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El Testimonio De Los Niños De El Parque: Discipline Practices And The Impact On Public High School Students

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EL TESTIMONIO DE LOS NIÑOS DE EL PARQUE: DISCIPLINE PRACTICES AND THE
IMPACT ON PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

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Francisco E. Huizar-Gonzalez

2024

DEDICATION

A mi mamá Irma, papá Esteban, mis hermanitas Isela y Monica, mis hijas Bianca y Elisa, y a todos mis ancestros que son parte de mi historia. Gracias.

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IMPACT ON PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

by

FRANCISCO ENRIQUE HUIZAR-GONZALEZ, M.ED.

DISSERTATION

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To all of Los Niños de el Parque whose stories are not yet known, you are always in my thoughts and my heart as I continue my professional journey in public education. Keep your head up and your dreams alive. You matter and you are important. I hope I have made you proud of me.

I present to all of you here my dissertation which was solely made possible by all of you. In recognition of my gratitude and appreciation, I dedicate this work to you.

“Youth are part of the story of the political life of any given nation, and of the globe.” Danielle Allen, Harvard University

ABSTRACT

What happens to our students when they do not complete their studies and drop out of school? Perhaps this question is probably not something that we reflect on as educators. This study seeks to amplify three students' voices and explore their unique experiences and the challenges they faced after they did not complete their high school studies. The interviews that I conducted tell the story of three minority students from lower-income families. Their stories highlight the overall purpose of this study, which is how students who find themselves involved in disciplinary issues are pushed out of school. The interviews capture the lived experiences as well as the resilience of these individuals. My research question focuses on understanding the personal and systemic challenges that marginalized youth face and how they navigate and make sense of the obstacles in their daily lives. I used qualitative and Testimonio methodology involving semi-structured interviews. The students' lives are similar in that they are affected by socio-economic disadvantages and racial and ethnic marginalization. The interview protocol was designed to offer a safe and respectful environment to ensure that the participants shared their stories and perspectives openly. These interviews provided a rich collection of narratives that revealed significant insights into the adversities faced by these students, such as discrimination, limited access to resources, and social exclusion. The findings from my study not only shed light on the needs and challenges of these kids but also highlight the need for the development of all-encompassing strategies and supportive policies that can support students' well-being and provide opportunities for them to complete their studies at the secondary level. My research contributes to a broader understanding of the intersectionality of disadvantage and resilience, offering guidance to educators, policymakers, and community stakeholders to better support vulnerable populations.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Knowing our students and their learning needs, including working through disciplinary challenges, is a worthwhile investment in the time we spend on campus. Students feel disconnected from their school environment when school leaders fail to create supportive environments. Student-centered spaces can provide students and educators an opportunity to work together and focus on discipline that is not punitive in nature. However, many schools lack an understanding of what support our students need to minimize disciplinary removals. Students who attend public school here in the borderland and who are coded as at risk for dropping out of school are more likely to experience behavioral problems. Not surprisingly, these students also have low academic achievement (DeMatthews et al., 2018; Leung-Gagne et al., 2022). There is a correlation between low achievement and discipline problems, and this association often leads students not to complete their course of study (Leung-Gagne, et al., 2022; Welch & Payne, 2018). If this is occurring, what becomes of students who are not finishing their schooling?

Schools across the country have historically implemented exclusionary discipline practices to control student behavior to address the issue of student misbehavior and punish students into compliance (Allman & Slate, 2011; Anyon et al., 2018; Leung-Gagne, et al., 2022; Morris & Howard, 2003; Welch & Payne, 2012). However, these practices are ineffective and can lead to students' activation of criminal records and criminal identities and could also be the origin of the journey into the school-to-prison pipeline (Anyon, et al., 2018; Welch & Payne, 2012). Programs such as Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEP) or more severe Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Programs (JJAEP) are used as disciplinary techniques to

improve student behavior and as alternatives to complete removals from the educational setting. Even such options may not be the most effective for student learning.

Exclusionary policies in public education have led to a significant increase in the number of students being kept out of the classroom due to forms of punishment often referred to as exclusionary discipline (Daniels, 2002; Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022; Woodward, 1955). This type of discipline has been used to punish minor infractions such as being late or being disrespectful (Perera & Diliberti, 2023; Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). Students' lack of access to public education due to being pushed out of the educational setting is a significant issue that affects student development and prevents them from reaching their full learning potential, particularly for students from impoverished backgrounds (Anyon, et al., 2018; Welch & Payne, 2012). The push into the so-called school-to-prison pipeline often leads students into the juvenile justice system, sometimes unnecessarily. Once students are pushed into this path, it may eventually lead to prison (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). The implementation of exclusionary discipline has been shown to disproportionately affect students of color and those with disabilities (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

According to research, the goal of suspending students is to deter misbehavior and improve school safety (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). However, these studies also reveal that the assertive style of disciplining students is not effective at addressing the underlying causes of student misbehavior (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022; Perera & Diliberti, 2023).

The problem addressed in this study is the effect of ineffectively punishing students, leading to their unnecessary removal from the instructional setting. The problem is that we, as

instructional leaders who are charged with analyzing, developing, and maintaining effective disciplinary processes, are not cognizant of the diverse disciplinary needs of each student. Educational leaders are trained to assess differentiation within lesson delivery. However, the same is not consistently true when it comes to student discipline. When a child is removed from the educational setting due to undesirable behaviors, we could be leading them to the school-to-prison pipeline (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022; Perera & Diliberti, 2023). If indeed we are aware of students' instructional needs, are we creating environments that are conducive to learning for every student, including those who struggle with discipline (Algozzine, Wang & Violette, 2011; Carr & Horner, 2007; Pas, et al., 2014)? In other words, we have done well in developing teachers to offer effective pedagogy, but we have fallen short when looking at systems of discipline that work for all students.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to reveal what happens to our students when they are not successful in high school due to disciplinary issues and ineffective disciplinary practices by retelling their stories or testimonios. The study aims to tell the stories of selected participants who may have been impacted by discipline systems and who now find themselves in a situation where dropping out was a viable option for them. The primary research question guiding this study is: What are the lived experiences of students who were removed from school through existing discipline practices, and what were the causes that led to them being ejected from school?

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Systems currently used to manage student discipline, such as Boys Town and Assertive Discipline, may seem attractive to educators because they offer quick fixes to sometimes challenging student behaviors (Leung-Gagne, McCombs, Scott, & Losen, 2022; Perera & Diliberti, 2023). Although they may be simple to implement within a campus and attractive to disciplinarians within the campus as a form of a one-size-fits-all system, these systems may lead our students into the school-to-prison pipeline (Leung-Gagne, et al., 2022; Perera & Diliberti, 2023). An examination of the importance of providing restorative discipline practices and having effective disciplinary systems that work for all students within the public education school setting is critical because of the negative effects school removals have on students. Such negative effects include safety concerns due to lack of adult supervision, academic decline, and in some cases, legal ramifications such as due process violations and increased possibility of illegal activities (Leung-Gagne, et al., 2022; Perera & Diliberti, 2023).

To research exclusionary discipline practices and the effects of being out of the classroom setting for our students, I will explore the lived experiences of secondary school students and how negative behaviors impacted their education and perhaps led them to not complete their high school course of study. Important to this study are the students' stories or Testimonios. It is the "why" of this study.

The concept of Testimonio emerged during the 1960s to the 1970s from Latin American movements (Lykes & Crosby, 2018). This research method involves gathering and analyzing personal narratives from people who are affected by social change and oppression. It is utilized to challenge dominant ideas and provide a voice for those who are not able to participate in

mainstream discourse. Testimonio methodology offers a powerful tool for understanding the experiences of those who have been historically marginalized and excluded from dominant narratives (Beverly, 1986; Deere & Leon, 2001; Martin-Baro, 1994). By centering the voices of these individuals, testimonio methodology can contribute to more nuanced and inclusive understandings of social issues. I will elaborate on the testimonio methodology in subsequent chapters to explain how I will use it to examine the effects of exclusionary discipline practices on high school students.

POSITIONALITY

Positionality is a concept that describes an individual's perspective on a certain research project and its political and social context (Briscoe, 2005; Holmes, 2020). My positionality, or worldview in this research, is that if we had more holistic and inclusive disciplinary methods, our students who struggle the most, whether with academics or discipline, would not be removed from the educational school setting. My position on the issue of student removal from school due to disciplinary issues and ineffective disciplinary practices is that the system of discipline itself is broken and does not work for all students. An orderly instructional setting is necessary for teachers to execute effective lessons; however, my position on an ideal and effective learning environment was not the crux of this study. I decided to conduct a qualitative study of the experiences of students who perhaps could have benefited educationally from the effective implementation of, for example, the PBIS system. I believed that qualitative research would allow for an inquiry to study and document human phenomena or experiences (Briscoe, 2005). I conducted one-on-one interviews with students who were no longer enrolled at my campus. Using interviews provided by *los niños* and qualitative research methodology, I documented and

analyzed the experiences of the participants in story form to come up with a more accurate and meaningful analysis through a discourse of the issues brought about by ineffective discipline practices (Busetto et al., 2020; Casella, 2003).

Recently and in my current position, I have noticed students walking down toward a park near the school after they have been removed from the educational setting. I believe that when we have to deal with a difficult disciplinary issue, we are not interested in listening to or acknowledging the students' voices and stories. The students are not being heard and therefore their stories are often misunderstood. I suspect that there could be some psychological issues or trauma that the campus is often not aware of that are impacting their behaviors, but this will not be highlighted in this research. The perception of some on the campus that I currently serve is that these children are thugs and drug dealers who are incapable of learning. As a practitioner, one of the most difficult phrases that I hear my colleagues use is "those kids." This phrase is used, even by some of my colleagues throughout my career, without regard, and perhaps unconsciously, to identify students who are struggling in school.

Student researchers, such as I, may be required to identify and articulate our positionality within our research. This study, therefore, will include information about my background and its influence on my research. The task of identifying our positionality may be challenging because doing so exposes vulnerability. Nonetheless, I would like to offer my own story and relevant experiences in public education to divulge that I was "one of those kids" or a *niño de el parque*.

I include my own experiences, highlighted below, within the public education system as a child and then as an administrator and how these experiences have provided me with a unique perspective on the discipline system and how it does not work for all students. As an educator, I have more insight into the system. I have worked in the public education system for twenty-six

years. I began my career as an English teacher and then earned an advanced degree, which helped me earn a position as an administrator.

REVISITING MY OWN EXPERIENCES

I felt it was important to include my own experiences in this study and recognize that I, too, was a niño de el parque. As a student, I realized that at times, I was one mistake from not finishing my school. I believe my parents loved me. My mother's way of encouraging me was kinder and sweeter and always included our Catholic traditions that God would look over me or that the Holy Mother would guide and take care of me as I went out into the world. My father's way was harsh and sometimes violent. He mirrored how he was raised or as he would call it, "old school." His was filled with insults and mockery as forms of backward psychology designed to motivate me. I recall a time when he was showing me how to change the oil in his car. I hated it. I hated my hands getting nicked, banged, and full of a mixture of blood and oil. He looked at me hard when I tossed the wrench to the side. He told me he was teaching me to work since I was "...too stupid for college."

Neither of my parents finished school and had an elementary education, so neither of them knew how to advocate for me. Perhaps it was a different time (late 70s and 80s) when many of us going through school received the same type of encouragement from our households. There is no doubt that both my parents valued an education and I recall stories of regret about not finishing school coming from both of them. As an immigrant from Mexico and a naturalized United States citizen, I have grown to value the opportunities and choices that having an education facilitates. Unlike me, both of my sisters did well in school. They received awards, were on the honor roll, were well-liked by their teachers, and experienced overall success. All

three of us attended the same schools, and I recall telling my sisters the story of Ms. E. putting me in a trash can in first grade for not being able to complete math problems correctly. After they finished laughing, my older sister was in disbelief. This type of experience was not either of my sister's experiences. Both of them were beloved by Ms. E. One of my sisters told me that I probably deserved it for being a *travieso* or mischievous. This contrast in experiences with public education made me reflect on discipline and los niños whom I had interviewed. What was the element that made the difference between their experiences and my experiences in public education?

I grew up in a community in south-central El Paso. My mother was a stay-at-home mom and took care of my sisters and me while my father drove a truck as a civil servant at Fort Bliss. I do not remember ever feeling like we were poor. It did not occur to me that we were living in poverty until I was much older, and I realized that our duplex was only two bedrooms – one bedroom for my parents and one bedroom for my two sisters and me. My parents never went to the school to ask questions about how we were progressing in our classes. When it was report card time, my parents never signed any of these, and the school never requested us to return the copies. Even as a young child, I felt a lot of freedom in my life. I was not scared of the streets in my neighborhood. Perhaps it was because when I was living in Juárez, I often stayed out past midnight and was remarkably familiar with the neighborhoods near Bellavista – a violent area in Juarez.

My experience as a child in public education was difficult and painful. I was born in Juarez, Chihuahua, and immigrated to El Paso at age five. Attending public school was a very shocking and frightening experience, particularly because, and this should probably go without saying, I did not speak the English language. This shock caused me to be unable to behave or

choose not to behave in the classroom. I hid behind telling jokes and pulling pranks within the classroom and enjoyed watching my classmates laugh. This, of course, put a lot of pressure on people noticing that I was different from my classmates. In 1976, I was enrolled in a local elementary school located in my neighborhood. There were no restorative discipline practices. It was a different time. I remember that if there were any incidents of student misbehavior, they were taken care of through corporal punishment and humiliation. I remember this because I was often humiliated in front of my peers for consequent misbehavior on my part. The humiliation that I endured included being hit with rulers and paddles, and one time the teacher hit me with her hand on my face. I was often referred to as a “wetback” presumably since I was born in Juarez, or a “porker” since I was overweight (I struggled with my weight till this day). I was also quite frequently put in the corner. I was once asked by a teacher to place myself in a trashcan for not completing math problems correctly. One time I was also asked to leave the class and go home because I could not sit still. Of course, I did not go home. I could not face my mother or stepfather, particularly my stepfather, who was extremely strict and sometimes abusive. Instead, I wandered into a nearby park and stayed there most of the day, sitting under a tree. For me, the fear of getting beat at home grounded me there. I would, the times that I was thrown out of class, stay at the park and wait until I noticed parents starting to arrive to pick up their children towards the end of the day. At this point, I began to walk slowly to my house. The school never called, or I am sure I would have heard about it as soon as I walked through the front door. These experiences were not particular to me, nor were they effective, as evidenced by the frequency of occurrences throughout elementary school.

As I transitioned from one grade level to another in school, I began to learn the English language and experienced some success. In hindsight, learning English should not have been part of my perception of what it meant to be successful. The topic of that experience of learning the English language as an English as a Second Language, or ESL student as it was referred to in those days, or how we now identify similar students, Emergent Bilinguals, is a topic for another study.

The misbehavior continued to manifest as well as disciplinary consequences. I lost count of how many times I was paddled in middle school. I do know that getting paddled was not a deterrent nor were any of the other disciplinary strategies that were used to gain compliance. Getting paddled made me feel dangerous and strong, and I developed a reputation with the other students as one who could take a beating. In middle school, I was also thrown out of the classroom much for the same reasons as I was in elementary, but again, I would not go home and I would wander the neighborhood. During this time, I began to meet other students who were out in the street. During this time, I began to be exposed to alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. I do not wish to share too much about my experiences at the middle school. What I can share here is that students that I met had already been involved with the law and some had served time in “juvie.” By the time I reached high school in 1986, my teachers were more tolerant of my incessant talking and joking in class. I was frequently redirected by my teachers’ words as an insult or a putdown and it was usually about my intelligence or my weight. The behaviors that I started to manifest in high school were mainly skipping school, talking, and socializing.

The east side park located behind my high school, was filled with trees and picnic tables where you could spend time listening to music or just relaxing. Students often went to this park to skip classes, smoke cigarettes, drink, and do other drugs. School to me during that time was not a priority. I did not see the point in attending classes and no one on campus questioned my gaps in attendance. My parents stopped checking my grades. Counselors never asked what my plans were once I graduated. I just knew that the next step would be community college. I considered joining the service like my stepfather. He was a veteran of the Korean War.

What I do remember about high school is that I accumulated fifty-eight unexcused absences. The attendance clerk at my high school could be easily charmed by my personality and so these absences were forgiven, for the most part, by not contacting my mother to let her know what was going on at school. I am certain that I skipped school more than fifty-eight times, but my charm, which I had been working on since I was a child, bought me a pass.

My experiences as a Mexican national student were not unique. My peers from the neighborhood also had similar experiences. This is just the way it was, or what my father would say, “old-school discipline.” When I compare stories with people that are my age, we can all agree that we were ridiculed, beaten, and asked to leave school and no one would ever wonder where it was that we went when we did leave the school grounds. Astonishingly, I made it through elementary as a Limited English Proficient student and continued through high school. With the number of times that I was removed and the fact that I did not have a command of the English language, I should be a high school dropout, statistically speaking.

I have had the opportunity to work in some interesting as well as challenging situations as a school administrator in public education. I have learned so much and made many relationships with students, professionals, and other stakeholders. I have gained a great deal of satisfaction in improving the lives of others. At times, the intersectionality of discipline and keeping students engaged and in class was overwhelming, particularly after the COVID-19 pandemic and when we were allowed to return to school. My purpose of improving instruction for all students by preparing teachers with the necessary tools and resources to succeed had to balance with the need to administer discipline that sometimes led to removal from the instructional setting.

Our families that we serve where I am currently an administrator (and my own family as a child for that matter) put their entire faith in public education. In my twenty-six years of experience serving in different roles in public schools, from the very far east part of El Paso County to the furthest community in the west upper valley part of El Paso, I have met many parents and can count on one hand our parents who genuinely did not care about their students. Perhaps they did not know how to navigate the systems within a school as kids and now as adults. Perhaps because of their own experiences with public education and their upbringing, they advise those who serve our students to hit their kids when they do not comply with established school rules and to change their behavior. Of course, these are just my assumptions based on what I have heard from my parents as a practitioner as well as my own lived experiences.

When students do not meet the standards of discipline for the school, the first thing that we do as educators is to contact the family when there is a discipline issue with a student. Parents sometimes give us full permission to beat the student consequently for their behavior. This is not an innuendo or an exaggeration. Parents often see violence as an end to the means. No educator,

however, would take this seriously but they are offers that are made to find a resolution to problems that arise on the campus. Recently, I have heard my colleagues talk about “fixing” the violence, misbehaviors, and prison identities that students sometimes mimic by implementing old-school discipline.

I am a champion of public education and I believe wholeheartedly that students benefit from our schools. But with that, I also recognize that some of our current disciplinary systems simply do not work for every single student. Assertive discipline has been used in public education but has been ineffective. Much like instruction should be tailored to the individual student, so should disciplinary practices and procedures. What I am trying to convey here is the idea that perhaps we are not looking at every possibility of creating spaces that are conducive and supportive of students who struggle with discipline. I am not condoning misbehaviors either. I just want leaders to consider if we are truly looking at all possibilities within our systems of discipline that keep students in class and off the street.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this study is centered on our students who are removed from the campus for disciplinary reasons and the possibility of landing in the school-to-prison pipeline. To illustrate a contrast with exclusionary discipline practices, this chapter will review the Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system and how it can positively benefit students overall when it is implemented school-wide (SW). Particularly, I will review research on how this system can have a positive effect on students who struggle with challenging behaviors. By effectively implementing restorative discipline practices such as School-Wide (SW)-PBIS, school leaders can prevent the oppression and marginalization of students. Alternative discipline practices such as the Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) system allow practitioners in the classroom and other school leaders the opportunity to teach students more appropriate behaviors within the school setting. Ultimately finding progressive avenues that keep our students in school instead of being removed should be the desired outcome in public education in general. Alternative discipline practices are important because they can create a culture of responsibility and growth in students. As I will discuss further in this chapter, when PBIS is used in the context of the whole school, this system can help address the social-emotional needs of students (Carr, Dunlop, Horner, Koegel, Turnbull, & Sailor, 2002; Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005; Sugai & Horner, 2006) and address the cultural health of the campus.

