Understanding Disproportionate Discipline in Suburban Public Schools

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Dr. Alicia Okpareke
ABSTRACT

In the American public school system, Black and Hispanic students and low-SES (socioeconomic status) students are punished more frequently and more harshly than students of other races and socioeconomic statuses (Mitchell, 2014; Porter, 2015; Verdugo, 2002). This study seeks to examine whether or not the racial and SES composition of a high school is related to how students are disciplined. In order to examine this, 10 semi-structured interviews were conducted with school professionals at two high schools. The first school was predominantly white and middle- to upper-SES, and the second was predominantly black and lower-SES. Findings indicate that students at the lower-SES high school are punished more harshly than students at the upper-SES high school. The analysis indicates that race, socioeconomic status, differing perceptions about students, and hypercriminalization are important factors in explaining the difference in discipline. Policy implications will be presented.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2

Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................................. 4

Chapter 2: Methodology ............................................................................................................... 6

Chapter 3: Differential Punishment and Punishment Philosophies ............................................. 12
  Review of Literature ...................................................................................................................... 12
  Findings ........................................................................................................................................ 16
  Discussion ..................................................................................................................................... 25

Chapter 4: Hypercriminalization .................................................................................................. 28
  Review of Literature ...................................................................................................................... 28
  Findings ........................................................................................................................................ 33
  Discussion ..................................................................................................................................... 39

Chapter 5: Structural and Individual Factors that Influence Perceptions of Students................ 42
  Review of Literature ...................................................................................................................... 42
  Findings ........................................................................................................................................ 48
  Discussion ..................................................................................................................................... 59

Chapter 6: Perceived Effectiveness of Policy Changes .............................................................. 64
  Review of Literature ...................................................................................................................... 64
  Findings ........................................................................................................................................ 66
  Discussion ..................................................................................................................................... 70

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Policy Implications .......................................................................... 72

Bibliography ..................................................................................................................................... 80
UNDERSTANDING DISPROPORTIONATE DISCIPLINE IN SUBURBAN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Educational reformer Horace Mann (1796-1859) once said, “Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of social machinery” (Rhode, Cooke, & Ojha, 2012, p. 1). While that quote was spoken over a century ago, the belief of education as a great equalizer is still prevalent in the American psyche. In fact, former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan echoed this sentiment in 2011 saying, “In America, education is still the great equalizer” (Rhode, Cooke, & Ojha, 2012, p. 1). However, the American public school system has historically not been the great equalizer it has been praised to be, especially in regards to Black and Hispanic students and students with a low socioeconomic status (SES). Up until 1954, schools were segregated by race, and despite the qualifier, “separate but equal,” they were far from equal. In the Supreme Court’s ruling of Brown vs. Board of Education, Chief Justice Warren said, “‘Education [was] perhaps the most important function of state and local governments,’ and that denial of equal education would make it difficult for children to perform their roles in a democratic society” (Greene, 2015, p. 133). According to him, to fail to uphold the promise of an equal education is to fail to uphold one of the most crucial tenets of America’s core values.

Although schools are not legally allowed to segregate students based on race anymore, many schools are still fairly racially homogenous and/or homogenous in terms of socioeconomic status. For instance, according to a study conducted by the U.S. Government Accountability Office, 16 percent of U.S. schools were comprised of 75 to 100 percent Black or Hispanic students and students eligible for free-and-reduced lunch (U. S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). The inequality in the U.S. in terms of public education and race and
socioeconomic status is clear. For instance, in 2010, The Schott Foundation concluded that 78 percent of White males graduated from high school, while only 47 percent of Black males did (Storer, Mienko, Chang, Kang, Miyawaki, & Schultz, 2012). One reason for this may be the significant inequalities present in the disciplinary practices within public schools in this country. For instance, schools with higher percentages of Black and Hispanic students—as well as low-SES students—oftentimes have disproportionately higher suspension and expulsion rates.

The objective of this thesis is to explore if and how race and socioeconomic status shape inequalities in disciplinary practices within the suburban public school system, and how Senate Bill 100, a recent law eliminating zero tolerance policies in Illinois, has affected schools by seeking to eliminate highly punitive disciplinary practices. While most of the current literature juxtaposes inner-city schools populated with Black and Hispanic students and low-SES students with suburban high schools populated with White students and high-SES students, this study explores differences between two suburban high schools—one predominantly White and middle-to upper-SES, and one predominantly Black and lower-SES—that are just twenty-five miles apart from one another.

Chapter 2 presents the methodology of this thesis. In Chapter 3, literature and findings relevant to different punishment styles and disciplinary practices is presented. Chapter 4 presents literature and findings regarding hypercriminalization and the school-to-prison pipeline. In Chapter 5, literature and findings relevant to structural and individual factors that impact school professionals’ perceptions and expectations of students is presented. Chapter 6 presents literature and findings on the perceived effectiveness of different policy implications, namely Senate Bill 100 and restorative justice. Finally, Chapter 7 offers policy implications and potential directions for future research.
CHAPTER 2: METHODOLOGY

In order to explore potential differences in disciplinary practices of schools based on their racial and socioeconomic composition, two public suburban high schools in the state of Illinois were recruited to participate in the study. Schools were chosen based on their suburban location and opposing demographic characteristics. The target demographics were percentage of Black and Hispanic students and percentage of students eligible for free-and-reduced lunch, and these were meant to indicate the racial and socioeconomic compositions of the high schools. While the primary means of data for this study is qualitative, some quantitative data was initially gathered regarding the demographic compositions of the schools. Below is a chart of demographic information for the two target high schools (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016). After completing the interviews, academic achievement and resources were two themes that emerged as additional differences between the selected schools. As such, basic indicators of resources (average spending per pupil) and ACT score information were included in the charts. The category “two or more races” was excluded from analysis, as it is impossible to tell which racial groups students within that category belong to. The schools have been assigned pseudonyms.
Qualitative research was chosen as the primary means of data collection for this study because much of the previous literature on disproportionate discipline has focused on quantitative data. While qualitative research does not allow for generalizability, it does allow researchers to delve deeply into the underlying mechanisms of the discipline disparity between race and SES that has been shown in several other studies. Qualitative research is important when trying to get a full picture of how a phenomenon, such as differential discipline, is manifesting itself within schools. Oftentimes, the voices of participants are “lost in research” among researchers’ own theories, so qualitative research seeks to ensure that the voice of participants are being heard (Adams, Chen, & Chapman, 2016, p. 9). Additionally, when creating policy implications, it is beneficial to understand the voice of those who will actually be affected by the policies.

Each school was visited at least once, and while ethnographic observation was not part of the analysis, the researcher was able to observe some characteristics of each school while spending time there. At the high-SES school, the lobby area was very large and inviting, and had

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School name</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Percent of Black or Hispanic students</th>
<th>Percent of non-Black and non-Hispanic students</th>
<th>Percent of students eligible for free-and-reduced lunch</th>
<th>Average spending per pupil (instructional and operational)</th>
<th>Percent of students w/ ACT score of 21 or higher (college readiness indicator)</th>
<th>Average ACT score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wilshire High School</td>
<td>2,834 students</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>89.2%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
<td>$31,333 per year</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanders High School</td>
<td>1,177 students</td>
<td>94.8%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>59.6%</td>
<td>$22,161 per year</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
a receptionist at the window giving I.D.s to guests, whereas at the low-SES school, the lobby area was much smaller and austere, with a police officer giving I.D.s to guests. The students’ interaction with the staff members appeared to be different at both schools. At Sanders High School, the researcher spent a lot of time between interviews in the Deans’ Office, and while there, the students tended to speak to the receptionists only about pertinent matters such as why they were there, whether they were there for a disciplinary purpose or because they were leaving early for a number of reasons. At Wilshire High School, while the researcher spent less time in the Deans’ Office, the minimal interactions seen were very different. The students in the office spoke to the receptionists almost like peers, asking them what their weekend plans were and speaking very casually with them as they signed out for the day. The students appeared comfortable.

In order to gain insight into how SES and race influence disciplinary practices between the schools, the researcher conducted ten semi-structured interviews with school professionals—five from Wilshire High School (high-SES) and five from the Sanders High School (low-SES). Once the principals at each school were contacted and agreed to allow their staff to participate, school professionals were recruited primarily through snowball sampling. Four interviews from each school were conducted in-person in the respective school buildings, and one interview from each school was conducted via phone. All of the interviews were recorded besides one at the request of the participant. For the interview that was not recorded, the researcher took copious notes and spent sixty minutes after the interview reconstructing the interview. This ensured all pertinent information presented was captured. The interviews lasted an average of 32.2 minutes. Below is a chart of some basic information about the school professionals who participated in the study. All participants have been given pseudonyms.
After the interviews were conducted, they were transcribed and coded. After an initial set of coding was performed, the codes were placed into larger themes (Flick, 2009). The interviews were then hand-coded to easily compare and contrast the two schools. In the interviews, two additional low-SES schools were brought up by Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) and Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) as points of comparison since they both worked at low-SES schools prior to working at Wilshire High School. The demographic composition of those schools is included below, as they will be referenced in the analysis (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016). The demographic information was taken from five years ago—the oldest data that was available—for the categories for which that data was available, because the participants worked at the schools five (Scott Talkie) and thirteen (Alexander Perry) years ago respectively. It is possible that the actual numbers, especially for Alexander Perry’s experience thirteen years

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age range (in years)</th>
<th>Position at school</th>
<th>Seniority</th>
<th>School type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elaine Barker</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>7 months</td>
<td>Low-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mark Brown</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>17 years (3 as Dean)</td>
<td>Low-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin Ashner</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>55-65</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>Low-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria Ryan</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>Low-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kay Williams</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>High-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle Richards</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Social worker</td>
<td>1.5 years</td>
<td>High-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly Haugen</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>13 years (2 as Dean)</td>
<td>High-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott Talkie</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>25-35</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>High-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander Perry</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>35-45</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>High-SES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet Hoving</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>45-55</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>14 years</td>
<td>Low-SES</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ago were slightly different, but the numbers match his basic description of the school and the
trend has remained relatively consistent over the past few years, so the actual numbers were
unlikely to be very different.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Merrick Township</td>
<td>2,789 students</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>$25,873 per year</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Buchanan South</td>
<td>3,618 students</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>79%</td>
<td>$18,856 per year</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly, Scott Talkie (High-SES Dean, White, 25-35) noted of his experience at
Merrick Township that it was “a world of difference demographically,” but the numbers do not
paint quite as drastic of a picture. Three possible theories emerge about why this might be the
case and why the differences seen between Merrick Township and Wilshire High School turned
out to be so drastic. One is that free-and-reduced lunch eligibility might not be the best
indication of SES—although it is the most readily available. Students in the high-SES school
seemed to have a much higher SES than someone who barely missed the cut-off for free-and-
reduced lunch. For instance, three school professionals from Wilshire High School described the
student population as, “some are wealthy,” “mostly upper-middle class…to very high upper-
class,” and “primarily affluent kids.” The second theory is that maybe the school seemed like a
“world of difference demographically” because there was a disproportionate amount of nonwhite
and/or low-SES students being sent to the Deans’ Office. The final theory for the differences
seen between the schools is that even a slight difference in demographics can produce highly
different discipline strategies. Further research would be necessary to assess one or all three of these theories.

One school professional noted an example of a recent disciplinary procedure at a nearby low-SES high school, so the information for that school is included below as well (Illinois State Board of Education, 2016).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School name</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Percent of Black or Hispanic students</th>
<th>Percent of non-Black and non-Hispanic students</th>
<th>Percent of students eligible for free-and-reduced lunch</th>
<th>Average spending per pupil (instructional and operational)</th>
<th>Percent of students w/ ACT score of 21 or higher (college readiness indicator)</th>
<th>Average ACT score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Foxborough High School</td>
<td>1,696 students</td>
<td>73.4%</td>
<td>22.5%</td>
<td>64.3%</td>
<td>$19,264 per year</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER 3: DIFFERENTIAL PUNISHMENT AND PUNISHMENT PHILOSOPHIES

Review of Relevant Literature

Research suggests that Black students, Hispanic students, and students of lower socioeconomic statuses are often subjected to harsher discipline than their White and upper-SES colleagues. Much of the literature focused on punitive disciplinary policies disproportionately affecting minority students is centered on zero-tolerance policies, which historically have targeted minority students at a disproportionate rate. Additionally, another branch of research focuses on the school-to-prison pipeline, the idea that students who are pushed out of the school system are all too often pulled into the prison system. The school-to-prison pipeline is a phenomenon that also affects minority students more drastically (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014).

Despite the differences in the implementation of zero-tolerance policies between races, many studies have shown that Black students have not engaged in misbehavior at a higher rate than White students, and thus the inequalities in discipline cannot be blamed on disproportionate misbehavior (Welch & Payne, 2010). The major racial disparities between White and minority students who are affected by zero tolerance lie in what type of offense a student is punished for. For instance, minority students are often punished for subjective offenses such as misbehavior whereas White students are punished for more objective offenses such as drugs or weapons (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014).

