Turning off the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Harry Wilson

Zero-tolerance practices of exclusionary discipline fuel school failure and push students into the justice system. Inclusive school climates with restorative practices foster academic success leading to positive life outcomes.

The causal link between educational exclusion and criminalization of youth is called the *school-to-prison pipeline*. This is a byproduct of "zero tolerance" polices which have been widely discredited by research (APA, 2008; Skiba, 2014). However, these practices are still widespread in the United States and have been exported worldwide (Wacquant, 1999). School failure and exclusion predict poor life outcomes and are implicated in the mass incarceration of boys and young men of color. Still, these are not insoluble problems as educators and policy makers are discovering effective strategies to engage instead of exclude these students.

A Culture of Incarceration

While home to only 5% of the world's population, the U.S. has 25% of the world's prisoners. According to the Criminal Justice Fact Sheet, prison populations have quadrupled since 1980 (NAACP, 2014). Persons of color make up the majority of this population with African-Americans locked up at six times the rate of whites. The United States has become a culture of incarceration, removing from society people who present difficult problems, including conditions caused by disability and addiction. Prisons spawn a new generation of future prisoners: there are more than two million children with at least one incarcerated parent, and these youth are five times more likely to end up in prison themselves (Murray & Farrington, 2005). Schools are a significant contributor to the current prison crisis with more than half of incarcerated individuals entering prison without a high school diploma.

In the late 80s and early 90s, a rise in high-profile violent and drug-related crime, particularly in urban areas, was hyped by predictions that we were raising a generation of "super predators." Fearing the worst, jurisdictions raised penalties for juvenile offenders. Boot Camps became a popular remedy with an emphasis on a heavy dose of coercive discipline. Later research showed that the vast majority of "Boot Campers" subsequently wound up in prison (Lutze & Bell, 2005).
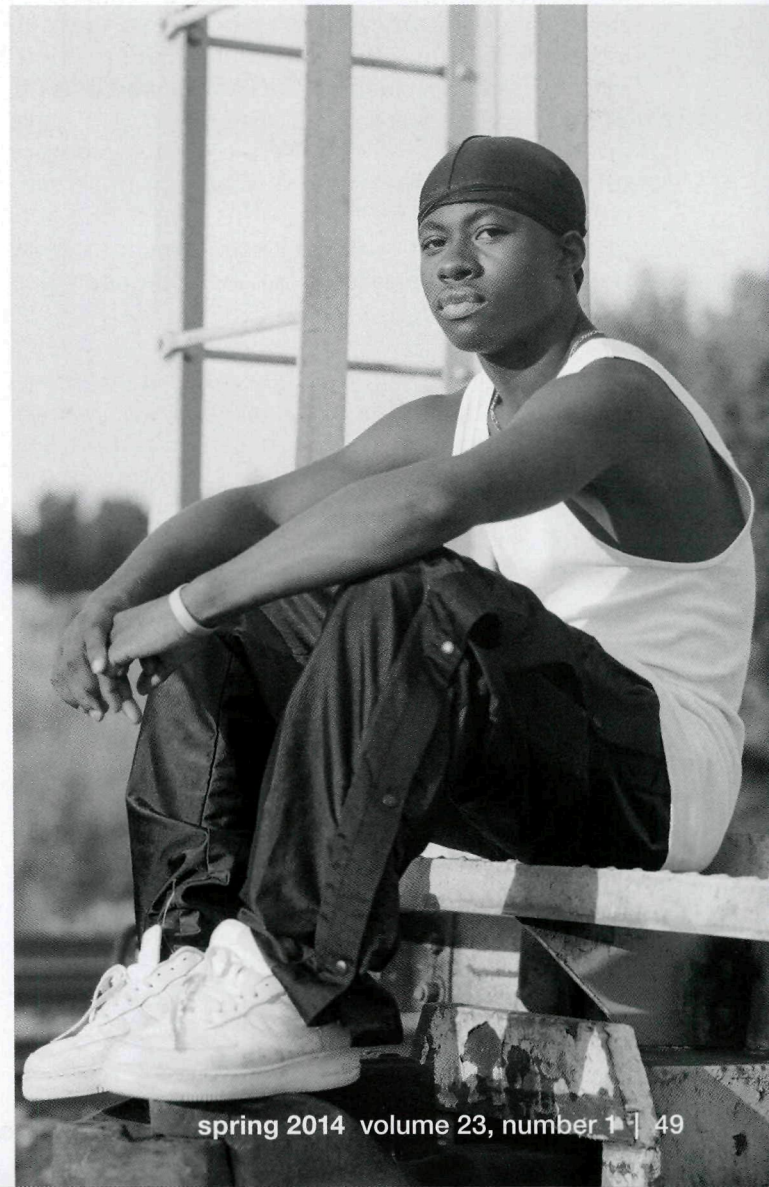
Legal scholar Michelle Alexander (2012) from The Ohio State University describes how zero tolerance schools effectively funnel students of color from schools to jails. Schools have adopted the same strategies as courts and seek to remove students whose problematic behavior "gets in the way of learning." Harsh disciplinary procedures, school-based police officers, mandatory reporting of behavioral incidents, and the use of school exclusion as a punishment have become commonplace. School referrals to police and juvenile justice have soared even though national crime trends have been on the decline for over two decades (OJJDP, 2012).