A critical approach must be taken when deciding whether to remove a student from school is the most effective solution to a disciplinary problem. Instead of punishing students in a manner that removes them from the learning environment, restorative discipline encourages the

healing of relationships between all parties involved rather than leaving these relationships damaged. This method of discipline involves holding all parties responsible for their actions (Lustick, 2015), as described in the SW-PBIS system. This discipline system works by being reactive and proactive in addressing the issues that arise from student behavior and offers support for students to learn new, positive behaviors. Through the process of accountability for a student's less-desirable behavior, all parties involved can begin to rebuild the damaged relationships within the classroom and the school community. This chapter will also explore a much less obvious component of discipline: the development of mentoring. If the SW-PBIS system is applied with fidelity campus-wide, mentoring relationships will also develop. The literature review in this chapter will demonstrate that supporting the improvement of chronically low-performing schools requires a school-wide effort that includes effective leadership and data-based decision-making (Herman, Dawson, Dee, Greene, Maynard, Redding, 2008). District-level administrators, as well as school leaders, look at different data sets. Most of the time, however, the data sets that are analyzed or related to standardized test results. Data that should be focused on, in addition to standardized test results, should be discipline referrals by students, teachers, and the type of discipline issue that may be prevalent on a particular campus. A school-wide approach to addressing behavioral and social concerns is one of the most effective ways to improve the quality of education for all students (Borman, Hewes, Overman, & Brown, 2003).

STUDENT EXCLUSION

The education system, which is only around two hundred years old, was initially only for the elite. Universal education was then established due to industrialization, which transformed how people worked (Schrager, 2018). During this time, factory owners required workers who could follow their managers' orders, and education was tailored to suit factory work (Schrager, 2018). Fast forward to today, in the context of school discipline, we are still in the practice of excluding and removing students from school when they are not docile, compliant, or sober. The detrimental effects of exclusionary discipline on students' academic success and behavior are also associated with a higher likelihood of juvenile delinquency, their chances of dropping out, and incarceration (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Anyon et al., 2018). Exclusion is a common solution to address misbehavior (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Perera & Diliberti, 2023). Exclusion forces kids to develop a negative image of school administrators and teachers (Bowditch, 1993; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2012). The concept of what is referred to as the broken windows approach (Kelling & Wilson, 1982) was re-introduced in the US during the 1990s as the country's criminal justice policies were being implemented (Kelling & Wilson, 1982). This philosophy encouraged harsher punishments for minor infractions to discourage more serious offenses (Perera & Diliberti, 2023; Kelling & Wilson, 1982). Schools were also required to adopt zero-tolerance policies, which often involved the suspension or expulsion of students (Perera & Diliberti, 2023; Kelling & Wilson, 1982).

The likelihood of being suspended is also not evenly distributed among all students (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Perera & Diliberti, 2023). Since a disparity based on ethnicity among students exists, the issue has raised fundamental concerns with fairness as well as civil rights

issues (Losen & Gillespie, 2012). With prevalent approaches such as these in our schools, many students end up being pushed out and not finishing school. This phenomenon, of course, has larger implications not only for our society but also for the children themselves and their future. Those who drop out of school are more prone to committing crimes as they lack the necessary skills to enter the workforce (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Anyon, et al., 2018). This creates a chain reaction that could lead students to juvenile detention facilities or adult prisons (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Anyon, et al., 2018). The results of one study revealed that a school's strict discipline procedures are not good for children (Carter, Fine & Russell, 2014).

The idea of zero-tolerance discipline or assertive discipline, which is commonly used in schools, was refined through the Guns Free Schools Act of 1994 (Casella, 2003). This law was enacted to prevent students from bringing guns to school (Casella, 2003; Englehart, 2014). Perhaps then, the public school system has inadvertently pushed out and deterred students from receiving a free, equitable, and public education because of ineffective implementation of discipline processes and procedures that often remove the same students from the classroom (Anyon et al., 2018; Vincent & Tobin, 2011, Skiba & Peterson, 2000). As a result, zero-tolerance tolerance policies spurred other policies not related to guns on campuses. Policies within schools utilized suspensions and expulsions not only for guns but also for drugs and other disciplinary issues (Skiba & Peterson, 2000).

Over time, the concept of restorative discipline has evolved. Research on its nature and application is needed to ensure that it is utilized effectively. Currently, campuses are utilizing a system known as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports. The development of PBIS stems from Restorative Justice and Restorative Discipline (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009). The connection between Restorative Discipline, Restorative Justice, and the PBIS system made

these ideas almost synonymous due to their similarities. However, the PBIS system has been developed in a way so that students can benefit within the public school. These connections will be discussed further.

The concept of Restorative Discipline methods was originally developed based on the principles of the Restorative Justice Theory (RJT). The Restorative Justice Theory (RJT) involves a reparative process that aims to improve the relationships between the school community and students. The system of Restorative Justice has been around since the 1990s and was popularized first by William Zehr. RJT has gained increased attention from the behavioral-analytic community as a methodology and concept that holds promise for prisoner reform (Anderson & Freeman, 2000; Zehr, 2015). The process involves holding individuals accountable for their actions and helping those affected by them to simply move on (Anderson & Freeman, 2000; Zehr, 2015). The concept of restorative justice is a movement that aims to transform the criminal justice system into a system that focuses on the needs of the victims and the communities it serves (Anderson & Freeman, 2000; Zehr, 2015). The system also aimed to increase the involvement and empowerment of the victims, as well as the process of healing for all parties involved (Zehr, 2015). Although Restorative Justice can lead to beneficial outcomes such as reduced backsliding of offenders and forgiveness, it is not required to achieve its goals. Instead, it is focused on addressing the needs of the victims and communities affected by a crime (Zehr, 2015).

Interestingly, both Restorative Justice and Retributive Justice movements contend that the punishment and pain of a crime should be balanced (Zehr, 2015), reflecting current ideas in the criminal justice system. Both systems also hold that addressing the needs of the victims and communities affected by a crime can help prevent further harm. In essence, both systems are

similar and one is not any more desirable than the other. The latter, however, includes a “make things even” for the victim component. The other is just the same, but there is a focus on responsibility and acknowledgment of the wrongdoing.

Perhaps there is some skepticism that Restorative Justice is meant to do away with the criminal justice system. Yet, this is not the case. RJ is not a replacement but instead, it aims to transform the victims and communities into a better place by focusing on the potential of everyone (Zehr, 2015). The concept of RJ requires the involvement of all the parties involved in a crime to achieve justice (Zehr, 2015). As I will discuss later in this paper, the PBIS system also has a similar component known as the three tiers. The difference between these two systems, however, is that the PBIS system’s tiers are tiers that list possible supports for the student. The concept of RJ includes what Zehr (2015) describes as the three pillars:

1. Harms and needs
2. Obligation (to put right)
3. Engagement (of stakeholders)

School leaders, in a similar manner, can also use the Restorative Justice Theory to discipline students for their actions. In our schools, however, these methods use student-friendly language and support. Nonetheless, this process involves holding students accountable for their actions and repairing the damage they caused to the school community (Zehr, 2015). Restorative practices can have positive results (Anderson & Freeman, 2000; Zehr, 2015). Of course, within a public school setting, this type of theory takes on a different meaning, mainly because our students are not prisoners, and our schools are not prisons. However, the methodology does have

some similarities to the restorative discipline framework I have identified as School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SW-PBIS).

The blending of the deep-rooted, assertive discipline methods with newer restorative discipline practices ends up negatively impacting students and thus a change and unmelding of the two are needed. Something important for school leaders to consider is how restorative discipline practices are communicated to the campus. Restorative discipline practices can indeed work within any individual classroom. However, the most effective method to implement such practices is if the program is implemented school-wide (SW). Therefore, leaders need to be able to communicate effectively what the benefits are of having restorative discipline practices instead of assertive discipline which ultimately removes students from the educational setting.

School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (SW-PBIS) is associated with an increased positive school climate, decreased problem behaviors, and increased teacher self-efficacy. The system can also help improve academic achievement (Bradshaw, Koth, Thornton, & Leaf, 2009). The goal of School-wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (SW-PBIS) is to improve the quality of education by increasing the amount of time students spend in school (Horner et al., 2005). Logically, the more time engaged in learning, the better the quality of education. The level of engagement can also help students become more engaged in positive school life (Horner et al., 2005). The goal of SW-PBIS is to improve the quality of education by increasing the amount of time that students spend in school, which should lead to students developing academic skills (Putnam, Horner, & Algozzine, 2006). As I stated previously, assertive discipline practices remove students from the educational setting. Therefore, discipline practices must evolve to support our student's education. A school-wide approach that

champions Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports can then be an effective tool to keep students in class and school.

EQUITY, EDUCATION, AND DISCIPLINE

Historically, ideas on how we can make education more equitable for all students have been proposed, but the issues related to minorities students and discipline within the public education system are largely unsolved (Lareau, 2015). The failure of disciplinary systems to be implemented effectively within public education classrooms is unfortunate because we continue to create generations of students who do not experience social mobility due to low education levels and because our students are limited in opportunities to attend colleges, universities, or even trade school (Lareau, 2015).

The public school system and some of our outdated discipline processes, such as zero-tolerance policies, are excluding students, especially those that are from high-poverty communities, due to unnecessary removal related to discipline issues (Leung-Gagne et.al, 2022). One of the main arguments supporting the zero-tolerance policy is the idea that it aims to prevent violence by targeting students who are most likely to commit crimes (Casella, 2003). This concept is like other laws such as the minimum sentencing requirements for sex offenders and the community notification laws for convicted sex offenders (Casella, 2003). Furthermore, teachers and administrators have learned to manage unruly behavior by following the remains of zero-tolerance policies (Bowditch, 1993).

A study conducted by Mitchell, Leaf, Bradshaw, and O'Brennan (2012) revealed that ethnicity and gender play a significant role when it comes to the number of discipline referrals made by teachers. While there were no notable differences between White and Black girls, Black

males were more likely to receive referrals than White males. A study conducted by Birchmeier, Nicholson-Crotty, and Valentine (2009) revealed that African American students were more likely to be suspended than their white peers even when they committed the same offense. Other research has also shown that Black students who receive special education are more prone to getting suspended (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Skiba & Peterson, 2002). National data shows that children of color have higher dropout rates than their White peers (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, and Sickmund, 2022).

When the numbers associated with race are examined, students of color are more often the victims or perpetrators of crime, leading to legal issues (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, and Sickmund, 2022). The disproportionate risk of being suspended has been known to contribute to the inequity in the educational outcomes of students of color (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). Data has shown that certain groups, such as students of color, are more likely to be suspended than others, and several factors have been identified as possible causes of the disproportionate number of suspensions for certain students; one of these is the ineffective implementation of disciplinary systems in school (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). Other factors include inequitable resources, inadequate preparation for educators, and harsh discipline policies implemented in place of restorative discipline (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2021).

When we remove our students, we are violating their right, to some extent, to receive a free, equitable, and public education. Ultimately, the more time students spend away from learning, the more they will struggle to meet standards within the classroom. Inadvertently, we are creating another issue where students end up failing courses, losing credit for courses, and falling further behind in meeting graduation requirements. In this era of high-stakes exams,

students need to be in the classroom to receive the appropriate instruction to meet the standards of these exams.

Unfortunately, the same system that designs standardized tests to measure learning is unwittingly part of the problem. Looking at standardized testing data and perhaps even grades are important. However, a more critical piece of data that directly impacts students' learning should be the types of behaviors that students are struggling with within a given campus or classroom. Negative behaviors and using current discipline practices ultimately have students removed from class. The ineffective implementation of the SW-PBIS system and the inability of stakeholders to make sound, disciplinary decisions that involve students often lead to the removal from the classroom.

When looking at the practices of teaching, learning, and keeping students in class from a historical perspective, it is important to consider educational foundations on how we can make education more equitable for all students. Landmark cases such as *Mendez vs. Westminster*, *San Antonio ISD vs. Rodriguez*, as well as *Brown vs. Board of Education* addressed inequities in public education (Valencia, 2005; Sutton, 2008). Yet, within our school buildings, students continue to be marginalized (Morris & Howard, 2010). The phenomenon of otherness created a disadvantage for students who struggle in school, whether it was based on the color of their skin or the money that was being spent on their education (Briscoe, 2005). Historically speaking, the disciplining of students because of inappropriate and disruptive behaviors has been reported since the beginning of the public education system (Morris & Howard, 2003; Morris & Howard, 2010). If the issues students experience in school, including removals due to disciplinary issues, have nothing to do with skin color or funding, then can the problem be our failure in public education to ensure that our disciplinary systems are supporting all learners? Perhaps race and

poverty are related when it comes to students who need more support and have challenges in meeting standards in traditional, disciplined settings.

To fully understand the issues related to the struggles of some of our most challenging students and their experience in the public school system, the role of public education and the way disciplinary systems function must be examined. Specifically, there is a disconnect among educational practitioners when it comes to implementing Restorative Discipline practices and Assertive Discipline practices.

STUDENT BEHAVIOR AND POVERTY

Approximately fourteen percent of children under the age of eighteen were living in poverty in the US in 2019, exceeding the national average in several states (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, and Sickmund, 2022). It is important to note that although overall, there has been a decline in students under the age of eighteen who live in poverty (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, and Sickmund, 2022), there are still clusters of people who live in poverty, such as those living in government housing. Poverty is an issue that is all too common not only in the United States (McLoyd, 1998) but, more importantly, for those of us who work in public education here in the borderland. This directly impacts our students' educational experiences primarily because there is a connection between poverty and less desirable behaviors within the school. Disciplinary issues are more prominent in schools that are located within communities that are high poverty (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Puzzanchera, et al., 2022; Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). This phenomenon may be attributed to several factors that are also related to poverty. Some of our students may not necessarily have one parent in the house to keep an eye on schoolwork because of the necessity to work to provide for the family (McLoyd, 1998; Puzzanchera et al., 2022). Students living with

only their mothers are more likely to live in poverty (Puzzanchera et al., 2022). Furthermore, if parents are working, they are less likely to participate in school functions or other types of school life that support their students as the priority becomes supporting the family. The school, in turn, then becomes the hub for the student which includes providing for socialization.

Poverty has an impact on minority students and must be considered as a cause for undesirable behaviors. Students living in poverty may not be as academically and behaviorally ready to be in a typical class setting daily (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006). Consequently, the removal of students from the campus is shortchanging our vision that all students can learn when they are supported. The lack of proper implementation of effective disciplinary systems by leaders is therefore limiting the learning of all students, perhaps systemically (Annamma, 2018). Although this issue has been widely studied (Bowditch, 1993), educators still do not have a clear solution for students who are experiencing issues with behaviors while at the same time meeting graduation and other accountability standards. It is widely acknowledged that poverty is a factor in juvenile justice reform, but there has been a lack of scholarship on how it influences the experiences of poor kids in the justice system (Puzzanchera et al., 2022; Rhudy & Schuerman, 2009). What we do see, however, is an almost criminalization of poverty when it comes to our students (Annamma, 2018).

Some students have been placed in an alternative disciplinary setting because of drug use. The most common drug that students get expelled for currently is THC in liquid form. The state of Texas has made possession of Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) in liquid form a felony. At least thirty-five students have been expelled from the campus I serve during the 2021-2022 school year. However, at least three of them have reported to their off-campus disciplinary setting. The rest of the students have now become dropouts and are often seen at the park across the street.

Aside from race and family background, the neighborhoods where schools and residences are located can also affect student behavior. For instance, exposure to violence in the area is linked to poor school attendance (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). For example, students living in the neighborhood will probably be receiving a much different education based on their community. If students are being disciplined disproportionately, then logically this is also impacting the quality of education that students are receiving in whatever school they are enrolled in that is near their home.

Another effect of poverty on our students is the level of parenting and involvement in school (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2016). As I mentioned earlier, our working parents are less likely to participate in school and therefore not able to fully support their student and their academics (Sheldon & Epstein, 2002). In some instances, working-class parents and or guardians may hold a different perspective when it comes to school. It is not that parents or guardians do not care about what happens to their students because many do. Many do not have the level of education or the necessary social capital to be able to help their students navigate through school (Lareau, 2015). The working class and the middle class have very different approaches to raising their children (Lareau, 2015). Students are often left unattended because parents/guardians have non-traditional working hours and schedules, so students may have long periods where they are not doing schoolwork or no one is checking to see if schoolwork is getting done (Lareau, 2015). On the other hand, students' White peers disproportionately come from homes where work schedules are flexible, and where there may be at least one parent available to them after school (Daniels, 2002; Lareau, 2015). Their time after school, in contrast, is more structured. Parents/guardians may often ask about school and not only question and have

conversations about schoolwork, but also grades and progress. The social capital of these parents, therefore, is higher because they may have more education (Lareau, 2014).

The campus where I currently serve has identified 80% of the population as living in poverty. Almost all our students are also called “at risk.” High-poverty communities are disproportionately affected by the lack of quality public and private services, such as childcare, schools, and parks. As a result, our students also face higher risks of experiencing life-threatening conditions such as substance abuse and crime (McLoyd, 1998; Bowen & Bowen, 1999). Crime and violence can also have negative effects on the development of young people. They can prevent them from having access to quality learning opportunities and physical safety (Bowen & Bowen, 1999).

“DON’T BLAME COVID!”

It is true that in education, we meet our students as they arrive-no excuses. The mantra, “Don’t blame COVID!” started surfacing a year after we returned from quarantine and noticed that our students were not only behind academically but socially as well. The unprecedented global event that occurred in 2019 put lapses in our systems. Students were not used to being in class the full day and would often sleep or express that they were hungry at different times of the day. Being in front of a screen (or not) to receive instruction changed everyone. The COVID-19 pandemic impacted not only our students but also our society in general (Xiang & Kuwahara, 2020). Various complex issues, such as those of us in public education saw firsthand, must be addressed by policymakers, juvenile justice officials, and members of the public to effectively implement reforms (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, and Sickmund, 2022). Having accurate and timely information about the youth is very important for everyone (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry,

and Sickmund, 2022). The data provided in the report by the National Center for Juvenile Justice (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019) supports that youth crime has risen and will likely continue to rise, particularly after the mandatory quarantine was lifted.

The Coronavirus outbreak that started in 2019 was considered a global threat (Xiang, et al., 2020). Due to the severity of the pandemic, governments around the globe had no choice but to implement school closures. The pandemic has affected over 150 million children and adolescents (Xiang & Kuwahara, 2020). The available research has suggested that the effects of the prolonged school closures may have played a role in students' behaviors once they returned to campus (Xiang & Kuwahara, 2020).

Limited research data is available for me to have a complete discourse on the profound impact the virus had on our communities in our borderland overall. In addition to the data from the 2022 Youth and the Juvenile Justice System National Report (Puzzanchera, Hockenberry, and Sickmund, 2022), what I know about the effects of the pandemic on students are what I have observed as a practitioner in public school and as a human being who remained quarantined and scared for those two years when the whole world stopped. My perceptions were also based on information that I gathered through conversations with my colleagues. When students first returned from the quarantine period, educator observations revealed that something was different. Especially during the first semester of the 2021 school year, locally, the number of fights significantly increased. Incidents of random violence also increased. The undesirable behaviors that our students demonstrated were similar regardless of the part of town where the school campus was located.

