The American Public School: An Educational Oasis or Psychological Prison?

Monica E. Ilieva

Department of Psychology, SUNY New Paltz

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Dr. Patricia Sullivan and Dr. Karla Vermeulen

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Abstract

The authoritarian roots of state-sanctioned education continue to impact public schools in the United States, despite the nation’s democratic ideals. Increased police presence, strict hierarchical relationships between students and adults, and limited opportunities for student autonomy are just a few examples of authoritarian tendencies in modern public education (Goodman et al., 2011; Mann et al., 2019). Furthermore, the current literature suggests that these elements may be influencing the students’ attitude towards their academics, as well as their socio-emotional well-being (Goodman et al., 2011; Mann et al., 2019). The primary purpose of the present study was to examine empowerment in high school based on the level of respect former students perceived from adult authority figures and their level of control and autonomy within the institution. Empowerment was then examined in relation to current confidence and adjustment to adulthood. A significant positive correlation was observed between empowerment and adulthood adjustment ($r(64) = .428, p < .001$), and empowerment was also found to be significantly predictive of adjustment ($sr^2 = .08, p = .015$). These findings suggest that the sense of control and connection people felt in their school experience is intertwined with subsequent development into adulthood and confidence in handling the challenges and duties of this new phase of life. Motivated by the goal of promoting a healthier and smoother transition into adulthood, future research directions and possible interventions in schools to empower students and mitigate authoritarian influences are discussed.

Keywords: psychology, public education, authoritarianism, empowerment, development, preparation, mental health
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In the contemporary world, education can often be equated with school. When envisioning the typical school, it is natural to imagine a building with hallways, classrooms, and cafeterias. More importantly, one can envision students from young childhood to late adolescence roaming the building with backpacks and textbooks, surrounded by teachers, principals, and other adult staff that serve as educators and supervisors of our youngest generation.

However, it is important to highlight the distinction between education and schooling. While school is a relatively recent creation, education has been a fundamental part of our existence since the beginning, and can be defined as “a process of learning and growing as one gains understanding about the surrounding world” (Beasley & Haulmark, 2021, p. 1). On the other hand, Beasley and Haulmark (2021) define school as an “institution with a very specific motive—to drill learning into people according to some plan often drawn up by others” (p. 1).

Institutions labeled as schools differ significantly from country to country, from region to region, and even from one town to the next. Several versions of the institution exist globally, including boarding schools, private schools, and most commonly, public schools. According to the U.S. government’s school enrollment statistics as of 2021, approximately 82% of students attend public schools, equating to about 65 million individuals; private school attendees make up less than a quarter of that number (Fabina et al., 2023). While specific definitions of public schools vary between states, public schools in the United States can be generally classified as educational institutions funded by taxpayers without additional tuition charges for attendees. In addition, their curricula are controlled by a school board or government, and are divided by grade levels ranging from kindergarten through 12th grade (Zinth, 2005).
At first glance, schools appear to function as a generally universal method to provide children with rudimentary knowledge of our world in order to function as adults (Beasley & Haulmark, 2021). However, upon closer inspection of the historical background of modern schooling as well as the current circumstances of public schools in the United States, it appears that there may be other motivations for the maintenance of a state public school system, which will be elaborated on in the next sections. From the authoritarian roots of schools, to the expansion of law enforcement in public schools across the country coupled with the ongoing mental crisis in children and adolescents, the common notion that schools’ primary focus is learning can be challenged and dissected. Perhaps the interactions between the varying levels of people within the institution could be more indicative of the true primary goal of schools as opposed to the academics and information taught in their classrooms.

To begin with, there will be an overview of the historical and political context in which the state-enforced public education system emerged, and how authoritarian elements of obedience and control became an inherent part of the system. Next, there will be a discussion of how authoritarianism manifests itself in contemporary public schools in the United States, and the associations between this limited freedom and abundant control with academic motivation and emotional well-being. With a deeper understanding of authoritarian, controlling school environments and their significant potential impact on students, a study was conducted to provide a basic understanding of the relationship between authority and students in high school and the subsequent development of those students’ adult identities. To conclude, there will be a discussion on how to move forward in terms of researching and uncovering the powerful, hierarchical dynamics in schools and how chasms between students and adult authority can be
mitigated to create a less authoritarian and more authoritative, egalitarian, and collaborative educational atmosphere to promote mental wellness and healthy development in young people.

As authoritarian elements such as expectations of obedience and strict authority-subordinate relationships continue to be pervasive in our public education system, it is imperative to better understand how these elements may be interacting with the mental health and general development of people as they transition into adulthood. Perhaps, while authoritarian educational environments for children and adolescents could be beneficial in upholding political regimes, they may be intertwined with harmful outcomes by limiting the freedom and opportunity for young people to grow into independent, self-sufficient adults. Excessively controlling students’ behaviors and decisions and hesitating to offer them respect and trust could be stifling and psychologically imprisoning young people as they transition into the responsibilities and challenges of adulthood and develop the necessary skills for their new role in society.

