

Defining and Deconstructing the School-to-Prison Pipeline: The Role Teachers Can Play

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Introduction to the School-To-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline is the American practice of extracting children of color from schools and putting them in the juvenile justice system or prison system. As told by Wald and Losen,

“Students of color in low-income neighborhoods or coming from low-income households will be taught by unqualified teachers, tested on material they never reviewed, held back in grade, placed in restrictive special education programs, repeatedly suspended, and banished to alternative out-placements before dropping or getting pushed out of school altogether. Without a safety net, the likelihood that these same youth will wind up arrested and incarcerated increases sharply.”¹

The catalyst for this system differs for every student stuck within it; sometimes it starts with a challenging home life and the student’s living situation, and other times it can start with negative familial influences. However, more often than not this pipeline starts within school systems, specifically with the disciplinary methods the school and its staff use.

School discipline has gotten much harsher over the years, especially during and post the war on drugs era. One way to measure this is through school suspension data. In 1970, 1.7 million students were suspended from school, and by 2003 that number nearly doubled to 3.1 million students being suspended.² This rise in discipline had disproportionately impacted black students who have a 24% rate of discipline for all black students being suspended compared to the 8% of their white counterparts in 2016.³ Ms. Kipp Dawson, a former Pittsburgh Public School teacher, has outright admitted that this is an issue she observed within her school. This disproportion is still reflected in the modern-day, where black students are nationally 3.9 times as likely to be suspended as white students. In the state of Pennsylvania, black students are suspended at a 5.5:1 ratio compared to their white peers, and in Allegheny County alone, the rate is 7.3:1.⁴

¹ Wald, Johanna, and Daniel F. Losen. 2003. “Defining and Redirecting a School -to-Prison Pipeline.” *New Directions for Youth Development* 2003, no. 99 (Fall): 7. https://media.wiley.com/product_data/excerpt/74/07879722/0787972274.pdf

² “Indicator 15: Retention, Suspension, and Expulsion.” 2019. National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_RDA.asp.

³ Zill, Nicholas. 2019. “The Black-White Divide in Suspensions: What Is the Role of Family?” Institute for Family Studies. <https://ifstudies.org/blog/the-black-white-divide-in-suspensions-what-is-the-role-of-family>.

⁴ Huguley, James, Ming-Te Wang, Kathryn Monahan, Gina Keane, and Abel Koury. 2018. “Just Discipline and the School-to-Prison Pipeline in Greater Pittsburgh: LOCAL CHALLENGES AND PROMISING SOLUTIONS.” University of Pittsburgh. https://www.heinz.org/UserFiles/Library/Just_Discipline_and_the_School_to_Prison_Pipeline_in_Pittsburgh.pdf.

Exclusive curricula, lack of representation in lessons, and implicit biases lead to African American students being fostered out of schools and into the school-to-prison pipeline. Although principals, school districts, and police officers play a role in ending the school-to-prison pipeline, teachers have important control over these three problems and need to make an explicit effort in using inclusive and equitable practices in their classrooms.

Eurocentric Curriculum

Imagine that you are sitting in your history class, and your teacher tells you, “we’re moving on to a new topic.” You feel a small spark of hope that maybe this time it will be someone like me up there, someone that looks like me on the screen. Then you see it: another white person. The entire school year has been about white people, and it is getting irritating. Your past is never mentioned, your people are never mentioned, *you’re* never mentioned. You push the assignment of the day away from you, and put your head down on your desk. Why bother?

This scenario is something that happens far too often to black children in schools. Eventually, students of color may get tired of going through school year after school year with their classes being centered on white stories, histories, and experiences, with the only exception being slavery and the civil rights movement. Having no representation, in general, is disheartening, but having your only representation be a story of oppression is not particularly any better. As stated by Temple University alumni Ama Mazama, “Typically curriculum begins African-American history with slavery and ends it with the civil rights movement. You have to listen to yourself simply being talked about as a descendent of slaves, which is not empowering.”⁵ However, teachers have the power to change this. By including more black experiences, voices, and people in their usual curriculum that is not focused on slavery, Jim Crow, or the civil rights movement, they can change how a student feels about themselves and their class.

