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THE CULTURAL CONTEXT OF PEER AGGRESSION IN SCHOOLS

By

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And approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Cultural Context of Peer Aggression in Schools

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This dissertation examines the organizational and group-level cultural processes that shape the context for peer interpersonal aggression in high schools. I use a mixed-methods approach to understand how behavioral norms in schools are formed at the organizational level of the school, and are communicated, enacted, and reshaped in small groups. The extent to which these norms vary in small groups, or classrooms, impacts the conditions for learning within them. Currently the majority of school victimization research focuses patterns of behavior at the school-wide level, without accounting for variation in micro-level contexts within the school. I situate the classroom as a key site of interactions between students. I use the School Climate Understanding and Building Aspirations (SCUBA) Survey to capture patterns of victimization and students' perceptions and attitudes related to personal aspirations and school-wide norms. I conducted ethnographic observations in two high schools across a full academic year to observe grounded interactions over time. I also conducted in-depth interviews with students sampled from the observed classrooms. I argue that three main cultural factors shape the context for aggression in schools and classrooms. These are 1) academic and

aspirational norms; 2) disciplinary norms and practices; and 3) the everyday practices that develop in classrooms. Variation in observed aggressive behavior between schools is primarily shaped by these cultural factors. Within school variation is primarily shaped by how these cultural elements are enacted within local classroom idiocultures, which are differentiated according to the classroom's academic tracking level, the teacher, and the peer group. This study provides a grounded understanding of the cultural roots of aggressive behavior, and expands our understanding of how victimization varies across and within schools. Future efforts to reduce student interpersonal aggression and improve learning conditions should include measurement protocols and interventions focused on the key cultural factors identified, which take place at both the school-wide and classroom levels.

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## DEDICATION

To Ben, for showing me every day what is most important in life. I will do my part to help create the equitable, engaging, safe, and inclusive educational environments I wish for you and all children.

## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iv
Dedication	viii
Table of contents	ix
List of tables	x
List of figures	xi
Chapter 1: Introduction	1
Chapter 2: Background and Methods	37
Chapter 3: The Varying Contexts of New Jersey High Schools	82
Chapter 4: Academic and Aspirational Norms	135
Chapter 5: Behavioral and Disciplinary Norms	190
Chapter 6: Everyday Practices in Classrooms	249
Chapter 7: Conclusion and Implications	298
Appendix A: School Climate Understanding and Building Aspirations Survey	334
Appendix B: Student Interview Protocol	373
Appendix C: Classroom Observation Protocol	377
Appendix D: Classroom Group Descriptions	379
Bibliography	396

## List of tables

Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents by school	322
Table 2. Survey respondents' family background	323
Table 3. Scales measuring student attitudes	324
Table 4. Subject-specific disciplinary norms	326
Table 5. Rotated factor matrix with loadings for Social and Academic Goals Scale	327
Table 6. Mean scores on personal victimization scales by school	328
Table 7. Percentage of respondents reporting victimization in the last month by type and by school	329
Table 8. Percentages of respondents who witnessed victimization of others in each subject area as a summated count variable	330
Table 9. Percentages of respondents who experienced in-person victimization in each subject area as a summated count variable	331
Table 10. Multiple linear regression for predictors on personal victimization in both schools	332
Table 11. Multiple linear regression for predictors on in-school personal victimization in both schools	333

## List of figures

Figure 1. Cultural factors and mechanisms theoretically shaping the context for aggressive behaviors in schools	317
Figure 2. Classrooms sampled for ethnographic observations in Hilltop High School	318
Figure 3. Classrooms sampled for ethnographic observations in Hughes High School	319
Figure 4. Top locations for self-reported victimization by type and by school	320
Figure 5. Top ten reasons students perceive that other students in their school are victimized	321
Figure 6: Top ten reasons students report that they have been personally victimized	321

## Chapter 1: Introduction

In an era of high stakes testing and accountability in education, the contextualized local conditions affecting outcomes for students have been under great scrutiny. In addition to ongoing sociological research on factors affecting students' academic and social outcomes, such as teacher-student relationships (Hallinan, Kubitschek, and Lu 2009; Crosnoe, Kirkpatrick, and Elder 2004; Muller 2001) and student body composition by race and socioeconomic status (Crosnoe 2009), the effects of the overall social atmosphere of the school on these outcomes are important topics across disciplines. To date most studies conceptualize the social atmosphere of the school as "school climate" (Thapa et al. 2013, Paluck, Shepherd, and Aronow 2016), and apply interventions and policies focused on improving school climate (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2009; U.S. Department of Education 2014).

School climate has a profound impact on outcomes for students and staff, including social-emotional and behavioral health, relationship development, inclusion, perceived safety, motivation, and academic success (Bohanon et al. 2009; Brand et al. 2007; Cohen et al. 2009; Hosford and O'Sullivan 2016; Kutsyuruba, Klinger, and Hussain 2015; Thapa et al. 2013). Accordingly, the most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) incorporates school climate as an important indicator of a school's quality that is tied to student learning outcomes. ESSA grants each state the option to adopt a school climate indicator as an additional non-academic accountability measure, and recommends school climate data points include behavior-focused items such as the number of suspensions.

As such, schools are increasingly interested in understanding and measuring factors related to student interactions and peer aggressive behaviors, along with other indicators of school climate.

Despite the popularity of the school climate paradigm outside of sociology (Thapa et al. 2013; Paluck et al. 2016), Shepherd (2014:1019) advocates for a process account of culture in schools to understand how school climate itself is “the product of patterns of interactions among students and how students develop perceptions of what is acceptable and desirable behavior in schools.” School culture includes the unwritten rules and norms that constitute the static “personality” of the organization, whereas school climate represents the shifting “attitudes,” feelings or perceptions within the building (Gruenert 2008). Climate is more fluid than culture, and it can be measured through school climate surveys to provide a snapshot of how people feel at a given moment, at the organizational level. Culture is more engrained and plays an essential role in shaping the climate and how it is experienced by stakeholders. An element of school culture that has received attention in recent years is the behavioral context within schools as organizations, particularly in terms of the nature and extent of aggressive behaviors between peers, and related implications for overall school climate and learning conditions. It is critical to also consider the formation of micro-cultures within classrooms, as schools are loosely coupled organizations (Weick 1976), and classrooms are the local small groups where students and staff spend the majority of their interactional lives. The culture of the small group in the classroom setting is an important and understudied factor in shaping peer interactions and overall climate.

Bullying is a component of school climate that has received a great deal of attention in recent years, although the study of bullying alone fails to take account of other forms of aggression which do not meet the formal definition of bullying. In this study, I focus on the prevalence of what I call generalized peer aggression in high schools, and how aggressive behaviors vary across schools and within schools depending on cultural factors at various ecological levels. Currently, research has primarily focused on how either school-wide or individual, psychological factors shape variation in aggressive behaviors within a specific school, leaving a gap in understanding comparative differences in aggression between schools and across classrooms within the same school. Research currently does not sufficiently consider variation in exposure to aggression among students within the same school context. Instead most studies focus on the school as a whole organization, with limited consideration of the micro-dynamics in vulnerable settings, locations or “hot spots” for violence (Astor, Meyer, and Behre 1999).

In discussing the importance of school culture, Holt, Keyes, and Koenig (2011) find that school culture varies by school, and teacher attitudes are one of the factors that plays a significant role in shaping it (Olweus 1992). Such variation in school culture is understudied in relationship to differences in peer aggression across schools. At the same time, the broad concept of school culture found in the school climate literature in some ways falls short for the study of secondary schools because it does not account for the varying micro-contexts secondary school students experience as they move through a range of different classrooms throughout their day. The few studies that have focused on “classroom social ecologies” as predictive of aggressive behavior are typically found in psychology and do not employ a cultural framework to understand variation in classroom

settings (Doll, Song, and Siemers 2004; Swearer and Espelage 2011). Instead, these studies focus on singular variables such as teacher-student interactions, peer ecologies (Madill, Gest, and Rodkin 2014), or peer characteristics (Pellegrini and Van Ryzin 2011), to identify potential sources of aggressive behavior at various ecological levels of the classroom. These studies hone in on a particular micro-level concept or relationship, but do not look at the classroom as a small group with its own distinct culture and set of norms, which then play a role in shaping the context for aggressive behaviors.

Many studies have examined aggression as related to the overall school's organizational culture, while fewer have considered the role of the small group (classrooms) in shaping these behaviors by "moderating individual interests in the face of group goals and conflicting desires" (Fine 2012:21). I consider how the school-wide organizational culture works in concert with what I call classroom idiocultures (Fine 1987) to shape both the context of aggressive behaviors and the behaviors themselves. This approach suggests that certain targeted interventions, for example, those designed to focus on teacher strategies alone, are insufficient for reducing aggression, because they fail to take into account both the organizational and cultural factors that influence aggressive behaviors in the school organization and at the local classroom level.

In this study, I address gaps in the literature related to variation in school culture and general patterns of aggression, as well as variation in aggressive behavior that are mediated by small group idiocultures in the classroom. According to Fine and Hallett (2014:1775), "culture is a form of practice, linked to local understandings, everyday interactions, and ongoing social relations...culture is not merely cognitive, but is revealed in action." I focus on how cultures enacted at the school level and the classroom level

shape the context for aggressive behavior and the behaviors themselves, with attention to how the school organizational culture prefigures the most likely behavioral possibilities across contexts. For example, the extent to which students in a particular school perceive getting in trouble as “normal” may relate to the nature, types, and extent of aggression they witness and engage in both in and out of classrooms.

Students spend the majority of the school day in classrooms, and must balance priorities, such as social acceptance and academic achievement, within these spaces and groups. Less structured spaces outside of classrooms may seem more central to students’ socialization, however, students are typically engaging with students they already know from classroom groups in less bounded spaces and groups outside of classrooms, such as the cafeteria or hallway. I argue that classrooms are the primary location where much cultural work occurs, and play a vital role in in structuring various interactional micro-dynamics, and especially aggressive behavior. Fine (2012:5) argues that the small group is an understudied yet powerful force in organizing interaction, given that “the outcomes that are often attributed to large-scale social forces originate within small-scale domains.” The role of the small group, or classroom, in shaping students’ school-based experiences is also neglected in studies of aggressive behavior. The small group context of the classroom has been understudied relative to school culture and in studies focusing on individual students’ school attachment. Yet, it is at this micro-level within the organization that individual students interact with a teacher, negotiate social and academic goals, and engage in interpersonal behavior with peers. Attachment and achievement attitudes can vary across classroom settings for a secondary student and, in turn, impact achievement and behavior in those settings to varying extents. In addition,

the extent to which academic tracking impacts how aggressive behavior is experienced by secondary students has not been adequately considered through a cultural framework.

As Fine (2012:2) argues, each group or classroom functions as “a dense network of relations, [and] constitutes an interactional field that develops and negotiates norms,” and is a space that serves as “the arena of action that creates the predictable and ongoing relationships that are essential for a belief in social order.” As a group that meets at least once every other day, if not every day Monday through Friday, with the same members, and for a set block of time and sustained purpose, classrooms and the relations they foster are typically predictable arenas for action. These groups quickly develop both shared pasts and prospective futures that underlie the interactional arena of collaboration (Fine 2012:3). However, the specific relational dynamics and interactions that are enacted in these spaces depend upon norms and understandings regarding expected behavior both at the level of the school and at the individual classroom level.

Classrooms constitute small groups defined as “aggregations of persons who recognize that they constitute a meaningful social unit, interact on that basis, and are committed to that social unit. . . participants have interests in common and share a history” (Fine 2012:21). The group has “routinized interaction” which fosters the socialization of individuals to common standards and the establishment of communal standards and expectations (Fine 2012:25-26). During an academic year, the classroom serves as a space for collective development and a domain in which status processes and identities become concrete, allocating students to positions in a status hierarchy in a way that typically reproduces norms at the organizational level (Fine 2012:26). However, the norms and values that sustain social hierarchies in classrooms may vary (Faris and

Felmlee 2011). For example, some students may take on the role of being consistently disruptive or excessively playful to gain social status with peers. Others may adhere to classroom norms in a way that garners status in the eyes of the teacher, or adheres to the academic expectations of both the teacher and his or her peers depending upon the cultural norms within the group. In classrooms with different norms and logics, both of the aforementioned behaviors may have different implications for an individual student's academic and social goals. Classrooms may have "similar goals, comparable memberships, and interchangeable spaces, yet they develop unique cultures and distinct styles of behavior" (Fine 2012:37). For these reasons, it is crucial to add the study of small groups (classrooms) and micro-dynamics of interaction to the existing sociological literature on aggressive behavior in schools.

To understand how the peer interpersonal behaviors of students in a school are influenced and shaped at the classroom level, I employ the concept of small group idiocultures, or "microcultures that are developed from a group's opening moments and that depend on a shared recognition of solidified meaning and perspective" and lead to "local cultural understandings" (Fine 2012:3). Idiocultures are built on "a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and that serves as the basis of further interaction" (Fine 1987:125; Fine 2012). An examination of classrooms in schools facilitates the study of idiocultures in a way that builds understanding of "how macrostructures of institutions provide for the foundations of a microstructure" (Fine 2012:10), in this case, a classroom. Within small groups such as classrooms, idioculture is influenced and in part generated by teachers' and students' individual "cultural toolkits" (Swidler 1986). Swidler (1986)

defines cultural toolkits as the habits, skills and styles individuals draw upon within the interaction scene to construct “theories of action” (Fine 2012:29; Swidler 1986).

My dissertation extends the literature by interrogating the ways that the school organization generates the structure within which small group idiocultures are formed, and in turn shape students’ priorities, decisions, and behaviors. I explore how norms regarding behavior are shaped at the organizational level of the school, and how they become communicated, enacted, and sometimes challenged at the level of the small group in the classrooms. These small group settings both limit behavioral options and create new possibilities for students, who in turn approach classroom interactions with their own individual “toolkits.” By considering a students’ identity within a broader cultural framework, my project contributes to the sociological debate surrounding structure and agency, and bridges gaps between cultural sociology and social psychology (Nunn 2014) as related to aggressive behaviors.

In addition to extending theories regarding the enactment of culture at various levels in the school, I observed specific underlying mechanisms that contribute to the experiences of aggression and victimization students have in high school classrooms. I observed three main elements of school organizational culture and classroom-based idiocultures that shape the contexts in which aggressive interactions unfold at both the school and classroom levels. These are: 1) academic and aspirational norms; 2) disciplinary norms, policies, and informal practices; and 3), the “everyday practices” that develop in small groups within the school (see Figure 1). The three key factors which differentiate outcomes within these cultural elements at the classroom level are academic tracking, the classroom teacher(s), and its student peer culture.

Academic and aspirational norms include the symbols and narratives which are used to communicate about post-secondary opportunities, and how the daily objectives of schooling prepare students for accessing those opportunities. Academic aspirations have to do with post-secondary planning, including college-going norms and narratives within the broader school and specific classrooms. The nature of academic expectations and level of rigor within classroom groups shapes academic and aspirational norms, and the extent to which content and objectives are framed in a future-oriented way. In addition, academic and aspirational norms include the ways that school attachment, student motivation, and student engagement are shaped and supported within the school community's culture, as well as how they vary in classrooms by tracking level, teacher, and peer culture. The second element, disciplinary norms, policies, and practices, begins with the general disciplinary techniques, rules, and procedures typically employed within a given school (through mandate or otherwise), as well as the consistency or frequency of their applications. I examine how classrooms develop their own disciplinary cultures which cohere with or challenge the boundaries of the school-wide disciplinary culture. This approach provides an opportunity to understand how individual teachers, at the classroom level, convey and apply the official rules and develop disciplinary norms or routines that are used informally. Again, this varies according to tracking level and the peer culture endemic within the group. Understanding how the school-wide norms and practices translate into varying classroom-level disciplinary norms and practices can help account for variation in students' exposure to aggressive behaviors in those classrooms. Finally, the "everyday practices" or procedural and interactional routines and rituals that develop in small groups affect the types and frequencies of aggression observed.

Examples include the ways in which teachers structure classroom time, the norms of acceptable playfulness between peers, and other routinized, predictable patterns of behavior that are developed and sustained over time in interactional settings in the school. Again, these elements are typically differentiated through the curricular tracking level in both schools.

These three cultural mechanisms operate simultaneously at the school organizational level and at the level of the classroom, taking different forms in each context and reciprocally influencing one another. The school culture provides overarching norms, beliefs, and practices that shape the general context for the development of classroom-based idiocultures. Classroom-based idiocultures are developed as local understandings and shared expectations emerge around these three mechanisms, taking shape in concrete values, practices, routines, and interaction styles. Students move throughout a variety of classroom-based idiocultures, which through these three mechanisms (among other factors, particularly tracking, the teacher(s) and peers) differentially provide the context for aggression in a particular classroom and shape the actual behaviors of students. In the face of these varying classroom contexts, students exercise agency regarding involvement in aggressive behaviors, invoking their own cultural toolkits and the social capital they have developed both outside of and inside of the school, as well as inside of the various classrooms. In adhering to or challenging aspects of the school organizational culture, norms, or classroom-based idiocultures, individual students may also influence and shape the culture and context for aggression.

In this study, classrooms are considered not as random assignments of students, but instead are groupings of students that are deliberately determined by official

placement within a curricular track. Placements may be based on students' perceived ability, standardized test scores, behavior, personal preferences, or teacher recommendations. Each classroom group has its own logic and quickly emerging idioculture, determined by the configuration of students and the cultural norms and rules set by the teacher(s) from the very first day of school. I study classrooms as part of a greater institutional context (the school organization) that "enables, constrains, and *partially* constitutes group interactions" (Fine and Hallett, 2014:1776), and also as a locus where students plan shared futures as well as individual futures, and reach the objectives of everyday learning. Classrooms develop persistent idiocultures that can be analyzed efficiently through micro-ethnographic study (Fine 2012; Fischer 1968) given the time-bounded and predictable nature of the group and its goals. In all of the classrooms I observed there were clear, unspoken expectations on the part of both students and teachers that persisted across the school year and remained predictable in the face of daily shifts in classroom membership (for instance, attrition and/or replacement of members due to student absence, suspension, or teacher leave).

I use a mixed-methods approach to better understand the cultural factors impacting exposure to and engagement in aggressive behaviors at the level of the school, the classroom, and to an extent, the individual student. To learn more about the various types of victimization<sup>1</sup> and their patterning at the school level, I use an original research tool called the School Climate Understanding and Building Aspirations (SCUBA) Survey, which measures the types, frequencies, temporal and spatial locations, relational

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<sup>1</sup> The survey focuses on self-reported victimization as an indicator of the presence of aggressive behavior. Personal involvement in interpersonal peer aggressive behavior as a perpetrator could not be measured on the survey as it would require active parental consent under N.J.S.A. 18A: 36-34.

dynamics, and personal traits associated with victimization. The survey also measures students' perceptions of school-wide aspirational norms and personal aspirations, as well as their perceptions of discipline and willingness to report or seek help from adults. To witness the grounded process of aggressive behavior and the influence of classroom-based idiocultures, and to understand more nuanced variation in experiences within the same school and across school contexts, I conducted ethnographic observations in two high schools across a full academic year. I observed both general spaces (cafeterias, hallways) and a total of 29 classrooms of varying ability levels. Through these observations, I was able to study the school culture in terms of policies and practices at the school and classroom levels that would not be captured with the survey data. I also conducted in-depth interviews with students from the classrooms I observed to get a richer sense of how culture and behavior norms are understood and enacted by individual students.

In studying two schools during the course of an academic year, I found great variation in school-level culture and classroom idiocultures, as well as in individual student behaviors in different small group settings. In some cases, the same students were observed behaving quite differently across classrooms within the same school, illustrating the profound role classroom idiocultures play in determining students' participation in and exposure to aggressive behaviors. This study adds to the existing body of literature on aggression and victimization by expanding our understanding of variation in patterns of both at the school and classroom levels. The fieldwork also adds to knowledge of the cultural roots of aggression in schools by adding a grounded perspective on the classroom

environment and exploration of the interplay between school organizational culture and the formation of classroom idiocultures. I address the following research questions:

1. How do the nature, extent, patterns and content of aggressive behaviors vary across schools?
2. How are behavioral norms and expectations communicated, understood, and enacted in a school's organizational culture and in the idiocultures of the classrooms?
3. How are students' aggressive behaviors shaped within the classroom context via the three aspects of culture -- academic and aspirational norms, disciplinary norms and practices, and everyday practices?

Micro-level contexts vary greatly throughout the day for high school students, potentially leading to variation in exposure to aggression. Classrooms have their own logics and sets of expectations, and they are embedded within a larger set of school organizational beliefs and practices. This study seeks to better understand what effects these classroom contexts have on how students act out particular aggressive behaviors in school. In addition, this research counters the idea that there are "good schools" and "bad schools" in terms of the study of overall school culture, which has neglected the varied experiences students may have depending upon the various classroom-based idiocultures they experience throughout the school day in a traditional high school with curriculum tracking. The study also counters the idea that "bad schools" will be filled with "bad classrooms" or vice versa. I found that Hilltop High School, an organized, well-resourced, academically rigorous school where the majority of students have high academic aspirations, still houses classrooms that possess divergent academic and behavioral expectations that, in turn, lead to disproportionately high exposure to aggressive behavior as compared to other classrooms in the same environment. I also found that in the lower income school, Hughes High School, which is under-resourced and generally chaotic overall in terms of behavior, it is less clearly messaged that most

students are expected to achieve and to attend college. However, there are classrooms in Hughes in which students are more invested in college, teachers promote high behavioral and academic expectations, and students experience significantly less aggressive behavior than in other settings within the same school. While much existing education research in sociology utilizes a social reproduction framework to understand inequalities in educational access and outcomes, this approach does not account for the constitutive role of both teachers and students. Teachers, individual students, and in some cases, classroom groups, are able to defy typical mechanisms of social reproduction by creating their own unique culture, and enacting norms and practices that position their small group as variant in terms of behavior and performance within their school organization.

The findings also counter the idea that there are “bad students” who solely interfere with classroom functioning and who will act out regardless of contextual factors. Specific students who engaged in disruptive behaviors or aggressive interactions with peers in one classroom behaved quite differently in another classroom. The finding that individual students behave differently in different small group settings is not surprising to educators. However, the mechanisms for producing these variations in behavior are typically attributed to factors such as student-teacher relationships, student interest in subject matter, or other isolated factors that do not consider group culture processes. By highlighting the role of individual students in shaping the idioculture of the classroom small group, this study joins existing work that views students as agentic and autonomous participants in constructing their daily social reality in classrooms.

Acknowledging that student behavior varies according to small group culture grants more agency to students as individual actors with unique cultural repertoires they

can invoke during various points in the school day. It suggests that targeted behavioral interventions, which typically take place at the level of individual students, should also be considered in conjunction with examination of the small group in which problematic behaviors are being enacted. The findings also challenge arguments that the teacher is in total control of classroom culture as the “manager” of his or her classroom (Allen 2010; Roland and Galloway 2002). Instead, all of the local factors associated with the development and understanding of local classroom idiocultures must be understood together in order to explain variations in classroom-based aggression. Therefore, to fully understand and reduce patterns of aggression in schools, the organizational culture, classroom idiocultures, and individual “cultural toolkits” must be explored and theorized in concert. This approach follows the logic of the “multi-tiered systems of support” frameworks that have been developed in the field of psychology to guide behavioral interventions at various levels of the school (Bradshaw 2013), while adapting the content of a framework to interrogate behavior through a sociological and cultural lens (rather than an applied behavioral analysis approach). These multi-level approaches reinforce prosocial behaviors as alternatives to negative behaviors, such as peer interpersonal aggression.

## BACKGROUND

### *Defining Aggressive Behaviors*

Aggressive behaviors among youth are major sources of concern to policymakers and school administrators, as they function as major impediments to student achievement (Putallaz et al. 2007). A number of policies and prevention programs have focused on the reduction of student victimization and improvement of overall school climate in order to

improve student experiences and outcomes (Doll, Song, and Siemers 2004; Olweus and Limber 1999). Specifically, public concern about bullying behavior among children and youth has increased in recent years in the wake of unprecedented acts of school violence and an alarming number of student suicides. These events have drawn attention to aggressive behavior not only for educators and researchers, but also for the criminal justice system. In studying aggression in this context, I expand the typical focus of study of interpersonal student dynamics in schools beyond the traditional definition of bullying, which depicts the behavior as an outcome of individual-level psychological or behavioral problems. This definition of bullying includes the requirements of a power differential between victim and aggressor, and that the aggressive behaviors are chronic and repeated in nature (Gladden et al., 2014; Olweus 1991). This definition is limiting because it fails to consider seriously those behaviors that are not chronic or do not include a power differential, although these types of aggression may be just as harmful and disruptive to learning as those meeting the traditional definition. I focus on the wider use of aggression in schools to address the limitations of previous work focusing only on bullying behavior, which fails to capture other forms of conflict in schools (Collins 2011; Paluck et al. 2016). Expanding the behaviors of interest beyond “bullying” to include the full range of youth interpersonal aggressive behaviors that affect young people in schools is the first step to improving our understanding of these behaviors and our ability to prevent various forms of victimization. Eliminating the use of the word bullying from surveys and interviews altogether will be an important step toward gathering data on a wider range of negative behaviors, and has been shown to increase reporting compared with tools that use the term (Kert et al. 2010).

In addition, studies using the traditional bullying definition rarely, if ever, acknowledge that children may experience a range of aggressive behaviors in diverse ways depending on the social contexts of their lives. I focus on more generalized forms of aggressive behavior in order to include a broader range of behaviors that I call peer aggression. For example, peer aggression includes ritualistic aggressive interactions between friends such as “playfighting,” without regard for intent to harm or a power imbalance between the parties involved. Other behaviors captured include forms of relational aggression, drama, physical forms of aggression, teasing and name-calling, destruction of property, and issuing threats.

#### *Consequences of Aggressive Behavior*

Victimization can take a serious toll on students in both the short term and long term, so it is important to understand how aggression impacts different communities. Studies confirm that an increased risk of suicide is among the many potential adverse consequences of peer victimization (Rigby 2003), which also include stress, anxiety, headaches, academic problems, and damage to one's self-perception (Boulton, Smith and Cowie 2010; Due et al. 2005; Dyer and Teggart 2007; Peskin et al. 2007; Nansel et al. 2001).

Given the range of negative outcomes associated with involvement in bullying, the role of schools and law enforcement agencies in preventing victimization have both been under scrutiny. Responses to aggressive behavior are heavily focused on deterrence, not prevention. Recently the paradigm has begun to shift to the exploration of the root causes of aggression and victimization in different schools through data-driven approaches to measuring and understanding school climate. While these initiatives, when

implemented, may help to understand whether these patterns are consistent across all types of schools, measuring climate only at the organizational level fails to address variation in aggressive behaviors across classrooms within schools.

At the same time, schools in some states, including New Jersey, have begun to “get tough” by working with law enforcement to investigate and punish cases of bullying, yet it is unclear whether the threat of punishment may actually cause students to adopt more covert strategies to avoid detection, such as engaging in cyber forms of aggression rather than visible forms in front of supervising adults. If such behavioral adaptation does take place, this would be highly problematic; previous studies have shown that as few as 10% of students seek help from a teacher when they are bullied (Kanetsuna and Smith 2002), often due to fears about how the teacher would respond (Newman et al. 2001). Therefore, students experiencing covert victimization and the potentially adverse conditions associated with it may not be able to receive adequate attention or assistance.

In addition to focusing on consequences of interpersonal aggression and victimization on individual wellbeing, public attention has also shifted to the ways aggressive peer interactions and relationships may negatively impact overall school and classroom functioning, which in turn may lead to unsatisfactory learning outcomes. Previous research has shown that students’ academic focus can be compromised when they are placed in classrooms with high levels of aggressive behavior and low academic proficiency, as may result from common practices of academic ability-level grouping or curriculum tracking (Barth et al. 2004). Disorderly classrooms have been linked with poor student achievement (Mitchell, Bradshaw, and Leaf 2010) and diminished student engagement and motivation (Anderson, Hamilton, and Hattie 2004; Skinner et al. 2009)

ranging from disaffection (Skinner et al. 2009) to the extreme of student resistance (McFarland 2001; 2004).

### *Academic and Aspirational Norms*

Currently, there is little research that explicitly looks at the connection between academic aspirations and aggressive behavior in any context (McCollum and Yoder 2011), but it is likely that students take cues from their school environment and classroom idiocultures about what is expected of them academically and socially (Carter 2005:168), and act accordingly. A recent study by Konald and Cornell (2015) supports this, as they found that schools with high academic expectations had lower levels of teasing and bullying at both the student and school levels. Students in schools and/or classrooms featuring lower expectations or sense of personal opportunity may form their future aspirations and adjust their expectations based on their “feel for the game” and sense of their imminent future (Bourdieu 1990). In this case, “feel for the game” may be students’ perceptions of how likely and expected they are to graduate high school, which is typically lower in low socioeconomic status communities, as well as the likelihood they will attend college, which may be taken for granted in higher socioeconomic status communities. Cues exist not only at the level of the school and its achievement culture, but also within specific classrooms’ idiocultures, in which both teachers’ and peers’ expectations of students may vary according to academic ability level or other distinguishing factors. The sense of what is possible for a student can be shaped at the organizational level of the school, as well as in relationship to the particular idiocultures of the classrooms to which students belong. In addition to norms about academic possibilities at the school level, informal social norms in some school environments may

lead to aggression being viewed as an appropriate method for gaining social status (Faris and Felmlee 2011; Milner 2006) or addressing perceived injustices (Fagan and Wilkinson 1998). For students whose sense of academic possibility is lowered, social goals and priorities may become more important. Engagement in aggression as either a victim or aggressor may also vary across sub-groups and settings, as youth navigate differing classroom-based idiocultures, and exercise agency in invoking their “cultural toolkit” (Swidler 1986) to balance the status demands and desires associated with their social and academic lives.

In considering variation in academic climate according to student subgroups, there are a number of studies focused on students with disabilities who receive services both inside and outside of the mainstream classroom. However, there is a huge gap in the literature when it comes to academic tracking and victimization. Very little research has examined differences across academic tracks from the special education or “resource” level, to mainstream “academic” track classrooms, to honors and advanced placement classes. Theoretically, it can be assumed that even in a school with a school-wide “college-for-all” mentality, the idioculture of honors and advanced placement classrooms is the most committed to ambitious aspirational norms. As a function of the shared understandings and expectations associated with an idioculture emphasizing high academic aspirations, students in these classrooms are theoretically most likely to refrain from visible aggressive behaviors, or to strategically displace them outside of the classroom. Both strategies reflect individuals utilizing their “cultural toolkits” and seeking to preserve their academic reputation with peers and teachers.

At the individual level, disruption to learning could jeopardize students' achievement and, in turn, affect their long-term aspirations via concrete mechanisms such as Grade Point Average (GPA) or Advanced Placement (AP) test scores, which are used in college admissions decisions. In addition, students in higher tracked classrooms would likely be the most concerned with avoiding getting into trouble and potentially receiving a mark on a permanent record that could be seen by college admissions officers. Students' behavioral strategies may become normalized as they uphold understandings of the classroom-based idioculture by ensuring that the maximum learning time is dedicated to mastering course materials, and that the classroom's shared function or objective is met. In lower tracked classrooms, the idioculture of the classroom could be less geared toward achievement culture. In some cases, individual students may be academically motivated, but may not have as robust a "cultural toolkit" to draw from in making behavioral choices regarding aggression. Alternatively, a students' "cultural toolkit" may not be aligned with the norms and values of schools, or most teachers, because of social class differences (Zeichner 2003).

Students in lower tracked classrooms may experience classroom idiocultures with less emphasis on high expectations and the urgency of classroom tasks, and may have been immersed in classroom idiocultures that normalize aggression as a feature of daily interaction. Students in lower tracked classes where the idioculture is only loosely built around academic status may maximize other areas of status attainment, such as social status attainment, due to recognition that their potential to rise in academic status is limited by their academic track. Therefore, some students in lower-tracked classrooms may be more willing to risk punishment if aggressive behaviors or interactions within the

classroom are seen as a gateway to higher social status (Milner 2004; Faris and Felmlee 2011). Using classroom observations, I discuss how classroom-based idiocultures shape aggressive behavior and lead to the differential likelihood of serious classroom disruptions involving aggression, as they vary across ability level tracks within a school and across school communities. Survey data provide additional information about the correlation between academic tracks and reported victimization in settings beyond the classroom.

Related to aspirational norms, school engagement is a construct in the education literature that has been viewed in recent work as a way to promote academic performance, and in this literature, classroom-level factors appear to play an important role in determining levels of student engagement and motivation (Fredricks et al. 2004; Patrick et al. 2007). School engagement is a result of achievement culture in a student's community, family, and school; it is also an individual construct related to self-identity, which may be influenced by academic ability level tracking and other forms of "labeling" that influence a student's role and status as a learner. In addition, engagement shapes and is shaped by classroom idiocultures and the extent to which aspirational norms are communicated at the local level. Prior work has shown that aspects of the classroom environment are particularly important in relationship to the engagement of at-risk students (Downer, Rimm-Kaufman, Pianta 2007; Hamre and Pianta 2005), though a major limitation of this body of research is that it has been conducted primarily with very young students (Elaesser, Gorman-Smith and Henry 2013). I explore how aspirational norms get enacted within classrooms grouped by different ability level in secondary

schools, and how they in turn shape engagement and motivation, which may reduce aggressive behaviors.

### *Disciplinary Norms and Practices*

Discipline has been studied by educational researchers as a component of school culture, and is also central to the sociological study of schools and small groups, or classrooms, within schools. Durkheim contended that elements of school culture such as discipline provided a critical moral education needed for a successful adult life (Arum and Velez 2012). While the rules governing educational institutions tend to be the same for all schools within a state, the ways in which local school districts incorporate and enforce federal or statewide rules or protections varies greatly in the individual disciplinary policies and student codes of conduct produced at the local level (Sacco et al. 2012). In addition, teachers differentially enforce the “official” rules, while at the same time developing local understandings and norms to informally maintain classroom order.

Many individual states have recently sought to deter and harshly punish various verbal and social forms of aggressive behavior in a way that is similar to the zero tolerance approaches that have been adopted toward dangerous physical forms of aggression including carrying weapons or physical fighting in school (Jones, 2013, Two wrongs 2012; Kupchik 2010). This has been achieved through state-level legislation that expands the role of the criminal justice system in managing serious forms of aggression that meet the definition of bullying as criminal conduct, and by creating or modifying existing criminal statutes to apply to whatever is defined at the state level as bullying (Sacco et al. 2012). As such, the changing legal interventions designed to combat aggression and criminalize bullying behavior may play an important role in affecting the

types of victimization students are exposed to in school. These interventions and formal rules may influence the culture within the school, the idiocultures of its classrooms, and the individual decision-making processes of students who may consider the potentially harsh consequences and be deterred by them. In addition to deterrence, it is possible that severe sanctions for aggressive behavior can lead to displacement and the development of strategies to avoid detection. As such, it is important to explore whether various forms of aggression are likely to take place in overt settings, in view of adults, or in covert settings, with the goal of avoiding punishment.

According to Arum (2003), there is a crisis of moral authority in public schools, which prevents the effective socialization of youth, as well as teaching and learning. Arum points to the institutional environment around schools at the level of the courts, following the granting of due process rights to students in *Goss v. Lopez (1975)* and the related expansion of school-based litigation. This has led students to develop a sense of legal entitlement and skepticism regarding the legitimacy of some school disciplinary practices. Additionally, according to Arum, an organizational legacy has formed in response to the contestation of school discipline that affects practices and culture. Arum (2003) explains a rationale for why school administrators are hesitant to enforce disciplinary codes aggressively in schools, which may trickle down to the level of teachers, who in turn realize that their disciplinary decisions or requests may not be upheld or supported at the administrative level. This realization on the part of teachers will greatly affect the ways that they communicate disciplinary and behavioral expectations within the classrooms. In turn, the resulting idiocultures shape the context for peer aggression as determined by students' perceptions of which behaviors will likely

be met with formal disciplinary action or informal sanctions. In addition, students' perceptions of school and teacher authority may greatly influence the functioning of schools (Preiss et al. 2016; Bryk and Schneider 2002) and trickle down to the level of classroom.

Similar to the concept of engagement in the education literature, the concept of school attachment, especially academic orientation of individual students, has been studied in relationship to discipline and misbehavior along with a range of academic and social outcomes (DiPrete, Muller, and Shaeffer 1981). Perceptions of disciplinary fairness have been found to influence school attachment (Preiss et al. 2016). For example, McFarland (2004) shows how perceived teacher unfairness can challenge perceptions of legitimacy. Students who believe in the legitimacy of schools and adults are more likely to follow the code of conduct and the directives of individual teachers (Preiss et al. 2016). DiPrete and colleagues (1981) found that students were better behaved in schools that are perceived as both strict and fair. Similarly, Gottfredson et al. (2004) found less student victimization in schools where students perceived fairness and the rules were clear. Students in these schools also identified unfair rules or enforcement as central to disciplinary problems in their school (Gottfredson et al. 2014). Downey and colleagues (2009) show how excessively punitive or unfair school environments are more prone to disorder and lower academic achievement. Lack of school attachment, as influenced by perceptions of discipline, has been connected to both misbehavior and poorer academic outcomes in general (Arum 2003; DiPrete, Muller, and Shaeffer 1981; Gottfredson et al. 2005). As such, I will consider the role of school-wide and classroom-based disciplinary norms, as well as students' perceptions of disciplinary fairness, clarity, and legitimacy, as

shaping the context for victimization in schools and classrooms via attachment. The extent to which students demonstrate school and classroom attachment may shape decisions regarding aggressive behavior.

Policies in education at the state and federal level often give the illusion of isomorphism in public educational settings, particularly through standardized testing and adherence to Common Core curriculum, although this is not always the case. Instead, each school operates with a particular institutional logic that shapes action on the part of all members of the organization. For example, the administration in Hughes, the lower income school under study emphasizes adherence to a strict cell phone ban as a means of establishing legitimacy. However, this approach often leads to a need for excessively harsh punishments when students refuse to hand over their most valuable possessions and are issued a suspension for insubordination. Some teachers at Hughes regularly and consistently enforced the cell phone ban because they knew they would have administrative support in doing so; others did not because they did not perceive the rule to be fair. At times, enforcement of the cell phone ban interrupted teaching and learning, or prevented teachers from addressing other forms of aggression unfolding in the classroom. At times, teachers who had no disciplinary recourse with students who were persistently aggressive towards others would seize opportunities to punish a student for the cell phone, because they explained that they could not count on administrative backup for other behavioral issues.

In the higher income school, Hilltop High School, an emphasis is placed on meeting the externally imposed accountability requirements of standardized testing as a means of gaining legitimacy. At the organizational level, the verbalized mantra that the

school is filled with “good kids” gets reinforced by issuing a level of responsibility in students. An element of this demonstrated trust is the fact that a cell phone ban was reversed the year I entered the school, permitting students to use phones any time, as long as they are not walking in the hallway. In Hilltop, teachers rarely have to remind students not to use their cell phones during class time because almost all available instructional time is spent directly or indirectly preparing for mastering core content and preparing to demonstrate proficiency during standardized testing. Teachers continuously remind students of the connections of their daily objectives to future course placement, preparation for graduation, and college readiness. These persistent narratives are what Friedland and Alford (1991) termed “vocabularies of motive.” Students who violate the group cultural norms by disrupting content delivery in any way typically only require a verbal warning to return to the normalized routines of a classroom within this type of idioculture.

The institutional pressure to perform well on end of year standardizing testing prompts teachers in Hilltop to act in a way that maximizes class time and invests in students, leaving less unstructured time and opportunities for aggressive behaviors to unfold in classrooms. Aggressive behaviors that contravene the group’s objective are thus met with disciplinary enforcement if necessary, although students typically correct their behaviors after a verbal warning from a teacher or their peers. Therefore, the institutional logics shaping classroom norms and discipline in turn affect and become a part of idiocultures in the same classrooms. In Hughes, the lower income school, I found through observations that teachers’ uses of class time and associated aspects of idioculture vary according to level of the course students are taking, and I witnessed a

greater number and general severity of overt aggressive behaviors and interactions across all types of classrooms as compared with the higher income school. The enforcement of rules about various types of aggressive behavior also vary across institutional settings and classroom idiocultures, similarly structuring the range of aggressive behaviors that students engage in both inside and outside of the classroom environments.

Youth are able to strategically navigate the changing legal context of schooling as it relates to aggressive behaviors. I seek to understand how perceptions of formal disciplinary enforcement and informal behavioral norms and expectations at the classroom level influence decisions youth make about engaging in aggressive behaviors. Taken together, how the formal policies and informal routines to prevent victimization are enacted and understood within classroom idiocultures may moderate students' vulnerability to victimization in various contexts within and outside of their schools. It is likely that the implementation of formal disciplinary measures and involvement of law enforcement in dealing with aggression may vary across schools, as will informal sanctions at the level of classroom idioculture. The variation in disciplinary procedures, norms, and expectations in the schools and classrooms I studied lead to the differential patterns of aggression between schools that I observed in survey data and observations.

In addition to differences in perceived disciplinary response, students may experience differential patterns of victimization due to classroom idiocultures as they relate to achievement culture and future goal orientation. Classrooms with strong achievement expectations and norms of successful cooperation fostered a shared understanding that behaviors that lead to disruption and disciplinary issues are undesirable. Classrooms with less clear achievement orientation and less consistent

response to aggressive behaviors typically featured greater exposure to aggression. At the same time, the agency of individual actors within these classrooms played a role in situations where the stakes involved the potential use of discipline. Individual students who strive to succeed academically and who are invested in personal future aspirations may invoke their “cultural toolkits” to avoid getting in trouble regardless of the potential status benefits of aggression (Faris and Felmlee 2011). In doing so, they may deviate from the dominant classroom idioculture in a way that illustrates individual agency, while at the same time potentially shaping and changing the classroom idioculture through action. Therefore, if consistent sanctions for aggression (particularly aggression meeting the definition of bullying) exist in a school organization and are enforced at the classroom level, they should encourage risk aversion, particularly for youth whose academic reputation and potentially future aspirations could be threatened if they receive those sanctions. Aggressive behaviors may leave a mark on one’s permanent record and foreclose future opportunities such as attending an elite college, particularly under a law in New Jersey requiring that schools investigate allegations of bullying. For some youth the threat of harsh punishment may not be a successful deterrent, and other youth may navigate punishment by engaging in aggressive behaviors outside of adult view, leaving victims helpless and giving the illusion that punishment works.

The grounded nature of this study revealed situations in which adults did not invoke formal disciplinary codes or even use informal sanctions to address peer interpersonal behavior, and often this varied by the idioculture of individual classrooms. The primary role of classroom idioculture in shaping the use of discipline was evident even in comparisons of different classrooms taught by the same teacher. At times, the

same teacher would differentially invoke the use of sanctions in a way that reinforced the classroom's idioculture. These differences in enforcement in turn shaped variation in exposure to aggression. This study can provide insight into variation across schools, classrooms, and sub-groups of students when it comes to following school rules and avoiding sanctions, painting a detailed picture of how aggression unfolds in the face of expanded legal interventions prevent it.

### *Everyday Practices in Classrooms*

The terms classroom climate (Wilson, Pianta, and Stuhlman 2007), classroom environment (Fraser 2000) and classroom social climate (Allodi 2010; Patrick, Kaplan and Ryan 2011) have all been used in the education literature to describe the micro-climate within an individual classroom. In this study, I employ the concept of idioculture to contribute to a sociological understanding of how the classroom environment enacts elements of broader organizational culture in unique ways, via routines, rituals, and other everyday practices. Specifically, I will focus on procedural routines and rituals (for example, those set up by the teacher to ensure that tasks are completed in an organized and timely fashion) and interactional routines and rituals (i.e., how teachers and students interact with one another, and the type of language and discourse used). Classroom observations reinforced the importance of everyday practices in shaping aggressive behaviors. While everyday practices were strongly related to the academic ability level of the classroom, I observed cases in which lower ability classes exhibited a combination of structured everyday practices tied to strong aspirations, reducing observed aggression.

Previous work has found that bullying is more likely to occur in disorganized school and classroom settings. Newer teachers may initially be less prepared to carefully

plan the detail-level management of time, student workflow, and other aspects of classroom life including administrative tasks, curriculum, and materials (Duck 2007). A critical component of classroom management, in addition to the development of meaningful content and use of effective teaching strategies, is the employment of strategies for “organizing groups, monitoring and pacing classroom events, and reacting to misbehavior” (Borko and Putnam 1995:41). The effectiveness of instruction is an organizing structure preventing distracting or negative behaviors. Teachers who take a learner-centered approach establish clear learning goals, motivate students to achieve them, and assist students in monitoring their own progress are more likely to reduce opportunities for negative interactions in the classroom (Barbetta, Norona, and Bicard 2005:17). Roland and Galloway (2002) found that classroom management was related to whether bullying took place, with the social structure of student relationships playing a mediating role. At times, a student may react to unclear directives or routines by challenging a teacher, which could lead to reciprocal forms of aggression between both parties (i.e. a sarcastic exchange). Further work is needed to explore the relationship between classroom management practices and patterns of aggression (Allen 2010). I contribute to existing knowledge by providing a grounded perspective on the types of classroom management procedures and routines that consistently are related to observed acts of student aggression.

Classroom idiocultures are also shaped by routines and rituals associated with interpersonal interactions. These interactions may take place between staff, teachers and their students, and between peers in a classroom setting. In terms of teacher-student interactional norms, previous research has indicated that children who have negative

relationships with their teachers are more likely to have problems related to school engagement and academic achievement (Baker 2006; Birch and Ladd 1997; Hamre and Pianta 2001; Stipek and Miles 2008). As such, much of the focus of both research and interventions is placed on improving teacher practice and the quality of teacher-student relationships, and the literature suggests that students who like and respect their teachers more generally behave better in the classroom (Brackett et al. 2011). However, the question remains of whether the teacher-student relationship is as strong of a driving factor in determining behavior as students get older and enter high school. While the role of the teacher as the leader and manager of the classroom is always influential in shaping the classrooms' idioculture, there is a dearth of understanding related to the differences in norms of peer interactions and how these become routinized and ritualized in a classroom setting. It is likely that teachers, despite the similar training and skillsets they bring to classroom, are confronted with varying challenges to influencing idiocultural norms of peer interaction depending upon the grade level, subject area, and other factors related to local norms of peer interactions.

The function of teacher-student relationships on classroom dynamics has been widely studied, yet the role of peer-to-peer interactional norms in shaping aggressive behaviors has only recently been closely examined via social network influences (Ennett and Faris 2012; Paluck and Shepherd 2012) though they may be critical to understanding behavioral decisions of older students. Belonging and social support, which may be as related to peer relationships as with relationships to adults for older students, have been shown to be predictors of school engagement (Deci and Ryan 1985; Wentzel 1997). Research has demonstrated that students who are accepted by peers are more likely to

succeed academically, whereas those who are rejected by peers are more likely to struggle in the classroom (Rowe et al. 2010).

This study will provide an important contribution to the literature by exploring the role of peer interactional norms and routines among students as a feature of classroom idioculture, which in turn shapes the context for aggression at the classroom level. In chapter 2, I introduce the two school sites for the ethnographic study, along with describing the institutional and socio-cultural conditions in education that impact the everyday operation of school organizations in New Jersey during the period of study. In particular, I document the legal landscape as it relates to anti-bullying efforts, policies, and procedures and the implications for the two high schools under study, as these relate to the context for aggression. I also describe my mixed-methods approach, beginning with the data collection process and analysis techniques. In chapter 3, I use the descriptive findings from the SCUBA Survey to illustrate school-wide trends in the two high schools. Specifically, I report on data related to the types, extent, and locations of reported victimization. I also compare students' self-reported behaviors and perceptions about their environments, as generated from original scales on topics including college planning behaviors, investment in social and academic goals, the perceived importance of being "popular," and the perceived normalcy of getting in trouble. I also introduce and describe the characteristics of the 29 classrooms observed within the two schools, and generally describe the behaviors and patterns observed within them.

While the survey data on self-reported victimization rates are similar across schools, the forms of aggression that students report exhibit significant differences in the format, content, and where they take place inside or outside of the schools. These

differences and nuances in how these behaviors take place inside of the school are best captured through in-depth ethnographic study. In Chapter 4, I use observations and interviews to describe differences in exposure to aggressive behavior at the classroom level. I find that these differences are due in part to the school organization's cultural beliefs pertaining to academic and aspirational norms, combined with the aspirational norms and expectations embodied in the local cultural understandings of the classroom group via idioculture. I discuss how adults communicate college-going expectations at the organizational level through signage, programs, and other events, and how teachers reinforce these norms at the level of classroom-based idioculture through explicit messaging about future goals and college-going behaviors and how they connect to daily objectives and tasks. Through direct reference to future benchmarks in schooling, classroom group objectives, and individual aspirations, teachers both help set and capitalize on these aspirational norms to manage classroom behavior and influence decision-making at the group and individual levels, as described in interviews and observations.

In chapter 5, I examine the role of school discipline and enforcement norms as shaping behaviors at the school level, as well as at the level of the group in the classroom. I discuss observed differences in teachers' enforcement of the rules and development of informal practices for managing behavior. I use interview findings to discuss how students in these classrooms describe how informed other students are regarding the "official" rules and informal norms about aggressive behavior, how legitimate they view official rules to be, and how the rules and informal norms both contribute to behavioral adaptations to avoid detection or punishment. I pay particular attention to the informal

disciplinary norms which develop at the classroom level, short of the invocation of official policies or the use of punishment, in which both peers and the teacher(s) invoke locally shared understandings and expectations to regulate others.

In chapter 6, I further consider the everyday, routinized interactions of members of the classroom group (teachers, support teachers, and students) in light of the aspirational and disciplinary norms in the school. I focus on both procedural routines and rituals that are tied to the use of class time, use of space in the classroom, and the types of tasks presented (for example, individual or group work; guided versus independent work). I focus also on the interactional norms between teachers and students, and amongst peers, including appropriate forms of communication, language, and discourse. I consider how these factors, in addition to the mechanisms discussed in prior chapters, shape classroom attachment, which in turn shapes behavioral decision making for students. I take into account the overall imperatives and functions of the classroom group as a whole, for example, the universal goal to do well on high-stakes standardized testing. I examine how classroom-based idiocultures vary according to classroom compositional factors, including the subject area, the number of students, teacher characteristics, the method of learning, and the ability levels or general placement level of students in the classroom. These factors both shape and are shaped by the classroom groups' shared routines and rituals, thus also defining the context for aggression, disruption, and distraction in the classroom.

In Chapter 7, I discuss the implications of my findings and policy recommendations. Specifically, I will provide guidance on the development of more inclusive measures of school climate and culture, which could provide data to drive

school improvement efforts. This includes creating conceptual domains and items related to the key factors found to be related to aggressive behavior, as well as instruments and protocols for collecting data at the classroom level. I will also provide a brief summary of aligned evidence-based school climate strategies and intervention models. Future work should explore the potential promise of bringing together ecological or multi-tiered approaches from the field of psychology with a sociological perspective that situates these tiers within a grounded understanding of structural factors shaping the context of student behaviors.

## Chapter 2: Background and Methods

### CONTEXTS OF THE STUDY

As I walk up the stairwell on my first day visiting Hughes High School, escorted by a uniformed, tall and muscular school resource officer mumbling inaudibly into a walkie-talkie, three students come flying around the bend of the staircase from above. Two male students chase another male who is about three stairs ahead of him, taking two to three steps at a time. The student being chased bangs into me, causing me to wobble backwards but catch myself with the railing, and as a result he misses a step and falls down three steps onto his side. “Sorry, Miss!” he yells as he springs to his feet and continues to run. The two students pursuing him scream out, “Bitch!” and rapidly turn and run back up the staircase. The school resource officer bellows “Hey!” in a deep voice that echoes through the stairwell. He turns around and says “Animals, a bunch of animals. Use the elevators when you can.”

Before I can respond, three females who were convened on the stairwell a flight above us giggle and disperse back to their classrooms, one of them crossing our path as we reach the second floor. “Aaliyah, do you ever go to class?” the officer says to a student with whom he seems very familiar. She stares back at him without blinking, sucks her teeth, and keeps walking, as slowly as humanly possible, towards the hallway and classrooms, slowly sliding her phone into her back pocket. The school has a strict rule that cell phones must be kept out of view. Cell phone use could result in a warning or more often, immediate confiscation. The officer walks me the rest of the way to the main

office, where I wait to meet with administrators. During the meeting, I will finalize the list of classrooms I will visit for the year, and seek the approval of the teacher's union representative to observe teachers in their classrooms. I feel a bit shaken thinking about how I am lucky I didn't get hurt on the stairs, and get my first inclination of what it may be like to be a student in the hallways of the school building.

My first day in Hilltop High School was years before the ethnographic component of the study began, as the school served as a site for the pre-pilot and pilot of the School Climate Understanding and Building Aspirations Survey. Upon entry to the school building, there is a small security desk staffed by a faculty member who does so as one of their "duty" periods. The desk features a sign in sheet, and visitors are usually provided with cheerful instructions and a printed pass labeled with their destination. A young physical education teacher with a wide smile issues my pass, and directs me down the adjacent hallway of awards and trophies to the main office. Similar to Hughes, aside from the main entrance all other doors to enter the building are locked as part of state regulations to prevent incidents of school violence. The hallways in the front of the building are very quiet and it is rare to see a student in the hallway at all during class periods. Bathrooms remain unlocked all day so that students may use them during the change between classes if they wish to do so, and most students opt to use them outside of class time.

On my very first day in the building, the principal and vice principal give me a tour of the building. They highlight the display cases filled with trophies and newspaper clippings detailing athletic, academic, and service-related achievements within the community. Students passing in the hallways walk in a relatively orderly fashion, keeping

traffic to the right side of the hallway and walking slowly on the crowded stairwells. Occasionally students yell or screech to get each other's attention, and some reach across students passing by to get a high five or fist bump from a friend going in the opposite direction. Couples (including same sex couples) hold hands, hug, and/or kiss. Some students stand off to the side of traffic against the lockers, waiting to meet up with friends coming out of classrooms to walk and talk with them. Occasionally students walk and text, or use their cell phones by their lockers. Cell phones are permitted to be used in this school, although there is a loosely enforced rule that students are not allowed to text while walking in the halls to avoid collisions. Students observed violating the rule are sometimes given a gentle warning by staff members. During transitions students graze, bump, or rustle against one another due to the crowding of the main hallways, particularly at a main juncture near the cafeteria. At this congested part of the school, students and teachers move at a crawl, shoulder to shoulder, in one large mass as they attempt to turn a corner or go straight through to the other side of the hallway. The jostling and closeness is unfamiliar and uncomfortable to me at first, but after a few days I am used to the bottleneck and follow the stream like one fish in a school of fish making a turn.

### *Profiles of the Selected High Schools*

I selected high schools for this study because they differentiate students into classrooms by ability level. By examining homogenous groups by ability, I can consider how school-wide culture and norms are reinforced and enacted within classrooms. Classrooms are the places where students spend the majority of their academic day, and labeling classrooms by ability level can imbue the group with a particular set of

expectations and norms. These expectations and norms may get enacted in ways that correspond with the ability level and perceived shared purpose, or goal, of the group. Students in high school rotate through a variety of subject areas, taught by different staff members and grouped with a different set of peers. The high school setting allowed me to observe a range of classrooms featuring different groups of students working towards the same objective (mastery of course content) within different academic tracks. In some cases, I was able to observe the same teacher teaching two sections of the same course (i.e. 9<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts) at two different levels. I was also able to observe the same students in multiple classrooms, engaging with different groupings of peers and teachers, either within the same academic tracking level or in a different track. Observing how a student differentially employed his or her “cultural toolkit” within a given classroom highlights the role of classroom idioculture in shaping aggressive behavior.

Two high schools serve as the main research sites for this study. They were selected because they represent a lower income and higher income community in New Jersey. Prior studies have revealed gaps between lower and higher income schools in material resources including funding (Friedlander et al. 2014), and in human capital resources, such as the quality of teaching and curriculum (Darling-Hammond 2013) and gaps in students’ cultural capital, for example, college planning and preparation skills (Devine Eller 2012). However, the quality of a school’s overall environment or “school climate” is seldom considered a “resource” in setting the stage for the learning process. As such, the connections between SES, school resources, and variation in school climate are not yet well understood. This comparative study explores the role of SES in

relationship to the overall school culture and individual students' experiences of aggressive behaviors.

Gaining access to schools was challenging. The main barriers to my entry in the field were: 1) the newly enacted Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act (implemented in 2011); and 2) uncertainty regarding my presence (particularly whether I would be considered a mandated reporter of bullying behaviors) and my data (in terms of discoverability in legal cases or investigations). Political debates over teacher evaluation methods and performance-based merit pay also made some teachers hesitant to allow my presence in their classrooms.

Over the course of about three years, I approached twenty-seven high schools with an invitation to participate in my original school climate survey. The School Climate Understanding and Building Aspirations (SCUBA) Survey is designed to measure patterns of victimization and elements of school culture in secondary schools. Dr. Wilcox, the principal at Hilltop High School, agreed to meet with me after being referred by a professional contact. Dr. Wilcox finished his own educational doctorate at my institution and described himself as a "research and data nerd." He could see value in collecting school climate data, which I used to offer consultation and staff training. Eventually, the superintendent would mandate that another high school in the same regional school district be given access to similar services, including the survey. Having the opportunity to compare Hilltop to a school with nearly identical composition allowed me to recognize and support the role of some factors (i.e. SES, racial composition), while noticing how variation in particular cultural mechanisms could shift outcomes (i.e. school-specific student norms, school-wide narratives).

To find a similar comparison school, I consulted the ranking system used in the District Factor Group (DFG), which is the socioeconomic classification system used for schools in New Jersey. The DFG system was developed by the New Jersey Department of Education in 1975 to compare performance on statewide assessments across demographically similar districts. The DFG is a measure of a community's relative SES and takes into account factors including educational attainment of adults, occupation status, unemployment rate, percentage of individuals in poverty, and median family income. The categories, from lowest to highest, range from A-J. Hilltop is classified as one of 103 school districts in the "I" category (the second highest), which indicates that overall it is one of the highest SES communities in the state.

I created a list of high schools in the "B" classification (the second lowest category) as a target comparison, and then eliminated schools that varied in size classification (according to enrollment). Hughes High School was one of two schools in the "B" categorization list that responded to my recruitment tools and ultimately participated in the SCUBA Survey. As one of the 67 school district in the "B" range, Hughes obtains less funding through local taxes, but is excluded from the list of 40 schools in the "A" category that historically received supplemented funding through classification as an Abbott district (following the *Abbott v. Burke* decision ordering the state to fund the poorest districts at the same level as the wealthiest). As such one could argue that the district Hughes is located in is among the more disadvantaged school districts in the state, as it was barely below the threshold for additional state assistance under the Abbott designation and did not benefit from associated resources.

The willingness of school leaders to respond to recruitment materials was informed by various factors, including legislation focused on student behavior such as the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights Act, which requires annual school climate surveys among other interventions. The law will be described further in a later section, but it is important to note that many practitioners in the state regarded this legislation as an “unfunded mandate.” Even though the appointments of anti-bullying specialists and interventions written into the law are designed to be at no cost to schools, there are disparities in the resources schools can bring to bear to improve overall climate and aid in the prevention of what are defined as acts of bullying. A comprehensive prevention strategy may include hosting pricy speakers or assemblies for students, or purchasing evidence-based bullying prevention programs to be used school-wide.

These interventions are not possible in schools without access to abundant resources, but ultimately, all schools are held accountable for anti-bullying efforts through a self-assessment and accountability process under the law. The availability of a no-cost survey, school safety team consultations, and staff trainings appealed to the guidance department at Hughes High School as a way to outsource the additional responsibilities placed on guidance counselors under the law. These counselors were already facing a range of typical demands and serious needs among students experiencing things like family instability, exposure to trauma, and homelessness at higher rates than their counterparts at schools like Hilltop. They also viewed the process of collecting data and using it to drive decisions to be advantageous for future grant applications. These grants were needed to attempt to fill the gap in funding that prohibited the school from bringing in costly, but potentially needed, resources and supports. In the next sections, I

will describe the demographics and school-wide characteristics of the two schools that ultimately gave permission for me to conduct my research.

### *Hughes High School*

Entering each of the surrounding communities of the two high schools under study offers very different experiences. To get to Hughes High School, I take a major highway to an exit approaching the industrial section of New Jersey. It is this highway's stretch of billowing smokestacks, refineries, and oil drums that gives the whole state its reputation for being less than green (despite its nickname as the Garden State). Hughes Borough is about five square miles in size and has a total population of about 20,000 residents. All residents of the borough are districted to the local high school. However, on the higher SES side of town (where the greatest concentration of white residents lives), many families opt to send their children to private parochial schools outside of the town, particularly at the high school level. According to the American Community Survey about 20% of residents in Hughes Borough who are under 18 live below the poverty line. The high school serves 70% free or reduced-price lunch. The borough's poorest residents live in a low-income housing project called Zinc. At the same time, a high-rent luxury apartment building is sprouting up on the same side of town, fueling efforts to make the borough attractive to young, childless professionals who commute to New York City.

Off-duty New York City taxicabs are a common sight on the streets of Hughes Borough, and on clear days the city skyline is visible in the distance when one exits the main highway to enter the town. The town has a small, urban-industrial feel, with a traditional business district and a major shopping center where the major highway meets the main street. Although it is not apparent to a first-time visitor, there is an invisible line

dividing the town into the wealthier, predominantly white side with single family homes, and the side closer to the school building, which is generally less affluent and more racially diverse. Situated between the borough's two distinct sides is a series of strip malls. These include a large chain grocery store that employs a number of students from the high school, along with a restaurant featuring halal food and bright blinking lights, a Wendy's, a chain drug store, and some other storefronts. This is a major shopping area in the town, with a smaller, run down main street located near the government complex on the other side of town.

The streets of the borough are typically filled with people walking, particularly in the mornings. Many of those walking are children, wearing backpacks and the school uniforms required at the one local middle school that feeds directly into Hughes High School. Others are older school-aged children walking to the high school, in many cases long after the school day has already officially begun. Often these students do not carry backpacks, an indication that they may not have transported materials home to do homework. Adult men and women are also visible walking on the streets in the mornings and at times, during the day. The population of 1,050 students at Hughes is diverse. The school is about 15% white, 25% black, 40% Latino, and 20% Asian (mainly comprised of Southeast Asian students)<sup>2</sup>. Most students come to school in sneakers, jeans, and t-shirts, sweaters, or sweatshirts depending on the weather. Many students walk to school, and a considerable number do not wear coats or jackets, even in the coldest winter months. A few students, mostly white female juniors, carry Michael Kors handbags to carry their

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<sup>2</sup> The source of students' demographic data for both schools for the 2014-2015 school year is GreatSchools.org. Percentages have been rounded to protect confidentiality.

books. Through observed conversation I also learn these bags serve as signifiers of a students' SES.

The school building stands along the busy main street, with a large, well-manicured courtyard in front. A large, old cement football stadium is visible in the back sports fields. Private homes surround the school on all sides, along with some businesses including a small bodega, a gas station, a convenience store, and a barber shop. Parents dropping students off in front of school have to pull over and unload quickly, as the main street is the only available drop off zone, and street parking near the school is sparse and restricted to surrounding residential areas. Crossing guards stand on each corner to assist students in crossing, as cars exceeding the speed limit often fail to yield to pedestrians.

At Hughes, the bell rings at 7:55 a.m. as a warning, and again at 8:00 a.m. to signal the start of Period 1. In an effort to crack down on lateness, the school instituted a policy by which latecomers have to wait in the cafeteria rather than reporting to their first period classroom. On an average day, a steady line of tardy students enters the school building between 8:00 a.m. and the end of first period at 8:46 a.m. The line moves slowly as students display and scan their school identification badges as a record of their lateness. On most days, the cafeteria holds over 100 students who arrived late and were not permitted to join their peers for instruction. Most of the students in this situation speak quietly to one another or lay their heads down, unless the supervising adult happens to permit otherwise banned cell phones, or doesn't notice that they are using them. Anyone entering the school building, including these late-coming students, has to pass by a security desk populated by four to six school resource officers at any given time. Most of the resource officers are retired police officers or correctional officers. The

group includes two black men, an older white man, a Latino man, and two black women. Visitors to the school must sign in and be escorted to their destination. The main office of the school is located on the second floor of the building, tucked in a corner.

The building itself is a typical urban high school, with the majority of facilities housed in an 85-year-old building, and a smaller new extension. While the cafeteria boasts two large plasma screen TVs that are usually tuned in to ESPN during lunch periods, the televisions are often not in working order. The downstairs hallways are decorated with murals depicting diverse students interacting. Tall red lockers line most hallways, mirroring the school colors and the “Bulldog” mascot. The school building is three stories in the older wing with a square configuration. The second floor is home to the main office, guidance counselors’ offices, and a small library, among other classrooms. There is one no-frills gymnasium with a few red sports banners or school insignia, mostly championship banners from the 1980’s and 1990’s. Across from the gym are a very worn wrestling room and weight-lifting room that are used for overflow for physical education activities on days when the weather does not allow for outdoor activities.

In Hughes, regardless of time of day, the hallways are never completely empty or quiet. Students are often walking to class or back from bathrooms. It is normal for students to peer into the windows of classroom doors, to bang randomly on doors or lockers, to stop frequently in the hallway and walk slowly back to class, to take the long routes, or even to visit the classrooms where friends are located to signal that they should also ask for a pass and join them. At times students discretely use their cell phones to arrange meetings with their friends during these bathroom breaks, which often lead to

loud conversation, arguing, running, or other activities in the hallways. In some cases, students are brazen enough to walk into and interrupt classrooms during instruction, and to sit down or call out to encourage a friend to join them in the hallway.

One or more of the school resource officers are tasked with circulating throughout the hallways at all times, but students use their phones to warn others about the locations of the officers in order to facilitate their continued opportunity to socialize outside of the classroom. Snapchat is often used to coordinate student rendezvous during class time and to avoid detection by sharing the whereabouts of security officers in real time. The school uses and prominently discusses a system of closed circuit cameras patrolling the hallways, and students can see the active screens in view by approaching the security desk in the front of the school from behind. While the students are aware of the cameras, they don't often discuss them overtly. Teachers sometimes remind students that the cameras are recording before they leave for bathroom breaks, but the administration reports that many of them are not actually in working order. However, in some cases their footage has been used to aid investigations into bullying or fighting by providing visual evidence.

Hughes offers students four Advanced Placement options, A.P. Biology, A.P. Statistics, A.P. World History, and A.P. Calculus, along with some opportunities to earn course credit through the local county college. In addition, Honors courses are offered for sophomore math classes and above, U.S. History, and Language Arts. Most honors courses require summer projects, although in my first weeks in the classroom I learn that not all students actually complete them before returning. The school supports the following athletic teams: softball (girls), baseball (boys), track and field (boys and girls),

basketball (boys and girls), soccer (boys and girls), wrestling (boys), tennis (girls) bowling (boys and girls) and football (boys). Football attracts the strongest school and community-wide interest and support. A graduate of the Hughes football program had a successful college career and now plays in the National Football League, and bolsters the community's pride by returning semi-annually to the school for events and to support the program. The school's range of offerings and supports fail to engage all students. During the school year observed, 27 students officially dropped out, with most dropouts occurring in 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> grade.

Hughes High School is partnered with a county-wide non-profit organization called Journeys, which delivers on-site counseling services, health services, support groups, and recreation opportunities. Over one-third of the students participate in some form of individual, group, or family counseling through the on-site center. The location of the program within the hallways of the school enables the center to reinforce and contribute to the formation of culture and norms of behavior across the school building in important ways, which will be discussed in the subsequent chapters. The availability of Journeys also enables students to pursue more therapeutic and restorative options than disciplinary measures in some cases, and begins the process of equipping students in development social-emotional skills that will inform their "cultural toolkits" when it comes to their decisions about behavior.