Zero Tolerance in Schools

Zero tolerance is a political-media meme that casts all social problems as issues of security (Wacquant, 1999). By definition, zero tolerance refers to strict, uncompromising, automatic punishment to eliminate undesirable behavior. This notion had its roots as urban police were given carte blanche to make arrests for the smallest offenses and to remove homeless people in hopes of reducing more serious crime (Wacquant, 1999). While this contradicts principles of trust building central to community policing, severe measures become popular when fear of crime is high.

When applied to schools, the zero tolerance mentality totally contradicts the principle of "zero reject" which underlies U.S. special education law. Suspension and expulsion are "exclusionary discipline" policies which remove the student from normal education opportunities because of rule infraction. In the justice system, zero tolerance led to severe penalties for criminal acts. Mirrored by schools, discipline policies mandate predetermined punishments for specific offenses (James & Freeze, 2006). This precludes educators from focusing on the individual needs of the student since security becomes sacrosanct.

The justification for zero tolerance was fed by the perception that the public was being flooded by a crime wave (Potter & Kappeler, 2006). Constant attention to school shootings also sparked a fervor to profile troublemakers. One response was the Gun Free Schools Act passed by Congress in 1994. This required schools to enforce zero tolerance of dangerous weapons by expelling students and making court referrals if they brought a gun, explosives, or committed arson at school. Schools were forced to comply with the act or risk losing federal funding.

Before long, schools escalated the range of reasons for suspending and expelling students to include violating policies about alcohol, tobacco, drugs, fighting, insubordination, dress code, and "disruptive behavior." Removal for rule-breaking became the default position under the myth that this made schools more secure (Kupchik, 2012). An Ohio fifth grader was recently suspended from his elementary school for three days because he pointed his finger "in the shape of a gun" and pulled an imaginary trigger while playing with his friends; the letter from the principal to the parents cited his finger as a "level 2 lookalike firearm" (Bush, 2014).

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Ironically, the very policies that schools adopted to manage behavior and increase achievement are fostering failure and feeding the school-to-prison pipeline (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005). These include school policing, widespread student searches, and strict rules with consequences dictated by school discipline handbooks. Missing school contradicts the core goal of schools—achievement—and high-stakes testing further plunges students into failure, grade retention, and dropping out of school.

Exclusion and suspension have become standard tools for schools to demand obedience and compliance. Incidents once handled by a trip to the principal's office are dealt with by police and the justice system, contributing to the climate of suspension and exclusion (Kupchik, 2012). Teachers with poor classroom management skills turn to exclusionary tactics to essentially eliminate the problems and only teach those who "want to learn" or will conform. Some had predicted that zero tolerance policies with inflexible rules would eliminate bias and uneven administration of discipline, yet the opposite occurred. Zero tolerance policies caused imbalance as minority students were significantly more likely to be "pushed out" of schools and into the juvenile justice system (Evans & Didlick-Davis, 2012).

Challenging Zero Tolerance

Advocates for abolishing zero tolerance are taking their argument to state houses and school districts across the nation. Excessive use of exclusion has become a national concern in both education and juvenile justice reform. In 2011, Education Secretary Arne Duncan and Attorney General Eric Holder introduced a new initiative at a meeting of the Coordinating Council on Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (of which the author was a member). They announced a new partnership called the Supportive School Discipline Initiative to address the school-to-prison pipeline and related disciplinary policies. Attorney General Holder stated, "We need to ensure that our educational system is a doorway to opportunity and not a point of entry to our criminal justice system." By bringing together government, law enforcement, academic, and community leaders, the goal was to ensure fair discipline policies which are not obstacles to future growth and achievement.

This initiative led to extensive longitudinal research with Texas middle school students entitled: *Breaking Schools' Rules: A Statewide Study of How School Discipline Relates to Student's Success and Juvenile Justice Involvement* (Council of State Governments Justice Center, 2011). More than a million records were collected on three different cohorts of seventh graders for a period of three years. Then each cohort was followed through the twelfth grade. The records were cross-checked with other child welfare and juvenile justice records across the state.

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The *Breaking Schools' Rules* study revealed that excluding students was an extreme yet common practice, with 54% of all students experiencing at least one in-school suspension and 31% of all students spending on average two days at home at least once in their school career. The study further found that students with one suspension event were five times more likely to drop out. And, students who were suspended as a disciplinary action were nearly three times more likely to have a juvenile justice contact in the following year. Perhaps the most startling statistic in the Texas study was that this massive level of exclusion was discretionary. Only 3% of exclusions were for behaviors where state law mandated suspension or expulsion—and there were no racial differences on the incidence of these serious offenses. However, 97% were at the discretion of educators—and children of color were significantly more likely to be removed.

