

The School To Prison Pipeline

By: Laci Hamilton

Several years ago I had the distinct pleasure of participating in an "Are Prisons Obsolete" workshop at the Macomb Correctional Facility in New Haven, Michigan. During a bathroom and refreshment break I had an insightful discussion with one of the professors that flew in from Ohio. Some of which I'd like to share here.

The professor, a twenty year veteran of the academy, shared with me an essay wrote by Pedro. A. Noguera, a professor of education at Harvard University, called "Schools, Prisons, and Social Implications of Punishment: Rethinking Disciplinary Practices." In it, Noguera begins by recounting how he was taken on a tour of an elementary school in northern California, by the school's assistant principal. The purpose of his visit was to learn more about the ways the school was implementing a grant designed to increase provisions of social services to students, most of whom came from low-income, economically depressed neighborhoods.

As the tour came to an end Noguera and the assistant principal passed by a boy in the hallway who was no more than nine years old. The assistant principal began shaking his head back and forth as if he was gesturing to say no. Then, pointing at the child, Noguera remembered the assistant principal turned to him and said, "do you see that boy? There is a prison cell in San Quentin waiting for him." Surprised by his observation, Noguera asked his guide how he was able to predict the future of such a young child. He replied, "Well, his father is in prison, he's got a brother and uncle there too. In fact, the whole family is nothing but trouble. I can see from how he behaves already that it's only a matter of time before he ends up there too."

Responding to the certainty with which he made those pronouncements, Noguera recalled asking, "Given what you know about him, what is the school doing to prevent him from going to prison?"

He remembered the assistant principal being surprised and flustered by the question. He also remembered the assistant principal saying that he did not believe it was the school's responsibility to keep the child from following a path that would lead to prison. In fact, the assistant principal went as far as to say he was preparing to put the child, nine years old, on an indefinite suspension.

Noguera asked exactly what any person of consciousness would have: did the principal think that such a plan would work for the child given the difficulty of the child's situation at home. I forgot to mention, the child was being raised by his elderly grandmother.

The assistant principal responded, as many people who have been conditioned to view schools detached from the community and family, by telling Noguera there was nothing more the school could do. Supposedly, children like the one who is subject of this story just can't be helped. They take up so much time and keep teachers from serving the needs of other children who are there to learn.

This story is indicative of the ways many schools handle the discipline of troubled students. Throughout the United States schools frequently punish students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs. Many of which are students with learning disabilities, students in foster care, of color, or are under some form of protective custody. In doing so, they contribute to the marginalization of such students, ignoring the issues that actually cause the problematic behavior. Often pushing these children out of school altogether.

I asked the visiting professor if when we returned to group discussion would she mind sharing this story? It was obvious there was a connection between many U.S. school's fixation with behavior management--the observation that a nine year old had prison in his future--and the Are Prisons Obsolete workshop.

As our conversation carried over to the group discussion, most of the people in attendance agreed that there is a growing correspondence between many schools, especially inner city schools, and prisons; and that the similarities are not an accident. Disciplinary practices in schools often bear a striking resemblance to the strategies used to punish adults in society. Not surprisingly, those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look--in terms of race, gender, and socio-economic status--a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society.

Typically schools rely on some form of exclusion or ostracism to control the behavior of students. The linking of the two institutions, often referred to as the school-to-prison-pipeline, is a by product of a deadly symbiosis between schools that are custodial in nature and prison.

Many schools located in so-called bad neighborhoods, have similarly deteriorated to the point where they operate in the manner of institutions of confinement whose primary mission is not to educate but to ensure custodial control. Like the prison system, schools are organized along class and ethnoracial lines. And like inmates, students are herded into decaying and overcrowded facilities built like bunkers, where undertrained and underpaid teachers strive to regulate conduct so as to maintain order and minimize violent incident.

There are millions of people of all walks of life that find a correspondence between school and prison disturbing because the accusation is almost conspiratorial, implicitly if not explicitly. Unfortunately, in many ways the school-to-prison-pipeline is far worse than any conspiracy. The tendency to punish the neediest children, especially those who are Black and Latino, occurs without conscious planning or deliberate orchestration.

For educators like the assistant principal who saw no other option but to indefinitely suspend a nine year old, it is simply the way things are done. Removal of the student was the only option even though he knows it will not

help the student and may, in fact, make matters worse.

Sound familiar? A judge sentencing someone to prison, even though the judge knows that incarcerating people for part or all of their lives will not help with the underlining problem, and may in fact make matters worse.

I left that workshop and returned to a prison cell, where I had been held since July 1994. I lay there that night almost in disbelief, my story was so similar to that of the nine year old boy. And the more I have gotten to know many of the men I've encountered during my years of incarceration, it is their story, too. The way the United States approaches crime, the assumption that safety and order can be achieved by removing so-called bad individuals and keeping them away from others who are presumed to be good and law abiding, is also how control in U.S. schools is approached.

Now this is the part where I'm suppose to give you all the answers. Sorry, but I don't have the answers. No one individual does. Sure, I can definitely suggest that what is needed is a recruitment of educators who will question the tendency to punish through exclusion and humiliation, and who see themselves as advocates of children and not as wardens and prison guards, but the solution is more complex than that.

Once students know that the rewards of education are available only to a fraction of a percent of them, students have little incentive to comply with rules, no matter what control measures are taken. Such students are more likely to be labeled defiant, maladjusted, and difficult to deal with; and they are more likely to internalize these labels and act out in ways that match the expectations that have been set for them.

As they get older, the rule violations often increase in frequency and severity, resulting in a steady escalation in the sanctions that are applied. For many the cycle of punishment eventually leads to entanglement with law enforcement and the criminal justice system. This is why walking into many schools is like walking into a prison, metal detectors, surveillance cameras,

and armed guards to boot. Which is why the assistant principal's predictions about the future of the misbehaving youngster in his charge is disturbingly prophetic.

Perhaps solutions derive from the premise that many U.S. students are right i.e., "schools aren't talking about nothing?" Many students understand that their education cannot even lead them to the factories or other middle class jobs that have been taken from their parents; and they deliberately engage in behavior that will ensure their educational failure.

Many students realize that school does not address their most immediate problems. So, for example, for students growing up in the want and misery of many urban and inner city areas, school does not teach them how to make their families whole again, how to get drugs out of the neighborhood, how to stop police from brutalizing and murdering them, how to hold a derelict political structure accountable, or change it, self-determination, or how to create in their image and best interests.

Perhaps we have to re-think more than the educational experience, and re-think the social contract that underlies schooling? The unwillingness of educators to turn their attention to the immediate needs of students causes them to embrace the mistaken belief that we can teach students how to think without troubling them to learn anything worth thinking about; the belief that we can teach them how to understand the world in which they live without conveying to them the events and ideas that have brought it into existence. Re-thinking disciplinary measures that marginalize, isolate and punish students is just a prelude to repairing, restoring and revolutionizing their lives.

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