One reason for the inequalities in school discipline may be explained by Critical Race Theory, which studies the role structural racism plays in society and social institutions. This theory suggests that racial biases—such as viewing certain minority groups as likely to commit crimes—are embedded within our society (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014). These biases can oftentimes lead to fear, which can lead to differential treatment. For instance, studies have found
that schools in which administrators and teachers fear being victimized by their students tend to have more punitive disciplinary policies (Welch & Payne, 2010). Additionally, there is a link between demographic compositions of schools and the type of discipline that is used (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014). One study conducted by Triplett, Allen, and Lewis (2014) found that schools that have a higher percentage of Black students tend to use more punitive disciplinary measures.

**Zero Tolerance Policies**

Zero tolerance policies, as the name would suggest, are policies that are cut-and-dry. They originated in the 1980s as state-level mandates that students be expelled for “drugs, fighting, and gang-related activity” (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014, p. 353). Because of a large uptick of school shootings in the 1990s, the Gun-Free Schools Act was created in 1994 in order to try to combat the school shootings. The Gun Free Schools Act mandated that schools adopt a zero tolerance policy that would expel students for a minimum of one year if they brought a firearm onto school grounds. While the original act contained the specific word “firearm,” in 1995, the word “firearm” was changed to “weapon” (Martinez, 2009, p. 154). This change led to more subjectivity in deciding what could be considered a weapon.

Because zero-tolerance policies require mandatory disciplinary actions for certain offenses, they have been and continue to be misapplied. Zero tolerance policies seem to assume that every situation in which a student breaks policy is the same; therefore, the discretion is taken out of discipline. For instance, in one case, a sixth grade student was suspended for ten days and considered for expulsion because he threatened two boys with a nail file. The school district later found that he had done this in self-defense after being relentlessly bullied, yet his
punishment remained the same and the boys who bullied him were never punished (Martinez, 2009).

One factor that led to the widespread public support of zero tolerance policies was the series of mass school shootings between 1990 and 1999. Because these shootings occurred in fairly unknown places such as Pearl, Michigan, many people had anxiety that a school shooting could happen anywhere—even within their own community (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014). Over the last three decades, the majority of school shootings (62 percent) have been carried out by White males and have taken place in rural or suburban schools. Only 38 percent of the school shootings have occurred in urban schools even though nearly 81 percent of the United States’ population lives in urban areas. However, instead of focusing on the psychological issues that may be leading the White suburban and rural students to commit these heinous crimes, actions of young urban minorities are often punished (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014).

Since the initial enactment of zero tolerance policies, many schools have expanded zero tolerance policies to cover more subjective offenses such as disrespect or disruptive behavior. Clearly, zero tolerance policies are not only about protecting students anymore, but are also about removing students who the teachers feel are extremely difficult to handle. Since zero tolerance policies have been expanded to cover subjective offenses, suspensions and expulsions have grown at a rapid rate. For instance, in the 1992-1993 school year, the Chicago Public School system had a total of fourteen expulsions. In the 1998-1999 school year, this number rose to 737 and the following year (1999-2000) the number was at 1,500. That number represented 1,500 students in Chicago who were no longer receiving the free public education that they should have been entitled to (Villarruel & Dunbar, 2006). Considering the Gun Free School Act was enacted in 1994 and such a drastic change was seen between 1993 and 1998,
undoubtedly, the law’s use of zero tolerance had a large role in the drastic increase in expulsions (Martinez, 2009).

In addition to the fact that zero tolerance policies are very harsh, there is little evidence that punitive disciplinary measures including zero tolerance policies reduce violence or increase safety within schools. In fact, in a study conducted by Triplett, Allen, and Lewis (2014), schools that had been enforcing zero tolerance policies for four years remained less safe than schools that did not have these policies. Additionally, research has found that suspension does not seem to prevent future offenses. Some studies have found very high rates of recidivism, which has led researchers to conclude that punitive disciplinary measures may actually increase the tendency to misbehave rather than deter students from misbehaving (Triplett, Allen, & Lewis, 2014).

Mongan and Walker (2012) found that zero tolerance policies decrease children’s academic performance and have a negative effect on their emotions. Since suspension and expulsion remove students from the school environment, when suspended or expelled, students miss valuable knowledge that they will likely not be able to make up. High rates of suspension and thus lost class time, not surprisingly, have been correlated with lower standardized test scores in a wide range of subjects from math to reading. Furthermore, being expelled for a whole year can significantly affect students’ progress, leading them to have a difficult time trying to obtain higher education. Additionally, children who are the most likely to be punished by zero tolerance policies are often in the most need of professional counseling (Mongan & Walker, 2012).

**Changing Policies**

Taking away a child’s education is an indirect violation of his or her constitutional rights. While education may not be guaranteed to students through the constitution directly, if the state
in which a student lives requires school attendance, the Constitution protects their property right. Since people pay property taxes, their children should therefore be guaranteed a right to a free education (Mongan & Walker, 2012). To think that the right to a free public education could be taken away over something as simple as a child acting out in class seems drastic enough without taking into consideration the fact that in cases of expulsion many states, including Illinois prior to Senate Bill 100, are not required to offer students an alternative school to continue their education. Additionally, in many cases, the alternative forms of schooling that are available to students are not free and can put financial strain on families (Villarruel & Dunbar, 2006).

The idea that there is a problem with the way in which minority and low-SES students are being treated in the public education system has been made increasingly more public over the past few years, and some government officials have become aware of the need for a change. For instance, the Obama administration spoke out against zero tolerance policies and their differential impact on minority students and studied the issue (Zehr, 2010). Senate Bill 100 was passed as a law in Illinois in 2015 and became effective as of September 15, 2016. The law not only outlaws the use of zero tolerance policies in the state, but it also limits the amount and length of out-of-school suspensions that a school could use and for what reason. Additionally, several social work interventions are required because of the law such as re-entry plans to help a student adjust when they return to school after a suspension or alternative placement.

**Findings**

The literature suggested that Black and Hispanic students and lower-SES students were differentially punished despite the fact that they did not engage in more disciplinary infractions than their White colleagues. Based on this analysis, the low-SES students may have engaged in a different type of offense, one that unfortunately for them is less institutionally appropriate.
While without the actual disciplinary data, it is impossible to assess which school was engaging in more disciplinary infractions, clear differences emerged in the interviews between the way in which students at the different high schools disrespected both one another and staff members. While low-SES students were likely to handle their issues with one another face-to-face, typically leading to blatant disrespect and/or physical altercations, high-SES students were likely to go behind one another’s back, choosing to disrespect one another or their teachers covertly.

**Type of Offense**

Based on the interview data, students at the low-SES high schools were more likely than the high-SES students to get into face-to-face conflicts, both verbal and physical. Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said of his prior experience at Merrick Township, “…but I think there was a lot less fear of walking up to somebody and saying ‘I don’t like you. Do something about it…’” Physical altercations were spoken of commonly by Sanders High School professionals, and oftentimes ensued as a result of verbal face-to-face altercations. Every Sanders High School professional noted that fights were an issue at the school, whereas none of the Wilshire High School professionals considered physical fighting to be a significant problem.

A similar phenomenon was seen with low-SES students’ interactions with staff members. Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) noted of his prior experience at Merrick Township, “A kid would stand up and say ‘Fuck you. No. Fuck off.’ That happened every day, every period kind of thing.” Additionally, two Sanders High School professionals noted that some students were intentionally threatening, although their recounts of the perceived threatening behavior sounded rather subjective. For instance, Elaine Barker (low-SES social worker, African American, 35-45) noted, “He used his height I think in a threatening way to kinda be intimidating. You know just the male bravado to kind of get what he wanted…” It is unclear
what the student specifically did that was threatening considering height is not something he is able to control.

Wilshire High School professionals noted that students at their school were more likely to go behind one another’s backs or behind staff’s back to disrespect them. While in some cases, this was a way for students to be more covert about their disrespect, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) noted a case in which a student tweeted directly at the principal’s Twitter account saying that the study hall supervisor should be fired and cursing. While cursing in regards to a school professional online can lead anywhere from a 45-minute detention to an in-school suspension, typically cursing at a school professional in person would earn a student an out-of-school suspension at both Wilshire High School and Sanders High School. Therefore, while in essence face-to-face disrespect and social media disrespect are similar in intention and content, social media disrespect was seen as more institutionally appropriate, and therefore the penalty was less harsh. Interestingly, in-person fighting is seen as much more serious than fighting online despite the fact that an in-person fight is normally over relatively quickly and only witnessed by those who happened to be nearby at the time, whereas social media bullying is often much more public and more difficult to erase given the ability to screenshot and repost messages.

**Differing Punishment Philosophies**

There were differences between the high-and low-SES schools in terms of punishment and punishment philosophies. Overall, it was clear from the interviews that students at the low-SES high schools were more frequently and more harshly punished; in part, this was because of the types of offenses they committed, but it was clear that the same offense was differentially punished based on whether or not the high school was low- or high-SES. Sanders High School
used harsher punishments than Wilshire High School both before and after Senate Bill 100. Additionally, Wilshire High School used case-by-case discipline even before Senate Bill 100, whereas prior to Senate Bill 100 the low-SES high schools used more cut-and-dry discipline styles, leaving little room for individual and structural factors. Neither Wilshire High School nor Sanders High School was likely to use expulsion as a means of discipline since students in the state of Illinois are not able to go to any public school for the duration of their expulsion, although Merrick Township and Buchanan South did use expulsion as a means of punishment.

With the implementation of Senate Bill 100, all schools in Illinois are now mandated to use case-by-case discipline. Both Sanders High School and Wilshire High School had a similar understanding of what it truly meant to use case-by-case discipline, with Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) saying in a situation with different students engaging in similar infractions, “[Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45)] might be referring his kid to the social worker and I might be referring my kid to an ISS [in-school suspension].” Similarly, Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) said, “If that’s a suspension for one kid and a long talk with another, then that’s how you handle it.” Factors for determining punishments at both schools seemed to be based not only on students’ extenuating circumstances, but also on the severity of the offense and past disciplinary history.

Prior to Senate Bill 100, the low-SES schools were likely to use cut-and-dry discipline. For instance, Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) noted, that the punishment for fighting was, “ten days no matter what. Ten days. Call the police. Have them ticketed.” Even after Senate Bill 100, while discipline now must be to be case-by-case at Sanders High School, Elaine Barker (low-SES social worker, African American, 35-45) noted that the discipline is still rather “by the books.” Victoria Ryan (low-SES Dean, White, 45-55) noted that it’s case-by-case
“unless it’s something major…then you know, they’re pretty much handled the same.” This was in direct contrast to the philosophy noted by two Wilshire High School professionals, who seemed to think that the more serious the offense, the more necessary it was to use case-by-case discipline. Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) said, “…the more significant the consequence is, I think the more the factors come into play…if a student is assigned a 45-minute detention for cutting a class for going to the library to study, they’re gonna serve that 45-minute detention.” In his opinion, less serious punishments were less in need of case-by-case assessments because of their relatively minimal impact, whereas at Sanders High School, the punishments with the highest impact related to serious disciplinary infractions were the most cut-and-dry.

Overall, both high- and low-SES schools used some form of progressive discipline, with the offenses escalating as the students engaged in disciplinary infractions multiple times. Sanders High School and Wilshire High School seemed to have similar progressive discipline, oftentimes starting with a detention, moving to a longer detention, an in-school suspension, and eventually an out-of-school suspension. In some cases, when an offense was already serious, such as a physical altercation, the length of suspension increased progressively based on number of fights. At Wilshire High School, prior to Senate Bill 100, a student’s first fight was typically a 2-5 day suspension, and it took up until a student’s third fight to get to a 10-day suspension. On the other hand, at Sanders High School, a student’s first fight was typically a 10-day suspension, and by a student’s third fight, he or she was typically alternatively placed.

Based on the interview data, the high-SES students were given more chances than the low-SES students. For instance, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said of his prior experience at Merrick Township, “We’re just trying to maintain a safe environment, and once
you’ve proven twice that you’re not gonna abide by that, we gotta get ya out of here…” In saying this, he was not seeming to consider that the Wilshire High School students were given three or more chances in similar situations. Regarding progressive discipline, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) noted of his experience at Merrick Township, “I mean if you walked into the office of your assistant principal with a bad attitude, you could walk out with a ten-day suspension. I mean it was, you could easily escalate…but here [Wilshire High School] I mean you really did have to kind of earn your way out.” It is clear that students at Wilshire High School were given more chances than students at Sanders High School, Merrick Township, and Buchanan South in terms of committing disciplinary infractions, and this ultimately may have to do with differing perceptions of students’ level of danger, something that will be further discussed in Chapter 5.

**Suspension, Alternative Placement, and Expulsion**

While detentions were handled similarly at both Wilshire High School and Sanders High School, the most drastic differences between the two schools were seen in their harshest punishments—in-school suspensions, out-of-school suspensions, and alternative placements. At Wilshire High School, in-school suspension was referred to by Kimberly Haugen (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) as “in-school supervised study,” and the in-school suspension room was referred to across campus as the “student support center” or the “Senate Bill 100 room.” On the other hand, at Sanders High School, Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) referred to the in-school suspension room as “the box,” noting that that is what the students refer to it as. While the name of the room may seem relatively insignificant, the name has implications for the way students perceive the room. It appears that with a name like “the box,” students at Sanders High School see the room as particularly punitive and possibly even criminalizing. In contrast, with a
name like the “student support center,” students may be more likely to perceive that space as a rehabilitative environment. Clearly, this is another instance where low-SES students experienced differential treatment.