Indeed, our students returned to us not only academically underprovided but also addicted to using nicotine and Tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) vaporizers. Of concern was the use of THC in liquid form that students were inhaling using vaporizers. This problem started becoming serious because the penalty for having THC is severe. Currently, possession of THC in liquid form is a felony in the state of Texas; as far as the school setting that is affected by possession of this substance, the discipline recommendation made by administrators in due process hearings for this type of behavior may be expulsion for up to 180 days. The research on these substances is not critical to this study as it is too broad, but I am mentioning it here so that there is an understanding that the use of these substances did lead to some of our students being removed for disciplinary and legal consequences.

The effects of the pandemic on student groups continue to be uneven, according to available, quantified research data (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2021). For instance, the achievement declines were greatest for students of color and those from high-poverty schools (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2021). These findings are an important factor when looking at Los Niños de el Parque since low achievement and discipline are parallel (Anyon, et al., 2018; Vincent & Tobin, 2011, Skiba & Peterson, 2000). Available research suggests that during the 2021-22 school year, student achievement was lower than the typical year. The decline in math was more significant than the decrease in reading (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2021). This data, however, focuses on math and reading only. Historically underperforming groups such as students of color may have been impacted in ways that we at the secondary level may not yet have seen (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2021).

These same groups, when looking at research, not only underperform academically but also tend to have issues with discipline as well (Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2021). Additionally, if discipline issues lead to removal from the educational classroom, what are the long-term effects of these removals? As mentioned earlier, suspensions and expulsions can have long-term effects, as they can lead to lower academic performance and loss of credits toward graduation, as well as a greater likelihood of being entangled in the criminal justice process (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). Compared to their peers who were not suspended or suffered through removal from school, those who were expelled or suspended were more likely to experience negative effects on their academic performance (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022).

HIGH-STAKES EXAMS: A SYSTEM OF SUBORDINATION

The question must be raised here: if we are in the business of improving schools to positively impact student outcomes, are we including discipline data in our improvement efforts? Practitioners have their own opinions on the validity and usefulness of standardized testing, and perhaps it is unfair to use end-of-course exam data as an indicator of improvement, given that these are exams that are given to our students before the end of the school year and before teachers have presented the full curriculum to students. Data that has been analyzed to help students with mastery have some merit. When testing data are used to determine mastery, then the information can inform our public-school stakeholders on where students are struggling and assist in closing the achievement gap as well as provide insight on what areas can be improved instruction overall. Such information can also yield insight into how to best help our English Learner (EL) population when it comes to mastering the English language. The issue here, however, is how do we help students who are not in class. The problem that has been created

here is that if a student cannot master these exams, they will not graduate. Our students have two problems: they are not functioning effectively within a traditional disciplinary system, and as a result, they are being removed from the educational setting. To close the achievement gap, we are opening the discipline gap. The discipline process can be easily carried out since school districts, as well as the state of Texas, have policies that specify the types of misconduct and the consequences for those who violate them (DeMatthews, 2016).

If we are to look at the relationship between quality education and the amount of contact time with a teacher and the curriculum, we can begin to see that there is a correlation when looking at testing data. If you look at the available student testing data, less than fifty percent are successful in their End of Course (EOC) English one and English two exams. Most of the students who are not experiencing success are coded as Limited English Proficient (LEP) and almost all of these same students are of Latino and or Hispanic origin (Texas Education Agency, 2019). As such, the referenced campus has now earned a letter grade of “D” based on current state standards of accountability. The students living in this neighborhood depend on government support—families living below the national poverty level.

In some cases, course curricula are geared to assist students in experiencing success on a standardized test. Not that all learning is geared toward passing these types of high-stakes tests, but our teachers being held accountable for producing positive results on these exams through qualifying student scores is highly stressful for all on campus and district-wide. When students are not in class, teachers cannot assist them, particularly in core classes that are directly linked to standardized testing. Accountability in public education is a reality that educators will never be able to ignore. During the spring semester on any given campus in the state of Texas, most of the time is spent preparing students to take the end-of-course exam for their core classes. Currently,

students are tested on Algebra One, English One and English Two, Biology, and US History. These exams are a graduation requirement for all students. It is a very stressful time on campus, and student discipline is not put on hold even during these months. Students are still removed for disciplinary reasons and teachers lose valuable time, but they could spend on preparing students for their exams.

Research on standardized testing reveals intriguing data related to the validity of standardized tests (Solórzano, 2008). Results are reported for a variety of student categories including special populations such as Hispanic students who make up large percentages of our enrollment here in the borderland. Qualitative research provides an account of the struggles Emergent Bilingual (EB) students face when it comes to standardized tests (Solórzano, 2008). Quantitative research reveals that our students coded as emergent bilinguals or those who are limited English proficient struggle with reading and written portions of these exams (Solórzano, 2008). The research highlights emergent bilingual (EB) students' potential (Solórzano, 2008). What the research does not reveal is how students are impacted by not being in class and not receiving enough instruction to score at least the bare minimum to pass these exams. Some of our EB students may not have mastery of the English language to an extent that they can master these exams; however, the story that is behind the numbers is that if students are not receiving adequate instruction while serving assigned consequences, is this also having an impact on standardized testing scores? The federal government's involvement in public education requires that students' learning be measured in one form, and the current measurement is standardized testing (Solórzano, 2008). Through comprehensive educational policy, educators can remain accountable for student success while concurrently providing a quality education for our students (Solórzano, 2008).

Determining a student's academic achievement and the validity of proficiency tests are some of the key factors that can be considered when it comes to implementing restorative discipline (Solórzano, 2008). Besides these, other factors, such as the availability of accommodations and fairness issues, can also be considered to help improve the quality of education (Solórzano, 2008). Research on standardized testing showed that test score data was not being used to target areas that teachers could target for their students to improve (Solórzano, 2008). The research also revealed that the data from these tests may be flawed because the intent that the given test was meant for may/may not be measuring that intent, therefore, making the test invalid (Solórzano, 2008).

As previously mentioned, school leaders must consistently disaggregate discipline data along with standardized test data. Data collected on student discipline and suspensions disaggregated by race, much like testing data, revealed the complexity of the process and the biases that teachers and administrators carry out when making disciplinary decisions (DeMatthews, 2016). Also mentioned previously, there may be underlying factors that the school is unaware of that our students carry into the school building that also impacts their behaviors. Students often come to our classrooms from other schools and other feeder patterns with insurmountable learning gaps. Student discipline is a complex issue that is constantly evolving due to the various factors that affect it, such as policies, procedures, and systems (DeMatthews, 2016). School leaders within a given campus should consistently look at the types of referrals that are being written as well as the areas where these behaviors are happening, including classrooms and particular teachers. The lack of effective implementation of disciplinary systems for students exhibiting negative behaviors perpetuates their educational obstacles. The challenges presented due to poverty and race further complicate our journey to having equality in our public

education system (National Center for Children in Poverty, 2006). When students are removed for any period, they miss instruction and educational opportunities. As a result, our students are then labeled “At-Risk.”

STUDENT SUPPORT

The system of Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) is based on the idea that creating a supportive environment is the key to a student's life. It is not about addressing the issue of problematic behavior per se, but rather focusing on the issue of how to create a positive environment for students within the school context (Carr & Horner, 2007). This type of support for students is needed since not all students succeed within one given system. The public school system has, unfortunately, through systemic failures, excluded students in general from receiving a free, equitable, and public education (Anyon, et al., 2018; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). Outdated and ineffective disciplinary strategies do not change student negative behaviors but rather ensure that students do not fully participate in learning when they are removed from the classroom setting (Alvarez, 2021; Anyon, et al., 2018; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). The number of students being suspended increased significantly from 1973 to 2010 (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). During the early 2010s, the suspension rate reached a peak. From 2009 to 2010, the suspension rate went up to 7%. During the 2017-2018 school year, the suspension rate decreased to 5% (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). This drop was attributed to the efforts of the Obama Administration to reduce the number of suspensions and the effects of exclusionary discipline policies (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022). The 2017-2018 school year's suspension rate was higher than the rates experienced during the 1970s and 1980s (Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022).

Researchers argue that our representation of the experiences of marginalized groups should exclusively prioritize the perspectives of those oppressed (Anyon, et al., 2018; Briscoe, 2005; Vincent & Tobin, 2011), and based on my own experiences as a practitioner and as a researcher, I can assert that these observations are valid. By creating the phenomenon of otherness, or “those kids,” students in our region have been systemically marginalized through ineffective disciplinary actions by the systems set up in schools (Anyon, et al., 2018). The removal of students from school for minor infractions is carried out in hopes that the removal will teach the student a lesson, but has compliance through castigation worked? Our systems end up preventing students from obtaining instruction from a licensed teacher (Bowditch, 1993; Mitchell & Bradshaw, 2012). Consequently, the more you remove a student from school, the greater the student’s chances of not completing. Students who end up being pushed out of school and not completing, more likely than not, end up in the school-to-prison pipeline (Nocotella et al., 2014). So why, then, if we see that there are issues with our disciplinary systems, do we keep removing the same students from school? This perhaps is a facetious question since those of us working in public education work under similar systems of discipline. However, our marginalized students, therefore, may begin to develop prisoner identities within our systems that encourage oppression (Annamma, 2017). Our students who struggle with disciplinary challenges, therefore, are forced to navigate a disciplinary system that parallels the prison system, which in and of itself, encourages oppression (Annamma, 2017). Zero-tolerance policies usually impact students who are most likely to be affected by these policies since they are already struggling with discipline (Casella, 2003). Included are our students with limited resources and living in poverty, those with limited education, and those who have limited opportunities and or do not know how to navigate social systems (Casella, 2003).

SCHOOL-WIDE (SW) PBIS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

The Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) system provides a framework for students to learn behaviors that are more appropriate in the classroom. The reason for providing support for students is to create a more orderly environment for learning not only within the classroom but also schoolwide. School-wide PBIS (SW-PBIS) provides the necessary support for students struggling with behavior. Theoretically, when students are better behaved, it allows teachers to be able to deliver curriculum without the negative behaviors interfering with the learning.

Terms such as character education and social-emotional literacy are associated with the methodology of SW-PBIS. The system cannot be standalone and must be coupled with SEL as well as Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, as will be discussed later. Doing so will ensure that racial discipline disparities in school are also addressed (Anyon, et al., 2018). The common theme within the SW-PBIS is the importance of developing social-emotional skills to improve student learning and functioning (Murray, Hurley, & Ahmed, 2015). Positive behavior support is in and of itself a system that aims to help individuals with challenging behavior. When implemented effectively, these types of school and classroom organizational practices successfully can have a positive effect on overall student learning because the focus will no longer be on redirecting disruptive behaviors and student removal from the learning environment but rather on effective teaching and learning. Studies have shown that several factors, such as social behavior and academic achievement, are related to one another (Algozzine, Wang & Violette, 2011). In addition, programs designed to improve behavior, such as SW-PBIS in conjunction with social-

emotional competencies, when successfully implemented, improve the academic performance of students (Algozzine, Wang & Violette, 2011).

The SW-PBIS system is a school-wide prevention method that is currently being used in schools across the country. It aims to reduce the number of disruptive behaviors among students (OSEP, 2020). The goal of the SW-PBIS system is to help teachers improve their ability to motivate and inspire their students (Bradshaw, Koth, et al., 2009). The system has been developed through various academic disciplines, such as education, sociology, and psychology (Bradshaw, Koth, et al., 2009). Through data-based accountability and modeling, schools can effectively address the behavioral challenges of their students. This method offers a logical approach to delivering effective discipline practice for all students on campus. (Park & Lynch, 2014; Scheuermann, Duchaine, Bruntmyer, Wang, Nelson, & Lopez, 2013). The multi-tiered approach of SW-PBIS allows schools to address the various dynamics within their school. When used in the context of the whole school, it can help address the social-emotional needs of students (Carr, et al., 2002; Horner, et al., 2005; Sugai & Horner, 2006). The broad goal of the SW-PBIS system, therefore, is to improve a given campus' cultural health. It aims to reinforce proper classroom and overall school behavior. The system also supports the implementation of intervention programs (which will also be discussed in this section) that are designed to address the behavioral challenges of students. These are often implemented in different parts of the classroom and the campus.

THE PBIS STRUCTURE

A visual framework for the SW-PBIS program primarily consists of three tiers (Horner & Sugai, 2015). I mentioned previously that the goal of the SW-PBIS system is to teach more appropriate behaviors to students to maintain a sustainable learning environment. Therefore, campus stakeholders must teach the appropriate behaviors for the system to work.

The first tier of the SW-PBIS system focuses on the expectations of students. The process requires schools to explicitly teach these expectations and provide incentives to build intrinsic motivation for students who follow the pre-established rules. The first tier is considered the most effective part of the SW-PBIS system, and this is because the entire campus should be able to function within that first tier. Tiers two and three apply to a smaller percentage of students. The reason for this is that as practitioners move their methods toward the peak of the pyramid, the interventions and supports become more prescriptive. To provide an example of this, I have included a visual framework for the SWPBIS pyramid below. Thus, the first tier is an area where all students should be functioning within the school setting and when implemented effectively, it requires schools to clearly define the consequences of inappropriate behavior and provide incentives for those who follow the rules. This tier also requires schools to provide visual representations that contain the school's values and SW-PBIS guidelines. The entire campus uses these materials to reinforce the expectations of their students; these can be placed in spaces within the campus.

The second tier focuses on students who are struggling with the standard interventions. It also requires schools to provide additional support and feedback from their parents. The second tier focuses on a smaller group of students who may be struggling with behavior. The tier is more prescribed and focused.

The third and final tier offers intensive intervention for students who perhaps need support from agencies outside of the campus. What type of support intervention could include entities that could assist students with issues dealing with home, health, and mental issues, and in some cases, law enforcement officials? The third tier focuses on the needs of our at-risk population. Perhaps some basic needs are not being fulfilled in the students' lives that practitioners may have difficulty addressing due to specific training by other professionals that is simply not readily available at the campus level. This tier uses a variety of strategies and interventions to help our students manage sometimes severe behavioral problems the students are experiencing. These behavior concerns include the use of comprehensive assessments such as a physician or other medical or psychological professional can administer, as well as strategies and incentives for effective behavior that often do not include negative consequences (Horner & Sugai, 2015).

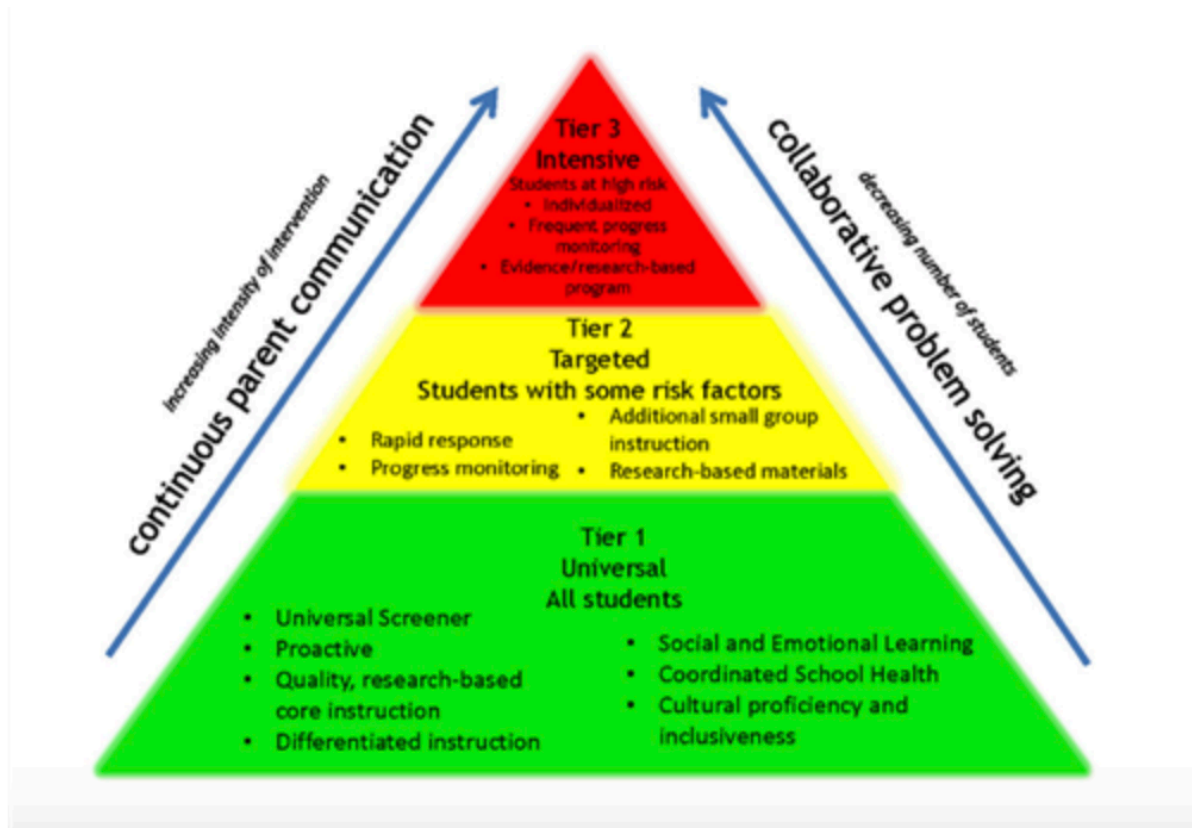
Possibly the most difficult aspect of successfully implementing Restorative Discipline within the campus is buy-in from the stakeholders. This could be due to different philosophies of educating and disciplining children. Some of these philosophies have been carried over with the professional staff from their own public school experiences and what we perceive as "the right way of doing things." Another challenge in implementing the SW-PBIS system is being able to consistently sustain the components of the system year after year well as analyzing discipline data consistently and providing feedback to the campus. Sustaining and remaining focused on carrying out the campus SW-PBIS is crucial for evaluating its success (Horner, 2000). As mentioned previously, data must be collected to identify reoccurring negative behaviors as well as places and spaces within the campus where these behaviors are occurring. This process involves collecting data to ensure that school personnel are using the framework in the best

possible way (Sugai & Horner, 2002). A tool used to accomplish data collection is called the Tiered Fidelity Inventory (TFI) (Sugai & Horner, 2002). The data that is collected through the TFI helps campuses (as well as school districts) measure the effectiveness of their restorative discipline systems. The tool can also help leaders develop a consistent and reliable set of behavior measurements (Sugai & Horner, 2002).

The success of the SW-PBIS system can also be linked to the level of buy-in from school officials and the support provided by the implementation process. Buy-in refers to the percentage of staff who participate and actively implement and record accurate data. A high buy-in level is also linked to the successful implementation of the SW-PBIS strategy. Schools must maintain an eighty percent buy-in to ensure that the program is working properly (Sugai & Horner, 2002). Other factors such as the support provided by the school's leadership, teachers, and staff are also considered when it comes to determining SW-PBIS effectiveness (Sugai & Horner, 2002). You can find a visual representation of the PBIS system below. Perhaps the most critical component, not easily apparent, is the human element through the form of relationships.

FIGURE 1

PBIS VISUAL REPRESENTATION



PBIS structure illustrates universal, SW interventions moving toward more intensive interventions.

I do want to clarify that the campus I am serving currently does have a system of restorative discipline that I have identified as SW-PBIS. However, the system intersects with current laws that also affect students and what administrators are supposed to do when disciplinary issues arise.

