

THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE: HOW EDUCATION HAS FAILED OUR MOST VULNERABLE STUDENTS.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline: How Education Has Failed Our Most Vulnerable Students:

A Meta-Synthesis

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### **Abstract**

Beginning in the 1980's, America began a 'war on crime', taking a tougher stance with longer sentencing on minor crimes. During this same time, and acting in concert, federal educational legislation began the policy of Zero Tolerance within schools. This meant that disciplinary issues, previously handled within schools, were now being addressed as criminal charges. This increased harshness and severity in punishment for school aged youth created a school-to-prison pipeline in which tens of thousands of students became incarcerated in juvenile and adult correctional facilities. The unintended consequence of creating safer school environments was that a disproportionate number of economically disadvantaged, minority, and youth with emotional disturbances were excluded from their learning environments and locked away in correctional institutions. Over the past four decades increased awareness about this disproportionality, along with a better understanding of mental health issues, has caused an upward trend in alternative educational strategies for our most at-risk and vulnerable student populations. Many of these alternative school settings still lack appropriate behavioral management interventions, social services, and mental health clinicians necessary to deal with root cause issues, but we are gradually trending back away from exclusionary, restrictive, and punitive punishments.

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## 1. Introduction

### *1.1. Background*

It is estimated that, in the United States, 1 in every 5 school aged children are struggling with some form of a mental health and/or social emotional disturbance issue. Over the past 40 years, great strides have been made in psychology and special education to acknowledge, diagnose, and provide treatment or counseling for the 20% of students struggling with these impairments. Educators, psychologist, and physicians have made groundbreaking progress, through working collaboratively, on properly diagnosing and preventatively treating many of these mental health and social emotional issues. However, nationally based policy changes inside the classroom, including: The Safe Schools Acts, Zero Tolerance, Inclusion, and No Child Left Behind have provided a recipe for disaster for students with a host of emotional, behavioral, and mental health issues across the United States. The enactment of these policies has had a direct and negative relationship on pushing many of our most vulnerable students out of the schools and into the criminal justice system. The school-to-prison pipeline, as defined by the American Civil Liberties Union is, “a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out.”

<https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline>

“Upwards of 70,000 adolescents are still confined each day in juvenile facilities, with an additional 10,000 in adult jails and prisons, many times more per capita than any other country.”

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(Mallet, 2015 Page 1.) These young adults are kept confined, for extended periods of time, through privately ran for profit penal institutions. There are little to no rehabilitative or mental health services made available to these children. Add to that the fact that now the only peer interaction that these young people will encounter while incarcerated are from other incarcerated young men and woman. (Mallet, 2016) Thus, we have effectively created a criminal sub-culture where young people can learn, develop, and reaffirm negative and deviant behaviors from their new founded peer network. We, as a society, essentially replaced one school, where we attempt to teach and develop positive behaviors and social interactions, with another. Staggeringly, for many children across the country, this pipeline into incarceration begins as early as 10 years old. It is inequitable and disproportionately, students whom are male, poor, black, or emotionally disturbed; In many cases, the child is all of the above.

The School-to-Prison pipeline is a metaphorical appeal for reform with its origins rooted in two distinct but intertwined movements that began in the early 1980's. First, on the educational front, we saw a nationwide push toward zero tolerance policies in schools. These zero tolerance policies were originally intended to work in tandem with the nationwide war on drugs, enacted by President Reagan. Students who exhibited aggressive or destructive behaviors began to be punished much more severely which directly resulted in a rise of suspensions, expulsions, and criminal charges being brought. This zero-tolerance movement immediately saw a disproportionate number of underserved groups of students being pushed out of the schools and into juvenile facilities. Amongst these underserved student populations, include: minority students, (predominately African American and Hispanic), socio-economically disadvantaged students, (both urban and rural poor), and students with special education needs, (social and

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emotional disturbances being amongst the predominate group). Secondly, as crime rates soared in major cities across the country, the Federal government pushed state courts to be ‘tough on crime’. This resulted in harsher sentencing for first time offenders, minor offenses, and crimes that would have, beforehand, held restorative justice outcomes, but now hold punitive punishments. (Mallet, 2016) Again, this push towards cracking down on crime immediately had negative effects on the underserved segments of our population. “Disciplinary practices in schools often bear a striking similarity to the strategies used to punish adults in society. Typically, schools rely on some form of exclusion or ostracism to control the behavior of students.” (Noguera, 2010 Page 342.)

Ironically, the very policies that were enacted to keep classrooms safe and remove disruptive students for the purposes of raising academic achievement, have had the opposite effect. Two of the strongest indicators of academic success are student engagement and educational opportunity. When a student is frequently suspended, expelled, or otherwise removed from the classroom, for disciplinary purposes, they not only lose out on the opportunity to learn, but will likely become disengaged and have a negative perception of school climate. “Emerging evidence suggests a negative relationship between exclusionary school discipline and multiple measures of student academic achievement.” (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams 2014 Page 551.) In other words, students need to present and participating in class to do be successful. While this may seem like a common-sense inference, it is all too often the students that need to be in the classroom the most, that get pulled and excluded from daily academic curriculum. One of the main causes for the recent surge in academic exclusion is inclusion. Just as we know and recognize that all students do not learn at the same pace, we also realize that all students are not successful with the same

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learning styles. The idea behind inclusion was intended to create a least restrictive environment for learning, not a one-size fits all classroom for every student. Children have a variety of learning, social, emotional, and cultural needs. Successful school districts have tiered and varied classroom environments to meet these needs. They provide scaffolded learning environments and multiple resources to actively engage all learners. Unfortunately, however, this is the exception rather than the norm. Far too many school districts have taken the idea of inclusion to mean that one general education classroom can be a dumping ground for all students with a plethora of learning, emotional, and behavioral issues. This typical classroom, often consist of a general education teacher trying to teach and maintain classroom management, for thirty-plus students with no paraprofessional aides or resources. The teacher often becomes overwhelmed and the most disruptive students are sent to administration and the quickest and easiest solution is to exclude the child by means of suspension or expulsion. Administrators, often untrained and unprepared to deal with these students, now must adhere to zero tolerance policies that require set infractions for these negative behaviors. Many of these behavioral issues now carry punitive criminal charges and the student is swept out of the school system and into a juvenile facility.

“Where a student attends school-not the nature of the offense -is the greatest predictor of whether a student will be ticketed or arrested at school.” (School Behavior-Criminalized, 2011 Page 8.) Children as young as ten years old are being ticketed, or even arrested at school, more and more frequently. This phenomenon to suspend, expel, and even arrest students is disproportionately high for students of color, of low socioeconomic means, and for students with social, emotional, and behavioral disorders. Often times, the same student is represented in all of the above criteria. This disproportionality in student discipline mirrors the student achievement

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gap, found in every state across the U.S. According to the *Berkeley Review of Education*, “School actions that label students as disruptive or disabled are the first step in the Pipeline, marking students as different from the norm and therefore problematic. There is a national pattern of overrepresentation of students of color in the special education categories that rely on judgement of school professionals: Mental Retardation, Emotional Disturbance, and Learning Disability. However, this overrepresentation of students of color does not occur in disability categories that are medically defined... This same pattern of overrepresentation based on subjective judgements also appears in disciplinary actions in public schools.” (Annamma, Morrison, & Jackson, 2014 Page 61.)

It is well established that low achievement is, by and large, a contributor to delinquency. Are there predetermined environmental factors that lead then, to low achievement? Does ones’ socioeconomic status, single parent household, nutritional intake, etc. determine how that student will perform in school? Or, do schools often exhibit culturally and socially biased behaviors, albeit inadvertently, that keep student achievement low in high risk communities? In other words, do teachers and administrators have the same expectations, opportunities, and per-child spending resources for schools in low-income and minority neighborhoods as they do in more affluent communities? A research study conducted for the journal *Exceptionality*, explored the variable of schools, rather than students, in determining successful achievement outcomes of students. “Research has shown a direct, positive correlation between the amount of student active participation and achievement. Thus, a school that employs teachers who lack effective behavior management and instructional skills has a diminished chance of affecting positive student outcomes. On the other hand, high quality teachers and effective, engaging instruction may

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counteract the negative effects of a high-poverty student population.” (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005 Page 3.) The catch-22 is that the schools that need the seasoned teachers and administrators the most, are in the most vulnerable neighborhoods. However, these are often the schools with the lowest seniority staff and least experience. This can be attributed to several factors, including lower teacher compensation, larger class size, per-student spending ratios, and cultural perceptions. At risk students, from lower-income communities, often times do not get the same educational opportunities as their more affluent counterparts. Thus, it is often the schools that fail the students rather than the student whom fails to achieve within the constructs of the school.

