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Student to Prison Pipeline

What ever happened to no child left behind? (Boehner, 2002). I have seen firsthand too many of my peers be a statistic in the prison pipeline. These peers carried so much potential but were ultimately underappreciated, victimized, and ignored during their most vulnerable years. These peers have been deprived of an education, life, and successful future that we each have been promised in each of our lives. It is inhumane to disregard what is happening to the children of this country. The student to prison pipeline is a present-day issue that is depriving students from their right to an education, and we must act accordingly. In this paper I will provide context on the school-to-prison-pipeline first through the lens of the zero-tolerance policy, what group is being affected the most and what effect these policies have made on students. Second, I will provide an analysis of why the pipeline is still relevant today due to teacher inexperience, lack of training and lack of diverse faculty. Last, I will provide possible solutions prevent students from entering the prison pipeline and to ensure we leave no child behind.

Numerous students end up discarded into the school-to-prison pipeline. This pipeline is the consequence of the zero-tolerance policy that became popular around "1996-1997 with 94% of public schools reporting [that they enforced this policy]" (Vidal-Castro, 2016, p. 2). Initially this policy targeted the removal of weapons, alcohol/drugs, aggressive behavior and fighting (Heitzeg, 2009). The policy gained popularity after families, schools and students became worried about the rise of crime around schools. The Columbine High School Massacre in 1999 and the Sandy Hook shootings in 2012 were both traumatizing events that pushed for even more zero-tolerance policies (Vidal-Castro, 2016, p. 2). However, this policy went from ensuring safety of students to targeting and removing unliked students (Vidal-Castro, 2016, p. 2). As cited

in Heitzeg's article, the Centers for Disease Control found that almost every school district was strong on removing misbehaviors. 80% of schools created bans on gang-affiliations at school along with 90% following the zero-tolerance policy for alcohol and drugs (Heitzeg, 2009).

However, many schools have been abusing this policy to punish students for minor actions. For example, in 2009 a 14-year-old boy in Texas with Asperger's syndrome was fined $364 by police for using explicit language in his classroom (Advancement Project, 2010). In another example, a 12-year-old Florida student passed gas at a school gathering and was ultimately arrested for the action (Advancement Project, 2010). It is apparent that although these students' behaviors seem quite inappropriate and that there must have been some rationale for their misbehavior, the form of punishment is an abuse of power.

Schools have used the zero-tolerance policy at alarming rates to expel and suspend students. In more recent years, another study showed that during the "2017-18 school year, out of the 291,100 disciplinary actions taken place, 73% were out of school suspensions that lasted 5 or more days, 22% were transfers, and 5% were removed with no access to school resources for the rest of the year" (Wang et al., 2019, p. 97). In each instance, a student is losing essential time that they could be spending in the classroom learning.

Students with disabilities and low socioeconomic students of color are the most at risk. Often students with disabilities are also targeted to be separated from the general population of the school. According to the 2014 Civil Rights Data Collection by the U.S. Department of Education, it was found that "students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (13%) than students without disabilities (6%)" (Duncan, 2014, p. 1). This disparity brings up the question of if schools are choosing to cater to a picture-perfect

student. The U.S Department of Education found that in schools with around 50,000 students, 24% of those students were Black but accounted for 34% of on-campus arrests (Marchbanks et al., 2015, as cited in Mallett, 2016). A study done by the Southern Poverty Law Center focused on Black students in the Louisiana School District. During the 2008-09 school year in New Orleans, there were 186 out-of-school suspensions per week in the Recovery School district where 98% of the students enrolled were Black and 79% were low income (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2010). As a city, New Orleans had hopes that their educational system would be rebuilt from the ground up after Hurricane Katrina, but it is quite apparent that no progress was made.

