Gettin’ it Right: Rethinking Policy, Revitalizing Schools, and Reforming the Experience for Young Men of Color in Chicago’s Public Schools

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Gettin’ it Right: Rethinking Policy, Revitalizing Schools, and Reforming the Experience for Young Men of Color in Chicago’s Public Schools

Image taken by Brian Cabral ©

Senior Honors Thesis*

Brian Cabral
Department of Sociology
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Spring 2018

*Submitted on April 13, 2018 in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the Bachelors of Arts in Sociology with distinction at Oberlin College.
To my parents, Martin and Blanca Cabral,

for their everlasting support in my education. Los amo.
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Introduction

In early November of 1987, roughly thirty years ago, U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett said, “Chicago's public schools are the worst in the nation” and recommended that “parents should consider private schools for their children” (Associated Press 1987). At this time, the white population in the Chicago Public School (CPS) system had dropped by nearly 50 percent and continued to drop in the years that followed and has remained below a mere 10 percent since (Chicago Reporter 2017; Bartin 2008). Many of those parents listened, saw the disastrous conditions of public schools in Chicago, and sent their children to private school. This fueled the belief that a quality education equated to a privatized one. Public education then and now is still plummeting and repeatedly failing to serve its purpose of providing young people with a quality education that will give them an opportunity to engage in both the American Dream and in upward mobility (Kozol 2005). With the decrease in the number of white students in CPS, this meant that the student population CPS had to serve was mostly racial and ethnic minorities, poor, and/or working class. These demographics are not unique to Chicago. It is happening to public schools across the U.S., which leads us to wonder, what is the status of public education today? Today, educators, local politicians, and business elites are failing to sustain Chicago’s public education system - they are not gettin’ it right. Chicago has closed many public schools down in the last four years. Those in charge of the educational agenda in Chicago continue to target ‘struggling’ schools in predominantly racial and ethnic neighborhood enclaves.
How did we get here? What led to the targeting of public schools? Why are predominantly racial and ethnic neighborhoods affected by school closures and not benefitting from new school openings? An emergence of charter or contract schools emerged in the 1990s, and Chicago was a hotspot for the innovative charter school movement to provide school choice for parents and families. Charter schools are considered public schools because they use public funds, but they are privately owned and financially supported through private investment or donations (Lipman 2011). Considering the increase of charter schools and the influx of neighborhood school closings, I date back to the 1988-1995 era, a pivotal time for educational reform in Chicago, and explore what the educational agenda was for the city of Chicago regarding public school education. This is an important component of the thesis that will contextualize the crux of understanding the relationship between schools and education policy and reform. Through this historical analysis, I assess that Chicago is under a neoliberal political economy that prioritizes the privatization of education. Under such neoliberal environment, a neighborhood on the Southwest side of Chicago, Little Village, managed to pressure CPS and Chicago politicians to build a neighborhood high school campus comprised of four small high schools, which I delve into further in chapter two. But, how did a neighborhood high school get built under Chicago’s neoliberal educational agenda? This thesis partly explores this question by highlighting the unique existence of one of the high schools: Social Justice High School or SOJO. More notably, this analysis attempts to assess the ways that despite the construction of this neighborhood high school campus, CPS officials persist in their pursuit towards school privatization. First, however, let’s discuss some key understandings of the city of Chicago itself. It is important to do this because the experiences and changes enacted in Chicago regarding
education went on to be promoted nationally under the Obama administration, given that a former CEO of Chicago’s public schools went on to become Obama’s Secretary of Education.

**Chicago’s Identity**

Chicago is a large urban city. Like many other large urban centers, Chicago embodies a ‘dual city’ (Mollenkopf and Castells 1992; Lipman 2002). A tale of two cities where one is poor, and the other is wealthy. The wealthy side of Chicago refers to the downtown (or Central Chicago) loop or ‘L’ and some of the neighborhoods located on the north side of the city (see figure 1.1 below). It is where shopping centers and stores are located, and various places filled with state-of-the-art tourism and luxury apartments.

![Figure 1.1 Neighborhood map of the city of Chicago (by Peter Fitzgerald via Wikimedia Commons).](image)

The poorer side of the city is mostly residential or areas with many vacant homes or lots on the West and South side of the city (see figure 1.1 above). The poor side of Chicago is one not
experienced by tourists or visitors, and one stereotyped as being violent or infested with crime. Criminologists and sociologists have shown that there is a clear distinction between poor neighborhoods and violent neighborhoods. For example, Rona Epstein has shown that an ongoing stigma exists for poor neighborhoods (Epstein 2016). This stigma correlates poverty with high levels of crime and violence, but *The Greatest Divide* by Andrew Harrop shows us that poverty itself does not directly produce crime or violence (Harrop 2015), rather crime, violence, and poverty are reproduced structurally through social inequality. The point is that the Chicago experience by the wealthy is not analogous to that experienced by the poor, but it is from the wealthy and well-off that policy makers come from. The duality of Chicago’s city infrastructure is further reinforced through its drastic forms of segregation. The north side of Chicago is considered a wealthier area of Chicago, with suburbs extending out in the city’s borders. The South and West side of the city is comprised of various neighborhoods that are poor or working class. Some areas are considered as ‘in-between’ the wealth and poor spectrum, but it still highlights the characteristic of segregated neighborhoods evident in Chicago’s urban identity.

Aside from embodying a dual city, Chicago is also considered a ‘global city’ (Sassen 2002; Lipman 2002), which in addition to playing a vital role in the local national economy, also contributes to the international economy through its relationship to global finance markets. This, in turn, hinders the local interests of the many segregated neighborhoods in Chicago. In fact, local interests are overshadowed by global interests. However, participating in globalization efforts and business did not come by choice of local neighborhood residents. Scholars have attributed such identity marker and global participation to the city government (Lipman 2011). In Chicago politics, it is the city mayor that possesses most of the control. This also includes the public education system, so inevitably, educational reform is influenced by globalization.
Re-shifting City Politics and Control of City’s Educational Agenda

With the power over education policy and reform given to city governments, it is important to consider the ways that Chicago city politics influences public schools. Chicago has historically been politically dominated by the Democratic party machine (Vargas 2016). The Democratic party is the deciding party for city infrastructure and social institutions and services. Having a strong Democratic running machine, however, did not mean that the interests of local residents were solved or at the very least, addressed.

The progressive party - a Democratic opponent - challenged the Democratic party in the 1980s and ultimately helped elect a non-Democrat in Chicago, Harold Washington (Vargas 2016). Washington became an emblem of racial progress in Chicago because he was the city’s first Black mayor. As mayor, Washington prioritized educational reform as it was a central issue to his goals and vision for Chicago. In 1988, Washington, along with community members across the city, helped push to enact the 1988 Chicago School Reform Act, which decentralized Chicago Public Schools and created local school councils (Lipman 2004). The local school councils were comprised of various community leaders and given the power to select school principals, approve school budgets, and develop annual school improvement plans (Lipman 2004). This brought control over public schools from the mayor over to the communities themselves, which included participation in the policy-making and assessing process for Chicago’s public school system both locally and city-wide. Unfortunately, mayor Washington passed away and soon after the Democratic party took control of the mayoral office again. Prior to Washington’s mayoral tenure, Richard J. Daley (senior) was mayor from 1955-1976, but his son, Richard M. Daley was who became mayor of Chicago a couple years after Washington passed away. It only took about five years for Daley (son) to grow impatient with the slow pace
of the policy-implementation and discussion process that, with support of the GOP or Republican Party, he was able to push the passing of the Chicago School Reform Amendatory Act of 1995 in the Springfield legislature (Lipman 2004). This amendatory act of 1995 abolished the 1988 reform act and gave Daley (son) complete control over the public school system once again.

The successful amendatory act passed in 1995 is key in understanding the impact it had on Chicago’s educational agenda. Richard M. Daley decided not to directly control the educational agenda for the city of Chicago entirely. He built a team comprised of wealthy individuals and business leaders to play a prominent role in educational policy as members of Chicago’s Board of Education. Both Richard M. Daley and Richard J. Daley (senior), had historical close ties with business corporations and many fortune 500 companies. Both pursued a neoliberal political and economic agenda that welcomed major businesses to the city of Chicago in hopes that it will bring economic prosperity as that resembled in other global cities. Consequently, as evident in other global cities, such agenda brought forth a continuation of gentrification in low-income areas, hiking up the price of living in such area, and displacing poor residents. This urban cycle, as explained by Neil Smith, further perpetuates residential segregation, the wealth gap, and ultimately reinforces the dual city identity described earlier (Smith 1996). This is relevant to education and schools because research has shown that many school demographic populations are reflective of the neighborhood that they are residing in (Schwartz 2011).

**School Reform in Different Eras**

Subsequent school reform in Chicago came in distinct forms. Chicago Public Schools underwent a series of reform efforts enforced by different leadership. When mayor of Chicago Richard M. Daley (son) regained control over the public school system, he appointed a Chief
Executive Officer or CEO to run the logistics, designing, and decision making for the entire school system (Allensworth, de la Torre, et al. 2011). The mayor had direct control over who to appoint as CEO of CPS and also had direct communication with the CEO to influence the public school agenda for the city of Chicago. Scholars from the University of Chicago traced Chicago’s public school agenda over a twenty-year period (1988-2009) and divided up that time period into three eras: Era 1 between 1988-1995 with CEO Argie Johnson titled Decentralization, Era 2 between 1996-2001 with CEO Paul Vallas titled Accountability, and Era 3 between 2002-2009 with CEO Arne Duncan titled Diversification (Allensworth, de la Torre, et al. 2011). These three eras of school reform for Chicago shifted the public school agenda for CPS, and each one built on the previous.

The first era under Argie Johnson occurred during the decentralization approach that CPS took under Harold Washington’s efforts to involve residents from neighborhoods into the decision-making and influencing process for public schools. This was thoroughly discussed in the previous section in this chapter (see section “Re-shifting City Politics and Control of City’s Educational Agenda”). The next era under Paul Vallas began in 1996 when CPS took a different approach to educational reform. It shifted its focus to one on accountability purely based on increasing individual student achievement (Lipman 2011). However, achievement came in the form of composite scores from standardized tests. Such accountability measures were to be implemented early in the student’s educational trajectory. Thus, during a students’ formative years, a high emphasis was placed on test taking preparatory curriculum and instruction. This shift in educational agenda left many students failing to meet a minimum composite score and resulted in an increase of roughly 7,000-10,000 students being retained in grade per year (Allensworth, de la Torre, et al. 2011). The shift to accountability measures in public schools
came at a time when the federal government was moving towards national school reform in implementing a test-based curriculum and policy through the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001.

The following era under Arne Duncan, who went on to be Obama’s Education Secretary in 2008, brought forth a new set of school policies and initiatives that prioritized the increase and improvement of statistical school data (Allensworth, de la Torre, et al. 2011) such as attendance, standardized test scores, for example. The stark difference between the Vallas and Duncan administration was that Duncan focused on improving math and literacy, of which brought standardized curriculums to schools to improve the subject matters aligned with what was in the ACT standardized test (Allensworth, de la Torre, et al. 2011). In turn, this era brought a diversity of subject matters into one curriculum that theoretically increased student achievement and school data. The unintended consequence of strengthening accountability measures was that CPS shifted its accountability measures from individual students and placed it onto schools. As a result, underperforming schools, usually measured by composite scores from standardized tests, were threatened with school closure or were replaced with a new school administration that would revamp the school’s test scores.

