“We never had a fair shake”:

Breaking structural barriers to education for disadvantaged youth

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Despite comprising only 15% of the national student body, Black students make up 35% of all school suspensions and over 50% of all school-related arrests and referrals to law enforcement (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Education, 2018). Black students are frequently exposed to both academic and social exclusion within educational settings (Howard, 2013; Noguera, 2008; Wright et al., 2010), as their learning experiences are further impacted by a variety of neighborhood and community-level challenges (Lofton & Davis, 2015; Pattillo, 2013). Although existing research has frequently examined the causes of racial disparities in educational outcomes, it has often neglected contextual factors (e.g., community) in shaping academic achievement (O'Connor et al., 2007). This study seeks to address this gap by exploring the structural and contextual mechanisms through which Black students experience academic disparities, drawing qualitative insights directly from community members mentoring youths who have been affected by structural violence and disadvantage. The following questions guide the analysis: (i) What contextual and structural mechanisms lead to poor academic outcomes and increased disciplinary pushout for disadvantaged Black and Brown youths in schools?; and (ii) What would be some effective alternatives to suspensions for addressing student behavior?

Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory and Sites of Resilience

This study draws on the Critical Race Theory (CRT) and the Sites of Resilience framework to deepen the understanding of systemic racism and its impact on Black youth in the education system. A central tenet of CRT is that racism is deeply embedded and institutionalized within society (Bell, 1987). CRT highlights that the maintenance of White supremacy relies on

the marginalization of Black communities, including the control of economic resources and social power (Bell, 1980). To illustrate, Black and African American students are disproportionately likely to live in under-resourced and disadvantaged environments, significantly affecting their academic performance (Ladson-Billings, 2006). These conditions expose them to both internal and external stressors that can disrupt their educational journey and diminish their motivation to succeed (Hurd et al., 2013), further affecting their career opportunities and future success. Moreover, CRT suggests that disparities in school disciplinary practices are often overlooked due to colorblind ideologies, further reinforcing the issue of structural racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Fine, 1996; Leonardo, 2007). Through a colorblind perspective, educators frequently criminalize and punish Black students without recognizing the systemic oppression that gives rise to their stress-related behaviors (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011). This is evident in the overrepresentation of Black students in suspension rates, contributing to their disproportionate involvement in the criminal justice system (Irby & Coney, 2021; Bailey, 2017).

This study also employs the Sites of Resilience (SOR) theory to explore why young Black boys often identify with street culture within educational settings. SOR theory frames street culture as a generationally passed-down, adaptive form of resilience or defense mechanism (Payne, 2011). In schools, this orientation often emerges as a survival strategy in response to limited access to quality education and economic opportunity (Payne & Brown, 2010). Research shows that many Black boys adopt street identities to cope with the oppressive and unsupportive environments of public schools (Payne & Brown, 2009, 2010, 2017; Payne et al., 2022). For example, Black students from low-income backgrounds may be ridiculed for lacking proper clothing or supplies, reinforcing feelings of exclusion. In turn, some respond by embracing

street-based identities, marked by behaviors like school violence, gang involvement, or disengagement as a way to navigate and survive these systemic challenges (Payne & Brown, 2017).

Literature Review

Researchers highlight the fact that children exposed to disadvantaged neighborhoods can lead to academic disparities, as these environments often lack resources and increased exposure to strains (Hernandez, 2011; Mincy, 2006, Young, 2004; Hurd et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2011; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Williams et al., 2002). Despite these barriers, educators frequently neglect the root causes of these challenges and attribute their underperformance to racialized stereotypes (Payne et al., 2022; Payne & Brown, 2010; Ferguson, 2000; Monroe, 2005; Auwarter & Aruguete, 2008). In response to systemic neglect and limited pathways to academic or economic mobility, many marginalized Black youth adopt elements of street culture as coping and survival strategies within the school setting (Payne & Brown, 2010; Payne et al., 2009, 2022; Ferguson, 2000). These behaviors are then criminalized (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011;), leading to disproportionate disciplinary actions (Skiba et al., 2002; Irby & Coney, 2021; Wallace et al., 2008; Hughes et al., 2017; Kupchik & Ward, 2014) and increasing their likelihood of being funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Payne & Brown, 2017; Simmons, 2017; Bailey, 2017).

