Spring 2013

Disciplinary Practices in the Elementary School Setting

Alicia MacNabb
Trinity College, terri.macnabb@trincoll.edu

Trinity College
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

Disciplinary Practices in the Elementary School Setting

Alicia MacNabb
Trinity College
Senior Research Project
Educational Studies
December, 17th, 2012
Updated January, 22nd 2013

Abstract: With an ever growing understanding that American Public School Systems are not successfully serving the needs of their students the amount of research on education, discipline, racial disparity, and student achievement is vast. However, the amount of literature that contextualizes the experiences of students, teachers, and school staff remains limited. In my study, I focus on the local reality of Pharos Elementary School, a high-poverty school in Hartford, CT. My study examines how misbehavior is defined in the school context, what form of discipline practices are used, and what effect that has on school climate. I used a mixed method approach, conducting five formal interviews, 20 hours of field observation, and analysis of school discipline data-bases. I found that there is an over-reliance of exclusionary discipline for ambiguously defined reasons such as "misbehavior" and "disrespect". The findings also suggest larger trends in an overemphasis of discipline in high-poverty, racial minority schools. Understanding the experiences of the people represented in my study highlights the flaws in the current system as well offers realistic recommendations for improvement.

Table of Contents

Introduction

Discipline in the school setting is integral to successful school functioning. How a school responds to "good behavior" and "misbehavior" has a large influence on student's inclination towards one or the other. For the purpose of this paper, I will refer to "misbehavior" as it was used by the teachers and staff I interviewed. Simply put, misbehavior is when students "aren't following the rules or instructions given at that moment" (Interview transcription, 2012). While "misbehavior" is integral to understanding educational discipline so too is the concept of "disrespect." In the school context, these two terms are often synonymous to each other and grounds for exclusion from the classroom. These markers of disciplinary action suggest the subjective nature of discipline and thus the problems that follow. While "disruptive" students can be a distracting force in the classroom, we must assess what price we are paying if we seclude these students from the school. My research project aimed to answer the following questions: *How do teachers define misbehavior and is it consistent with their actions? What forms of discipline practices are used in the elementary school setting? What effect does the type of discipline have on school climate?* When approaching these questions I am not only interested in understanding what happens in the classroom, but *why* and *how*.

Thesis

I argue that the subjective nature of "misbehavior" and its intimate relationship with "disrespect" creates ambiguity in what does and does not warrant disciplinary action. Additionally, I argue that there is an over-reliance of student removal from the classroom through exclusionary discipline. While aiming to correct behaviors that are harmful to the

larger classroom learning environment, it instead segregates the students most in need of academic and social support. Finally, I argue that this emphasis on discipline is influenced by the local context of the school, that the poverty level and racial makeup of the student population affects teacher's approaches towards discipline. However, it is through meaningful and established relationships between school staff and students that social and academic issues can be corrected and/or improved.

Case for Significance

While disciplinary practices shape the overall classroom atmosphere, discipline affects student populations differently. Previous research has repeatedly shown that African-American and Latino boys are disproportionally disciplined through the use of suspension and expulsion (Cole & Vavrus, 2002; Noguera, 1995, Ferguson, 2001). While African Americans constitute only 17% of the national student population, they represent 32% of the students who receive out of school suspension (Vavrus, F., Cole, K., 2002). The use of such discipline practices have been found damaging to academic performance, as these activities take children out of the learning environment of the classroom (Noguera, 2003). With growing knowledge about the harmful effects of alienating students from the school setting, new laws and approaches are being established. In 2007, the Connecticut General Assembly passed a law requiring that suspensions be carried out inside the school building, unless the "pupil being suspended poses such a danger to persons or property or such a disruption of the educational process that the pupil shall be excluded from school during the period of suspension" (Ali, T., Dufresne, J., 2008). Despite this new law,

Connecticut continues to have one of the largest education achievement gaps in the country between white and non-white students.

While the achievement gap has received nationwide attention in the push for educational progress, little attention has been placed on understanding how discipline influences these educational outcomes. One of the most consistent findings in education research is the strong positive relationship between time engaged in academic learning and student achievement (Brophy, 1988; Fisher et al. 1981; Greenwood, Horton, & Utlet, 2002 as cited by Gregory et al., 2010). Yet schools continue to rely heavily on exclusion from classrooms as the primary discipline strategy (Arcia, 2006 as cited by Gregory et al., 2010), thus contributing to the persistent gap between educational attainment and school experience of different racial and ethnic groups. Relying on these forms of discipline "exacerbate a cycle of academic failure, disengagement, and escalating rule breaking" (Gregory et al., 2010). For this reason the ways in which schools respond to "misbehavior" can contribute to lowered academic performance. Often the students who have the most frequent brushes with the discipline system and exclusion from the classroom are in fact the students that need the most time and attention *in* the classroom. Studies suggest that the disciplinary infractions demonstrated by this subpopulation of students often masks larger, underlying issues such as learning difficulties and personal hardships (Ali, T., Dufresne, J., 2008). For this reason, the ways in which discipline is administered and the frequency and manner in which each student experiences it has a great indication of student success or failure. As a nation aware of the dire need for improvement in the educational fields, understanding this topic is essential in bettering the inclusion and academic success of *all* children.

Literature Review

With an ever growing understanding that American Public School Systems are not best serving the needs of their students (Noguera, 2009) the amount of research on education, discipline, racial disparity, and student achievement is vast and continues to expand. However, the amount of literature that contextualizes the experiences of students, teachers, and staff remains limited. In order to create a comprehensive framework for my research I explored numerous studies examining discipline practices, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. I will highlight the strengths and weaknesses of each study in order to better inform my own research, seeking to extend beyond the limitations of past research.

Skiba et al (2011) sought to analyze 364 schools in one academic year. The ultimate purpose of their study was to conduct "a national investigation exploring the extent of, and patterns in, racial and ethnic disparities in school discipline at the elementary and middle school level" (Skiba et al., 86). Based on repeated findings that African-American boys were overrepresented in disciplinary programs (and later the prison system) they sought to explain why this happened and unearth ways to correct the disparity. Skiba et al. (2011) analyzed these disciplinary discrepancies through multiple explanations "including poverty, differential rates of inappropriate or disruptive behavior in school settings, and cultural mismatch or racial stereotyping" (Skiba et al., 86). In order to conduct their research they collected daily or weekly data from school personnel about the observed behavioral occurrences in the classroom. They used a quantitative method of analysis, using a descriptive and logistic regression of analysis to determine which students were

most represented in incidences of behavioral problems, what types of problems were reported, and the severity of punishment used in response to the student behavior.