The three eras of school reform in Chicago built on each other and created a culture of accountability and achievement that negatively impacted students of color the most (Allensworth, de la Torre, et al. 2011). In fact, Chicago’s plan in the early 2000s was to close its ‘failing’ or its ‘worst’ schools down to build 100 new schools across the city through the Renaissance 2010 plan spearheaded by then-mayor of Chicago, Richard M. Daley, but this failed (Banchero 2010). This culture of accountability and achievement continued long after the third era. Under a new administration both in the mayor’s office and in the CEO position of CPS schools, Chicago experienced one of the most drastic school closures in its history. In 2014, CPS
closed fifty public schools, schools that primarily served students of color (Perez Jr. 2015). Analyzing these time frames shows us how city politics influence the types of policies that are implemented across the public school system. Similarly, school districts influence the types of policies that public schools are mandated to implement, but how such implementation happens varies by school.

**Young Men of Color in Public Schools**

With the decrease of white students in Chicago Public Schools (CPS), we know that most students in CPS are students of color. Education scholars and sociologists have found that students of color struggle the most and receive an unequal education in public schools compared to their white and private school counterparts (Noguera 2009; Stovall 2006; Flores-Gonzalez 2002). While students from different genders are similarly affected by the ways that education policy is implemented in schools and how city politics shape their educational experience, the focus of this research will be on young men of color. The literature on urban public schools tells us that young men of color, Black men especially, are victims of stark underachievement, are more likely to drop out, are victims of hyper criminalization, and are more likely to be disciplined in schools (Noguera 2009; Rios 2011; Harper 2012). Former president Barack Obama showed national concern on this issue and implemented My Brother’s Keeper, an initiative focused on improving the livelihood of young boys and men of color and ensuring that they reach their full potential despite the gaps that exist preventing them from doing so (White House, Obama 2014). This national initiative failed to address some of the structural and racial inequalities that affected young men, nor did it specify how funding would be allocated for violence prevention programs or other programming. It did, however, influence other organizations and institutions to create a model addressing these issues affecting young men of
color. An example that I will further elaborate on is the Becoming a Man (BAM) program ran by the University of Chicago (Urban Labs 2018). This program offers direct, personal mentorship to young men of color in public schools across the city of Chicago. Despite the national and local initiatives however, the negative experience in public schools for these young men persisted.

The main purpose of this thesis is to understand the relationship between race, education policy, and sociopolitical power using the experiences of young Latino men as case studies. Specifically, I focus on the experiences of Mexican and/or Mexican American young men who either graduated or attended SOJO. I delve into the ways that educational policy, specifically that of standardized testing and discipline, influence the educational experience of this specific student population. In part, this research serves to contribute to the existing scholarship about young men of color and urban public schools. Public schools are struggling and research by educational sociologists Pedro Noguera, Shaun Harper, and Victor Rios tells us that young men of color persistently struggle in schools as well. Capturing the struggles of these young men in public schools offers us an insight into the ways that top-down implementation of education policy influences their complex educational experiences. Additionally, how political decisions dictate the types of policies that are implemented in school that affect the learning experience for public school students in Chicago.

Methods

The data for this project came from a series of phases starting at the beginning of the summer in June of 2016 until the winter in January of 2018. The first phase took place in 2016 where I conducted a historical analysis of Chicago city politics, education policy, and the educational experiences of young men of color. This historical section also includes quantitative data that I extracted from public statistics on public high schools provided by the Chicago Public
Schools website. Subsequently, I began the qualitative field work in November of 2016 and concluded in December of 2017.

The qualitative data in this study is derived from a total of nineteen in-person, semi-structured interviews with former SOJO students that identified as male and either Mexican or Mexican-American. I used the snowball sampling method, which is “when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants. This process is, by necessity, repetitive: informants refer the researcher to other informants, who are contacted by the researcher and then refer her or him to yet other informants, and so on” (Noy 2008). The current guidance counselor at SOJO, who has worked there since the beginning of the high school in 2005, served as the initial point person or ‘primary informant’ for this study. She provided names and contact information of potential participants for this study. I then reached out to them via phone call, email, and/or a social media platform. Interview participants were asked if they knew of other former SOJO students that fit the description or criteria for this research, and those names were noted and reached out to. All interviewees either attended SOJO for some time or graduated from the school. No interviewees were current students at SOJO. Each interview was recorded and ranged between thirty to ninety minutes long. The recordings were then transcribed by me or sent to a transcription service that transcribes audio into text using external funds provided for this research.

The interview data transcriptions were coded manually and separated into “thematic chunks” (Rossman & Rallies 1998). Using a similar coding method as that of Ceja, Smith, et al., the coding process involved “taking text data, creating common categories, and labeling those categories” (Yosso, Smith, et al. 2009), such as ‘experiences with standardized testing’ and
‘responses to discipline’ for this study. Thus, the chapters of this thesis came from such coding method, along with the supplemental analysis of field notes and memos.

**Positionality of Researcher**

I come to this research as a product of the Chicago Public School (or CPS) system for the entirety of my educational trajectory from pre-kindergarten to high school. I have seen the various nuanced attempts that policy makers, school administrators, and teachers have made with regards to standardized testing and discipline. Throughout this time, I have witnessed many young students of color not care about a standardized test, some failing it on purpose by simply not trying or sleeping during the test. Many of them have fell victim to detentions, in-school and out-of-school suspensions, and arrests. The first time I saw a young man of color arrested was in the fourth grade. These observations inform this research well particularly because they are lived experiences of my own or that I have witnessed. Thus, I approach this study with a critical understanding of the ways that education policy functions in relation to the overall student experiences of those attending a public school.

I also sauntered through the hallways of Social Justice High School (or SOJO) from 2010 to 2014. Upon graduation, I have returned to SOJO every year to visit staff, faculty, students, and administrators. This has allowed me to form relationships with the SOJO population that has made this research possible. While this study is personal, I acknowledge and actively sought to approach this work using an objective and neutral perspective when acquiring and analyzing data. Therefore, it is fundamental to highlight that my positionality as a researcher in this work (as an insider-outsider) provides a unique perspective providing insight on the scholarship of urban public schools and the experiences of young men of color.
Chapter 2 discusses the origin of Social Justice High School (SOJO) and the larger Little Village Lawndale High School campus that came to fruition despite Chicago’s educational agenda of straying away from building more neighborhood high schools. This chapter will address some of the trends that support the CPS agenda to open selective enrollment schools and strive for school privatization. In addition, I will highlight the educational injustice seen in Little Village that prompted the demand for a new high school. Three key events influencing SOJO’s origin are the analysis of Chicago’s neoliberal political economy in the 1980s, the community-based efforts and hunger strike in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and the ongoing street turf war between Little Village urban street gangs in the 2000s that date back to the 1950s.

Chapter 3 delves into the experiences with standardized testing of young Mexican and Mexican-American men at SOJO. Considering what the interviewees reported about their experiences with a standardized curriculum, the results show that a continuation of social issues remain regarding the unfair and persistent reliance on standardized test scores in assessing student overall learning. I discuss these results in light of academic critiques of meritocracy, but I include a brief genealogy of meritocracy and standardized testing first. Then, I proceed to discuss ways that a deficit framework used in SOJO can be harmful when advocating for high-achieving results and test scores. Lastly, I highlight the story that some young men endured when CPS officials used test scores to label SOJO as a ‘failing’ school in an attempt to change the schools’ governing structure and academic curriculum.

Chapter 4 highlights the disciplinary experiences that young Mexican and Mexican-American men experienced at SOJO. While SOJO diverts from traditional zero-tolerance policies, interviewees had very similar or varied experiences, reporting that SOJO’s school
policies follow a lineage of zero tolerance that affect their overall learning in and outside of the classroom. I compare these experiences to those detailed in other research and consider the ways that the criminalization of students across racial and ethnic groups is important to consider in the approach that schools like SOJO should take on disciplining their students, especially the highly stigmatized young men of color.

Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by summarizing the ways that race, education policy, and sociopolitical power play a role in the educational experiences of young Latino men, but also for other racial and ethnic students. In addition, I offer recommendations for improving the practice of education policy, specifically that of standardized testing and discipline, as well as for rethinking the way Chicago manages its agenda regarding public schools.
Building a New Neighborhood High School

“Historically, a hunger strike is a drastic non-conventional method employed to give a voice to and champion the causes of marginalized and disenfranchised peoples. We have taken lessons learned from the legacy of Cesar Chavez to heart and now to practice. On Mother’s Day, May 13th we declared our community in an educational crisis and consequently a hunger strike to bring attention to this blatant disregard to our children’s educational needs.”


Neighborhood schools, whether at the elementary or high school level, are intended to serve the youth in the community that the school resides in. The Little Village community, located on the brink of the Southwest side of Chicago, faced an educational injustice in an ongoing gang turf war and protested against the inaction of local politicians, board members in the Chicago Public School network, and legislative members in the capital of Illinois. These acts pushed for those in power to take action, get it done right, and build a new neighborhood high school for Little Village. The fulfillment of the promised high school stalled because neighborhood high schools were not a part of Chicago’s neoliberal agenda regarding public schools. Before elaborating on the matter, let’s discuss the neighborhood demographics and educational injustice found in Little Village.

Neighborhood and School Demographics

Little Village (also referred to as South Lawndale) is a predominantly Mexican and Mexican American immigrant and ethnic enclave located on the Southwest side of Chicago,
about twenty minutes away from the downtown Chicago loop or ‘L’ area. The neighborhood is renowned for its 26th street, which is home to various small businesses and restaurants that bring in a profitable amount of annual tax income and revenue to the city. It is also a small neighborhood hub that celebrates Mexican culture in various artistic forms, such as culinary dishes, bakeries, candy, religious institutions, dance classes, to name a few. It is also an active and significant neighborhood political ward, or section of the city, that played an essential role in the disruption of the Democratic machine in the 1980s when Harold Washington became mayor of Chicago (Vargas 2016). The neighborhood continues to have relevancy and importance in city electoral politics today, influencing the mayoral run-off with Progressive Jesus ‘Chuy’ Garcia against the Democratic mayor Rahm Emanuel during his re-election run in 2015. For most of its territory, Little Village belongs to the 22nd political ward, but due to historical gerrymandering efforts by politicians, a portion of Little Village’s east side belongs to other political wards (Vargas 2016). Despite this, the neighborhood remains an economic and political powerhouse but faces various social issues.

Chicago’s history with segregation in housing and schools reinforce the notion that a neighborhood’s residential demographic is reflective of a school’s student demographics (Schwartz 2011). This means that in a predominantly Mexican and Mexican American neighborhood, most students in the schools are going to primarily identify as Latino/a or Mexican and Mexican American in this case. Similarly, in a predominantly Black neighborhood like North Lawndale, which neighbors Little Village, most of the student population in the schools are those that identify as Black or African American. Figure 2.1 below shows us the Chicago Public School Racial and Ethnic Report in comparison to SOJO’s Racial and Ethnic Report for the school year of 2015-2016.
During that school year, about 39 percent of students in the CPS network were Black or African American compared to about 10 percent for SOJO. White students in CPS totaled to about 10 percent in CPS, but zero percent for SOJO. The most significant comparison for this research is the one for Hispanic or Latino students, which was about 46 percent for CPS and SOJO at nearly half more of that, at 88 percent. This means that SOJO serves 88 percent of Hispanic or Latino students but given the racial and ethnic demographic of the neighborhood where the school is located, it is assumed that a majority of those Hispanic or Latino students identify as either Mexican or Mexican American. When Little Village Lawndale High School was built, its intention was not simply to serve Little Village residents, but the neighboring community of North Lawndale as well. However, as seen in the Racial and Ethnic Report, the school still primarily serves Hispanic or Latino students.
The Call for Educational Justice

Little Village residents pressured Chicago Public School officials to build a neighborhood high school before mayor Richard M. Daley announced that the city planned to build one in 1998. Residents plead their case for a new neighborhood high school because Little Village was of the youngest in the city during the 1990s, “with 4,000 children of high school age” (Stovall 2006). However, only “17% of Little Village residents [had] a high school diploma, while 5.5% [had] college degrees…adding to these concerns is the fact that the neighborhood high school currently servicing the community [had] a dropout rate of 17% and a graduation rate of 55%” (Stovall 2006). These numbers were startling and showed an educational injustice that needed to be addressed and improved.

