ZERO TOLERANCE OR ZERO EFFICIENCY?

THE DETRIMENTAL EFFECTS OF EDUCATIONAL POLICIES THAT

ADVERSELY AFFECT AFRICAN AMERICAN MALES

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract

The school-to-prison pipeline is a phenomenon that mainly plagues the African American community. This thesis dives into the main components that contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline: demographic divide, psychological racism, disproportionate punishment, classroom management, and zero tolerance policies. Then it goes on to discuss solutions to the school-to-prison pipeline, like meditation and counseling.

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Introduction

In 2014, President Barack Obama began an initiative called "My Brother's Keeper" which called attention to the way in which black and Latino males, face unique societal and institutional problems. The initiative would partner with "businesses, foundations, and nonprofits to address disparities in education, justice, and employment," (ERIC, 2014).

My Brother's Keeper is split into six different components:

1.   Getting a Healthy Start and Entering School Ready to Learn

2.   Reading at Grade Level by Third Grade

3.   Graduating from High School Ready for College and Career

4.   Completing Postsecondary Education or Training

5.   Successfully Entering the Workforce

6.   Keeping Kids on Track and Giving Them Second Chances (The White House, 2016)

The last component, in particular, has recently come to light as it pertains to the school-to-prison pipeline which, defined by the American Civil Liberties Union, is "a disturbing national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into juvenile and criminal justice systems," (American Civil Liberties Union, 2016). With ineffective and inefficient rules and policies in the public-school system, young men of color have been stripped of their right of a fair education. This phenomenon has plagued

minorities since the 1970's when the "Zero Tolerance" policies that were used to combat the War on Drugs were then used in classrooms.

Since the White House is now publicizing the issue, there have been more studies done on the school-to-prison pipeline and although still a topic in its infancy, it is gaining momentum. The purpose of this thesis is to theorize how this nation acts as a conduit for the school-to-prison pipeline by examining the discipline practices in the classroom and the race discrepancies in education. Afterwards, there will be a set of plausible solutions that can be utilized to give minority males an equal chance to a fair education.

Race Discrepancies in Education

Demographic Divide

In her article, Gloria L. Billings (2011) cites a study by the Schott Foundation which indicates that African Americans make up a mere 8.6 percent of public school enrollment, they also make up about 22 percent of expulsions and 23 of suspensions in 2004. She then goes on to say that the graduation rate of black males is the lowest of any population (Billings, 2011). Then of those who graduated from a NCAA Division I school within six years, approximately 59 percent were white males, 35 percent were African American males, and 45 percent were African American females (Billings, 2011). So, there is not only an ethnic gap but a gender divide as well. African American males have been the target of absurd school disciplinary policies for decades and not only has it hindered them from receiving the proper education but it has gotten worse over the years.

In their quantitative study, Daniel J. Losen and Russell J. Skiba found that in 2006 African American males were suspended at least once at a rate of 28.3 percent and females at 18 percent. As time progresses, Black males regardless of ethnicity are being suspended or expelled at higher rates in comparison to their white counterparts. White males and females are suspended at rates of 10 and 4 percent respectively. The 18-point difference is the largest gap (aside from Asian/Pacific Islander male and females 6 and 2.1 percent respectively) between two ethnic groups (Losen).

Even though African American males typically are the demographic that suffers the most from suspensions and expulsions, it can differ between school districts. For example, in 2006 in the Palm Beach school district 53 percent of African American males were at risk of suspension and expulsions yet in the Indianapolis school district, 44 percent of white males were at risk for suspension (Losen). Therefore, although African American males comprise most of those who are suspended and/or expelled nationwide, it can differ across school districts.

Although ethnicity and gender play a huge role in who becomes victim to the school-to-prison pipeline, socioeconomic class and disabilities can also play a factor. African American males from lower socioeconomic classes, are removed from classrooms more than their peers (Milner, 2013). The same goes for African American males with special needs. Those of whom who enroll in special education courses return to "normal" classes 10 percent of the time and only about 27 percent of them graduate (Billings, 2011). Thus, this adds on to the amount of African American males who do not graduate.

