School to Prison Pipeline Unmasked: Review of how the School to Prison Pipeline Reinforces Disproportionality in Mass Incarceration

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SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE UNMASKED: REVIEW OF
HOW THE SCHOOL TO PRISON PIPELINE REINFORCES
DISPROPORTIONALITY IN MASS INCARCERATION

by

AKEEM BARNES

A master’s thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in partial fulfillment of
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Akeem Barnes

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Liberal Studies in satisfaction of the thesis requirement for the degree of Master of Arts.

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ABSTRACT

School to Prison Pipeline Unmasked: Review of how the School to Prison Pipeline Reinforces Disproportionality in Mass Incarceration

by

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Advisor: Susan Semel

Strict law and order policies, due to the War on Drugs, enacted in the 1970's have led to the mass incarceration that continues to plague communities of color. Simultaneously, zero tolerance policies in the nation’s schools have helped to fuel the mass incarceration of people of color by ensuring that students of color are disproportionately disciplined via suspended or expelled, criminalized, and eventually funneled into prison. This paper analyzes how the School to Prison Pipeline reinforces the disproportionate incarceration of people of color by targeting students of color. It identifies the rise and implementation of zero tolerance policies in the nation’s schools. Moreover, it explains how the use of propaganda was used to justify the deliberate targeting and criminalization of people of color, while simultaneously garnering funds and encouraging popular support for discriminatory practices when targeting poor communities of color. Additionally, it goes on to analyze how zero-tolerance policies have negatively impacted students of color. It explains an analysis of how zero tolerance policies, which was enacted to develop a more conducive learning environment, has instead, served as a conduit for students of color to be funneled into the criminal justice system; therefore, reinforcing the disproportionate incarceration of students of color. And lastly, it offers possible solutions such as restorative justice programs in schools or alternative vocational programs to help alleviate the discriminatory policies that funnel students of color onto a one-way path toward prison.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

More money is put into prisons than into schools. That, in itself, is the description of a nation bent on suicide. I mean, what is more precious to us than our own children? We are going to build a lot more prisons if we do not deal with the schools and their inequalities.

— Jonathan Kozol

All of us in the academy and in the culture as a whole are called to renew our minds if we are to transform educational institutions—and society—so that the way we live, teach, and work can reflect our joy in cultural diversity, our passion for justice, and our love of freedom.

— bell hooks, Teaching to Transgress

"You are lucky to be alive, but you might not be able to return to school for the first week, and it will be an extra couple of months before you can go back to work." These words from my attending physician devastated me. They pained me because my senior year was fast approaching (four weeks away) and I was due to be a first-generation college student, which was important not only to my mother because she wanted my two younger brothers to follow my example, but also a personal goal I sought to achieve. Returning to work was a priority of mine because my mother raised us by herself on minimum wage, which convinced me to start saving to help fund my first year of college. Even though I pleaded with my physician to please clear me for the first day of school and to allow me to return to work as soon as possible, he reminded me that the unknown assailant who shot me at point-blank range caused me to lose my left kidney, spleen, and half of my pancreas. He emphasized that the extensive injuries to my body required much more than a three-week recovery period—including physical therapy and someone to talk to that could help me deal with the traumatic experience.

After leaving the intensive care unit (ICU) and being told by my doctors that I would not be released—or even worse—cleared to return to school or work until I was well enough, I took
rehabilitation seriously. Each morning, before my doctors circulated the hospital on their daily rounds, I exercised, with the assistance of a nurse, by walking around the hospital for approximately 30 minutes. When I returned to my room, I practiced multiple leg exercises from my bed, including leg spinners and peddlers to help with my bodily functions. I made sure to eat the hospital food with vigor when doctors and nurses observed even though it was difficult due to the pain caused by the surgery. I refused to acknowledge to my doctor that exercising on a daily basis caused extreme pain to my incision site because he would attempt to convince me to stop, and I was not taking no for an answer, so I learned to cope with the pain. As a result of my ardent routine, I was released from the hospital earlier than doctors expected and cleared to attend school and work on the opening day of my senior year. This moment was joyous for several reasons including having the chance to be the first in my family to attend college, playing recreational sports, seeing my friends and family, but one thing remained on my mind as I departed from the hospital on that sunny afternoon in August—the police never found my shooter.

I felt as if the criminal justice system had let me down. I was a 17-year-old who felt as if the adults that were hired to protect and serve failed to honor their oath to "accord equal respect to all people." I refused to talk to anyone about my troubling thoughts concerning the outcome of my case. I shut down, became depressed, and felt helpless and voiceless all the while attempting to complete my senior year and save money for college. Eventually, the detective assigned to my case informed me that she had to drop it because she had no promising leads and I should instead focus on my future. I took her advice to heart and attempted to focus on my goals, but depression caused my grades to drop significantly, and my performance at work dwindled. The worse my grades and performance at work deteriorated, the more I began to "act out." I lost interest in remaining on the honor roll. I participated in more senior pranks and were involved in much more fights. Instead of seeking professional help for my depression from the shooting incident, my troubling behavior at
school caused the administration to suspend me a few times during my senior year. The more times I got suspended throughout the school year, the more I sought to run the streets of East New York with my childhood friends, which inevitably led to more trouble. During my senior year of high school, I was arrested multiple times for petty crimes, which increased my exposure to the criminal justice system. As my exposure increased, officers from local precincts in East New York began harassing, profiling, taunting and abusing my rights on several occasions. Ultimately, the failure of my school to address my issues momentarily led to me dropping out and almost becoming a statistic of the criminal justice system.

To better cope with the overwhelming pressures of my life, I volunteered to tutor at a local church in my neighborhood when I had free time. Tutoring children became one of my favorite pastimes because ever since the shooting incident, I’ve felt helpless, but working with children invigorated me with a purpose to help others avoid the feeling of helplessness and voicelessness that I felt while I was in the hospital. After graduating from high school and being accepted to Brooklyn College (CUNY), my tutoring role at the church became a mentorship role as well. As I formed close relationships with the children, I became an outlet for many of them. They felt comfortable enough to share issues about school and their home lives with me. Having me to confide in made it possible for my mentees to overcome obstacles in their lives, which still serves as one of my greatest pleasures to this day. Tutoring offered me the chance to stay off the streets and instilled me with a purpose. I loved educating young people from East New York on the dangers of running the streets and not taking their education seriously. The experience inspired me to pursue teaching youth in inner-city communities.

Inspired by my mentorship role at the church, I decided to become an educator in East New York, an underprivileged community, after graduating from Brooklyn College. For the past three years, I’ve been a staunch advocate for the students at my school where 98 percent of them are
either Black or Hispanic. During my advocacy efforts, I championed for changes in the required curriculum because it did not relate to or reflect the interest of my students. I organized and facilitated meetings for the student government to help ensure that students have a voice on issues that concern them. I piloted a book club in which students specifically chose books that spoke on issues in their community. After constant requests from my students to learn more about what enriches their neighborhood, I helped to kick-start a filming program that highlighted the vitality and importance of their community. For various writing competitions, I have been the point-person because my colleagues and students are well aware that I do not mind dedicating my time to helping others.

As excited as I am to be serving youth in East New York, the statistics highlight the disparities that the school system in East New York faces when compared with schools in high-income communities. East New York has higher proportions of black and Hispanic residents than in NYC overall. 34 percent of East New York residents are living below the poverty line, and only 8 percent over 25 have a college degree ("East New York Brooklyn," n.d.). The majority of schools that serve East New York are underfunded, and many of the students fall below the poverty line. In many underfunded schools in East New York, over 70 percent of students received free or reduced lunch ("East New York Brooklyn," n.d.). Teacher turnover rates are high in underfunded schools for a variety of reasons, which negatively impacts students' performance rates. To make matters worse, the constant turnover rates amongst teachers in the neediest schools causes students to have teachers that are not highly qualified, which is detrimental to both the school and the students. Lack of access to quality enrichment activities and courses in underfunded schools is troublesome because students' expectations and abilities are limited. It is important to realize that schools are not a separate entity from society, but instead, they are a microcosm of society. This explanation is why many educators believe that students of color (blacks and Latinos) are more
likely to struggle with their coursework and need to be subject to discipline more than their white counterparts. Studies show that when teachers enter their classrooms with limited expectations of their students, it has a dire effect because some students fail to exceed the limited expectations.