At the time of this community plead, the Little Village community had two other neighborhood high schools: Farragut Career Academy and Spry Community Links High School. Farragut is a four-year traditional neighborhood high school, which is the trajectory that many students decided to pursue after finishing their time in elementary school. Spry Community Links on the other hand, is a nontraditional three-year high school program that is very small (Chicago Public Schools 2017). Both high schools were located on the east side of Little Village. Figure 2.2 below shows a map of the Little Village neighborhood. The yellow star symbolizes the location where Farragut is located and the orange star where Spry Community Links is located. For decades, Little Village residents had a vast number of elementary schools to attend, as will be seen in figure 2.3 later. However, in terms of high school, many had the option of attending Farragut. Spry was an option, but given its nontraditional structure, not many students enrolled in it.
For this reason, Little Village youth pursued a high school education at Farragut or traveled elsewhere to attend another school. Further, it is important to note that Spry Community Links falls outside of Little Village’s 22\textsuperscript{nd} political ward. Figure 2.3 below shows a map of the current 22\textsuperscript{nd} political ward per the City of Chicago database. Each orange building resembles a neighborhood school in the area, which are mostly elementary schools. Most of the Little Village neighborhood is captured in this map, extending further into another community south of the Chicago river. However, the Spry Community Links is not considered to be a part of this ward due to years of a political turf war found in Little Village (Vargas 2016). In fact, years of political gerrymandering has neglected the east side of Little Village (Vargas 2016). In turn, much attention is not placed on the street dynamics or the school infrastructure of that section of Little Village. That responsibility currently belongs to Alderman George A. Cardenas of the 12\textsuperscript{th} ward.
Since the Spry Community Links High School belongs to the 12th political ward, it is not an option that youth consider since it is perceived to be outside of their jurisdiction or neighborhood. On the other hand, Farragut resides in the borderline between the 12th and 22nd ward, as seen in figure 2.4 below.

Due to this political turf war that divided both Farragut and Spry into two distinct wards, Little Village residents considered Farragut as their only viable option for earning their high school
diploma. But an issue remained. The school had a capacity of 1,800 students, which was not enough for the roughly 4,000 high school aged youth residing in Little Village in the 1990s. This led to overcrowded classrooms and to students being pushed out of the school (Stovall 2006). Another thing to consider regarding this educational injustice is the ongoing street gang warfare in Little Village.

**Street Gang Vendetta Between Latin Kings and Gangster Two Six**

Chicago has a deep and troubling history regarding street gang vendettas. One most prominent in Little Village is that between the Latin Kings and Gangster Two Six. The Latin Kings are one of the most notorious and organized street gangs in history (Vargas 2016), having factions of the gang across the city of Chicago and other cities like New York City and Los Angeles. The Two Six street gang is also notorious, but it is much smaller and less structured compared to the Latin Kings. The Little Village Latin Kings are infamous for their involvement in the drug trade, having experienced various federal police investigations and interventions in their drug and gang activity over the past three decades (Jones 2017a). The rivalry between the two prominent gangs in Little Village dates to the 1950s when both gangs were forming and expanding. The Latin Kings formed initially as a social group combatting the racism and discrimination faced by Latino communities, most notably Puerto Ricans and Mexicans (Jones 2017a). The Two Six, on the other hand, initially began as an urban baseball team that transformed into a neighborhood street gang after being harassed by the Latin Kings and other neighboring street gangs (Jones 2017b). The two have recruited youth from Little Village to join their respective gangs and participate in an urban street gang warfare for turf, respect, and recognition. Figure 2.5 below shows the presumed gang borderline between the Kings and Two Six. The gang borderline is presumably Lawndale Avenue. To the west side of that border reside
the Two Six and to the east side of the border is Latin King territory. This figure presumes that the Latin Kings own a large portion of Little Village, which is partially true, but other smaller gangs on the east side such as the 22 Boys or the Gangster Disciplines (a predominantly Black or African American gang) battle the Latin Kings for territory on the east side (Vargas 2016).

Let us consider the way this gang borderline plays out when looking at the 22\textsuperscript{nd} political ward. Contrary to the previous figure, figure 2.6 below shows that most of territory that is captured by Little Village’s 22\textsuperscript{nd} ward is that belonging to the Gangster Two Six. The yellow line runs across Lawndale Avenue, displaying that only a small number of street blocks belonging to the Latin Kings are captured in this ward.
While the Latin Kings and Gangster Two Six battled one another for street turf, residents worried about having their children cross this invisible gang borderline to school each day. The quotidian reality for many high school youths in Little Village was that their only option was Farragut. “Farragut enrolls predominantly Latino students who live in Latin Kings territory, African American students from the adjacent North Lawndale neighborhood…and students residing in Two Six gang territory” (Vargas 2016). Such gang rivalry made traveling to and from school unsafe. The Latin Kings routinely engaged in “violence to demonstrate power over the streets surrounding the school” (Vargas 2016). Consequently, the high school youth to the west side of the Little Village neighborhood had to opt into an alternative route for their high school choice, often one outside of the neighborhood. Miguel, a student who attended SOJO and participant of this research, lived on the west side of the Lawndale Avenue gang border and expressed that Farragut was out of the question when deciding where to go for high school, which is why he only applied to attend the Little Village Lawndale High School campus. Thus, the construction of a new neighborhood high school on the opposing gang territory also served
the purpose to alleviate gang tensions and create a safe school option for high school youth while also addressing the larger educational injustice in Little Village.

**Addressing the Educational Injustice**

In 1998, mayor of Chicago Richard M. Daley announced the construction of three neighborhood high schools that would occur within a two-year time span, and one of those neighborhood high schools was promised to the Little Village community (Stovall 2016). That same year, Chicago’s Board of Education “purchased the land at 31st and Kostner for the creation of [its] third high school” (Donna 2001a). This purchased site was formerly a cooking oil plant but had been abandoned for years. The money for the high school had also been allocated in 1999; state funds in the amount of thirty million were invested to construct the new neighborhood high school in Little Village, but unfortunately, no construction for the school had begun by the year 2000, when mayor Daley had promised the school was going to be built. In fact, officials in the Chicago Public School system claimed that the funds allocated for the new high school disappeared when they had truthfully been spent elsewhere (Stovall 2006). This infuriated the Little Village community considering that two-selective enrollment high schools were built on the North side of the city: Walter Payton High School and Northside College Prep (Stovall 2013). Selective-enrollment schools required that student applicants must meet a specific criterion, usually in the form of good grades and high scores on standardized tests to be considered for enrollment. Such school is not what community members in Little Village needed. They demanded the construction of their neighborhood high school.

Community members persistently pressured CPS officials, Chicago’s city hall, and the state government of Illinois. Despite these efforts, the Little Village community was still not
given the neighborhood high school they were promised, so they chose to strike. As a response to the inaction of CPS and government officials, a small group of fourteen people comprised of parents and community members in Little Village staged a hunger strike at the site that the high school was set to be built (31st and Kostner), naming their protest site “Camp Cesar Chavez” (Stovall 2006). This hunger strike went on for nineteen days. It began on Mother’s Day, May 13, 2001 and ended on June 1st, 2001. They consumed no solid foods and only drank liquids. This form of protest sparked local and national attention, which placed some pressure on CPS officials. Some of the hunger strikers were older and this caused large health concerns as well. Then-CEO of CPS Paul Vallas was sent to Camp Cesar Chavez to negotiate a deal with the hunger strikers regarding the new neighborhood high school (Stovall 2016). On June 1st, the hunger strikers finally declared that they will discontinue their fasting and protest, but the struggle for the neighborhood high school remained (Donna 2001b).

After the hunger strike, no direct declaration for the construction of the neighborhood high school had been made. Time passed and the Little Village community was granted its promise, and the school was finally set to be built. In the fall of 2005, Little Village Lawndale High School (LVLHS) campus opened its doors to its first incoming class (Stovall 2006). Before the school opened, the hunger strikers and other activists continued to advocate for autonomy in deciding what model or design the school should be. According to the school website (www.lvlhs.org/our_campus.jsp), activists and advocates canvassed the community “asking parents to create an ideal situation for their children to learn in.” The results of such canvassing turned out that the parents wanted a “safe, small, and academically rigorous place for their children.” Thus, the school campus is comprised of four small autonomous neighborhood high schools. One that valued bilingualism and biculturalism: World Language High School; another
that incorporated art, dance, and music in its curriculum: MAS, Multicultural Arts High School; one that prepared youth for the increasing popularity and requirement for strong math, science, and technology skills: Infinity Math, Science, and Technology High School; and one that would maintain the legacy of the physical, spiritual, and communal struggle that it took for the community to achieve educational justice: The School for Social Justice or Social Justice High School or SOJO (LVLHS 2005). Each school was to serve around 350-400 students each, totaling to about 1,600 in the student body campus-wide.

The four small autonomous high schools share a unique history, one that brought them all into fruition at the cost of years of planning, organizing, and fasting so that future generations of students can have access to a quality education in their own neighborhood. This history and this successful form of protest that brought Little Village Lawndale High School into the Chicago Public School network is scarce considering the larger educational agenda that Chicago had regarding public education. In what Lipman refers to as the neoliberal political economy that Chicago is in, building a neighborhood high school is not in Chicago’s agenda. At the time when mayor Richard M. Daley announced the construction of three ‘neighborhood’ high schools, two selective-enrollment high schools had been built instead. These selective-enrollment schools follow a tight advanced curriculum that is implemented by CPS. This school model neglects a fundamental aspect of what a neighborhood school does: incorporate the participation of the community. Thus, the advocacy and canvassing done for LVLHS by the hunger strikers and other advocates on what they wanted LVLHS to look like did not sit well with the plans that CPS had in mind, which is partially the reason why they delayed the construction for the school and ultimately spent the money allocated for it in the first place. The school of focus in this research,
SOJO, at least in its early formative years, reflected what a neighborhood school should be like. A reflection that CPS officials were not on board with.

The construction of a new neighborhood high school in Little Village, which came to fruition after an arduous nineteen-day hunger strike, served various purposes. The new high school helped address the educational crisis found in the neighborhood, which had a small percentage of high school and college graduates. It also alleviated some of the overpopulation happening in Farragut and gave Little Village residents another choice for high school enrollment. Additionally, as argued in this chapter, the new high school built on the west side of the neighborhood helped ease gang tensions between students residing in Two Six territory with those in Latin King territory surrounding Farragut. Some might argue that solving the gang tensions by separating student enrollment to both sides of the gang border is divisive, but at least to those living on the west side in Two Six territory like Miguel, having a viable option for a high school education made continuing their education safer. These social conditions and consequences derived from building the new neighborhood high school in Little Village are not concerns directly addressed by Chicago’s public school agenda. Little Village Lawndale High School campus was tailored to the community and served the student populace of the neighborhood, which is one form of gettin’ school policy done right and what public schools across the city and nationwide should seek to emulate.
Upsetting the Set-up: Standardized Testing at Social Justice High School

“If the kids don’t jump high enough, the school loses money
Improving a school by picking its pockets
is like tuning a guitar by ripping off the strings.”

-Dylan Garity on Rigged Game poem, 2013.