Additionally, the actual set-up of the in-school suspension room differed between Sanders High School and Wilshire High School. The in-school suspension room at Sanders High School had one teacher, and was referred to by Elaine Barker (low-SES social worker, African American, 35-45) as “a holding room for students.” Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) described it as a place with “twenty desks and a teacher in there. There’s nothing else.” In contrast, the in-school suspension room at Wilshire High School was staffed by a special education teacher and two para-educators (teachers’ aides). Additionally, the researcher was able to see the in-school suspension room at Wilshire High School, and it was a very pleasant classroom with computers, padded chairs, motivational quotes on the wall, and warm lighting. Both Sanders High School and Wilshire High School professionals noted that in-school suspension has the potential to serve as a beneficial alternative to out-of-school suspension because it gives students the opportunity to get support in the building and it can be easier for students to keep up on work. While both schools stressed the importance of the support students can be given in an in-school suspension setting, Wilshire High School seemed more committed to actually providing that support than Sanders High School was.

Although school professionals seemed to note the importance of in-school suspension, all schools in the analysis also used out-of-school suspensions. However, the out-of-school suspensions differed in frequency and length, with the low-SES schools tending to be harsher than the high-SES school in terms of frequency and length both pre- and post-Senate Bill 100. An easy point of comparison between schools is the consequence(s) for fighting because all of
the schools considered physical fighting to be a suspendable offense. Prior to Senate Bill 100, at Sanders High School, a physical altercation regardless of severity was an automatic ten-day suspension, and this was seen at Merrick Township as well. At Buchanan South, the punishment for a first time fight was an automatic five-day suspension. At Wilshire High School, however, according to Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45), the punishment for a fight prior to Senate Bill 100 was “up to five days…typically it was two to five days.”

Not only were the suspensions for fighting harsher at the low-SES high schools prior to Senate Bill 100, but even after Senate Bill 100, Sanders High School continued to have higher punishments for fighting than Wilshire High School. (Because neither Alexander Perry nor Scott Talkie still has a close connection to the low-SES high schools where they previously worked, it is unclear whether this trend was seen at Merrick Township and/or Buchanan South as well.) For instance, Michelle Richards (high-SES social worker, White, 25-35) recalled a student who got into a physical altercation post- Senate Bill 100 and received a one-day suspension. On the other hand, at Sanders High School, Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) recalled, “We had two little girls get in a fight and it took, they fought for five seconds and they’re pretty nice kids, so they got three days of suspension.” Although Michelle Richards did not specify how severe the fight was, it would be hard to imagine that it would be less severe than the one described by Mark Brown. Additionally, the Sanders High School professionals made it clear that they are still able to suspend students if the appropriate criteria are met whereas the Wilshire High School professionals seemed more focused on the fact that they can only suspend when the safety of the student body is compromised.

While neither of the target high schools used expulsion as a means of punishment, Merrick Township and Buchanan South did use expulsion as a means for removing students
from the school environment. For instance, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said of his prior experience at Merrick Township, “If [fighting] happened more than once then it went up to the board for either expulsion or…alternative school.” Additionally, Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) said of his prior experience at Buchanan South that “a lot” of students were expelled during his time there.

Sanders High School was likely to use alternative placement as a means to avoid expulsion while still being able to remove students from the building if they were either a safety threat or a significant disruption. According to Elaine Barker (low-SES social worker, African American, 35-45), “fifteen plus” students were transferred from Sanders High School to an alternative school within a little over four months. On the other hand, the Wilshire High School professionals were less likely to talk about transferring students for behavioral reasons and more likely to talk about transferring students—in collaboration and agreement with their families—because of socioemotional reasons such as severe anxiety leading to school avoidance.

While all of the low-SES high school districts were reported to have two options for alternative placement—one for students with special needs and one for students with behavior problems—Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) spoke of a lot of options for the Wilshire High School district, saying, “Every therapeutic school that I’ve seen kind of specializes in something or has a higher population of something, so we kind of pick and choose from a long list of places around here.” While alternative placement is a beneficial alternative to expulsion, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said that the education at an alternative school “does not compare to what you would get here.”


**Discussion**

Overall, much of what came out in the interviews reflected and expanded upon what was in the literature such as the fact that lower-socioeconomic and minority students are punished more harshly despite the fact that they do not necessarily engage in more disciplinary infractions (Welch & Payne, 2010). This was reflected in the interviews because students were differentially punished for the same offense depending on whether their school was high- or low-SES. While the literature pointed out that nonwhite and lower-SES students were not engaging in more disciplinary infractions than their white and higher-SES peers, it could be important to specify whether those statistics represented the quantity of overall disciplinary infractions or the severity. In the schools studied, distinct themes emerged in the types of disciplinary infractions committed by students at each of the schools with the students at Sanders High School tending to engage in disciplinary infractions that were seen as less institutionally appropriate such as physically fighting. Clearly, students may have the same or worse intentions when bullying someone on social media versus getting in a physical altercation. Additionally, cyberbullying may have an equal or worse effect on its victims than on the victims of a physical altercation due to the permanency of things put online. However, cyberbullying overall was not punished nearly as harshly as physical altercations were.

Additionally, the idea that low-SES school professionals punish students for increasingly subjective offenses was also seen. In certain cases it seemed relatively obvious that the students should be punished for subjective offense—such as in situations where students curse at their teachers and/or call their teachers names. However, there were certain instances in which school professionals at Sanders High School interpreted students’ behaviors as threatening, which may or may not have been behavior that the students intended to be threatening. Interpreting
potentially harmless behavior such as “[using] his height...in a threatening way” suggests that administrators might fear their students, which could be related to the notion that school professionals who fear students are more likely to implement punitive disciplinary policies (Farmer, 2010).

While Senate Bill 100 has eliminated some of the disparities between the high and low-SES schools, clearly, there are still disparities between the two schools even post-Senate Bill 100. Therefore, it may be necessary to discover the root of why the disparity exists and to go a step further than Senate Bill 100. Additionally, while previously it seemed as though in-school suspension was a healthy alternative to out-of-school suspension, and staff members at both target schools spoke of it as such, it is possible that that is not always the case. While at Wilshire High School the in-school suspension room was a very warm space, the notion of in-school suspension seemed much different at Sanders High School, with students even referring to it in similar terms as they would a prison, “the box.” Additionally, in-school suspension is sometimes referred to in the literature as a form of punitive discipline and criminalization (Hirschfield, 2008). Clearly, while in-school suspension has its benefits, it also has its pitfalls.

While it was impressive that neither Sanders High School nor Wilshire High School was likely to expel students, alternative school should not be used as an automatic way to remove students who give the administration a difficult time. It seemed concerning that Sanders High School transferred so many students to the alternative school. While it was framed as a way to do what was best for the students, the best thing for students, if possible, is likely in the general education setting (sentiment expressed by Michelle Richards [high-SES social worker, White, 25-35]). However, since the Wilshire High School district has more resources and thus more alternative options for students, in some cases, alternative schooling may actually be beneficial.
for some students such as those who struggle with anxiety and school avoidance. For instance, both social workers at Wilshire High School spoke highly of a therapeutic day school setting where students are given additional supports and are able to take general education classes when appropriate since the therapeutic school is within one of the district schools. Students should be transferred to alternative settings only when it is truly in their best interest and/or when all other disciplinary options have been exhausted or when the student poses a significant threat to the safety of the student body.
CHAPTER 4: HYPERCRIMINALIZATION

Review of Relevant Literature

The literature suggests that Black and Hispanic students and low-SES students are hypercriminalized in the school environment, oftentimes the first step of the school-to-prison pipeline. For instance, Victor Rios (2011), in his case study of young Black and Latino boys in Oakland, California, concluded that the boys in his study were criminalized not only by law enforcement officials but also within the school system. The heavy criminalization of minority youth in the school system through various forms of punitive discipline such as surveillance, zero tolerance policies, metal detectors, random searches, etc. makes school a reflection of the criminal justice system (Hirschfield, 2008). These hypercriminalization procedures too often lead students to drop out of the school system—or in cases of expulsion, push students out of the school system. Unfortunately, many students who prematurely exit the school system end up in the prison system at some point in their life.

Youth of all races commit illegal infractions, but Black and Hispanic youth are disproportionately convicted in the juvenile justice system (Campaign for Youth Justice, 2016). While official statistics show that Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system, a limitation of using arrest records for data is that it does not necessarily include all of the crime that youth commit. Rather, it only includes the crimes that youth have been arrested for (McCord, Widom, & Crowell, 2001). Because Black and Hispanic youth face hypercriminalization when compared with White youth, figuring out youth crime statistics is a difficult process. Black and Hispanic youth are treated more harshly in the criminal justice system when compared with White youth (Campaign for Youth Justice, 2016). For instance, “African American youth are 8.6 times as likely than white youth to receive an adult
prison sentence” (Campaign for Youth Justice, 2016, p. 7). Additionally, Latino youth are “43% more likely than white youth to be waived judicially to the adult system and 40% more likely to be admitted to adult prison” (Campaign for Youth Justice, 2016, p. 7). These statistics show that there are clear disparities in the criminal justice system based on race regardless of which races may be engaging in the most crime.

Youth are not only criminalized in the prison system, but also in the school system. The hypercriminalization of Black and Hispanic youth in schools has been occurring for decades. Thompson (2011) noted a connection between the criminalization of Black students and the Civil Rights Movement, saying that historically, schools with the most outspoken Civil Rights protests were the most likely to have police officers on staff. Farmer (2010) attributed another possible catalyst of the hypercriminalization of Black students to the increase in juvenile homicides between the mid-1980s and the mid-1990s and the subsequent increase in stereotypical depictions of Black urban youth in the media (Farmer, 2010). Although the majority of severe school safety incidents such as gun violence have taken place at White suburban or rural schools, inner-city schools or schools populated with a high number of Black or Hispanic students typically get the most school security (Sussman, 2012).

Historically, hypercriminalization has manifested itself and continues to manifest itself in three major ways in the school system—cut-and-dry extremely punitive policies such as zero tolerance policies, exclusionary practices that remove students from the school environment such as suspension and expulsion, and most obviously, the actual involvement of law enforcement agents and the incorporation of law enforcement practices in the school (Hirschfield, 2008). These policies and practices affect low-SES students and nonwhite students the most drastically. For instance, nonwhite students are significantly more likely than white students to be arrested
while in school despite the fact that they are no more likely to commit illegal offenses within the school (Sussman, 2012).

While zero tolerance policies and exclusionary practices were discussed in detail in the last chapter, law enforcement involvement is another aspect of criminalization in the school system that is relevant to the hypercriminalization of youth. The involvement of law enforcement in school is especially seen in school districts with a large portion of minority students and low-SES students (Ramey, 2015). Certain cities, such as New York City, have struggled with extreme forms of school hypercriminalization that include one case where a six-year-old girl was arrested and taken to the police station for throwing a tantrum in class (Sussman, 2012). This trend is hardly unique to New York, however, as the presence of law enforcement in a school increases the likelihood that students will be criminalized for minor offenses such as disruptiveness (Justice Policy Institute, 2011). The fact that schools with a high amount of low-SES students spend so much money to maintain a high law enforcement presence is especially relevant considering this leaves them with less money to spend on their students and on the social service interventions that they may be lacking (Sussman, 2012).

**School-to-prison Pipeline**

Hypercriminalization and the school-to-prison pipeline have manifested uniquely in the state of Illinois. In the 1990s, Illinois added several detention centers—both adult and juvenile—and at the same time, Illinois schools were becoming more punitive and more secure. According to Scott and Saucedo (2013), the creation of the detention centers significantly added to the hypercriminalization of Chicago Public Schools, making the trade-off from the school system to the prison system direct. For instance, in the Reagan era of the War on Drugs, schools were mandated to send all drug offenders directly to police, where the statutes at the time
mandated that they would be sent to adult court and given a minimum prison sentence. Under that system, 65 percent of juveniles who were tried in adult court had never had a prior conviction, even in juvenile court, and 99 percent of those juveniles were minorities. Due to several policy changes, the trade-off between school and prison is not as immediate anymore, but the school-to-prison pipeline in Illinois and across the United States is a phenomenon that is unfortunately still occurring although in a less direct way (Scott & Saucedo, 2013).

Currently the school-to-prison pipeline is a phenomenon that often begins with a student prematurely exiting the school system either through dropout—oftentimes because of hypercriminalization—or expulsion. Hypercriminalization is related to dropping out because if a student is suspended one time in his or her freshman year of high school, he or she is twice as likely to drop out. Additionally, African American students are twice as likely and Hispanic students are 2.5 times as likely to drop out as are White students (Cramer, Gonzalez, & Pellegrini-Lafont, 2014). Given the relationship between race and school punishment, that statistic is unsurprising. There is also a relationship between school dropout and incarceration (Cramer, Gonzalez, & Pellegrini-Lafont, 2014). For instance, 60 percent of black males who drop out of high school go to prison at some point by the ages of 30-34 (Hirschfield, 2008).