As public schools continue to struggle and fail in successfully educating our most vulnerable children, a viable yet underutilized option is the alternative school. Alternative schools can consist of many different pedagogies or philosophies and range from boot-camp style dormitories to outdoor themed adventure learning. The common denominator between all alternative schools is that they are created to serve students whom are not successful in a traditional classroom setting. Alternative schools are a great solution to the school-to-prison pipeline and slowly growing in popularity and support. “Alternative schools can provide all students, especially those with challenging behaviors, low motivation, poor attendance, failing grades, or those afraid to even walk into the school building, with an engaging and enriching educational experience.” (Maillet 2017) Many of these successful alternative schools employ psychologist, psychiatrist, and grief and trauma councilors. They utilize healing practices such as group therapy, talking circles, and one-on-one counseling sessions to engage and restore vulnerable students. Successful alternative school settings offer holistic approaches to

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preventative behavioral support rather than punitive disciplinary practices. There are numerous examples across the country, in some of America's most violent cities, of alternative school programs that have decreased behavioral issues, increased academic success, and reengaged students whom otherwise had been written off by the traditional education system. Aside from the positive effects of turning these students' lives around, the social cost savings by keeping young men out of incarceration is innumerable.

Unfortunately, as with any program, there are also examples of unsuccessful alternative education programs as well. These programs are often times set up to accommodate students that cannot successfully acclimate in a traditional classroom. One such program that is popular in urban areas across the country is DAEP, or Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs. "Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs provide educational opportunities for students who have violated the code of conduct at their home schools. These students are characteristically impulsive, emotional, aggressive, and considered especially 'at risk' often because of antisocial tendencies that make it difficult for them to function in traditional educational settings." (Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013) While in theory, these DAEP schools are intended to be an alternative to the school-to-prison pipeline and help reengage our most troubled youth. However, in practice, many of these DAEP institutions lack the training, resources, and social work centered rehabilitative services needed to positively affect troubled youth. They essentially become dumping grounds for students with trauma, Emotional Disturbances, and behavioral issues that are beyond the scope of the traditional classroom. (Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, and Aeby, 2001) These alternative 'disciplinary programs' are usually sought during an IEP conference, after all least restrictive classroom measures have been exhausted. What makes

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these programs often times fail, where others succeed, is in both lack of appropriate therapeutic resources and, just as importantly, a lack of collaboration between the sending school and the alternative school in communication, follow-up, and transitioning. “When the ‘least restrictive’ educational environment is deemed unsuccessful for students labeled as having emotional disturbances (ED), they are often placed in either self-contained classrooms (when available) or alternative schools. Despite these schools’ growing numbers, little is known about them and their students, who are segregated from the mainstream population...Findings revealed staff’s frustration with the: (1) school’s reputation within, and isolation from, the larger district; (2) lack of follow up and communication; (3) lack of professional development; (4) lack of oversight from school district administration.” (Hoge & Rubinstein-Avila, 2014) The key differences between successful and unsuccessful alternative school settings are: availability of social and health services, emphasis on therapy, counseling, and rehabilitation, and positive collaborating relationships with the district at large, as well as, the community being served.

The school-to-prison pipeline, created in the 1980’s and in full effect by the mid 90’s, is a direct result of national level failed educational policies, cultural biases amongst teachers and administrators, and lack of training and professional development in the area of students’ mental health issues. (Mallet, 2016) This pipeline has grown exponentially over the past thirty years and we now refer over 300,000 students annually to law enforcement. That is 300,000 of our nation’s most vulnerable and at-risk children that are now excluded from an environment created to nurture and develop. The majority of these students have not committed serious and heinous acts. They are oftentimes referred to law enforcement over minor infractions that would have been handled at the school’s administrative level in the past. According to David Nagel, 2016, “In

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some states, the problem of law enforcement referrals became so bad in recent years that the United States Department of Justice intervened. DOJ has also issued guidance to all schools aimed at cutting down such referrals. The American Bar Association (ABA) too has taken notice” (Nagel 2016, Page 4.) Fyodor Dostoevsky, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian novelist, once famously wrote “the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons”. The United States has the largest incarcerated population on earth. We are the only first world country that incarcerates children, individuals with learning disabilities, and those with mental health issues in adult facilities where they are excluded from any social rehabilitation services. There are many advocacy groups currently working to enact policy changes to end the school-to-prison pipeline. This is not just an educational issue, it affects every aspect of the social contract between our nation and its citizens.

### *1.2. Author's beliefs and experiences*

My experience and interest in successfully acclimating students with social and emotional disabilities through school and into the adult world is rooted in my own experiences as a child. I grew up as a member of the underserved populations that we here so much about. I was poor, I was almost completely autonomous by the age of 6 or 7 as I began to be bounced from one family caregiver to the next. I was what, by today's standards, would have been a diagnosable case for serious emotional disturbance. I attended IPS, Indianapolis Public Schools from 85'-91' and have no recollection of a special education department during that time, though I am certain it existed. I do however recall the seemingly constant interactions with the vice-principal, school counselor, local law enforcement, and of course my poor teachers. By second or third grade I

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was pulled to the front of the room and paddled, by my teachers, almost daily. I was consistently sent to the principal's office and began receiving suspensions as early as 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. By 6<sup>th</sup> grade I had been expelled from school and was ordered to complete work packets from home. By the time I got to Middle School I had a file that was several inches thick, I had been unofficially labeled as troubled and maladjusted and was doomed toward a trajectory of failure.

I was very fortunate in that as I grew into a teenager I began to settle down with my disruptive behaviors, take responsibility for my own actions, and to comply with the norms expected from me both in the classroom and in society. Had I not made the changes I made, when I made them, I would have very likely ended up in and out of prison, becoming institutionalized. I am very much aware of how lucky I am that I ultimately decided to make the right choices when I did. I can honestly say that I never took anything positive away from my educational experience, at least from K-8<sup>th</sup> grade. They in no way provided me with the help or resources that I needed to make successful changes in my social and emotional interactions. I knew, by high school, that there must be tens of thousands of other young people out there that had went through the same circumstances I had and that many of them would not turn out as positively.

Even today, I struggle with the social constructs that others deem as normal. I have taught myself how to appropriately manipulate my world, but it was through trial and error of eliciting different responses rather than any engrained emotional sense. Because of my own experiences and nurtured beliefs, I knew that I wanted to pursue a career in Law. My original plan after High School was to go and seek a B.S. in Political Science and then go to Law School so that I could change the system from the inside. I was naïve then and didn't realize at the time that Law

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School was a privilege reserved only for the upper-class. I could only afford a state sanctioned university, even with scholarships, and decided to settle on Education.

I have taught both Middle and High School students in very rural and urban areas. Through my experiences as a general education teacher at these age levels, I have formed very strong opinions about the current state of the special education process. I have witnessed, time and again, special education teachers, coordinators, and specialist come into a classroom, make observations, and then go file away reports. Best case scenario, these ‘specialist’ come back with a recommendation that is not only irrelevant but doesn’t meet the specific needs of that student what so ever. Worst case, you never see these individuals again for months and there only insight is a few lines contained within an ESER report or an IEP. As a direct result of my experiences, I have decided to transition myself into a role within special education. My goal is to be more than just a filing clerk of IEP’s and to actually find relevant, practical, and individualized ways to help the students who are absolutely the most vulnerable.

I am a firm believer in the old adage that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. We are, as a society, reactionary in everything we do. Education and law are no exceptions. The very term corrections, in our justice system, implies that a mistake has already been made, that the purpose of law enforcements and the courts is to correct that mistake. Why? Well adjusted, gainfully participating members of a society do not commit crimes. Similarly, school aged students whom are mentally healthy, well nourished, and nurtured in a loving environment will do well in any classroom environment. What about the kids that aren’t functioning at a mentally healthy level in schools? What about adults that fall outside of the norm? There is an absolute inverse relationship between healthcare and incarceration. The peculiarity of the U.S. system

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though is that we will scream and gawk at any increase in healthcare spending, for our nation's most vulnerable citizens, but we do not bat an eye at the staggering cost of keeping someone locked up for years at a time.

