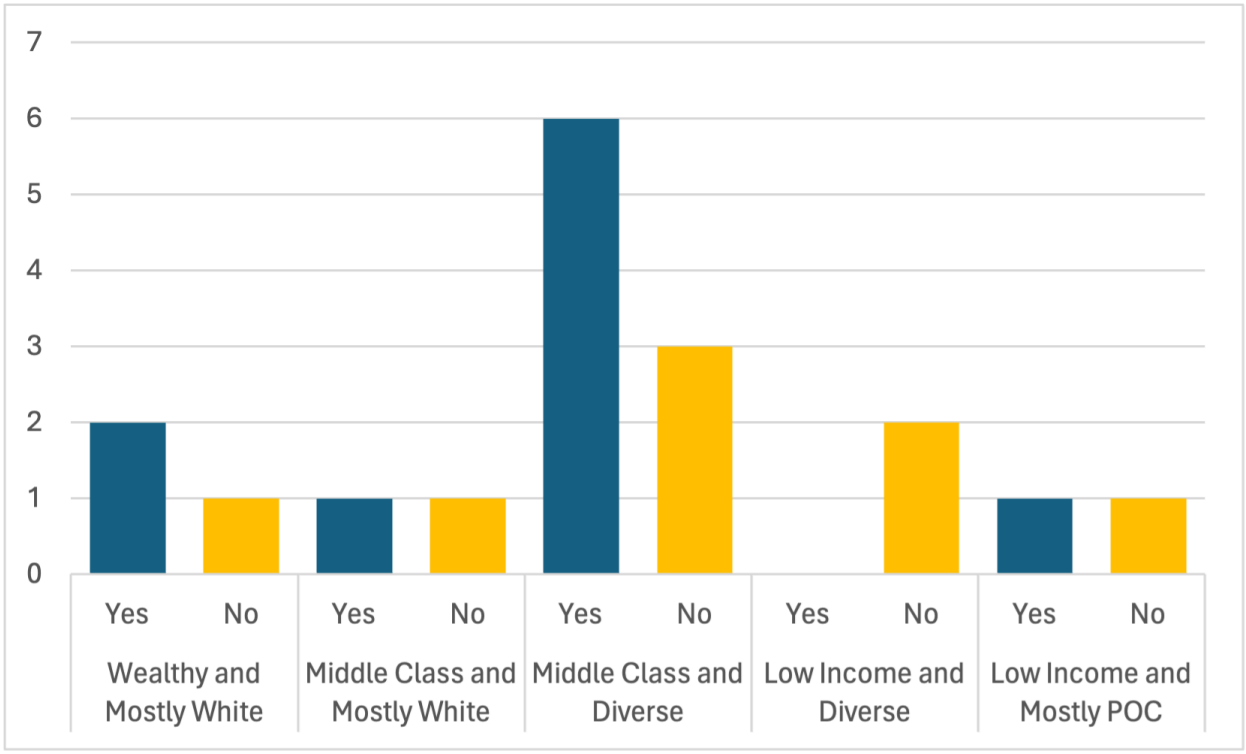
the number of people who received a degree would have been higher if it were not for prison transfers. Of the 50% (9/18) of participants who went back to school at some point, 66.78% (6/9) did so in prison. Because 2/3 of the people went back to school in prison, it seems that prisons play a role in people's return to school. I say this not to suggest that prisons play a positive role in people's lives, but to note that there are not many opportunities for adults to go to school outside of prison, especially if they have not completed high school.

School Discipline

50% (9/18) of participants were suspended at some point during school while 33.3% (6/18) were expelled. Six of the suspensions (66.7%) were a result of fighting, while other reasons cited for suspension included talking in class, cutting class, and smoking. The irony of being forced to miss school as a result of cutting class should be noted as it points out the lack of logic in much of the punishment seen at schools. The duration of the suspensions ranged from one week to sixty days. Of the nine people who got suspended, 44.4% were white, 33.3% were Black, and 22.2% were Hispanic. This means that 66.7% of whites who completed the survey were suspended at some point in their academic career, 37.5% of participating African Americans were suspended, and 66.7% of Hispanic participants were suspended. This shows that a greater percentage of white participants and Hispanic participants were suspended than Black participants. While this does not match the data in my literature review (Smith, 2015), one explanation is that perhaps because white people are not criminalized as much in society, their path to the criminal justice system begins in schools where for students of color, because they are criminalized in society they may end up in the criminal justice system without school being a contributing factor. Figure 3 shows the percentage of participants who were suspended for each school makeup.

Figure 3

Number of Participants Who Were Suspended by School Makeup



Note: POC stands for People of Color

Figure 3 shows that students at wealthy and mostly white schools and middle-class and diverse schools were suspended at the highest rates, while those who attended a low-income and diverse school were suspended at the lowest rate. An explanation for students at wealthy and white schools being suspended at high rates, as noted by one survey response, was that the person was "poor" at a wealthy school. Even though the respondent was white, because they were "poor", a minority at a wealthy school, perhaps they were treated differently because they were not part of the dominant group at the school. Another explanation could be that wealthy and white schools feel the need to maintain a prestigious image more than other schools and thus act more punitively towards anyone they feel threatens that image. A possible explanation for middle-class and diverse schools having high rates of suspension is that they contain the greatest

amount of diversity which means that the hierarchies (racial, class, gender) created by capitalism are displayed to their fullest.

33.3% (6/18) of participants reported being expelled from school. Of the six people who got expelled, 50% cited fights as the cause of their expulsion while another cited cutting class, and two others did not state the cause of their expulsion. Of the participants expelled, two were white, two were Black, and two were Hispanic. This means that 33.3% of participating whites were expelled, 25% of participating African Americans, and 66.7% of Hispanic participants experienced expulsion. Of the two participants who shared what they did after expulsion, one said they attended an alternative school, while the other said they went to jail. This makes sense as Brownstein (2009) observed in their research that suspension and expulsion increase the chance of involvement with the criminal justice system. 50% (3/6) of the expulsions came from a wealthy and mostly white school, 33.3% (2/6) came from a middle-class and diverse school, and one came from a low-income school of mostly students of color. This shows that the wealthy and white schools were the most punitive.

