

## **Racialized Educational Opportunities: The School-To-Prison Pipeline and Possible Solutions**

### **Introduction**

The development and implementation of school discipline policies and practices along with educational policy reforms across the United States, has dramatically shifted and fueled numerous inequities in education. For example, Raible and Irizarry (2010) argue that medication, metal detectors, and police officers are heavily relied upon in today's U.S. education system. Schools have also increased their use of punitive policies (Payne & Welch, 2010; Mallett, 2016; Irwin, Davidson, & Hall-Sanchez, 2013), which in turn, affects the perspectives of youth's experience of school and, compared to previous generations, school is perceived differently today (Raible & Irizarry, 2010). Furthermore, scholars have noted that the administering of school discipline has varied based on the students' race, ethnicity, gender, and/or disability status at the state (Carrino, 2016) and national levels (Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Additionally, harsh disciplinary policies are more likely to be implemented in schools that largely serve low income and minority students (Nance, 2016).

The culmination of punitive school discipline policies along with the inequitable implementation of these policies has fueled the vicious cycle known as the school-to-prison pipeline (SPP). Specifically, the SPP is a phenomenon wherein predominately students of color are more likely to be suspended or expelled for minor infractions, relative to white students (Dancy, 2014; Carrino, 2016). These suspended and expelled students are more likely to have increased contact with the juvenile justice system (Gass & Laughter, 2015; Moody, 2016; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015). The goal of this paper is to delineate the factors that contribute to the SPP. In order to understand the genesis of contemporary educational policies and practices that contribute to the SPP, it is important to first consider which policies were developed in

response to the illicit drug epidemic and in the wake of prominent, national school shootings. For example, scholars have highlighted the “Columbine Effect” which compelled school administrators and policy makers from across the country to develop policies and procedures to ensure school safety and curtail premediated mass shootings in the 1990s. These safety measures included policies and practices adopted to severely punish students who used weapons or drugs on school grounds, as well as, the development of zero tolerance policies and other exclusionary discipline practices. There were severe consequences related to the enactment of zero tolerance policies, including poorer academic performance and increased likelihood of dropout for racial/ethnic minority students. This paper will present potential disruptions to the SPP that are currently being implemented in educational settings that were shared at the inaugural Collaboration on Race, Inequality, and Social Mobility in America (CRISMA) conference, in March 2019 at Washington University in St. Louis.

### **Federal Policies**

Federal policies have transformed neighborhoods and schooling. For instance, The Fair Housing Act prohibited real estate agents from: commenting on the race of residents, making false claims about neighborhood conditions, and racially discriminating in real estate advertising, sale, and rent (Metcalf, 1988). To reduce residential segregation, in 1968 Civil Rights advocates promoted The Fair Housing Act (Massey, 2015). However, the lack of presidential support for this policy is associated with housing discrimination and segregation, which occurred under the Nixon and Reagan Administration (Lamb & Wilk, 2009). Even fifty years after the implementation of The Fair Housing Acts, residents are denied residential inclusion, as subsidized affordable housing have been established in low-income communities in central cities (Franzese & Beach, 2018). Finally, between 1967-1987 manufacturing jobs became suburbanized due to lower overhead

costs, the reduction of unions, and declining wages that heighten unemployment (Wilson, 1997). Neighborhood conditions also impact school funding.

To mitigate this issue, The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) created relocation programs for low-income students of color to reside in less racially and ethnically segregated communities to increase education opportunities (Johnson, 2012). However, these programs have failed due to the difficulty of acculturation, challenges among replication, and lack of educational preparedness when students and families were relocated (Johnson, 2012). Moreover, public schools are funded through state and local revenue, which is directly affected by economic challenges leading to revenue cuts (Baker, Sciarra, Farrie, 2014). Research indicates, poor and minority students are overrepresented in highly impoverished public schools (Saporito & Sohoni, 2007).

### **The War on Drugs**

In 1971, President Ricard Nixon declared the “War on Drugs,” a U.S. federal campaign, to establish both conformity and patriotism (John, 2014). Along with public recognition and support, this campaign created conservative policies and political rhetoric aimed to reduce crime and drugs (Hawdon, 2001). Prominently, mandatory minimum sentencing provisions were expanded (Wodak, 2018), which are defined as obligatory prison sentences designated for certain drug-related offenses (McNelis, 2017), which include crack, cocaine, heroin, and marijuana (Mandatory Minimums and Sentencing Reforms, n.d). These mandatory minimums, in conjunction with zero tolerance policies were enacted to severely punish drug related offenses, which dramatically altered communities across the country (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). The effect of these policies intensified in 1993 with the expansion of punitive policies that would include tobacco use and school disruption (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). Zero tolerance policies in schools

mirrored mandatory minimums, as both result in immediate consequence focusing on punishment rather than prevention while creating racialized-based fear among students of color (Heitzeg, 2009).