The circumstances mentioned above are problematic, especially when the residents of East New York are more likely to be surveilled, criminalized, and incarcerated at disproportionate rates than their white counterparts in well-to-do neighborhoods. Police officers from local precincts raid and terrorize public housing units and residents on a daily basis. Due to the high rate of poverty, East New York has a high crime rate that affects the lives of many of its residents, whether it is directly or indirectly. Instead of addressing the social ills involved with poverty, local police departments opt to criminalize and incarcerate residents. The effects of criminalizing and targeting residents while neglecting social ills are staggering incarceration rates that affect students. Students are ultimately affected because they are losing loved ones to the penal system while simultaneously attempting to balance their school work. They become emotionally scarred. As a result, their school work suffers. Some children resolve to misbehavior as a call for help. Unfortunately, our school systems use a punitive approach, which, therefore causes children to be suspended or expelled. Suspending and expelling students increase their chances of dropping out and being trapped within the criminal justice system, which relegates them to second-class citizens. The perception of being second-class citizens by society has detrimental effects on the remainder of their lives.

As I am currently in my third year of teaching eleventh and twelfth grade English in East New York, I often reflect on how I've managed to persevere despite my grim upbringing as a child. The answer is not the education system in East New York. In the middle school that I am currently teaching at, I identify with many of the students because of my childhood experiences. While I believe that my school means well, I can't help but realize a disturbing pattern from my experience in school when it comes to disciplining students. I've participated in meetings where students'
behaviors are the topic of discussion, but no mention of the social ills that affect their communities on a daily basis. Faculty members are seemingly only interested in placing the blame on students', but failed to focus on how homelessness, poverty, and constant harassment by police officers contribute to their behavior. By disconnecting personal hardships from their behavior, faculty members at my school have made it more applicable to criminalize children. As a result, the school has decided to create a disciplinary system that does tolerate even the slightest examples of misconduct. The disciplinary system has caused students that are deemed "problematic" to be suspended on a daily basis, whether it is in-house or out-of-house. Students have one chance to perfect their behavior. Parents are solely contacted to warn them of the consequences if their child continues to "misbehave." The slightest act of defiance can result in permanent removal from a classroom. When students object to what they deem as an unfair punishment, teachers usually reprimand them. It also damages a student's sense of worth about him or herself. On many occasions, many students have approached me and complained that they feel they are a part of a military program rather than in a school where their learning is supposed to be getting fostered. Out-of-house suspension causes students to miss crucial instructional time and risk exposure to the criminal justice system. The effects of suspension and exposing students to the criminal justice system are well known, but schools continue to implement zero tolerance policies. The more students are suspended and or expelled, the higher their chances of dropping out or being incarcerated. I realized that students at my school are trapped in a vicious cycle that diminishes their opportunities for learning. They experience residents in their community penalized for minor infractions mainly due to their social conditions, and they are disturbingly set up for the same experience in their public schools.
The Desire for a New Approach

The criminalization of students in urban schools is not a new phenomenon. As a young student, I remember walking through metal detectors to enter schools and removing my boots. If the metal detector beeped, officers would proceed to search my hat. I did not consciously understand why the policies that my school inflicted upon the student population upset me at the time, but my psyche was damaged. I felt as if the faculty at my schools did not trust us enough to enter their learning institutions without first searching us for weapons. It was heart-wrenching. It was apparent that educators at my schools failed to give students' a chance when they refused to be impartial. They showed how much they did not value us as human beings. The searching policies reflected the biases that many of the individuals who were hired to teach and nurture us thought of us at the time. Being searched and prodded for more than half of your schooling, unfortunately, becomes normalized over time, but the constant feeling of degradation and humiliation have a lasting effect on your sense of value as a person. As if searching policies were not worst enough, they coincide directly with the aforementioned zero-tolerance policies. Students that attend my school go through metal detectors daily; are asked to remove their boots upon arrival, and even worse, are repeatedly removed from classes for minor offenses. The only way to change the negative stereotypes and injustices experienced by inner-city children is to switch the system that is currently in effect.

A restorative justice approach will benefit students more than suspension or expulsion because it allows all stakeholders to participate in the resolution process instead of depending on an administrator to be a disciplinarian that "hands out" punishments. Restorative justice (RJ) is a broad term that encompasses the process of bringing the accused and the offended together to help find a positive way forward. RJ increases students of color chances of succeeding in inner-city
schools because it significantly decreases their chances of dropping out and becoming victims of the school-to-prison pipeline, which fuels the mass incarceration epidemic that currently plagues America. Allowing all stakeholders to participate in resolving an issue by using RJ approaches decriminalizes students by showing that reconciliation is possible with victims and the community at large if everyone shares the same goal. Contrary to zero tolerance policies that demean students' value by using exclusionary tactics, restorative justice uplifts students by involving them in the process. It has the potential to boost students' confidence, enhance empathy for one another, and create a community that understands that they are responsible for one another's actions. My school has attempted to use RJ approaches in the form of peer-mediated small groups, but the attempt has been futile thus far. The primary reason for this is because educators have not brought into the program. The majority of educators in my building believe that students should not be involved in deciding the consequences of their actions. The result is a small number of peer-mediated small groups attempted with minimal support from educators. It is clear that the educators at my school prefer to maintain complete control over their students with no pushback from administrators or the students themselves. As a result of educators' desire to continue being the sole disciplinarian, the culture of the school is in disarray. Students have asked for an alternative to the traditional forms of discipline because they believe that the school can improve by considering their perspective.

My purpose for writing this paper is to inform educators in my school and all over the United States on why we should implement RJ practices in our schools—especially schools that educate students in inner cities. For years, zero tolerance policies have had harmful effects on blacks and Latinos that attend schools in inner-city ghettoes, and an instant change is required to begin repairing the damage. Structured alongside law and order policies that purportedly are used to maintain control, zero-tolerance policies have helped to marginalize people of color by targeting the nation's most vulnerable in what is believed to be by many their safest environment. By using
punitive approaches to discipline children, we are reinforcing law and order policies that have led to the decimation of communities of color throughout the nation. We are reinforcing the fact that the U.S. maintains its role as the leading nation with the highest rate of incarcerations by far. It is clear that we implicitly accept the notion that criminals, even those accused of minor offenses, deserve to be excluded and secluded from society. Unbeknownst to many of us, our efforts to maintain control in our schools have helped to funnel children into the criminal justice system. If we want to improve the chances of inner-city youth, we need to end punitive approaches in schools. If we do not, we risk excluding, excluding, and marginalizing millions of children who society will treat as pariahs when they deny them jobs, access to public housing, and forbid them from a quality education.

My research exudes from my passion for ensuring that students of color have a fair chance at obtaining a quality education. The majority of my research focuses on alleviating the school to prison pipeline by implementing a new less punitive approach, but I also focus on the rise of mass incarceration to highlight the correlation between how law and order policies and zero-tolerance policies impact people of color. Zero-tolerance policies exacerbate the challenges that children encounter on a daily, which could be detrimental to their health and sense of self. Even worse is the fact that the policies have proven to assist in funneling primarily students of color into prisons. As an eighth-grade teacher who personally experiences the disastrous effects of zero tolerance policies on students and who experienced it as a child in East New York, I am advocating for RJ approaches as opposed to zero-tolerance policies. The paper aims to highlight the inconsistencies with punitive approaches in schools as to its goal of "maintaining order." It also seeks to show how zero-tolerance policies contribute to mass incarceration by mirroring law and order policies developed in the early 1970's. Specifically, the following questions helped guide my research:
• What are the origins and theory underlying both zero-tolerance policies and law and order policies?
• How does the school to prison pipeline reinforce mass incarceration?
• How does zero-tolerance policies have detrimental effects on students of color in impoverished neighborhoods?
• What issues are currently affecting U.S. schools that have led to a call for the implementation of RJ approaches in schools?
• What does the empirical research say about the impact of RJ approaches in schools?