Expulsion is one of the most devastating punishments a student can receive, and according to Rios (2011), expulsion is a clear step in the criminalization process of youth. While school hypercriminalization can lead students to drop out, in the case of expulsion, students are not left with any choice but to stop attending school. In Illinois, once a student was expelled, until recently—with the passage of Senate Bill 100—they were not able to attend another school for the length of their expulsion, so many never returned to school. Without a high school degree, students’ job prospects are low. Additionally, for students living in areas with high
crime rates, many may turn to criminal activities such as selling drugs as many may see doing so as their only option (Scott & Saucedo, 2011). Clearly, this lifestyle leads many former students into the prison system, something that some youth view favorably because at least in prison they are protected from violence for the most part and are given solid meals and some predictability (Rios, 2013).

**Psychological Effects and Medicalization**

In addition to the negative effects of the school-to-prison pipeline, criminalization of students in the school environment can lead to negative psychological effects. For instance, “disintegrative shaming,” is a process defined by Brown and Clarey (2012) as a means of deterring students from engaging in various forms of misbehavior. The process of disintegrative shaming involves students either being shamed themselves or witnessing others being shamed for engaging in a prohibited behavior. While shame was meant to act as a deterrent, Rios (2011) noted that shame played an important role in hypercriminalization of youth, as it was an outcome of many disciplinary procedures. Unfortunately, in order to deter students, some students are publically shamed in order to make a statement.

A study conducted by Ramey (2015) involving nearly 60,000 schools from over 6,000 districts found a clear connection between hypercriminalization and race and SES. Ramey (2015) found that districts with high minority populations were significantly more likely to criminalize their students. Criminalization in the study was measured by the amount of students who had been suspended or expelled and the number of arrest referrals from the school. This was a particularly important study not only because of the large sample size but also because it studied the effects not only of race but also of SES on hypercriminalization. Ramey (2015) found that a one standard deviation increase in percentage of Black students within a school
“was associated with 19.5 percent higher punishment rates and 8.7 percent higher referral and
arrest rates” (p. 193). Additionally, one standard deviation increase in students on free-and-
reduced lunch was associated with “82 percent higher punishment rates and 3.6 percent higher
rates of police referral and arrest” (Ramey, 2015, p. 193).

**Findings**

Overall, low-SES students were criminalized in ways that high-SES students were not. While neither Wilshire High School nor Sanders High School had much of a problem with weapons—one of the most serious potential offenses within a school — each of the schools had its own share of legal troubles. For instance, gang activity was more often mentioned by the low-SES high school professionals, and drug use was more often mentioned by the high-SES high school professionals. Despite the fact that both high- and low-SES students engaged in criminal activity, low-SES students were criminalized more harshly and more publicly than high-SES students were. Additionally, while Wilshire High School had 1,657 more students than Sanders High School, Wilshire High School had only one “school resource officer” with a badge and gun but no police uniform. On the other hand, Sanders High School had five uniformed police officers, with Kevin Ashner (low-SES teacher, White, 55-65) commenting, “We got cops all over this place.” In calling the officers “cops,” it was clear that Kevin Ashner viewed the school security as actual police officers as opposed to school security, so it is likely that students had a similar impression.

At both Wilshire High School and Sanders High School, the school security officers handled fights, but at Wilshire High School, the officer also handled substance abuse concerns, lost and found, and some social media concerns. At Sanders High School, officers regularly handled disciplinary infractions. For example, at Sanders High School, security was frequently
called when students refused to come to the Deans’ office and/or in cases where students were being defiant, whereas at Wilshire High School, the only mention of a police officer intervening in a non-illegal disciplinary matter was one in which the student was in possible danger of hurting himself. In the situation at Wilshire High School, school officials used law enforcement when they believed it was in the best interest of the child in ways that were not solely punitive. Professionals at Sanders High School, on the other hand, appeared to involve school security with ease; they did not view the police as a last resort. Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) called security seven times in two weeks for some serious matters such as fights, but also for some more trivial matters—any time a student refused her instruction. Clearly, at Sanders High School, officers were used to control the students. Security at Sanders High School handled incidents that were handled by teachers or Deans at Wilshire High School, providing further evidence of the hypercriminalization of low-SES students.

Gang Affiliation and Drug Use

Gang affiliation was considered to be an extremely serious offense, and was brought up as an issue at Sanders High School, Merrick Township, and Buchanan South. Sanders High School had a gang presence that differed from what some might consider “typical” gang culture. For instance, Victoria Ryan (low-SES Dean, White, 45-55) noted, “What the city would call a gang is not what we call a gang. What we call a gang is any group of kids that call themselves something that are causing disruptive behavior, negative behavior, so I have to differentiate between those two.” It became clear that deciding what constituted a gang at Sanders High School was a subjective process. When asked how she knew which students were involved in gang activity, Victoria Ryan (low-SES Dean, White, 45-55) commented, “I can, I used to work in the city…so I can kinda spot that.” While it is possible that her predictions are correct,
hopefully they are based on clear evidence considering students are alternatively placed if they
are found to be involved in gang activity. Sanders High School professionals as well as the two
high-SES professionals with low-SES experience at Merrick Township and Buchanan South
noted that gang activity often led to a host of other problems such as physical violence and/or
drug use. Additionally, at each low-SES school, gang activity was grounds for alternative
placement or even expulsion.

Because the concept of gang activity was spoken of so vaguely by Victoria Ryan (low-
SES Dean, White, 45-55), the student handbook was referenced in order to see how exactly gang
activity was defined. In the Sanders High School handbook, gang activity is defined as
“anything threatening done by a group of students…” (Sanders High School Handbook, 2016 p.
89). On the other hand, while gang activity was never specifically defined in the Wilshire High
School handbook, when gang activity was mentioned, it was related to objective signs of gang
affiliation such as “wearing of gang symbols and paraphernalia, recruitment, representing, and/or
drawing gang graffiti” (Wilshire High School Handbook, 2016, p. 29). It is clear that gang
activity was defined in a more objective way by Wilshire High School professionals. By using a
subjective definition of gang activity rather than having clearly defined standards for what
constitutes gang affiliation, Sanders High School leaves open the possibility of other factors such
as race and socioeconomic status playing a role in which students are considered to be involved
in gangs.

Drug use did not seem to be as prevalent at Sanders High School as it was at Wilshire
High School. It was mentioned only once by one of the Sanders High School teachers as an
example of an extreme form of misbehavior she had encountered, whereas it was mentioned by
all five of the Wilshire High School professionals in some capacity. Wilshire High School had
social service interventions in place for students who engaged in drug activity, such as a free
drug assessment. Prior to Senate Bill 100, participating in the drug assessment would
automatically cut a student’s punishment in half, but now with the decreasing punishment
lengths due to Senate Bill 100, that incentive is no longer available. Drug punishments varied
based on the offense but tended to escalate with frequency and severity. For instance, if a
student was selling drugs, that could be grounds for alternative placement or expulsion. Law
enforcement was involved when drugs were brought into the school because of the legal
seriousness of drug offenses. While drug use is an extremely serious offense and noted as a
negative byproduct of gang activity—a heavily criminalized offense—overall, high-SES students
were not hypercriminalized for engaging in drug use in the same way that low-SES students
were hypercriminalized for gang activity.

**Arrest Procedures**

At both Wilshire High School and Sanders High School, police had the potential to be
involved when fights broke out. At both schools, students were issued citations for getting in
fights, unless it was an extremely serious one-sided fight or an instance of battery, at which point
students would likely be taken into police custody. School professionals at Wilshire High
School seemed comfortable with students simply being issued citations, but three Sanders High
School professionals noted that they would prefer to have students arrested when fights broke
out. However, the local police do not consider arresting students for two-sided fights to be a
preferred method. For instance, Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) said, “We’ve tried
to, to try to make a statement in the past get [the police] to arrest…but they don’t like to.” It
seemed based on that statement that the main purpose of the arrest was to make a statement even
when it may not be fully necessary, at least according to the police’s protocol. Therefore, the
school professionals who pushed for arrest were interested in deterring the individual student and other students regardless of the implications of arrest on the young person’s future. For instance, an arrest at school could be a student’s first step into the criminal justice system, beginning the school-to-prison pipeline.

The idea of needing to make a statement was seen in the different ways in which the high- and low-SES schools handled situations in which students were arrested. At Wilshire High School, when students were arrested, they were calmly escorted out a side door into a loading dock area with no windows where the students were handcuffed and processed. At Sanders High School, Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) noted that because of the previous location of the Deans’ Office, everyone in the school was aware when a student was getting into legal trouble. As of 2-3 years ago, the Deans’ Office was moved into a side hallway, and now when students are arrested, they are escorted out a side door. When asked why the school chose to make that change, Janet Hoving commented that it was in order to appease the district rather than for the students, suggesting that the school did not take into consideration the harmful effects of public arrest on the students. Here, it is evident that what is in the best interest of students was not the guiding force in the changes that were made.

At Merrick Township and Foxborough High School, students were intentionally arrested in front of other students. Additionally, at Buchanan South, while students were not intentionally arrested in front of other students, because of the location of the office and the police protocol, students were—supposedly inadvertently—arrested in front of other students at times. Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) noted that at Foxborough High School, when students were arrested, the students were escorted out of the building though the cafeteria “so the students could see, so they knew that’s what would happen.” She used this as what she
perceived to be an example of a positive reform made at a nearby school. This is problematic. Forcing arrested students to walk through the cafeteria could lead students and employees to label the student being punished as delinquent. Once labeled delinquent, students and employees may treat them like a delinquent and the students may start displaying behaviors consistent with their label (Rios, 2011).

Similarly, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) who used to work at Merrick Township noted of his experiences there, “You wanted to show kids getting dragged out in cuffs just as an example of you know if you bend or break the rules, this is what’s gonna happen to you, whereas here we try to do it as non-publically as possible just for the kids’ sake. We’re not trying to embarrass anybody…” This is a clear example of one school professional seeing high- and low-SES students differently in terms of the need to protect their dignity. By saying Wilshire High School arrests students non-publically “for the kids’ sake,” Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) seemed to be aware of the negative impact of public arrest. Additionally, the idea that not only would students be arrested, but they would be “dragged out in cuffs” shows an example of treating low-SES students like faceless criminals rather than minors and students.

Not wanting to embarrass students was a common theme that was mentioned by Wilshire High School professionals as a reason for keeping the arrest details private. Interestingly, the Wilshire High School professionals who had previous experience at low-SES schools did not seem as concerned about the embarrassment low-SES students might face in the wake of a public arrest. Rather, they seemed to justify arresting students in front of other students as necessary in order to send a message to the other students to stay in line. The idea that school professionals did not necessarily want to embarrass students, but it was ultimately for the greater good of
making a statement that would deter other students from misbehaving was asserted only by low-SES school professionals. Here, it is evident that the demographic composition of the school plays a key role in the disciplinary procedures school professionals engaged in and considered necessary.

Additionally, public image was something taken into consideration both by Wilshire High School and Sanders High School regarding their arrest protocols. For instance, Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) said the reason for the school to shift the arrest of students to be more private rather than public was to protect Sanders High School’s public image. Of Wilshire High School, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said, “The community, a little more sensitive… We don’t want the school to look bad that you know kids are getting dragged out in handcuffs.” On the other hand, he noted of his experience at Merrick Township, the community’s reaction to students being arrested publically was, “Good. The school’s cleaning up the garbage that’s happening in there and they’re taking it seriously.”

Clearly, there is not only a difference in the way low-and high-SES students are perceived by school professionals, but also a difference in the way they are perceived by community members. This idea will be explored further in the next chapter.

Discussion

Overall, students were criminalized much more harshly in the low-SES schools, and this was a phenomenon also seen in the literature. While the schools did have some similarities in the way in which they handled legal procedures, the Sanders High School professionals wanted the police to criminalize students more than they were willing to. There were also differences seen in terms of needing to make a statement by publically arresting students. Perhaps most interesting were the two high-SES school professionals who had prior experience in low-SES
high schools who were dedicated to protecting the privacy and dignity of their high-SES students, yet did not feel the same dedication to protecting the privacy and dignity of their former low-SES students. Here, general deterrence took precedence over what was in the students’ best interest. Shaming students by “dragging them out in cuffs” is an extreme form of hypercriminalization, and can lead to them being labeled as a criminal by staff or other students. The idea of labeling will be explored further in the next chapter.

There was also a difference in the way in which school professionals talked about and utilized the law enforcement within the school. At Sanders High School, for instance, a uniformed police officer is the first person one encounters when entering the school, whereas at Wilshire High School, the first person one encounters is a receptionist. Additionally, the significantly higher number of police officers in uniform at Sanders High School paired with the fact that school professionals referred to them as “cops” and “school security” rather than “school safety/resource officers” suggests that students likely see them as similar to law enforcement they may encounter outside of school. At Wilshire High School, the school officer is able to build relationships with students by engaging with them in ways that were not solely punitive such as handling lost and found and discussing appropriate social media use. Additionally, he is likely seen as less threatening because he is out of uniform, and his presence within the school is not overwhelming since he is the only officer present. At Sanders High School, while it is possible that the school officers do more than discipline and/or arrest students, this was not something that was mentioned by school professionals. Therefore, students likely associate the officers with criminalization.