Most disabilities and impairments are initially identified and diagnosed by the time a child starts preschool. Social, emotional, and behavioral disturbances tend to reveal themselves later, but are typically recognized somewhere in the elementary school process. Our current system of education, then leaves it up to the general education teacher to observe the signs and symptoms of these disturbances, keep detailed records of observations, and then finally we formally involve the special education team. At this point, the special educator will follow up with more observation and notation. After several months, the participating members of student, family, and general education teacher will be given goals and objectives to work on. Meanwhile, that student has continued to be a hardship on their teacher, fellow students, and likely at this point administrators are involved. The school district has no invested countless man hours and resources into this one student, whom no one has likely gotten to the root cause of the disturbance in the first place. Teachers and administrators are now, unintentionally of course, biased to this student for being nonconforming and will look for any reason for disciplinary action. This is how the school-to-prison pipeline begins.

Imagine however, if every school district had access to and fully utilized a team consisting of clinical and behavioral psychologist, medical staff, social workers, nutritionist, and a special education coordinator that acted in a role of child advocate. The special educator should work as a general contractor of sorts, involving expertise from many professionals to individually diagnose, prescribe practical treatment, and directly follow up on results regularly. This is a far

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more holistic approach that involves more than jotting down goals and objectives and checking off success or failure of such. This would also involve, to a great extent, a reversal of the inclusionary practices that have created this pipeline to begin with. Many of these children with SED's require far more individualized attention, care, and commitment than we should ever expect a general classroom teacher of 30 students to be able to provide. It is in no one's best interest if the student is still failing, the teacher becomes stressed and frustrated, and the class is disrupted from their daily learning. By allocating the extra resources on the front end, to preventively diagnose and change course, we are not only saving tens of thousands of dollars on the back end, but also creating a much higher chance of success for the individual student.

Conversely, our current educational practices tend to drastically over-diagnose students with SED labels simply because they are difficult, rambunctious, and have trouble sitting still at a desk for six hours a day. There is a very simple term for many of these misdiagnosed students, kinesthetic learners! The diagnoses of severely emotionally disturbed is grossly overrepresented by a handful of the population. These students are almost always male, usually low-income, often times minority. This is the exact group that mirrors the predominate prison population in the United States. Ironically, the very same aggressive behaviors that cause these young men so many disciplinary problems in school and in life are the same behaviors that make successful business moguls, CEO's and Presidents.

The school-to-prison pipeline is a serious concern for, not only SED diagnosed students but for all children, both receiving special education services and not. As a parent myself, and from the perspective of a classroom teacher I believe that the number one priority for any school district is keeping students safe. Many of the young people that end up in the criminal justice

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system are aggressive, impulsive, and have serious enough behavioral impairments that they pose a serious safety threat to the general classroom, as well as the school itself. This is a direct result of forced inclusion. The response to this mandated inclusion has been to turn these students over to the criminal justice system rather than deal with the issues at a school or district level. These students, whom need the extra help and support more than ever to become successful, are then locked away punitively, with no hopes of rehabilitative or consultative services. The school-to-prison pipeline, from my perspective, consist of a three-fold systematic failure between healthcare, education, and criminal justice.

With this meta-synthesis, I hope to investigate the following research questions:

1. What are the policy related issues that created and perpetuates the school-to-prison pipeline?
2. What alternative education strategies currently exist?
3. What are the ethnographic implications of the school-to-prison pipeline?
4. How have these policies affected students in special education, specifically, those with emotional disturbances?

### *1.3. The purpose of this meta-synthesis*

This meta-synthesis, which focused on the school-to-prison pipeline, had multiple purposes. One purpose was to review journal articles related to the educational policies and legislation, over the past four decades, specifically those policies relating to disciplinary practices in schools. A second purpose was to review journal articles related to alternative educational strategies; I was specifically interested in articles that analyzed the effectiveness

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of these alternative strategies in keeping students out of the legal system and on track to graduation. A third purpose was to analyze the ethnographic factors involved in school level decision making, in regards to suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to law enforcement. These factors included: race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and diagnosed disabilities, specifically social and emotional disturbances. A fourth purpose was to classify each article by publication type, to identify the research design, participants, and data sources of each research study, and to summarize the findings of each study. My final purpose in conducting this meta-synthesis was to identify significant themes in these articles, and to connect those themes to my own personal and professional experiences in education.

## **2. Methods**

### *2.1. Selection Criteria*

The 40 journal articles included in this meta-synthesis met the following selection criteria.

1. The articles explored issues related to educational policies that created the phenomenon commonly referred to as the school-to-prison pipeline.
2. The articles explored issues related to alternative educational strategies in regards to student behavior intervention.
3. The articles explored issues of ethnographic disproportionality in regards to school discipline practices.
4. The articles were published in peer reviewed journals related to the fields of education, psychology, and law.

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5. The articles were published between 1997 and 2018.

### 2.2. *Search Procedures*

Database searches and ancestral searches were conducted to locate articles for this meta-synthesis.

#### 2.2.1. *Database searches*

I conducted Boolean searches within the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC, Ebscohost) using these specific search terms:

1. ("Educational policy") AND ("school to prison pipeline")
2. ("Alternative education strategies") AND ("incarceration")
3. ("Disciplinary alternative education programs")
4. ("Special Education") AND ("school to prison pipeline")

These database searches yielded a total of 36 articles (Annamma, Morrison & Jackson, 2014; Association for Experimental Education, 2011; Baltodano, Mathur & Rutherford, 2005; Bird & Bassin, 2014; Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001; Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Clark & Unruh, 2010; Czaja, 1997; Davis, 2014; Emmons & Belangee, 2018; Fowler, 2010; Guetzloe, 2001; Hatt, 2011; Heitzeg, 2009; Hellenbach, Karatzias, & Brown, 2017; Hoge & Rubenstein-Avila, 2014; Hudson, 2011; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Khan & Slate, 2016; LaMarche, 2011; Maillet, 2017; Mallett, 2015; Mallett, 2016; Mallett, 2016; Meyer, Anderson, & McQueen, 2013; Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011; Nagel, 2016; Noguera, 2003; Perepiczka, 2009; Quinn, 2017; Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013; School Behavior – Criminalized, 2011;

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Shepherd, 2013; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003; Singer, 2009; Skiba, Arrendondo, & Williams, 2014).

### 2.2.2. *Ancestral Searches*

An ancestral search involves reviewing the reference list of previously published works to locate literature that aligns with the research being conducted. I conducted ancestral searches using the reference list of the previously retrieved articles. These ancestral searches yielded six additional articles that met the selection criteria (Allman & Slate, 2011; Marzano, 2011; Robertson & McGillivray, 2015; Wacquant, 1996).

### 2.3. *Coding procedures*

I used a coding form to categorize the information presented in each of the 40 articles. This coding form was based on: (a) publication type; (b) research design; (c) participants; (d) data sources; and (e) findings of the studies.

#### 2.3.1. *Publication types*

Each journal article was evaluated and classified according to publication type (e.g., research study, theoretical work, descriptive work, opinion piece/position paper, guide, annotated bibliography, review of literature). *Research studies* use a formal research design to gather and/or analyze quantitative and/or qualitative data. *Theoretical works* use existing literature to analyze, expand, or further define a specific philosophical and/or theoretical assumption. *Descriptive works* describe phenomena and experiences, but do not disclose particular methods for attaining data. *Opinion pieces/position papers* explain, justify, or recommend a particular course of action

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based on the author's opinions and/or beliefs. *Guides* give instructions or advice explaining how practitioners might implement a particular agenda. *An annotated bibliography* is a list of cited works on a particular topic, followed by a descriptive paragraph describing, evaluating, or critiquing the source. *Reviews of the literature* critically analyze the published literature on a topic through summary, classification, and comparison.

### 2.3.2. *Research design*

Each empirical study was further classified by research design (i.e., quantitative, qualitative, mixed methods research). *Quantitative* research utilizes numbers to convey information. Instead of numbers, *qualitative* research uses language to explore issues and phenomenon. *Mixed methods* research involves the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to present information within a single study.