66.7% of respondents said that they thought discipline in their school was fair while 28% said it was not fair, and one abstained from answering. 50% of whites said it was fair, 87.5% of African Americans said it was fair, and 66.7% of Hispanic participants said it was fair. Examples given of those who felt it was unfair were:

"not one of the rich ones"

"innocent party would take the fall"

"some given less punitive treatment"

"hit with ruler"

The reasoning of participants who thought it was fair:

"call parents"

"everyone held accountable"

"rules applied to all"

"kids were acting out"

"warn you first"

"time to think about actions"

"gave reasonable consequences"

55% (10/18) of respondents said detention was the most common form of punishment, 33.3% (6/18) said suspension was the most common discipline, 16.7% (3/18) said physical punishment and 5% (1/18) said staying in class extra time. Some people listed multiple forms so the total does not add up to eighteen people or 100%. There was no distinction along racial lines of which form of punishment was most common.

When asked if students of color or of low economic status were disciplined differently than white or rich students, 28% said yes. Three who said people were treated differently based on race or economic status were white and two were Black. This means that 50% of whites who completed the survey believe that students were punished differently based on race or economic status while 25% of African Americans and 0% of Hispanic participants thought there was different treatment. This begs the question, why do the white participants feel there was unequal treatment when it is people of color who are discriminated against at higher rates than white people? Participants explanations for unequal treatment were:

"it was a rich white school"

"there were not many African Americans"

"African Americans got suspended and whites got detention"

55% of respondents had police or security at school. 45% of participants had surveillance measures. New York State public schools have a 53% rate of police or surveillance in schools (NCPR, 2023), so the responses align with existing statistics.

100% of participants responded none or unsure to whether alternative forms of discipline were used in their school. 88.8% (16/18) of participants said they felt safe at school. The two who said they did not feel safe were white. Participants stated that their reasons for feeling safe:

"There wasn't violence like today"

"There was a very peaceful environment"

"Because I could fight"

"Sometimes it was the safest place for me to be"

"I was always fighting with both teachers-students"

People's reasons for feeling unsafe were:

"always knives and guns in school"

"Other than fights I never feared weapons"

The mention of there not being violence like today is significant because despite there being increased security measures today (Fuentes, 2022), participants have noted that schools are more violent than before which points to the security not fulfilling its purpose.

Alternative Education

61% (11/18) recorded feeling a sense of community at school. 75% of Black respondents felt a sense of community, 66.7% of white participants, and 33.3% of Hispanic respondents felt a sense of community. Elaborations on the ways a sense of community was felt included:

"All together."

"Family cared more back then."

"There was support."

"Everyone was pretty much positive minded."

"I was on the football team. sports and groups."

This shows the significance of extra-curriculars and sports in creating community and a sense of purpose. Participants who did not feel a sense of community cited the following:

"most were out for themselves."

"never got along."

"I was from a poor family".

61% said they looked forward to going to school while 33.3% said they did not look forward to going to school. Those who looked forward to school were 87.5% of African American participants, 100% of Hispanic participants, and 16.6% of white participants.

When asked whether they felt represented in the curriculum, 50% (9/18) said no. 66.7% of the total white participants did not feel represented, 50% of total Black participants did not feel represented, and 33.3% of total Hispanic participants did not feel represented. One worded response to not feeling represented was "hell no." 33% said they did feel represented, 37.5% of African American participants, 33.3% of white participants, and 33% of Hispanic participants. People who felt represented cited the following answers:

"I did because of African American Studies"

"positive reinforcement"

"made me feel a part of it"

"I did not care I just wanted to learn"

This shows the importance of classes that make students feel represented and create community in the classroom. Three people said they preferred not to answer, the most for any question. 61%

(11/18) said they did not encounter alternative modes of teaching, 100% of white participants, 50% of Black participants, and 33.3% of Hispanic participants. Since all but one participant went to public school, this shows that public schools are not challenging the status quo or exploring alternative education methods. 38.9% (7/18) said they did experience alternative education, 62.5% of African American participants, and 66.7% of Hispanic participants. Alternative modes cited by participants were:

"trips to Wall Street"

"teachers who were talkative with students"

"teachers who kept things simple"

"keeping the class engaged"

"interacting with mindset"

"teachers' smile"

While these examples do not constitute alternative education as I have defined it, they have been kept in the data as it is essential to describe what participants perceive to be alternative education. 72% said their school did not advertise itself as different while 22% said it did and cited "the eagle" and "performances" as examples.

66.7% (12/18) of participants said they did not feel empowered, 83.3% of white participants, 62.5% of Black participants, and 66.7% of Hispanic participants. The majority of people from each race did not feel empowered which shows that empowerment is a school-wide issue. 33.3% (6/18) said they did feel empowered. Those who did feel empowered said it was because of:

"Teachers"

"learning new stuff"

"accomplishments in front of peers"

"teachers looking for ways to help people grasp stuff"

When asked if their voices mattered, in the classroom, 55% said yes their voice mattered while 45% said it did not. At school in general it was 50/50 with one white, four African Americans and three Hispanic participants saying yes, their voice mattered and five white and four Black participants saying it did not.

Chapter 6: Interview Findings

This chapter details the conversations with the three people I interviewed. It also contains my analysis of what they shared. Through my conversations with each person, I was able to gain an understanding of their school experiences and how they reflect on their time in school.