Institutional Neglect Toward Marginalized Black Students

Children living in poverty, especially African American children, face a significantly greater risk of not graduating from high school compared to their peers who have not experienced poverty, as these academic disparities become apparent as early as third grade (Hernandez, 2011). Youth exposed to these conditions often face challenges like family stress,

insufficient social support, encounters with community violence, crime, and gang activity (Mincy, 2006; Young, 2004). These adverse experiences are associated with a higher risk of academic interruptions, psychological and emotional strain, and physical health issues, all of which can negatively impact students' motivation to succeed in school (Hurd et al., 2013; Robinson et al., 2011). The increased likelihood of Black and African American students living in these environments and experiencing related hardships offers insight into the underlying causes of their achievement gaps, as reflected in their low performance on standardized tests and academic evaluations (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Williams et al., 2002). Despite the presence of these structural barriers, educational institutions hold these marginalized student populations to the same level of expectations as their peers.

Structural and Cultural Blindness in Teaching

Educators who are unaware of the socioeconomic and structural factors impacting Black communities may misattribute their academic challenges to personal shortcomings, reinforcing stereotypes rather than addressing the root cause. Black students involved in street life experience strained interactions with teachers through the implicit belief of existing stereotypes (Payne et al., 2022; Payne & Brown, 2010; Ferguson, 2000). For instance, the majority of teaching candidates in the United States are White, middle-class women from suburban or rural backgrounds with limited exposure to culturally diverse communities (Howey, 2006). These cultural differences can result in misunderstandings, where behaviors commonly exhibited by Black students (e.g., louder speaking style, preference for a different learning method) are frequently misinterpreted as disruptive or defiant (Monroe, 2005). Due to the impact of socioeconomic hardship on their academic performance, these student populations can be perceived as less capable, resulting in lowered expectations for their success (Auwarter &

Aruguete, 2008). These biases, along with the lack of culturally informed teaching embedded within the classroom, prevent the formation of supportive and positive teacher-student relationships, contributing to racial disparities in school discipline. As a result, Black students subjected to these stereotypes may internalize and reflect these biases in their behavior, inadvertently reinforcing educators' beliefs (Steele et al., 2002).

The Resilience of Black Youth in the Face of School Oppression

Within hostile school environments and limited access to economic and academic opportunities to succeed, expressions of street culture emerge as coping strategies and survival mechanisms among Black marginalized youths (Payne & Brown, 2010; Payne et al., 2009, 2022; Ferguson, 2000). When Black students view schools as irrelevant or unsupportive of their long-term success, they may withdraw from formal education and invest in immediate means of survival, such as drug dealing, as these paths offer greater economic stability in the face of systemic inequities and educational neglect. For example, Payne and Brown (2010) argue that Black youth often turn to illicit economies after realizing that educators have failed to invest in their development, leaving them ill-equipped for legitimate pathways to upward mobility. Overall, these expressions of street culture are rooted in the form of a resilience or defense mechanism in navigating the oppressive school system. Such behaviors often result in punitive responses, increasing their vulnerability to exclusionary discipline and contact with the criminal justice system.

The Role of Exclusionary Discipline

Punitive policies like school suspensions have had a disproportionate, negative impact on Black students, increasing their likelihood of becoming involved in the criminal justice system (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011; Payne & Brown, 2017; Simmons, 2017). Black students are often

stereotyped as troublemakers (Rocque & Paternoster, 2011) and deemed "criminally inclined" (Simmons, 2017), contributing to their overrepresentation in disciplinary actions and increasing their likelihood of being pushed out of schools. Researchers have highlighted racial disparities in school punishment, with Black students facing higher rates of punitive discipline, such as office referrals (Skiba et al., 2002), suspensions (Irby & Coney, 2021), expulsions (Wallace et al., 2008), and law enforcement referrals (Irby & Coney, 2021). Further, scholars have highlighted that the most severely disciplined schools in the nation often have a high concentration of students of color (Hughes et al., 2017; Kupchik & Ward, 2014). Such actions often result in these students experiencing academic setbacks, ultimately pushing structurally disadvantaged youth further into criminogenic environments that they are surrounded with instead of providing access to positive developmental pathways. This situation serves as an entry point to the school-to-prison pipeline, where students are sent to the criminal legal system through punitive disciplinary measures employed by schools (Bailey, 2017).