My research primarily stems from focusing on the high school where I currently teach at and other middle and high schools across the nation. All of suspension, expulsion, and incarceration statistics are from U.S. schools or penal systems. Similarly, even though RJ approaches originated in countries such as Canada, The United Kingdom, and Australia (Fronius et al., 2016), this study only focuses on U.S. based practices and reports. The primary goal of this research paper is to convey to educators servicing inner-city schools across the nation that using punitive approaches solely is furthering the destruction of our children. Hopefully, we can understand that our children need to be able to reflect on their wrongs instead of being excluding immediately.
Mass Incarceration and the School to Prison Pipeline Defined

“In the last decade, the punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools, serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison. . . The School-to-Prison Pipeline is one of the most urgent challenges in education today.”

(NAACP 2005)

The History of Mass Incarceration

On October 26, 2015, millions of people witnessed the horrifying video in which school safety agent, Mr. Fields, who is white, grabbed a black 16-year-old girl by her hair, tilted her chair backward until both her desk and the chair fell over, and then dragged her across the classroom. Her crime—refusing to leave her seat when ordered to do so. The video eventually led to the firing of the school safety police officer, Mr. Fields. Students and school administrators throughout the nation highlight that encounters between school safety agents and students are not as uncommon as some people tend to think. On December 3, 2015, African American student Byron Scott refused to leave his ninth-grade math classroom in Brooklyn, NY when the teacher asked him to do so after accusing him of repeatedly talking. After the two argued, school safety was called to escort Scott out of the classroom. On January 27, 2016, ninth-grader Jessica Blackman allegedly started a fire by lighting a paper towel in the bathroom of her public school located in Brooklyn, NY. Blackman was accused by her principal of starting a fire in the bathroom, solely because a peer of hers blamed her.” An upset Blackman stormed out of the principal’s office crying and demanding the
presence of her parents because she asserted that she "refused to take the blame for something that she did not do." After Blackman refused to return to the principal’s office, she was detained and placed in handcuffs by one of the school safety agents for arson and being disruptive. Her mother picked her up at the 73rd precinct later that evening. As extreme as all three of the cases above sound, they are not uncommon in the nation’s public schools or in our criminal justice system, which is similarly overly punitive.

Presently, the United States of America has the highest incarceration rate at approximately 25 percent, but only holds 5 percent of the world’s population. Advocates for prison reform have repeatedly cited that blacks and Latinos are overrepresented in our nation's prisons because they account for 60% of those imprisoned, which is not synonymous with the makeup of the United States, especially when Blacks and Latinos only make up 13.3% and 17%, respectively. Studies reveal that “1 in 15 every African American men and 1 in every 36 Hispanic men are incarcerated in comparison to 1 in every 106 white men” (Kerby, 12). Observing states nationwide reflect the disproportionate targeting and incarceration rates of people of color. For example, in figure 1, incarceration rates in New York City highlight the staggering incarceration rates of people of color and the significantly lower rates of white individuals:
Prison reformers have also noted that incarcerating more individuals does not effectively reduce crime, which does not reinforce the astonishing fact that we have over 2.2 million people locked up in cages.

Michelle Alexander (2010) argues that the worst effects of the American penal system are that it “has emerged as a system of social control unparalleled in world history…. that targets
people of color and relegates them to a second-class status analogous to Jim Crow” (p. 8). Alexander argues that upon release, prisoners are subject to legalized discrimination for the remainder of their lives. The stigmatization of being a prisoner follows them when they return home. Job discrimination, denial of public benefits, and prohibition from public housing are all consequences. For example, in 2014, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) announced that “An estimated two-thirds (68 percent) of 405,000 prisoners released in 30 states in 2005 were arrested for a new crime within three years of release from prison, and three-quarters (77 percent) were arrested within five years” (3 in 4 Former Prisoners, 2014). The devastating effects of mass incarceration do not only impact grown blacks and Latinos in poor communities. Children, too, suffer from the consequences of losing families to the carceral system because family members are carted off to prison.

Teachers emphasize the importance of American patriotism, which the story of mass incarceration contradicts because the statistics don't align with the American values that promote equality for all citizens despite the color of their skin. The colorblindness theory does not explain why African Americans only account for 13.3% of the, while whites make up 77%, but the rates of African American drug offenders dwarfs the rate of whites. To highlight the gross disparities of racial bias in detail, consider this, "1 in every 14 black men was behind bars [for drug offenses] in 2006, compared with 1 in 106 white men” (Alexander, 2010, p. 98). As if the deliberate targeting of African Americans is not problematic enough, the prison label attached to them upon release is sometimes more troubling, due to their second-class citizenship. People convicted of felonies are disenfranchised, denied access to public housing benefits, and finding a job becomes more difficult. African Americans are disproportionately targeted and overrepresented in jails and prisons, which means that they are more likely to be excluded from ample opportunities and increases their chances of recidivism. If we are to reduce their chances of re-entering the system,
our society needs to revamp the entire system and begin to seek solutions that include rehabilitation rather than imprisonment.

**The Harmful Effect of Propaganda on Society’s Perception**

Historically, the United States has subjugated and marginalized persecuted African Americans since the country's inception. America media outlets used propaganda to gain mass support for the War on Drugs at the expense of African Americans. For example, before 1985, the media imagery surrounding cocaine usually focused on white recreational drug users who abused the drug in its powder form and rehabilitation clinics that can help to alleviate the problem. Moreover, by 1985, when the War on Drugs intensified, transgressors "were poor, nonwhite users and dealers of crack cocaine" and "Law enforcement officials assumed the role of drug "experts," emphasizing the need for law and order responses" (Alexander, 2010, p. 105). The apparent distinction between the media's response to white and black drug users keenly reflected thoughts of citizens across the nation. White drug users deserved forgiveness and recreation while black drug users deserved contempt and prison. As images of black drug abusers replaced white recreational drug users, the perception of the black drug criminal began to manifest in the minds of people. It was a recipe for disaster because images of blacks proliferated across television screens while political officials were petitioning for a war to put an end to drugs. It is no secret who the enemy was. While it is clear that the United States did not explicitly proclaim that blacks were the targets of the War on Drugs, the word 'crime' sufficed because advocating for a stop to crime while portraying black images translates to the more blacks are imprisoned, the more crime decreases. This information explains why a survey conducted in 1995 about what a drug user looks like
revealed that "Ninety-five percent of respondents pictured a black drug user, while only 5 percent imagined other racial groups" (Alexander, 2010, p. 106). This data contrasts reality because, in 1995, only 15 percent of drug users were African American. Police officers and prosecutors, too, had access to media imagery that implicitly blamed blacks for the drug use that allegedly plagued America. As a result, blacks are disproportionately targeted and arrested for drugs. Anyone possessing a television was most likely well aware that black men were dehumanized and targeted unfairly due to propaganda used by politicians that promised to be tough on crime.

Of course, it would be reasonable to expect that the individuals whose communities are frequently targeted by police officers would automatically attempt to stop it, but law and order policies created because of the War on Drugs help to justify the raids of poor black communities. By promising radical change during the Great Depression, Ronald Reagan gained the support of disaffected poor and working-class rights who felt betrayed by the Democratic Party's embrace of the civil rights agenda (Alexander, 2010, p.48). Moreover, the economic collapse of the 1980's caused the blue factory jobs that were abundant in urban areas during the 1950's and 1960's to suddenly disappear. As America shifted from to a more technological society, highly educated workers benefited a great deal, while less educated workers continued to lose work. Black inner-city communities suffered most from the impact of globalization and deindustrialization. Due to underfunded and racially segregated schools, an overwhelming majority of African Americans in urban neighborhoods during the 1970's lacked a college education. The loss of jobs in black communities caused unemployment rates to rise significantly. As Alexander notes, "that as late as 1970, more than 70 percent of all blacks working in metropolitan areas held blue-collar jobs...yet by 1987, when the drug war hit high gear, the industrial employment of black men had plummeted to 28 percent" (2010, p. 51). As the job rate decreased, more and more African Americans that resided in ghettos were incentivized to sell cocaine. Plummeting job rates also caused an increase
in crime. Joblessness combined with a rise in crime and the use of drugs justified Reagan’s call for a War on Drugs. Not only was he able to gain support from whites who felt mistreated by the government, but he was also able to gather support from the black community due to the recent rise in crime. This consensus caused minimal pushback from community activists because the support for Reagan’s administration was substantial. Reagan brilliantly garnered unwavering support from both the blacks and white community by promising to crack down on crime. History would teach us that his promise to be tough on crime resulted in the repression of the same black communities that helped to place him in office.