**Historical Context of the Modern Education System**

**Significance of the Prussian Model**

To understand contemporary school as a form of universal education, including its structure, hierarchies, and overall dynamics, it is important to reflect on its roots. The implementation of a state-wide schooling system, which consists of several students and appointed teachers learning in a formulaic classroom environment, can be traced back to 19th century Prussia as well as other autocratic states of the period (Schleunes, 1979). However, the model did not become widespread outside of Prussia until the 20th century, when countries like France, the United Kingdom, and the United States eventually adopted it (Komline, 2020). While schooling initially focused on education for the elite in the form of secondary and higher
education, the Prussians were able to popularize a model for the youngest members of society’s lower classes to receive an education (Schleunes, 1979). Education was no longer reserved for the elite, and was now open to the masses (Schleunes, 1979). On the surface, education did not appear to have evolved significantly; however, the idea that the masses, or people of lower classes, were capable of being educated and absorbing knowledge in the same manner as members of higher social and economic classes was revolutionary (Schleunes, 1979). Additionally, the Prussian education model diverted educational responsibilities from the hands of the church into the hands of the state, representing yet another meaningful change that would live on, particularly in secular nations (Schleunes, 1979).

**Authoritarian Roots of Public State-Sanctioned Education**

As previously mentioned, the Prussian model was adopted globally; notably, it was implemented in democracies such as the United States. In contrast, the system itself emerged under an authoritarian regime (Paglayan, 2022). Augustina Paglayan, a professor of global policy and political science at the University of California, San Diego, provides an in-depth analysis of the circumstances under which the Prussian model came into existence (2022). Paglayan challenges the default reasoning for school, which focuses on providing knowledge about language, mathematics, science, and history, and on reinforcing critical thinking skills in young people; instead, she paints a more sinister picture of the institution’s true purpose, particularly by connecting the rise of state-sanctioned education with civil conflict (2022). Furthermore, Paglayan offers insights into how schools were designed with the main goal of instilling lifelong obedience and subjection to authority from the youngest age to minimize the risk of revolution and the overthrow of autocratic governments, which were common at the time (2022).
While the Prussian model did open doors for poor, peasant children to receive an education, as highlighted in Schleunes’ work (1979), schools continued to uphold the status quo and discourage upward mobility for lower-class children (Paglayan, 2022). Mandating and establishing state-wide schools for all young children was not done with the intention of pulling people out of desolate conditions, but rather as a way to “promote order by shaping the preferences, beliefs, moral character, and behavior of the masses” (Paglayan, 2022, p. 3). Within the state model, three strategies existed to maintain order: 1) teaching children to be content with what they have, regardless of circumstances, 2) instilling a sense of fear to ensure obedience, and 3) manipulating children to form repetitive and “unconscious habits of compliance” (Paglayan, 2022, p. 4). According to early proponents, a system that adhered to these three strategies could extend the life of the political regime by promoting infallible respect and discouraging citizens from violence and rebellion (Paglayan, 2022).

The Prussian state-controlled school system also focused on primary education, as opposed to secondary or higher education; young children were targeted for their adaptability and incomparable ability to be molded and trained as opposed to older adolescents and adults. Encouragement to focus on the youngest members of the population also came directly from highly-esteemed philosophers, such as Plato and Rousseau, due to children’s malleability (Paglayan, 2022). Plato argued that children required taming and restraint (Paglayan, 2022), while Rousseau asserted that “to form citizens is not the business of a single day, and to have them be citizens when they are men, they have to be taught when they are children” (Rousseau, 2019, p. 18).

While the Prussians shifted the duty of educating children from the church to the state, this did not eliminate religious presence and significance in children’s education. Divine right,
defined as the idea that monarchs were assigned the responsibility of governance by God and were only answerable to God, was used as justification for the role and power of monarchs (Burgess, 1992). While the idea had been challenged by revolutionaries in England and other parts of Europe, it still remained a crucial aspect of upholding and preserving the absolute power of kings and queens (Burgess, 1992). The political advisors of Prussia’s King Frederick II condemned children who rejected authority and rebelled against the “divine order” to divine, eternal punishment (Paglayan, 2022, p. 4).

**Panopticism and the School**

The ideas relating to children’s education seemed to hinge on a common goal: to instill lifelong compliance by teaching young children to follow authority and to internalize the utility of obedience. Convincing people at the earliest ages of the usefulness and benefits of obedience would minimize the need for authorities to use force and suppression to ensure compliance; they will already be trained to do so and accustomed to following the orders and wishes of those higher up on society’s hierarchy (Paglayan, 2022). When conditioned at such a vulnerable stage in their lives, people will never have experienced autonomous choice and thought. Obedience would become an inherent part of life, and people may not be so inclined to fight an environment and dynamics they are so familiar with.

The push for establishing a level of subconscious comfort in children’s minds to not question authority ties well to philosopher Michel Foucault’s panopticism (Foucault, 2008). In the most simplistic terms, panopticism can be defined as internal surveillance. Essentially, people learn to adjust their behaviors to comply with authority, even when not under the physical presence of a watchful eye. Direct supervision is not required for people to continue following
the expectations of those in the upper echelons of societal hierarchies, whether they are political or educational.