This study aims to provide qualitative insights into the specific reasons why Black students, particularly those who are disadvantaged and marginalized, are disproportionately affected by school disciplinary actions and low academic performance. By directly engaging with community members who are deeply involved in the city's public school system and youth, the study captures valuable perspectives on Black students' educational experiences. These insights shed light on the effects of exclusionary policies and offer informed policy recommendations and alternatives to punitive school punishment.

Methodology

Research Site

This study draws upon data gathered from field observations and interviews conducted at the Center for Structural Equity, an organization established by Darryl “Wolfie” Chambers in 2020. This center is a non-profit organization located on the west side of Wilmington, Delaware, with the mission to empower and equip Black and Brown communities to combat structural violence, promote structural equity, and address the social determinants of health (Center for Structural Equity, n.d.). The organization primarily focuses on three key areas: positive youth development, impactful community engagement, and changing societal norms. These goals are supported through collaborative efforts, rigorous research, and effective advocacy, with a central focus on transforming social norms that represent the promotion of fairness, justice, and equal opportunity. The center provides youth programs to foster creativity and growth, offering a range of activities from tutoring sessions to evidence-based curricula.

These initiatives, implemented through after-school and summer programs, aim to support students’ ongoing educational and personal development while also helping prevent their exposure to harmful environments. The center also provides a music program that inspires children to explore their creativity, offering comprehensive instruction, guidance, and resources to help them develop their musical skills and create original compositions. Beyond these programs, the center runs targeted outreach efforts that offer educational resources conducted through workshops and training sessions designed to equip the community with skills to overcome structural barriers. In addition to education, they foster social connections and a sense of belonging among community members by organizing recreational events that encourage interaction, networking, and mutual support (Center for Structural Equity, n.d.).

City of Wilmington

As of July 2023, Wilmington, Delaware, had a population of 71,625. The racial composition included 53.7% Black, 34.3% White, 11.3% Hispanic or Latino, 1.3% Asian, and 0.1% American Indian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Although White individuals make up just over a third of the population, they experience higher employment levels and have a median income of around $60,000 in 2019, compared to about $30,000 for Black residents (Prosperity Now, 2019). Many Black residents live in low-income areas such as Eastside and Southbridge, where street culture is prominent. The average income in these neighborhoods is about $23,000 in Eastside and $20,000 in Southbridge. Further, nearly 40% of people in South Wilmington's Tract 19 earn under $15,000 annually, while over 60% fall below that income level in Eastside's Tract 17 (Delaware Public Media, 2023). These patterns of racial and economic inequality have played a role in Wilmington's violence rates. In 2015, Wilmington was ranked the third most violent city for its size, with about 2,000 violent crimes and 44 homicides per 100,000 residents (Wilmington Public Safety Strategies Commission, 2015).

Payne (2023) argued that Wilmington's smaller-scale environment intensifies its violence problem, as victims, offenders, and their families live very close together, fostering retaliatory violence. Small cities like Wilmington also tend to lack the resources necessary to adequately address systemic poverty and violence, which contributes to youth involvement in violent acts, especially when they are personally affected by the deaths of siblings, cousins, or friends (Payne, 2023). These racial and economic disparities also persist in the city's education system. Wilmington's public schools enroll about 11,460 students, 71% of whom are low-income and 72% are Black (Rich et al., 2018). Academic performance among Black students is notably low, with 75% failing to meet state standards in English Language Arts and 84% in Math (WEIC,

2016). Disciplinary data further reflects racial inequity, as Black and Brown students account for 75% of suspensions, 56% of school-related arrests, and 67% of police referrals (U.S. Department of Education, 2016).