The demographic divide in the education system does not only entail ethnicity but

also gender, socioeconomic class, and disabilities. Therefore, more and more African American males are falling victim to the school-to-prison pipeline and not partaking in their education.

Psychological Racism

America has embraced the African American culture but has not been able to embrace African Americans. We have the tendency to imitate but not educate or appreciate men of color. Celebrities, in particular, have been known to inject their lips and buttocks to make them appear fuller or braid their hair into cornrows, both of which are physical features or cultural practices associated with African American culture. It's the idea that we are essentially stealing from the culture; stealing in a sense that we take parts of the culture that we like and rid ourselves of the owner. We like to cheer for them at sporting events or buy their albums when they become musical sensations, yet when it comes time to disciplining and educating blacks, America does not show the same amount of patience and understanding. Billings (2011) said,

The clothes, the style, the language, and the effects of young, Black, urban males are visible throughout the nation and the world. The symbolic message attached to these young Black men is that they are seductive and intriguing [and] we have no shortage of images of Black men as simultaneously appealing and repulsive (p. 9).

The media plays a huge role in negatively portraying not only African American males but Latinos as well. Blacks are perceived as "inferior, lazy, dumb, and dishonest; either clowns or crooks; professional quacks and thieves without adequate skill and

ethics," (LaPierre, 1999). These roles normally include drug dealers, drug addicts, dead-beat fathers, gang members, and violent members of the community. Latinos are likely to be portrayed as negative characters and are "crudely stereotyped." Typically, Latinas are characterized as being loud, aggressive, and always possessing a sexual component. Latinos, on the other hand, are seen as having heavy accents and having the inability to comprehend complex situations.

In this sense, we are unknowingly attaching a label to different ethnicities and we carry these labels into our everyday lives. For example, the Trayvon Martin case. Trayvon Martin was an African American teenager in Florida who was gunned down by a neighborhood watchman named George Zimmerman in February 2012. Zimmerman claimed that Martin "looked suspicious" and his innate fear of African American males cost a young man his life and was ultimately the catalyst that started the Black Lives Matter movement.

With psychological racism comes the fear of African American males and a need to control them. In her article, Billings describes when she observed a predominately white school, the students could roam freely with minimal supervision. Yet, when she attended a predominantly black school, every movement of the students was supervised by administration. They were told where to go, when they could move, and a strict dress code was enforced. Billings compared the strict environment to that of a prison (Billings, 2011). Society unknowingly begins to treat these adolescents as criminals prior to them committing a crime.

In addition, this control can lead to the criminalization of African American males at a very young age. When they are young, black boys are viewed as cute but then are

abruptly seen as men around the age of nine or ten.

Classroom and School Discipline

Disproportionate Punishment

Per the New York Times, about half of New York public school suspensions are given to black students even though they only make up about 28 percent of the student population (Rich, 2015). Even though the New York Times specifically cited this problem in New York, the same can be said across the nation. African American males' education suffers due to high suspension rates. The more they are being disciplined and being removed from the classroom, the more their education deteriorates. This in turn plays into the school-to-prison pipeline. Students who are not physically in class are out doing things that are detrimental to their futures, i.e. selling drugs, vandalizing, or stealing.

Another concept that plays into disproportionate punishment is the fact that discipline is at the discretion of teachers and administrators. "Administrators-typically disciplinary principals-have the power to suspend or expel students based on (a) their interpretation of the behavior described by teachers in the classroom and (b) their interpretation of rules and policy violation," (Milner, 2013, p. 483). When a student violates the rules, and disrupts the class, administrators generally side with the teachers because the teacher is a figure of authority. Siding with a student may disrupt the atmosphere of the classroom by igniting a rebellion against the teacher. Once the administrator has assessed the situation, from the point of the teacher, (generally when an infraction occurs, students are not given a chance to explain until after the teacher

discloses their side of the story) the administrator decides on what punishment is appropriate for the student. Most of the time, there is no specific set of disciplinary actions that complement each infraction. Instead whatever seems like an appropriate punishment at the time is given to the student.

Another issue arises when differing punishments are given to African Americans versus their Caucasian counterparts for the same infraction. Per Milner (2013), "African American students are referred to the office for infractions that are more subjective to interpretation whereas White students are referred to the office for more objective ones" (p. 484). Consequently, African American males can suffer more dire consequences for an infraction that only requires a verbal warning. This could lead to the resentment of one's classmates and anger towards faculty and staff.

