

Jennifer Luna
Professor Anderson
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Research Paper

Students of color in our school system continue to face injustices that hinder them from obtaining the level of education they deserve. The format of the school system makes it so that students of color are disproportionately overrepresented in special education as a mechanism to keep them excluded from the general population. Apart from pushing them out of general education, practices are being used to force students of color out of the school system altogether. The system behind this is known as the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is a system of various tactics used to push students of color out of our schools and leads them down a path into the criminal system. Some of the tactics used to force students of color out of schools are harsh disciplinary practices, the treatment of children as adults, implicit bias, a lack of cultural competence, a lack of culturally responsive curriculum, and a lack of professional training for school staff. These factors play an essential role in the overrepresentation of students of color in the criminal system and special education. To ensure students of color are provided with the education they deserve regardless of race or disability, schools need to dismantle the harmful practices.

Since the start of harsh disciplinary actions within our schools, children as young as preschoolers have encountered severe consequences that force them into suspension or expulsion. Unfortunately, a large percentage of these children who have found themselves on the receiving end of those consequences happen to be children of color. In their 2017 article, Brianna L. Kennedy, Melanie M. Acosta, & Olivia Soutullo explain how using exclusionary discipline leads to an abundance of students of color forced into alternative schools. They also provided the experiences of nine middle school students during their transition from alternative schools back into comprehensive schools. Overwhelmingly, eight of them were students of color, and their testimonies expressed how the school system and the lack of empathy from the school staff made them feel as if they don't deserve to return to their regular schools. According to Kennedy et al. (2017), "Students of color are disciplined over three times more frequently than White students, and primarily for behaviors such as 'willful defiance,' which educators judge subjectively" (Kennedy et al., 2017, pg. 130). Students of color are the ones experiencing the harsh disciplinary actions put in place in schools. Even if the behavior they took part in was not a serious offense, their teachers are jumping the gun and enforcing harsher punishments. These students are being suspended, expelled, and are sent to schools specifically known to house 'troubled students. On the other hand, White students who may demonstrate the same behavioral issues are not reprimanded to the same extent as their peers of color. Harsh disciplinary practices also have a hand in the overrepresentation of students of color being placed in special education. According to Kennedy et al. (2017), "The master narrative legitimates the school removal of any student whose behavior challenges teachers, and teachers promote and enforce majoritarian expectations when they use punitive discipline in response to being challenged" (Kennedy et al, 2017, pg. 134). Once educators become fed up with the students' 'abnormal behavior' and disobedience, those students are labeled as having behavioral issues making them eligible for special education. Predominantly, the students given those labels are students of color and are segregated from general education classes and confined to the four walls of a special education classroom. Being

separated from the general population makes it difficult for these students to become fit to reintegrate back in with their peers. This notion is like the amount of people of color who have been placed in prison and have a difficult time rejoining society, often are sent back because prison becomes all they know.

From an early age, children of color are forced into the role of adults. The severe consequences they receive resembles the punishments given to adults. Children of color are pushed out of their childhood innocence and are faced with the harsh realities adults of color are faced with every day. In his 2003 article, Pedro A. Noguera examines why minorities, such as Black and Latino males are being suspended, expelled, or removed from their classrooms due to behavior. He explains how often the children who need the most help academically, emotionally, socially, and financially are punished and treated like adults instead of like children. According to Noguera (2003), "Consistent with the way we approach crime in society, the assumption is that safety and order can be achieved by removing "bad" individuals and keeping them away from others who are presumed to be "good" and law abiding. Not surprisingly, those most frequently targeted for punishment in school often look—in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status—a lot like smaller versions of the adults who are most likely to be targeted for incarceration in society" (Noguera, 2003, pg. 343). Adults who have fallen into the criminal system and children in the school system all happen to be individuals who share similar cultural beliefs. Just like criminals who break the laws are placed in prison, students of color are punished and removed from the classrooms because they believe they are disruptive and have difficult behavior. By removing those students, educators believe it will help them provide a better environment for the students who they feel behave and focus. In their 2017 article, Kennedy et al. discuss how the adultification of young children of color plays a huge factor in the way they are disciplined in schools. According to Kennedy et al. (2017), "In situations where they receive disciplinary sanctions, Black children are often treated as though they are at least four and a half years older than they actually are... When educators adultify students who have violated school rules, educators no longer see students as innocent adolescents who have behaved impulsively. Instead, educators dehumanize these students by viewing students' behaviors as criminal violations rather than as developmentally appropriate missteps" (Kennedy et al., 2017, pg. 133). Even if a student of color is a small child in the eyes of their educators, they are more mature than peers. This point of view is hurtful because it can bring the educator to take inappropriate actions when correcting behavior. Even if the child breaks a small rule in the eyes of their teacher, it's a huge offense and therefore it's dealt with as they would an older child or adult. Being under that constant pressure can be overwhelming for children of color. Unlike their White peers, they have no room for mistakes and must walk on eggshells while they are at school.