Dylan Garity brings attention to the unequal and unfair assessment of schools and students based on test scores. School policies that increase dependence on test scores created by education board members and policy makers are not gettin’ it done right. In Chicago, accountability measures based on standardized test scores increased in 1996 (Lipman 2006). As we learned in the introduction, these accountability measures intensified as testing became a national phenomenon for public schools in 2001 through the No Child Left Behind Act. These test scores are important because high school students who achieve a national average or above average standardized test score influence whether a student can be admitted to a good college or university. In some cases, a higher test score allows students to negotiate for additional funding from an institution after being admitted. At the same time, scoring a below average score hinders a students’ ability to compete for college matriculation and funding. This, at least, is under the assumption that all students aim to go to college and are told that scoring high will increase their chances of going to college (Gordon 2015).
Test score accountability also affects schools. Schools are evaluated based on average scores by cohort. Typically, evaluators look for consistent high scoring averages or effort from schools to make improvements to their test score averages. In turn, these accountability measures affect students’ futures and a schools’ ranking and funding since achievement is tied to the test score results from both students and schools. In Chicago, what led to the increase dependence in standardized tests during the 1990s and early 2000s? How does this cultural dependency on test scores affect the educational experience of young Mexican and Mexican American men? How does it affect SOJO as a school? First, let us delve into a complex genealogy of standardized tests and meritocracy in the United States.

**History of Standardized Testing**

Capturing the lineage of standardized testing in the United States and Chicago is tricky. What we know about Chicago is that accountability measures on test scores increased in 1996 under era two and three as described in the introduction. This came in the form of school policies created by education board members and school administrators, following a top-down implementation of education policy. The beginning of standardized testing in public schools, however, is unclear. Nicholas Lemann attempts to grapple with this genealogy in his assessment of American meritocracy and its influence in schools.

Lemann’s insight on meritocracy offers one explanation for the increase dependence on test scores in schools. According to him, the American meritocracy is a system that benefits individual people by offering them opportunities solely based on their talents or presumed merit in society, but it was not intended to do that at first. The presumption of this system is supported by its initial main task to “select a small number of people to form an elite – the goal of giving
opportunity to all Americans was added later” (Lemann 1999). To determine one's merit, people had to take intelligence tests. Consequently, the definition of ‘merit’ is an intellectual, educational one (Lemann 1999). This means that those who exemplify superb intelligence, or a high IQ, are granted the status and recognition of high merit and conversely, for those scoring a low IQ score are deemed unintelligent and unmerited. What happens then is a process fundamental to the functioning of public education: sorting. The process of sorting is when schools sort students based on measures of their academic ability and place them on trajectories that influence the type of jobs they will have in the future (Noguera 2009). But before standardized tests were prominent in schools, IQ tests were used. During World War II, the US attempted to create a draft deferment system that allowed for high IQ individuals to defer military training and enrollment and instead granted them admissions and the opportunity to receive a college education (Lemann 1999). The purpose of that, according to Lemann’s records, was to “avoid sending men with high IQ into war when they could be at home advancing our machinery.” Inevitably, these tests sorted men into a binary system of having either an average or high IQ or a below average IQ score. Those with a low IQ score were sent to war while those with a high IQ score stayed behind to receive a college education. As a result, class divisions were further perpetuated through this system of meritocracy. Lemann also found that the men sent to war were primarily men of color, Black and Latino, while those who scored high enough to defer were mostly white (Lemann 1999). This racial inequality seen in IQ tests and draft deferment has parallels to schools today, where students scoring high on their standardized tests are mostly the white counterparts of students of color (Tyson 2011).

What we imply from this short genealogy of meritocracy is that tests were not constructed to have young men of color score high, rather it sorted them out of an opportunity to
receive an education in the US. Schools today undergo a similar sorting process, often sending “intelligent” students to advanced courses and weeding out the rest into regular or remedial classes. Those enrolled in advanced courses are expected to do well in standardized tests while the others are expected to do poorly. SOJO engages in such sorting process given their curriculum with Advanced Placement (AP) courses. This sorting practice plays a fundamental role in the set up that young men of color experience. In fact, out of the nineteen men interviewed for this study, nine were enrolled in AP classes. Enrollment in these courses gave them additional exposure to testing, but both AP and non-AP young men still found themselves underperforming and unmotivated to take standardized tests. Before discussing the experience of my interviewees with testing, let’s consider the approach SOJO took with standardized testing.

**Framing the Test**

Social Justice High School (SOJO) is part of the Chicago Public School network. Despite its many efforts at trying to envision public education differently by implementing social justice specific policies as school policy, it is mandated to conduct standardized tests to its students by law. In abiding to the law, SOJO requires that all students take standardized tests throughout their time in high school. They do, however, take a unique approach in the practice and framing of standardized testing.

Over the years, school administrators and teachers preach the basics: Francisco, a Mexican American male-identifying student who was part of SOJO’s first graduating class, recalls that “they told us we had to get high scores…over and over again.” Then, he continued, “some teachers said the test [is] unfair and doesn’t really capture our intelligence…but we were expected to fail…we were smart and they reminded us that.” Francisco refers to the state mandated tests that students took during their first and second years in high school. During these
tests, students were being told to aim for a high score. The rhetoric shifted when it came to the state-sponsored standardized test for Illinois students—the ACT. The framing of that test changed. School administrators were now using a deficit framework that told students they were expected to fail. Cesar, who graduated from SOJO in 2014, recalled similar language used during his time at SOJO about standardized testing. During the interview, he retold the story about the time he sat in the middle section of the school auditorium during his junior year and heard the rhetoric used by his chemistry teacher who delivered a speech in an attempt to motivate the juniors for the ACT. He recalled his chemistry teacher saying the following:

This test does not reflect what you know...you are all being set up to fail...but I want you to know that it is your job to come on-time for the ACT tomorrow and do the very best you can...you have to upset the set-up.

This unique approach, that I will call ‘upset the set-up’ is specific to SOJO. This framework is also specific to the racial and ethnic student body that the school serves and one that reinforces sociological and educational research on the testing performance of students of color. The approach however, follows the rhetoric of what Shaun Harper calls the “deficit thinking” framework. One of the tenets of deficit thinking is that student failure falls on the deficiencies of the student and the household that they grew up in (Harper and Williams, Jr. 2013). Harper and other sociologists push back against this framework and advocate for the use of an anti-deficit framework. SOJO, however, uses a deficit framework to push for student motivation prior to taking the state mandated test of the ACT, particularly towards the junior class.

High schools across the country, both private and public, host pep rallies where the entire student body congregates to demonstrate school spirit and usually cheer the football team on prior to the school’s homecoming football game. SOJO emulates this event and hosts an annual
ACT pep rally for the junior class a day before they take the test. The junior class also gets t-shirts with a big number in the middle that resembles the score that everyone in the junior class should aim to score on the ACT. In 2013, Cesar recalled having the number twenty-one. This universal benchmark also reflects a number that would help increase SOJO’s overall test score average if every student achieved that score on the ACT, a twenty-one in Cesar’s example. This pep rally is where students receive the framework about being set-up and upsetting the set-up. Now, let’s define what the set-up is based on the experiences of the interviewees.

The Set-Up

In the framework used by SOJO administrators and Cesar’s chemistry teacher, there is a ‘setup’ being referred to. What is this ‘setup’ that the interviewees described? According to various accounts by the young men, I synthesized that one component of the setup was the mere act of sitting down and taking a test. Another was being expected not to perform well, which I will discuss later. It is important to note that none of the interviewees mentioned that they enjoyed taking state mandated tests despite some of them admitting that they saw value in taking the tests. But, what about test taking gave the setup a negative connotation- that is, made it unenjoyable and an indicator of failure for these young men? One student, Juan, who transferred to SOJO from a larger public school in Chicago, said that the taking a standardized test was not the worst, rather spending instruction time during the school day doing test prep. “They wasting our time [trying to] teach us how to test, they even got us practicing how to bubble in a scantron sheet like we’re little kids.” Juan’s tone here showed annoyance towards the patronizing ways that his SOJO teachers and administrators were on him and his classmates. I then asked Juan what he thought the purpose was for taking a standardized test:
It tests our intelligence. I guess it's supposed to show whether we pay attention in class and if we are able to retain what our teachers have taught us throughout the years.

In this moment, Juan believed that standardized tests are reflective of the curriculum followed and taught by instructors, and other interviewees shared the same belief. However, academic curriculums in public schools often do not reflect the standardization of knowledge. Classroom curricula is intended to teach students various skills and practices and then taught how to apply those skills across different disciplines. I further probed Juan on his experience with SOJO’s curriculum and asked whether the academic curriculum reflected some of the content he had witnessed in standardized tests. “Not really, but we have test prep and that’s where we are supposed to master taking a test.”

Another component to the setup described by the young men was the implementation of test prep courses in the schools’ curriculum. Public schools across Chicago implement standardized curriculums, which is curricula reflecting the basic skills needed in scoring well on standardized tests (Azcoitia, Buell, and Kerbow 2003). Instead of giving teachers the freedom to engage in their own pedagogy, they are expected to abide by the curriculum that promotes test prep. The way test prep is embedded into a curriculum varies by school. Ivan, a graduate of SOJO in 2015, went in-depth on the different test prep course structures and methods SOJO experimented with to improve test scores.

“One year they had us come on Saturdays to do test prep, but many people didn’t go” he said.

Did you go? I asked.

“Twice but they were boring…I stopped going and sleeping in on Saturdays instead” he responded.
I asked the other interviewees about test prep on Saturdays. Most said they knew about them but never went themselves because it was not mandatory and felt that they spent enough time in school already to be going an extra day on Saturday. What struck me was that three of the interviewees mentioned never knowing about the Saturday test prep sessions. Ivan proceeded to share the mandatory methods SOJO used to offer test prep to its students. “[The principal] had the teachers make a whole class based on sections of the ACT. One teacher taught science, another English and Reading, and then we had a math teacher do the math part.”

Were you given a choice which course you wanted to be enrolled in or which section you needed the most help in? I asked.

“No, we switched a couple weeks in,” he said slowly, “I remember starting off with math, but I hated it because I’m no good in math. Then I was sent to science, and after some time spent the class with the English teacher.” Here Ivan offers insight on the three-course test prep crash course SOJO experimented with. The intent was to focus on one section of the ACT in each course and expose the students to the different forms of questions and test taking strategies that would help them improve their test scores. I asked Ivan whether any of the test prep initiatives offered by the SOJO staff helped him improve either his test taking strategy, his composite score on the ACT or any standardized test he took, or both.

“My score was always the same. I never did go above a 17” he said.

Ivan admitted that he never fully read through the English or Reading sections because “the stuff they had us reading was boring.” The other interviewees expressed a similar sentiment about the test being ‘too boring.’ Cirilo, another SOJO alum who also transferred to SOJO from a larger public school in Chicago, admitted that he slept through the ACT his junior year. He took the
ACT twice, once again during his senior year, but also slept through it. During the test, Cirilo remembers thinking, “Why am I doing this s**t. I’m not even kidding. I remember I fell asleep… I was a straight A student in high school. I played varsity soccer and I was the captain of both the soccer team and volleyball team and I like to consider myself pretty active outside in the community and I just didn’t care for this test.”

Two important trends about the setup come out of Ivan and Cirilo’s testimonies. First, the content and texts in the standardized tests they take are not culturally relevant to the quotidian experiences of young Mexican or Mexican American men in high school. Their disengagement, as well as the disengagement of the other interviewees, about taking the standardized test is not solely based on incompetency as some might generalize. I asked them what changes would make them score higher or make test taking more enjoyable, and Aldo, who graduated from SOJO in 2014, put it cogently: “Make it about the hood, about us, not about no John finding himself lost in a forest and whether we understand the big words they use in telling that story.” Aldo offers that structurally changing standardized tests to include content that is relevant to the test takers would help make the test taking experience better. In addition, it would be helpful to the students if the tests used colloquial language that is not strictly the standardization of the English language. At SOJO, 40% of the students spoke English as their first language according to Katherine Hogan, a former SOJO English teacher (mifarmer0 2012). This means that the other 60% of students spoke English as a second language. Thus, taking a standardized English test that consisted of texts and questions in a language that they are unfamiliar with sets these young men up in a position to fail the test.