Sampling and Recruitment

My sample primarily consists of community members and mentors affiliated with the Center for Structural Equity. These individuals bring valuable lived experience and extensive mentoring backgrounds, particularly with Black and Brown youth impacted by structural violence and systemic disadvantage. In addition to their work with youths, they also partner and collaborate with the city's public school systems. I used a purposive sampling method to recruit participants, ultimately selecting four individuals: Director of Operations, Senior Case Manager, Intervention Specialist, and Education Specialist.

Project Timeline

This study involved approximately three months of fieldwork, from March to May, during which I visited the center for 2-3 hours on Mondays. This schedule allowed me to observe key interventions, programs, conversations, and discussions aimed at addressing low academic performance among disadvantaged youth. It also offered opportunities to explore the center's school-based initiatives and deepened my understanding of the persistent challenges within the state's public education system. Through regular engagement with staff who worked closely with schools, I gained valuable insights into how structural barriers and systemic factors impacted students' academic outcomes. Additionally, this timeframe helped me build relationships with the staff, fostering an environment of trust and openness by the time I conducted my interviews.

Instrumentation

Field observations. I conducted field observations at the center, focusing on youth and staff interactions that related to supporting academic growth. I concentrated on spaces where both youth and staff were most actively engaged, such as the room where the Book Nook program is held (a popular spot for both staff and youth to gather), the office where staff frequently work, and the conference room where the youth would participate in their activities. This allowed me to gather insights into the conversations and discussions surrounding academic progress, difficulties, and structural barriers students are facing, along with how community members work to support these youths. For data collection, I took physical notes during my visits to document specific interactions and observations at the center. Confidentiality was maintained by removing all participant names.

Semi-structured interviews with staff. I conducted semi-structured interviews with staff members at the center to gain insight into the specific mechanisms by which youths contribute to low academic performance and increased risk of school punishment, based on the staff's direct experiences working with them. Further, I asked staff about alternative approaches to suspensions, drawing on their expertise and close involvement with both the youth and local schools. To gather data, I used voice recorders to capture the full interviews. Prior to each interview, I obtained permission to record, prioritizing participants' comfort and ensuring they felt comfortable with the process. To maintain confidentiality, all names were redacted in the transcripts, and the recordings were securely deleted when the data had been transcribed.

Data Analysis

All audio recordings were transcribed the day after the interview using the transcribe tool in Word Document. These transcriptions, along with my field notes, were compiled into a single

Word Document, as I conducted manual coding by hand, using various colored highlighters to represent specific codes and themes throughout the data.

Results

Based on interviews and field observations, the qualitative data sheds light on the structural barriers that disadvantaged Black children in Wilmington face in accessing education. These challenges begin with a lack of opportunities and resources in their neighborhoods, compounded by limited access to basic resources, and taking on adult responsibilities at home. These factors create spaces that do not support learning or academic growth, leading to a heightened risk of school punishment and revealing a deeper generational and historical pattern of marginalization targeting Black and Brown communities. To address these issues, participants propose alternative, supportive solutions to replace exclusionary discipline practices.

Holding students back through unsupportive environments and unmet needs

Structural inequities are often first experienced through the environments youth live in, as participants in this study identified visible signs of gentrification in the city of Wilmington. For instance, the route to the center is presented with newly developed, tall, modern office buildings and PNC Bank glass towers, gradually transitioning into an area with older, worn-down local businesses, where the center is situated. Through field trips organized by the center, the youth were given opportunities to compare their neighborhoods with others, helping them develop a language to articulate disparities created by gentrification and institutional neglect. These experiences helped them recognize the scarcity of safe spaces in their communities, exposing them to criminogenic environments and settings that fail to foster learning. As a result, these youths face a heightened vulnerability to punitive school punishment and academic failure. The Senior Case Manager at the center referenced Sutherland's Theory of Differential Association,

explaining that many youth grow up surrounded by criminal activities like drug dealing, which becomes their primary source of income and knowledge, especially when legitimate job opportunities are lacking. This reality was further highlighted by one participant's reflection during a field trip:

> We came to Hersheypark and we just said point out what you don't see compared to your neighborhood and they kept saying, 'I don't see no liquor stores…I see liquor stores on every corner where I live at.' If they'd be able to understand the significance between asset and liability and community…They would understand this as gentrification, right…then they look on the corners and they see the guy selling drugs [and] they can understand some of the reasons why they sell drugs, some of the reasons why you shouldn't sell drugs, right. And some of the reasons of how these institutions, these structures, played to that poverty (Director of Operations).