The principal of Hughes is Mr. Rizzo, a white male in his fifties who is a solidly built man of average height. He has curly hair, deep set eyes, and a distinct manner of speaking in a slow and methodical way, in a voice that is deep but occasionally squeaky. The few times I visit him in his office he appears exhausted and overwhelmed. He is

passionate about serving the students in the school, and very candid regarding the challenges the community is facing. The school has two female assistant principals, a white woman in her fifties and a Latina in her thirties that some students had as a teacher in the middle school prior to attending the high school. Students regarded her as a nice teacher and were generally pleased she was working as an administrator, although they questioned on occasion whether she was capable of being strict enough. This perception encouraged her to crack down severely on cell phone possession, often attempting confiscations without warnings, which led to observed cases of student insubordination and suspension. She replaced a former administrator who was convicted of a crime and sent to prison.

As noted, the school day at Hughes begins at 8:00 a.m. Morning announcements occur during the last few minutes of the first period, beginning with a special needs student reading the Pledge of Allegiance. Depending on the classroom, some students stand for the pledge, while others remain seated or talk through it. Hughes uses block scheduling, which means students follow two schedules of classes on alternating days, allowing for double or block periods of 46 minutes each. All Mathematics and Language Arts classes meet for a double block period (92 minutes) every other day, as do most core content classes. Enrichment classes meet for a single 46-minute period, every day. The school day ends at 2:37, typically with no announcements; just a shrill bell and the sounds of students clamoring into the hallways. In some classrooms, including those I observed, students hang behind for a few minutes or more to socialize with their teacher or get extra help.

*Hilltop Central High School*

Hilltop Central High School is located about 45 miles west of Hughes. The trip to Hilltop is a longer car ride from the university, but one that gets more rural and hilly as the drive progresses. The drive turns from tree-lined highway to smaller highways dotted with large farms. I pass miles of farms before taking another, yet smaller highway, where the high school is located. The school is set off by about half a mile from the nearest residential and business areas, on a small hill overlooking expansive fields and trees. The view from the school grounds and many of its classrooms extends into the hills of neighboring Pennsylvania, with a large church steeple in the distance.

Almost all of the students at Hilltop live far enough from the building to qualify for bussing. Many students use the busses, while others opt to be dropped off by a parent or drive in themselves if they are old enough. Those who are bussed to the school enter the building through a side entrance; they walk directly into the building, because there is nowhere else to go within walking distance before the school day begins. In the front of the school, there is a long driveway feeding into to a circular driveway by the entrance. Parents, typically driving very high-end cars, can pull up directly in front of the main entrance, where students unload, often toting backpacks busting at the seams, gym bags, instrument cases, large projects, sports equipment and other materials.

There are large parking lots with ample spaces and clearly marked visitor's spots off to the side of the building, and the school is surrounded by pristinely kept athletic practice fields on one side, and a large, new football stadium on the other. The light posts around the school feature new banners in the school's royal blue and yellow colors, with an image of the Hilltop "Warriors" mascot. After the warning bell, the circular driveway

in front of the school is a ghost town save for one or two latecomers being dropped off by their parents. These students typically jump out of the vehicles and run into the building at a frantic pace. Sometimes, after school has begun, parents leave their keys in their idling cars outside while bringing in the homework, lunch bag, or gym clothing their child left home by mistake.

According to public data, the student population is about 90% white, 2% black, 3% Latino, and 5% Asian. Hilltop serves a total of eight sending communities as a regional school, with an enrollment of 1,700 students. About 3% of students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. At this school, the Michael Kors handbags carried by the select few at Hughes are commonly carried, along with other high-end brands of a more preppy variety. Vineyard Vines, J. Crew, Brooks Brothers, and Vera Bradley are among the most popular brands. One of the most common wardrobe staples of male and female students at Hilltop is a college sweatshirt, often retrieved on a college visit, or representing the school a parent attended or a sibling attends. The types of schools represented vary but are typically recognizable, and in the top 50 of college rankings. It is also very common to see a variety of garments featuring the school's mascot and colors. While most students wear jeans to school, yoga pants and sweatpants are common, especially among students who are exhausted from the demands of rigorous coursework, homework, extracurricular activities, and daily sports practices or competitions. As some students would explain, comfortable clothing is sometimes a visible status symbol of the rigors a student faces in his or her academic and extracurricular schedules, signifying that they got little rest the night before.

On game days, athletes wear the shirt or jersey portion of their uniform to class to reinforce pride and school spirit. The school has a robust athletic program, and students can participate in: soccer (boys and girls); field hockey (girls); cross country (boys and girls); volleyball (girls); tennis (boys and girls); football (boys); track and field (boys and girls); cheerleading; gymnastics; basketball (boys and girls); fencing (boys and girls); winter track (boys and girls); wrestling (boys); swimming (boys and girls); lacrosse (boys and girls); baseball (boys); softball (girls); and golf (boys and girls). The school's web site notes that about 70% of students are involved in athletics. The wide range of sports offered prepares students to potentially obtain scholarships and play in the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and many graduates do. The more expensive to play and less frequently offered sports (such as golf, fencing, or gymnastics) means that students from Hilltop have a competitive advantage in getting recruited early to play these sports (often on scholarship) in college. Students at schools like Hughes do not get to build skills in similar programs during their high school careers.

The school's website features a detailed course selection guide with recommended course sequences to prepare for the STEM college path, descriptions of 46 electives offered on a range of topics, and a suggested visual arts sequence. The school offers courses such as "Business and Sports Management" and "Business Law" through the Business Education department, with descriptions that state "students will learn to retire a millionaire." The guide indicates that student placement in terms of tracking is determined by performance in a given subject area. In order to move up a level, from "Focus" to College Preparatory (CP), CP to Honors, or Honors to AP, the student must have an "A" or a "B" with a teacher's recommendation. In order to maintain a level, the

student must have a “C.” Honors and AP courses are weighted for the calculation of Grade Point Average (GPA). There are 24 AP courses available to students (compared to four at Hughes) and a range of honors courses, as well as courses aligned with the local community college. Where Hilltop has a 53-page course selection guide, Hughes has a one-page sheet describing “Credits Required to Advance and Graduate,” a more vague set of electives, and no publicly accessible criteria for course level assignment.

Hilltop has been recognized with a special designation by the U.S. Department of Education and routinely ranks in the top list of New Jersey high schools, also being recognized on nationwide lists. The school implemented a district-wide mobile computing initiative in 2013-2014, providing all students with district-issued Chromebook, or allowing them to bring their own laptop to school. There is an active parent-run community foundation to provide instructional grants and materials to teachers.

The current principal, Dr. Wilcox, is in his second year as principal, after being promoted from assistant principal after the previous principal was promoted to another role. Dr. Wilcox is a white male in his mid-forties, and he sports a constant wide grin and a boyish face that belie his age, as he balances a high degree of professionalism with lighthearted and a playful demeanor. He is always dressed in a suit and tie. He started his educational career as a teacher, and completed a doctorate in education. He speaks fondly of his dissertation experience, and his continued role in higher education as an adjunct professor. His voice is smooth and he speaks very quickly, like a professional announcer. His assistant principal, Mr. Bowles, is a white male in his upper thirties, and is more stoic

and soft-spoken, though he dresses less formally than his boss. Another assistant principal, a white woman in her early sixties, is focused on curriculum and instruction.

At Hilltop, the warning bell rings at 7:40 a.m. and class begins at 7:45 a.m. Prior to the bell, music is played through the loudspeaker to set the tone and energy for the day. Most of the music is selected by administrators and teachers, although student input is also welcomed. The music is played at the end of the day as well, at times setting the backdrop for scenes of couples kissing, students throwing footballs, packing up at lockers, and pairs or groups taking selfies; all scenes that seem like they could come straight from a typical high school movie. Each day, students follow a traditional schedule and move through the same series of classes. Most academic courses meet daily for two periods totaling 40 minutes, with the exception of Honors Pre-Calculus, which meets for 60 minutes.

In Hilltop, the day starts with long series of announcements at the end of Period 1 and at the end of the school day. A student or teacher reads long list of clubs, college preparation opportunities, service projects, student and teacher accomplishments, and facts or quotes reflecting the theme of the month (i.e. substance use prevention, social emotional skills). The end of day bell rings at 2:25, and the music plays in the background as some students pack quickly to catch their busses. Those getting picked up or staying for extracurricular activities move more slowly and socialize.

Every Friday afternoon, before the dismissal bell, the same statement is read: “Be good kids and make good decisions.” When I ask a teacher about this statement, she says that it has been the tradition on Friday afternoons to remind students that the school believes in them, and wants them to succeed by making positive choices. Students I speak

with interpret the statement as a sign of high expectations, and typically take it as a warning not to get swept up in the demands of parties or social media that have been pitfalls to some students. Students bring up some of these “cautionary tales” of the students who have not made good decisions (socially or personally, through substance use) during interviews.

### *Understanding the Assessment Landscape*

Assessment plays a critical role in determining the shared purpose and goals of the classroom. Schools as organizations are held accountable for proficiency rates across the school and by student sub-group, and students are held accountable for mastering educational standards in key subject areas. From the point of view of students, assessment may be critical to advancing a grade or graduating, while for teachers, assessment may be tied to performance evaluation. During the year of observations, the classroom imperatives to do well on standardized testing became complicated by the adoption of a new statewide assessment called the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC). The unique demands of the test, its new electronic format, and the ambiguous decisions regarding the use of scores as promotion or evaluation criteria created a great deal of focus and anxiety on the outcomes of the spring tests.

The PARCC is a consortium of states collaborating to design and deploy a standard set of K-12 assessments in Math and English, based on the Common Core State Standards. The assessments cover grades 3-11 using a computer-based assessment system. New Jersey joined the consortium along with 23 other states and the District of Columbia during the period observed. At the time, New Jersey was one of nine states left

in the consortium. By 2018, New Jersey planned to revisit use of the test under the leadership of a new gubernatorial administration. Numerous issues caused states to opt out of the partnership, including ubiquitous glitches in the testing system and strains on wireless internet systems that caused district-wide testing shut downs. The PARCC replaced the High School Proficiency Assessment (HSPA), which was a paper and pencil test administered in 11<sup>th</sup> grade. During the period of this study, the PARCC was in its first year of official implementation at the high school level, causing uncertainty among staff and students, who were not sure how results could be used to evaluate or penalize them. Students were able to opt-out of taking the PARCC with a note from a parent or guardian. In Hilltop, between 6-15% of the students in grades 9-11 opted out of a given subject area test. In Hughes, fewer students opted out, with the percentage ranging from 4-8%.

Data from the 2014-2015 PARCC assessments begin to outline the gaps in academic outcomes between Hughes and Hilltop High Schools. On average Hilltop students were consistently above state averages on all assessments, whereas Hughes students were below state average scores for all assessments except one (10<sup>th</sup> grade Algebra II). In Hilltop, students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade were more than twice as likely to earn a passing score (4 or 5) on the Language Arts PARCC assessment compared to those in Hughes. In Hughes, only one in five 9<sup>th</sup> grade students passed the Language Arts PARCC, and only one in twenty passed the Algebra 1 Mathematics Assessment, compared with almost one in four in Hilltop High School. By 11<sup>th</sup> grade, the disparities in performance between the two high schools have grown significantly. Nearly 70% of Hilltop students earned passing scores (4 or 5) on the Language Arts assessment,

compared with 40% in Hughes. As students move through high schools, the disparities for the Algebra II Mathematics Assessment increased, as students in Hilltop were more than three times as likely as their counterparts in Hughes to pass the test. Nearly 70% of students in Hilltop passed the test, compared to only 21% in Hughes (see Table 1).

During this initial year of PARCC implementation, PARCC scores were not clearly designated as an official criterion for promotion to the next grade level. Teachers often reassured students that the exams did not “count,” while at the same time imploring them to do their best, as it was unclear how scores would reflect on teacher performance evaluations. Hilltop was selected as a pilot field testing site for PARCC the previous year, so many students had been exposed to the content before taking the “real” test. In addition, the 1:1 computing initiative meant that students in Hilltop had many more opportunities to engage with sample tests and the testing platform itself prior to test day. This advantage was not shared by students at Hughes, who in some cases had to figure out various functions of the testing platform (i.e. a non-intuitive highlighter function) on the day of the assessment. While critics of the PARCC exam raise a variety of reasons why disadvantaged students may not fare well on the assessment, including unfamiliarity with the technology used or questions lacking cultural relevance, these gaps mirror the achievement gaps commonly observed across schools in New Jersey with vastly different socioeconomic makeups. This study will attempt to understand the ways in which variation in classroom group dynamics, and in norms of aggressive behavior, may contribute to the disadvantages that lead to diminished performance from students in lower income districts. The implications of PARCC testing for the content of classroom

life, from pedagogical techniques to everyday practices, will be discussed in both Chapter 4 and Chapter 6.

### *Understanding the Legal Landscape*

As of 2016, all fifty states have some version of an anti-bullying law in place, and New Jersey has what is regarded as one of the strictest. Georgia was the first state to pass anti-bullying legislation in 1999, and New Jersey followed soon after in 2002 with the New Jersey Anti-Bullying Law, in many ways a reaction to the Columbine shootings and other focusing events. The law states that schools must enact policies including a formal definition of bullying behavior, an investigation procedure for reported bullying, outlined consequences, a statement prohibiting retaliation or reprisal against persons reporting bullying behavior, and consequences for making a false accusation (Irving 2016). In 2011, following the suicide of Rutgers University freshman Tyler Clementi, the law was bolstered under New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, and updated to include cyberbullying and events taking place outside of the school day and off school property.

The law expands the definition of bullying to be applied in any situation in which bullying has created a hostile environment or infringes on a students' rights in school (Garden State Equality Fact Sheet). The bill applies to all students, regardless of whether they are targeted according to characteristics of a "protected" group. A student who has committed an act of bullying must receive both consequences and appropriate remedial actions under the law, while consequences may go beyond the individual to a classroom-wide response, school response, and/or district-wide response (Cerf et al. 2011). Guidance to stakeholders around the law attempts to differentiate between conflict, which is mutual in terms of involvement in aggressive behavior, and bullying, in which one

person or group intentionally commits a mean or violent act against a person or group in a one-sided way. The legal definition of bullying in New Jersey does not include the power differential component of many popular definitions of bullying in scholarship, which typically involves a power differential between a victim and bully, and that the behavior is chronic and repeated.

In addition to expanding the responsibility of schools for student behavior inside and outside of the building, the mandated reporting procedures and timelines are specified in the 2011 update of the law, which calls for “comprehensive anti-bullying policies” in all schools. The law also mandates the creation of “School Safety Teams” in every school, charged with managing the Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB) investigation process, along with leading related data collection and planning and implementing anti-bullying programming. This includes a mandated “Week of Respect” in October featuring workshops, lessons, and activities around bullying prevention. In addition, each school must identify an existing staff member to serve as the ‘Anti-Bullying Specialist’ and each district appoints an “Anti-Bullying Coordinator.” The contact information for these personnel are mandated by law to appear on the school district’s web page. The bill provides guidelines for self-grading for each school and district on issues related to school safety, and the grades earned are posted publicly.

The law was lauded by anti-bullying advocates, while at the same time causing anxiety and uncertainty among administrators and school staff. Failure to investigate properly could lead a staff member to lose his or her teaching license (Irving 2016). The law did not take effect until the 2011-2012 school year, and the uncertainty associated with it delayed my official entry into schools by two years. Following several years of

implementation experience, schools became more comfortable with the law's provisions and less fearful about the vulnerability associated with gathering data on students' experiences of aggression. In the summer of 2014, I was able to secure permission to undertake research in the two sites of study described in the previous section. By participating in this study, the schools satisfied their data collection guidelines and some staff training requirements under the law, and I provided staff-wide data discussions, training, and school safety team consultations in exchange for the access for the research.

For practitioners and researchers alike, the conceptualization and definition of bullying typically implies that negative behaviors are chronic or repeated, and involve a "power imbalance" between the victim and the aggressor (Gladden et al. 2014; Olweus 1991). This definition fails to incorporate other equally debilitating behaviors that cause harm to students, including single-incidence micro-aggressions, and/or conflicts or situations where the relative strengths of a victim and aggressor are unclear. Therefore, when schools implement a law focused primarily on the concept of "bullying," the word itself becomes a form of response or strategy for victims and/or families seeking corrective action. At the same time, students begin to learn the locally popular meaning of the term "bullying" and to avoid behaviors and interactions that meet the criteria for inclusion in that category, as a means of avoiding punishment (Raia-Hawrylak and Donoghue 2015). Staff members often discouraged use of the term unless absolutely necessary, as doing so could trigger the mandated investigation process. In the words of numerous school staff, under the law "bullying" becomes a bad word. At the same time, other forms of negative interpersonal interactions, including what would be considered "conflict," are potentially overlooked.

The implementation of a strict law to prohibit “bullying” behavior had several unintended effects on how schools and students deal with what I refer to in this dissertation as peer aggressive behavior. I will discuss these primarily in Chapter 5 as they pertain to discipline norms, and the strategies adopted by students to avoid detection and punishment in response to their interpersonal behaviors.

### *School Discipline Data*

It is important to note that higher or lower numbers of confirmed cases of HIB, in general or from year to year, could be heavily influenced by reporting norms and the responses of administrators to student reports. In reality, the numbers reported may not reflect all experiences of aggressive behaviors in the school. In addition, the types of punishments issued in these schools range in nature, from lunch detention to in- or out-of-school suspensions, and the conceptual categories used to label student misbehavior also vary across schools. Because the ways in which these behaviors are recorded and reported are not easily comparable, I will detail them in the descriptions below.

In the year observed, Hughes reported 15 confirmed cases of Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying. The school earned a 56 out of 78 on the School Self-Assessment for Determining Grades Under the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights, which assesses the steps the school is taking to prevent and address bullying behavior. The school lost points mainly on elements that required resources to be implemented (initiatives, training, curriculum, personnel). The local discipline data on disciplinary actions varied greatly from one year to the next and did not cohere with the range of behaviors I observed (or HIB data), generally suggesting that the types of behaviors met with punitive action are not consistent in the school. These disparities may reflect

teachers' reporting preferences or their sense of which behaviors will receive administration backup. Viewing internal disciplinary data also reveals a discrepancy with official numbers reported to the state for forms of violence, which were much lower. Teachers in the building revealed that while there was a before-school and after-school detention system in place in Hughes, the students who received these penalties often would not show up, and there was no system in place to address no-shows to detention. Therefore, many teachers stated that they did not bother to issue detentions at all. The school did not provide discipline data differentiated by punishment type.

Hilltop received a self-assessment score of 74 out of 78 on the School Self-Assessment for Determining Grades Under the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights. The number of confirmed harassment, intimidation, and bullying incidents was five in the year of my observations, down from 26 the previous year and 55 in 2011-2012 (the first year of the law's implementation). In terms of local disciplinary data, Hilltop provided data for suspensions according to type of behavior, although the behaviors are labeled differently from Hughes, making a comparison across schools difficult. Conduct totals provided by the school indicated that around 500 detentions were assigned and served during lunch periods or after school.

Again, the picture provided by comparing state-level reports of violent incidents and HIB is limited. Even local data sources pertaining to incident and disciplinary measures are difficult to compare across schools as they are measured and recorded differently. As such, a grounded perspective is needed to truly understand and compare, from a students' viewpoint, the types, frequencies, and content of aggressive behaviors in their school, as well the disciplinary responses they typically invoke. The following

methods section will describe how the combination of survey methodology and an ethnographic approach can provide more consistent measurement and more rich detail for comparing aggressive behaviors across high schools.

## DATA COLLECTION METHODS

The following methodological sections will detail the mixed-methods approach I utilize to address my research questions, which are:

1. How do the nature, extent, patterns, and content of aggressive behaviors vary across schools?
2. How are behavioral norms and expectations communicated, understood, and enacted in a school's organizational culture and in the idiocultures of the classrooms?
3. How are students' aggressive behaviors shaped within the classroom context via the three aspects of culture -- academic and aspirational norms, disciplinary norms and practices, and everyday practices?

The first goal of this study seeks to understand overarching patterns in aggression and how they vary across high schools by SES. To learn more about patterns of aggressive behaviors at the school level, and which types of victimization are most commonly experienced, I co-designed and piloted a research instrument called the School Climate Understanding and Building Aspirations (SCUBA) survey. I referenced the name "SCUBA" as in scuba diving to help explain to students that the instrument is designed to "dive below the surface" and learn more about types of student experiences that aren't always easy for others to see. The SCUBA Survey is an original instrument and primary data source used to gather school-wide data from students in the two high schools under study. The survey was cross-sectional and was conducted over 2-3 days in late April (Hilltop) and mid-May (Hughes) of 2015. The instrument measures the types, frequencies, temporal and spatial locations, relational dynamics, and personal traits

associated with victimization<sup>3</sup>. The 104-item survey also measures students' perceptions of school discipline and willingness to report or seek help from an adult (see Appendix A).

The initial survey instrument was piloted in a mix of eight middle and high schools in New Jersey, including both public and parochial schools. Hilltop High School served as a pilot high school, and conducted the survey in its pre-pilot and pilot stages before participating in the data collection period associated with this dissertation. Hilltop participated in the SCUBA for four years total, which enables me to confidently assert the reliability of the instrument by comparing the stability and uniformity of student responses to the same items over time. In addition, I administered the survey to the other high school in Hilltop's regional school district for two years, allowing me to further support the instrument's reliability. The sample also included Hughes High School, and a fourth high school in New Jersey with a similar demographic makeup.

I managed the stages of the data collection and management processes, with the assistance of a research team including four undergraduate and two graduate students. I used an online professional survey platform called Surveygizmo to create the survey and store collected data securely in school-specific folders.

### *Survey Administration*

Each school selected its own administration period for the online survey during the late spring of the school year. In Hilltop, students in grades 9-11 used school-issued personal laptops, and students in grade 12 took the survey in the school's computer labs

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<sup>3</sup> As noted, victimization was measured through self-report as personal involvement in interpersonal peer aggressive behavior as a perpetrator could not be measured on the survey as it would require active parental consent under N.J.S.A. 18A: 36-34.

and the media center's computer bank. In Hughes, the computers in the library did not have adequate internet speed and wireless bandwidth to support the survey. The students were able to use laptops from the district's loaned laptop carts with WiFi capability, set up using folding tables and chairs in the school's gymnasium. The district laptop carts are primarily used for computer-based standardized testing across schools via the PARCC assessment.

The survey was approved for passive parental consent by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at Rutgers University. Hughes High School's administration and board of education approved the survey for passive parental consent. Two weeks prior to survey administration, the school created a telephone "blast" or "robocall" in English and Spanish which was repeated multiple times prior to the administration dates, up to the day beforehand. Parents and guardians who wished to opt their children out of the survey were asked to call the main office to do so. I was informed that no parents called in to ask questions about the survey or opt their children out of participation.

On the dates of survey administration at Hughes (May 11-12, 2015) students reported to their usual physical education or health classes and were instructed not to change into gym clothing. I read an assent script to students and had the support of several undergraduate and graduate research assistants in monitoring the survey administration and addressing questions or technical issues. Of the total school population of 1,050, 882 students began the survey. After reading the student assent form at the beginning of the survey, 91 students opted out of the survey, and 791 assented to the survey and completed some or all of the survey.

Hilltop High School opted to administer the survey using active parental consent per local board policy. A description of the project and a parental consent form was sent home with each student two weeks before the survey date by their physical education or health teacher. To improve the return rate, some teachers assigned the consent form as a homework assignment, and counted the assignment as completed if students returned the form (regardless of whether they were allowed to participate or not). Since the school community participated in the pre-pilot and pilot of the survey using active parental consent, the process of explaining the study, disseminating and collecting forms, and processing the consent forms to create class-specific rosters was familiar to all involved and went very smoothly. I received several phone calls from parents with inquiries about the types of questions on the survey and how the data would be used. Of the students who returned the active consent forms, 127 indicated “No” that their child could not participate in the survey. I spotted some students checking off “No” and in some cases, forging a signature to receive homework credit on the day of the survey, so it is very possible that some students opted out of (or into) the survey on their own. I overheard a number of students articulating that they were opting out of the survey because they could use the time as a study hall to complete homework assignments due the same day.

In Hilltop, a team of research assistants were scheduled to cover class periods throughout a three-day administration period and to assist with the roster check-in process, technical issues, and questions about the survey. Out of the 1,700 students in Hilltop, 898 obtained parental consent, reported for the roster process, sat to take the survey, and entered the school-specific password. Eighteen students opted out of the survey after accessing the assent form. 871 assented to the survey and completed all or

some of the survey. Although the survey was designed to collect data for all students, factors including the parental consent process in Hilltop, and peer pressure to engage in alternate activities during the survey period in both schools, led to non-participation or attrition. The potential self-selection bias of students obtaining parental consent and granting their own assent to participate is a limitation of the survey methodology; however, the qualitative component of the study, which entails observations of hundreds of students in each school, in some ways addresses potential selection bias in the survey. In both schools, there was a mix of student reactions and feedback to the survey instrument.

The descriptive data from Hilltop High School and Hughes High School are presented in Chapter 3, and begin to paint a picture of patterns and trends in aggressive behaviors at a school-wide level. In addition to the quantitative component of the study, I engaged in a school-year-long qualitative study to see how the aggressive behaviors actually play out in context, and to understand the more nuanced variations in the experiences of students within the same school contexts and across school contexts. I conducted year-long ethnographic observations and in-depth interviews in both Hilltop and Hughes for the majority of the 2014-2015 school year. In the following section, I describe the sampling techniques and methods used to further understand how aggression unfolds within small groups, or classrooms.

#### *Ability-Level Tracking and the Selection of Small Classroom Groups*

Quantitative data alone are not sufficient to fully understand the processes behind statistically observed patterns. Leff et al. (2009:168-169) argue for the use of observational methodologies to better understand the social ecology of the school

classroom, and note that this is an “important, yet relatively understudied, area of research.” I conducted year-long ethnographic observations in 29 classroom groups and interviews with 42 students to corroborate survey findings and observe unreported patterns as well as social processes underlying overt aggression and victimization. The use of multiple data sources provides a means to triangulate both the qualitative data and the quantitative data from the survey instrument, and increases confidence in the validity and reliability of the analyses. Few studies have taken a longitudinal approach to studying how social interactions unfold across the school year, an important exception being the ethnographic work of Crosnoe (2011) in one public high school.

Students in secondary schools typically move through a variety of small groups, or classrooms in a given school day. In high school, many of the core content area classrooms are grouped according to academic tracking practices, using various indicators of perceived student ability and motivation to determine the level of a particular classroom. In both high schools, “college preparatory” or “CP” classes are considered the typical or “average” track. In Hilltop, lower performing students are offered a “non-college preparatory” or non-CP option for key content areas such as Language Arts, Math, and History. In Hughes, lower performing students on the CP track, or general track, are placed in an “enrichment” section for Language Arts or Math. These students are identified as lower performing through standardized test scores from the previous year. For the purposes of this study, I will focus primarily on how aggressive behaviors unfold in Language Arts and Math classrooms, as they are the most tested subjects on accountability measures (such as PARCC) and benchmark assessments, and

are required for all students. Students must take four years, or 20 credits, of Language Arts content for graduation, and three years of Mathematics content.

I elected to observe 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts and Mathematics classrooms. This strategy allowed me to compare social dynamics across different subjects, and to observe the same students in different contexts. Freshmen are in the “blank slate” stage of constructing their social identity, reputation, and new position in the social hierarchy, which is comprised of students from eight different communities. They are also just beginning to learn the disciplinary climate and norms of the school. Juniors are in the maintenance stage when it comes to social identity; the social hierarchy is relatively fixed, and juniors may be in a position to better predict the likely disciplinary responses that their behaviors may provoke.

I used classroom observations to measure and understand differential likelihoods of classroom-based victimization, and to uncover patterns of aggression as they varied across academic tracks and across school communities. In order to begin the sampling process, I consulted school-wide schedules of courses offered in Mathematics and Language Arts for students in 9<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade. I created three tiers of academic tracking for each school: in Hilltop, I sought to sample a non-CP course, a CP course, and an Honors/A.P. course for each grade level in the subjects of Mathematics and Language Arts. In Hilltop I was not permitted to observe students in self-contained special education or resource room settings. In Hughes, I had to consider the tiers slightly differently because there was no 9<sup>th</sup> grade Honors Mathematics course offered. I oversampled sections of classes because of block scheduling. For Mathematics in Hughes, I sampled an Algebra Resource Room for special education students, two

Algebra 1 enrichment classes, and one ninth grade CP Math class (Algebra 1). In Language Arts, to create three tiers I sampled an English 1 Enrichment class, two CP English classes, and an Honors English 1 class. I took a similar approach for Mathematics, although I was able to oversample because students in 11<sup>th</sup> grade could be taking a range of Mathematics courses in varying levels (from highest to lowest: Honors Pre-Calculus, Honors Algebra 2, CP Algebra 2, Math Strategies). (See Figures 2 and 3)<sup>4</sup>.

I created a class schedule that would allow me to attend a full day of school in each research site and observe as many classrooms meeting my criteria as possible. I then created an observation schedule that rotated so that I could observe classroom groups at least once on each day of the week. In both schools, once I identified a potential class observation schedule, I directly emailed the teachers of those classes to invite them to meet and discuss the project with me in the teachers' lounge on a specific day. During the meeting I outlined the purpose of the study and the measures I had taken to protect confidentiality of participants. I made sure that teachers were aware that participation was optional, and that I had not informed their administration that they had been selected to participate, nor would I inform the administrators that they were going to participate if they chose to do so. This allowed teachers to make a decision free of coercion or fear that my notes or assessments could be used in performance evaluations. In some cases, I repeated the process with the in-class support teacher(s) working in the selected

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<sup>4</sup> In both schools, students with Individualized Education Plans may receive "push-in" support in an inclusive classroom via an in-class support teacher, or placement in a self-contained classroom serving only students with disabilities. In Hilltop, "Honors" or "Advanced Placement/AP" options were offered for students in Language Arts and Math at all grade levels. In Hughes, there was no honors-level track for Math for 9<sup>th</sup> grade students, but Honors that are offered for topics including Algebra 2 and Pre-Calculus were exclusively taken by sophomores, juniors, or seniors.

classrooms as well to ensure they were briefed on the study and also given the opportunity to decline participation without penalty.

In Hughes, two teachers declined to participate in the classroom observation that I requested. A number of the teachers who agreed to participate in Hughes were new to the education field, and asked if I would debrief them on my observations, and I agreed. At times these teachers solicited my feedback on lesson plans or interventions, and I decided on a case-by-case basis if providing feedback would be appropriate in my role as researcher. In Hilltop, all of the teachers I approached agreed to participate. I began officially attending classes in Hughes during early October and in Hilltop the first week in November. I continued observations in both schools through the end of the school-year in mid-June.

During classroom observations, I took notes by hand into a notebook. I included details on topics including classroom norms and goals, and the types, frequency, and content of aggressive behaviors. I used a system of coding to label the classroom group in my notes and created student pseudonyms and codes for recording purposes. I asked teachers to let students know ahead of time that I was a student from the local university who would be observing their class periodically for the entire school year. I attempted to blend in to the setting and to dress more casually than the teachers so that students would not question my presence or view me as an outside evaluator from the district or the state. I aimed to dress similarly to the students and would arrive early to the classroom to take my designated seat, typically in a back row corner seat if extra desks were available, or a chair off to the side or the back of the room. In both schools, there were times when

students would verbalize their recognition that I was present (“Oh look, she’s here today”) or would greet me directly.

In Hilltop, most students did not question my presence, as they were very used to college students and student teachers being present in the school. In some classes, students were so engaged in the content being delivered that at the end of class upon exit, they would note that they hadn’t noticed I was there. Most students did not interact with me at all. In one case, a white male 11<sup>th</sup> grade student named Brooks, whose parent was a school board member, and as such had reviewed my research proposal, asked in front of the class if I was there to study bullying. I directly explained the purpose of my research project to him. This same student would typically announce my presence to the class, making comments like “our friend is here.” Later in the spring, while deflecting from a warning his teacher gave him for a negative behavior, this student indicated to the class that he “felt hunted” because I was present in the classroom and observing his behaviors (which were often aggressive toward his peers). I immediately discontinued observations in this classroom, debriefed with the student about his feelings, reported the situation to a guidance counselor, and allowed them to reach out to the students’ parents. The reaction of this student indicated two things to me. First, that he was concerned about the implications of my observations of his negative behaviors; and second, that he was savvy enough to avoid future detection by forcing my exit.

On the occasions when I ate my lunch and observed the student cafeteria at Hilltop, I would always sit alone. Sometimes, the teachers monitoring the cafeteria would come to my table to sit and talk about how the study was going. It was not unusual for socially isolated students to sit alone at Hilltop, often behind their school-issued laptops,

either working on assignments, or engaging in other activities. Even students who sat with other kids might be engaged in computer-based or cell phone activities, and often did not speak directly to one another much for the duration of the period.

At some point in most classrooms in Hughes, a student would ask me directly why I was there. I always responded to explain that I was a student at the local university. I told them that I was doing research to better understand what it is like to be a student in their school, and how students get along with one another in their classroom. At times, students would ask if I was studying to be a teacher, and I would answer truthfully to let them know that I had worked as a teacher in a high school setting before. In some classrooms, during independent work time students would question me about my university, or ask my advice about college applications or other topics. In a few cases students asked me to provide assistance on tasks they were working on. Students in Hughes would often engage me in conversation, seemingly mining me for information and resources that may have been difficult to access. Other times, it was clear that they were going out of their way to make me feel more comfortable in situations that were otherwise uncomfortable (such as when conflict or violence was occurring). At times, Hughes students would ask for me to intervene in difficult interpersonal situations as they unfolded, particularly if they felt their teachers were not upholding what they understood to be the norms of the school or their classroom. Again, I would use my best discretion to determine to what extent my involvement would compromise my role as researcher. I acted as a “mandated reporter” in only one case in Hughes, and that was after learning that a student with disabilities was being videotaped and mocked on social media. I

brought the issue to the principal, who indicated that he would address it, although I did not see evidence to convince me that he did so.

During cafeteria observations in Hughes when I would eat my own lunch, students whose classrooms I observed often invited me to join them individually or at their tables. These lunchtime conversations often turned to opportunities for students to ask questions about post-secondary planning. Our conversations, along with interviews I conducted with representative students from each observed classroom, informed my deeper understanding of the meaning of the events and actions I witnessed in classroom groups over the course of the school year.

At the end of each school day, I reviewed and added detail to my handwritten field notes. I set aside a day to transcribe the field notes each week, and to begin to write research memos to document emerging themes. I analyzed these data primarily through an iterative reading process. I used NVivo to organize the field notes and interview transcripts, and kept research notes and memos including emerging themes and analysis. The research design facilitated comparisons across similar classroom settings as well as triangulation across survey data, classroom field notes, and interview transcripts from students belonging to those classrooms. I edited quotes from observations (and interviews) to remove repetitions and pauses while taking efforts to maintain the intent and content of the student's statements and interview responses.

#### *Experiences of Aggression and Victimization as Explained by Students*

I recruited two students from each of the classes I observed to participate in interviews. Those who obtained parental consent received a \$10 incentive before the interview. I interviewed a total of 42 students (20 in Hughes; 22 in Hilltop). Five

students declined to participate or did not return their forms, and in these cases, I asked alternates to participate. In three cases, the alternates declined as well. The interviews were conducted in the last few weeks of school, which meant that students could reflect on the full year and could interview without missing classroom content. Ultimately I was not able to obtain two respondents from every classroom because of scheduling challenges or unanticipated student absences. Most interviews were about 45 minutes to an hour long on average.

The interview protocol for students was semi-structured with at least 21 core interview questions (see Appendix B). My observations in the students' classrooms also informed the questions I asked in specific student interviews, as I would reference people, situations, or themes I had observed. The interviews were conducted in the school building, during school hours, in a private location and were recorded. All recordings were transcribed and respondents were provided with a pseudonym and a code to protect confidentiality.

The questions used in the interviews were field tested for efficacy with a small group of high school students who were not a part of the study sample or affiliated with the research sites. Questions focused on descriptions of aggressive actions rather than using the term "bullying." Despite consistently omitting the term from my questions, 34 out of 42 interview respondents used the word "bullying" in response to a question in the protocol, and I followed the lead when students initiated use of the term. I used those opportunities to question students for their own definitions of the behavior and to gain a better sense of the nature of aggressive behaviors students did report.

The ethnographic observations and interviews inform my second research question, which seeks to understand how behavioral expectations are understood and enacted within the idioculture of the classroom. These data also shed light on my third research question, regarding how students' aggressive behaviors are shaped within the idioculture of the classroom small group.

### *Analysis Methods and Limitations*

I analyzed the survey data using SPSS. Cases were excluded where respondents were missing data on more than 70% of survey items, or those who were missing data on key variables of interest (n=99; 82 from Hughes and 17 from Hilltop). After these cases were dropped, the final analytic population was 1,467 students, with 871 from Hilltop High School (52% of the total enrollment) and 596 from Hughes High School (58% of the total enrollment). Items developed for the SCUBA Survey were tested for internal consistency. All scales were internally consistent with Cronbach's alphas over 0.7 (discussed in more detail in the next chapter) (Nunnally and Bernstein 1994).

I employed NVivo qualitative analysis software to track and identify emerging themes and patterns in my field notes and interview transcripts. I identified emerging concepts through nodes that were used across both sets of data (field notes and transcripts). I both manually and electronically coded the data, and linked together the two sets of qualitative data in an iterative process designed to distill key mechanisms related to aggressive interactions in the classroom groups. Broad groupings of nodes that cohered thematically resulted in the identification of the three categories found to be related to the context for aggressive behaviors: academic and aspirational norms, disciplinary norms and practices, and everyday practices. One of the most difficult coding

decisions to make had to do with my assessment of whether behaviors I observed were intended to be playful or intentionally harmful. Ultimately, I decided that because I could not accurately assess the intentionality or impact of behaviors, I would simply code them as “aggressive” according to the standard definitions I held for various types of behavior (i.e. verbal, physical, social).

A limitation of randomly sampling only two students from each classroom for interview was that I did not get the opportunity to interview the students who were most actively involved in aggression and victimization in some cases. Random sampling also meant I was not able to attempt to construct a sample that was representative by race or ethnicity, but had to leave the makeup of the interview sample to chance. I obtained a limited first-hand view of the experiences of non-white students in Hilltop because there are so few in the population in general, and only a handful in those classrooms I observed. My random sampling method enabled me to select only one of the three black students I observed in that school setting for interview, and the themes that emerged suggested that the subtle experiences, via microaggressions, of non-white students in majority white schools are an area ripe for future research.

In addition, my method of observing real-time interactions in the classroom and school building limited my perspective on cyberbullying to public (overt) acts I witnessed or heard about from students. Another direction for future research would consider how small group norms in the classroom group translate (or don't) to virtual life and online social networks to which students extend their daily interactions. In part, these virtual networks and the ability to access them anytime, including on mobile devices during class time, enables students to disengage socially from classroom group peers. Removing

the socialization and the hierarchy of the classroom peer group may allow greater concentration on academic pursuits, while pulling student attention towards their virtual social settings. However, in schools like Hughes in which students are potentially cut off from social networks via the ban on cell phones and lack of connective technology, the social hierarchy of the classroom peer group remains as salient as ever, and possibly more salient when academic priorities are not articulated clearly. In Chapter 4 I will discuss the ability of both the school organization and the classroom small group to promote and enact academic and aspirational norms as a mechanism impacting the prevalence of aggressive behaviors in the classrooms observed. When small groups view the goals of schooling and the achievement of daily classroom objectives as tied to long term academic and/or aspirational objectives, aggressive social interactions tend to be regarded by the group as an unwelcome distraction.

#### *A Note on Researcher Positionality and Self-Reflection*

As I made sense of the qualitative data, I attempted to be as reflective and self-aware as a researcher as possible, and to continuously interrogate how aspects of my identity and positionality affected my sense-making on interactions I witnessed in the schools. In particular, I sought to be as honest and self-reflective as possible regarding what my position as a white female researcher, who attended suburban, high-performing schools, would mean in terms of my impressions of interactions and norms in a lower income, racially and ethnically diverse school building. I did my best to be thoughtful and to recognize that in another cultural context, the meaning of particular behaviors may be different than my impressions, assumptions, or interpretations.

For example, the use of profanity did not always equate to aggressiveness, the loudness of an exchange may not correspond with conflict, and I had to recognize that some cultural modes of expression may be less familiar to me and would require further exploration if I was unsure of the meaning of words or symbols that were exchanged by students. I had to constantly unpack and be aware of implicit biases and in some cases, a lack of cultural knowledge of student culture. I had grappled with these challenges before as a teacher in another school where many students were from different backgrounds and communities than mine. In this way, I could empathize with the situation of the teachers, who were in a position I had been in before of having to find culturally sensitive ways to communicate and reinforce desired behaviors, without diminishing the value of various forms of cultural expression (i.e., playing the dozens) or disproportionately disciplining students. I had to also be careful, as researcher, to not assume that the methods I learned during my own teacher preparation were optimal, nor to compare the teachers' styles to my own teaching techniques or expectations of what teachers should do in a given situation.

When teachers who are less familiar with the cultural modes of expression of their students are not self-reflective or honest about potential biases, this may lead to disproportionate punishment patterns, lower expectations of student achievement, and unequal outcomes for students. I was very careful in the researching and writing of this study to describe interactions as agnostically as possible. I looked carefully at bodily and verbal cues of those witnessing or interacting with other students to determine if a behavior was being read as aggressive by participants. I underscore this point to say that through observation of aggressive actions, intentionality of those involved can never be

fully known, and as an outsider, I can never fully know the unspoken attributes and understandings of the groups I was observing. However, I am confident that the chapters that follow will lay out a strong case for the urgent need to more fully understand how aggressive patterns of behavior vary across schools and classrooms. The factors contributing to the formation and enactment of school cultures and classroom idiocultures must be identified, measured, and monitored over time, to move beyond what the law has done (or not done) to reduce students' exposure to aggressive behaviors. Doing so uncover new opportunities to provide all students with the conditions for learning that will enable them to succeed.

### Chapter 3: The Varying Contexts of New Jersey High Schools

My first research question asks how exposure to aggressive behaviors differs between two high schools that vary in socioeconomic makeup. In this chapter, I describe patterns at the school-wide level using data from the SCUBA Survey and ethnographic observations. Through the quantitative analysis I provide a snapshot of the perceptions, attitudes, and experiences of high school students within the two schools. In addition, the items in the survey are designed to measure self-reported victimization over the last month by various forms of in person and cyber aggression. Respondents are also asked about victimization of others witnessed in academic classrooms.

The findings from the survey help illuminate how school-wide culture shapes aggressive behavior. However, comparing the percentages of students who have reported victimization is not sufficient to fully understand the nature of behavior and its variation at the school and group level. In this chapter I also provide an overview of common patterns of aggressive behavior from year-long ethnographic observations of classrooms, as supported by interview data. The second section of this chapter will provide a descriptive overview of patterns of victimization to give a general sense of the nature, frequency, and content of behaviors in both schools, as well as the typical range of behaviors in terms of severity. I explore specific aspects of school culture and classroom idiocultures that shape the processes by which these aggressive behaviors occur in Chapters 4-6<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Appendix D provides a descriptive overview of the 29 classrooms observed in this study. I describe these groups to set up the context for interactions I describe in Chapters 4-6, including: subject area, ability level,

## SCHOOL-WIDE PATTERNS FROM THE SCUBA SURVEY

### *Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

Table 1 includes the demographic characteristics of the SCUBA Survey respondents by school. Students in lower grade levels were slightly overrepresented in both samples. Seniors were least represented in both samples at 23% in Hughes and 20% in Hilltop.<sup>6</sup> In terms of gender, male and female respondents were evenly split in Hughes. In Hilltop, females were overrepresented compared with males, who accounted for 43% of respondents. Students were given a non-binary option of “prefer not to say,” for gender<sup>7</sup>.

Sample composition differed greatly by SES, as was expected given the purposeful selection of a higher income and lower income school for the study. In Hughes, students were ten times more likely to receive free or reduced-price lunch compared with those in Hilltop, and slightly more than half of students who took the survey reported that they did (55%)<sup>8</sup> compared to 5% of students in Hilltop. I also created a scale to measure SES for use as a control variable in the regression analyses. In addition to the free or reduced-price lunch item, students were asked if there was a time in the last year that parents were unable to pay rent and/or bills. These three items were

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time parameters, number of students, and descriptions of key members (teachers, staff, and most active students). I describe a generalized sense of the norms, routines, regular interactions and typical range of behaviors in each group. It is designed to help the reader visualize and recognize these groups and some of their members throughout the text.

<sup>6</sup> This is consistent with overrepresentation of lower grade levels in previous administrations of the survey. The timing of the survey toward the end of the academic year may in particular dis-incentivize seniors, who are close to graduating and may see no future personal benefit to sharing their experiences in the school.

<sup>7</sup> This was the recommended terminology from the Human Relations Campaign for non-conforming students on student surveys at the time of the survey.

<sup>8</sup> The percentage of students indicating they receive free or reduced-price lunch in the sample is slightly lower than public data for Hughes which report that 65% receive supports. This is not unusual because some students may not be aware or sure if they receive free or reduced-price lunch, and may have selected the “Not sure” option.

dichotomized (yes, no) and summated. Students with scores of two and three were considered low SES, and students with a score of three were considered the lowest SES group. In Hughes, 12% of respondents were in the lowest SES category, compared with 3% of respondents in Hilltop. In both schools, the sample closely reflects publicly available data on the racial makeup of the student body, with slight differences, as students could select all categories that apply.

In Hughes, more than half of students did not take any honors or AP courses, compared with a little more than a third in Hilltop. About 16% of students took one honors/AP class in both schools. The percentage of students taking three or more honors/AP courses, who could be considered on an honors “track,” varied across schools, potentially due to the range of course offerings available. In Hilltop a little less than a third (30%) of students could be considered on the honors “track” compared with 18% in Hughes.

Items related to family background are included in Table 2. Students in Hughes are much more likely to have a parent who immigrated to the U.S. compared to students in Hilltop (63% in Hughes, compared with 4% in Hilltop). The majority of students in Hughes have one or more parents who were born outside of the United States, which may have implications for income level, educational level, and proficiency in English. These factors may potentially impact family members’ level of comfort and ability to engage with the school, their child’s teachers or administrators, or to assist with homework or post-secondary planning. Nearly a quarter of respondents in Hughes did not have any family members who had attended or currently attend college, which was slightly more than in Hilltop’s sample (19%), although it is unclear how the respondents defined

“college.” Students in Hilltop were more likely to have a mother and/or father who attended some college, completed college, or completed an advanced degree compared to Hughes. Students in Hughes were three times as likely to have a father and/or mother who completed a high school diploma as the highest level of attainment.

## STUDENT ATTITUDES, GOALS, AND PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL-WIDE NORMS

I identified items in the SCUBA survey that reflect the norms students perceive to be prevalent amongst their peers in the school, as relates to college planning and preparation, the importance of popularity with peers, and the normalcy of getting into trouble among peers (Paluck and Shepherd 2012). For concepts that had at least four related items, I ran correlations and reliability tests using Cronbach’s alpha to ensure that a scale containing the conceptually related items had internal consistency. I used the means of the responses to generate a score for the scale. I ran a factor analysis with the purpose of reducing a list of items pertaining to respondents’ personal goals to two dimensions reflecting underlying concepts. The variables I explored in the factor analysis related to the importance individual respondents place on goals related to social and academic outcomes. Some of the scales reported were created solely for descriptive purposes, while others will be used for regression analyses to explore their relationships to self-reported victimization.

### *School-wide College Planning and Preparation Norms*

Several individual items on the survey reflected students’ perceptions of school-wide college-going norms, and descriptive comparisons of responses on these items are presented here. Students were asked if they agreed or disagreed with the statement that,

“[School name] prepares me to go to college.” In Hughes, the majority of students disagreed or strongly disagreed (53%). In Hilltop, 90% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the school prepares them for college. Students were also asked what percentage of students at their school “are confident they will go to college” and provided with response options from “Nobody” through “100%.” In Hughes, the majority (58%) of students expected that 50% or fewer of their classmates are confident they will go to college. In Hilltop, the percentage of students who thought at least 75% of their peers would attend college was double that in Hughes at nearly 90%, and nearly eight times as many students thought that everyone was confident they would attend in Hilltop compared to Hughes.

#### *College-going Attitudes and Behaviors*

I created a scale for descriptive purposes to measure individual respondents’ College-going Attitudes, by combining items related to the personal importance of going to a good college, time spent thinking about college, researching colleges, and having identified at least one college to which the respondent plans to apply. Only students in grades 9-11 were asked these prospective questions regarding their attitudes about college, because seniors had likely made their post-secondary decisions by the time the survey was administered. The mean of the responses was used to generate a score on the scale. In Table 3, I report the item-level means as well as the score on the scale by school. Students in Hilltop were significantly more likely to report college-going attitudes, although the mean was only slightly higher than that in Hughes.

I created a scale for descriptive purposes to measure individual respondents’ College Planning Actions by summing responses on items related to the rigor of

courses students take, their plans to prepare for and take college admissions tests such as the SAT/ACT, and having planned or taken college visits (see Table 3). Students in Hilltop were significantly more likely to report being engaged in college-planning actions. The difference may be a reflection of the extent to which academic and aspirational norms and practices are enacted at the school-wide level, which will be explored qualitatively in Chapter 4.

#### *School-wide Safety, Popularity, and Disciplinary Norms*

Several individual items on the survey, reported here for descriptive purposes, captured students' general perceptions of school safety. When asked to respond to the following statement regarding the last month, "I feel safe at [school name]," nearly a quarter (24%) of students indicated that they disagreed or strongly disagreed in Hughes, compared to 7% in Hilltop. Similarly, when provided the statement "I feel comfortable with other students at [school name]," nearly a third (33%) disagreed in Hughes. Students at Hughes were three times as likely to report not being comfortable with peers, compared with 10% who disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement in Hilltop. When asked how often, in the last month, they saw other students breaking the rules, more than half (54%) at Hughes responded with the maximum possibility, "Many times," compared with 16% in Hilltop. Self-reported feelings of discomfort, insecurity, and unpredictability are therefore higher in Hughes.

I created a scale to measure the extent to which respondents thought it was important to other students to be popular with their peers as a way of capturing school-wide social norms about popularity and social goal attainment (see Table 3). Students in

Hilltop were significantly more likely to indicate that it was important to their peers to be popular.

To assess school-wide norms related to getting in trouble, I created a scale including four items which asked students what percentages of students in their school thought that to get in trouble was normal and funny, and what percentage thought it was normal to interrupt the teacher during class (see Table 3). Students were provided the responses “Nobody,” “A few people,” “About 25%,” “About 50%,” “About 75%” and “Everyone.” Students in Hughes were significantly more likely to perceive that it was normal to peers to get in trouble, with a mean score that was over one full point higher than Hilltop on a scale of six.

#### *Severity of Discipline in Mathematics and Language Arts*

I created scales to measure the severity of the expected disciplinary response of a teacher if a student disrupted class by teasing another student. Respondents were asked how often, from “Never,” “Rarely,” “Sometimes,” or “Often,” that their Mathematics and Language Arts teachers would respond with specific disciplinary measures. The five items used in the scale include the most severe responses of the student being sent to the office or out of class, the parents getting a phone call, the student receiving detention, getting suspended, or getting expelled. In Table 4, I report the item-level means as well as the score on the scale by school and by subject area. Overall, the perceived severity of discipline was significantly higher for both subjects in Hughes compared to Hilltop. Perceived severity of discipline was similar across subject areas in both schools.

In summary, the differences in terms of scores on scales related to college planning attitudes, college planning behaviors, and perceptions of popularity norms

scales were significantly different from one another in the two schools, although the means were not as distinct as one might expect. The perceived normalcy of getting into trouble varied significantly between schools and was about one point higher in Hughes compared to Hilltop on a scale of 1-6. The importance of school-wide norms related to popularity and getting in trouble will be explored in relationship to personal victimization in Chapters 4 and 5.

#### *Personal Importance of Social Goals and Academic Goals*

The survey includes items related to students' personal priorities or goals. I conducted a factor analysis to determine how the items clustered to best reflect the importance of academic goals and social goals to individual respondents. All questions began with the root "How important are the following goals to you?" and with a response set of "Not at All Important," "Somewhat Important," "Important," and "Very Important." I opted to use Principle Components Factor Analysis because the primary purpose was to reduce the data to a single dimension by computing composite scores for two types of goals held by students, social and academic, which are theoretically connected to victimization. I used the Varimax rotation method because the orthogonal rotation maximizes the variance of the squared loadings of a factor, and thus produce factors that are uncorrelated, differentiating the original variables with more discrete loadings (Osborne 2015).

Four items were removed at the outset because they did not cohere well with the other items in the scales and were clustering separately. Sixteen items related to students' personal goals were factor analyzed using principal component factor analysis with Varimax (orthogonal) rotation (see Table 5). The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) was above

the recommended value of 0.6 at 0.91, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was statistically significant ( $p=0.000$ ). Both tests indicate that the set of variables were adequately related for factor analysis. The communalities were all well above 0.3, confirming that each item shared some common variance with other items. The analysis yielded two factors explaining 60% of the variance for the entire set of variables. Factor 1 was labeled "Social Goals" due to the high loadings by the following items: "For other kids to think you're cool;" "To belong to a 'cool' group;" "For others to have a crush on you or want to date you;" "To go to parties;" "To have a boyfriend or girlfriend;" "For others to think you are good looking, hot, or pretty;" "To be considered popular;" "To have nice or trendy clothes;" "To have a lot of friends." The first factor explains 36% of the variance.

The second factor derived was labeled "Academic Goals." This factor was labeled as such due to the high loadings by the following items: "For teachers to think you are a good student;" "To be in honors classes;" "To do all of your homework on time;" "To do well on standardized tests;" "To get good grades;" "To get into my top choice college;" "To get a scholarship to college." The variance explained by this factor is 24%. The internal consistency for each of the scales was examined using Cronbach's alpha. The alphas were strong for both scales: 0.92 for Social Goals (9 items) and 0.87 for Academic Goals (7 items).

Descriptive statistics for the scales, which represent the means of the items listed above, are presented in Table 6. Social goals are not as important as academic goals in either school, but they are significantly more important to students in Hilltop compared to Hughes. Students' scores on the Academic Goals scales are nearly identical for students in both schools, and are over a point higher than the Social Goals scale on a scale of 1-4.

These scales will be used to explore the relationship with personal investment in academic and social goals with self-reported victimization. The next section will overview the types of victimization measured on the SCUBA Survey.

## VICTIMIZATION PATTERNS

### *Victimization by Type*

A key aspect of understanding variation in exposure to victimization involves surveying for general trends at the school-wide level on nine types of victimization. By taking the average of a respondent's Likert scale responses for victimization frequency on all nine types of victimization, I report on Average Personal Victimization by school (see Table 6). I then disaggregated the types of victimization into two scales to reflect primarily in-person forms (verbal, physical, social, threats, damage to property) and cyber forms (verbal, social exclusion, rumors, threats in a digital format; see Table 7). In summary, average, in-person, and cyber victimization is significantly more likely on average in Hughes compared to Hilltop, although the mean scores are very similar for all three scales.

In Table 7, I report the percentages of students in each school who indicate that they were victimized at least once in the last month according to each type of victimization. On the survey, students were asked how frequently they experienced in-person aggressive behaviors in the last month, including: *verbal victimization*, "I have been teased, called mean names, or insulted;" *physical victimization*, "I have been slapped, pinched, hit, kicked, shoved, or punched;" *social victimization*, "Someone told lies or spread rumors about me, or tried to get other people not to like me;" *threats*, "Someone threatened to hurt or fight me;" and *damage to property*, "Someone tried to

damage or destroy your things.” For “in-person” forms of victimization, about 39% of students in both schools reported experiencing verbal victimization. Social forms of victimization were the second most reported, with about 27% in Hughes and 23% in Hilltop indicating it occurred at least once. Threats were next most common in Hughes with 18%, where three times more respondents indicated that this occurred in the last month compared to Hilltop. Physical victimization was reported by 17% of students in Hughes compared with 14% in Hilltop. Damage to property was the least likely form of victimization, reported by 9% of students in Hughes and 4% in Hilltop.

Several forms of cyber victimization were about as ubiquitous as forms of in person aggression, and students were asked about the frequency in the last month with which they experienced: *verbal victimization*, “Another person wrote mean things about you, called you mean names, or posted something embarrassing about you with a phone, in a computer game, or on the internet;” *social exclusion*, “Another person left you out or wouldn’t let you join a group (on Snapchat, Instagram, or another app) using a cell phone or the internet;” *rumors*, “Another person spread rumors about you online, using a cell phone, computer, or other technology;” and *threats*, “Another person threatened you using a cell phone, in a computer game, or on the internet.”

Students in Hughes were more likely to experience all of these than students in Hilltop with the exception of cyber exclusion, occurring at least once. Students were asked about how often in the last month “Another person wrote mean things about you, called you mean names, or posted something embarrassing about you with a phone, in a computer game, or on the internet” to measure cyber verbal victimization. Verbal victimization online was the most common behavior at both schools, as 22% of students

in Hughes reported victimization compared with 19% of students in Hilltop. In Hilltop, 17% of students experienced social exclusion online compared to 15% in Hughes. Victimization by online rumors was reported by 5% of students at Hughes compared with 11% in Hilltop. Students were about twice as likely to experience cyber threats at least once in Hughes (15%) compared with Hilltop (7%).

It is important to note that the percentages of students reporting victimization reflect only the respondents' admission that a specific action happened to them, as they interpret the wording of the item and generally define the terms used. However, the content and severity of interactions falling under these definitions varied extensively and systematically between the schools in my observations. The variation in the content and relative severity of these interactions will be discussed in light of a summary of ethnographic observations and emergent patterns provided at the end of this chapter, and in subsequent chapters.

#### *Victimization Locations and Targets*

The survey provided information regarding the types and frequency of victimization, as well as the most common locations of victimization of each type as indicated by those who reported it. A selection of these findings will be reported here for additional detail and context. I include the extent of self-reported victimization of respondents and witnessing of victimization in core content area classrooms of Language Arts and Mathematics, as those are the types of classroom groups I observed. Finally, the characteristics that are typically targeted, as perceived by and experienced personally by respondents, will be listed and compared across schools to get a broader sense of common victimization norms and patterns.

Students who experienced victimization at least once were given a list of 19 potential locations for victimization and asked to select all that apply. These locations were a mix of overt, or supervised, settings within the school, as well as covert, or less supervised/unsupervised settings inside and outside of school. Respondents could check off as many locations as they were victimized in during the last month. Figure 4 lists the top five locations for victimization, by type and by school. The hallway, a semi-supervised space, was listed as the top location for both verbal and physical victimization in both schools. The hallway was listed in the top five locations for every type of victimization except damage to property, in both schools. The cafeteria was another semi-supervised, non-academic setting where the majority of reported victimization took place for all forms of victimization. In both schools, students were likely to report “outside of school” in the top five locations for verbal, physical, threats, and social victimization. For social victimization, “outside of school” was indicated as the top location of victimization for both schools. Notably, in Hilltop, Language Arts, a core content course, only appeared in the top five locations for victimization for physical victimization, where it was tied with Science class. In Hughes, students indicated Language Arts in the top five for verbal victimization (along with physical education or health class) and social victimization. Mathematics was in the top five in Hughes for threats and damage to property. Students in Hilltop indicated “sports practice or game” to be in the top five locations for victimization in all types except for threats, for which the locker room was in the top five. Electives and foreign language classes also appeared in the top five locations for victimization for students in both schools reporting victimization.

In regard to covert forms of aggression within the school building, students in Hughes were more likely to perceive that other students frequently used devices to tease one another during school hours, despite the official cell phone ban in the school and general lack of access to laptops or desktop computers. Students were asked how often students in their school use devices to tease one another during school hours. They were provided options “Almost never,” “At least once per month,” “At least once per week,” “At least once per day,” and “In every class.” In Hughes, 29% of students perceived that this happened in every class, compared to 15% in Hilltop. In terms of the perception that this happened at least once per day, 17.5% in Hughes and 10.4% of students in Hilltop felt this was the case.

The survey data provide a baseline for understanding the relative extent of victimization in core content area classrooms across the two schools, which will be further specified in light of ability level tracking through observation data. Students in Hughes were at least twice as likely, and up to four times as likely, to report experiencing each type of victimization in their Language Arts class or Mathematics class. These include verbal victimization in Language Arts (12% in Hughes, 6% in Hilltop) or Mathematics class (11% in Hughes, 5% in Hilltop); physical victimization in Language Arts (4% in Hughes, 2% in Hilltop) and Mathematics (3% in Hughes, 1% in Hilltop); social victimization in Language Arts (4% in Hughes, 1% in Hilltop) or Mathematics (3% in Hughes, 1% in Hilltop). Almost no students in Hilltop experienced threats in Language Arts (0.5%) or Mathematics (0.3%) compared with 3.9% and 4.2% in Hughes, respectively. In Hughes, 2.3% experienced damage to property in Language Arts and 2.0% in Mathematics, compared to 1.0% and 0.6% in Hilltop respectively.

*Victimization in Mathematics and Language Arts*

I created composite variables to measure overall victimization witnessed by students in the core content area classes I observed, Mathematics and Language Arts. Respondents were asked to indicate if they had witnessed the following during the last week in these classes: students making fun of one another, hitting or pushing one another, threatening one another, damaging someone else's property, or physically fighting. The responses were used to generate a count score on the scale between zero (no victimization witnessed) and five (all forms of victimization witnessed). In Table 8, I report overall mean scores on the scales by school and by subject area. On average, overall observed victimization was about two times higher in Hughes in Mathematics and about three times higher in Language Arts compared with Hilltop. It is important to note that in Hughes, 9% of students reported witnessing all five types of victimization in Mathematics and 10% reported witnessing all five types in Language Arts, compared with 2% and 1% respectively in Hilltop. In Hilltop 67% of students did not witness any victimization in Mathematics, and 77% did not witness victimization in Language Arts. In Hughes 55% did not witness any victimization in Mathematics, and less than half (49%) did not witness it in Language Arts.

Similar to the count variable above, I created a composite variable to measure overall personal victimization in the core content areas of Mathematics and Language Arts. Respondents were asked to indicate if they had personally experienced victimization in a particular setting after confirming they were victimized at least once in the last month. Students who did not report victimization did not view the items, and were recorded as "0" responses as they would not have checked off the box. Students

were asked about the same in-person behaviors as those used in the variable above (verbal, physical, social, threats, damage to property). The responses were used to generate a count score on the scale between zero (no personal victimization in Language Arts or Mathematics) and five (all forms of victimization occurred to them in those classes). In Table 9, I report overall mean scores on the scales by school and by subject area. On average, overall personal victimization was higher in Hughes in these two classes than in Hilltop. The mean on the count variable in Mathematics was 0.23 (SD=0.64) and 0.08 (SD=0.32) In Language Arts, and the mean personal victimization was 0.26 (SD=0.69) for Hughes students and 0.09 (SD=0.35) for students in Hilltop.

#### *Targeted Characteristics by School*

Students were asked about a list of 55 characteristics or reasons why an individual in their school might be targeted for victimization. They were asked how frequently, from “Never,” “Sometimes,” “Often,” or “Always,” they think that others are targeted for victimization for these characteristics in their school. Students then were asked how often they were personally victimized according to these characteristics. Figure 5 lists the top ten characteristics that respondents perceive others to be victimized for “Often” or “Always” in their school, and Figure 5 lists the top ten reasons why they report having been personally victimized “Often” or “Always.” It is important to note that students may not be entirely forthcoming or honest about reasons they were personally victimized, particularly if admitting the targeting might force students to grapple with particular qualities about themselves that might deviate from the norm. As such, some personal characteristics with a more positive leaning (such as “being too competitive”) may be ranked higher on a self-report list than in reality.

The items listed in the top ten reasons students perceived that others are victimized (Figure 5) provide a sense of the most prevalent norms at the broader level of school culture that students perceive will be enforced by peers through teasing. In both schools, the top reason students felt that norms would be upheld through teasing had to do with hygiene and how a student smells (68% in Hughes; 57% in Hilltop). The second most common reason students perceived that others would be victimized frequently is for being overweight. Other reasons in the top ten that are common across both schools are “not being attractive,” “acting like a teacher’s pet,” “having too many boyfriends or girlfriends,” “hairstyle, hair color, or hair type,” and “being too loud or talkative.”

The bottom three reasons for victimization (within the top ten lists) varied between the two schools. In Hughes, “being too skinny,” “race or ethnicity,” and “skin color” were tied for 8<sup>th</sup> place. These reasons were ranked much lower in Hilltop; for example, “race or ethnicity” was cited as a reason that students in Hughes were “Often” or “Always” victimized by 46% of students, compared with 23% of students in Hilltop. In Hilltop, “flirting too much,” “being too competitive,” and “not being good at sports,” rounded out the top ten in Hilltop. These items were relatively high on the list of reason for Hughes as well. It is important to recognize that of all of these reasons, race and skin color are considered “protected categories,” even though the NJ Anti-bullying law does not require for a protected category to be involved in order to require the investigation process.

Figure 6 reflects the reasons why respondents reported that they were personally victimized “Often” or “Always” in their school. “Being too skinny” is the top reason cited for Hilltop students. The top reason in Hughes for self-reported victimization was

“race or ethnicity,” and “skin color” was ranked second. Other reasons that are common across both schools are “being too quiet,” “being too short,” “being too loud or talkative,” “getting high grades,” “not being attractive,” “being too competitive,” and “not having a boyfriend or girlfriend,” Unique reasons for victimization in the list of the top ten are: “not being good at sports” in Hughes and “being overweight” in Hilltop. Therefore, the reasons for perceived victimization and actual victimization (as reported) are similar between schools, with a few key exceptions highlighting important differences in norms across schools.

## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

### *Student Background*

Self-selection bias for a survey such as this one may occur depending how students perceive the subject matter. For example, students who experience victimization or are involved in aggression may not choose to relive or face the implications of their own experiences. In Hilltop, where students needed active parental consent to take the survey, even if they were 18, parents with particular beliefs about bullying or related topics, or with general fears regarding the personal data collected using survey instruments in school, may have opted out of the survey.

The sample reveals an important similarity between the two schools’ populations. In both schools, 2-3% of students indicated they “prefer not to answer” or select a gender identity, which is helpful for considering the experiences of non-gender conforming students. Aside from this similarity, the demographic characteristics of the schools vary widely by race and socioeconomic status. Differences emerge in the level of coursework taken by students, which cohere with the fact that fewer Honors/AP courses are generally

offered in Hughes compared with Hilltop. These disparities reflect both differences in access to rigorous coursework (due to differential offerings between schools) as well as potential disparities in overall student-level motivation.

Family-level factors, and specifically parental education level, have important implications for the “cultural toolkit” students arrive with at school. Family level factors also impact how peers influence one another within their school building, based on their own families’ experiences. While the school organization and the classroom groups communicate their own academic and aspirational norms to be described in Chapter 4, the demographic data on parental background indicates the extent to which family conversations might reflect cultural capital and knowledge surrounding the post-secondary planning process.