The other theme, mainly expressed by Cirilo, is the construction of ‘success’ defined by one's ability to test well. A popular belief, as mentioned earlier, is that high-stakes standardized
testing determines ones’ future. But there are more fluid components that determines student success outside of testing. In Cirilo’s case, he matriculated into a small four-year liberal arts college and graduated in 2014. What he was involved in during high school that fostered his development helped him achieve success in his own terms. He further expressed that standardized test scores are not indicative of how well a student will do in college if they chose to go there. Curious for him to elaborate, I asked Cirilo whether the ACT or other standardized tests helped him during college. “No. I never thought about that test again until I had to take the GRE [a standardized test taken for those wishing to pursue graduate school upon completion of their undergraduate degree] but didn’t take it and took a different career path.” Achievement and success, then, should not be tied to a students’ composite score. All the interviewees had some form of leadership responsibilities and positions while at SOJO. Some were talented basketball players, members of the Academic decathlon team, or took care of their families outside of school. The two themes discussed here contribute to the barriers that exist in achieving a high-test score for these young men, as well as the ways that the assessment of student achievement and success should consider a students’ wholistic identity, not just the test score they receive.

One of the tenets of this setup discussed earlier was the expected failure of the young men when taking a standardized test. Erick, who graduated from SOJO in 2016, mentioned that the worst part about standardized testing was receiving the composite score. “Teachers were always disappointed…we never did good but it's not because the teachers are not good at their job it’s just we ain’t good at these dumb tests.”

Did you learn anything from taking these tests? I asked.

“Nah, other than being able to sit still for hours” he responded.
At first, the interviewees said they did not learn anything from taking a standardized test. I asked them all what lessons they learned from taking those tests, and many shared similar experiences as the one Erick had: “I learned I can take a X hour test” or “I learned to remain silent during the test.” This reinforces the socialization process that students undergo in schools. This process is one of the three main functions of public education, wherein schools are a vital agent of socialization for students given that they teach them values and norms that are considered to be important to civil society (Noguera 2009). In this case, test taking prep served two functions. The first was to familiarize the students with the content and strategies they can use during examination. Consistent exposure to the content found in these tests would make it possible for students to do better in tests such as the ACT, which was discussed earlier. The second function is to accustom students into taking a standardized test. This socialization process forces students to remain silent for hours as they take the test. However, some of them reflected on their test taking abilities and said they learned “how dumb they were.” Jesus, who was supposed to graduate out of SOJO in 2014 but was unable to finish, said that he learned about his vocabulary deficiencies and inability to comprehend the nuanced interpretation of the texts in the test. “I read again and again but never understood shit. It frustrated me so I just bubbled in whatever.” Jesus and many others in this study struggled to do well in the standardized tests, but to them, those results were expected of them. Further analysis on this matter will be discussed later. While these experiences affected these young men individually, the imposed failure with tests that they experienced also affected the school itself.

Continuing the Struggle for Educational Justice: Destabilizing SOJO

Low test scores affected individual interviewees in this study, but some of them shared that in 2012, low test scores nearly led to complete chaos at SOJO. The young men referred to
the destabilizing efforts that the Chicago Public School network enforced to try and take control over the school. Ricardo, a 2014 graduate of SOJO, shared his excitement about starting his junior year in the fall term of 2012: “I wanted to focus on school. I worked all summer to make money and hated it so I wanted to make that school year the best I’ve had…it didn’t go as planned. I came to school and we had a new principal…my English teachers were [later] fired…[and] my friends were pissed.” Ricardo mentions the drastic principal turnover that SOJO experienced in the 2011-2012 academic school year. Another interviewee, Daniel, who graduated from SOJO in 2013, said that in 2011-2012, “[We] had three principals…one left in the middle of the school year, then came Ms. Alvarez who was nice and then Ms. Farr.” Ms. Farr was the principal that Ricardo mentioned who was fired days prior to the academic school year of 2012-2013 without any explanation. She was simply told that her services were no longer needed at SOJO (Stovall 2016). Ms. Farr was originally selected by the local school council, but her position was given to another woman, Ms. Velasquez, who was appointed by the head of the CPS network. Immediately, “the principal [Ms. Velasquez] cut our AP classes” said Daniel. Her rationale for cutting the advanced placement (AP) courses was simply that the curriculum was too advanced for the students who were showing signs of academic struggle, given that they were under academic probation by the CPS central office (Stovall 2016). Roberto, also a 2014 SOJO graduate, said that he felt “offended by [Ms. Velasquez’s] decision to cut AP classes” because that was his first year taking an AP course and Ms. Velasquez was confirming the larger stereotype that students of color are not able to handle advanced coursework. Ricardo affirmed his ability to do well in AP: “I was capable of passing the class…and I knew it, and my teachers knew it also.”
Under Ms. Velasquez’s administration, two AP-qualified teachers who taught English courses at SOJO since the school’s origin were fired due to the under-population of students at the school, according to the central office at CPS (Stovall 2016). If this rationale held true, there is no reason to fire experienced teachers like the two AP-qualified English teachers at SOJO. Daniel recalled, “security guards came to get Ms. Hogan (one of the English teachers). She had no time to get her stuff. She was thrown out, and no explanations were given at first.” Students were angry. They wanted their principal, teachers, and AP classes back. Eventually, due to a miscalculation of the number of students in the school by the central office, the two English teachers were reinstated (Stovall 2016). It is important to note that the two English teachers were part of the initial design team for the school and were also responsible for the curriculum taught at SOJO, so they oversaw the designing and implementation of the test prep sections for English and Reading. This was a tremendous loss for the students, even if the teachers’ absence from SOJO was short-lived.

Here we witnessed how the urban political economy in Chicago influenced the public school agenda by CPS that specifically targeted SOJO. The efforts to destabilize the school concerned school administrators, the founders of the school, and parents of the community. Some feared that destabilizing SOJO was CPS’s first attempt at combating the school structure of the high school campus, which was comprised of four small autonomous schools. The belief was that CPS wanted to consolidate the campus into one large high school, convert it into a charter school, or close it down. This fear grew as parents, community members, and scholars were aware of the increasing number of schools being closed in primarily Black and Latino neighborhoods across the city of Chicago (Stovall 2016). College professors and community members were invested in this situation because of the hard-fought battle in the 1990s and early
2000s that occurred in constructing the neighborhood high school in the first place. They questioned the CPS network and the SOJO principal about these destabilizing efforts. Ms. Velasquez and the central office of CPS would not give anyone straightforward answers, if any at all. Daniel said, “We were frustrated that our classes were cut, teachers fired…and principal fired so we all came together to sit in and protest.” Over 200 SOJO students staged a sit-in on the second day of school in 2012 and weeks later organized a march around Little Village demanding that their classes and teachers be reinstated, and their concerns heard by the CPS administration (Stovall 2016; Steiner 2012). In fact, they demanded that everything be returned to how things were on August 6th, which was the day prior to the initial chaos that erupted in the firing of Ms. Farr.

In a community forum that occurred in the high school cafeteria in 2012, Ms. Velasquez finally met with community members, students, and parents about the current situation at SOJO. I sat in the audience of this community forum as a SOJO student and witnessed Ms. Velasquez give a presentation explaining her actions and decisions about the school that the students were protesting. I sat and heard her say that SOJO was underperforming and changes had to be made to change the school around. This is part of CPS’ agenda with public schools. If they are failing or underperforming, efforts to improve the school or close it down would be executed by CPS. I also remember not many SOJO teachers were present at this forum because they had been encouraged not to attend via an email from Ms. Velasquez’s administration. The chemistry teacher that Cesar mentioned earlier in this chapter stood and challenged principal Velasquez, addressing and challenging the data she showed in her presentation about test scores dwindling down and were not meeting the CPS benchmarks. He continued to argue that SOJO’s average composite score from standardized tests showed an upwards trend over the past three years,
which demonstrated improvement, so there was no need for all the changes and the destabilization of SOJO (Stovall 2016). Here we see test scores affect a school itself and this is no accident given the high accountability given to schools and students that is solely based on test scores. That school year also coincided with the city-wide strike of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) (Liebelson 2012). Students missed school instruction during SOJO’s destabilization efforts and the CTU strike. “We had to make those days up at the end of the year...we learned things late. Our test prep started after we came back in January...it was a terrible year” recalled Roberto, who was scheduled to take the ACT in March of that school year.

Upset the Set-Up

Up to this point we have discussed the history of meritocracy and the high dependence of standardized test scores that affects the educational experience for young men of color and other students, as well as influencing the schools themselves. We have explained the deficit framework used in SOJO regarding test taking. In sum, this chapter has explored ways that public school policies and framework with standardized testing has not gotten it done right.

The deficit framework of upsetting the setup is specific to SOJO but is evident in other public schools as well. The intent behind such frameworks is that students will feel motivated to take the tests to the best of their ability because they want to disprove the imposed failure given to them by society. This framework had the adverse effect on some of the students that I interviewed. At the end of the ‘setup’ section, I shared Jesus’s experience with testing and having that process confirm his inability to succeed in tests. Other young men shared similar experiences, but the response by Brandon, a 2012 SOJO alum, stood out the most as he said, “[it is] much easier to meet the expectation than it is to disprove it.” The expectation he refers to is
the expectation to fail. The premise of the setup is that students are being set up to fail, and to young men like Brandon, it takes less energy to abide by that imposed failure than it is to try and prove it wrong. Only two out of the nineteen men I interviewed said that this framework motivated them to take the required tests. What is startling about this finding is that these young men do not fear failure. Young men of color experience failure in other aspects of their life and educational experience, so they are used to it and not afraid of it when it comes to test taking (Noguera 2008).

The rhetoric of ‘upset the set-up’ is one that can work if used differently. Instead of telling students that they are set up to fail, telling students that they are being set up to succeed would change their approach to standardized testing. Instead of using labels and stereotypes about the failure of students of color, telling students that their exposure to test taking strategies in test prep puts them in a good position to score well on the tests. However, reframing the approach to standardized testing is not enough as it does not address the larger structural issues related to the tests. As some young men have mentioned, part of the failure that comes out of these tests can be improved if there is a lesser dependency on test scores and more emphasis on student learning based on skills and knowledge necessary for life after high school. Similarly, changing the content of the tests to one that is relevant to the school demographics is key in improving the motivation and engagement for students of color. In this unique case study involving SOJO, we also note ways that schools are set up to fail and are put in a vulnerable position to be reformed or closed. For these reasons, universal top-down implementation of standardized testing policies is not gettin’ it done right for public schools like SOJO and for students like the young men in this study.
Go to 105! Disciplining Young Men of Color

“No one wants to be in a place where you are perpetually told what to do or where you are treated as if you were incarcerated."

Certain policies that are in place can make a student say “Fuck school. Why do I need to be here, why would I go?”

-David Stovall on Brown v Board talk, 2014.