After completing their analysis of office discipline referrals they found several statistically significant disciplinary patterns between racial and ethnic groups. Higher rates of multiple referrals for African American students than White or Latino students at the elementary and middle school level across all infraction types were found. Latino students also become overrepresented in referrals at the middle school level, due to an underrepresentation of their white peers (Skiba et al., 2011). Most notably African American elementary students were more likely to receive out of school suspension for minor digressions than their white peers. The overall pattern was that of significant disparities between African American and Latino students compared to white students.

While the study found noticeable inequalities in punitive distribution, the quantitative design turned students and their experiences into numbers on a chart. Student behavior became an equation to understand, explain, predict, and solve. In a section entitled "Gaps in Knowledge" the authors acknowledged the limited depth and detail this study provided. While the statistically relevant findings contributed to the enormous body of research that highlights the disproportionate and unequal representation of race in disciplinary issues, it did not provide increased depth of understanding. They noted that a more ethnographic and comprehensive study of discipline is necessary to create a richer picture, but nonetheless felt it was more important to maintain objectivity and generalizability of their findings. In a scientific, numerically driven society the pressure to maintain objectivity and distance is a reoccurring theme amongst the research community. However, the body of "scientific" findings on social,

cultural, and behavioral topics barely scratches the surface of addressing the problems at hand. Thus in my research I seek to go beyond "generalizability" and create a narrative that digs behind the numbers and facts represented in countless past studies.

Noguera (2003) provided an improvement from the above mentioned limitations. Like Skiba et al. (2011) he critiqued punitive and no-tolerance based discipline systems. The purpose of his study was to analyze the patterns of student behavior and teacher response in order to make sense of the larger patterns of misrepresentation in the disciplinary system (Skiba et al., 2002; Gregory, A., 2010; Arcia, E., 2006). His research goals include targeting the ways in which school operations perpetuate and possibly accelerate these patterns and why a school's drive for "order and safety" has resulted in "the neediest and most disadvantaged students being the ones most likely to be punished" (Noguera, 341). He draws on essential pieces of research such as Paul Willis' Learning to Labor (1977), as a possible explanation for self-fulfilling prophecies, in which students internalize school labels of inferiority and resist the system by avoiding conforming to its expectations of student conduct and behavior.

Essential in Noguera's research were the constructive definitions of his research terms; such as "misbehavior," expectations of the school, and school culture. As these terms are subjective and vary depending on the individual, location, and time it was crucial to clearly state his stance. In fact, the subjectivity of "discipline" problems, such as disrespect and noncompliance, were more regularly tied to students of color than white students. What exactly is disrespect? In what way is it appropriate for students to disagree with teachers? Asking these types of questions separated his work from other scholarly articles.

With these concise working definitions and provocative questions he provided a dynamic, flexible, and comprehensive incorporation of personal experience with students in the classroom setting. He included both personal research observations and dialogues in order to address his research questions. He eloquently focused on the problems that were observed in the classroom, whether it was student disengagement, confrontation, or denial of the expected student conduct. He stated that the "factors that give rise to misbehavior [often] go unexplored, ignored, and unaddressed, while the penchant to punish proceeds with little thought given to the long-term consequences on students" (Noguera, 345). Thus teachers and school administrators target the inappropriate or disruptive behavior without stopping to understand the motivation factors driving the student to "act out."

Noguera notes that is not enough to simply correct or punish student behavior, but rather understand the underlying *reasons* for such behavior. While discussing a "difficult-to-teach" student with his teacher he asked "Given what you know about him, what is the school doing to prevent him from going to prison" (Noguera, 342)? I aim to continue this question and dialogue in my own research in the Hartford Public School System. Asking these questions are essential in re-centering discipline towards being a proactive and positive intervention mechanism.

Despite the depth of knowledge offered in Noguera's article his work offered limited solutions for the problems he highlights. He mentions exemplary schools which are able to incorporate positive and proactive means of discipline, but only does so briefly in the concluding paragraphs. Mirsky (2011) elaborates more on possible suggestions, including personal testimonies as a way of presenting effective discipline alternatives. Her focus lay on creating disciplinary practices that elicit positive change and growth, raising

student's awareness about how their actions and behaviors affect others. She uses anecdotal support as a way of emphasizing three main strategies that have created more positive student teacher relationships. While her research effectively covers the present and future condition of discipline, she does not address the history or underlying factors of discipline inequality. My research will target the past, present, and future of the disciplinary system. With the expedited timeline of my research I believe it is most important to use my experiences in the classroom (in the here and now) as the primary focus of my research. However, if researchers only focus on what they see without analyzing the past and future implications of such findings, the scope of change remains limited. Thus I seek to create a rich and descriptive local context of a Hartford Public School, as a way of contextualizing previous research and using personal narratives as testimonies for action.

Ferguson (2000) offers an extensive critique of the public school system and its role in creating and shaping concepts of black masculinity. Based on three years of participant observation and a wide range of interviews and conversations with children and adults at Rosa Parks Elementary School, she creates a rich portrait of (mostly) eleven and twelve year old male students and their experiences with and reaction to negative school perceptions of black males. While black males represented only 25% of the student population, they accounted for nearly half of the discipline referral cases and 90% of students considered "at risk" (Ferguson, 2000). Routine among this environment of racial and ethnic tension, these boys were continuously seen as "culturally disadvantaged", "unsalvageable" or "bound for jail" (Ferguson, 2000). Through her research Ferguson (2000) seeks to animate the stories of these male students "not only because they are the

most silenced and the most invalidated in discussion of school trouble and punishment, but also because they provide a critical view that augments significantly our knowledge about the contemporary crisis in education" (Ferguson, 11).

Essential in understanding her research is the notion that black males receive labels of being delinquent, intimidating, dangerous, and threatening in schools. She goes beyond these labels however, and is interested in analyzing the *effects* these labels have on student identity and the ways in which black youth transgressions are viewed. She argues that while white youth are allotted freedom to push boundaries in their search for developing a sense of self-control, black youth are denied this explorative period. Even in the face of minor infractions such as being "disrespectful" or "having attitude" their behaviors are adultified, being "made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naiveté" (Ferguson, 83). When white males misbehave they are seen as "naughty", however a black male's misbehavior signifies a larger trend toward future criminal activity.