As convincing as Reagan's administration was in persuading the black community, Bill Clinton's campaign in 1992 happened to convince 83% of the black vote by promising to be tough on crime. As Clinton was on the campaign trail, economic collapse continued to plague the black community, while crime and unemployment rates rose as crack cocaine continued to flood the streets. Blacks trapped in inner-city ghettos were desperate for solutions, and many perceived Clinton as their savior. In 1992, When Toni Morrison referred to Clinton as "the first Black president," it reflected the black community's perception of him. The black community supported Clinton because he promised to decrease crime rates. Moreover, he also appealed to blacks because he grew up in a working-class, single-family household which was stereotypical of black families. (Alexander, 2016). Ultimately, blacks that sought to rid their communities of crime elected President Clinton—even if it meant at the cost of their people.

Before Clinton's inauguration, the War on Drugs has been in effect, but no president prior or since then has decimated the black community as much as he did. Historically, conservatives had been the advocates for being tough on crime, but Clinton shifted the responsibility to prove that conservative before him was tougher on crime. He championed for a 100-to-1 sentencing disparity for crack-powder as opposed to cocaine. In his State of the Union address, he advocated for a
"three strikes" law that sought mandatory life sentences for three-time offenders and signed a $30 billion 1994 crime bill that created new federal crimes. The implementation of the crime bill combined with more money for police departments to use at their expense caused local police departments to expand at staggering rates.

In their desire to fight crime within their communities, blacks ultimately supported someone who decimated inner-city ghettos using their support. For example, as more and more money was distributed to correctional facilities, funds that were used to help assist public housing dwindled. According to Michelle Alexander, "Washington slashed funding by $17 billion (a reduction of 61 percent) and boosted corrections by $19 billion (an increase of 171 percent) effectively making the constructions of prisons the nation's main housing program for the urban poor" (2010, p. 57).

Moreover, Clinton intensified the alteration of funds from public housing to correctional facilities. The initiative made it possible for federally assisted public housing projects to exclude people that have a criminal history. Due to the law, poor people of color that are disproportionately targeted by the drug war were now more vulnerable from being banned from residing in public housing. Clinton's tough on crime rhetoric not only further marginalized racial minorities in mainstream society but also barred them from their homes.

The damage caused by the Clinton administration continues to reverberate throughout society until this day. When he left office in 2001, the United States had the highest rate of incarceration in the world. Moreover, in seven states, African Americans constituted 80 to 90 percent of people who are incarcerated for drugs even though studies show that blacks and whites use drugs at roughly the same rate. During his tenure, Reagan certainly gained the support of both disaffected whites and blacks, but it was during the end of Clinton's tenure that "prison admissions for drug offenses reached a level in 2000 for African Americans more 26 times the level in 1983" (Alexander, 2016). Clinton’s supporters assumed that by denouncing crime, he was making the
nation more powerful, stronger, and successful, but instead, he disproportionately incarcerated blacks residing in inner-city ghettos. It is apparent that mass incarceration negatively affects adults, but not many are made aware that the problem has seeped into the nation’s public-school education system as well.

**School to Prison Pipeline Overview**

The School to Prison Pipeline refers to the tracking of students outside of their educational institutions, primarily because of zero tolerance policies, and tracking them directly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems (Heitzeg, 2016). Many Americans share the belief that hard work is essential to achieving the American Dream. They have also forgotten to take into account the inequalities that plague the nation's education system. According to Nancy Heitzeg (2016), the Professor of Sociology at St. Catherine University, “The School to Prison Pipeline disproportionately impacts the poor, students with disabilities, and youth of color, especially African Americans, who are suspended and expelled at the highest rates, despite comparable rates of infraction.” Students of color are most at risk for being removed from their public educational institutions – released into the streets, which increases their likelihood of being thrust into the juvenile justice system, and therefore, thrown into adult prisons or jails. This disturbing pattern is not coincidental. Despite the comparable disciplinary infractions committed by students of color and their white counterparts, the fact remains that students of color continue to bear the brunt of the consequences. As seen in figure 2, the discrepancies in school suspension rates for blacks and Latinos are unmatched when compared to other races:
The disturbing trend of funneling children out of public schools and into the criminal justice system fuels mass incarceration because it targets the nation’s younger population, criminalizes them, and pushes them into jails and prisons. Criminalizing students for minor disciplinary
infractions via zero-tolerance policies have led to more frequent police presence and stricter surveillance at schools. As if overcrowded, underfunded, and inadequately resourced schools were not detrimental enough to the population that they served, criminalizing students reinforced the reality for many of them that their futures were bleak. The school-to-prison pipeline has exacerbated the disproportionate mass incarceration of people of color by limiting a young person’s earnings potential, increasing dropout rates amongst students of color, and disproportionately targeting and disciplining students of color. Mass incarceration limits the opportunities of marginalized individuals ensnared within its system by denying them access to the mainstream economy. Similarly, the school-to-prison pipeline limits the potential of students by severely limiting the earning potential of young people and increasing dropout rates amongst students of color. The following paragraphs explore the factors that continue to contribute to the school to prison pipeline and the flaws that come with punishing rather than educating our nation’s youth.

The Rise of Zero Tolerance Policies

While America’s federal government prepared for a War on Drugs, the nation’s schools adopted what is known as zero-tolerance policies to help minimize discipline issues in the nation's public schools. According to the legal author, E.A. Gjelten (2017), “Zero tolerance policies developed in the 1990’s, in response to school shootings and general fears about crime.” As a result, the Gun-Free Schools Act, developed in 1994, required schools to expel any student who brings a gun to school. The logic behind the implementation of zero tolerance policies was that minimizing minor infractions would prevent serious crimes from occurring, but the effects have been adverse. As incarceration rates throughout the nation continued to rise, many thought that it corroborated with swelling crime rates. Moreover, many also believed that harsher policies in
schools could alleviate crime rates in the future. Under zero tolerance policies, schools began to discipline students for a wide range of conduct, which includes cutting ahead of another student in line, writing on desks, minor scuffles, and insubordination, which could include talking back to a teacher or administrator. The more serious infractions, such as fighting and smoking tobacco required out-of-school suspension and expulsion for first-time offenders. The fear associated with the possibility of children becoming the next wave of delinquents not only led to an increase in suspensions and expulsions but the federal government and states began to increase the number of security guards in their schools. According to Browne, Trone, Fratello, Daftary-Kapur (2013), “Between the 1996-1997 and 2007-2008 school years, the number of public high schools with full-time law enforcement and security guards tripled.” Instead of making students feel protected or creating a feeling of safety, the presence of more guards negatively impacts students' perception of safety by criminalizing the school climate.

**Zero Tolerance Policies in Schools**

Security measures intensified as a result of shootings in primarily white suburban schools, but nearly 70% of schools in urban communities with higher percentages of students of color and lower test scores have adopted and enforced the policies (Heitzeg 2016). Disciplinary issues that were once problems for school administrators were not dealt with by law enforcement officials. It was this sociopolitical climate that eventually led to the criminalization of students of color because as both, federal and state governments, began to increase funding for school-based law enforcement officers and the installation of metal detectors, students of color were more likely to be disproportionately targeted and disciplined. Under zero-tolerance policies, schools disciplined
students for a wide range of conduct, including cutting ahead of another student in line, writing on desks, minor scuffles, and insubordination, which could include talking back to a teacher or administrator (Heitzeg, 2016). The dire infractions, such as fighting and smoking tobacco, required out-of-school suspension and expulsion for first-time offenders. Consider the following cases: The three cases mentioned at the beginning of this paper above include both middle and high schools, but the School to Prison Pipeline has seeped into all of the nation’s schools, which emphasizes that no students are exempt from being suspended, arrested, or expelled for minor infractions. Consider the following cases:

- A 17 year old junior shot a paper clip with a rubber band at a classmate, missed, and broke the skin of a cafeteria worker. The student was expelled from school.
- A 9 year old on the way to school found a manicure kit with a 1-inch knife. The student was suspended for one day.
- Two 10 year old boys from Arlington, Virginia were suspended for three days for putting soapy water in a teacher’s drink. The boys were charged with a felony that carried a maximum sentence of 20 years, and were formally processed through the juvenile justice system before the case was dismissed months later.
- A Pennsylvania kindergartener tells her friends she’s going to shoot them with a Hello Kitty toy that makes soap bubbles. The kindergartener was initially suspended for two days, and the incident was reclassified as a “threat to harm others.”
- In Massachusetts, a 5 year old boy attending an after-school program makes a gun out of Legos, points it at other students, and mimics the sound of gunfire. He was expelled.
- A 5 year old boy in Queens NY was arrested, handcuffed and taken to a psychiatric hospital for having a tantrum and knocking papers off the principal’s desk.
• In St Petersburg Florida, a 5 year old girl was handcuffed arrested and taken into custody for having a tantrum and disrupting a classroom.