David Stovall highlights the ways that disciplinary policies are not gettin’ it done right and are instead creating a hostile environment in schools that affects a students’ desire to be in school. Previously, we discussed two main functions of public education: sorting and socialization. But, public schools carry a third essential function: social control. Schools carry-out a function with respect to the care and control of its students (Noguera 2009). This control primarily stems from disciplining students and it works in conjunction with the process of socialization that students undergo in schools. Students experience the process of socialization regarding student behavior deemed appropriate and necessary for maintaining a safe and controlled learning environment for teachers and students alike. In sociology, discipline and human behavior is often viewed through the conflict perspective where power dynamics among members of society are examined. This chapter will attempt to show the presence of the conflict perspective in the exercise of disciplining or controlling young men of color. In addition, I will analyze the ways that SOJO students are overly penalized for misconduct, which follows the lineage of the once established zero tolerance policies in public schools.
No tolerance or zero-tolerance policies were implemented in public schools across the US in the mid-1990s to ensure that schools are physical safe spaces for students. This policy stemmed from the zero-tolerance approach that law enforcement took during the war on drugs in the 1980s that led to an increase in the criminalization of Black and Brown men and people of color generally (Alexander 2010). This approach was then co-opted and enforced in schools. The policy “mandates predetermined consequences or punishments for specific offenses that are intended to be applied regardless of the seriousness of the behavior or situational context” (American Psychological Association 2008). This policy is otherwise known or enforced through the student code of conduct reference booklet that school administrators refer to when disciplining students. These booklets state the necessary actions administrators must take in the event that a student commits a behavioral misconduct or an infraction.

The implementation of zero tolerance policy in public schools varies by institution. Education scholars and sociologists have found that zero tolerance policies do more harm than good in schools- that is, have not “shown to improve school climate or school safety,” especially in schools with predominantly racial and ethnic minorities (American Psychological Association 2008). I argue here that despite efforts to handle discipline differently, schools like SOJO create an environment that follows the lineage of zero tolerance policies. Panfilo, a SOJO graduate in 2015, said “I left [SOJO] before it got worse. Teachers were being tough, and I was in in-school every day.” Panfilo spent time in in-school suspension due to excessive tardies, according to his own account. Cesar, a graduate in 2014, also mentioned that he was in in-school nearly every day and claimed that teachers were “tough” on them. For this reason, I took a look at some disciplinary statistics for SOJO. Disciplinary statistics are measured by looking at the number of arrests, in-school and out-school suspensions, and number of misconducts reported by the
schools (Noguera 2009). Given that Chicago Public Schools (CPS) is a public entity, it is required to release school metrics and statistics to the public. Unfortunately, CPS does not provide elaborate disciplinary statistics nor does it provide a breakdown of statistics on discipline based on gender and race. However, given the school demographics of SOJO (see chapter 2, figure 2.1), it is safe to assume that the statistics reflect a majority of the Latino student population at SOJO. I looked at statistical data that showed the likelihood that a student received an out-of-school suspension (OSS) as a consequence given that the student committed some form of a behavioral misconduct. According to figure 4.1 below, CPS calculated that the district average for its high schools in misconducts resulting in an OSS in 2015 was 18%, which encompasses all public schools under CPS.

![Misconduct --> OSS for SOJO](image)

Figure 4.1 Data derived from *CPS Find a School 2015 Progress Report*. Graph created by Brian Cabral ©

For SOJO, that number was 35% in 2014 and more than doubled in 2015, which was 79%. While the district average for 2014 was not provided, these statistics show an increase in the likelihood a student received an OSS as a consequence. This means that a SOJO student has slightly over a \( \frac{3}{4} \) chance of receiving an out-of-school suspension for a misconduct, which is significantly
higher compared to the district average in 2015. However, the way CPS defines misconduct varies by school and the numbers that are provided are self-reported by school officials, which puts to question the accuracy of the numbers reported. Regardless, I hypothesize that the drastic increase in being punished for a behavioral misconduct might be due to the prominence and methods of disciplinary action enforced by SOJO school administrators or the implementation of stricter disciplinary policies. The young men in this study show that it might be a combination of both.

Recurring Visits to 105

Both sociologists and education scholars have found that “males of color have the highest rates of suspension and expulsion from school. They face more punitive punishments for school infractions and are far more likely to be referred to the juvenile justice system” (Bryant, Bird, Harris 2016; Noguera 2005; Rios 2011). Often, the educational experiences of Black and Brown men have been analyzed through the vantage point of the school-to-prison pipeline. This pipeline shows the ways that schools and prisons function in similar ways to enforce social control and safety to the school environment or society in general. The hypercriminalization of young men of color occurs in schools, but it is also prevalent in the street culture they are immersed into (Rios 2017). Because of this, men of color face quotidian realities of being disciplined excessively and are often the ones labeled as troublemakers or disruptors. At SOJO, such sentiment existed among the participants of this study. “They [school administrators] were on to us ‘cause we ran together in our friend group so they’d always pick on us…girls got picked on but got off the hook easier than us,” said Francisco, a 2009 SOJO graduate. Francisco referred to the persistent discipline that he experienced with his group of friends and then comparing it with what he
witnessed when the same school administrators were discipling women or their female counterparts.

“What happens when they [school administrators] discipline you?” I asked.

“You get sent to 105” he responded.

Room 105 at SOJO is a classroom located in the middle of the first-floor hallway, right next to the teachers and staff meeting and dining room. The office for the Dean of Discipline is stationed inside of room 105, which means that all students are directed to that specific room number whenever they are misbehaving, are serving a detention or in-school suspension, or need a temporary ID. Upon realizing that visits to 105 was a recurring thing for the young men at SOJO, I sought to figure out what relationship, if any, existed between discipline and room 105. Through personal accounts, I found that being sent to room 105 meant a student was stigmatized as a troublemaker. I asked Francisco how many times he found himself in room 105, to which he responded, “That was basically my homeroom.” During the formative years at SOJO, all students were assigned a homeroom, which was a cohort of students that you spent time with for half of the lunch period for your four years of high school. Francisco described room 105 as his homeroom because of the high frequency of visits he had in that room.

Room 105 served as a control room at SOJO where students were being sent for any behavioral infraction. Except for two, most of the young men in this study spent time in room 105 during their time at SOJO. Aldo, a 2014 SOJO graduate, and Cirilo, a 2010 SOJO graduate, identified themselves as a “goody-two-shoes” or having experienced discipline and room 105 through their peripheral. “Some of the guys I went to middle school with are here now and they are always in trouble. I rarely see them in my classes” Aldo recalled. Though, Aldo would not
see his friends in his classes partially because he was following the Advanced Placement (AP) track while his friends were not. However, in the few classes Aldo had with them, “[they] were always disrupting class…teacher kicked them out and they would spend the rest of the day in 105.” I followed-up and asked Aldo whether his classmates disruption in class affected the learning environment in the classroom. “At times,” he said, “honestly the time our teachers spent disciplining all kinds of people made us waste more time than the disruption made by them [the students].” Cirilo shared a similar sentiment regarding the way SOJO teachers handled class disruptions. “They didn’t know what else to do so they would send them to 105. Even that took a long time because they [the students] didn’t want to go to 105,” Cirilo said. The two students who rarely got in trouble offer insight on two major trends. First, even for those who are not directly disciplined, the disciplining of other students still affects them. Second, the immediate response to disciplinary action is to send students to the control room. This latter trend is not new. When students act up in class, the first instinct is to tell the student to quiet down and demand that they discontinue the disruption. If the student persists, the next viable option teachers have is to take the students out of the class to ensure that the classroom is in an environment that is conducive to learning for the rest of the students. In turn, taking away the ‘bad’ and disruptive student will make such environment possible and it will benefit the learning of the rest in the class (American Psychological Association 2008; Noguera 2009). However, Aldo, Cirilo, and others mentioned that teachers spent more time kicking students out of the classroom and sending them to room 105, which according to them was unnecessary.

Kicking students out of the classroom strips them from the everyday school routines. This practice is enforced in schools with the belief that it will rectify the behavior of the student. According to the young men, school administrators believe that this should work. The belief is
that when you take away certain privileges from people, they will respond with rectified behavior so that their privileges are returned. However, the latent function, or unintended consequence, of kicking students out becomes normalized for the students. “I tried to self-discipline myself…you always want to discipline yourself so nobody else has to. I was always tardy and ended up in in-school all the time. I didn’t want to be there at first but you get used to not being in the boring classes so I didn’t mind it” said Cesar, a 2014 SOJO graduate. Other young men said similar responses to the normalization of going to 105 and being pulled away from their classrooms. Another unintended consequence was that students missed out on important class content. To them, sitting inside of room 105 doing busy work or doing nothing became an easier alternative than being in the classroom to learn. The disciplinary issues and practices seen in SOJO are rampant in traditional public schools as well. The school did, however, also attempt to approach discipline uniquely using the Essential 7 school values as a mechanism to control the behavior of the students.

**Essential 7 Values**

At the start of their SOJO education, every individual student is taught the history of the school. This history includes the hunger strike, the rationale behind the school structure and curriculum design, among other things. Simultaneously, SOJO students are presented and taught the essential 7 values or expectations that, as Kevin described, “are the 7 pillars the school was founded on.” Figure 4.2 below shows a screenshot of what the Essential 7 values are followed by a quote describing the value that SOJO’s design team agreed to associate each value with. The Essential 7 values are the following: unity, respect, self-discipline, excellence, service, honesty & ownership, and being prompt and prepared. Students were referred to the essential 7 values for the entirety of their time at SOJO. “We might as well have gotten it tatted [to our bodies]” joked
Samuel, a SOJO graduate of 2011, “the amount of times we heard at least one of these values is ridiculous.”

![Essential Seven Expectations](http://sj.lylhs.org/sj/curriculum_framework.jsp)

In an attempt to engrain the Essential 7 values into the lives of SOJO students, it appears that school administrators wanted these values to dictate the way students behaved and interacted with each other and the adults that worked inside of the school building. Juan, a SOJO graduate of 2010, remembers having the teachers revert to the Essential 7 values when disciplining students. “They asked us what value we violated, and what we were going to do to fix the violation,” he said. I asked him whether any severe consequences or punishments were given for student misconduct or an infraction. He said, “they tried to avoid it. No one wanted to go to 105. It’s too much work for all parties. But we had the essential 7 pep talks before they disciplined us.” Juan’s experience with the essential 7 and disciplinary protocol came during SOJO’s formative years. After his interview, I asked the remaining interviewees, who were expected to graduate after
SOJO’s initial formative years, about the relationship between the Essential 7 and disciplinary practices. Erick, a SOJO student who expected to graduate in 2016, identified himself as one of the school’s troublemakers. “I got in trouble so much they knew no essential 7 could fix the way I acted…I always made excuses and never came in prepared…for what? To be picked on by the teachers?” Erick said. Another student, Daniel, who graduated from SOJO in 2013, said that when he got in trouble, the value of unity went out the window, which made him lose respect towards the validity of the Essential 7. “It be me and my dudes causing so much noise and only the troublemakers get called to the Dean. All the good students who laugh at what we do don’t get in no trouble. Unity only applies to what they [school administrators] care about, school shit.” Erick’s experience highlights the prevalence of the conflict perspective. He highlights some of the tension that exists between the students being disciplined and the ways that school administrators enforce the essential 7 when doing the disciplining. As a result, however, despite the unique approach in trying to control the behavior of the students, the young men shared that the using the essential 7 when they are disciplined had little to no effect on their behavior.

Throughout the interviews, many of the young men used words and phrases that are aligned with the language used in the Essential 7. Words such as ‘respect,’ ‘unity,’ and ‘self-discipline’ were prevalent in their experiences. What SOJO tried to do was teach students about the history of the school and the importance of the essential 7 values with the intent of avoiding misbehavior. This is yet another example of socialization, where students are being taught the values that the school was founded on so that they act a certain way respecting the school history and enforcing the social control of student behavior. This approach appeared not to work, however. For some of the young men, the essential 7 resonated well with their SOJO experience
and even beyond it after graduation, but for most, it was not as meaningful and did not influence their everyday behavior in school. It was other in-school policies that were influential.