**Civil Conflict and State-Mandated Primary Education**

Returning to Paglayan’s analysis, she presents evidence from student enrollment rates in 40 countries in Latin America and Europe between the years of 1828 and 2015 to illustrate the use of primary education as a way to bring about the Prussian educational ideal of docility (2022). For example, a notable statistic from the analysis shows that, on average, a 56% increase in primary student enrollment rates occurred two decades after a civil war in non-democratic regimes, indicating a rapid rise from the mere 20% student enrollment rate prior to the conflicts in these regions. This correlation was not observed in countries without internal conflict (Paglayan, 2022).

A specific example of the phenomenon can be observed in 19th-century Chile. The 1833 Constitution of Chile did include the state’s right to “promote public education… but left the management of and funding of primary education to municipalities” (p. 10), with greater emphasis on education for older children and young adults. While 1842 marked the establishment of the first state-sponsored teacher education program in the country, schools for younger children were still mostly in the control of municipalities and non-state sponsored initiatives (Paglayan, 2022). However, a failed rebellion against high taxes on silver and copper exports coincided with a radical shift in primary education policy. After the Civil War of 1859, the country’s leaders passed the *General Law of Primary Education* of 1860, which entirely centralized primary education, from funding to curriculum. Furthermore, the content published in textbooks for children emphasized submission to divine and state powers.
As hypothesized, student enrollment rates increased from 12% prewar to 20% postwar. Rhetoric comparisons of prewar and postwar speeches also point towards education’s role in indoctrination; while pre-war speeches made brief references to schools, postwar speeches by President Manuel Montt highlighted the ultimate role of public state schools in maintaining social order: “Extirpating it through a system of common schools that enlightens the masses by correcting their bad habits and teaching them proper behaviors is the most urgent task you can devote yourselves to” (Paglayan, 2022, p. 13).

**The Prussian School Model in the United States**

The first attempts at establishing a Prussian-style, public school system in the United States date back to the country’s initiation, when the Prussian model itself was in its early stages. While ultimately unsuccessful, Thomas Jefferson was the first to propose a system of this kind and continued to do so throughout his life (Herbst, 2002). According to Herbst, the push to allow the state to have greater influence and control over children’s education came from politicians and philosophers, as they did not feel confident in parents’ ability to instill values such as “love of country, industriousness, and productive competence” (p. 322). In 1779, Jefferson proposed a bill that would create a state-governed and -operated education system for children with specific modifications more fitting for a democratic society. While Prussia was Jefferson’s inspiration, he was committed to finding a balance and advocated for government supervision and management but not for “detailed control of individual schools and schoolmasters by an administrative bureaucracy” (Herbst, 2002, p. 323). Those directly impacted by it, such as parents, teachers, and taxpayers, generally preferred that control of schools be left up to municipalities (Herbst, 2002).

Horace Mann then continued Jefferson’s mission into the later part of the 19th century, going into the 20th century (Herbst, 2002). Upon his appointment to the Massachusetts State
Board of Education in 1837, he committed himself to establishing a Prussian-style centralized school system. Through this system, the children of the newfound democracy would grow into competent citizens and would learn basic knowledge of language and mathematics, as well as receive a “strong dose of moral instruction… to instill civic virtues” (Kober & Rentner, 2020, p. 3). Furthermore, as marketed in Prussia, schools were promoted as institutions that would help poor children climb the socioeconomic ladder, and would reduce the nation’s burden of otherwise dealing with widespread poverty.

However, since state education originated in an autocratic regime, religious authorities, parents, and taxpayers fought against Mann’s attempt at introducing the model in the United States (Herbst, 2002). From the 1850s onwards, the dilemma continued to unfold in determining to what extent the state should get involved in education. As a new nation that upheld the ideals of small government, state-implemented education seemed contradictory. Nonetheless, while universal public education was not established on a federal level, state constitutions did assume educational responsibility for their young residents (Kober & Rentner, 2020). Currently, there are approximately 100,000 public schools across the nation. These institutions are funded by federal and state governments, as well as local taxpayers, and are primarily controlled by state authorities (Kober & Rentner, 2020).

**Authoritarianism in Contemporary Public Schools in the United States**

While centuries have passed since the initiation of centralized school systems in Prussia and eventually the United States, authoritarian elements still exist and even thrive in contemporary public schools in the U.S., despite the country’s ideals of freedom and independence (Huntington, 1982). The following section will address the contrast between the presence of law enforcement and mental health professionals in our schools, and discuss
approaches that have been used to reduce some of the authoritarian elements of school on an individual and classroom level in an effort to promote student autonomy.

**Law Enforcement Presence and Mental Health in Schools**

Dr. Angela Mann, a Florida-based school psychologist, explores the disproportionate numbers of law enforcement and mental health workers in public schools across the nation, especially in relation to the ongoing mental health crisis among the youngest generations (Mann et al., 2019). Her analysis suggests that the excessive presence of disciplinary figures like police officers may be associated with more hostile and uncomfortable psychological environments for students, contradicting notions that police presence provides a sense of security and safety (Mann et al., 2019).

To begin with, Mann and colleagues (2019) state that the decade from 2006 to 2016 saw a 70 percent increase in suicide rates among 10- to 17-year-olds. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention provides additional alarming statistics. From 2013 to 2019, almost 21% of 12- to 17-year-olds reported at least one major depressive episode (Bitsko et al., 2022). In 2019, approximately 37 percent reported depressive symptoms of persistent sadness and hopelessness, and 18.8 percent contemplated suicide (Bitsko et al., 2022).

