

Using Creative Writing and Literacy to Dismantle the School to Prison Pipeline

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The school-to-prison pipeline is a national issue where juveniles are being funneled out of the public school system into the juvenile justice system (Youth Incarceration, n.d., pg 1). This has been an increasing problem in the United States since schools adopted the zero-tolerance policy in the 1990s following school shootings and violent outbreaks. Zero tolerance states that if a student breaks school rules, such as bringing a weapon to school, disruptive behavior, or bringing drugs and alcohol to school, that student will receive a harsh punishment regardless of previous history or circumstances surrounding the behavior (Gjelten, n.d., pg 1). Following the adoption of the zero-tolerance policies in schools, the rate of expulsions and suspensions have drastically increased which has also led to a higher number of juveniles being placed into the correctional system. Once these students enter the correctional system, the chances of them escaping the system decreases, and their chances of recidivism, reoffense of a crime, increase. Government intervention is necessary to dismantle the school to prison pipeline because the government, at both state and federal level, are responsible for creating laws that will be enforced in our school districts. The government is responsible for enforcing the zero-tolerance policies in the school system and needs to use its power to help remove it from the schools and create interventions that will allow students to express themselves. It is important that we look into ways to solve this issue because if not the number of youth who will enter the correctional system will only continue to increase. In this paper, I will discuss the scope of the school to prison pipeline and also make recommendations for policy changes. I also will suggest a course of action to solve this issue that will have a lasting and measurable impact.

What started as a way to help limit the number of school shootings and violent outbreaks, evolved into students being punished for smaller infractions such as cutting in line or speaking out against mistreatment. When government officials passed zero tolerance laws in the 1990s, they did not anticipate the amount of damage that would occur, but once more students started to be arrested and pushed into the prison system they also did not retract this policy. Minority groups, specifically Hispanic and African-American students, are three and a half times more likely to be victimized as part of the school to prison pipeline than their Caucasian counterparts (The School To Prison Pipeline, 2019, pg 1). Not only are they more likely to be convicted of crimes, the crimes they are likely to be convicted on subjective measures than their caucasian classmates. Minority students are more likely to receive charges related to school disturbances like food fights, excessive noise, and disobeying a teacher, whereas caucasian students are more likely to be charged with concrete instances such as skipping school or smoking (The School To Prison Pipeline, 2019, pg 1). Students who are classified as being at-risk, meaning they have a higher potential to drop out and are not experiencing success in school, are more likely to be criminalized by the school to prison pipeline (Partnership, 2013, pg 1). To be specific, these students may experience poverty, maltreatment at school and home, or who are classified as having a disability (Mallet, 2016, pg 5-6). The number of students being pushed into the system with a disability is one of the fastest-growing groups, with these students making up approximately 32% of the youth currently being held in juvenile detention centers (Elias, 2013, pg 1). The demographics of the students being affected by the school-to-prison pipeline is not the only alarming factor. As zero-tolerance is adopted into more schools across the country, the age of students being arrested is becoming increasingly younger. More than 250,000 young children,

many of who are not yet teenagers, are arrested and charged in adult courts, which in return results in adult charges (Youth Incarceration, n.d., pg 1). Current efforts have been made to help dismantle the school to prison pipeline. States like Illinois, New York, and Ohio have started to implement more community-based alternatives to replace state-run programs (Youth Incarceration, n.d., pg 1).

Several policies have been made to try to dismantle the school to prison. School officials and advocates have suggested that we implement creative writing in schools, better train teachers, and try to remove zero tolerance from schools. The main argument for zero-tolerance policies in the schools though is that if we do not crackdown on the behaviors that are causing a disruption in schools, students will start to believe they can get away with all bad or unwanted behaviors. Some schools also report that once they started implementing zero policy into their schools, crime and suspension rates went down. While this might be the case for some schools, more often than not though schools rates go up instead of down and more students report negative emotional health and graduation rates also decrease (Holloway, 2002, pg 1). Schools also say that creative writing is not able to be done in the classrooms because of the way standards are written and that it will not be beneficial to students, but Laura Bean, the executive director of Mindful Literacy disagrees with this statement and says that she has been able to find numerous ways to implement creative writing in her classroom as well as in others. She also states that creative writing helps children heal from trauma and helps them begin to trust that the classroom is a safe place to share and come to (Bean, 2018, pg 1). One policy recommendation that I feel would help start the dismantling process includes making literacy and creative writing an important part of student's lives, especially at school. Roughly 85% of juveniles who are

