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Implicit Bias and the School to Prison Pipeline

by Thomas Morris

(English 1102)

One afternoon, while walking from my downtown Chicago office building to the train station, a somewhat disheveled man approached me from across the street. “Excuse me, sir!” he shouted as he got closer. “Could you please help me get something to eat?” “Sure,” I replied. As I was handing him some change, I said to him, “You look awfully familiar to me!” After talking for a few minutes, we discovered that we were in fact high school classmates. I remembered him as a shy, quiet and somewhat awkward kid, never really having very much to say. I also remembered that in the middle of our sophomore year, all of a sudden, he was gone. I figured he’d moved and transferred to a different school. During our talk, he began to share the reason for his sudden disappearance. He explained that the school’s administration had him expelled and arrested for fighting. He ended up being convicted and sent to a juvenile detention center in Lake County. He went on to explain how after his release, his only option for finishing high school was an alternative school for boys with disciplinary challenges. He shared in vivid detail the horrors of that experience. In his words, “...that one fight put me on a downward spiral, from which I’ve never recovered.” I was struck by his story. I was pained by the fact that something like this could happen to someone so easily! When tasked with choosing a topic for this research essay, his story immediately came to mind. So, the focus of this essay will be to show that within the American educational system, African American male students are disproportionately represented in the number of cases where disciplinary practices are deemed necessary, thereby exacerbating the phenomenon known as the School to Prison Pipeline.

The School to Prison Pipeline is not an isolated social anomaly. A close examination of contributing (historical) factors would uncover an all-too-common theme. In a broad sense, it is the manifestation of a much deeper issue, an issue that has been woven into the very fabric of the American social construct. It’s another chapter in a very telling saga chronicling the history of America’s acrimonious relationship with her black and brown citizens. In order to fully understand this, a much wider look at the historical factors that have contributed to the shaping of America’s default perspectives on issues dealing with race is needed.

The biases around race that we see today have their origins in early American history. These dark and ugly manifestations are part of the residue left over from a time in history when the American paradigm on race carried with it the notion that people of African descent were considered property, items to be bought and sold by their owners (Alexander 17-18). Despite all of the social progress made over the years, the horrific legacy of racial bias still persists.

In 1903 (some 40 years after emancipation), noted sociologist and historian Dr. W.E.B. DuBois, Ph.D., put forth a premise that has relevance even for today. In his incomparable work *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, Dr. DuBois provides a finely-focused lens through which the African American experience in American society can be viewed. Addressing the issue of racial bias, Dr. DuBois poignantly and prophetically posits, “...for the problem of the Twentieth Century, is the problem of the color line” (vii). Now, even though more than a century has passed since the original penning of that statement, a compelling argument in favor of its pertinence can still be made. Even the most cursory of examinations would uncover evidence showing how implicit, race-based biases pervade some of America’s most important social institutions – housing, (un)employment, education, criminal justice – just to name a few. For the purposes of this essay, the focus will be its

impact on what are considered to be two of American society's most critical institutions – education and criminal justice (government).

Modern sociology suggests, crucial to the efforts of achieving and maintaining societal stability is the strength of its institutions' inter-twining relationships (Kendall 105). The relationship between education and government has evolved over the years. Studies have shown this evolution to have had a disproportionately negative impact on communities of color, specifically, that of African Americans (Rodríguez 828).

In taking a look at school disciplinary practices from the past, it was observed that student behavioral issues requiring discipline were, by and large, handled internally. According to an article in the *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, research has uncovered that from as early as the 1800's, up through the latter part of the 20th century, schools would sometimes implement corporal methods of discipline as a means to manage student behavior. Over this same time period, the number of students attending school grew substantially, rendering these methods ineffective. As a result, students requiring disciplinary actions were either suspended or outright expelled from the school. Inevitably, these methods also proved to be problematic, as issues around due-process began to surface. The article continues to point out that beginning in the 1960's, up through the late 1980's, schools incorporated in-house suspensions as a means of mitigating disruptive classroom behavior. This practice involved isolating the offending student(s) by having them removed from the classroom, but allowing them to remain in school so as to not lose valuable instruction time (Mallett 10-18). The data seems to support this approach as being somewhat productive; however, as the student population continued to increase, issues around resource allocation – such as classroom space and availability – started to become more prevalent.