Discipline becomes a hidden curriculum, guiding these ""jail bound" children directly to its front door. Her findings mirror these arguments, as the "Punishing Room" (room designed to correct the misbehaviors of "trouble" children) becomes a place where "school identities and reputations are constituted, negotiated, challenged, confirmed for African American youth in a process of categorization, reward and punishment, humiliation, and banishment" (Ferguson, 40). The room becomes both a site of punishment and pleasure; a social space for self-expression and identity formation. Similarly, the "Jailhouse", reserved for more serious discretions, is a place where students form an identity in response to the school's inferior labeling. Not only were the boys aware

of this labeling process, but understood where they fit into the social order; knowledge that further disengaged them from the school.

Ferguson's (2000) detailed and intricate accounts of the school setting created an essential framework for my research. She unraveled the expectations, perceptions, labels, and identity formation of black students in response to larger institutional forces. While she examines the different responses to this hostile environment, more emphasis could have been placed on how the "schoolboys" handled their constant struggle to distance themselves from the "troublemakers." Additionally, she steered clear of concrete recommendations for improvement, suggesting full-scale revolution was more appropriate. While revolution may be the end goal, it is nonetheless important to offer insight into the small steps that can limit the demonizing school climate she so eloquently described.

Similar to Ferguson (2000), Vavrus and Cole's (2002) research refutes theories that blame individual behavior for heightened disciplinary infractions. By focusing solely on the individual, the larger institutional and societal implications of the perceptions of student "misbehavior" are ignored. Through the analysis of classroom observations, videotaped lessons, and interviews Vavrus and Cole's (2002) five year longitudinal study examines the use of suspension through a sociocultural lens that influences teachers' decisions to remove students from the classroom. They look specifically at the reasons for disciplinary action, particularly in the absence "of an obvious breach of disciplinary policy" (Vavrus and Cole, 88). While "disruption" is commonly used in school policies as a definitive guideline for disciplinary action, in actuality "disruptions" represent a highly contextualized and socially variable behavior.

Vavrus and Cole (2002) found that discipline was less about enforcing known expectations, but were "shaped, though not determined, by sociocultural relations in the classroom that affect whether a nonviolent event will be singled out for a suspension by the teacher" (Varus and Cole, 109). The violations that resulted in suspensions were always nonviolent and happened alongside multiple disruptions from several students, though only one student was singled out for punishment. Even more, there was no consistent response to utterances that were deemed "insubordinate" or "disrespectful," as these comments were ignored or met with humor when the teacher didn't feel that he/she was under threat. This subjective definition of misbehavior created confusion in the classroom, with students receiving suspension without understanding the exact moment that caused their punishment.

Vavrus and Cole (2002) provided a thorough and rich depiction of the two classrooms observed in this study. While interviews were also conducted, they were not included in the studies' findings and analysis. Inclusion of these transcripts would have helped enhance the classroom interactions depicted; offering an insight into student/teacher reflections after instances of discipline. Additionally, the study focused only on the process that leads to disciplinary action, but did not address what happens to the students after they are sent out of the classroom. In my research I aimed to understand both what instances precipitate disciplinary action in the classroom, but also what happens to the students once the classroom door has been shut behind them. I used these previous studies as a framework for my research. I aimed to humanize the topic of school discipline

by depicting the experiences and voices of the members of the Pharos Elementary School community.[1]

Methodology

In this study I used observational and interviewing methods as the primary data collection source. I adopted a qualitative research approach to best capture the experiences, voices, and observations encountered throughout my research process. I also integrated quantitative methods by collecting and analyzing discipline referral reports from the school as well as through state databases. My research process began in late September with my application to both the Trinity College and Hartford Institutional Review Board (IRB), seeking ethical approval to conduct research in the Hartford Public School System. By mid-October I received district approval and was accepted into my research site in the beginning of November.

Over a five week period I conducted twenty hours of onsite observation. In this time I observed three different classrooms as well as the behavioral technician's room. Of the three teachers observed, two were African-American, one male and one female, and the third was a white female. The age of teachers ranged from mid-twenties to mid-forties. The selection of these teachers were not done randomly, but through the vice principal's recommendations. In addition to my observations, I conducted five formal interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. Upon transcription the original recordings were deleted and the names of all interview participants were changed to protect their identities. I conducted formal interviews with two of the three teachers observed, as well as informal conversations with all observed teachers. Additionally I conducted formal interviews with

---

[1] School name has been changed to protect its identity

one behavioral technician, one security guard, and one teacher I met through my observations in the behavioral technician's room. The interviews ranged from fifteen minutes to an hour in length. My goal of the interviews was to form an understanding about the individual's role in the school, outlook on and experience with discipline, and personal suggestions for improvement of the system. I accomplished this through a set of interview questions that served as my guideline for the interviews (See Appendix D for full list of questions). Through my observations and the sentiments expressed in my interviews I adapted the questions to best cover my growing research topic.

Considering the revealing nature of professional labels, any job descriptors or personal information that could identify the participant have been changed or omitted. While I initially sought to conduct formal interviews with the students I observed, due to time constraints I was unable to distribute the necessary parent consent forms. Therefore the experience of the students is captured through informal conversations, observations, and secondhand reports from teachers, staff, and administrators.

I established Pharos Elementary School as my research site, because of its status as a low-performing school, its proximity to Trinity College for access, and my personal history at the school. In the spring of 2010, I observed a second grade classroom at Pharos Elementary School for four hour weekly slots from September through to December. These previous observation hours helped inform my research questions and thesis.

The Local Context

Pharos Elementary School is a "high-poverty" kindergarten through sixth grade school located in Hartford, Connecticut. Based on the 2009-2010 Strategic School Profile, approximately 47.5% of students are not fluent in English, 12.2% have a disability, over

95% of students are eligible for free/reduced-price meals, and only 0.3% of the students are identified as gifted and/or talented. These numbers are lower than both district and state averages. In the district only 19.8% of students are not fluent in English and an even smaller, 7.4% in the state of Connecticut. While the district's population also represents a student body with more than 95% of students eligible for free/reduced-price meals, a stark contrast in poverty level exists when compared to the whole state, where only 36.7% of students meet this need. The number of either gifted or disabled students additionally creates a contrasting profile, where there is a larger margin of "need" versus "gift" at the district and individual school level than state level. These statistics flag Pharos as "indicators of educational need" (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2009-10. See Appendix A for full data). Beyond these indicators, Pharos has tested well below the state average in both math and reading for the past 3 years, showing little to no improvement during this time; deemed a "school in need of improvement" for seven consecutive years (Connecticut State Department of Education).