It is even prevalent in schools that have a predominately White student body, that students of color are suspended at greater rates. Northwood Middle School, located in Renton, Washington, had a population of 584 students in the 2017-2018 school year. In that school year, 40.6% of the students were White, 23.5% Asian, 12.7% Hispanic, 12% two or more and 9.6% Black (Civil Rights Data Collection). Of those that received in school suspensions, 32.6% were White and 30.2% were Black (Civil Rights Data Collection). Black students are being suspended at the same rate of White students while they only make up $1/10^{th}$ of the population. Even Hispanic students are being suspended at double the rate of their study body make up, 23.3% (Civil Rights Data Collection). It is clear that suspensions continue to target students of color even in predominantly White schools.

In the 2011 study Breaking Schools' Rules, researchers followed Texas students from seventh to tenth grade and then followed up with them to their senior year of high school (Wilson, 2014, p. 51). This 2011 study found that "54% of all students experience at least one in-

school suspension and 31% of all students spent on average two days at home at least once" (Fabelo et al., 2011, as cited in Wilson, 2014). According to this study, African American and Hispanic students were more likely to be disciplined repeatedly than their White peers (Fabelo, 2011). It was found that "African American students were given disciplinary action at a rate of 25.7%, compared to 18.1% of Hispanic students and less than 9.5% of white students" (Fabelo, 2011, pg. 40). The more time spent out of school being punished, the less time students can keep up with schoolwork. These seemingly harmless punishments can alter a student's motivation in their schools. In fact, "students with one suspension were 5 times more likely to drop out" (Wilson, 2014, p. 51).

Not only do expulsions restrict the amount of time a student is in a classroom, but they also impact the motivation a student has for continuing their education. Jennifer E. Grace and Steven L. Nelson interviewed 10 Black male students to uncover the "educational experiences of Black males who have been expelled from public school settings [and] to what degree do Black males perceive the roles of race and racism in their educational experiences" (Grace et al., 2019, p. 665). The interviewed students had different expulsions, extracurriculars and goals for postsecondary education (Grace et al., 2019). Malik, 18, voiced that his constant encounters with racism became overwhelming, and although he graduated, the expectations for Black students were always so low, and he felt as though none of his accomplishments were appreciated (Grace et al., 2019). Malcom, 16, voiced that he was always worried about doing the wrong thing. He often stayed quiet amongst his peers and never sought help from teachers because he feared judgment (Grace et al., 2019). He also mentioned that it was difficult sharing these hardships to his White teachers who often did not understand his struggles as a Black male (Grace et al., 2019). Although some of the students in this study graduated, it is apparent that the lack of

support from the teachers and the intense stereotypes affected their eagerness to succeed in school.

While zero tolerance policies are the most significant factors to the school-to-prison-pipeline, there is still many other contributing factors. Teacher inexperience, lack of training, and lack of diversity contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline. First, teacher inexperience in handling inappropriate behavior places more students in the pipeline. As stated in Wang's 2019 report, 61% of the teachers that had less than 3 years of experience felt as though they were able to handle disruptive behaviors most of the time. However, 86% of teachers that had far more experience felt as though they were able to handle disruptive behaviors most of the time (Wang et al., 2019). Schools are fundamentally expecting inexperienced teachers to cater to the needs of students when they never received the adequate training. This puts the teachers and students in grave danger.

Second, although all districts require a version of essential training for each teacher before entering the school, many trainings do not address critical issues. For example, during the 2017-2018 school year, 70% of schools reported training on cyberbullying, 75% on violence, and 82% on other types of bullying, but only 48% were trained on discipline policies for alcohol and/or drug use (Wang et al., 2019). This displaces many students from receiving essential support to resolve their issues. What has been even more alarming is the lack of training on interventions for students that show signs of mental health disorders; about 60% of teachers reported that they did so (Wang et al., 2019). Lack of funding for training also plays a key role in the access to this training. 52% of public schools in 2017-18 reported that they had inadequate funding to provide the essential services for their students (Wang et al., 2019). When teachers

lack this essential training, students often struggle to keep up with their courses and students are disciplined more than necessary (Mallet, 2016).