A participant echoed this concern, emphasizing the limited access to safe, engaging public spaces in their neighborhoods:

> During the summer, way more people are getting, like, reprimanded, arrested, whatever for… loitering and stuff like that. But, it's like, where are they supposed to go? You know, it's like your options are like the park. I don't know? Like, McDonald's?... They don't really have things to do (Education Specialist).

Youths in these communities are not only deprived of safe spaces in their neighborhoods, but also lack supportive learning environments at home, further hindering their academic success:

> You come from a household where learning is not supportive, but I mean we got people who- they don't even have Wi-Fi, right…People don't have Internet access. People's phone is cut off… Man, their phones don't even work (Director of Operations)

> When you go to their home and as soon you open your front door, the smell of marijuana is bellowing out of the house. The music is on. You know, it's little siblings at their parents, knees and ankles pulling on mom: "Mom who that? Who that?" You get a full view on…[how they are] operating from a space of deficiency. When [they] enter the educational building [they have to go through] hurdles just to get to the bus. Now once [they] get through the bus and the hurdles…. that [they] had to get through just to get through [the] door by the time the first bell rings, [they're] exhausted (Senior Case

Manager).

These environmental disadvantages are accompanied by unmet basic needs, which are an additional factor significantly hindering students' academic attendance and behaviors. A member at the center emphasized that these communities often struggle to access essential resources such as safe housing, violence-free environments, adequate healthcare, and nutritious food. They further explained that many of the neighborhoods they serve are classified as food deserts, which are areas that have limited access to affordable and nutritious food options. The absence of basic necessities often leads students to "act out," which participants described as a form of resilience and self-protection in response to poverty and systemic neglect. One participant illustrated how the absence of adequate or clean clothes can leave the youths feeling vulnerable and defensive, often leading to school avoidance or disciplinary action:

> One new girl, one of her issues stem from a lot of times is, especially [for both] girls and boys, is fighting and not going to school [because] they don't got clean clothes, [they] got no money in [their] pocket: 'I just can't buy some of the new stuff, all my stuff is old, so I'm just not going.' Or as a defense mechanism: 'As soon as somebody looks at me wrong, I'll punch him in the face, so the rest of y'all know, don't say anything about my sneakers, right? Because if you do, I am going to fight you (Director of Operations).

Food insecurity and transportation have also been prevalent issues among children in this community, influencing their behavior in ways that are often misinterpreted and result in punishment within school settings.

> I think a lot of times, suspending the kids, where some of them coming to school just to eat, probably. And I've seen that on multiple occasions. Some of them come to school, just cause they're hungry, but we're suspending them (Intervention Specialist).

> You have kids that aren't going to school… [because] they have no way to get to school. Like if you're a high school student that lives in Wilmington and you miss the bus or something like, you know, what are you gonna do? And those are things that they can't really address in school (Education Specialist).

The structural inequities confronting youth in Wilmington are deeply interconnected with their surrounding environments, which play a critical role in shaping their behaviors and engagement in educational settings. The systemic neglect of these neighborhoods contributes to a shortage of opportunities and resources, impeding students' ability to fulfill basic needs essential for school attendance and academic success. The persistent lack of resources often forces children to manage adult responsibilities at home, all while being expected to meet the demanding standards of educational institutions.

Taking on adult responsibilities

The Senior Case Manager shared observations on the academic progress of specific students they were monitoring, highlighting a critical concern around school attendance, particularly at the elementary level. In this community, absenteeism is not simply due to the parents' inability to bring their children to school. Instead, the problem is more complex. Some students are burdened with adult responsibilities at home, such as caring for siblings or even family members, which makes regular school attendance extremely challenging. In some cases, young female students experience motherhood at an early age, often struggling to balance parenting with their education, while lacking a support system:

> One of our kids, she has a daughter, right. [Her] mom ain't healthy, right? The [child's] dad's nowhere to be found… So now we're talking about a 16-year-old with a child, right? We don't even know if she's suffering from- how do you pronounce it? Post-partum depression. Nobody's ever diagnosed her when she says "I'm tired," and nobody even knows if this child is really, like, suffering from this (post-partum depression)...Because she doesn't have the money to go get diagnosed, right. And then you saying, "come to school on time, right?" Leave my baby. Most adults can't leave their baby, and she doesn't drive. Her mom doesn't drive. So, traditionally…all her behaviors is getting addressed with expelling them, her kicking around the school, nobody saying, "hey man, let me solve this problem for her (Director of Operations).