While students were not arrested in many of the cases involving school security in Sanders High School, because the officers were dressed in uniform and mainly involved in the
disciplinary process, the presence of them as a disciplinarian seemed inherently criminalizing. Additionally, Sanders High School students were criminalized for behaviors that were not typically criminalized at Wilshire High School. The phenomenon of utilizing school officers in many cases both serious and minor could have two effects. One is that students might feel highly criminalized and constantly impacted by the presence of the school security, but the other is that with so much use of the school officers, the presence of not only school officers but of law enforcement in general becomes normalized and stops having an impact on the students at all.
A number of individual factors can affect both the way students behave in school and the way they are perceived in school. Additionally, structural factors—namely socioeconomic status and race—can also influence the way students are perceived within the school environment. Middle- and upper-class status can provide students with differential access to cultural capital (Lareau, 2011). Cultural capital is comprised of a various set of skills such as knowing how to navigate various situations, how to dress appropriately, etc. “that can be translated into different forms of value” in various institutions (Lareau, 2011, p. 7). Additionally, higher-class status allows students to benefit from a wide variety of often-expensive social service programs meant to remedy behavioral and/or socioemotional concerns. Race, although less often admitted by school professionals, is another factor that leads to differential perspectives of students. Much of the racial bias may be implicit and likely stems from the media’s portrayal of Black and Hispanic youth as dangerous (Hirschfield, 2008).

**Structural and Individual Factors**

Race is an important factor in the way in which students are perceived. Black children are often dehumanized based upon race-based perceptions, which leads to a variety of forms of differential treatment. For instance, Goff et al. (2014) noted that Black children are perceived as being less innocent than children of other races and therefore are afforded less protections of innocence. In one study conducted by Goff et al. (2014) beginning at age nine, participants rated “Black children and adults…as significantly less innocent than White children and adults or children and adults generally” (p. 529). While the scores in innocence were seen as equivalent
up until the age of nine, it is interesting that scores started to diverge at such an early age and may have implications for the way students are perceived.

In addition to race, SES impacts the way in which students are perceived. The first way in which SES impacts the way in which students are perceived by staff members is in terms of the cultural capital of both parents and students. In her ethnographic study of families of varying races and social classes, Lareau (2011) discovered two distinct parenting styles that differed based on social class. Parents with a class status of middle-class or higher were likely to use a concerted cultivation style, which led to a “robust sense of entitlement” in children (p. 2). This sense of entitlement gave children an increased institutional advantage as they were taught to advocate for themselves and to question authority when appropriate. Working-class parents, on the other hand, were more likely to use an accomplishment of natural growth style, which led students to have “an emerging sense of distance, distrust, and constraint in their institutional experiences” (Lareau, 2011, p. 3). According to Lareau, these differing parenting styles—which were deeply rooted in social class differences—led to a “transmission of differential advantages” to children in institutional settings, such as the school system. (Lareau, 2011, p. 19).

One of the differential advantages for higher-class students is that middle-class parents often have an increased presence in the classroom, making them able to hold teachers accountable (Hassrick & Schneider, 2009). Hassrick and Schneider (2009) studied a racially homogenous—all African American—mixed income charter middle school in an urban environment in order to isolate the class variable on parental involvement. They found that the middle-class parents were more frequently able to watch the actions of teachers by volunteering, attending school events, and/or during drop-off/pick-up. Additionally, middle-class parents oftentimes took advantage of parent-teacher conferences to push back when they felt that they
knew best regarding something having to do with their child’s experience within the school. Middle-class and “well-connected working class” parents were also deeply involved in the disciplinary policies, intervening when they felt as though their students were mistreated (Hassrick & Schneider, 2009, p. 197).

**Teacher Expectations and Labeling Students**

In addition to cultural capital differences, school administrators’ perceptions of students are extremely important in terms of their success at the school, and these perceptions can lead to differing expectations, expectations that oftentimes vary by race and social class. Because it can be difficult to assess teachers’ biases due to the sensitive nature of bias, Van den Bergh et al. (2010) noted the importance of implicit assessments of bias. When researchers presented participants with implicit and explicit tests of bias and prejudice, they found that the two tests had almost zero correlation to one another. This finding suggested the possibility of socially desirable responding when explicitly asked about biases that one has. The researchers compared the implicit and explicit measures of bias to the expectations that teachers had for their students. Overall, the teachers in the study had lower expectations for Turkish and Moroccan students than Dutch students, and the low expectations increased as the teachers showed more bias toward Turkish and Moroccan students on the implicit bias test. Interestingly, teacher’s expectations were not correlated with their scores on the explicit bias test. The fact that the implicit bias test predicted biased expectations but the explicit bias test did not suggests the usefulness of implicit bias testing. In their study, teachers also had lower expectations for students with lower socioeconomic statuses. (Van den Bergh et al., 2010).

While the study conducted by Van den Bergh et al. (2010) was conducted in The Netherlands, similar studies have been conducted in the United States regarding differing
expectations for students based on their race and/or social class. For instance, a meta-analysis conducted by Tenenbaum and Ruck (2007) found that teachers had the highest expectations for Asian students, followed by European American students, African American students, and finally Latino students. In their study, they also found that while teachers afforded all students an equal amount of negative feedback, European American students were given more positive feedback than students of racial minorities (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007).

Teachers’ expectations of students can be impacted not only by their race but also by their social class. For instance, researchers in one study conducted by Auwarter and Aruguete (2008) presented teachers with identical hypothetical student profiles, manipulating only the student’s gender and socioeconomic status. Overall, teachers rated the students with lower socioeconomic statuses as being likely to have “less promising futures” (Auwarter, A. E. & Aruguete, 2008, p. 245). According to Auwarter and Aruguete (2008), in low-SES schools, 75 percent of teachers have low self-efficacy with their teaching, and they proposed that the reason might be that the teachers have inherently lower expectations for low-SES students.

School professionals’ perceptions of students are impacted by factors such as class and race, but also by offense history. Rios (2011) wrote about the damage that a label could have on a student’s psyche. Not only are certain students stigmatized because of the negative labels imposed upon them, but also once they are given one label (i.e. “troublemaker,” “criminal,” etc.), they are sometimes victim to somewhat of a snowball effect. In Rios’ (2011) ethnographic study when the students were given one negative label, they were more likely to be given more negative labels as time went on. Oftentimes, according to Rios (2011), the labels started off fairly general such as the label that a student comes from a “bad family,” and got more serious with time such as referring to the child as a “delinquent” (p. 45). This can lead children to fulfill
the expectations they believe others already have of them and to develop a “deviant self concept” (Rios, 2011, p. 45).

While low expectations can be detrimental for students, it is clear that high expectations can also have a negative effect on students. For instance, one study that explored how participants labeled “high potential” handled feedback referred to high expectations as a “double edge sword” (Kotlyar, 2013, p. 581). Kotlyar (2013) found that while high expectations can turn into a self-fulfilling prophecy that can lead a person to perform better on a task, high expectations can also lead to lower levels of overall satisfaction and commitment to task persistence when given negative feedback. Basically, when people have very high expectations for themselves, they are more easily discouraged when these expectations are not met (Kotlyar, 2013).

While self-fulfilling prophecies can play a role in schools, the extent to which self-fulfilling prophecy effects are seen varies by race and socioeconomic status. Research has found that members of stigmatized social groups, especially Black and/or low-SES students are more likely to be impacted by self-fulfilling prophecies—stemming from teacher effects—than their White and higher-SES counterparts (Hinnant, O’Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009; Jussim & Harber, 2005). Teachers’ expectations affected students from low-income families to a higher extent than students from average-income families. Additionally, teachers’ expectations did not affect students from high-income families at all (Hinnant, O’Brien, & Ghazarian, 2009). The self-fulfilling prophecy also has a higher impact on Black students (Jussim & Harber, 2005).

While many teachers do not blatantly tell their students what their expectations of them and labels for them are, students are often able to figure out how much their teachers expect of them based on subtle cues. For instance, Jussim and Harber (2005) concluded that teachers
showed more warmth and support to students for whom they had high expectations. In a study conducted by Pringle, Lyons, and Booker (2009), American high school seniors were interviewed about perceived teacher expectations. Students perceived a split between the way teachers treated the students whom they thought were college-bound and those who were perceived as not college-bound (Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2009). “Over one-half of the Black students that were interviewed believed that race or ethnicity was a factor in the way that their teachers viewed them” (Pringle, Lyons, & Booker, 2009, p. 36). Additionally, White students were more than twice as likely as their Black colleagues to believe that teachers “cared about their success” (Hirschfield, 2008, p. 92). Therefore even though teachers may not be intentionally treating students differently based on their expectations of them, if students perceive that they are being treated differently based on their race or SES, the self-fulfilling prophecy could have a potential effect (Jussim & Harber, 2005).

The differing expectations that teachers tend to have about Black and Hispanic students and/or low-SES students may be deeply engrained and rooted in stereotypes that society holds about those groups. For instance, Hirschfield (2008) suggested that the shared habitus held by teachers working in a school environment could affect the perceptions and expectations that teachers have of their students. For example, the media portrays poor, young, Black and Hispanic males as criminals, and even if the teachers do not believe that stereotype, they are often still exposed to it, and it may be subconsciously affecting the way they handle discipline. In addition to school professionals making assumptions about students, they are likely also to make assumptions about students’ families—in some case blaming students’ chronic behavioral issues on bad parenting (Ramey, 2015).
Differing perceptions of students not only impact them psychologically and afford them some differential advantages in terms of cultural capital, but students also can be affected by actual policies and practices within the schools. For instance, differential disciplinary policies and philosophies as well as hypercriminalization likely have to do with perceptions of different groups of students. Additionally, oftentimes when Black students commit a lot of disciplinary infractions, they are criminalized, as it is assumed by some that they are bound to head toward incarceration regardless (Hirschfield, 2008). On the other hand, when White students commit a lot of disciplinary infractions, they are more likely to be medicalized and/or rehabilitated (Ramey, 2015).

Findings

Students at Sanders High School and Wilshire High School had a variety of different structural factors such as race and social class and individual factors such as home life and emotional issues that impacted the way teachers viewed them and their disciplinary transgressions. Professionals spoke about extenuating circumstances that were unique to each high school. Extenuating circumstances at Sanders High School tended to focus on home life, whereas extenuating circumstances at Wilshire High School centered on emotional issues. For instance, homelessness, foster care, and student mobility were only discussed in regards to low-SES settings, whereas anxiety and pressure were only discussed in regards to the high-SES setting. Both Wilshire High School and Sanders High School experienced family issues, although family issues were more heavily emphasized at Sanders High School.

Individual and Structural Factors

Underlying individual circumstances emphasized the highest by Wilshire High School professionals were anxiety and pressure. Several school professionals noted that Wilshire High
School was highly competitive, and Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) even referred to it as “pressure-packed.” Students felt pressure to meet their parents’ high expectations, which often caused anxiety. Additionally, one of the major causes of anxiety noted by three Wilshire High School professionals was the pressure that students felt from being a part of such a high-achieving environment. The consequences of the pressure and subsequent anxiety that students felt to succeed were school avoidance and/or skipping classes in order to work on other homework, a problem that was mentioned in some way by all Wilshire High School professionals.

Underlying individual circumstances emphasized the most by Sanders High School professionals were foster care, student mobility, urban influence, and lack of family support. Sanders High School had a high percentage of foster students (school professionals’ estimates fell between 20 percent and 30 percent of the student population). School professionals considered foster placement as a potential reason for disciplinary issues and noted that many of the students lacked structure at home because of their temporary living arrangements. The temporary nature of foster care also led to student mobility. Additionally, with many students from the South and West sides of Chicago, urban influence was noted by school professionals as both a source of trauma due to the drastically different environment and also as a negative influence on behavior in terms of fighting and holding grudges. While it makes sense that students could be experiencing trauma from a change in environment and from losing attachments to their previous environment, citing urban influence as a reason for fighting and holding grudges may indicate school professionals’ stereotypical view of an urban environment.

Lack of parental support was seen as a huge issue by Sanders High School professionals, and this was in stark contrast to the high levels of parental involvement at Wilshire High School.
Additionally, when parents did get involved at Sanders High School, the involvement was often characterized negatively. For instance, Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) described a situation regarding a fight between two girls, and the subsequent incident that ensued when their parents were called to the school. When the parents were called to the school, the parents got into a physical altercation with one another. Mark Brown explained, “So I was in here talking to a girl that was at the game about what happened. And then we got a call—they call it 1010 on our radio if there’s a fight…The first person I grabbed was a mom. And it’s like okay. You know this is bad.” Outside of the parental involvement within the school, school professionals also made assumptions about parental involvement at home. For instance, Kevin Ashner (low-SES teacher, White, 55-65) noted, “I’m a big believer in parenting. Our kids just don’t get the parenting…” Additionally, Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) said of Wilshire High School students from lower-SES backgrounds, “Different values are being taught, and/or you know different values being promoted at home. I mean in terms of from the parents.” It was clear that the school professionals felt that low-SES students were not receiving the “correct” values from their parents.