Yet, examining the number of law enforcement officers in comparison to mental health professionals hired in the nation’s public schools may suggest that primary and secondary education continues to prioritize discipline and control, much like its Prussian predecessors, over healthy psychological development and student well-being. For example, Mann and colleagues highlighted that 14 million students attended schools with police officers present in the building, but no health or mental health professionals, including nurses, psychologists, counselors, or social workers, as of 2019. Schools that do employ mental health professionals are massively
understaffed and frequently do not meet the minimum acceptable ratio of one mental health professional (counselor or social worker) per 250 individuals. In 2016, only three states met the ratio when it came to students assigned to a single counselor: New Hampshire, Vermont, and Montana. As for social workers, none of the states met the standard; Connecticut came closest to meeting that recommendation, with 580 students per school social worker. The worst offenders were Texas and Washington, with upwards of 10,000 students per social worker. Furthermore, approximately 70,000 public schools nationwide reported a total absence of social workers to tend to the psychological and social needs of young, developing minds (Mann et al., 2019).

In stark contrast to mental health workers, law enforcement has infiltrated public schools in unprecedented numbers. On average, public schools nationwide have two to three times more police officers than social workers (Mann et al., 2019). In 1975, a mere one percent of public schools employed police officers; in 2014, this number rose to 43 percent, and by 2019, half of all public schools in the United States had a police presence (Mann et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2016). Additionally, from the shooting at Columbine High School in 1999 to 2015, public schools saw a 16 percent increase in security guards and only a 5 percent increase in counselors within the same 16-year period (Mann et al., 2019). Suspension and expulsions rose 200 percent between 2000 and 2014, despite an overall decrease in “crimes against students,” with greater impacts on students of color (Weisburst, 2019, p. 1).

This increase in funding and presence of law enforcement in public schools has been justified because of the numerous shootings that have occurred in recent years (Mann et al., 2019; Weisburst, 2019). However, quantitative research suggests adverse outcomes, particularly when integrating authority figures such as police and security personnel in secondary school environments (Flores et al., 2023; Weisburst, 2019). Research within the last year has even
shown that a positive association exists between the presence of a school resource officer and the likelihood of a school shooting in that building, completely contradicting the concept of implementing law enforcement in schools as an effective strategy for preventing violence and protecting lives (Flores et al., 2023). In Weisburst’s (2019) analysis, data from 2.5 million public school students in Texas found that “exposure to a three-year federal grant for school police is associated with a 2.5 percent decrease in high school graduation rates and a 4 percent decrease in college enrollment rates” (p. 1). Evidence also exists showing that failure to graduate high school is associated with higher criminal activity and suicide attempts in young adults (Maynard et al., 2015). Considering the connections between school shootings, law enforcement, high school graduation rates, and mental wellbeing, there are undeniable negative consequences for students within the institution and their development into adulthood, which are observed.

Mann and colleagues (2019) discuss more concerns with police surveillance in the educational environments of young people. For example, arrests and interrogations remove students from the classroom, disrupt the learning process, and even infringe on students’ rights to due process and humane treatment. Many police officers who work in schools do not have prior experience with or training in working with the very population they are employed to protect and serve. Frequently, members of law enforcement will utilize physical methods of managing conflict, such as weapons and Tasers, rather than focusing on a less aggressive and more hands-off approach to address student social, emotional, and behavioral problems (Mann et al., 2019).

Negative outcomes associated with police presence appear even greater in predominantly non-white schools. First, police officers in these districts are less likely to contact local emergency services in the event of a genuine threat (Mann et al., 2019). Second, non-white
schools have much harsher “security measures like metal detectors, random ‘contraband’ sweeps, security guards, and security cameras” (p. 7). Third, there are higher rates of arrests amongst students with mental health challenges and disabilities, particularly students of color with disabilities.

So far, significant positive outcomes of these additional authority figures have not been documented. North Carolina’s evaluation of the success of school resource officers in the state’s middle schools did not provide substantial evidence that these individuals reduce and eliminate incidences of “assaults, homicide, bomb threats, possession and use of alcohol and drugs, or the possession of weapons” (p. 6). While shootings and other violent events can motivate the need for new security measures in educational settings, the data does not support the premise that police officers are the answer to safer schools; in fact, statistics showing increases in arrests, suspensions, and expulsions aligning with increases in police presence may suggest that school resource officers serve as supplementary disciplinarians, hired to promote punishment rather than provide protection.