• An 11 year old girl in Orlando Florida was tasered by a police officer, arrested, and faces charges of battery on a security resource officer, disrupting a school function and resisting with violence. She had pushed another student.

• An honors student in Houston, Texas was forced to spend a night in jail when she missed class to go to work to support her family.

• A 13 year old from New York was handcuffed and removed from school for writing the word “okay” on her school desk. (Heitzeg, 2014)

As the examples above point out, zero tolerance policies do not discriminate when it comes to age. Because school officials are so determined to remove students who they predict could ruin their school culture, they do not consider the devastating consequences. Students who are suspended and or expelled are disadvantaged because of the many missed instructional hours. Moreover, they are forced to attend alternative schools instead of their primary institutions. The situation can be even direr if the state does not offer alternative schools because students are left to fend for themselves and are more likely to be suspended because they are now subject to be closely monitored by school staff and police. Students are more likely to lag behind their peers when or if reinstated, which can prevent promotion to the next grade.

The over-policing of schools contributes to the School to Prison Pipeline, and sometimes, affects them long after their teenage years. According to Heitzeg (2016)

“Zero tolerance has engendered a number of problems: denial of education through increased
suspension and expulsion rates, referrals to inadequate alternative schools, lower test scores, higher dropout rates, and racial profiling of students…… Once many of these youths are in “the system,” they never get back on the academic track. Sometimes, schools refuse to readmit them; and even if these students do return to school, they are often labeled and targeted for close monitoring by school staff and police. Consequently, many become demoralized, drop out, and fall deeper and deeper into the juvenile or criminal justice systems. Those who do not drop out may find that their discipline and juvenile or criminal records haunt them when they apply to college or for a scholarship or government grant, or try to enlist in the military or find employment. In some places, a criminal record may prevent them or their families from residing in publicly subsidized housing. In this era of zero tolerance, the consequences of child or adolescent behaviors may long outlive students’ teenage years.” As problematic as zero tolerance policies have been, it has most negatively impacted students of color in poor communities who are more prone to be targeted and harassed by law officials. It is apparent that school or the confines of their neighborhoods could protect students of color from the biases that mirror harsh policies in the nation's inner-city schools.

**How Zero Tolerance Policies Impacts Students of Color**

Strict law and order policies were supposedly enacted in the 1970’s to help prevent crime in America, but instead, resulted in the rising disproportionate incarceration rate of black and brown people. Zero tolerance policies are strikingly similar because they were supposedly developed to help limit misbehavior in the nation’s public schools, but instead of improving misbehaviors, students of color continue to face racial disproportionality, despite comparable infraction rates. The
School to Prison Pipeline reinforces mass incarceration by seemingly prepping students of color for a life of crime. National reporter, Tamar Lewin, highlights the astonishing discrepancies in The New York Times. According to Lewin (2016), nationally, “black students were three times three and a half times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers. One in five black boys and more than one in 10 black girls received an out-of-school suspension.” The Civil Rights Division further documents the disparity plaguing students of color in our nation’s schools: black students made up only 18 percent of the students surveyed but accounted for 35 percent of those suspended once, 46 percent of those suspended more than once and 39 percent of all expulsions (2015).

Similar to how the War on Drugs has increased incarceration rates throughout the nation, zero-tolerance policies have increased the number of students who are disciplined. The statistics differ from state to state and city to city, but one underlying factor continues to remain the same: students of color are disproportionately affected by zero-tolerance policies. For example, in San Francisco, approximately 20 percent of Oakland’s black students were suspended at least once in 2011, which is six times the rate of white students in Oakland. Black boys constituted 45 percent of Chicago’s public schools in 2009-2010 but accounted for 76 percent of suspension (Rudd, 2016; New York Times Education- 2012). In the West Valley School District in Spokane, WA, the statistics are startling: while black students only represented 4 percent of the student population, they accounted for 20 percent of the expulsion rate that received no educational services and 10 percent of those referred to law enforcement (Rudd, 2016). Nationwide, suspension and expulsion rates highlight the contradiction that America is just to all of its citizens. For example, in figure 3 below, the graph emphasizes which races are most negatively impacted by zero-tolerance policies from 2011-2012:

These numbers, while staggering and disturbing, are not coincidental for students of color. New Orleans had even more alarming numbers, primarily because of its 98 percent black student population: under zero-tolerance policies, 100 percent of their expulsions and 100 percent of their
school-related arrests were all black students (Rudd, 2016). Zero tolerance policies and the over-policing of our nation’s public schools create an environment that is contradictory to what an education is supposed to offer students. Researchers at the Justice and Prevention Research Center point out some of the negatives associated with zero tolerance policies:

- Zero-tolerance policies have led to larger numbers of youths being “pushed out” (suspended or expelled) with no evidence of positive impact on school safety (Losen, 2014).
- There is racial/ethnic disparity in what youths receive school punishments and how severe their punishments are, even when controlling for the type of offense (Skiba et al., 2002).
- More school misbehavior is being handed over to the police (particularly with programs that have police in schools, such as School Resource Officers), leading to more youth getting involved with official legal systems — thus contributing to a trend toward a “school-to-prison pipeline” (Petrosino, Guckenburg, & Fronius, 2012).
- Research strongly links suspension and other school discipline to failure to graduate (Losen, 2014). (Fronius, Persson, Guckenberg, Hurley, & Petrosino, 2016).

Studies show intensifying police presence and increasing the number of metal detectors in schools does not guarantee a safer environment and one conducive to learning, but it no doubt, ensures that schools resemble prisons. Even worse, instead of treating students as the next generation in which to pass on knowledge and skills that can help better prepare them for an ever-changing world, they are instead criminalized and dehumanized, which can be emotionally scarring for children of any age. The racial disproportionality is most glaring when statistics reveal when compared to their white counterparts. A stimulant treatment conducted in Maryland’s public schools showed that “816,465 students surveyed, 20,050 (2.46%) received methylphenidate and 3721 (0.46%) received other medications for ADHD. Black and Hispanic students received
methylphenidate at approximately half the rate of their white counterparts” (Safer and Malever, 2000). Studies not only reveal that black students are more likely to be suspended, expelled and or arrested at higher rates, but that “schools with more black students…also had substantially lower rates of enrollment in mental-health and special education programs” (Holmes, 2015). School officials attribute students of color misbehavior to behavioral disorders as opposed to mental-health treatment, which helps to justify the funneling of students into prisons. There is a discrepancy between how teachers and administrators respond to disruptive behavior depending on the race of a child. This disparity is the norm throughout the nation. The overarching result is that students of color, continue to be criminalized, and their white counterparts, are treated as individuals who need help, and are, therefore, medicalized.

**Rising Dropout Rates**

Arguably, the most detrimental effect of zero-tolerance policies is the fact that it leads/causes more students of color to drop out of schools at staggering rates. Studies reveal that 75 percent of America’s inmates, 69 percent of jail inmates, and approximately/almost 59 percent of state inmates did not receive a high school diploma (Amos, 2010). These statistics alone are obviously disturbing, but even more troubling is that the 2012-2013 school year estimates, which show that that black and Latino students account for 59 percent and 65 percent respectively of the national graduation rate, as opposed to 80 percent for whites. The statistics are much worse in inner-city neighborhoods that poor students of color populate. Students that are suspended and or expelled are more likely to experience poor academic performance, and eventually drop-out (Heitzeg, 2016; Advancement Project 2011). Heitzeg (2016) notes that “31 percent of high school
sophomores that left school had been suspended three or more times, a rate much higher than for those who had not been suspended at all.”