A parent’s educational level predicts educational success and outcomes, particularly via “expectancy” socialization and the formation of achievement-related aspirations (Davis-Kean 2005; Dubow, Boxer and Huesman 2009). Because a lower percentage of parents in Hughes completed college as reported by students in the sample, it makes sense that perceptions of college-going behaviors or planning actions would be slightly lower overall in Hughes. While educational background or degree completion may have little or nothing to do with the nature of aspirations parents communicate to their children, parents who have been through post-secondary schooling will have first-hand knowledge of the steps to prepare for and apply to college, and can model those steps for their children. Coupled with differences in socioeconomic status between the two school communities, and potential language barriers faced by the majority of parents born outside of the United States in Hughes, the degree of knowledge and support parents

provide in college-going conversations with their children likely varies widely across the two schools. These disparities then also may trickle into the nature of peer conversations about college planning and academic success norms. At the same time, students' college planning attitudes and behaviors do not vary greatly between schools, which indicates that the school culture's influence plays an important role, particularly in Hughes.

Interviews corroborate some of the more common types of conversations students have with parents, and peers, regarding post-secondary aspirations. For example, in many interviews with Hughes students, students indicated that their parents communicate the importance of attending college to their children, particularly because they have not done so themselves. Still, these same parents may not know to push their children as hard to take preparatory courses for admissions tests, or insist that they take a rigorous course load, because they are less aware of the importance of these elements. The income gap associated with degree completion may also mean that there is some precariousness around the prospect of attending college and that financial access is viewed as a potential barrier, particularly for students without a parent holding a college degree. In Hilltop, even the nearly one in five students without a family member who had attended college had access to a variety of school-based resources and scholarship discussions, in addition to the ability to ask questions of well-informed peers and their families. In Hughes, the resources supporting students without immediate family supports were more limited.

#### *School-wide Attitudes and Norms*

Students were asked about college-going and college planning norms at the school-wide level. While students' personal aspirations in both schools consistently reflect a desire to do well academically and attend college, there are important differences

in students' perceptions of their high school environment in terms of how well it prepares them and their peers for success in doing so. Students in Hilltop are twice as likely, compared to those in Hughes, to report that their school prepares them for college, and that all students were confident they would attend college. This general sense of what is possible, and generally expected, for students in each school is communicated through specific school-wide and classroom practices, which will be discussed in Chapter 4.

Despite these differences in perceptions of the academic atmosphere in terms of college preparation and college-going norms for others, students in both schools had similar levels of personal investment in academic success and college attendance. The only attitudinal scale that does not reflect significant differences between the schools is the Academic Goals scale. This suggests that although students on average are equally committed in terms of personal desire to succeed academically and go on to college in both schools, this factor alone does not lead to similar patterns of victimization or levels of exposure between the schools. A confluence of factors override the average academic investment of students in Hughes to create classroom learning environments that generally are less predictable contexts, where students experience more frequent victimization as the norm. The relationship between personal academic investment and personal victimization will be further explored in Chapter 4, however, it can be concluded that in terms of individual mindsets, students in both schools generally view academic success and attending college as personally important. In the face of these similar personal goals, other factors contribute to differential experiences and conditions in the learning environments.

An interesting point of variation in attitudes across the two schools occurs on the scale measuring College Planning Actions, where some disparities in cultural capital or access to post-secondary planning information may be reflected in terms of behavior. In addition to differences in college-going by family members, the gap may reflect important and subtle aspects of the academic and aspirational norms formed and enacted at the levels of the school organization and the classroom group level. Students in Hughes were much less likely to have taken or planned to take SAT/ACT preparation courses or to have visited, or plan to visit, college campuses. In Hughes, the Journeys program did provide some opportunities for students to engage in college-planning actions, including campus visits, but the number of seats on these trips were limited. In Hilltop, students often talked about trips they took with their families to visit colleges, including trips that involved cross-country flights and weekend-or-longer trips. Some students planned college visits with a friend or a group of friends. Holiday breaks were often used for this purpose, and some students missed school days to engage in this step associated with college planning and decision-making.

Students in both schools were asked about their attitudes on social matters with peers in reference to perceived popularity norms among other students in their school, as well as their personal level of investment in the importance of “Social Goals.” On average students in Hilltop perceived popularity to be more important to their peers than did students in Hughes, implying that students on average felt more intense pressure to be socially accepted in Hilltop than in Hughes. In Chapter 4, the relationship between social goals and personal victimization will be explored, particularly paying attention to whether the school-wide norms related to popularity play a greater, equal, or lesser role in

determining overall patterns of victimization. Additional analyses will explore the extent to which the students' personal attitudes about social objectives, the school-wide norms about popularity, or some combination of both are related to the overall personal victimization patterns of respondents. Research suggests that the more motivated an individual student is to change his or her social status, the more likely he or she will be to be involved in victimization and aggression (Faris and Felmlee 2011).

Feelings of relative safety varied greatly across the two schools. Nearly a quarter of students in Hughes indicated that they did not feel safe in the last month, and were nearly four times as likely to feel unsafe compared with students in Hilltop. Students were also asked if they were comfortable with other students in their school, and nearly a third in Hughes indicated they were not, which made them three times more likely to be uncomfortable with peers compared with students in Hilltop. It is very likely that these discrepancies reflect differential exposure to negative behaviors such as victimization, as a witness or victim. A more general item sought to understand the frequency with which students anticipated seeing others break rules. In Hughes, more than half indicated that this happened "Many times" compared to only 16% in Hilltop. Although the specific rule-breaking behaviors are not specified in the question, and the students could have been thinking of the ubiquitous cell phone policy or a non-aggression related rule when answering this question, it is unlikely that cell phone use, dress code policy, or other violations would have caused the general discomfort and feels of insecurity with peers reflected by a large portion of Hughes students on the survey.

Students were also asked about their perceptions of the normalcy of getting in trouble, as well as discipline norms at the school-wide level and within the core content

area classes I observed in both schools (Language Arts and Mathematics). Students in Hughes were significantly more likely to perceive that others think it is normal or funny to get in trouble. This significant difference in reported norms around getting in trouble may reflect the more consistent and severe disruptive and aggressive behaviors observed in Hughes. In Chapter 5, I will explore the extent to which students who perceive getting in trouble as more normal, perhaps as a result of being exposed to higher levels of peer misbehavior, relates to victimization experiences.

Students were asked to report on the expected severity of a disciplinary response in his or her classroom if a student disrupted class by teasing another student. Students in Hughes expected more severe disciplinary responses from subject area teachers in Mathematics and Language Arts compared with students in Hilltop. It could be interpreted as antithetical to see that disciplinary response is predicted to be harsher in Hughes, yet the overall victimization in core subject areas is higher according to both survey data and observation data. Overall, the relative severity of incidents in Hughes may have also led to expectations that punishable offenses would be more serious in nature, and thus more likely to be met with harsh forms of punishment. Students in both schools describe the warnings and anecdotes that are spread through the school to underscore the seriousness of the Anti-bullying law and the investigation process, which may lead to impressions of severe consequences being issued to those who have been caught engaging in “bullying” behaviors. In Chapter 5, I will explore whether more severe discipline is related to lower incidence of aggression witnessed and personal victimization experienced by students in their Mathematics and Language Arts classrooms.

*Patterns of Victimization Across Schools*

The main purpose of the SCUBA Survey is to expand beyond traditional survey instruments that measure bullying, and to ask students about specific behaviors they are exposed to in their school building. Previous research has suggested that particularly for older students, eliminating the word “bullying” from survey items can lead to greater reporting and more accurate estimation of existing patterns (Kert et. al 2010). These data provide information on the frequency of a variety of types of victimization, including in-person and cyber formats. While the observed patterns of behavior varied greatly across the two schools in terms of specific patterns of interaction, levels of severity, content, and targets, the percentages of students indicating they were victimized vary for some types of aggression and are strikingly similar for others.

The mean scores for scales measuring personal victimization of all types, in-person types, and cyber types were all significantly higher in Hughes compared with Hilltop. This suggests that students in Hughes were subject to more victimization exposure both inside and outside of schools, although the nature and content of these interactions are given greater detail through ethnographic description. School-wide data patterns also indicate similarities and differences in students’ choices of where to engage in aggressive behaviors. For example, the hallways and cafeterias were frequent sites of reported victimization of various types. This decision-making by students may reflect the fact that these settings are much less supervised compared to classroom settings, and do not reflect the structure or purpose of the classroom either. The hallways are where the norms and cultural attributes of the whole school, specific classrooms, and individual students intersect and sometimes collide. The cafeteria is a site where even the most

academically invested students are able to enact the popularity norms of the school and pursue any personal social goals as well, with a lower likelihood of detection and negative consequences. Victimization can also disrupt the learning process covertly in digital formats, both inside and during school, and outside of school as well. The boundaries of these interactions are fluid and can continue across contexts and time frames.

Overall, the common patterns of victimization outside of classrooms in both schools make intuitive sense considering the likely desire of students to avoid detection and punishment for their behaviors. Again, the decision to engage in victimization primarily outside of academic content delivery in classrooms allows students to maximize their pursuits of both academic and social goals, and reduce the likelihood of detection. A striking difference between the victimization patterns in both schools relates to the propensity of Hughes students to report victimization in core content area classrooms (Mathematics and Language Arts in particular). Academic courses including electives and foreign language classes also appeared in the top five location lists, but did not impact a very large percentage of students reporting personal victimization. However, in Hughes, students included Language Arts in the top five for verbal and social victimization, as well as damage to property; Mathematics class was listed in the top five for threats and damage to property.

Disruption of class time in these core content area classrooms has important implications for teachers' abilities to deliver content and students' academic outcomes. The biggest disparity in victimization between schools is observed for threats of harm. Physical victimization and threats of physical harm are conceptually important areas to

consider when examining the impact of aggressive behaviors in a classroom setting. Whereas verbal victimization, social victimization, and damage to property could have impacts generally ranging from being a nuisance to severe emotional harm, physical victimization and threats are more inclined to also elicit a biophysical “fight or flight” response that would render it difficult, if not impossible, for students to learn and remember information in a classroom environment (Vogel and Schwabe 2016). Whether these forms of victimization occur in the classroom itself, or in proximal spaces such as the cafeteria or hallway, the potential effects on classroom learning are important to consider.

The data on victimization in Language Arts and Mathematics classes suggest that the likelihood of being part of an extremely chaotic and disruptive core content area class is much higher in Hughes. For students in the classrooms where victimization is more widespread, it cannot be easy for students to focus, regardless of their individual motivations. The subsequent chapters focusing on mechanisms related to victimization, including academic and aspirational norms, disciplinary norms, and everyday practices, will attempt to make sense of why some classrooms exhibit these patterns of victimization and disruption more frequently than others. Understanding why patterns of victimization vary so greatly, particularly in core content area classrooms, is critical to improving learning conditions.

Students in Hughes may be more likely to victimize others in core content classrooms for a wide variety of reasons. On one hand, discipline may be lax in certain classrooms, although as indicated by the scales on disciplinary severity, students in Hughes overall expect to be subject to more harsh discipline. Students may expect more

punitive responses because the behaviors they have observed typically are more intense and do merit more severe disciplinary reactions. It is also possible that the teacher's response generally is to ignore behavior or enforce rules and norms inconsistently, which results in a very harsh reaction when behaviors fester and worsen over time. On the other hand, discipline may be strict and consistent across the school or in specific classrooms, but students may not care as much about getting in trouble if their academic goals are less formed or it is perceived as normal to get in trouble. From the attitudinal scales, however, it is clear that on average students in Hughes are equally invested in academic goals compared to their counterparts at Hilltop. Still, it is considered more normal in Hughes to get in trouble. Thus, competing social norms at the school-wide level around the normalcy of getting in trouble may play a bigger role in shaping the context for aggression in content area classrooms. Classroom observations reflected the fact that much aggression and victimization behavior was ignored by teachers or met with warnings, because the behaviors were so frequent and ubiquitous that reacting to every instance would completely take over class time. I rarely witnessed disciplinary situations that would match severity that students expected in Hughes, despite the range of serious aggressive behaviors occurring in classrooms. Addressing both the root causes of these differential behavioral patterns, as well as disparities in disciplinary responses, are essential steps to reforming the small group contexts within classrooms.

The ethnographic data support survey results suggesting that students in Hughes are two to three times more likely than students in Hilltop to witness victimization in Mathematics and Language Arts (as well as in other academic classrooms). Not only is victimization in these classrooms more frequent overall in Hughes, but the severity,

content, and duration of observable aggressive interactions is also greater compared to Hilltop. In Hilltop, individual students engaging in aggression typically took measures to make their aggressive behaviors as discreet, fleeting, and invisible as possible. While those discreet behaviors may have been similarly severe, they were not visible to the classroom group during class time. For example, a student in Hilltop frequently smacked another student, who was seated in the back row of desks, in the head when walking to use the garbage. He would always wait to do so until the teacher's back was turned to write on the blackboard.

In addition to visibly engaging in behaviors that lead to classroom-based victimization, students in Hughes were more likely to perceive that students in their school use devices to tease one another during school hours. More than a quarter of students felt this happened in each and every class, which could be very distracting if students think they might be the subject of online victimization while they are trying to learn, compared with 15% of students reporting the same behavior in Hilltop. In part, the risks of distraction and victimization online during school hours were major factors in the school's decision to strictly enforce the cell phone ban. However, students skirted this ban by asking to leave the classroom for a drink or to use the restroom, and using their phone outside of class. The ban addresses the online aggressive behavior by making it somewhat more difficult to engage in, but does not address the root of the issue, which is that some students are more motivated to engage in online aggression than to focus on classroom-based content. The reasons for this behavioral gap may be attributed to the academic and aspirational norms, or lack thereof, as communicated and enacted at the school-wide and classroom levels. Even more specifically, there may be a cultural

disconnect in understanding why classroom focus on and mastery of daily learning objectives is critical to the long-term attainment of students' academic goals.

Students were asked about their perceptions of patterns related to verbal victimization and the attributes or characteristics most often targeted for victimization. Asking the question about whether students were "teased or picked on" about specific characteristics may have yielded a mix of joking among friends and intentionally harmful behaviors among non-friends. Though it isn't possible to measure intentionality, in the next section, I will provide a theoretical overview of conceptual categories of aggressive behavior that occur between friends and non-friends. At the same time, the characteristics that emerged as being targeted often highlight important patterns in school life regardless of the intention behind interactions or the actual harm they caused to the person targeted. Students in both high schools were targeted for very similar reasons overall, reflecting not only school-wide norms which are reinforced through teasing, but popular societal norms as communicated through media and general socialization. For example, the importance of physical appearance and norm regulation of bodyweight and body size are apparent in the lists of the top ten reasons students perceive that others will be victimized, as well as reports of personal victimization.

Students in both schools were asked about the top reasons for victimization, and the top ten lists from each school reflect the same attributes in seven out of ten items perceived as most frequently victimized. The schools were also aligned in eight out of ten attributes indicated for personal victimization experiences. Arguably the aligned categories reflect norms on a supra-organizational or societal level. In both schools, norm regulation occurs around hygiene, appearance (body size, hair color, attractiveness,

shortness), loudness, perceived sexual behavior (as indicated by the number of boyfriends/girlfriends one has), competitiveness and getting high grades (described in interviews in both schools as generally “trying too hard”). It is critical to note that none of the attributes above are specifically protected categories, and the fact that some of them are not inherently negative makes it difficult for adults to determine when teasing has gone too far and is hurtful or harmful. For example, being “talkative” isn’t necessarily a “lesser than” quality, in fact, extroversion is generally valued in schools, and “getting high grades” is generally viewed as a positive attribute. This makes it difficult for students and adults to disentangle situations when teasing is intentionally harmful. Still, when the intention behind the teasing is negative, or has a negative impact on the student being targeted, it can still be construed as aggressive in nature (rather than playful).

The two school settings diverge across a few notable characteristics related to teasing. For example, in Hilltop, “flirting too much” went along with the notion that having too many boyfriends or girlfriends was undesirable, and “studying too much” went along with the potentially targeted attribute of having high grades. Not being good at sports was perceived as a reason that others in Hilltop were teased, and was on the list of top reasons students were actually victimized in Hughes. The biggest divergence is that in Hughes, the protected categories of race/ethnicity and skin color emerge as top reasons for victimization, and are in the top two reasons for reported personal victimization. This finding may be surprising given the extremely diverse racial and ethnic composition of the Hughes community. However, I observed situations in which it seemed apparent that adults did not think it was possible for students to victimize others

according to racial attributes within the same racial group or across minority groups, or where adults (especially white adults) felt uncomfortable intervening in such conversations between non-white students. For example, it seemed that some teachers felt that students of color could not exhibit racist behaviors, or that intra-racial teasing was never intentionally hurtful. Student interviews supported the importance of addressing racial forms of victimization, especially among students of color, because of the harm that victimization based on racial background can yield in terms of lowered self-esteem and self-efficacy over time (Rodriguez-Hidalgo, Ortega-Ruiz and Monks 2015).

The number of non-white students in Hilltop was so low that even if those students experienced frequent victimization on the basis of race and reported it on the survey, it would not register as a top reason for victimization for the population as a whole. When the sample is split to look only at the experiences of non-white students in Hilltop, 22.2% reported that they were “Often” or “Always” victimized according to race or ethnicity. Observations could only play a small role in providing information on victimization by race or ethnicity, because the non-white population was so small that I only directly observed about 20 non-white students across the thirteen classrooms I followed. Based on other patterns, it would have been very unlikely for students to overtly victimize others according to a protected category such as race, particularly if they were motivated to avoid trouble.

In addition, I could interview only those students who were randomly selected for my sample to hear more about their experiences directly. Both of the non-white students I interviewed in Hilltop, an Asian female and a black male, described persistent occurrences of racialized teasing and victimization. At times the aggression they

described took the form of “microaggressions” or interactions or statements that communicate subtle insults to an individual based on their group of membership (Embrick, Dominguez, and Karsak 2017). For example, Elijah, a black 11<sup>th</sup> grader at Hilltop in CP classes said that his friends at lunch would often make racist jokes and say, “but you’re not that kind of black person.” He felt that he could not stop the behavior or report it because it did not target him directly, and he did consider the aggressors friends. Jenny, an Asian 11<sup>th</sup> grader, would describe situations when fellow students would make jokes about her academic aptitude based on her race, or point her out when something culturally specific like sushi was mentioned, conflating Asian ethnic groups. Again, this supports the compelling case that measuring school-wide victimization patterns through aggregate survey data alone are not sufficient for fully uncovering the nuanced, covert patterns of victimization that emerge in specific school and classroom settings.

The Reasons for Teasing inventory allows for a deeper understanding of the norms at work within a school community. They highlight general patterns regarding most typical targets of victimization when the targeted characteristic is clearly perceived by a witness or victim. However, there were many cases in which victimization took place in a way that was not clearly related to or motivated by a victim’s personal characteristics. This does not mean that the individuals involved in the interaction could not read into the meaning of an interaction to understand whether a specific characteristic or attribute was being targeted through local meanings or implicit actions. An example would be if a student cursed out or threatened another student without explanation, or in response to an action rather a characteristic. It is difficult for a survey to attempt to document measure the characteristics of specific situations, or to fully capture patterns

across them. This situational nuance, and the factors and dynamics that either discourage or enable victimization in schools and classrooms, will be better unpacked through an analysis of observation data and students' explanations in interviews.

### *Overview of Qualitative Data Patterns*

As I immersed myself in the two schools for daily classroom observations, I immediately noticed significant and consistent differences between the schools in the patterns of overt aggression and victimization. In addition, the classroom occurrences I witnessed fell into relatively predictable and consistent patterns of interaction once the opening moments of the small group had been solidified. In other words, once the routines, practices, and interpersonal dynamics of the group were established in the first month of school, there was little unpredictability unless key shifts in membership or other factors occurred. The patterns I describe at a conceptual level in this section reveal a high degree of variation across contexts that persisted over time. These patterns persisted in the face of major school-wide and classroom group events, including shifts in membership. The disparities I describe impacted the learning conditions and outcomes for students within the classrooms across the duration of the group's life, which is an academic school year.

Among school practitioners, there is a widespread opinion that cyber forms of victimization are increasing, and that they are a bigger issue facing teens than in-person aggressive behaviors. However, these self-report data coupled with observations support the argument that in-person forms of aggression in school are experienced more frequently in both schools. Although these in-school behaviors take very different forms depending on the school, and are fleeting, these data suggest they are more widespread

than cyber forms and have the potential to seriously disrupt the learning process depending on when and how they unfold. In Hughes as a whole, aggressive behaviors were more blatantly visible and “normal,” although the frequency, types, content, and range of severity did vary consistently across contexts and classroom groups within the school. Verbal forms of victimization were most commonly reported by respondents in both schools, and were also most frequently observed.

### *Common Spaces*

The hallways and cafeteria, two locations I observed frequently, were often louder and generally more chaotic in Hughes compared to Hilltop. In the cafeteria at Hughes, yelling and throwing objects, such as rolled up paper or food items, were commonplace behaviors. Each round lunch table seats nine students, and the groups at these tables were very diverse in makeup by racial/ethnic group and gender. Students in Hughes were only officially permitted to leave their seats to get lunch, although some cafeteria monitors (a mix of teachers, administrators, and security guards) were lenient to let students stand near other tables to talk. In Hughes because of the prior issues with food fights and throwing food, the monitors brought the trash cans around to students in their seats. Name-calling, teasing, and threatening behavior, often including audible profanity, were all common in both the cafeteria and the hallways. The hallway’s verbal interactions were typically so loud that their content was audible in classes that were in session during transitions. In the hallways in Hughes, I witnessed at least three physical exchanges that students and school officials classified as “fights.” Banging on lockers, body-slammings others into lockers, and smacking books out of someone’s hands were common occurrences.

Most teachers in Hughes, with a few key exceptions, often looked down and did not acknowledge behaviors in the hallway, moving quickly to get to their next destination. On several occasions when I observed a teacher intervening, the student ignored them or ran away if the person was not his or her teacher. While the hallways in Hughes were much less orderly overall, only a small number of students were responsible for most conduct, and I became familiar with them over time. They stood out in the sea of other students trying to move quietly through the halls, some looking as if they wished they were invisible, eyes down and books clutched. Some students seemed to try to walk in close proximity with adults such as myself. In interviews, some students confirmed that students do this because being near adults was a buffer to avoid unnecessary conflicts that could arise by looking at someone the wrong way, walking too fast or too slow, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

For the small number of students who engaged in aggressive or disorderly behavior, being in the hallway between classes (and sometimes during classes) was a source of entertainment. These students often ran or weaved between students and adults while chasing one another, as I witnessed in my first moments in the school's stairwell. A 9<sup>th</sup> grade student in Enrichment classes described her own behavior in the hallway in the following way: "We'll play tag in the hallway. Run away from security, and security will be chasing. Then they – then the students will go into their class and security can't find them." In Hilltop, the hallways and cafeteria are much quieter and more orderly. Students have physical contact via fist bumps, high fives, hugs, and the occasional slap to get someone's attention. In the hallway, they walk on the right side only, and an invisible and understood line divides traffic moving in opposite directions. Occasionally a student

using his or her cell phone bumped into someone else, and typically would apologize right away. In the cafeteria, students were permitted to move freely, and could obtain a pass to go to the library or get extra help with a teacher if they requested it. Students were often engaged in conversations in both the hallway and cafeteria, or used cell phones or laptops instead of speaking with others. The cafeteria was extremely quiet compared to a typical high school cafeteria because so many students use devices or laptops rather than conversing.

The most common aggressive behavior in both the hallway and cafeteria at Hughes was “playfighting” or sparring between students. This sparring included slapping, punching, pushing and kicking in the air or making contact, but typically without using full force. Playfighting also occurred frequently in classrooms of all levels in Hughes, although it was almost never observed in Honors classes for juniors. This behavior almost always happened between friends, making it less likely that an adult would intervene, even if the playing went too far and someone got hit a little too hard. In interviews, students described occasions when playfighting went too far and got mistaken for a real fight (resulting in the police being called) or resulted in an actual fight. In Hughes, males typically play fight with other males, although playfighting did occur between males and females, and on rare occasions, between females.

Playfighting was described by a male 9<sup>th</sup> grader in Hughes as “a game” that would help them get their “hands right” or prepare them for an actual fight. Students typically noted that they could tell it was a “play” fight if the individuals involved were smiling. I observed the behavior during just about every hallway transition and at many other points throughout the day. At times, the behavior was so ritualized, it appeared to serve as a

greeting or a mode of entertainment to fill empty time. As an 11<sup>th</sup> grade female Honors class student described it:

In the hallways all the time, I see kids – I guess, they’re friends, I don’t know. They’ll just be – they call it slap boxing and they’re hitting and slapping each other back and forth or whatever and just – I don’t know. I guess, you can call it playfighting, but it happens pretty often. I usually see it in the hallways a lot, especially when I’m walking through the freshman and sophomore wings of school, I see it a lot. They’re always touching each other. They do it a lot.

It was not unusual to see a non-participant get knocked down to the floor by happening across the path of playfighting. While I got knocked into often, I didn’t get knocked down myself, but I extended a hand to knocked-down students or helped them pick up belongings on several occasions. Students I interviewed indicated that a few playfighting students had been suspended in periodic crackdowns on the behavior by administrators, but otherwise, the behavior typically was not addressed when it occurred outside of classrooms.

At Hilltop I observed the majority of overt aggressive behaviors in the hallways, which was the least supervised area. The school encourages teachers to stand in their doorways during transitions to monitor interactions. Teachers typically could not fulfill this role as they were moving to another classroom, preparing for the next class, or entering data. Students in the halls often clustered around a cell phone to look at a photo or social media post. At times, I overheard what sounded like rumors and threats. I noticed isolated cases of male students punching or hitting one another about once per week in Hilltop, compared to in almost every class in Hughes. These behaviors almost never occurred in view of a school staff member in Hilltop. Similar to Hughes, to deescalate conflicts or attempt to get others in trouble, a student being hit would typically invoke the “bullying” language, which often would halt the interaction if an adult was in

range. I did not witness any fights in Hilltop and most students I interviewed indicated that they had not heard of or seen any fights during the school year. One or two students had heard of fights happening outside of school, and described them as happening between “more redneck people.” Some students brought up a “girl fight” that happened the previous year; one of the girls in that fight was in a Focus classroom I observed, and dropped out mid-school year. When students were asked about fighting behavior in Hilltop, they typically said that it did not happen in their school or might happen rarely outside of school. Some students considered fighting as a social situation (rather than physical), in which they would describe two students “fighting” as giving each other the silent treatment. For example, a student might indicate she is “fighting” with her best friend because she failed to keep a secret. Instead of reflecting physical interactions, this use of “fighting” reflects a temporary break in the relationship, which mean not communicating or spending time together.

#### *Classroom-based Victimization*

In classrooms, verbal victimization was common in Hughes regardless of the level of the classroom. Some visible behaviors in Hughes were so severe that they would be extremely rare to witness in Hilltop, if ever observed. In terms of verbal victimization, use of slurs such as “faggot” and “retarded” were used often across contexts in Hughes, and the statement “suck my dick” was used audibly in all settings and classroom levels. The phrase is most typically directed from a male to a female, followed by a female to a male, and at times, from a female to a female or a male to a male, although the last example invited homophobic retorts. The phrase was said so frequently that it echoed in my head when I returned home from fieldwork and it appeared hundreds of times in my

field notes. The saying appeared to be used as a knee-jerk reaction from students responding to a verbal insult. The use of “suck my dick” seems in an interactional sense to be the local equivalent of “shut up” which is used more often (although not very often) in Hilltop. In both schools, use of the phrases “suck my dick” or “shut up” were used least frequently in Honors classes, and most frequently in the lowest level of classes.

While males in Hughes are often called “gay” as an insult, female bisexuality is considered a norm in the school, and 9<sup>th</sup> grade teachers and administrators described “all or most” of the freshman class of girls as identifying as lesbian or bisexual. Insults regarding being bisexual or lesbian were not typically directed at females, but female sexual behavior was typically referenced in common insults like “ho” or “THOT – that ho over there.” The word “n----r” is used frequently along with “n---a” in some classrooms. A ritualistic type of exchange that often occurred between some students resembled “playing the dozens” or an insult contest such as a “roast.” Students would go back and forth in an attempt to outlast the other student and outdo them with creative insults. Insults in these exchanges became quite specific and unusual, and at times so silly that they may not have been actually offensive to the targeted student, i.e. “You got some small ass fucking feet” (an Enrichment class) or “You the type of kid to take a bath and sit down in that dirty ass water” (a relatively orderly CP class). There were references to current events in the formation of incredibly common insults across the school, including “You have Ebola” or “Your mom has Ebola.” At times, using this insult took on a racial undertone if a white student referenced Ebola to a black student, and often the targeted student would say something back like, “That’s racist.” Even when the subject matter was silly or considered a joke, the pattern and continuity of the exchanges may have hurt

students' feelings. The performance of these aggressive rituals served to distract other students during instruction or independent work time in classrooms. The way that these interpersonal ritualistic exchanges become a part of the everyday practices in some classrooms will be discussed in Chapter 6.

The diversity of the student body in Hughes often meant that students spoke another language in addition to English, and sometimes they would whisper or speak in these languages as a way to exclude other students (or adults) from their conversation. This resulted in the often-used statement, "We're in America, speak American [or English]." Cases of students making fun of the skin color, accent, language, or other practices of other students, and even teachers, were commonplace. Students were observed mimicking the accents of teachers (in all levels of classes) as side conversation or directly to the teacher. In one case, when substituting for an Enrichment class, a Sikh teacher was repeatedly called "ISIS" regarding his turban; in another, the same teacher was referred to as a "taxi driver" by a student in his own Honors class. He ignored these instances, and told me later they happened often and did not bother him. The teacher attempted to model turning the other cheek, but at the risk of underemphasizing the seriousness of making racially charged comments, which could be met with sanctions in other spaces.

When a racial slight pushed the boundaries of acceptability or normalcy in Hughes, students would often say "Yeet" to deescalate the tension. The expression "Yeet" was used after an insult to indicate the person was just joking or not serious, similar to the use of the expression "psych." "Yeet" was often heard used after the targeting of a student or adult from a protected category or around a taboo subject, like

race or cognitive ability. If teasing was perceived as a bystander to have gone too far against a targeted student, other students would say that he or she “took that short.” To “take that short,” meant that the person was hurt or upset by an act of verbal aggression, whether it was intended as harmful or not. One of the worst things a student could be called in Hughes was “fake,” which often escalated conflict. On the other hand, as mentioned previously, calling another student out as a “bully” or naming their behavior as “bullying” or “Hibbing” often shut down an exchange right away.

In classrooms, when playfighting occurred teachers typically asked students to stop or sit down, and they would usually comply, but at times would reinstate the behavior later. The Honors student noted above who described playfighting in the hallways also described it occurring in her non-honors classrooms, and described it as annoying and distracting. Most students felt the same way, particularly those in more rigorous classes. In Hilltop, male students would sometimes engage in similar physical exchanges or ritualistic greetings, but would not use the playfight terminology common in Hughes. Students described these types of behaviors rarely or occasionally occurring in the hallway and physical education classes. I observed hitting among students who appeared to be friends at times in the unstructured one or two minutes at the end of class, when students in some classrooms were permitted to pack up and line up near the door in anticipation of the bell.

Physical behaviors like pulling hair, smacking, punching, scratching, and tripping were observed at least once per class in Hughes, although typically much more often, even at the Honors level. However, physical behaviors tended to be markedly more ubiquitous overall as the ability level of the classroom decreased. In one meeting of an

Enrichment Mathematics class for 9<sup>th</sup> graders, I observed two male students threaten a fight, and they both stood up, yelled, and waved their hands in each other's faces.

Another male student in the same class repeatedly grabbed the neck of the male student in front of him to demand help with a question. Some nonviolent physical behaviors seem intended to obtain peers' attention or a reaction, such as an example of students chewing up paper spitballs and putting them onto the exposed skin of other students.

Some physical behaviors in Hughes were threatened or mimicked, such as a student repeatedly pretending to stab another student between the eyes with a pencil, and actually holding the pencil to the skin between his eyes. Threats were observed infrequently in Honors classes but very often took the general form of "Fight me." "Fight me" is a challenging form of a threat, which was also framed as "I'll fuck you up" or "I'm gonna pop your ass." When students were threatened with a fight, other students often also implied that the friends of the person threatened were expected to "jump in." This norm meant that bystanders were also engaged in the distraction associated with the threat, and potentially in the aftermath if the conflict persisted. Threats in Hughes were often specific and graphic, and were rarely discreet, as the volume in which they were delivered appeared to emphasize a performance of toughness. Students often threatened to stab one another, and would swing around objects like writing utensils in proximity to the student being threatened. Another example illustrating the specificity of threats was "I'm gonna forearm you in the throat" in an Honors class. In this case, referencing a relatively non-violent form of physical aggression compared to stabbing may have been viewed as less likely to elicit an adult intervention or punishment. It seemed that students specified threats and were creative with content in order to make their statement stand out

beyond the often used threats to “fight” or “kill,” which lost their shock value and impact. An example was a female student in a CP Algebra class yelling “I will fuck you up. I will kill you if you say anything. I will have to go to jail.” This statement was ignored by the teacher, who raised his eyebrows and kept trying to teach. In an Honors class in Hughes, a student whispered to another student “I will slice you like a bagel,” then loudly repeated the word bagel throughout the rest of the class. This threat was overlooked by the teacher, who did not know that bagel was shorthand for the threat because the student had created coded language to avoid detection.

Very few of the threats I observed resulted in a physical exchange in the classroom, but at times a threat or challenge to fight within a time frame and location outside of school resulted. It was unclear how many of these challenges resulted in an actual fight, but it is likely a very small percentage given the nearly one in five students who reported having experienced threats in the last month. In Hilltop, threats were reported as happening only one third of the time as compared with Hughes, and they were rarely observed. One specific student in a core level classroom would typically say “Fight me” in a ritualistic exchange with another male student, but other instances of this type of threat were very rare in an overt form. In terms of damage to property, students in all levels in Hughes were observed ripping up one another’s work, as well as writing in or on notebooks or other assignments. However, this type of behavior occurred less frequently than other forms of aggressive behavior. In Hilltop, it was almost never viewed, with the exception of one female student observed in a core level class who often wrote insults or slurs in the notebook of a male student, or on his skin, in a ritualistic manner.

In Hilltop overall, the norm in classrooms was to observe one or two aggressive interactions, if any. Rarely, and often in lower tracked classrooms in the Focus designation, there were several examples of aggressive behavior in each class meeting. Sometimes these involved sarcasm, or playful, ritualistic aggressive banter. Other times, they were time-specific routines, as in the group of male students who would pack up their things and stand and circle up in the back of a CP Mathematics classroom during the moment before the release bell. They would look over to make sure the teacher had her back turned to enter participation data into her computer, as she did daily, and would slap and punch each other within the circle before being released to their next class. In an Honors Mathematics class, students could typically be observed throwing papers or tissues at one another, and at times sarcastic comments were made to attempt to put down another student, i.e. “Are you going to cry about it?” or “Wow, you’re cool.” In interactions that appeared to be playful, but bordering on rude or being a nuisance, students used seemingly benign or juvenile insults similar to those in Hughes; i.e. “Don’t talk to her, she has cooties.”

Students in non-CP or Focus classes in Hilltop sometimes used variations of slurs used frequently in Hughes. For example, rather than use the word “retarded,” which was sanctioned by both students and adults, the word “tard” would be used instead. I heard students use the word “faggot” and more often, “pussy,” on occasion in CP and Focus classes, but the behaviors could be considered covert because I do not believe the teacher could hear them. In one Honors class for 9<sup>th</sup> graders, the teacher often arrived after students were already seated. In the moments before she arrived, aggressive interactions

would often occur between a specific group of male students. This typically involved verbal insults, such as “You’re not smart enough to be in this class.”

There were one or two students in Hilltop, in the freshmen non-CP Language Arts class, who engaged in threatening behavior frequently. One of these students had an in-class support teacher, possibly for his academic and behavioral needs. She typically redirected the student by squatting next to his desk and speaking to him. In a Focus mathematics class for juniors, three key students often argued with one another about comments, photos, and videos posted of one another on Snapchat. This led to snatching, hitting, and distraction or disruption to the class. The teacher, an older male who left the school mid-year, typically ignored their interactions, while a male in-class support teacher often intervened similarly to the other one described, by squatting and whispering to the students involved. In these classrooms, students almost always used their school-issued laptops for some element of the independent work. In “Focus” or “non-CP” classes, I was much more likely to witness students toggling back and forth between the assignment and social media web sites such as Facebook or Instagram. These classes also often had an in-class support teacher present, so the students toggling would need to be vigilant as adults circulated in the room.

The use of cyber communication to engage in digital forms of aggression could be seen as an effort, across both schools, to avoid detection and punishment by engaging in victimization covertly. The conditions in the two schools, however, led to differential opportunities for students to use devices to victimize others. Across all levels of ability, students used cell phones discretely during class in Hughes, although older students seemed to be more adept in how to perfectly balance their phone under their desk, in their

lap, or disguise it as a calculator in Mathematics class. Students in the Honors classes were less likely than those in lower levels to use their phones consistently or ask to leave the room to make use of their phones. In Hilltop, most students regardless of level checked their cell phones only one or two times, if at all, during class, and only for a second or so. Most waited and checked their phones during hallway transitions. Some sent text messages quickly, but the desire to communicate with peers during class could be satisfied privately through the use of messenger systems on school-issued laptops. Social media sites such as Facebook were not blocked in Hilltop, and administrators attributed this openness to their desire to demonstrate trust for the students and reinforce their decision-making skills. In Hughes, network administrators in the school district attempted to block social media sites, but tech savvy students discovered a workaround. This led the school to shut down the wireless networks in the building for several months, meaning that wireless devices including laptops used for occasional classroom assignments could not be used to access information via the web unless special permissions was granted. In addition, students described needing to use data from their cell phone plans to communicate or research information to complete their assignments, which caused a strain to parents being faced with higher cell phone bills for data overages. When the standardized testing period in the spring was approaching, the district had to lift the network blockage to allow students to use the online testing platform for PARCC.

According to survey data, students in both schools experienced similar frequencies of victimization for most types, with some key exceptions. Yet I observed more aggressive behaviors in Hughes than Hilltop directly. This is due to the fact that so

much more of this victimization was overt, and specifically took place in the core content area classrooms where I spent the majority of my time. Part of the reason for this difference in the visibility of behaviors may be due to access to technology to displace some of the behaviors in Hilltop. However, this is unlikely to be a sole factor in shaping the differences observed, as students in Hughes also reported cyber victimization at similar if not greater rates than students in Hilltop

Overall, the behaviors *observed* in classrooms were almost always more frequent and severe in Hughes, which has important implications for content delivery and student performance. It is very important to underscore that the frequency and severity of behaviors described in this overview were almost always most intense in the lowest tracked classrooms in both schools, although there were some exceptions. Notably, there were key exceptions of classroom groups in Hughes that were able to deviate from the behavioral norms at the school-wide level by forming an idioculture that prioritized academic focus and fostered little to no aggressive behavior among peers. The mechanisms shaping the context for aggression in classrooms will be described in detail in the chapters to follow, beginning with the role of academic and aspirational norms.

## TYOLOGIES OF PEER AGGRESSIVE INTERACTIONS

I observed a range of aggressive behaviors that can typically be isolated into four analytical categories: playful and isolated; playful and ritualistic; intentionally harmful and isolated; intentionally harmful and ritualistic. I define these categories according to the frequency of interaction, which is objectively observed, and signals of intended harm, which are interpretive. The peer aggressive interactions described in the prior sections vary not only by type, but by relational characteristics and intentionality. These

differences are important to consider in relationship to the potential negative outcomes (e.g. disruption of academic focus, physical injury) that could result from a students' involvement in these interactions in a classroom setting.

*Frequency: Isolated and Ritualistic*

Some forms of observed victimization I observed were isolated incidents, while others took on a ritualistic nature (Collins 2011). An incident is classified as "isolated" if it occurs between students who do not engage in observable interpersonal aggression during most meetings that I observe. Student pairs or groups that engage in observable interpersonal aggression at least once or more during each meeting I observe are defined as engaging in "ritualistic" interactions. These interactions typically occur during the same timeframe or type of activity within the classroom group, such as before the bell rings, during group work, and/or during the unstructured time right before the bell rings. In ritualistic aggressive interactions, the same dyads or groups of students exchanged insults or engaged in other routine forms of aggression that became predictable and normalized. In Hughes, ritualistic aggressive interactions were extremely common. All members of the classroom group, including myself as an observer, could typically predict which students would engage in mutual forms of aggression on a given day. These conflicts often started similarly according to a typical "routine," but extended into other forms of aggression, potentially bringing in uninvolved students in the same classroom into the event. However, these ritualistic exchanges typically were initiated or instigated by the same student or small group of students in each group.

In Hilltop, I observed extremely limited cases of ritualistic aggressive exchanges, and those that emerged were all confined to a handful of students, most in Focus

classroom settings. Many fewer aggressive behaviors were overtly observed in Hilltop overall, and most were isolated events. All of the behaviors in Hilltop, if overt and particularly if serious, were much more likely to be addressed by adults in some way (potentially decreasing the likelihood of ritualistic exchanges). The role of disciplinary norms and practices in shaping the context for isolated versus ritualistic forms of aggression in classrooms is discussed further in Chapter 5.

### *Intentionality*

Conceptualizing the frequency and regularity of aggressive peer interactions between specific dyads, triads, or groups is simpler than attempting to attribute intentionality. However, the general severity of the content of an interaction, the relationship between involved students, and the expressions and reactions of those involved enable categories of intentionality to emerge. Many aggressive peer interactions, whether isolated or ritualistic, are playful in nature. This may mean they occur to elicit laughter or lighten tension. These types of interactions often occur between individuals who consider themselves “friends,” and at times, take on a flirtatious nature. Smiles and laughter often follow the exchange, and it is most typically ritualistic, involving a back and forth between friends or a group that tapers off on its own. At times these interactions are exclusively verbal exchanges, but at others they take on additional forms, most commonly threats (which can be distinguished as playful because of humorous or fantastical undertones) and physical interactions (playfighting or slap-boxing as opposed to full-force hitting). They typically do not escalate in severity, but instead, fizzle out.

On the other hand, intentionally harmful peer interactions characteristically involve a challenge that can easily escalate in severity. The motivation may be to harm,

but also to perform socially for one's peers. These interactions often involve students who would not consider one another "friends" and the intention is not to perform a relationship, but to establish status. The reaction to an intentionally harmful act depends on the "victim," as some students react by ignoring, others look upset or angry, and depending on the context, retaliation is common. Intentionally harmful peer interactions have the strong potential to escalate in severity and to include forms of aggression that are normalized within the culture of the school and the specific classroom group. Within classrooms, intentionally harmful peer interactions often become ritualistic as students test the disciplinary boundaries of the group. Cases of intentionally harmful peer interactions that are isolated may be in reaction to a specific incident or condition in the classroom, or may not yield the type of reaction or outcome the aggressor has intended. For example, the "victim" may not respond, peers may not react, or the student may be sanctioned by an adult.

Examples of students engaging in playful isolated aggression are a female student hitting a male student to get his attention, or a male student teasing that his friend and classmate "should bring that encyclopedia nerd brain onto Jeopardy." Isolated intentionally harmful behaviors may include any form of aggressive behavior that does not occur each time I observe. An example might be a student screaming at a student she doesn't know in the hallway, "Stop looking at me, I'll fucking cut you," or a student making fun of the clothing of a student he or she does not communicate with regularly, but discontinuing the behavior when there is no response.

An example of playful ritualistic aggression in Hughes is a group of four male students who sit in the back corner of Dr. T's Honors Pre-Calculus class (Classroom 12).

They often tease one another, and attempt to use clever word play or coded meanings to get under one another's skin. They would consider themselves friends and often assist one another with schoolwork, but the insults, threats with humorous undertones, and hitting or poking they engage in are a performance of their relationship. They engage in these behaviors when the teacher's back is turned, and are always smiling and laughing. In interviews, other students describe these students as friends. In Mrs. Gardener's CP English class (Classroom 6), there are a number of pairs and groups that engage in playful ritualistic aggression. There is a pair of Asian Indian male students who begin each class with ritualistic aggression that is playful, but on certain occasions it escalates into intentionally aggressive behavior that involves serious threats ("I'll fucking kill you") and hitting. The demeanor and expression of these students turn serious and angry as the interactions unfold. On one occasion Cash, a Latino student who is not friends with the aforementioned pair, points out the interaction to others by mimicking the students and mocking their accent, but his peers correct him by saying, "Stop being racist, Cash," and his intentionally harmful behavior becomes isolated due to peer disapproval. Generally, more intentionally harmful behavior occurs in lower tracked classrooms in both schools. In the higher income school, these behaviors are more often isolated, because aggressive behavior is generally less tolerated from a disciplinary point of view. An example of ritualistic and intentionally harmful behavior occurs in Mr. Brodzki's Algebra 1 Core class (Classroom 18), where several male students pick on a soft-spoken male student from the start to end of class. They tousle his hair and push his head down into the desk as they enter the room, and make frequent unnecessary trips to the garbage

can to try to do the same during instruction, whenever the teacher is writing on the board. They also mouth threats across the room, and verbally victimize him regularly.

Overall, the behaviors *observed* in classrooms were almost always more frequent and severe in Hughes. In other words, the behaviors were likely to be ritualistic and intentionally harmful, characteristics which have important implications for content delivery and student performance over time. Students experiencing intentionally harmful victimization from others who are not their friends may experience worse outcomes, and more ritualistic forms of aggression will distract them in a sustained and repeated way from classroom content. The mechanisms shaping the context for aggression in classrooms will be described in detail in the chapters to follow, beginning with the role of academic and aspirational norms.

## Chapter 4: Academic and Aspirational Norms

Students in high school must navigate a range of social and academic priorities. *Should I finish my homework or gossip with my friends in study hall? Should I pay attention to the review or hurl an insult at someone less popular? Should I provide social support to a friend in the bathroom when I'm supposed to be in class?* These decisions are further complicated by the availability of constant, invisible forms of socialization during classroom instruction via technology. Students not only engage in decision-making regarding interactions in real life, and the demands and norms that change each time they change classes, but they also constantly face choices in a digital social space. *Should I respond to a Facebook post or work on my essay?* Toggling between worlds, tasks, and priorities is as easy as opening and minimizing web browsers on a computer, or using a hidden cell phone. Virtual social exchanges may make a student feel like he or she is sitting in both an instructional environment and the cafeteria at the same time, and balancing his or her social and academic demands simultaneously. In this chapter, I address how school-wide and classroom-based academic and aspirational norms inform students' academic and social priorities, and in turn, shape the context for in-person aggressive behaviors in school.

A student's individual priorities and aspirations are potentially first informed by his or her background and "cultural toolkit." Upon entering the school, they are then shaped by a school's organizational culture or "value climate" (Coleman 1961) and classroom idiocultures. As Nunn argues, scholars "need to look at students' school environments if we want to comprehensively understand how their ideas and behaviors

relate to the concept of success” (Nunn 2014:2). Crosnoe (2011:58) refers to cultural ideas about academic success as pro-school or anti-school attitudes, which arise within the peer culture of a school, and send messages about how important academic success is relative to social success. Crosnoe (2011) also points to how students work out cultural ideas in interactions within a peer social hierarchy. In concert with the local culture they experience both in schools and classrooms, students develop personal goals and aspirations surrounding the goals of schooling: academic achievement and skill mastery. Skill mastery serves various purposes; among those commonly articulated are earning points, passing a class, preparing for a test, pleasing parents, and preparing for more rigorous content in high school and college. Students also implicitly develop social goals, which are informed by local norms about peer interpersonal behavior and social status. For example, positive peer behaviors or attributes, such as helping behavior and kindness, may be valued by significant others (peers and teachers) more than negative behaviors, such as teasing to achieve social dominance. The formation of strong social priorities related to peers, in the absence of strong academic priorities, may take focus and attention away from achieving academic goals, no matter the types of behaviors employed to achieve them.

The potential focus of students on social status may lead to increased engagement in aggressive behavior as a means to increase social status, or popularity. Conversely, the promotion of aspirational norms that affirm the importance and long-term payoff of academic success may mitigate aggressive behaviors, at least those that are overt. Previous work demonstrates that high academic expectations are associated with lower levels of teasing and bullying at both the student and school levels (Gregory and Cornell

2009). Students who want to do well in school may resist opportunities to engage in distracting interactions during class, and may work to preserve a positive reputation with teachers. The ability of the school organization to transmit academic and aspirational norms impacts the extent to which students view their classroom's daily objectives as conducive to fulfilling their long-term objectives. Classrooms that collectively prioritize skill mastery, achieving daily objectives, and academic focus do not provide the opportunity or social rewards for engaging in distracting and potentially aggressive interactions.

#### STRUCTURAL FACTORS INFLUENCING SCHOOL ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

To understand the ways in which school culture and classroom idiocultures structure students' academic goals and shape their behaviors, it is necessary to consider how societal norms become enacted at the institutional and organizational levels. According to Nunn, "Different schools create their own versions of larger cultural ideas, modifying and adapting" existing narratives about success (2014:2) The influence of the "college-for-all" era (Devine-Eller 2012; Rosenbaum 2001) left its mark on both high schools, although the ways in which it is enacted differ and reflect modifications to the message over time. Hilltop markets itself as a college-preparatory high school, but operates in practice as a "college-for-most" environment, providing alternative messages around future planning for students who may not be suited to college. In Hilltop, students believe that most, if not all, of their peers go on to college after high school, as indicated through survey data and interviews. The majority do go on to four-year schools, and a good number complete their first two years at a local community college to save money

and find their paths. A modification of the “college-for-all” ethos for students in “Focus” or non-college preparatory classes is evident through the careful and considerate messaging teachers provide about post-secondary planning. In discussing college-going expectations with teachers of students in non-college preparatory classes, the administration took steps during the prior year to create a clear, consistent, and inclusive message for students who may not be well-matched to college. This unified cultural message was reinforced at faculty meetings, and most teachers adhered to it closely, delivering it to students in a way that seemed rehearsed.

One step was to change name of the lowest ability track in Hilltop from “non-College Preparatory” to “Focus” to avoid stigmatization or labeling of students. The students in these classes were called “Focus kids” by teachers and other students, a label that sent an implicit message by using the label “kids” as opposed to the commonly used labels of “honors students” or “CP students.” In Focus classes, teachers were very careful to be inclusive yet set unbounded expectations in their messaging about the future. For example, when describing the importance and utility of a skill, teachers would explain how it would serve students in “college, vocational school, military, or a job,” to keep the range of possibilities open, but not assert college was the right fit for everyone. This messaging emphasizes other equally important and valuable paths, including vocational school and military service. The potential for all students, including “Focus kids” to attend college is often mentioned, but is not communicated as an expectation or certainty. Great efforts are taken to ensure students feel that whatever post-secondary plan they make is valuable, as long as they are doing something. In College Preparatory (CP),

Honors, and Advanced Placement classes, the alternatives to college were not mentioned, and the relevance of content for college was frequently reiterated.

The demographics of the wider community are reflected in how the school organization frames and discusses college-going. In Hilltop, most students have parents who attended at least some college, and a third have at least one parent with an advanced degree. Discussions about college-going preparation and expectations were the norm in families, peer groups, and within all levels of classrooms. In Hughes, nearly a quarter of students did not have any family member that attended any form of college. College-going was not seen as the typical postsecondary plan, and students had less cultural capital available to engage in informed planning. Hughes echoes the ethos of the “college-for-all” mentality, but it operates in the background structures (e.g. the names of courses) and at the school-wide level, while college-going was typically referred to only in honors courses.

As part of the “college-for-all” approach, in Hughes there were no courses other than college-preparatory – every student is in the college-preparatory (CP) program, with the exception of those with cognitive disabilities. This eliminates differentiation between students and leads to conditions where students who are highly motivated and demonstrate a higher ability level are grouped with students who may be less able and/or less motivated. For freshmen, there was no Honors Mathematics option, meaning that all students were grouped together regardless of variation in motivation, preparation, or skills. The mixing of students with differing “cultural toolkits,” motivations, and abilities sometimes led to cultural conflict within classrooms and the contentious negotiation of norms.

Resources to support students in postsecondary planning varied greatly between schools, as did access to other resources, such as access to software or web-based applications to assist in college planning, or private tutoring. Parents at Hilltop supported ongoing opportunities for involvement in the college-going process through the creation of a new college and career resource center, supported by a large grant from the parent's association. The center offers college essay writing workshops and opportunities for parents to meet and discuss what to expect in preparing applications and dealing with financial aid. In Hughes, I did not witness any opportunities for parents to directly engage in college-planning. The school and its partner organization, Journeys, provided opportunities for students to attend overnight college visits with staff, but parents were not involved. It was unclear if resources and supports were in place to support families in helping students navigate the college planning process. Opportunities for students to obtain support and resources in school were also few and far between. For example, an annual college fair with representatives from local New Jersey schools required that students miss class to take part in the event, and some teachers resisted if they were going over new material. The next day, I heard some students lamenting that because they couldn't attend, they would need to wait another year to find out more information about the schools.

Societal norms and community-level norms inform the ways in which academic and aspirational norms get communicated at the school-wide level. However, they are arguably not as central to shaping student behavior as the local understandings that develop in the school organization and classrooms. I draw a similar conclusion to Nunn (2014:10) that, "individuals who are embedded in an organization - as students are in

high schools – rely on the organization’s interpretation of a given cultural idea rather than a more widely shared version of the same idea.” In the first part of this chapter, I present qualitative findings on how academic and aspirational norms and ideas get enacted as part of classroom idiocultures. Often classroom idiocultures and related academic and aspirational norms are shaped according to the ability level of the group, as well as other factors. In turn, these classroom idiocultures and norms shape the context for aggression. At the end of the chapter, I revisit survey data from the SCUBA to support the argument that school cultures and classroom idiocultures intersect with students’ personal priorities and shape the likelihood that they will be victimized in school.

#### *School-wide Culture and Academic and Aspirational Norms*

School leadership plays a key role in producing cultural ideas and norms, determining the shared narrative around college-going and future-planning. Hilltop’s principal, Dr. Wilcox, consistently spoke with all stakeholder groups (students, staff, parents) about the expansion of opportunities and access to credit-earning opportunities as a cost-saving measure for college. In a mid-year assembly to reinforce expectations set in the beginning of the year, Dr. Wilcox described various new opportunities available to students to explore their interests and earn college credits through A.P. courses and partnerships with local private universities. He describes a dual enrollment program at a local university through which students can earn up to 22 college credits while in high school. “It would be a substantial savings for your parents, rather than paying \$1,000 a credit, or \$22,000, you could take it here for about \$75 a credit.” The freshmen in the room are not eligible to begin the program, but they are expected to start planning.

Dr. Wilcox also uses the convening to tell students about changing graduation requirements and standardized tests, including the PARCC assessment. He reassures students by describing classroom-based practice opportunities and how the school will test the wireless network capability the following week to be sure it functions well. He sets positive expectations for success by saying, “The test is a big change. I know you’ll do well, Hilltop students always do.” The equivalent reminder at Hughes for the start of a new semester came by way of a quick morning announcement. On the morning marking the new marking period, Principal Rizzo assisted in giving the morning announcements and said, “It’s the beginning of the second semester. It’s a big day. You should be in your first period class.” This message did not contain or reinforce existing expectations about academic achievement, and was limited to the expectation that students would be physically present in the proper room. This message stands out in contrast with the affirmative message about achievement and college-related cultural capital shared by the principal in Hilltop.

In Hughes, the previous principal had worked to expand available academic opportunities and A.P. offerings. A partnership with a local university had been secured during his tenure, but I only heard it spoken about in high level courses such as Pre-Calculus Honors. Mr. Rizzo seldom spoke about college-going expectations or post-secondary resources in his interactions with or announcements to students. He and other administrators were in a triage situation to deal with and enforce the cell phone ban, dress code, and other minor offenses (see Chapter 5 on discipline). The “broken windows” approach to interacting with students and enforcing order left administrators little opportunity to consider or promote post-secondary planning. Instead, most energy and

planning went into developing alternative opportunities to engage students that had trouble adhering to the rules of the school, such as a “evening academy” or night school. Few teachers in Hughes explicitly made connections to post-secondary planning, although those who did were consistent about doing so regardless of the level of the course. I did not observe discussions about strategies for framing college-going options or setting high expectations for students in faculty meetings, and expectations were not communicated consistently across classrooms. Individual teachers relied on their own commitments to equity and opportunity, and their connections with their students, to guide messaging about college-going and postsecondary planning.

Loudspeaker announcements conveyed important information regarding college planning and preparation. In Hughes, students in most classes I observed were engaged in loud side-conversation while the loudspeaker announcements were made, making it difficult to hear important information. In Hilltop, students were relatively quiet and most listened intently to the information. If they missed anything, students could see the announcements scrolling on closed circuit TVs in the cafeteria, or could look up the information on the school’s well-maintained web site, where announcements are posted for parents to view.

In both schools, college-planning and acceptance bulletin boards lined the hallways closest to the offices of guidance counselors. In Hughes, flyers were posted to inform students about free SAT tutoring and supports. Hilltop had about triple the number of bulletin boards as Hughes throughout the hallways, and the information on them was up to date and clearly organized. Both schools had bulletin boards to celebrate the achievements of their active National Honor Society chapters.

The bulletin boards in Hilltop hallways did more than highlight college-going opportunities and foster high expectations for students. In addition, the boards showcased the accomplishments of student groups with diverse strengths and skills. Bulletin boards celebrating the artistic, musical, extracurricular, philanthropic, and athletic groups and teams in the school were neatly decorated and updated. Individual students were highlighted for non-academic achievements, framing the importance of well-roundedness and involvement, which were also communicated consistently as being important for college applications. Dr. Wilcox reinforced the importance of involvement at a mid-year assembly for freshman, stating, “Don’t forget, community service is important for your college applications. Finish strong. If you haven’t gotten involved in an activity yet, now is the time.” Reminders to get involved were issued frequently, and in various contexts.

The bulletin boards in Hughes often were not updated and sometimes were damaged. Many of them featured graffiti with a student’s name and a coded insult (i.e. “Aaliyah is a THOT”). Aside from college-going resources, National Honor Society and Student Council information regarding events of interest such as prom, there were not many other displays highlighting student achievements or talents. At times flyers would advertise upcoming club meetings, but the selection of opportunities to explore and develop a skill or talent, whether athletic or extracurricular, were far more limited at Hughes compared with Hilltop. According to interviews, this often resulted in students at Hughes having far less to list on a college application, and less of sense of why doing so was important.

Students interviewed in Hilltop cited a number of resources to support future planning, including a widely-used online platform called Naviance. School districts

purchase the platform to support college and career readiness of students, and it features tools to help students explore careers, create a personalized plan, and organize materials for applications. Students in Financial Literacy classes research colleges and plan budgets reflecting the cost of tuition. In sophomore year, students take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery along with web-based questionnaires designed to provide customized career recommendations. Junior year, students in Hilltop are expected to fill out a “junior packet” that provides guidance counselors with personal and specific examples for college recommendation letters, which helps them make counselor letters more personalized and effective.

College and career planning is constantly a part of the agenda set by the school for students in Hilltop. Conversely in Hughes, students must specifically seek out college and career planning opportunities and support from overburdened guidance counselors. The expectation that students should begin planning before senior year is not communicated. Students in Hughes might make more intentional decisions about course selection, aptitude testing, and finding a well-matched future path if the importance of these actions was reinforced in the culture of the school and met with resources from the beginning. According to interviews, the extent to which students have future pathways in the forefront of their minds may play a role in shaping behavioral decisions.

Peers play an essential role in shaping cultural ideas about success and informing academic and aspirational norms. Speaking openly about college and career planning with peers was much more typical in Hilltop. Students often spoke with peers in the hallways and the moments before or after class about recent college visits, tutoring or courses to improve aptitude test scores, and acceptances or rejections. In Hilltop, students

commonly talked about college acceptances in the spring. I heard about many college acceptances through conversations in the classrooms I observed. I often saw students run up to teachers in the hallways to let them know about acceptances and thank them for recommendation letters. I never witnessed a celebratory conversation about a college acceptance in the hallways of Hughes.<sup>9</sup>

Many students in Hilltop regularly wore collegiate apparel. Students wore shirts ranging from prominent Ivy League schools, to selective liberal arts schools, and large state universities with prominent athletic programs. The apparel signified to others the student's dream schools, schools visited, and in the spring, actual destinations. Wearing college apparel signifies status in a number of ways. First, it signifies a student's family's wealth because they can travel long distances for college visits. Second, the apparel signifies a student's academic status and aspirations; students in lower ability classes would be unlikely to wear apparel from a top university, and might even be questioned for doing so. Apparel also operates as a sorting mechanism. For instance, students and teachers sometimes expressed surprise if a student wore apparel that seemed a mismatch with their perceived ability level. I often saw male students in a CP class say, "You could never get in there," to a student wearing a "Duke University" sweatshirt. I witnessed a teacher asking a student in a Focus class if she was wearing a Vanderbilt shirt because she wanted to go there. She replied that she wore it because her brother attended the school and added that she knew she'd never get in, showing she had the cultural capital to know it was well above her reach. The norm of wearing collegiate apparel, no matter one's grade level, is a reflection of the cultural norms within the organization which

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<sup>9</sup> These may have taken place in classrooms of seniors, which I did not directly observe.

expected that most, if not all, students would go to college, and that through visiting one might find their right fit.

Students rarely wore college apparel in Hughes, even if they had siblings who attended nearby schools. While I sometimes wore college apparel to Hilltop to blend in, wearing it in Hughes made me stand out, but also led students (whether I knew them or not) to take the opportunity to ask me critical questions about college planning. Some teachers in Hughes opted to display banners or other materials from his or her college, which invited similar conversations and helped build a classroom idioculture featuring discussions about college and futures. In Hilltop, visible symbols of college-going culture were widespread. The guidance hallway featured flags and banners from various colleges and universities. Although many teachers attended the same short list of in-state schools, all classrooms had at least one visibly displayed college or university flag or banner.

School-wide opportunities to build cultural capital about future planning were sometimes available in Hughes, but they were viewed as more or less important or relevant by certain teachers. When students in 9<sup>th</sup> grade CP Language Arts classes were given an opportunity to complete a survey on their post-secondary plans that would enable them to receive additional information and resources, teachers framed it as unimportant and something to be completed quickly or skipped altogether. It seemed as though teachers rushed this exercise because they did not recognize the importance of early planning and exploration, or they simply did not think college was for their students.

By discouraging questions and careful consideration of future options, some Hughes teachers missed an opportunity help students understand the steps necessary to

prepare for college. During that exercise, students in Hughes were able to name some Ivy League schools and schools with prominent sports programs, but many were not aware of the name or location of New Jersey's state universities. The gap in cultural capital between Hughes and Hilltop students was apparent, yet there was not a culture or strategy at the organizational level to promote addressing it. It was often up to the initiative of classroom teachers, and their students, to build an idioculture featuring the cultivation of academic and aspirational norms.

While the unequal types of preparation high schools offer for post-secondary planning are well known (Nunn 2014:14), students in both Hughes and Hilltop indicate on the SCUBA survey that they are highly motivated to do well academically as indicated by scores on the Academic Goals scale. However, my study shows that schools may reproduce existing inequalities by structuring different behavioral contexts and learning conditions in classrooms via idiocultures. The following section will illustrate examples from both schools of the ways in which classroom-based idiocultures were formed, and enacted academic and aspirational norms in distinct ways.

#### **CURRICULAR TRACKING AND COMMUNICATING EXPECTATIONS ACROSS ABILITY LEVELS**

In Hilltop, there was general agreement that academic pressure was high in the school. Several students I interviewed said that pressure varied by ability level, and that it impacts student behavior. Generally, students agreed that behavior varied by ability level, and that students in higher ability level groupings were more likely to be focused and less likely to engage in aggressive behavior. Students in honors classes may have the clearest window into how pressure varies by level, because they are in honors but also take

elective or general courses with both CP and Focus students. Students who only take classes at the CP or Focus levels may not have first-hand experience to comment on behavioral disparities between types of classrooms. As Alex, a Hilltop freshman in honors classes, comments on his sense of school-wide culture,

**Alex:** There's pressure. I feel there's a lot of pressure to get good grades, to do well, to pass this, to succeed there. But I think students here, especially in this district, a lot of people –I feel there's definitely a lot of academic pressure in this district. I guess it might not be as much though in some of the lower class levels, but I think there's a lot of academic pressure.

**ARH:** Where do you think that comes from?

Alex: I think a lot of it comes from parents, parents' expectations, and friends, because we probably push each other a bit. We definitely do push each other a bit.

I observe Alex in his honors Mathematics (Classroom 20) and Language Arts (Classroom 23) classes, where the idioculture encourages students to be focused most of the time. I witness very few instances of interpersonal aggression, which are isolated and playful. However, academic pressure leads to one common form of interpersonal aggression in honors classes. One day when I was observing, students in Alex's class collectively agreed not to speak to a student who got 100% on a recent test. They repeatedly called her a "Curviewrecker," although this was an isolated instance – anyone could be the "Curviewrecker." This isolated form of aggression was rare, but was shaped explicitly by a classroom idioculture enacting a specific response to school-wide academic pressure.

When asked about how students generally treat one another in her school, Jenny, a junior honors student in Hilltop, brings up the word bullying in an interview, but clarifies that she does not think bullying ever happens in her school. She defines it as, "Just immature either physical bullying or cyberbullying, which I really don't think

happens here. Because Hilltop is pretty rigorous with the academics and the homework, so people really don't have enough time to.” Her statement indicates a belief that academics are important enough to most people to preclude opportunities for bullying behavior or aggression. However, she subsequently describes a sense that academics may not be as important to students in lower ability level classes. Jenny’s perceptions of school-wide norms about students’ social and academic goals, and social behaviors, are largely informed by her experience in high-ability level classroom contexts. A student from a lower academic track might offer a completely different assessment of the extent to which bullying or aggression takes place, based on the behaviors the idiocultures of their classrooms have fostered. Students I interviewed from CP or Focus classrooms reported a greater sense that aggressive behaviors occur in their classes.

Tyler, a Hilltop junior in mostly Honors classes, shares the following perception of students in Focus classes:

They scream a lot of curse words at each other from what I've seen. I don't know. I feel like it's a different world down there, so I can't really comment on it. People make it out to seem like they're just students in different classes, but you could definitely tell what's going on in different classes based on what level they are.

Similarly, Rani, a junior in honors classes in Hughes, describes how priorities of his classmates vary based on the ability level of the class, and how these differences shape his own behaviors:

**ARH:** You said you take school seriously.

**Rani:** To an extent. My honors classes, I do. But then I see kids in my other regular classes that don't take school seriously, so then I just join in with them and I just do everything at a minimum.

**ARH:** Okay. Would you say that the students in different classes during your day act differently?

**Rani:** Yeah. Honors students, you can tell they're serious about their rank. They're serious about their GPA when the others ones are just trying to graduate. That's it.

Rani later clarifies that the behaviors he joins in with in “regular” classes include aggressive behaviors, such as hitting or teasing, which are atypical in his honors classes. Similarly, Michelle, a junior in Honors Pre-Calculus (Classroom 12), states: “I feel in honors classes, the kids are more quiet because I mean, it's not really a stereotype. In honors classes, the kids have more discipline and they act better in class.” When I ask her what she means by “acting better,” she indicates that they leave one another alone, and do not make fun of or hit their peers as she has experienced in “regular” classes.

Danisha, another female student in Hughes in mainly honors classes, similarly explains what makes her honors classes different from the others she takes. I observe her in Dr. T's Honors Pre-Calculus (Classroom 12), which is a classroom with very little aggressive behavior, and Mr. Ayala's CP English class (Classroom 16), in which Danisha is one of only four focused students who sit in the front of the room. During English, the majority of students engage in loud ritualistic aggression that wavers between playful and intentionally hurtful. When asked about how peers get along in her Honors classes, Danisha explains:

**Danisha:** I mean, they don't interrupt the classes. We sit in groups with people we get along with, but it's not we make a whole bunch of noise. We don't interrupt the classes or anything like that. So it's like we know that we're supposed to be paying attention, but then again we're hanging out, too.

