



Essay

Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline: Impact on Black, Hispanic, and Native Indigenous Students

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Abstract

Youth who experience academic failure are at a greater risk for involvement in delinquency. While studies have revealed a myriad of factors for such failure, the perceptions of these youth regarding their educational experiences have proven to be one of the most valuable resources regarding the systematic barriers to academic achievement. The purpose of this essay is to examine how youth of color are overwhelmingly affected by a phenomenon known as Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline. Several school districts in the U. S. employ harsh discipline practices that inevitably push students out of classrooms, on the streets, and in the juvenile justice system at an astounding rate. Students of color experience higher rates of suspensions, expulsion, truancy, retention, and academic failure in schools. Harsh discipline policies, along with bias and discrimination have a direct or indirect impact on their academic journey, including feeling of inferiority due to their academic shortcomings.

Youth who experience academic failure are at a greater risk for involvement in delinquency. Studies have revealed a myriad of both structural and societal factors for such failure, impacting youth of color, those living in poverty, and those whose primary language is not English (Mitchell & Leachman, 2014). Structural issues include institutions, policies, and practices that govern and control our society. Within the realm of education such policies include Get Tough and “Zero-Tolerance” Policies that contribute to a phenomenon known as the Cradle-to-Prison-Pipeline (CTPP), which creates systematic barriers for youth of color in schools and pushes them towards the juvenile justice system (Milner et al., 2018).

The CTPP is one of the most pressing issues facing our schools and, by extension our society, today (Tuzzolo & Hewitt, 2006). In fact, it has been

described as one of the greatest threats to civil rights issues of our time (Samel et al., 2011). I can personally attest to this, having served as a counselor, teacher and principal in the juvenile correctional system for eighteen years. Indeed, for the vast majority of the youth I worked with the path from early childhood to incarceration was disturbingly straightforward. It also robbed them of opportunities to obtain employment and be productive members of society. Their stories and lived experiences left an indelible mark on me both personally and professionally, and made me even more aware of the urgent need to address structural racism within the educational arena. As Dr. King famously wrote in 1963 after being arrested during a non-violent protest, “I am here because injustice is here” (King, 1994).

In his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, Dr. King also noted that, “injustices anywhere is a threat to

justice everywhere." We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly" (King, 1994, p. 2-3). These powerful words written over fifty years ago still speak truth to systemic injustices inflicted on the overwhelmingly disproportionate number of young Black men who become victims of the Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline. Any serious attempt to dismantle the CTPP must include an examination of best practices around strategies, research, equality, and equity initiatives for marginalized youth.

Understanding the educational experiences of youth of color can yield valuable information regarding the complexities of the Pipeline. For example, issues such as disengagement, suspensions, expulsion, truancy, academic failure, substance abuse, systemic inequities, school violence, poverty and parental neglect are all significant contributors and predictors of dropout and delinquency. Furthermore, youth's personal challenges, including feelings of inferiority, also have a direct and/or indirect impact on their academic journey, including an increased likelihood that this journey will end in, or be disrupted by, incarceration (Henry et al., 2012).

Background

Currently, approximately 48,000 youth, ages 13 to 18, are confined in correctional facilities in the United States, which exposes them to greater risk of assault and other abusive treatment (Prison Policy Initiative, 2019). "At a cost of approximately \$90,000 per juvenile in a facility per year, this is both a massive waste of taxpayer funds and an unconscionable waste of the potential of thousands of young people" (Carter, 2018, p. 373). Additionally, an Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (2020) report showed that 43,580 youth had been remanded to residential facilities during 2017, inevitably at a cost to states (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), 2020). Perhaps most concerning is the overrepresentation of Black, Latino, and Native Indigenous male youth housed

in detention facilities and the clear link between these groups and academic failure. It is estimated that more than half of adolescent male youth attending urban high schools fail to obtain a diploma (Lynch, 2017). Of the dropouts, nearly 60 percent will go to prison at some point via a phenomenon known as the "School-to-Prison-Pipeline," which funnels "students out of school and into the streets and the juvenile correction system," depriving them "of meaningful opportunities for education, future employment, and participation in our democracy" (Tyner, 2014, p.1).

Historical Influences Pipeline

This disturbing trend follows the historical treatment of African American youth in the U.S., namely a racial caste system of institutional slavery, the Jim Crow era, the convict lease system, and racial profiling (Alexander, 2010). During colonial times, juvenile offenders were subject to the same punishments as adults, and they usually lived in inhumane conditions (Bartollas & Miller, 2001). Youth of color were disproportionately affected by this, as slavery was the law of the land, rendering Black people the property of White slaveholders and thus ineligible for basic rights afforded to "human beings" (Bell, 2017), including due process. Although legislation in 1804 brought an end to slavery in the North, the institution would persist in the South until the Civil War and eventually evolve into the system of Jim Crow (Bell, 2017). As noted in Michelle Alexander's book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, after losing the War and the institution of slavery upon which their economic system was based, Southern Whites needed to create "a new racial order" (Alexander, 2010, p. 28) of control. In the 1890s, the southern states enacted notorious "Black Codes" (p. 28), or vagrancy laws designed to establish a new system of forced labor (Alexander, 2010). These laws affected youths and adults alike, and though in the mid-1800s penalties for juveniles decreased and the government established separate facilities to house delinquent youth, youth of color were

still denied equal access to the services their White counterparts were afforded.