Classroom Management

Classroom management is a key factor in the school-to-prison pipeline. The way that an instructor governs a classroom and its students can determine whether the student is fit for the learning environment. Those who are considered unfit, are removed by the teacher at their discretion. Yet, "the time teachers spend handling disciplinary problems is time taken away from instruction; [and] Black male achievement suffers as a result," (Milner, 2013, p.483). Those who are suffering from disciplinary problems will eventually suffer academically.

Unfortunately, the sufferers are usually male, minority, and from a lower socioeconomic class. "Overwhelmingly, the findings in the literature are straightforward in that most disciplinary referrals originate in the classroom and, more times than not, the

referrals are for students of color and students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds,"

(Milner, 2013, p. 483). Therefore, the disenfranchised become more disenfranchised.

Those who are willing to overcome, cannot because their education is being hindered by

menial mistakes.

There are a few reasons why students are missing during their education. For

instance, some teachers are not culturally equipped to build relationships with minorities

in the classrooms. Some teachers do not understand the differences African American

males face in life versus their peers. There is no sense of self in lectures, meaning that

students cannot relate to the lessons. Some students grow up learning about life

differently, and to force all students to conform to one way of learning can hinder a pupil.

Sometimes teachers don't acknowledge the different cultures within the classroom unless

a specific period rolls around, i.e. Black History Month or Hispanic Heritage Month.

There are also those instances where teachers interpret students' actions wrong.

For example, if "…African American students joke with a teacher, the teacher may

interpret that behavior as being defiant or rude" (Milner, 2013, p. 484). African American

culture is not always portrayed in the classroom, therefore when a student is making a

joke or 'mouthing off' to an adult, the behavior may seem disrespectful and disruptive

but the student may think it is 'alright' because the behavior is accepted at home.

Some instructors may even fear their students.

Fear may…contribute to over-referral [of students of color]. Teachers who
are prone to accepting stereotypes of adolescent African American males as
threatening or dangerous may overact to relatively minor threats to authority,

11

especially of their anxiety is paired with a misunderstanding of cultural norms of social interaction. (Milner, 2013, p. 485).

Fear from typical stereotypes can allow for prejudice from faculty and staff. These misconceptions can then manifest into the preferential treatment of students. They unconsciously label Black and Latino males as problem children, when that is not true. These students are being robbed of an equal education because the labels placed on them indicate they are "unteachable".

Another factor that hinders the education of minorities is the ineffectiveness of teacher education. Teachers are not being trained to interact with students of different ethnicities, socioeconomic statuses, religions, and the like. "Some teacher education programs do not see the need to even offer courses on 'classroom management' and teachers are left to figure out how to work effectively with students in the classroom," (Milner, 2013, p. 486). This method has been proven to be ineffective since a specific group of people are constantly being targeted.

Zero Tolerance

"Zero tolerance can be defined as a highly structured disciplinary policy that permits little flexibility in outcome by imposing severe sanctions for even minor violations of a school rule," (Gregory, 2009, p. 107). Although quite restricting, zero tolerance was not initially created to combat issues within the education system.

In the early 1960s, people were experimenting with marijuana, LSD, and heroin. Although, not many people were partaking in illegal drug use, most of the drugs of the

60s were relatively new; which caused an (appropriate) uproar. It wasn't until 1971 when President Richard Nixon declared the War on Drugs (htt). Nixon specifically stated "America's public enemy number one in the United States was drug abuse. In order to fight and defeat this enemy, it is necessary to wage a new all-out offensive," (htt). He took a proactive approach to combat those who wanted to experiment with new drugs and the undeveloped countries who were supplying the drugs.

The War on Drugs, during the Nixon administration, led to a few exceptional programs though. For example, it led to the creation of the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) in 1973 and better regulation of the United States/Mexico border. Then in 1977, President Carter called for the decriminalization of marijuana. He said to Congress, "penalties against possession of the drug should not be more damaging than the drug itself," (htt). He believed the laws were too harsh for a drug like marijuana which, to him, didn't have as many damaging effects as cocaine or heroin.