**ARH:** Why do you think the students in those classes know that they should be paying attention?

**Danisha:** I think because the fact that it's honors class. When you say honors it's automatically focus. You can't just fool around.

**ARH:** Okay. How about your other classes? You have French, Health. Can you describe what students are like in those classes?

**Danisha:** They do interrupt and fight a lot, and the teachers often get off task like most of the class so – it's one of those classes like I say you just go there just to

be, there because I don't think I really learned anything in French. In Health, I do learn because we do book work and stuff like that, but other than that it's one of those classes you're just there.

For Danisha, there is an idiocultural expectation to focus in honors classes, and a lack of direction in other classes in which “you're just there.” In turn, students' behaviors may influence the behaviors of teachers, contributing to an idioculture in which the importance of learning is not clearly communicated.

Jaakirah, a Hughes junior who I observe in both Dr. T's Honors Pre-Calculus class (Classroom 12) and Ms. Morales' Honors English (Classroom 17) describes how students are “rowdy” and “mess around” with one another in her SAT-prep elective.

**ARH:** What do you mean by rowdy?

**Jaakirah:** Just disruptive, always getting up every five seconds, asking to go to the bathroom, on their phones, not wanting to do work and like – or they'll just distract other kids and try to mess around with them. I feel like I'm – one of the kids I felt like I was in second grade, because he's just like always has to be touching someone, and I'm like can you just sit down so we can get over with this. And she tries – she tried to ignore it, but you can only ignore it for so long before it starts getting irritating.

**ARH:** What do you mean by messing around? How was he touching other people?

**Jaakirah:** Him and this other girl, they would always be – they'd always go at it. And they'd always be yelling back and forth. Then at the end, they would be fine. It would – I don't know how to explain it. It was like they were kidding, but then they weren't. It was really weird, and then he'd just start – not hitting her, but – I guess, hitting her – playful hitting her, and then they'd go like back and forth, and Ms. Wiley had to stop the lesson, tell them to relax, separate them – literally like a second grade class. It was so annoying. But – yeah. Just things like that, I guess.

**ARH:** Does stuff like that happen in any of your other classes?

**Jaakirah:** My main classes, no. And I feel like that's because of the whole me having honors. The kids are a little more mature, I guess. So I wouldn't say in those classes, no. But some of my electives or even like gym classes, they can get like that, too. Where kids are playfighting or just messing around with each other – going back and forth with each other verbally and stuff like that. But I don't know – I just really don't pay any mind to it. It just annoys me, so I'm just like, whatever. I just kind of like push it aside kind of thing. So, yeah. So I'd say some of my electives, it happens in.

**ARH:** Does it ever feel like it's distracting you from your work?

**Jaakirah:** Yeah, definitely. Especially in my SAT class, those two kids always go at it, and I'm like, oh my God. I can't even concentrate because they're literally yelling back and forth at each other. So sometimes it does really get distracting. Especially when it starts distracting the teacher because then it's distracting – so then it's distracting me because I can't learn because the teacher is too busy having to worry about kids who can't just sit there and listen to the lesson.

I find out that the disruptive male student Jaakirah is referring to from her SAT class is also in Dr. T's Pre-Calculus class (Classroom 12), where he behaves differently from what she describes. This suggests that student interpersonal behaviors may be shaped by the idioculture of the classroom. When I probe further to find out why she thinks he acts so differently in the different groups, she responds that he wants to look cool in front of specific students in the SAT class, and knows the teacher will not issue a penalty for the behavior since aggressive behavior is so common in the group. However, she concedes that in the honors classroom, his behavior is completely different, because "he probably wants Dr. T to write him a letter of recommendation for college, so he can have a doctor on there."

Ishan, a junior from Hughes in Honors Algebra 2 with Mr. Martinez (Classroom 11), describes how he perceives students in non-honors classes as being more concerned with social priorities than academic ones. He is specifically describing dynamics in his history class, where the teacher rarely can get through a lesson due to the amount of interpersonal aggression that takes place. Ishan says,

...Right now, I'm trying to get good grades in my classroom and working pretty much mostly on my SAT, which is coming up in a few days. And I'm mostly focused right now on my college. So – and I mean, I'm more of like – most of the kids, they're mostly concerned with being more social. But me, I'm more concerned with academics and homework and stuff like that.

In Mr. Martinez's class, I often observe more aggressive behavior than I do in some CP-level classes despite it being honors. When I bring up the disruptive ritualistic aggression that occurs often in Mr. Martinez's class, Ishan agrees that it happens in that class as well, but to a lesser extent because it is honors and more students care about academics more than social goals, like he does. Ishan describes the motivation to do well academically as intrinsic and personal, even for honors-level students, but still points to the effect the group can have in shaping behaviors.

Joshua, a 10<sup>th</sup> grader in Hilltop, describes how he thinks students in lower ability levels frequently use their phones during class to engage in covert aggressive behavior. Similar to Ishan, he attributes behavioral decisions to individual factors and intrinsic motivations, rather than being specific to the classroom group itself. Yet, the social motivations he ascribes to some peers correspond directly to their classroom level. The extent of interpersonal aggressive behavior that occurs overtly, and covertly via phone, varies in his opinion, by the level of the classroom. This variation corresponds with patterns I observe in different ability level classrooms.

**Joshua:** It depends on what class – study hall, obviously, but in regular academic classes, at least for my level, no one really does that because we all have a pretty serious work ethic. For childcare, people are definitely on their phones a lot. In lunch, people are on their phones and it's usually on social media. I mean, most of our friends are in school, so we don't really have anyone to text or anything. So it's usually social media.

**ARH:** Okay. And you said most of the kids in your level are serious about class? What did you mean by that?

**Joshua:** I'm taking mostly honors, and, I mean, I have the AP history class. I'm in CP chem and CP math, but at the same time, I feel like those kids are serious and we're really trying to understand the material. In my honors English class, everyone's serious. You'll rarely see people pull out their phones unless the class is just done and we're not learning anything. But that class, I never see it. In chemistry, it's a little bit more of a relaxed vibe, but again, we all kind of are really serious about our work. And I feel like that's what's in most of my classes.

In both schools, the ways in which classroom idiocultures form and get enacted in the ways described above, typically follow from the ability-level label assigned to the group. The label serves to create and reinforce both teachers' and students' expectations regarding the behavior, priorities, and motivations of the class. Teachers play an essential role in setting up, communicating, and enforcing the expectations surrounding behavior and learning. The techniques teachers use to communicate about learning objectives, group expectations, the utility and rigor of content, and the urgency of learning play critical roles in shaping classroom idiocultures and academic and aspirational norms. Peers also constitute the academic and aspirational norms of the classroom by communicating expectations for their own mastery and the behavior of their classmates and teachers.

#### *Communicating Expectations Across Ability Levels*

The most basic shared goal of any classroom group is that something will be learned and/or a skill will be mastered by the end of the period. Pedagogical techniques and instructional practices vary, as do modes of assessment. However, it is standard practice that each classroom group should work towards a clearly stated learning objective each day. It is also generally understood that the objective should be aligned with a learning standard, in New Jersey's case, from the Common Core national standards. The objective should be logically and sequentially embedded within a broader curriculum and a unit of study. In theory, students in Hilltop and Hughes should be learning similar concepts over the course of the year to be moving towards the same standards. The rigor of courses should also be similar in term of content.

A first step towards making sure the students understand the standards and competencies they are working towards, and how they fit within a larger picture and purpose, is for a teacher to state the learning objective on a daily basis. Many administrators require that educators write the daily learning objective on the board, often beginning with a standard performance-based language such as “Students will be able to...” Good practice involves situating the stated objective within a sequence by reminding students what objective was previously covered, previewing how the current content relates to the prior objective, and previewing how mastery of today’s objective relates to future content. Even better is to integrate real-world applications of related skills, or efforts to connect proficiency to post-secondary objectives and the steps needed to achieve them (e.g., passing standardized tests, college essay-writing skills). The process of stating and displaying the objective, and situating it in the history and future of the group, constitutes a group narrative and purpose that serves to invest individual members in a shared goal. Investment in this goal supports adherence to norms of behavior; for example, a classroom that has full support of its members to achieve a daily objective does not have time for arguing, and individuals who diverge from this shared purpose will likely be warned or sanctioned by peers and adults.

In both schools, the extent to which individual teachers conceived and communicated clear learning objectives varied. In Hilltop, most teachers communicated a clear objective at all times, either verbally or more often, in writing. Many teachers displayed the objective or outlined it in a “syllabus,” which documented their expectations for students, showed them the big picture of how their daily learning objectives fit together, and exposed them to college-level language. Some teachers wrote

it on the board as part of their daily routine, while others were inconsistent about explicitly stating a daily objective. This ambiguity at times led to less investment in the task on the part of students, which would make it more likely that they would get off-task and potentially engage in interpersonal aggressive behaviors. The lack of an objective may have implicitly communicated to students that there was no expectation for them to learn something or complete a task during the class, sending the message that social objectives might be served during that time.

The ways in which both the learning objective and activities for the period were communicated by teachers to students played an important role in shaping their level of motivation to complete the work. Often, the framing of these messages varied by ability level. This framing especially varied in terms of the degree of future-orientation and how the purpose of the work was described as foundational for achieving long-term objectives. The extent to which high expectations and future utility of skills are framed by the teachers varies by ability level and general classroom idioculture.

The following is an illustration of how daily objectives are framed in junior-level English classes of all ability levels in one school: In an English 3 Focus class for juniors in Hilltop (Classroom 27), Ms. Conti greets me and announces loudly in front of the group that today the students will write an essay, and getting students to write an essay is “like pulling teeth.” She does not describe the skills students will build as part of this exercise, the objectives they will achieve, or the ways in which this exercise relates to a future task or goal. Her presumed lack of student engagement in the task is a self-fulfilling prophecy. The announcement of the essay elicits a symphony of sighs and groans from the students. A male student named Ed asks why they have to do it, and she

responds, “Because.” Several students attempt to get Ms. Conti off track by asking what she did over the weekend. They seem to know from prior experience that this strategy is effective at diverting time from tasks. She describes her weekend for several minutes, including a detailed account of the process of making applesauce, and then asks the students to get their computers set up to start working. She does not conduct any instruction or modeling to support the students in writing the essay, as she has not articulated any concrete skills that the students should use or will develop in completing the assignment.

Students open their computers and the majority immediately begin toggling back and forth between social networking sites like Facebook and Instagram and the assignment. A student teacher, Ms. Marcuzo, circulates to make sure all students are on task, and students successfully switch off of social networking sites when she or the in-class support teacher pass by. Several students engage in isolated verbal aggressive behaviors during the class, but the quiet independent work time seems to lend itself mainly to socialization in a digital space. None of the students appear to complete more than a paragraph during the entire work period, yet, the manner in which the teacher laid out the assignment did not signal the importance or urgency of the task.

In the same teacher’s CP English class (Classroom 28), Ms. Conti introduces the same essay assignment by stating the daily objective clearly and enthusiastically as a competency to be developed. The focus for the day is building the skill of using supportive textual evidence, which the teacher describes as necessary for any course or test the students will ever take that uses writing and requires an argument. She mentions in passing that they will also use this writing skill often in college. Ms. Marcuzo provides

direct instruction on how to write a paragraph using a supportive quotation and models an example. Ms. Conti interjects to explain that they need to use quotes to prepare for success on the upcoming PARCC exam. The students in this classroom work silently on their essays, and complete the assignment with little support within two class periods. When students in Ms. Conti's first class, Focus English, are still working on the same essay assignment later the same week, they need more targeted support. An entire class meeting is dedicated to one on one conferences between a teacher and student. When a student asks why they are conferencing to improve their writing, Ms. Conti replies "You're doing this because you're earning points," which implies that the objective for the Focus class is to obtain a passing grade, and one as high as possible. The utility of the skill in the future is not mentioned, and the concrete skills being developed are not communicated to be of importance in any other context.

In English 3 Honors for juniors in Hilltop, Ms. Miller (Classroom 29) often refers to the skills students will develop on a particular assignment and how those will be helpful in college assignments. An entire research project is framed as preparation for college. With a detailed assignment rubric, Ms. Miller goes over specific organizational skills students will build in assembling a research binder. She explains the importance of the assignment, and the skill being developed, in detail, using future-oriented language:

This will help in college. These are all things that you'll use in college. I get emails, believe it or not, from students saying they have a leg up on their classmates in college after doing this research. A lot of high schools don't do this kind of research. These databases cost a lot of money, not as many have the resources. Don't get distracted online by social stuff when you're supposed to be using them, it's a privilege. You'll be shocked how little research experience some of your college classmates will have. You'll totally thank me later.

Clearly stating the objective, the benefits of the skills developed, and their utility as related to future aspirations of success in college invests students in this class. No one I observe switches to another web page, and students silently focus on completing the assignment until the bell rings and they quickly save their work and pack up. In Ms. Miller's class, I do not ever witness aggressive interactions beyond very occasional, seemingly benign jokes such puns or a play on words. Students almost never use social media during independent work time in this class.

### *Future Goals and Group Expectations*

On a different day, Ms. Conti frames an assignment for her Focus class as preparation for college or a job.

How do you want to represent yourselves when you go to college or go to a job? This project gives you an opportunity to see how others shaped their identity and message. If I looked at your Facebook and your pictures, the impression I have of you as students wouldn't be the same. How are you going to shape your message for social media, interviews, and college applications?

Investing students in the assignment through real-world connections does seem to help students maintain focus on this assignment, and reduces the time and motivation for aggressive interactions. In a conversation with me afterwards, Ms. Conti indicates that she estimates that about 20% of the students in this class will attend community college, and the others will work or "will not do anything." However, on this particular day students focus on the task which has been made relevant to all of them, regardless of whether they plan to attend college, and no aggressive behaviors are observed. Her mention of college, a rare occurrence, may have sent a message that postsecondary achievement is possible, even expected, for the group. On a different day in the same class, though, the teacher references college only to ask students if they know the mascot

of her university. She makes fun of them when they don't know it, saying "I guess none of you are going there." She goes on a tangent about what a terrible mascot it is, which only serves as a distraction to the task they are working on and reinforces the lower expectation communicated in this setting for student work and focus. During that day, a verbal altercation takes place between three students.

In the 9<sup>th</sup> grade Focus Language Arts class in Hilltop, Mr. Schumacher (Classroom 21) often connects the skills students are learning to future success, and includes college-going as an option per the school-wide culture of "college-for-most." For example, when practicing the skill of writing "stage one" paragraphs, he engages students at the beginning of the lesson by describing the utility of the skill without mentioning anxiety-provoking high stakes testing. Instead, he says, "You'll use the stage one paragraph on your midterm next week, but it will also serve you in college, trade school, advanced school, whatever you decide to do after Hilltop. And it will serve you in the rest of your three years at Hilltop as well." He then invests students in terms of the grades students could earn, naming high grades that these students likely do not earn as often as their counterparts in higher-tracked classes. He says, "95% of the time, students who don't do as well as they want lose points because they don't follow this structure, they go off on tangents. If you follow what I'm about to teach you, your teacher has no choice but to give you an A or at least a B." Describing the prospect of earning "A's" and "B's" as not only possible, but likely, communicates high expectations to these students regardless of their ability level label as "Focus kids." Even Craig, a student who almost always engages in some form of ritualistic aggression during class, is on task, raising his

hand and responding to questions throughout the lecture. He states that it is his goal to get an “A” on the assignment, which signals to peers he is serious about focusing.

Teachers in Hilltop typically reference the importance of a learning objective for use in the future. In honors classes, these references often include potential uses in college. Yet references to future or college-readiness are far less frequent, and in many cases, nonexistent in Hughes. The absence of these conversations affirms a culture of lowered expectations in Hughes. For example, the most explicit conversation about future planning and college I witness in Hughes takes place in Mr. Martinez’s Algebra 2 Honors (Classroom 11). In the hallway before entering, James and Mike are wrestling and Mike throws and hits James in the back with an orange as they enter the classroom. The teacher explains in a somber tone that today the students will get back their PSAT scores, which they should use to plan for the SATs and “life after Hughes.” Not mentioning college explicitly, in an honors setting, underscores the “college for some” culture school-wide.

Once students get their scores back, most appear to be sharing them with one another. Some students are very tense, fidgeting, or shaking with nervousness as they wait. Some teasing takes place, for example, Jatinder says to the male student next to him, “You must be retarded” after seeing his score. However, most negative comments seem self-directed. The score is normed on a 20-80 point range, and most scores I overhear are in the 40’s, while a few are in the 60’s. A guidance counselor is also present to go over what the scores mean relative to future planning. “You want to take the SAT once, if not twice, in your junior year, and shoot for at least 500 [out of 800] on each section. Each college has its own admission requirements.” She explains that the percentile tells students how they compare to others in their grade, and that some juniors

might qualify for National Merit Scholarships. She adds that the skill set used on the SAT is the same as that in the PSAT, and that once PARCC is over, guidance counselors will work to review the PSAT questions with honors students. The students will be given access to a web site that gives them a personality test to help choose a college major. She explains that it's okay if their major changes from the time they took the PSAT in school. She asks students if they have registered for the SAT, and two in the class have done so. She reminds them it's the last day to register to take the SAT that month, and talks about the differences between ACT and SAT, and how students can obtain fee waivers for both tests if they receive free or reduced-price lunch.

There are a limited number of these waivers available, and some students raise their hand to go speak with their counselor immediately to try to obtain one before they are gone. Mr. Martinez says no, that they have already used up important class time and they should go during a different class. He then says that it is important that the students think about life after high school. "It does not matter what you do, but you have to do something after school." He lists off possible options of four-year college, community college, military, and the vocational workforce as options. This is atypical in an honors level class and contradicts the "college-for-all" ethos. Students begin having side conversations about what they want to do when they leave school. The teacher returns to his usual routine of reviewing the previous night's homework as a group and going over difficult questions. The students are much more focused than usual. It is possible that thinking about the long-term implications of their PSAT scores motivates them to focus during class, including the four students in the back of the room who typically engage in disruptive ritualistic aggression.

Conversations about future-planning in CP classes in Hughes sometimes take an opposite turn, by reinforcing lower expectations or aspirational norms that are not academic in nature, thus undermining the importance of focusing on daily learning objectives. For example, in Mr. Said's CP Algebra 1 class for 9<sup>th</sup> graders (Classroom 4), the students on the left side of the room engage in ongoing disruptive interactions during instruction. They are almost always engaged in both isolated and ritualistic forms of aggression, in addition to generally not working on assignments and talking over lecture. These students often talk openly about dropping out of school when they are finally old enough. At times, their peers on the other side of the room encourage them to pay attention, but Mr. Said almost never interjects, which might implicitly send the message that he expects or even wants those students to drop out. A few of the females talk at least once per class about their aspirations to be strippers or "lesbian porn stars," and their perception that these professions are lucrative. A male student named Cash often reminds them, "This is a small town, there's not room for that many strippers." One day he directly asks the teacher what he thinks of his peers' plans, and he replies, "I guess they won't need math for that." Mr. Said's intention could generously be read as a desire to challenge them to do the math anyway, but instead they look disappointed that this is his response to the path they have articulated, and continue to disengage from content.

Also in Hughes, Mr. Duncan's Enrichment Language Arts class for 9<sup>th</sup> graders (Classroom 5) fosters an idioculture that incorporates positive expectations and future talk, building strong academic and aspirational norms. Despite being the lowest ability level track, Mr. Duncan successfully integrates positive future discussions with the relevance of material to students. The students may internalize his careful planning, the

class's rigorous content, and their use of all available class time as signs that he has high expectations for their learning. They respond positively to his future-orientation and ability to make content relevant, making this group an outlier in terms of engagement and behavior. His ability to connect content to interesting topics and potential future occupations on a consistent basis makes students feel important and valued. Aggressive behavior is almost never observed in this classroom group, even though he teaches a contingent of students whose behaviors are so severe that they are frequently suspended based on actions elsewhere in school. In his classroom, he treats each student as if they are special, important, and capable of learning and growing into productive individuals by capitalizing on their talents – which he is able to reference readily as a means of redirecting students.

For example, Andre is a student who is frequently engaged in aggressive behavior and one of the most frequently suspended students in school. He begins to look agitated when another student baits him by asking him about his recent suspension, but Mr. Duncan interjects positively and redirects him. “Andre, I’m so glad you’re back to help us dissect this advertisement, because everyone knows you are stylish and know a lot about aesthetics.” Andre, who is typically regarded as a “bad” student, and who almost always has a scowl on his face, cracks a smile and asks him to define “aesthetics.” He replies, “Thanks for the SAT word, Mr. D. I’m gonna teach my grandma that later.” In the same class, Mr. Duncan gives his students a boost of confidence before their midterm, recognizing this is a group of students who do not typically test well (hence their placement in Enrichment). “I know you all have worked hard this semester and you can do it, that’s why I’m setting you up for success, and I’ll let you use articles with facts and

statistics you can reference.” Mr. Duncan enacts the “college-for-all” culture of the school by explicitly discussing college-going as an expectation. “*When you’re in college, use MLA format. Your teachers will come across your essay and be impressed. They will look at it with a positive attitude, because you look academic.*”

The relevance of skills to college preparation are not referenced in any other Enrichment class that I observe. College preparation is rarely referenced even in honors-level courses in Hughes. Yet, students who are otherwise difficult to reach in other settings respond very positively to Mr. Duncan’s expectations of them. All students are engaged in this classroom, and aggressive behavior almost never occurs, even though the students in the room are some of the most frequently suspended students in the school – who staff refer to as the “heavy hitters.” Mr. Duncan never lowers his expectations and always demands full attention and effort from students at all times, creating an idioculture fostering stronger academic and aspirational norms than those observed even in higher-tracked classes.

#### TEACHERS AND ENACTMENT OF SCHOOL-WIDE ACADEMIC AND ASPIRATIONAL NORMS IN CLASSROOM GROUPS

##### *“Pretend You’re Doing Something:” The Communication of Low Expectations*

Students in Hughes are often implored by adults to “pretend” to do the work within classrooms idiocultures that do not effectively support the importance or relevance of doing so. In Mr. Ayala’s CP English 3 class (Classroom 16), the majority of students on one side of the room were so engrossed in ritualistic and intentionally harmful peer interactions that they expressed surprise when the teacher says an assignment is due. On the first day after a holiday break, the teacher tried to collect an assignment that was

started the week before break in class. The four female students in the front of the room who are always quiet and on task turn in their assignments, and they are the only ones to do so out of the 11 students present. Several students ask, “What project?” to which the teacher responds that it is described on the student portal. Then he adds that they were working on it the entire week before break, and says, “I know you like to play around in here and talk with your friends. That’s okay, but you should pretend you’re doing something even if you’re not.” The teacher does not connect his recommendation for student decision-making to a compelling reason to complete work. He does not cite even the basic matter of obtaining a passing grade, nor the more potentially engaging reason that students will obtain a needed skill or competency. While at other times he strives to create interesting and relevant assignments, in this case, he seems defeated and does not attempt to appeal to their interest by making the assignment seem worthwhile. This failure to engage students in the work sustains an idioculture of ritualistic aggressive exchanges and off-topic interactions in class at all times, even during lecture. Most students in this class consistently choose not to complete work until it is absolutely necessary to obtain a passing grade at the very end of the marking period.

Mr. Martinez communicates diminished expectations for his Honors Algebra 2 group in Hughes (Classroom 11) when he has to implore them to behave well while the Vice Principal visits for a scheduled observation of him during the following period. He says, “While she’s in here, take out your stuff, and pretend you’re a student for a minute.” This statement, while potentially flippant, visibly irritated some students and seems antithetical to the orientation and motivation honors students would be expected to have towards their schoolwork. It was also out of sync with the observed idioculture of the

group, in which most students (except the four in the back corner) are typically very motivated and engaged in their work. In the interim before the Vice Principal arrives to observe, the four highly aggressive students in the back of the room seem to engage in accelerated aggressive interactions, as if they know their window of opportunity will be closed when the administrator arrives. James relentlessly makes fun of Jenna's body, "Why you got a big ass? Everything on you is big. Fuck out of here, get the fuck out of here. You're not even in the same class as me. I hope you get raped." She gets up, punches him full-force in the side of his face, and goes back to her seat. They continue to argue back and forth from their seats.

The Vice Principal arrives, and suddenly everyone is silent and attentive while the teacher models a problem and circulates to help students with their work. The four students in the back corner are on their best behavior, as if they took the teacher's request to "act like students" to heart. The class acts like a different group until the Vice Principal leaves, keeping their cell phones away and focusing on the work more than any other class period I observed. Administrators are known for immediately confiscating devices and suspending students who refuse to hand them over for insubordination, so students in this classroom may know better than to mess around on this occasion. As honors students, they may want to avoid punishment, and while the teacher does not issue sanctions for the types of interaction described above, the potential reaction of the administrator is more uncertain.

### *Constructing Academic Idioculture via Urgency*

The first signal a teacher sends students regarding the urgency of work has to do with communication of the objective and agenda for the day, and the structure for

beginning work right away. In both schools, some teachers (particularly those in honors or CP settings) set up a routine in which students begin work right away on a “Warm Up” or “Do Now” activity. In Focus or Enrichment classes, this type of structure is not typically followed, and often the first few minutes are used liberally for settling in and talking. These less structured opening moments can often set the stage for aggressive interactions to unfold. A range of everyday practices associated with setting a tone of urgency will be discussed further in Chapter 6.

As a result of the teacher’s implementation of specific pedagogical techniques fostering urgency, students who are invested in succeeding academically learn to sideline social interactions and prioritize completing academic tasks in class. Indicating that work will be collected at the end of class is one way the teacher signals that completing the work is urgent. In Hilltop, teachers in Focus classes warn that work will be collected when students are off-task. Generally the importance or future utility of a skill to college or one’s career is used to motivate students in CP and Honors classes. For non-CP students, the threat of losing points or credit on a collected assignment is potentially more effective in lower-level classes where the connection between academic achievement and future pathways has not been emphasized. In lower tracked classes there is an understanding that losing points could jeopardize getting credits toward graduation. There is a potential behavioral middle ground for students who are motivated only to pass; a certain amount of off task behavior is permissible, regardless of urgency, if a student is mainly motivated to get any score higher than 65, rather than striving for 100. At times, peers will police one another’s behaviors to sustain an environment in which they can focus and complete the task on time when the work is being collected. Again,

whether the group level norm is to strive for the 65, the 100, or somewhere in between, determines the amount of time and attention students may direct toward social interactions with peers.

In Hughes, sense of urgency depends on timing within in the marking period. At the beginning of a new marking period there is less incentive for students to complete their work in a timely manner. School-wide there is an informal policy and norm that students can turn in work late and pull their grades up at the end of the marking period. This results in a week-long period at the end of each marking period in which teachers beg and plead students to turn in outstanding assignments or complete “recovery packets,” which contain anything from reviews to busy work such as word searches. Therefore, students who are not invested in academic success but merely interested in passing are not motivated to continuously complete work throughout the marking period. A student explains this to a substitute in her Math Strategies class (Classroom 9), as she tries to collect the papers from those who are not working as a punishment, “It doesn’t matter, even if he collects it now and we get zeroes, we have the whole marking period to get our grade up.”

On a typical day in Ms. Taylor’s Algebra Enrichment class (Classroom 2) the students have a worksheet assigned but most are off topic. Ms. Taylor tries to encourage students to complete their work by reminding them she will collect the work at the end of the period and grade it. She asks students to put away their phones when she sees them and periodically reminds them that she will collect the worksheet at the end of class. The warnings do not deter the students, and they continue using phones and engaging in aggressive behaviors and off-task interactions. Only one student hands in the worksheet

at the end of class, and the others do not seem at all concerned that they did not turn it in. The teacher communicates less than high expectations, by saying “Did anyone do any work to turn in to me?” before collecting the papers. Students respond that they will make it up at the end of the marking period; instead, they have used the class time to attend to social goals and priorities, which include engagement in aggressive behaviors that have become a regular feature of the class’s idioculture.

The threat of having to complete missed work as homework also offers students an opportunity to engage in socialization, and to fully invest in seeing aggressive interactions through. For example, during a class in Hughes when Mrs. Kelley implored her 9<sup>th</sup> grade Language Arts students (Classroom 7) to finish a credit recovery packet then told them whatever they did not do during class would be for homework, most students opted not to work, distracting those who did. Wayne and Cecilia engaged in intentionally harmful ritualistic aggression throughout the class, going back and forth, “Your dreds stink,” “Your nails stink,” “Your weak ass mustache stink,” filling in eyelids, teeth, eyelashes, inside of nostrils, and other categories in a sustained back and forth, while hitting one another and threatening to kill one another in their sleep. When Mrs. Kelley attempts to make them work alone instead of in a group, both students respond that they are choosing to complete the work for homework. This leaves Mrs. Kelley with little recourse to put a stop to their behavior. The teacher works on her computer at her desk and does not intervene until Wayne calls Cecilia “fat,” to which she says, “That’s not nice.” Later, she says, “Alright, the group in the back has to break up!” Cecilia yells “No!” and Mrs. Kelley replies, “Do your work, just do your work.” At one point, Cecilia calls Wayne psychotic and retarded, and he yells, “How about a big bowl

of shut the fuck up?” Cecilia says to Mrs. Kelley, “Did you hear him?” and she replies, “Yeah, I heard him,” but continues to work on her computer without looking up. She reminds the students to complete their work for homework as the bell rings.

At the same time, specific teachers in Hughes successfully create a sense of urgency within their classrooms through explicit messaging and rigid routines, which are then connected to an idioculture promoting strong academic and aspirational norms. Mr. Duncan (Classroom 5) teaches Enrichment for English 1 to students who are struggling and would be considered in the lowest ability level track. However, he conveys a sense of urgency each class, posting a student objective and previewing the activities students will engage in to master the material. All assignments are completed in class, and he never assigns or threatens homework. He communicates high expectations and presents information around college-going behavior as a way to pique students’ interest in the content and motivate them to do their best. Many of the students I observe in this class do not hear similar messaging in other Enrichment classes, where teachers hand them a packet and don’t seem to think they will complete it or care much whether they do or not.

One day they are analyzing an advertisement for Doritos, and the students are engaged since it is a product most of them consume. Mr. Duncan focuses on the appealing layout and text of the article and its images. He explains, “This is actually a college major. If you go to college, it’s called graphic design. It’s a great major.” Cecilia (described above in Mrs. Kelley’s class) is intrigued and begins asking thoughtful questions about whether someone needs experience using a computer to major in graphic design. She is concerned because in this school, the students don’t get much time on a well-functioning computer, and she does not have one at home to practice on. Even so,

she proudly tells the students around her that she is going to major in graphic design, and stays after class to ask Mr. Duncan questions about the major. Cecilia's affect and behavior are almost opposite to that in other classes I observe her in, including Mrs. Kelley's English 1 (Classroom 7). In that class, Cecilia acts hard and tough, and is on the constant defensive from verbal and physical aggression from two male students in the class. She realizes Mrs. Kelley will not typically intervene, and may be unmotivated by the unchallenging assignments which are disconnected from her long-term interests. The main motivation communicated in that classroom is to get through an assignment, not for mastery, or connection to a future objective or goal, but so that students can earn free time and play mindless board games when they finish their work. While Cecilia decides to engage in aggressive behavior often in Mrs. Kelley's class, which may be defensive but also potentially leads to more victimization, she is on task and motivated to complete the assignments for Mr. Duncan. She sees their relevance to her future goals, because future orientation is built into and enacted via the classroom's idioculture. She also has a reasonable expectation that others will not victimize her, as her peers share in the class's future-oriented idioculture, and aggressive behavior was rarely observed in the group.

#### *Constructing Group Identity and Behavior According to Rigor*

In both schools, teachers get students in honors courses back on track if they are displaying aggressive behaviors by simply reminding them of their label and stating: "You are Honors students" prior to a redirection or stated expectation. Dr. T. (Classroom 12) reinforces his expectations and the class's serious and focused idioculture by calling students "geniuses" and challenging them with difficult problems. On a day when students were particularly rowdy, engaging in pronounced physical interactions such as

grabbing one another, the teacher puts a problem on the board and announces “All the geniuses in here, here’s a hard one.” The teacher calls on a female student that a male student had just been grabbing as she tried to work, just as she swipes back at him. “You asked the geniuses to do it,” she replies, to which he responds, “Everyone in here is a genius.” She mutters under her breath, “No sir,” but is redirected from the aggressive interaction and begins working on the problem.

In a CP level Mathematics class in Hilltop, specific students articulate social priorities over academic ones, and are often off-task or unresponsive to teachers’ efforts to get them on track. In the same class, when students are given independent work later, the teacher says, “Can we turn off the phone, please? I may as well not give you time to work *in the CP class [emphasis added]*, half of you get started on the work and the other half mess around, and it really isn’t that hard.” Inserting “the CP class” reminds students that this teacher mainly teaches honors courses; the tone in which he says it transmits a sense of lower expectations for the group based on their identity label. A male student named Brooks who is very frequently engaged in aggressive interactions ignores the teacher and instead calls out, “Guess whose parents are going away this week? Who wants to rage their balls off Wednesday night?” The teacher ignores him and walks over to assist a student with a question. Most students in this classroom try to pay attention and do their best, but the idioculture is largely impacted by Brooks and his effort to socially dominate the group.

In Mr. Schumacher’s Focus English class in Hilltop, the expectation that students will perform closer to average is communicated implicitly. After the midterm, both the in-class support teacher and Mr. Schumacher express surprise and delight, saying the

students “did really well,” getting A’s, B’s, and B-’s – grades that are not typical or expected among this group. It’s a new marking period, so the teacher reminds students, “Keep your A, you’ve all got an A,” sending the message that grades are not earned, but instead points are lost through lack of effort. Mr. Schumacher opens class by attempting to alleviate some anxiety caused by PARCC testing.

Gang, today we’re going to work on a practice test. If you do well, great. If not, that’s just where we’re at right now. You practiced test navigation yesterday, and probably already have a better handle on it than old Mr. Schumacher... We’re not putting your grades from the practice test in the gradebook, there’s no pressure, but give it an effort so we know what work we have to do.

A student asks if the PARCC will count for them, and he replies in a way that confirms that the primary goal for students in this class is to receive a high school diploma – postsecondary goals or planning are not referenced.

Whatever happens, don’t give up. Give it an honest shot. Tests like this, it’s always going to impact us some time down the road. This will impact your high school experience and what classes you take while you’re here, and when you graduate and walk across that field, three years from now, it will be because you were able to do what you needed to do to pass this test.

Most of the students are quiet and focused on the task, but a handful of students engage in the typical ritualistic aggressive behavior in this class that centers around Craig and his provocations of peers around him through staring, poking, or throwing small paper balls.

During Mr. Schumacher’s medical leave, students are generally respectful of the substitute teacher in the beginning, as she is a retired teacher from the school. As time goes on, the substitute does not frame her expectations for the Focus class as positively. Instead, she repeatedly reminds the students in this section that they have been given much easier content than the CP class, repeatedly referring to them as “you Focus kids.” On one occasion she states, “no homework, but only for this class, you guys sure have it

nice and easy in here.” This identity label and verbal reminder of low academic and aspirational norms seems to incite the students to misbehave more than usual, and even to mock her indirectly as she conducts class.

In Hughes, direct messaging about rigor is typically exclusive to those honors students, and is framed around their identity label. For example, Mrs. Morales often says that skills they are practicing will be useful. “We are practicing notetaking strategies, and those of you who highlighted the text did a good job. Knowing how to do this is important. This is very important for when you go to college, when you have rigorous three-hour lectures and you need to be able to take down good notes.” In the same period, however, Mrs. Morales brutally reminds students that even though they are in honors and hold that label, their class is not as rigorous as one in a more affluent community. She refers to the manner in which she grades, which she views as lenient.

I’ve been more than nice to you. Some of you complain about expectations, would you agree? My expectations are not high compared to other experiences in the honors program in other high schools. They’re actually kind of low. If you didn’t do summer reading, in another school you’re kicked out of honors. You signed a form and your parent, that if you don’t do your homework, it’s a zero. If you don’t do your homework, don’t ask to make it up. Never have any work out unless it’s English, it’s disrespectful. Right now I’m not that happy with this class. The other [honors] class is better. You’re not going to just slide by on ‘oh, I’m so smart’ because I’ll be the judge of that and will grade you harder and harder.”

After calling several students out by name for not having well-developed answers on an assignment, she says,

Before you hand in your work, be the best you can be. This is an honors class, you don’t have to be here. You’re lucky to be here. You don’t capitalize “I”? That’s embarrassing. I can name names. I feel embarrassed for you. I don’t want to have this conversation again. This is an honors program, it doesn’t matter if it’s Hughes or Princeton.

In delivering her feedback in such a harsh way, and by referencing socioeconomic class indirectly, the teacher models aggressive behavior by insinuating that students couldn't cut it in a similar program in a "better" school. These negative comments potentially diminish students' confidence but also rupture social bonds and group trust. Ms. Morales puts the appropriateness of the label "honors" into question in relationship to the group, and in doing so negatively impacts its idioculture. In interviews, students indicate that they and their peers become disengaged from the teacher and the course as a result of being called out and having their status as honors students diminished. I noticed high achieving students who I observed in other honors settings appearing to shut down, or in some cases, talking back to the teacher and pointing out her lack of organization and professionalism. These actions seemed to serve to defend the idioculture of the students from attack, although it could be considered a losing battle since the attacks on the group's identity was coming from the instructional leader of the class. Students described this class as stressful and upsetting in interviews, and explained that students would sometimes tease one another to distract from their "misery" and distrust of the teacher. At the same time, the use of humor, inside jokes, and sarcasm emerged among peers, and was described in one interview as a "coping mechanism," for getting through the class that cemented friendships.

Rigor also is communicated in the ways in which grading occurs within different classrooms. For example, in Hughes Mr. Ayala (Classroom 16) sends the message that simply completing the required task is sufficient, and can happen on a students' timeline, due to the flexible late work policy in the school meant to ensure students are promoted. Mr. Ayala does not communicate measures of quality or skill attainment. On the other

hand, Ms. Morales uses a rubric with her juniors in Honors English (Classroom 17), grading for mastery rather than effort, timeliness, or participation. Timeliness is a norm and an expectation in the honors idioculture, and this encourages students to focus on academic work during class time rather than being distracted by social goals.

*Teacher Personality, Professional Commitment, and the Academic Tone*

A clear pattern emerges related to the teacher's role in shaping classroom idiocultures. As the leader of the classroom, the teacher acts in ways that set expectations and the tone of interactions. However, the teacher's personality and behaviors are largely shaped and constrained by the organizational norms in the school. In terms of academic and aspirational norms, some teachers diverge from school-wide norms in a way that is jarring for students, whereas others conform to prevailing attitudes among staff. A teacher like Mr. Ayala in Hughes put a great deal of effort into creating engaging activities and assignments in the beginning of the year, only to seemingly burn out and lower his expectations when the majority of the class was not completing the work. Teachers like Mrs. Kelley and Ms. Taylor in Hughes conveyed low expectations by presenting students with simple packets to work through on their own, providing little support or guidance, and remaining disengaged when students tested their management styles through increasingly severe behavior.

Over time, teachers in any school come to understand, as students do, what is permissible and how to navigate existing rules and expectations. The flexibility in expectations for teacher performance vary by school building. For instance, the way that Ms. Taylor ignored the needs of her students in Hughes would not be permitted to continue at Hilltop, where students and parents generally have more cultural capital to

complain about teacher performance. The extent to which Mrs. Kelley occupied her students with busywork like crossword puzzles, and incentivized them with board games, so that she could work on other things on the computer would never be allowed at Hilltop, where administrators conducted more frequent and rigorous walk through evaluations for teachers. In Hilltop, a teacher like Ms. Conti was able to set a problematic tone in her classroom by engaging in sarcasm, a form of humor enjoyed by some students which didn't explicitly violate rules or norms about the teacher's role. She was able to code switch with groups of different ability levels, and again, seemed to engage in the most sarcasm and teasing within her Focus classroom. In my early observations her digressions were less frequent than later in my observations, when she seemed to either get used to my presence or to fully trust I was not there to evaluate her performance. Students in this group may have also had less cultural capital to push back on her pedagogical techniques and general tone, even though it was generally in conflict with the school-wide norms.

The extent to which school-wide disciplinary norms and classroom disciplinary practices shape a teacher's actions, and the general context for victimization, will be explored in the next chapter. In Chapter 6, the range of everyday practices adopted by teachers, and their influence on the context for aggression, will be explored in greater detail.

#### *Students' Co-construction and Performance of Idiocultural Norms*

Students create and enact norms of socialization and peer interaction in a given classroom, although behaviors form and adapt in response to the group's shared goals, the constraints of discipline, and the routines and practices implemented by teacher.

Students co-construct shared academic and aspirational norms in a classroom that guide decision-making through the articulation of their own expectations for learning and peer behaviors. Students articulate what is important to them, at times challenging and reshaping local cultural norms about academic focus and aggressive behavior in the process.

As noted, in Hilltop, performing the role of a student with high academic aspirations involves wearing college apparel, which signals teachers and peers that the student is serious about attending college and has potentially visited the college displayed. The apparel sends a message regarding the caliber of college the student expects to or hopes to attend, which can be a proxy for academic seriousness. At times, the college displayed by a student is mismatched with the ability level of the students' class, which can spark an exchange in which the students' academic aspirations are interrogated and negotiated among group members. For example, students in Mr. Anderson's CP Algebra 2 class (Classroom 25) react with surprise when a peer comes in wearing a shirt from a prestigious university. They ask if that is his future college and continue to probe regarding the other courses he takes, his rank, and his SAT scores. The shirts send the message about his academic seriousness, and at times foster a conversation about post-secondary planning. As in the Duke example, these conversations on mismatch can also lead to insults and arguing.

Beyond the discussions sparked by clothing, discussions about college visits occur often in the Honors level freshmen courses at Hilltop, and in junior-level courses in both Honors and CP classes. Students construct expectations about performance and the rigor of coursework by referencing the advice of their private tutors. Students in the

school often reference future plans, including decisions about what classes to take during high school and in preparation for college. Students in both CP and Honors classes in Hilltop talk frequently about decision-making to be competitive in college admissions. For example, during down time or unstructured class time students frequently discuss involvement in extracurricular activities to enhance their resume or transcript. Students in CP classes often discussed course selection, demonstrating their agency in selecting the courses they take. At times students justify why they decided not to take the Honors section of a subject if they were enrolled in CP, explaining that their GPA would be higher if they got a good grade in the easier class, and that would also allow them to do better in the others honors classes they have enrolled in. During a typical conversation during down time in a CP class, a student says, “Think I am taking Spanish because I like it? It’s for my resume. Pre-calculus will look good for my resume for college, too. And it’s honors so it will bump up my GPA.”

Students in Focus classes in Hilltop rarely discuss performance in other classes unless to complain that they are not doing well or failing. Unstructured time, which is usually more abundant in Focus classes by design (see Chapter 6) is filled with discussions about social topics, which sometimes set the stage for aggressive interactions. In Honors Pre-Calculus in Hilltop (Classroom 18), students often use group-work time or down time to look up college acceptance rates and discuss them in small groups. A group of juniors in this class has been keeping an electronic spreadsheet since their freshman year to keep track of college acceptances and rejections of peers, and to record whatever information they can find out about those students in terms of rank, GPA, SAT/ACT

score, and activities. They edit and share the document on a collaborative space, and use it to inform discussions and planning decisions for their own college applications.

Molly, a student who is in a CP math class with Mr. Anderson (Classroom 25) and Honors English (Classroom 29) projects her academic goals differently in the two classrooms, adhering to and reinforcing existing expectations and norms within the groups. On a day that she wears her “Johns Hopkins University” sweatshirt, students in Mr. Anderson’s class ask if she plans to go there. “Hell no, I ain’t that smart. I went there over the summer for a camp for ten days.” This response coheres to the idioculture of this classroom, which differs greatly in terms of academic norms and behavioral norms from the honors course in which I observe her. In the honors class, a peer asks her if she is applying to Hopkins. She responds that she may apply, but it is a very expensive school and has a very low acceptance rate, so it would be a reach school for her. She describes the “camp” she mentioned in her mathematics class as “an accelerated college credit-bearing course for high school students.” In English Honors, Molly participates regularly and does all of her work. She seems to put in extra effort to excel in classroom discussions and win the favor of her teacher. On the day that she offers two distinct responses about her college plans, she tells Mr. Anderson she left her homework at home, although she did about half of it. A male student loudly says she should have her tutor do her homework for her while she gets high. Even though she often criticizes Focus students for partying and not caring about school in conversations with her peers in Honors, repeatedly saying she would never do drugs, Molly laughs at her CP classmate and says, “Good idea.” Later in the class, she smacks him and writes a slur on his hand.

In Hughes, talking with peers during class about academic aspirations is less typical, although it sometimes occurs in Honors classes. One day in Dr. T's Honors Pre-Calculus, an Asian Indian female student asks me which college I go to and tells me she's interested in applying to Princeton. She explains that Katie, a white female student I observe in this class and the Honors English 3 class, is off to a good start and has already taken her SAT and done very well, so she will probably go to Princeton. When I ask her how she knows about Katie's performance, she says she heard about it through someone else in her honors class. Her description of her classmate's aspirations indicates that while they don't often discuss their goals openly during class time, information about college-planning spreads through conversations outside of class.

In Mr. Ayala's CP English class (Classroom 16) in Hughes, the four focused female students in the front of the room finish their homework and begin to discuss their aspirations by college essay, performing their aspirational status. They ask the teacher questions about college applications and his own postsecondary experiences while the rest of the class engages in loud, off-task, aggressive interactions. While some students perform and project academic aspirations, other students in CP and Enrichment classes in Hughes construct expectations about their own performance by referencing prior failures as if they are points of pride. For example, students in Mr. Said's class often talked about how many times they failed math in middle school in side conversations during his lectures. Other students shared examples of times they failed a course, attributing the failures to personal choices or issues other than intelligence (e.g. excessive absences). These discussions often led to the student who admitted failure being called stupid by their peers.

Some students in Ms. Taylor's Enrichment class (Classroom 2) construct an idioculture focused on social behaviors when they openly talk about parties and getting drunk and high instead of working on independent work. Throughout this class, students engage in ritualistic playful aggressive behavior that at times escalates to be intentionally harmful. One day as Wayne and Raul get into a verbal argument and begin shoving one another and wrestling, knocking into and sliding desks, Ms. Taylor looks down at her keyboard and types, pretending not to see. Other students laugh and start saying her name louder and louder to try to get her to look up, but she waits until Wayne gets knocked onto the ground, gets up, and returns to his seat, then looks up and says, "Gee, let's see how many people have actually done some of this worksheet."

Wayne and Raul continue to go back and forth, because Raul says Wayne cracked the screen of his phone when he smacked him. They go back and forth, Wayne yelling, "Fix your pointy eyebrows. Shut up. Do your work, you look like a dirty taco bowl." Raul goes on a profanity-laced tirade in Spanish that makes the students who speak Spanish yell, "Ooooh!" and then he complains again that his phone is cracked. Wayne replies, "Want a bowl of I don't care, with a glass of shut the fuck up? Your phone is a piece of crap, that's why it cracked." The teacher completely ignores this exchange, but once it has fizzled out, she stands up and says, "Alright, who wants to go over the worksheet?" A female student in the front of the room named Anika is squeezing a stress ball and trying to focus and follow along. Anika deliberately avoids engaging with peers in her class, and tells me each time she earns a high grade to let me know that she is serious about school. Most other students in this classroom perform in a way that

suggests they prioritize social goals over academic goals, via ritualistic playful interactions that ultimately distract from learning objectives.

Students who do not wish to deviate from the social norms within their classroom idioculture may project future aspirations as the justification for why they abstain from typical patterns of peer interactions that have developed in their class. Ms. Lewis's Honors English 1 class in Hughes (Classroom 8) is an anomalous honors course with relatively high interpersonal aggression. One day a typically aggressive and disruptive student named Crystal is frustrated by her peers, who are engaging in aggression, when the teacher is trying to move quickly through content. She stands up, picks up her desk about a foot off the ground, slams it down, and says, "I'm getting really aggravated with this class as the year goes on. I need to get my life together, and you all do too. Nowadays you have to have at least a Master's degree to get a job." Ricky says, "Not for nothing, you only need like 60 credits to sub here." Crystal says, "I wouldn't do that, I would murder children, and I need benefits. What if you need to go to the doctor and they're like, that will be \$20,000, please?" Crystal performs academic investment in a way that resonates with the classroom's idioculture. While she typically participates in aggressive interactions, on this particular day she has decided to perform her academic and aspirational norms, and other students follow her lead, quietly following along with the teacher after her outburst is over.

#### *Corroborating Classroom-level Data with School-wide Patterns*

The purpose of this chapter has been to illustrate how academic and aspirational norms at the school-wide level become enacted within classroom groups. These norms shape students' individual goals and priorities, and guide decision-making and student

behaviors. In particular, the range and frequency of aggressive behavior is shaped by the enactment of these norms in small groups. Overall, academic and aspirational norms are communicated most clearly and consistently in Hilltop compared to Hughes. In many cases variation in these norms coheres with the ability level of the classroom. However, in some cases groups produce unique idiocultural ideas and norms that impact the ways in which academic and aspirational norms become enacted. In both schools, academic and aspirational norms are communicated most consistently in higher tracked classrooms, although they are communicated more overall in Hilltop compared to Hughes. I found that classrooms with stronger academic and aspirational norms and future-oriented cultures feature more academic focus and less visible interpersonal aggression. Groups with an idioculture reflecting social priorities over academic ones feature regular aggressive interactions during time which might otherwise be occupied with schoolwork. In these classrooms, students may perceive that it is more important to their peers to be popular, and in turn, it may also be more important to them.

I use the SCUBA survey data to assess how general these patterns appear. I analyzed the survey data by school and ran a multiple regression analysis including two models (see Table 10) to explore how personal victimization is related to a student's academic and social goals, perceptions of school-wide college-going norms, and perceptions of school-wide popularity norms. The  $R^2$  for the second model, with control variables included, is 0.096 for Hughes, indicating that 9.6% of the variation in personal victimization can be explained by the 10 independent variables in the model; in Hilltop, 14% of the variation in personal victimization is explained by the same variables. I explore the role of two original constructs, individuals' Social Goals and Academic Goals

(see Table 5) as they relate to the self-reported victimization in school of the survey respondent. Generally, there is a significant positive relationship between stronger social goals and personal victimization in both schools, although the relationship is no longer significant in Hughes when control variables are added. In Hilltop, investment in social goals increases personal victimization while academic goals reduces personal victimization. In Hughes, while the personal level of academic goal investment was similar to that in Hilltop on average, there is not a significant relationship between academic goals and victimization. A student's perception that popularity is important to peers increases personal victimization in Hughes and Hilltop. The perception that more peers in your school are confident they will go to college reduces personal victimization in Hughes and is not significant in Hilltop. Lower socioeconomic status increases personal victimization in Hughes and Hilltop. In Hughes, black students are more likely to experience personal victimization. In Hilltop, females are less likely to experience personal victimization than males.

While it is not possible to use cross-sectional data to fully parse out the roles of class, race, or classroom placement on students' goals or experiences, the results support the role of school-wide academic aspirational norms in shaping victimization patterns described in the qualitative data. In Hilltop, both personal academic goals and school-wide college-going norms predict victimization, while in Hughes, the perception that others will attend college predicts victimization. Perceptions of college-going norms may vary by the types of classes students are placed in, yet the relationship between goals and class placement in each school is unknown. Despite the strength of a student's academic goals in Hughes, these goals may not affect victimization because aggression is common

enough that students experience it to some extent no matter what their academic orientation or placement. In Hilltop, levels of victimization are lower overall and more sorted by individual orientations, which may also be indirectly related to the types of settings students are in. In a school like Hilltop with at least three ability level tracks, students are more likely to be in classrooms with others who are similarly motivated by academic goals, and there is little variation in the perception that most students will go on to college.

The perceptions of school-wide popularity norms and college-going norms are likely to vary by student according to the classrooms they spend their time in (which shape their perceptions of school-wide culture), in the same way the victimization patterns I observed in the ethnography varied across classrooms. If classroom environments and norms did not vary, there would not be a logical source of variation in students' perceptions of school-wide norms. Finally, the finding that lower income students in both schools and black students in Hughes are more likely to experience victimization cohere with previous research on how ability level tracking disproportionately places students of color and from low income backgrounds to the lowest tracked classrooms (Burris, Welner, and Bezoza 2009; Oakes 2005; Tippet and Wolke 2014). Generally, lower tracked classrooms in both schools have more incidents of victimization, so it follows that these students are reportedly experiencing more victimization if they are also enrolled in lower track classes. These findings, coupled with the qualitative findings, show that students may experience and perceive their school community's culture differently, as it relates to academic or popularity norms, depending upon their experiences in classroom groups.

Therefore, cultural norms experienced in classrooms may play a stronger role in shaping a student's victimization experiences than his or her personal priorities or behavioral decisions. Students observed in classrooms with a stronger emphasis on academics were less likely to experience overt victimization, whereas students in classrooms where it was culturally important to pursue social goals and popularity were more likely to experience overt victimization. The survey findings support the conclusions of the qualitative work by reinforcing the role of academic culture in reducing exposure to aggression. In the next chapter, I will explore the role of disciplinary and behavioral norms in schools and classrooms as another cultural element shaping student decision-making and behaviors.

## Chapter 5: Behavioral and Disciplinary Norms

Students' behaviors are shaped by their perceptions of how they will result in academic or social rewards, depending on the relative importance of both to an individual. I have described how grades and peer approval are two such forms of social control. The decisions students make regarding aggressive behavior are also shaped by the behavioral norms that are developed and enacted within a school's organizational culture and within classrooms. At the school level, official rules and disciplinary norms exert social control via formal punishment and deterrents. These rules and norms are further differentiated through their enactment in classrooms. Perceptions regarding the normalcy of getting in trouble among peers vary among students, likely due to the various idiocultures they experience throughout the school day. As will be described in this chapter, these perceptions are significantly related to their self-reported experiences of victimization overall. With a classroom's idioculture, the role of the teacher in enacting the school's cultural norms and creating a classroom-specific disciplinary climate is an important component that differentiates outcomes related to aggressive behavior. In addition, peer norms and interventions shape the field of action through informal sanctions against interpersonal behaviors that deviate from the norm.

When it comes to peer interpersonal aggression, factors at the societal level, such as mass media coverage of "bullying" and socio-legal realities such as anti-bullying legislation, play a role in shaping local norms and policies about interpersonal behavior. At the same time, increased awareness of race and gender gaps in discipline and the deleterious effects of disproportionate punishment (Bottiani, Bradshaw and Mendelson

2017; Gregory et al. 2016) have led to disciplinary reform efforts that complicate the institutional, organizational, and group-level responses to aggressive behavior. These reform efforts have pushed for responses to aggressive behavior to be restorative and competency-building rather than punitive and exclusionary. Yet, to be effective, these social-emotional approaches require significant resources for training and implementation, which may not be available especially in low-income school districts.

Responses to peer interpersonal aggression in schools have been significantly shaped by the public discourse and subsequent legislation around bullying. Legal definitions of bullying behavior vary from state to state, but generally aim to deter youth from engaging in negative interpersonal behaviors that are sustained and/or targeted towards lower status or protected groups or individuals. In New Jersey, the legal definition of bullying is general enough to encompass most examples of peer interpersonal aggression. Anti-bullying legislation frequently focuses on the reduction or prevention of problem behaviors, without identifying the root causes of the behaviors or equipping students with positive skills or competencies to respond to conflict or interact positively with their peers. As the short- and long-term positive outcomes associated with competency-building approaches such as social emotional learning become better understood (Domitrovich 2017; Durlak et al. 2011; Gregory and Fergus 2017; Portnow, Downer and Brown 2018), some schools have adopted competency-building prevention efforts and more restorative alternatives to harsh punishment to shift behavioral norms. These programs are designed not only to reduce aggression, but to promote norms of respect and help students develop stronger “cultural toolkits” that support communication and relationships skills.

In this chapter, I present the connections between norms of behavior, formal and informal discipline, and the disparities in peer aggression that I observed in Hughes and Hilltop. The ways in which institutional and organizational imperatives around discipline are enacted in small groups, or classrooms, are understudied. In the following sections, I focus on the disciplinary culture of the organization at both the school and classroom levels, and how these shape behavioral norms among students in small groups. I argue that norms of behavior, specifically related to aggression, are influenced by formal rules enacted at the school-wide and classroom levels, and informal constraints on behavior that occur primarily in classrooms. Behavioral decisions are made by individual students invoking their own “cultural toolkits” within the constraints of the social situation, and in relationship to aspirational and social norms discussed in the previous chapter.

Aspirational norms, particularly as related to academic tracking, relate to the extent to which sanctions are invoked as part of the disciplinary culture within a classroom. In classes with high academic aspirational norms, behavioral norms reflect the investment of students in academic success, and the need for punitive responses is minimized. In classes where the students are less motivated by grades or less academically engaged, there may be less informal regulation by peers, and formal sanctions are needed to curb aggressive behaviors.

This work extends the literature by exploring discipline gaps related to aggressive behavior and resulting impacts on the interpersonal experiences of students. Little scholarship exists that compares the impacts of school-level disciplinary culture on students’ victimization experiences in specific classrooms. This research builds on our

understanding of how aggressive behavior and its control is shaped by the interplay of institutional, organizational, and group level processes.

### *Disciplinary Disparities in Schools*

In schools, norms are communicated and enacted through the interactions of students with authority figures, as well as with peers. A school's disciplinary climate is conceptualized as "a product of the actions of teachers and administrators, the cultural beliefs and behaviors of students, and the interactions between students and educators that shape the school's organizational culture" (Arum 2012:2). Adults play an important role in shaping the beliefs and behavioral expectations of students, particularly in an urban school such as Hughes. Shedd (2015:3) explains "urban high schools play a major role in either ameliorating or further reinforcing adolescents' racially divergent social worlds, particularly their perceptions of and experiences with authoritative figures." These authority figures create, articulate, and enact behavioral norms as well as creating formal and informal systems of rewards and punishments within a school's organizational culture. They do so in reaction to laws and policies from various levels, which are enforced (or not) locally. In addition to adult authority figures, peers also play an important role in shaping behavioral norms. According to Crosnoe (2011:57) "the peer cultures and subcultures of high school expose teenagers to various socializing messages, present opportunities to engage in certain behaviors, and provide a standard for self-evaluation."

In the school organization and classrooms, both authority figures and peers play roles in socializing students to the desired norms of interpersonal behavior through the deployment of formal and informal rewards and consequences. The rewards adults have

at their disposal to reinforce positive behavioral norms are primarily related to academic credentials and distinctions, such as grades. In higher ability level classes, the threat of losing points or favor with a teacher could pose a strong enough deterrent to aggressive behavior that disciplinary responses are rarely used or even mentioned as a warning. Academic rewards and consequences vary in their efficacy depending upon the academic and aspirational norms of the school, classroom, and the individual student's personal goals. Extracurricular privileges or opportunities, such as playing for a sports team or attending a dance, might be also utilized as rewards or withheld as punishment. In addition to these rewards, exclusionary punishment is often used to deter and punish negative student behaviors. These forms of punishment may include detentions and in-school or out-of-school suspensions, which remove students from the learning environment.

A growing body of research on school discipline has focused on the negative impacts associated with exclusionary discipline. In high schools especially, discipline has been a focus due to concerns about inequitable disciplinary practices and the associated risk of failure and dropout (Morgan et al. 2014) as well as its relationship with involvement in the criminal justice system (Shollenburger 2015). Particular focus has been given to the risks of excessively harsh and disproportionate discipline for students of color and in low-income communities. Studies have revealed that black and Latinx students are disproportionately affected by school discipline policies (Skiba, Arredonda, and Williams 2014) which may lead to less positive views of school and disconnection (Arcia 2006; Voight et al. 2015). In terms of aggressive behavior, it is possible that cultural dissonance leads teachers to be more likely to respond punitively to interpersonal

behaviors of students who do not demonstrate “dominant cultural capital” (Carter 2005:10). Carter argues “many teachers do not themselves possess the requisite cultural competences to help students become multiculturally fluent” (Carter 2005:168). Students of color may also be more likely to attend lower income districts that do not have the resources to support restorative or competency-building alternatives to exclusionary discipline.

In addition to the direct impact of disciplinary policies, perceptions of the fairness and legitimacy of rules have important implications for student behaviors and outcomes. Johnson (2009) found that the knowledge of school rules and belief they were fair were associated with lower school violence. Students’ perceptions of the legitimacy and fairness of school discipline impacts student outcomes more than perceived strictness (Arum 2012). Students actively assess the legitimacy of rules and the individuals enforcing them by evaluating their consistency in application (Shedd 2015:111). The extent to which students perceive rules as strict but fair is related to higher student engagement and lower peer aggression (Konald and Cornell 2015). Perceptions of fairness and equity also play a role in students’ developing sense of belonging to their school (Debnam et al. 2014). The contextual effects of discipline disparities on the perceptions of supportive school climate by students of color has important implications for the academic and social goals students develop, as discussed in the previous chapter.

## SOCIO-LEGAL AND SOCIETAL FACTORS INFLUENCING SCHOOL DISCIPLINE

### *Zero Tolerance and “Broken Windows” Discipline*

The shift to increasingly punitive and exclusionary forms of school discipline reaches into the disciplinary codes of all schools, though the policies vary in their foci

and the consistency of enforcement. Since the 1990s, zero tolerance policies have bolstered a school-to-prison pipeline, pushing students away from school through exclusionary punishments (Shollenburger 2015; Skiba 2014). Zero tolerance strategies rely on deterrence by sending the message that infractions will be met with strong enforcement, taking on a “broken-window” approach to punishing minor violations (Skiba 2014). Under zero tolerance strategies, the disproportionate punishment of students of color, known as the discipline gap, is associated with negative outcomes including increased risk of involvement in the juvenile justice system, dropout, and diminished academic outcomes (Bottiani, Bradshaw and Mendelson 2017).

In 2014, President Barak Obama’s administration issued a “Dear Colleague Letter on the Nondiscriminatory Administration of School Discipline,” focused on assisting schools in administering “school discipline that does not discriminate on the basis of race.” The Dear Colleague letter was written to acknowledge that racial biases and stereotypes may play a role in disciplinary discretion and referrals, which may have long term negative implications for a student’s academic success. On one hand, this directive focused attention on disciplinary records and may have encouraged schools to be more intentional in making disciplinary decisions and avoiding unwarranted referrals, particularly for students of color. On the other hand, it may have discouraged or suppressed documentation of disciplinary responses. A progressive response taken by some schools to reduce referrals includes efforts to promote cultural competency among staff, to reduce instances of punishment due to cultural dissonance between staff and students. For example, Carter describes the potential sanctions adults might bring against “loud verbal play” of a non-aggressive nature (2005:68). Instead of punishment, schools

might help students develop “dominant cultural capital” and perform the associated norms they would need to be successful in various settings.

Under the 2014 directive, the disproportionate use of harsh discipline and resulting deleterious effects are better monitored and potentially kept in check. However, a potential unintended consequence of the directive to reduce disciplinary referrals for students of color is that in the absence of alternative interventions to support pro-social behaviors, discouraging the use of sanctions could lead to an institutional practice of ignoring incidents of victimization, and tacitly treating them as typical or acceptable. If interventions are not in place to support competency development, students may not possess the skills to resolve conflicts, and will have little deterrent for engaging in aggressive behavior towards peers. While disciplinary referrals are easily quantified, and fewer referrals may seem to be a positive indicator of a school’s disciplinary climate, a reduction in referrals does not necessarily equate to the reduction of interpersonal aggressive behaviors. Instead, these behaviors may be pervasive yet systematically ignored, as they were in Hughes, having long-term effects on learning and well-being that are less easily measured or understood.

#### *Dynamics of Zero Tolerance in Hughes and Hilltop*

Previous research on the discipline gap suggests that students in urban environments such as Hughes High School experience harsher discipline for similar behaviors compared to students in suburban settings such as Hilltop. At the same time, studies of students’ disproportionate disciplinary experiences do not adequately interrogate the nuanced and uneven enforcement of rules in urban schools. Understanding the nuanced ways in which behaviors are consistently punished or permitted requires a

grounded approach. While students in urban schools may be subject to consistent surveillance and punishment for certain behaviors, other behaviors that are more difficult to address may be ignored. In Hughes, rules surrounding easily corrected student behaviors, such as using a cell phone or wearing flip-flops, are aggressively enforced through surveillance, intervention, and strict disciplinary follow-through. Yet student interpersonal behaviors that would evoke an immediate response in other contexts, such as sexual harassment or hitting, are so ubiquitous that adults describe feeling justified in ignoring them. Talking about ongoing disciplinary challenges in the teachers' lounge, a Hughes teacher once said, "If you wrote up every student you could write up..." and another teacher ended his sentence, "I wouldn't have any students left."

Elements of zero tolerance are present in both schools, involving the use of severe penalties for both major and minor violations of the school's code of conduct (Shedd 2015). Shedd (2015:84) describes these practices as reflective of a "universal carceral apparatus that undermines the educational functions of these institutions." Hughes High School exhibits some of the common traits of securitized urban high schools, which mark the expansion of the carceral state (Shedd 2015). While the school does not have metal detectors, the presence of nine security officers at the front of the building (up from two the previous year), who use closed circuit televisions to monitor the hallways, sets a tone of surveillance. At the same time, the Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB) law described in the next section is seldom referenced or enforced, even in situations where the law's definition invokes mandated reporting rules. Students are aware of the law and the corresponding rules about bullying, but it is not a cultural norm to define the aggressive behaviors they witness and experience as bullying in most cases.

In Hilltop a uniformed police officer is posted at the entrance of the building about once per week, and he warmly greets community members and reminds students gently not to walk while using their phones. Other elements of the carceral apparatus such as closed-circuit cameras would feel out of place in Hilltop, which emphasizes student responsibility and positive decision-making. The lack of surveillance at Hilltop implies trust; another high school in the same district uses closed-circuit television to monitor all hallways in the building, and the absence of similar monitoring in Hilltop is viewed as a distinctive aspect of the culture of trust. Yet, one area of focus and enforcement for zero tolerance efforts is bullying, or “HIB,” as it is referred to by most students. When asked about the rules in interviews, most students begin by explaining that bullying isn’t allowed in the school, and that behavior meeting its definition, broadly defined, is taken seriously and even prosecuted. Riley, a freshman, described his vicarious experience of rules related to the HIB law: “I know in my gym class somebody called someone a really mean name and he got written up, and he went to the principal’s office and everything, and they took it really seriously for just a small thing that other people would consider.” All Hilltop students who were interviewed cited similar examples of enforcement.

The divergent ways in which rules are enforced, and the foci selected by a school organization for zero tolerance approaches, lead to varying experiences of peer interpersonal interactions for students in Hilltop compared to Hughes. In Hughes, for students’ interpersonal behaviors there is an awareness of the statewide HIB policy that coexists with a sense that interpersonally, “anything goes here.” At the same time, compliance with the dress code and cell phone restrictions was strongly enforced by the

principal, Mr. Rizzo, and these rules were viewed as excessive and illegitimate by most students. The following conversation with a female junior in honors classes in Hughes illustrates the view articulated by many students:

**ARR:** And so you mentioned two of the rules as being commonly enforced – the dress code and the cell phone rule. Are there any other rules in the school that you see being enforced?

