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Schools, Prisons, and Social Implications of Punishment: Rethinking Disciplinary Practices

Throughout the United States, schools most frequently punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs. An examination of which students are most likely to be suspended, expelled, or removed from the classroom for punishment, reveals that minorities (especially Blacks and Latinos), males, and low achievers are vastly overrepresented. The enactment of zero tolerance policies related to discipline in school districts has contributed to a significant increase in the number of children who are being suspended and expelled from school. This article explains why this has occurred and puts forward an alternative approach to discipline that is aligned with the educational mission of schools.

NOT LONG AGO, I was taken on a tour of an elementary school in northern California by an assistant principal. The purpose of my visit was to learn more about the ways this school was implementing a grant designed to increase the provision of social services to students, most of whom came from a low-income, economically depressed neighborhood. As we came to the end of the tour and walked toward the main office, the assistant

principal shook his head and pointed out a boy, no more than 8 or 9 years old, who was standing outside the door to his office. Gesturing to the child, the assistant principal said to me "Do you see that boy? There's a prison cell in San Quentin waiting for him." Surprised by his observation, I asked him 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 an 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 these pronouncements, I asked "Given what you know about him, what is the school doing to prevent him from going to prison?"

I could tell by his flustered response that the assistant principal was surprised by my question. He did not think it was his responsibility to keep the child from following a path that would lead to prison. In fact, he informed me that he was preparing to put this child on an indefinite suspension from school. This was an extreme form of punishment used in a small number of cases for children with persistent behavior problems. It allowed the school to remove difficult children to be schooled at home while still collecting funds from the state for their average daily attendance. Under the plan, work would be sent home and, occasionally, a teacher or counselor would make visits to monitor

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the academic progress of the student. I asked if he thought that such a plan would work for this child given what he had said about the difficulty of his situation at home (the child was being raised by an elderly grandmother). He responded by telling me that there was nothing more the school could do. "Kids like him just can't be helped. They take up so much of my time and keep teachers from serving the needs of other children who are here to learn. It may not be the best thing for him, but right now, it's the best thing for the school."

I begin with this vignette because I believe that while it may seem extreme, it is indicative of the ways many schools handle the discipline of troubled students. Throughout the United States, schools most frequently punish the students who have the greatest academic, social, economic, and emotional needs (Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz, 2001). In most schools and districts, an examination of which students are most likely to be suspended, expelled, or removed from the classroom for punishment, reveals that minorities (especially Blacks and Latinos), males, and low achievers generally, are vastly over-represented (Meier, Stewart, & England, 1989). An even closer examination of disciplinary practices reveals that a disproportionate number of the students who receive the most severe punishments are students with learning disabilities, students in foster care or under some form of protective custody, and students who are homeless or on free or reduced-price lunch (Skiba, 2000a).

Often, it is the needs of students and the inability of schools to meet those needs that causes them to be disciplined. Children who are behind academically and who are unable to perform at a level commensurate with grade-level expectations, often engage in disruptive behavior, either out of frustration or embarrassment (Hirschi, 1969). Likewise, children who suffer from abuse or neglect, and children who are harassed by their peers because they are different, are sometimes more likely to act out and get into trouble (Singer, 1996). Too often, schools react to the behavior of such children while failing to respond to their unmet needs or the factors responsible for their problematic behavior. In so doing, they contribute to the marginalization of such students, often pushing them out of school altogether, while ignoring the

issues that actually cause the problematic behavior. Schools also punish the neediest children because in many schools there is a fixation with behavior management and social control that outweighs and overrides all other priorities and goals.

Understanding why many schools have a preoccupation with control is essential to understanding why it is that certain children are more likely than others to be targeted for punishment. This is the central focus of this article, and such a focus is particularly pertinent because available evidence suggests that the adoption of zero tolerance policies related to discipline and order by school districts across the United States has contributed to a significant increase in the number of children who are being suspended and expelled from school (Skiba, 2000b).