George

George is a Hispanic male aged 58. He spent the first years of his life in Alphabet City in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. He attended public school all of the years he was in school and the schools were largely poor and diverse. George described himself as a good kid who wanted to learn and would even help distribute food to the classrooms before school started. As a child, he remembers playing in the street and being out until late hours of the night hanging out with the neighborhood kids. Around age 7, he moved with his mom to the Bronx to be in a better neighborhood as the Lower East Side was "collapsing." George described the new neighborhood as isolated from others, lying between factories and garages. This forced him to stay at home more or play just outside his house. He said school went smoothly through junior high, but when he got to high school, things changed. George chose to attend an all-boys high school because it promised to teach him to be a mechanic. Unfortunately, he said that attending an all-boys school was a mistake as he felt being separated from girls created a lack of community. Furthermore, the first years of high school did not have anything to do with being a mechanic and solely focused on academics, not what George had been promised. At this point, George admits he had already begun using drugs and making poor choices. To make matters worse, George moved again, and instead of enrolling in a new school, he dropped out to begin working. He began working construction but after being laid off from that, began selling drugs and committing crimes as the money "came faster that way." Even when he secured other jobs after the construction job, none

could make him as much money in a day as selling drugs did, which made it hard to justify doing something else. Because of his illegal activities, George has been arrested 62 times, and while he was able to avoid prison for some of the cases, the last time he was arrested he got sentenced to 11+ years in a maximum security prison. He is out now and working to save enough money to be able to be independent.

Upon digging deeper into his school experience, his happiest memories from school are in the marching band when they played in Carnegie Hall and on the Grand Concourse in a parade. He recounted these memories with a big smile on his face, mimicking playing the drums. When asked about his favorite teacher, George immediately thought of Mr. McGraw, a teacher who left an impact in more ways than one. In middle school, Mr. McGraw took George and a few other students on a weekend trip to a cabin in the woods. This trip was meaningful to George because he was able to know Mr. McGraw as a human instead of just a teacher and create memories outside of the classroom. Mr. McGraw also took students to Wall Street for tutoring which not only showed George other parts of the city but also helped him in his learning by giving him a tutor he looked up to. Going outside of the classroom to Wall Street was the closest thing George experienced to alternative education, as he described his experiences in the classroom as being based on lectures and tests, with traditional curriculum and textbooks being followed at all times. George's in class experience shows a following of the banking model of education where the teacher talks and deposits information into the student which limits creativity and individuality (Friere, 2018). One positive aspect of his time in high school was having bilingual classes. George shared that this made him feel a stronger connection to his peers and teachers as their shared language also meant a shared heritage and culture. Shifting to the punitive aspects of his schooling experience, George shared that he was not personally punished

in school, but that when students were punished around him, the most common form was physical punishment. This is most likely because physical punishment was widely accepted as the norm in the 1970s-80s when George was school-aged. George said that there were no police or other surveillance measures in his school and that he always felt safe at school. He added that was not violence like there is today though, so he never questioned his safety at school.

Despite dropping out and never completing high school, George went back to school when he was in prison because he wanted to attain a GED. When prompted as to what motivated him to pursue a GED, George explained that he was told that in the U.S., if you do not have a high school diploma or equivalent, you are considered illiterate. He knew he was not illiterate, and wanted to make sure he had a degree to prove it. It was apparent from watching George explain his GED process, that he took pride in having received his degree.

My conversation with George ended with me asking him what, if anything, he would change about his school experience and what he would change about the school system in general. George shared that he regretted going to the all-boys school because he believes that had he been at a school with girls, he would have never dropped out. He explained that the lack of community and isolation from the people he hung out with in his neighborhood were part of the cause of his leaving school. For the school system at large, George said that more support from teachers is important and that communication between teachers and students and communication home needs to happen more often so that all parties involved in a students' education are on the same page. Lastly, George said that more afterschool programs are important because they open students to new people and ideas and keep them motivated.

George's journey through school resembles that of many people who find themselves involved in the criminal justice system as described in the case studies by Marsha Weissman

(2017) in her book on students' perspectives of school punishment. The beginning of George's education went smoothly, he was successful and stayed on track, but then a few factors contributed to a strained relationship with school, and he eventually dropped out. The first factor that contributed to George's dropout was school not meeting his expectations or goals. He chose his high school because of the promise of being trained to be a mechanic, but when he got there, the school focused solely on academics, which George was not interested in. The difference between George's interests and the training to become a mechanic he was promised created a disconnect between George and school. This shows the importance of schools meeting student's interests, especially when they advertise having unique opportunities. Second, George's reality outside of school began to get in the way of his success at school. He began to use drugs and "make poor choices" showing once more that the disconnect between school and the rest of his life was making life outside of school a greater priority.

George's love of marching band emphasizes the importance of non-core academic classes in schools. The impact that Mr. McGraw had on George shows the critical role teachers play in influencing how students think about school. Mr. McGraw's actions, both his efforts to know his students as people and to share himself as a person, and the act of taking students to tutoring at Wall Street, demonstrate aspects of Noddings' theory regarding care in schools. George was able to see that Mr. McGraw cared for him and his success and in turn this motivated George. The influence teachers have on students and the way students remember their teachers, often for the rest of their lives, cannot be underestimated.

George's memories of high school, specifically the way that being in bilingual classes and having teachers who looked like him and shared his history made him feel a deeper connection to peers and teachers confirms the importance of feeling represented in the

curriculum and the community. In the same way, George becoming uninterested in school as it followed a traditional banking model of education shows the importance of making a curriculum that caters to student's needs and interests.

George's return to school because of the fear of being illiterate and a new understanding of the importance of education demonstrates how essential it is to teach students about why school is critical to their future. Perhaps if students understand what a degree can do for them, they will be less inclined to drop out and more motivated to continue their education.

Overall, George's story emphasizes the critical role teachers play in how students view their education. Because George stated that if he had gone to a mixed-gender school, he would never have dropped out, his story shows how the school community influences students and whether they choose to remain in school. Based on George's story, it seems that when school does not reflect your community, or who you usually hang out with outside of school, it is detrimental to a student's school experience. My biggest takeaway from George was the importance of student-teacher relationships and their lasting impact on people.