### 2.3.3. *Participants, data sources, and findings*

I identified the participants in each study (e.g., students affected by disciplinary practices, staff and administration administering disciplinary policies, juvenile inmates detained in correctional centers, students participating in alternative educational settings). I also identified the data sources used in each study (e.g., observations, surveys, analytical data). Lastly, I summarized the findings of each study (Table 2).

### 2.4. *Data analysis*

I used a modified version of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method previously employed by Duke (2011) and Duke and Ward (2009) to analyze the 40 articles included in this

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meta-synthesis. Significant statements were first identified within each article. For the purpose of this meta-synthesis, significant statements were identified as statements that addressed issues related to: (a) educational policy implementation and resulting statistical changes in disciplinary practices; (b) alternative educational strategies and facilities; (c) staff and administration attitudes, beliefs, and culture; (d) ethnographic disproportionality in disciplinary practices; (e) disproportionality in disciplinary practices amongst students with diagnosed emotional disabilities; (f) ideas for improvement; (g) correlations between achievement and discipline. I then generated a list of non-repetitive, verbatim significant statements with paraphrased formulated meanings. These paraphrased formulated meanings represented my interpretation of each significant statement. Lastly, the formulated meanings of all 40 articles were grouped into theme clusters, represented as emergent themes. These emergent themes represented the fundamental elements of the entire body of literature.

### **3. Results**

#### *3.1. Publication type*

I located 40 articles that met my selection criteria. The publication type of each article is located in Table 1. Fifteen of the 40 articles (37.5%) included in this meta-synthesis were research studies (Annamma, Morrison & Jackson, 2014; Baltodano, Mathur & Rutherford, 2005; Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001; Christie, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2005; Czaja, 1997; Hoge & Rubenstein-Avila, 2014; Hudson, 2011; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Khan & Slate, 2016; Meyer, Anderson, & McQueen, 2013; Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011; Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013; Shepard, 2013; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003; Skiba, Arrendondo, & Williams, 2014). Fifteen of the

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articles (37.5%) were descriptive works (Association for Experimental Education, 2011; Bird & Bassin, 2014; Clark & Unruh, 2010; Emmons & Belangee, 2018; Hatt, 2011; Heitzeg, 2009; Hellenbach, Karatzias, & Brown, 2017; Mallet, 2016; Marzano, 2011; Nagel, 2016; Noguera, 2003; Perepiczka, 2009; Robertson & McGillivray, 2015; School Behavior – Criminalized, 2011; Wacquant, 1996). Four of the articles (10.0%) were guides (Guetzloe, 2001; Maillet, 2017; Mallet, 2016; Quinn, 2017). Three of the articles (7.5%) were opinion piece/position papers (Davis, 2014; Fowler, 2010; LaMarche, 2011). Two of the articles (5.0%) were reviews of literature (Allman & Slate, 2011; Mallet, 2015). One article (2.5%) was a theoretical work (Singer, 2009).

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**Table 1**

Author(s) & Year of Publication	Publication Type
Annamma, Morrison & Jackson, 2014	Research Study
Allman & Slate, 2011	Review of Literature
Association for Experimental Education, 2011	Descriptive Work
Baltodano, Mathur & Rutherford, 2005	Research Study
Bird & Bassin, 2014	Descriptive Work
Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001	Research Study
Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005	Research Study
Clark & Unruh, 2010	Descriptive Work
Czaja, 1997	Research Study
Davis, 2014	Opinion piece/position paper
Emmons & Belangee, 2018	Descriptive Work
Fowler, 2010	Opinion piece/position paper
Guetzloe, 2001	Guide
Hatt, 2011	Descriptive Work

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Heitzeg, 2009	Descriptive Work
Hellenbach, Karatzias, & Brown, 2017	Descriptive Work
Hoge & Rubenstein-Avila, 2014	Research Study
Hudson, 2011	Research Study
Kennedy-Lewis, 2015	Research Study
Khan & Slate, 2016	Research Study
LaMarche, 2011	Opinion piece/position paper
Maillet, 2017	Guide
Mallet, 2015	Review of Literature
Mallet, 2016	Guide
Mallet, 2016	Descriptive Work
Marzano, 2011	Descriptive Work
Meyer, Anderson, & McQueen, 2013	Research Study
Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011	Research Study
Nagel, 2016	Descriptive Work
Noguera, 2003	Descriptive Work
Perepiczka, 2009	Descriptive Work

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Quinn, 2017	Guide
Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013	Research Study
Robertson & McGillivray, 2015	Descriptive Work
School Behavior – Criminalized, 2011	Descriptive Work
Shepard, 2013	Research Study
Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003	Research Study
Singer, 2009	Theoretical Work
Skiba, Arrendondo, & Williams, 2014	Research Study
Wacquant, 1996	Descriptive Work

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### *3.2. Research design, participants, data sources, and findings of the studies*

As stated previously, I located 15 research studies that met my selection criteria (Annamma, Morrison & Jackson, 2014; Baltodano, Mathur & Rutherford, 2005; Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001; Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Czaja, 1997; Hoge & Rubenstein-Avila, 2014; Hudson, 2011; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Khan & Slate, 2016; Meyer, Anderson, & McQueen, 2013; Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011; Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013; Shepard, 2013; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003; Skiba, Arrendondo, & Williams, 2014). The research design, participants, data sources, and findings of each of these studies are identified in Table 2.

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**Table 2**

<b>Authors</b>	<b>Research Design</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Data Sources</b>	<b>Findings</b>
Annamma, Morrison & Jackson, 2014	Mixed Methods	Colorado students of color with Emotional Disturbances whom have disciplinary records	Representative case study of student data records, for Colorado	A state level case study in the state of Colorado that is representative in disproportionate discipline practices among minority and special education students.
Baltodano, Mathur & Rutherford, 2005	Mixed Methods	53 Youth, age 14-17 with transition plans in correctional facilities	Surveys and longitudinal case studies, including file reviews of 53 participants	Transition planning for incarcerated youth is often times non-compliant, lacks substance, and fails in acquiring essential life skills necessary for success.
Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001	Qualitative	43 students enrolled in an alternative educational program for weapons carriers, drugs and alcohol violators.	Structured interviews	Implementing an intensive psychosocial services program for at-risk students, in an alternative educational program significantly increased students' positive behaviors and academics over similar programs without social service interventions.
Christie, Jolivet, & Nelson, 2005	Quantitative	8 principals at the 4 lowest and 4 highest rate of suspension high schools across Kentucky	Surveys	There was a direct correlation between years of experience in administration and how behavior was managed. Each of the 4 schools with the lowest suspension rates had the most tenured principals and vice-principals.
Czaja, 1997	Quantitative	22 chief probation officers in Texas,	Mail Surveys	There are numerous positive correlations between positive

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		involved in Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Programs		behavioral management and life skills training, such as: vocational mentoring, emotional counseling, and drug and alcohol counseling, within the alternative education programs yet there are huge gaps of students needing these programs and lack of facilities and resources for them.
Hoge & Rubenstein-Avila, 2014	Qualitative	6 school personnel at Hinton Alternative School including, school psychologist, principal, 2 classroom teachers, and intervention technician, and transition liaison.	Individual 1-On-1 interviews	Alternative schools for students with emotional disorders, like Hinton, have numerous barriers to success such as, lack of funding and resources, isolation from school district at large, limited investment from school district at large, and teacher perceptions. Often times these well-intentioned programs become dumping grounds for students with ED who are unable to participate in a least restrictive environment.
Hudson, 2011	Qualitative	2 Adult African American Males incarcerated in correctional institutions, in Mississippi.	Interviews	The disproportionate harshness and frequency of zero tolerance policies in school, towards African American males, begins a cycle of incarceration, unemployment, and recidivism that is extremely difficult to break out of.
Kennedy-Lewis, 2015	Qualitative	10 school administrators and staff members, 4 district level administrators, and 17 7-8 <sup>th</sup> grade students at Vista	Semi-structured interviews	School culture plays an important role in everything from behavior management, academic success, and rehabilitation. The schools culture needs to be uniform,

