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Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Studying The Effects of Disciplinary Actions in Schools for Students

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Effects of Disciplinary Actions in Schools for Students

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Abstract

As educators, a large part of our job day in and day out will be to enrich the minds of young students, who are our future generations. Given this, schools are tasked with student discipline in addition to their learning development. The focus of this senior capstone is to examine the school-to-prison pipeline and identify what educators can adjust in order to decrease the funneling of students into incarceration. Utilizing literature reviews, interviews with in-service teachers and administrators, and studying various approaches to disciplinary actions, the result findings indicate that there are alternative, more positive approaches to disciplinary actions in schools to lead students to success. Individual student accountability avoids a heavier course of action, allowing affected students more opportunities to change and develop.

Introduction

At their start, Zero-tolerance policies were introduced to schools to fight the War on Drugs in the 1990s. These policies have sparked many discussions as the years have passed, especially as challenges approach. With an increasing number of school suspensions, expulsions, and detentions, our education system has unintentionally created what we now refer to as the School to Prison Pipeline: the implementation of policies and practices that are pushing our students, both directly and indirectly, out of our classrooms and into the juvenile or criminal justice systems beginning during their formative years in secondary education.

In lesser-funded schools, we find a higher police presence, disproportionately affecting students who are labeled as "problem children", continuously finding themselves in the cycle of school discipline. In current findings, it is seen that with an increased reliance on severe consequences for student disruption, there is also an increase in referrals to the juvenile justice system that had previously been handled in schools (Reynolds et al, 2008). These students affected by harsh punishment commonly are associated with communities struggling with community issues such as violence, poverty, and inadequate healthcare; issues that are out of the individual's control but result in youth becoming ill-prepared to handle structured environments of the public schools they attend (Schiff, 2017) These students who have been suspended once are likely to be suspended again, further creating a gap between the individual and the school community. As these children may repeatedly be suspended, they are likely to fall behind both behaviorally and academically, losing access to resources within the school community. By adjusting a school's approach to harsh disciplinary action, we

may allow for more individualized accountability, avoiding a negative correlation between a student's view on school and discipline.

As a nation, there are newly developed and implemented practices being reviewed, allowing for a new approach to assisting our students without the harsh consequences that may limit a child's future opportunities. These practices, known as restorative justice practices (RJP) are utilized strategically in order to address harm while building a positive culture within schools, maintaining a school climate in which strong relationships form the foundations of the culture (Schiff, 2017). When RJP is properly implemented, it allows for individual accountability while fostering a caring community for all students involved.

The central goal of this paper is to provide a better understanding of what the School to Prison pipeline is, how it occurs, and the extent to which it affects the students it targets. The primary research question I held as I studied was: How do disciplinary actions in schools affect the school-to-prison pipeline for students? As I completed research, I studied what was claimed about the effects of disciplinary action on students in schools with strict policies, and questioned the policies and procedures in place to address students who have behavior problems. The related questions guiding these thoughts were:

1. What is the school-to-prison pipeline? How has this issue evolved? To what extent has it impacted different demographics of students?

2. What does research say about the effects of disciplinary actions on students in schools?

3. Do schools have policies and procedures in place to deal with students who have

behavior problems? If yes, how do they implement them?

4. How do in-service teachers in the classroom identify students with behavior

problems? Given the behavior problems of students, how could schools dismantle these

behaviors and redirect disciplinary actions to avoid funneling them to juvenile detention

centers and incarceration?

5. What alternative mechanisms could be used to prevent strict disciplinary actions,

avoiding the school-to-prison pipeline?

  Within this project, I will be taking time to outline the findings of research through

means of a literature review and will be highlighting current teacher's practices in the

Methods & Procedures portion of the paper. As a future educator, I believe that it is

important to understand the lifetime effect that our teaching practices have on the

students we will be impacting. Regardless of a child's socioeconomic status or previous

upbringing, it will always be at the forefront of our duties as educators to provide them

with a chance to grow and change, rather than direct them to a lifetime of repeated

behaviors and consequences.

Literature Review

  As I began the research process, a preconceived notion was that finding any

data regarding the School-to-prison pipeline would be difficult, as it has only recently

become a large topic of discussion. However, the pipeline is a result of strict disciplinary

action, which has been a constant topic of study for as long as many remember. The

discussions regarding proper and effective discipline have been, and I imagine will

always be, a topic of discussion that changes and evolves as we continue to learn and

develop as human beings. Studying the two very polarized methods of discipline: Zero

Tolerance and Restorative Justice Practices, would allow for an equal discussion

regarding the effects of each disciplinary practice.

      Are Zero Tolerance Policies Effective in Schools? In 2008, there was a

growing controversy surrounding the utilization of zero-tolerance policies within schools.