Marcus

Marcus is an African American male aged 48. Marcus grew up all over the NYC area because his involvement in the foster care system meant he moved around a lot. He explained that his mother was an "addict" so his home life was unstable and he began to cut school in the second grade. The community Marcus grew up in was violent and most people were unemployed. At the same time, the sense of community was strong because the older members of the community looked out for the children and there was a shared sense of struggle. Marcus attended low-income schools that consisted of mostly students of color. When asked what school was like, Marcus said it was strict. The teachers did not play and they used physical punishment

via a ruler often because many of the kids were considered “bad.” He added that he suspects that many kids had ADD or ADHD but no one was diagnosed at that time so teachers did not know what to do with the “bad” students and resorted to the ruler. On a personal level, Marcus remembers hating school. He could not pinpoint why he hated school, given that he said he was really smart, but thinks maybe the lack of consistency because of his constant moves contributed to him not liking school. He added that perhaps because he was used to “the streets” because of the instability of his home life, by the time he was in second grade, school seemed slow and pointless. Marcus continued to detail his time in school explaining that between second and seventh grade, he cut school whenever he could to the point of dropping out in seventh grade. He never attended high school.

Digging deeper, the person that stuck out to Marcus the most in his brief time in school was the principal who he said begged him to stay in school. He said that no one else seemed to care, but that the principal knew the risks he would face by leaving school and thus begged him to stay. Marcus remembers liking drama class because he was good in that class and being forced to speak and interact with other students created a sense of community. Upon further examination of the relationship between students and teachers at his school, Marcus remembers that the teachers cared about the students but there were so many students compared to teachers that they did not have the time nor resources to focus on each student and their individual needs. Shifting to the curriculum in school, Marcus found it to be irrelevant to his life. He elaborated that part of it was because no one told him what an education could do for him, he had no idea that school was the way to a career. He had no goals or vision for himself in school because he did not realize school served any purpose and simply thought it was an unnecessary requirement in an already chaotic life. Marcus did not experience any aspects of alternative education and

described his learning as coming straight from the book or chalkboard. There were no police or cameras in Marcus' school, but doors were locked so students could not leave. Compared to the projects where Marcus grew up, school felt safe and secure. Marcus was under the impression that most punishment was dealt with via contacting parents and dealing with consequences out of school. Many of Marcus' memories he said are vague, or he does not remember because of how much he skipped school.

When he was in his late teens, Marcus got his GED via a program in his neighborhood. He said the program was "ghetto" and he had to mostly teach himself the material, but he passed nonetheless. In prison, he ended up teaching in the GED program and finding he was good at teaching. I could tell he took pride in these accomplishments.

When I asked Marcus if he would change anything about his experience in school and about the current education system, he had a lot to share. First, he wishes he had taken school more seriously and been told the usefulness education could have in his future. He explained that he realizes now that education increases your critical thinking skills, and gives you a better understanding of the world. Marcus said that perhaps if someone had taught him how to make educational goals he would have made it farther in school. As for the school system in general, Marcus advocated for one-on-ones between students and teachers to increase understanding and create a bond between the two. He said that because many children do not get the attention they need at home, getting time with the teacher would show their worth and be a place to set goals for themselves. Additionally, if the teacher did not come from the same neighborhood as the kid, it would be a way to create an understanding of where the child comes from. Marcus truly believed that if children were taught to make goals and given the attention they deserved, there would be better educational outcomes.

It was quite obvious from my conversation with Marcus that the instability caused by his home life had a detrimental effect on his education. The lack of consistency in what school he attended caused by frequent moves greatly contributed to his cutting class and eventual dropout. Additionally, the constant moving did not allow him to form bonds with teachers or establish the meaning of school in his life. While he could not pinpoint why he hated school, it was apparent that many factors did not put him in a position to succeed in school. Because he did not see the purpose of school or its potential impact on his future, he saw no reason to remain in school. Furthermore, the disconnect between his home life and school life led to school seeming pointless and a waste of time, again contributing to his eventual dropout.

Through my conversation with Marcus, it seemed that the teachers in his schools growing up were not able to meet the needs of their students for two reasons. One, a lack of resources. The ratio of teachers to students did not allow for teachers to give the time or attention to meet individual students' needs. Two, racism and stereotyping of children of color. Marcus' explanation of students being punished for being “bad” in addition to his observation of a lack of diagnoses for students who were likely on the spectrum aligns with the lack of care, especially for students of color observed by Fuentes (2022). The use of punishment as a solution instead of getting to the root of the problem also shows a lack of care for students. The fact that Marcus does not remember a single teacher, only the principal, looking out for him and checking in on his well-being shows that students need support from teachers, but also that teachers need the resources to be able to offer this support.

Marcus’ favorite class being drama shows the importance of non-core academic classes which often have more space to create community and allow students to express their individuality. Marcus finding the curriculum to be irrelevant to his life, especially because no one

told him its value, demonstrates the need to tell students the purpose of school and the reasoning behind requirements and curriculum, etc. If students do not understand why they are being asked to do something, they are less likely to see the point of doing it. Furthermore, as demonstrated by Marcus' story, students need to see the role school can play in their future and be taught how to set goals for themselves, so they can remain motivated and see a bigger reason to stay in school.

Despite teachers punishing students often, Marcus pointed out that he always felt safe at school because it was safer than his neighborhood. Marcus also did not have police or security at his school, and I wonder if his response would have been the same if there were police in his schools. Either way, Marcus' story is a reminder that for some students, school can be the safest place they know, reinforcing the importance of students feeling safe at school. If schools do not feel safe for students, they have another reason to not attend.

Marcus teaching himself the material to get a GED is a testament to how smart he is, and his teaching others to help them pass the GED test shows his desire to help others get an education after seeing the impact education has on career choices and options in life. Overall, Marcus' story shows the need for consistency in schooling and for students to understand the role school plays in their lives and future success. Marcus's call for students to be taught how to make goals and to be given more attention by teachers demonstrates a need for teachers to be given the resources to ensure they can treat students as individuals and help them understand the purpose of school in their lives.