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		Hermosa alternative middle school		consistent, and administered top-down.
Khan & Slate, 2016	Quantitative	341,411 6 <sup>th</sup> grade students, in Texas public middle schools, in, 2011-2012 school year	Texas Education Agency database analysis on student demographics and disciplinary records	There were consistent correlations, across races, of economically disadvantaged students receiving higher suspension rates that their non-economically disadvantaged peers, at a nominal ratio of 3:1.
Meyer, Anderson, & McQueen, 2013	Quantitative	356 students, aged 5-17 whom were participants in the Dawn Project, in Indiana, for improve functioning of at risk youth.	In-depth longitudinal interviews with families and youth.	Schools continue to have difficulty meeting the needs of students with emotional and behavioral challenges. There is an overrepresentation of minorities in special education and restrictive placements.
Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011	Quantitative	Secondary students enrolled in disciplinary alternative schools, in California	Data analysis of (RRIS) Readiness to Respond to Intervention Scale records from 08-09'.	Consistent results showed that girls, of all racial backgrounds were typically the first to go through the Action stage, indicating they are ready to accept intervention strategies, followed by white males, and that black and Hispanic males are often the last to accept intervention.
Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013	Quantitative	225 students, grades 1-12, participating in disciplinary alternative education programs (DAEP), in the Southern Gulf Coast of the U.S.	Youth Outcome Questionnaire.	Empirical support shows significant reductions in students' overall distress and disruptive behaviors when participating in Dialectical Behavioral Therapy sessions, through DAEP, compared to those students not enrolled in a DAEP program.
Shepard, 2013	Qualitative	3,000 adolescents in, correctional facilities, in Maryland, Minnesota, and Ohio.	Surveys; prerelease, and post parole release.	Young men who become incarcerated at an early age have been involved with (CPS) child protective

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				services 40% of the time. Adolescent males who received special education services made up 35% of the incarceration rate. These statistics are highly disproportionate to the educational system at large.
Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003	Qualitative	82 students, at Southern California Kids Clubs	Formal and unstructured interviews	Aggressiveness is the leading cause of disciplinary action in schools. There are many ethnic variations in what is perceived as aggressiveness and it is often cultural differences amongst school staff and students that lead to misperceptions regarding aggressiveness that cause disproportionate rates of discipline among these ethnic groups.
Skiba, Arrendondo, & Williams, 2014	Qualitative	Grades 7-12 students, in Texas public schools, with at least one suspension or expulsion incident.	Longitudinal investigation of data analysis collected from (CRDC) Civil Rights Data Collection, between 1974 – 2010.	There is strong evidence of intentionality in how school exclusionary discipline practices lead to a school-to-prison pipeline.

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### *3.2.1. Research design*

Six of the 15 studies (40.0%) used a quantitative design (Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Czaja, 1997; Khan & Slate, 2016; Meyer, Anderson, & McQueen, 2013; Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011; Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013). Two of the studies (13.3%) utilized a mixed methods research design (Annamma, Morrison & Jackson, 2014; Baltodano, Mathur & Rutherford, 2005). Seven of the studies (46.6%) used a qualitative research design (Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001; Hoge & Rubenstein-Avila, 2014; Hudson, 2011; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Shepard, 2013; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003; Skiba, Arrendondo, & Williams, 2014).

### *3.2.2. Participants and data sources*

The majority of the 15 research studies included in this meta-synthesis analyzed data from secondary students with disciplinary records of suspensions or expulsions, students enrolled in alternative educational programs or incarceration, and special services professionals. Three of the studies (20.0%) analyzed data collected from students, grades 6<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup>, who had disciplinary records of suspension, expulsion, or criminal (Annamma, Morrison & Jackson, 2014; Khan & Slate, 2016; Skiba, Arrendondo, & Williams, 2014). Nine of the studies (60.0%) analyzed data from students enrolled in alternative educational programs, youth clubs, or juvenile facilities (Baltodano, Mathur & Rutherford, 2005; Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001; Hudson, 2011; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Meyer, Anderson, & McQueen, 2013; Mitchell, Booker, & Strain, 2011; Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013; Shepard, 2013; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003). Three of studies (20.0%) analyzed data from special service professionals (Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson,

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2005; Czaja, 1997; Hoge & Rubenstein-Avila, 2014). These special service professionals comprised of chief probation officers, school psychologist, administrators, teachers, and technicians.

Surveys and interviews provided the main data sources used in the research studies. Five of the studies (33.3%) used surveys to collect data from participants (Baltodano, Mathur & Rutherford, 2005; Christie, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Czaja, 1997; Ricard, Lerma, & Heard, 2013; Shepard, 2013). Six of the studies (40.0%) used interviews to collect data from participants (Carpenter-Aeby, Salloum, & Aeby, 2001; Hoge & Rubenstein-Avila, 2014; Hudson, 2011; Kennedy-Lewis, 2015; Meyer, Anderson, & McQueen, 2013; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003). Other data sources were also used in the research studies, including case study and database analysis.

### 3.2.3. *Findings of the studies*

The findings of the 15 research studies included in this meta-synthesis can be summarized as follows.

1. There are several factors which lead to a disproportionately higher rate of exclusionary discipline practices amongst school aged students. The most prevalent of these factors include: Being male, having emotional disturbance (ED) or other mental health issues, perceived aggressiveness, economic disadvantage, and racial and ethnic makeup. These factors are non-exclusionary in that a single student can exhibit multiple factors.
2. Students who are subjected to exclusionary discipline practices such as suspensions and expulsions have a direct and negative correlation with academic success, school-

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- engagement, attendance, and graduation rates. These students, therefore, are far more likely to end up incarcerated than their peers.
3. There is strong evidence to suggest that educational policies, at both the state and federal levels, such as zero tolerance, have directly contributed to the funneling of students into the school-to-prison pipeline. The harshness, frequency, and disproportionality of students charged with criminal acts varies significantly depending on the attitudes and tenure of administrators, school cultures, and ethnographic makeup of the districts.
  4. Throughout the United States, there are a number of alternative educational programs aimed at behavioral management, rehabilitation, and therapy for the most at-risk students. These programs vary greatly in degrees of success, resource availability, and cultural attitudes.

### 3.3. *Emergent themes*

Five themes emerged from my analysis of the 40 articles included in this meta-synthesis. These emergent themes, or theme clusters, include: (a) ethnographic makeup being the largest indicator of disproportionately severe discipline practices amongst youth; (b) Amongst students in special education, youth diagnosed with emotional disturbances are the largest group to face exclusionary discipline practices and be placed in more restrictive environments; (c) educational policies of the past four decades have had significant negative impacts on at-risk students; (d) There are a number of alternative educational strategies and programs that are being utilized throughout the United States in an attempt to reduce the school-to-prison pipeline. (e) District and school level culture has a significant impact on disciplinary practices and is directly

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correlated with staff and administrator attitudes, perceptions, and years of experience and training. These five theme clusters and their formulated meanings are represented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