The foundation of American public school was created by white people for white children, specifically males. Due to this origin, school curriculum focused on white history since the beginning, and change to the curriculum has moved far too slowly. When black people were first brought into discussion at schools, it was to warn and educate white children about the dangers and stupidity of them, with books and poems such as *Tintin in the Congo*, and *Ten Little*

⁵ Wong, Alia. 2015. “History Class and the Fictions About Race in America.” *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2015. <https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/the-history-class-dilemma/411601/>.

*Ni**ers* becoming popular among and readily available to young white children.⁶ After black people were finally included for non-slandering purposes, it was typically to focus on the tragedy of slavery and segregation, and was often taught by problematic textbooks.

A rising concern in the academic world today is the white-washing and subtle changes in African-American history within textbooks. This is a significant concern because a report from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences on public high-school educators found that in the 2011-12 school year, more than a third (34 percent) of history teachers had neither majored nor been certified in the subject, and only 25 percent of them had both credentials.⁷ With teachers not being certified in the subject, they would, logically, only teach as far as the textbooks can take them. If textbooks hold a bias or spread incorrect information, then that is what students are going to receive and learn. This puts incredible importance on the quality of textbooks, which, unfortunately, often fall short. For example, the popular textbook company McGraw Hill was caught using the word, “worker,” to refer to slaves in a 9th grade World Geography textbook in 2015.⁸ The company released a statement apologizing for the oversight, and they recalled the textbook to correct it, but it was already too late. Over 140,000 copies were already out in school districts across America by the time the mistake was addressed, influencing a group of young, impressionable children.⁹

Colorblind Curriculum

Since the Civil Rights Movement, many teachers and textbooks have tried to create a narrative of race no longer being an issue. While this idea is honorable and clearly well-intentioned, it is also damaging. Colorblindness should more accurately be called, “color evasiveness,” as it is used to avoid discussions about the importance of racial identity. When educators claim to be “colorblind,” all it does is tell their students of color that their race, identity, and experiences tied to those things do not matter.¹⁰

⁶ Brown, Anthony L., and Keffrelyn D. Brown. 2015. “The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same: Excavating Race and Enduring Racisms in U.S. Curriculum.” *National Society for the Study of Education* 114, no. 2 (January): 103-130.
file:///home/chronos/u-0830dd35e03a634073e44bd6118ff18dbe56f6b3/MyFiles/Downloads/The_More_Things_Change_the_More_They_Sta.pdf.

⁷ Wong, Alia. 2015. “History Class and the Fictions About Race in America.” *The Atlantic*, October 21, 2015.

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/10/the-history-class-dilemma/411601/>.

⁸ Wong, Alia.

⁹ Wong, Alia.

¹⁰ Ancy Annamma, Subini, Darrell D. Jackson, and Deb Morrison. 2016. “Conceptualizing color-evasiveness: using dis/ability critical race theory to expand a color-blind racial ideology in

Race has impacted life experiences and policies in America since its beginning as a country, and teaching children that it has not is both incorrect and harmful. Black children know that the color of their skin matters, and the idea of being “colorblind” is often insulting to them. To tell a student that you do not see color is not only a paradox of admitting that you do, but also implies to students of color that being white is the default to earning respect and being treated fairly.¹¹ People do not acknowledge what they do not see, and to not see color is to only see white, the absence of color, so making this claim is essentially the same as telling students of color you see them as white, and will treat them like your white students. Instead of trying to claim colorblindness and push the subject away, teachers must address race with students of color by acknowledging the societal issues that come with them not being white, then opening themselves up to discussing it with them, and helping create a safe space for their students to talk.