(In)School Policies

“What did students get in trouble for?” I asked all of the young men in this study. They gave me many reasons that they were disciplined for, but the responses were different as the expected graduation years progressed forward. Some of the young men, especially Cirilo, who graduated from SOJO in 2010, said that SOJO was getting stricter year after year. He continued to say that SOJO was “lenient with discipline the first couple of years,” which might have been due to the fact the school was new, still forming its identity, and finding effective practices for discipline. Those who attended SOJO after the time Cirilo was there, however, described SOJO as “stricter” due to the enforcement of new in-school policies.

The most prominent consequences that the young men experienced were detentions and in-school suspensions (ISS). Some went through out-of-school suspensions (OSS), but none were expelled or arrested. The detentions and in-school suspensions mostly came from acting out in class, ditching or skipping out on class, and to my surprise, being tardy. The out-of-school suspensions were due to drug or alcohol use or possession inside of the school, inciting or participating in a physical altercation inside or near the school premises, bullying, or other forms of harassment. Earlier in this chapter, disciplinary statistics showed that a SOJO student’s likelihood of receiving an OSS increased drastically from 2014 to 2015. Given what the young men shared, let us accept the assumption that discipline at SOJO got stricter. They “implemented strict policies to get us into in-school or detention” primarily to “increase our attendance and grades” noted Daniel, a 2013 SOJO graduate. Other young men like Brandon (2012 graduate) and Roberto (2014 graduate) shared that school administrators were adamant about their agenda
regarding an increase in attendance and academic grade point averages (GPA). “I think an increase [of] in-schools and detentions were favored because it required us to be in school…that was good numerically” said Cirilo, a 2010 SOJO graduate. In the previous chapter, we learned that SOJO underwent destabilizing efforts by the CPS network. As a result, the way to show improvement or consistency in a school was through its compiled numbers, such as its attendance rate and academic records. Cirilo hints that SOJO administrators chose to discipline students through detentions and in-school suspensions simply to uphold the necessary numbers in attendance that is deemed necessary by CPS officials. However, note that this is his assumption and not a proven fact.

Some of the in-school policies implemented by SOJO were extreme and quite absurd, as the young men described. For example, being tardy became one of the biggest rationales for school detentions and ISS. According to the young men who were expected to graduate from the year 2013 and onwards, SOJO implemented a policy that if a student is tardy at least three times in a given week, it is an automatic detention. Then, the policy changed that being tardy at least three times resulted in an ISS. Similarly, if a student was caught using their cell phone during school hours (including lunch breaks and passing periods), they were given two choices: allow your phone to be confiscated and have it picked up by a parent the following Monday or serving three ISS. Many students were unwilling to give up their phones, so they chose the latter and served their three ISS instead, according to Cirilo. Policies such as these are not intended to follow or resemble zero tolerance policies, but its implementation and consequences in increasing the number of detentions and ISS at SOJO follows a lineage of zero tolerance. This is again not statistically proven, but also an assumption yielded from the young men I interviewed. Still, many public schools today have denounced the use of zero tolerance policies, but remnants
of zero tolerance remain in in-school policies. In effect, these policies perpetuate the earlier finding in this chapter about school administrators spending unnecessary time disciplining students and forcing them out of the classroom (Noguera 2009; Rios 2017). This tension between school administrators and students exists due to the ways that administrators handle discipline, but this is not the only tension that influences the behavior of students.

**Racial Conflict and Gang War**

We have discussed the ways that SOJO has tried to handle the behavior of the young men, ways that the school normalizes getting in trouble, and the tensions that exist between students and authority figures in schools. To the interviewees, their SOJO experience had stricter disciplinary policies and an increase in detentions, ISS, and OSS for some. However, the young men also pointed out that SOJO slowly tried to transition into alternative forms of disciplinary action: restorative justice and mediation. These forms of disciplinary action came during times of conflict, according to Cirilo (2010 SOJO graduate). The conflict that he and other young men brought up during the interviews was the racial and gang tensions between Black and Brown (mostly Mexican and Mexican American) students from the Little Village and North Lawndale neighborhood.

As mentioned in chapter 2, Chicago is one of the most segregated cities in the US. Racial and ethnic enclaves exist in different sections of the city that are mostly lumped together. There are city-wide efforts to desegregate Chicago and create neighborhoods that are racially and ethnically mixed, but the residential and school segregation persists. In the case of Little Village Lawndale High School (LVLHS) and SOJO, the school primarily served students from two distinct, but neighboring racial and ethnic enclaves: one in Little Village, which is where the
majority of the Latino population comes from, and the one in North Lawndale, where the majority of Black or African American students come from. The young men in this study who attended SOJO during its first six years talked about the racial hostility that permeated across the school during that time. “We didn’t get along well. Mexicans stuck together, and Black people stuck together…fights broke [out] all the time between the four schools…mostly after school” said Geronimo, who graduated from SOJO in 2010. Francisco, a student who was part of the first incoming class at SOJO, participated in the racial brawls that occurred during that time. “I did it to backup my homies who had beef with the [Blacks]. They weren’t from the Vil, and came out here throwing up their signs like nah we don’t welcome that here. You in Two Six hood.” While racial tensions remained intact in the efforts of LVLHS and SOJO to integrate students from two neighborhoods, the reality about Chicago’s segregation is that urban street gangs are an influential part of divisive relationships among communities, especially in low-income communities of color. Farragut Career Academy, the other public high school in Little Village (see chapter 2), had a similar issue for many years, which shared its educational building with Black and Brown students who were members of the Latin King gang, the Gangster Disciples, the Gangster Two Six, the Two Two Boy gang, the Vice Lords, to name a few (Vargas 2016). Inevitably, LVLHS and SOJO experienced the same tension early on, often mixing in members of the Two Six gang from Little Village with members of the Vice Lords or Gangster Disciples from North Lawndale. Aware of this issue, the young men like Francisco, Cirilo, and Geronimo shared that during this racial and gang war, SOJO administrators exerted efforts to mediate the conflict.

A high number of OSS and some expulsions occurred during the first few years at LVLHS and SOJO, according to the young men who attended the school. I was not able to find
public records or statistics to prove this point, so this remains purely an observation that the
young men pointed out during the interviews. One of the efforts to continue mediating the racial
and gang conflict was to implement a restorative justice curriculum that included training
students to be peer mediators. In turn, this would decrease the number of suspensions and the
severity of consequences given to students for behavioral misconducts. Consequently, the young
men at SOJO in the early years felt that a culture of cohesiveness and respect among the students
was created at SOJO that helped minimize the racial and gang conflict. I theorize that these
efforts were effective because the young men who attended SOJO after the first six years did not
talk about the racial and gang war at SOJO as much. Tensions existed, but as Cesar said, “we
were cool ‘cause we played in the same [sports] team…[and] we were told from the start that we
are all each other’s brothers and sisters so we had to care, not hate each other.” The racial and
gang tensions were addressed directly through different forms of discipline not reliant on zero
tolerance. Instead of enforcing zero tolerance, school administrators dealt with the conflict
directly without handing out consequences. This is one way that schools address conflict in
schools and avoid having increasing numbers of behavioral infractions and consequences.

**Metal Detector Routine**

Another recurring problem mentioned by the interviewees was the daily routine of
passing through metal detectors when entering the high school building. Security guards ran the
metal detector machines and at times had Chicago police officers present in the school during the
mornings. Brandon, a 2012 SOJO graduate, detested the school-wide routine because “long lines
formed, sometimes all the way outside of the building, and people are pushing and cutting line,
so they can pass through faster.” Students are supposed to stand in single-file lines with their
backpacks ready to place through a machine and empty whatever is in their pockets. Then, the
students pass by the metal detectors themselves. If any sharp or prohibited item is suspected by the security guard based on the stench of drugs or highlighted red areas on the machine screens, the student is subject to additional screening and searching. “My first two years they patted me down all the time, mostly because my belt made the detectors beep but it was stupid to make me take it off, so they just pat me down,” said Kevin, a SOJO graduate of 2014. The young men understood these security measures were intended to ensure the safety of the school, but none said they enjoyed going through that procedure daily. To some, it was not a big deal. A couple of SOJO students went to school earlier than usual to avoid the hectic long lines. But to most, it was bothersome. “It always made me late,” said Cesar, “I had to drop my brothers off at school first and then I come to the long lines close to the start of the first period bell...it’s not my fault I’m late and that’s why I was in [ISS] a lot.” Cesar referred to SOJO’s ‘three strikes and you are out’ policy that gave students an automatic consequence if they were tardy at least three times. Many other interviewees said that if the daily routine of going through the metal detectors were abolished, it would enhance their learning performance for first period and tardy record, but also noted the importance of maintaining a safe school environment.

In this chapter, I looked into the ways that SOJO’s disciplinary policies created a culture of control with the continual effect of over-disciplining young men of color. In effect, many of them spend ample time outside of the classroom, which hinders the learning socialization they need. We see that school-specific policies and practices contribute to the persistence in disciplining these young men. The findings from the interview data indicate that this persistence is created by the individual criminalization of the young men by school administrators. This leads them to believe that every misconduct, whether small or severe, must be handled through discipline protocol. Tensions arise between students from different racial and ethnic
backgrounds, as well as conflict about where students live because then they are associated with whichever gang hangs around that part of the neighborhood. To ease these tensions, school administrators must not revert to tough discipling of the young men. Instead, these tensions should be addressed and mediated through other forms of resolution like restorative justice, which I will discuss further in the next chapter. Lastly, it is understood that CPS gives specific instructions to schools like SOJO about what to do when a student misbehaves. In practice, school administrators target young men of color and further perpetuate the culture of punishment and control prominent in public schools across the country. Sociologist Victor Rios calls this a cultural misframing by administrators when they view young men of color as threats and troublemakers that leads to the harmful criminalization and excessive disciplining of this student population (Rios 2017). To get discipline done right, or differently, schools need to shift the cultural misframing of control into one of care.
Conclusion: Moving Forward

“If we think about school differently as a place for potential to happen, then what would schools look like?”


Following Dr. Stovall’s rhetoric, I contest that if we think about education policy as a place for potential to happen, then what would the high school experience for young men of color look like? In 2014, as I stood in the podium to deliver my welcome speech as class president of SOJO during the commencement ceremony, I smiled and glanced over the middle section of the auditorium where the graduates sat. At SOJO, female-identifying students wore maroon gowns, male-identifying students wore silver gowns, and students in National Honors Society wore white gowns during the ceremony. In the ten seconds that I took glancing over the graduates, I saw a clump of maroon and not much silver. I did not think much of this at that moment because I had a speech to deliver but knew that more young men of color were supposed to be in that auditorium participating in the graduation ceremony. What happened to those young men of color, specifically Black and Mexican or Mexican American men, that prevented them from graduating out of SOJO? At the heart of this thesis, I have attempted to better understand the relationship between race, education policy, and the lives of young men of color in high school, specifically through the lens of standardized testing and discipline. To do this, it is important to consider the influence that the urban political economy in large urban cities has on the types of
policies that schools enforce and acknowledge the different ways that schools enforce these policies. Using the case study of SOJO provides us with insight on the ways that young men of color are pushed to the margins of school environments hindering their academic achievement and ultimately their chances of graduating.

Before delving into the takeaways from SOJO and young Mexican and Mexican American men, let’s revisit the question posed at the beginning of the thesis: What is the status of public education today? The recent trends in Chicago public schools show that schools struggling to meet certain benchmarks are being closed or are being revitalized with the implementation of charter school models and curriculums, or sold to business entities. What is going on with public schools in Chicago? How do we revitalize public schools and help them achieve their purpose of providing a quality education across race, gender, and class? Will amendments to education policy and practice help achieve this envisioned revitalization? How do we ensure that those in charge get it done right?