What is it about the way schools throughout the United States operate—without any apparent orchestration or uniform code—that results in the consistency of these patterns, and their recent acceleration? And why is it that the drive for order and safety has resulted in the neediest and most disadvantaged students being the ones most likely to be punished?

By attempting to answer these questions and analyzing some of the factors that influence the approach schools take toward maintaining order and control over students, I hope to make the case that alternative methods for producing safe and orderly environments are possible.

Social Control and the Social Contract of Schooling

Disciplinary practices in schools often bear a striking similarity to the strategies used to punish adults in society. Typically, schools rely on some form of exclusion or ostracism to control the behavior of students. Chastising a child who has misbehaved or broken a rule with a reprimand, or placing a child in the back of the room or out in the hallway for minor offenses, are common disciplinary practices. For more serious infractions—fighting, defiance, cutting class—removal from the classroom or removal from the school through suspension or even expulsion serve as the standard forms of punishment employed by schools throughout the United States. Increasingly, behavior that violates the law (e.g., drug use or drug trafficking,

assault against a teacher or another student, etc.) results in intervention by law enforcement and school sanctions. 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 (Singer, 1996).

As social institutions charged with the task of preparing and socializing young people for adult roles, schools generally reflect many of the characteristics of the society in which they are located.

As is true in society, an implicit social contract serves as the basis for maintaining order in schools. In exchange for an education, students are expected to obey the rules and norms that are operative within school and to comply with the authority of the adults in charge. Like the social contract that serves as the basis of order in most democratic societies (Durkheim, 1961; Rawls, 1971), students are expected to relinquish a certain degree of individual freedom in exchange for receiving the benefits of education. For the vast majority of students, this arrangement elicits a relatively high degree of compliance. Despite surveys that suggest a growing number of teachers and students fear violence in school, schools in the United States are generally safe places (Pollack, 1999). Even though children significantly outnumber adults, students largely conform to adult authority and through their compliance, make it possible for order to be maintained.

Not surprisingly, this arrangement tends to be least effective for students who are not receiving the benefits of an education. Once they know that the rewards of education—namely, acquisition of knowledge and skills and ultimately, admission to college, and access to good paying jobs—are not available to them, students have little incentive to comply with school rules. As the vignette I described at the beginning of this article illustrates, at a relatively young age students may have so many negative experiences in school that they soon begin to recognize that education is not working

for them and will not provide them with access to socially desirable rewards. Such students are more likely to be labeled defiant, maladjusted, and difficult to deal with (Brookover & Erickson, 1969), and they are more likely to internalize these labels and act out in ways that match the expectations that have been set for them (Johnson, 1995). Because they violate school rules more often, they are more likely to be punished and subjected to various sanctions. A large body of research has shown that labeling and exclusion practices can create a self-fulfilling prophesy and result in a cycle of antisocial behavior that can be difficult to break (Casella, 2001; Gottfredson, 2001). As they get older, the rule violations perpetrated by such students 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 the assistant principal's prediction about the future of the misbehaving youngster in his charge is disturbingly prophetic; administrators like himself often play a significant role in matriculating young people from school to prison.

Students who get into trouble frequently are typically not passive victims; many of them understand that the consequences for violating school rules can be severe, particularly as they grow older. However, as they internalize the labels that have been affixed to them, and as they begin to realize that the trajectory their education has placed them on is leading to nowhere, many simply lose the incentive to adhere to school norms.

This dynamic is illustrated quite vividly in Willis' *Learning to Labor* (1977), a study carried out in a decaying industrial city in northern England. The troublesome youngsters he refers to as the "lads" boldly flaunt school rules, harass their teachers and peers, and even break the law with reckless abandon. They do so with full knowledge that their antisocial behavior will guarantee their failure in school, largely because they have already concluded that their education will not lead them to college or middle-class jobs in the future. Willis argues that the boys' behavior constitutes more than just "acting out." He suggests that their blatant noncompliance is rooted in an active rejection of

middle-class norms. The students understand that their education will lead them to the factories where their parents have worked, and they deliberately engage in behavior that will ensure their educational failure.