Disengagement as a result of suspension or expulsion can have lasting negative consequences that can funnel children into the criminal justice system. Being suspended or expelled doubles the chances that a student will have to repeat a grade. Studies show that youth with a prior suspension are 68 percent more likely to drop out of school. (Kang-Brown et al. 2013).

Once students choose to drop out, they are more prone to be institutionalized because according to The New York Times, one in every ten male high school dropout is in jail or detention center, compared to one in thirty-five male high school graduates. For African Americans, the picture is even bleaker because nearly one in four black male dropouts is incarcerated, as opposed to one in fourteen males, white, Asian, or Hispanic dropouts (Dillon, 2009). Because black students experience much higher suspension and expulsion rates than their counterparts, it is more likely that they will drop out of school. For example, figure 4 shows the glaring discrepancies of high school dropout rates by ethnicity ranging from 2000-2001 through 2009-2010.
Figure 4. Average High School Dropout Rates by ethnicity from ’00–’01 through ’09–’10.

Adapted from

https://www.reddit.com/r/dataisbeautiful/comments/2hg2kc/percentage_of_us_college_students_by_race_oc/, (n.d.). Copyright by DataIsBeautiful

After dropping out of school, not only are individuals more likely to earn much less in their lifetime and end up unemployed, but it also increases their chances of being incarcerated. For example, according to the Census Current Population Survey, 60 percent of young white dropouts,
and 36 percent of young black dropouts were employed. The glaring disparity is that only 7.6 percent of the white men were locked up in 2014 as opposed to 29 percent of black male high-school dropouts that were locked up (Guo, 2016). The connections are clear-cut. For schools that continue to suspend or expel students, it can ultimately lead to immediate or future incarceration. For students of color, especially black students, the chances that they will be forced out of schools, and funneled into the criminal justice system are much higher. Zero tolerance policies have served as a venue for doing just that.

The Harmful Effect of Implicit Biases

The incarceration statistics associated with the U.S. is well known have been a running theme throughout the entire paper, but many people fail to realize that the U.S. also imprisons more of its children than anywhere else in the world at roughly 70,000 per year. (Elgart, 2016). Compared to swelling incarceration rates of blacks in inner-city communities, it is clear that something more disturbing than coincidence is affecting the numbers. Implicit bias is one of the subtler reasons why students of color and adults that reside in urban neighborhoods are treated more harshly than their counterparts. The criminal justice system highlights these biases at almost every level. For example, even though blacks are more likely to be targeted and incarcerated for drugs, statistics show that whites, abuse and distribute drugs, at roughly the same rate, if not more. Opponents of these arguments contend that blacks are more likely to be disproportionately incarcerated because they are more likely to distribute drugs outside, but statistics have shown that whites distribute drugs outside at roughly the same rate. Blacks are more likely to receive harsher sentences for the same crimes. Figure 5 below highlights sentencing discrepancies between blacks
and whites:

Figure 5. What It’s Like to Be Black in the Criminal Justice System, 2012. Adapted from
http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/crime/2015/08/racial_disparities_in_the_criminal
_justice_system_eight_charts_illustrating.html by A. Kahn, C. Kirk, 2015. Copyright by Slate.com
The graph pinpoints that the more months given in sentences, blacks gradually rise over whites. These biases are one of the primary reasons why inner-city communities contain many individuals who have felonies. Laws prohibiting felons to interact with one another are almost impossible to avoid because of the staggering felony rates in black communities. After release, blacks are more likely to be discriminated against than their white counterparts. They are disenfranchised, removed from public housing, denied tuition, and banned from obtaining jobs at times. Implicit biases have plagued the criminal justice system at every level and led to the decimation of the black community.

Unfortunately, the same biases affect students of color for the worst as well. For example, in the school where I currently teach at, educators frequently apply negative stereotypes to students because of where they live. Some of these stereotypes include students' parents not caring about their child's education, students likely to misbehave, and inclined to receive low grades. These reflect how educators perceive and approach students. In my school, suspending students is not uncommon and expulsion, though rarer, is not a new phenomenon. Teachers refuse to include students in the disciplinary process because they implicitly believe that they are not deserving enough. It impacts the school culture for the worst. Teachers have negative perspectives of students, which leads to students losing trust. Implicit bias in school’s nationwide leads to the mistreatment of students of color. This bias manifests itself when teachers have control over the type of discipline they impose on students. Instead of taking the time to understand their students, suspension and expulsion have become in many schools across the U.S. Many people might wonder how experienced educators can't remove their implicit biases from their professional duties. The answer is straightforward and simple. The earlier section on propaganda directly correlates with the actions that teachers exemplify in schools. Similar to police officers that
terrorize black communities, many teachers are insensitive to the conditions that their students experience. Students of color are more likely to attend schools where the majority of their peers are low-income or living in poverty. Exacerbated by misguided educators who have negative biases about their students, the situation is a dire one. It is harmful because it helps to fuel the school-to-prison pipeline by criminalizing students and increasing their chances of dropping out. After dropping out, some students never return. They are left to roam the same streets where police deliberately target and criminalize their elders and peers. Change is required if we are to dismantle the disciplinary system that harms students of color.

Devastating Consequences

In the past three years of teaching English at my high school, I have witnessed the devastating consequences that zero-tolerance policies have had on students. Students are more focused on challenging the established system than they are learning about writing thematic and persuasive essays. The harsh disciplinarian approach disrupts the school's culture for the worst. Students are more disengaged from learning and more prone to challenge the status quo. Several requests have been made by the student government to sit down with educators. Students' intended goal in attempting to converse with faculty members was to ease tensions, but many adults perceived it as micro-aggressions and refused to meet unless an administrator was present. The students' concerns are valid: I have personally observed fifteen suspensions and five expulsions since I began teaching three years ago. The following offenses led to suspension or expulsion for some students at my school:
• One male student smeared Vaseline on a young girl's hair. He received a ten-day suspension.

• One male student purportedly was being disobedient to the teacher by refusing to exit the classroom. He received a five-day suspension.

• After complaining about three separate occasions in which she alleged to being bullied, one young girl was involved in a fight with her accused bully. She received a 20-day expulsion despite her earlier complaints of constant bullying.

• One male student, who slammed the door after being asked to leave the classroom for mimicking his teacher, which he denies. He received a five-day expulsion.

• One young girl accused of being disorderly with an educator was asked to leave and shuffled desks on her way out of his room. She received a ten-day suspension.

The disciplinary punishments listed above does not equate to the actions displayed by students. Educators at my school claim that harsh discipline is what keep students in check and without it, students would run rampant. I believe that to the contrary, excluding them from the disciplinary process taints the school culture. It is no surprise that they have developed a mindset that it is them vs. us. The bond between students and adults seems broken. Students seem more anxious, alienated, and defensive when communicating with teachers. Some students seem dejected and dispirited when entering the building. Sarcasm of the policies has become a way for them to mock what they deem as ridiculous. Three out of the five students mentioned above have dropped out of my school. Recently, we have discovered that two of the students are currently locked up. As a
school system that purports to develop individual thinkers and empower students to criticize the world for themselves, we have done the exact opposite. The staff at my school has sought to control student behavior at all costs. We have partaken in the deliberate criminalization of young people who trusted us to protect them.

The two African American students mentioned early in the paper, Jessica Blackman and Byron Scott, both were suspended and eventually escorted out of their respective schools in handcuffs. According to recent data, both Jessica and Byron are twice as likely to drop out because “suspension in ninth grade doubles the likelihood that students will drop out eventually” (Hing, 2014). To make matters worse, Jessica was suspended for no reason apparently since she was not the student who initially started the fire. By being more strategic about how to handle disciplinary issues, instead of primarily resorting to suspensions and expulsions, educators and administrators can help alleviate the School to Prison Pipeline. If our nation continues to use zero-tolerance policies to discipline students, more and more of our young ones will be suspended and or expelled, which will lead to them being disengaged from school and eventually entwined in the criminal justice system. Comparable to how law and order policies target, criminalize and depopulate communities of color at disproportionate rates; zero-tolerance policies similarly impact communities of color. Some of these students are left to fend for themselves because not all states offer alternative programs for students who are suspended or expelled. The School to Prison Pipeline has undoubtedly reinforced mass incarceration by enforcing zero-tolerance policies and targeting disadvantaged populations. There is not one study that proves that zero tolerance policies help to improve behavior at schools, but research continuously highlights the disastrous effects. America’s education system is a microcosm of society. Unfortunately, society is imbalanced when it pertains to social inequalities, and schooling is one of the many results affected. The well-known educational reformer, Horace Mann, once stated that “Doing nothing for others is the undoing of
ourselves.” Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” As educators and beings of society where all the children of America depend on us despite race and socioeconomic status, it is our duty to them that we continue the fight and commitment to providing equity in education for all students.