MENTORSHIP

Teacher training programs offer a variety of methods for teaching, classroom management, and data analysis. However, there is limited pedagogy when it comes to learning to be a mentor. Up and down the educational spectrum, from the youngest students to academia, the workforce, and beyond, we all need mentors. Many of us right now can name at least one person whom we consider a mentor. An area that needs to be further refined is the area of mentoring students. School reform requires a continued commitment to establishing mentorship programs for teachers (Vierstraete, 2005). Mentorship for teachers is designed to foster a special relationship with an individual or individuals who have already been in the profession as well as to help them navigate through career systems and processes that they are not familiar with (Vierstraete, 2005). A good mentor should be honest, compassionate, trustworthy as well as understanding (Kuperminc et al., 2020; Vierstraete, 2005). This component is critical training that new teachers should receive as part of the other components required to become a teacher. Much like teachers, students also require this type of connection to help them through school. Additionally, student mentors should be willing to share ideas to help students through difficulties they encounter in school. Through mentoring, individuals can help promote healthy social interactions and develop positive peer relationships (Kuperminc et al., 2020). Further, mentors may also assist in helping solve conflicts by helping students understand other students' perspectives through mediation (Kuperminc et. al., 2020). As a student in public education, having a mentor or peer mentor just may be just what is needed to think through difficult scenarios, educational decisions, or decisions in general and perhaps avoid the negative consequences experienced at school as well as in life.

CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT

When students are asked why they are not able to follow the classroom rules, a standard answer that I hear is, “It’s boring!” or “The teacher doesn’t like me!” Student academic success is dependent on creating and nurturing an organized and orderly environment for students to be able to remain in class (Algozzine et al., 2011; Carr & Horner, 2007; Pas et al., 2014). A school's instructional program is not one-size-fits-all. Instead, programs use a variety of approaches to teach students based on their individual learning needs and intellectual development. In the same way, discipline and behavior should be taught according to the child's unique abilities and background (Chin et al. 2012).

Disruptive behavior in schools contributes to the development of a negative environment that prevents students from learning. It also contributes to the negative interactions between the students and their peers (Epstein et al., 2008). Due to the implementation of federal laws such as No Child Left Behind, schools and districts are under immense pressure to improve their performance. Districts are also required to produce data that show that their students are learning (Klehr 2009). There is a lot of frustration when teaching students appropriate behaviors, such as required through the restorative practice of PBIS/SEL programs, particularly among classroom teachers (Bradshaw et al., 2009). Teachers are already overwhelmed with preparing students for standardized testing, making sure that students get through the curriculum at a rigorous level and having the students perform at a satisfactory level on state exams. Teachers are also charged with keeping up with parental contacts, which is essential. Due to these constraints, many schools and states have zero-tolerance policies, which are designed to punish students without considering their circumstances (Casella, 2003; Klehr, 2009). Unfortunately, implementing zero tolerance has caused controversy and data suggests that these types of systems are ineffective (American

Psychological Association, 2008; Casella, 2003). The goal of a successful disciplinary system such as a SW-PBIS system is to ensure that a safe school climate is maintained while avoiding policies and procedures that can reduce the opportunity for students to learn.

As I had previously suggested, this is where our focus on an overall SW-PBIS begins and ends: in the classroom. To sustain a system such as SW-PBIS the effort must be with all stakeholders, yet there also needs to be a focus on the classroom, since this is where we provide instruction for our students. The most successful schools have strong relationships between their teachers and students (Anyon, et al., 2018; Li et al., 2011). These relationships are formed on the idea that each student is an individual and that they genuinely care for them. Thus, an effective teacher is only as good as the tools she uses to manage her classroom. Of course, it also includes the relationship between the teacher and the student. It also extends to the relationship between the school itself, stakeholders, and the level of genuine engagement of the students in their environment (Li, et al., 2011). Unfortunately, it can be hard to do so without an organized environment. According to research, teachers can help improve the classroom environment by implementing effective classroom management strategies and interventions (Epstein, et al., 2008).

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

Without an environment conducive to learning, it can be a challenge for teachers to lead effective lessons and help students who are struggling. It is widely believed that the environment in which kids live and attend school can affect their academic performance (Epstein, et al., 2008; Bowen & Bowen, 1999). Although educators try to deter extreme behaviors such as violence, unfortunately, it does occur on campuses (Casella, 2003). Some campuses consist of thousands

of students in large buildings that can create environments prone to confrontations between students and sometimes adults (Casella, 2003). A well-designed discipline policy can help prevent these types of confrontations from happening in the first place. It can also help prevent students from being pushed out of school and committing crimes in the future (Casella, 2003). Violent behavior can also affect the learning process by disrupting the routines of the teachers (Bowen & Bowen, 1999). The quality of academic instruction and the behavior of students are also factors that can affect the academic performance of students (Algozzine et al., 2011). Having a comprehensive and effective behavior management system is very important to ensure that all students are learning and performing well academically (Algozzine et al., 2011; Carr & Horner, 2007; Casella, 2003). I believe that this is where we begin as educators to set up students for failures that ultimately lead them to drop out of school (Casella, 2003).

The idea of restorative discipline practices should always be a campus-wide endeavor. Zero-tolerance policies, however, are not effective and must be tailored to the individual student (Casella, 2003). These policies are commonly used by our schools to discipline students for misbehavior by scaring them into compliance (Casella, 2003). Despite the pressures, there is still a consensus that schools should be safe places for children, particularly within the classroom (Klehr, 2009). The classroom is an essential part of the entire campus and should be a place where the most focused restorative practices are taking place.

It is widely believed that having strong social and emotional skills can help children perform better in school (Jones & Bouffard, 2012). These skills can also help our students develop positive relationships with their peers and adults within the school setting. Aside from being a major part of our student's development, our schools are also a context for developing social and emotional skills due to the amount of time we get to work with our students. Social

and emotional skills are commonly referred to as SELs (Social Emotional Learning). They can be defined in various ways, such as the importance of relationships, citizenship, and schooling (Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) skills can start in the early years and continue throughout our students' lives (Jones & Bouffard, 2012; Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004). The concept of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is not a new one, but it has been brought to the forefront by federal legislation over the years (Howard, Berkowitz, & Schaeffer, 2004). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) requires schools to provide a well-rounded education that prepares students for success in life and careers. To address this issue, schools have various programs aimed at addressing various social-emotional issues (Greenberg, Weissberg, O'Brien, Zins, Fredricks, Resnik, & Elias, 2003). SEL is the missing piece of a well-rounded education (Elias, 2006), as it links academic knowledge with a set of skills that are important to success in various facets of life (Elias, 2013; Jones & Bouffard, 2012).

The campus where I am currently serving as an administrator has an SEL component within the SW-PBIS system. There is a curriculum and training that we offer for stakeholders on campus that provides strategies for the classroom. However, these lessons are only expected to roll out at least once a week. Some practitioners do make SEL an intentional part of the learning in their given classroom, but this is not a consistent practice. Although academic skills are important and should go without saying, social-emotional skills are also required to be continuously developed to be effective in the school environment (Elias, 2013; Jones & Bouffard, 2012). This is because these skills must be continuously reinforced as various teaching opportunities arise as is the practice on most campuses. There is not, to my knowledge, a testable, state-sponsored exam that measures the level of mastery of SELs by our students.

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

It may be true that today's learners need information much quicker and in better packaging than traditional classrooms. Not to say that having a traditional classroom with rows of student desks all aligned and facing the front is effective for some students. As I have mentioned throughout this study, building relationships with students is perhaps the most important ingredient in teaching and learning.

When lessons fully engage students in the learning, they are less likely to exhibit negative behaviors that could lead to a referral and possibly removal from the learning environment. Hands-on learning or Project-Based Learning (PBL) is a type of lesson that requires full involvement by the student and is attached to a project usually that is carried out in groups of students. Teachers can now focus on implementing and executing effective, rigorous lessons and have the time to work with students individually if their focus is not on getting students to behave. Furthermore, when students are engaged and meaningful learning, the likelihood of their inappropriate behaviors leading to a discipline referral or minimized. Involving our students in diverse types of lessons, such as Project-Based Learning (PBL) or any other hands-on type of lesson, also raises the level of student engagement. Higher levels of student engagement can help deter inappropriate behaviors (Algozzine et al., 2011). Because not being engaged in meaningful learning creates educational gaps, PBL can offer some solutions for keeping our students in class and engaged. With this, practitioners are reducing the probability of students becoming dropouts. Students learn best when they can put into practice what they learn.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the research methodology for this qualitative research study that aims to tell the stories of selected participants who may have been impacted by discipline systems and who now find themselves in a situation where dropping out was a viable option for them. The primary research question guiding this study is:

What are the lived experiences of students who were removed from school through existing discipline practices, and what were the causes that led to them being ejected from school?

Qualitative methodology, including Testimonio and the Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework, are discussed in this chapter to contribute to a more effective understanding of how to improve the disciplinary practices of schools that do not work for our minority students. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the theoretical perspective used to guide this research to demonstrate the relationship between racism and race and the manner students are disciplined (or not) through existing disciplinary strategies and systems. The theory is used as a lens when looking at the interviews or testimonios that were conducted with students who unfortunately were removed from the educational setting.

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

For this research, I used qualitative methodology. This type of research is valid because it will allow me to focus on a deeper understanding of social phenomena (Toye, 2015). The concept of qualitative research involves asking individuals to share their experiences so that researchers can gain a deeper understanding of how they experience the world around them. This type of research allows us to in a sense empathize with individuals using their own words which we are trying to capture through writing (Toye, 2015). This methodology allowed me to include observations as an educational practitioner and interviews with ex-students who have been removed from school and are now coded as dropouts. This type of research allowed me to analyze disciplinary practices within the public education system and the effect these policies have on students through the perspective of the participants. Using qualitative research, a collaboration between myself as a researcher and my participants was formed. It allowed both of us to benefit from this partnership. Aside from being able to provide a deeper understanding of how these now ex-students are experiencing the world, this type of research also challenged our own beliefs.

Qualitative research can be conducted through various methods such as focus groups, document studies, and interviews (Busetto et al., 2020). Field notes and audio recordings are then transcribed into reports and transcripts (Busetto et al., 2020). These types of artifacts can then be used to enhance the quality of the research (Busetto et al., 2020). For this research, I focused on interviewing participants using a semi-structured interview methodology. The goal of this type of interview format was not only to have participants more at ease but also to build trust and rapport. My goal here was to establish a way for educational champions to look at the

disciplinary practices of schools using restorative discipline theory and reform existing systems for the students' sake.

CRITICAL RACE THEORY (CRT)

The concept of the Critical Race Theory (CRT) perspective has been used in education to effectively analyze and reveal the various forms of racism in schools, particularly within disciplinary systems and practices used to achieve subordination (Amiot, Mayer-Glenn, & Parker, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). However, CRT has been underutilized as a tool within school leadership practice (Amiot et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2002). Therefore, the failure of public education to educate our students overall has been identified as one of the biggest causes of racial conflict in the country (Amiot et al., 2020; Metze, 2012). It has been shown that the past has gradually evolved into more imperceptible expressions of inferiority and superiority (haves and have-nots) when it comes to oppressive conditions in education (Metze, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Yosso, 2002). The increasing use of CRT in education has led to the development of an interpretive lens that can be used to address the various forms of racism in schools including discipline (Amiot et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Critical Race Theory has been used by scholars to analyze the various forms of oppression and subordination that people of color experience in the education field (Amiot et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This theoretical framework is an ideal tool for exposing and disrupting the conditions that are affecting the lives of people of color in the US (Amiot et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

To better understand how the Critical Race Theory works in the public education system when it comes to discipline, I have listed down five key tenants (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001) of this framework:

- (1) the intersectionality of racism and race relations with other forms of oppression;
- (2) the challenge posed by dominant ideologies, the interconnectedness of racism and race, and the subordination of these two elements with other oppression forms;
- (3) the commitment to social justice;
- (4) the importance of experiential learning;
- (5) the development of social awareness and critical thinking through interdisciplinary methods.

These tenets help explain how various forms of oppression, such as gender and class, intersect with racism and race and how these experiences must be studied to understand the lives of individuals of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT challenges Eurocentric and dominant beliefs about race neutrality, fairness, and objectivity (Amiot, Mayer-Glenn, & Parker, 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Using the Critical Race Theory, educational researchers and school leaders can identify and explain the role that racism and race play in the education system and within institutions that affect the outcomes of our students of color. This framework allows for conducting a comprehensive analysis of the various forms of subordination that people of color experience (Amiot et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

TESTIMONIO

“Not everything that can be counted counts and not everything that counts can be counted.”

Albert Einstein

Stories tend to outlast numbers in the minds of everyday individuals. Therefore, I will also use a qualitative methodology known as *Testimonio* to provide an account of the personal lived experience of students who were removed from the main campus due to disciplinary reasons (Bernal, et al., 2012; Smith & Osbourn, 2015). Testimonio is writing that involves drawing on personal experiences that use narrative to express an urgent voice that in some manner has been silenced or de-platformed (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). The concept of Testimonio methodology varies depending on the type of writing and it can take many forms (Albert and Couture, 2014). Unlike oral history or memoirs, Testimonio requires participants to reflect on their own experiences. This type of research also engages both the listener and the individual (Albert and Couture, 2014; Delgado, Bernal et al., 2012,).

Scholars believe that the Latin American version of the Testimonio is like the North American memoir (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). The methodology's main feature is a discourse of solidarity, which is why it has been regarded as a literary mode and an integral part of the ongoing resistance movements in third-world countries (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). Although it is hard to pinpoint the exact moment when the Testimonio was first established, the methodology has been sanctioned and inscribed since the 1970s due to the various movements that have been carried out against imperialism (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). Testimonio, therefore, is utilized to tell the stories of the ongoing struggle for the rights of people of color to education (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012).

This type of discourse is different from other forms of writing, such as oral history narration, in-depth interviews, and prose (Albert and Couture, 2014; Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). This methodology can be presented as a memoir, oral history, song lyrics, or prose. This type of writing is often referred to as a political and conscientic reflection (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). Although Testimonio does not always remain in its oral state, personal experiences can be taken as recorded, transcribed, or written in various forms, such as diaries, letters, and journals. What is certain is that this type of writing is not made intimate or hidden (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). The rationale in utilizing Testimonio was not only to bring attention to a particular issue or point of view, in this research, it was the students' accounts, but it also aimed to create an urgent call for change in the way schools manage their discipline procedures.

Unlike quantitative research methodologies, Testimonio does not attempt to produce unbiased knowledge. Instead, the Testimonio methodology attempts to capture the collective experience of people, particularly in this study, students impacted by disciplinary systems in each school now sharing a common struggle of being out of the classroom (Delgado & Bernal, 2002). This methodology is also differentiated from other forms of storytelling as it aims to shed light on a wrong. This type of discourse is different from other forms of writing, such as oral history narration, in-depth interviews, and prose (Blackmer Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012; Delgado, et al., 2012). The wrong that unfolded through discourse is perhaps the unintentional marginalization of public education students who were removed because of the disciplinary systems that are in place at a given school. My interest in using this methodology has much to do with all the children that I have worked with for the past twenty-six years of my career.

Scholars generally define a *testimonio* as an account of a person's experience that is told in the first person (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). This type of narrative is typically told from a narrator's point of view and is influenced by the experiences that he or she has had, which is why I decided to include my own experiences as delineated earlier in the research. My own experiences as a practitioner as well as a niño de el parque, bring another dimension to this research. As a sort of protagonist or witness, I retold students' life experiences and events (Albert and Couture, 2014). What I wanted to focus on, however, was centered on my students' own experiences. Thus, my use of the Testimonio methodology was aimed at providing a voice for these children's stories.

Additionally, Testimonio is a process that combines historical and political histories to create a story of social change (Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012; Saavedra, 2010). The methodology aims to stimulate dialogue about oppression and bring about positive change (Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012). As such, the main concern of the Testimonio methodology is to give a voice to the students who are systemically silenced (Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012; Saavedra, 2010) when they are no longer a part of the school due to disciplinary reasons and allowing for them to reclaim authority. I desire to provide disentangling questions about legitimate truth (Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona, 2012; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012)— as will be the case of this study; to me, it is the students' truth which I want to celebrate and publicize.

The research into the problem of students being removed from the educational setting for disciplinary reasons and what the effects of these removals cause in our participants' lives will be conducted using qualitative methodology and the use of Testimonio. It is important to be able to gather information and retell this information in story form so that the students' experiences

within the public school system are told not only colorfully but at the same time accurately. The data that will be collected will be documented as interviews that will be conducted with both ex-students and participants who attended public educational campuses located in an unidentified region of the city. To gather reliable information from participant interviews, it is important that as the researcher, I rebuild the trust that may have been lost because of negative experiences in school.

PARTICIPANTS

In this study, I interviewed students who have been removed from school due to suspension or expulsion. I collected their *testimonios*. The participants, or *Los Niños de El Parque*, were offered the choice to remain anonymous and to be identified by a pseudonym of their choice. All participants were former students who are now considered by the school system as dropouts and have not been enrolled in any public school for more than one to two years. My goal was to interview male and female students to compare possible similarities and differences in their experiences. My aim was to gather their stories to provide the participants with a voice. Through a method known as *testimonio*, which is a storytelling technique, I hoped to gather their stories to create a more accurate representation of the student's experiences by not only annotating their experiences but also recreating their voices through writing (Saavedra, 2010). The overall goal of this project is to provide a voice to the students who may have been unjustly suspended or expelled. Additionally, I interviewed a total of three students who were in the role of *testimoniolistas*.

THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Qualitative research is focused on understanding the human experience (Holloway & Jefferson, 2000; Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020; Dilley, 2004). Through this process, I will apply the findings to the study of student removals from the instructional setting due to disciplinary reasons and document each participant's perspective and how they make sense of what is going on in their world currently (Dilley, 2004). It is not just necessarily about collecting the facts from the participants. I also need to make sure that I understand what message they are trying to convey to me through their stories.

Because the participants are technically considered dropouts, a site that is away from the campus was ideal for interviews with the participants. The park across the street from the campus was proposed to the participants as a possible site to conduct the interviews. All interviews were limited to no more than one hour. I conducted three separate interviews with each of the participants. The interview questions were adapted with written permission from The University of Texas at El Paso professor Dr. Teresa Cortez titled, *Portraits of Hispanic Females Who Have Returned to Complete Their High School Diplomas After Dropping Out* (Cortez, 2002). The questionnaires she developed are comprehensive and allow students to share information about themselves, their family, familial education, and their friends. The questionnaires also allow the participants to reflect on their educational issues which are delineated from the elementary to current school years. The questions allowed me to gain insight into feelings and attitudes about work and if the participants would make different choices given the opportunity. Interviews were recorded using a cell phone application named Otter. AI. The recordings were not accessible to anyone since the app and cell phone itself are password protected.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Due to the nature of the research and personal topics that may arise, I am aware of ethical issues when it comes to conducting interviews, particularly with ex-students. Gathering the students' testimonios through interviews required first to ensure that los niños were informed of my study and its purpose (Huante-Tzintzun, 2020; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). To avoid violating the participant's rights, and although the participants are no longer students, I provided them with a consent form in English and Spanish, and gained written consent from them to participate in the study (Huante-Tzintzun, 2020; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). This form made it clear that the participants had the right to refuse to participate in the interview at any time. The form also informed participants that they could remain anonymous and or use a pseudonym of their choice. In this study, none of the participants chose to reveal their identities. What this created was a much more comfortable setting where the participants shared their stories comfortably. All chose pseudonyms as stated.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

Interviews were recorded using the Otter.AI application, and data was stored and secured using password protection. The participants were interviewed once and the interviews were untimed. The interview process allowed me to analyze what the participants shared and if recurring themes, phrases, and ideas arose amongst the participants' responses to the interview questions (Huante-Tzintzun, 2020; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012; Taherdoost, 2016).