As a result of these educational problems, in 2007 school redesign specifications took effect. This legislature brought about both subtle and drastic changes to Pharos. Most notably, a new principal was instated with the caveat that he/she must be bilingual in order to better reflect the demographics of the student population. The teaching force was also renewed, as each current teacher was required to reapply for their position, with fewer than 50% retaining their job. This shift in the professional body mirrors the change in the demographics of the teaching force. While the student racial and ethnic demographics remained relatively level, with 97.4% minority students (82.7% Hispanic and 14.4% Black) in 2009-10, there was a dramatic increase of minority professionals

between 2006-07 and 2009-10. From 2001 to 2006 the percentage of minority

professionals wavered between 33 to 35% (Connecticut State Department of Education,

2009-10). However, between the 2006-07 and 2009-10 academic years, minority

professionals increased to an even 50%. Other changes included increasing the length of

each school day by an hour in order to accommodate for a new daily Spanish class.

Additionally, in accordance with the new state rules enforcing inside over out of school

suspension, the school added the "Stop and Think" room. The purpose of the room was to

house students "who break the most serious rules or who continuously disrupt the class

despite several interventions by staff" (Hartford Public Schools School Design

Specifications, 2007).

Despite the incorporation of a larger minority authority force, bilingual principal,

more school hours, and a new location for suspension, the number of discipline incidents

per academic year have increased. While there was a slight decrease of incidents

immediately following the changes in the 2008-09 academic year, the numbers have begun

rising once again (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2009-10).

Hartford School District- Pharos Elementary School
Discipline- Number of Incidents by Incident Category

School Name	School Year	Incident Category	Number of Total Incidents
Pharos Elementary School	2010-11	All	333
Pharos Elementary School	2009-10	All	168
Pharos Elementary School	2008-09	All	90
Pharos Elementary School	2007-08	All	190
Pharos Elementary School	2006-07	All	116

With this increasing prevalence of disciplinary incidents, I aimed to understand the current

role of discipline at Pharos; bringing life and personal experiences to these statistics.

Analysis of Data

Stepping into the behavioral technician's room I was struck by plain white walls, large covered windows, fluorescent row lighting, and eight students of all age ranges sitting, standing, rolling, and talking in various locations of the long rectangular room. Two office desks are located on opposite ends of the room housing the two behavioral techs, busy filling out the papers that cover every inch of their desks. Without questioning my presence, students continued talking to each other and making pleas of innocence to the behavioral techs. The room was a social hub, with students entering and exiting at a constant pace. Students arrived through various means of transportation- under the force of the school security guards, alongside a disgruntled teacher, wandered in alone, or slipped in with little acknowledgment. Within a three hour period twenty-one students spent anywhere from five minutes to the full four hour period in the room.

After all, the behavioral technician's room is the gateway to either inclusion back into the classroom or a waiting point before further disciplinary action. The role of the behavioral techs is to "provide intervention to the 'high risk' students... to the 10% of the school that needs the extra supervision. So if a kid is put out of class it's our job to get them back, you know, have them calm when they reenter class" (George, interview transcription, 2012). In order to accomplish this they have the students "do math or count or do their ABCs... all those little things to calm them down" (George, Interview transcription, 2012). However, these "calming" activities were largely absent in my observations. Rather, the continual comings and goings of students created an environment in which the reason for each student's presence was largely unknown.

Bombarded by the associated paperwork that came with each child, there was little time remaining for the intervention the behavioral techs sought to provide. As a consequence many students were lost in the cracks- either refusing to explain the behavior that had landed them there, consumed by hysteria, or petitioning to return to class to no avail. The "revolving door of children" signifies a larger problem of an over-reliance on exclusionary discipline and the ambiguous behaviors that result in student's presence in this disciplinary waiting room. (Staff, Observation field notes, 2012)."

What Am I Doing Here?": The Ambiguity of Discipline

Amongst the many commands made in Mrs. Johnson's class was that of being "respectful." Within a two-hour window, the term "respect" was mentioned dozens of times. Students were asked to respect each other, respect the rules, and respect her. In a conversation after-class I asked her what she meant by this. She felt that showing respect in the classroom, meant that students were "quiet, well-mannered, listened to one another, and did what they were told" (Mrs. Johnson, observation field notes, 2012). When asked to define "misbehavior" in her classroom, similar concepts were highlighted, stating that it involved "not listening to me or being disruptive" and "not respecting me and not following the rules" (Mrs. Johnson, observation field notes, 2012). However, these definitions blend together, with no clear difference between the two. Obedience became interlaced in both the definitions of behavior and respect, however ambiguously.

Similarly, Ms. Rodriguez defined misbehavior in terms that were difficult to conceptualize. In her classroom, misbehavior was "when someone isn't following the rules or instructions given at that moment" (Mrs. Rodriguez, interview transcription, 2012). The

ambiguity in her definition lay in the phrase "given at that moment," suggesting that the student expectations are variable yet nonetheless strictly enforced. In both classroom examples the unclear definition and intimate relationship between behavior and respect created subjective grounds for discipline. After all, how do you quantify disrespect? Furthermore, where do you draw the line of the "appropriate" amount versus a degree of disrespect that merits removal from the classroom?

The notion of respect also penetrates teacher's expectations of their students. In response to my question regarding student expectations in the classroom, Ms. Rodriguez stated that she "wants [her] expectations to carry on wherever they go. So that they get used to acting that way, all the time. Not just because [they're] with me in the morning. And then [they] lose that structure wherever [they] go. Sometimes in the morning I have to remind them that [they're] here in school now" (Mrs. Rodriguez, interview transcript, 2012). She felt that there is little difference between respect and obedience, thus aimed to teach the student's the appropriate way to behave inside and outside the classroom. The challenge lay, however, when these expectations change based on teacher, classroom, setting, and time. Students must learn to deal with multiple authority figures and learn to "behave" properly in each setting. If they fail to comply with these changing definitions of appropriate behavior, they are held accountable for their actions nonetheless.

Within minutes of my first classroom observation referral slips were being threatened as a response to a wide variety of actions, including not sitting down, not putting away a pen upon request, and using profanity. One of the two students who the teacher identified as having "the biggest behavior issues" expressed resistance towards the classroom math exercises (Mrs. Rodriguez, interview transcript, 2012). He would stand up,

talk to other students in the classroom, and fiddle with items in his desk. The moment that precipitated the yellow behavioral slip being filled out, however, happened when he used the wrong pen after finally complying with the teacher's request to work on his math. He immediately raised his voice saying "come on, you're gonna get me suspended for nothin'" (student, field notes, 2012). In a quieter, more private voice the teacher eventually asked the reasons for his refusal. He admitted that he didn't like doing math because he didn't understand it and felt stupid. Nonetheless the student was penalized for his academic insecurities even after the reason for his behavior was revealed, adding to the long list of disciplinary sanctions against him. While he was not listening to the teacher's request, he also was not overtly disrespecting her despite what the checked box on his referral slip reports. Respect can be present even if agreement and conformity are not.