Restorative Justice in Schools

The paradox of education is precisely this—that as one begins to become conscious one begins to examine the society in which he is being educated. The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity.

— James Baldwin, A Talk to Teachers 1963

Theory Underlying RJ in Schools

James Baldwin (2008) once asserted that the job of education is to immerse students in the education process (p. 15). His purpose in declaring this statement was because he believed that children should be taught to be independent thinkers. The same is true for disciplinary procedures in our school systems. The decision to suspend or expel a child is primarily the responsibility of teachers or educators. This approach gives the child no opportunity to partake in the discipline that is dished out to him or her. He or she is at the will of people who sometimes use implicit biases as a measure of how much punishment a person could endure. It is imperative that students participate in deciding the consequences of their actions. The RJ framework includes allowing "offenders" and
the rest of the community to reflect on the offense and consider the situation in its entirety. RJ is a non-punitive approach to resolving issues in school. Some of the reasons that RJ approaches should be in schools are:

- The ineffectiveness of zero-tolerance policies
- The harmful effects that zero-tolerance policies have on students of color
- The ability for students and teachers to cultivate and foster a stronger community amongst themselves.
- The connection between suspension, expulsion and increasing dropout rates.

Thus, the philosophy behind RJ approaches stems from the idea that schools can't continue to rely on traditional methods to discipline children, but want to be able to them accountable for their offenses. According to Fronius et al. (2016),

RJ began in the pre-modern native cultures of the South Pacific and Americas, in which the approach to conflict and social ills focused more on the harm done to the community rather than the act. RJ also focuses on the "reintegrative shaming theory" (Brathwaite, 2007). This theory emphasizes the wrongdoing of both the offender and harmed individuals. Reintegrative shaming highlights the significance of helping individuals reenter into society. Rather than attempting to control student misbehavior and dish out punishments, schools should seek to include all stakeholders in resolving an issue. Contrary to RJ approaches, many schools continue to use a harsh disciplinarian that ultimately removes the student from the decision-making process. Similar to how police forces in black communities are used to maintain order, punitive approaches are used to redirect "misguided" behavior.

The traditional approach has led to a system that manages students' behavior as opposed to assisting in cultivating their growth. Empowering students by allowing them to partake in the procedural process helps them to perceive institutions as fair and legitimate, which ultimately
benefits them (Tyler, 2006). Tyler (2006) also argues that by allowing youth to participate in the decision-making process, they have a chance to self-regulate without the need of formal discipline. More importantly, the use of RJ helps rationalizes educators’ actions to students when it pertains to discipline. More importantly, the use of RJ helps rationalizes educators’ actions to students when it pertains to discipline. RJ approaches also help to legitimize schools as institutions that genuinely care about fairness and nurturing the development of their students. Ultimately, RJ can help the U.S. schools improve the atmosphere, create a community that genuinely cares, and limit behavioral issues.

An Overview of RJ in U.S. Schools

For quite some time now, school systems across the United States have sought a system that could alleviate exclusionary disciplinary actions. One reason for this the negative impact that zero-tolerance policies have had on schools and their culture for past few decades. Another reason for this includes the disparity amongst the groups that are more likely to be targeted and punished. According to Fronius et al. (2016), African Americans are 26.2 percent more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions than their white counterparts. Zero-tolerance policies also disproportionately impact other groups including other racial and ethnic minorities and students with disabilities (Fronius et al., 2016).

RJ is considered a remedy to zero-tolerance policies. Instead of solely placing the blame on offenders, RJ encourages the support of a community to help overcome obstacles. RJ proponents conclude that strictly focusing on the misconduct criminalizes children by stigmatizing them for their behavior. There is not an emphasis on redemption for the offender. The offender is not the only one who is negatively affected when misconduct is the sole focus. Any eye for an eye can
leave the victim without closure or a chance to bring resolution to a painful situation (Fronius et al., 2016). RJ mends this pain by involving both the victim, offender, and community in the process.

Traditional forms of discipline developed schools that were overly prescriptive for simple offenses. The offenses included talking disrespectfully to an educator or disrupting class while teaching is taking place. Under zero-tolerance policies, both of these offenses could result in suspension, or expulsion if the situation was to escalate. Proponents of RJ argue that they do not intend to minimize the harm caused by these offenses, but instead, bring together the offender and the harmed to repair the possible damage. The goal is to help the student reenter into the community instead of isolating and stigmatizing him or her for his offense (Fronius et al., 2016). The key to having a school run successfully with an RJ approach is implementation. Many educators are not accepting RJ practices for a variety of reasons. For example, perfecting RJ requires more work on behalf of all stakeholders. Other educators believe that RJ is not ideal for their schools because it is not punitive enough. Many schools also resist RJ because of timing issues. They expect instant gratification, but researchers predict that a shift in attitudes will take at least one-three years to change, and three-five years for a deep-shift to a restorative-oriented school (Fronius et al., 2016). In the next section, I will thoroughly explain how my school attempted to implement RJ and ultimately failed.

**Presumed RJ in My School**

When I first began working at my school three years ago, the principal decided that misconduct should be a priority. According to her, one year ago, the school was in turmoil primarily because of the misbehavior of students. When a student misbehaved, she admitted to choosing punishments that she saw fit. She felt as if she had failed her students, so she offered a
new alternative for the upcoming school year. Her plan involved implementing RJ practices hoping that it will alleviate misbehavior and instill trust between students and educators. She stated that she wanted to create a student council that will partake in resolving students' issues. She sought to establish guidelines that included students in the process of their disciplinary process. From the very beginning, teachers were reluctant to relinquish what they perceived as the control they possessed to their students. Teachers complained that involving students in the decision-making process would ultimately lead to insubordination. When the meeting was over, the only thing that the principal and the reluctant teachers agreed upon was developing a student council that will resolve the conflicts. Some teachers complained that RJ approaches are too soft and will not teach life lessons. Others argued that it strips teachers of all their authority. Proponents of the RJ practices asserted that it would bolster the school's community.

Eventually, the student council was established and trained on how to address concerns from their peers. The buy-in was never unanimous amongst the staff, which meant that only some teachers sought to dedicate their time to teaching students how to use RJ techniques. Students fully understood that it was a weak consensus amongst the staff. As a result, students began to question the new system in place. They assumed that teachers were choosing their favorite students to participate in the student council. Feelings of distrust pervaded the school building. Even student council members questioned the selection-process when they realized the intricacies of how the committee chose. Misbehavior continued throughout the school. Repeat offenders assumed that student council members were out to get them. Opponents of the plan to implement RJ practices pointed out that the continuation of misconduct indicates that RJ would not work. The goal was to assist students in understanding their role in the decision-making process when it pertains to disciplinary action, but it ultimately failed. The five following reasons are why RJ did not succeed at my school:
Lack of Planning

1. Faculty members did not initially buy-into the program, which caused subconscious punitive approaches to remain. The culture of the school community worsened as a result. The implementation of RJ requires a shift in thinking because the new system is radically different. Educators, parents, administrators, counselors, and most importantly, students need to agree on the implementation of the new plan. Progress check, logistics, and systems of support are required. The school community must work in unison to establish the guidelines.

2. Lack of Vision

- Lack of the vision of RJ was a concern for faculty members at my school. Some teachers refused to inform parents. Others did not want to include students in the decision-making process. Confusion amongst adults in the building caused students to doubt our new approach. Without vision, the plan failed because it had no driving force. For RJ to be effective, everyone would have to had been on the same page.

3. Lack of Training

- Training on RJ at my school manifested itself in a three-day PD. RJ training requires constant coaching and reinforcement. Three days was not enough for anyone on my staff. Even the educators who wholeheartedly sought to accept the implementation of RJ reasoned that continuous coaching should be required. RJ is more than an intellectual change because it changes people's perception of
discipline. Considering that teachers have to roll-out the plan to students, it would be wise to train staff thoroughly.