**Combating Authoritarianism and Student Authority**

The current psychological atmosphere of public schools seems unconducive to student well-being, with a surplus of police and a shortage of mental health workers (Flores et al., 2023; Mann et al., 2019; Weisburst, 2019). Other factors also contribute to an authoritarian environment, such as the unique relationship dynamics between students and adults, and the extent to which students are given opportunities to make meaningful decisions (Goodman et al., 2011). In the following publication, four graduate-level student teachers conducted informal experiments (e.g., no control variables) in which they prioritized student authority to address interpersonal conflicts and classroom management issues (Goodman et al., 2011).
Christina Sanabria, a student teacher at a middle school, dealt with an interpersonal conflict by addressing the fundamental power imbalances between students and their adult teachers (Goodman et al., 2011). One core element in this situation was Sanabria’s observation that students do not feel heard by their adult authority figures. In response, certain students maintain an aggressive, closed-off demeanor towards their superiors, likely as a defense mechanism from the disdain they perceive from these authority figures. JJ was known to be one of those students, and his interaction with Mr. B would be no exception. Upon attempting to retrieve his backpack from another classroom, JJ claimed to have been pushed out of the classroom’s doorway by Mr. B. While the situation triggered JJ’s hostile behavior, Sanabria opted for a nonpunitive approach by setting up a three-way meeting between herself, Mr. B, and the student, and encouraging JJ to write a letter to share his side of the story and express his feelings to the teacher in a healthier, calmer manner. According to Sanabria’s observations, the letter-writing exercise appeared to have a significant positive impact on the child’s mood. Furthermore, the meeting provided both the child and adult a space to acknowledge each other’s faults and apologize, rather than passing blame back and forth (Goodman et al., 2011).

Celeste Rodriguez, a student teacher at the same middle school, granted greater authority and autonomy to her students in an attempt to improve behavior and learning. Students often seen as petulant and violent determined a social issue that piqued their interest and designed a project to raise awareness and combat it with the assistance of teachers (Goodman et al., 2011). In this case, the middle school students chose the topic of abuse and its effects. According to Rodriguez, there was a definite, clear shift in the attitude of the students, despite the communication issues, disputes, and sudden resignations of students in leadership positions that occurred in the process. Additionally, there were objective, statistical improvements amongst the
students; for example, those who participated in the collaborative assignment had the best attendance out of six classes of seventh graders. Academic performance improved by 14 percent for these students by December, as opposed to the 2–5 percent average improvement for the other classes. When it came to pure observations of behavior and communication, Rodriguez reported that even the most violent student in the class had begun processing her emotions in a healthier way by initiating difficult conversations with Rodriguez.

Nadel Pierre-Toussaint also expanded the role of her students at the high school level by providing opportunities for the young adolescents to have greater power and autonomy over their education (Goodman et al., 2011). In her approach, Pierre-Toussaint separated tasks into two categories: power-enhancing and authority-enhancing. Power-enhancing tasks included grading quizzes and tutoring peers according to a predetermined lesson plan. In authority-enhancing tasks, students designed grading rubrics and were required to explain their utility, and tutored their peers without the guidance of a pre-written lesson plan. While students who engaged in authority-enhancing tasks exhibited better comprehension of the material and greater confidence, Pierre-Toussaint noted that all the students, regardless of whether their tasks were power-enhancing or authority-enhancing, were highly appreciative of her trust in them (Goodman et al., 2011).

**Outcomes of Granting Student Autonomy**

Perhaps most informative in each of these case studies were the reflections of each student teacher. Sanabria’s approach had great outcomes for JJ, but the situation also highlighted how the rigidity of school hierarchies may possibly be contributing to tense relationships between students and authority and to hostile school environments. For example, when the three individuals discussed the backpack incident, Sanabria made sure to squat and be closer to JJ’s
eye level; Mr. B., on the other hand, remained upright while JJ looked up at him. Even if Mr. B. provided a verbal acknowledgement of his fault, the physical stance itself served as a subtle reminder to JJ that he was smaller, more vulnerable, and under the control of an older authority figure at all times. Sanabria states, “the observation underscores... how difficult it is to really listen when children address us, how to shift our paradigms from adult-child, authority-subordinate to, at least instance, two individuals angered and hurt by one another” (Goodman et al., 2011, p. 381). Furthermore, addressing structural, hierarchical, and organizational issues in public schools in this manner reduces time for learning, which can have a negative impact on academic performance. JJ did practice writing and communication skills; however, he also lost time developing his mathematical skills. Mr. B.’s assertion of authority in the moment led to unintended consequences as the young student sacrificed time for math instruction to address the issue. Overall, “the incident required a change in authority relationships,” which Sanabria emphasizes is an unfamiliar and uncomfortable shift to the school climate (Goodman et al., 2011, p. 382).

Rodriguez acknowledges that she took a bold risk by giving students unrestricted access to school spaces and not questioning their decisions or destinations when administering hall passes. To her pleasant surprise, students who had never spoken with the principal and generally had poor views of school administration were now requesting passes to the principal’s office to share the progress on their project. Pierre-Toussaint’s exercise in granting her students greater authority gave her the ability to focus almost exclusively on actual instruction rather than behavioral misconduct.