The two perspectives, policies and teacher training, go hand in hand. If schools have policies that are mandatory for teachers to follow, then those enforced policies directly affect the progress that students can make and the connection that they have with their teachers. If teachers are seeking out behavior in students that is disorderly, they are more likely to punish than find the root cause of a student's mannerism. Bornstein mentions that some schools have been implementing PBIS, "positive behavioral innervation and support" (Bornstein, 2017, p. 135). In a recent interview, a current middle school teacher working at Highline school district said that school district is making progress to stem the tide of the school-to-prison pipeline. For example, Chinook middle school implemented PBIS and restorative justice (Student Handbook). Although this method of intervention can be seen to encourage a greater connection between teachers and students, it is yet again another method of enforcing compliance (Bornstein, 2017). It was also found in Bornstein's 2014 study of five school districts that when the intervention side of PBIS wasn't working, teachers were assuming that a student has a behavioral disorder even though the teachers do not have the authority to diagnose (Bornstein, 2017). The students that were initially seen as troublesome now became students with disorders (Bornstein, 2017). Lack of training and the idea of receiving compliance from students restrict students from becoming successful.

Third, lack of diverse teachers leads to more students in the pipeline. Cultural differences can often influence teachers in believing that a student's behavior can be seen as disrespectful, as mentioned by a participant in Mallett's 2016 report. In 2018, Gershenson reported that in a North Carolina school district, it was found that Black students that were placed with at least one Black

teacher during their kindergarten to third year were 13% more likely to graduate from high school (Gershenson et al., 2018). It is apparent that by having positive role models for students at a young age will drastically change their outcomes after high school. Positive role models that reflect your ethnic identity, are also likely to understand your life outside of school. In Gershenson's same report, authors Lindsay and Hart uncovered that the number of referrals written for Black students by their Black teachers was close to none (Gershenson et al., 2018 as cited in Williams III et al., 2020). Although the written referrals were lower, it was also found that suspensions for Black students by Black teachers increased (Gershenson et al., 2018, as cited in Williams III et al., 2020). Latino/a students are suffering just as much with lack of representation. As cited by Rubin, in 2011 it was reported by Feistritzer that 84% of teachers were White females. These teachers have been taught through a White lens of education that does not foster help for Latino/a in English/Language Arts (Rubin, 2014). Without altering the learning approach specifically for English Language/Arts, these students are often left behind.

Incivility most certainly exacerbates the issue. Racial stereotypes and other social factors give the "label of Black man-as-villain" which creates hesitation for teachers to engage with Black male students (Noguera, 1997 as cited in Grace et al., 2019, p. 665). These stereotypes are restricting students of color from getting the best education. Acting with civility means you treat each student with the same respect while creating connections individually to cater to each student's needs. Ignoring the conversation of racism amongst teacher causes an influx of privilege that can restrict students from being educated accordingly (Alexander, 2010, Ladson-Billings, 1998 as cited in Grace et al., 2019).

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To combat the student to prison pipeline, we must eradicate zero-tolerance policies, train teachers accordingly to adopt restorative practices and increase diversity in schools either through the teachers or administration.

It is imperative that zero-tolerance policies are eradicated. Instead of teachers using their power to arrest or fine students, teachers need to make the conscious effort to seek out the root cause of misbehavior. It is an abuse of power that should be used to help students learn how to resolve their issues. If the issue is not being addressed appropriately, then the number of suspensions for that student would increase. No matter how serious the infraction, it is apparent that once a student is exposed to the punishment and forced into suspension and/or expulsion, they are less likely to return and continue their education. As mentioned by the 2005 Advancement Project report, schools can often refuse to readmit students after expulsion, and even if they are allowed back, they stand out amongst their peers as a troublesome student and are never welcomed again (Advancement Project, 2005).