Disproportionate Representation

During a single year, an estimated 744,451 thousand youth under the age of 18 are arrested in the United States, with delinquency cases reaching juvenile courts each year (Sickmond et al., 2020). Equally alarming is the vastly disproportionate numbers of children who are poor and members of racial and ethnic minority groups who populate the delinquency system. The data show that disparities are particularly pronounced among youth of color, who have a greater likelihood of being incarcerated than their White counterparts (Sawyer, 2019). The disproportionate numbers of African American youth in the justice system, moreover, reflect the harsh reality that society imposes unequal and discriminatory treatment upon poor children of color (Sawyer, 2019).

Pathway to Delinquency

By the time most juveniles enter the justice system, they have already displayed a downward trend in most areas of their life (Rider-Hankins, 1992). They likely began to express delinquent behavior at an early age and are defiant, hostile, resentful, and frustrated. Much of this is exacerbated by “structural, systemic, institutional and societal challenges and barriers that produce inequity, inequality, racism and various other forms of discrimination” (Milner et al., 2018, p. 33). Since the 1970s, the number of suspensions involving Black high school students have grown to eleven times that of Whites, and currently Black students are almost four times more likely than their White counterparts to be suspended. Those students who receive suspensions during their freshman year of high school are twice as likely to drop out of high school altogether. Furthermore, there is strong evidence that young men who experience discipline in K-12 schools through suspension and expulsions are at greater risk for ending up incarcerated later in life, and in fact nearly 68 percent of all adult men in federal

prison have never earned a high school diploma (Lynch, 2017).

What we need to understand is that most youth entering the system have been traumatized both physically and emotionally. Delinquents have frequently expressed feeling that they are victims of society (Rider-Hankins, 1992), most notably in our schools.

Our Black males do not enter a domain that represents their community. The textbooks that are used, the authors that are esteemed, the art on the walls, and the ideas that are embraced are those that emanate from a system that sustains itself by requiring the participation of Black males as “workers,” members of the “underclass,” and “prisoners”. (Woods, 2018, p. 5).

Studies have demonstrated that the incarceration rate in the United States is one of the highest in the world, with a strong correlation to racial discrimination experienced by African American youth in schools (Walmsley, 2015) that hinders their ability to establish healthy social bonds and impedes their opportunities to pursue educational dreams, goals, and aspirations (Unnever & Gibbidon, 2011). Research shows that a Black male growing up in the United States faces a one-in-three chance of entering the prison system during his lifetime, a Latino male has a one-in-six chance, and a White male has a one-in-seventeen chance. It is important to note that racially disproportionate distributions also play out among females, with Black females having had a one-in-seventeen chance of going to prison in her lifetime, a Latina female has a one-in-forty-five chances (The Sentencing Project, 2017).

Approaches and Strategies for Dismantling the Pipeline

Classroom management has tremendous influence on student success, an influence considerably greater than social standing, drive and determination, or student intellect (Weinstein et al., 2004). Effective classroom management remains one of the most challenging tasks facing

educators in schools (Rose & Gallup, 2002) and is directly connected to learning and academics. The goal of effective classroom management is to decrease negative disruptive behaviors and increase time spent on academic engagement. Teachers possessing effective skills in classroom management are able to provide a safe space conducive to teaching and learning. Furthermore, effective classroom management can be used to prevent unnecessary disciplinary referrals that lead to suspension or expulsion, and protect academic learning time (Milner, 2013).

Research shows, “the disproportionate office referrals of students of color, those with learning differences, and those who live below the poverty line” (Girvan et al., 2017; Skiba et al., 2011, p. 11). Thus, culturally responsive classroom management (CRCM) practices are essential for teaching in today’s diverse schools and classrooms. CRCM requires educators to recognize one’s own culture and prejudices; acknowledge the cultural backgrounds of students; and understand the broader social, economic, and political context that encompass the lives of students. Culturally responsive educators must have the skills, readiness, and commitment to employ culturally relevant strategies to foster and sustain caring classroom environments (Weinstein et al., 2004).

Culturally Responsive Management Approaches

Research based in CRCM protocols that could be used to address discipline problems include fostering positive relationships, culturally responsive classroom management, and family communication:

- Fostering caring relationships with students is an important element in the teaching and learning process. Research shows the relationships that teachers and stakeholders forge with students can bridge disconnections and nurture academic and social achievement, which is vital to classroom success (Noguera, 2003).

Weinstein et al. (2004) noted that a student’s perception of care for their well-being was significant in determining if they chose to cooperate or resist teacher expectations. It is important for students to know that teachers genuinely care about them through action (Bondy et al., 2012). Students are more academically empowered, and more likely to behave in more pro-social ways, when teachers invest in them (Weinstein et al., 2004).