Coding and analyzing Testimonio data involved a qualitative approach (Huante-Tzintzun, 2020; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). This allowed for the respect and personal nature of the

student narratives to come through in writing (Huante-Tzintzun, 2020; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). Before transcribing, I listened to the narratives multiple times and immersed myself in the information I collected. After I listened several times, I took notes on the audio recordings and transcribed the interviews into written text. I ensured to include participants' verbal and non-verbal cues such as pauses, emotions, and shifts in tone, which was extremely challenging. Using the data I collected, I then began to group similar codes and arranged these into broader themes in order to identify relationships and connections among them (Huante-Tzintzun, 2020; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). When analyzing and interpreting the niños' interviews, I examined how their individual stories were connected to broader context, cultural nuances, and underlying meanings (Huante-Tzintzun, 2020; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). I examined how each of the participant's stories connected to the broader narratives of oppression, resistance, identity, and resilience (Briscoe, 2005; Huante-Tzintzun, 2020; Reyes & Curry Rodriguez, 2012). As mentioned in Chapter One, I reflected on my own experiences in school. The purpose behind this was so that I could acknowledge my positionality and its influence on my interpretation of the students' narratives. The result was narratives that honored the voices and experiences of Los Niños de el Parque.

RESEARCH SETTING

My position as a school administrator and researcher offers privilege and power over the participants. Some may have been reluctant to speak to me due to a lack of trust in not only me but perhaps the school itself, and depending on their experiences, adults in general. As an administrator, I began to take note that some of the children, when removed from school, would never report to alternative school settings, but rather, experience being pushed out of school and

accepting it as a viable option. Even students who were removed for short periods sometimes did not return to school. Once students were removed from the educational setting for disciplinary reasons at my current campus, they were often seen walking down the street next to the campus. The students that were removed walked from where they reside a few miles away. The area where most students we serve is a multi-acre, facility with many of the apartments funded by our government. Others do live in the houses surrounding the campus. Of course, students walk because they do not have the means to purchase a car. If there is a car available for the household, it is used to get to work. Our families do not have a lot of disposable income to be able to afford a car for their students. Only twenty-three parking permits have been issued historically. This housing area is at least three miles away from the campus. Yet, the students make their way to where they used to be enrolled perhaps to still feel like they are a part of something related to the campus. Certainly, walking from their home to the campus leaves our students open to negative experiences on the street. The students, however, were placed in an alternative disciplinary campus. Students who were recommended to the alternative campus did not see attending alternative as an option and do not, in my estimation, have the support at home to encourage them to enroll in these alternative campus settings. I am familiar with the students because I am responsible for disciplining most of them. I am familiar with which campus they were supposed to report to due to expulsion.

CHAPTER 4

PRESENTATION OF THE DATA

The interviews were conducted at a park that is located across the street from the campus where the participants were all students at one time. Each of the three participants agreed to meet here. All the participants were seen at the park when they should have been in classes. They all saw the park as a place where they could remain connected to school and friends.

LOS NIÑOS DE EL PARQUE

For the study, I interviewed three individuals who provided testimonios about how they were expelled or suspended and how they left the school where they were students and never returned for different reasons. All three students identified as Latinx, and all three participants experienced disciplinary issues to some extent. Using Testimonio methodology, I was able to document their unique perspective on their school life. When I first spoke with each of them, they were a bit apprehensive. I had to explain that I was conducting a study and that I wanted to include them and their story in one of the chapters. The participants, who are identified as los niños de el parque in this study, all chose to remain anonymous, and all provided a pseudonym that they chose. Moving forward, the participants will be referred to as Casper, Mel, and Yaya. They are all former students who were enrolled at the campus situated next to the park and who at some point during their enrollment, dropped out and were not reenrolled in any public schools for various amounts of time. They were all coded as Special Populations. That is, students who are coded as being a Special Population, and need extra support whether it be through language or other accommodations. The students were coded, “ESL,” “At-Risk,” and “Special Education or 504.” I must include here that I believe that the systems we create often place our students in

these special categories. One male and two female students agreed to grant me interviews. The selection was done in this manner to determine if there were any similarities or differences between their experiences.

I used the Testimonio methodology to gather the students' stories, give them a voice, and provide them with an opportunity to share their thoughts. By utilizing this storytelling technique, I was able to capture their experiences and provide them with an opportunity to write their memoirs. Through the testimonies of these students, I was able to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences, and therefore, their stories became much more than a retelling of how they dropped out of school.

CASPER

CETENTA Y DOS

Casper was a student that I often saw as I walked through the hallways of my campus. He liked walking beside me and talking to me about random events going on in his life. One day, he told me to call him, “cetenta y dos” or seventy-two. I remember that day he was wearing his JROTC uniform, polished shoes, and a new haircut. “Cetenta y dos mister, ok?” I laughed and asked him why that number. He replied that it was his father’s favorite and that now he wanted to be referred to by that number. He was planning on getting a tattoo on his forearm of that number. “Ok, cetenta y dos. You got it,” I replied. About a month passed, and Casper one day told me he was dropping and heading to Houston. I told him to be careful and to get a hold of me at the school if he ever needed anything. I never saw him again.

“Today is Friday, and I am interviewing a participant who wishes to go by the name "Casper." Casper previously attended a high school in El Paso and has kindly agreed to share information with me. The questions I asked him were open-ended, allowing him to answer in any way he felt comfortable. To maintain anonymity, Casper's appearance and age will remain our secret and therefore unknown to anyone. I asked Casper if he was ready for the first question and reiterated that he felt at ease as his identity was protected.

FAMILY

As I began to ask questions, I reiterated that I had known him for some time, and I reminded him that I would remain the same person as he knew in school, but that now I would be simply writing this chapter that would focus on him. Casper recalls dropping out his junior year as a seventeen-year-old and that he is now nineteen years old. He informed me that he had fallen

behind on his credits. He expressed that he has no children. He then begins to tell me about his family. His family unit consists of one brother, his father, and his mother,

“I have one brother but he's special needs. The one you've met. Okay, that one time, and just my mom; mom's at work. My pops is at work. And I just got out of work.”

I am reminded that I had met his family at some point while he was still enrolled in school. He explained to me more about his day and how he had just left work before this interview. He continues to tell me about his family and how his mother was married while she was still in high school, she got pregnant and then dropped out. He tells me that he does not know if his father finished school. He then reminds me that who he refers to as “dad” is his stepfather,

“Don't know if he went to school. My dad didn't. My real dads. He passed, right. I don't know about my stepdad. He passed away on December 11, 2013.” He proceeds to show me a tattoo of the number seventy-two on his forearm. He tells me that was his father's favorite number.

FRIENDS

I then proceeded to ask Casper about his friends. He refers to friends he knows are now enrolled and that he keeps contact with them. He tells me that the friends he had when he was enrolled, all graduated. Although his friends all graduated, he tells me, they all still have similar jobs to him and are not enrolled in college courses. He remembers his friends were not involved in gangs or having many issues in school except for getting into fights at the park.

“They are different than me in that way,” he tells me, “well, for example, if they would fight I would just be there recording just for safety, and yeah, but then I wouldn't be the

one to do anything. I would instigate the problem. Yeah, I would just hang out with the wrong crowd.”

He clarified that what he meant by the wrong crowd was students who would fight and smoke marihuana, but that he did not feel like they influenced him negatively. He stated that he would be the one to influence them to fight or as he stated “instigate” to record the fighting. I then asked him about dropping out,

“You said you dropped out of school when you were seventeen? Did your friends have any influence on you dropping out?” He identifies a reason for him not finishing school, “No, It was a job I had.”

I asked Casper when he realized he was having problems in school and he replied, “Since the first grade; it's since my dad passed everything has not been the same since third grade,” and refers to himself as, “...a slacker.” I reply, “Well, what makes you say you're a slacker, though?” He tells me, “My grades and credits. I had freshman credits, but I was a junior. And I was trying to pick it up and nothing, so I went home.”

MIDDLE AND ELEMENTARY

I continued next by asking Casper about his experiences and what he remembers from his time in middle and elementary school. He proceeded by telling me about the last day of fifth grade. He recalls getting nervous because he was stepping into a new life as a middle school student. He also recalled feeling nervous when it was the last day of his eighth-grade year. He experienced the same emotions when he started high school because as he puts it,

“...high school for me sounds like a big word. Yeah, you know what I mean? Like it's horrible, but you get used to it. You got used to it.”

I continued to probe if Casper recalled any other stories from middle school. He stated, "...I was a smart kid. I would just, you will slack...I would slack."

He tells me that he did not have discipline problems while he was a middle school student. He informed me about his relationships with his administrators and counselor:

"I have well, I had this one counselor in the middle school that would help me with a lot of stuff. Like sometimes I would feel alone and I would go run to her and talk to her about my family problems. And it was...she was like the only one I would talk to. But my relationships with my teachers were pretty good. It was. I would, if they told me something, and I didn't like it. I would stay quiet. I wouldn't argue. I would just think, okay, whatever."

According to Casper, his favorite teacher was in his words, "Nobody. Nobody." He proceeded to tell me that instead of a favorite teacher, his favorite person on campus was his counselor.

"Because I had summer school in that middle school, my girlfriend and I had to move to the valley because like, my grandma passed, and I moved. Then I came back because it was...it was a bad experience over there. And she [counselor] was helping me; she was like, 'Okay, you have to do this.' She'd help."

I wondered why he considered having a good relationship with that counselor. What was it about this relationship that made her special? According to Casper, it came down to her giving him advice, and simply just listening to him.

HIGH SCHOOL AND TRANSITION

In high school, particularly his freshman year, Casper recalls being “a good kid.” He remembers being in the JROTC as a cadet. When he transitioned to the tenth grade, according to Casper, something happened.

“But I got I don't know what happened when I moved to when I jumped grades and went to sophomore year. I didn't...I don't know what happened then. And then sophomore, well that's when COVID was hitting. And in 2021 I think we came back.” I asked him if this was the last year he attended high school. He simply replied, “I got lost. It's okay.” He became deep in his thoughts and had to ask the question about high school again.

“As far as high school goes, what were your relationships like with your teachers, counselors and administration?”

“Well, you. We got along good. Me and you. It was me, and you. That was pretty good. And we're, yeah, like, close. But I had this one teacher. She would always get on my on my butt. Always and I wouldn't do nothing. There was one time when I went late. I went to lunch to my house because my mom came back from out of town. And then she's like, ‘Why did you come late?’ She like gave me attitude for no reason. She didn't even ask where I went or who I was with. I hadn't seen my mom in a while.” She made me feel weird. Uncomfortable.”

I wondered if he had been redirected in front of the class. Casper recalls that,

“...she walked up to my team because I walked in late, I don't know. I think it was like it was... what's it called? Tardy sweep? And I just walked in, you know? Because I went to go celebrate with my mom 'cause she came back from out of town.”

I asked Casper if he recalled having a favorite teacher.

“Favorite teacher? It was junior year junior; I don't remember her last name. Yes, it was my...it was biology class. I think it was because I failed biology the year before. Yeah.

And then now I was passing and everything. But yes, she was my favorite teacher.”

I asked if he recalled why she was his favorite teacher because he could not recall the teacher's name. For Casper, it came down to how “...she would teach [the content].” He then recalls his US History teacher. The coach for the football team.

“It would be more understandable than other teachers because they'll be like, ‘Oh, the natives did this.’ And he would do it differently. He wouldn't write it down on the board and we would copy. Yeah. And that made me understand.”

Casper also told me that the US History teacher would always talk to the students about other things other than school. He said he felt comfortable in the class.

DROPPING OUT

I transitioned into finding out about any challenges that Casper may have encountered when he did not return to school. He told me that not having reliable transportation became a challenge not only for work but also for his family. Although he was not specific, he recalls applying for a job and being hired on the spot. Once this company hired him, he dropped out of school. I asked him if during this time when he decided to drop out of school anybody reached out to you to help him. Particularly, I wanted to know if any teachers, counselors, administrators, or friends had reached out. I also asked if his boss helped him in any way. Casper responded,

“When I dropped, my mother...” I assumed before he elaborated, that his mom perhaps tried to talk him into returning to campus. However, he told me,

“She helped me. She was my immediate transportation when they needed to go to my job. And she worked in the same job. So yeah, it was easy for us.”

He also informed me that she never talked to him about returning to school. According to Casper, what kept him from coming back to school, was work.

“The job. The job.” He did reminisce, however, about his short time enrolled as a high school student.

“Well, every time I pass it through here, I'm like, damn, I miss the school.” I then asked if he could do something different, with all the different experiences he had described to me, what would it be if anything at all? He stated that he would talk more to his teachers. He felt he missed out on opportunities to build a relationship with them.

THE FUTURE

“Casper, tell me more about your plans. Have thought about returning to school or completing a GED?” I asked. According to him, he would like to go to the Job Corps, “...so I can get an education so I can be someone in my life, like a judge or something. But yeah, I'm planning to go to Job Corps.” I then asked Casper if there was anything that was making his life harder as far as any obstacles or difficulties. He described what it was like having two vehicles, but neither of them in working condition. The expense it would take on his part to replace a transmission would be almost impossible.

“...we couldn't really move so we wouldn't always have someone to pick us up. Go to work, and back.” Despite the challenges he was describing to me, he stated that he loved his life,

“I’m single and I have a job; um, I’m getting paid good. I have five dogs and no kids. I have a brother to take care of and I could sleep.”

Although Casper has plans to enroll at the Job Corps at some point, he tells me that,

“School to me school is not important. But it has to be important because you have to have education to be someone and not work at a slacker’s job.”

He also goes on to tell me that as far as having a family of his own, he is never getting married or having children.

“...But I mean, there's someone out there for me. I want to fix my vehicle and go to Job Corps. That’s it. And having fun.”

I concluded the interview with Casper by thanking him for being honest and open with me. I did not want him to leave the interview without reminding him that he was somebody. Not a slacker. He is important. Casper thanked me for the comment, and we concluded the interview.

MEL

BACKGROUND AND FAMILY

Mel, as I will refer to her at her request, is nineteen years old. She divulged to me that she was a student who had a 504 because she struggled with staying focused. The last time I had seen Mel, she was in the lobby area in the front office. She was crying and hugging another female student. When I approached her, the other girl told me to back off because her friend did not feel like talking to anyone. Later that day, I received a drop notice to sign. I learned that Mel had dropped and she intended to get her GED. That was the last time I saw Mel.

I began her interview by asking her about what her life was currently like. She begins by repeating her age and telling me that she is living at home with her parents and does not have any children because “it would make it harder on me.” She immediately added that she was, “thrown out of school,” and that she was offered an opportunity to attend an adult education school to complete her credits, and she told the individual who made this offer, “Girl, I’m not going back.” I had to bring her attention back to the interview and ask her for her age again. “I am nineteen, I live at home, and I don’t have kids.” She added,

“My mom and dad both came [to this school] and so did my brothers and sisters.

My dad never finished but he owns a shop and he’s doing good. My little brother is a student at the school right now. I have two other brothers and a sister and they’re in online school. No one from my family has gone to college.”

I then asked her about her school life when she was a student. She put her head down a little and replied that she keeps in touch with one of her friends. This friend did finish high school, and he never got in trouble because, “...he was like, very quiet...would do his work and get out of here...”

SCHOOL, FRIENDS, AND DISCIPLINE

I went on to ask her about discipline. She recalls not having many discipline problems when she was enrolled. She tells me that her friend who did finish high school is now enrolled in a local college and often tells her to reenroll and finish, “You should do it...then go to college.” She often thinks that she should, before she really quits, but then says, “...but I don’t like school...”

She reminisced about her time at school, particularly being a part of the cheer squad, and how much she missed her friends, especially during the COVID shutdown,

“I missed them and then there was COVID. When we came back, I was like, wow. I didn’t log in to [virtual] and I’m super behind. Yeah.”

Her life in elementary and middle school was much more peaceful and recalls never receiving a referral until she enrolled at the high school.

“My teachers, some of them were cool. Some of them were just there...and some of them I wish they weren’t there.”

I asked her about her relationships with some of the other staff such as counselors and administrators.

“I didn’t like my counselor. She was like weird. Like, the whole time I was here, I probably only saw her like three times. And that’s because she was telling me like go to [adult education school]. She would tell me to ‘just leave this place.’ I was like, Please, my senior year like I’m in here, why would I go? And she’s like, ‘No, you have to and I was like, Yeah, I can. I can just leave then.’”

I asked her how that made her feel, and she replied that at least she helped her get into the adult education program,

“...she got me into night school and stuff. And then I finished like a class and then they were like, ‘...oh, that was a class you didn’t need. Not for credit.’ And I was like, all right. I’m not coming back. Like, yeah.”

I asked her to clarify her statement. At first, I thought maybe the class she took was an elective course, but I was not sure what she meant by taking a class that was not for credit.

“...they said that they don’t know why I did [the class]. Because supposedly, the classes I needed were all locked, and only [the counselor from high school] was able to unlock it. But they unlocked it over there. And I was like, so if you guys unlocked it, why can’t you just count it? And they’re locked, ‘No, you have to redo it.’ And I was like, I’m not redoing it.”

I paused for a moment and realized that a clerical error had been made by one of our staff and that Mel felt like she had been cheated and wasted her time on a course she did not need. She recalled that one of her favorite teachers, “...was always there for me.” She then proceeds to tell me about cheer. She expresses a love of her friends, pep rallies, and fun as being, “the only thing I miss...” about school. She then tells me once again that she does not miss high school at all. She then goes back to the question about discipline and says that she was suspended from school, “for being late to class...really, I don’t know.”

She recalls having good relationships with her cheer coach and weightlifting coach. I asked her to tell me more about this.

“Well, I will just talk about some of them. Some of them I like Mr. [teacher], who gave me the referral and I was like, yeah, don’t ever come near me. Mr. [administrator] before

he retired was always nice to me. Coach would always listen to me and be there for me, and my weightlifting teacher Mr. [teacher] because he was hot! And also, very nice.”

PROBLEMS

The interview then proceeded and led me to inquire about any problems she might have faced whether it was with transportation, the need for work, family issues, or any other type of academic problem that she may have encountered that made returning to school more challenging,

“Or like my siblings, since they're like not liking online school and stuff, and they don't really have to get up so my mom doesn't really like to get up either. So sometimes she'd be like, just go like, go drive? Yeah, what the hell do you mean drive? Do you see all that traffic after school? And then sometimes when I would see teachers they will just tell me like, ‘Oh, no, you're not gonna be anything in life. And I would think, all right, then. I'm not. Shit. All right. I mean, you're the teacher. You're supposed to be bringing us up not putting us down. Yeah.”

She went on to describe one health challenge that happened when she was enrolled. This problem did not, however, happen after she dropped out. I refocused her on whether she had received any kind of help after she dropped out of school and if any have any teachers, counselors, administrators, friends, bosses, or anybody for that matter, try to reach out and motivate her to reenroll,

“Well, a counselor from the high school called my mom. But then the people from the [adult learning school] showed up at my house, and they were like, ‘If you don't go and register, you're gonna be considered a drop.’ Well, I was like, I mean, I have been gone

for like a year, aren't I already one? But yeah, they said that I should go back. Man, to go back and be dealing with all them kids all going and to use to going there again and then all the teachers..." she nods her head and laughs.

I asked her if she knew how far she was from graduating, but she did not know. She did know, however, that she had passed all her end-of-course exams. She also knew she only needed a few credits because as she stated, "I know I just need credits, because I mean, I'm not stupid. Showing up is the hard part. Especially early..."

I asked her if she could do high school all over again, and if would she change any of her experiences. She stated that she would re-do her junior year,

"Logging my junior year, because it was so easy like I was at home I could have done it. I don't know why I didn't it. It was kind of a weird time. It was weird being locked up all day.

I led to ask her about her plans for school and if she was planning to return to school or look into getting a GED or any kind of other certification. She rearranged herself where she was sitting and gave a slight grin,

"I want to, I mean, I've tried to plan for online school like three different times already.

And they just don't get back at me. I don't want to go to a physical school."

Mel expresses that she would rather do something online where she does not have to deal with the staff or other students and work at her own pace. She sees school as important.

"You always need your education. Like that's what's gonna get you farther in life. Yeah."