Willis focuses his analysis on students in secondary schools, but chances are that signs of trouble for the lads were present during their earlier school experiences. In my many years of teaching and working with schools, I have seen this phenomenon played out repeatedly. Schools struggle to maintain order and discipline, while a relatively small number of recalcitrant students wreak havoc in classrooms and hallways until they are pushed out or drop out of school on their own accord. Before they exit, the administrators charged with handling discipline engage in a futile game of cat and mouse with them. They desperately try to apprehend, contain, and control incorrigible students even as the students conjure up new ways to violate school rules. The repeated violations suggest that the students understand completely that the social contract underlying their education has been broken. By their actions it appears they have decided to make the lives of adults and other students miserable as their way of obtaining retribution for a failed education.

Discipline and the Social Purposes of Education

To break the cycle of failure and restore the social contract that underlies schooling, I believe it is necessary to revisit the purpose of education. In American society, schools carry out three primary functions. First, schools *sort* children based on various measures of their academic ability and place them on trajectories that influence the economic roles and occupations they will assume as adults. In so doing, they play a role in determining who will lead and manage corporations and government, and who will be led and managed by those in charge (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Oakes, 1985). Second, schools play an important role in *socializing* children by teaching the values and norms that are regarded as central to civil society and the social order (Apple, 1982; Durkheim, 1961). They do this by teaching social conventions (e.g., obedience to authority) through implicit and explicit means and by instilling a sense of what it means to

be “normal” in students (Gottfredson, 2001). Finally, schools operate as institutions of *social control*, providing an important custodial function with respect to the care and movement of children. Operating as surrogate parents, schools exercise considerable authority over students, and many of their basic civil rights are suspended while they are in school (Casella, 2001).

Each one of these functions is important and central to the operation of most schools, but without the third—maintaining order and control—the other two functions cannot be easily accomplished. Without a relatively orderly environment where the authority of adults is respected and rules are followed, it is difficult to sort and socialize students. Of course there are some schools where adults experience considerable difficulty in maintaining order and where control of students is tenuous at best. Such places are generally regarded as educational wastelands and schools of last resort, and placement in these schools constitutes the ultimate sorting and socializing on the path to nowhere (Devine, 1996).

While important in their own right, each of these functions also serves an overlapping and related purpose. By sorting children on the basis of their presumed academic ability or behavior, children learn whether they are in on the educational pipeline and develop expectations regarding where they will end up on the social hierarchy. Some paths lead to success and prosperity, or at the minimum, economic security. Other paths lead to dead-end jobs, low wages, and subordination. The socialization process that accompanies the sorting makes it possible for students to accept the educational trajectory set for them and to see their future adult roles as positions they have earned. For this reason, there is surprisingly little objection to the sorting process because students come to believe that their grades, test scores, and behavior have created a future for them that they deserve.

Yet, the fact that the process seems to work does not mean that there isn't any resistance. In fact, most often it is the students who understand that school is not working for them, and who know that education will not lead to admission to college or access to a promising career, who typically cause the most trouble and disturbance in school. With the rewards of education largely unavailable

to them, we must realistically ask ourselves why we would expect that students would comply with the rules and adhere to school expectations? When the social contract of schooling is broken or no longer operative for certain students should we be surprised that they become more likely to disrupt the educational process?

Experience shows that the answer is no. Although it is almost never stated as official policy, school officials are generally aware that students on an educational path that leads to nowhere will cause more trouble, and will therefore have to be subjected to more extreme forms of control. This is especially true for schools that serve disproportionate numbers of academically unsuccessful students (e.g., alternative schools for students with behavior problems, some vocational schools, and many inner-city high schools). Such schools often operate more like prisons than schools. They are more likely to rely on guards, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras to monitor and control students, restrict access to bathrooms, and attempt to regiment behavior by adopting an assortment of rules and restrictions. Although such measures are more likely to be imposed in high schools, I have observed a number of elementary schools that have adopted similar measures. In any educational setting where children are regarded as academically deficient, and where the adults view large numbers of them as potentially bad or even dangerous, the fixation on control tends to override all other educational objectives and concerns.