Disciplinary scare tactics as a way of preventing this type of resistance emerged as another common theme in this classroom. When the teacher felt that a student was not acting appropriately or was misbehaving, the slightest movement toward the known location of the yellow referral slips served as a final threat for student obedience. Similarly, a staff member suggested that there is a large trend toward using scare tactics in the classroom to quiet students into obedience. Eddie, a school staff member, light-heartedly responded to my question about different teacher's disciplinary practices by saying:

A lot of times they call the security guards and use them like pepper spray... What they'll do is call them up and they'll go to the door and the teacher will be like 'okay, you see who's here?' It's like daddy at the house- 'you see daddy's here- if you don't behave you're in trouble" (Eddie, interview transcript, 2012).

The scare tactics observed in the classroom, whether in the form of threats of calling the security guards or filling out referral sheets created an authoritarian and negative environment in the classroom. Rather than addressing the reasons that underlay student "misbehavior" students were sent out of the classroom as an easier, quicker fix. The primary focus shifted towards control and order, rather than productivity and inclusive learning.

Is obedience the overall goal of education then? Not for Mr. Lopez. He was explicit in his disagreement with both equating respect and obedience and with the heavy reliance of exclusionary discipline at Pharos. His definition of respect stipulated that it "is pretty much, showing courtesy for the people around you, for the place you're in, and for the activities you're engaged in" (Mr. Lopez, interview transcription, 2012). However, he does not rely on this social concept as a means of managing and controlling his classroom, stating that:

I never want a kid to do what they're told. I want a kid to understand that I have your best interest in mind, which is why I'm trying to redirect you and asking you to do something different or to stop doing something that's inappropriate. But I don't believe in blind obedience. In fact, I'm not a fan of obedience, you know, I want a thinking person, not someone that just follows directions. Everyone knows I like a noisy room. And I like a certain kind of noise (Mr. Lopez, interview transcript, 2012).

Mr. Lopez's desire to nurture free thinking and inquisitive students was immediately apparent in his classroom. While the classroom setting was the same- with the off-white, run-down, harshly light, empty walls- the atmosphere was entirely different. School, in fact, appeared fun. Standing at roughly six feet tall, Mr. Lopez had a strong presence in the classroom and a personality to match his stature. Rather than using unidirectional

commands at his students, he was inquisitive, sarcastic, good-humored, and generally light-hearted in his interactions.

As I was able to witness his class during a school testing day, when students would get out of their seats or attempt to check answers with their neighbors, Mr. Lopez would meet their actions with a sense of humor. Rather than becoming irritated that they were not doing as directed, he would correct their behavior through the use of jokes, body and facial gestures, and comments about knowing better. Elaborating on the reasons for such reactions he said:

I don't want to be a disciplinarian. And I want them to realize that what they're doing isn't so serious. You would see a difference if what they were doing was potentially hazardous to anyone. Then I would take a different approach. But I try to tell them, this isn't life and death, this is school (Mr. Rodriguez, interview transcript, 2012).

He created a fun, relaxed environment without making school a joke. In fact, he felt that by using scare tactics, constant threats of discipline, and context-specific terms of respect school became a game. The school environment should be one of honesty and increasing intellectual growth and curiosity, however the "game playing" created an environment based on asserting power, control, and order through excessive discipline.

"*They Are Your Client*": An Over-Reliance on Discipline

The over-reliance on exclusionary discipline was not only reflected through my observations, interviews, and informal conversations but can be seen in the school referral numbers. In recent years, the school has begun compiling each referral slip into a larger database which tracks individual student's number of referrals, the reason for the referral, and the time of day as well as location in which the discretion occurred. This database is

only accessible through the behavioral techs, as this is the main responsibility of their job; transferring each handwritten yellow slip into the web-based system. Through my involvement and observation period in the behavioral techs, I was granted access to some of this information, which was essential in contextualizing my anecdotal findings with larger school norms.

From the beginning of the 2012 academic year to the end of November there have been 584 disciplinary referrals to the behavioral tech room. This means that in the last three months there were 584 times in which students were removed from the classroom, a process that I have demonstrated to be detrimental to student learning based on past educational research findings. Additionally, among these cases, 287 of the incidences, a staggering 49.14% of all referrals, were reported for acts of "defiance/disrespect/insubordination/non-compliance" (May, S. et al., 2010). However, as previously mentioned teachers were unable to agree on a common definition and standard for these exact types of misbehaviors. The other most common reasons for discipline included "disruption", consisting 14.9% of the referrals and "physical aggression" at 13.53% (May, S. et al., 2010). While these three "problem behavior" categories are most frequently cited, they are also the most subjective, as definitions of each category vary based on perspective. Other more objective standards such as "skipping," "tardy," "fighting," or "property damage/vandalism" which can be easily identified represented a minor percentage of the overall referrals(To see full report refer to Appendix B).

Based on the subjective grounds for referrals, discipline became over-used and abused by teachers. Mr. Lopez stated that there is absolutely an over-reliance on the behavioral techs, that:

"it is the default. It is 'get out.' And it really sickens me... When a child is out of the room, the learning stops. And when we send a child to ISS (in-school suspension) for the *day*, they're suspended... and what do we hope to gain from it? That's what I say. Are we here for kids or are you here to just get your job done? Because they *are* your job. They are your client. They're the reason you come in here. And if they're not (exacerbated)... Go somewhere else! (Mr. Lopez, interview transcript, 2012).

With an average class size of about 20 students, the overwhelming nature of the job resulted in a trend toward kicking students out of the classroom as a way of relieving extra stress. In my observations, teacher frustration was apparent anytime that student compliance was not. Rather than taking the measures necessary to redirect student attention and focus, the student was instead removed from the class and confined to the behavioral tech room.