While parental support at Sanders High School overall was perceived to be low, two Sanders High School professionals noted that parents are likely to support the school in the right to discipline their children. For instance, Victoria Ryan (low-SES Dean, White, 45-55) said, “They know, we’re very fair,” and Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) said, “They know what their kids are like.” Parents’ tendency to defer to school officials is also influenced by their lack of social capital. Not intervening in situations where the school is hypercriminalizing their children can negatively impact their children by increasing their likelihood of being introduced to the school to prison pipeline.
Parental involvement at Wilshire High School was high, but at times counterintuitive. While Wilshire High School professionals noted that parental involvement was a positive thing overall, some noted that the parents were overly concerned with getting their student out of trouble and/or with their reputation. For instance, Michelle Richards (high-SES social worker, White, 25-35) said, “When you get the parent involvement that more so enables the behavior or parents who are trying to more so get involved so that their kid gets out of trouble, then I think that’s where it creates some issues.” Additionally, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said when a student gets suspended, “You know the first question is not, ‘Is my kid okay?’ Not that kind of stuff. It’s, ‘What’s this gonna do to his college aspirations? Who’s gonna know about this?’” Clearly, both schools experienced pros and cons of parental involvement. Additionally, it is clear that the school professionals had a clearly defined outline for what they considered to be appropriate forms of parental involvement. While they wanted parents to be involved and noted the benefits of the involvement, the involvement was valued higher when parents were on the same page as the respective schools.

In addition to the individual level factors, structural factors such as surrounding community, race, social class, and school resources also shaped the way students were viewed and treated. Both the SES composition and the racial composition of Sanders High School were drastically different from Wilshire High School, and that led to differential outcomes and perceptions of students. Social class impacted students in ways that were not purely economic. One major side effect of social class was reflected in parenting style. Social class allowed higher-class parents to be highly involved in their children’s school lives because many had work schedules with flexible hours, something that unfortunately many working class families do not have the luxury of. Social class also impacted parents’ ability to provide social service
interventions for their children. For instance, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said, “The amount of money that families will spend on their own is amazing…that wasn’t available to [Merrick Township] kids.”

Not surprisingly, SES composition of schools was also linked to the resources within the school, and Wilshire High School spent $9,172 more per student annually than did Sanders High School. The differences in resources were evident through some of the services the schools had to offer. For instance, Sanders High School had 1,177 students whereas Wilshire High School had 2,834 students, so it makes sense that Wilshire High School would have more guidance counselors, but the numbers were still disproportionate. Wilshire High School had thirteen guidance counselors—one for every 218 students—compared to four at Sanders High School—one for every 294 students. The in-school suspension room at Wilshire High School also had two para-educators in addition to a teacher as opposed to Sanders High School, which just had one teacher. Additionally, Wilshire High School’s district had many more alternative options including a therapeutic day school that would allow students to have a supportive program while still attending some general education classes whereas all of the low-SES districts only had one alternative placement option for each student depending on whether he or she had special needs or not.

In addition to social class, race also played a crucial role in students’ experiences. Two Sanders High School professionals recognized the idea that Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately punished and responded to it in different ways. Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) seemed to think that because most of the students at Sanders High School were Black, it was unavoidable that they were suspending a lot of Black students, not realizing that it was possible for them to still be disproportionately punishing those students when
compared to other high schools with different demographic compositions. Kevin Ashner (low-SES teacher, White, 55-65) said, “I’m not gonna deny [that students are disproportionately punished], but then it goes back…it’s like being a cop. I don’t think any, not too many teachers are here saying ‘Okay. I’m really gonna nail 17 kids. I’m gonna really build up our data on that.’” He seemed to recognize that many students were getting harshly punished but seemed to conclude that it was necessary to maintain an orderly school environment.

Additionally, it was clear that the expectation level was different at the two schools. Wilshire High School professionals noted that the expectations were high to a point of anxiety-invoking pressure. For instance, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) noted, “I think just the level of expectations here across the board, I mean for every student, for every faculty member, for every staff member, are very, very high compared to the other schools I worked at. And I think you can see that in the results…” On the other hand, Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) noted, “We don’t have a culture and climate for learning here.” Clearly, staff members were aware of the implications that school-wide expectations had on students. For instance, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) attributed the academic success of the students in part on the expectations of the school as a whole, and Janet Hoving (low-SES, teacher, White, 45-55) similarly attributed the academic and disciplinary struggle of students to the lower expectations for the school as a whole.

Effect of Differing Perceptions and Labels on Discipline and Student Treatment

Both target schools seemed to make an effort to get to know students’ underlying problems. However, it seemed that Sanders High School professionals were more likely to “cut [students] some slack”—a sentiment expressed by three school professionals—because of their underlying issues, whereas Wilshire High School professionals expressed more of a dedication to
get to the bottom of students’ underlying issues and find solutions. For instance, Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) shared an anecdote where the school helped a family put together a plan to get a student’s mother additional medical care around the house so that he could make it to school on time. The reason for the dedication to solutions could also be because of the nature of the problems and the willingness of parents to cooperate. It may be easier, for instance, to get a student the counseling he or she need to cope with anxiety than to fix a student’s foster care or money situation at home.

While professionals in both Wilshire High School and Sanders High School noted the importance of getting to know students’ underlying concerns, the two schools seemed to differ in terms of communication. For instance, Kay Williams (high-SES social worker, White, 25-35) noted that the social workers find ways to respect students’ confidentiality while still giving teachers “some background to why that behavior might be happening.” On the other hand, Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) expressed immense frustration at the fact that there was a student who was acting out in her class who she later found out had witnessed his father die in the car next to him. She was not informed of his situation until a large amount of time had passed. She noted that had she known about his underlying circumstance, she would have been happy to “cut him some slack.”

Professionals from both schools noted their experiences with I.E.P.s—individualized education programs—and manifestation meetings [meetings in which school professionals decide whether or not a student’s disciplinary infraction was a manifestation of his or her disability]. While Sanders High School professionals respected existing I.E.P.s, Wilshire High School professionals seemed more willing to initiate the I.E.P. process when they felt that a student was not doing well. For instance, Kay Williams (high-SES social worker, White, 25-35)
noted that many times rather than turning to alternative placement in the cases of extreme misbehavior, “We’d move through the I.E.P. process.” While students at Wilshire High School were given ample opportunities for rehabilitation including going through the I.E.P. process and a variety of different alternative settings, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said of his experience at Merrick Township, “Students weren’t as heavily diagnosed as far as I.E.P.s… and that kind of stuff, so they were just kind of, ‘They were bad,’ ‘They were crazy.’” It is very disheartening that a lack of diagnosis led to negative assumptions about students, and it is unclear whether similar assumptions were made at Sanders High School since students there were not as heavily diagnosed either.

Oftentimes school professionals used students’ individual and structural factors to make assumptions about students, and these assumptions oftentimes led school professionals to label students. While school professionals labeled certain groups of students based on their characteristics such as SES, they seemed most comfortable admitting that they had differing levels of expectations for students based on their disciplinary history. The most common split was between students who teachers perceived as wanting to learn and students who teachers perceived as simply at school because they were required to be. The idea that some students were at school to learn and others were simply there to cause problems was an idea only spoken of in regards to low-SES students.

For instance, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said of his experience at Merrick Township, “You really did have to kind of almost remove some students because they just weren’t in it for the education.” In the most drastic example of labeling, Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) said, “I keep the kids who are problems contained on one side of the room so that I can teach the others.” In this case, not only were students labeled, but the teacher
also made it clear that the problem students were not her priority and she was instead dedicated
to “teach[ing] the others.” It seems that the expectation that certain students did not want to
learn was unique to the low-SES schools. For instance, despite the fact that Scott Talkie (high-
SES Dean, White, 25-35) said Wilshire High School had a “serious drug issue,” he said of the
students at Merrick Township, “They were in it just because legally they had to be there, and you
know they wanted to get their drug deals in or they wanted to get their gang reps in, or whatever
it was.” Clearly, he defined students at Merrick Township by their gang affiliation and/or drug
use whereas Wilshire High School students were not defined by their offenses.

While school professionals did not directly say that they had differing expectations for
students based on various characteristics, they engaged in labeling students, which undoubtedly
led to differing expectations. At Sanders High School, various negative labels that school
professionals used to describe students were “high flyers,” a term used to describe students who
got in trouble frequently, “fighters,” “immature,” and “mean.” Additionally, Wilshire High
School professionals used labeling to pick out the highest achieving students who were to
represent their class on a student safety committee. Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35)
said, “You know and the kids are always, they’re kind of hand-picked, so they’re a good
representation of what we want our student population to look like.”

Students were also sometimes labeled based on SES. For instance, several school
professionals associated a low socioeconomic status with violence and gang involvement.
Michelle Richards (high-SES social worker, White, 25-35) noted that students on free-and-
reduced lunch were more likely to get in trouble for fighting. Additionally, Alexander Perry
(high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) said of his previous experience at Buchanan South, “With that
lower socioeconomic standing with a lot of kids, there were definitely more gangs and kids were
more prone to reacting violently with certain situations. They’re more prone to fight.” He also went on to differentiate between social classes within Wilshire High School, saying, “Kids that do get into fights, those aren’t your…typical well-to-do [affluent suburb] kids…that’d be more the kids who come from lower socioeconomic areas…” In this instance, the teacher clearly admitted differential behavioral expectations for students based on their social class.

In addition to using assumptions to set expectations, some school professionals seemed to base punishments off of assumptions, assumptions about the impact of the punishment. Typically, school professionals perceived students’ reaction to discipline in terms of their understanding of the necessity of the punishment and in terms of the perceived effectiveness of the punishment. Professionals at Sanders High School were more likely to perceive that students did not understand the necessity of the punishments whereas Wilshire High School professionals were more likely to perceive that students did understand the necessity of the punishments. For instance, Elaine Barker (low-SES social worker, African American, 35-45) told a story of one girl who could not understand why she was punished for eating a teacher’s donuts that he bought for his field trip because she felt that she was entitled to eat them since she was hungry. The Wilshire High School students were noted by Kimberly Haugen (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) as “understand[ing] that there are consequences in life.” She went on to say, “They feel like…they deserve the consequence.” It was unclear what school professionals based the perceptions of student understanding on.

One exception to students at Sanders High School not understanding the necessity of discipline was through relationship building. Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) said, “The kids tend to be able to accept [discipline] when they know you’re not out after ‘em.” School professionals from both Wilshire High School and Sanders High School echoed the
importance of relationship building. For instance, Kevin Ashner (low SES teacher, White, 55-65) commented that because he was a coach, he was able to spend time with students outside of school and continue to develop a rapport with them. Additionally, at Wilshire High School, Alexander Perry (high SES Dean, White, 35-45) spoke about how simply going out to the parking lot as the students get on the bus helped to build his visibility on campus. Therefore, relationship building may be an important step to lessening disciplinary issues within the schools.

Additionally, overall low-SES students were perceived as not caring about consequences whereas high-SES students were perceived as caring very much about consequences. For instance, two Sanders High School professionals seemed to think that students enjoyed out-of-school suspensions and noted that students viewed out-of-school suspension like a “vacation.” In contrast, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said, “Where here [Wilshire High School] if a kid got suspended, they’re usually in tears, and then when they came back they were usually groping to get back into the swing of things academically.” The perception that low-SES students did not care about punishments as much led to the perceived need for making a statement such as in the cases of publically arresting students, something that was seen more frequently at Sanders High School. Because of Senate Bill 100, school professionals at both Sanders High School and Wilshire High School worried about the impact of consequences, something that will be explored further in the next chapter.

In addition to all of the assumptions made about low-SES students’ behaviors and qualities, staff members also made assumptions about students’ level of understanding. The idea of not only choosing to but of needing to teach students expectations and appropriate behavior was emphasized much higher by Sanders High School professionals. Two Sanders High School
professionals specifically noted that because the students do not always have a supportive home setting, they need to be taught life lessons at school in addition to academic curriculum. The Wilshire High School professionals, on the other hand, were more likely to express the need for teaching students how to avoid a negative behavior in the future once a student had already gotten into trouble once. Additionally, Kimberly Haugen (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) noted that Wilshire High School professionals teach students what is appropriate on social media.

Student feedback was interpreted differently at the two different high schools. Overall, student feedback seemed to be valued much more highly by Wilshire High School. The school professionals at Wilshire High School have a student safety committee, which is a panel of students whom the administration consults with about discipline and school-wide policies. Additionally, Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) noted that a student informed him that the teacher was not handling the classroom well, and based on that tip, Alexander Perry spoke to the department chair and the teacher, clearly taking the tip very seriously. On the other hand, the only time that student feedback was mentioned by a low-SES school professional, it was in regards to a student who threatened Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) that she was going to report her for being racist. Janet Hoving did not provide information on what prompted the student to feel discriminated against, but she noted in regards to her subsequent meeting with the Dean, “We both chuckled.” The student was disrespectful to the teacher calling her “retarded” and “a bitch,” so it is unclear how respectfully the report was made, but it was still clear that the report was not taken seriously.

**Discussion**

Students were labeled quite frequently by school professionals, and it was clear that some students had a label stamped on them from the second they walked through the door. (“well-to-
do [affluent suburb] kids”). The common label that marked many students was the distinction between those who wanted to learn and those who did not. It was often perceived by low-SES school professionals that the students engaging in various forms of misbehavior did not actually want to learn, although this distinction was never made at Wilshire High School. This distinction often went hand-in-hand with labeling students based on their offense history, which was commonly seen at Sanders High School.