Schools fail to recognize the heavy responsibilities and structural barriers that many marginalized youth face, operating under assumptions of stability that do not reflect these students' lived realities. The Senior Case Manager pointed out how many of their peers from more privileged backgrounds do not encounter such obstacles, as they typically have access to the basic resources needed to attend school, allowing them to focus solely on their education. This disparity contributes to a harmful standard in educational settings, where all students are held to the same expectations, regardless of their circumstances. As a result, marginalized youth become more vulnerable to disciplinary action and are disproportionately targeted due to the system's failure to consider the barriers they face.

Post-*Brown*: Continued Displacement of Black and Brown Students Through Suspensions

The historical roots of suspensions were widely discussed by two of the participants, highlighting how the displacement of Black and Brown students continued even after the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) decision. For instance, the Senior Case Manager explains that *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was one of the five cases argued by Thurgood Marshall before the Supreme Court. One of these cases also originated in Wilmington, Delaware, known as *Gebhart v. Belton* (1952), represented by Louis L. Redding, a prominent Black man from the city. In arguing the case of *Brown, Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) ruled "separate but equal." However, when Thurgood Marshall went down South to examine Black schools, "he sees that's really not the case." To illustrate his observations, "schools are in deplorable conditions, textbooks are very, very bad with missing pages, school houses are cold, students can't even learn because they're cold and books and all that (Senior Case Manager)." As a result, Marshall "makes it even more fair" making schools "more inclusive," as "people adhere to that change and they say 'OK, now you have us all in the classroom together.'" The Senior Case Manager

makes a point that although schools have been racially integrated, the objective of these institutions is to suspend Black and Brown students as a tool to use to keep a certain group of people at that "subservient level" or that "caste society":

> Now the objective is this, in a book that I'm reading by Mr. Aaron Kupchik, he states that the most formidable mechanism that the school system uses post-slavery is to suspend Black and Brown students at a far more alarming rate than any of their counterparts… some of the things that they're suspending Black and Brown children for in the education system within Newcastle, Kent, and Sussex County is unwarranted (Senior Case Manager).

> In America, in a capitalistic society. There has to be a bottom caste, right? And so who is going to be that bottom caste right now? It's been the Black and Brown communities, right, who have been chosen to be the bottom caste for whatever reason (Director of Operations).

The ongoing displacement of Black and Brown communities from equitable access to education has placed them at a generational disadvantage that continues to affect them today:

> Once upon a time, this town was based upon the fact that you better get a job down the docks…to do assembly line work. It's not too much. But as the world evolves and it's a more technological society…it's a little bit more emphasis on education right? When it comes to education and things of that nature, we've (Black and Brown communities) been suffering since the inception of time… There's never been a time in history where you can actually say that prominent (Black) people across the country have came up to the ranks of public education and went on to excel…Of course, you got outliers…but I'm talking about the masses of people like a generation of people in a society (Senior Case Manager).

The Senior Case Manager emphasized his students' perspectives on suspensions, essentially supporting the argument that minoritized populations are disproportionately targeted compared to their peers:

> The students were basically saying that they do feel as though sometimes they are a target of a suspension, far more faster than people that they go to school with and the punishment sometimes causes the students to say, "Well, I don't feel as though I can do nothing right here, like everything I do here, it seems like it's scrutinized (Senior Case Manager).

The continued reliance on suspensions is often tied to how teachers, administrators, and schools place blame on marginalized youth for failing to meet academic standards, rather than fulfilling their responsibility to support and help them catch up. As the Senior Case Manager explained, "we (Black and Brown communities) never had a fair shake. It was automatically we were playing catch up," due to generations of inadequate education and disproportionate school punishment. Rather than providing a meaningful intervention with these disadvantaged students, schools resort to punishment as an easy way out.