**Jaakirah:** Definitely dress code, the phones. The – being in the hallways and stuff. I know that security is very on top of that and who’s roaming the hall and things of that sort. What else? I feel like those are the only rules that they’re really worried about. The ones that I can think of – those are the only ones that I always see being enforced. The other ones, not so much. I mean, obviously if there’s fights, they pull them apart and all that stuff – those kind of rules. If people break them, then they enforce them and stuff like that. But the ones that they enforce are basically those two, which I don’t think are the main ones that should be worried about, but –

**ARR:** Which ones do you think they should be most worried about?

**Jaakirah:** I don’t know. I just feel like always being worried about phones and who’s wearing what isn’t the most important thing to worry about in a school. I feel like sometimes there’s bigger problems like people fighting or people spreading things about other people. There’s a lot of kids who feel suicidal and stuff like that, and I just feel like they should worry about bullying and more things of that sort than she’s wearing a mini skirt or something like that. You know?

In Hilltop, rules about technology and attire are more flexible and recognize the students’ personal responsibility, and the importance of developing decision-making capacities as emerging adults. Dr. Wilcox describes how students need to get used to managing their technology “like the rest of us do,” referring to staff. Yet in Hilltop, the potential harm of aggressive interpersonal interactions, particularly those rising to the definition of bullying, is perceived as great enough that enforcement is strict and certain. In contrast to Jaakirah’s point above, there is a sense in Hilltop that the administration and staff care about students’ emotional and psychological well-being and will not tolerate aggressive behaviors. The organizational motivation to strongly deter and

respond to bullying behaviors could also be related to the threat of litigation by parents, as I show below.

*The Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights: “The Rule Against ‘Hibbing’”*

Anti-bullying legislation has been enacted in all fifty states, although New Jersey is regarded as having the nation’s strictest law (Pelley 2015) after a series of high profile cases. The definition of bullying varies from state to state and typically fails to capture or address other forms of conflict in schools (Collins 2011; Paluck 2015). School districts adhere to and apply state-level anti-bullying legislation at the local level through district policies. Schools, in turn, develop and enforce the policies uniquely, and the role of teachers enacting disciplinary norms and rules in classrooms varies as well. Little is known about the differential enactment of the law by individual teachers, and I discuss their actions within the context of the two high schools and classrooms I observed for this study.

As noted in Chapter 2, New Jersey’s anti-bullying law contains a general definition of bullying which allows for some interpretation. The “Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights” or P.L. 2010, Chapter 122 was enacted in 2011, defining behavior qualifying as bullying as:

...any gesture, any written, verbal or physical act, or any electronic communication, whether it be a single incident or series of incidents, that is reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic...that takes place on school property, at any school-sponsored function, on a school bus, or off school grounds...that substantially disrupts or interferes with the orderly operation of the school or the rights of other students, and that a reasonable person should know, under the circumstances, will have the effect of physically or emotionally harming a student or damaging a student’s property, or placing a student in reasonable fear of physical or emotional harm to his person or damage his property (NJEA).

This inclusive definition of prohibited behaviors potentially regulates almost any form of peer interpersonal aggressive behavior. While some formal definitions of bullying require that the behavior is chronic and repeated, New Jersey's law recognizes isolated incidents, and expands potentially protected categories to include any target of victimization.

Finally, schools are legally responsible for enforcing behavioral regulations on harassment, intimidation, and bullying, or "HIB," both inside and outside of the school building. As Shedd (2015:90) notes, "get tough" approaches such as increasing surveillance or making bullying behaviors illegal fails to address the "root causes" of behavior. The threat of punishment and extended reach of the "HIB" law is designed to deter students from victimizing others, but does not address root causes.

The general and inclusive language in New Jersey's anti-bullying law leads to ambiguity and potentially uneven enforcement of the law across schools and districts in the state. Overall, documented cases of bullying declined over the first three years of implementation (New Jersey Anti-Bullying Task Force Annual Report 2016). This decline could have been due to the law's effective role as a deterrent, or could have indicated a shift to more lax enforcement over time. Parental involvement and vigilance play a role in enforcement, as districts with parents with more social and cultural capital might take legal action if they feel the laws are not being adequately or fairly enforced. Perceived over-enforcement may also spark legal action for students who are accused and subject to the law's investigation process in settings where families have the cultural capital to do so. Students in both schools describe bullying being viewed by authority figures as "really serious" within their local context. However, Nunn (2012:9) notes that students in different school environments may not imbue similar meanings to institutional

features, such as the HIB law, which are shared across schools, and indeed, students interpreted the content of “bullying” behavior and corresponding laws differently in Hughes and Hilltop. In interviews, students’ descriptions and examples of behaviors meeting the definition of bullying varied by school, yet in both schools, students described anti-bullying rules as fair, reasonable, and necessary.

There is an acute sensitivity to the potential punishment associated with aggressive behaviors meeting the definition of “bullying” in Hilltop. The rules are perceived as an effective deterrent, and most students and adults state that “it doesn’t happen here.” In lower-track settings where aggressive behavior is observed more frequently, the term “bullying,” (or the “b-word” as it is colloquially called) is invoked to immediately halt aggressive exchanges by appealing to students’ fear of punishment. For example, in Mr. Brodzki’s Algebra 1 Focus class (Classroom 18), the teacher frequently commands, “Stop bullying, \_\_\_” followed by a student’s name. Naming the student and using this language signals to the student that if he or she does not stop, the components needed to launch the HIB investigation process are present. Students in both schools leverage the b-word to de-escalate conflict, as will be described in a later section.

In Hughes, students frequently described witnessing and experiencing widespread aggressive behavior, but infrequently characterized it as meeting the definition of “bullying” and rarely discussed the behaviors in relationship to the law or local enforcement of rules about bullying. I also observed widespread aggressive behaviors, and few references to the law as a means to deter the behavior. As noted, the 2014 federal directive around equity in discipline may have resulted in a retrenchment of punitive policies in response to aggressive behaviors. Hughes administrators may have responded

to the 2014 directive by discouraging staff from writing referrals for students.

Administrators encouraged teachers to address behaviors in their own classroom whenever possible, and teachers articulated a feeling that administrators might “punish” those who submitted too many referrals by reflecting it in their professional reviews, or assigning them undesirable duties. I observed unaddressed peer aggressive interpersonal behaviors continuously disrupting learning. In a school like Hughes where it is not the norm to invoke the HIB law, and there are few restorative resources in place to get to the root of behaviors, staff are left with little recourse in dealing with less prioritized types of student misbehavior. In response to the absence of both enforcement options and preventative supports, a cultural norm of ignoring aggressive behaviors emerged in Hughes. Staff in Hughes reported feeling as if their hands are tied; they have no recourse to prevent problematic behaviors, and inadequate supports and resources to support students’ prosocial development.

#### SCHOOL-WIDE CULTURE, BEHAVIORAL NORMS, AND DISCIPLINE AT THE ORGANIZATIONAL LEVEL

“Be good kids, make good choices,” is a mantra repeated as a ritual in Hilltop by staff and students. Each Friday, this expectation punctuates the morning and afternoon announcements, priming the students to continue engaging in the generally positive visible behaviors they display in school, and to avoid risky behavior over the weekend. Throughout the week, the message is reinforced through the official policies and informal practices of discipline. Students are encouraged to practice positive decision-making, and privileges are revoked only when students prove they cannot handle freedoms, such as the ability to use their cell phones during school. Hilltop relaxed the cell phone ban at

the beginning of the school year I observed, specifically permitting students to use cell phones in non-academic spaces as long as they are not used while walking in the hallways. During my time at Hilltop, I saw students being gently warned to stop texting and walking, and not to use the phone during class time. I never witnessed a student being warned that their phone would be confiscated, and I never witnessed or heard about a phone being taken away.

In both high schools, students place a high value on their cell phones. Phones are a lifeline for emergencies, the social connection to friends and family, sources of information, and digital organizers of time and tasks via calendars and checklists. Adults in both schools openly admit that it would be difficult or impossible for them to make it through a day without their phones. Yet, in Hughes, a recently implemented and rigidly enforced ban on cell phones expects just that of students. Enforcement of the cell phone ban is the centerpiece of Principal Rizzo's "zero tolerance" approach to discipline. He and his fellow administrators walk around holding open paper bags, collecting phones as they move through the building. In a conversation relating to the policy, he explained that he believes cell phones have the potential to cause social conflicts or fights. Digital postings creates a greater threat of litigation than the fleeting in-person aggressive interactions common in the school. Secondly, phones can be a distraction from learning, particularly for students exposed to lower academic aspirational norms. In establishing his authority as a new principal, Mr. Rizzo and his fellow administrators spend the majority of their time enforcing this ban and other visible signs of rules transgression, such as hats, hoodies, and headphones. This amounts to a "broken

windows” approach to discipline, illustrating that administrators have the authority to issue penalties and ensure rule compliance.

Cell phones, however, are so valuable to most students in Hughes that keeping possession of the phone is perceived to be worth any type of risk. Very often, students who refuse to turn over their phones are written up for insubordination, immediately resulting in an in-school or out-of-school suspension. In-school suspensions are the more common punishment, and were sometimes assigned for only part of the day so the school could avoid recording a full-day in-school suspension, which would be counted toward disciplinary totals submitted to the state. School resource officers (SROs) are often involved in efforts to confiscate phones, escalating the potential penalty for insubordination to the risk of in-school arrest.

Previous work has found that students are more likely to follow rules being enforced by school leaders when they feel supported and respected by them (Gregory and Cornell 2009). In Hughes, the mere sight of a phone often led to confiscation, even when students explained valid reasons for using one (i.e. using as a calculator, receiving directions from a parent to pick up a sibling after school) or simply having it visible. The general lack of discretion evidenced by immediate and forceful confiscation led students in Hughes to report feeling unsupported by school administrators, and to view the rules as illegitimate and unfair. When discretion did occur, this could also lead students to perceive unfair application of the rules. Vanessa, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader who was frequently in trouble made the astute observation, “Every time a dark-skinned person would take out their phone, she [the teacher] would scream at them and take it away. If a light-skinned person would take it out, she wouldn’t say anything at all.” Vanessa’s observation is an

example of how students monitor adult enforcement to assess the legitimacy of a policy, and is in line with a finding from previous work that African American students are more likely than European students to be referred for defiance (Gregory and Weinstein 2008).

Students noticing disparities in treatment are much more likely to view the school's disciplinary policies as illegitimate. Students who resist the confiscation of their cell phones arguably do so as an act to preserve dignity "in an environment that already saw them as criminal prior to their committing" a prohibited act, such as cyberbullying (Rios 2011:105). While many students in Hughes with high academic aspirations complied with adults enforcing procedural rules around phones and the dress code, many others did not, and faced the negative consequences of being excluded from instruction as punishment.

As another example of how the disciplinary culture is enacted in Hughes, I observed Andre being removed from the same "Enrichment" class (Classroom 3) several times for using his headphones. He explained to me one day that the headphones helped him focus on his work and avoid the ritualistic and intentionally aggressive interactions he often engaged in with peers, especially Manny. He figured that even if he were removed from class, if SROs were delayed in responding, he might be able to get a good chunk of his assignment done to illustrate that he could complete his work under the right conditions. Even so, teachers like Ms. K. expressed that they were unwilling deal with the consequences of subverting the headphone policy for fear of getting "in trouble" with administration. Mr. Rizzo frequently reminded staff members of the rules and enforcement expectations during staff meetings and morning announcements. There was

a sense that there would be consequences for teachers who did not comply with the enforcement of these procedural rules, whether they agreed with them or not.

In Hilltop, there are also regular organizational reminders of the cultural norms and expectations around behavior. Use of headphones is permitted in most classes “as long as there isn’t fooling around,” and dress code violations result in warnings rather than removal. The rules that are communicated and enforced most consistently are those posing the greatest perceived risk or harm to students’ physical and mental wellbeing, specifically those prohibiting substance use and “bullying.” During the same mid-year expectation-setting student assembly discussed in Chapter 4, Hilltop principal Dr. Wilcox reminds students about penalties related to substance use. In particular, the school is concerned about “vaping,” and students caught vaping on school property receive an automatic three-day suspension. Dr. Wilcox warns that students caught with paraphernalia will be drug-tested on the spot. Hilltop routinely uses random drug tests, although students question the randomness given what they describe as the repeated testing of the same students.

The bulk of the discipline-focused component of the mid-year presentation in Hilltop, though, is on “the importance of the HIB policy,” which by its mention draws groans and grumbles from students. The Vice Principal cites evidence from research to try and compel students to take the issue of Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB) seriously, given the negative outcomes associated with it. “Usually, we can stand before you and say HIB reports are going down. Unfortunately this year I can’t say that. We’re seeing a slight increase. Whether it’s because of cell phones, computers, I don’t know. But we’re going to go over the definition of an act of HIB and the consequences of

it.” Another Vice Principal presents the legal definition of HIB and then adds, “It does not happen at Hilltop.” Using locally compiled data, she explains that most of the time, the school is observing social bullying and cyberbullying. She gives an example of each type. “This is a very serious thing that’s happening to students,” she says, and then cites a list of negative consequences and alarming statistics about victims. She encourages peers to intervene as bystanders because “research shows that half of incidents stop when peers intervene,” and implores students to simply “avoid people you don’t like.” She encourages students to report incidents right away, while reminding them explicitly of the potential punishment. “The consequences at Hilltop are stern. In addition to remedial consequences, you may lose cell phone privileges or use of your laptop, or at least have social networking sites blocked on both.” She adds, “the behavior will not be tolerated at Hilltop, and all reports will be investigated and reported to colleges,” connecting the consequences of behavioral infractions to the academic and aspirational norms cultivated at the school-wide level.

As noted previously, both schools employ elements of zero tolerance policies. In Hughes these policies are directed towards compliance related to devices and apparel, and in Hilltop, they are primarily deployed in reference to peer interpersonal behaviors and preventing bullying. In these contexts severe exclusionary punishments are used to deter students from engaging in specific behaviors. In Hughes these punishments are designed to prevent students from resisting directives to comply and hand over cell phones, and in Hilltop they encourage students to abstain from aggressive interpersonal behaviors. Alternatives to harsh punishment include restorative practices and social emotional competency-building approaches. Previous work has found that positive

behavioral supports can improve connectedness and school climate, and decrease problem behaviors (Bradshaw, Waadorp, and Leaf 2012). Skiba (2014) recommends prevention or intervention models built on conflict resolution, student supports, and consistent discipline, while others promote social emotional skill development (Durlak et al. 2011).

In Hughes, cultural norms and school rules related to interpersonal behavior were not consistently communicated or enforced school-wide, nor were prevention models or competency building approaches implemented. However, once a year the school contracted with an expensive out-of-state company to do a community building event involving about one fifth of the school population. During the event, called “Healing Day,” students would engage in social-emotional skill building exercises, view models of conflict resolution strategies, and apply those strategies in addressing conflicts or issues that had happened previously with peers. Clementine described a segment in Healing Day when a person can go up to anyone and apologize. She described experiencing persistent victimization by a girl who she felt was jealous of her and her best friend, and who had spread rumors and tried to get others not to speak to her. On Healing Day, the girl “apologized and we hugged her. That’s another reason why I like this school, because we have opportunities and privileges to be around this, and we can solve certain things.” The few opportunities students in Hughes have to engage in prosocial skill development and conflict resolution are viewed as valuable, memorable, and formative. The few students who got to take part in Healing Day referenced it during our interview, and typically indicated a desire for more opportunities to engage in this type of restorative approach. A

limitation of the Healing Day event, aside from the fact that not all students could attend, is that the skills taught were not reinforced in other contexts throughout the school year.

In Hilltop, cultural norms regarding interpersonal behavior are communicated regularly at the school-wide and classroom levels. The “be good kids” mantra is connected explicitly to the development of skills and competencies related to interpersonal behavior and inclusion. Several events were designed to reinforce the social emotional skills developed through formal curricula and the school’s “hidden curriculum” related to interpersonal behavior. These events were held throughout the year. Social emotional skills and concepts were regularly infused in content by teachers who had received training on how to integrate these skills. In addition to a homegrown community-building event to promote inclusion of students with disabilities, the school had a variety of extracurricular groups and projects dedicated to promoting prosocial behaviors. A well-established and highly selective peer leadership initiative was a big component of the school’s efforts to promote healthy sexual behaviors and prevent bullying. The school participated in an evidence-based program that involved identifying student leaders who developed and delivered lessons to health classes related to prosocial skills, interpersonal relationships, and positive decision making. A student participating in the project described how the group’s mission during the current school year was to change norms among students regarding sexual harassment and the use of the words “faggot” and “retard.” In addition, the school was able to bring in various types of curricula and programming to support positive decision-making and expand students’ interpersonal competencies.

In Hilltop, students who persistently violate school rules or classroom norms are met with dedicated resources to identify the root cause of the behaviors. In Mr. Schumacher's Core English 1 class (Classroom 21), one female student is typically responsible for provoking others and starting conflicts. "When she's here, the class is just different," the teacher explains. Rather than adopt a punitive response, the school hires a social work consultant from a local university to observe the student and help create a behavioral support plan. Unfortunately, similar supports are not readily available for disruptive students needing interventions in Hughes, such as Andre. Andre waits months to have a thorough mental evaluation to determine an appropriate course of services, then several more months to receive an adequate placement – in June. The lack of immediate resources means that exclusionary forms of punishment are the only options at a teacher's disposal to deal with Andre's disruptive behaviors and have a smoother running class.

Crosnoe (2011:60) finds that "social and emotional disruptions to and distractions from conventional academic pursuits are going to be more plentiful in some high school cultures and subcultures than others." Students in all contexts deal with conflict and the pressure to attain academic and social success. However, some schools are better equipped to provide non-punitive approaches to dealing with these issues than others, both via skill-building resources, and in the cultural competency of staff in interpreting social emotional needs and student behaviors. The lack of available restorative approaches in Hughes to support students engaging in aggressive behavior as a result of various causes and robs those students of the opportunity to develop social emotional competencies and coping skills necessary for success in academics and beyond. In addition, being stuck in classrooms with students whose behaviors are not being

addressed through a preventative approach, but instead, through a reactive and punitive approach, means that other students suffer the consequences of victimization, distractions, and poorer learning conditions. To assess the extent to which disruptions, rule violations, and punishments were perceived by students to be more plentiful at a school-wide level in Hughes compared to Hilltop, I use data from the SCUBA survey.

### *Perceptions of School-wide Disciplinary and Behavioral Norms*

I observe distinctly more frequent patterns in disruption and aggressive behavior in Hughes compared to Hilltop. To corroborate my findings at the school-wide level, I use SCUBA survey data to assess how general these patterns appear within the perceptions of students in both schools. Specifically, I explore the extent to which perceptions of the disciplinary and behavioral culture at the school relate to personal experiences of victimization.

I split the SCUBA survey data by school and ran multiple regression analyses including two models (see Table 11) to explore how personal victimization is related to perceived behavioral and disciplinary norms. I test whether the following relate to a students' personal victimization: his or her perception that it is normal for peers to get in trouble in their school; perceptions of the severity of a teacher's disciplinary response for teasing (a common form of aggressive behavior); and perceived incidence of victimization of others in core content area classrooms. The  $R^2$  for the second model, with control variables included, is 0.226, indicating that 22.6% of the variation in personal victimization in Hughes can be explained by the 15 independent variables in the model; in Hilltop, 24.4% of variation in personal victimization is explained by the same variables. As in the models discussed in Chapter 4, academic and social goals were not

significantly related to personal victimization when additional variables related to disciplinary culture and behavioral norms were added. In Hilltop, these variables are significant in the models looking at personal investment in academic and perceptions of social goals and academic and social norms. These relationships are no longer significant in the models described above. In the second model for Hughes, all variables added to the model to represent perceptions of behavioral norms and disciplinary norms are significantly related to personal victimization.

When control variables are added in the second model, perceived victimization of others in Language Arts class is significantly related to personal victimization; expected severity of discipline in Language Arts class reduces reported victimization. In Hughes, lower student SES was significantly related to personal victimization; this coheres with the models in Chapter 4 and my observational findings in the previous chapter that students in lower ability track classrooms are more likely to experience victimization, and the findings of other work exploring the disproportionate placement of low-income students in lower academic tiers. In the previous chapter I found that academic and social goals in Hughes are not significantly related to personal victimization in Hughes overall because aggression is common enough that all students experience it no matter their personal academic orientation. Victimization exposure may vary, as will be discussed in the next section, by classroom, but this cannot be supported through survey data focused on overall experiences.

In contrast, in Hilltop both social and academic goals as well as popularity norms matter in relationship to personal victimization in the previous chapter, suggesting that experiences are sorted by individual orientations that are indirectly related to the settings

(i.e. level of courses) students are in. However, individual orientations are no longer significant in predicting personal victimization in Hilltop when the variables related to perceptions of school-wide and classroom-specific behavioral and disciplinary norms are added into the second model. The perceived importance of popularity to peers remained significant in this model (as did the perceived normalcy of getting into trouble among peers). Individual students' perceptions of peer norms may be shaped by the types of classrooms they are placed in during the school day. More severe expected discipline in Mathematics decreased personal victimization. Perceived victimization of peers in Language Arts and Mathematics increased personal victimization. Lower SES increased personal victimization. Female students reported significantly more personal victimization, and Hispanic/Latinx students reported significantly less personal victimization compared to males and other racial categories.

As noted in the previous chapter, it is not possible to articulate the role of class and race, or to fully understand the role of classroom environments in predicting victimization, by using cross-sectional data. However, these data do support the role of both school-wide and classroom cultures in shaping perceived behavioral and disciplinary norms, which in turn play a significant role in shaping a student's individual victimization experiences. The fact that the relationship between strict discipline and victimization varies according to the subject areas measured in each school reinforces the notion that harsh punishment alone may not be a sufficient deterrent to aggression. This points to the complex interplay between school-wide and classroom specific cultural norms, student's personal goals and priorities, and exposure to victimization. As the qualitative data in the following sections reveal, simply having tough rules about

interpersonal aggression in place is not enough to prevent aggressive behavior, and variation occurs according to classroom idioculture.

In the next sections, I discuss a range of group-level factors shaping students' interpersonal behaviors in classrooms. I begin by exploring how individual teachers play an important role in interpreting and enforcing organizational rules at the group-level and enacting behavioral norms and expectations. I observed significant variation in how teachers enacted school-wide behavioral norms and enforced rules. I also observed variation in how the same teacher did both across different classroom groups. Students in different classrooms innovated ways to avoid detection and punishment, and negotiated the behavioral norms and organizational and group-level rules in creative ways when engaging in aggressive interpersonal behaviors. Teachers in both schools also found creative ways to avoid engaging with aggressive interactions under the guidance of the HIB law. Some found ways to build social-emotional competencies in the moment when responding to aggressive behaviors. At the same time, peers were often responsible for the most effective regulation of students' behavior and the maintenance of group norms in classrooms. The particular composition of students in each class, and the unique social hierarchies that emerged in each setting, played a role in determining dominant norms and patterns of behavior.

#### TEACHERS AND THE ENACTMENT OF SCHOOL-WIDE DISCIPLINARY AND BEHAVIORAL NORMS IN CLASSROOM GROUPS

Previous work has supported the notion that students' perceptions of unfair treatment by teachers play a role in the variation of behavior across classrooms. In one study, within-student variability in behavior was found to be greater than between-student

variation (Gregory and Thompson 2010). Variation in behavior across classrooms may have to do with the ways in which school-wide disciplinary norms are reshaped and enacted within the classrooms' idiocultures. According to Fine (2012), small groups such as classrooms "socialize individuals to communal standards" and allow members to shape expectations for the group through the development and enactment of norms. Norms do not eliminate conflict, but their existence "provides strategies for resolving it through the negotiation of action based on common values" (Fine 2012; p.81). Classroom members observe, interpret, and regulate the behaviors of one another. The "confined intimacy of groups" in classrooms, "facilitates the monitoring and sanctioning of individuals" similar to the concept of the Foucauldian Panopticon, where the individual is constantly watching others and being watched (Fine 2012:25-27). Students' behavior in classrooms is constrained through the presence of teachers as authority figures who can distribute both rewards and punishments, as well as peers, who provide cues for acceptable behavior (Fine 2012:27).

In Hilltop, I never observed a student being written up or formally disciplined by a teacher, although I did hear about it infrequently through the conversations and vicarious experiences of other students. In cases of aggressive behavior or victimization I observed, teachers issued informal sanctions if behaviors could be interpreted as violating norms or rules, and this always resulted in termination of the observable behavior. Mostly, the behaviors were conducted discreetly and not easily observed by teachers. Students in most classes are similarly discreet if they break the rules or violate norms, and creative in finding ways to avoid detection. In Hughes, although aggressive behavior was observed in all types of classrooms, and in some more frequently than others, formal

punishment in classrooms is also rare. While teachers intervene with informal sanctions such as verbal warnings, with varying levels of success, similar to Hilltop, formal sanctions are typically reserved for transgressions deemed important to administrators; specifically, cell phones and dress code compliance, and related insubordination. Teachers, especially those who are not yet tenured, tell students they need to enforce the compliance-focused rules under focus for zero tolerance, whether legitimate or not, so they will not “get in trouble.”

Individual adult responses to norm or rule violations in Hughes are constrained by the supports available to them and the directives of authority figures, specifically the building administration. As Rios (2011:42) observes, “adults in the community might attempt to support young people, [yet] may be limited by inadequate policies, philosophies, programming, or financial resources...these well-intentioned adults often fall back on the dominant resources available to them: zero tolerance policies...” Teachers in Hughes know they can call on administrators or SROs for support with enforcement of compliance-related rules, but are less confident they will receive support for student interpersonal issues, where it is often difficult to distinguish between the playful versus intentionally harmful. As such, teachers often ignore interpersonal behavior or attempt to defuse conflicts or address victimization themselves. A failed attempt to intervene against aggressive behavior or victimization could leave the teacher looking powerless to students if he or she could not get administrative backup in enforcing behavioral standards, rules, or the HIB law.

One Hughes student, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader named Anika, described how another student had repeatedly bullied her, sexually harassed her (in her words), and threatened to come

to her house and shoot her family. She reported feeling very scared and upset for over a week, before reporting it to a teacher. The teacher complied with the HIB reporting rules and sent Anika to a counselor, who ultimately talked Anika and her mother out of filing a formal HIB report, and instead brought the students together and made the male student issuing the threats promise not to do it again. This approach had the potential to re-victimize Anika, and reinforced the lack of compliance and follow through related to the enforcement of laws and rules designed to prevent victimization.

The following vignettes highlight a selection of situations in Hughes classrooms in which serious and intentionally harmful aggressive behaviors, including sexual harassment and physical harm, are overlooked by teachers, while compliance with cell phone policies are enforced strictly but unevenly. The events described took place in freshman classrooms, thus socializing students to expectations regarding the types of behaviors that are permissible in the school. Over time, students may gain the sense that these behaviors are normal or typical in their learning environments or peer groups, even if minimal sanctions are delivered in response. At the same time, the enforcement of compliance rules such as the cell phone ban which are generally perceived as illegitimate and inconsistent may result in students' disconnection or loss of academic motivation, in addition to the other negative outcomes associated with harsh punishment.

On an average school day, 9<sup>th</sup> grader Shantelle enters Mr. Said's class (Classroom 4) late and is visibly aggravated. She mutters to herself upon entry, clearly violating classroom expectations given her frustration. Though her behavior may be motivated by a desire for attention or acknowledgment, Mr. Said ignores her. There are few resources for assisting students in emotional distress, as school counselors have large caseloads and

are typically not available for immediate de-escalation or one-on-one support. After distracting peers with her agitated muttering, Shantelle gets into an aggressive verbal exchange with Aaliyah involving threats, which appears to be intentionally aggressive as they call one another names and tell one another to “shut the fuck up” several times. She disengages from the argument by beginning to list aloud all of the reasons she is mad she’s in school. She stands up from her seat and begins pacing, standing close to Luisa, who looks annoyed. Luisa and Shantelle previously disclosed that they used to be in a relationship. Luisa says to her, “Get the fuck away from me before I punch you in your junk. I bet you wear a strap on to school.” Rather than responding to Luisa, Shantelle looks at Mr. Said and says, “Mister, let me get up out of here before I get suspended again.” Shantelle seems to recognize that difficulty managing her emotions or responding to Luisa may lead to trouble, and asks for support in the only way she thinks possible – to remove herself from the situation. Mr. Said responds without looking away from the board, “No, do your work,” ignoring the distress the student is displaying and the escalating situation.

Shantelle walks towards the door to leave without a pass, and Mr. Said tells her again to stop and sit down since she does not have a pass. She replies, “I’m me. They can’t tell me I need a pass. I walk these halls all day, every day without a pass.” Shantelle is highlighting her perception of the uneven enforcement of rules, and her expectation that there will not be a consequence for missing instructional time. Mr. Said replies, in a serious but quieter tone, “But I’ll get in a lot of trouble if you don’t have a pass.” Shantelle sighs and walks back to her seat, but begins talking with students around her about sexually explicit subjects in graphic detail. Mr. Said says, “Watch your mouth” to

her, and repeats the same to Aaliyah, who just called a student on the other side of the room who is trying to follow Mr. Said's lesson a "fucking pussy."

Meanwhile, two male students are having a very loud conversation about a freshman girl in their school. "She's like the only Muslim, the only one who wears the hijab, who looks good. I'm gonna stick my dick in her ear when she's not looking." "I'm gonna tell her you said that," another male student said, "Plus, you can't even see her ear." The teacher does not intervene in this conversation, which contains sexually aggressive and potentially biased content. Instead, Mr. Said turns his focus to Aaliyah, who is "twerking," a dance move in which she shakes her backside in front of Luisa, to put her phone away. "I don't have anything out!" she yells back to him. The teacher looks frustrated and says, "Go away. Just get out of here. Just leave." Aaliyah looks shocked, and replies, "Stop playing with my butt." Mr. Said walks to his desk, writes a pass to ACS (alternative classroom setting, or in-school suspension) and says, "I was being nice to you." Aaliyah responds, "How was that being nice?" "You were giving me an attitude, so get out," he says, and points to the door, holding the pass out. Aaliyah's face turns from a smirk, suggesting she thought he was joking, to an angry frown as he continues to hold out the pass. "They all have phones out too," she says to the teacher as she snatches the pass from his hand. Aaliyah's observation is correct: many students are taking pictures of the textbook because they are not permitted to take them home to complete assignments, since too many copies have gone missing. "I'm telling you to get out because you were screaming at me, so get out," he replies. Mr. Said does not call down to let the office know that Aaliyah is coming for in-school suspension, so it is implied that he just wants her out of the room, and she will likely wander the halls until the next

period – an outcome that could lead him to face the same sanction as if he had let Shantelle go out in the first place. As a black female student, Mr. Said’s actions in response to Aaliyah’s “yelling” may be reflective of what Morris describes as a pattern of punitive responses by school staff to loud behavior or “attitude” that defies the “White middle class definition of femininity” (2016:10). Similar to students who refuse to hand over cell phones, Aaliyah’s pushback on Mr. Said’s uneven enforcement may also be read as a demand to be heard when other forms of mistreatment are overlooked, and an effort to preserve her dignity.

During my year observing Mr. Said’s class, the only behaviors that consistently receive a verbal warning or other sanction (albeit inconsistently and infrequently) are cell phone use and use of profanity (on the third or fourth time, and only for the F-word). When students, and in particular a male student named Cash, get into inappropriate and sexually explicit topics as part of a ritualistic aggressive interaction, Mr. Said typically ignores it and teaches over it. The students in the cluster of eight who sit on the right side of his desk, pulling their desks to abut the teacher’s desk, lean in to hear his teaching over the loud interactions of their peers in the back of the room and on the left side. It is up to classmates to intervene and police the boundaries of acceptable discourse for the majority of the class who has fully disengaged from the lesson.

Cash and other male students in the class sometimes engage in isolated intentionally harmful aggressive behavior towards Mark, a student who is socially awkward and one of two white students in the classroom, who sits on the outer fringe of the cluster of focused students. As the teacher is going over “light material” after students sat for PARCC, Cash provokes a conversation with Mark, who is trying to follow the

teacher's lesson. Mark tries to ignore Cash's comments, but alternates covering and uncovering his ears with his hands to hear what Mr. Said is saying. "Hey Mark, you like guys? I heard you like guys. You like girls? Do you like men, or boys? It's boys, right? Do you like tighty whiteys, or boxers?" Cash laughs loudly in between each question, and looks around at his peers for a reaction. Jenny, an academically motivated student who is respected by her peers and teachers, takes a hard stand in enforcing anti-bullying norms. She can expect retaliation, given that Cash ritualistically engages in intentionally harmful behavior towards her as well. Jenny sits with the focused cluster of students, and exhibits high academic aspirations and focus, which at times makes her a target for peers like Cash. She likes math, and tells me she would have been enrolled in Honors Algebra had it been offered at Hughes. "Cash, stop it. Leave him alone. Stop being a bully. You're gonna make him drop out of school, or worse. Stop being an asshole. Stop being a fucking asshole. He wasn't even talking to you."

Jenny invokes the word "bully," which could reasonably be expected to evoke a response from the teacher under the HIB law; in this case, it does not. She appeals to Cash's emotions by citing the potential negative implications of his behavior, and signals her social disapproval by loudly repeating the word "asshole," which gets Cash to stop and argue with Jenny instead. The use of the "b-word" – bully - and lack of response seems to trigger students to mention other rules that the teacher is failing to enforce in the moment. "Mr. Said, aren't you not allowed to wear hats?" Franco asked, pointing at another student. "I tell you like three times a day," Mr. Said says quietly. He walks over and takes the cell phone out of the hand of the student wearing the hat, but leaves the hat unaddressed. Manny, a particularly disruptive freshman who is not part of this class,

walks into the classroom to socialize and Mr. Said tells him to leave. Manny says to the teacher, “Big Poppa, can I have a fist bump?” Mr. Said says no, shuffles him out the door, and closes and locks the door. Teachers are not allowed to lock the classroom doors except during active shooter drills, but Mr. Said may view this as the only way to keep Manny out of the room. Manny stands at the glass window of the door giving Mr. Said the middle finger for about thirty seconds, with his tongue out, dancing. Mr. Said ignores him and keeps teaching, and several students on the less engaged left side of the classroom say, “Mister, we tired from the test, you doing too much” as they stare in Manny’s direction.

Meanwhile, Jenny and Cash have been insulting one another, exchanging graphic threats, and smacking one another in the face with escalating intensity after her intervention on behalf of Mark. Finally, when Jenny smacks Cash across the face full force, leaving a red mark, he says to the teacher, “She’s hitting me!” Mr. Said responds, “Stop flirting already and just grow up.” Cash rips Jenny’s headphones out of her ears and holds the cord tightly around her neck, to simulate choking her. She elbows him in the ribs, takes them back, and moves to another seat. The students seem to have noticed that their behaviors are not going to be regulated, even if they do pose a risk of physical harm. By calling the behaviors “flirting,” the teacher implies that these are normal and acceptable interpersonal behaviors associated with courtship, while in most other settings, these behaviors, which did not appear to be playful, would be viewed as much more serious. This type of behavioral classification by adults, which minimizes aggressive behavior, occurred on numerous occasions in Hughes. Students describing these situations in interviews typically realized that the behavior was more serious than

“flirting” despite the inaction by adults, and were frustrated and disappointed when adults did not respond more supportively.

I observe Jenny and Cash from the scenario above in Mrs. Gardener’s CP English class as well (Classroom 6), but these students, and the other freshman in the group, are generally much more focused and less likely to engage in aggressive behaviors in this setting compared to Mr. Said’s class. Mrs. Gardener creates her own disciplinary and behavioral norms in class through the explicit cultivation of an idioculture of high academic and behavioral expectations. She holds students accountable for school rules, tells them that she is on their side, and avoids imposing sanctions for compliance-oriented rules that will get them in actual trouble. Students understand that in doing so, she is assuming personal risk of punishment as an untenured teacher, so they generally comply with her informal sanctions and view them as legitimate articulations of illegitimate school-wide policies. For example, when it comes to the cell phone policy, she immediately confiscates phones by having students placing them in a hat box. However, she always allows students to take the phone back at the end of the period rather than turning them in to the main office. Emphasizing her vulnerability in circumventing official disciplinary policy, she asks students not to tell others that she is enforcing the policy in this way. Students seem to view her procedure as legitimate, because she explains that she is removing their phone so they can make the most of their learning time. She reinforces the importance of the daily learning objective and its connection to students’ long-term goals as part of her justification. Mrs. Gardener provides warnings and behavioral reminders in a way that communicates her concern for students and desire to keep them out of trouble. When students leave the room to use the restroom, she often

reminds them not to take “side trips” because “the cameras will see you,” and the students seem to interpret the warning as a sign that she cares about them.

However, similar to other teachers at Hughes, Mrs. Gardener is almost never punitive in response to aggressive behaviors, and at times, she does not respond at all. When I ask her about this, she indicates that she does not impose official sanctions for aggressive behavior because she feels she will not receive administrative back up in doing so. However, she does recognize the potential harm in ignoring victimization, and it troubles her that she does not have the means to effectively address it. During my observations, she addresses extreme cases of aggressive behavior and sends the message that they are not acceptable by taking one of several measures. In some cases, she lectures the entire group about why it is wrong to make fun of others, engaging in efforts to build social emotional competencies. In others, she steps outside of the classroom with a student to correct his or her behavior. She concludes the quick conference by encouraging them to reflect on the source of their behavior, and gives them a new seat assignment away from the person with whom they are engaged in conflict to prevent re-victimization.

In viewing Mrs. Gardener as a caring and fair adult, students in this class seem concerned about their teacher getting into trouble. They indicate their concern by inquiring about my purpose in observing the classroom, and by correcting one another’s behaviors when they are getting the class off track from the objective. Another untenured teacher in Hughes similarly avoids issuing punishments for aggressive behavior, but attempts to render rules legitimate by explaining the logic behind them. Ms. Scott warns a student who has a crumpled ball of paper in his hand not to throw it at a peer. “You know

what they say about teachers, they have eyes in the backs of their heads.” He throws it into the trash can instead. “John! No!” she says firmly. “But I didn’t hit anyone, I made it?” he replies. Ms. Scott responds, “No. I don’t care. Here’s the thing. When students are throwing things, it deems it an unsafe environment. Let me give you an example. I always run things as if the vice principal, or Dr. Rizzo, might walk in at any moment. What will they think of my classroom? That could hit a student and cause them harm, so it’s an unsafe environment.” I did not witness the student throwing paper balls again in this classroom, but he continued to do so over the remainder of the school year in the other setting in which I observed him.

A teacher’s communication and enforcement of norms at the classroom level led to many observed cases of students exhibiting extreme “within-student” behavioral variation. Another example of a student vacillating between aggressive behavior and adherence to group norms and rules in different groups is Andre. Andre, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader who I observed in several classes, was frequently suspended for behaviors including insubordination and victimization of his peers. However, he was generally respectful to his teachers and conveyed warmth to them, especially to Mr. Duncan, as described in Chapter 4 (Classroom 5). Andre accepted a suspension from Mr. Duncan as legitimate after playfully pulling out a strand of a female peer’s hair, because he understood Mr. Duncan could have gotten in trouble himself if he did not issue a disciplinary response. However, one day Mr. Duncan was absent from Language Arts Enrichment, and Dr. T. (from Classroom 12) substituted for him. Dr. T. had confiscated Andre’s girlfriend Vanessa’s phone, and she was very upset that he would not agree to give it back to her after class. She begins working on an assignment from another class, and laughs loudly at

Dr. T., asserting her view of his disciplinary sanction as illegitimate, and potentially trying to preserve her dignity. “He can’t kick me out for laughing, I don’t care, kick me out. And he took my phone that was in my bag. That’s another one.” As her anger escalates, Andre becomes agitated as well. “I hate this school. I’m about to pop a motherfucker one of these days.” The teacher ignores him and walks over to confiscate a phone from another student who has it out. Andre says, “Big brother, big brother, he can do what he wants. These teachers gonna go to hell.” Vanessa notices that Andre’s anger is escalating and whispers to him, “You’re gonna get kicked out of school.”

Andre is now very worked up and begins a racist tirade against Dr. T., who wears a turban. His comments are audible to everyone in the room, and his peers cringe at commentary that violates norms related to diversity and inclusion in the school, as well as the usual calm and peaceful atmosphere of this classroom. “I’m gonna pick up the phone and dial 1-800-ISIS,” he repeats over and over. He begins impersonating Dr. T. with what he refers to as an Indian accent, and several students plead for him to stop. When he doesn’t, several of Andre’s peers say to Dr. T., “Yo, I don’t know him,” to distance themselves from his actions and express disapproval. In doing so, they risk facing victimization by him as well, but the rupture to the group norm and sense of predictability is great enough that students endure that risk to restore it.

Andre stands up, throws a crumpled paper across the room, and walks into the teacher’s personal space, continuing the Indian accent and asking if he “is the janitor in the school.” At this point, the norm violation is severe enough that Vanessa sticks up for the teacher she had viewed as illegitimate a moment before. “Yo, he’s a doctor, that’s so disrespectful.” Andre says, “Who said I’m respectful? I’m about to knock your top off,

rip off his turban. Indian ass.” The other students in the classroom continue to contort their faces with horrified looks, continuing to signal their disapproval and that Andre is violating the norms of the group. Throughout my observations this group stood out in Hughes as an outlier – the classroom with the least observed aggressive behavior, despite being a remedial track. Some students put their heads down on their desks, unable to look up—embodying the perception of Dr. T’s helplessness as he ignores the behavior. Andre continues mocking the teacher, repeating, “Burn that shit off,” over and over. Vanessa pleads for him to stop, saying “Andre, stop for real,” as tears roll down her face. She seems equally distressed by the impact on the teacher as well as the prospects of formal punishment and informal peer social exclusion potentially in store for her boyfriend.

The teacher ignores both the behavior and the discomfort of other students. He sits at Mr. Duncan’s desk with an unfazed grin on his face, and keeps the confiscated cell phones to turn over the office per policy. I follow up with him later to extend support and to personally reflect on my complex decision not to intervene in the incident as a researcher. I find out that the teacher will not write Andre up because his behavioral issues are well known with the school counselor. In terms of systems and structures, there is no way for Dr. T. to write Andre up because the referrals happen through the computer-based roster system, and teachers can only have access to their own class rosters to write up their own students. What I realized after the event unfolded is that Dr. T. may have hesitated to react because he may not have received any backup had he picked up the phone and asked for help in the form of an administrator or SRO. In this incident, Andre was not breaking any of the rules for which there was zero tolerance enforcement – he did not have a cell phone out, and he was not being insubordinate in

response to a teacher's directive. This situation contrasts with the previously described situation in Ms. K's class (Classroom 3) in which I observed Andre getting removed from a classroom while completing work quietly, because he was wearing headphones and refused to remove them since he felt he could not focus without them.

A teacher's decision to call and ask for backup reveals vulnerability if no one shows up to actually remove and address a student who is out of control. In a school with well-established and clearly communicated school-wide norms regarding threats or hate speech, there would have been a simple mechanism for removing the student and making sure the root causes of such behavior were addressed. In this situation, the students' behavioral issues were well documented, and the teacher felt that no positive outcome could come from struggling with the paperwork process to address this incident. The teacher also felt that the student had underlying issues that would not be solved through punishment, and preferred a more restorative approach than those available in Hughes. Still, while the inaction on the part of the teacher was meant to convey that he was not personally affected by the actions of the student, other students may have internalized the message that this type of behavior is normal or accepted within their school. At very least, it may have reinforced a sense of personal insecurity that comes with knowing that even in the face of hate speech and threats, there are not systems in place to protect *them* should they be the victim of similar behaviors.

#### *Adult Response Strategies: Ignoring, Selective Hearing, Coaching, Bargaining*

One common adult response to aggression in the two schools is for adults to ignore behavior or engage in what appears to be selective hearing. In Hilltop, a teacher might hear a student deliver an insult and hear an allegation of bullying, and yet ignore

the use of the “b-word” and only address the insult. Assuming the teacher hears the full interaction, this strategy enables him or her to avoid the mandated investigation process under the law by engaging in personal discretion regarding the incident’s qualification as bullying. If a student continues to use the word bullying, the reaction may include a discussion of why the behavior being reported did not constitute bullying.

An example of ignoring the “b-word” or use of selective hearing occurred one day in Mr. Brodzki’s Pre-Calculus Honors class in Hilltop (Classroom 26). A female student was talking about being allergic to every kind of bagel except “everything” bagels. A male student became very agitated. His face turns a bright shade of red and he clenches his fists as he interjects, “I actually am allergic to bagels, so I want to hit you so hard when you say that.” The female replies, “That’s bullying. You bullied me. Did anyone hear him bullying me?” Rather than acknowledge the interaction as bullying, the teacher ignores the female student and speaks directly to the male student, “You know, they actually make gluten free bagels too.” On this particular Friday, students are much more rambunctious than usual. A male student grabs another male by the shirt near his chest and talks quietly near his face after an argument about whether the Beatles’ song “Let it be” should be considered classical music. They push each other back and forth as they talk, looking steadily at the teacher, who is circulating the classroom to help students with questions. The teacher stares intently at his cell phone during the interaction and does not look up or intervene despite the likelihood that he detects the skirmish is occurring.

In Hughes, there are examples of classrooms where teachers not only ignore aggressive behavior, but coach students through use of warnings to modify their behaviors to be less visible. On a particular day in Mr. Said’s class (Classroom 4), several

9<sup>th</sup> grade male students talk loudly about girls they “wouldn’t fuck,” including some in the room that can hear them, and one student goes on in detail about how he “fucked his stepsister” who also attends the school. Rather than addressing the content of the conversation, or redirecting students to complete their work, Mr. Said responds by saying, “Learn to whisper.” Later, when students are continuing to talk about sexual situations, Mr. Said says, “Watch your language.” When a female student repeatedly grabs the private parts of a male classmate and screams, “He has herpes, he has herpes,” Mr. Said’s response is, “Stop saying herpes.”

Teachers subtly coach students to avoid sanctions in various ways. Mrs. Gardener (Classroom 6) coaches her students to avoid punishment by reinforcing positive expectations for behavior through reminders. Mrs. Gardener has behavioral expectations posted around the room, including “Be positive,” and “Be encouraging,” and she uses the practice of noticing and naming behaviors to reinforce positive behaviors and to attempt to redirect negative ones. For example, when talking about random drug testing policies as part of an assignment, Luisa yells out, “Everyone would fail, especially Cash,” and the teacher replies, “Be positive.” When a student who often bickers with Princess compliments her handwriting at the board, Mrs. Gardener points to the behavioral expectation posted on the wall and says, “Good! That was encouraging.” During the rest of the class, the same student continues loudly praising peers for positive reinforcement. Mrs. Gardener repeatedly responds with over the top excited praise, which seems to amuse the student, who typically gets little attention in the class even when he is engaging in ritualistic aggression towards another male student next to him. The teacher continues to remind Luisa to “Be positive” on occasions when she engages in ritualistic

verbal aggression in reaction to Cash's taunts. Interestingly, Mrs. Gardener can't easily point to any behavioral expectations to address physical aggression, so on the two occasions that she addresses it directly in class, she asks the male students who engaged in it, "Was that really necessary?" In one case, Cash replies assertively, "Yes," after jabbing another student between the ribs with the handle of a gavel being used by the class as a prop for an activity.

While often well intentioned, Ms. Gardener coaches victims of aggressive behavior in a way that at times invalidates their experiences. When physical aggression occurs in her classroom, rather than take a punitive approach, Mrs. Gardener operates from an assumption that these behaviors must have been an "accident." She suggests this possibility to the same two students who Mr. Said suggests were flirting. Jenny had been struck several times on the behind with a foam sword by Cash, who says he was "spanking" her, and that "she liked it." Jenny replies, "Mrs. Gardener, he just hit me in my butt with that. I don't like that. He can't do that. I should have smacked him." She is attempting to defuse the situation and preserve her dignity without engaging in aggression herself. The teacher replies, "Maybe it was an accident," which invalidates her experience. When the teacher looks away, Cash reaches out and smacks her on the behind with his open hand. Jenny says loudly, "No, Mrs. Gardener, he did not hit me by accident. He just did it again when you weren't looking." Ms. Gardener is helping another student, and Luisa realizes she needed to take matters into her own hands. She begins yelling at Cash, "Why you walking around hitting people with swords, sit the fuck down. Miss, you need to control your childish ass students. I'm going to get in trouble. Can I leave? Can I leave?"

In his Honors Pre-Algebra 2 class, Mr. Martinez often does not pursue disciplinary sanctions, even for the use of cell phones, but instead attempts to reason and bargain with students. His bargaining strategy is particularly pronounced with the four ritualistically aggressive and disruptive students in the back of the classroom. It is important to consider that these students are white, and are the only white students in the class. In the beginning of class, Mike takes Michelle's phone and starts going through messages and taunting her that her dad texted her. He takes her sweatshirt, swings it around, and throws it on the floor. Then the phone locks, and he repeatedly enters the wrong password so she will be locked out of her phone for an extended period of time. She wrestles the phone away from him and attempts to pull down his pants. He screams, "Her hands are in my pants, you see it?" seeming to appeal to the teacher for intervention. Mike grabs the phone of another white female student in the group, Jenna, and they begin to wrestle over her phone.

Mr. Martinez goes and sits down with the group, beginning to negotiate with them. "I don't know why you're the loudest group, you don't even have Jatinder in the group," he says, teasing an Asian Indian student who asks a lot of questions but is very compliant and focused. Jatinder looks down and looks embarrassed, and the teacher appears to laugh at him with the four white students. The teacher begins bargaining with the group, "There's a reason I let you sit back here, don't make me regret it." James and Mike continue arguing even as the teacher tries to encourage them to focus on their work. It is unclear what the reason is that he lets them sit in the back and engage in nonstop interpersonal aggression, but it seems that the teacher does not have punitive or disciplinary options at his disposal to coerce the students to leave one another alone. The

teacher does not cite the possibility of academic consequences, such as a reduction of points, which may have motivated the honors students to stop their behaviors. Instead, they continue unfazed by the teacher's intervention, and the teacher walks to the front of the room to put the homework assignment on the board.

The group's behaviors continue to escalate towards the end of the period. Mike slaps Michelle repeatedly and Jim makes fun of her "muffin top." Mike stabs Jenna in the arm with a pencil, drawing blood, and throws something at her head. She repeatedly calls out "Ow, that hurts!" and holds her arm and her head, but Mr. Martinez does not respond, and seems to be staring at the second hand of the clock, waiting for the bell. Mike pokes Michelle in the head repeatedly as she tries to work, and then Jenna and Michelle go after Mike, pinching him. Mike snatches Jenna's phone and they begin punching and hitting one another. He throws it onto the floor, and the screen shatters. She yells "Pussy!" at him across the room as he begins to run out the door. At the same moment the bell rings and he runs full speed out of the room into the hallway. On his way out, he drops the shattered phone in the garbage can. Jenna looks disappointed, but not surprised by the outcome. She walks out alone after waiting for other students to leave the room. Not only does this group fail to complete any work during the double-period class, but the unpredictability and intensity of their interactions are a distraction to other students working in groups to complete the assignment.

Students in all levels of classes at Hughes often appealed to adults for intervention and expressed a desire for stricter enforcement of rules related to interpersonal behavior.

Dmitri, a junior in Honors English (Classroom 17), explains:

**ARH:** Do you have any teachers that do a good job of keeping that [aggressive behavior] under control?

**Dmitri:** I think so. There are teachers who do keep it under control. They're very strict in a way, but they're also nice. They're strict in the sense that it helps – keeps the students in line. And – yeah.

**ARH:** How do they show that they're strict?

**Dmitri:** They – there're some teachers I know who'll set these guidelines that will – in the beginning of the year, they'll kick you out immediately if you don't do something – if you do something that's inappropriate, like inappropriate behavior, they'll automatically just kick you out, which I like because a lot of teachers just let it go. And they'll – they just keep yelling at them and yelling at them, and I don't think that shows good discipline. I think that they need to be sent away – put in some sort of punishment because I think it just leads students to just believe that they can just still act that way without a punishment.

Anika, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader in Hughes, describes a similar desire for intervention by Mr. Said, who she has for Mathematics in a different section than the one I observe. Although the student composition of the group is different, the behaviors and teacher responses described are similar to the class I observe with the same teacher:

That class. It's just, they don't listen in that class. They really don't, and I can't like- because they're always yelling and throwing stuff around the classroom, I can't really concentrate on what the teacher is like, teaching us, and he just really doesn't know how to control the classroom. So like, he'll be like "oh, sit down" or "don't do that", but they don't listen to him. And they'll do it a second time and he just won't... He'll just keep saying the same things over and over again. He won't send them out of the classroom. He won't call the principals up. Nothing.

The type of swift and certain disciplinary response Dmitri and Anika desire in their classes is not supported through the organizational policies and procedures at Hughes on a school-wide level. While some teachers, arguably those with tenure, feel empowered to enact discipline in the way they see fit, others may not have the power or authority to do so. The inability of teachers to rely on either punitive or restorative options to respond to peer interpersonal behaviors leads to situations in which students must defend one another or fend for themselves. Situations in which peers intervene in

aggressive interactions and assert behavioral norms, by appealing to the teacher to act or directly to peers, are described in the next section.

## PEER NORMS, STUDENT INTERVENTIONS, AND SANCTION AVOIDANCE

### *Invoking the “B-word”*

In Hilltop, it is the norm for teachers and students to respond immediately to violations of the norms and rules around aggressive behavior when they are observed. It is communicated regularly that any form of teasing is not permitted, whether playful or intentionally aggressive, precisely because of the difficulty in determining motive. Any mention of the “b-word,” bullying, is supposed to result in immediate action. Therefore, students use the “b-word” to informally shut down conflicts or end aggressive behavior, because they know staff will typically issue at least a warning if the word is invoked. In addition to the zero-tolerance element of the HIB law enforcement, students in Hilltop understand and articulate cultural norms around diversity and inclusion as they are applied to protected groups. Terms such as “faggot” and “retard,” which are very rarely observed being used; if they are, their use is discreet, and is generally regarded as taboo. Students indicated in interviews that they believed this language would be met with swift and certain sanctions, as well as informal sanctions such as peer disapproval. Most examples of observed aggressive behavior that occurred in classrooms were discreet, and while I was able to observe many of them, it is likely there were other behaviors that I failed to capture.

Overall, students in Hilltop were far less likely to report victimization of others in classrooms on the school-wide survey compared to Hughes, and this was corroborated in my observations. I observed little aggressive behavior occurring directly, and most of

what I did observe took place in lower-ability tracked classrooms. On rare occasions I observed prohibited behaviors, such as hitting or the use of inappropriate or demeaning language, in less supervised settings, such as the hallways. Even in the less visible and formally supervised settings, students are able to invoke the zero tolerance rules against aggressive behavior at Hilltop. In some cases, students attempted to avoid detection, but in others, they referenced key disciplinary terms to cease the interaction or invoke the threat of adult intervention. For example, in one case that occurred near the open door of a faculty meeting after school, two male students were hitting one another. One yelled out loudly, "He's a bully, he's a bully!" to which the other stopped in his tracks and replied, "Dude, that shit's serious in school." The conflict immediately ended, with the possibility of intervention looming as an effective deterrent.

In rare situations, I observe students using the "b-word" to regulate staff behaviors. Ed challenges Ms. Conti (Classroom 27) after she tells the story of how the school mascot came in to recruit people for a blood drive, and the teacher put on the Macarena and forced the student to dance, even though she told Ms. Conti she was embarrassed. Ed states, "You're evil." Ms. Conti replies, "Am I evil or do I just like to have fun sometimes?" Ed responds, "That's a bullying situation right there. Ms. Conti's a bully." The teacher's reply is, "I like to think I just made use of my power and authority." Another student points out that power is part of the definition of bullying, and the teacher ignores her and says it's time to start class. The situation is not brought up again when I am present, but by invoking the legal language, students have reflected the desired behavioral norms back onto the authority figure when her behavior pushes the boundaries of anti-bullying norms communicated strongly at the school level.

*Peer Interventions and Norm Policing*

Peer interventions both hold adults accountable for enforcing behavioral norms, and are effective in creating social pressure through the threat of informal social sanctions. As noted, peer interventions were seldom needed in Hilltop, where overt aggressive behaviors were typically addressed by teachers, and often the “b-word” was sufficient to shut down aggressive behavior. Yet on several occasions, especially in Hughes, students called out adults who were ignoring or not noticing potentially harmful behaviors, asking them if they see it, and if they are going to do something. Walking in the halls at Hughes, I witness a male student pick a female student up off the ground and swing her around, as she demanded to be released and repeatedly hit him. Another female says to the female teacher in front of me, “You’re not gonna do something?” The teacher half-heartedly says, “That’s enough,” and the male puts her down. It becomes clear that the female who asked the teacher to intervene does not know the female who was being picked up, as she asks, “Do you know him? Is that your boyfriend?” The female says it is not, and thanks the other student for saying something.

In Ms. Taylor’s class, the boundaries of tolerance for physical aggression are unclear, and students often make comments to focus the teacher’s attention on ritualistic and intentionally aggressive interactions that occur in the group. One day during a pretty routine conflict, Ms. Taylor sits back, intermittently reminding students they will “lose points” if they do not complete their work, but never asking students who are engaged in what appears to be intentionally harmful aggressive behavior to stop. Princess and Wayne have been going back and forth all class, and the content of their exchange escalates from profanity-laced insults, to threats, and finally hitting. Princess hits Wayne repeatedly in

the chest and laughs, saying “He has asthma,” over and over as he clutches his chest. “Would you stop?” Ms. Taylor says without looking up from a book. Wayne runs to a corner to recover his breath, then jumps over a desk, grabs and holds Princess in a headlock, hitting her in the head with his free hand repeatedly. Another male student in the class points out that I am taking notes, and says to Wayne, “I hope you know you’re going to jail.”

Wayne pretends to be worried, and he holds his hands on either side of the face and runs out of the classroom. Anika, a female student who typically does her work, pops up, closes the door, and tries to hold it shut so Wayne can’t reenter the classroom. The teacher says, “Let him back in so I don’t get in trouble.” Princess pleads with the teacher directly, “Ms. Taylor, just pimp slap them. Nobody gets in trouble in this school. You’re not doing anything. Let go of your ID [Ms. Taylor has a habit of twirling it nervously]. Do something.” Ms. Taylor looks up, but keeps a hold on her ID. “Why are you guys always so mean to each other?” Anika interjects, “You know some black people don’t get along with black people.” Ms. Taylor looks uncomfortable and says, “It has nothing to do with that. It has to do with being a respectful person. You guys just have to be nicer to one another. You guys don’t give me anything but a headache and I’m nice to you. You guys still didn’t finish this. You had like two weeks to do this...” The bell rings and Ms. Taylor continues muttering to herself, and seems aggravated that she was asked to intervene.

The need for a student to call the teacher out in order to get an intervention in this scenario illustrates the cultural tolerance, on the part of adults, of intentionally aggressive physical behavior within this school. The students understand that this behavior is not

playful and would not be tolerated in other settings, particularly under the anti-bullying law, thus referring to the prospect of being sent to jail. Yet the lack of intervention from adults suggests that these students do not deserve intervention, and that this behavior is inevitable and expected in this setting. The importance of behaving differently towards peers is not modeled or communicated. The teacher has framed the need to replace this behavior with “being nice” in terms of her own well-being (to get rid of her headache) and to complete the work she has assigned. She does not reference the benefit of completing the task to the students in the short or long term. Factors such as frustration or even implicit bias may cause her to believe that doing so will not make a difference.

I ask Princess if she’s okay in the hallway as we walk together from Ms. Taylor’s class to Mrs. Gardener’s class (Classroom 6) the next period, which I also observe. She says she wants to do well in school, but she can’t stand Ms. Taylor’s Enrichment class because the students in it “don’t care, so I act a fool too.” While there is frequent ritualistic aggression in Mrs. Gardener’s class mainly stemming from Cash (the same student observed in Mr. Said’s class), Princess rarely gets involved in the back and forth. She loves English and writing, and thinks Mrs. Gardener is a good teacher who cares about her class. Princess asks thoughtful questions, and ignores students who try to pull her in to aggressive exchanges. In the beginning of class Jenny is trying to get Mrs. Gardener to address a racist comment Cash made to a peer, and is frustrated because the teacher ignores her. Princess coaxes Jenny, “Just focus on your work. All you’ve got to do is focus on your work.” In this room, her behavior and her role is very different to that in Ms. Taylor’s class, demonstrating that she relies on a different set of tools from her “cultural toolkit” depending upon the group she is in.

It is unusual for Mrs. Gardener to ignore seriously aggressive behavior, particularly when it includes profanity, racist undertones, or threats of physical violence. On this particular day, many aggressive behaviors are happening simultaneously among dyads and groups in various points in the classroom. The students are taking a test that many have verbalized they are not prepared for, and these behaviors are possibly avoidance-related. It is not possible for Mrs. Gardener to react appropriately to it all, so she tries to keep going with the instructions, interspersing general comments like “Language,” and “Follow the rules.” Julian replies, “There’s no rules in here keeping me alive” after Cash threatens to throw him out the window. Princess gets up without permission and moves her seat next to me. “I just can’t focus in here,” she says. “I like Mrs. Gardener but I hate this class, to be honest with you.” Princess attempts to intervene by redirecting her peers, unlike Anika, who appealed to Ms. Taylor directly for intervention. Princess seems to sense that while Mrs. Gardener means well, she is overburdened with conflicts to defuse and has little support.

Noah, an 11<sup>th</sup> grade honors student in Hilltop, discusses the role that peers play in regulating behavioral norms in various settings. This regulation occurs primarily around speech and word choice, to reflect cultural attributes such as open-mindedness and inclusion. In Hilltop peer intervention is critical to regulating the interpersonal behaviors that students in Hilltop typically engage in discreetly or outside of adult view. He describes the following example:

I would say with homosexuality. I have a couple friends that are homosexual. I feel like we’re – there’s – no one really cares if you’re homosexual or not. We’re just – we’re very accepting. So I would say that one thing that never comes up is making fun of someone who’s homosexual because they’re homosexual. I just – first of all, that’s seen as, excuse my language, but a dick move. It’s – that just

doesn't happen. We – if you say that, you're looked at by a lot of people like, why do you say that? You're a terrible person. And they usually don't say it again. So it's a very – we're very accepting of them. And to some degree, we don't care if you're homosexual or you're trans or stuff like that. We just – we base you on your personality. And I think that's just because of how we've grown up. We're very – we're okay with it.

In addition to regulating one another's behaviors, student in both schools negotiated interactions with their peers in ways designed to subvert school rules and the legal structures, such as the HIB law, that back them.

#### *Avoiding Sanctions Off School Property and in the Digital Space*

While the rules against HIB are designed to prevent victimization, students in both Hughes and Hilltop are creative in finding ways to subvert them. In Hughes, students describe common displacement of physical fighting to locations off school property. In Hilltop interviews, respondents described how “redneck” students would arrange to fight at a local strip mall.” Students in both schools also described the displacement of aggressive interactions. The ever-present option for displacing aggressive behaviors from in-person to virtual settings via social media and communication technology motivates schools' concerns about cyberbullying. The HIB law in New Jersey requires that schools investigate any case of HIB regardless of location, meaning that students could not simply shift aggressive behaviors to an out-of-school or digital setting and avoid punishment. Instead, they would need to render their actions invisible (by using self-deleting apps like Snapchat) or anonymous (by using a fake profile or by not naming the target(s)). While the creative behavioral adaptations students describe potentially reduce the presence of aggressive behavior in the classroom, at times they cause persistent stress among students who feel they need to monitor their

online profiles, even during the school day. Students might learn about a challenge or physical fight scheduled for after school by text or social media. Beyond monitoring direct references or postings, students have to be vigilant about less direct exposure to online aggression – for example, a post on a peer’s profile referring to them only by initials or another obvious but not definite or searchable identifier.

For intentionally harmful online aggression, students’ aggressive behavior online was adapted to avoid sanctions, both formal and informal. Some of these strategies, applying to postings on social media, are referred to as “indirects,” “subbing,” “sub-Tweeting,” “sneak-diss,” or “throwing subs.” Students defined these behaviors as writing a specific insulting statement that obviously applies to one or more people, without naming the person or group explicitly. It was difficult for schools to investigate these cases, in which the targets were more or less clearly identified. Playful interactions that border on aggressive behavior also occurred in both schools. For example, in both schools, there is a ritual among students of posting very embarrassing photographs of friends on their birthdays. The ritual is viewed as a joke that should not cause offense, but at times, the posting went further to include comments and captions that could cross acceptable behavioral boundaries.

In both schools, students are confident that the rules around cyberbullying are legitimate and necessary because of the potential harm caused by some of the behaviors. The risks of suicide and self-harm are well communicated and understood in both settings. In Hilltop, students expressed confidence that these rules are reliably enforced. The percentages of students who reported personal cyber victimization on the SCUBA Survey were more similar across the two schools than the percentages reported in-person

forms of victimization, which were higher in Hughes compared to Hilltop. Students in Hilltop were more likely to explain the engagement in cyber forms of aggressive behavior as the displacement of in-person behaviors to avoid detection. At the same time, Hilltop students were careful regarding their activity on school-issued laptops, as there was a sense that surveillance of online activity was possible. Brianne, a 9<sup>th</sup> grade student, described extremely cautious behavior:

**ARH:** Do you ever use social media or communicate with other students using your Chromebook in school?

**Brianne:** No. I'm the type of person that barely looks anything up on Google on their Chromebook because I know they can search all of it.

**ARH:** The school can see how you use your –

**Brianne:** Yeah. The school can look at that type of stuff, I'm pretty sure. They can look at your search history and everything.

In interviews, students in both schools describe how victimization took place online because students did not want to be caught doing it in person. However, they recognize that the potential permanence of a posting, versus a fleeting interpersonal interaction, could lead to serious punishment. Michelle, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader at Hilltop, describes “exposing” which was defined by students in both schools as posting a nude photo of another student which they obtained in the context of a romantic relationship. “That's a crime to post a picture like that of somebody. I would have to probably get – I would tell my parents definitely, and they'd probably tell the police or something like that or the school so that they can deal with it.” Michelle references the involvement of law enforcement because this prospect is consistently reinforced school-wide. Students in both schools viewed assemblies from local prosecutor's offices, which send representatives to describe the potential criminal sanctions associated with cyber victimization. Hailey, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader in Hilltop, describes her classmates' awareness that

posts are never truly anonymous, even on supposedly anonymous apps, and can thus lead to police involvement:

**ARH:** Okay. So, are they anonymous or you know who they are?

**Hailey:** No. You pretty much on Snapchat and stuff you know who it is. On Snapchat and Instagram their user names right there. So, you know who it is. I mean I've known in past years there's been a social media site that was really popular that was called Ask.fm. And that you could be anonymous. I mean I never really got too into that. I had one for a little while but it just never really was so interesting to me. But I know of girls who have really gotten in bad places because of that. Because they were just so obsessed with what people were saying to them on that. And it could be totally anonymous. And they were really just getting pounded on. And they just couldn't stop. And I know of girls who have really gotten to bad places because of that. So, that's definitely been – but that's been something that it could be anonymous. But that – really no one goes on that anymore. It kind of got shut down...the school kind of got involved, and it really ended a little while ago, so.

**ARH:** How did the school get involved?

**Hailey:** I know people were – one girl specifically was really hurt by it. And she told her parents or she told the guidance counselor. It got to some adult who contacted the school or was part of the school. And they really kind of like – they really made it a point to the students. You guys can't be just going on this media and calling each other names or whatever. Because even if you think its anonymous, if it really gets too bad the police can trace it to you. This is all stuff really the company can trace to you. Even if you say it's anonymous, the company will have your name attached to it. So, they really kind of made a point of even though it says anonymous, people can figure out who it is. So, all in all, it just kind of became such a bad thing to go on it that no one really did anymore. I mean I didn't go on it very often but just from hearing other people talk about it and just being up at school. They were giving these meetings. People kind of just stopped after a while.