In a research paper submitted to the American Sociological Association titled “Institutional Racism and the School-To-Prison Pipeline,” Professor Madeleine Cousineau puts forth that the 1990's brought with it a shift in school disciplinary practices. The crack-down on crime in schools coincided with the implementation of federal and state laws that focused on curbing the rising number of gang and drug-related crimes (1-6). As societal views on crime and violence began to harden, school disciplinary policies followed suit and gradually moved from a restorative approach to a more punitive one. Professor Cousineau goes on to say that while lawmakers were busy implementing new “tough on crime” legislation, school districts across the country were in constant pursuit of new ways to effectively address what was perceived as the growing issue of crime and violence inside the schools (7-11). The result was the wholesale adoption of a new and controversial disciplinary practice called Zero Tolerance.

Referring again to an aforementioned article in the *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, author Christopher Mallett provides important information on the origins of the phrase “Zero Tolerance.” According to Mallett, the phrase came on the scene in the early/mid 1980's during the Regan Administration's highly publicized war on drugs. It was used to describe the enforcement of ultra-strict, non-forgiving policies aimed at addressing the nation's growing drug problem. By the late 1980's - early 1990's, school districts in various parts of the country had decided to mimic the actions of the government by adopting and implementing their own version of zero tolerance. This was done in order to address what school administrations referred to as “intolerable” behavior (14-20). By the mid 1990's, zero tolerance had become the default disciplinary philosophy for school districts all across the country. As a result, the school districts experienced an exponential increase in the overall number of suspensions and expulsions (Cousineau 20).

Today, in conjunction with local law enforcement agencies stationing police and private security personnel inside the actual school facility to serve in the role of “School Resource Officer” (SRO), school administrations continue to implement zero tolerance procedures and practices as a means of control in an attempt to manage student behaviors inside the classroom, as well as on the school grounds. If either the faculty or administration considers a student to be in violation of school

policy, or if the student is generally considered a “problem”, the SRO could be called in to remove the student. Depending upon the committed offense, the student could be subjected to disciplinary actions ranging anywhere from suspension, up to and including incarceration (McClellan 5-7).

Notwithstanding its originally stated intent – which was to improve school safety– Zero Tolerance as practiced by the U.S. educational system has resulted in a number of consequences, largely unintended. These unintended consequences have given sufficient rise to some very legitimate questions around its efficacy. More importantly, there is an abundance of research providing evidence of implicit bias when determining how and against whom zero tolerance policies are enacted. Stetson University Law Professor Judith A.M. Scully provides the following analysis in her research on this topic:

The unequal use of zero tolerance policies can easily be attributed to conscious and/or unconscious racial bias. Teachers, administrators, and other school personnel who are prone to embracing stereotypes of Black children as unruly, out of-control, or dangerous “may react more quickly to relatively minor threats to authority.” In addition, administrators and other authority figures who stereotype children of color as being “beyond help” may rationalize that it is appropriate to dispose of Black and Brown children by pushing them out of schools, eventually leading to their detention. The rationale following this stereotype is simple—if a child is beyond help, why should the teacher care whether the child is in or out of school? And it is not a huge leap to imagine that, if the child is deemed to be “beyond help,” they are also probably deemed to be dangerous, and therefore the rationalizer believes that locking the child up will ensure public safety (975).

In an article written by University of Florida Associate Law Professor Dr. Jason P. Nance, a clear and concise explanation is given to describe how overly- harsh disciplinary practices – such as those brought about by the implementation of Zero Tolerance policies – can have a profoundly negative effect on the overall educational success of the student. When examining the impact on schools that were primarily comprised of students of color, Dr. Nance points out a number of very disconcerting facts:

It is also important to emphasize that over-disciplining students often does not create a more orderly environment conducive to learning. While removing a disruptive student from the classroom or school may temporarily improve the learning climate, empirical evidence demonstrates that over-disciplining students and creating a punitive environment often alienates students, generates mistrust, and impedes the learning environment even more. In fact, punitive environments often lead to additional violence and disorder and lower academic achievement for all students. (14)