Of course, carrying out the three functions of schooling—sorting, socializing, and social control—is not what attracts most educators to the field of education. Most are drawn to teach and work in schools because they believe education should serve a higher moral purpose. Many are drawn by ideals like those espoused by Rousseau or Dewey, who envisioned schools that would instill values that result in enlightenment, intellectual growth, compassion, and appreciation for human dignity (Fishman & McCarty, 1998; Rousseau, 1974). Others are inspired by the possibility that education can serve as a means to empower and open doors of opportunity to those who have been disadvantaged by poverty, racism, and injustice. Noble ideals such as these catalyzed support for public education in the early 19th century

(Katznelson & Weir, 1985) and continue to generate support for education among the American public today (Metropolitan Life, 2001).

The majority of my students who seek to become teachers and the vast majority of teachers I have worked with did not enter the profession because they wanted to serve as sorters and gatekeepers. They also did not choose to teach because of the high status the profession enjoys or because they believe it will lead to financial security. Most are motivated by the idea that education can transform lives by inspiring young people and exposing them to knowledge that makes it possible to dream, aspire, and imagine new possibilities for themselves and the world.

The fixation on control is antithetical to many of these ideals. When children are presumed to be wild, uncontrollable, and potentially dangerous, it is not surprising that antagonistic relations with the adults who are assigned to control them develop. The fact that such assumptions and the disciplinary practices that result from them are commonplace and deeply imbedded in the routines of so many schools, makes one wonder why so many educators could allow themselves to become complicit in this unfortunate subversion of educational ideals.

Does Sorting Out the Bad Apples Work?

The story I began with at the outset of this article about the assistant principal and the little boy serves as a useful anecdote for understanding why schools rely so heavily on punishment to deal with the needs of their most disadvantaged students. This example also serves as a useful means of showing why these strategies generally fail to produce the results they seek, namely safety and order.

Even before finding out why he had been sent to the office, the assistant principal assumed that the boy had once again done something that warranted his removal. It is ironic and telling that schools typically punish children who are behind academically by depriving them of instructional time. Particularly if the misbehaving student is behind academically or missing school frequently, it would seem illogical that the punishment for misbehavior should be denial of school time. But more often than not, schools treat the removal of students as though it were the only form of punishment

available. In so doing, the factors that give rise to misbehavior go unexplored, ignored, and unaddressed, while the penchant to punish proceeds with little thought given to the long-term consequences on students.

Schools typically justify using removal through suspension or expulsion by arguing that such practices are necessary to maintain an orderly learning environment for others. The typical rationale given for such practices is that by sorting out the "bad apples," others will be able to learn. This is the only justification that seems even remotely plausible because there is very little evidence that such practices actually change or improve the behavior of offending students. I often point out to teachers and administrators that the only students whose behavior is likely to improve if they are suspended are students who care about school and who believe their participation in school will help in meeting goals they have set for themselves. The strongest indication that such practices are ineffective at changing behavior is the fact that students who get into trouble and are suspended most frequently rarely change their behavior for the better because they are periodically not allowed to attend school for a few days.

But does excluding the troublemakers and those who misbehave actually make it possible to provide a better learning environment for others? Keeping in mind that one of the primary functions of schools is to sort students according to some measure of their ability by separating those with promise from those without, it might seem that excluding the most vulnerable and difficult students would make perfect sense. Administrators who mete out punishments typically rationalize their actions by suggesting that removal of difficult students is beneficial for those who want to learn. This form of sorting, or what I often call the "triage approach" to schooling, requires that we accept the fact that not all students will succeed, and that some students must be deemed expendable so that others can be saved.