Students from Hughes cite similar online strategies to avoid detection, such as “subbing,” as well as witnessing instances of cyberbullying and exposing on various apps. However, students in Hughes who were interviewed were overall less certain regarding the ability of adults and police to intervene in these types of situations. Students describe feeling they need to take matters into their own hands to get harmful postings removed, including confronting the individuals posting negative content in

person to encourage them to stop the behavior. This perception may stem from the pattern of nonintervention for in-person forms of aggressive behaviors students described. If staff ignored behaviors that occurred in front of them, or were not equipped to address them, how would they be expected to do so in a digital setting? Students and families with less cultural capital may be less aware of the legal recourse under the HIB law they might have if evidence of online aggression is well documented. Further exploration of digital patterns of aggressive behavior are needed to draw conclusions about how school wide culture and classroom idiocultures shape students' online aggressive behaviors, in addition to those observed in person. In many ways, online aggressive behavior can be viewed as a behavioral adaptation used by some students to navigate the academic and social challenges of school, while adhering to dominant behavioral norms and avoiding formal and informal sanctions.

#### *Students' Varied Experiences in the Margins Between Policy and Practice*

The qualitative findings in this chapter focus on the behavioral and disciplinary norms at the school-wide and classroom levels, and how these shape students' exposure to aggressive behaviors. The qualitative data illustrate how students negotiate the potential rewards and consequences associated with aggressive behavior in various settings. Aggressive behaviors are observed less frequently in Hilltop, where there is a clear zero tolerance policy for behaviors falling under the definition of bullying. In Hughes, there is little enforcement associated with peer interpersonal behaviors falling short of a physical fight. However, in both schools, exposure to aggressive behavior varies between classrooms. In these small groups, adult practices and peer interventions shape differential behavioral expectations within classroom idiocultures. As highlighted

in the previous chapter, these idiocultures often vary according to the ability level of the group, the teacher, and the peer norms that emerge to affirm or challenge behavioral norms.

In conclusion, the cultural attributes shaped at the school-level and experienced locally within classroom idiocultures arguably play a stronger role in shaping a student's victimization experiences than his or her individual orientations or behaviors. Students observed in classrooms with both a stronger emphasis on academics as well as formal and informal supports to prevent aggressive behavior and develop prosocial competencies were less likely to experience overt victimization. This variation was particularly pronounced in Hughes, where high academic investment and prosocial supports were not in place school-wide. In the next chapter, I will use observation and interview data to explore the most localized elements of idioculture in individual classrooms, by examining the role of everyday classroom practices in shaping students' behaviors.

## Chapter 6: Everyday Practices in Classrooms

In this chapter, I describe how everyday practices at the classroom level are shaped by institutional, organizational, and group-level factors in mathematics and language arts classes that I observe. These subject areas lend themselves to different instructional styles and have varying outcomes or objectives. While influenced by organizational factors, distinct routines, rituals, customs and norms emerge in each group, which in turn uniquely shape the context for aggressive behavior. Everyday practices in classrooms are shaped by school-wide curricular norms and expectations for classroom and pedagogical practices, as well as temporal and spatial arrangements. At the classroom level, exposure to aggression is further influenced by the teacher's pedagogical style, such as tone and routines, behavior management and social control techniques (e.g., circulating to monitor students, use of sarcasm), curricular tracking, and peer interactional norms. Finally, I explore the ways idioculture forms and operates in classrooms as racialized, gendered, and classed spaces. The pressures of group life encourage all members to play a role in shaping "communal standards and expectations" and provide "spaces for the collective development" of "a set of meanings that individuals refer to in creating collective identity" (Fine et al. 2012:26). I compare examples and patterns of everyday practices in the two schools to explore how the teacher, curricular tracking, and peer interactional norms shape patterns of peer aggressive behavior, beginning with a consideration of how organizational culture shapes a teacher's classroom organization and pedagogical practices, followed by the roles of curricular tracking and peer cultures.

Teachers play a key role in establishing everyday practices during the opening days of the school year. In a popular text used to prepare teachers for the first days of school, McEwan (2006) describes the ways in which teachers coach students to meet the commonly mandated learning standards, which is arguably the main objective of any classroom group. McEwan (2006:2) argues that to be effective, teachers must be “on top of, tuned in, aware of, and in complete control of three critical facets of classroom life: 1) the management and organization of the classroom, 2) the engagement of students, and 3) the management of time.” The extent to which school leaders hire highly qualified teachers, provide them with necessary resources and supports, and monitor them for competence in these and other facets varies by school, in turn shaping not only academic outcomes, but behavioral outcomes as well.

### *Organizational Culture and Classroom Practices*

School-wide there are explicit and implicit norms for the ways in which all teachers should plan and deliver lessons and manage their classrooms. Expectations or requirements for instructional practices are communicated during faculty meetings, school-wide professional development sessions, and in the criteria emphasized for performance evaluations. In Hilltop, I observed frequent and explicit conversations in departmental and staff-wide meetings about the classroom components that administrators expect teachers to have in place. Many of the standard pedagogical components guiding instructional practices are communicated in relationship to the PARCC test and in the use of school-wide resources for preparation. For example, in Hilltop all mathematics and language arts teachers are expected to assign students homework using school-wide test-preparation software programs on school-issued

laptops. The programs differentiate content based on students' ability level and provide applied practice opportunities for the upcoming standardized test, while monitoring students' progress and providing data to teachers. Most teachers and students complain about this requirement and regard it as tedious. However, this task means that students always have something to work on if they finish an assignment early; they are expected to bank between 60-90 minutes of time in these online programs per week, which is tracked by the teacher. Having a predictable and accessible required task means that students spend less time socializing (whether in person or virtually) during down time in a classroom, and an engrained aspect of their daily routine is to turn to online exercises once they have finished other assignments. This lack of downtime prevents interactions between peers that could potentially lead to aggressive behaviors.

As I demonstrated earlier, school-wide pedagogical norms about the urgency and importance of daily learning objectives relate to the academic and aspirational culture in the building and the classroom. In Hilltop, where there is a school-wide culture of urgency, teachers are expected to begin class time with a warm up activity, and follow a clear and specific agenda that reflects a formal lesson plan tied to a specific objective. This expectation is reinforced in department meetings, during which teachers discuss their daily learning objectives in relationship to student growth objectives (SGOs), which are long-term academic goals for groups of students. SGOs became required of teachers beginning the year before I conducted my observations. In Hughes, although teachers are expected to set SGOs according to state-wide performance evaluation criteria, classes typically lack clearly articulated daily learning objectives.

Writing an objective and a clear agenda on the board communicates to students that the teacher has planned for the day and has imagined what is possible to accomplish within the time available. The extent to which an agenda is detailed and ambitious determines how students predict the use of their time and effort during class, and how much time will be available to engage in social objectives. I observe that newer or untenured teachers in both schools are more likely to consistently display a clear agenda. This may be because it was emphasized in recently completed teacher preparation programs. Or it could be because new teachers are under more scrutiny, and the objective and agenda may be a required “look for” on unannounced classroom observations. In Hilltop, just about every teacher consistently displays and verbally reinforces the objective and/or agenda for the day, regardless of tenure status. Even when teachers have to relocate from another classroom, they use the first few minutes of class to write the “Warm Up,” giving students a task to focus on, and then fill in the rest of the agenda while students are working.

In Hughes, school-wide standards for teaching are not as clearly in place and are seldom discussed by leadership or staff. There are only a handful of teachers I observe (4 of 17) who consistently display an agenda and use a warm-up activity. Three of the four are newer, recently trained teachers who also consistently communicate high expectations to students, and generally have well-planned, focused lessons and proactive classroom management techniques. These teachers represent all levels of curricular tracking, and are only some of the newer teachers I observed, suggesting that this practice is teacher-specific in Hughes. It is possible that some teachers in Hughes may be resistant to

changing pedagogical techniques, or that they may not be trained in or held accountable for adopting new practices within the school-wide culture.

### *School-wide Temporal Factors*

The length of class meetings are determined at the school level. Hilltop operates on a single-period, daily meeting schedule, which means that students engage with the same group for 43 minutes each day. In Hughes, most classes students meet every other day on a block schedule, for twice as long (86 minutes), but enrichment classes in Hughes meet daily for 43 minutes. The length of classes affect the complexity of daily objectives as well as the teacher's ability to implement opening and closing activities. When new content is introduced, the short class time limits the ability of teachers to reteach, model, or scaffold difficult content and still provide time for independent practice. As such, particularly in lower tracked classrooms, students became more frustrated, particularly in mathematics courses, if they did not initially grasp the content but were expected to perform quickly so that the teacher could check their understanding before leaving. This frustration could lead to avoidance-related negative behaviors, in some cases including aggressive interactions. In Hilltop, teachers' sense of urgency is at least in part fueled by the short class periods. At Hughes, often teachers do not plan content to fill all of the time in the period, leaving time for social interactions that could easily, depending on the idioculture of the group, turn into aggressive interactions. Policies restricting access to technology in Hughes mean that students did not have another avenue for filling time or avoiding the social stressors or behavioral triggers in the room. They could not start homework assignments requiring a computer or engage in skill-building practice or test preparation like students in Hilltop. In between tasks, or in

the rare event that students finished work early in Hilltop, in addition to test-preparation software, they were typically permitted to take a “brain break,” as it was called in the school, by playing online games. This minimized interpersonal interaction with peers in Hilltop, while similar unoccupied time in Hughes necessitated it.

Another school-wide issue that impacts practices in the classroom in both schools, but especially Hilltop, is the tight transition time between classes. Some teachers are not based in a home , which means the teacher must travel between classrooms in the large building during the same three-minute transition as students. In Hughes, tight transitions do not make as much as a difference if teachers do not provide objectives or warm up activities to signal students to get on task, but in Hilltop, students are accustomed to the norm of getting engaged in a warm up right, and teachers must write them on the board quickly upon arrival.

For Mrs. Olson’s Honors English class (Classroom 23) in Hilltop, the demands of moving from one classroom to another create one of the few opportunities for unsupervised aggressive exchanges, and some students take advantage and engage in ritualized playful or intentionally harmful interactions. Specifically, the gap leads to physical interactions and teasing among a few male students on each occasion that I observe<sup>10</sup>. On one occasion, I am positioned in the back of the classroom when one male student stands in the doorway, blocking another student trying to enter. The entering student throws his backpack on the floor, wraps his arms around the other student’s waist and tackles him. The student blocking the door yells, “You’re not smart enough to be in

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<sup>10</sup> It is important to consider that students may tone down their exchanges on the days I am present in the back of the classroom before the teacher arrives (if they notice my presence), and that days I am not present might feature additional examples of aggressive behavior during the entry ritual.

this class,” and repeatedly punches the other student. They both peer into the hallway, pick up their things, and move to their seats. They mouth threats at one another during the first few minutes of class, while Mrs. Olson turns her back to write the agenda on the board. Sometimes students talk quietly at this point, and the ones closer to the back at times will whisper aggressive or negative remarks which are out of earshot of the teacher, something that the two male students involved in the altercation do on this day. Once the warm-up is posted and Mrs. Olson is facing the class, students begin to work on it silently, and all students are on task. When Mrs. Olson is present, students in this class are so silent and disengaged from one another that she describes it as her quietest class, and asks me for advice to encourage the students to talk and interact with one another.

In both schools, the teachers who created a structured agenda referred back to it to summarize main ideas from the class, assess understanding through an exit slip or discussion, remind students about homework, and preview the objective of the next class. This end-of-period routine, or “closing” was more commonly observed in Hilltop despite the shorter class periods. Mrs. DiPalma (Classroom 20), the freshman Honors Geometry teacher in Hilltop, provides a detailed formal closing in the moments before the bell rings, often including an exit slip or a walk-through to check that all students are correctly solving problems. Almost no aggressive behavior is observed in her classroom, and this practice at the end of the period limits opportunities for students to do so while reinforcing content. However, also in Hilltop, freshman CP Algebra teacher, Ms. Schneider (Classroom 19), typically ends class a few minutes early, while students may be working on homework if they choose. She does not have a closing, but instead uses those last moments to record participation data, and quickly erase the work on the board,

putting up a new agenda and “warm up” activity for the next class coming in after a three-minute classroom transition period. During this time, her back is always turned.

Ms. Schneider seems to ignore behaviors that happen in unstructured times of class that she uses for administrative tasks and preparation. On most days, a group of male students move into the back of the classroom to engage in a range of aggressive interactions. One particular day, about seven male students have formed a tight circle in the back of the room and are whispering taunts to one another. One male student looks to see if Ms. Schneider’s back is turned before running around the outside of the circle punching each of the other students. A group of female students are doodling notes on at the chalkboard on the side wall, writing insults such as “slut” and “ho” and pushing one another out of the way to erase the phrases before others see or take a photo of them. A female student takes a photo of the male student standing in front of her and uses an app to draw an outline of an erect penis pointed toward his mouth. She shows it to him, shows it to others, then appears to upload it to a social media web site despite his loud verbal protests and attempts to snatch her phone.

Even when students become too loud or disruptive, Ms. Schneider typically does not address or acknowledge problematic behaviors beyond a dirty look. However, she reveals to me that she is aware they occur one day when I apologize after class for arriving late, and she replies that, “the last five minutes of class is when you’re gonna see what you want to see.” Ignoring the behaviors in her room could be conceived as an act of survival, given her tracking and preparation demands in the face of tight transitions. Alternatively, Ms. Schneider may believe that these behaviors are normal or typical among freshmen or among CP students. Regardless of the reason the behaviors are

permitted, they may have negative implications for students who experience anxiety as the unpredictability of the end of class nears, or whose engagement in aggressive interactions might affect their performance or focus in a subsequent class.

Few of the teachers observed used consistent end-of-class routines or closings. Mr. Schumacher, a 9<sup>th</sup> language arts teacher in Hilltop, provided closings for his Focus (Classroom 21) and CP (Classroom 22) students, but seemed to spend longer summarizing big ideas and previewing future lessons for his Focus students in order to better support their understanding and level of engagement. He would spend time praising the Focus students on their performance and behavior to build their confidence, filling the time until the bell rings with enthusiastic and detailed comments about the work they completed. During Mr. Schumacher's extended leave, students would line up near the door as early as ten minutes before the bell, and several would engage in aggressive behavior during the time that would have been occupied by his long closing. In Hughes, Ms. Scott (Classroom 15) was one of the few teachers who used a formal end-of-class routine as part of her highly structured daily agenda. While some aggressive interactions took place during group work sessions, students were attentive in the moments at the end of the period when she would tie everything together.

### *School-wide Spatial and Material Factors*

The physical and spatial arrangements in the classroom channel the movements and possibilities of actors (Fine 2012; Goffman 1974). They shape a classroom's idioculture and are also a reflection of it. The adaptability of classroom conditions varies by school, and classroom teachers are limited by physical conditions and resources. Specifically, the nature of furniture (e.g., whether it can be moved or modified), the

quality of the walls and windows, and whether the room has adequate heating and cooling are some examples of physical conditions that impact the group's mood and ability to focus. Teachers are subject to school-wide expectations for the upkeep of the room, organization of materials, and decoration of wall space. For example, student work products and vocabulary walls are standard "look fors" on walk through evaluations. Student work can also be a visual reminder of variation in student performance, and can be a motivation for teasing.

In Hilltop, teachers are expected to decorate the window portion of the classroom door to limit sight into and out of the room. This rule is in place for security reasons, so that in the event of an active shooter, an assailant in the hallway cannot clearly view the location of students in a locked down classroom. This practice not only minimizes distractions to students in class, but it also visually and symbolically restricts the interaction space. Some students describe it as fostering a claustrophobic feeling, particularly in classrooms that also do not have windows to outside, such as Mr. Anderson's. Bethanny, a student in Mr. Anderson's Integrated Algebra class (Classroom 24), often attributes her loud verbal and physical outbursts towards two male students in the room to her feeling of being "trapped in a box" near them as they tease and touch her.

In Hughes, the opposite rule is in effect regarding the visibility into doorways. Teachers are required to leave the window on their classroom door clear. This enables administrators to monitor students and staff, to ensure instruction is taking place, but primarily facilitates the enforcement of rules (e.g., the ban on cellphones, headphones, and hoodies) through quick visual inspection. I observed administrators circulating in the hallway randomly opening classroom doors and pulling out offending students for

sanctioning mid-lesson. This type of policing disrupts the lesson and distracts the rest of the students while their peer is being punished. Often, the visibility of the reprimand to peers leads the student to defy authority in front of his or her peers, or risk being teased by them on return. Having an open window to the hallway provides numerous opportunities for distractions and even aggressive interactions, as it is customary for students in the hallway to give the middle finger to students in a classroom. The window also provides opportunities for peers to signal for a meeting in the bathroom or hallway during class time.

The setup of furniture in a classroom creates or forecloses opportunities for students to engage in peer interactions, whether they are focused on collaboration, aggression, or some other purpose. While a variety of seating possibilities exist for different instructional purposes, most of the classrooms I observed contained moveable L-shaped desks with attached seats, arranged in rows. Most of the desks are oriented for right handed students, which causes conflict if there is not sufficient seating for left-handed learners. In Hilltop, there are a number of classrooms with separate desks and chairs, and the detached chairs accommodate students tipping backwards, which at times causes conflict when a student “tips” into another student’s space. Moveable desks mean that students can create physical distance from others when needed, but the class size meant that in some classrooms the ability to move away from an antagonistic peer (voluntary or at the teacher’s direction) is more constrained. In most classes, the rows of desks are packed so that the back of one student’s chair touches or nearly touches the front of the desk of the student behind. This proximity often leads to discreet poking, hair

pulling, whispering, and other forms of aggressive behavior initiated from the student behind.

In some courses, teachers ask students to move their desks into clusters to facilitate group work. Most students seem to enjoy the opportunity to collaborate with peers, although in classes in both schools I noted that at least one or two students per class opt to work alone. Ethan, a Hughes 9<sup>th</sup> grader in honors English, is accustomed to group work in English class and is disappointed that the instructional practices and furniture configuration in his CP mathematics class do not provide the same experience:

When I get in there, like I said before, I don't – I kind of get a little bit disappointed at the sort of ability or the motivation of how people are learning... we're in rows so rows kind of either further damages it, especially when it comes to mathematics because mathematics is all about how you articulate how you solve and how you sort of comprehend this. If you have a group, if you're able to talk to more than one person, then you're – sort of collaborate, you're able to spread ideas, spread tactics and stuff like that. That sort of like helps you think, help you understand things. And I'd say that would be a more productive class. That's the same exact thing that happened with every other year. This year in math, we are in rows. We don't talk to each other much on how to do things. If someone asks me a question, however, I answer them. I help them. I detail.

In most classrooms I observe in both schools, students are seated in rows, but teachers vary in their flexibility to rearrange the furniture to better facilitate group work or provide students with adequate personal space in order to make interpersonal conflict less likely. The process of moving furniture at times leads to bumping or jostling that can cause a disagreement.

Beyond the furniture configurations, teachers make aesthetic choices about classroom décor, and may solicit students' input. Typically, the teacher's attention to details in the physical space and efforts to bring in materials to make the space more homey (e.g., window curtains, live plants, bean bag chairs) correspond directly to their

attention to other aspects of classroom management and their expectations for students' success. Access to technology in physical classroom spaces also shapes idioculture, impacting the teacher's ability to engage students and appeal to different learning modalities. In Hilltop, most teachers have the ability to project content from a computer screen, while students have access to personal computers and their cell phones. In Hughes, some teachers have access to computer-based projection systems while others have to use transparencies. Additionally, teachers require resources, particularly training and materials, to be able to differentiate instruction and use technology to appeal to various learning modalities. Students I interviewed in both schools indicated that teachers' efforts to make the content engaging, interesting, and accessible to all students have an impact on the tone of the classroom and the group's engagement. For example, Andre, a Hughes 9<sup>th</sup> grader in Enrichment English (Classroom 5) describes:

Mr. Duncan makes it really nice to learn things and makes it easier for us unlike most teachers. He – the way he does the PowerPoints. Most teachers don't do PowerPoint. They'll just sit there and tell you about it. But the way he finds videos online, songs to find out. It'd be like, okay, now I get it. Now you go listen to music and be like, oh, this is what I learned in Duncan's class. It's just so easy.

Arguably, to some degree the wide variation in Andre's behavior in other classes compared to Mr. Duncan's is shaped by his preference for Mr. Duncan's style of content and delivery, which he finds engaging. Joshua, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader in CP English in Hilltop, similarly describes a preference for varied instructional techniques which impacts the overall orientation of the class.

**Joshua:** English is probably my favorite class. I have a really good teacher. She's probably one of the best English teachers I've had. It's really relaxed. We get a lot of work done, and she's really good at explaining it. I know that some

English classes, they can be kind of dry, but I like mine because the teacher kind of teaches it like history class where it's like a lecture. Which – it's not as bulky as history, obviously, because it's English, but it's easier to understand and she always makes it easier. She relates it to everyday life. We'll do different activities. We'll watch things on the projector. So I like that class.

**ARH:** How do your classmates get along in that class, would you say?

**Joshua:** We get along really well. It's a good group of kids. We're all really serious about the work that we do. It's a really small class. It's probably like 15 students. There's never any talking, honestly. We've never gotten yelled at or even told to stop talking.

Joshua highlights that the teacher's instructional style, as enabled by local resources, incorporates a multimedia approach which makes it easier to grasp content, and engages students. This engagement is arguably a key factor in his description of an atmosphere in which students stay on task and get along socially.

Temporal-spatial factors also play a role in determining who dominates the verbal space of the classroom, which in turn plays a role in the development of its idioculture (Nunn 2011). In Hughes, the block schedule generally forces most teachers to utilize a variety of instructional methods and activities, including group work and discussions (or be forced to lecture for 86 minutes or give 30 minutes of free time, as in the case of Mrs. Kelley), whereas in Hilltop, teachers at all levels struggled to find opportunities for meaningful in-class group work because of the short instructional period. Instead, they often engage in direct instruction, guided practice, and limited independent practice within the 43 minutes scheduled, with few opportunities for open discussions or group work. To address this, teachers assign online forum postings or group projects using collaborative online tools to facilitate students' interactions. In some cases, teachers use online platforms which enable students to compete against each other in answering questions. This same competitiveness, however, did instigate conflicts among students who were frustrated or who wanted to win at any cost. Next I discuss how the allocation

of verbal space also varies according to curricular track and common pedagogical techniques.

*Curricular Tracking and Pedagogical Practices*

Significant variation was observed in teacher's everyday pedagogical practices by tracking, which in turn were related to differential patterns of aggressive behavior. The more rigorous levels of a course are most likely to follow structured time usage in both schools. The literature on curriculum tracks suggests that higher tracks are typically structured to be more discussion-oriented and collaborative, while lower tracks are more managed and teacher-centric in terms of content (Metz 1978; Nunn 2011; Oakes 1985). In Hilltop, a good juxtaposition is Ms. DiPalma's Honors Geometry for freshmen and Ms. Schneider's Algebra CP class. Ms. DiPalma engages students in group work and project-based learning, along with discussions of geometric proofs, on a daily basis. Her class is structured from start to finish, with no free time for socialization outside of group problem-solving. She uses rapid pacing, and timers signal the end of each carefully planned activity. She circulates through the classroom, and her proximity ensures that students' conversations rarely diverge from the task at hand. In this way she diverges from the typical emphasis on independent work, by incorporating group work regularly, but monitoring it in a way that effectively prevents aggression. A student in the class named Hailey explains:

**ARH:** So, you said in every class pretty much, there's certain kids that have tension between each other. As you know, I've been visiting with your Geometry class. And so, I'm wondering is that a class where you would say there's a lot of tension between students?

**Hailey:** I would say not in that class. Specifically, because pretty much,

everyone across the board in that class is pretty much quiet, does their work, does what they need to do. And once the class is over, they go. In that class, there's not too much interaction between the students. I think Mrs. DiPalma really does keep us doing what we need to do. And keeps the activities coming. Which I actually like that. I think her class is really good. But that's actually one of my classes I would say that it's not as prominent in.

In comparison, Ms. Schneider teaches Algebra 1 CP from the front of the room, and does not engage students in purposeful group work. In the opening and closing moments of class, students engage in aggressive behaviors, particularly as they line up in the back of the room before the end of the period. Whereas Ms. DiPalma grades for students' effort in learning material, in particular by allowing "test revisions" so that students can correct and learn from mistakes on previous exams, Ms. Schneider grades for participation to ensure student engagement.

Ms. Schneider's practice of forcing volunteerism by tracking participation for each student in turn leads to situations where more introverted students are routinely called out and teased by their peers. A trait they possess that is generally devalued in an educational setting, introversion, is penalized and placed in the focus of classmates. One day, Ms. Schneider asks for a volunteer to complete a problem at the board. A few students raise their hands immediately, those who typically volunteer. She pauses and asks for students who didn't participate yet this week. "How about Scott?" a male student says, pointing at him and laughing. Scott replies, "I already went. Stop making fun of me." The teacher ignores the interaction and allows one of the regular participants to complete the problem. The male student who called Scott out repeatedly whispers, in a whiny voice "I already went..." "I already went...to the bathroom...in my pants." Scott's face grows red and he presses down hard on his pencil while working, until the point cracks. Eventually, the other student transitions into copying notes and Scott appears to

relax, but stands far away from Brian when he lines up at the end of class in the back of the room. Targeting Scott becomes ritualized, and I observe similar exchanges throughout the year. He appears to be generally uncomfortable in this classroom, yet in English (where I also observe him) he is at ease and participates easily, which indicates he may be struggling with the content and/or peer dynamics in mathematics.

Again, the practice of recording participation points for every student who speaks requires that Ms. Schneider takes the last few minutes of class to record points in online software, and that she has her back turned to the class while doing so. Students pack up with one or two minutes left and several male students make a circle to talk in the back of the room. On a different day, Scott grabs Brian's new notebook and throws it on the floor. "You pay for it, you faggot," Brian responds quietly. Scott student calls him a "pussy," to which he replies with a common retort in Hilltop, "wow, you're cool." These male students develop another daily ritual to fill the unstructured time, which is picking on a student who is Jewish and who volunteers "too often." One male student says to the Jewish student, "That's because you're Jewish," as he moves his lunch money from his pocket into his backpack. Another male reaches over and squeezes his nose, "I don't know, this nose is pretty small." A third male student says, "He's a Jew, shoot him." The student who is being targeted sometimes smirks or giggles but never responds, nor do any of the other males in the group of five or six that typically assembles when the teacher is entering points at the end of class. Other students are working on their homework, and everyone rushes out when the bell rings to move on to their next class. In this classroom, less supervised, informal group work also provides a context for aggressive behaviors to quietly unfold. Without circulating through the room, and again being engaged in data

entry around participation points, Ms. Schneider appears not to notice these behaviors. Students are expected to be talking while starting their homework at the end of class, so the aggressive interactions I witness are masked.

In Mr. Anderson's Integrated Algebra class in Hilltop (the lowest level for juniors outside of a resource setting), he calls on students for answers, even though the students in this classroom might be hesitant to participate. Students who get the problem wrong are often mocked or made fun of by others. A group of males on the far right, toward the back of the room, engages in ritualistic banter and whispering. They typically tease a member of their small group who is called on often by the teacher because he appears to be sleepy. In the same teacher's Algebra 2 CP course, Mr. Anderson asks for volunteers first, and typically only calls on students who appear to be off task. In this class, he gives students multiple opportunities to answer the question if they get it wrong at first, which positions error as a natural aspect of the learning process. It is important to note that in the lower level class, at least one student has an individualized education plan (IEP) for a learning disability. This student's IEP requires a paraprofessional, called the "in-class support teacher" in Hilltop, who supports all students in the class and also plays a role in defusing conflicts and modeling and reinforcing prosocial skills such as self-control. All of the Focus courses I observe in Hilltop have at least one in-class support teacher or paraprofessional present, which impacts the everyday practices of the group in many ways, including increased monitoring and academic support. In Hughes, I do not witness any students who have paraprofessionals or in-class support teachers, which likely highlights a gap in resources rather than needs.

In Hilltop, Ms. Conti's pedagogical technique in her Focus (Classroom 27) and CP (Classroom 28) English classes often involves long and tangential personal stories. This tradition developed in the beginning of the school year, as she invited students to also share off-topic details and opinions. These conversations have the propensity to spark conflict when students' comments are similarly provocative to those modeled by the teacher. However, the length, detail, and general inappropriateness of Ms. Conti's stories are generally greater in the Focus class compared to the CP class, which diverts more learning time. Her teaching style is adopted by the student teacher she is supervising from the local community college, Ms. Marcuzo. On a Friday when Ms. Marcuzo has her first opportunity to take over the class, five students are late, but she ignores them, as Ms. Conti has done all year. She begins a lesson on foreshadowing for the Focus class by telling a 25-minute story (during a 43 minute period) about a friend's boyfriend who has made an advance on her. A male student marks the end of the drawn-out story by saying sarcastically, "And that, class, is the definition of foreshadowing." She adds the detail that the boyfriend is in the military, which caused her fear in fighting his advances, to which a female student replies, "people in the military are all psychotic." This comment offends several students in the room from military families or with military aspirations. There is no clear purpose or assignment following the story, and some students begin milling around the room. Two male students are wrestling in the back and throwing crumpled up papers at one another after a story-inspired argument about whether Army or Navy is better. Ms. Marcuzo does not repeat the same story in the CP class, even though they are reading the same text and covering the same content. Instead, she presents the content in a more urgent and professional manner. Throughout

the year, she mirrors Ms. Conti in adapting her storytelling custom according to the level of the course. The unstructured discussion her commentary evoked for the Focus class creates opportunities for aggressive interactions, and highlights the reproduction of inequality that occurs when pedagogical techniques vary by classroom ability level. This, in turn, negatively impacts learning opportunities for students who may already be facing learning difficulties or differences.

Dr. T's Pre-Calculus Honors class operates similarly to a higher-tracked class in Hilltop, and is an outlier in Hughes. Most of the students I interview there also describe similar idiocultures and related practices across their honors courses, which foster less aggressive behavior. Yet in some honors classes I observed in Hughes, the teaching style reflects the school-wide propensity to have less structured, objective-driven classes.

#### *Teaching Style and Structured Action*

In Ms. Lewis' Honors English 1 (Classroom 8), two male students are constantly punching, teasing, swiping, and getting in one another's faces. On one particularly chaotic afternoon, Ricky and KJ alternate between escalating physical behaviors and asking questions about their grades. Ms. Lewis is going over notes on a Powerpoint, ignoring the interactions among these two students and talking over them. Ricky yells out, "Miss, miss, miss, miss," until Ms. Lewis turns around and looks at the pair. "You're so slow, he could have killed me by now. When you turn around, he's gonna hit me." She rolls her eyes and turns back around, and KJ punches him hard in the arm and slams his face into the desk. Other students become aggravated because the teacher talks faster and changes the slides, and the altercation has caused them to miss the notes. The teacher

begins screaming at the whole class, “You are so bad and should be embarrassed to be an honors class!” Then, Ricky and KJ begin going back and forth comparing their grades.

The teacher stops lecturing and retreats to her desk, looking resigned. She says, “Please stay in your seats until the bell rings.” Immediately KJ jumps up and grabs Ricky’s head, “he’s got a bug right here.” Ricky begins wrestling with an aggravated female student. He stops to look at his grades on his phone, and then asks the teacher why he got a zero for a journal entry. Before she can answer, he pulls the student, who has also gotten up, back into her chair, and pushes another female student next to her off of her chair. She yells, “suck mine!” and the bell rings. The behaviors in this group are more persistent and disruptive than in both CP English classes I observe in the same school. There are fewer efforts by the teacher to invest students in what they are covering by making it seem interesting or connecting it with skills they will need for success beyond the classroom. The honors students in this group are motivated by grades, but grades are not connected to behavior in the classroom. They are still able to earn high grades while enacting ritualistic aggressive exchanges.

Clementine, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader in Ms. Lewis’ class, describes how the class’ lack of structure leads to out-of-character behavior for her and her peers:

I’m embarrassed that you have to see me in that classroom, because I am, I think, The most rowdiest in there. I think, I love English, I just don’t like the way she teaches... her teaching methods, I think because, I’m not sure how long she’s been teaching but, I just, I don’t like the way she teaches. She can teach a lesson and she teaches it well, but there isn’t a lot of structure in that classroom, and I feel like part of that is her fault.

When I follow up about the general behavior in the class, which includes a range of playful and intentionally aggressive interactions each meeting, Clementine explains that,

Because it is an honors class, we definitely should have more control over ourselves, but sometimes I feel like adults can be very immature as well, and sometimes I feel like that's what happens...the whole classroom, I feel like, more structure, if there was more structure it wouldn't be like that. Knowing these people, and knowing them from outside, they know when to be quiet and what's right and what's wrong... That part of the classroom where you used to sit, those group of people have known each other for a long time. I think they've grown to have some comfortability, and I think they're also very loud because there isn't a lot of structure set in the classroom. None of them are bad people, I just wonder if they're on the right path to what they deserve.... I really like the people in there when they aren't doing bad things, like immature things. The classroom has a lot of potential, and there are days when there will be less screaming, more discussion, more intellectual opinions. Lately it's just been a lot of yelling and I feel like one of my favorite classes, because of the lack of structure, has been my least favorite.

Clementine suggests that the class's behavior is driven by a combination of Ms. Lewis' teaching methods and personality, and that her peers have the "cultural toolkit" to behave differently in other settings. She hints at her perception of the teacher's "immature" behavior by providing several examples when Ms. Lewis was sarcastic or targeted generally compliant students for harsh punishment, while overlooking the groups that predictably engage in ritualistic aggression during every class meeting. As an honors student, Clementine articulates a desire for classrooms with less disorder and interpersonal aggression, in order to facilitate learning and intellectual discussion. Her English class falls short, and in Hughes, Clementine does not have the option to take an honors math class as it is not offered for freshman. She has skipped freshman level math to be in a sophomore level class, but it too does not offer an honors section, and she faces similar behaviors there. Clementine does experience classrooms where students engage in more positive interactions in her arts electives, in which she describes peers as being motivated by similar objectives and interests.

Danisha, an honors student in Hughes, described additional ways in which teaching style structured students' actions:

**ARH:** How does the teacher teach differently that makes it feel more serious?

**Danisha:** I don't know. I guess different activities, but then again, last year, we did activities, but it was playful activities. And this year, it's just more serious. There's no room for playing around basically because it's junior year.

**ARH:** What are some things that you don't like about your school?

**Danisha:** The teachers who do not teach correctly. I wouldn't say – they're not bad people, but they're not good at their job – they're not good at teaching. Because most of it – I know for a certain teacher – I'm not gonna say who, but they get their work off of Google or whatever, and they just read off the slides and not say it – they don't actually teach.

**ARH:** Okay. Is there anything else that you don't like about their teaching style – those particular teachers?

**Danisha:** The fact that – I don't know why – I guess, they don't have time to actually create their own work or give effort to actually get the class to pay attention and not do bad stuff. But I would say it's all up to the students, because depending on what students they are, any student can interrupt any class and any student – no matter honors or regular class, have a choice to pay attention or not to. If you focus on paying attention, you could pay attention. Like me, I don't get distracted easily, I just focus on what the teacher is saying – so.

In describing teachers taking their lessons, or work, right from an online source she indicates that teachers may model a poor orientation towards work (e.g., copying, doing the minimum) and fail to engage students. Their lack of effort, as she describes, extends to the regulation of student behaviors. Instructional practices and teachers' informal behavior management styles comprise the teacher's tone. The teacher's tone sets the stage for student action, and is described in the next section along with implications for the overall classroom context.

### *Teacher Tone and Social Control Norms*

Norms regarding the group's tone develop as part of the specific class's idioculture, impacting norms of interpersonal behavior among students. In many cases

the teacher's tone plays a key role, although the tone may vary for the same teacher in different groups from encouraging to hostile. In both schools, teachers I observe are just about split between being generally sarcastic (often interpreted by students interviewed as "passive aggressive" for female teachers and "funny" or "goofy" for male teachers) and generally encouraging (described as "nice teachers"). Since formal discipline is used very little in the classrooms, teacher sarcasm and teasing is sometime used as informal social control. In some cases the focus of joking or sarcasm varied slightly according to ability level, even for the same teacher. For example, Mr. Brodzki is always sarcastic, but I observe him engage in a custom of directly teasing students in his Focus-level Algebra 1 class in Hilltop (Classroom 18), whereas in his Honors-level Pre-Calculus class (Classroom 26) he is typically sarcastic in reference to general topics, rather than specific students, and uses dry humor and more clever comments.

As an example, one day Mr. Brodzki says to his in-class support teacher, "You awake, Mrs. Fisher? You're starting to look like Scone!" as a way to tease Scone for having his head down and correct the behavior. Scone, a student who is frequently subject to physical and verbal aggressive behavior in this classroom, smirks, but appears to be embarrassed by the teacher's negative attention and asks to use the restroom. Mrs. Fisher adopts the teacher's style in this classroom as well. One day she tells Mr. Brodzki that one of the students is out with a concussion, and a male student yells out, "I once had a concussion." Following the style of the teacher, the in-class support teacher responds, "Good, do you want another one?" Mr. Brodzki also teases a specific student in his Focus Algebra 1 class, Becca, who is frequently absent for medical and/or psychological issues which she discloses to her peers. When he calls on Becca to work out a problem, she

explains it is too difficult and she doesn't understand it. "Well, why don't you come to school once in a while," he says. He then calls a student with her head down "Aurora Rose" and a few male students snicker and say, "sounds like a stripper name." The teacher lets them know that he is making a "Sleeping Beauty" reference, but one of the students has already created a Snapchat story about their peer's "stripper name," and the whispered nickname "stripper" sticks for some time. When Mr. Brodzki implores Becca to do her homework during the remaining time in class, she replies jokingly, "I'm spending this time thinking of ways not to do the homework." He responds, "Instead of Brewer, your last name should be Slacker. Burn!" She smirks and looks down. Rather than starting her work, his comment incites her to target another student who is laughing at the teacher's joke. "Then your last name should be fart-hyphen-loser." The renaming exercise cycles through several pairs or groups of students that ritualistically tease or intentionally harm one another, causing a more widespread distraction.

Later, I ask Mr. Brodzki about what techniques he thinks works with students in the Focus class, and he states, "If you're a little bit sarcastic with them, they're good." Mr. Brodzki views his technique in the lower tracked class as a behavior management strategy, possibly in the absence of the level of engagement demonstrated in higher tracked groups. It is possible that many students attempt to retain a low profile to avoid being the subject of teasing or sarcasm, resulting in a more orderly class. However, the modeling of behavior and tone set through these interactions may create a stressful atmosphere for students who are already struggling in the subject.

In Honors Pre-Calculus, Mr. Brodzki jokes that a very quiet high achieving student was absent because "maybe she was taking crack?" which her peers find

humorous. More than one student comments quietly that they plan to tweet the teacher's quote after class, which could lead a classroom joke to cause issues for the student in a digital setting. Mr. Brodzki rarely teases students in the honors class directly. At times he playfully chides students for being too concerned with their grades and not having any fun. Once, Mr. Brodzki teases me in this class for being "so quiet and so short" that he had no idea I was present. I realize that in doing so he is trying to initiate me and fully involve me in the life of the group as a member. Yet in doing so, he models for students a type of playful aggressive interaction that despite intention, may have the potential to harm the recipient. Students who wish to gain his approval tend to engage in similar behaviors to those he models, with potential consequences for the students about which the jokes are made. However, in the honors class Mr. Brodzki typically engages in clever, general comments or plays-on-words rather than focusing on one particular student as he does in the Focus setting.

Ms. Conti also models a negative interpersonal tone by talking about other students or classes with her CP students. She refers to the Focus group, who frustrated her earlier in the day, and tells the following story. "Once every few years, I embarrass myself by how I have to yell at a student. It's a challenge to read *Great Gatsby* with my Focus students, especially one girl – you know who I mean. She was running around the room yelling the end of the story, and I was like, *are you stupid?* Something happens in my brain, like if you think of the movie *Gladiator*, I turn into the last man standing." The CP students she tells the story to react with unhappy faces and reject her actions, responding, "That was so mean," and "That's not okay" in reference to the teacher's behavior. The class then plays a game together, and a number of students mimic what the

teacher has just done, repeating in a similar intonation, “Are you stupid?” if they get the wrong answer. She does not intervene but instead praises students for their competitive nature. Ms. Conti also appears to mock Focus students directly. She says at the beginning of one class, “Yesterday I did most of the work. It’s time for you to use your brain, if it works, and your fingertips.” During a read aloud she mouths the words of a recording of a British male accent reading the *Great Gatsby*, then repeatedly challenges students to make fun of her as an engagement technique. “Are you awake? You are Melody, so make fun of me as much as you want. You like to make fun of people.”

Ms. Conti also sets the tone for aggression by mocking the work products of students in the Focus section of her English class with her CP students. It is possible her motivation in doing so is to solidify the boundaries and identity of the CP group and build their esteem to do well, yet she does so through setting a negative example. “My core class wrote stories about how I hurt my foot. I’m gonna read them and you pick the best.” She reads, giggling, stopping sporadically to intersperse degrading comments such as, “Whatever that sentence meant.” A student who is still working from the prior class meeting finishes her paper and hands it in, indicating that she hopes Ms. Conti won’t read it since they’ll know it was hers. The teacher agrees that she won’t read it, but then starts to read it aloud as soon as the student leaves the room, stopping to highlight errors or unclear elements. The story reads as a journal entry, and is about the character’s (based on the teacher’s) mother and father leaving, sister dying, becoming a drunk, and not wanting to actually be a teacher. A male student jokes, “Did she just write her own life?” and the class laughs, including the teacher. “High school kids are so weird,” she says. “You all are.” She then has the current class make up their own stories about how she

hurt her foot, going line by line with each student. The tone in the room carries over from the previous exercise and students tease one another throughout the period as they make up a story together. The teasing takes students so off topic that the teacher gives up and allows them to play a game called “7 Up” for the rest of the class. The game involves putting one’s head down on the desk, without peeking, while seven people push down the upward facing thumb of seven students, who guess who of the seven in the front selected them. This game lends itself to rough physical contact at times, as some students would slam down the thumb of the student they selected. Ms. Conti notes that watching high school students play the game like this “is amusing” to her. It is possible that Ms. Conti’s comments represent boundary work to solidify her rapport with the class, which may be lacking due to her negative tone.

A teacher’s efforts to engage in students’ joking rituals could unintentionally promote idiocultural norms supporting aggressive behavior. Ms. Schneider attempts to assign a student to a new seat, and he argues that he doesn’t want to sit in the “dark corner.” Without understanding what was meant by the comment, the teacher integrates the comment “dark corner” throughout the class period, which leads to a great deal of taunting and laughing among the students sitting in that location. Other students are confused about what is meant by “dark corner.” A Latino student who sits in the corner asks for a third time what is meant by the comment “dark corner” when the teacher uses it again. A white male student yells out, “Because you’re here,” and points to his skin, clearly making a comment about skin color. After class, I asked Ms. Schneider about her use of the reference, and she said she heard students saying it so she repeated it to make a joke. She either didn’t realize the racial implications of the commentary, or thought she

might minimize them by adopting the joke herself. However, this type of joking incited additional victimization for the Latino student, when a related hashtag started to appear on anonymous social networking sites. I also heard students from other classrooms refer to the student as “dark corner,” in other settings, indicating the nickname stuck. For the next few weeks in the class, I observed a number of conflicts between several white male students and the Latino student they targeted. These became ritualistic and intentionally harmful, as the white male students punched him and said things like “I’ll fuck you up, pussy,” quietly when the teacher’s back was turned. Typically, I could make out their comments from the same distance away as the teacher, although she was focused on working out a problem at the board. The Latino student replies angrily, “I hate this school. I can beat you little bitches. I’m tired of your shit.”

Ms. Schneider continues over the side conversations and seems to drown them out as she calls on student volunteers and moves quickly through the material. None of the students engaged in the aftermath of the “dark corner” situation are paying attention, and this time Ms. Schneider isn’t paying attention to them either. She may realize that the joke she participated in went too far. In an interview, a student from this class, Brianne, says regarding Ms. Schneider, “She joins in a lot in what we’re saying and sometimes it’s frustrating. So, we’ll be talking about something completely personal and she’ll jump right in and it’s like, okay, no. And then other times you’re making a joke and she jumps in and the whole class says something, and it turns into a big thing.” Ms. Schneider’s gaffe is invested with local significance and becomes sedimented in a way that informs the class’s collective memory.

Ms. Schneider's "dark corner" and Mr. Brodzki's "Aurora Rose," are examples of cultural memes (Fine et. al 2012; Heath, Bell, and Sternberg 2001) that become enmeshed in the classroom idioculture, but which also evoke a tradition that triggers similar action between peers. In some classrooms, these cultural memes represent "functional culture" in that they provide distractions to difficult course content, getting the class off track from its objectives. In others the memes serve as "inside jokes" cementing the group's shared history and identity. In both schools, students interviewed speak positively about teachers who joke around as making things interesting or less boring, and give examples of jokes that have become cultural memes which bond the group together and in some cases, reinforce the content, without being at the expense of a student.

In classrooms where the objectives are clearly stated, cultural memes that do not support the interests of the group may be rejected by members of the group via boundary work. For example, students challenge the tone set by teachers and often recreate or reshape it. Mrs. Kelley's negative tone and ritualized quips can also send a message regarding lower expectations for students. "My dream is to win the lottery and retire," Mrs. Kelley (Classroom 7) frequently announces to her CP English class in Hughes, and she repeats it on a day when they are particularly off-task and rambunctious. "But you're stuck with us here," says a student. "Mrs. Gardener is the only teacher here who doesn't complain about her job." As they go over an assignment, Mrs. Kelley says, "I want you to be as eager as teachers leaving on a Friday afternoon." The same student corrects her again, saying, "Actually, there are teachers who stay until 7:00 on a Friday." Mrs. Kelley rolls her eyes and continues, but the student's intervention has challenged the teacher's

tone, asserting a sense that students in the room desire a norm of embracing hard work, rather than complaining about it. As mentioned in a previous chapter, Ms. Morales' Honors students in Hughes (Classroom 17) band together to challenge her teaching style and general negativity, policing the boundaries of acceptable behavior by pointing out her disorganization and challenging her negative comments about their lack of fitness as honors students, which do not fit with their desired idioculture.

In Hughes, the extent to which teachers care about teaching and about their students is often articulated in interviews, although teachers' tone in reference to caring is never mentioned by students in Hilltop. Caring is used in reference to the extent that teachers invest effort in their work, and the extent to which they support students.

Jaakirah, an honors student, says, "I feel like – I wish that some of the teachers cared a little bit more about students. I feel like a lot of the teachers just kind of come, and they're just like okay – this is just like – they don't really care for the students. I don't know if that makes sense, but I feel like if they cared a little more that the students would too." She provides the following examples:

I feel like I used to really love English. That was my favorite subject. I loved writing and stuff, and I feel like the way that some of my English class was taught is – I don't know. I just feel like she doesn't know what she's doing. I feel like – my English teacher is really disorganized, and it – I feel like that's hard, because it rubs off into what she gives us, and things are always getting lost. It's just – I'm so fed up with it. I feel like how she teaches sometimes – it just doesn't go – coincide with how I think things should be taught, I guess, to me. I don't know what it is. I just – it just really turns me off to any of the subject. Okay. And for example, my math teacher – I hate math. I'm not good at math. I'd rather do twelve English essays than a few math problems honestly. But my math teacher makes it a point to make sure that – even if he puts it down to simpler terms to make sure that everybody gets it and then we all end up on the same page and then we can move on. He doesn't move on until everybody gets it. He's so patient, and I really love that, because it makes me feel like – it doesn't make me feel like I'm lost or like I'm the stupidest kid in class or something like that. It makes me feel like, okay, I can do this. We're getting through it. He works with

you. He has patience whereas other teachers they don't care enough for that. They're just like, okay, I'm moving on. I don't have time – or something like that and then that just kind of shuts your brain off because you're just like – whatever I don't care and then you just push it aside kind of thing.

Jaakirah's comment indicates that students do not think of "caring" in a maternal sense, or as related to kindness, but are constantly developing perceptions about whether a teacher cares about their job and their students in a general sense from the everyday practices they lead in the classroom and the level of support they provide. Students who experience the feeling of "shut down" Jaakirah describes may react in a variety of ways, and one of which may be aggressive behavior because in Hughes it is typically without consequence.

*"Nice Teachers" and Positive Reinforcement*

Students in Hughes typically describe classrooms as "loud" or "quiet," and "distracted" or "serious," mainly characterizing the identity of the classroom based on peers' behaviors. As discussed, peer behaviors can be modified through social control via teacher sarcasm or teasing. Alternatively, students pressure one another to modify their behaviors to allow "nice" teachers, for example, Mrs. Gardener, to actually teach. The motivation to focus on the work and minimize interpersonal exchanges, in some cases, is driven by students' feelings of care or pity for teachers who have a positive tone and clearly work hard to prepare for their class. In Mrs. Gardener's class, although she leads the classroom with high expectations for students and strong academic and aspirational norms, and is a "nice" teacher with strong routines and a positive tone, this is not enough to overcome the lack of disciplinary follow-through or other behavioral supports in the school. Her freshman students, while they care for her and at times modify their behavior

to engage in the lesson, are also experimenting with the boundaries of acceptable behavior and navigating new social hierarchies and behavioral norms as high school students. Since many of the students in her class have other classes together (e.g. Cash, Jenny), they do not fully deviate from their typical behaviors, potentially to avoid “looking soft” and risking victimization in this context and others. Arguably, the students in Hughes receive little support for navigating the transition to high school or developing social and emotional skills that would round out their cultural toolkits and provide alternative choices for responding to peers’ interpersonal behaviors in a generally unregulated space.

In Hughes, some teachers, such as Mrs. Gardener (Classroom 6), use positive reinforcement techniques to keep students on task. Mrs. Gardener uses noticing language, for example, “I notice Gurjeet got on task right away.” While Mrs. Gardener notes and celebrates examples of students engaging in positive peer communication, she also models examples of positive communication by complimenting students on their general engagement and demonstrated skills. Dr. Bennett (Classroom 1) also ritualistically compliments students in her Resource Room mathematics class from the moment they walk in the door until they leave, communicating supportiveness, positivity, and a growth mindset outlook that praises and recognizes hard work and perseverance in the face of challenges or errors. As a female student enters late, the teacher says, “You look nice. You’re stylin’ again,” using language students use with their peers. She goes on to reassure them all about the upcoming midterm, “It looks like the stuff we’ve been doing lately. I’m confident you’ll all do well.” When a student who is new to the class starts struggling with a problem on the board, the teacher asks for someone to help him. When

no one responds, a student named Malika calls the other students out for being lazy. The teacher reminds the students, “By working on the hardest problem and not giving up, Ricardo is helping you.” Ricardo calls out a new student named Francisco, saying, “You gotta participate.” The teacher interjects that he did a challenging problem before Ricardo arrived. The teacher redirects Ronaldo to help Malika with her problem, but he says, “I don’t think Malika needs help right now. She’s doing it all good, even though it’s a hard one.” On the next problem, Malika tries to solve but needs help, and without being asked Francisco, the new student, jumps up to help her. “Good helping,” the teacher says, and starts calling him “Picasso” because, “he makes some nice graphs.” “Picasso, your turn at the board,” she says, and he laughs and gets up to work on the question. Malika jokes, “he’s a bootleg Picasso,” to which he responds, “I’m a 21<sup>st</sup> century one,” and she nods her head in agreement. The pace of the class is relaxed, encouraging students who otherwise might feel anxious about their abilities due to their “special ed” label to want to go to the board and prove they can solve problems successfully. The encouraging and supportive tone of the teachers extends to some of the same students who were observed needing to be defensive and aggressive in other classroom contexts, in which other students might refer to their resource room placement as a reason for teasing.

Dr. Bennett attempts to ensure the confidence she builds in her classroom translates to other settings by taking a few minutes at the end of each class to look up students’ grades and check in on how they are doing in other classes. In this ritual she provides advice to help the students advocate for themselves in getting the support they need, and guidance on how to deal with negative peer interactions that they sometimes mention as distracting them in classes in which they are not doing as well. Dr. Bennett’s

class defies what literature on ability-level tracking would predict for a special education classroom, by building a warm space focused on self-expression and building the self-confidence of students (Nunn 2011;1247) more effectively than most other settings I observe. However, the opposite pattern occurs in Ms. K's Enrichment mathematics class in Hughes (Classroom 3), in which students at the board often taunt on another with, "Don't fuck up," or "Duhhh..." if they pause to complete a step. Ms. K is regarded as a "nice teacher," but her tone towards students is not always positive. For example, she often asks Manny directly and seriously "What is wrong with you?" or states "Something is wrong with you," in front of his peers. This shaming may contribute to patterns of ritualistic aggressive behavior between Manny and others.

In Hilltop, a "nice teacher's" kind tone typically plays a lesser role in shaping students' behaviors because there is a stronger academic and aspirational culture motivating all students to succeed in their classes and avoid sanctions. There are also more clear and certain behavioral sanctions for violating school-wide and classroom behavioral norms. In Hughes especially, the interplay between teachers' personalities and tones and students' peer behaviors greatly differentiate the idiocultures that form in specific classes and predict differential patterns of aggressive behavior.

### *Peer Traditions and Status Struggles*

Classrooms serve as small groups within which individuals are allocated to status positions. As arenas in which status processes occur, members of the class work to manage stigma through their presentation of self (Fine 2012). In both schools, the characteristics associated with high esteem or low status in core content area classrooms vary by ability level. For example, as discussed in Chapter 4 there is a stronger emphasis

on social status goals over academic status in lower tracked classrooms. Students who do not conform to norms of dress, speech, or interaction may be targeted or left out of group dynamics. In higher tracked classrooms, aggressive behavior often relates more directly to the academic pressure and competition students perceive. The need to conform socially is less salient, but violations of norms relate to the completion of academic work (e.g., taking the class off task, aggravating the teacher). Still, students who traditionally dominate verbal space in the group influence the formation of peers' idiocultural norms.

Peer to peer triggering events often facilitate aggressive interactions, and these interactions can become a custom or ritual within the group's dynamic if the trigger (e.g., a person or activity) is always present. In Ms. K's Enrichment Algebra class in Hughes, Manny always enters the classroom late. He targets Andre with verbal aggression that starts off as playful, and they go back and forth with escalating intensity until the point that they are intentionally harmful to one another physically. If Andre is absent, which he often is due to suspension, Manny diverts his ritual of entry to Otto or Devonte, neither of whom are friends with Manny or typically engage with his display. Otto and Devonte ignore his behaviors initially, so Manny starts the exchange with an intentionally harmful statement and begins throwing objects (pens, rubber bands, staplers, scissors) or using his physical proximity to elicit a response. In Hilltop, a student named Brooks engages in similar rituals to instigate his peers in Mr. Greene's Pre-Calculus CP<sup>11</sup>. While the teacher circulates to check the homework, Brooks engages in a similar entry custom to Manny, entering the room late, and beginning with seeming playful teasing of a student he considers his friend, and then escalating the interaction quietly or discreetly. Brooks does

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<sup>11</sup> This classroom was observed informally outside of the official sample.

not use inappropriate language or overt insults, but instead uses seemingly innocuous language. For example, upon entry he repeatedly teases Autumn about her outfit. “Nice puffy life vest. If the ship sinks, we know you’ll survive. Did you get that at the boat supply store?” He goes on with directed teasing, as if he is interested to see at what point Mr. Greene will intervene – it seems almost as if Brooks considers it a game, or an assertion of his own authority. In a lowered but audible voice, when Mr. Greene is on the other side of the room, Brooks leans in close to Autumn, who sits diagonally across to the front of him, and whispers, “I’m surprised you’re so covered up, you usually dress like a whore.” She giggles, swipes at him without touching him, and tells him to “shut up,” and turns around and stares into her paper, putting her hands to the sides of her face like blinders. Brooks fist bumps the male student next to him, then acts as if he is going to punch him but stops short of his arm. Mr. Greene has made his way back to the front of the room, and asks Brooks how his college visit went over the weekend. Brooks explains that he will attend the school he visited because he was a legacy and his father has donated a lot of money to the institution. Without explicitly saying it, the statement suggests Brooks’ grade in this class does not matter because of his father’s status, and that he can act towards others without impunity.

Mr. Greene tries to redirect Brooks on most occasions by asking him questions about himself rather than correcting his behavior. Brooks at times teases Mr. Greene, walking a fine line to more serious insults that Mr. Greene may actively avoid by taking a gentler approach to getting him back on task. Brooks’ aggressive behavior is subtle enough that it appears playful, although on several occasions Autumn and others call him a “bully,” with no real response from Mr. Greene. All of the students who sit in proximity

to Brooks on the far right of the room are targeted by him at some point, and those on the other side of the room are still and silent, as if they are hoping to be spared his attention. This classroom is an exception in Hilltop in which a single student's customs and rituals heavily influence the tone of the room. Still, despite Brooks' apparent sense of entitlement, and the "average" ability level of the group, the other students remain relatively silent during class and appear to be academically motivated. Although I sit on the complete opposite side of the classrooms when I attend, Brooks attempts to engage with me sufficiently that I need to withdraw from the class towards the end of the year.

Dmitri, an honors student in Hughes, describes how when students are engaged in aggressive behavior, it affects the climate of the room and his psychological well-being even when he is not being directly targeted. He explains:

I get very uncomfortable. I know they're not targeting me in any way. Nothing bad really happens to me. But I sort of get anxiety. I'm socially weird. I'm not good with being social most of the time. So, it makes me uncomfortable when people act that way. And I'm just trying to learn whatever.

Dmitri explains that in his accounting class, in the beginning of the year he was very nervous about the people in the class with him. Yet over the first few weeks of school, students who were well known for acting up or engaging in aggressive behavior went from being aggressive to being part of the class' friendly and collegial idioculture. "I do judge a book by its cover usually. Because there are some people in there who do act up. It was the first day of classes. People sort of acted up, so I wasn't expecting good things to come out of them. But they don't start issues, and if you need help with something, they'll all be friendly, which I like that." Under the right conditions, individual student behavior adapts to the norms and customs unique to the larger group,

and the interplay of the teacher's style with the student dynamics which emerge in a particular group.

In Hilltop, Madison, a 9<sup>th</sup> grader in Focus classes, describes how grouping a particular set of peers together under certain conditions can cause them to be “different people” in a way that fosters aggressive behavior. Regarding her physics class, she explained:

**Madison:** That class is pretty obnoxious, honestly. The most – the popular people – and they're just really obnoxious to the teacher. He waits until you're quiet. And they take pictures of each other in physics. And if we're learning about something, they would make fun of what we're learning. Like, oh, that's so cool. Like, “whoa, whoa, that's so cool” in a mocking tone... It's annoying, because like I said I don't really talk and I do my work, and they're just really obnoxious to everybody – to the other students, to the teacher.

**ARH:** Is it hard to focus in there sometimes?

**Madison:** Focus – yeah. But not like if someone's picking at – like making fun of you. But I guess not, because my lab table, we're fine. We get assigned seats. But there's a back table in the back of the room that they're obnoxious, but everyone else is pretty much fine.

**ARH:** Okay. Would you describe any of your other classes as obnoxious, similar to physics?

**Madison:** Mm-mm. Just that class.

**ARH:** Just that one. And so it sounds like there's a certain combination of students in there that also make it a little harder to focus.

**Madison:** Yeah.

**ARH:** And you don't have classes with them, other classes?

**Madison:** I mean, I pretty much – sometimes I would have an occasional person in, but when they're not with their friends, they're totally different people. When they're with their friends, they feel more confident, I guess, and they're more – I don't know.

These interpersonal peer dynamics, and the extent to which they are observed and documented by staff and administrators, are regarded as important data and used in decisions about scheduling and class rosters. Classroom composition varies between a random process of sorting students without differentiation and purposeful selection. Purposeful course assignment includes a process of sorting by perceived ability and

holding staff conferences to consider “red flag” pairings or groupings (e.g., students who must be separated due to ongoing investigations under the state’s Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying law; separating friends known as “the mean girl group”). Across the board, influential peers and groupings play an important role in directing the classroom’s idioculture.

### *Classrooms as Racialized, Gendered, and Classed Spaces*

The intersectional identities of students and their teachers play a role in shaping everyday practices and interactions in classrooms. The composition of identities in a given classroom varies by school population and course assignment. Nunn (2011:1226) describes the importance of understanding classrooms as racialized spaces, in which categories are co-constructed and “contribute to larger patterns of inequality in achievement and unequal college futures for minorities” (Nunn 2011:1226). In addition, classrooms are gendered and classed spaces, and experiences are further moderated by other identities and characteristics of students (e.g., sexuality, disability status, religion). School organizations and their staff are differentially equipped to relate to the needs of diverse students (Garza 2009), which in turn impacts the idiocultures that form in classrooms. These classroom dynamics may lead to differential levels of engagement of a student in coursework and social exchanges depending upon his or her intersectional identity and how aspects of the identity fit with norms in the idioculture of the class.

In Hilltop, the population is relatively racially homogenous, and so gendered and classed aspects of classroom dynamics are more salient. Still, the few non-white students in Hilltop may experience racial or ethnic differences in acute ways, by being asked to speak as representatives and experiencing normalized and routine microaggressions, as

described by Elijah (p. 271). In addition, not having experience with students from diverse backgrounds may limit the cultural competency of Hilltop educators in working with diverse students when they do have them in class. Examples of gaps in practice might relate to the teacher's ability to provide culturally relevant examples, materials, and to engage with the student with an awareness of how his or her implicit biases may impact practice. In Hilltop, staff are focused on data-driven efforts to build cultural competency around gender identity and sexuality during the year I observe, after having identified a need in this area from the SCUBA survey. This focus is notable but leaves out other key aspects of students' intersectional identities and how they shape their educational experiences.

In Hughes, teachers and students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds negotiate these and other identities in classrooms. Some students I interviewed in Hughes feel that everyone gets along in their school and the diversity is a positive aspect, whereas others indicate that cliques break down according to race or ethnicity. The classrooms I observe reflect both possibilities, although self-selected homogenous seating groups are more common in lower tracked classrooms. In honors classrooms, students typically want to sit near and collaborate with students they perceive to be the top performing students, who are often white. It is possible that these students were perceived to be top performing because they best adhered to a classroom space that "feels white" in terms of interaction styles, which Nunn (2011:1234) noted was the case in the honors and AP courses she observed. In Hughes, white students are disproportionately represented in honors courses, and seem relatively comfortable with their idiocultures, which are more in sync with dominant, white, and middle-class norms. On the other hand, lower tracked classes have

idiocultures in tension with dominant cultural norms. White students assert their group membership in ways including projecting toughness and using Ebonics and other localized forms of speech. Yet, while widespread use of the n-word was normalized and typically was ignored by teachers, a white student using the n-word could instigate a major conflict. Subtle microaggressions and stereotypical statements were exchanged by students in diverse classrooms, often leading to conflict. For example, students in Dr. T's honors Pre-Calculus class would call a white male student "Richie Rich" and ascribe the nickname to his race, even though he constantly protested that he lived in the same neighborhood as them. At times, statements leading to conflict reflected ignorance on the part of the student speaking, which was then corrected by peers who were quick to regulate others if they transgressed the norm of celebrating diversity that was fostered at a school-wide level among students by stating "that's racist."

Cultural biases may lead to the teachers' lowered expectations if students do not demonstrate culturally dominant, middle-class speech or behaviors (Nunn 2011). Nunn (2011:1228) describes the "pervasive cultural bias of schools" which reflects preference toward white and middle-class culture. Socialized ideas about students of different racial or ethnic backgrounds shape the academic environment and classroom group interactions (Nunn 2011). As Nunn (2011:1229) argues, the structure of the classroom shapes interactions in key ways, particularly through "cross-ethnoracial collaboration" and "instances of ethnoracial conflict." Teachers' choices regarding the formation of collaborative groups as self-selected or purposefully assigned contributes to opportunities for meaningful interactions that promote understanding. In classes in both schools, however, student groups are self-selected and many students opt to work alone. I

witnessed few cases of ethnoracial conflict at the aggregate level, but I did see individual teasing targeting a student's racial or ethnic background.

Another key racialized lens impacting how students interact with one another, as well as how teachers respond to student behaviors, relates to emotionality. According to Halberstadt et al. (2018:127), classroom strategies for dealing with emotionality is informed by racialized teacher expectations, and is a primary pathway through which a teacher's "racialized lens might be manifested in classroom practices." Aaliyah and her boisterous response to Mr. Said's comment is one example of how a student's failure to exhibit dominant, middle-class behavioral practices could result in conflict and exclusionary discipline. Aaliyah expresses her emotions in a way that makes Mr. Said feel his authority is challenged, serving an example of how, "emotion-related behaviors of black and white children may be differentially interpreted by white teachers...as relatively more troublesome and disruptive" (Halberstadt et al. 2018:126). Awareness of how everyday practices are potentially shaped by "racialized expectations" including "racialized emotion perceptions" is essential to understanding how teachers of various backgrounds interact with students of various backgrounds (Halberstadt et al. 2018).

Nunn (2011:1250) notes, "Teachers and administrations who overlook the ethnoracial tensions their students experience foster classroom dynamics that exacerbate those very tensions." While I witness cases of aggressive interactions related to race or ethnicity in Hughes, I observe few organized discussions among staff regarding diversity and preventing ethnoracial tension. In addition, there are few discussions of cultural competency or implicit biases among staff at Hughes, where professional development generally focuses on instructional techniques to improve test scores. In faculty meetings a

contingent of staff members made culturally biased statements about parents of particular racial or class backgrounds not caring if their children went well in school, without push back from other staff who disagreed with their viewpoint. These same teachers frequently and openly referred to students as “animals” and “feral animals,” in faculty meetings or even in front of students, using thinly veiled racist language which revealed biases that factored into their expectations for students’ performance.

In Hilltop, since there are very few non-white students, classroom-based conversations about race or ethnicity almost never take place as part of the content I observe, and staff seem similarly unengaged in these discussions about their own practice. Elijah, an 11<sup>th</sup> grader, describes how peers at his lunch table share problematic assumptions and ideas about race at lunchtime. He describes discussions about, “Skin color, how they look or how they act. It’s like, okay. Like, really? I mean, honestly, either way – white, black, Latino, it doesn’t matter, you know? We’re all people, we’re all the same people, we all do what we gotta do. It’s like – exactly. And just because I don’t – just because – and it’s also just because I don’t act like that does not change who I am or what I look like, just because I don’t do this.” Elijah’s comments are in response to stereotypical or prejudicial ideas others at his lunch table share. While students do not articulate the same ideas during class time, and I do not observe many critical classroom-based discussions of race and ethnicity during my observations, the underlying beliefs of these students may impact interactions or dynamics within the classroom as well.

Since racial and ethnic diversity was generally low in Hilltop, students focused on and articulated differences according to social class in aggressive peer interactions. Students in Hilltop referred to lower income students, particularly those in lower track

classrooms, as “red necks.” Wearing a flannel shirt or items of clothing associated with farming often resulted in teasing for this reason. Similarly, students in Hughes sometimes focused in on the quality or brands of clothing one another wore, or the quality of one another’s shoes. Gendered aspects of idioculture varied; for example, in some classes, teachers call more heavily on males, which affected interpersonal dynamics of competition in honors classes. In other cases, female teachers seem more confident in correcting misbehavior of female students. In both schools, male teachers are more often observed calling sexual harassment behavior “flirting” rather than unpacking the meaning of the interactions or acknowledging them as forms of violence.