### **The Columbine Effect**

The tragic Columbine High School shooting, which occurred in 1999, left 12 deceased and over 20 wounded (Lickel, Schmader, & Hamilton, 2003). At the time, the Columbine High shooting was the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history. In addition to the loss of life and trauma due to school shootings experienced at Columbine High School, and other schools and communities across the country, these national events have altered and remained indelible in the nation's collective conscious. Scholars have described the public fear and anxiety around school shootings as "The Columbine Effect" (Muschert & Peguero, 2010; Cloud, 1999). The Columbine Effect involves four components: (1) media portrayals of school violence; (2) public understanding of these acts as ubiquitous; (3) parents' fear of their child's safety and increased demands for security; (4) response from school personnel emphasizing antiviolence policies and practices (Muschert, Henry, Bracy, & Peguero, 2014). These shootings initiated growing concerns around an "epidemic" of deadly school violence (Muschert, 2007).

### **Zero Tolerance Policies**

In the aftermath of multiple prominent national tragedies, including the Columbine High shooting, (Lawrence, 2007), demand from the public (Carrino, 2016) and greater media scrutiny fueled requests for additional security measures in schools (Muschert, 2007; Muschert, 2009). Subsequently, communities across the country have adopted policies intended to promote school safety. Policymakers at multiple levels, particularly at the local level, have implemented policies that, although intended to improve school safety, created educational inequities. Specifically, the

adoption of “zero tolerance” policies have directly and indirectly contributed to the SPP, as they have increased the number of students removed from educational settings, as students miss critical academic instruction, and are pushed into juvenile and adult criminal justice systems (Heitzeg, 2009).

The use of suspensions and expulsions, both forms of school exclusion, are fundamental aspects of zero tolerance policies (Skiba and Knesting, 2001). Additionally, security measures were implemented in schools, including the use of security cameras, the presence of law enforcement, specifically school resource officers, as well as, mandating the use of clear backpacks, and the use of metal detectors in schools (Addington, 2009; Aull, 2012; Hong, Cho, Allen-Meares, & Espelage, 2011; Muschert, Henry, Bracy, & Peguero, 2014). Again, while these policies were intended to increase school safety and prevent school shootings, these measures have heightened the use of exclusionary discipline in schools.

The prevalence of exclusionary practices has rapidly expanded across the country. Between 2002-2006 school suspensions rose by 1.2 million students and school expulsions increased by roughly 30,000 students (Carrino, 2016). For the 2009-2010 school year, data drawn from more than 25,000 United States’ middle and high schools indicated that approximately two million students were suspended (Losen and Martinez, 2013). Furthermore, there is a high degree of discretionary implementation of zero tolerance policies which has resulted in the majority of school suspensions and expulsions being administered for non-violent offenses (Skiba & Peterson, 1999). This subjective implementation of zero tolerance policies has fueled racial/ethnic (Castillo, 2013; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002) and gender inequities in school discipline outcomes (Morris, 2016; Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015).

A key factor in the discretionary enforcement of school discipline is the presence of School Resource Officers (SROs) (Theriot, 2009). Initially, implemented in schools as a way to build relationships with students and serve as an in-school mentor, SROs have primarily been contracted to promote safety within schools today (McKenna, Martinez-Prather, and Bowman, 2016). SROs are in approximately 35% of American schools (Weiler & Cray, 2011). Scholars have noted that the presence of SROs in schools is associated with the criminalization of student and subsequently, greater likelihood of legal intervention, including school-based arrests (Martinez-Prather, McKenna, and Bowman, 2016; Theriot, 2009). Additionally, zero tolerance policies have heighten police presence in schools, leading to racial/ethnic differences where students of color account for majority of school based punishment and arrests (Castillo, 2013).