Suspensions as a quick fix for systemic educational failures

Members at the center highlight how educational institutions often overlook the root causes of academic struggles and barriers among marginalized students in Wilmington. Rather than addressing these core issues, such as low academic proficiency and poor attendance, schools tend to rely on suspensions as a way to avoid confronting their shortcomings. This, in turn, leads to blaming the child for their academic difficulties:

> The underlying issue behind it, the suspensions and everything is a cover up… the real failure is that we have failed to teach our generation of kids anything…nobody wants to admit that the traditional way…the lot of suspensions being put in context, they're not fair because all it is is a way of adults to not accept responsibility for their failure and put it on the kids and then we just buy on time…[They're] really just saying that [they] don't want to face the reality that [they] didn't teach [them] how to read. And so [they're] just going to suspend [their] way out of it (Director of Operations).

> I think the way that discipline is treated in schools in Wilmington is like- very, I don't want to say hands off. But it just kind of hands off. It's like that idea of just like we're going to push them somewhere else. We're either going to send them to, you know, alternative school or we're just going to suspend them so that we can focus on, like other kids versus, like trying to deal with those issues (Education Specialist).

A participant agrees with these arguments, noting that schools frequently resort to suspensions without tackling the core issues, such as academic proficiency and attendance:

> That's what I see every day. These kids getting suspended for their quote on quote behaviors, but a lot of times it's not the best answer. It's not the best answer because…the kids are struggling with their proficiency reading and math proficiency. I see that on a daily basis, its also because kids are struggling with attendance (Intervention Specialist).

The ongoing reliance on punitive measures like suspensions, which disproportionately target marginalized students in Wilmington, highlights how educational institutions heavily contribute to a cycle of neglect and failure among these populations. This issue underscores the urgent need for alternatives to suspensions to help break the generational cycle of disadvantage affecting low-income Black and Brown communities. The need for guidance toward school administrators and staff is crucial in terms of addressing the root causes and barriers of youths to academic success.

Alternative approaches to suspensions

All of the participants emphasized the importance of alternative approaches to suspensions. For example, the Intervention Specialist suggested that schools should "have a punishment that should be [connected to] their goal for success." Participants advocated for strategies that include increased support and mentorship within schools, culturally responsive training for teachers to better engage with marginalized student populations, and trauma-informed, pedagogically sound teaching methods to reduce burnout. One participant also highlighted the need for greater investment in accessible programs that provide academic guidance and extracurricular activities like sports, arts, and music to lessen their exposure to criminogenic environments.

Building support systems through mentorship and credible messengers

Two participants stress the importance of building one-on-one relationships with trusted peers, emphasizing consistent support and regular check-ins as key to helping these children feel seen and valued. They also highlight the significance of representation, ensuring that these youth

are surrounded by individuals who share the same background as them. For example, the Senior Case Manager reflects on the impact of being around the Executive Director, "a self-made Black man, entrepreneur," noting that seeing Black professionals "fighting structural inequities" provides vicarious motivation and helps students realize that success is not a "far-fetched idea." Both the Director of Operations and the Senior Case Manager highlight that mentorship and support are crucial for helping students "catch up" academically, as many are already significantly behind in their learning.

> [These kids] work better in an intimate setting with one-on-one relationships with peers and you got to have credible messengers, right? Social capital, experience, non-judgmental people to come into your educational systems…those credible messengers and those mentors in your school can act as a buffer between school administration, parents, deans, and the teachers to shadow and be with the students all day long…if you had somebody that can act as that buffer and provide services such as stipend programs, employment, little incentives throughout the course of the school year…to allow them to reach their ultimate goal with either promotion, graduation, or something along those lines (Senior Case Manager).

In discussing the value of additional support, both participants emphasize the critical need for "buy-in" from schools. They acknowledge that the process can be "a bit rough" and requires commitment from the entire school district, especially from teachers. One noted that "teachers aren't equipped to deal with what's going on." Because of this, the participants stress the importance of addressing teacher burnout and ensuring educators are provided with the proper tools and training to effectively teach marginalized student populations.