- CRCM practices, which encompass culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000), help teachers cultivate the awareness, ability, and the appropriate attitude to address issues with students from a variety of backgrounds. At some point all teachers will deal with conflicts in the classroom, despite the best protocols put in place to handle them. “Culturally responsive classroom managers reflect on the kinds of behaviors they judge to be problematic” (Irvine, 1990, p. 274).
- Communicating and working with family members is essential to addressing issues and changes in students’ behaviors. Teachers should provide a safe, supportive, and caring space for family members to come and discuss issues. The goal is to actively listen to their advice and concerns, foster relationship-building and resolution (Whitbourne, 2012), and use the “funds of knowledge,” expertise, and experiences of family members to inform current and future management practices (Moll, et al., 1992). Additionally, teachers can use the cultural experiences of students and families to filter perceptions based on different cultural views. This does not necessarily mean changing every practice to satisfy the parent and child, but rather seeking to understand how the role of family culture, context, and interactions play in classroom behavior management.

“When the teacher is culturally aware, the conflict between systems is minimized, and there is formulation of strategies to work around differences” (LaRocque, et al., 2011, p. 120).

Long-Term Recommendations

Practicum and observation phases are valuable aspects of the preparation of teacher candidates and preservice teachers; thus, they should be restructured to ensure that candidates are aware of disparities that place some students at risk for incarceration. It is important to address the disproportionate rates at which students, particularly males, of color experience the School-to-Prison Pipeline and other systemic issues present in K–12 settings. Undoubtedly, the academic and social conditions of Black boys can get better if the majority of their time is spent inside the classroom rather than outside classroom spaces (Howard, 2014; Wright & Ford 2016), for example, due to suspensions and expulsions. It is essential therefore that White K – 12 educators evaluate and change their disciplinary measures. This shift will not only dramatically decrease the dehumanization of Black boys but create opportunities for teacher candidates to observe fair and restorative practices being used to address student behavior in the classroom. The potential here is to produce teachers who come to value Black males and set examples for White students who might otherwise spend years of watching White teachers mistreat Black males in classrooms (Bryan, 2017).

Recommendations

A national study is needed to assess the effectiveness and rigor of educational programs in juvenile correctional settings and determine how these programs can be improved. Most programs in juvenile settings have been designed to provide minimal services to youth. Educators within these settings are bound by outdated pedagogy, limited technology, poorly trained teachers, and a transient student population. This is compounded

by administrative issues such as the transfer of previous school records and multiple school placements. A large percentage of incarcerated youths have been diagnosed with some type of mental health issue that requires other specialized services; and, if they are to successfully transition back into their respective communities, correctional facilities must look beyond preventing recidivism and toward preparing them for employment and other aspects of daily life. It should be noted that one positive aspect of many of these programs is mandatory attendance and participation, which eliminates the truancy issue and presents a real opportunity to effect change.

Also necessary is the identification of interventions that improve juveniles’ educational, employment, and recidivism outcomes in less restrictive settings such as alternative and traditional schools. Evidence shows that incarceration in and of itself may hinder educational achievement and increase the likelihood of recidivism, as opposed to placements in less restrictive settings (Aizer & Doyle, 2013). A current positive trend shows a decline in the number of juveniles incarcerated in correctional facilities in the United States; in fact, between 1997 and 2011 the number of youths apprehended, redirected, or committed in this country dropped from 105,000 to 61,000. While it must be acknowledged that incarceration is often necessary for violent and serious crimes, one can make the argument that juvenile correctional facilities should be reserved for the most dangerous youthful offenders.

Perhaps more importantly a determination must be made with regard to effective methods, strategies, and decision-making around race-based disparities in the juvenile justice system. While crimes being committed by youth appear to be similar regardless of race, social class, and environment, it appears that youth of color have higher rates of incarceration than their White counterparts. Data revealed that in 2010 youth of color comprised of 17 percent of juveniles committed to facilities, but accounted for

only 31 percent of total arrests (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). There has been little to no change in this rate from previous decades; however, the data with regard to ethnic disparities appears to be limited (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). We do know that their issues usually begin in school, with higher rates of truancy, suspensions and expulsion far exceeding those of White youth. Examining these disparities could reveal more concise information regarding the racial and ethnic makeup in the juvenile correctional populations.

Conclusion

The information presented in this paper affirms the need to address structural issues that create barriers for marginalized students of color in schools across this country. Chief among these issues is the disproportionate targeting of Black, Latino, and Native Indigenous youth for subjective behavioral infractions and the imposition of extreme disciplinary measures. Indeed, an overreliance on suspension and expulsion in response to normal classroom behaviors feeds the perception of youth of color as criminals, thus perpetuating the Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline responsible for increased incarceration rates among these populations. A key component in reducing these rates is gaining a deeper understanding of the various insidious complex and often interlocking aspects of this Pipeline and tackling them in culturally responsive and empowering ways.



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