William

William is an African American male, aged 54. He grew up between Queens and Long Island, attending school in both areas. Up until his teenage years, William lived in Queens with his mother and two sisters. They lived in public housing but had plenty to eat, and William says

they were happy. He remembers getting into fights a lot even at a young age, but they were usually rooted in loyalty to a friend or sticking up for people. In his early teens, his mother got married and his stepfather was abusive. This change at home had many impacts on William including the motivation for his fights changing from loyalty to being out of anger and frustration and an inability to process what was happening. This change also forced William to move to Long Island, and while that would usually be an upgrade because it was considered a nicer area, William felt it isolated him more. William attended public schools all of his life and they were usually middle-class and quite diverse. William shared that at a young age, he initially loved school but as he moved through elementary school something changed. While school was not miserable, it stopped being pleasant or something he looked forward to, it was simply part of his daily routine and had to be done. School was never a challenge for William as he was smart and tested well, but some of the social aspects became a challenge as issues at home began to impact him at school. He noted that the lack of resources to process what was happening at home was a large contributor to what messed his life up in the long run. In the 10th grade, William was expelled for a fight when he accidentally elbowed the principal who was trying to break up the fight. From there he went to a program for students who had issues in regular school, but he did not complete the program and dropped out.

William had many negative aspects of his schooling experience to share, some stemming from personal issues and others from the way the schools he went to functioned. He remembers math once being his favorite subject, but his favorite class quickly shifted to being “cut class” time. He says he never wanted to be in school, so this did not help create motivation to stay in school. The classes William took did not feel relevant to his life or experiences outside of school, and he did not feel school was designed to empower him because of his race. He explained that

he was frustrated by constantly being reminded that he came from slaves because there is a history of African American people before slavery that never gets taught. An uncle of William was critical of many American holidays and their roots so learning about them at school conflicted with what he had been taught at home. He also felt his voice did not matter in the classroom and every person was just out for themselves. William also struggled because the curriculum at his school was largely lecture-based and audio learning was not his strength. He talked about getting distracted easily and needing hands-on learning which was not available to him. William suggested that perhaps he has ADD or ADHD which contributes to his short attention span, but since no one was getting diagnosed when he was in school, he is not sure.

On a school-wide level, William began by explaining that the administration was awful. Between unequal punishment that largely occurred along racial lines and the normalization of excessive physical punishment, there were many wrongdoings at William's high school. There were no police or other security measures in place, which William cited as probably being because he went to school before mass shootings were a thing and schools were considered safe places to be. Because William was school-aged during the 1980s when zero-tolerance policies were first implemented, it is possible the implementation of police as a result of these policies had not occurred yet. While there were no police, William emphasized that detention and the use of a paddle were extensive. In thinking back to his time in detention, William mentioned that students just sat, no school work was done, and the teacher in charge took pleasure in beating children with the paddle he kept in the room. William remembers it seeming like the teacher took satisfaction in beating children and would get a scary look in his eyes when beating them. The high school William attended was socially (not legally) segregated by race and economic status, which did not create a sense of community or a nurturing environment. Additionally, when kids

got in trouble, from William's perspective, there were different punishments depending on the student's race. He says that all of the kids in detention were Black, and when white kids were punished, the consequence was always minor. There were two sets of rules based on what race you were. Despite these inequalities, William did think that punishment was fair when children were punished for actions that made the school unsafe such as fights. He believes that he deserved to be expelled because his actions made the school unsafe and were not conducive to a learning environment.

When asked about the potential of restorative justice, William said it would probably have a positive impact. He explained that when punitive rules are applied to people whose hearts are already hardened, they have no impact and do not hit the heart, but something like restorative justice, because it centers on community and healing, would impact people and touch them in a way current punitive practices do not.

One positive thing William shared from his time in school was the impact of the teacher at the alternative program he attended following his expulsion. The teacher, a white woman, who in William's opinion had the hardest job in the world since she was trying to teach "bad" kids, was supportive, patient, and generous. She took the students on trips and showed them she cared about them as people. William says she sticks out because, in a time when he believed that all white people were evil, she showed him that white people could be good, and her support has stuck with him to this day.

William returned to school in prison after being inspired by his then wife and not only completed his GED, but had the second highest score in the class. He also took some college classes that he said changed his life because what he learned from them changed who he hung out with and the values he surrounded himself with. The thing that made classes in prison unique

according to William was that everyone who was there was motivated and truly wanted to be there. There was a different energy because it was a privilege to be in class, not a requirement.

My conversation with William ended with a discussion about what he would change about his school experience and schools in general. On a personal level, William said he wishes he had gone to an all-boys school because having girls around causes boys to act up when they are high school aged. In a general sense, and largely due to what he sees at the school his son attends, William thinks there should be a change in the curriculum so that it caters to people's learning styles and needs. He believes that individualized lessons and practical hands-on activities give students a better understanding of the material. Furthermore, culturally inclusive classes would allow students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. Lastly, William says that having children in older grades serve as mentors to younger students not only gives the older students a sense of purpose and the younger ones a role model, but it builds community.

William's educational journey shows the extent to which home life influences how students act and experience school, and the impact that undealt with trauma can have on a person. Like George, William's first years in school went smoothly and he enjoyed going. As school started to feel less relevant to his life, his love of school changed and school became a routine, but not a meaningful aspect of his life. Despite being smart and school being easy for William, social challenges, exacerbated by trauma from home began to get in William's way. The combination of moving and having a new family dynamic impeded William greatly. The fact that William did not have a counselor or any resource to help him process new changes and trauma shows a lack of care and support at school. William's story shows the importance of students receiving support and the impact that home life has on school.

William's issues in school were also impacted by race. He shared that classes felt irrelevant to him because they only shared one narrative about people of color, slavery, and left out anything else that African American people have done. Not seeing himself in the curriculum did not help with motivation in an already challenging time. Punishment at his school was also motivated by race. William's observations of only Black students being in detention and being punished more extremely for the same infraction is an example of racism and is in line with observations from other studies (Smith 2015; Morgan, 2021). While Willam's school did not have police, the unequal use of punishment reflects aspects of the SPP because students of color experience greater punitive measures than white students. Despite the negative experiences William had because of his race, the impact of his white teacher at the alternative school shows the power teachers have to change students' perspectives and the extent to which care and support impact students. Once again, the ways teachers impact their students cannot be underestimated as the memories of how teachers made students feel will stick with them forever.