While observing in the behavioral tech room, numerous students stated how "stupid" it was to waste their day there. While only a portion of the students were sent to ISS, many spent hours outside of the classroom being held in that long, rectangular room. One student who was sent there because he was about to get in a fight, but instead walked away remarked, "you can't tell me to stay here all day, who're y'all?... It's not even that serious, I should be back in class" (student, field notes, 2012). He had followed the directions given to him "at that moment" and walked away, but still received punishment. Yet another student who was sent there because she arrived five minutes late to class stated several times that she should be back in class and didn't need to be in the room. She knew that her time would be better spent learning in the classroom than sitting around waiting with the other banished students. The majority of the time these student's protests were either not heard over the other noises of the room, or were politely denied, as the behavioral techs were still entering their paperwork into the system. In these situations students recognized the importance of being in the classroom rather than being excluded

for minor discretions; finding irony in missing entire class periods because of an incident that did *not* occur or being late to a class period.

<div align="center">"<u>*Welcome to the Inner City*</u>": Why Context Matters</div>

In a series of questions inquiring about my experience at the school I was asked by Mr. Lopez if I thought there was a correlation between the poverty of the community and the ways in which the kids were treated. His opinion that the context of the school did in fact influence its discipline practices sparked my curiosity. Were my findings unique to Pharos or did they correlate with other low-income, minority schools? In order to answer this question I asked staff members their opinions and then compared the anecdotal evidence to district and statewide discipline reports. In response to Mr. Lopez's question one staff member stated:

Absolutely. Immediately the teachers are on defense. They require respect *from* the students, but don't give respect *to* the students. I don't know if that's from a racial standpoint or a poverty standpoint, but they automatically view the student body negatively. I don't think teachers would ever see it like that. But it's there (staff, interview transcript, 2012).

Another staff member agreed saying "even right now they are installing cameras in every hallway... If that doesn't scream 'I don't trust you, you're up to no good', I don't what does" (staff, interview transcript, 2012). A staff member who was a recent addition to the Pharos community noted that the over-reliance stemmed from fear, that teachers "turn to harsh discipline because they're scared of their classroom" (Interview transcript, 2012). Other teachers, however, did not feel that this was true; that there was more discipline only because there was more misbehavior. While this focus on blaming the individual permeates popular discourse, as Ferguson (2000) suggested, it limits the full scope of the education system.

The opinion of these few staff members who felt that the local context of the school mattered was indeed reflected in state issued discipline reports. In order to make this comparison I analyzed nine school districts in Connecticut in terms of average household income and the average number of school discipline incidents. Five of these districts, New Canaan, Weston, Canterbury, Darien, and Farmington, were considered high-income with average incomes ranging from $71,977 to $231,138 per year in 2009. The four other districts, Hartford, Norwich, Bridgeport, and New London, were low-income with average incomes ranging from $28,300 to $49,629 in 2009 (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2009-10). Upon analysis I found an inverse relationship between the household income and number of school discipline incidents. While Norwich, New London, Hartford, and Bridgeport had between 112 to 324 average school discipline incidences in 2009-2010, the five higher income districts reported only 24 to 37 incidences (To see full data set, refer to Appendix C). Consistent with my findings of disciplinary ambiguity, the definition of "school discipline incidents" was not included in this report. I am thus unsure if these numbers are referring to office referrals, suspension, and/or expulsions. Additionally, these numbers represent an average of all schools in the district, with some schools within the district reporting higher or lower discipline incidents. Despite these factors, the general trend persists that low-income districts reported greater school discipline incidents than the higher-income districts.

Limitations & Suggestions

While I began my research process in late September by applying for approval from the Hartford School Board, I did not receive research authorization until mid-October. Additionally, despite correspondence with administrators at Pharos during this

preliminary process, I was not accepted into the school until early November, well after

receiving approval. Due to these access restrictions the duration of my research was

limited. I condensed my research into a six week period, in which I dedicated any available

time to observing at Pharos. I also adapted my research questions based on this shorter

research duration. While my original goal was to focus on the student perspective, I did not

have enough time to distribute the necessary parent consent forms and thus formally

interviewed teachers and school staff members only.

While my research was altered because of the short duration, I was nonetheless able

to create a rich profile of the school. Student experience was still incorporated in my

research through the interactions seen in my observations and the informal conversations

in which I engaged. I suggest that future research on this topic expands on my findings by

conducting interviews with students. As an under-represented voice in educational

research, it is essential to incorporate the experiences of the people who are most

intimately involved in the topic at hand. Just as I was able to incorporate teacher and staff's

voices into a comprehensive portrait of school discipline, future research should draw on

the other half of the equation- the students.

Conclusion: Where to Go from Here

My study found that there is an over-reliance of exclusionary discipline for

subjective forms of behavior. The concept of misbehavior, respect, and obedience became

interchangeable in school rhetoric. This ambiguity allowed the qualifications for

misbehavior to be time, place, and person specific. Additionally, this emphasis on

discipline that removed the child from the classroom was reflected in larger trends of low-

income schools and opinions of certain teachers and school staff members.

While my findings suggest a large emphasis on exclusionary discipline for ambiguous reasons, this was not unanimous amongst all teachers. It is essential to avoid all-encompassing statements, which result in the misrepresentation of subpopulations. Exceptional teachers persist. Fortunately through my research I was able to observe and interview Mr. Lopez, who visibly inspired his students, steered clear of exclusionary discipline, and balanced both with a smile and a laugh. It is these teachers that must inform more inclusive ways of balancing student engagement and classroom management. Essential in my research I wanted to understand what was happening in and out the classroom, but also to identify ways of improving this flawed school system. Previous research has focused on the dramatic change that is needed, short of full-scale revolution (Ferguson, 2000). While I understand the rationale and need for such suggestions, I aimed to highlight smaller steps that can be made at the individual level. While institutional reform is the ultimate goal, the individual teacher and school is not powerless in the meantime.

When speaking of his personal journey of establishing a rapport with his students, Mr. Lopez mentioned that the relationship comes before the teaching can. When a teacher attempts to teach without the relationship challenges occur "and if [teachers] just made more of an investment of their time in getting to know kids, things could go a lot better" (Mr. Jones, interview transcription, 2012). His process of establishing this relationship was not easy, instantaneous, or flawless. In fact, he attempted many different strategies that did not work before he was able to reach his students. After mounting frustration, it was his final "no nonsense" attitude that gained the students' attention. After establishing and enforcing high expectations he was able to gain control of the class. Once this initial

attention had spiked, he was then able to ease into a comfortable, humored classroom environment.

There are number of simple but important ways in which Mr. Lopez continually fosters the rapport with his students. First, teachers must know their students outside the classroom, on a personal and individual level. This can be accomplished by becoming involved in their extracurricular activities, eating lunch in the cafeteria with the students, and especially building a relationship with the children *before* they become your students. Just as the relationship should not be confined to the classroom, neither should it stop at the individual child. Rather, an established relationship with both the local community and student's family has a direct impact on the child. This extra effort and investment does not go unnoticed and replaces the suspicion and distrust of students that permeates in discipline-ridden schools with one of trust, respect, and appreciation. At the end of the day, the purpose of school is to best serve the children, so that "no child has an excuse to not learn" (Mr. Jones, interview transcript, 2012).