I saw how this approach played itself out while I was working with a middle school in Oakland, California (Noguera, 2001a). The school was under pressure from the district leadership to raise its abysmally low test scores. In response to this

pressure, teachers at the school asserted that they were unable to produce higher levels of student achievement because they simply had too many disruptive and misbehaving students. Tired of the school's excuses, the district leadership responded by providing the school with a specially trained teacher who was assigned to work with the most disruptive students in the school. Teachers identified the most difficult students who, in turn, were assigned to the new teacher. The teachers welcomed the plan and 22 students were placed in a separate classroom for the entire school day in an isolated part of the school building. In this racially diverse school, all but two of the identified students were Black males (the other two were Black females). To gain their parents' permission for the placement, the students were promised mentors, field trips, summer jobs, and an enriched Afro-centric curriculum that would be taught by a gifted, young African American male teacher. The students and their parents were assured that the classroom was designed to help them and would not serve as some form of isolation unit.

Within a week, it became clear to the students and the new teacher that the class was, in fact, an isolation unit. The atmosphere in the classroom degenerated quickly as the students realized that the district would not fulfill its promise of providing additional services. The students took out their resentment on their new teacher, who quickly went from being enthusiastic about the experiment and the prospect of working with this group of students, to being bitter toward both the students and the district.

The most interesting thing about this story is not what happened in that classroom, but what happened in the rest of the school. When I spoke with teachers about the state of their classrooms now that the most disruptive students had been removed, the responses from the teachers were surprisingly similar. In nearly every case I was told that while they appreciated the absence of the troublemakers, new students had emerged to take their place. Several teachers informed me that they were still experiencing disruptions in their classrooms, and some even suggested that the school needed one more teacher and one more isolated classroom to handle the remaining problem students.

A few weeks after the experiment was terminated, I attended a faculty meeting where we discussed what had happened and what should be done next. During the discussion, I pointed out that I had visited several classrooms and noticed that not all teachers had trouble with disruptive students. I then suggested that we ask these teachers to talk about what they were doing in their classrooms that made it possible for them to experience few disruptions and keep all of their students academically engaged. This turned out to be a truly radical idea because the teachers had never talked with each other before about how to handle discipline issues in the classroom.

This example illustrates why it is problematic to assume that better learning environments can be created by excluding students who misbehave. In most schools, the number of referrals made by teachers for discipline is very uneven; some give many, others very few. In most cases, what separates those who experience frequent behavior problems from those who do not is their ability to keep their students focused on learning and intellectually engaged. Ultimately, I believe that unless we focus on how to do this in more classrooms we will continue to have a revolving door for students who are bored, restless, and behind academically—the kids we typically sort out and push out of school. Moreover, when we locate discipline problems exclusively in students and ignore the context in which problematic behavior occurs, we run the risk of overlooking some of the most important factors that give rise to the behavior.

Disorder and Disengagement in High Schools

In schools where suspension rates are high, sorting out the “bad” students rarely results in a better education for those who remain. This is not because order is not a necessary precondition for teaching and learning; rather it is because there are several other factors that must be addressed in order to improve the quality of education. A large body of research on high schools shows that many students are bored, academically unengaged, and deeply alienated in school (Newmann, 1992; Steinberg, 1996). Many students have weak and even antagonistic relationships with the adults that serve

them, and report that they have very few teachers who they believe care about them (Metropolitan Life, 2001). Schools that suspend large numbers of students, or that suspend small numbers of students frequently, typically find themselves so preoccupied with discipline and control that they have little time to address the conditions that influence teaching and learning.

For the past 2 years, I have been engaged in research at 10 high schools in Boston and Cambridge, Massachusetts. The purpose of the research is to understand how the reforms carried out by schools are affecting the achievement and social development of students. Many of the schools in the study have been engaged in some of the most popular reforms sweeping the country today—the adoption of small learning communities, block scheduling, career academies, etc. The types of schools in the study include charter schools, pilot schools (the equivalent of charters that are still part of the school district), vocational schools, magnet schools, and traditional comprehensive high schools. With two exceptions, the schools in the study have high suspension rates, even though concerns about safety are only an issue for three of the schools.