As noted by Rios (2011) students who are labeled as deviant are stigmatized not only by school professionals and their peers, but they may also begin to view themselves as deviant and be more likely to continue to commit disciplinary infractions. It would be very difficult not to recognize trends such as when Kevin Ashner (low-SES teacher, White, 55-65) said, “I can think right now of kids who are tardy to my class. I know they’re gonna be tardy…” However, there is a difference between being aware of a pattern of disciplinary infractions and using those patterns to impose additional negative labels on students. One of the best examples of this distinction was the way in which Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) spoke about students who engaged in drug use at Wilshire High School, where he currently worked, and Merrick Township, where he used to work. At Merrick Township, students who did drugs were described as only coming to school to sell drugs. In describing them this way, the school professional was making it clear that the students were drug dealers first and students second. On the other hand, students at Wilshire High School who chose to sell drugs were not labeled in this way, implying that in Scott Talkie’s eyes the high-SES students were students first and drug dealers second.

In addition to labeling students based on their offense history, students were also labeled based on structural factors. Most of the negative labels given to students based on structural
factors were focused on SES, and this could have been because SES seems to be more acceptable to talk about than race since many people may view social class as something people can control—although many times this is not the case. Therefore, it may be easier for people—especially predominantly White administrators—to make assumptions about students based on their SES rather than based on their race. School professionals may have been engaging in socially desirable responding as many see it as socially unacceptable to make vocal assumptions of people based on their race. Despite the fact that not many school professionals specifically mentioned race at all in their interviews, race and class are inexplicably intertwined. For instance, there are clear trends in this country in terms of income and wealth inequality and race, with White people being significantly more likely to have a higher social class than nonwhite people (Pew Research Center, 2016). Additionally, many administrators likely did not mention race as a means by which to label students because both schools were relatively racially homogenous, making socioeconomic status one of the main variations within the student populations.

It seemed disturbing that two Sanders High School professionals were acutely aware of the disproportionate discipline shown toward Black and Hispanic students, yet they seemed to dismiss the correlation and contend that the harsh discipline used was necessary and even in the best interest of the students. It was interesting that Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) suggested that it was impossible that the school was engaging in racial profiling with a relatively racially homogenous student population. Just because nearly all of the students in the school are Black does not mean that they are not the victims of racial profiling. If the entire student population is operating under a different set of policies than a racially homogenous White school, it is possible that racial profiling is occurring.
The trend for medicalization vs. criminalization was seen between the two schools as well (Ramey, 2015). It was not surprising that Wilshire High School families would be more likely to medicalize students outside of school because of their resources; however, the trend to medicalize high-SES students more so than low-SES students was seen within the schools as well. Wilshire High School was extremely likely to medicalize by beginning the I.E.P. process, providing drug rehabilitation, transferring students to a therapeutic day school setting, etc. On the other hand, the low-SES schools were more likely to criminalize. For instance, students were likely to be punished and/or transferred to a discipline-based alternative school in cases where they violated disciplinary policies. While Sanders High School did comply with students’ existing I.E.P.s, Sanders High School professionals did not express a similar urgency noted by the professionals from Wilshire High School for beginning the I.E.P. process when students were exhibiting negative behavior.

Lareau (2011) found that lower-SES parents were less likely to have the cultural capital to intervene on their children’s behalves when necessary. This was seen in the study to a point since two school professionals from Sanders High School noted that parents supported them in their decisions to discipline their students. While it is unclear what the specific situations were in which parents supported the administration’s decision to discipline, given the harsh sanctions imposed on students prior to Senate Bill 100, it seems that parents would have had the right to intervene in many situations. On the other hand, parents at Wilshire High School intervened at some points too much, attempting to get the most opportunities for their children that they could. In addition to staff reacting to parents’ interactions with the school, as predicted by Ramey (2015), certain staff members perceived that low-SES students were lacking quality parenting at home, with Kevin Ashner (low-SES Dean, White, 45-55) and Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean,
White, 35-45) suggesting that the values they were being taught at home did not align with those considered institutionally appropriate within the school building.

In addition to low-SES parents having a lower amount of cultural capital than high-SES parents, this pattern was also seen in the students. While it is unclear how often students at either school attempted to go to the administration, one example from each school offered a stark difference in the way in which student feedback was received by Wilshire High School and Sanders High School. When a student at Wilshire High School noted that a teacher had poor classroom control, Alexander Perry (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) took immediate steps to address the issue. On the other hand, a much more serious accusation, racism, was made against Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55), and it was dismissed and even laughed about by Sanders High School officials. It is clear that school professionals’ perceptions not only impact their expectations of students but also the seriousness with which they consider students a source of authority.
CHAPTER 6: PERCEIVED EFFECTIVENESS OF POLICY CHANGES

Review of Relevant Literature

Senate Bill 100, initially introduced on January 28, 2015 by Senator Kimberly A. Lightford (D), was an amendment to the Illinois School Code. Lightford has been an active advocate for nonwhite and low-income students for the eighteen years that she has served on the Illinois Senate Education Committee (Illinois Senate Democratic Caucus, 2017). The bill went into effect on September 15, 2016, and its major goals were to increase students’ time in the classroom by decreasing the amount of time they would be out of school because of punitive punishments, to increase parents’ and students’ knowledge of the disciplinary policies, and to increase student supports (Illinois General Assembly, 2016).

One main initiative of the bill is to decrease some of the most punitive disciplinary actions such as expulsion and/or out-of-school suspension and to completely outlaw the use of zero tolerance policies. While previously when students were expelled in Illinois they were not offered an immediate alternative, now students must be accepted as a transfer to an alternative program upon expulsion unless the student poses an immediate safety threat to the alternative setting. Additionally, regarding suspensions, students may only be suspended for up to three days in the case of a safety issue or where a significant disruption to the rest of the students is unavoidable. In cases where school officials feel three days is not long enough to suspend students to minimize a safety threat, they can suspend students for longer provided that they have documentation proving that a longer suspension is truly the only option and is in the best interest of student(s). Parents must also need to be notified of the suspension reason and be made aware that they have the right to have the suspension reviewed by the school board (Illinois General Assembly, 2016).
Another of the main initiatives of the bill is clarity of disciplinary policy and involvement of parents in disciplinary policies. For instance, each school must have a parent-teacher advisory committee whose responsibility it will be to amend disciplinary policies where necessary and must alert families within 15 days of the new school year what the policies will be so that all relevant parties are informed. Additionally, this committee is responsible for clearly defining roles with law enforcement in the school to ensure their place in the school system. The purpose of the disciplinary initiatives must not only be clear to the parents, but also to the teachers. Part of the initiative is that teachers should be provided with professional development on the harm of school exclusion and on educating members of different cultural groups (Illinois General Assembly, 2016).

The final main initiative of the bill is increased student support services. If a student is suspended for more than four days, he or she must be provided with some type of support services, which will vary depending on what the district has to offer. Additionally, the school must provide re-entry plans to ease the transition back into the general education setting after a suspension, alternative placement, or expulsion. These social support services are meant to help students who are penalized with exclusionary disciplinary policies to get back on track as soon as they re-enter the general education setting.

Restorative Justice

In addition to Senate Bill 100, restorative justice is a strategy that many schools have chosen to adopt as an alternative to punitive discipline. Restorative justice is a paradigm applied to the criminal justice system that refers to rehabilitating relationships via apologies and mediations to try to restore a positive environment for all parties “with or without additional punishment” (Menkel-Meadow, 2007, p. 162). The focus of restorative justice is not on the
punishment but on amending the situation. Additionally, according to Sullivan and Tifft (2008), the United Nations defined restorative justice as “a process within which all those affected by a harm come together to collaboratively decide how to respond to its aftermath and its implications for future” (p. 17). Since punitive discipline has been related to racial composition of a school, not surprisingly, restorative justice policies are also related to racial composition of a school. Schools with a higher population of Black students are less likely to use restorative justice policies (Payne & Welch, 2015).

Findings

School professionals at both Sanders High School and Wilshire High School noted the importance, at least in theory, of keeping students in school as much as possible both by using out-of-school suspensions and alternative placements sparingly, and in those situations returning students to the general education setting as quickly as possible. Both schools noted that it was easier to keep students caught up on work when they were in the school. Two Sanders High School professionals agreed in theory that students should be kept in school as much as possible but felt that in keeping disruptive students in the classroom, other students were possibly at a disadvantage. For instance, Kevin Ashner (low-SES teacher, White, 55-65) said, “Well I’m a little sarcastic when it comes to that stuff because I know there are protections that every kid has a right to a free and appropriate education, but thirty-one years has told me that if Charlie over here is a problem then now that person’s free and appropriate education is being minimized or you know reduced because of his shenanigans and the teacher has to do to deal with that.” On the other hand, Scott Talkie (high-SES Dean, White, 25-35) said of his prior experience at Merrick Township that keeping kids out of the school for ten days “was kind of a selfish thing to
be honest.” While Scott Talkie has that perspective now, it is unclear whether he would have had a similar sentiment had he still been at Merrick Township.

Along with the idea of keeping children in school, the major changes since Senate Bill 100 at both schools were reducing the overall number of suspensions, reducing the length of suspensions, and increasing social services regarding discipline. The changes were undoubtedly more drastic at Sanders High School because they had a higher suspension rate prior to Senate Bill 100, but both schools were equally committed to adapting to the new policy. Because of the drastic changes necessary, Sanders High School hired a restorative justice coordinator to help them to become more of a restorative school and to implement case-by-case discipline. While Wilshire High School did not have to change quite as drastically, they also hired additional staff—two paraprofessionals to add additional support to the in-school suspension room, which since Senate Bill 100 has been nicknamed “The Senate Bill 100 room.”

Both Sanders High School and Wilshire High School professionals overall had mixed reactions to Senate Bill 100, recognizing the benefit of keeping students in the school, but feeling somewhat restricted by the law. Sanders High School professionals were more likely to comment that there was fear among the staff regarding the bill that they would never be able to suspend students anymore. One staff member from each school fully supported Senate Bill 100, with Elaine Barker (low-SES social worker, African American, 35-45) saying, “I love Senate Bill 100.” However, many were at least somewhat critical of the bill. For instance, Kevin Ashner (low-SES teacher, White, 55-65) was very critical of Senate Bill 100 saying, “That’s where I think these laws you mentioned are garbage because it really should be based on almost school to school, the environment…” and “Who are these people?” referring to the state lawmakers. Clearly, Kevin Ashner felt that lawmakers were ill-equipped to dictate the type of
discipline Sanders High School could engage in since lawmakers are not a part of the specific school environment. While some felt that the bill is highly limiting, since Senate Bill 100 dictates a case-by-case discipline style, school professionals actually have more flexibility in choosing how to discipline their students rather than having cut-and-dry punishments for certain offenses.

Overall, at least one school professional at Sanders High School and Wilshire High School did not feel as though Senate Bill 100 was written for their situation. Kevin Ashner (low-SES teacher, White, 55-65) commented, “They talk about schools have their own culture and they want that, they want schools to develop that, but then they’re gonna blanket every school with certain laws like what you’re talking about…” In saying this, Kevin Ashner seemed to be suggesting that a school’s culture is reliant upon its ability to use highly punitive disciplinary measures. However, schools can and should develop a culture that is independent of their disciplinary style. Similarly, Kimberly Haugen (high-SES Dean, White, 35-45) commented, “Yeah, I think that it probably wasn’t written for our situation. It was written for other schools, and so the rest of us kind of have to pay the penalty for what was going on in other schools.” Therefore, neither a school with a lot of suspensions nor a school with very few suspensions felt that the law was written for them. While both schools have complied with the law and changed their policies accordingly, both schools, especially Sanders High School, did so with slight reservations.

While both Sanders High School and Wilshire High School used restorative justice practices, Wilshire High School professionals rejected the term “restorative justice” as they seemed to view it in a very one-dimensional way. Wilshire High School professionals who rejected the notion of restorative justice noted that students did not find some of the specific
DISPROPORTIONATE DISCIPLINE

restorative justice strategies—such as apology letters—to be helpful. While Sanders High School also rejected certain aspects of restorative justice such as peace circles, they were very adamant that they used restorative practices and even hired a restorative justice coordinator who also worked as a social worker in order to ensure that they were implementing restorative practices. Both schools noted the importance of mediations and relationship building with students, but mediations and connecting with students were both emphasized more highly by Sanders High School professionals. The idea of offering students socioemotional support was emphasized by both schools.

In addition to the broader policy changes that applied to both schools, Sanders High School had a unique amount of pressure from the state and district. Mark Brown (low-SES Dean, White, 35-45) spoke about the school’s status on the state watch list and mentioned that some teachers were starting to leave because of new evaluation procedures. Janet Hoving (low-SES teacher, White, 45-55) spoke about this in more detail, saying that the state regularly checks in on Sanders High School to observe students and teachers. Additionally, she noted that the school was under pressure from the district for writing too many referrals and suspending too many Black students. Instead of getting at the root problem of why so many referrals were being written, the teachers were simply told to stop writing referrals. In addition, for certain offenses that led to automatic referrals such as being tardy, rather than fix the issue, the number of tardies one could get before going to the Deans’ Office was simply expanded from three to eight. Clearly, the school feels a high amount of pressure from the state and district, so much so that rather than try to understand the root of the problems, they are simply manipulating the numbers so that it looks like the situation is improving when really nothing is changing. This is highly problematic because the root of the problem is not being addressed and therefore students may
be slipping through the cracks unbeknownst to the district since the numbers show an improvement.