<b>Theme Clusters</b>	<b>Formulated Meanings</b>
<b>Ethnography and Special Education</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● African American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged white male students are disproportionately represented in exclusionary discipline practices in schools across the nation.</li> <li>● Students designated as receiving special education services are also overrepresented in exclusionary discipline practices, as well as, incarcerations.</li> <li>● Youth with (ED) emotional disturbances are most likely to end up suspended, expelled, incarcerated, and placed in more restrictive environments than any other category of special education.</li> <li>● Cultural misperceptions among staff and administrators are a major factor in the disproportionate harshness and frequency of discipline in many schools.</li> <li>● Mainstreaming and least restrictive environment policies have had negative unintended consequences for many students with social, emotional, and behavioral issues as general classrooms are equipped to address mental health issues.</li> <li>● Much research has been conducted, through surveys, interviews, and case studies, on the negative attitudes toward successful academic careers, by teachers and administrators, for economically disadvantaged and minority students.</li> </ul>
<b>Educational Policy</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act of 1974 (JJDP) was the forerunner of Federally mandated education policy to address school safety and discipline.</li> <li>● Zero Tolerance, which became an umbrella term in the 1980's, encompassed several policies and programs, in schools, that mirrored the war on crime, for the nation at large.</li> <li>● ZT policy requires that minimum mandated exclusionary punishments, including: suspensions, expulsions, and criminal charges, be administered for certain specific behaviors.</li> <li>● ZT policies were specifically aimed at violence and drug, alcohol, and tobacco use which means that even minor offenses can now carry serious consequences.</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● ZT policy has created many unintended consequences since being enacted and administration and interpretation of such policy can vary greatly by district and administrator.</li> <li>● The Safe Schools Act of 1994 became essentially a revised version of Zero Tolerance and required mandatory expulsions for any weapons violations in schools, which carried very broad definitions.</li> <li>● In 1998, President Clinton initiated a COPS in schools' program, in partnership with the Department of Justice.</li> <li>● COPS in schools' initiatives solidified a direct pipeline from school-to-prison for many youths.</li> <li>● By 2010 the Federal government had begun to roll back some of these safety policies, due mainly to budget reallocations, but many of the policies and programs are still being administered.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Alternative Educational Strategies</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● There are numerous alternative educational strategies and ideologies that have grown and developed over the last 30 – 40 years.</li> <li>● Most alternative schools are created for the express purpose of addressing behavior issues that a general public-school classroom is not equipped to handle.</li> <li>● Alternative schools created by districts at large are predominately in large urban area and have not become a norm in less populated centers as of yet.</li> <li>● Research has shown that alternative schools with high success rates all share a number of factors including: strong behavior intervention plans, positive attitudes amongst staff, availability of tiered social and mental health services, and an emphasis on therapy/counseling.</li> <li>● Privately ran alternative education facilities tend to have higher rates of success then those administered by public school districts.</li> <li>● Many alternative schools, set up for behavior intervention, become dumping grounds for the district at large, are disconnected from district resources, and ultimately have low success rates in engagement, achievement, and rehabilitation.</li> <li>● Adventure Therapy schools are growing in popularity and consist of students spending several weeks or months outside doing physical activities such as hiking and rock climbing.</li> <li>● Dialectical Therapy is also an increasing popular concept among alternative education in which talking and healing sessions, both group and individual, are a large part of the students' day.</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Most students who end up at an alternative school setting are in need of a variety of social and mental health services in which some programs are set up to provide but many are not.</li> <li>● Restorative justice programs, in schools across the country have seen significant drops in suspension, expulsion, and incarceration rates compared to traditional punitive exclusionary discipline practices.</li> <li>● Alternative education tends to almost always be reactive, rather in proactive in that students must first have disciplinary issues before they are recommended to an alternative setting.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Social Services / Mental Health</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The role and importance that mental health and social services play in education tend to mirror the emphasis, or lack thereof, of these services in society at large and have a cyclically more or less important role depending on state and Federal budgets, social attitudes, and healthcare trends.</li> <li>● Most students who are considered at-risk and/or vulnerable would benefit from a number of these services, however, they are often times not available.</li> <li>● 80% of youth ages 6 to 17 years old with severe mental health challenges never receive services.</li> <li>● Psychologist, psychiatrist, councilors, transition specialist, clinicians, and social workers all have critical roles in developing successful outcomes for at-risk students.</li> <li>● There are tremendous cost savings, over a lifetime, in properly preventatively treating youth with social, emotional, and behavioral issues, versus long term incarceration.</li> <li>● Therapy and counseling services tend to be highly undervalued in the United States, especially amongst youth.</li> <li>● Special Education and mental health services need far greater collaboration than what is currently practiced.</li> <li>● Research has shown that when mental health services are provided, either in a traditional or alternative school setting, at-risk students have a far greater likelihood of success, measured in engagement, academics, attendance, productivity, and behaviors.</li> <li>● Students that are or have been involved with (CPS) Child Protective Services are at the greatest risk, amongst any group, of having long term behavioral issues including extended incarcerations.</li> </ul>

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<p><b>Critical Theory and Disproportionality</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The ACLU, NAACP, and ABA have been at the forefront of raising awareness and pushing for legislative changes to stipple the school-to-prison pipeline.</li> <li>● Racial disproportionality in education effects achievement, as much as disciplinary practices and are closely correlated with each other.</li> <li>● Racial overrepresentation in special education, suspensions, and expulsions is also overrepresented in both the juvenile and adult justice systems.</li> <li>● Minority youth are incarcerated at a ratio of 2:1 over their white peers for the same offences.</li> <li>● Minority students are three times more likely to be suspended than their white counterparts for comparable offenses.</li> <li>● Youth with diagnosed disabilities represent only 12% of the overall public-school population yet average 37% of the juvenile incarceration population rate.</li> <li>● This disproportionality in incarcerated youth had become so prevalent that by the mid 2000's the Department of Justice had to get involved and pass mandates for public school administrators to review their current practices and find alternative strategies.</li> <li>● Where a student attends school, not the nature of the offense, is the greatest predictor of whether the student will become incarcerated or not.</li> <li>● School shootings, at white suburban schools over the past 25 years have become the rationale behind legislative practices that allow police, canine units, and even SWAT teams to be involved in urban public-school districts.</li> <li>● In 21 states the disproportionality of black students being suspended is so pronounced that it represents double the percentage of the student body.</li> <li>● States with the lowest percentage of black students represent the highest levels of disproportionality in discipline due to lack of cultural understanding.</li> <li>● African American students make up only 17% of the entire national student body yet represent 37% of all suspensions and 35% of all expulsions.</li> <li>● Students are often times put in curriculum and academic tracks, as young as 6 years old, which significantly impair their likelihood of success, based on ethnographic factors such as race and economic status.</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● African American students are perceived as having a more aggressive communication code which is one of the leading causes of ED diagnoses, suspensions, and expulsions.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Incarceration</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Only 27% of black youth with ED graduate high school and of those that drop out, 73% will be arrested within three years.</li> <li>● Students as young as 10 years old are receiving misdemeanor tickets or being arrested for offenses that were historically handled in the principal's office.</li> <li>● The prison population in the United States, both juvenile and adult has increased ten-fold since 1970.</li> <li>● The U.S. has the largest prison population in the world with 2.5 million people currently behind bars and another 5 million under some sort of correctional supervision.</li> <li>● 70,000 youth are incarcerated in juvenile facilities and 10,000 are in adult prisons.</li> <li>● 2.1 million youth, under the age of 18 are arrested annually.</li> <li>● 300,000 students are referred to law enforcement, by teachers and administrators annually.</li> <li>● Students are being referred to law enforcement for such minor offenses as skipping school, vandalism, and use of profanity.</li> <li>● Research suggest that many of the juvenile facilities that house youth offenders do not offer adequate services for special education, transitioning, and mental health services.</li> <li>● The social cost to tax-payers is approximately \$149,000.00 per year, to keep a juvenile offender locked up in a correction institution, far more expensive than providing rehabilitative services would be.</li> </ul>

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### **4. Discussion**

In this section I have summarized the emergent themes from my analysis of the 40 articles included in this meta-synthesis. These emergent themes were then connected to my own personal observations, experiences, and practices as an educator.

#### *4.1. Ethnography and Special Education*

There are approximately 75 million students enrolled in school, grades PreK – 12<sup>th</sup>, in the United States. By and large, most of these students successfully acclimate to the constructs of a traditional general education setting. These students are able to transition year after year into the educational stages of achievement and development without any serious impediments. What happens to those students however, that find themselves unable to thrive in their current educational settings? For tens of thousands of school aged children, in the U.S., this means they ultimately find themselves incarcerated in correctional facilities designed to exclude and punish, rather than rehabilitate. (Mallet, 2016)

There are a number of factors which determine whether a student will be successful in school or not; some of which are the onus of the student themselves, but far too often the determiners of success are external variables in which the student has little or no control over. Education, as with society at large, is ripe with cultural biases, racial and economic misperceptions, learned behaviors and attitudes, and a lack of overall awareness of mental health issues. The most concerning facet of education is that there is a clearly recognizable and disproportionate hierarchy of youth groups with which incur the majority of disciplinary practices within education. Atop this hierarchy are students with diagnosed emotional

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disturbances, trauma, and mental health related issues. Following the top tier, are students whom are African American and then Hispanic, in disproportionality. Next are youth who are economically disadvantaged, of any race. Finally, being male rounds out the pyramid. These are not exclusionary ethnographic categories as many students fall into multiple categories. For example, a poor black male student with ED has an exponentially higher chance of being funneled into the school-to-prison pipeline than his peers.

This is not a new phenomenon as critical race theorist have been addressing inequities in discipline and achievement for over a century. What makes these statistics especially alarming is that the unintended consequences of school discipline policies throughout the 1980's and 90's caused a significant surge in disproportionate numbers of at-risk youth being suspended, expelled, and incarcerated. While many major organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples, and even the Department of Justice have studied and extrapolated alarming data trends, little has been done legislatively to address these inequities.