Works Cited:

Ali, T., Dufresne, A. (2008). Missing Out: Suspending Students from Connecticut Schools. *Connecticut Voices for Children*.

Arcia, E. (2006). Achievement and enrollment status of suspended students: Outcomes in a Large, Multicultural School District. *Education and Urban Society*, 38, 359–369.

Darensbourg, A., Perez, E., & Blake, J. (2010). Overrepresentation of African American Males in Exclusionary Discipline: The Role of School-Based Mental Health Professionals in Dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline. *Journal Of African American Males In Education*, *1*(3), 196-211.

Ferguson, A. *Bad Boys*: *Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity*. (2000). Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Gregory, A., Skiba, R., Noguera, P. (2010). The Achievement Gap and the Discipline Gap: Two Sides of the Same Coin? *Educational Researcher*. Vol. 39, No. 1, 59-68

Kozol, J. (2005). The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America. New York: Crown.

Macleod, G., MacAllister, J., Pirrie, A. (2012). Towards a Broader Understanding of Authority in Student-teacher Relationships. *Oxford Review of Education*, Vol. 38, Iss. 4

May, S., Ard, W., Todd, A., Horner, R., Glasgow, A., Sugai, G. & Sprague, J. (2010). School-wide Information System v4.5.94. University of Oregon.

Mirsky, L. (2011). Building Safer, Saner Schools. *Educational Leadership*, *69*(1), 45-49.

Mirsky, L. (2011). Restorative Practices: Giving Everyone a Voice to Create Safer Saner School Communities. *The Prevention Researcher*, Vol. 18, Supplement.

Noguera, P. (2003). Schools, Prisons, and Social Implications of Punishment: Rethinking Disciplinary Practices. *Theory into Practice*, Vol. 42, No. 4, Classroom Management in a Diverse Society, 341-350

Noguera, P. A. (2007). How Listening to Students Can Help Schools to Improve. *Theory Into Practice*, 46, 205–211.

Skiba, R. J., Homer, R. H., Chung, C., Rausch, M., May, S. L., & Tobin, T. (2011). Race Is Not Neutral: A National Investigation of African American and Latino Disproportionality in School Discipline. *School Psychology Review*, *40*(1), 85-107.

Skiba, R. J., Michael, R. S., Nardo, A. C., & Peterson, R. L. (2002). The Color of Discipline: Sources of Racial and Gender Disproportionality in School Punishment. *Urban Review*, 34, 317–342.

APPENDIX A

School Student Profile 2009-2010
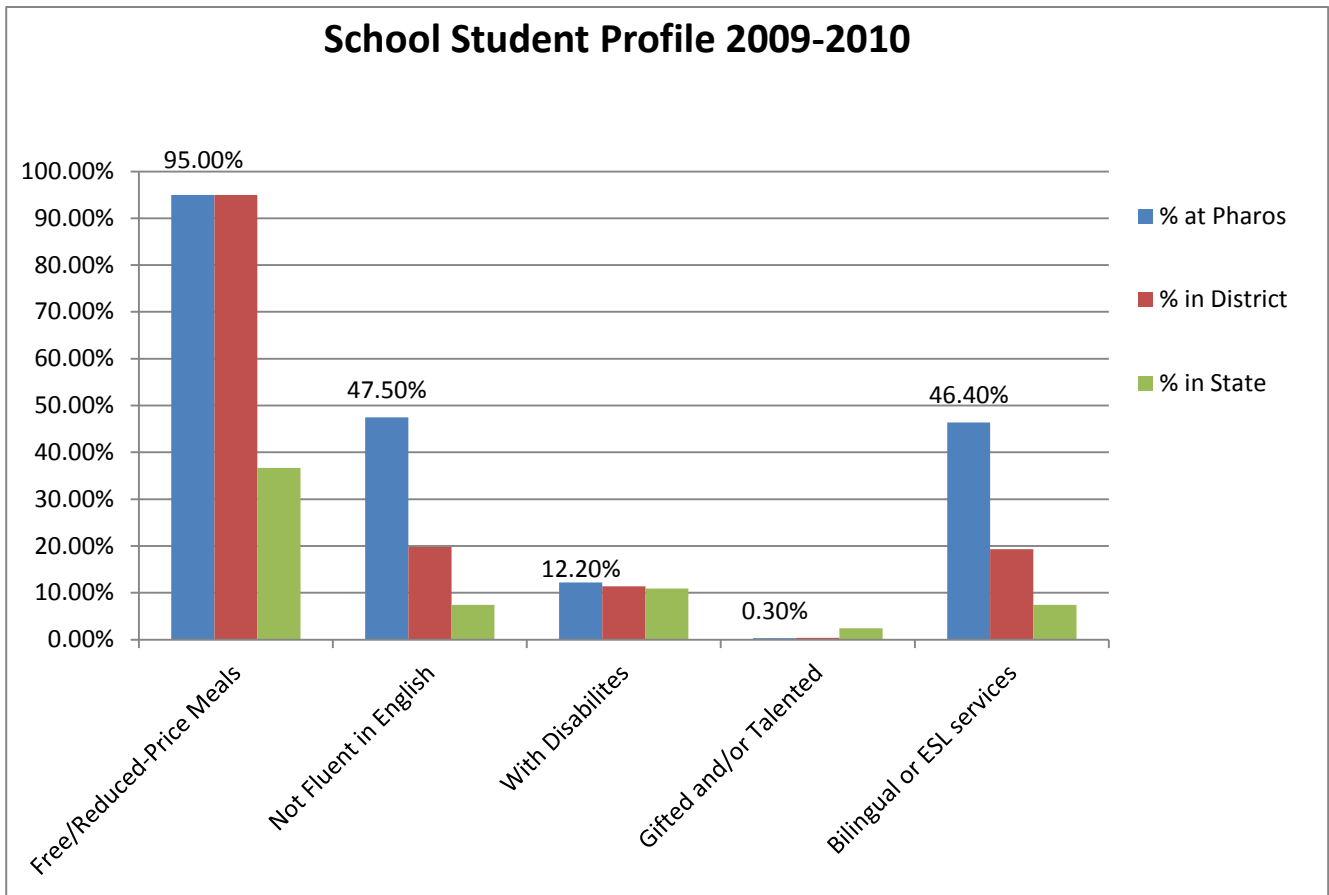
APPENDIX B