Racism/Racist Curriculum

A common issue within class curriculum is how racism appears, both in terms of subject matter and in practice. Often, racism in America is taught under one unit or category, and not as a phenomenon that has continuing and lasting effects on African-Americans. This leaves students with gaps in the truth of America’s brutality, which puts black children in the unfair position of having to sugarcoat their histories and lived experiences to protect their white peers. Along with the issue of excluding information while teaching about racism in America, schools often face the issue of accidental racist curriculum practices. Both of these occurrences leave students of color, especially black students, feeling unsettled when the topic of race or race-based topics are brought up in class.

When racism is taught in schools, it is not often taught to its fullest extent. Most children are taught American racism in terms of individual acts, learning the names of white supremacy groups such as the KKK and all the horrible actions they did. While this part of history is important to know, students are deprived of the truth of the matter; racism has been ingrained in America starting at its very foundation. This method of education is harmful to not only black students, but white students as well. By teaching racism as individual or isolated acts of hatred, black students are left unprepared for the real world discrimination they are very likely going to face, simply due to the color of their skin. On the other hand, white students are left ignorant of

education and society.” *Race, Ethnicity, and Education* 20, no. 2 (November): 147-162. 10.1080/13613324.2016.1248837.

¹¹ Ancy Annamma, et al.

the fact that nearly every system based in American society itself was built on the oppression of the “other,” and that white privilege is a large driver of one’s ability to achieve the American Dream. This half-teaching method is used to protect the innocence of white children, which is a luxury that black children do not get to have.¹²

Another occurrence that often happens at the expense of black children is a practice called curriculum violence. Curriculum violence is a term coined by Erhabor Ighodaro and Greg Wiggan that is defined as, “Deliberate manipulation of academic programming which compromises the intellectual or psychological well-being of learners.” However, curriculum violence does not always have to be deliberate or intentionally manipulated to cause harm to students of color. Far too often, well intentioned practices, lessons, and projects end up causing harm to black students and negatively influencing white students. The most common occurring example of this is slavery and civil war reenactments, as well as family tree projects. While in theory, these seem like interactive educational tactics to get students really engaged in the lessons, they often cause more harm than good, hurting black children by either having them act in subservient or oppressed roles or reminding them of the true personal impact of the history of their people, respectively. These practices also establish a role and idea of “us” and “them” in the classroom for white students and students of color.¹³

Teachers have a duty to take care and put thought into what they show their students and expose them to. Students deserve and need to have the full truth, otherwise, they are left unprepared for harsh reality and facts. However, there is a certain way that teachers must carefully plan when going about this to give their white and black students an equal experience, without sugarcoating the truth at the expense of their black students, or inadvertently creating traumatic experiences that leave them dreading the classroom, and school as a whole.

When black students are faced with all of these issues in curriculum, it can be disheartening and emotionally draining. This can cause students of color to either act out or completely disengage from their classes. Teachers feel faced with the dilemma of how to pull their students back into an active role in the classroom, but when that does not work out, they may feel they need to push those students, which is where school disciplinary measures come in. These punishments, which often push students out of the classroom, act as the start for students of color to enter the school-to-prison pipeline.

¹² Brown and Brown.

¹³ Jones, Stephanie P. 2020. “Ending Curriculum Violence.” Teaching Tolerance. <https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/spring-2020/ending-curriculum-violence>.

Standardized Tests

Since the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the general idea education officials have is that there are race-based gaps in standardized testing, and if those gaps are closed, then racial equality in education will be achieved. However, this simplistic plan will not work because of two reasons. The first reason is because high stakes or standardized tests are not race-neutral. In fact, at the center of their origin, standardized tests are embedded in white supremacy, and have been used as weapons against people of color, immigrants, and poor people, to prove that rich, white, and US-born people were biologically intellectually superior.¹⁴ Considering the fact that the idea of standardized testing was first introduced in 1845, with the purpose to replace oral exams, and monitor and compare typical white schools with “urban schools,” this is not surprising.¹⁵ The second reason focusing on standardized testing achievement gaps will not lead to equitable outcomes is because standardized tests operate under the belief that human intelligence is based on biological aptitude distributed “naturally” across a population, thus the results that are produced come in a bell curve, where some people do really well, most people score in the average range, and some people do very poorly. Due to this, it is impossible for everyone who takes these tests to pass, so the idea of closing the gap would not be everyone passing or succeeding, but would rather, unfortunately, be balancing the amount of failure and success between opposite demographics.¹⁶