Another contributing factor to the way educators punish students of color is implicit bias. Implicit bias can be stereotypes, thoughts, beliefs, or attitude that affects the way we treat a person or a group of people. Having specific biases in mind when addressing certain children can hinder educators from getting to know their students and what their needs are. In their 2020 article, Clayback & Hemmeter conducted a study about suspensions and expulsions in early childhood settings specifically in Pennsylvania. The study provided prevention solutions to prevent harsh disciplinary actions in school settings based on the answers provided by the center teachers and directors. According to Clayback & Hemmeter (2020), "Though suspensions and expulsions are generally used in response to a child's behavior, the decision to utilize exclusionary discipline practices in early childhood centers is ultimately an adult decision made by child care administrators and teacher. This adult decision is likely shaped by director and teacher background

and perception, including implicit biases” (Clayback & Hemmeter, 2020, pg. 130). When it comes down to it, teachers have a say in the punishments students of color receive. If the teacher already has preconceived negative thoughts about a child due to their race or disability, they would not waste time to ensure they get rid of that child, so they don’t have to deal with them. In their 2019 article, Garro et al. discuss how to use a consultation approach to help reduce implicit bias in early childhood education. According to Garro et al. (2019), “Teachers, classroom aides, and even administrators develop implicit attitudes and stereotypes as a routine process to help categorize and sort the vast amounts of sensory information they encounter on an ongoing basis... implicit bias often develops from overgeneralized associations which come from limited or unique experiences or exposure to particular groups” (Garro et al., 2019, pg. 125). Even if an educator has had limited interactions with students of color, they may already have prejudice towards them because of stereotypes they may have heard before. Teachers closely watch students of color especially males due to the general stereotype of them being troublemakers. Any little move they make can lead to their removal from school.

These biases can hinder children’s development. One common stereotype is that the way students of color speak indicates they have a speech delay or disability which needs to be helped with the placement of a special education classroom. This kind of ignorance can have a detrimental effect on a child’s cognitive development as they will be placed in an environment that isn’t stimulating and lacks their needs. The child’s social development would be affected due to the lack of interactions with their peers in general education. Implicit biases affect a child’s emotions because the biases can lead to internalized racism. Internalized racism is the acceptance of society’s racist views and stereotypes about you or your ethnic group. Giving into negative views placed on you or your people can cause low self-esteem, lack of pride, lack of motivation, and can make children not want to continue their education because they feel like no one believes in them including themselves. In the same way, implicit bias contributes to the school-to-prison pipeline and the placement of minority students in special education, the lack of cultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogies add on to the injustices these students face.

Being raised in an environment that accepts other’s differences especially when it comes to different cultures. One great way the school-to-prison pipeline continues to be in effect is due to the lack of cultural competence and culturally responsive pedagogy. Teachers should take it upon themselves to learn about the cultural backgrounds of their students and applying the information to their curriculum. When teachers have a preconceived bias about students of color it will make them not want to give them their all; they won’t teach them to the best of their ability and if they don’t want them in their classrooms, they will find a way to have the children placed in special education or force them out of the school system and into the prison system just so they don’t have to deal with them. In their 2008 article, Cartledge et al. discuss why students from diverse cultures are extremely overrepresented in special education and explain why it is essential for teachers to gain cultural competence to provide them with a well-deserved education. According to Cartledge et al. (2008), “Culturally competent teachers not only take the time to learn about the culture of their students but also learn about themselves. They come to recognize their personal biases, that their worldview is not universal, and that their cultural norms are not absolute” (Cartledge, 2008, pg. 31). Teachers need to learn about the cultures they encounter every day. Learning the different aspects of their students’ cultures will help them not give in to their biases. It can help erase the master narrative that White people are more superior than people of color if it’s incorporated into the curriculum. Providing students with a culturally responsive curriculum can help develop their social and cognitive domains. When students begin to learn about their

cultures, they will want to share things like traditions, language, and music with each other. It will make them open to learning from their peers and will help them learn to have racial pride in who they are and will help them develop a strong sense of self.

Learning about the injustices within the school system makes me want to make sure I'll be the best teacher for my future students. Everyone has biases even if it's not about specific people. As a future teacher, I will be educating myself about my students' cultural backgrounds to prevent any biases from being displayed. Some ways I would educate myself would be to ask the students' families questions about them. Not only will I learn about various cultures, but it will help me forge a relationship with the families. In their 2020 article, Amanda L. Tamagni & Andrea M. Wilson investigated how various types of school disciplinary actions affect the social skills of preschoolers in special education. According to Tamagni & Wilson (2020), "Research in K-12 environments suggests that there are several contributing factors to disproportionality in exclusionary discipline practices. These factors include poor school climate, a lack of teacher and administrator training regarding bias and perception, a lack of funding for programs, and biased implementation of discipline policies" (Tamagni & Wilson, 2020, pg. 43). We need to provide educators with training to teach them about how to accept different cultures. Professional development training would be used to learn the appropriate way to handle any kind of situation thrown my way. With the knowledge I gain, I will find ways to incorporate it into the curriculum. Teaching my students about different cultures will teach them to love what makes them unique and teach them to accept the differences they see in each other. As an educator, I'm committed to always keep my students curious and answer any questions they may have, no matter how difficult it may be. To prevent the continuation of the school-to-prison pipeline, I will always encourage my students so that they don't feel like they can't accomplish anything. I want my students especially those of color to know that they are superior and can achieve success with work hard. When it comes to placing a student in special education, I promise to work with the counselors to meet my students' needs. If a student isn't behaving, I will take a moment to breathe and assess the situation instead of resorting to kicking them of my general education classroom. Most importantly, I just want to be an advocate and make sure I can be a voice for my students' best interests.

In a world that is already filled with so much hatred and injustice, our schools should be a neutral place. It should be a safe and accepting and nurturing environment where all our students feel welcomed. We need to do better for students. Starting from an early age, we need to encourage and uplift them. Educators go to school so they can teach children and not force them out into the criminal system. We need to stop the school-to-prison pipeline and focus on teaching our students of color like we do White students. When it comes to special education, the system needs to stop placing students of color that don't belong there. Special education is supposed to be a tool that is used to meet the needs of students with disabilities. It shouldn't be used to segregate students of color from the general population. I think special education educators should collaborate with general education educators to successfully meet students' needs and to ensure inclusivity takes place. By making changes to include a culturally responsive curriculum, providing teachers with training to develop cultural competence and ways to deal with students' behaviors, our schools can become a place where our students are safe, can focus on learning, and not worry about being treated unjustly.

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