**School-to-(Factory, Prison, College) Pipeline**

The intricate work of British educator and sociologist Paul Willis provides two prominent findings relevant to public schools and the schooling experience for young men. Willis finds that ‘lads’ or young white boys are uninterested in schools and do not find purpose in it due to the trajectory they perceive that is set out for them, which is getting factory jobs (Willis 2003). His larger argument is that schools serve as institutions that place students in a process of socialization for working at factories for young working-class boys. Schools then, according to these young ‘lads’ or boys, are for middle class boys and students (Willis 2003). His ethnographic and participant observation research hints at a structural school-to-factory pipeline that permeated in American public schools as well. SOJO graduate of 2010, Geronimo, recalled
SOJO’s innovative approach to notify students when class was over and how much time they had to arrive to their next class, “they played music during the passing period mainly instrumental [but] sometimes hip hop music with lyrics...no one liked the traditional bell...my teacher told us that schools use that bell to train us to leave work for lunch or to know when the work day was done.” Geronimo though not explicitly stating it refers to the training to leave work for lunch or the end of the work day as analogous to the experience of a factory worker. SOJO strayed away from the traditional bell, but such innovation was short-lived. When asking interviewees about music being played during passing periods, those who attended SOJO after the first four years had no acknowledgement of it or as Kevin, a 2014 SOJO grad, put it: “that was rumored but I never experienced it.”

The research data in this thesis does not reinforce the school-to-factory pipeline as described by Willis. Instead, SOJO shows us that the pipeline is reformed into a school-to-college pipeline, which is nuanced but evident in two forms: first, as seen in the introduction, due to city-wide and national efforts, schools shifted their focus to accountability measures reliant on standardized test scores that help a student matriculate into college or a university. Second, as discussed in chapter 3, school curriculums were tailored to test taking skills and preparatory pedagogy to enhance the students ability to achieve a high score on a standardized test. The purpose of public schools is thus refined as one that prepares students for college instead of the workforce like it formerly did. Meritocracy then is one form that helps youth participate in higher education and allows them to engage in upward mobility in the future. Public schools, however, are multi-purposed. In thinking about the ways that gender and race influence this presumed school-to-college pipeline, young men of color are participants of another pipeline that education scholars and sociologists have noted before: the school-to-prison pipeline. Over-
disciplining and the reinforcement of punishment and control in schools affect young men of color more prominently than their white and female counterparts (Noguera 2009; Rios 2017). In turn, young men of color are put in a position where they have to navigate various social structures that influence their academic achievement, test taking ability, and behavioral record. Note that how these pipelines shape the educational experiences of students in public schools vary depending on city-wide, district, and school-specific education policy and practice.

What SOJO Teaches Us

SOJO offers a unique perspective on the ways that race, gender, and policy shape the educational experiences for young men of color. It is a small neighborhood public high school located on the southwest side of Chicago that became a reality after an arduous 19-day hunger strike in 2001. It offers an educational opportunity to students from various socioeconomic statuses, documented and undocumented students, and students from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. It survived neoliberal efforts to dismantle the school in 2012 by the CPS network and has continuously leveraged the racial and gang tensions that arise at the school. For a couple years, due to an upwards trend in attendance, test score averages, and other metrics, SOJO was out of academic probation and labeled as a Level 1 school, which is the highest it could be. The guidance counselor at the school notified me that the school barely missed the benchmark this past year and it is now ranked a level 2 school, but school administrators are optimistic that the school will increase its rank back to level 1. The ongoing presence of SOJO in the Little Village community continues to combat educational inequality in the neighborhood, and it serves as a testament of the neighborhoods’ successful collective action against Chicago’s neoliberal agenda regarding the city’s public schools.
The unique history of SOJO remains alive today more than ever. It influenced a contemporary protest on the southside of Chicago in 2015 where community members and activists united to stage a 34-day hunger strike demanding that Dyett High School be reopened as part of its revitalization process instead of having it shut down indefinitely. The Dyett hunger strikers were adamant that the tactic of staging a hunger strike would work just as it did for SOJO and Little Village Lawndale High School (Teachers for Social Justice 2015; Stieber 2015). They vocalized the influence that the 19-day hunger strike in 2001 had on their decision to protest.

**Maintaining Scholarship Focus on Young Men of Color**

This research highlights the experiences of young men of color in an attempt to reframe the negative narratives imposed on them by society. Young men of color have experienced issues centered around school failure, dropouts and pushouts, gang violence, and disciplinary punishment that some scholars and politicians have actively tried to offer resources and programming to help them combat these issues. These young men were given the spotlight when former President Barack Obama created My Brother’s Keeper initiative mentioned in the introduction. While that initiative failed to address some structural issues that these young men faced, it helped spark a conversation about ways that smaller communities can help these young men succeed. One of these smaller initiatives was the Becoming a Man (BAM) program. Little Village Lawndale High School (LVLHS) built a partnership with the University of Chicago and implemented this program. BAM “offers youth weekly group sessions during the school day and uses cognitive behavioral therapy to help youth slow down in high-stakes situations” (Urban Labs 2018). This program has been effective at improving the experiences of young men of color across schools in CPS and boosting graduation rates, according to its website. The program
offers direct mentorship to Black and Latino men in high school (Urban Lab 2018). SOJO is a beneficiary of this program and has maintained this partnership for numerous years, which has presumably helped address the negative experiences young men of color face at the school.

**Limitations of Research**

While the qualitative and quantitative data in this research provide a nuanced understanding of the way race, politics, and the high school experience for young men of color influence one another, there are a few quirks that could have been done differently. For starters, the sample of interviewees were mostly those who graduated from the high school in 2013 and onwards. Reaching out to young men of color who graduated within the first four graduating classes was difficult because many were no longer living in the Little Village area, were working two jobs or one demanding job that did not allow them to schedule an interview or were simply unresponsive to my outreach. It would have provided a stark conceptualization of SOJO’s early years if I had included their experiences in this study and could have possibly done a comparative analysis between the first five years of SOJO in comparison to the next five years since the school opened its doors to students in 2005. Regardless, having most of the interviewees be young men that graduated from SOJO in 2013 and onwards provided us with insight on how education policy had shifted during their time at the high school and how that influenced their overall SOJO experience.

This research does not account for the gender dynamics and differences that permeate in the high school experience for youth, much less its intersection with race and the varying socioeconomic statuses of students. An extension of this study would delve into the ways that masculinity or machismo plays a role in the way young men of color are treated by school administrators and their gender counterparts, but also ways that their inability to excel in school
are perpetuated through stereotypes by those in position of authority and their female-identifying counterparts. An inclusion of stereotype threat would have been fruitful and comes up briefly in this study, but not to the extent that Karolyn Tyson goes into with her work (Tyson 2011). It is important to acknowledge the role that stereotype threat plays in the schooling experiences of students of color more broadly in relation to academics and test score achievement. Additionally, this research delves into the experiences of young Mexican and Mexican American men, but I could have incorporated the educational experiences of Black and African American young men as well to fully encompass the way race and gangs intersect to influence their SOJO experience at a high school situated in a predominantly Mexican and Mexican American community. The inclusion of those experiences would have further highlighted ways that young men of color are pushed to the margins of society, and it is a line of inquiry that can be added as an extension to this groundbreaking work.

Moving Forward

The increasing success of young men of color in high school and beyond has shown that national and local initiatives have helped spark change in their school behavior that leads to better graduation rates (Noguera 2005; Harper 2012). We must ensure that young boys and men in urban public schools are continually encouraged to do well in school. This must be done by having them spend more time in the classroom instead of the disciplinary office (or in SOJO’s case, room 105), or have them engage in a learning process that pushes them to think critically about things that are relevant to their lives instead of being taught how to properly fill-in a circle in a test. To do this, schools and city politicians must rethink school policy. As mentioned in the introduction, often those creating school policy are not culturally aware of the situational contexts of the schools or students in those schools. Such lack of cultural awareness affects the
types of policies that are being implemented in schools, and often misframes the ways that young men of color are viewed and approached in high school (Rios 2017). Large urban school districts like the one in Chicago have the potential to include community members and youth to the policy discussion table as opposed to simply having business leaders and well-renowned politicians crafting policy. More notably, schools should be given the autonomy to implement their own school policies. SOJO was able to experiment with this autonomy when it first opened, and while their results still followed lineage from school pipelines, the school administrators were sometimes able to respond to student behavior and social processes at the schools in a way relevant to the current student body at the school. Without this autonomy, schools must follow universal procedures in disciplining and creating curriculum for the students. Thus, given the distinctness in student demographics across different schools, the traditional top-down implementation method does not account for other social structures affecting the educational experience for these young men, such as residential segregation, gang vendettas, and the scarcity of after school activities for youth.

While this research did not directly address activities outside of school available for young men, a couple of the interviewees made mention of after school activities that have helped in their student development that include academic achievement and behavior in school. To address the dearth of these opportunities for youth in urban neighborhoods, politicians should work on creating more employment or internship opportunities that will help young men of color cultivate skills that cannot otherwise be learned in school. After school programs involving arts and sports do exist for Chicago students, but funding is never consistent. Sociologist Victor Rios provides similar recommendations that require incentivizing small businesses to employ these young men and provide more civic engagement opportunities over the summer (Rios 2017). I
argue that providing opportunities throughout the school year will also help these young men work on their interpersonal skills that may improve their overall experience when they are in school. Access to these programs and resources will help young men develop in ways that require their engagement outside of daily school activities or routines.

It is equally important to note that the lineage of zero tolerance policies and the school-to-college pipeline will not go away any time soon, considering the ongoing criminalization of young men of color in society and dependency on test scores (Rios 2011). Diminishing this criminalization will come slowly. The implementation and training of restorative justice can help this process, and SOJO tried to. However, according to SOJO’s counselor, the lack of resources and pay for professionals in this field barred the school from implementing it long-term. Regardless, we cannot continue to run our schools in similar ways that prisons do when disciplining the imprisoned. Scholars, community members, and activists are already working on reshaping the way we discipline our young boys and men in schools. Supporting their efforts socially, financially, and politically is fundamental. Standardized tests are also not going to vanish, and colleges and universities will continue to require these scores for admissions consideration. High schools will also continue to teach to the test. What we must do is foster an environment where test taking skills are taught through culturally relevant pedagogy. This means shifting the curriculum in schools as well as the content in the tests themselves. On a more systematic level, however, we must restructure our accountability measures for schools. If we persist our dependency on disciplinary statistics and standardized test score averages, we will not accurately assess the success nor the improvement of schools in urban settings. Again, the recent trend seen in Chicago’s public schools is that a vast number of school closings or school revitalization projects are happening. We find ourselves in a very crucial time now. The Chicago
Public School (CPS) network issued a five-year moratorium that went into effect during the fall of 2013 (Chicago Public Schools 2012). This moratorium will end this upcoming fall in 2018 and it is uncertain what CPS will do regarding school closures or revitalizing efforts. The fear is that CPS will close more schools down that are primarily serving students of color, as recent trends show. The recommendations here do not fully capture a solution to this issue but do highlight vital information that I deem necessary as Chicago students, parents, and activists work towards gettin’ school policy done right.

November of 1987 was not too long ago. William Bennett regarded Chicago’s public schools as the worst in the nation, and even thirty years later, we have a lot of work to do to improve the conditions of our public schools and be able to directly address Bennett’s claim. To do this, we have to rethink education policy, reform the ways we perceive and revitalize public schools that primarily educate students of color, and both reform and reframe the educational experiences of young men of color in urban public schools. This starts at the city’s political economy and dwindles down to schools and to the individual interactions with students. If we do this, we can move towards gettin’ it done right and finally achieving some form of educational justice for public schools and students of color across the city of Chicago and nationwide.
## APPENDIX I: Interviewee Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview #</th>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Graduation Year</th>
<th>Graduated?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
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<td>y</td>
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I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this assignment. x__Brian Cabral__