Fast forward to the Reagan's administration where he took a similar approach to the War on Drugs as President Nixon. Instead of copying his predecessor, Reagan proclaimed "It's far more effective if you take the customers away than if you try to take the drugs away from those who want to be customers," (htt). His approach was coined as *Zero Tolerance.*

Zero tolerance has been labeled as an *authoritarian* approach because it focuses on "high structure and control with an absence of support and understanding," (Gregory, 2009). Authoritarian concentrates more on the rigid structure than the effect, meaning that those who partake in authoritarian practices don't consider the individual and their circumstances. They are strictly "obedience and status-oriented and expect their orders to

be obeyed without explanations," (Gregory, 2009, p. 107). On the other hand, the *authoritative* approach "balances adolescent needs for enforcement of rules and monitoring with responsiveness to their individuality," (Gregory, 2009, p. 107). The authoritative approach caters more to each individual, so the punishment is justifiable.

When the two approaches are weighed against each other, the research has found that "adolescents with authoritarian parents scored lower on verbal and mathematics achievement tests when compared to adolescents with authoritative parents," (Gregory, 2009, p. 107). Children who are raised, within authoritarian environments are not allowed to make sensible mistakes. They are taught that all mistakes, in any shape or form, are unacceptable and should be avoided. This should not be the case. Children and adolescents should be free to make (certain) mistakes which will allow them to grow and mature.

Nowadays schools have taken their zero tolerance policies to extreme measures. If a student is late to class they are sent to in-school-suspension (ISS), or if they become involved in a physical altercation with another student, they are expelled. Zero tolerance does not take into consideration the factors in which students break the rules. Factors could range from problems at home, relationships, the inability to balance too many responsibilities, societal or peer related pressures, the list is endless. Sometimes educators forget to acknowledge the multiple roles students take on at such tender ages.

Although the concept behind zero tolerance proved to combat the use and distribution of illegal drugs, the same concepts proved not be effective in the deterrence of public school policy infractions. In recent years, zero tolerance policies have been at the core of education reform. More educators, administrators, and parents are realizing

that zero tolerance policies are detrimental and need to be reformed to accommodate the needs of the students.

<div align="center">**Solutions**</div>

The Five C's of Pedagogy

Although the school-to-prison pipeline affects millions of African American males across the nation, there are plausible solutions that can resolve this problem. In his article, Christopher Emdin gives the five C's of reality pedagogy: cogenerative dialogues, coteaching, cosmopolitanism, context, and content (Emdin, p. 14). The subsequent paragraphs details each reality pedagogy and how it can be applied to classrooms.

The first C of pedagogy is cogenerative dialogues in which teachers and students sit down and engage in a conversation about what is going on in the classroom. "These dialogues will allow the teacher to have conversations with black male students about how the teacher can better meet their specific academic needs and allow them to present their true selves to the teacher," (Emdin, p.14). With cogenerative dialogues, the classroom set-up can tailor more to students' needs.

Coteaching is defined as teachers and students switching roles in the classroom. Students take on the role of teaching the class with the direction of the teacher. At the same time, teachers act as the students by sitting in their desks, asking questions, and partaking in the lesson. By utilizing this technique, students are more active in the lesson and are able to retain the information better because it is being taught by a peer with similar thought processes. It also gives the teacher a chance to view the dynamic of the

classroom through the view of the students. While sitting in a student's desk, one can see

what is going on while the teacher's back is turned. For example, is the set-up of the

room distracting or conducive to learning? Are there any distractions around the students'

area? These are questions that teachers may not necessarily ask from their stance at the

front of the class. Coteaching also allows for the flow of respect between peers and their

teachers. No one knows the difficulties associated with teaching until they become a

teacher, same goes for students. With trying to manage a classroom, gain the respect of

students, teach the right lesson in a conducive way, all in a timely manner can be

stressful. So when someone else is given the opportunity to "walk in their shoes" it can

open someone's eyes.

Cosmopolitanism allows for the participation of students in the classroom.