Standardized tests do not measure school success and learning. Test scores and results actually correlate mostly with four outside-of-school factors that measure wealth: family income, neighborhood, education level of parents, and access to resources.¹⁷ Looking at America’s history of slavery, sharecropping, segregation, and redlining, where black people were prevented from gaining wealth, owning land, working at high paying jobs, living in safe neighborhoods, and going to school, the logical conclusion can be made that African-Americans are, for the most part, at the disadvantage when it comes to passing these tests. Based on a problematic bell curve that largely measures access to generational wealth, African Americans are too often labeled as low-performing.¹⁸

¹⁴ Au, Wayne. 2019. “Racial Justice is Not a Choice.” *Rethinking Schools* 33, no. 4 (Summer). <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/racial-justice-is-not-a-choice/>.

¹⁵ Gallagher, Carole J. "Reconciling a Tradition of Testing with a New Learning Paradigm." *Educational Psychology Review* 15, no. 1 (2003): 83-99. Accessed April 14, 2021. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23361535>.

¹⁶ Au, Wayne

¹⁷ Duncan, Greg J., and Richard J. Murnane. "Rising Inequality in Family Incomes and Children’s Educational Outcomes." *RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 2, no. 2 (2016): 142-158.

¹⁸ Au, Wayne

On top of standardized tests functionally working against most people of color, students of color in low-income schools are disproportionately disciplined for their test results because the tests concentrate on failure in their schools and communities the most. These children are tested more frequently and have their performance scrutinized more by officials and policymakers. They are also punished for test results and are subjected to more drastic curricular “corrections,” experiencing a great loss of time dedicated to non or less-tested subjects such as art, music, science, and social studies. Multicultural instructions and discussions are also deterred at their schools since they do not help provide any obvious benefits to test-taking. Overall, the way that standardized testing and its results are handled, interpreted, and processed is leading to disproportionate suffering in the lives of students of color, and the hyper-focus on testing accountability is not going to close the achievement gap anytime soon, if ever.¹⁹

The purpose of standardized testing is to measure the academic performance of students on a mass scale and see how many of them meet the standard that was previously set by officials. However, there is a lot of negative history and toxic functioning of standardized tests that defeats the purpose and does not provide an accurate report of their academic success and intelligence. There are a few other alternatives to standardized testing that would be as equally, if not more, effective, and have no negative connotation to them for students to fear. One of these alternatives is stealth assessments, in which students are given tests to complete without knowing they are tests, thus taking away test anxiety and the pressure of fearing failure. Another alternative to standardized testing is sampling. Taking a statistically representative group of students and having them take one or two tests can provide the government with a general range of success from school districts, without stressing students out and giving them a series of difficult tests over the course of multiple days. The federal government can also take into consideration the fact that mega-testing students on only two core subjects, math and reading, for most of their academic career, is not going to paint the full picture of academic achievement or failure, and think about looking into tests that focus more on skills such as critical thinking and making connections between the past and present.²⁰

Teacher Implicit Bias

¹⁹ Au, Wayne

²⁰ Kamenetz, Anya. 2015. “What Schools Could Use Instead Of Standardized Tests.” NPR: 90.5 WESA.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2015/01/06/371659141/what-schools-could-use-instead-of-standardized-tests>.