The research approach we have taken is relatively unique: we are studying schools through the perceptions and experiences of students. We are doing this by collecting qualitative and quantitative data on approximately 150 students (15 students at each of the participating schools). Working with the school staff we have selected a sample at each school that is comprised of five high, five medium, and five low achievers. Each student in the study is interviewed several times throughout the course of the school year, and observed in the classroom and in out-of-school settings. Additionally, we have interviewed teachers, parents, coaches, and employers in order to develop a complete profile of each student in the sample.

Preliminary findings from the research are both surprising and disturbing. At most of the schools, students routinely report that their teachers have low expectations of them and allow them to get away with doing minimal amounts of work. In our own observations it was not uncommon to find students sleeping or playing cards in class, courses where students were made to watch videos

that were unrelated to the subject of the class, and students who roamed the hallways freely without concern that they would get into trouble. One of the highest achieving students in our sample informed us that he was going to drop out of school at the end of the 10th grade because he felt he wasn't learning anything. He had obtained the highest possible score on the state exit exam, but he was opting to quit school so he could take the exam that would provide a General Equivalency Degree (GED). He then planned to enroll in a junior college. Another student in the study, who was widely regarded as one of the best students in her school due to her high grades and good behavior, had been unable to pass the exit exam. When we probed further to find out why, we discovered that despite her high grades, she actually had very low skills in literacy and math. Her high grades, it seemed, were largely attributed to her good behavior.

Conditions like these were not present in all 10 schools in the sample. In two of the schools—the ones that happened to have the lowest suspension rates—there was considerable evidence that students were being challenged by rigorous courses and supported by caring teachers. But at the other eight schools, maintaining order and discipline were the priority of the administrators and relatively little attention was paid to the quality of education being provided. Some of these were large schools with elaborate security systems. However, even two of the smaller schools showed evidence of a preoccupation with discipline and had high suspension rates due to rigid enforcement of rules and regulations. At the larger schools, the focus on security appeared to be largely superficial. These schools had metal detectors at the entrances and an assortment of guards patrolling the hallways. Yet, beyond these symbols of order a disturbing chaos prevailed, particularly in classrooms taught by disorganized or unmotivated teachers.

At each of the schools we reported our findings to the site administrators at the end of the first year of data collection. In the majority of cases, the principals were neither surprised nor disturbed by our findings. At one school where two thirds of the senior class was at risk of being denied a diploma because they had not passed the exit exam, we explained to the administration that

students felt their teachers had low expectations of them. The principal readily acknowledged the problem but said there was nothing he could do about it because he was preoccupied with raising test scores. When we asked him how he would raise test scores without addressing the quality of instruction, he informed us that he was requiring all students who failed the exam to take a double period of test preparation. Another school had a very rigid tardy policy that required students who arrived at school 5 minutes after the starting time (7:30 a.m.) to be denied access to school unless they could present a letter from a parent. I arrived one morning at 7:45 a.m. to find dozens of students pleading with security guards to be allowed into the school. When I pointed out to the principal that he now had a tardy policy that was creating a truancy problem, he responded by telling me that at least he had solved the tardy problem.

Research on urban high schools suggests that our findings are not anomalous (Newmann, 1992). While the preoccupation with order and control is widespread, particularly since the school shootings of the past 10 years, relatively little attention has been paid to finding ways to increase academic engagement and the intellectual challenge students experience in school. I frequently visit schools in suburban communities and private schools that serve affluent students and see quite clearly that poor children in the inner city are more likely to receive an education that places greater emphasis on order and control than academic rigor. I have also conducted research in schools that are racially and socioeconomically diverse and seen how a single school can provide affluent students with a quality education, while disproportionately punishing its poorer and needier students and providing them with an education that leads to nowhere (Noguera, 2001b).