Students with diagnosed Emotional Disturbances, social maladjustments, traumas, and mental health issues are especially at high risk of severe exclusionary and punitive disciplinary practices. With the policies and practices of mainstreaming, inclusion, and the ideologies behind least restrictive environments, our most vulnerable youth were dumped into general education classrooms, often with over thirty other students. General Education teachers, lacking experience, resources, and aide often times become completely overwhelmed in this one size fits all environment. Therefore, it has become common practice to remove the most disruptive students out of the classroom. These students, who have a host of social, emotional, and

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behavioral issues are quick to be referred to school administration for even minor infractions due to their needs for additional resources which are often unavailable. School Administrators, in following federally mandated policies, are quick to practice exclusionary discipline by suspending and expelling at-risk students frequently and severely. Many of these students, starting as early as 10 years old, are now being charged criminally for a range of infractions which were once addressed administratively. By excluding this vulnerable population of children from the classroom, either through expulsions or incarceration, their likelihood of academic achievement, engagement, graduation, and transitioning into post-secondary life diminish significantly.

Countless research has been conducted on the impacts of attitudes and culture, amongst teachers, staff, and administrators on children of minority or economically disadvantaged backgrounds. Many studies have concluded that school culture and the attitudes of staff have a direct correlation with success or failure rates of these at-risk groups. Teachers and administrators who are experienced, have additional education and training, and promote positive attitudes are far more likely to implement effective behavior intervention strategies than their colleagues. Conversely, school cultures that promote negative attitudes towards poor and minority students, albeit oftentimes inadvertently, have significantly higher rates of suspensions, expulsions, drop-outs, and criminal charges filed. In considering the impact of attitudes and culture, the below chart represents how even connotations in describing students can have adverse effects. (Hudson, 2011)

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### Comparative Chart of Industry Terms

Negative	Positive
1. Hyperactive	1. Energetic
2. Impulsive	2. Spontaneous
3. Distractible	3. Creative
4. Daydreamer	4. Imaginative
5. Inattentive	5. Global thinker with a wide focus
6. Unpredictable	6. Flexible
7. Argumentative	7. Independent
8. Stubborn	8. Committed
9. Irritable	9. Sensitive
10. Aggressive	10. Assertive
11. Attention Deficit Disorder	11. Unique

#### 4.2. Educational Policy

Education, much like healthcare or corrections, oftentimes mirrors social attitudes and ideologies of society at large. Starting in the 1970's, in the United States, there was a major ideological shift in both mental health awareness and crime prevention. Many of the nation's mental health facilities began to lose their funding and ultimately closed their doors. Tens of thousands of patients that were once housed at these institutions, ranging from severely disturbed inpatient facilities to therapeutic outpatient clinics, were thus sent back into the civilian

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population with no oversight or follow-up; Public awareness of mental health conditions, which had peaked in the 1960's, began to dwindle as a host of new issues and concerns filled our psyches. During the same time period, local, state, and federal authorities all began to work in collaboration with legislators and policy makers to wage a war on crime. Hundreds of new correctional institutions were being built across the country, law enforcement personnel increased exponentially, punishments for crimes and infractions grew in both harshness and frequency, and the department of education began enacting policies to criminalize behaviors that were once administratively adjudicated. All of these practices culminated in creating the largest and most inequitable industrial prison complex in the world.

By the 1980's, as President Ronald Regan's wars on drugs and crime raged throughout inner-cities across the U.S., the Department of Education had begun enacting numerous policies that were collectively labeled Zero Tolerance. Zero Tolerance, or ZT policies, in a nationwide effort to keep schools safe and drug free, mandated that local school administrators must adjudicate specific punishments for a number of specifically identified behavioral infractions. These punishments ranged from extended out of school suspensions, to expulsions, and up to criminal charges and prosecution of behavioral punishments which were identified as falling under the ZT infraction list. Students, oftentimes as young as nine or ten years old were now being arrested and incarcerated for behaviors deemed unacceptable at school. These specific behaviors, identified under ZT, included: cursing and obscenity, vandalism, truancy, alcohol, tobacco, and drug violations, bullying and aggressiveness, and possession of weapons. Many school districts around the country began employing law enforcement personnel within the schools, including K-9 units and even in some cases SWAT and tactical teams. Many of the

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infractions deemed unacceptable under ZT policy carried very broad and ambiguous definitions which left considerable autonomy in the hands of local administrators and adjudicators.

By the 1990's, during the peak of ZT disciplinary practices, another fundamental shift occurred in educational policies involving special education. The practices of inclusion, mainstreaming, and least restrictive environment began to become common-place, through a number of legislative educational acts. What this meant for local school districts across the country was that students, identified as receiving special education services for a variety of cognitive, intellectual, social, and emotional impairments, were being placed into general education classrooms as often as possible. What this meant for many classroom teachers and administrators, whom all too often lacked experience and professional training, became frustrated and overwhelmed with the host of emotional and behavioral issues that these students brought with them. Whereas before many of these students were allocated intensive aides, resources, and interventions, they are now being forced to acclimate into a traditional classroom setting. Classroom teachers became quick to refer these students to administration, for even the slightest of disruptive infractions, and administrators were all too willing to implement exclusionary disciplinary practices to address these disruptors. The combination of ZT policies and mainstreaming practices created a recipe for disaster for many of the most at-risk students.

In the wake of several school shooting massacres that swept headlines across the country, in 1998 congress, under then President Bill Clinton, passed the COPS initiative which created additional federal funding to bring increased law enforcement personnel into schools. Several school districts, especially in inner-city neighborhoods, created police sub-stations within the school building, had armed officers patrolling the school grounds, and began policing schools in

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much the same way as they patrolled the adjoining communities. Tens of thousands of children were arrested, at school, and hauled off to correctional facilities that housed both juvenile and adult offenders. The school-to-prison pipeline, through policy and practice, had quickly gained momentum and the number of children being locked up grew exponentially.

### *4.3. Alternative Educational Strategies*

Through advocacy and awareness of the failures in traditional public education for our most vulnerable students, there has been a recent movement to develop more appropriate alternative educational settings. The creation of alternative schools, over the past two decades, has been a two-fold development. First, public school districts across the country, predominately in major urban areas, have developed alternative schools as extensions to their traditional schools within the district at large. For example, if a city's public high school system consists of six traditional high schools, they will create one alternative school in which to funnel in students with behavioral, attendance, and social concerns. This alternative high school is created to develop appropriate behavioral intervention plans, increase student engagement, and decrease drop-out rates by individualizing learning. Secondly, there has been a number of private alternative educational settings that have been created around the country. These private institutions tend to have a more focused design on mental health, therapy, and rehabilitation. Privately run alternative schools have a much greater flexibility in their design and can look like anything from a boot-camp style live-in facility to an outpatient counseling session modeled after a health services facility. The success rates for alternative schools overall is polarizing at best; Many of these schools have accomplished great successes while others have only further perpetuated the problem.

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Public educational alternative school settings have a notoriously negative connotation of being dumping grounds for students who have failed to thrive in the traditional setting. These schools often times fail due to having inexperienced staff and administrators, lacking of training in dealing with behavioral, social, and emotional disabilities, negative attitudes and cultural perceptions among staff, and lack of resources from the district at large. The number one complaint amongst staff surveyed at public alternative schools is that students are referred to the alternative setting and then no further follow-up or resources accompany them after they are transitioned; in other words, they are dumped into the alternative system. Many of these alternative schools' lack mental health professionals, special educators, councilors, and clinicians. These schools often become little more than a way to segregate vulnerable students from the general population.

Not all public alternative education has failed. There are numerous examples of alternative schools, in cities across the country, where staff and administrators have done an excellent job of creating and implementing individualized behavioral interventions. These schools typically have in common the following traits: staff that is experienced and trained in behavioral modifications, a school culture of positive reinforcement and attitudes toward success, and access to support resources from a wide variety of mental and social health service providers. These successful schools, while often times carrying a much higher operating budget, have proven to increase engagement, decrease behavioral disruptions, and lower drop-out and incarceration rates.

Privately ran alternative schools, on the other hand, have a unique advantage of having greater autonomy in how they construct both their ideology and practice. Among the most

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successful models, as gauged by lack of recidivism, graduation rates, and academic achievement, are those institutions that support a therapeutic counseling model as part of the daily curriculum.

In these schools' students, aside from traditional academic courses, spend part of their day in either a group or one-on-one therapy session with a trained mental health clinician.