This same pattern was reported by the National Educational Policy Center at the University of Colorado (Losen, 2011) as schools increasingly have suspended students for nonviolent offenses. In the words of the Los Angeles superintendent John Deasey, "It's not violence, weapons—it's defiance" (Rojas, 2011). While there are many effective ways to handle defiance, exclusion only further damages the bond between students, families, and school staff. Those smaller numbers of students presenting serious emotional and behavioral problems need interventions tailored to meet their needs if they are to become responsible, contributing citizens.

Pathways to Change

Since zero tolerance policies have been commonplace for two decades, they will not disappear just because researchers or federal officials declare the practice an abject failure. A generation of teachers and parents have been told these punitive methods are necessary to keep control and maintain safety. Removing exclusionary practices from the educator's tool box will require serious staff development and often a change in personal philosophies. Research has shown that educators can prevent students from entering the pipeline by establishing relationships of mutual trust, building a caring learning environment, and applying positive behavioral approaches to prevent and respond to problem behavior (Coggshall, Osher, & Colombi, 2013). However, some school districts are entrenched in what they know and resist new ideas. Others try to be evidence driven but grasp for various interventions without developing their own culturally competent theory of change.

An effective new model for creating change is the *professional learning community* (Dufour, Dufour, & Eaker, 2008; Hannay, Ben Jaafar, & Earl, 2013). Educators in positions of authority become knowledge leaders instead of managers. A key goal is to develop personal and professional knowledge about effective teaching and learning. It is also important that the entire community, both professionals and students, share a common vision for their school. This enables schools to better engage students and develop more effective classroom management practices.

To build a professional learning community, educators need ongoing opportunities to engage in professional dialogue about their practice and assess evidence about what works. Eliminating zero tolerance involves personal as well as system change. Putting student needs first is primary. This requires new ways of responding to disruptive behavior so these problems become learning opportunities—both for students and staff. There is now a rich body of scientific and practical evidence about what works to move schools beyond folk psychology (Hattie & Yates, 2013).

The evidence is clear: policies that seek to exclude students from our schools and the educational process are not in the public's best interest.

Beyond teacher and administrator efficacy, strategies for system change are designed to turn off the school-to-prison pipeline. Schools can engage many different community stakeholders, including representatives from the juvenile court, county government, law enforcement, social services, parents, and citizens. Working together, participants learn about the social and financial costs of pushing students out of the schools and identify positive alternatives which help all students learn and grow.

Four Steps to Cut Off the School-to Prison-Pipeline

1. Eliminate Zero Tolerance

The evidence is clear: policies that seek to exclude students from our schools and the educational process are not in the public's best interest. The harm of removal is too great a cost as children, families, and communities are being systematically torn apart. Zero tolerance is outmoded and all remnants should be eliminated. Even existing federal policy related to weapons in school allows for mitigating circumstances which permit discretionary enforcement.

2. Personal Efficacy and Systemic Change

School administrators and teachers are embracing the need for new training in building positive school climates. These changes enable individuals to explore their personal theories of behavior and management so that a caring community can be created within classrooms and schools. Best practices employ culturally sensitive models that challenge students to excellence rather than force compliance. These are essential steps toward ending exclusionary practices that feed the school-to-prison-pipeline.

3. Community Support

There is a reciprocal connection between the quality of schools and the vitality of a community. The power of schools to strengthen and change the society is a core principle of building a democracy. The entire community can be enlisted in efforts to eliminate the pipeline. This can include parents, teachers, libraries, boosters, service clubs, youth development organizations, faith groups, and others in a position to directly support students and schools. Other groups that benefit indirectly from quality schools include the courts, law enforcement, realtors, businesses, and senior citizens.

4. Youth Engagement

Students in Michigan created a community advocacy group named Youth Voice (2014) which organized student rallies and marches in Detroit and across the state, drawing attention to the school-to-prison pipeline. Mentored by community organizers and law students, these brilliant young people have their own stories to tell about being excluded from school for minor infractions or in some cases a simple misunderstanding between teacher and student. Youth Voice has presented at statewide conferences to enlist other communities in learning how to advocate for the elimination of zero tolerance policies. Through their own research on best practices, students are helping schools embrace Restorative Practices to resolve issues peacefully and productively.

Conclusion

Tim McDonald (2013) of Australia notes that schools throughout the Western world are under increasing pressure to lift standards of achievement—while at the same time encountering growing numbers of students who are difficult to teach. Educators have difficulty making sense of the plethora of theories and programs competing for their attention. He suggests that an effective model needs to meet a few basic standards. Schools must organize around the needs of students. A positive school climate is essential to engage students. High quality instruction is needed if students are to develop the competence necessary in the 21st century. Further, the school must have positive strategies for dealing with challenging behavior. He concludes, "The universal needs identified by the Circle of Courage provide a solid foundation to develop positive classrooms and schools" (p. 77).

The Circle of Courage keeps the focus on four powerful life outcomes: *Belonging* results with positive connections to teachers and among peers. *Mastery* enables students to develop talents and strengths and solve problems. *Independence* involves opportunities to develop self-control and responsibility. *Generosity* is grounded in the core value of respect, in other words, becoming my brother's keeper.

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