Goodman and colleagues (2011) conclude the analysis by providing commentary on all the student teachers’ experiences, and highlighting how authority-granting practices could be
especially relevant in schools in underprivileged communities. The Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2023) published data providing evidence that black children are in a particularly precarious situation: in 2020, black children made up a mere 17 percent of the total number of children in the U.S. aged 17 and younger, yet made up over 53 percent of child homicide victims. Systematically discriminated against due to their race and with the highest child homicide rate (Wilson et al., 2023), these adolescents find themselves in a constant state of survival in which they must be “quick to take a defensive or aggressive stance, and are remarkably sensitive to any perceived (or misperceived) signs of indicating disrespect” (Goodman et al., 2011, p. 391). Goodman suggests that leaving room for these students to gain greater control over parts of their education can indicate respect from the adults in the institution, possibly decreasing rebellious, disorderly conduct. While implementing authority-granting practices on an individual and classroom level would not dismantle the restrictive structure of schools, it would still allow for people in the institution to “step out of their controlling ways and arrive at positions of greater equality and mutual trust with students” (p. 396), which appears to be associated with positive outcomes for students on an academic and emotional level (Goodman et al., 2011).

Present Study

As illustrated above through the existing literature on the topic, authoritarianism has been and continues to be a fundamental component of public school structures. Beginning with the political motivations to suppress rebellion and encourage obedience in autocracies, school authoritarianism has evolved into strict hierarchies with stark divisions between adults and students, and the rights and respect they receive (Goodman et al., 2011; Paglayan, 2022). Recent additions of school resource officers in primary and secondary educational institutions have also
appeared to strengthen the authoritarian foundation of public education, while the presence of mental health professionals in these buildings has not risen in proportion to the ongoing youth mental health crisis (Mann et al., 2019). Furthermore, it appears that authoritarian elements in school environments, either through the excessive presence of police or through restricted student autonomy and rigid power dynamics between students and their adult superiors, are associated with academic issues, acts of violence, poor emotional regulation, and a multitude of other problems (Goodman et al., 2011; Mann et al., 2019).

The present study aimed to explore authoritarian elements in schools via the concept of empowerment, or the extent to which young adults felt trusted, respected, or controlled by adult authority figures. Then, the study examined how that level of empowerment may be associated with their development into healthy, capable adults. There was also an interest in the level of preparation for adulthood that their high school offered and its relationship to adjustment to adulthood. The hypothesis was informed by the literature discussed above: Individuals who felt more empowered rather than restricted by their public school environments were anticipated to also have adjusted better to adulthood. Participants who reported greater preparation for adulthood in high school were also anticipated to have adjusted to adulthood better than those who did not receive support in transitioning into adulthood in their public educational institutions.

The study also briefly examined the perceived impacts of relationships with authority on development into adulthood, mental health, and overall wellbeing to further the discussion on the topic. In essence, the remainder of the paper will be focused on providing preliminary but important answers to questions on the intersection of authority-student dynamics in the public school and young adult development and mental well-being.
Methods

In order to explore connections between perceived empowerment in high school, preparation for adulthood in high school, and comfort and adaptation to adulthood, a self-report online survey was administered.

Participants

Participants for this study were recruited through the SUNY New Paltz online subject pool system for psychology undergraduate students. Two emails were sent out to recruit psychology students interested in receiving subject pool credit. In addition, an email was sent to all students to recruit participants outside of the psychology department. Compensation was not offered for participants outside of the psychology department.

There were four requirements for participation in this study: Students were required to be 18 years of age or older, fluent in written English, to have attended at least two years of public high school in the United States, and to have graduated in 2017 or later.

Procedure

The format of this study was an online survey, utilizing both quantitative and qualitative data collection. Participants were instructed to use a secure internet connection and preferably complete the study on a laptop or desktop computer. The estimated completion time for the survey was 30 minutes. The study opened with a consent form detailing the structure of the study, potential risks, confidentiality, and information for obtaining subject pool credit for psychology students. All participants were required to consent before proceeding. If any discomfort was experienced throughout the duration of the study, participants were asked to close their browser window and not complete the study. The study closed after a week and a half.
The survey began with general demographic questions, including age, gender, high school location (urban vs. suburban vs. rural), and their year in college. The first section consisted of an open-ended question regarding the relationship between the respondent and their adult authority figures in school. That question was then followed by three sections of statements on a Likert scale; respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each statement, ranging from 1, indicating strong disagreement, to 5, indicating strong agreement. Part I included 10 statements regarding the dynamics between themselves as students and their respective adult authority figures in terms of trust and respect, the level of autonomy and freedom they had, and the level of importance of obedience (i.e., empowerment in high school). Part II included five statements primarily focused on financial and college literacy and their evaluation of how well high school educated them on these topics (i.e., preparation for adulthood in high school). Part III included 10 statements referring to participants' current attitude and feelings of capability when it comes to managing adult responsibilities and independently handling academic, professional, and personal matters (i.e., adjustment to adulthood).

These three sections were followed by an additional three open-ended questions, which prompted participants to critically analyze the ways in which their place in the secondary school hierarchy and the rules, expectations, and relationships with superiors within that environment may have influenced their mental health and their current lives as emerging adults. For all open-ended questions, respondents were asked to refrain from including any identifying information, such as names of people and places, in order to protect confidentiality. If deemed necessary, they were instructed to use pseudonyms for people or places in their responses.
The survey concluded with a thank you message, contact information for the campus psychological services if respondents experienced any mental distress as a result, and information regarding receiving subject pool credit.