**Discussion**

Although Senate Bill 100 affected both of the schools, it was clear that Sanders High School was affected more deeply by the changes because of their higher suspension numbers and previously cut-and-dry discipline style. Therefore, it may not be surprising that Sanders High School implemented harsher disciplinary policies even after Senate Bill 100, given that the changes expected of them required more of an adjustment. While both schools are compliant with Senate Bill 100 because it is the law, it is unclear the level of dedication that the schools have to actually fulfilling the goals of Senate Bill 100. For instance, some Sanders High School professionals were quick to point out that they can still suspend students under the right circumstances. However, it is important that Sanders High School professionals make an effort to only suspend students for true safety concerns rather than suspending students for 3-5 days for physical fights—even those that are not serious—just because they are legally able to. In other words, it is important that the schools are honoring the intentions of the original bill rather than just trying to find ways to work around it.

Both schools spoke briefly about professional development in the school system regarding Senate Bill 100, but it was unclear about the nature of this professional development, and whether it was the type of professional development outlined by Senate Bill 100. For instance, Sanders High School professional development regarding Senate Bill 100 seemed to be more about eliminating fears that school professionals had regarding not being able to suspend students anymore rather than getting to the heart of why the bill was necessary. It seems that since professionals at both schools were at least somewhat unsatisfied with the bill, perhaps a
professional development session synthesizing research on the reasoning behind the bill would be beneficial.

While Wilshire High School was ahead in terms of case-by-case discipline, the school professionals there seemed to have a skewed vision of what actually constitutes restorative justice. For instance, when referencing restorative justice, Wilshire High School professionals were quick to point out that they did not engage in specific restorative tactics—such as peace circles or apology letters—but failed to realize that restorative justice as a paradigm is more than those few specific policies. Both schools seemed to operate within the frame of restorative justice, so it may be important for school professionals at Wilshire High School to reconsider what it means to support restorative justice without supporting all of its strategies.

One disturbing part of the analysis is that Sanders High School is under so much pressure from the district and the state that the administration implements certain policies and manipulates the data simply to please outside entities such as the district and the state. Regardless of the intention, certain policy implications have been effective, such as moving the Deans’ Office to lessen the phenomenon of publically arresting students. However, manipulating the discipline data to make it look like discipline is improving within the school when it is not is something that Sanders High School certainly should not be engaging in. However, the fault does not lie solely within the school. The state and district should work more closely with the school and should understand that when policies are implemented, it may take time to see serious changes.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Important insights into the disciplinary practices in two suburban high schools have been garnered from this study. Overall, while professionals at both Wilshire High School and Sanders High School found Senate Bill 100 to be limiting in certain respects, clearly, due to the ample research on the negative effects of hypercriminalization and overly punitive disciplinary policies—namely zero tolerance policies—Senate Bill 100 is beneficial to students in Illinois. Since Illinois did not provide alternative school options in expulsion cases prior to Senate Bill 100, it is also beneficial that now students must be offered an alternative placement in cases of expulsion. Therefore, it is important to have Senate Bill 100 so that more students will stay in school, thus decreasing the chances of the negative impacts of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Additionally, it is clear that the resource distribution seems to be creating tracks for students. By hiring a disproportionately higher amount of guidance counselors—one for every 218 students compared to one for every 294 students at Sanders High School—Wilshire High School is making it clear that the expectation is that college will be students’ next step. On the other hand, Sanders High School prioritizes school security over guidance counselors. By having a disproportionately higher amount of school security officers—one for every 235 students compared to one for 2,834 students at Wilshire High School—Sanders High School is making it clear that school security and criminalization is important, and they may be preparing their students for what may unfortunately be the next step for a portion of them—prison.

It was clear from both Sanders High School professionals and Wilshire High School professionals that relationship building was a crucial aspect of gaining students’ respect and trust, which in turn led them to engage in fewer disciplinary infractions. School professionals at both schools had their own methods for becoming more involved with students’ lives outside of
the classroom with one saying he coaches while another simply saying he makes himself visible by spending time near the buses after school. Therefore, school professionals should get involved where they can outside of the classroom both in roles such as coaches and club advisors, but when such a time commitment is not possible, even simply increasing their visibility and being a friendly recognizable face for students could be beneficial.

Since both schools responded to external pressures, it could be important for surrounding communities of all schools—especially low-SES schools because of the findings—to be informed on what is happening within the school and educated on evidence-based practices. For instance, the surrounding community of Merrick Township was happy that the school was really cracking down on discipline by publically arresting students. However, if the community was informed of the negative impacts of hypercriminalization and about their ability to put pressure on the school, they might be more likely to intervene and put pressure on the school to change their policies.

Because Senate Bill 100 has not even been in effect for a full year yet, there is no data on the effectiveness of the bill on accomplishing the goals it was intended for. Therefore, future research could and should focus on what about Senate Bill 100 is working well and what, if anything, needs to be amended. It would also be beneficial to assess students’ perceptions of Senate Bill 100 and if they feel it is effective since the policy highly impacts their school experience as well. Additionally, if Senate Bill 100 does prove to be effective, other states that have historically struggled with highly punitive and exclusionary disciplinary policies could consider adopting similar policies.

Unfortunately, it was clear throughout the interviews that some school officials did not fully understand the reasoning behind Senate Bill 100. Some seemed to resent the fact that state
officials who do not know what goes on in their school every day would dictate how they can discipline students. There needs to be less of a disconnect between what policymakers intended for the law to represent and how the school professionals are understanding it. The policymakers intended for Senate Bill to be beneficial for student success, but some of the school professionals actually felt that they were hurting children by not holding them accountable and/or by distracting the rest of the students.

Although some school professionals got frustrated with students’ disciplinary infractions and/or with the state, it seemed that all ten interviewees truly did care about students and felt they were making a difference in the students’ lives. Unfortunately, research suggests that some of the policies school professionals have been using are actually detrimental to students’ success. Therefore, professional development on the importance of keeping students in school and racial and socioeconomic disciplinary disparities in schools could be highly beneficial for both high- and low-SES school professionals. Some school professionals at Sanders High School seemed reluctant to admit that race may be playing a part in the way they are handling discipline, so it could be important for them to look at disciplinary data from schools with opposite demographics like Wilshire High School so that they could see that their students are being disproportionately punished for the same behaviors.

Additionally, since Van den Bergh et al. (2010) discovered that implicit bias tests were a better indication of prejudiced feelings than explicit bias tests, it could be beneficial to run implicit bias workshops with staff members so that they are aware of underlying biases that they may have toward certain groups of students. However, according to a study conducted by Schlachter and Rolf (2016), not all individuals are equally impacted by the results from implicit tests of bias. In fact, some have been known to question the validity of the test or to feel very
strong emotions about their results, especially when the findings indicate an implicit bias (Schlachter & Rolf, 2016). Therefore, it is important that such an implicit bias test be paired with a debriefing session and potentially a professional development outlining the mechanisms behind the implicit test, how to process the results, and how to work on unconscious biases (Schlachter & Rolf, 2016).

Given that this study is qualitative in nature and has a relatively small sample size, this study cannot be generalized to all schools by any means. However, since at least two of the participants from each school were Deans, the primary distributors of discipline, they were able to provide a fairly comprehensive view of what discipline looked like within the respective schools. Although the results cannot be generalized, given that clear themes and differences emerged between the two schools, this study provides some indication of a few ways in which differential discipline might be manifesting in schools. Additionally, since a fairly clear picture emerged of the two schools and the various problems they have faced, more specific policy recommendations for each school are included below. Other schools, both high- and low-SES may find similar policy implications helpful to improving the overall climates of their schools as well.

At Sanders High School, the largest problems that seem to be contributing to the stalled progress of many students are an uneasy relationship with the district, staff members’ lack of communication and/or lack of understanding of the purpose behind various policies, lack of what is perceived as beneficial parental involvement, and hypercriminalization. It was clear based upon the interviews that Sanders High School struggles with the pressure imposed upon them from the district to stop suspending and/or writing referrals for so many students. While some positive changes were made because of the district pressure such as ceasing to publically arrest
students, school professionals should want to make such changes in order to benefit the students, not simply to impress the district. The district professionals and school professionals should work more collaboratively so that everyone is on the same page. While the district and the school should be on the same team, it is clear that since school professionals at Sanders High School have manipulated their numbers in order to please the district, they may feel threatened by the district. Additionally, while the district is clearly aware of the problem with suspending so many Black students, the teachers seemed to feel as though it was unavoidable due to the demographic composition of their school overall, so more staff education is necessary.

Staff members’—specifically teachers’—lack of awareness about the necessity of Senate Bill 100 leads to the next policy implication, a necessity for better understanding and communication between the various branches of the school. For instance, while the Deans were aware of the necessity of Senate Bill 100 and commented that the faculty overall accepted Senate Bill 100, the two teachers interviewed were far from content with the law, suggesting that perhaps faculty and the administration are not on the same page. Additionally, Wilshire High School professionals pointed to the benefit of rich communication between the social workers, teachers, and administration, which is something that Sanders High School could certainly benefit from as well.

Because parental involvement was seen by both schools as being crucially important but was said to be lacking at Sanders High School, it is essential for the parents and school to have a more open set of communication, and it may also be essential for the school professionals to redefine what they consider parental involvement. For instance, Wilshire High School professionals noted that parents were able to be so involved in the school because of their flexible work schedules, something that unfortunately working-class parents often are not as
readily able to achieve. Therefore, Epstein (n.d.) outlined several ways in which school professionals could redefine what it means to be an involved parent in a way that makes more sense for working-class parents who may not have the luxury of taking off work in order to come to school events. Low-SES school professionals could likely benefit from adopting such a perspective.

Hypercriminalization is the final major problem at Sanders High School and can be seen in terms of highly punitive policies and law enforcement involvement. While Senate Bill 100 and the restorative justice coordinator are working to lessen some of the highly punitive policies, the high amount of law enforcement involvement in the school is a problem that still needs to be addressed. While Wilshire High School professionals did note fewer physical altercations and gang activity, it is unclear whether students there are actually engaging in less illegal behavior considering the drug problem. The fact that Wilshire High School functions with one police officer and over 1,500 more students than Sanders High School suggests that Sanders High School could likely downsize the police presence at their school and/or have the officer(s) in plain clothes and allow them to have interactions with students outside of when they are being punished. Doing so would not only make the school environment less punitive, but downsizing would also save resources, resources, which could be reallocated to social service interventions that students could benefit from. Additionally, to show students that they have the potential to graduate successfully and/or to be on a path to college, the school should consider hiring additional guidance counselors or a youth advocate.

At Wilshire High School, the largest problems were anxiety, drug use, and negative assumptions about low-SES students. While Wilshire High School’s district has several alternative placement options including the therapeutic day school setting, most school
professionals agreed that if possible, the best setting for students is the general education setting. Therefore, Wilshire High School should work on decreasing the anxiety level, pressure, and highly competitive nature of the school. This can be achieved by working with students and parents and increasing cooperation among students. Students can and should be encouraged to try their best and to succeed; however, it seems that students need more education on how to cope with failures and shortcomings in a way that will not significantly hinder their school performance. Additionally, it seemed as though some of the pressure placed on students was coming from their parents, so Wilshire High School could benefit from hosting parent workshops on how to put a healthy level of pressure on students without invoking too much anxiety in the students. Finally, while a certain level of competition is healthy, it is clear that the high level of competition at Wilshire High School contributed to tension between students. Therefore, teaching students to cooperate and support one another rather than trying to upstage one another could be important to improving student relations and subsequent pressure and anxiety.

In addition to anxiety, drug use was seen as a significant issue at Wilshire High School. While prior to Senate Bill 100, students could cut their suspension time in half if they participated in a drug assessment, with the shortened suspension, that is no longer an option. Therefore, Wilshire High School should come up with a new incentive that would encourage students to attend the drug assessment so that each student is taking the necessary steps to decrease drug use. Additionally, since the parents were not always on the same page when confronted with the fact that their child was using drugs, perhaps school professionals should host parent workshops about the signs and symptoms of drug use. Since parents at Wilshire High School are highly involved, parent workshops could be a key tool for school professionals to use.
Finally, while Wilshire High School has a population of primarily affluent students, it does contain just over 6 percent of students who are eligible for free-and-reduced lunch, and their perspectives should not be ignored. While it is inevitable that school professionals will generalize and thus view the student population overall as affluent, a few of the school professionals made deeply concerning comments about students of lower social classes implying that they were “prone” to violence, receive negative parenting, and/or are the only ones who engage in physical violence. Perhaps a professional development session on low-SES families would benefit school professionals so that they ceased to make such overgeneralizations.

Education, if it is truly equal, is one of the greatest opportunities that a person can have. It should transcend socioeconomic status, race, and all other forms of stratification, but unfortunately in its current form, it does not. Fortunately, steps are being taken in Illinois, such as Senate Bill 100, to lessen educational inequality, specifically in terms of differential discipline. If school professionals implement some of the suggested policy implications and rally behind Senate Bill 100 and implement it fully—not only in terms of going through the motions to impress the state but to truly recognize the benefits of the law for the success of students—Illinois’ education system would likely be one step close to becoming equal.
References


Sanders High School Handbook (2016) [actual citation not included to protect confidentiality]


Wilshire High School Handbook (2016) [actual citation not included to protect confidentiality]