MOVING FORWARD

I continue to ask her about what her life is like today. She tells me that she is currently not working but is planning on looking for a job soon.

“Like I definitely want to finish high school. I don't want a GED but like, if that's what I can get, I'm gonna get in. But I kind of want to go to like, like beauty school, because it's something sure. It's something that I like and I can create, like my own schedule. If I want to work I work and if I don't, I don't. I want to be really in my own space. I mean, I did want to get married but I would always think, no. And then I got back with my ex-boyfriend. And I was like, you know what, yes. And now that I'm not with him, I'm like, no, no! I just want to have kids but not right now. Because I mean, I'm basically still a kid, like, I haven't even finished school. I don't want to be a lowlife and just be there doing nothing. I don't know what I want to do, but I want to do something.”

I asked her to think more on this topic, but she replied, “Maybe I will know and tell you at a later date.” This is how the interview with Mel concluded. She stood up hugged me, and said, “Thank you for hearing me.”

YAYA

THE BEGINNING

Yaya's interview began with her asking me how I had been. She has wild hair with a backward-facing baseball cap. She wears her blue jeans low on her waist and has a red handkerchief hanging from her left pocket. Her grey hoodie also fits large on her. The last time I had seen Yaya, she had been recommended for off-campus expulsion for possession of narcotics. She ran away from the administration, never attended her due process meeting, and the house she reported as her address was empty. She was eventually dropped for non-attendance. A few weeks later, a coworker saw her at the park and reported that she was selling pills to students. When we approached her, she ran away from the area.

"Well." I began. "I've been well; hanging in there." I said to her. A standard answer I give to most regardless of what is going on in my life. She smiled. I began much as I did the other two testimonios by asking her to tell me about herself and how her life is at the moment,

"My name is Yaya and I had dropped out of school when I was sixteen- 'bout to be seventeen. "She continued to tell me about her family,

"I have two little sisters and my mom and then I live with my grandma and stuff. But my grandma passed away. It's just me and my mom. And then my two sisters and my stepdad who lives by himself. And our family are lives here. So, he's literally just alone."

I then asked her if anyone in her family graduated from high school or college. She replied, "My grandma; my mom, she didn't finish school. And my sister's going to school now.

and haven't finished school yet either."

SOCIAL BUTTERFLY

When she was enrolled, Yaya was very social always and surrounded by her friends,

“Oh, when I came here to school I don't keep in touch with them like I used to. But I do talk to them here and there. You know we say hi to each other stuff like that, but we're not close. We don't hang out or like talk like we used to; some of them are currently still going to school and some of them just dropped out already. But I think not any graduated.”

I asked her if any of her friends were experiencing what she had experienced while she was still in school referring to discipline specifically. She put her hoodie over her head and replied,

“Yes. We had a lot of discipline problems. We were fighting at the park, causing trouble. We were selling. We're doing everything bad. It was just...” She paused, “Yeah, we were selling drugs. We thought we were hard. We were getting high at school. We were just doing bad. We were ditching class we were doing everything; just no good.”

I asked her how much influence her friends had on her,

“No, I didn't personally want to drop out of school but they dropped me out. They had kicked me out when I got in trouble here; I got in trouble a lot because I will never pay attention. I will never go to a class or anything. I'll just be fighting and arguing with teachers and just misbehaving you know? So, like they just got tired of me to the point where they expelled me from school for fighting this one kid at the park. And they expelled him from school and then I ended up getting arrested and I went to jail.” She continued after a pause, “So I wasted time there and I couldn't finish school. And then by the time that I got out, I wasn't able to go to school no more. So, they tried to take me to [adult learning center] and because when I came back I told them that I wanted to go

there so I could get my credits. they said I only have four credits, but when I had moved out here three years ago I had all my credits. So, they had lost my credits. So now I have poor credits. So, I would have to start as a freshman. So, no school for me anymore. So.”

COMMUNITY MEMBER

I suspected that Yaya was in a gang. I am familiar with some of the gang activity in the area, and she was wearing what gang members refer to as a “flag” hanging from the side of her pants.

“Were any of your friends or you involved with gangs?” I asked. She replied, “Yes. Not me personally, but yeah, the people around me they were.”

“When did you realize you were having problems in school, Yaya?”

“I've always had problems in school since I was a little girl. Like, remember my ADHD. I was always arguing. I was always fighting with kids and I would never listen. I would just misbehave.”

SCHOOLS

I moved on to ask her about experiences she might remember about her elementary or middle school years. She smiled and looked at me,

“I have good experience and I have bad, bad experiences because during every time I go to school, I was always bad and I was good too. You know? Like there was days because I would misbehave every day and there was days I would behave. You know do my work and everything; unless teachers that I had they say they're proud of me for behaving and

stuff like that. But I would just misbehave. Ya saves. No matter what I would just misbehave.” She apologized for speaking Spanish.

“Use whatever language you feel comfortable with, okay? I stated, “You feel like speaking Spanish? You can, okay, this is your interview. I continued, “Now when you were in school, what was your relationship with your teachers, and counselors?”

“My teachers and my counselors. They always liked me. Yeah, they always got along with me and everything and whether I was being bad or not; they were still there for me. They would tell me that I'm good that they know that I'm a good girl; that they know that I can do it and stuff like that. And I can change; do better and with behavior. So, they were always there for me. There was a couple haters, a couple haters. Couple of teachers but no, I always experienced good relationships with my students and well my classmates and my teachers.”

We then moved on to discuss her relationships with school staff,

“Um honestly, I like all my teachers; every teacher here at school, and I don't know if they're still here but every teacher at [school]...they were my favorite. I like the security guard like Ms. M., and you, and like, I like everybody.”

I asked, “So you don't like a few people, just everyone on campus? What is it that you like about the people at the school?”

She leaned back and slouched in her seat. Then she replied, “Because whether I was doing bad, they will try and help me and give me opportunities to change for me to be able to stay here. You know, and for me not to get in trouble and stuff like that. You know, like what was the principal's name? Mr. D.? Yeah, like Mr. D., I wouldn't be so mean to him and like I wouldn't

listen to him like every time he chased me. I will just run out [of the campus]. Like, I would disobey, but he still he's still there and like he would try and help me do better. You know?"

"What do you remember most about your high school years?" I asked.

"My high school years?" she replied.

"Yes. Your experiences when you were enrolled in the school. Tell me about these." I answered.

"I was just always drama. It wasn't my drama, but like, I would jump in my friends' drama, you know, because I wouldn't like... I wouldn't let nobody talk about my friends or do fake stuff to my friends, you know, so like simple stuff. I put it to you simply. I will defend them, you know, so like, I'll get in trouble."

"Tell me about your favorite teacher at the school. Did you have any favorite teachers here at the high school?" I asked.

"Like, I really don't remember their names that much because it was a long time ago, but I did have a couple. My favorite homeboy was money. That was my friend." she laughed at her comment.

SPIRAL

I continued to ask her to tell me about the issues she faced during the times that she decided not to return to school. I prompted her with some possible issues such as transportation, jobs, family problems, health problems, or any other she would like to share. She thought for a few moments. Then she replied,

"I never had, like, transportation problems. But I just wouldn't come to school because I will just fight and I'll be expelled the whole time. So, and then I had like stopped coming

to school because they put me in alternative. And I didn't want to do that. So that's when I just stopped going to school.”

I proceeded to ask her if she had any type of legal problems or other problems when she did not come back to school. She thought for a few seconds and looked up at the sky. Then she replied,

“Oh, yes. I...I've been in and out of jail. Since then, till this day, I've been in jail. And so like, okay, so when I moved out here three years ago I started here at this school, and like the first or two months here I was already arguing with people I was already fighting I was already causing drama because I have a mouth, and like when teachers be rude because you know, there's teachers that would be rude and stuff like that and when they're rude is like, I will talk back to them you know? And like that will get me in trouble a lot. And like, I will walk away when they were trying to like get me to listen or to do this or that. So, I'll walk away and just leave the class and just be out. I'll go to the park and smoke or just do anything and then I'll get kicked out of the park I even got banned from the park. I couldn't go there no more.”

I continued and asked her if anyone from the school tried to reach out to her and offer her help once she did not return to school. She stated,

“Even though I got expelled from the school, I will still come to see my friends at the park. When they would have mentioned stuff to me. That's why they don't let anyone have lunch at the park. No more there. But I would always come and my friends would just come to cause drama and see who would always fight. We was just doing what we were supposed to so it was just always a lot of drama and a lot of trouble in the park.”

I had to ask her if there was any particular reason why you wanted to go to the park. I looked around and smiled. It was a bright day and very peaceful. There was no one playing in the jungle gym. She answered,

“Because I saw I was working at Dairy Queen, right? So like, I would come in I would chill with my friends before I go to work, you know? And since I would have to walk that way I will go during that time to the park. So, when their lunch is done, I would just go.”

I then asked her what kept her from coming back to school. She replied,

“Oh, what kept me coming back from school was that...Like I said, they expelled me. And I tried to come back but they want to expel me. Then I tried to go to the address and they like sent me there.” I replied, “What address?” She stated, “They sent me to the [adult learning center]. It was court-ordered from court to go to the [adult learning center] because I had to do school no matter what. And they didn’t accept me there either. So, they sent me back to come here to [the school]. And I came and I told them what the court said. And they said that like they didn’t accept me. I tried every other school and they wouldn’t accept me. I’m still trying. I was even accepted parole.” I was interested if there was anyone that motivated her, other than court orders, to want to come back to school. She replied,

“Myself. I want to finish school no matter what. Like at least wanting...I always wanted to get my diploma. If I can, get my diploma. But I have low credits; they lost my credit system. Then I might as well just get my GED, you know? It’s something, but I do want to finish school because having an education is gonna get you somewhere in life, and it’ll help you more than not having one.”

I looked at her for a few seconds and asked her if she would do differently if she had to do it all over again. She looked at me and replied, “If I was able to do it all over again?” I clarified, “Yes. School, I mean.” She then said,

“I would be...I wouldn't do what I used to. I wouldn't be ditching I wouldn't come to school just to ditch. I wouldn't waste that time. I would actually go to class since I will wake up in the morning anyway and get ready to take the time to come to school on campus and go to class.”

BACK AND FORTH AND EVERYWHERE

“So, earlier you started to talk about your plans for your future. Tell me more about that. Do you plan on returning to school to complete a GED or another type of certification?” I continued. She shook her head as if she had answered the question in her head.

“Yes. If I was able to return back to school, trust me, I will do everything. I will be the best student ever. Like I've been trying to come back to [this school] or [a school nearby] or any other school you know? Because like in middle school, I was not going able to learn.” “Can you clarify?” I asked. She stated, “Like, I'm far behind and I like, I have ADHD so it's hard for me to concentrate and learn, you know? So yeah, no, I don't think I'm gonna be able to do those.”

I paused for a few moments to process the information she had provided me about being diagnosed with ADHD, but I proceeded to ask her more about what she mentioned some drug use and gangs and also mentioned legal problems. I asked, “What other obstacles have you encountered since you have been out of school.” She looked confused so I added,

“You know, in life, sometimes things come up and make life more difficult.” She then replied, “Yeah, I was doing drugs. You know, I was bad. I was doing it for a couple years to this day. I was doing them but finally... Yeah.” “Are you trying to clean up?” I asked.

“I was doing everything. I was doing everything and like, that, like affected me.”

“Can you explain?” “A lot of drugs,” she replied.

“Because I will start overthinking about all the stuff that I will put my mom through and everything you know? So that made me go into depression, you know? So, then I started having problems at home and then it was just me and my mom fighting and everything. And like I was always just doing drugs, no matter what I will go to work and everything but I was just always no matter what I will come to school. I would do everything, you know? But it will help me with my ADHD but that's no excuse, you know? And, um, but yeah, everything has gotten better since then.”

Yaya looked like she was not quite telling me about her challenges, so I remained quiet for a few moments. I remember sitting in Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings for our students coded as Special Education. Most of the time, students and parents did not fully understand what was happening in the meetings nor did they understand some of the terms being used as the meeting proceeded. I often asked students if they understood what was going on in these meetings, and of course, they would divulge that they did not. Parents and students alike did not know how to navigate these meetings and much less advocate for themselves. That task I often undertook. I wondered now if Yaya fully understood or could advocate for herself. She then continued,

“My dad passed away. It's just me and my two sisters, but like, the house is better. Like we're all better; the relationship is better. Mom understands me more. You know I went to rehab and everything. So...”

“So, I know that you mentioned that that you would do it all over, you'd be the best student? So, I think from what I'm hearing, you are saying that school is important; has that changed over time? As you grew up, has your opinion changed?” I asked.

“The more I grew, the more I understood how school was important, you know? she said, “I, when I was sixteen when I was younger, I thought everything was just a joke, you know? So, I was like, ‘no mamona’; like I didn't care. Now that I don't have the opportunity to go back to school and finish high school, how I was supposed to and get a diploma like everybody else that graduated from my year that I was supposed to graduate too. It's like, so like, I want my sisters and everybody...just, I just want everybody finish school because school is important. Like, I don't like school and I know I like doing projects and stuff like that, you know? But like school, I just can't do it. But it's really important; it's gonna be worth it. They say that school doesn't teach you nothing for the future but it teaches you the basics like numbers reading what you need to know, you know?”

I proceeded to ask her about her life today. I asked if she could share anything about her family, if she was married, if she had a boyfriend, or girlfriend, about her friends, work, or if she had any health problems. She replied,

“Right now. I just got out like, what day is it? Yeah, from the jail annex and like ever since I got out. It's been hard. It's been hard like really hard because they gave me ten years of probation, and then a plus another three years of probation and then I have drug

court. So, it's like a lot of things that I have to do, a lot of things that I have to do, and since I'm not working, and nobody's working, it's like, it's a lot, you know? Like I have to pay seventy-five every two weeks if not, if I don't pay them, I get a warrant, you know? So, it's like, I gotta. I asked her if she wanted to take a break from the interview, but she replied that she did not. She then continued,

“I stress about my freedom every day. Because no matter what I do, or what it is, is just like if I'm not working, if I'm gonna go to school, I'm going back to jail. Like I have to be working and I have to go to school, and I have to go to ten classes to be out here. Ten classes. Okay, I was taking [mental health] classes from Monday to Friday from nine to two but I don't take those. I take them every Wednesday like today. But yeah, like I have a lot, like, it's a lot of stress, you know? Like it's a lot on my shoulders. Like, it's a lot of things that I have to do. Like I have to keep, like I have a lot of appointments and if I miss one, violation and I go back. Like they're already on the last day because I'm riding my PR bonds. I violated my first provision that they had given me for five years. And that's why they gave me the ten-year probation. Now, you know, like I've been fucking up. I've been fucking up. I used, just because due to my grandma's passing, and then I had passed one [drug test] but then I fucked up again. I have my hearing. I'm trying to get clear, clean parole, which is a fuckin pain. And if I do come out dirty, I'm going back. Today I go to go get drug tested; if I come out dirty, I'm going to jail.”

WHAT IS NEXT

The amount of stress that Yaya was going through took me aback. The possibility of her being incarcerated for any amount of time was shocking, particularly because of her age. I maintained my tone and composure and asked her to tell me more about her plans for the future. I asked her to tell me more about what plans she had for education for her and her family. I also asked if at some point she would want to get married. She replied,

“I’m really worried about a marriage because I don’t need a partner to be happy with or to live life, but I just want to finish school and have something for myself. I want to be able to be something so when my mom’s not here. But it was just me and my mom and my sisters and stuff. So, it’s like I have to... I have to leave that.” “Can you explain what you mean, Yaya?” I asked. She then replied,

“And I have to trust like that I do better. So, I can give my sisters or be able to take care of my sisters. When my mom’s gone, you know? Because nobody else is gonna take care of them and they’re little. Well, it’s like it’s been getting better... I’ve been getting better. Like my mom told me one time that I’m not the same as before. Before, like cuz, back then, I was on drugs, bad like I was bad, bad, bad, bad. I was never even home. I would like not even pay attention to my family. I want to spend time with them now. Back then, I was just either coming to [the school] to start some bullshit or I was in jail. You know? I was always starting stuff with the cops and it was just bad, you know? Like it was, I was out of control, and I regret it, you know? Because during that whole time that I was wasting my time doing stuff that got me to where I’m at now, I could have been finished with school, you know? Because I know I’m not dumb. I know.”

There was silence for a few minutes, but the interview had concluded. I felt the stress that Yaya was going through. The uncertainty was her reality. I was very tired and she was now slouched. I reached my hand out to her and thanked her. "For what?" she said. "For your time. For your honesty. For sharing your story with me?" I replied. "It was nothing, mister," she replied. I wished her luck with the impending meeting she had with her parole officer. Something inside me told me that she was not going to pass her court-ordered uranalysis that was scheduled for later today. The money and meetings all designed to rehabilitate her, did not work or at least it appeared this way to me. I stayed at the park for a few minutes more as I watched Yaya disappear into the neighborhood behind the park. I looked around and appreciated the quietness that surrounded me. I looked across the street and I could see my office. I felt thankful and saddened at the same time.

CONCLUSION

The testimonios provided by Casper, Mel, and Yaya depict their struggles in a reality that does not include completing their high school education. From their interviews, we can begin to understand that their lives will be filled with many obstacles that they may not be aware of. It remains to be seen if each of them will ever complete their education. Each of the testimoniolas has a glimmer of direction. Each, although different in their experiences, knows that they want more out of their lives than what they currently have. Each of them has evolved in their perceptions of the value of an education from the time they were students to where they are currently in their lives. The students live their lives hoping for more, but without mentorship, they are destined to keep learning on their own, and the learning they will undertake does not come from textbooks.

All three students state that they had relationships with a handful of adults. The importance of having mentors in an educational setting that students do not know how to navigate became clear as a piece that was missing in the participants' school lives. Hearing the participants' testimonios reinforces the promise that educators accept, which is to educate all children and do so by accepting them at the point they arrive at our campuses. Then, the issue is finding a system that works for all children, not just the ones who are easy to work with or the percentage of students that can function within a tier-one system of discipline. Reducing punitive measures for all students and working towards more effective strategies and incentives for effective behavior that often do not include negative consequences should be the goal of our public education system (Horner & Sugai, 2015).

CHAPTER 5

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

The purpose of this study was to tell the stories of three participants who did not complete their high school studies. As previously mentioned, what was revealed through these stories is what happens to students when they are not successful in high school due to disciplinary issues, removals, and ineffective disciplinary practices. It was of the utmost importance to give Casper, Mel, and Yaya a voice. The goal of this study was to find out what happens to students who are not successful in high school through the retelling of their own unique stories after being subjected to disciplinary methods at school. Through this study, I sought to provide insight through the contributions of personal accounts of students who have dropped out and who were personally affected by the school's disciplinary systems. I wanted to capture the students' accounts wherein dropping out was an option for them.

DATA ANALYSIS

In the Testimonio methodology, it is the participants' stories that reveal an otherwise hidden voice and validate their voice as participants are often marginalized and overlooked. By using this methodology, I was able to tie the research to real words and therefore experiences of the participants. I chose to use Critical Race Theory as a theoretical perspective to further analyze my data. The idea behind using this framework is to bring to light what we often overlook in education. That is, not all systems work for all students. Our world is diverse, and public educational campuses are microcosms of the world. I wanted to make sure that these systems are exposed so that other systems that are designed to work with the most diverse populations can be developed and implemented fairly. The guiding questions were developed so

that the participants could have an opportunity to provide a complete picture of their lives. It is my view that using the Testimonio methodology, CRT, and the guiding questions all worked in tandem to provide the most comprehensive approach to understanding how students work within existing disciplinary systems. The perceptions of the value of the education that the students provided were interesting. Albeit in hindsight, they all would have taken a different approach to navigating the system if they could do it all over again. The question that remains was whether students would have experienced a different result given that each of them would still have existing challenges in their lives, such as poverty, crime, and limited support from their families at home. If the disciplinary systems that the school had in place had been more inclusive and more intentional, as well as implemented with fidelity, could these students' educational outcomes have changed? I stand by my assertion based on the data and my own experiences within public schools: assertive discipline does not work for all students, and unfortunately, our students who are already marginalized are the ones who end up jettisoned from school (Anyon, et al.2018; Allman & Slate, 2011; Leung-Gagne, et.al, 2022; Morris & Howard, 2003; Welch & Payne, 2012).