Another solution to combat the school-to-prison-pipeline is requiring new training for all teachers regardless of experience. The training needs to incorporate SWBPIS and restorative practices. SWBPIS is schoolwide behaviors and interventions services, which can be divided into three tiers (Mallett, 2016). The first tier encourages to teach students “behavioral expectations, reward positive behavior and continuum of consequences” (Mallett, 2016, p. 299). The second tier is for at risk students to address strategies for their behaviors (Mallett, 2016). The third tier incorporates family and community to find strategies to assert the behavioral issues (Mallett, 2016). Restorative practices focus predominantly on making the student accountable for their behavior (Mallett, 2016).

The issue with these practices, as mentioned by Mallett, is that there wasn't enough proof to show that there will be long term benefits. As reported by McMahon in Bratley's report, teachers in Syracuse City School District stated that restorative practices have made them lose control of their classroom since the practice means that punitive discipline is not allowed. In fact, Chinook Middle School in Tukwila has faced similar issues. The interview I conducted with a 6th grade teacher stated that they did not agree with removing expulsions as discipline because of instances when a student became physical with a student or teacher. On the other hand, these practices are not intended to disregard all dangerous behaviors such as physical/verbal assault and drug abuse. Miami-Dade County Public Schools was able to adjust their rule regarding zero-tolerance policies (Thompson, 2016 as cited in Vidal-Castro, 2016). By defining what a serious offense is versus an insignificant one, the school was able to prevent victimization and create clear steps to how to handle discipline. SWBPIS and restorative practice are not intended to ignore dangerous acts; rather they are intended to discover the root cause for why a student is behaving a certain way.

Lastly, another solution to combat the school-to-prison-pipeline is to diversify the field. For the schools that already have faculty of color, they need to promote these faculty members to work in administration (Williams III et al., 2020). Faculty of color that are seen as leaders have a greater ability to become powerful influences (Williams III et al., 2020). By having faculty of color in these administration roles, they can notice unresolved issues among students of color. As stated previously, having faculty that are an adequate representation of the student body can create a welcoming environment for students of color. However, to assume that teachers of color should be expected to act as role models solely for their shared ethnic backgrounds is highly inappropriate (Maylor, 2009 as cited in Simon et al., 2015). Some schools in Simon's study were

required to meet a quota for hiring teachers that were Black, about 10%. One of the administrators voiced that this forced schools to focus on the quota rather than the qualifications a teacher had (Simon et al., 2015).

If schools focus on retraining the faculty that they currently have on SWBPIS and restorative justice, they will provide the essential care and education for their students. With this training, there will be better understanding for how to care for students appropriately. Along with the training, there needs to be a diversification of the field to adequately represent the student population, whether that's through hiring teachers of color or having faculty of color work in administration. These factors will create progress to steer away from the pipeline.

Personally, I believe that schools in Washington, within the last five to ten years, are making the essential changes to help students away from the pipeline. Chinook Middle School had hired a specific faculty member, a reengagement specialist. A reengagement specialist works closely with students that are not fully engaged in their classrooms and are not expected to graduate on time (Communities in Schools, 2021). The specialist creates a structured approach to bring the student back on track by incorporating pre-existing social and economic inequities (Communities in Schools, 2021). I believe that a faculty member specialized in this field will decrease the pipeline and increase graduation rates.

There have been generations upon generations deprived of their futures due to the student-to-prison-pipeline and we need to act swiftly. To combat this pipeline, we must adopt policies that will uncover the root cause for misbehaviors, policies that encourage the student to feel safe in their environments. Secondly, we must retrain faculty to have the ability to respond to misbehaviors, but without appropriate funding this will not be possible. Lastly, we need to

diversify the field with faculty that accurately represent the student body. We can all play an active role in destroying this pipeline. Advocate for your communities to receive funding and volunteer at your previous institutions to be a guiding light for younger students. Without the help of all of us, we will continue to lose students to this pipeline. It is time we go back to ensuring that no child is left behind.

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