According to recent research, the nationwide population of African American and Latino students (K-12) is slightly below twenty percent. However, this same demographic comprises twenty-seven percent of the students that have been referred to law enforcement for discipline and thirty-one percent of the students who have experienced school-based arrests (Nance 1066). While there has been no credible evidence found in support of any supposition suggesting that African American and Latino school-age children are more prone to commit punishable offenses, they are, however, six times more likely to face disciplinary actions than their non-minority counterparts. These statistics seem to point out an obvious and disturbing pattern. Black and brown (primarily male) students are far more frequently exposed to severe disciplinary practices. They also tend

experience the effects of Zero Tolerance far more than any other racial group (Rodríguez 813). The question now becomes, “Why?” An objective analysis of the data uncovered during this research would strongly support “Implicit Bias” as one of several influential and contributing factors (Nance 1067).

As was pointed out earlier, implicit, race-based biases are built into the American sociological construct. These ingrained beliefs are embedded in the psyche and often work without specific intention. This is the primary point made by the adroit analysis offered by Dr. Jason P. Nance when discussing the inner working of implicit bias:

Implicit biases, on the other hand, are behavioral propensities that result from implicit attitudes and stereotypes. They originate from the deep influence of the immediate environment and the broader culture on internalized preferences and beliefs. They function independently of an individual’s awareness of having these attitudes and stereotypes. Rather, implicit biases function automatically, including in manners that might be consistent with a person’s explicit set of personal values if that person were consciously aware of those biases. This is because implicit biases operate in an alternative cognitive processing system, often termed “System One,” that is quick, contextualized, automatic, associative, independent of cognitive ability, and operating mostly outside of our conscious awareness (365).

In addition to Dr. Nance’s work, a group of sociologists and psychologists from around the world collaborated on a research project that focused on examining the long term effects of “unstated and unexamined” racialized biases. The group was called “The Discipline Disparities Collaborative.” The group was led by Dr. Prudence Carter. The results of the research were shared in an article written for a publication called *Urban Education*. In it, the group provides some very valuable insights on the pervasiveness of implicit bias in school environments comprised primarily of African American and Latino children:

Today, brains still “hold” old biases and preferences for various groups (positive or negative); such associations are mostly involuntary. These biases do not necessarily lead to explicitly biased decisions or behaviors in schools, but they can certainly undergird discriminatory behaviors—especially when such biases remain unstated and unexamined. In the school discipline realm, some research suggests that White and Black students may receive differential treatment in terms of opportunities to participate in learning settings, or different teacher reactions to misbehavior of students of color for the same or similar behavior. (4)

This was an attempt at an unbiased examination of the data. I couldn’t, however, escape feeling a sense of fear and heaviness as each statistic was uncovered. Given the considerable amount of influence implicit bias has when disciplinary practices within the school system are carried out, it is fairly easy to recognize the role it plays in the perpetuation of a very destructive narrative. Experts agree on the grim narrative: starting as early as elementary school, the treatment of black and brown children is vastly different from other groups. By the time a black male enters high school, he is six times more likely to be labeled as a disciplinary problem than a white male of the same age. He is three times more likely to have been arrested or have had some kind of serious involvement with the criminal justice system; nearly four times more likely to be suspended; three times more likely to drop out of school (Cousineau, Mallett). These statistics are absolutely staggering! After many hours of mining through the data, a sobering fact dawned on me: How does one get an accurate measurement of the dreadful toll this must take on the lives of those who have been directly affected,

those who have been the victims of this brutal and unfair process? How would someone rebound and pick up the pieces? Where would they go for help? I reflect back on my conversation with my friend from high school. The despair with which he spoke was palpable.

The prism through which America views the African American male is flawed. This is a daunting reality with which I grapple and work to change. As a father to an absolutely brilliant black boy, full of promise and hope, my life's primary objective is to continue the grueling work of making sure he will never have to face such obstacles. Despite all of America's greatness, still so many of our children are being redirected from the classroom to the jail cell. This is an untenable proposition. I do not have the luxury of idly sitting. I will continue the work of dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline. This assignment has been an illumination. So, it is with a reasonable amount of certainty one can surmise that this research essay is suggesting strong support for the following conclusion: The extent to which any effort toward dismantling the School to Prison Pipeline is effective, efforts toward addressing the issue of implicit bias must be commensurate. It is imperative that the stakeholders recognize the severity of this problem; and also, recognize their role in its solution.

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