While curriculum and standardized testing can push black students out of class, so can the biases of teachers. They have direct control over the discipline their students face, and facing a certain amount of discipline is the start of an African-American student's journey to the school-to-prison pipeline. White teachers often go into their jobs with expectations about their students before they even meet them, and this implicit bias impacts black children the most, starting at a very young age. White teachers expect their black students to need the most help and cause the most trouble. Over disciplining of black students starts with children as young as four or five, with black preschoolers being 3.6 times more likely to receive one or more suspensions than their white peers.²¹

A two-part study conducted by Gilliam et al. found that white teachers hyper-focus on their black male students the most and their black female students the least when assessing classroom behavior. The study consisted of 132 experienced preschool teachers who were instructed to participate in two tasks. The first task was for the participants to watch a six minute long series of clips starring four children; a white boy, a black boy, a white girl, and a black girl. The participants were told to press the enter key every time they saw a behavior that could be a challenge in the classroom. Participants were then told to explicitly select the child they felt needed the most attention while watching the video. The results from the participants showed that they focused more on the males and the black students. However, Gilliam and his partners were conducting their own study in secret. While the participants watched the clip, they tracked their eye movements and collected data on the children they spent the most time looking at. From those observations, they found that in order of greatest to least, the participants focused on the black boy the most, then the white boy, then the white girl, and finally the black girl got the least attention overall.²²

These results and what they imply affect black students very severely, especially considering the fact that these biases extend beyond Gilliam's teachers, with 48% of white people having at least a slight preference for other white people, and 35% having a blatant moderate preference for white people over black. With implicit biases that lead many white to expect trouble from black students, coupled with their hyper-focus on their male African-American students, it is no wonder why black boys are over disciplined compared to their female and white counterparts. However, having little attention does not do black girls any justice. Black girls are often viewed as independent and mature, able to handle their own issues

²¹ Wald, Johanna, and Daniel F. Losen. 2003. "Defining and Redirecting a School -to-Prison Pipeline." *New Directions for Youth Development* 2003, no. 99 (Fall): 7. https://media.wiley.com/product_data/excerpt/74/07879722/0787972274.pdf

²² Wald, et al.

and take care of themselves, or even take on a helping role in the classroom.²³ While this view is not innately negative or bad, it ties back to a very common issue that young black children face that causes them a lot of problems and suffering: adultification.

Adultification is the idea of children not only being viewed as physically older than their actual age, but also the view that they can handle more adult discussions and responsibilities. Young black children, especially between the ages of 5-12, are often adultified, both in their homes and in the eyes of white America. The adultification of black children goes all the way back to the start of slavery, when enslaved children between the ages of 8-12 had to both take care of the younger children between the ages of 2-7, acting as a parental figure, and complete their own labor tasks.²⁴ This practice can still be seen today in some low-income black households where older children have to take care of the younger children and complete other household jobs due to the lack of money that can be spared for expenses such as daycare, babysitters, and nannies.

It is not just within households, however, that this adultification takes place, but also in schools. From a young age, young black children are often viewed with the expectations of teenagers or adults. Black boys are scrutinized and disciplined without the labels of “child” or “boy” that their white counterparts are allowed, and black girls are viewed as older and more knowledgeable of topics perceived to be for adults. The Georgetown Law Center on Poverty and Inequality released a report in 2017 entitled, “Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girls’ Childhood,” in which they found that beginning at age 5, black girls were found to be thought of as needing less protection from sex and nurturing than white girls, which is disgusting and horrific seeing as most American children do not have a sexual education (or sex-ed) class or lesson until around 7th grade, or age 12. This hypersexualization of black girls often leads to them being dress coded at school the most, for outfits and clothing pieces their white counterparts could get away with. Black girls have to watch how they dress at school, otherwise they could get put out by their teacher for distracting the boys, and disrupting the class. This skewed perception of black children being older than they actually are affects the treatment of black boys in the classroom as well. Black boys are disciplined more because their misbehavior in the class is viewed as more severe. Often, when African-American males act out in class, their teacher begins to subconsciously view them as a threat and want them gone. These, and

²³ Wald, et al.