In addition to issues of race, other factors that negatively impacted William. The curriculum at William's school did not allow for people of all learning styles to succeed because it was lecture-based. The lack of hands-on learning and variety in how material was taught, was detrimental. Furthermore, a lack of diagnoses for people who may be neurodivergent or have different learning styles meant that student's needs were not being met. It was clear from my conversation with William that his school lacked community because of the negative aspects and the way students were treated.

The experience William had going to school in prison shows the impact education has on a student when they want to be there. The feeling of being privileged to be in school and not forced to be there was the game changer for William. While it is easier for adults to see the value

of education because it is not compulsory for them and they have a higher level of maturity, school-aged children must see the importance too.

Overall, my conversation with William reinforced that racism in schools is a detriment to students and that without support in and out of the classroom, students will struggle. William's story also shows the importance of each student learning in a way that meets their needs and learning style. Lastly, William's experience in school shows that while outside of school factors may impact a student's success and social life at school, it is just as important to have a culturally responsive curriculum that makes students feel heard and valued.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusion

While I have already shared the findings of this study, I have not defined their significance or explicitly answered the research questions. The following section will do just that by highlighting major themes and their significance to the research questions but also education and education research at large. This section includes limitations and recommendations for future research because this work is only a piece in a seemingly never ending process of research and recommendations. It should be noted that due to sample size, the conclusions I make based on my findings are interpretations of the data I have gathered and cannot speak for every person's experiences. While I believe that there is truth to my analysis, I am intentionally trying to not overgeneralize or make universal conclusions. Furthermore, because my study involved 18 participants, I do not claim to speak for all formerly incarcerated people and the experiences they have had. I aim to weave a narrative from the life stories I have gathered that shows there are trends in people's experiences without negating the fact that every person has their own story to tell and no two stories, especially no two school experiences, are the same.

In what ways, if any, did school create a support system for people who were formerly incarcerated when they were in K-12 schools?

The findings show that while individual teachers and some classes showed support or created community, overall, schools and the education system as a whole do not support students. Individual teachers or administrators supported students by getting to know them as people through trusting relationships, leading outside of school activities, and making students feel seen and heard. Teachers have lasting impacts on people, so those who did show support to students are still in people's memories even 30+ years after they have left school. Electives and art classes were also places where people found community and saw meaning in their education.

Whether it was because people were able to be themselves or because these classes were where they got to learn about themselves, non-core classes were where participants felt aspects of a support system. While these two aspects of the findings showed signs of support systems in schools, the majority of the findings point towards a lack of support in schools.

First, students' learning needs are not met. They are not given agency in what they learn or how they learn. Participants reported experiencing only lecture-based learning. The teacher talks and they listen, what Friere defines as the banking model of education occurs (Friere, 2018). The lack of variety in teaching methods means that students with different learning styles, especially those who struggle with auditory learning, are not supported. Second, the curriculum is not relevant to students' lives and results in them not seeing why school matters. This reflects a lack of support because students cannot build community with peers and teachers when they are not represented in what they are learning. Students will not feel that they matter in the classroom if they are not represented in what is being taught in the classroom. Furthermore, when students do not see themselves in the curriculum they become disengaged and begin to question why they are in school in the first place. The lack of variety of teaching styles combined with a limited and one perspective based curriculum leads to a lack of agency for students because they have no control over how or what they learn. This shows a lack of support because a student's lived experience is not taken into account and community is not centered in the classroom. Without agency and support, students are left questioning the purpose of their education and thus, a reason to remain in school. Student's lives beyond the classroom may begin to seem more important than school leading them to potentially skip classes or drop out entirely. Lastly, since students are not taught about goal setting or the importance of school, they cannot see how their actions may affect future endeavors such as jobs they can work. Not teaching students why

school is important for their future shows a lack of support because students are not set up to succeed later in life. The hierarchy created by capitalism is reproduced because students are not taught to try and change their position in the world. More importantly, they are not taught to question what they learn and how the world works, which means that capitalism will continue to thrive and people will continue to be oppressed.

Were formerly incarcerated people's experiences in schools characterized by aspects of the school-to-prison pipeline?

Findings show that participants did experience aspects of the SPP. The biggest piece of evidence of this is the suspension and expulsion rates participants reported. Suspension and expulsion rates were far above the New York average suspension rate of 4.36% and expulsion rate of 0.13% for men (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Since it has been established in "The Problem: School-to-Prison Pipeline and School Policies/Practices" section of the literature review that suspension and expulsion are parts of the SPP the fact that participants experienced higher rates of both than the state average shows that they experienced aspects of the SPP. Additionally, high suspension and expulsion rates show that the SPP has ramifications later in life as all of these men are formerly incarcerated and they experienced higher levels of exclusion from school. Research has shown that suspension and expulsion increase the likelihood of being involved in the criminal justice system later in life, and my findings confirm this. Furthermore, the dropout rates for participants were higher than the state average which shows the impact the SPP has on students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021).

It is unclear where detention fits into the SPP as research regarding the SPP does not mention it, yet it is the most common form of punishment according to Louis Rosen (2005), and my findings. Because of detention's similarities to juvenile detention and detention centers, albeit

on a smaller scale, it should be considered another punitive aspect of the SPP. Given that it was the most common form of punishment experienced by participants, I believe it shows another way they experienced the SPP. Detention served as another way for them to be punished without addressing the root causes of harm and without learning how to be better next time.