**Results**

There were a total of 136 participants. 59 participants did not provide any responses beyond demographic information and were immediately omitted. Of the 77 participants who provided at least one response beyond demographic information, three surveys failed to meet one or more requirements for participation. As for the Likert-scale statements, 64 participants completed all three sections in their entirety, which were used for the quantitative analysis.

In analyzing the quantitative data, the primary goal was to determine whether correlations exist between empowerment in high school and perceived adjustment to adulthood, and preparation for adulthood in high school and perceived adjustment to adulthood. Correlations between adulthood adjustment and age, gender, and the high school location (urban, suburban, or rural) were also briefly examined. For each participant, a sum of the Likert-scale responses was calculated for each of the three sections measuring empowerment, preparation, and adjustment. These sums were then used to determine correlations and conduct regression analyses.

Moderate and significant positive correlations were found between empowerment and adulthood adjustment ($r(64) = .428, p < .001$) and preparation and adjustment ($r(64) = .358, p = .004$). Participants who reported stronger feelings of empowerment and better relationships with authority during their time as students in public high schools also reported higher perceived adjustment to adulthood in regards to handling errands (e.g., medical appointments, car repairs, etc.), communicating effectively with people in their personal, professional, and academic lives, and taking initiative at home, school, and work. In contrast, participants who indicated lower
levels of empowerment in school also reported lower confidence in their adjustment to adulthood. The correlation between preparation and adjustment was slightly weaker, but still indicated that a relationship does exist between the degree of resources provided to students in high schools regarding finances and career pathways and their subsequent confidence in an adult role.

No significant correlations were found between adjustment to adulthood and age ($r(64) = .023, p = .857$), gender ($r(64) = .132, p = .297$), and high school location ($r(51) = -.065, p = .650$). In determining the correlation between adulthood adjustment and high school location, 13 participants were omitted as they reported multiple high school locations.

A multiple regression was also conducted to explore variability in adjustment to adulthood explained by empowerment and preparation in high school ($R^2 = .21, F(2, 61) = 8.11$, $p < .05$). Approximately 21% of variability in adjustment to adulthood was accounted for by participants’ perceptions of their empowerment and preparation in high school. Next, semi-squared partial correlations were computed to address the unique amount of variability in adulthood adjustment accounted for, separately, by empowerment and preparation. The results showed that empowerment uniquely accounts for a significant amount of variability in adulthood adjustment ($sr^2 = .08, p = .015$), whereas preparation does not account for a significant amount of variability in adulthood adjustment ($sr^2 = .03, p = .157$). The analysis suggests that while preparation in high school regarding adult responsibilities like careers and finances is not strongly or significantly predictive of adjustment to adulthood, empowerment in high school does appear to be significantly predictive of adjustment into this mature role.
In regards to the responses to the open-ended questions, an in-depth qualitative analysis was not conducted at this time. However, an overview of the responses to these questions is provided in the discussion section.

**Discussion**

The statistical significance of the moderate and positive correlations found between empowerment and adulthood adjustment and preparation and adulthood adjustment suggests that the degree to which students feel empowered and prepared in high school does indeed intersect with their current adaptation to adulthood.

Furthermore, responses to the open-ended questions provide fascinating insights into the level of preparation their high schools offered for adulthood and the relationships between students and authority and other facets of life, such as mental health. For example, almost all respondents to the question regarding preparation for adulthood in high school resoundingly stated that their public high schools provided minimal or no resources for developing skills needed for a successful transition into an adult role, such as managing finances and determining future educational and career paths.

While many participants did report positive relationships with teachers and counselors, some participants reported severe negative consequences for their mental and emotional well-being resulting from poor relationships with authority. For example, one participant reported that due to strong pressure from their authority figures to take a full course load, they did not have a scheduled lunch period, which subsequently contributed to their disordered eating and mental illness. Other participants also noted that their schools were hyper-focused on academic excellence at the expense of the mental health of students, with one participant even reporting that the excessive pressure led to a complete psychological breakdown and a suicide
attempt. Other respondents stated that their experiences made them distrustful of authority, and the authoritarian division between students and their elders fostered feelings of incompetence. Several students found that their strict relationships with authority were alienating and associated this loneliness with a decline in emotional well-being.

A participant who had attended a suburban high school did acknowledge that her school “wasn’t a place where students’ opinions about school policies were welcomed by teachers,” and students were expected to “Do as your told, do not question”. Another student, who also attended a suburban high school, reported that authority figures were dismissive of issues like bullying, assault, and discrimination, and students were often told to “ignore it” despite feeling threatened and unsafe.

Overall, the general themes were that academics consistently overshadowed the human issues these students faced, and great disparities existed between the respect given to adults and students which left students feeling ostracized and incapable.

However, a large number of responses also included highly positive experiences from high school. Many reported that they had several supportive and attentive teachers who trusted and respected them, and expressed care and offered accommodations for their mental health difficulties. Some participants even emphasized that these interactions had positive impacts on their lives even after they graduated. Participants who mentioned positive relationships with authority also generally mentioned concepts such as respect, trust, critical thinking skills, and self-advocacy. Overall, the responses to the open-ended questions greatly varied; most responses were either positive or negative, and few reported neutral experiences with school authority.
Limitations

It is imperative to address that the research design did come with several limitations. Arguably, the greatest limitation of the study was the sample. Only 64 respondents completed the three sections of Likert-scale statements, and an even smaller number completed the survey in its entirety and according to the rules of participation (discussed in the Methods section). Participants consisted exclusively of undergraduate students at the State University of New York at New Paltz. While psychology students were compensated for their participation with subject pool credit, students outside of the psychology department did not receive any compensation. Compensating only a portion of participants may have inadvertently led to psychology students having more incentive to complete the study thoroughly and accurately as opposed to students in other disciplines.