### **Racial/Ethnic Inequities in School Discipline**

Students of color are disproportionately affected by the implementation of zero tolerance policies, particularly exclusionary practices. For example, during the 2009-2010 school year, national data indicate that 17%, 8% and 7% of African American, American Indian, and Latino students were suspended, respectively, relative to 5% of White students (Losen & Martinez, 2013). Education scholars have argued that this disproportionality in discipline is related to racial biases held by teachers and school administrators. For example, results from a meta-analysis indicate that teachers hold lower expectations for African American and Latino students relative to White students (Tenenbaum & Ruck, 2007). Bryan, Day-Vines, Griffin, and Moore-Thomas (2012) observed racial/ethnic, and gender biases in disciplinary referrals; they found that African American students received more referrals to school counselors than any other racial group.

In addition to discipline, teachers play a critical role in the development of students and their educational trajectory (Workman, 2012). Researchers have investigated the importance of

teachers' perceptions of students and how perceptions can influence dynamics inside and out of the classroom (Blazar and Kraft, 2017). For example, Blazar and Kraft (2017) found that emotional support from upper-elementary teachers is positively associated with student happiness in the classroom and self-efficacy in math. They also found that student behavior in the classroom was positively associated with teacher classroom organization. According to Saft and Pianta (2001), classroom interactions and student outcomes were associated with teacher's positive and negative perceptions of students due to student age, gender, ethnicity, and teacher's ethnicity.

Academic achievement and educational attainment is negatively affected by exclusionary discipline practices and racial/ethnic disproportionality in these practices contributes to educational inequities. Disparities are reinforced through the SPP. Scholars define the SPP a set of practices and policies that increases students contact with the juvenile justice system by removing them from the academic environment (Meiners, 2011; Advancement Project, 2010). The "no-nonsense" or zero tolerance approach utilizes exclusionary punishment to counter school and community disruption (Skiba, 2014).

Consequentially, racial/ethnic disproportionality in school discipline, especially exclusionary practices, extend beyond school, following students into adulthood and into the juvenile justice system. Research indicates majority racial/ethnic minority student attendance in schools is associated with increased punitive discipline practices such as detention, suspension, police referrals, and/or expulsion (Welch & Payne, 2010; Welch & Payne, 2012). The American Community Survey (ACS) reports African Americans, American Indians, and Hispanics were about three times more likely to drop-out of high school than European American students

(McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016). Consequently, if these students dropout they face an increased risk of being institutionalized (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

The Collaboration on Race, Inequality and Social Mobility in America (CRISMA) hosted its inaugural conference on the campus of Washington University in St. Louis in March 2019. Education is critical to multiple outcomes, ranging from health to socioeconomic mobility. Three education researchers shared their approaches to addressing racial/ethnic inequities in educational outcomes, including school discipline, academic performance, and educational attainment. This paper focuses on an approach developed by Dr. James Huguley, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh. He described an intervention approach called “Just Discipline,” designed to disrupt the SPP. The findings from Just Discipline represent a promising path to address the SPP.

### *Context of Pittsburgh*

Huguley, based in Pittsburg, first described the Pittsburgh Parenting Project Survey, a survey of 507 African American students ranging from the fifth to tenth grade in Greater Pittsburgh. Results from the survey indicated that students perceived a high level of discrimination as 38% of students felt they had been treated unfairly by the police or security because of their race, 41% reported being disciplined unfairly because of their race, and 51% disagreed that people in this country valued the lives of their ethnic group. These findings not only underscored feelings of marginalization among African American youth, but also related to their perception of discipline practices in schools. Data from this study provided a foundation for the development of the Just Discipline Project.

### *Just Discipline Approach*



One of the primary goals of Just Discipline is to reduce the use of exclusionary discipline procedures, particularly out-of-school suspensions. Just Discipline focuses on the use of best practices in community-building, professional development for faculty and staff and training peer leaders to deescalate behavioral problems that occur in schools. Huguley and colleagues engaged in a three-phase process to develop The Just Discipline Project. In phase one, the team conducted a review of previous literature in order to examine whether there was a consensus on factors related to the development of the SPP and which factors were the most critical for researchers to intervene. Huguley's review showed discrimination and racism makes the SPP a disproportionate issue for Black and Brown kids. In phase two, the team investigated school discipline rates, as well as, the effects of exclusionary discipline practices within the greater Pittsburgh area. They found significant racial/ethnic disparities in school discipline, regardless school type. In urban school districts, the suspension rate for Black students was seven times the rate of other students. This foundational research crystalized the importance of discipline practices in the perpetuation of the SPP and indicated that addressing exclusionary discipline practices could be a promising avenue to disrupt the SPP.