²⁴ Adekeye, Lara. 2019. “To Be a Child Without the Protections of Innocence: The Repercussions of the Adultification of Black Youth by School Teachers in the United States Education System.” *CAS: Political Science: Undergraduate Honors Theses*, (May), 59. <https://open.bu.edu/ds2/stream/?#/documents/325761/page/1>.

many more, biased views of black students contribute to disproportionate discipline and suspensions that black children face, which put them on the track toward the school-to-prison pipeline.²⁵

Conclusion

For far too long, schools have served as a cog in the system known as the school-to-prison pipeline. This system takes the discipline that African-American students face in a school setting and uses it to slowly withdraw them from school and into the juvenile or adult prison system. However, schools do not have to function this way. With effort and funding put in by governments, school boards, and administrators, school as we know it now can change from just a place of learning to a place where parents can receive the help they need to raise their children to be healthy, safe, and happy, and students can gain personal connections to their communities to help them develop further in life. This is where the idea of community schools comes in. Community schools are schools that not only educate children, but also offer support to parents and get students involved in the community in many different ways. With community schools, students are able to go to community clubs and buildings after school, to get meals from local soup kitchens, and to receive supplies they need from local stores.²⁶ Everyone in the community pitches in to take care of the school children anyway that they can, to give them a safe and healthy environment to flourish in.

However, this type of macro-response is not the only way to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. There are many ways that individual teachers can and should play a role in their own classrooms. African-American students are plagued with Euro-centric and exclusive classroom curriculum at school. Not only this, but students of color are also often faced with colorblind or out-right racist curriculum and classroom practices, making them feel isolated and unsafe. There are many things that teachers can do to address this issue, from learning about the origins of the activities and lessons they teach in the classroom, to screening and checking for one's own implicit bias that may disrupt the perception of black students. One idea and possible solution to fixing the exclusive curriculum, introduced by Ms. Pamela Harbin, a school board member of Pittsburgh Public Schools, is having a required black history course every student has to take before they graduate. Requiring classes that are explicitly non-Eurocentric is a step in the right direction for the American school system as a whole.

²⁵ Adekeye, Lara.

²⁶ Pamela Harbin (Pittsburgh Public School Board of Education Member), interview with author, February 10, 2021

Teachers can also intervene with another issue that troubles black students across the nation: disproportionate school discipline. Black students are singled out for disciplinary measures by their teachers more than any other demographic of students. Nationally, African-American students are suspended 3.9 times more likely than their white counterparts.²⁷ Even our own city of Pittsburgh faces this issue, with black students being suspended at a 3-to-1 rate compared to their non-black peers.²⁸ However, unlike many districts in the US, Pittsburgh has begun to deal with out-dated school discipline measures as a whole, with the Pittsburgh Public School Board getting rid of suspension for grades K through second. It can be assumed that black students, and many others would benefit if such a practice was put into place at every school in the country, though that will be difficult. While school boards move slowly to alter suspension and expulsion policies, teachers can continue to put in inclusive practices in the classroom, educate themselves in their own implicit biases, and advocate for their students that are facing the threat of suspension or expulsion. A teacher's primary role in a child's life, outside of being an educator, is to be a support system their students can come to for any of their troubles.

The American education system has served as a place of anguish and distress for black students for too long, and it is time for us to make a change. With civil rights activism such as the Black Lives Matter movement gaining attention, conversations about how America has failed the African-American community have arisen, but action still needs to be taken. The truth is that there is not one solution or change that is going to fix the problem, and nothing is going to change instantly, but with effort and aid from everyone involved, we can make school a safer, happier, and better place for the future generations of African-American children.

²⁷ Groeger, Lena V., Annie Waldman, and David Eads. 2018. "Miseducation." ProPublica. <https://projects.propublica.org/miseducation/>.

²⁸ Huguley, et al.