4. Lack of Support

- Once again, lack of buy-in for RJ is why it failed at my school. Teachers barely supported the initiative. Lack of support meant lack of time convincing parents and students that it could work. Unrelenting support is required to make RJ work. All staff members need to be on board to help the plan flourish. Only including enthusiastic staff members would not alleviate the disciplinary issues. Being consistent is key to reinforcing RJ practices for students and faculty members.

5. Lack of Investment in both Time and Money

- Many faculty members at my school refused to invest the time in RJ approaches. The constant excuse was that they needed their time to plan for a lesson. As an educator, I can attest that time is essential to the profession, but they did not deem RJ important enough to dedicate their time to developing it. Money was another issue. There were disputes over how to fund training for teachers. Administrators also disagreed on what training should teachers receive. The result of the constant disagreement was a three-day PD that did not benefit the majority of the faculty members.

Ultimately, it was unfortunate that RJ failed at my school because the criminalization of students has not disappeared. Students continue to experience high rates of suspension. While expulsion rates have dropped, the change is not significant enough to acknowledge as an improvement. The implementation of RJ failed at my school for a variety of reasons, but studies show that it has had a
positive effect on schools that have implemented it successfully.

Successfully Reversing the Effects of Zero-Tolerance Policies in Schools

Zero-tolerance policies were implemented to manage behavior in schools, and from the time that they became widespread in the 1990's, there has been no evidence that they have worked. There has been evidence to prove the exact opposite though. Suspension and expulsion rates have swelled. Dropout rates have also increased. Students have not become more compliant, safer, or academically sounder (Fanion, 2013). Ethnic and racial minorities have been criminalized by the institutions that are meant to level the playing field. Schools with high suspension and expulsion rates also experience low academic achievement. There have been studies that have proven the direct links between suspension incidents and students subsequently dropping out of school. Jones (2016) claims that "Nationally, only 71 percent of eighth-graders who were suspended graduate from high school, compared to 94 percent of those who avoided sanctions." When students are not able to reach their full potential, it is detrimental to all of us. It is harmful because it limits their ability to thrive. If students drop out, they ultimately contribute less to society.

Despite the depressing facts listed above, there are instances when RJ has thrived in schools that have successfully implemented it. For example, legislators and education experts in Denver, Colorado recognizing the pernicious effects of zero-tolerance policies has been instrumental in dismantling exclusionary policies in schools. Denver's schools sought to address behavior challenges and racial gaps in suspensions (Jones, 2017). Denver's Cole Middle School was the site of the original RJ program because of notorious suspensions and widespread school violence. A program known as the Victim-Offender-Restoration Program came to the school to help support restorative justice (Jones, 2017). The program planned to foster positive relationships between
offenders and those harmed by their offenses. Early success with the pilot program led to the initiative formally being a part of the school's system discipline process. After the second year of the pilot program, police citations declined by 86 percent and suspension by over 40 percent (Jones, 2017).

Success at Denver's Cole Middle School led to the expansion of RJ in Denver's public-school system. The restorative framework helped to reduce suspensions and bolstered school communities. Figures 6 and 7 depict the positive effect that the pilot program had on Denver's schools:

Figure 6. Learning Uninterrupted: Supporting Positive Culture and Behavior in Schools, 08-'09 through ‘12-13. Adapted from http://massbudget.org/report_window.php?loc=Learning-
As the graph indicates, suspension rates dropped from 2009 to 2013 for all races. As schools shifted from zero-tolerance to RJ, academic scores, and the number of students who graduated on time in Denver's school's increased moderately. Figure 7 shows suspension rates in large urban districts in Massachusetts after the implementation of the pilot program. The graph shows that Denver had lower suspension rates in two of Massachusetts largest cities.

**Suspension Rates Higher in MA Large Urban Districts Than Denver's After RJ**

Share of students suspended, Denver Public Schools 2012-2013, compared to Boston, Springfield, and Worcester, 2015-2016

![Graph showing suspension rates](http://massbudget.org/report_window.php?loc=Learning-Uninterrupted.html)

As seen in both figures 6 and 7, African Americans still contained the highest suspension rates but gradually declined over time. The gradual decline indicates that RJ was a positive start even though schools have a lot more work to do to address racial disparities in discipline. Denver’s school system has improved the school climate and managed to keep more students in school. According to Jones (2017), Denver’s school’s system was able to initiate RJ because of successful ideas. The ideas include:

- **Leadership Vision and Commitment** – School leaders and administrators concluded that exclusionary responses to misbehavior were ineffective and embraced RJ as an alternative. This was a practical response to having the same students being suspended repeatedly and returning to school resentful and without the skills to prevent future problems. It wasn’t necessary that principals participated directly in Restorative Justice, but they had to believe in the approach and communicate its importance to staff.

- **Staff Buy-In** – After some initial resistance to RJ among teachers in several Denver schools, principals received staff feedback and integrated their suggested adjustments. This process provided an opportunity to bring staff together and give teachers leeway in adapting Restorative Justice to their classrooms. Progress with some teachers and positive results for students with behavior challenges increased staff buy-in.

- **Professional Development** – Training teachers on any new discipline approach is essential. Denver Public Schools provided significant, ongoing training on RJ practices, including several full-day trainings before the school year and regular “booster” sessions throughout. The focus of these sessions was hands on, working through reflection and feedback, responding to likely scenarios, and modeling approaches to handle conflict. Professional development was not limited to classroom teachers, but also included office, support, and operational staff, such as custodians and bus drivers. This process led to having greater capacity at individual schools to train and support others, though outside support was available for challenging situations.
• **Integration into Behavior Policies and Structures** – Instead of being considered an isolated initiative, Restorative Justice was situated within school behavior policies. Notably, these schools integrated preventative and positive behavior approaches, such as PBIS, culturally responsive instruction, and another similar system, with RJ.

• **Full-Time Restorative Justice Coordinators** – Given the additional duties required of educators using RJ, research found that full-time RJ coordinators were necessary to sustain the initiative. These coordinators were tasked with building relationships across schools, facilitating conferences and mediations, following up on reparative agreements, and providing coaching to staff. Participating schools also featured teams of educators who focused on overseeing RJ, reviewed cases, monitored progress, and communicated with staff across their schools.

**Conclusion**

As a society, if we are to help improve the next generation and the generation after them, an attempt to provide an equitable education for all students must be made. Criminalization of students is something that remains in schools all across the nation. The school to prison pipeline needs to come to an end because it harms children, particularly, racial and ethnic minorities. Black and Hispanic students are suspended and expelled at higher rates than their peers. Even worse, criminalization fuels mass incarceration by funneling students into the criminal justice system. Once a person becomes victim to the criminal justice system, it is not easy to remove the stigma. It becomes difficult to obtain decent employment, live in public housing, and receive tuition to attend school. As educators and caring individuals, we can collaborate on every level to address the biases that affect the lives of others. RJ is one alternative. Denver's school system serves as an example of what can happen if individuals’ biases are dealt with accordingly, and children became our primary concern. As is mentioned early in the chapter, Baldwin claims that it is our job to immerse students in the learning process and develop independent thinkers. Punitive approaches instead disengage
students and create feelings of distrust amongst students instead of establishing independence. We need to take Baldwin's advice to heart and work diligently to implement RJ in our schools because all students deserve to flourish and enjoy childhood without being criminalized and punished as if restorative practices are not an option.

Teachers, administrators, scholars, and parents alike seem to have forgotten that schools are representative of society, and historically, the United States has perceived children of color as inferior. If schools continue to use a punitive approach when attempting to discipline children of color, they are perpetuating society's treatment of people of color. It is possible that many of my childhood friends would have avoided the penitentiary system if they had access to a restorative justice program that took into account their perspective of their wrongs. Instead, my friends were immediately removed from classes and sometimes schools. The effects have been disastrous. Schools have failed my friends and many other children of color throughout the nation. It is time that we reverse the trend that has helped to decimate communities of color for decades. The well-known educational reformer, Horace Mann, once stated that “Doing nothing for others is the undoing of ourselves.” Be ashamed to die until you have won some victory for humanity.” As educators and beings of society where all the children of America depend on us despite race and socioeconomic status, it is our duty to them that we continue the fight and commitment to providing equity in education for all students.
References