Equipping teachers with inclusive and trauma-informed practices

Participants mentioned that teacher burnout is a significant issue in schools, noting that by as early as November, "somebody's teacher was burned out already." Many teachers are overwhelmed by the demands placed on them, including managing frequent fights, monitoring bathrooms to prevent smoking, acting as hall monitors to make sure students are not skipping,

while still being responsible for instruction and testing. Participants stressed the need to provide teachers with the proper tools and support to handle these responsibilities effectively, highlighting the promotion of pedagogy as one essential tool. This approach is described as an inclusive method to learning that accommodates diverse student needs by offering multiple ways to understand a topic, rather than relying on a standardized method of instruction:

> If you're a math teacher, right, you should teach me several ways. If it's multiplication, I'm supposed to know separate ways how to do multiplication…Sometimes I got to break it down until the game is done (Director of Operations).

In terms of addressing trauma-informed teaching, the Senior Case Manager shared a disturbing incident where a girl was slammed to the ground by two school resource officers, prompting them and the Director of Operations to take action. The participant stressed the need for trauma-informed training, arguing that punitive measures are ineffective and that educators must understand how to respond to traumatized students. To address this, the center collaborated with a University of Delaware professor to develop a 50-minute presentation focused on de-escalation techniques, physiological effects of trauma, unique challenges faced by specific student populations, and tools to address these behaviors. They are also working on a pamphlet to distribute to schools in Delaware, aimed at addressing these critical issues and encouraging institutions to implement strategies for tackling trauma behaviors.

Investing in safe spaces and positive pathways for youth

The Education Specialist strongly highlighted the importance of providing youth with access to programs that offer positive alternatives to street life, particularly during the summer months when many of them lack structured activities and meaningful engagement, given their challenging environments:

> So like, I think maybe it's just like a huge thing would probably be like fund them more programs that like are accessible to kids like…summer camps or like youth programming

> over the summer…Give these kids like the information and opportunities that like a that some of which I wish I had later on, like I don't know, I guess accessibility to like disability stuff, but then also, it's like, I got lucky that my parents knew how to do the FAFSA. My parents introduced us to a lot of different like music and art and like sports programs (Education Specialist).

Providing these resources, guidance, and activities will not only steer them away from their criminogenic environments but also support their academic success by equipping them with knowledge and access to essential educational resources.

Discussion

These qualitative insights reveal how the broader community context in which Black and Brown youth live significantly impacts their academic performance and increases their risk of being punished and pushed out of the school system. Youth from these marginalized communities often face an initial disadvantage from the lack of environments conducive to learning, along with the absence of necessities such as food, transportation, and clothing to support their academic performance. Additionally, many are burdened with adult responsibilities from resource scarcity, further obstructing their educational success. Participants emphasized that these structural challenges have persisted across generations. Although *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) sought to guarantee equal access to education, structural inequalities continue to hinder that goal for Black and Brown communities to this day. This aligns with Critical Race Theory's (CRT) argument, asserting that racism is deeply embedded in the fabric of society. Participants argued that White dominance is sustained by maintaining a "bottom caste," a position into which Black and Brown communities are systemically forced, evidenced by their limited educational resources and upward mobility. Disciplinary practices such as suspensions were identified as tools used to exclude and marginalize these students, further reinforcing White supremacy.

With these adversities, many students develop resilience in response to such environments, exhibiting behaviors like disengagement or fighting as coping mechanisms, which is a concept supported by the Sites of Resilience Theory. To address these issues, participants advocated for alternatives to punitive discipline, including increased in-school support through mentorship and partnerships with credible messengers who can provide individualized guidance. Interviewees stressed the importance of tackling root causes (e.g., attendance issues, lack of opportunities, and academic gaps in literacy and math) through culturally responsive pedagogy. Furthermore, schools should implement trauma-informed practices, ensuring that staff are trained to understand and support students from marginalized backgrounds. Redirecting funding toward summer enrichment programs and academic support opportunities was also recommended as a way to bridge resource and academic gaps. Finally, the study highlights the need for further research focused on cultural and community-level mechanisms to racial disparities in education, particularly by examining the insights and experiences of the youth themselves across various institutions.

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