Given that the percentage of police present in schools matches that of New York state, this is another facet by which participants experienced the SPP in school. The final way that the SPP was present in schools was in the ways they saw favoritism or inconsistency in punishments at their schools. While not all participants felt that punishment was unequal at their schools, those who did cite their race or economic standing as the reason for this treatment. The unequal punishment based on race and class shows yet another way in which the inequalities in society are reproduced in schools. This inequality also reflects the statistics of who is disproportionately represented in the criminal justice system and thus shows the ways that schools mirror prisons in following a hierarchy of white supremacy and economic favoritism.

Did formerly incarcerated people experience any aspects of alternative education or discipline, and if so, did these positively or negatively affect their schooling experience?

Participants did not experience alternative forms of education or discipline. While some people said they experienced alternative forms of education, the evidence cited by participants (teachers' smile, keeping class engaged, teachers' talking to students) did not meet the criteria for alternative education as it did not suggest any challenging of traditional ways of teaching or learning. It is still important to note what respondents considered alternative education because it shows an acceptance of the status quo and that people take what I would argue to be the bare minimum of teaching as alternative education. Actions such as a teacher's smile or being talkative with students do not constitute alternative education, but the fact that participants

considered this to be alternative education shows a lack of awareness of what alternative education looks like and could be.

In terms of discipline, no one experienced any aspects of restorative justice or any other alternative forms of discipline. Because alternative discipline was not experienced, it is impossible to say whether it would have positively or negatively impacted participants' school experiences.

The fact that no participant experienced alternative education or discipline shows a lack of questioning of the status quo or efforts being made in schools to explore alternative methods. Given that the data has established that current education methods do not create support systems for students, alternative methods must be explored, as the education system as it stands does not support students. If students are to experience school in a way that reflects their lived experience and builds community and trusting relationships, alternative methods are most likely a solution since current practices do not meet student's needs.

Other Themes

Teachers were cited as the biggest impact makers on students. Each participant remembered a teacher who made a difference in their life, and for the interviewees, a smile came to their faces when remembering that teacher. While participants could not remember the classes they took, or even which class was their favorite, they could each remember a teacher who made a lasting impact. This shows the key role teachers play in schools. As the people who students interact with most, teachers must be given the resources they need to be able to give each student the attention and support they deserve. For teachers to make positive connections with their students, they must have the resources, financial and other, to create a classroom that works for

all styles of learners and allows for flexibility. The significance of the role of teachers and their influence on students cannot be underestimated in making schools places of support.

Another theme that was brought to light through the interviews was the impact that going to an all-boys or girls school might have on students. Since one participant said they regretted going to an all-boys school and another said they wished they had, it is unclear whether schools divided by gender are for better or worse. The divide in which kind of schools participants would have preferred shows the importance of having options and that school is very much an individual experience. The contradiction in responses shows the need for a variety of school options even in public schools. Having options would allow schools to better cater to students' needs since each school in a given area could focus on a different teaching style, curriculum, format, etc. More importantly, the contradicting responses emphasize that each student has different needs and will thrive in different environments. This confirms previous theories that students have individual strengths and need school environments that are not one-size-fits-all.

There was a narrative among participants that they had less security in their schools because schools were less dangerous than they are today. This narrative suggests that schools have become more violent and there is now a need for security to curb the danger. As established by research in the literature review, security and police in schools do not make schools safer (Fuentes, 2022). Furthermore, violence in schools has been decreasing since the 1990s (Frederique, 2020), so the justification of police to minimize an increase in violence is invalid because there is no increase. This begs the question: Why did participants rationalize the presence of police in schools as a response to supposed increased violence? A possible explanation is that dominant narratives have justified the presence of police in schools by convincing the public (participants included) that they are necessary to make schools safer.

While it is not the participants' fault that they see police as a solution to violence since that is what carceral logics teach us, the fact that participants have been through the criminal justice system and still see police as a solution to violence shows just how deep carceral logics are entrenched within us. It is critical to question society's reliance on police and whether schools are more violent today or if that is the capitalist narrative being told to justify extreme punitive practices in schools.

The most surprising finding, because it conflicts with previous research as discussed in the literature review, was that white respondents felt that punishment was unfair and that people were treated differently based on race or class at greater rates than Black respondents. This is significant because previous research has found that African American students routinely experience greater rates of discrimination and unequal treatment when it comes to punishment in schools. While this makes my findings seem bizarre, there are a few explanations for this discrepancy that perhaps suggest that individual feelings of discrimination are more complicated than previous research has found.

Some explanations that are possible for Black participants not feeling discriminated against are personal blame/self-fulfilling prophecy, not seeing racism on a systemic scale, and internalization of white supremacy. While I cannot confirm that these are the explanations for African American participants' perspectives given that I am neither Black, formerly incarcerated, or male, there are systemic and academic rationalizations for this trend in the findings. The self-fulfilling prophecy/personal blame is the idea that students of color internalize messages that they are "bad" or likely deserve punishment and thus act out and justify the consequences as bound to happen, not as a result of discrimination. This would explain why African American participants felt punishment was fair, because if they have internalized that they deserve to be or

will inevitably be punished they will not find their punishment to be wrong or discriminatory. The idea that Black participants may not have seen race factoring into their education on a systemic scale comes from Desiree Tallent et al. (2021) who found that African American youth could identify personal instances of racism, but not see the historical or systematic aspects of racism present in their schools. If Black participants are unable to identify contradictions between personal experiences and systemic contexts/circumstances, then it is unlikely they would feel that punishment was unfair or people were treated differently based on race or class. White supremacy is the facet of capitalism that normalizes whiteness as superior in morality, intellect, and power, and works to keep this dynamic intact. Because white supremacy is a part of capitalism and capitalism is ingrained in everyone since it is the system that most of the world functions under, it is safe to say that white supremacy is also ingrained in everyone. This means that people, even if they are not consciously aware, have internalized ideas of whiteness being superior and as a result do not always question when systems reinforce this superiority. This serves as another possible explanation for Black participants not observing discrimination at their schools because they too, may have internalized aspects of white supremacy that justify or normalize unequal treatment, even in schools.