When the day came that I finally got to interview, I discovered that the student's experiences and life stories were different in some ways. However, their perception of school and friends, their ideas on what they could do differently if given the chance, and their opinions on the importance of completing school united the three participants. More themes are illustrated below.

PERCEPTIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The participants' perceptions and assumptions of themselves, particularly when it came to the label of dropouts, mirrored some of society's same perceptions and assumptions. The most common perceptions include that dropouts are deviants and criminals; that they are lazy and unmotivated (Anyon, et al., 2018; Losen & Gillespie, 2012); that they are slackers and losers who see no value in themselves or education; and that they are poor and are just looking to take advantage of the system. Research supports the perception that students who reside and attend public school here in the borderland, particularly those students who are at risk of dropping out of school, are prone to experience behavioral problems (DeMatthews, Welch & Payne, 2018; Leung-Gagne, McCombs, Scott, Losen, 2022). Furthermore, one of the participant's life experiences included being in trouble with the law. Research also supports that there are indeed detrimental effects of exclusionary discipline practices on students' academic success and behavior, and they are also more likely to experience legal issues along with a higher chance of dropping out and incarceration (Anyon et al., 2018; Losen & Gillespie, 2012). Perhaps the stigma affected their self-esteem and increased their stress levels which are both crucial factors affecting academic performance. Persistent negative stereotyping can lead students to internalize these ideas, potentially leading them to a self-fulfilling prophecy where they perform poorly because they believe that is what is expected of them. The research became clear as I heard Yaya's story.

FINDINGS: THEMES

The themes and ideas that emerged from the participants were:

1. Their concept of school and teachers and how it evolved,
2. How each of them dealt with day-to-day problems both in and out of school,
3. Their concept and outlook on life now and in the future as a school drop-out.
4. The lack of mentorship

The last theme was not overtly obvious, but it was something the participants touched upon but not mentioned. Each discussed how they had individuals in their school lives that they enjoyed being around for different reasons, but there were only a handful of these individuals and the relationships were not formally developed as they would with a systemic mentorship program. The participants shared similarities in high and middle school experiences: the role that school counselors played; the importance of friends, family, and school; their outlook on the future. The participants also described instances of misbehaving, the trouble and problems they experienced as a result, discipline referrals, and their administration at school. Los niños also expressed how their views on the school had evolved since the time they were still registered. The three participants all lived in the same neighborhood. The area is made up of low-cost government housing. There are single-family homes, apartments and duplexes. Casper did move away from the neighborhood and moved to an unknown part of Houston.

The following are descriptive questions that the participants answered, followed by summaries and analyses of their responses.

QUESTION ONE: Tell me about yourself. Include the name you want to be referred to in the study, your age, and the age that you dropped out of school. Tell me about your family (your mother, father, siblings, and other children in your household).

Interviewing Casper reminded me of the relationship I had developed with him when he was a student enrolled at the school. As I walked through the school's hallways, I often saw Casper wandering, and I often chatted with him not before asking him where he was supposed to be. He liked talking to me about his life and the random events in it. One day, he asked me to call him "cetenta y dos." Casper was always trying to find his niche, so he joined the school's JROTC program. During the interview, I learned that the number he wanted to be referred to was his father's favorite number. He reminded me during the interview about a tattoo he now has on his forearm. He also reminded me that at that time, he was getting ready to leave school and move to Houston. That was the last day I saw Casper, and the last day he would attend school. He was seventeen. Casper informed me that he had been struggling with his studies overall. He also informed me that he has no children. His family unit consisted of his father, his mother, and his only sibling, who is special needs. He described to me that his parents were at work most of the time. When he spoke of his mother, he included that she got pregnant at a young age and did not finish high school but said that his mother had been married for a long time, and he had no idea that she was pregnant until she left school. He tried to recall if his father finished high school. He also wanted me to understand that he refers to his stepfather as his "dad," and he confirmed that his real dad passed away in 2013. The interview revealed that the death of his father greatly

impacted Casper's life. As we began to talk about this topic, I noticed that he became sullen when his father's death came up. Even as a nineteen-year-old, young man, there was still a sadness that came through as we talked. Yaya also came from a similar family background as Casper, but in Yaya's case, her mother and grandmother lived in one household and her stepfather and other siblings lived in another household.

Mel has a family unit that seemed to offer her more support than the other two students. Mel was a soft-spoken young woman who was seventeen at the time she decided not to return to school. When she was in school, she enjoyed socializing with her friends, particularly the cheer squad. I remember that she was highly involved with this group of students. It was interesting that one of the first items that Mel brought up was the fact that she was a 504 student. Students who receive services under the 504 provisions. In public education, 504 plans are made for students who do not require special instruction. Individuals with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can receive specialized support and instruction to help them with their studies. Yaya was very special and extremely bright. She always thought before she answered, but she was always impulsive with her actions. This part of her personality came through in part when she divulged that she was diagnosed with ADHD. She dropped out at the age of sixteen, right before her seventeenth birthday. Her home situation seemed like it became supportive but not until after she had already dropped out of school. Yaya has been cultured by the streets and jail. Only she knows what happened to her when she was "locked up." Bits and pieces of her family life came through throughout the interview but not at the asking of the first prompt. She lived at her grandmother's house because it was in proximity to the school. Her mom became a part of her life again when she got into high school but she did not disclose where she was before that reunion. She also suffered through the death of her grandmother. She also did not disclose why

her stepfather lived apart. I do know that her grandmother and mother, according to her, began to accept and understand her a lot more but this again was not until after she was having legal issues. After her grandmother's death, her mom and she became closer. I also found it interesting that Yaya at first seemed like she was more interested in what was going on in my life but I think she was just calculating if she could trust me. I think as the interview progressed, she became more comfortable and started to divulge a lot more personal information.

ANALYSIS

Casper, Mel, and Yaya all had family units but had different levels of support when it came to advocating or participating in their school lives. Two of the participants had two parents and one of them had only one parent that reappeared at some point, and her grandmother. In households like the ones our participants lived in, it is difficult for one parent to keep an eye on schoolwork because of the necessity to have to work to provide for the family (McLoyd, 1998). Casper and Mel's families were always working. Yaya never discussed her grandmother other than to mention that she had passed away or her mother working and since her father lived away from her, his work status is unknown or was not discussed by her. Furthermore, if parents are working, they are less likely to participate in school functions. Although Mel was in cheer, her parents were unable to attend her events due to work constraints. School in turn became the hub for the participants' socialization.

QUESTION TWO: Has anyone in your family graduated from high school? Has anyone in your family graduated from college?

The participants' parents did not graduate from high school, and of course, did not attend college. Casper's mother was a teen parent and did not finish. He was unsure if his "real dad" or his stepfather finished school. Mel shared that her parents were students at the same school she was once enrolled but did not complete their studies. She immediately shared her father's success as a shop owner. She also highlighted her siblings' accomplishments in the online school setting. Yaya mentioned that no one in her family had finished their studies, but her siblings are attending school. No one in her family has enrolled in college.

ANALYSIS

I think what is most concerning with the data that the participants shared with me is the lack of opportunities that the participants will have moving forward. What I noticed is that now there are generations of students who do not experience upward mobility due to low education within their families or themselves. Our students then will have limited in opportunities to attend colleges, universities, or even trade schools (Lareau, 2015). As previously mentioned, in studies conducted by McLoyd in 1998 and Hockenberry, Sickmund, and Puzzanchera in 2022, students who live in one-parent households do not have a parent who can look after their schoolwork due to the need to support their family. In other words, working parents are less likely to attend school functions and other activities that support their kids. All the participants also had siblings. I wondered if they would make it through and finish high school and go on to college and beyond.

QUESTION THREE: Tell me about your friends. Do you keep in contact with friends from high school? Did they experience what you did through high school? Do you remember your friends having discipline problems in school? How much influence did your friends have on your decision to leave school? Were any of your friends involved in gangs?

All three participants, much like all teens, had many individuals their age that they considered friends. In response to the question about his friends, Casper shared with me that all his friends had graduated, and he continues to keep in touch with them. However, since they all worked in similar jobs, none were able to enroll in college classes. He said that his friends did not get involved in gangs or problems at school, and they would often only fight at the park. He noted that these friends were different from him, and he would only record fights on his phone as a safety measure. Casper then changed what he had first shared. He stated that he would like to hang out with the wrong crowd. He admitted that what he meant was the students who would smoke marihuana and fight. He went further and divulged that he would be the one who would persuade them to engage in fighting, and he said that he initiated the activity. Casper's friends, although would often get into physical altercations, and do drugs, still completed school and did not persuade his decision to drop out, but it was rather his job that kept him from finishing school.

Mel, on the other hand, has a close friend who is always encouraging her to enroll in school. She did not experience as many issues with discipline as the other two participants. She sees herself as not quite a dropout yet, but shares that school is not really for her. Her dislike of school, however, comes from what a counselor told her to do, which is to leave the high school and go enroll at a different campus. Her discipline issues involved low attendance due to truancy,

so as an administrator, I understand that when students are absent, the school loses money. I can see why the counselor tried to find her other options. There was no relationship to speak of between her and her counselor, as she discussed how she had only seen her counselor three times. Moreover, clerical errors once she did decide to enroll at an adult learning center completely turned her off. At her age, however, she felt unwanted. She felt pushed out, especially since it was her senior year when students participated in different sunset-type activities. COVID lockdown did not help as she did not log into the virtual classes, so when she returned to the regular, face-to-face setting, it was difficult. Her former involvement in extracurricular activities created a hole in her life that was usually filled with activities related to cheer and her friends.

Yaya, much like Mel, enjoyed socializing with her friends. She indeed was a leader and was always in the middle of anything happening with the large number of friends she had. Some of her friends are still in school, and a few have also dropped out. None of her friends have graduated. When she was enrolled, she was always at the park. If she was not at the park, she was at school also getting in trouble. She shared that her friends and her were dealing drugs at school and often under the influence. As a leader, she feels that she never dropped out of school, and most definitely, her friends could not influence her to drop out. Rather, she feels that the adults dropped her. She admits that this was her own doing for getting in trouble, and she says that "...they got tired of me..." to the point where she was recommended for expulsion. In her case, it was due to possession of a drug classified as a felony. Like Mel, she also felt unwanted and pushed out of school. She also enrolled at the adult learning center, but because she only had a total of four credits, she was discouraged from continuing as her completion date was almost unattainable.

ANALYSIS

The participants all experienced discipline issues at different levels of severity. Only Yaya's discipline issues pushed her out of school. The issues she was experiencing became legal, so she felt since she had been pushed out anyway, why continue with her education. All the participants could have benefited from mentorships. Only Mel shared that she had a friend who would encourage her to reenroll and finish school so that she would move on to college. Perhaps having an adult or a peer who was a positive influence in their lives could have kept them in. I am not directly blaming the adults here. As mentioned in Chapter Two, professionals in education may not have the training to serve as effective mentors. Our students need this level of connection to help them through school. I also understand that schools often do not have the resources to support compensating the professional staff to mentor. In these cases, student mentors could be assigned to not only share ideas with peers but could help them navigate through difficulties they encounter in and out of school. A type of confidant, mentors can help promote healthy social interactions and develop positive peer-to-peer and peer-to-adult relationships (Kuperminc, Chan, Hale, Joseph, and Delbasso, 2020).

QUESTION FOUR: When did you realize you were having problems in school? What experiences do you remember about your elementary and middle school years? Include good experiences, bad experiences, and discipline problems. What was your relationship with your teachers like? What was your relationship with your counselors like? How about with your school administrators? Who was your favorite teacher or person at school? Why?

Mel describes a more stable experience at school and recalls not having many issues with discipline. She does identify her learning challenges and prescribes this to her coding as a 504

student. What was interesting about Mel's experience was that she did state that COVID-19 quarantine impacted her studies because she did not log in to her virtual classes, but moreover, her inability to socialize with her peers influenced her mental well-being. Casper's perception and recollection of when he began to have problems in school had more to do with his self-perception of being a "slacker." When he informed me that he had problems with his studies, he referred to himself as a slacker. He said that everything had not been the same since his father passed away in the third grade. He also stated that he was trying to catch up with his schoolwork, but he decided to leave school after only taking freshman credits. Yaya did not recall a time in her school life when she was not experiencing problems. When asked when she first realized that she had problems at school, she said that she always had issues with discipline since she was a young child. She noted that she would often argue with other peers, and she would also frequently misbehave. Like Mel, Yaya believed that her participation in the Special Education Program at school due to her diagnosis of ADHD played a part in her issues. The participants all agreed that the best part of being a student was socialization, as they all had relationships with other teens. Yaya and Casper both played off these relationships and somehow became involved in behaviors that were inappropriate for the school setting.

ANALYSIS

Relationships among everyone on campus play an important role in the participants' lives. The fact that two of the three participants became involved in behaviors that were not conducive to positive school life is unknown. The COVID-19 quarantine was all discussed by the three participants as having an impact on the person once they returned from the quarantine. Casper described not liking anybody on campus except for one administrator and one counselor

when he was at the middle school. Overall, the importance of relationships seems to be present, not only for student socialization but also for having a support system in the form of mentorships for students. Only one of the participants describes having substance abuse issues after the COVID-19 quarantine.

QUESTION FIVE: What is it that you remember about your high school years? Tell me about good experiences, bad experiences, and discipline problems. What was your relationship like with your teachers? Your counselors? School administrators? Who was your favorite teacher? Why?

The three participants describe very limited relationships with grown-ups on campus. Each was able to describe at least one relationship with an adult and when I asked why the relationship was special, each of them described feeling valued and heard by these individuals. They each described that a particular staff member had made them feel special. When the participants described the negative relationships they experienced with adults on campus, their descriptions became more detailed and poignant. Mel described experiencing clerical errors in the adult learning center which caused her to take courses that she did not need that would have otherwise counted toward her graduation requirements. For Mel, school was not something that she enjoyed. She felt like she had wasted time taking courses that were not good for her graduation. She described this error as what triggered her not to return. Casper described becoming involved in instigating fights at the park as a discipline issue he was experiencing. Casper flew under the radar, as some administrators would say; he never really got in trouble and described himself as being a quiet student who never “argued.” This was an interesting comment as it made me think, why would he have reason to argue with an adult? He adds that whatever

situation was at hand with an adult, he would just brush it off as, "...ok, whatever." In high school, he considered himself "a good kid." I gathered that this was his perception as he transitioned from middle to high school life. For Casper, low attendance to classes did cause him to fall behind on his credits. Yaya, on the other hand, had more serious legal and disciplinary problems at school. Both Casper and Yaya found themselves surrounded by other students who were also experiencing issues with discipline. Perhaps these relationships kept him away from possible positive relationships he might have developed with some of the professional staff on campus. Each of the two participants did have at least one adult on campus that they felt they could go to. However, because they were involved in these other issues off campus, this was not possible. Perhaps there were better opportunities here on the school side. As I had mentioned previously, unless our efforts are more intentional and systemic then we are not going to experience a lot of success with students that need our help.

ANALYSIS

Although the three participants described some disturbing experiences with some of the professional staff, each of them had at least one individual that they considered to be "their favorite" staff member on campus. Mentorships, perhaps, could have benefited the participants if such a program was implemented more intentionally. Through mentorship, teachers and other professionals in the school setting can develop stronger relationships with these participants and students in general. As previously mentioned, professionals entering the public education field need formal training on how to develop these relationships with students. It can also help them navigate through the various processes and systems in their profession that they may not be familiar with.

QUESTION SIX: Tell me about the problems you faced during the time(s) you decided not to return to school. Did you have problems with transportation, need for a job, family problems, academic problems, discipline problems, or any health problems?

Thankfully, none of the participants had health issues that perpetuated their circumstances at school. Mel, however, felt as though her 504 coding was, in a way, a health problem. Yaya also described her ADHD as a concern since she acknowledged that her condition was a challenge for her since she could not stay focused, and learning for her was challenging as well. Her drug use also became, in a sense, a health concern. Casper discussed his grandmother and biological father's death, but it is unknown if he had any health issues that led to his untimely death. Yaya also talked about losing her grandmother, but again, it is unknown why she passed away. Casper was aware that he was experiencing problems at school from a young age (first grade). Yaya did as well. Casper recognized that the loss of his father impacted him at a young age. He then went on to state that his credits also caused him problems since he had been officially enrolled for three years but had five and a half credits or less. He also describes himself as feeling nervous and anxious throughout his schooling. Mel describes her problems stemming from helping her parents with her siblings. She shared that two of her siblings are doing their studies online, and the other siblings are doing face-to-face studies; her mom does not get up to drive the siblings to school. She also describes being put down by teachers when she would drive her siblings to school. These put-downs, of course, became internalized and they became almost a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yaya was the only one of the three participants who had legal challenges that were threatening her freedom. For her, these legal challenges had now become a cycle where she

could not keep a job, so she could not pay her fees, she could not go to mandatory counseling, and she could not stay clean from drug use. She feared that she was going to be put in jail for a long time as a result. She was highly stressed and described being in a depression resulting from feelings of letting her mother down. Although she had been to rehabilitation, she was still experiencing challenges from everything that was being required for her to do by the courts.

ANALYSIS

Unfortunately, our teachers and other professionals on campus are still not able to effectively implement the procedures and policies that are designed to support the needs of students with behavioral problems and or substance abuse issues, as described previously by one of the participants. Professionals, perhaps, are not equipped to work with Tier Three (PBIS) students' needs, and schools may not have the resources to help students in need. Professionals at the campus level are already stretched thin due to the preparation that they have to carry out for daily lessons as well as high-stakes, standardized tests. Professionals must also keep in touch with parents, ensure that their students pass the curriculum at a high level, and ensure that they can perform well on exams. The location of schools and houses in low-income neighborhoods, as described by the participants, can also affect the behavior of students (Bowen & Bowen, 1999).

QUESTION SEVEN: What obstacles have you encountered since you have been out of school?

The question concerning obstacles varied from all three participants' responses. Casper talked about transportation being an obstacle, whereas Mel described her lack of motivation as being an obstacle. Yaya has been experiencing legal issues that have turned into multiple obstacles that seem to have her trapped in an endless legal cycle. Casper's family owns two vehicles, neither of them is in working condition. The expense that it would incur for the family to replace the transmission is almost impossible. Yet, he still must work to help his family out. He describes having to ask different people for rides to and from work. Yet his demeanor remains positive and he says that he loved his life, nonetheless. Mel's challenges, again, go back to having to help her family out with her siblings. She described her life as that of chipping in to help her parents while they were working or resting. She has the duty of transporting siblings and being there for anything they may need that is school-related. Her mother takes care of the siblings who are in virtual school at whatever time they wake up and have to log in. In her own words, "In life, sometimes things come up and make life more difficult."

Yaya's drug use and her legal issues were all taking a toll on her life. She described herself as using a variety of drugs daily and for years. She struggled to stay in rehab and get clean. She also described being depressed from all the obstacles she was experiencing in her life. This included getting into fights with her family and again getting herself into a cycle of becoming depressed and using drugs to mask the obstacles she was experiencing. Still, she said she made no excuses for herself and seemed to take responsibility for everything that had happened to her in her life.