Referrals by Problem Behavior

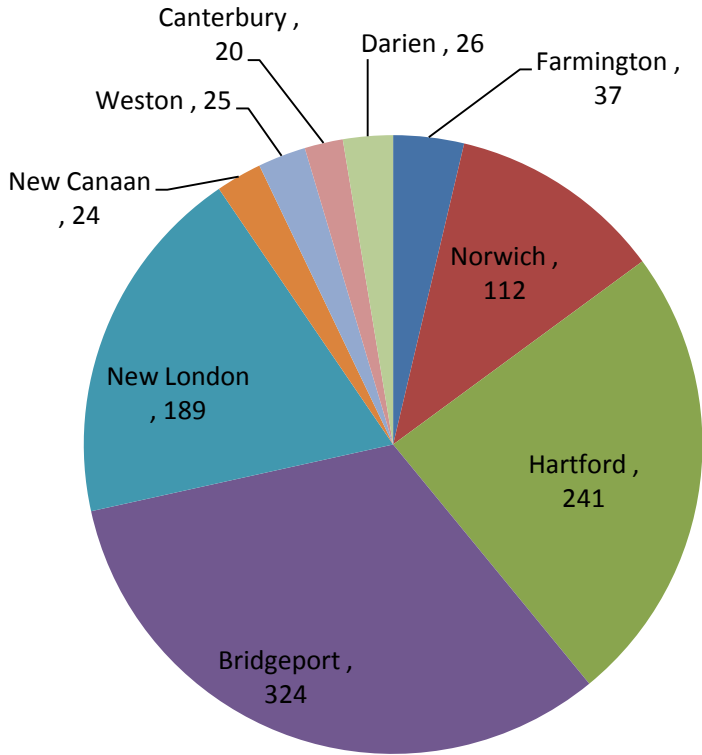Pharos Elementary School
Generated: 11/27/2012
All Referrals & Minors
8/1/12-11/27/12

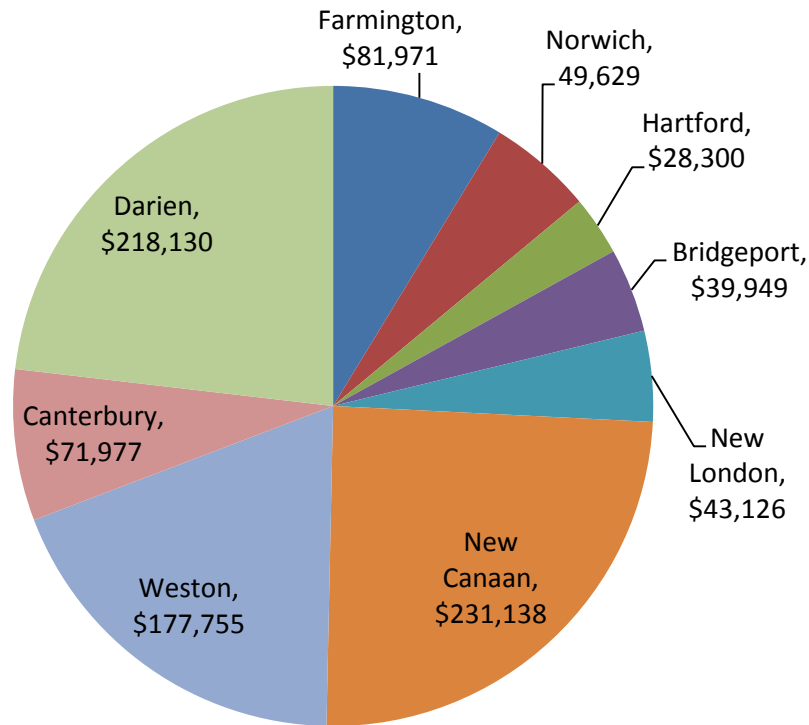| Problem Behavior	Frequency	Percentage
Defiance/disrespect/insubordination/non-compliance	287	49.14%
Disruption	87	14.90%
Physical Aggression	79	13.53%
Abusive language/inappropriate language/profanity	34	5.82%
Fighting	32	5.48%
Skipping	13	2.23%
Other behavior	12	2.05%
Harassment/bullying	12	2.05%
Tardy	8	1.37%
Inappropriate location/Out of bounds area	7	1.20%
Property damage/Vandalism	7	1.20%
Inappropriate display of affection	2	0.34%
Bomb threat/False alarm	2	0.34%
Dress Code Violation	1	0.17%
Forgery/Theft	1	0.17%
Totals	**584**	

*Categories not included on chart: minor/warning, lying/cheating, skip class/truancy, use/possession of tobacco, use/possession of alcohol, use/possession of combustibles, vandalism, arson, use/possession of weapons, unknown behavior, use/possession of drugs, minor-inappropriate language, minor-physical contact/physical aggression, minor-defiance/disrespect/non-compliance, minor-disruption, minor-property misuse, minor-other, minor-dress code violation, minor-technology violation, minor-tardy, technology violation, minor-unknown, gang affiliation display, and truancy. These categories were not included on this chart because there were no reported cases in the 2012 Academic Year thus far.

APPENDIX C

Average Number of School Discipline Incidents by CT School District in 2009-2010

Canterbury, 20
Darien, 26
Farmington, 37
Weston, 25
New Canaan, 24
Norwich, 112
New London, 189
Hartford, 241
Bridgeport, 324

Average Household Income by City in 2009

Farmington, $81,971
Norwich, 49,629
Hartford, $28,300
Bridgeport, $39,949
New London, $43,126
Darien, $218,130
Canterbury, $71,977
Weston, $177,755
New Canaan, $231,138

APPENDIX D

Teacher Interview Questions

1. What grade do you teach?
2. What subject(s) do you teach?
3. What did you study in school/at what level?
4. How long have you taught at Burns?
5. What do you think the role of the teacher is?
6. What does student "misbehavior" mean to you?
7. How do you personally react to these situations?
8. When do you feel a student should be removed from the classroom?
9. How frequently do you refer students? This week/month/term?
10. What types of offenses usually result in student removal from the classroom?
11. What expectations do you have of your students?
12. How do you articulate these expectations?
13. What is your ideal method of addressing student misbehavior?
14. Is this ideal strategy realistic?
15. How do you respond to students with persistent academic and social problems in the classroom?
16. What is your opinion about the use of discipline that removes students from the classroom? Disadvantages or advantages?
17. What is the most difficult aspect of your job? And the most rewarding?