being held in a correctional facility are functionally illiterate and research also shows that by them being locked up they are more likely to continue to struggle with basic reading skills (Lexia, 2019, pg 1). By implementing creative writing programs into schools, especially schools that are considered to have a higher amount of at-risk students, students will be given the opportunity to be able to express themselves. This form of self-expression can help students work through years of built-up trauma and potentially lead to a decrease in disruptive behaviors that result in them being arrested or charged. Not only does creative writing help students work through how they're feeling, but it also allows them to become more compassionate and understanding people. They will be able to work through not only what they are going through, but also help others who are going through similar situations. Students who receive creative instruction are also more likely to be involved in school activities and organizations, which makes them more connected to the school. By being more connected to the school they are considered less likely to commit acts that will disrupt the school environment, meaning that they will be less likely to be charged with infractions related to school disruption (Strauss, 2018, pg 1-2). One successful program that has been used so far for students is the Prison Writing Program and Writers in Schools. These programs are primarily being used in secondary schools and correctional facilities, but as younger students are being charged these programs are starting to be introduced into elementary schools. These programs encourage self-expression in students, school engagement, and also an increase in literacy rates (Strauss, 2018, pg 1-2). We also need to make sure that we are educating youth who are already incarcerated about how the juvenile and adult systems work because this will allow them to understand not just their charges, but what their rights are and how to become advocates for themselves (Chang, 2019, pg 1). Although

some states have made moves towards decreasing the number of students being charged per year, many people are against programs like these. Unfortunately, though, there are people who are in support of the juvenile justice system and are not in support of the implementation of literacy and creative writing programs in schools. Many people, some who also admit they are not educated on how the juvenile justice system works, say that the system needs to be in place to ensure the youth being charged are able to be readmitted as law-abiding citizens to society. Fifty-six percent of American citizens also report that they feel like a youth who commits crimes needs to be punished in order to show them they can not commit these crimes without punishment (Chang, 2019, pg 1). Some people also feel like implementing creative writing is frivolous and does not serve a purpose in our schools and in the education of our youth (Strauss, 2018, pg 1). Something that needs to be considered when creating policy changes is that we need to think of the best interest of the students. Too often we do not take students' needs in mind when we are making changes that will directly affect them. We also need to make sure that we understand that this system is something that has been rooted in schools for more than thirty years and it is not something that will happen overnight.

To follow up on the progress that is being made, the administration and those involved in the juvenile justice system, such as school resource officers and judges, need to keep track of the number of students being charged per year. They also need to keep track of how many of those students are recidivists. Specific ways that I feel like would be impactful would be to also select students who are considered at-risk or who are already involved with the juvenile justice system and have them participate in literacy and creative writing programs to compare their crime rate to students who are not involved in these programs. There also is not a clear-cut decision of who

should be involved in tracking the data and the progress of the students. This issue arises because the correctional systems and schools are not working together with the government to create new programs and keep track of how students are doing. Ultimately, we can not forget about the policies put into place to help dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. If we allow for these policies to be forgotten and are not being held accountable, we will start to see students slip through the cracks again and a return to higher recidivism and arrest rates. Policies that impact the schools can not be ignored once we see progress because if they were to go away the same people who created the rules that allow us to get to this point will be back in charge and we will once again be putting our students at risk of losing their future. Ultimate success, like mentioned earlier, would be that no students would be charged for crimes that are only considered subjective and cause no true harm, but a more realistic success would be to see much lower recidivism rates and see more schools across the country adopt creative writing and literacy programs. Success also would look like more schools taking the initiative to properly train their teachers on how to deal with unwanted behaviors in the classroom and helping them gain the confidence to do this.

In conclusion, the school to prison pipeline is something that was created out of fear that if nothing was done, school violence would greatly escalate. What began as a way to curb violence ultimately had led to higher arrest rates among our youth. There are ways to help dismantle the school to prison pipeline but as a country, we need to be willing to accept we have taken these measures to the extreme and be willing to put in the hard work that it will take to help with the rehabilitation process for these students. If we push our government and school

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officials to make changes and make creative writing a standard part of a child's education, we can help our youth succeed and make school a safe place for them.

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