Gendered forms of aggressive behavior take place in both schools and are dealt with differently depending upon the teacher and the perceived relationship among involved students. In both schools, explicit forms of gender-based violence are described by students as being more prominent in a digital setting (e.g., slut-shaming, exposing students by sharing nudes) rather than in person in classrooms. In classrooms, examples might include exchanges that are characterized by adults as flirting, or that may take place within what looks like a consensual relationship. In Hilltop, Bethanny and Connor, students in Mr. Anderson’s Integrated Algebra class who are dating, often tease and slap one another, constantly pursuing negative attention from one another and at times, pulling friends into their exchanges. When they are “in a fight” and not speaking, the atmosphere of the classroom feels tense, and when they break up toward the end of the year but remain friends, the group feels more focused. Andre and Vanessa’s typical interactions provide an example. During a midterm review in Ms. K’s class, Andre shows Vanessa a picture of her he took and says, “Baby, your head is so big.” “Bully!” Vanessa yells, and

hits him across the face. Ms. K asks, “Now, you want to go to in-school suspension? Vanessa, Andre, you need to pass your midterm exam.” Andre responds sarcastically, “I already took it, I have it at home.” Not wanting him to get himself in trouble, Vanessa says, “Shut up Andre, just shut up.” The teacher rolls her eyes and returns to her desk. Andre chokes Vanessa, who looks afraid, but then lets her neck go and pokes her in the eye. She laughs, holding her eye. Later, Vanessa takes Andre’s pencil. He says, “Alright bitch, give me my fucking shit back. You think I’m playing with you?” A female student says to the teacher, who is looking on without responding, “Miss, you look like you about to cry.” Ms. K responds, “That’s why I tell you to focus while I teach, right?” Andre continues to escalate with Vanessa, “Stop fucking playing.” He grabs her by the back of the neck and bites her between his hands, and holds her head down on the desk, while they both laugh. The teacher ignores it and works to solve the problem with the students who are paying attention. Vanessa knocks Andre off his chair, onto the floor, and Ms. K, seeming more comfortable correcting a female student than a male student, looks up and says, “Guys, stop it.” Andre says to Vanessa, “Stop fucking with me,” and squeezes her arm. “I have to exercise, I was fat. I was a fat child midget.” Melanie says. “You still,” Andre replies, and she slaps him, grabs him by his hair, and pulls him toward her, kissing him. Vanessa tries to pull back from the kiss, and Andre continues to forcibly kiss her. After dismissal I stay after with the teacher ask about the process of reporting the interaction between Andre and Vanessa, which at times appear playful since they are laughing, but involve serious behaviors like choking and biting. While the mandated reporter role is complicated by my position as researcher, this was a case like others in which I felt a student might be in possible danger of harm, and that they needed support

in addressing the safety of their relationship. Ms. K indicates that she has reported on this ritualistic behavior between the couple before, and since Andre's needs are well known yet under-addressed, she saw no reason to report it again.

Students in Hughes intervene in their classroom's idioculture by performing gender and sexuality in visible ways, demanding to be recognized for who they are and for the environment to be inclusive. When Mr. Said tells Cash to stop flirting with Luisa, she replies, "Mr. Said, I'm a dyke, I thought you should know." Mr. Said ignores Luisa's statement, and therefore her identity, rather than affirming it in the moment, and in the process fails to categorize Cash's behavior as unacceptable. In a later class, Mrs. Gardener also fails to address Cash's sexual harassment towards another student. During a game of Bingo, an enthusiastic and engaged student named Daisy stands up and puts her leg on her chair as she reaches her arm up to get called on to answer a question. Cash says, "Bitch, put your leg down. No wonder it stink in here. What'd I tell you? I need a gas mask. Its smells like fish filet. Do you shave down there? Marco says you do." The student ignores him but looks uncomfortable, and the teacher walks over to pick up the phone. She jokes, laughing, "I'm calling the office, watch out," and then proceeds to call the office for information on when lunch will be served during the following day's modified scheduled. The response was dismissive and insensitive following the sexual harassment Daisy had experienced, but is the typical type of avoidance and non-response I observe in reaction to sexual harassment and racialized aggression in Hughes. Teachers may feel ill-equipped to engage in sensitive conversations with students, particularly when those students are different from them in terms of race, class, and other aspects of their identities.

Another example in Mrs. Gardener's class highlights the extent to which her status as "nice teacher" cannot prevent her freshmen students from testing the boundaries of aggressive behavior through coded and explicitly racialized and gendered forms of aggression. On the same day when the class is playing a game of Bingo to review content, Cash, a Latino student, declares that Bingo is for old people, and begins making fun of the Asian Indian male students who were fighting, saying "Cricket sucks, Cricket sucks." An Asian Indian female student stares at the teacher, who does not say anything. "That's racist!" she finally yells out. "How is that racist?" Cash asks, then smirks. "Seriously, I'll stop," he says, linking eyes with the teacher, who does not respond. He then repeatedly mouths "Cricket," and gives the Asian Indian students on the right side of the room the finger. Then he repeatedly says, "Logistics," to them. "Do you even know what logistics are?" the Asian Indian female says. Rather than address the content of the interaction or intervene on the behavior, Mrs. Gardener praises the Asian Indian female student for using an "SAT" word and defines "logistics" for them and provides examples.

Considered together, the micro-level everyday practices and norms observed in classrooms illuminate a process by which exposure to aggressive behavior is differentiated across and within school organizations at the group level. Academic aspirations and disciplinary norms and practices at the organizational and idiocultural levels inform the enactment of these practices, routines, and rituals among students and staff within the small groups they assemble in each day. The experiences of students in groups are further moderated by their own intersectional identities, the membership of their classroom, and the identity, personal beliefs, and self-efficacy of the classroom teacher in responding to racialized, gendered, or classed forms of aggressive behavior.

In conclusion, school-wide factors shape pedagogical norms and practices in ways that structure the field of action within local idiocultures. Teachers and students act within the temporal, spatial, and ideological constraints of their environment, and in ways that are shaped by dominant cultural norms. While focusing on academic and aspirational culture and disciplinary culture of a school will improve everyday practices in the classroom, the impact of micro-level interactions, practices, and rituals must also be interrogated relative to the social climate of the group. For example, pedagogical practices that are promoted for their instructional benefit, such as student competition and grading for participation, can foster a climate conducive to aggression. Curricular tracking plays a key sorting role in differentiating norms and everyday practices within classrooms, and in turn, the context for aggression. Teachers lead the classroom and set the tone for interpersonal behavior, and students develop peer norms that play a role in influencing behavior as well. A widely quoted description of teaching posits that teachers make between 1,200 and 1,500 decisions per day, which have important implications for student outcomes (Jackson 1990). Students make just as many choices regarding their actions in various classrooms, and specifically those related to interpersonal behavior. Now that the cultural factors shaping the context for peer aggression in schools and classrooms are better defined and understood, they must be integrated within systemic efforts to improve learning contexts by reducing peer aggression.

## Chapter 7: Conclusions and Implications

### FINDINGS AND CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE LITERATURE

In the face of a reported uptick in various forms of bias-driven incidents in schools following the 2016 presidential election, understanding the social context for peer victimization has never been so urgent. Political rhetoric, deemed “the Trump Effect” by psychologists, has arguably impacted the culture and climate of schools throughout the country by increasing peer aggression. In particular, the Human Rights Commission (HRC) and Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) have reported that student victimization according to race and religion is increasing, as are misogynistic comments and sexual harassment and assault (HRC 2017; SPLC 2016). These studies broaden our understanding of victimization patterns by reporting behaviors beyond the traditional definition of bullying, and by clearly specifying targeted characteristics in order to reveal the underlying cultural norms which perpetuate and embolden these behaviors. However, nationwide, quantitative datasets do not capture variation across or within schools. Thus, the evolution of these patterns in response to external forces and cultural shifts within specific organizations is not well understood.

In this dissertation, I demonstrated the role that organizational and small group culture plays in shaping the context for aggressive behavior, and in turn determining whether students experience optimal conditions for learning in their schools and classrooms. By pointing to the classroom as the primary site for interaction and the enactment of school-wide norms, I contribute to our sociological understanding of the process of aggressive behavior in schools. Through integrating the literature from fields

including sociology, criminology, education, and psychology, I provide a sociological social psychological and cultural framework for viewing and understanding multiple forms of victimization. This interdisciplinary approach takes into account ecological and structural factors, while attending to the group dynamics in classrooms and their impact on individual student action and agency.

By exploring the role of small group idioculture in shaping the context for aggression in high schools, I account for a major gap in school victimization research which typically does not account for variation in micro-level contexts such as classrooms. I also contribute to the criminological understanding of school-based aggression and victimization by highlighting the limitations of cross-sectional quantitative data and incident counts in revealing the full range of students' experiences. Developing a "process account of culture in schools" (Shepherd 2014) requires that organizational patterns be put in conversation with observational data highlighting patterns of micro-interactions within classrooms. To fully understand and address the cultural factors shaping the context for aggression, researchers must take a grounded approach to link quantitative patterns to observed interactions. My contribution to school-based criminology has illustrates the promise of a multi-tiered and methodologically diverse approach to diagnosing needs and strengths in a school's culture, and designing interventions to address needs. Changing the culture and improving interpersonal behaviors in schools requires a change process at multiple systemic levels, and is one that sociologists should play a key role in informing.

By pairing patterns from survey data with qualitative data collected over the course of a school year, I find that in the two schools, students are unequally exposed to

different types, frequencies, and consequences of peer interpersonal aggression. Students in Hughes are significantly more likely to experience victimization in their classrooms compared to those in Hilltop, regardless of their placement. Even within these schools, exposure to aggression varies by academic curricular track. Yet not all classes are tracked, and regardless of a students' individual goal orientation or behavior patterns, there is an element of luck that enters the composition of a classroom group and its resulting culture and climate. On top of the advantage or disadvantage of where a student resides, which typically determines the quality and culture of his or her school, there is the luck of placement into classes within the high school. While curricular tracking eliminates some of the variation in peers' attitudes and aptitudes in core content areas, electives, lunch periods, gym and health classes, and other random assignment periods present the opportunity for small group dynamics that are not sorted. I find that regardless of a student's individual motivations, personal goals, or cultural toolkit, it is the culture within the school, which is further differentiated through enactment in classrooms, that determines how things will go for the student throughout his or her day. Future research is needed to explore the extent to which disparities in school and classroom climates contribute to observed opportunity gaps, evidenced by a widening achievement gap by socioeconomic status.

I illustrate gaps in victimization at a school-wide level by surveying students in detail about their experiences in the last month. I pair these overarching patterns with observational data from classrooms representing honors, college preparatory, non-college preparatory, and enrichment or remedial courses. In addition to the role curricular tracking plays in shaping the context for aggression, I find that the teacher's attitudes and

practices, as well as the norms and behaviors of peers, are key components differentiating how behavioral norms and expectations are communicated and enacted within classrooms. These factors determine the ways how cultural factors related to academic aspirations, discipline and behavior, and everyday practices (routines and rituals) are enacted in classrooms, accounting for within-school variation observed. While greatly influenced by the interplay of cultural factors at the organizational level and within the curricular tracking level of the group, daily reality is co-constructed by teachers and students whose everyday interactions and shared norms construct the classroom's idioculture, and the context for aggressive behavior.

#### *Academic and Aspirational Culture*

The ways in which expectations for academic success are communicated at an organizational level shape the enactment of an academic and aspirational culture among students and staff. Teachers reinforce these expectations, and students meet them, in ways that are typically sorted by curricular tracking. Each student develops personal goals and aspirations related to achievement and social acceptance, which they negotiate relative to the perceived norms among their peers. While a students' personal goals might guide his or her behaviors, they matter less than local contextual factors in relationship to the students' likelihood of victimization. Students who perceive their peers to be more interested in popularity, and more likely to get in trouble, are also more likely to report having experienced victimization. The context for aggression and victimization varies even within the same building, reflecting the numerous idiocultures students experience, which vary by ability level tracking.

Far fewer resources and opportunities are in place in Hughes to promote an organizational culture of academic achievement that affects students' aspirations as compared to in Hilltop. This disparity in school-wide expectations in most cases was enacted within classrooms across both schools, although the extent to which high academic aspirations were communicated varied by academic track. In both schools, the more successfully a classroom group enacted high academic aspirations within its idioculture, the less likely it was that aggressive behavior would be normalized.

Academic culture shaped the context for victimization in each classroom. Teachers played a key role in communicating and enacting academic and aspirational culture in ways that adhered to or challenged the organizational culture. When students' academic investment were high, less emphasis was placed on deterrence through disciplinary measures; the potential penalty of forgoing content mastery or losing points was often sufficient deterrent to aggressive behaviors. Peers' informal rewards or sanctions also precluded the need for formal sanctions in classrooms where the norm was for students to encourage one another to stay on track. In summary, higher tracked classes where teachers had higher expectations and peers were more academically invested experienced less victimization than lower ability level classes.

#### *Disciplinary Norms and Practices*

In addition to the threat of missing content or receiving a lower grade, disciplinary culture in both schools and their classrooms represented another key factor shaping the context for aggressive behavior. While official rules about interpersonal behavior existed in both schools, guided by state law and district policies, they were differentially enforced in Hughes and Hilltop. In Hilltop anti-bullying legislation resulted in strict,

swift, and certain enforcement, whereas in Hughes, school leaders opted to primarily enforce rules related to electronics use and dress code and to ignore aggressive interpersonal behaviors, sending the implicit message that aggressive interpersonal behavior was acceptable. Within both schools, behavioral norms varied by academic track, as well as the teacher's tone and orientation toward student interpersonal behavior. Peer norms also guided behavior through informal sanctions.

The recent expansion of anti-bullying legislation into all fifty states provides an opportunity to address incidents involving aggressive behavior, provided that they meet the local definition of bullying, and that the disciplinary norms and practices within a local organization support intervention. Providing some recourse to students who are seriously and repeatedly victimized could balance the scale of power, particularly for marginalized groups. At the same time, laws and rules do not account for the disparities in power and cultural capital that enable some students and their families to invoke the law more effectively than others. Also, not all types or patterns of aggressive behavior are addressed or prevented through a punitive approach focused specifically on bullying prevention, as the anti-bullying framework also fails to understand or address generalized peer aggression that falls under the definition of conflict among equals. Whether aggression is intentionally harmful or playful, or reflects typical conflict rather than targeted aggression, these negative interactions result in a range of negative consequences for the students who experience them.

I find that in the two schools, students and staff had divergent views of which types of behaviors met the definition of the law. In Hughes, many overt behaviors that meet the law's definition were overlooked, even if harmful. In the absence of alternatives

to disciplinary measures, such as restorative or competency-building approaches, the context in Hughes produced aggressive interactions much more frequently than observed in Hilltop. Yet, the absence of visible aggressive behavior in Hilltop does not mean that students did not engage in covert or coded forms of aggression, or displace the interactions until they were outside of the classroom. In addition, the fact that students in Hilltop rarely exhibited negative interpersonal behaviors does not mean they are more socially or emotionally competent. In fact, students at Hilltop, by virtue of demonstrating the ability to be silent and compliant with authority's requests, and very frequently being assigned individual computer-based work, had far fewer opportunities to learn to negotiate differences and conflict with peers. While they avoided detection and punishment for interpersonal aggression, it does not mean they were better equipped to work through conflicts in other settings or groups. In Hughes interpersonal aggressive behavior was not suppressed by the anti-bullying law and associated rules in the classroom. In Hilltop, it appeared to be, and though students had significantly more access to social and emotional supports, the nature of instruction as being individualized, and use of school-issued laptops, meant that they had fewer opportunities to develop and practice social and emotional competencies with the guidance of adults.

### *Everyday Practices*

Culture is enacted through routines, rituals, customs, and norms at the school-wide and classroom levels. Classroom pedagogy is also shaped and constrained by temporal and spatial aspects of the school, in addition to the influence of curricular tracking, teacher tone, and peers' interactional norms as they develop within a specific group. While the organization-level cultural factors account for between-school variation

in victimization, factors at the classroom level impact the enactment of these cultural elements in specific groups. Specifically, teachers, peers, and, and the academic ability level of the class determine how the cultural factors noted are filtered and enacted, shaping the everyday context for aggression. Through shaping everyday practices, these factors account for within-school variation in exposure to aggressive behavior.

Classrooms also operate as racialized, gendered, and classed spaces, and in order for the local context for aggressive behavior to fully be understood, students and staff must have space and time to unpack and reflect on individual identity, privilege, bias, and implications of all of these factors for the formation of a collective group identity with a shared purpose. Only then will staff be able to institute equitable academic and behavioral expectations for all students, and will schools be equipped to support them in doing so.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

### *Using Multi-Method Approaches to Assess and Improve School Culture and Climate*

The tide seems to be shifting from an anti-bullying approach, which was limited in its focus on particular forms of negative interpersonal behaviors, to one focused on school climate as shaping victimization as well as other outcomes. This represents a shift towards efforts to improve school climate over time, in a sustained and measurable way. Reduction of bullying or aggression is one expected outcome of these efforts. While ESSA requires all schools to report on loosely related indicators of school climate, and in New Jersey's case, to focus on chronic absenteeism, there are no requirements under the legislation to systematically assess and strategically intervene to improve the conditions related to the findings. The interplay of cultural factors at various levels results in a need

for both organizational change and improvement of individual teacher practices to reduce aggression and improve school and classroom culture and climate. The assessment of culture and climate at both the organizational and group levels is necessary for identifying data-driven needs, but at this time most school climate reform efforts use cross-sectional, aggregated data to pinpoint areas for intervention. In doing so these fail to capture the experiences of sub-groups or to account for the process by which engrained culture is enacted and informs the interactions of students and staff within a school community. In addition, few existing school climate measures focus on conceptual domains related to the key cultural factors I found to be related to aggression: academic and aspirational culture and disciplinary culture.

There is an urgent need for improved instruments and methods for assessing school culture and climate, and specifically, understanding patterns of aggression beyond bullying. Aggression reduction requires a specific, targeted approach that follows observed patterns of behavior and needs identified through data collection. A first step to identifying needs is to create metrics, drawing from multiple methods, to support the measurement of culture in order to develop an understanding of how culture informs climate. These data should be collected at multiple levels, using multiple methods and a systematic analysis technique that puts quantitative and qualitative data in conversation to reveal common behavioral patterns and identify targeted areas of need. In addition, current school climate assessments must be revised to include key conceptual domains highlighted in this study. Specifically, in New Jersey, the statewide survey used to assess climate, the New Jersey School Climate Survey (NJSCS), contains few items related specifically to academic and aspirational culture and disciplinary culture. As such, it is

currently not possible to capture these cultural components as school-wide factors and predictors of student victimization using the survey.

In addition, the results of the NJSCS cannot currently be disaggregated according to sub-group, which prohibits the opportunity to explore how variation in experiences of these cultural factors vary by group, nor how they shape experiences with victimization. When doing so does not “out” particular students, school climate data should be disaggregated by group when possible to better understand how a student’s intersectional identities inform his or her experiences. Aside from teacher evaluation protocols which may assess the teacher’s actions in fostering classroom climate, there are not sufficient instruments or supports for collecting culture and climate data at the classroom level. The development of protocols for systematic classroom observation, as I conducted through this dissertation, would assist teachers in reflecting on their classroom’s culture, and would enable a school-wide understanding of how culture is enacted in different groups. These observational tools may require implementation by an outside observer, who does not take the patterns of everyday life in a school or classroom for granted.

Once meaningful school climate and culture data are collected, in a way that represents multiple aspects of group life, including classroom idiocultures, those data must be systematically analyzed to identify needs and plan for interventions, including strategies to reduce forms of peer aggression that have been found to be problematic. The use of school climate and culture data to drive systems-level improvement efforts is a multi-year, complex task, which requires accessible tools and guidance for school stakeholders shepherding the process. Some states have provided supports, training, and targeted coaching and consultation for school leadership teams driving this work. A

major barrier that remains for most schools is carving out the necessary time needed for team members to engage in data analysis and strategic planning. Yet, it must be recognized that the time dedicated to using data to drive instruction will be squandered if the interpersonal conditions for successful instruction are not in place. Interventions to improve staff relationships may also be needed to create conditions necessary for system-wide change.

*School Reform: Districting and Tracking*

Students in New Jersey are typically districted to neighborhood schools, where they are likely to encounter peers with similar family backgrounds and cultural capital as themselves. Residential segregation perpetuates the reproduction of inequality by largely limiting students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds from interacting and exchanging information with middle-class and more affluent peers. Conversations about college-planning, course selection, and other topics central to the academic culture are potentially not as informed in a school such as Hughes, where students were less likely to have family members who had attended college. Without these meaningful interactions and exposure to academic planning norms, students are segregated in schools where the majority of students are from similar income backgrounds and racial and ethnic backgrounds, based on the composition of the local community. Alternatives to local districting which promote cultural exchange include policies designed to balance schools socioeconomically redistricting or other means.

In the absence of the political support for these types of balancing policies, charter schools emerge as an alternative to public schools with high peer aggression and/or negative school culture and climate. Charter schools provide a choice for families and

students to avoid a school with a negative culture and climate by choosing what they perceive to be a better one. The charter school process requires that schools establish a clear mission and strong academic culture, although the mechanisms for enforcing norms can include the notoriously high use of exclusionary discipline. The presence of an alternative setting with a strong academic culture creates the imperative for the district school to compete to retain students. One aspect of this competition may include increased efforts to reduce peer aggression and improve culture and climate; however, as noted these systemic reforms take time. In the short term, the availability of school choice may have the effect of concentrating and isolating students with less capital to pursue alternative educational opportunities, or less luck (if operating on a lottery admissions system), in a school with a less positive culture and climate, which worsens as the most motivated students exit.

As curricular tracking was a major differentiating factor shaping outcomes related to aggression in my study, interrogating the process by which students are assigned to homogenous ability level groupings is necessary. There are certainly advantages to tracking by perceived ability, but the potential disadvantages of segregating students are great. Tracking may lead to segregation by race and class within a school, and may diminish the self-esteem of students in lower ability level groups, an experience which is only augmented through the decreased expectations of teachers. The sense that school is not for them may lead to frustration or a sense of alienation, and students who sense they have nothing to lose academically might invest in social goals and engage in aggressive behavior as a means to elevate their status.

Even small changes to systems of curricular tracking would require major reorganization within schools, and if ever possible, will take time. In the interim, efforts should be taken to ensure that all students are noticed, recognized, and celebrated for abilities falling outside of the narrow set of academic skills most recognized by schools and measured by standardized testing. Recognizing the skills of all students, and providing opportunities to develop them, would lead to greater student engagement and motivation, particularly for students who struggle in core content areas. By building a strong aspirational culture around the strengths of all students, and by valuing diverse talents and contributions and setting high expectations, the overall context for aggressive behavior might be reduced.

#### *Changing School-wide and Classroom Behavioral Norms*

A multi-level approach to modifying behavioral norms through a sociological and cultural lens provides the opportunity to reinforce prosocial behaviors as replacements for negative ones. Building student engagement, student-teacher relationships, and a teacher's cultural competencies are several approaches for changing cultural norms in an organization. In addition, efforts to change peer norms are also key. Often these types of interventions operate in isolation and focus on one group; for example, providing intensive training for teachers or using a peer nomination system to identify social referents who can model desired norms or behaviors for peers who will be likely emulate them because of their social status. For example, student-driven initiatives to change peer norms have been found effective at reducing peer conflict (Paluck, Shepherd and Aranow 2016). In the case of Hilltop, central students selected for a peer leadership initiative could engage in an anti-bias initiative to reshape norms around comments such as the

anti-Semitic remarks I observed. However, efforts to change culture within a system must be multi-tiered to effectively change the context for aggression, and must take into account the roles that school-wide culture, academic tracking, teachers, and peers play in producing the idiocultural realities within classrooms. Efforts should be taken to align strategies focused on each of these components as part of a comprehensive approach to improving cultural norms.

Differences between a teacher's cultural background and that of his or her students can lead to tensions, misunderstandings, or lower expectations. These facilitate student disconnection and foster frustration, which can at times manifest in peer aggressive behaviors. However, research-based strategies for improving student-teacher relationships often begin with building teachers' self-awareness and cultural competency. These strategies may involve a mix of training opportunities and applied techniques, and there should be school-wide leadership, training, and reinforcement, and mechanisms to track teachers in their mastery and implementation of related competencies.

Teacher preparation programs, which often require that teachers engage in some training and applied action research project, should focus the development of educators' inquiry skills around the collection and analysis of local data from their own classrooms. This training would support educators in being more reflective on how their identity and privilege informs their pedagogy. It would also present an opportunity to equip educators to gather data to understand how everyday dynamics within their classrooms perpetuate or challenge school-wide norms and foster a unique idioculture, setting the context for interpersonal behaviors. Finally, this approach to teacher education would help educators identify sources of frustration, anxiety, or disconnect that lead to negative student

outcomes, including engagement in peer aggression. For teachers already in service, Professional Learning Communities, or PLCs, could focus on equipping teachers to assess school-wide culture and classroom idiocultures.

In situations where there is an observed disconnect between students and teachers, potentially leading to lowered expectations, Emdin (2016) recommends techniques which empower students to participate in a dialogue about how to improve their classroom environment. Emdin (2016) terms such dialogue a “cogen” or cogenerative dialogue. Cogens involve conversations between teachers and students with the goal of generating plans of action for improving the classroom assist in bridging cultural divides between students and teachers, and between students of different backgrounds (Emdin and Lehner 2006). Engaging in this practice could build bonds that increase academic engagement and promote cross-cultural understanding not only between teachers and students, but among peers, protecting against aggressive interactions. These practices hold relevance in Hughes due to the racial, ethnic, and social class divides between teachers and students; however, they are also relevant in Hilltop. In Hilltop, teachers may interpret the actions of less affluent students, deemed “rednecks” by peers, as being academically unmotivated or unprepared as well. These perceptions may perpetuate the disproportionate placement of lower SES students in lower ability level groupings, where they are more likely to report victimization. In these classrooms, lower expectations on the part of the teacher serve to reinforce disparate cultural norms and a sense of academic disconnection that may contribute to the context for aggressive peer behaviors.

Emdin (2016) argues that the tension between a teacher’s culture and that of students can be used as a bridge to building a “cosmopolitan culture” that views each

cultural identity as valuable and solidifies the roles and contributions of each member, building a sense of family. The lessons of cosmopolitanism and building a sense of family are relevant not only in urban schools such as Hughes, but in Hilltop as well. Students in Hilltop may be no more prepared for interpersonal challenges than counterparts in Hughes. While they are generally more able to demonstrate desired behaviors in the classroom behind their school-issued laptops, they are typically not engaged in meaningful social interactions promoting their ability to collaborate or present their own authentic identities.

*Replacing Exclusionary Discipline Policies with Competency-building Approaches*

The negative outcomes associated with exclusionary discipline are well documented, as are disparities in its application to students of color. As Emdin (2016:6) notes, “Many urban youth of color describe [schools as] oppressive places that have a primary goal of imposing rules and maintaining control.” This description fits with the enforcement of cell phone and dress code rules in Hughes, but extends to the regulation of behaviors in Hilltop as well. Replacing exclusionary discipline with equity-informed competency building approaches is an act of liberation, by highlighting the gaps in experiences and achievement that occur when students are unable to enact their authentic identities in school. As social and emotional learning approaches expand, it will be essential that these interventions are equity-informed (Gregory and Fergus 2017), and do not simply perpetuate the institutional bias towards predominantly white and middle-class behaviors. These programs and strategies should reinforce the school’s clear value for students’ authentic selves and behaviors, while supporting them in developing cultural

toolkits that enable them to “codeswitch” and adhere to “dominant” cultural norms when needed.

Teachers play a key role in determining their classroom’s idioculture, and as such, they must be equipped to self-reflect and assess the patterns in their room over time. For school staff, the development of cultural competency described in the previous section is critical to pursuing equity in educational opportunities and outcomes. Recruiting and retaining diverse district and school leaders, and educators, is another important step toward improving educational outcomes and reducing disciplinary disparities. However, a concerted effort is also needed to improve the teaching and cultural competency of white teachers and school leaders (and staff of other backgrounds as well) who are already in the field. As Emdin (2016) notes, offering effective instructional strategies to teachers during their ongoing professional development does not address the root of the problem, which are differences in cultural background that lead to misunderstandings and punishment. He argues that teachers must be equipped with an understanding of the assets and strengths of the communities they serve and an appreciation for local cultural knowledge. Teachers must develop more than a surface awareness of their own biases; they must be led to situate students of color within a system of oppression and marginalization that shapes their experiences. And, they must be able to interrogate and reflect on their own roles in that oppression as a means to advancing a culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings 1995) and to engage in reality pedagogy, which reconciles the experiences and viewpoints of various classroom members (Emdin 2016:27-30). This work involves efforts to “unpack their privileges and excavate the institutional, societal, and personal histories they bring” to the profession of teaching (Emdin 2016:15).

Encouraging adults in positions of authority to be more aware of their biases and more reflective about responses to perceived misbehavior could reduce disciplinary disparities. It could also foster a sense of higher expectations for all students, which builds a strong academic and aspirational culture, and reduces the context for aggression.

### *Conclusion*

While external structural factors such as access to resources initiate the path to unequal educational outcomes, a school's organizational culture and classroom idiocultures shape students' interactions with others, and perpetuate unequal learning conditions. Disparities in learning conditions and environments should be regarded as a major unaddressed barrier to achieving educational equity and access for all. Current anti-bullying initiatives fail to capture the impact of more common forms of interpersonal peer aggression, and school climate efforts fall short of measuring or addressing the very cultural factors that shape climate and conditions for learning. Resources must be brought to bear at the federal, state, and local levels to assess school climate via surveys that identify patterns of behavior and norms across groups and begin to pinpoint specific, localized needs. These overarching patterns must be paired with rich ethnographic work to uncover the process by which culture is formed and enacted through group-level interactions within a broader structure. The extent to which culture informs climate must be systematically explored prior to efforts to identify areas of improvement. Strategic, data-driven, systems-level change requires the deployment of resources and tools to school leadership teams, who require time, support, and training to fully understand and strategically address the root causes of peer aggressive behavior.

Currently, anti-bullying and school climate work is largely centered in the field of psychology. Going forward, sociologists must be engaged in the problem-solving process related to school culture and climate in order to fully account for the structural, organizational, and group-level factors that determine the opportunities all students receive in various settings. Sociologically informed systems-level change should drive the development contextually specific reform efforts, with the goals of reducing peer aggression and improving learning opportunities for all students.

Figure 1. Cultural factors and mechanisms theoretically shaping the context for aggressive behaviors in schools.

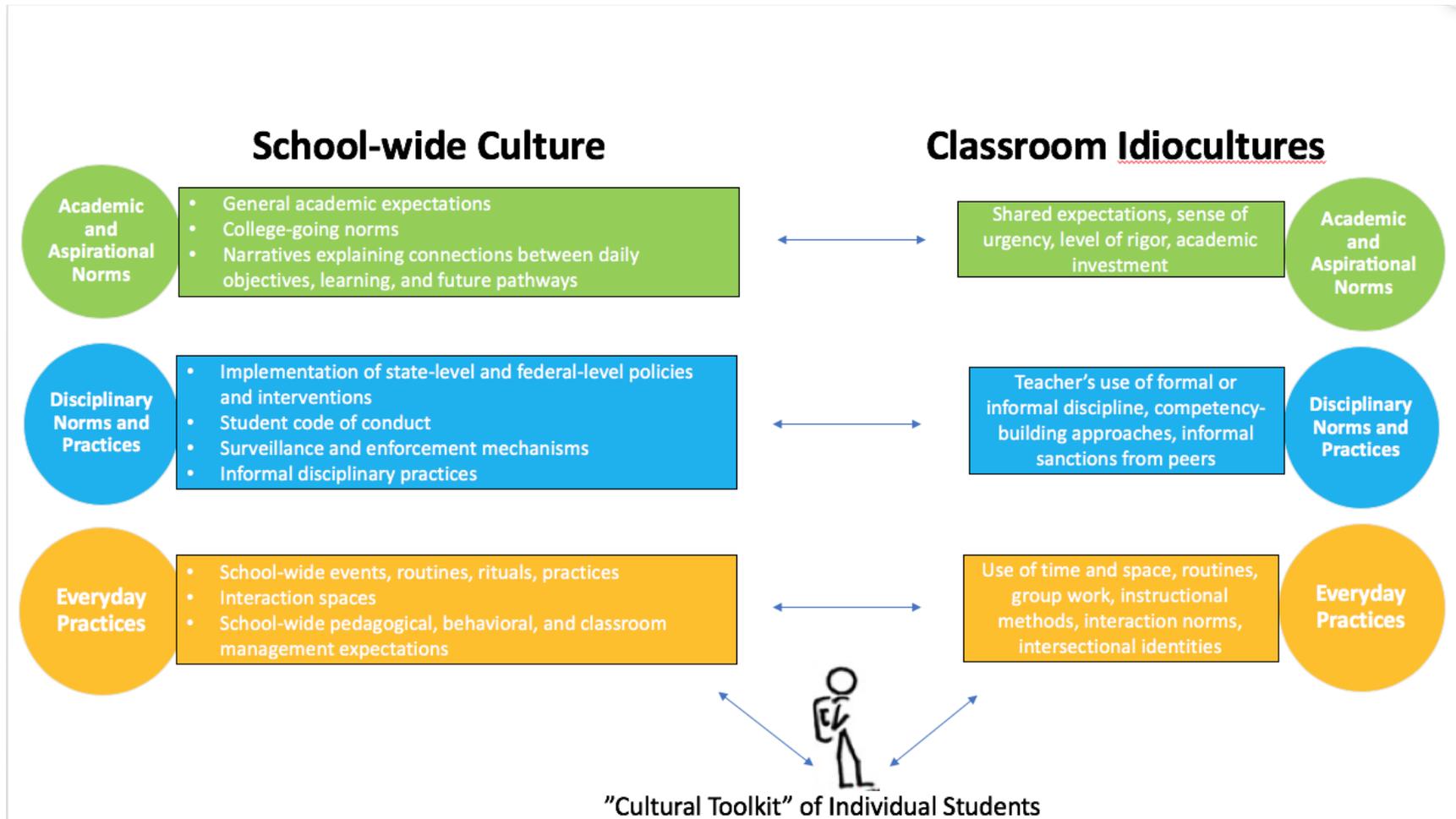


Figure 2. Classrooms sampled for ethnographic observations.

<b>HILLTOP HIGH SCHOOL</b>			
<i>9th Grade Classrooms</i>			
Subject	Lower Track (Non-CP)	Average Track (CP)	High Track (Honors)
Math	Mr. Brodzki Algebra 1	Ms. Schneider Algebra 1 CP	Ms. DePalma Honors Geometry
Language Arts	Mr. Schumacher English 1	Mr. Schumacher English 1 CP	Mrs. Olson Honors English 1
<i>11th Grade Classrooms</i>			
Subject	Lower Track (Non-CP)	Average Track (CP)	High Track (Honors)
Math	Mr. Anderson Integrated Algebra	Mr. Anderson Algebra 2 CP	Mr. Brodzki Honors Pre-Calculus
		Mr. Greene* Pre-Calculus CP	
Language Arts	Ms. Conti English 3	Ms. Conti English 3 CP	Ms. Miller Honors English 3

\*Withdrawn in Spring

Figure 3. Classrooms sampled for ethnographic observations.

<b>HUGHES HIGH SCHOOL</b>			
<i>9th Grade Classrooms</i>			
Subject	Lower Track	Average Track (CP)	
Math	Dr. Bennett Math Resource Room	Ms. Taylor Algebra Enrichment	Mr. Said Algebra 1 CP
		Ms. Kaur Algebra Enrichment	
			High Track (Honors)
Language Arts	Mr. Duncan LA Enrichment	Mrs. Gardener English 1 CP	Ms. Lewis Honors English 1
		Mrs. Kelley English 1 CP	
<i>11th Grade Classrooms</i>			
Subject	Low Track	Average Track (CP)	High Track (Honors)
Math	Mr. Sharma Math Strategies	Mr. Sharma Algebra 2 CP	Mr. Martinez Honors Algebra
			Dr. Singh Honors Pre-Calculus
Language Arts	Ms. Flores LA Enrichment	Ms. Scott English 3 CP	Ms. Morales Honors English 3
	Ms. Campbell LA Resource Room	Mr. Ayala English 3 CP	

Figure 4. Top locations for self-reported victimization by type and by school.

	<b>HUGHES H.S.</b>	<b>HILLTOP H.S.</b>
<b>Verbal</b>	1. Hallway 2. Cafeteria 3. Outside of school 4. Language Arts 5. Physical Education or Health	1. Hallway 2. Cafeteria 3. Outside of school 4. In my home 5. Sports practice or game
<b>Physical</b>	1. Hallway 2. Cafeteria 3. Outside of school 4. Physical Education or Health 5. Elective	1. Hallway 2. Outside of school 3. Cafeteria 4. Sports practice or game 5. Language Arts/Science
<b>Social</b>	1. Outside of school 2. Hallway 3. Cafeteria 4. Bathroom 5. Language Arts	1. Outside of school 2. Hallway 3. Cafeteria 4. Sports practice or game 5. Elective
<b>Threats</b>	1. Hallway 2. Outside of school 3. Cafeteria 4. Mathematics 5. Physical Education or Health	1. Outside of school 2. Hallway 3. Physical Education or Health 4. Cafeteria 5. Locker room
<b>Damage to Property</b>	1. Elective 2. Language Arts 3. Physical Education or Health 4. Mathematics 5. Cafeteria	1. Cafeteria 2. Elective 3. Foreign Language 4. Science 5. Sports practice or game

*Figure 5. Top ten reasons students perceive that other students in their schools are victimized.*

HUGHES H.S.	HILLTOP H.S.
1. Hygiene or how they smell	1. Hygiene or how they smell
2. Being overweight	2. Being overweight
3. Not being attractive	3. Acting like a teacher's pet
4. Having too many boyfriends or girlfriends	4. Not being attractive
5. Being too loud or talkative	5. Having too many boyfriends or girlfriends
6. Acting like a teacher's pet	5. Hairstyle, hair color, or hair type
7. Hairstyle, hair color, or hair type	6. Being too loud or talkative
8. Being too skinny	7. Flirting too much
8. Race or ethnicity	8. Being too competitive
8. Skin color	9. Not being good at sports

*Figure 6. Top ten reasons students report that they have been personally victimized.*

HUGHES H.S.	HILLTOP H.S.
1. Their race or ethnicity	1. Being too skinny
1. Being too quiet	1. Being too short
2. Their skin color	2. Being too quiet
2. Being too short	2. Getting high grades
2. Being too loud or talkative	3. Not being attractive
2. Getting high grades	3. Being overweight
3. Not being attractive	3. Studying too much
4. Not being good at sports	4. Being too competitive
4. Being too competitive	5. Being too loud or talkative
5. Not having a boyfriend or girlfriend	6. Not having a boyfriend or girlfriend
5. Being too skinny	

*Table 1. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents by school.*

	HUGHES H.S.	HILLTOP H.S.
<b>Grade Level</b>		
	9	26.2
	10	25.3
	11	25.5
	12	23
<b>Gender</b>		
	Female	47.1
	Male	48.5
	Prefer not to say	3.2
<b>SES</b>		
	% Free/reduced price lunch	54.5
	Low SES	25.8
	Lowest SES	11.5
<b>Race</b>		
	White	21.8
	Black	22.8
	Latino/Hispanic	40.4
	Asian	15.9
	Asian Indian	10.9
	American Indian	4.5
	Multiracial/Other	13.9
<b>Number of AP/Honors Courses</b>		
	0	53.6
	1	16.4
	2	15.4
	3 or more	14.7
<b>GPA Grade Range</b>		
	A's	40.9
	B's	34.4
	C's	9.9
	D's	0.8
	F's	0.7
	<i>n</i>	596
		871

*Note: Racial category totals may exceed 100% as students were able to select all categories that apply.*

*Table 2. Survey respondents' family background*

	HUGHES H.S.	HILLTOP H.S.
<b>Parents' Immigration Status</b>		
One or more from outside of U.S.	62.7	3.8
<b>Family Member College Attendance</b>		
0	24.7	18.9
1	26.5	14.2
2	21.8	37.8
3 or more	24.5	28.2
<b>Father's Highest Degree</b>		
High School Diploma	30.2	10.2
Some College	11.6	7.8
Completed College	17.1	39.3
Advanced Degree	7.6	34.9
<b>Mother's Highest Degree</b>		
High School Diploma	24.3	8.4
Some College	18.1	7.3
Completed College	25.7	46.4
Advanced Degree	8.4	30.2
<i>n</i>	596	871

*Note: Percentages not totaling 100 indicate some respondents didn't know or skipped item.*

Table 3. Scales measuring student attitudes

	HUGHES H.S.		HILLTOP H.S.		t	df
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
<b>College-going Attitudes (1-4; Strongly Disagree-Strongly Agree)†</b>						
I is important to me to go to a good college.	3.65	0.64	3.70	0.63		
I spend time thinking about the college I will go to.	3.27	0.76	3.34	0.78		
I often read about colleges on the internet.	2.84	0.83	2.88	0.90		
I know of at least one specific college I will apply to.	3.21	0.78	3.30	0.86		
<i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.79</i>						
<b>Mean Score on Scale</b>	3.23	0.58	3.30	0.63	-1.93	1155
<b>College Planning Actions (1-4; Strongly Disagree-Strongly Agree)</b>						
I will take the most challenging courses I can take at my school.	2.70	0.87	2.88	0.83		
I am going to take the SAT or ACT (or I have taken it already).	3.36	0.84	3.65	0.65		
I have taken or I plan to take a class to help me to do well on the SAT/ACT.	2.99	0.99	3.16	0.92		
I have visited or plan to visit college campuses.	2.99	0.96	3.42	0.80		
<i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.73</i>						
<b>Mean Score on Scale</b>	3.01	0.68	3.27	0.59	-7.97 **	1461

\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$  †Items only asked of students in grades 9-11.

	HUGHES H.S.		HILLTOP H.S.		<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>		
<b>Popularity Norms (1-4; Strongly Disagree-Strongly Agree)</b>						
In my school it is looked down upon to be a member of an unpopular group.	2.25	0.86	3.09	0.79		
Everyone knows who the "popular" kids are in my school.	2.71	0.92	2.53	0.81		
Kids in my school do whatever it takes to become popular.	2.73	0.91	2.64	0.75		
My classmates think it is important to be a member of a group that is considered popular.	2.44	0.86	2.64	0.88		
The number of "friends," "followers," or "likes" a person has on a social networking site is important in my school.	2.66	0.98	2.66	1.10		
<i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.73</i>						
<b>Mean Score on Scale</b>	2.56	0.62	2.66	0.56	-0.32 *	1461
<b>Normalcy of Getting in Trouble (1-6; Nobody-Everyone%)</b>						
<i>What percentage of students at your school:</i>						
think it is a normal thing to do to get in trouble?	4.23	1.22	3.24	1.10		
think it is funny when they get in trouble?	4.29	1.35	3.13	1.11		
think it is funny when other students get into trouble?	4.73	1.31	3.96	1.28		
think it is a normal things to do to interrupt the teacher during class?	4.25	1.38	3.09	1.20		
<i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.87</i>						
<b>Mean Score on Scale</b>	4.37	1.11	3.35	0.94	18.89 **	1461

\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$  †Items only asked of students in grades 9-11.

Table 4. Subject-specific disciplinary norms.

	HUGHES H.S.		HILLTOP H.S.		<i>t</i>		<i>df</i>
	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Mean	<i>SD</i>			
<b>Severity of Discipline in Mathematics (1-4; Never-Often)</b>							
<i>If a student disrupts your class by teasing someone else or calling the names, how often do these responses occur?</i>							
The student gets sent to the office or out of class.	2.31	1.09	1.71	0.90			
The students' parents get a phone call.	1.99	1.04	1.60	0.85			
The student gets detention.	2.02	1.06	1.72	0.90			
The student gets suspended.	1.84	1.01	1.40	0.72			
The student gets expelled.	1.56	0.88	1.26	0.62			
<b>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.92</b>							
<b>Mean Score on Scale</b>	1.94	0.87	1.50	0.71	11.04	**	1435
<b>Severity of Discipline in Language Arts (1-4; Never-Often)</b>							
<i>If a student disrupts your class by teasing someone else or calling the names, how often do these responses occur?</i>							
The student gets sent to the office or out of class.	2.35	1.02	1.66	0.91			
The students' parents get a phone call.	1.95	0.94	1.54	0.87			
The student gets detention.	2.10	1.00	1.63	0.90			
The student gets suspended.	1.93	1.00	1.36	0.71			
The student gets expelled.	1.53	0.81	1.27	0.66			
<b>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.90</b>							
<b>Mean Score on Scale</b>	1.97	0.77	1.53	0.69	19.76	**	1422

\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$

Table 5. Rotated factor matrix with loadings for Social and Academic Goals Scales

Items (1-4; Not At All Important-Very Important)	Loadings		Communality
	Factor 1: Social Goals	Factor 2: Academic Goals	
<i>How important are the following goals to you?</i>			
For other kids to think you're "cool."	<b>0.86</b>	0.04	0.74
To belong to a "cool" group.	<b>0.86</b>	0.04	0.75
For others to have a crush on you or want to date you.	<b>0.86</b>	0.02	0.68
To go to parties.	<b>0.78</b>	-0.07	0.61
To have a boyfriend or girlfriend.	<b>0.70</b>	-0.03	0.49
For others to think you are good looking, hot, or pretty.	<b>0.83</b>	0.05	0.68
To be considered popular.	<b>0.86</b>	0.03	0.74
To have nice or trendy clothes.	<b>0.70</b>	0.09	0.51
To have a lot of friends.	<b>0.68</b>	0.16	0.49
<b><i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.92</i></b>			
For teachers to think you are a good student.	0.09	<b>0.75</b>	0.57
To be in honors classes.	0.09	<b>0.72</b>	0.52
To do all of your homework on time.	0.00	<b>0.78</b>	0.60
To do well on standardized tests.	0.01	<b>0.72</b>	0.52
To get good grades.	-0.04	<b>0.82</b>	0.68
To get into my top choice college.	0.06	<b>0.76</b>	0.58
To get a scholarship to college.	0.03	<b>0.70</b>	0.49
<b><i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.87</i></b>			
	Eigenvalue	5.76	3.89
	% of Total Variance	35.99	24.29
	Total Variance		60.28

*Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization.*

*Table 6. Mean scores on personal victimization scales by school.*

	<b>HUGHES</b>		<b>HILLTOP H.S.</b>		t	df
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD		
<b>Social Goals (1-4)</b> <i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.92</i>	1.63	0.68	1.98	0.73	-0.92 **	1462
<b>Academic Goals (1-4)</b> <i>Cronbach's Alpha = 0.87</i>	3.22	0.69	3.24	0.64	-0.73	1461
<b>Average Personal Victimization (All Types)</b> <i>Cronbach's Alpha= 0.78</i>	1.28	0.41	1.2	0.3	4.24 **	1443
<b>Average Personal Victimization (In Person)</b> <i>Cronbach's Alpha= 0.7</i>	1.32	0.44	1.24	0.36	3.85 **	1443
<b>Average Personal Victimization (Cyber)</b> <i>Cronbach's Alpha=0.77</i>	1.25	0.52	1.17	0.33	3.99 **	1458

\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\* $p < 0.001$

*Table 7. Percentage of respondents reporting victimization in the last month by type and by school.*

	HUGHES H.S.	HILLTOP H.S.
<b>Verbal</b>		
At least once	39.3	39.5
Several times per week	7.8	6
<b>Physical</b>		
At least once	17	14.2
Several times per week	2.4	2.2
<b>Social</b>		
At least once	27.5	22.8
Several times per week	4.6	1.7
<b>Threats</b>		
At least once	18.2	5.6
Several times per week	2.4	0.5
<b>Damage to Property</b>		
At least once	8.6	3.5
Several times per week	1.6	0.1
<b>Cyber: Verbal</b>		
At least once	22.2	19.4
Several times per week	3.4	1
<b>Cyber: Exclusion</b>		
At least once	15.3	17
Several times per week	2.2	0.6
<b>Cyber: Rumors</b>		
At least once	14.9	10.8
Several times per week	1.7	0.8
<b>Cyber: Threats</b>		
At least once	14.9	6.9
Several times per week	3.2	0.5
<i>n</i>	596	871

*Table 8. Percentages of respondents who witnessed victimization of others in each subject area as a summated count variable.*

	HUGHES H.S.	HILLTOP H.S.
<b>Victimization of Others in Mathematics (Count Variable; 0-5)</b>		
<i>Which of the following happened during your class during the last week?</i>		
<i>(Students teased or made fun of one another; Students hit or pushed one another; Students threatened one another; Students damaged one another's property; Students were physically fighting with one another)</i>		
0 (None)	54.7	66.8
1	18.1	26.2
2	9.7	3.4
3	5.2	1.7
4	3.7	0.3
5 (All)	8.6	1.5
<b>Mean</b>	1.10	0.47
<i>SD</i>	1.60	0.87
<b>Victimization of Others in Language Arts (Count Variable; 0-5)</b>		
0 (None)	49.2	76.7
1	21.6	16.6
2	8.9	3.2
3	6.9	1.3
4	3.5	0.9
5 (All)	9.9	1.3
<b>Mean</b>	1.24	0.37
<i>SD</i>	1.64	0.86

*Table 9. Percentages of respondents who experienced in-person victimization in each subject area as a summated count variable.*

	HUGHES H.S.	HILLTOP H.S.
<b>Personal Victimization in Mathematics (Count Variable; 0-5)</b>		
<i>For respondents who indicated that they were victimized at least once in the last month according to each in-person type below, in Mathematics class.</i>		
<i>(Verbal, Physical, Social, Threats, Damage to Property)</i>		
0 (None)	84.9	93.1
1	9.6	5.9
2	4.2	0.8
3	0.7	0.2
4	0.3	0
5 (All)	0.3	0
<b>Mean</b>	0.23	0.08
<i>SD</i>	0.64	0.32
<b>Personal Victimization in Language Arts (Count Variable; 0-5)</b>		
<i>For respondents who indicated that they were victimized at least once in the last month according to each type below, in Mathematics class.</i>		
<i>(Verbal, Physical, Social, Threats, Damage to Property)</i>		
0 (None)	83.9	92.1
1	9.4	6.8
2	4.5	0.9
3	1.3	0.1
4	0.7	0.1
5 (All)	0.2	0
<b>Mean</b>	0.26	0.09
<i>SD</i>	0.69	0.35

Table 10. Multiple linear regression for predictors on personal victimization in both schools.

Variable	HUGHES HIGH SCHOOL				HILLTOP HIGH SCHOOL			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>
Constant	1.155*	0.183	1.288*	0.279	1.079*	0.1	1.155*	0.138
Social Goals	0.061*	0.032	0.043	0.033	0.046*	0.014	0.032*	0.014
Academic Goals	-0.008	0.033	0.003	0.033	-0.055*	0.016	-0.045*	0.016
Popularity Norms**	0.098*	0.037	0.105*	0.037	0.135*	0.018	0.137*	0.018
Confident will attend college (%)	-0.049*	0.022	-0.047*	0.022	-0.029*	0.014	-0.015	0.014
SES			0.061*	0.022			0.063*	0.016
Female			-0.066	0.043			-0.052*	0.016
Other Race			0.008	0.049			0.012	0.03
Black			0.113*	0.051			0.049	0.051
Hispanic			-0.004	0.048			-0.033	0.038
Grade			-0.022	0.019			-0.014	0.009
<i>F</i>	5.684*		3.962*		24.212*		12.464*	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.057		0.096		0.112		0.14	

\* $p < 0.05$  \*\**T*-test for the significance of difference in coefficients between schools was significant.

Table 11. Multiple linear regression for predictors on in-school personal victimization in both schools.

Variable	HUGHES HIGH SCHOOL				HILLTOP HIGH SCHOOL			
	Model 1		Model 2		Model 1		Model 2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE(B)</i>
Constant	0.851*	0.216	1.119*	0.328	0.939*	0.135	1.019*	0.177
Social Goals	0.067*	0.032	0.049	0.034	0.014	0.017	0.001	0.017
Academic Goals	0.011	0.033	0.014	0.034	-0.037	0.019	-0.029	0.019
Popularity Norms**	0.002	0.023	0.014	0.041	0.097*	0.022	0.102*	0.022
Confident will attend college (%)	-0.023	0.024	0.003	0.023	-0.014	0.017	-0.004	0.017
Normalcy of Getting into Trouble	0.047*	0.023	0.041	0.023	0.058*	0.014	0.054*	0.014
Severe Discipline in Language Arts**	-0.081*	0.033	-0.079*	0.033	0.022	0.025	0.026	0.025
Severe Discipline in Mathematics**	0.061*	0.029	0.053	0.029	-0.059*	0.024	-0.060*	0.024
Victimization of Others in Language Arts	0.079*	0.016	0.081*	0.016	0.088*	0.016	0.085*	0.016
Victimization of Others in Mathematics	0.036*	0.016	0.031	0.017	0.055*	0.016	0.057*	0.016
SES			0.048*	0.022			0.070*	0.019
Female			-0.055	0.044			-0.055*	0.024
Other Race			0.022	0.05			-0.006	0.035
Black			0.066	0.052			0.034	0.061
Hispanic			-0.2	0.050			-0.091*	0.046
Grade			-0.026	0.02			-0.011	0.011
<i>F</i>	10.232*		6.824*		23.740*		16.066*	
<i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>	0.206		0.226		0.221		0.244	

\* $p < 0.05$  \*\**T*-test for the significance of difference in coefficients between schools was significant.

*Appendix A. School Climate Understanding and Building Aspirations Survey*



**Welcome to the School Climate and Building Aspirations (SCUBA) Project!**

**Why is this study being done?**

We want to learn how you feel about school and the challenges you face every day as a student.

**What will happen while you are in the study?**

We will give you a survey on a computer. The survey will ask how you feel about school. It will also ask general questions about you, your experiences, your wellbeing, and your feelings.

**Time:** This will take about 25-35 minutes.

**Benefits:** We will use what we learn to help your school become a better place.

**Will you keep my answers secret?**

Yes. We will not tell anyone about your answers. We won't even know who you are because you can't put your name on the survey. The survey is ANONYMOUS.

**Who will know that you might be in this study?**

You and your parent will know. We won't tell anyone else. The students around you know but they won't know your answers.

**Do you have to be in the study?**

No. We won't get mad if you say no. It is okay to change your mind and stop. You do not have to answer a question you do not want to answer. Nothing will happen to you.

**Do you have any questions about this study?**

You can contact Alicia Raia-Hawrylak at \_\_\_\_, or Dr. Lauren J. Krivo at \_\_\_\_.

**Do you have any questions about your rights?**

Call or email the Rutgers University IRB at 848-932-0150 or [humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu](mailto:humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu).

Risks: If you don't feel comfortable with a question, you can skip it. If you want to stop taking the survey, you can do so at any time. If you feel bothered or upset, please let an adult know right away. You should also tell an adult if you know that someone is being bullied. Here is who to call:

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DO THE SURVEY, CLICK "YES." IF YOU DON'T WANT TO DO THE SURVEY, CLICK "NO THANKS."

- Yes, I want to do the survey. (1)
- No, I do not want to do the survey. (2)

If YES Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Block

If NO THANKS Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

Q1 What grade are you currently in at this school?

- 9 (1)
- 10 (2)
- 11 (3)
- 12 (4)

Q2 In which grade did you start attending this school?

- 9 (1)
- 10 (2)
- 11 (3)
- 12 (4)

The questions below will ask you about your school.

Please tell us how often the following happened in the last MONTH:

Q3 This month, I feel safe at [this school].

- Never
- Once or Twice
- A Few Times
- Many Times

Q4 This month, I like coming to school.

- Never
- Once or Twice
- A Few Times
- Many Times

Q5 This month, I feel comfortable with other students at [this school].

- Never
- Once or Twice
- A Few Times
- Many Times

Q6 This month, I saw other students breaking school rules.

- Never
- Once or Twice
- A Few Times
- Many Times

Please tell us how much you agree with each statement:

Q7 I feel like I am a part of this school.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree Somewhat
- Agree Somewhat
- Agree Strongly

Q8 [this school] prepares me to go to college.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree Somewhat
- Agree Somewhat
- Agree Strongly

Q9 I know I will go to college.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree Somewhat
- Agree Somewhat
- Agree Strongly

Q10 rules In your opinion, how strict are the rules and punishments in your school?

- Not strict enough (1)
- Somewhat strict (2)
- Very strict but fair (3)
- Too strict (4)

Q11 acfuture3 It is important to me to go to a good college.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q12 acfuture2 I spend time thinking about the college I will go to.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q13 acfuture4 I often read about colleges on the internet.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q14 acfuture1 I know of at least one specific college I want to apply to.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q15 My schoolwork is important.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q16 Being successful in school will help me in the future.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q17 When I have an assignment due, I keep working on it until it is finished. 4—Strongly Disagree (1)

- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q18 Getting good grades is important to me.

Strongly Disagree (1)

- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q19 I plan to pursue more education after high school.

Strongly Disagree (1)

- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q20 It is important to me to be successful in a job.

Strongly Disagree (1)

- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

**BREAK 1**

Q21 socgoals How important are the following goals to you?  
Please rate how important the following goals are to you.

	Not at all Important (1)	Somewhat Important (2)	Important (3)	Very Important (4)
For other kids to think you are cool (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To belong to a "cool" group (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For others to have a crush on you, or want to date you (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To go to parties (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
<u>To have a boyfriend or girlfriend(5)</u>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For others to think you are good looking, hot, or pretty (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be considered popular (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To have trendy clothes (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To have a lot of friends (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be seen by others as a good or nice person (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q22 acgoals How important are the following goals to you?  
Please rate how important the following goals are to you.

	Not at all important (1)	Somewhat important (2)	Important (3)	Very Important (4)
To be good at music or art (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be good at sports. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
For teachers to think you are a good student (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To be in honors classes (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To do all of your homework. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To do well on standardized tests (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To get good grades. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To get into my top choice college (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To get a scholarship to college (9)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
To get a good job (10)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q23 Please tell us about your expectations for the future.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)
I will get into a college. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will attend community college. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will attend a four-year college (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will be able to afford college. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will graduate from college. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will join the military. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will get a full-time job after graduating high school. (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I will attend medical school, law school or graduate school. (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q24 Please tell us about any steps you are taking to plan for college.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Agree (3)	Strongly Agree (4)
I am taking the most challenging courses I can take at my school. (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I am going to take the SAT or ACT. (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have taken or I plan to take a class to help me do well on the SAT or ACT. (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I have visited college campuses. (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
I read about the rankings of colleges in magazines or on the Internet. (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

Q25 The following questions are about the school you are attending now.  
Please tell us how much you agree with each statement.

In my school it is looked down upon to be a member of an unpopular group.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q26 Everyone knows who the “popular” kids are in my school.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q27 The different groups in my school get along well.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

Q28 Kids in my school do whatever it takes to become popular.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

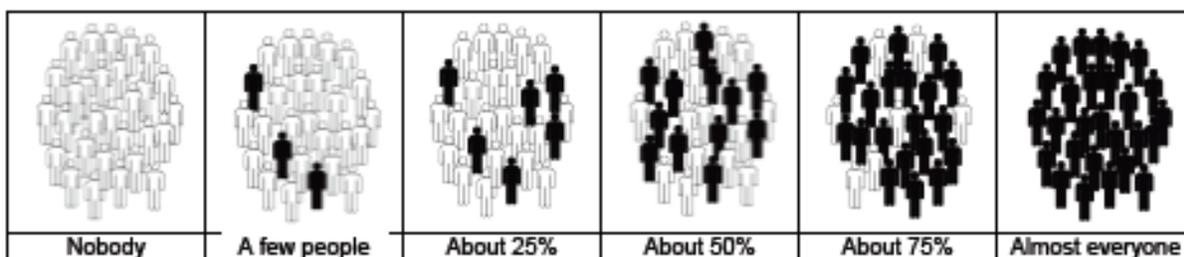
Q29 My classmates think it is important to be a member of a group that is considered popular.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

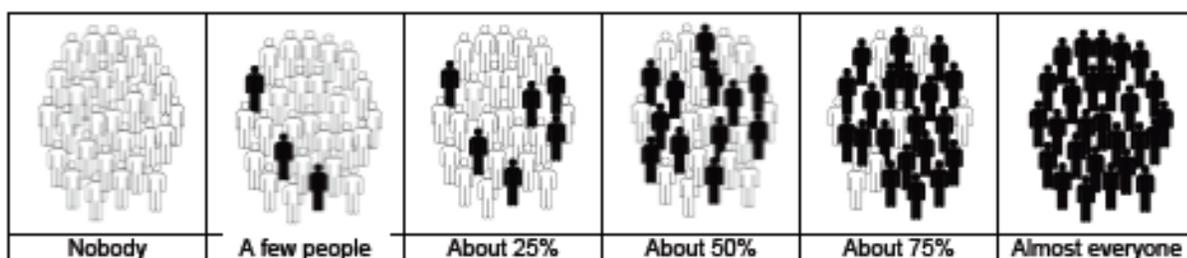
Q30 The number of “friends” or “followers” a person has on a social networking site like Facebook is important to students in my school.

- Strongly Disagree (1)
- Disagree (2)
- Agree (3)
- Strongly Agree (4)

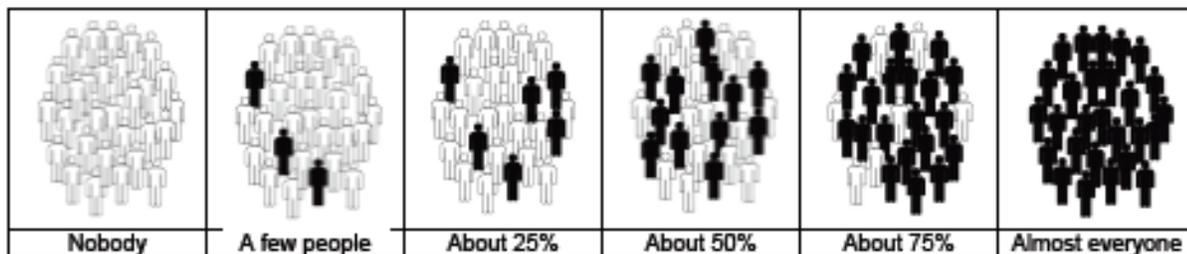
Q31 What percentage of students at [this school] are confident that they will go to college.



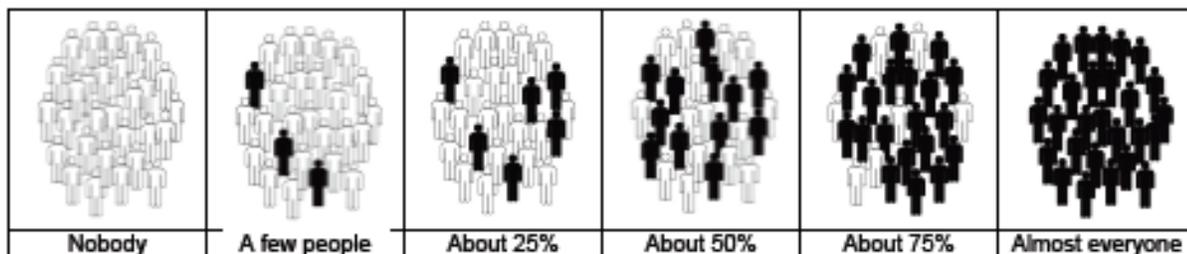
Q32 What percentage of students at [this school] think it is a normal thing to do to get into trouble?



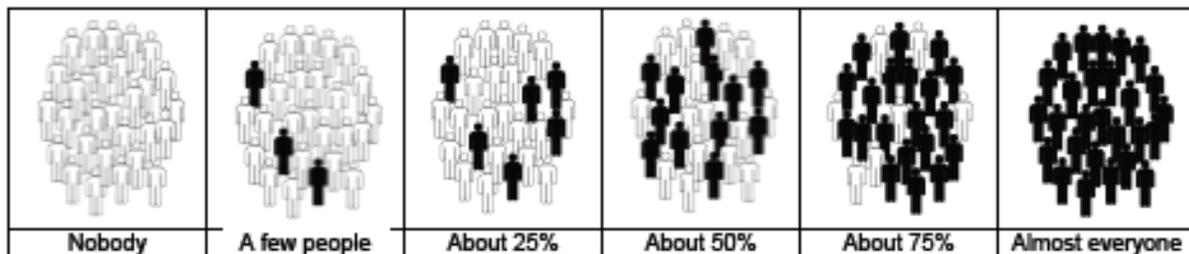
Q33 What percentage of students at [this school] think it is funny when they get into trouble?



Q34 What percentage of students at [this school] think it is funny when other students get into trouble?



**Q35** What percent of students at [this school] think it is a normal thing to do interrupt the teacher during class?



Q36- 49 Think about your Language Arts class and respond to the following questions. (REPEAT SET for Math, History, Science, Physical Education, Foreign Language, Elective)

Which of the following things happened during your \_\_\_\_\_ class during the last week? SELECT ALL THAT APPLY.

Students in my class wasted a lot of time.

Students did not follow directions in class.

Students in my class interrupted the teacher, preventing him or her from teaching.

I saw all the other students working hard in this class.

I could do my assignments in class without being interrupted or bothered by other students.

Most students in my class could do their assignments in class without being interrupted by other students.

Students teased or made fun of one another.

Students hit or pushed one another.

Students threatened one another.

Students damaged one another's property.

Students were physically fighting with one another.

Students used their cell phones or laptops to talk to one another, use social networking sites or apps, or to do something else that was not school related.

Most of the students in my class did all of their classwork and homework.

Students helped one another with their work.

Students received detention or in-school suspension.

If a student disrupts this class by teasing someone else or calling them names, how often do these things occur?

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Always (4)
The teacher notices but ignores it and keeps teaching (1)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The teacher gives the student a warning (2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The teacher asks the class to discuss why it is wrong to tease others (3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The student gets sent to office or out of class (4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The student's parents get a phone call at home (5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The student gets detention (6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The student gets suspended (7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
The student gets expelled (8)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

## BREAK 2

**In the following section, we will ask questions about your social experiences in general.**

Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH:

Q50 tsfrq I have been teased, called mean names, or insulted ~~on purpose by other kids.~~

- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once per week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

If Never Is Selected, Then Skip To Think about the other students in you...

Q51 tsplc In the last month, WHERE have you been teased, called mean names, or insulted by other kids? Please select all that apply.

- In Language Arts class
- In Math class
- In Foreign Language class
- In an elective class
- In Physical Education or Health class
- In History class
- In Science class
- In a sports practice or game after school
- In a club or other extracurricular activity after school
- In the hallway
- In the bathroom
- On the way to or from school
- In the cafeteria
- In the locker room
- In the school parking lot or playground
- In my home
- At the home of another kid
- Somewhere else INSIDE OF SCHOOL
- Somewhere else OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

Q52 tsaggid In the last month, WHO teased you or called you mean names?

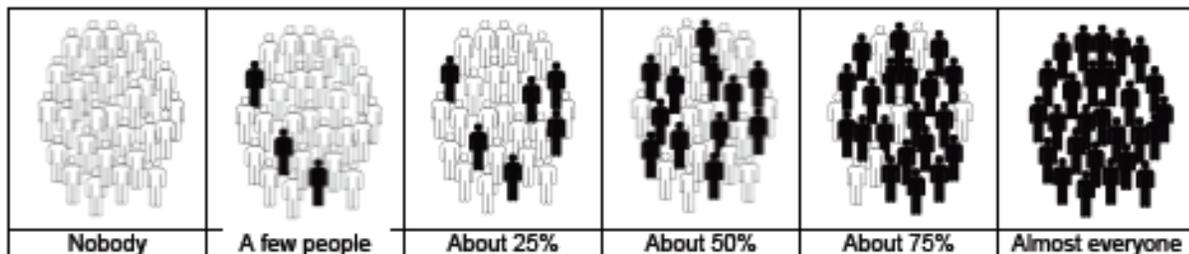
Please select all that apply.

- A friend (1)
- My boyfriend or girlfriend (2)
- An ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend (3)
- A group of friends (4)
- Someone who is not my friend (5)
- A group of people who are not my friends (6)

Q53 tsbother How much does it usually bother you when someone else teases you or calls you mean names?