ANALYSIS

Being able to identify the needs of students and their learning environment is very important for us as educators. It can help us develop effective strategies and procedures that will support them in dealing with their various disciplinary problems (Tan, 2001). There is importance in fostering a supportive learning environment, which can help develop a person's confidence and skills. As educators, we are responsible for getting to know our pupils and communities. By being able to identify their needs, we can provide them with the necessary support and activities. Obstacles sometimes come unexpectedly in our lives, and even as adults, we have learned (to some extent) to cope and manage these as they come to us by compartmentalizing them into manageable bits. For our students, however, some may not yet know how to do this, and when they come to our campuses, the learning curriculum may be the last thing on their minds. Again, the importance of knowing our students is much more important than the lesson at hand.

QUESTION EIGHT: Did anyone help you during this time? Teachers? Counselors? School administrators? Friends? Boss? Mentor? What kept you from returning to school? Did anyone motivate you to want to return to school?

Casper described the type of help he received from his mother. He told me that she never pushed him to go back to school, yet she didn't make sure that he always had a ride to work. He explained that, in his mind, it was the job that essentially caused him to drop out. In a sense, it was helpful because he was able to help his family with the additional income, and he and his mom helped one another by commuting and working at the same place together. He reminisces about school every time he passes by the campus and from the information I collected, he misses

being enrolled. Mel recalled receiving phone calls from a counselor who she does not name, but for her, it had already been a year since she had been out of school. And based on the information I collected, she felt it was a little bit too late to reenroll. Aside from this, she was not trusting of counselors in general, as she described her counselor as “weird” and only spoke to her three times. Further, the clerical error was also, according to her, the fault of a counselor who enrolled her in courses that she did not need. What struck me about the information that she provided is that she knows in her heart that she is not “stupid,” and she remembers passing all of her end-of-course exams but was only short a few credits to graduate. It seemed that for Mel, not returning to school a choice she made more out of principle. She was not going to be returning to school because she felt let down and she did not trust the professionals that were supposed to be helping her. Yaya indicated that she walks around everywhere she goes, so she has never really experienced problems with transportation. In her response to the question, she indicated that no one ever really reached out to her. She felt unwanted because she had to seek out opportunities to re-enroll on her own. Granted, she was doing it more for legal reasons so that she could fulfill court orders. Nonetheless, she indicated that the only people that reached out to her were her friends, and it was because she continued to go to the park during lunch.

ANALYSIS

In this section, Casper talked about the type of support he received from his mother. He said that she never pushed him to return to school, but she was unsure if he would have a ride to work. He attributed his decision to drop out to because of his job. He noted that it provided him with an additional source of income and helped his family. His reason was understandable. However, upon returning to the proximity of the campus, he reminisced about his time at school,

and the information I gathered made him miss being in classes. Mel, on the other hand, received a call from a counselor who did not identify herself, and based on the data I gathered, she decided that it was too late to return to school. She was very distrusting of the counselors, and school staff in general during her time at school. She also noted that the counselor she dealt with was strange and only spoke with her a few times. Her perception of this counselor was that she did not want her to be a student at the school anymore. She attributed her issues to a clerical error, as well as the courses she took that she didn't need. She passed all of her end-of-course tests, but she only managed to get a few credits. Mel's decision to stay away from school was also out of principle. She didn't trust the individuals who were supposed to help her. According to her friend, Yaya, she has never experienced issues with transportation. No one reached out to her during her time at school, and she felt unwanted due to how she had to go looking for ways to re-enroll. Although she was looking to re-enroll for legal reasons, she claimed that her friends were the only ones who reached out to her.

QUESTION NINE: What would you do differently if you had to do it all over again?

This question was interesting. It required our participants to think at a higher order and try to imagine a reality where perhaps they would have taken a different path given what they know now of their life without school or completing their secondary education. It required them to imagine themselves as not being labeled a dropout but, perhaps, as a high school graduate. Casper seemed to already have the answers in his head. Reflecting upon his childhood as “the quiet kid” he describes possibly talking more to his teachers and other adults. He feels that he missed opportunities by keeping his mouth shut, and those opportunities could have been in the form of relationships. The adults that he did get along with were those who listened to some of

the struggles he was going through in his life at that given moment. As a student that I perceive to be as extremely shy and introverted, at least when it comes to adults, you must build a certain level of trust for him to be comfortable to open up. For Casper, I think that taking the time to get to know him outside of what you are trying to teach him, as he mentions in his interview, opens avenues for him to open up. It does come down to knowing who the individual is before you try to teach them any kind of curriculum or talk to them about anything school-related. Mel's biggest regret is not logging in to virtual school during the COVID-19 quarantine her junior year. That's exactly what she would do. She stated that she would redo her junior year. She feels she missed out on an easy opportunity to get through school courses. She could not explain why she didn't do it. Perhaps she needed more structure than the freedom of hiding behind a screen provided for our students during that strange time. She did not enjoy being "locked up all day," and she missed being at school with her friends. Now looking back, she realized that she would not ever want to go back to physical school and would much prefer taking advantage of online school. I think this realization goes back to how she lost trust in some of the professional staff by whom she felt betrayed during her time as a student. To some extent, Mel is also very shy and introverted and would much rather work at her own pace and not with other staff or other students. She expressed that school is important and that is something that has evolved as she spends more time away from the physical campus. For Yaya, the question first perplexed her. I had to explain to her that when I asked about "doing it all over again," I meant school. Her biggest regrets come from the fact that she would not attend school classes. She would attend school to socialize but would never make it to class. As she stated, she would come to school "just to ditch," and in hindsight, this was a big waste of her time. She recognizes that she took the time to wake up and get ready in the morning but did not take that next step and step into her

classes. Perhaps for Yaya, it had more to do with recognizing that if she entered class, she would be putting herself in a situation where she already knew that she was going to misbehave. The fact that she was also more interested in socializing and abusing drugs also were factors in keeping her from entering classes. Yaya's challenges were a lot deeper, psychologically speaking, than those of the other two participants, which can be a lot more powerful than any discipline issues that any of the three may have encountered.

ANALYSIS

The participants have evolved in their way of thinking and can see themselves as doing a lot more with their opportunities at school. None of them spoke of graduating but did speak of making different choices than the ones they had made while they were students. Previously I had discussed having more hands-on type of learning environments to keep students more engaged. Perhaps this is one area where students might have benefited. Except for Mel, who describes herself as not liking to work with her peers in class, and Casper who does not like talking to others because of his shyness, having more cooperative learning-type environments with hands-on activities that are relevant to students could have benefited our participants.

QUESTION TEN: Do you plan on returning to school to complete a GED or other certification? Do you think school is important? Has your opinion changed over time?

Casper would like to return to the school setting, but he is only willing to go back and earn his GED. For that, he sees himself as making sure that he keeps reliable transportation. At the time of the interview, he did not have a vehicle so that was going to be a challenge now for him. He sees himself as going to the Job Corps so that he can get an education. Again, he sees

himself as “a slacker,” and he dreams of having a professional type of career such as a judge or something similar. He recognizes that for these dreams to come true, he must enroll himself at a job corps or other facility that can provide him with the resources to earn his GED. Much like Casper, Mel would also like to earn her GED or any other kind of certification for that matter. Her dream is to one day be her own boss and own a shop like her father does. Yaya would also like to continue school, but feels like she was turned away anytime she tried to reenroll including at the adult learning center. One of the conditions of her parole was to be reenrolled. However, the schools, for some reason, were not honoring that court order. She sees completing school as something she must do at any cost. She wants her diploma but is OK with getting her GED. She recognizes that she needs her education if she wants to do something more than she has been doing. From what she described to me, she sees her education as a way to get out of some of her legal issues. She sees having her certification or GED as more helpful than not having one at all.

ANALYSIS

All the participants’ thoughts on school have changed to some extent. The three participants see that perhaps a high school diploma is out of reach since they have been out of school for several years now. However, they have a vision that they can still earn a GED, which in their own words, is better than not having any type of certification at all. All three participants have dreams that they want to fulfill and they see that the only way to do this is through having some sort of certification. Except for one of the participants who is in legal jeopardy and is close to losing her freedom, the other two participants still have an opportunity to earn a GED whether it is through a face-to-face or virtual program. Yaya can still earn her certificate if she were to be incarcerated. Perhaps this is not the most ideal way of going about earning that certification, but

hopefully, she sees this as an opportunity. It saddens me to think that an individual her age could be incarcerated for many years and is possibly going to enter the school-to-prison pipeline, but my hope for her is that she finds what she needs.

QUESTION ELEVEN: Tell me about your life today.

By this point in the interview process, I have learned a lot about the participants. Casper tells me that his life is good. He is happy that he is single and that he has a job that pays him well, and he is also happy that he has five dogs and does not have any kids that he has to support. He also loves his brother and loves taking care of him, and he loves the fact that he can sleep whenever he wants when is not at work. In his life, he wants to have fun and eventually get into Job Corps. He wants to fix his vehicle rather than to have someone do it for him. For Casper, he does not see himself as ever getting married. In his life, it is important that he loses the stigma of “being a slacker” and do something more than what he is doing. Mel is currently not working, but she is planning on looking for a job soon; she also sees herself as finishing high school, and if that doesn’t work out, then she wants to earn her GED. She sees her life as being positive, but to maintain that positivity, she wants to have her own business and create her schedule the way she wants. She also wants to have her place and, at some point, would like to get married. Her current relationship challenges have changed her opinion to some extent. She is dating an older man who has kids already. Because of this, she has changed her mind about having kids. She states that maybe one day she might want to have kids, but as she says, she is “still a kid” and still has not finished school. She also wants to lose the stigma of being a “lowlife” and wants to do something with her life. She acknowledges that she might not know what this something is, but she knows that she wants to do more. The amount of stress that Yaya is going through is

shocking. This, of course, has to do with her age. The things that concern the other two participants are not concerns for her at this point. She doesn't see herself with a partner because she does not believe she needs a partner to be happy with herself or with life. She wants to finish school so that she can do something for herself before she commits to being with anybody else. She worries about her mom not being there at some point and so she wants to make sure that she has her education to support herself when the time and day comes that her mom is not there. She also sees herself as the care of her siblings in the future. To her, she has to do better because there is no other choice. Who else is going to take care of her sisters if her mom were to die? She wants to be a better person for herself and for her siblings. She does not want to keep using drugs, and she sees this as a waste of time. She recalls not coming home for days and regrets all the time she could've spent with her family. Instead, she recalls the "bullshit" of being in jail and wasting time. Yaya knows that she has a lot more than what her appearance and her predicament project to the world. She states that "she is not dumb" as she acknowledges everything that she's been through as well as recognizes all that she wants for her future.

ANALYSIS

The three participants have dreams and aspirations and although they are not sure what direction they may go, all three of them have a vision of the future. For at least two of the participants, a GED is probably going to be their reality. Mel has a vision of owning her beauty salon, and she will probably receive guidance from her dad, who is also a shop owner. They are well aware that they are not old enough to involve themselves in any type of relationship, at least at this point in life, and they do not see marriage as a necessity. As Mel describes, she is a child

herself. Yaya does not feel that she needs anybody to make her happy. Casper is enjoying his life as a single man.

Only time will tell what truly will happen to our participants. I was encouraged, however, that they have a vision for the future and, with that vision, anything as possible. For Yaya, my only hope for her is that she receives the help she needs and maybe avoids any jail time. She is the only one who perhaps might enter into the school-to-prison pipeline, and once she is in prison, then her chances of exiting are unfortunately low, so she could become a statistic in the existing data on children who are special needs, imprisoned, and did not complete their schooling.

IMPLICATIONS

The journey in putting together this study led me to the realization that the problem of how we discipline our students is much larger than it appears. Perhaps, discipline is but a branch of what the true problem is. Research suggests that the goal of suspending students is to change their behaviors in school to improve the safety of all (Leung-Gage, et. al, 2022; Perera & Dilbert). In the case of Casper, Mel, and Yaya, what we learned here is that there is a combination of challenges that go beyond discipline. First, there is missing support from the home, with no fault of anyone. One or both parents or guardians work to sustain the family. One is unemployed. Also, one or both parents and or guardians have to provide transportation to younger family members who are still not at the secondary level. This limits their ability to advocate for their students at the secondary level. Additionally, none of the participants' parents or guardians completed schooling. Aside from this fact, navigating systems, be it school or other bureaucracies can be a challenge for anyone.

There are also missing opportunities for mentorships for students. As mentioned in Chapter 2, teachers are not prepared to implement mentorship programs when they enter the profession since they do not have any formal training on this component. It would be up to the university in concert with the secondary school systems to develop this component. When there is no formal mentorship between student and teacher, there will likely be discipline problems that did manifest. Our participants described having at least one adult in their lives who they look up to, but it was informal and not school-wide.

More concerning is that the participants more than likely will not be enrolled in a vocational school or college of their choice and will remain as dropouts. Although the participants all have a vision for what they want in their futures when it comes to a career or

some form of vocational training or education, they do not know how to navigate or open doors that will help them get there.

What we learned from the study is that the participants chose not to return to school. Only one of them was the victim of zero-tolerance policies. As Yaya indicated, she did not want to go back after being expelled. The other two participants, Casper and Mel were in some sense impacted by discipline systems. Casper indicated that he was not removed, but was disciplined and also kept friends that were involved in fighting, and drug use. Mel was suspended from school and lost trust in the system due to a clerical error. All of the participants are now in a situation that they see no way out of. So, returning to school is not an option for them at this point. Although all of them indicate that they want to still receive some sort of certificate in the form of a GED, they may remain as dropouts because the participants still do not know how to navigate the school systems or unlock opportunities on their own (Casella, 2003). The participants will more than likely become statistics in this ever-growing cycle that is a phenomenon of marginalized individuals who have dropped out of school (Casella, 2003). If they do one day decide to have children, will their children also not complete their studies and go on to life after high school?

I had to reflect on the idea of what the goal of teaching and learning truly is. In my reflection, discipline becomes a branch of the system of teaching and learning, and why we participate in this noble endeavor. Ultimately, we teach our students so that they can be productive citizens and hope that one day acquire a position of their choice that will help them achieve independence. Our goal as educators is to help our students find a path for themselves perhaps in a field that requires brain power more than brawn. I am not opposed to manual labor. I believe it builds character and teaches humility-at least it did to me. I am grateful for the trades I

learned through my father's effort, but education as a whole, at least what I have reflected on, does not exist to produce manual laborers. However, as students continue to not complete any form of study or trade preparation programs, this is what public schools are producing. The work industry as a whole, perhaps, still gets the labor they need, albeit, with lower skill levels. Students who do complete are, therefore, trained to enter the workforce, having successfully navigated the public education system as socialized, compliant workers. Some of our students, as evidenced in this study, will simply be thrown away as a means of fixing the problem of undesirable behaviors by the systems we create and support (Annamma, 2017).

We cannot achieve this end of having our students "become someone" in life if we are losing children to unnecessary disciplinary removals. First and foremost, they are *someone*. Maybe they have not completely found themselves, but can many of us say the same thing about ourselves as adults? We cannot continue to throw our students away as if doing this would solve the issue of inappropriate behaviors. The data collected from the lived experiences of our students who participated in the study give us some insight into how they see a future that is much brighter than perhaps what they are experiencing today. However, if we could have avoided the situation that occurred at the campus, would their lives be much different than what they shared with me? These students' lives were impacted as a result of cookie-cutter discipline policies and other problems such as students' family life, poverty, and lack of mentorship as outlined in this study (Park & Lynch, 2014; Scheuermann et al., 2013).

Educators have challenged existing punitive measures and have developed forms of restorative disciplinary systems. Much work remains, though, to continue changing our approach to discipline that focuses on restorative justice and addressing possible underlying causes such as poverty. The merits of the research-based Positive Behavior Intervention and Support (PBIS)

system or another form of restorative discipline, must be implemented with fidelity to teach behaviors that are conducive to teaching and learning (Carr, Dunlop, Horner, Koegel, Turnbull, & Sailor, 2002; Horner, Sugai, Todd, & Lewis-Palmer, 2005; Sugai & Horner, 2006). In conjunction with these types of systems, a formal and intentional mentoring system must also be implemented. The data for PBIS shows that at least eighty-five percent of a given campus can function within the First Tier (Bradshaw et al., 2009; Carr & Horner, 2002; Horner et al. 2005; Putnam et al., 2006). This means that it is likely that each of our participants could have benefited from this system if it had been implemented with fidelity. One participant may have benefited from more targeted interventions at the Tier 2 and 3 levels of the system.

When systems such as discipline systems go unquestioned, then we are creating a situation where we as educators are implementing systems for which we do not even know the origins. We accept systems because perhaps that is all we know and have been taught either through our own formal training or at the campus level. Do we ever question how the power structures, particularly those related to race, influence discipline and education? Perhaps this is something we take for granted in our region since there is a large percentage of Hispanic individuals. However, we must still be willing to examine our own biases and those embedded within our systems at the district and campus levels which may lead to differential treatment of students. We must be willing to examine our existing policies as well as those policies we wish to enact and make adjustments when needed to ensure that we are not further marginalizing our students.

According to the theory of Cognitive Development and Culture, a supportive environment can help children develop a well-rounded and resilient mind (Tan, 2001). For instance, a school that is focused on intentional multiculturalism can provide a conducive

environment for learning for diverse learners (Tan, 2001). A school setting based on diversity and multiculturalism can also help our students here in our borderland region where most of our students are from Hispanic backgrounds. An investment of time in creating such a space can help our students feel that they are connected to a community (Migration Policy Institute, 2020; Tan, 2001).

We have to stop looking for a quick fix to manage student behavior. Assertive Discipline systems may be simple to implement at the campus level and for administrators in charge of discipline; they may seem attractive as a one-size-fits-all system, but we have to realize that the systems may lead our students such as Yaya to the school-to-prison pipeline (Annamma, 2017; Leung-Gagne, McCombs, Scott, & Losen, 2022; Perera & Diliberti, 2023), as discussed in this study. Restorative discipline practices must be explored and implemented as campuswide systems (Anyon et al., 2018; Vincent & Tobin, 2011). More robust hands-on classroom settings must be available for all students to keep them, the modern learners, engaged in whatever curriculum we offer them.

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CURRICULUM VITA

Francisco E. Huizar-Gonzalez was born in 1971 in Juarez, Mexico, and immigrated to the United States in 1976. As a first-year, emergent bilingual student, he was enrolled by his parents and attended elementary school in south central El Paso. He quickly learned the English language and was able to phonetically read textbooks that were given to him by his first-grade teacher.

In 1989, he graduated from Burges High School and went on to study at El Paso Community College and The University of Texas at El Paso where he earned his bachelor's degree. In 1998, he began his career as an English teacher in the San Elizario Independent School District and worked with his students for over seven years. In 2002, he enrolled at Sul Ross State University and graduated with his master's degree in education. Shortly after earning his master's degree, he continued serving the San Elizario community as an administrator where he worked for over eight years. He continued his career in public education and began serving the Canutillo Independent School District community in 2013 for three years also as an administrator. His career path led him to serve the El Paso Independent School District community in 2016. In 2018, he was accepted to the doctoral program in Educational Administration.

Over the last twenty-six years as a public servant, Mr. Huizar-Gonzalez has provided numerous workshops, training, and professional development to teachers and other public school staff members where he has covered and coached topics on effective discipline practices and classroom management, the PBIS model, as well as de-escalation methods and techniques. He has remained engaged in his community throughout his career by serving on several committees such as the Campus Improvement Team, District Improvement Team, Campus Safety Committee, Principal Advisory Committees, as well as the Superintendent Advisory Committee.

His study titled, *El Testimonio de Los Niños de El Parque* is a culmination of experiences that stem from working with hundreds of students in the borderland and his continued concern for the many who have dropped out of school.