It pertains to the idea of distributing responsibility throughout the classroom. Students are

given the responsibility of small tasks for their teacher, i.e. passing out or picking up

papers, being a line leader (for younger children), or helping a teacher grade assignments.

Through cosmopolitanism, students feel needed. They feel as though they are an essential

asset to the classroom. This in turn boosts their morale and their motivation to be and stay

in the classroom. They don't want to get in trouble because they know they are missing

out on the incentives for being well behaved. The sense of wanting and responsibility

unconsciously makes children want to behave.

In the classroom, if a student cannot identify oneself within the lesson then

ultimately the lesson is lost. This plays into the context aspect. When students aren't

witnessing enough of their culture in a place where they spend one third of their day,

there becomes disconnect. It is the thought that education and the school system is seem

as one entity while one's home and neighborhood is seen as an entirely different entity. Yet when a teacher decides to implement aspects of one's own world, they can more easily identify. For example, asking African American males to express their opinion on a book recently discussed in class through poem or rap song can get them more engaged in the assignment than writing an essay. Relaying the idea of context is not just adding ethnic names to homework problems. It's giving students a chance to express themselves the best way they know how. It allows their creativity to flow which then can increase their understanding of complex topics.

Content, in this sense, is the ability of teachers to admit that they don't know everything but are willing to learn with the students. Normally in classrooms, teachers are viewed as these magical beings who know every possible thing about any topic, which is entirely not true. Within the confines of content, students are conditioned to not just "sponge up" everything the teacher says but to ask questions. Asking questions leads to the inquiry of more knowledge. It also forces students to think for themselves, to search for knowledge. Content also creates a sense respect between teacher and students. If a teacher can admit their unknowing, students are more likely to respect an honest answer instead of a possibly wrong answer just to save face.

Meditation

Another solution to the school-to prison pipeline is replacing programs like in school suspension (ISS), out of school suspension, or expulsion with meditation. Meditation is defined as "a very special kind of sitting quietly doing nothing, in which the mind is held clear and still, alert and watchful, and free from losing itself in thinking," (Fisher, 2006). It is a form of reflective time-out in which one could physically separate

17

themselves from the classroom and take some time to relax. Nowadays, students are under massive amounts of pressure. They are expected to maintain high grade point averages (GPA), participate in extracurricular activities, maintain jobs, and others have the responsibility of taking care of their families. School becomes even harder with amount of homework, projects, and numerous things to study for while still maintaining a healthy, social life. Eventually something has to give. With the use of meditation, students can release their minds of their daily burdens and just relax. Research has proven that meditation can improve mental abilities, health, and social behavior (Fisher, 2006). It can also "reduce blood pressure and stress, improve immune function, and better [one's] mood," (Fisher, 2006).

Counseling

Providing adequate counseling and psychological services to students is another plausible solution to help alleviate the school-to-prison pipeline. Again, students nowadays are facing more difficult challenges than past generations and they need more information on how to cope with the demanding needs of life. "Attempting to get to the root of problems of students and finding ways to address student psychological needs are tasks that schools should be able to support and develop through counseling and psychological services," (Milner, 2013). With counseling services, students are better capable of handling life's challenges and won't bring their issues to classrooms. The same concept goes for teachers. Teachers are expected to carry a heavy load, from managing classrooms to dealing with parents and children, yet they are not provided with the proper services to help alleviate outside issues. Instructors need as much psychological support as the students do.

Conclusion

Although suspension and expulsion rates have increased over approximately thirty years, there are some places in the U.S. that have experienced a decrease. "The number of suspensions in New York public schools dropped about 17 percent [in 2014]," (Harris, 2015). In New York to allocate for this decrease, teachers and administrators have shifted their focus from zero tolerance policies to restorative techniques. These techniques emphasize communicating with students to try to figure out the root of their issues.

Along with restorative techniques schools can also apply the 5 C'S of pedagogy, allow time for personal meditation, and provide adequate psychological services for both students and staff. Supporting students in their learning environment shows them that faculty and staff care about them and their futures. Instead of pushing our African American males through a system that is going to chew them up and spit them out, we can embrace them and cater to their specific needs. They are our next generation of doctors, lawyers, police officers and even teachers. We just should take the time to acknowledge the on-going problem so we can make the possible steps forward.

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