- It doesn't bother me at all. (1)
- It bothers me a little bit. (2)
- It bothers me a lot. (3)

Q54 tsstuds Think about the other students in your school. About how many of them have been teased or called mean names by other kids in the last month?



Q55 psfrq Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH: I have been pinched, slapped, hit, kicked, shoved or punched by another kid.

- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once per week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

If Never Is Selected, Then Skip To Think about the other students in you...

Q56 psplc In the last month, WHERE have you been pinched, slapped, hit, kicked, shoved or punched by another kid? Please select all that apply.

- In Language Arts class
- In Math class
- In Foreign Language class
- In an elective class
- In Physical Education or Health class
- In History class
- In Science class
- In a sports practice or game after school
- In a club or other extracurricular activity after school
- In the hallway
- In the bathroom
- On the way to or from school
- In the cafeteria
- In the locker room
- In the school parking lot or playground
- In my home
- At the home of another kid
- Somewhere else INSIDE OF SCHOOL
- Somewhere else OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

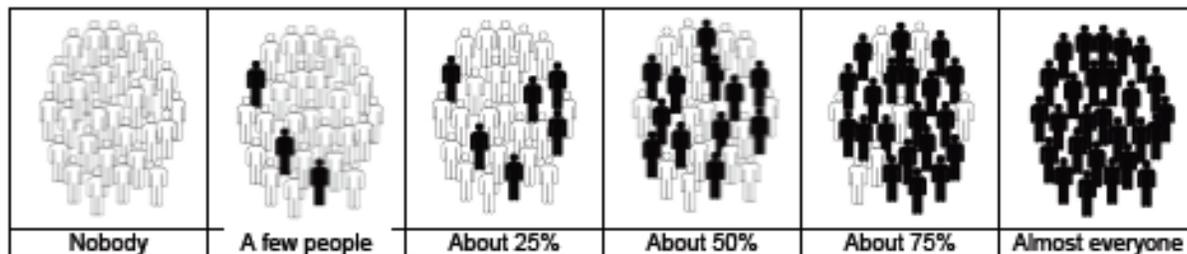
Q57 psaggid In the last month, WHO pinched, slapped, hit, kicked, shoved or punched you? Please select all that apply.

- A friend (1)
- My boyfriend or girlfriend (2)
- An ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend (3)
- A group of friends (4)
- Someone who is not my friend (5)
- A group of people who are not my friends (6)

Q58 psbother How much does it usually bother you when someone else pinches, slaps, punches, or kicks you?

- It doesn't bother me at all. (1)
- It bothers me a little bit. (2)
- It bothers me a lot. (3)

Q59 psstuds Think about the other students in your school. About how many of them have been pinched, slapped, hit, kicked, shoved or punched by another kid in the last month?



Q60 thfrq Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH: Someone threatened to hurt or fight me.

- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once per week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

If Never Is Selected, Then Skip To

Think about the othe...

Q61 thplc In the last month, WHERE were you when someone threatened to hurt or fight you? Please select all that apply.

- In Language Arts class
- In Math class
- In Foreign Language class
- In an elective class
- In Physical Education or Health class
- In History class
- In Science class
- In a sports practice or game after school
- In a club or other extracurricular activity after school
- In the hallway
- In the bathroom
- On the way to or from school
- In the cafeteria
- In the locker room
- In the school parking lot or playground
- In my home
- At the home of another kid
- Somewhere else INSIDE OF SCHOOL
- Somewhere else OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

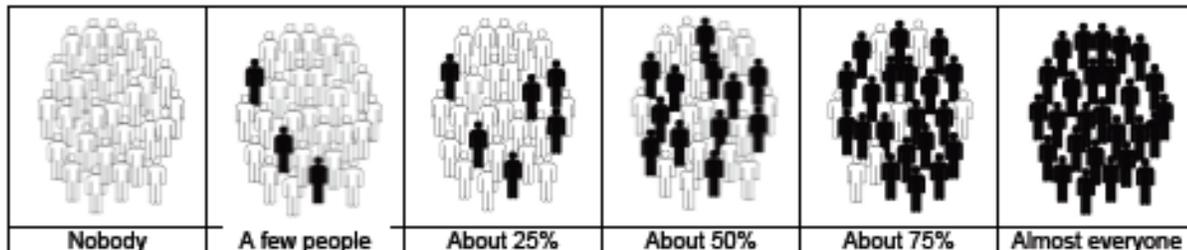
Q62 thaggid In the last month, WHO threatened to hurt or fight you? Please select all that apply.

- A friend (1)
- My boyfriend or girlfriend (2)
- An ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend (3)
- A group of friends (4)
- Someone who is not my friend (5)
- A group of people who are not my friends (6)

Q63 thbother How much does it usually bother you when someone else threatens to hurt or fight you?

- It doesn't bother me at all. (1)
- It bothers me a little bit. (2)
- It bothers me a lot. (3)

Q64 thstuds Think about the other students in your school. About how many of them have been threatened with harm or a fight by another kid in the last month?



Q65 scfrq Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH: Someone told lies or spread rumors about me, or tried to get other people not to like me.

- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once per week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

If Never Is Selected, Then Skip To

Think about the othe...

Q66 scplc In the last month, WHERE did people tell lies or spread rumors about you, or try to get people not to like you? Please select all that apply.

- In Language Arts class
- In Math class
- In Foreign Language class
- In an elective class
- In Physical Education or Health class
- In History class
- In Science class
- In a sports practice or game after school
- In a club or other extracurricular activity after school
- In the hallway
- In the bathroom
- On the way to or from school
- In the cafeteria
- In the locker room
- In the school parking lot or playground
- In my home
- At the home of another kid
- Somewhere else INSIDE OF SCHOOL
- Somewhere else OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

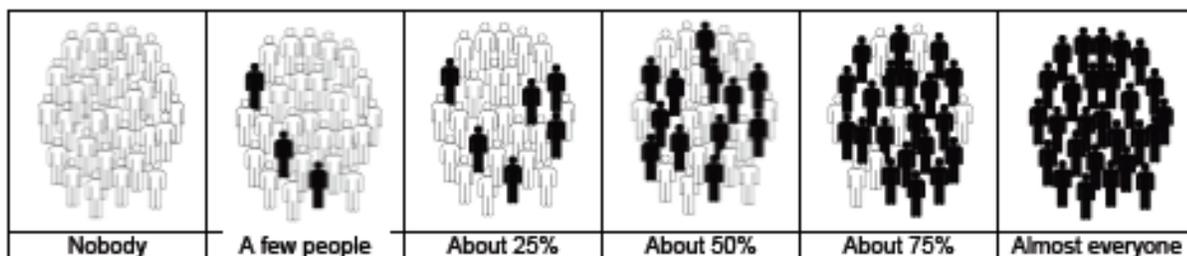
Q67 scaggid WHO told lies about you or spread rumors about you, or tried to get other people not to like you? Please select all that apply.

- A friend (1)
- My boyfriend or girlfriend (2)
- An ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend (3)
- A group of friends (3)
- Someone who is not my friend (4)
- A group of people who are not my friends (5)

Q68 scbother How much does it usually bother you when someone else lies or spreads rumors about you?

- It doesn't bother me at all. (1)
- It bothers me a little bit. (2)
- It bothers me a lot. (3)

Q69 scstud Think about the other students in your school. About how many of them have had lies or rumors told about them in the last month?



Q70 dpfrq Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH. Someone tried to damage or destroy your things (such as a notebook, a book bag, or a cell phone) on purpose?

- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once a week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

If Never Is Selected, Then Skip To Think about the other students in you...

Q71 dpplc WHERE did someone try to damage or destroy your things on purpose? Please select all that apply.

- In Language Arts class
- In Math class
- In Foreign Language class
- In an elective class
- In Physical Education or Health class
- In History class
- In Science class
- In a sports practice or game after school
- In a club or other extracurricular activity after school
- In the hallway
- In the bathroom
- On the way to or from school
- In the cafeteria
- In the locker room
- In the school parking lot or playground
- In my home
- At the home of another kid
- Somewhere else INSIDE OF SCHOOL
- Somewhere else OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL

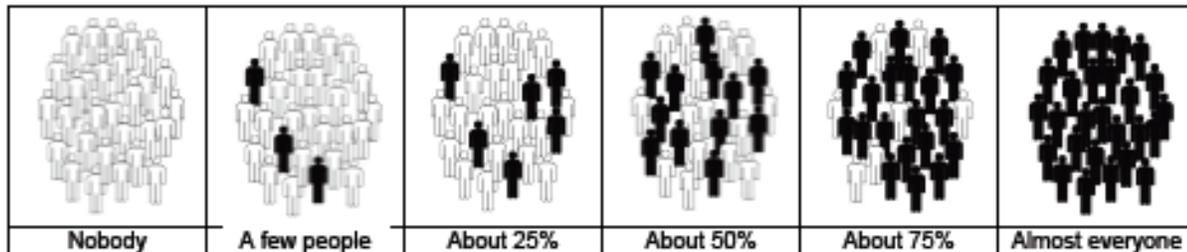
Q72 dpaggid In the last month, WHO tried to damage or destroy your things on purpose? Please select all that apply.

- A friend
- My boyfriend or girlfriend
- An ex-boyfriend or ex-girlfriend
- A group of friends
- Someone who is not my friend
- A group of people who are not my friends

Q73 dpbother How much does it usually bother you when someone else damages or destroys your property on purpose?

- It doesn't bother me at all. (1)
- It bothers me a little bit. (2)
- It bothers me a lot. (3)

Q74 dpstuds Think about the other students in your school. About how many of them have had their things (such as a notebook, a bookbag or a cell phone) damaged or destroyed by someone on purpose?



Q75 tparent What are your parent(s) most likely to tell you to do if another kid teases you, calls you a mean name, or insults you on purpose?

- Ignore the person (1)
- Ask the person to stop (2)
- Tell the teacher (3)
- Tell your parents (4)
- Report to a school safety office or the police (5)
- Report to a guidance counselor (6)
- Tease them back (7)
- Tell them if they don't stop you will hurt them (8)
- Fight them (9)

Q76 thparent What are your parent(s) most likely to tell you to do if another kid threatens to hurt you?

- Ignore the person (1)
- Ask the person to stop (2)
- Tell the teacher (3)
- Tell your parents (4)
- Report to a school safety office or the police (5)
- Report to a guidance counselor(6)
- Threaten them back (7)
- Tell them if they don't stop you will hurt them (8)
- Fight them (9)

Q77 phparent What are your parent(s) most likely to tell you to do if another kid hits you first?

- Ignore the person (1)
- Ask the person to stop (2)
- Tell the teacher (3)
- Tell your parents (4)
- Report to a school safety office or the police (5)
- Report to a guidance counselor (6)
- Hit them back (7)
- Tell them if they don't stop you will hurt them (8)
- Fight them (9)

Q78 tsotsreas1 The next section will ask about reasons why students in your school might be teased. How often do OTHER STUDENTS in this school get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Not being attractive (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being overweight (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too skinny (3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too short (4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too tall (5)	<input type="radio"/>				
Their hairstyle, hair color, or hair type (6)	<input type="radio"/>				
Their hygiene or how they smell (7)	<input type="radio"/>				
Owning cheap or beat up things like an old book bag (8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Their family not having money (9)	<input type="radio"/>				
Wearing clothing that is out of style (10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not having enough money for lunch or snacks (11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too quiet (12)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too loud or talkative (13)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q79 tsotsreas2 How often do OTHER STUDENTS in this school get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Getting high grades (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Studying too much (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Volunteering too much in class (3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Acting like a teacher's pet or favorite student (4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Getting low grades (5)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not being good at sports (6)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not having special talents in art or music (7)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not joining school clubs or going on school trips (8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not having clear future goals(9)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too competitive (10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not being competitive enough (11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Talking or being disruptive in class (12)	<input type="radio"/>				
Acting out and getting in trouble too much (13)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q80 tsotsreas3 How often do OTHER STUDENTS in this school get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Not being popular or having enough friends (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not having a boyfriend or girlfriend (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being perceived as gay or lesbian (3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being a member of the LGBT+ community (4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not listening to the right music (5)	<input type="radio"/>				
Looking weak or unwilling to fight (6)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having too many boyfriends or girlfriends (7)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having too much money (8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too popular (9)	<input type="radio"/>				
Flirting too much (10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too "girly" (11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being a "tomboy" (12)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q81 tsotsreas4 How often do OTHER STUDENTS in this school get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Not speaking clear English (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Their race or ethnicity (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Their skin color (3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Their religion (4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Getting help at school because of a disability (5)	<input type="radio"/>				
Wearing glasses (6)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being blind or deaf (7)	<input type="radio"/>				
Speaking slowly or stuttering (8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not being able to pay attention in class (9)	<input type="radio"/>				
Needing a wheelchair or another device because of a disability (10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being an immigrant (11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having a medical condition or requiring medication (12)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having a mental illness (13)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q82 tsotsreas5 How often do OTHER STUDENTS in this school get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Having a parent who is an immigrant (1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having a single parent or divorced parents (2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having two moms or two dads (3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having brothers or sisters who are teased or made fun of (4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Hanging out with a group in which other people are teased or made fun of (5)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q83 tsareas1 In the previous sections, we asked you to think about how often OTHER students are teased or made fun of for certain reasons. Now we would like you to answer about whether you have been teased or made fun of for any of these reasons. How often do YOU get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Not being attractive (x1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being overweight (x2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too skinny (x3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too short (x4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too tall (x5)	<input type="radio"/>				
Their hairstyle, hair color, or hair type (x6)	<input type="radio"/>				
Your hygiene or how you smell (x7)	<input type="radio"/>				
Owning cheap or beat up things like an old book bag (x8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Your family not having money (x9)	<input type="radio"/>				
Wearing clothing that is out of style (x10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not having enough money for lunch or snacks (x11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too quiet (x12)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too loud or talkative (x13)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q84 tsareas2 How often do YOU get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Getting high grades (x1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Studying too much (x2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Volunteering too much in class (x3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Acting like a teacher's pet or favorite student (x4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Getting low grades (x5)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not being good at sports (x6)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not having special talents in art or music (x7)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not joining school clubs or going on school trips (x8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not having clear future goals(x9)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too competitive (x10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not being competitive enough (x11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Talking or being disruptive in class (x12)	<input type="radio"/>				
Acting out and getting in trouble too much (x13)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q85 tsureas3 How often do YOU get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Not being popular or having enough friends (x1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not having a boyfriend or girlfriend (x2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being perceived as gay or lesbian (x3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being a part of the LGBT+ community (x4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not listening to the right music (x5)	<input type="radio"/>				
Looking weak or unwilling to fight (x6)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having too many boyfriends or girlfriends (x7)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having too much money (x8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too popular (x9)	<input type="radio"/>				
Flirting too much (x10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being too "girly" (x11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being a "tomboy" (x12)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q86 tsareas4 How often do YOU get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Hardly Ever (2)	Sometimes (3)	Often (4)	Always (5)
Not speaking clear English (x1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Your race or ethnicity (x2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Your skin color (x3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Your religion (x4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Getting help at school because of a disability (x5)	<input type="radio"/>				
Wearing glasses (x6)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being blind or deaf (x7)	<input type="radio"/>				
Speaking slowly or stuttering (x8)	<input type="radio"/>				
Not being able to pay attention in class (x9)	<input type="radio"/>				
Needing a wheelchair or another device because of a disability (x10)	<input type="radio"/>				
Being an immigrant (x11)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having a medical condition or requiring medication (x12)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having a mental illness (x13)	<input type="radio"/>				

Q87 tsureas5 How often do YOU get teased or picked on for:

	Never (1)	Rarely (2)	Sometimes (3)	Quite Often (4)	Very Often (5)
Having a parent who is an immigrant (x1)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having a single parent or divorced parents (x2)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having two moms or two dads (x3)	<input type="radio"/>				
Having brothers or sisters who are teased or made fun of (x4)	<input type="radio"/>				
Hanging out with a group in which other people are teased or made fun of (x5)	<input type="radio"/>				

The following questions will ask about your experiences on the internet.

Q88 inthours About how many hours per day do you use the Internet on a computer or another device such as a cell phone or a tablet?

- 0 (1)
- Less than 1 hour (2)
- 1-2 hours (3)
- 2-3 hours (4)
- 3-5 hours (5)
- More than 5 hours (6)

Q89 intmobile Do you have internet access on a mobile device you bring to school, such as cell phone?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q90 cyfrqverbal Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH:  
Another person wrote mean things about you, called you mean names, or posted something to embarrass you on purpose, with a cell phone, in a computer game, or with other technology.

- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once per week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

Q91 cyfrqthreat Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH:  
Another person threatened you using the internet, with a cell phone, in a computer game, or with other technology.

- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once per week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

Q92 Cyfrqsoc Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH:  
Another person left you out or wouldn't let you join a group (on Snapchat, Instagram, or another app) using the internet, with a cell phone, in a computer game, or with other technology.

- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once per week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

Q93 CyfrqsoceX Describe how often the following happened to you in the LAST MONTH:  
Another person spread rumors about you using the internet, with a cell phone, in a computer game, or with other technology.

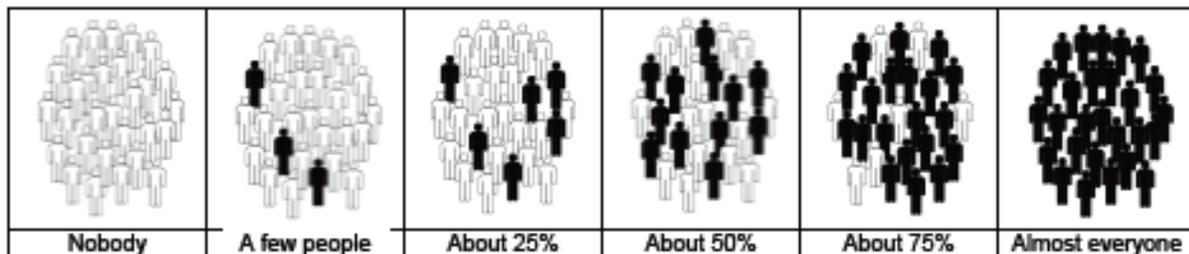
- Never (1)
- Once or twice (2)
- About once per week (3)
- Several times per week (4)

Q94 cybother How much does it usually bother you when someone else spreads rumors about your or posts mean or embarrassing things about you on the internet?

- It doesn't bother me at all. (1)
- It bothers me a little bit. (2)
- It bothers me a lot. (3)

Q95 cystuds Think about the other students in your school.

About how many of them have had mean things written about them, have been called names, threatened or embarrassed on purpose by someone on the internet, with a cell phone, in a computer game, or with other technology?



○

Q96 cyinscl How often do students in your school use their mobile devices to tease, call others names, threaten, or post embarrassing things about other students DURING SCHOOL HOURS?

- ⊖ In every class (1)
- At least once per day (2)
- At least once per week (3)
- At least once per month (4)
- Almost never (4)

Q97 rankprobs Please put these in order from 1 to 6 based on which one of these type of behaviors is the biggest problem in your school.

1= BIGGEST PROBLEM 6= SMALLEST PROBLEM

- \_\_\_\_\_ CYBER: writing or posting mean things on the internet, cell phone, or other device (1)
- \_\_\_\_\_ PHYSICAL: punching, hitting, pinching or kicking (2)
- \_\_\_\_\_ SOCIAL: spreading rumors, lying, or getting someone to not like someone else (3)
- \_\_\_\_\_ DAMAGE TO PROPERTY: damaging someone else's things on purpose (4)
- \_\_\_\_\_ VERBAL: teasing and name calling (5)
- \_\_\_\_\_ THREATS: threatening to hurt or fight someone else (6)





Q100 tellparent In the last month, how often did you tell a parent or guardian the following behaviors happened to you?

	Never (1)	Once or twice (2)	About once a week (3)	More than once a week (4)	About once a day (5)	More than once a day (6)	All the time (7)
Someone teased and called me names (x2)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Someone punched, hit , pinched, or kicked me (x3)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Someone wrote mean thing about me using technology (x4)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Someone spread rumors about me or got someone else to not like me (x5)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Someone threatened to hurt or fight me (x6)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Someone damaged my things my things on purpose (x7)	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

You're almost done! Here are a few more questions about you and your family.

Q101 Which of the following letter grades best represents your overall grade point average (which grade do you get the most often)?

- A+ (1)
- A (2)
- A- (3)
- B+ (4)
- B- (5)
- B (6)
- C+ (7)
- C (8)
- C- (9)
- D+ (10)
- D (11)
- D- (12)
- F (13)

Q102 How many Honors or Advanced Placement (AP) Course are you taking this academic year?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 or more (6)

Q103 How many siblings live with you in your home?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 or more (6)

Q104 How many adults live in your home?

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 (4)
- 4 (5)
- 5 or more (6)

Q105 Do you live at home at least most of the time with your biological mother?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q106 Do you live at home at least most of the time with your biological father?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

Q107 What is the highest level of education your biological or adoptive father completed?

- Less than High School (1)
- High School Diploma (2)
- Some College but not completed (3)
- College Degree (4)
- Advanced Degree (for example a Master's Degree or a Doctorate) (5)
- I don't know (6)

Q108 What is the highest level of education your biological or adoptive mother completed?

- Less than High School (1)
- High School Diploma (2)
- Some College but not completed (3)
- College Degree (4)
- Advanced Degree (for example a Master's Degree or a Doctorate) (5)
- I don't know (6)

Q109 What is your biological or adoptive father's current employment status?

- He works part time (1)
- He works full time (2)
- He does not have a job (3)
- He is retired and does not work (4)
- He is disabled and does not work (5)
- I don't know (6)

Q110 What is your biological or adoptive mother's current employment status?

- She works part time (1)
- She works full time (2)
- She does not have a job (3)
- She is retired and does not work (4)
- She is disabled and does not work (5)
- I don't know (6)

Q111 What is your current age?

- 13 (3)
- 14 (4)
- 15 (5)
- 16 (6)
- 17 (7)
- 18 (8)
- 19 (9)
- 20 (10)
- 21 (11)
- Other

Q112 How would you describe the amount of money your family has, compared to other families in your school?

- My family has less money than most other students' families in my school. (1)
- My family has about the same amount of money as other students' families in my school. (2)
- My family has more money than most other students' families in my school. (3)

Q113 What is your gender?

- Male (1)
- Female (2)
- Prefer not to answer (3)

Q114 livfamcol How many members of your immediate family (parents, brothers or sisters) have attended college? (Check one answer)

- 0 (1)
- 1 (2)
- 2 (3)
- 3 or more (4)

Q115 house What type of housing do you live in?

- Public housing apartment (1)
- Apartment (2)
- Condominium or townhouse (3)
- Single family home (4)
- Where I live changes from day to day (5)

Q116 paroutus Do you have a parent who was born outside of the United States?

- Yes - One parent (1)
- Yes - Two parents (2)
- No (3)
- Not sure (4)

Q117 lunch Do you receive free or reduced price lunch?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- Not sure (3)

Q118 Was there any time in the last year when your parent(s) was unable to pay the mortgage or rent for the place where you live?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- I don't know (3)

Q119 Was there any time in the past year when the gas, electric, television, or phone service was turned off because your parent(s) could not pay the full amount of the bill?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)
- I don't know (3)

Q120 race What is your race? (CHECK ALL THAT APPLY)

- Black or African American (2)
- Hispanic or Latino (3)
- White (4)
- Asian (5)
- American Indian or Native American (6)
- Other (7) \_\_\_\_\_

Q121 job Do you currently have a paid job outside of school?

Yes

No (skip logic)

Q122 reasonjob Why do you work outside of school? (Select all that apply)

To help my family with bills

To save for or pay for my car

To save for college

To pay for my own things or activities

Other

Q123 How many hours do you work during an average week of school?

1-2

3-4

5-6

7-8

More than 8

*Appendix B. SCUBA Student Interview Protocol*

**Note:** These questions will be used as a guide, with openness to new research avenues and questions that may arise during the interview and the responses to these questions.

**Target Subject:** High School Students

**Introductory Instructions:**

Explain research questions and purpose of study

Attain written parental consent/assent to participate and be recorded

I will start the interview by referring to the visits to the classroom I've been conducting observations in, and explaining that the purpose of my work is to gain a better understanding of what it's like to be a student in the school.

**Personal Background:**

Tell me a little bit about yourself.

- You're in \_\_\_ grade, right? How old are you?
- Where were you born, and where have you lived?
- Tell me how someone close to you would describe you.

Tell me a little bit about your hometown/this town and any other towns where you have lived.

- Where did you grow up? What was it like there?
- What is there to do there? What do teenagers do (outside of school)?

Tell me a little bit about your family.

- Who do you live with?
- Are your parents from NJ originally?
- Were they born in another country?

What are your goals for the future? What are your priorities now, and for the future?  
To prompt: How important to you are the following (list items from Academic versus Social goals index including things like wearing cool clothing, going to parties, being part of a cool group, getting good grades, finishing homework, challenging yourself, getting a good job, etc.)

**Academic Experience**

Tell me about your high school.

How do you feel about school?

- What classes do you take? How do you feel about them?
- What are your favorite or least favorite classes?
- Tell me about your teachers. (Ask about the rules in their classrooms)

-How do you feel when you're in class? What are you typically thinking about while you are in class? Do you ever feel distracted while in class, and if so, what is distracting you (if you feel comfortable telling me)?

-How much homework do you have per night?

Are most of the classes in your school more or less like the classes you are in? How are they similar or different?

Tell me what it's like in your school's cafeteria.

Tell me what it's like in your school's locker room. (follow up as necessary with gym class, study hall, etc.)

Tell me about the rules at your school.

-How many students actually adhere to rules?

-What are the consequences?

-Are the rules enforced fairly? Consistently?

Tell me about the administrators at your school.

Tell me what your parent(s)/guardian thinks about your school.

Tell me about your extracurricular activities.

Tell me about the extracurricular activities of your peers.

### **Social Experience**

Tell me about your friends. Tell me about other groups at your school. Are certain students or groups more popular than one another, and how so? What do students in your school need to be or do to be considered "popular"?

Do you go to parties?

Tell me about your peers in your school. Tell me about peers in your classes. (I will reference events and observations from the classroom to elicit responses regarding various forms of aggressive behavior, without explicitly naming them).

Does teasing or name calling happen a lot at your school? Tell me about it.

-How often/where/when does it typically occur?

-Have you ever had this done to you? (How often/where/how did you feel/what did you do?)

-Have you done this to others? (How often/where/why did you do it?)

- What are the reasons why students tease or call one another names in your school?

Do students in your school gossip or spread rumors? Tell me about it.

- How often/where/when does it typically occur?
- Have you ever had this done to you? (How often/where/how did you feel/what did you do?)
- Have you done this to others? (How often/where/why did you do it?)
- What are the reasons why students gossip/spread rumors about each other in your school?

Do students in your school ever threaten one another? Tell me about it.

- How often/where/when does it typically occur?
- Have you ever had this done to you? (How often/where/how did you feel/what did you do?)
- Have you done this to others? (How often/where/why did you do it?)
- What are the reasons why students threaten one another in your school?

Are students in your school physical with one another - do they hit each other a lot, or punch, slap, or kick one another?

- How often/where/when does it typically occur?
- Have you ever had this done to you? (How often/where/how did you feel/what did you do?)
- Have you done this to others? (How often/where/why did you do it?)
- What are the reasons why hit or otherwise physically hurt each other in your school?

Are the behaviors serious problems? Which of the behaviors we discussed are the biggest problem(s) in your school?

Tell me about the rules in your school. (follow up regarding specific classrooms)

What do your different teachers do to deal with these behaviors if they occur in class? Are your classes at school ever interrupted by fighting or arguing among students?

If you went home to a parent or guardian and told them that a student was being aggressive or bullying you, what would be their response? What did your parents teach you about fighting?

Have you ever been in a physical fight? Would you mind describing it/them for me (precipitating action, decision to fight, outcome)

### **Internet/Cell phone use**

Tell me about how the other students in your school use the internet. What apps do they use?

Tell me about your internet use. (Do you have internet access in your household (if not, do you use it often, and where)? How many hours per day would you estimate that you

use the internet? What types of things do you do on the computer/cell phone? Tell me about apps you use.

Do students in your school use computer sites or apps on the cell phone to bother other students (such as calling them names or spreading rumors)?

Do things that happen online ever lead to fighting or arguments in school? Do kids ever check their social networking sights or communicate using cell phones or laptops during school? When? How often?

What do you usually do after school and on the weekends?

- What do you like to do outside of school?
- Do you have any hobbies? A job?
- Do you hang out with friends? If so, what do you do?

### **Future Goals:**

What are your plans following graduation?

Tell me about what most people in your school do after they graduate.

Where do you see yourself in 5-10 years?

What would you like to do when you are older?

Tell me about your plans for the future.

- Do you plan to attend college? What type of school?
- What types of steps do you need to take/are you currently taking to prepare for college? To apply?
- Did any members of your immediate family or extended family attend college?

What do you have to do in order to prepare for and get into college? What challenges might you face once you get in?

*Appendix C. Classroom Observation Protocol*

When entering the classroom, I vary my seat selection when possible (not possible in classrooms that are filled to capacity or when teachers have told me where to sit). If students ask why I am there, I tell them that I am a student at Rutgers. If they probe further (very rarely), I tell them I am interested in learning what it's like to be a student at their school. This rarely occurs now that I have been in these classrooms for about three months.

I take notes on behaviors before the bell rings, as well as the number of students who enter the classroom after the bell, and the teacher's response. If the teacher does not start instruction right away, I make note of the dynamics between students and any behaviors meeting the definition of aggression of any type that I observe. As I spend time in each classroom, the normal routines in each classroom environment become clearer to me, and my notes will reflect these patterns and how they contribute to particular types of student interaction (as well as reflecting a sense of urgency to achieve the lesson's objective).

In the beginning phases, I took notes on the demographic breakdown of the classroom (gender and perceived race/ethnicity). Every class I take a count of the students present, and if I notice key students are absent, I note this in my field notes. I also make note of support teachers and other adults in the classroom, as well as interruptions or visitors.

If significant changes to the seating arrangement or layout of the classroom have been made, I note this.

If a learning objective is clearly posted I note this, or put general notes on the subject matter covered during the class period or the goals for student production by the end of class (if directly observable). If the teacher states a justification for this goal, or why it is important, I make note of that as well (examples include things such as to prepare for the state test, to prepare for the next level of study (next grade), or to prepare for college).

I take notes on the visibility and presence of technology, including cell phones, head phones, laptops, tablets, etc. and how it is being used (these are permitted in the affluent school, which actually issues laptops to students; in the lower income school, cell phones and headphones are not allowed and laptops are not issued or typically used).

I take detailed notes on student interactions, and particularly those that meet my definition of aggressive behavior. I document the circumstances around the interactions so that later, I will be able to theorize about the context behind the interaction and potential intention/outcomes (ritual, playfulness, to cause harm, etc.).

I note how many students are focused or unfocused during teacher instructions or lecture. Once teacher has explained a task, I take notes on the number of students who appear to be engaged in the task, and the length of time it takes them to get started. I make note of what disengaged students are doing, and any teacher action to remind or redirect them. I make note of the timing when students finish and/or hand in required tasks, and whether

any remaining class time is structured by the teacher toward an alternate task, or used as free time.

In noting teacher's directions, as well as reminding and redirecting language, I also record rules or policies that are posted, referenced, or enforced (how rules are conveyed, when, to whom). I also record references to individuals in authority (principal, administration, parents, district).

**I boiled this down to a list of items that I make sure to record during each period's observation:**

- Grade, subject, and level of class
- Location of meeting (if not teacher's classroom); other notes on any changes in layout
- Activities before the bell rings (if I arrive early)
- Number of students who enter after the bell and teacher response
- Attendance (total number of students, support staff, specific missing students, if teacher is absent, a description of the substitute and whether they appear to know the students in the class)
- Activities during interim from bell to teacher instructions/lecture (routines, urgency, and time of start)
- Learning objectives, agenda, or other indications of focus of period; statements of "why" they are doing this from the teacher (purpose of lesson or work completed)
- Number of students who appear focused or unfocused during teacher's lecture or instructions, how quickly students get to work when a specific task is assigned
- Students' interactions during lecture, instructions, and group and/or independent work (particularly any form of aggressive behavior, with notes on circumstances surrounding the interaction and whether teacher intervened in any way during the class period)
- Invocation of rules or policies on the part of the teacher (school-wide and classroom specific)
- Student engagement/focus on work products, actual work turned in or completed within specified time period
- Any student articulations of why work is important or not

*Appendix D. Classroom Group Descriptions by Grade Level and Academic Ability Level***HUGHES HIGH SCHOOL****9<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics*****Resource Room (Special Education)*****Classroom 1**

Dr. Bennett is a white woman in her late forties, and has a deep voice and a calm and patient demeanor that becomes mirrored by her students. She sits behind her desk for most of the class period, but greets students warmly as they enter class, and encourages them as they work through math problems throughout class. There are four students in the class in the beginning of the year – two Latino students, one black female, and one black male. The class meets during first period, and most students often enter late (indicating they were in the building on time, but took longer to make it from their locker to the classroom). The teacher does not respond to lateness through a warning or punishment, which may reflect accommodations in the students' Individualized Education Plans that allow for extra time in class transitions. The classroom displays student work and is one of the few featuring a SMART board. The teacher often models algebra equations on the board, then has students work on them independently at their seats and work them out on the board for others to see as guided practice. At times, it can take most of the class period to work out the answer to a "Warm Up" question on the board. The students are adept at finding topics or conversations to engage the teacher, who shows an interest in her students' interests and expresses a deep level of interest in them and care for their well-being. For example, a student commenting on his Instagram post diverted attention from math content for about fifteen minutes on my first day of observation. When giving feedback, she gets down to the student's eye-level, crouching, and uses positive and encouraging language. When students are working, she frequently looks up their report cards to praise their strengths or encourage improvement where they are not doing well. Off-topic conversations are frequent in this classroom, and at times address situations involving aggression among others outside of class. However, the students in this group are typically supportive of one another and do not engage in much aggressive behavior toward one another, and the only type observed is teasing. Dr. Bennett explains that her other self-contained class is "quite different," with much more interpersonal aggression and less focus. This group has developed a focused culture, which involves some playful teasing, but is generally supportive.

***Algebra Enrichment (extra support for students in Algebra)*****Classroom 2**

Ms. Taylor is in her early to mid-twenties. While she smiles and jokes with the students often, at times she looks defeated or resigned. The purpose of this class is

enrichment and additional practice with content that students find difficult. Students are primarily placed in enrichment because of low standardized test scores in mathematics and/or low performance in their previous mathematics placement, and there are 12 students in this class. I do not witness Ms. Taylor engaging in any whole group instruction to reinforce and model mathematics concepts. Instead, students bring worksheets up to her desk to ask specific questions or work them out with her. The level of focus among most students varies between a general level of sustained focus, pockets of disruption or unfocused students interacting with one another, and at times, interpersonal aggressive interactions that become a spectacle distracting all members of the room. Students engage in ritualistic verbal interactions that are often aggressive. Females routinely yank other students' hair. Male students also routinely push and grab one another in this class. Sometimes these interactions are playful, but at times they escalate into yelling, grabbing, or pushing. The class is held after lunch for most of the students enrolled, so much of the side conversation that is permitted as students work on worksheets independently or in self-formed groups revolves around social drama and fights that occurred during the period beforehand. Continuous side-conversations and interactions are the norm as students work on their packets. The teacher repeatedly remind students of impending deadlines and chastises them that they will not turn their work in on time. However, she does not take action to prevent side conversations, which distract participants and students who are trying to work as well.

### **Classroom 3**

Ms. K. is a petite Sikh woman in her thirties who speaks quickly and with a hint of sarcasm. She reminds her students at least once per class that she cares about them. This is a smaller group for an enrichment class with 8 students, but the tone is set by two highly disruptive black male students (Andre and Manny) who engage in aggressive behaviors towards one another, and others as well. One student (Andre) is frequently absent because he has been suspended, and when he is not present, the classroom functions a bit more smoothly. Typical behaviors include calling other students names, threatening behavior, throwing objects ranging from chalk to staplers across the room at other students, flinging rubber bands, and hitting one another. The language used is vulgar and explicit at times. A Latina student, Vanessa, frequently hits the male students, and in particular, her boyfriend Andre. When the teacher is attempting to model a problem and appeals to students to stop, she references her care for them and how hard she is trying to teach them mathematics. They relent to a degree because they appear to like the teacher and feel guilty when she frames their behavior in this way. Yet, her appeals do not result in compliance with assignments or engagement with content. Most of the class time is used for independent work, and the teacher helps students who are actually completing the work if they have questions. Four or five of the eight students in the class consistently try to do their work, but Andre, Manny and Vanessa often engage in intense and constant ritualistic aggressive behavior that alternates between playful and intentionally harmful. One or more of these students is typically suspended on a given day, and the behaviors are

worst when they are all present. Manny often engages other students in the class in isolated intentionally harmful aggressive behaviors.

### ***College Preparatory (CP) Algebra 1***

#### **Classroom 4**

Mr. Said is an Asian Indian man who appears to be in his thirties. He is a relatively new teacher after transitioning to teaching from another career. This class meets in the morning during the second period, and has 17 students. A group of primarily Latina students, a couple of black female students, a Southeast Asian student and one white male student sit to the far right side of the classroom, which has many more desks than students. They cluster around the teacher's desk to be as close to him as possible, and to be able to hear him teaching. There is a divide of an unoccupied row of desks, and a group of students including a diverse mix of Latino, Latina, black female students and one white female student who sit to the left side of the room and are typically less focused on content and very engaged in peer interactions. At times, the teacher teaches over the unchecked and chaotic exchanges on the left side of the room, ignoring them and attempting to speak loudly enough that the five or six students on the right side can hear him and follow a lesson. Students on the left side of the room get out of their seats, hit one another, go to the doorway to talk to students in the hall, curse at one another and call one another names, and use cell phones on the left side of the room. At times, students from the left side of the room threaten students on the right-hand side to hand over their completed work so they can copy it and turn it in. The students typically resist, but the teacher does not hear or pretends not to hear these exchanges. There are one or two instances when the teacher is able to engage most of the group. One time is when two more aggressive students are absent from class. Another is when he creates an engaging lesson with content that interests all of the students (local crime data). In interviews, it becomes clear that the students who are trying to focus in this classroom are very frustrated by the distracting behaviors of their peers. Students frequently used social media to arrange opportunities to meet up with others in the school to perform an aggressive interaction and engage in fights or conflict. His failure to control his class or intervene in these cases led to his dismissal and transfer to another school the following school year.

### **9<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts**

#### ***Language Arts Enrichment***

#### **Classroom 5**

Mr. Duncan is a white male in his mid-thirties with spiky hair, who typically wears jeans and boots, and is almost always smiling when students are present. He is an advisor for a number of after-school activities and puts a great deal of effort into creating interesting and engaging lessons for students. When students are not present and he is speaking to other adults, his smile and enthusiasm switch

quickly for a look of malaise and comments on some of the challenges associated with the school. Mr. Duncan's classroom is decorated in a way that reflects his personality and tells students about his interest in theater. The walls are filled with beautifully stenciled murals with inspirational quotes, and the décor of the room changes to match the season. Of the Enrichment classes I observed, Mr. Duncan's is the most structured of any I observe at Hughes, regardless of level. He designs engaging original lesson plans for the students in the class and always follows a clear agenda. The objective for the day is posted, and he provides interesting visuals and graphic organizers to help students learn and accommodate multiple learning modalities. He uses every minute of class for learning experiences that take students out of their seats, which breaks up the after-lunch tiredness that some may feel in the afternoon class. Group work is used to break up the 18 students in class, but the groups are assigned by Mr. Duncan for strategic reasons (i.e. matching students who are weaker in a particular skill with those who are stronger). During read alouds or whole group instruction, all students are engaged, including a student named Andre who is highly aggressive and disruptive in other classrooms. Independent work activities feature extremely clear directions and are always timed. It is very rare to see aggressive interactions in this classroom, although several of the members of the class are regularly involved in aggressive behaviors in other settings.

### *College Preparatory English 1*

#### **Classroom 6**

Mrs. Gardener teaches a full classroom of 25 students. She is a white female who appears to be in her mid-to-late forties, and has transitioned to teaching recently from another career. Her classroom is well-organized, and displays positively-worded statements regarding students' behavioral expectations that she refers to as a reminder when students get off track. She has a clearly written agenda on the board for the class period and attempts to use every minute of class time to accomplish the tasks listed. She begins each period with a journal entry warm up. She regularly intervenes when students engage in aggressive behavior, while demonstrating patience and caring for each student. She prepares engaging materials and moves seamlessly between tasks, giving clear instructions and reminding students what they need to complete at home. She redirects students who verbalize tangential ideas in discussions and generally obtains compliance in completing and turning in in-class assignments. Despite the students' general compliance with her tasks, a range of negative interpersonal behaviors go on in the background of the class. These include ritualistic verbal exchanges, fake-choking, tripping one another, and threatening violent behavior. The teacher does not use disciplinary sanctions to address these behaviors, but instead tries to appeal to her relationship with individual students to convince them to refocus on academic work. She also uses positive behavioral expectations, which she reinforces through signage and continuous reminders. Her strategy for refocusing students includes stepping outside of the classroom with them to discuss their choices. However, this leaves the rest of the group somewhat unsupervised to

engage in negative interactions that she cannot see or hear. While a great deal of ritualistic interpersonal aggression happens in this class, she says this group is more positive and focused overall than another section of the class she teaches.

### **Classroom 7**

Mrs. Kelley teaches another CP English class of 17 students, with almost every desk occupied. I sit in one of the empty desks towards the back, amongst the students. Mrs. Kelley is a gruff woman in her late forties, with a teaching style that includes a balance of direct and harsh statements, alongside patience, warmth, and accommodating students' interests. When I ask her how long she has been teaching here, she responds with the number of years she has left until retirement. Her classroom is wallpapered with posters, some inspiring and some sarcastic, that frame behavioral expectations in a somewhat negative way. These include: "It's clear you drank deeply from the well of ignorance," "Some people are like slinkies...they're really good for nothing...but they still bring a smile to your face...when you push them down the stairs!" "My face hurts from pretending to like you; and "The smartest thing about you is your wisdom teeth." Plastered over the wall clock in the classroom is a paper sign that reads, "Time is passing, are you?" Mrs. Kelley gets students on task by talking about the excitement of a particular assignment or passage the class is going to read. At other times, she promises students that if they complete their work with time to spare, they will be able to take board games from her closet and play them until the class is over. Students often are given time to work on assignments in groups they select themselves. Often, some members of the group complete the assignment while others exchange in off-topic conversations or aggressive interactions. It is very common, particularly during group work, to see students hitting or pinching one another, throwing or blowing pieces of paper at one another, or engaging in verbal arguments. The students mock one another, threaten one another, and in some groups, ritualistically take every opportunity to insult one another. Mrs. Kelley sits sideways, working on her computer, glancing out of the corner of her eye and at times, shaking her head when she hears severe insults, but does not intervene in most peer interactions during the unstructured group work time. The class meets in the early afternoon, and often, the teacher's parting words to the class are usually: "One more class then I'm out of here."

### *Honors English 1*

### **Classroom 8**

Ms. Lewis' Honors Language Arts class is a somewhat disorderly class despite being the highest ability level track. The frequency and severity of aggressive behaviors far exceeds the lowest track in Hilltop High, but is still generally lower than that in the CP classrooms in the same school. Ms. Lewis is a white woman in her twenties who often speaks in a sarcastic tone. She takes pride in the appearance and displays of her classroom, and is typically passionate and engaged in the material she is delivering. Typically, Ms. Lewis will yell very loudly and in

a very shrill voice to attempt to maintain order or get students to focus. Students describe the class in interviews as lacking structure, and describe the teacher as “screaming a lot.” Ms. Lewis lets certain things slide, while overreacting to others unpredictably. For example, she typically ignores when students are calling each other names (even using profanity) or simply responds to remind them not to use profane words. However, on particular days, she assigns detentions to typically focused students who enter the room just as the bell rings. Her treatment of students does differ and she seems to prefer, or at least be more lenient, with some students compared with others. The class of 24 meets in the late morning. The structure of the class time varies each day, and the agenda is not usually clear even though the time is used on specific tasks. I sit in the back corner next to a Latino student and a black student who constantly tease and slap one another. They get up out of their seats, take one another’s pencils and pens, and generally do not pay attention to the teacher. Despite the nearly constant disruption they cause, she never separates them or issues a consequence stronger than a warning.

## **11<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics**

### ***Math Strategies***

#### **Classroom 9**

Mr. Sharma’s Math Strategies takes place every day during first period, which means that a handful of students flow into the room after the bell. The teacher is Sikh and wears a turban, and is in his mid-forties. The classroom is decorated with positive and future-oriented messages. The 16 students in this classroom generally are engaged in instruction and comply with tasks they are given, although there is a small group of students in the back of the room that engages in off-topic conversations and some aggressive interactions. On one occasion students talk throughout a graded quiz they are taking, making it more like a group task. In the background, students mock one another for their academic abilities, although all students have been placed in this enrichment course due to low scores or grades in mathematics. The teacher ignores most side-conversations and aggressive interactions but intervenes selectively in some cases. This often leads to a resentful and challenging response on the part of the student he corrects, who may ask why they were spoken to and not the other students. I notice that the teacher does not use formal disciplinary sanctions often, and when he warns students, he focuses on black female students and often ignores the behaviors of male students. He is eager to improve his practice and asks me for feedback on his lessons and delivery often.

### ***CP Algebra 2***

#### **Classroom 10**

Mr. Sharma (see also Classroom 9) embodies a slightly different teaching style with his college preparatory class. In this class, he rigidly follows a detailed and carefully prepared Powerpoint presentation beginning with a “Do Now” activity.

There are 14 students in the class, and almost half of the students are consistently late to the midday class. The teacher tells students he is upset when they are late but does not issue consequences. Students in this class sometimes hit one another and have frequent side conversations, but seem motivated by grades as they frequently ask about whether grades are available, and whether assignments will be graded. Students often engage in aggressive behaviors, such as hitting one another or throwing papers, when they have looked first to make sure Mr. Sharma is not going to see them.

### *Honors Algebra 2*

#### **Classroom 11**

Mr. Martinez is a Latino teacher in his mid-forties. He has a full classroom of 28 students, and I sit on a stool in the back of the room among students. The class is a mix of tenth and eleventh graders, is very racially diverse, and is the only honors class in which I observe black male students (two). In the back right-hand corner of the classroom, there is a group of two white male students and two white female students who engage in loud and disruptive aggressive behavior throughout the period. These interactions include the use of profanity, hitting and slapping, and recording one another with cell phones to post something embarrassing. The rest of the class, which is extremely racially diverse, is typically focused on content and does not engage in visibly negative peer interactions, even during group tasks. The teacher engages in sarcasm and teasing towards students, and ignores many of the behaviors that occur among the four white students in the back corner of the room. These behaviors occur while the teacher is walking around, checking students' homework, while other students complete homework questions on the board, during instruction, and during independent work time. The teacher does not have a formal agenda or objective, but most meetings follow the sequence of activities described in a predictable way. The aggressive behaviors typically observed by the four white students include name calling, threats, hitting, and using electronic devices to take embarrassing photos or show embarrassing photo or posts (often on Snapchat). The teacher issues warnings about cell phones but does not confiscate the devices, and typically ignores the interactions or makes a sarcastic comment to one of the two white male students. He also often makes passive aggressive comments, such as "Look at Mike having a party over there. That's alright, I'll just talk to the students who are listening." At times, he goes on tangents, but at times, these tangents are somewhat related to academic or future aspirations.

### *Honors Pre-Calculus*

#### **Classroom 12**

Dr. T. is an older Sikh man who refers to his students playfully as "geniuses" and calls homework "home fun." He transitioned to teaching from another career and uses technology to enhance his lessons. His walls are bare, but his assignments and modeling of graphing tasks and other content uses a projection system. His

“syllabus” is housed on a course web site, and his teaching style mirrors that of a college setting more than high school. In addition to using the “syllabus” terminology, he promotes the availability of resources and opportunities at the local community college. He speaks often about the way to enroll for low-cost college credits. He presents the students with ambitious tasks, but at the same time announces on Fridays that the group will take an easier pace. As the highest level of mathematics offered in the school, it is not surprising that this classroom has the highest concentration of white students I’ve observed compared to any other group. The class of 21 students has six white females, two white males, and a mix of black female students, Latino students, Latina students, and Southeast Asian students. There are no black male students in the group. The students in this classroom tease the teacher at times, and he teases them back. Students often engage in open mocking or sarcasm towards one another, but aggressive interactions are typically discreet or whispered. For example, a group of three male students towards the back of the room often engaged one another with homophobic remarks, and would at times hit or poke one another with a pencil. These three males, one Latino, one Asian, and one white, would often make derogatory racial remarks towards one another as well. However, all students are compliant with tasks in this room, and there are almost never widely visible aggressive exchanges in this classroom.

### 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts

#### *Resource Room (Special Education)*

#### **Classroom 13**

Ms. Campbell, a white woman in her fifties, teaches a class of three students Language Arts in a self-contained setting. As the last period of the day, everyone in the room seems tired by this point in the day. Typically, at least one of the three students is absent, and one drops out of school mid-year to attend to family issues. One of the others, a white male student named CJ, is almost always late, and frequently refuses to follow instructions or walks out of the room. He bickers frequently with a black male student in the class who is almost always present and follows instructions carefully. This student, Damian, sat with me often during lunch observations. He described college visits and aspirations to be a lawyer. In this setting, he acts like a different person, engaging in name-calling and losing control of his emotions at times. During my observations, this group doesn’t get through many assignments or much content if CJ is present. When only Damian is in attendance, he works well one on one with the teacher.

#### *Language Arts Enrichment*

#### **Classroom 14**

Ms. Flores is a Latina teacher in her late thirties. She teaches only four students in her Enrichment class, including three black male students and one black female. Her classroom is relatively bare aside from a sign that reads, “I teach for three

reasons: June, July, and August.” Each time I observe this class, the teacher does not engage in instruction, but the students work on an on-going task. The task does not seem very well-defined, and the teacher articulates frequently that the group is behind schedule in completing the task. This pattern occurs each marking period as I observe the class. The students talk and avoid work, sometimes engaging in aggressive behavior or asking the teacher a number of questions on unrelated topics to avoid completing the assignment. Then, as the end of the marking period approaches, the teacher repeatedly reminds students that their work is late and they need to finish something to turn in for a grade by the end of the marking period. The week before the end of the marking period is typically a busy week in most classes, as teachers must accept late work in order to assign a grade, because little work has been completed and turned in to that point.

### *College Preparatory English 3*

#### **Classroom 15**

Ms. Scott is a white female teacher in her twenties who is teeming with energy and enthusiasm. She begins each class meeting with a Warm Up activity as part of a clearly written agenda on the board. She tries to make the most of each minute of class time and indicates her professionalism by dressing sharply in blazers and other professional clothing (whereas it is not uncommon for other teachers in the school to wear jeans and T-shirts). She is relatively new to the teaching profession, but her regimented lesson plans reflect her recent completion of a teacher preparation program. She does her best to engage her students in course content, including literary works such as *Frankenstein*, by relating them to current events through creative assignments. Examples include creating a “Facebook” profile for characters from literature, and structured group debate assignments on current events topics. She often gives students a “menu of options” including various assignments with which they can demonstrate their mastery of a skill. She offers to play music during work time, although the offer sometimes turns into an argument about what is “whack” music. The class is on the smaller side, with 12 students, and they are typically quiet and compliant during class. She has difficulty soliciting participation from most of the students, whereas in another section of the same class, she explains that it is often difficult to break up student conversations and there are more aggressive interactions. In this group, most students are compliant in completing work and do so quietly. A white female student and a Latino student often engage in aggressive exchanges with one another, but appear to be friends. The teacher generally intervenes in negative interactions between the pair by engaging the outspoken female in the content by asking her a question. A white male student does not engage in content and occasionally will engage in aggressive behavior towards other students. The other students typically ignore him or tell him to stop, and he typically desists. The teacher does not address him in class but has several one on one conversations with him to express her concerns. The student drops out of school in the early spring, and the class runs slightly more smoothly.

**Classroom 16**

Mr. Ayala is a soft-spoken southeast Asian teacher. At times he speaks with an accent, and at others he does not. He prepares lessons and delivers them without much attention to the interactions in his classroom or whether students are engaged. He often tries to project his voice over the arguing and yelling of students, but I cannot make out what he is saying from the back of the room because it is so loud. At times he tries to connect content to interesting subjects or future pathways, but often a majority of the classroom is not paying attention. On the left side of the room is a group of four or five female students who consistently pay attention and complete their work. Behind them is a group of male students, including Kenny, who use their phones and are generally disengaged and almost never complete their work. At times, they sleep or have their heads down. On the right side of the room are two louder, rambunctious groups of students who never do their work. Many of them complain in other classes that they are failing in this class. They often are engaged in name-calling, threats, and hitting. One female student's boyfriend sits in on the class often because it is his lunch period, and the teacher does not acknowledge his presence, even when he interjects or argues with students in the class. The teacher acts as if he cannot see or hear the majority of the students who engage in ritualistic aggressive behavior. Some of it is playful, but most is intentionally harmful or escalates to that point. The majority of students, about 10 out of 14, never complete work in class, including tests and quizzes. Several students make comments like, "I act like an idiot in this class. In other classes I'm quiet as fuck."

*Honors English 3***Classroom 17**

Ms. Morales is a Latina teacher in her late thirties. She talks often about personal stories and the circumstances of her divorce, and often goes on tangents in delivering content. She assigns work that the students describe as burdensome, and does not typically return it graded. Students describe her as disorganized, and very sarcastic. The Honors English 3 class has 27 students and is nearly filled to capacity. It is the first period of the day, and a few students trickle in late each time. Students are typically alert and engaged in the lesson. The teacher uses a mix of project-based learning and integrates technology through use of Powerpoint slides which she uses to deliver lessons. She often tells students that if they were enrolled in a "better" school, the Honors section would be more rigorous, and many of them would not be able to handle the work. Her sarcastic tone and at times, lack of professionalism, lead students to band together in opposition to her teaching approach. The students in this class tease one another but generally show warmth and camaraderie that is potentially made stronger as they reject the manner in which they are taught and spoken to by their teacher.

## **HILLTOP HIGH SCHOOL**

### 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics

#### *Algebra I (Focus)*

##### **Classroom 18**

Mr. Brodzki is a white man in his mid-forties, and is a high energy teacher who often tells jokes or uses sarcasm to engage students in this class. He has a very silly demeanor in this class, and talks in different character voices. At times, he playfully mimics comments from his students. In this class, he does turn serious to frequently lecture students about their grades and asserts that many of them are failing the subject. He does so in a tone that is scolding and refers to how their parents will be disappointed, and how he doesn't want to have difficult conversations with them so the students should do so themselves. This class has 25 students, and they are all almost always on time for class. There is an in-class support teacher who supports a student with a physical disability, although the student is well-accommodated and included in the class (for example, he is always asked to do assignments at the board like others), and the in-class support teacher often sits in the back of the room reading a newspaper. Mr. Brodzki also teaches an Honors-level class for juniors (Classroom 26) and his persona and style is very different in that section. Mr. Brodzki often refers to a sign in the classroom featuring his one rule, "No Whining." In this section, the students are generally silly and boisterous, particularly when one white female student named Kiley is present to probe the teacher and other students with constant questions. There are also siblings in this classroom who frequently engage in aggressive exchanges of a verbal or physical nature. The teacher likens this to behaviors among his own children and brushes the interactions aside, even when they get relatively serious and disruptive.

#### *Algebra I CP*

##### **Classroom 19**

Ms. Schneider often wears athletic apparel representing a team she coaches at the school, and jeans. She is white, in her late twenties, and has the solid routines and confidence of someone who has been teaching for a long period. The class is large with 25 students total, and meets during first period, so students are often finishing up breakfast items they purchased at school and at times look as if they are still waking up. The class follows a rigid routine of checking and recording who has their homework, going over the homework, tracking participation, and copying notes from the board. The teacher uses the "notes with holes" technique, which forces students to follow along and fill in key words missing in a reproduced packet. In this class, participation is required and incentivized. The teacher takes great efforts to count and document the number of times an individual student participates, to make sure that each student participates a set

number of times per week. In the last few minutes of class, when students are working on independent work, group work, or an early start to their homework, she turns her back to the room to enter participation points in an online software tool. She also quickly erases the objective written on the board to turn things over for her next class, which will come in after a three-minute passing period in the hallway. During the times her back is turned, a group of five to six male students engage in ritualistic aggressive behavior in the back of the room as they line up to leave. Some of it seems playful, but much of it is intentionally harmful, particularly when directed toward the only non-white student in the room, a Latino student named Mateo, who goes by Matt. On one day in the spring the students engage in teasing of this student that the teacher thinks is an “inside joke” although it is really a remark about Matt’s skin color. She unknowingly participates in and perpetuates the joke, and the tension associated with it lingers in the group through the end of the year.

### *Honors Geometry*

#### **Classroom 20**

Ms. DiPalma is a white woman in her late twenties who teaches a packed classroom of 30 students. This is one of the more diverse classes I observe; while most students appear to be white, there are two Asian females, one Asian male, one Asian Indian female, and one Asian Indian male. I sit at her desk during my observations because the room is so full. Most students arrive to class on time, and the one or two who do are consistently late do not present a late pass because the teacher is aware of the distance they travel from their prior class. Ms. DiPalma’s class is very structured and students are quiet and focused most of the time. One southeast Asian male student is particularly vocal in this class, making jokes and asking a lot of questions. The teacher becomes visibly annoyed with him at times, and he is the only student who I notice to be on the receiving end of teasing or other forms of aggressive behavior. The students are given tests and quizzes often to demonstrate their mastery, and she often offers extra credit opportunities to keep students who finish their work early engaged and focused on a task. Even when students are assigned to engage in group work, there is very little conversation, and most of it is an occasional whisper from a student to make sure their answer is correct (rather than working out problems together). While there is rarely any aggressive behavior visible when the teacher is present, a handful of students act differently when the class has a substitute teacher, punching students as they walk by to retrieve a textbook, or hitting one another on the back. Even when the teacher isn’t present, all students focus and complete their work with little conversation.

### 9<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts

#### *English 1 (Focus)*

### **Classroom 21**

Mr. Schumacher is a white man in his late fifties who tries to incorporate humor and storytelling in his teaching style. In this class, there is an in-class support teacher who is assigned to a specific student, but works to support all students so that it is not obvious which student(s) she is assigned to work with. This class has 16 students, and one or two usually come in after the bell but do not receive a warning. The teacher almost never gets started right away, but allows students to get settled in, which at times can lead to aggressive interactions as part of the conversations students have with one another. The assignments in this class are not always very structured; for example, the teacher will often assign group work, but several students never make it into a group and work on their own, while others never really get started on the task assigned until the in-class support teacher goes over to them and gets them started. The in-class support teacher is a white woman in her late forties with a very soothing voice, who interacts with students in a friendly and enthusiastic way. Mid-way through the year Mr. Schumacher is out on leave for a number of months, and a substitute teacher, an older woman who used to be an administrator in the district, takes over for him. He continues to plan lessons and connect with students using a digital platform used by the students on their school-issued laptops. Craig is a regularly disruptive student who engages in aggressive interactions with others, and it seems that the in-class support teacher is assigned to work specifically with him.

#### *English 1 CP*

### **Classroom 22**

Mr. Schumacher (see Classroom 21) also teaches a college preparatory section of English that I observe, which has 20 students. He is more serious in terms of his tone and the urgency of assignments in this classrooms. He illustrates the same examples as in the Focus class, but without using engaging and humorous voices or storytelling. He refers more often to standardized testing and PARCC preparation in explaining the objectives of the day's lesson. During his leave, the same substitute covers this section as the non-CP section of this class.

#### *English 1 Honors*

### **Classroom 23**

Mrs. Olson teaches a packed classroom of 31 students in Honors English 3, all of whom appear to be white. I pull in a stool from an adjoining classroom to sit in the corner during my visits. Mrs. Olson is a white woman in her late fifties, who teaches the period before this one in a classroom on the other side of the building. All of the students arrive on time, and she arrives a minute or two after the bell. The minute or two before she arrives is the time when students are most social with one another, talking about assignments and social topics. On occasion, several male students move into the back corner of the room where they tease one another verbally and on rare occasion, hit one another. When she enters, the

teacher turns her back to immediately write the agenda and the warm up activity on the board. This is another point when students whisper and on rare occasion, hit or slap one another. The class period is very structured, typically featuring a read aloud or whole group instruction, followed by independent work. The teacher attempts to infuse group work and opportunities to participate, because as she explains to me, this section of students is extremely quiet, much more so than her other Honors classes. The same students participate regularly, including a student with a severe speech impediment. I notice over the course of the year that males are much more likely to volunteer in this class and the teacher rarely hears from female students.

## 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Mathematics

### *Integrated Algebra (Focus)*

#### **Classroom 24**

Mr. Anderson is a white male in his mid-seventies and is a serious, soft-spoken teacher. There are 12 students in this class, and the teacher typically arrives about five minutes late because he teaches another class on a far side of the building. A male in-class support teacher is present from the start of class, writes the objective on the board, begins checking homework and keeps students on track until Mr. Anderson arrives. Mr. Anderson sets up a projection system to show the notes and work out problems on the projector as students follow along. He also has students demonstrate problems at the board from the homework, then introduces new skills during whole group instruction. Students in this class are frequently sarcastic towards one another and engage in open aggressive behaviors. The in-class support teacher typically addresses these behaviors rather than the teacher, who sticks with modeling problems and giving assignments. There are three students who engage in the majority of aggressive behavior: a white male student named Simon, a white male student named Curt, and a white female student named Bethanny. Bethanny and Curt are in a romantic relationship for the better part of the year. Students frequently use their cell phones and laptops to engage on social media, and speak openly about it in this class. In some cases, posts on Snapchat and other platforms cause conflict during the class meeting. The teacher ignores these conflicts and allows the in-class support teacher to address them. While it is unclear who the in-class support teacher is assigned to in this room, it seems that most of his attention is focused on Simon, and that may be why the teacher does not intervene in most aggressive interactions or student behavioral issues. In the CP Algebra 2 class taught by Mr. Anderson (Classroom 25) the students are more compliant, but his style is quite similar. He displays a “Tulsa College” banner in the front of the room, and his students ask him about it often.

*Algebra 2 CP***Classroom 25**

Mr. Anderson teaches Algebra 2 CP to about 21 students during the last period of the day. The students are typically on the quiet side during this period. Unlike the other section he teaches (Classroom 24) Mr. Anderson is in this classroom from the start of the period and walks around the room to do the homework check himself. There is not an in-class support teacher in this class. Students often have their phones out and are discussing after school plans or social plans. The teacher uses the “notes with holes” technique and gives students packets of worksheets to follow along with his instructions. Often when the teacher collects the homework, only a portion of the students turn it in (about a third) and the teacher does not seem surprised or express concern. The teacher asks for volunteers as he demonstrates a new concept and at times, calls on students. He circulates as the students work on sample problems and typically, all of the students are focused on completing assigned tasks. As the last period of the day, the class is punctuated by a long list of student activities announcements. Students pack their bags and line up at the door to exit the classroom for dismissal. In this class, aggressive behavior is rare, but one of the key students involved in aggressive behavior is Molly, a white female student who talks often about her college aspirations when in English Honors 3.

*Honors Pre-Calculus***Classroom 26**

Mr. Brodzki is much more serious and strict in this class compared with the Focus Algebra 1 section he teaches (Classroom 18). He does not use character voices or make many jokes in this classroom, aside from occasionally teasing specific students. He uses the handle of a broom to point to the board as he creates graphs and illustrates concepts, and he swings the broom handle around and bangs it on desks as he walks and lectures, keeping everyone on their toes. He transitions from another classroom in the building and often enters this class a few minutes late. During the unsupervised time, the 26 students in the packed classroom typically talk quietly or play games on their phones or computers, while others work on problems from the previous night’s homework assignment. All members of the class appear to be white with the exception of one Asian female. As soon as the teacher enters, most students quickly put away their phones and laptops, and wait to see which ten will be selected first to model homework problems on the board. The students who are not modeling problems on the board typically discuss grades in the downtime or check their grades on the school’s portal. After the first set of problems is reviewed, another group of students go to the board. Side conversations are typically whispered and silenced by the teacher looking over and saying “Zip it.” After this exercise the teacher typically introduces new material or reviews what will be covered on an upcoming test. Rather than taking notes, students take a photograph using their cell phones of the list he writes on

the board. Aggressive interactions typically take the form of teasing or throwing papers at one another in this classroom, and no key or consistent players emerge.

### 11<sup>th</sup> Grade Language Arts

#### *English 3 (Focus)*

##### **Classroom 27**

Ms. Conti is a white woman in her mid-thirties who often uses sarcasm and teasing in her interactions with students. She tells personal stories and uses anecdotes that are connected to class content but at times go on a tangent. She also teaches a CP section of English for juniors (Classroom 28), which is completing similar curriculum but with modified and more rigorous activities. The way she describes the purpose of classroom objectives varies according to the two classes. For this class, she often speaks in terms of obtaining a passing grade and receiving credits. At other times, assignments are framed as something that simply needs to be done, without a clear purpose or basis. There are 20 students in this classroom, and a few are consistently late each class. Notably, the class is predominantly male, with 15 male and five female students. Students in this class are often not prepared in terms of materials (i.e. no laptop, no laptop charger, didn't complete the homework). The assignments are done on school-issued laptops and students are frequently working within a Google drive for this class. Tasks are simple and straightforward, and students focus somewhat but work at different paces. Students in this classroom frequently have to be warned to get off of unrelated web pages (such as social media sites) when working on their computers. Behaviors such as poking other students, kicking their chairs, or calling names are common in this classroom among a specific group of students. The teacher typically ignores this behavior. Several students attend the first part of their day in a vocational setting before returning to Hilltop for this class. A female student in the class stops attending mid-year and drops out of school in early spring.

#### *English 3 CP*

##### **Classroom 28**

In this class, compared with her Focus section (Classroom 27) Ms. Conti often frames the daily mastery of classroom objectives as connected to post-secondary goals, such as success in college. She tells personal stories about her experiences in college and graduate school to illustrate why specific skills or activities are important to students. There are 24 students in this classroom, and one or two are consistently late, but Ms. Conti doesn't notice or ignores it because she is usually in conversation with students about social topics. This is one of the more diverse classrooms I observed at Hilltop, with two black male students, one Asian Indian male, and one Asian male. Ms. Conti displays the penants from her undergraduate and graduate colleges in the classroom. Students watch films frequently in this class and complete associated assignments on their laptops. Mid-way through the

year, white female student teacher enrolled in a local college begins attending daily as a student teacher. There are several students in this classroom that are described on an individual basis as “redneck” students, and who engage in aggressive interactions more frequently. One student in this classroom is named Ed, and he often wears a shirt labeled “redneck” with a confederate flag prominently displayed.

### *English 3 Honors*

#### **Classroom 29**

Ms. Miller is a white woman in her mid-thirties teaching a small class of 15 juniors English Honors. The majority of students frequently wear college sweatshirts, including Princeton, St. John’s, Harvard, UNC, Stanford, and Virginia Tech. They all arrive before the bell and typically use the time before class starts to discuss their grades and assignments in other classes. There is almost never visible aggressive behavior in this class. The teacher always opens class by doing announcements and reminders. The agenda and objective for the day are written clearly on the board. They typically start off with a read-aloud or whole group lesson, and all students appear to follow along. Many students volunteer to respond to the teacher’s questions, with thoughtful insights making connections to the text. There is more participation and solicitation of students’ opinions in this class compared with the instructional style used in Ms. Conti’s CP English class. Ms. Smith frequently frames assignments in terms of their relevance in building skills for college.

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