Rehabilitative and therapeutic counseling is an integral part of the academic day as staff attempt to determine root cause issues that have led students to this juncture. Many of these privately ran alternative schools also offer a variety in settings as well. Adventure therapy is a growing movement, founded in the 1970's, in which students spend their sessions outdoors, completing physical obstacles while learning coping mechanisms and healing processes. The common denominator between all successful programs, as significant data from longitudinal studies has shown, is the presence of mental health and social services as part of the overall program.

### *4.4. Social Services and Mental Health*

Eighty percent of school age children with severe mental health challenges never receive any services. Multiple studies have concluded that at-risk students and children with mental health issues would benefit from receiving mental health related services. Most private insurance companies, as well as Medicaid, do not cover many of the mental health services available. Data from the Department of Education suggest that the two most vulnerable groups of children are those that have had direct interaction with Child Protective Services and students with emotional disabilities. These two at-risk groups are the most likely to end up dropping out of school and becoming incarcerated. There are numerous programs available, ran through social services and mental health providers, both public and private, that offer rehabilitative, therapeutic, life and coping skills, and counseling services. These programs are rarely utilized or implemented in

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public schools. The social cost of providing preventative mental health services is far less expensive than keeping an individual incarcerated for extended periods of time.

The most beneficial model of services for any school, whether traditional or alternative, is that of a collaborative nature in which the special education coordinator works with psychologist, social workers, councilors, and therapist. Data on at-risk students has shown a direct positive correlation between student engagement, achievement, attendance, behavior, and graduation rates amongst youth who receive mental health services versus no services offered. Legislatively, IDEA or the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act covers a broad and encompassing array of mandated services for special education. However, there is very little policy regarding mental health issues and subsequent services provided in education.

There is a growing, albeit slow, movement in alternative education to increase awareness and services around mental health. Dialectical therapy sessions, coping and healing groups, and positive behavioral counseling are being utilized in small numbers around the country. These programs so far, tend to be located in major urban areas such as Oakland, Dallas, and New York. Alternative educational programs that incorporate mental health services as part of their daily routine have shown consistently positive results.

### *4.5. Critical Theory and Disproportionality*

The disproportionality of African American youth being referred into the legal system, from schools, became so pronounced by the mid 2000's that the DOJ actually had to intervene. The DOJ, in working with state and federal educational policy makers, reviewed the inequitable rates at which black youth were being referred into the legal system and passed mandates requiring additional training for school administrators in dealing with this crisis. In 21 states the

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disproportionality of black students being suspended is so pronounced that it represents double the percentage of the student body. Minority youth are locked up at a rate of 2:1 over their white peers for the same offenses. The overrepresentation of minority youth is prevalent in special education, alternative school placement, suspensions, expulsions, and criminal referrals.

The American Civil Liberties Union, National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples, and the American Bar Association have all been fighting to raise awareness of the disproportionality of achievement, treatment, and punishments of minority youth in the educational system. For many black students, where they attend school is a more significant predictor of whether they will end up incarcerated or not than the offense itself. States with the lowest rates of ethnic diversity have the highest rates of disproportionality. In this regard, is education mirroring society or is society mirroring education? Oftentimes students as young as six years old are put into curriculum tracks that will impact their academic performance throughout school.

This is by no means a new phenomenon. For over a century advocates such as W.E.B DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr have been fighting against critical race theory practices. The unfortunate irony in recent history is that most of the modern policies regarding disciplinary practices and criminality were direct results of school shooting massacres in white suburban school districts. Those most affected however, are poor black youth. The leading causes of disparity, amongst punishments in school for black students, are cultural biases and negative attitudes. Black male students are perceived to be more aggressive and thus far more likely to be placed in special education for emotional disturbances, suspended, expelled, or incarcerated.

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There is a clear, statistically defined hierarchical tier of disproportionality in punishment, achievement, and exclusion in education. At the top of this pyramid are students that have been involved with CPS and have received foster care services. The second tier is reserved for youth with diagnosed emotional disturbances and other social and behavioral disabilities. Next, black male students are severely overrepresented followed by Hispanic males. The bottom tier then consists of economically disadvantaged white males. Every one of these groups has achievement gaps, higher drop-out rates, and more frequent and severe exclusionary punishments administered than their middle-class white peers. Unfortunately for many students in this pyramid of inequity, they fall into multiple categories. For example, a poor black student who has been identified as having emotional / behavioral disorders, who has been in foster care has an exponentially higher chance of failure within the system. The catch-22 is that the younger and more frequently a student is subjected to exclusionary discipline, the less engaged they become, the greater the achievement gap grows, and the likelihood of dropping out and becoming incarcerated increases. Once an at-risk youth is introduced into the legal system the risk of perpetual recidivism becomes highly likely as their opportunities at success transition into employment or post-secondary become diminished. Decisions made by school administrators, against students as early as elementary school, can have debilitating consequences for the rest of that young person's life.

### 4.6. *Incarceration*

"The degree of civilization in a society is revealed by entering its prisons." (Fyodor Dostoyevsky) The United States has the largest prison population of any first world country on earth. Each year, over 2.1 million youth are arrested. There are over 70,000 youth serving time in

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juvenile facilities with an additional 10,000 in adult penal institutions. 2.5 million people Americans are locked up at any given time annually. Children as young as 10 are often times charged with misdemeanor offenses, through the schools, and students receiving special education services, including learning disabled are not exempt from incarceration either. In some states, it is legal and practiced to permit the death penalty for crimes committed by youth under the age of 18, as well as, individuals with mental disabilities.

Incarceration rates, in the United States, which have increase ten-fold since the 1970's is a direct result of the cumulative policies effecting school discipline and the decreased utility of mental health and social services. There is a longstanding and growing trend to lock away, rather than treat and rehabilitate our most vulnerable citizens. One of the central arguments for the decline in mental health and social services over the past four decades has been budgetary. However, from a social cost perspective, we spend approximately \$150,000.00 per year, per person, to keep youth locked up in juvenile facilities.

Many of the juvenile correctional facilities in the United States lack any form of mental health or social services. They often times have inadequate special education and transition services. Given the lack of education, life skills training, and transition services, the recidivism rate for incarcerated youth is extremely high. Many of the 300,000 students that are referred to law enforcement annually, by school administrators, are due to minor infractions such as skipping school, profanity, and vandalism. Through educational policy making, lack or appropriate resources, and cultural attitudes and biases, we have enabled a school-to-prison pipeline that is both dangerous and debilitating for our nation's most vulnerable children.

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### **5. Conclusion**

The findings of this meta-synthesis highlight the disproportionate administration of disciplinary policies across the United States. The evidence shows that there is in fact a school-to-prison pipeline which oftentimes begins for children as young as six. This pipeline is confounded by a number of issues which negatively affect poor, minority, and emotionally disturbed youth. While there are a number of advocacy groups, as well as, individual local school districts that have attempted to raise awareness and effect change, the need for a federal level overhaul of educational policymaking still exist. When viewing this crisis from a macro lens, schools are only one piece of the overall problem. I believe that for society at large to function positively and productively, there must be a cradle to grave mentality for social well-being. This means that schools should have positive working relationships with social services, healthcare providers, law enforcement, and local employers. Without a bigger picture view of the social contract, the school-to-prison pipeline is only one representative indicator of society at large ideology.

It is estimated that by the year 2030, eighty percent of the jobs that will be available to graduates, have not been created yet. However, education is firmly entrenched in this antiquated ideal of funneling all students into the same traditional curriculum tract. While this long-standing belief works sufficiently for the majority of students, what about the tens of thousands of the most at-risk and vulnerable students whom don't fit easily into a one size fits all school philosophy? If school is intended to be the one safe place where all students are welcomed, why do we not provide medical and mental health services for students in need? Why are there not

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more councilors and clinicians, behaviorist and nutritionist? Why is the schools number one priority not to develop and nurture healthy and engaged young men and woman, regardless of their ethic or economic backgrounds?

The findings of this study suggest that the answer lies in the longstanding belief systems of institutional classism and racism. Both class and race have been at the forefront of American politics since its founding. Over time these struggles have become far less overt and have been replaced with more subtle acts such as policy making and legislation. The underlying cultural belief systems, for many Americans, have changed very little over the past two centuries. Special Education, especially the labeling of emotional and behavioral disabilities is often nothing more than a byproduct of these cultural biases and belief systems. The solutions are not easily found but the most effective ways to make progress are from the bottom-up, not the top-down.

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