Breaking the Connection Between Prisons and Schools

Sociologist Loic Waquant has argued that there is a growing correspondence between inner-city schools and prisons, and that the similarities are not an accident. He suggests that the linking of the two institutions is a by-product of what he terms a "deadly symbiosis between ghetto and prison"

(2000, pp. 16-24). He argues that since colonial times America has been trapped in a quandary over what to do about the Black people they captured in Africa and enslaved. Slavery was motivated and rationalized by the desire to *exploit* Black labor, but there was also a competing desire to exclude Black people—except for those in servile roles—from all facets of public life. A series of strategies—beginning with slavery, which was followed by legally sanctioned segregation, which in turn was followed by defacto segregation in ghettos—were designed to make it possible for American society to accomplish these contradictory and competing goals. However, over time each of these strategies proved to be untenable, either because they were morally indefensible, or for practical reasons, difficult to sustain. He argues that in the current period the melding of ghetto and prison through various carceral strategies is the latest method devised for achieving these long-standing objectives. Waquant (2000) suggests that ghettos became more like prisons in the 1970s and 1980s as poverty became more concentrated, Black labor became redundant, and state institutions of social control replaced communal institutions that previously served community needs. He cites inner-city public schools as one of the primary examples of community organizations that have gradually been transformed into “institutions of confinement” (p. 15).

Public schools in the hyperghetto 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 custody and control:

Like the prison system, their recruitment is severely skewed along class and ethnoracial lines. . . . Like inmates, children are herded into decaying and overcrowded facilities built like bunkers, where under-trained and under-paid teachers . . . strive to regulate conduct so as to maintain order and minimize violent incident. (p. 15)

Waquant’s characterization of inner-city schools and his attempt to link their deterioration to historical forces that have shaped the urban environment and the conditions under which poor Black people live is disturbing. It is disturbing because the accusations are almost conspiratorial, implicitly if not explicitly. My own experience as a researcher and educator in urban public schools

leads me to reject the possibility that the correspondence between patterns of punishment in prison and schools is the product of a conspiracy. If we were dealing with a genuine conspiracy it would be relatively easy to identify the conspirators, figure out when, where, and how they hatch their plots, and put a stop to them or at least expose them.

In many ways the problem is actually far worse. The tendency to punish the neediest children, especially those who are Black and Latino, occurs without conscious planning and deliberate orchestration. For those like the assistant principal in the opening vignette who enforce disciplinary measures, it is simply the way things are done. The fact that he is a Black man is irrelevant to how he responds to this child. When he contemplates the course of action to take to discipline the student, removal is the only option that comes to mind even though he knows this will not help him and may, in fact, make matters worse.

Like the ballooning prison population that is disproportionately comprised of poor Black and Latino men, those who are punished and disproportionately pushed out of school have few advocates and defenders in American society. Particularly since the advent of zero tolerance discipline policies in the 1990s (Ayers, Dorhn, & Ayers, 2001), relatively few educators are willing to question the fact that we disproportionately punish our neediest students.

However, if we remind ourselves of the noble ideals that served as at least a partial impetus for the creation and proliferation of public schools in the United States, it may be possible for alternative approaches to discipline to be considered. In the early part of the 20th century, many educators called for schools that functioned like an extension of families (Cremin, 1988). They were envisioned as places where the education of children was to be as concerned with the mastery of basic subjects as with the development of character and the inculcation of values and ethics conducive to a moral and just society (Fishman & McCarty, 1998). Some of these ideals are still present in private and public schools for affluent children, but they are less evident or common in schools for the poor.

This should not be the case. Poor children are no less deserving of nurturing and kindness, and in

fact may require it even more. A small number of urban schools understand this and try to embody these principles in their operation. Not surprisingly, they tend to be extremely popular and academically successful. One such school, Phyl's Academy in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, has been praised simply for adhering to principal Monica Lewis' admonition to "treat children with kindness." In describing her school, she reports "We don't have a rigid hand. We show them values. Once you give a child reasons, you get them to follow directions" (Shores, 2003).

It sounds so simple because it is. Finding ways to produce safe and orderly schools need not compel us to turn schools into prisons or detention centers. It should be possible to create more schools like Phyl's Academy where high academic achievement is the norm, and discipline problems are the exception. It should be possible if we realize that the children of the poor are no less deserving than the children of the affluent. Perhaps what is needed even more than a revival of ideals 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. Without such personnel, the drive to punish will undoubtedly be difficult to reverse and abate.

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