There are also some explanations as to why white participants felt they were discriminated against or that schools were unfair to them: white supremacy, and economic marginalization through capitalism. Again, given that I am not a formerly incarcerated white man, I cannot confirm that these are the reasons, but they are the explanations I have come to after looking at previous research and the ways capitalism functions in society. Because white supremacy establishes that white people should be at the top, it is possible that if/when white participants were not, they felt discriminated against. If white participants felt entitled to being

treated well or not getting punished because of the superiority white supremacy made them feel, it would make sense that they would feel wronged when they were punished. On the other hand, white participants explained that there was discrimination because they were not the rich ones at a rich, mostly white school, which suggests marginalization along economic lines. The fact that discrimination was still a perceived issue at a mostly white school shows the ways that capitalism will always find ways to divide people. It has already been established that schools create power structures to mimic society as a result of capitalism. Since there was a lack of diversity to discriminate based on race, people were discriminated against based on economic status, which shows that capitalism will create hierarchies and power structures in any situation.

The biggest takeaway from the findings regarding discrimination in schools is that there will always be othering, whether identified or not. Schools reproduce inequalities created by capitalism and divide people by any means possible. While African American participants may have rationalized punishments through self-fulfilling prophecies and white participants may have felt discriminated against because of white supremacy, both were negatively impacted by the way capitalism divides people to maintain power structures.

Overall, my findings led me to conclude that in general, schools did not create support systems for the participants of my study. Between capitalism, the SPP, and a lack of alternative education and discipline, there are many systemic problems facing the education system, which prevent it from being a place of support. While this project is not perfect, as explained in the limitations below, it provides a unique perspective from formerly incarcerated people who are not usually included in discussions of education and its flaws.

Limitations

The primary limitation of this project was time. Because the entire project was completed in about seven months, there was no time for follow-up interviews, waiting to gain a larger sample size, or many rounds of revisions. Along the vein of time restrictions, there was red tape in accessing the population to conduct the research. I was delayed about one month in distributing the surveys because the organization had to go through a bureaucratic process before approving the project.

Another limitation of this project is the sample size. Because there were a total of 18 participants, the data does not lend itself to be generalizable or speak for a group of people. The size of the study makes this project more of a case study, which is not bad, but was not the intention, and thus a limitation. An unforeseen limitation resulting from the sample is that it only contained male identifying participants. While not necessarily a negative outcome, this meant that the data could not be analyzed based on gender comparatively.

An unavoidable limitation is my own bias as a human being. I am a privileged person at an elite institution conducting research on a marginalized population. While I have taken every measure I could think of to avoid bias and not misconstrue the answers or words of participants, it is entirely possible that at times, personal beliefs or biases have impacted this work. I do not say this to discredit my work, but to emphasize that even as a researcher intending to elevate other people's voices and raise awareness of the experiences of those who are often ignored, it is impossible to conduct any research without some amount of bias.

Recommendations for Future Research

Given some of the limitations stated above, my primary recommendation is for this project to be executed with a larger sample size and with people of all genders. This would lead

to a better understanding of formerly incarcerated people's experiences as it would allow for more nuanced responses and perspectives. This work also concerned people who attended school in New York, so further work could be done at a national level.

More work must be done on the benefits of alternative education and discipline as this project was not able to answer questions about the potential benefits of these methods given that participants did not experience either. To get buy-in to move away from a punitive system, there must be evidence that alternative methods are a solution.

Lastly, it is imperative that research continue to be done that centers the voices of those on the margins of society. It is impossible to solve problems without talking to those experiencing said problems and listening to their ideas for solutions.

Conclusion

I end this project with quotes from both the survey and the interviews. The quotes are a response to the question: If you could change anything about your schooling experience or how schools function to make them better for students, what would you change? I conclude with direct quotes from participants as the intention of this project is to elevate their voices. I hope that their responses will serve as a call to action and a reminder of what is needed to improve schools for students.

"Only to be able to finish college when I had the chance to. But unfortunately I was in prison."

"I would have taken my English classes seriously and would have looked for help with reading and understand what I read."

"Not everyone's living situation is the best, help give them a place to come before and after school. A program that feeds kids who can prove they're doing their H.W. or did it"

"schools should have more intervention"

"the encouragement of the principals to allow students to drop out"

"Keeping tests accessible…keeping politics out…not banning books…let the teachers teach"

"I would first treat everyone on the same level"

> So, I like that because just as separate as people are, when you learn about them, you find that common thread and it brings you close up. So I appreciate that…They always pair an older kid with a younger kid, and they do read time, because it makes the older children responsible for somebody else. And you are more inclined to do well when you know somebody's relying on you. So I like that. I like that aspect, too. I would do that more in schools. (William)

"I would change the time school started and gave more hands-on classes."

"more of a [historically black college and university] hbcu type school with more learning about future life references"

> So again, teaching individualized lessons being one of the things that I really appreciate about where my son goes to school is that they find practical ways to present the curriculum. When they do math, they set up the room like it's a diner sometimes, where people are spending, exchanging money. So they counted money and they're adding, subtracting and doing multiplication. Well, he's only in third grade, so they're doing it like that. So, I think more schools would do that. And B, more culturally inclusive. Where he goes, they go in on, you name the culture, I never even heard of, they're talking about it. (William)

"Change the texture of learning"

"Peer to peer learning. combine visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and reading/writing. not just lecture"

"More teachers"

"More support by staff"

"have more staff to work one on one with students"

"the overall student teacher relationships need to be more one on one basis"

> I think they should have at least each student get a one-on-one once a month…Get to know their mind, what they think, help them out better. Because like I said, a lot of these kids ain't getting none at home and the teachers are what builds our future…So if you get one kid each month a day with a teacher or a day with a guidance counselor and have them have the day with them, go to each class and have a sit down, show them how they learning, what they're thinking about when they reading this type of thing. (Marcus)

"The environment would be more inclusive and culturally sensitive. Every child would not be forced into a box of learning. Next I would create a community based system of learning."

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