In addition, recruiting participants from universities across the region and nation would diversify the data and could contribute to more generalizable and meaningful results. State colleges usually target students residing within that state, hence, these students likely attended high school within that state and provide a picture of public schools in that specific state as opposed to public schools throughout the country. Finally, recruiting non-matriculated or working young adults would further diversify the data and contribute to more widely applicable findings.

The design of this exploratory study itself also has limitations. The survey was entirely self-reported, leaving room for great subjective variance in reported experiences. Furthermore, the scales and open-ended questions used in this survey were created by the principal investigator. Bias may have influenced the design of the survey and produced skewed results.
While statistical significance indicates reliability, validity of the survey cannot be determined as no other research using the exact study design has been conducted at this time.

**Future Directions**

While the research design and data collected in this paper provide a preliminary glimpse into the interactions between empowerment students feel in high school and their subsequent adaptation to an adult role and accompanying responsibilities, modifications could be made to enhance the self-report study.

For example, placing Section III measuring adulthood adjustment at the beginning of the survey, and moving Section I measuring empowerment in school in its place, could possibly reduce bias. While entirely speculative, being reminded of the lack of support, freedom, and poor relationships with authority in school could be eliciting feelings of helplessness and frustration. In turn, when determining levels of adulthood adjustment, participants may be projecting their helplessness and reporting lower levels of adjustment, even if they generally feel comfortable in this more mature role. The opposite may also be true: Participants who recall positive feelings of connectedness and autonomy may be subconsciously overrating their actual daily capability and comfort with adulthood.

Adding a neuroimaging component to assess physiological changes in the brain in relation to school dynamics and environment could also be highly informative. For example, the current study could be transformed into a two-part study. The first part would be completing the survey, and the second part would be monitoring the brains of these same participants using functional magnetic resonance imaging, or fMRI. As blood flow to regions in the brain is measured, participants would be shown images relating to adult responsibilities, such as an individual taking the subway alone to work, doing their taxes, talking to a medical receptionist,
or explaining a car issue to an auto mechanic. Hypothetically, participants who scored low on the empowerment variable in the survey (<25) would experience greater activity in the amygdala, or the small almond-shaped structure in the brain responsible for emotion regulation, particularly relating to fear, stress, and anxiety (AbuHasan et al., 2023). Reversely, participants who scored highly on empowerment (>35) would experience less amygdala activation, as these participants also appear to be better adjusted to adulthood according to the data presented in this research.

**Conclusion**

Despite the gap in research when it comes to examining high school social environments’ relationship with authority and autonomy and adult development, the existing literature still provides an incentive to begin considering ways to shift the school's psychological layout. As Mann and colleagues (2019) presented in their extensive report on law enforcement and mental health in public schools, the ratio of students per mental health worker is still critically high. Perhaps, reallocating funds for school resource officer salaries towards mental health workers (e.g., school counselors and social workers) could be crucial to reaching the minimum 250 students per mental health professional (Mann et al., 2019).

In Goodman and colleagues (2011), four masters level student teachers attempted to grant their students varying levels of autonomy in otherwise highly authoritarian educational settings. Despite the hurdles, there were positive outcomes in all scenarios. For example, Christina Sanabria managed to calm and reunify two hurt individuals, despite the existing power imbalance, through a civil discussion and a letter-writing exercise in which the student acknowledged his behavior and accompanying feelings, and the ways in which they were inappropriate (Goodman et al., 2011). Undeniably, applying this method to conflict resolution requires extensive patience and emotional regulation, as well as individual commitment to a less
disciplinary and more rehabilitative approach. It asks the adults in these situations to not assert their dominance but instead to put their sense of pride aside and admit fault. It requires that both adults and children recognize their identities as humans first, teachers and students second. One application that relates to Sanabria’s experience and extends beyond individual scenarios could include school-wide workshops including both students and adults to promote emotional regulation (e.g., mindfulness exercises).

Dismantling authoritarian school structures, hierarchies, and expectations across the entire public school system is undeniably incredibly challenging, even if these elements seem to pose a hindrance to students academic, emotional, and developmental success. However, individual schools can still make small but meaningful strides in creating school environments that rely less on punishment and obedience and instead encourage unity, mutual respect and trust, greater student autonomy, and more egalitarian relationships between students and their authority figures. Perhaps, shifting away from treating young students as incapable of autonomous choices and undeserving of respect can make these vulnerable individuals feel the acceptance, warmth, and support needed to focus on their personal and academic growth, both in school and beyond. Further research is necessary to explore these complex systems and their implications, but the existing literature and current study still provide solid evidence that empowerment of adolescents should be highly prioritized in education, as it may be a crucial factor in their adjustment to life even long after they have left the halls of their public schools.
References