During phase three, the researchers developed and implemented the Just Discipline approach, in order to, reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions. Describing different tiers that would support greater equity in discipline, Huguley provided a broad overview of the community-building work necessary to better align school discipline policies in a fashion that is suitable for the violations within schools. For example, education practitioners must cultivate trust between schools and community in order to garner buy-in and enhance collective efficacy. Huguley described a process of conversations between school educators and administrators that also include feedback from parents, guardians, and community members. Huguley also noted that the

development of a supportive and safe environment should be the priority of schools, which includes conduct expectations that are clearly articulated to students and adhered to by school officials. In order to achieve this goal, schools must build the capacity of faculty and staff in addition to hiring full-time staff. Huguley noted that in order to develop an equitable school discipline program, it is critical to assisting faculty in the establishment of strong student-teacher relationships. Just Discipline data indicated that the integration of behavioral systems is critical as this allows for a greater understanding of the social and emotional needs of students in addition to the contextual factors in which students are exposed to such as neighborhoods with high levels of poverty or violence. Two integrated approaches described were the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Support, which encourages positive behaviors rather than only punishing negative behaviors, and Social Emotion Learning, which privileges students' different learning needs both socially and emotionally.

Key to the implementation of restorative discipline, Huguley argued that school administrators and teachers must consider different ways of disciplining students in order to reduce the use of out-of-school suspensions, especially for students who have just committed their initial punishable offense. Huguley shared data from the implementation of the Just Discipline approach that was piloted at the Pittsburgh-area Woodland Hills Intermediate School. This school was composed of 610 students, grades four to six serving a predominately African American (72%) and economically disadvantaged (78%) student population. Three restorative discipline approaches were applied in this setting, specifically reset circles, healing circles and reentry circles. Reset circles were implemented when students' behavior interrupted the classroom. During the next class session, students' behavior was addressed with the teacher during the class period as a way to discuss disruptive behavior and provide a resetting of conduct

expectations. Healing circles provided a more intensive intervention strategy in which teachers and school administrators discussed the harm a student caused, probing for the reasons why the behavior occurred, and made a plan about how to reduce the likelihood that the harmful behavior would occur again. Reentry circles were developed in order to provide a smooth transition to welcome students back into the school environment when they were suspended with the goal of fostering a sense of belonging in students.

Two years post-implementation, Just Discipline Project data indicate significant decreases in out-of-school suspensions in addition to other positive outcomes. Overall, there was a 28% decrease in suspensions along with a 20% decrease in the number of students referred to the office. Students perceptions of school safety increased by 19% and there was a 45% decline in school fights. Study data also indicated significant gains in academic outcomes including 10% increase in science proficiency and a 5% gain in English language proficiency.

The overwhelming majority of teachers, 91%, expressed support for the program to continue. The implementation of a restorative practice coordinator was identified as an asset and pivotal in the development of relationships with student and resolving student conflicts. There were also a number of challenges identified by teachers and school administrators. Some of the challenges included: the need to provide more resources and supports for students, a clearer set of school discipline policies, and more space and staff support to implement restorative discipline approaches rather than exclusionary discipline practices.

## **Discussion**

Just Discipline findings indicate that restorative discipline practices can yield favorable results and a safer school environment in a relatively short period of time. Observed over a longer period of time, school climate could become even more inclusive and students would feel

a greater sense of safety. Huguley reported that his team is engaged in continuous evaluation and improvement and outlined a number of areas to direct efforts. He noted that increasing the number of restorative spaces and alternative discipline approaches is needed along with increasing supports for students, particularly addressing social needs and mental health concerns. Next steps for the Just Discipline team include increasing the number of staff, specifically adding more restorative practice coordinators, providing additional training for schools, and implementing the approach in multiple sites in order to conduct a comparative analysis.

As indicated by data drawn from a number of students, teachers, and administrators at the Woodland Hills Intermediate School, the Just Discipline model could be an approach that could be disseminated and implemented in other schools and communities. Given the positive data from this project, particular increases in perceptions of school safety, decreases in exclusionary discipline practices, and gains in academic performance, Just Discipline is a promising, multilevel intervention strategy that could disrupt the SPP. Beyond data provided by the pilot study, the replacement of punitive discipline policies and practices that were derived from fear following school shootings and the War on Drugs, a restorative approach is necessary to reset school climates in communities across the country. A key takeaway from Hughley's work is to see students from a holistic, human perspective. To recognize their context and consider how their behavior and performance could be affected by external factors such as trauma and poverty. This inspires teachers and administrators to not only care more deeply for their students but to be more intentional in how they are displaying that care to their students and making efforts to make their classrooms and schools an affirming, restorative environment.

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