In order to respond to this controversy, the American Psychological Association formed

a task force whose focus was to evaluate the evidence found, ultimately making

appropriate recommendations regarding the topic. In their review of the literature, it was

found that although Zero Tolerance policies had been implemented for 20 years, there

was "few data that could directly test the assumptions of a zero-tolerance approach to

school discipline…Moreover, zero-tolerance policies may negatively affect the

relationship of education with juvenile justice" (Reynolds et al, 2008, p.852). These

policies, originally developed as an approach to drug enforcement, became largely

adopted by schools as a policy that mandated the application of predetermined

consequences. These predetermined punishments were most often found to be severe

in their nature, and are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of the student's

behavior or situational context. Within their findings, the task force discovered that there

is a lack of evidence supporting an assumption that violence in schools is increasing,

nor is it out of control. Additionally, there is no evidence that zero-tolerance policies

have increased the consistency of school discipline. The variation of school

suspensions and expulsions continue to vary across schools and school districts,

appearing to be due to the characteristics of the schools while also considering the

attitudes and behaviors of involved students. Another finding of the Task Force is that

there is a disproportionate discipline affecting students of color: there is a consistent

finding of overrepresentation in suspension and expulsion for African American

students. Upon further investigation, it is suggested that "the disproportionate discipline

of students of color may be due to lack of teacher preparation in classroom

management, lack of training in culturally competent practices, or racial stereotypes"

(American Psychologist, 2008, p.854). Within their conclusion and findings, the task

force explains that upon examination of the evidence gathered, zero-tolerance policies

do not achieve the goals of an effective school discipline system. The application of

these policies in suspensions and expulsions has not been proven as an effective

means to improve student behavior, and evidence shows that there is a desperate need

for change in the application of disciplinary policies.

Prelude to Prison: Student Perspectives on School Suspension. Weissman (2017)

is an advocate who left the traditional classroom setting to work in a more hands-on

setting, working to end mass incarceration and introduce alternative programs to

incarceration for youth. Weissman (2017) advocates for a more effective system in

juvenile and criminal justice. Within her book, she presents the voices of young

individuals directly affected by the school-to-prison pipeline. The book highlights what

occurs to students after they are excluded from their regular school settings, aids in

understanding the suspension process, and ultimately pushes for advocacy and change

within these systems. Weissman (2017) discusses both direct and indirect links between

disciplinary policies and the involvement of the criminal justice system, such as direct

links of increased police presence in schools. With an increased police presence, many

schools are essentially handing off student misconduct or noncompliance to the

school-based police, rather than addressing these issues with school administrators, which was previously the occurrence. Additional findings highlight that near the closing of the twentieth century, an indirect link between the US prison system and American education was created by school suspensions. As affected students were suspended, they became more likely to become dropout students who became at high risk for being incarcerated at some point in their lives. Within these findings, it is estimated that "one in ten young (age 22-30) white high school dropouts and 52 percent of African American male high school dropouts have been incarcerated by their early thirties" (Weissmen et al., 2017, p. 38).

Can Restorative Justice disrupt the 'school-to-prison pipeline'? Schiff (2018) highlights the discussions already occurring around the school-to-prison pipeline, more specifically focusing on the redirection that the use of restorative justice practices provides in the classroom setting. Schiff's article aims to address the question of whether or not the implementation of these restorative practices is able to disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. In her findings, Schiff highlights that most of the youth who are subjected to these harsh punishments are also located in communities in which poverty, violence, and unemployment are just some of the setbacks, which tends to result in these youth becoming more defensive and unsure of how to adapt to the structured environment of public schools (Schiff, 2018, p.122). Countering the normative approach to discipline, Restorative Justice Practices began to be implemented to address harm within schools, building a more positive school culture. These practices are commonly applied in one of two ways: either as a whole-school approach, or an incident-driven approach. RJP is applied in schools with a focus on addressing youth misbehaviors and

rule violations (Schiff, 2018). At the core, the utilization of restorative justice practices

assumes "school misbehavior and other conflict is not simply a violation of the rules, but

rather a violation of the relationships that form the foundation of a school's climate and

culture" (Schiff, 2018). While the zero-tolerance approach requires the student offender

to take their punishment, the restorative process encourages the individual to take

personal responsibility, collaborating with other students and adults in conversations

that create plans for restoring and repairing the relationships at stake. When discussing

the achievements of restorative justice practices, Schiff states "achieving justice and

meaningful school discipline in a restorative way….[is] about ensuring they take

responsibility by understanding the impacts of their actions and then making amends"

(2018). Schiff goes on to highlight Reistenberg's (2007) words, stating

A restorative philosophy emphasizes problem-solving approaches to discipline,

attends to the social/emotional as well as the physical/intellectual needs of students,

recognizes the importance of the group to establish and practice agreed-upon norms

and rules, and emphasizes prevention and early restorative intervention to create safe

learning environments. (p.10)

At the time of her research, it was found that within the United States, there is

considerable evidence that restorative practices assist in reducing suspension and

expulsion, decreasing disciplinary referrals, and improving academic achievement. In

California, Cole Middle School in Oakland was able to decrease suspensions by 87

percent when implementing whole-school restorative justice practices (Schiff, 2018).

Methods and Procedures

To gain a well-rounded understanding of the various approaches to discipline, in addition to literature reviews, I was aware that there was a need to gather information from teachers and administrators who have experienced student misconduct and behavior. I sought out interviews with current in-service teachers (See Appendix A ~ Interview Questions for In-Service Teachers) and administrators (See Appendix B ~ Interview Questions for Administrators) at both the high school and elementary school levels. My goal was to complete at least two teachers and two administrators. I created a series of questions, adjusting the questions accordingly to which audience would be receiving them. To answer the primary and secondary research questions sculpting this research, I tailored the questions to best understand the approaches being taken at the different schools as well as levels of administration or teacher involvement.

For the sake of comparison, I had a goal of highlighting the findings from both schools implementing restorative practices, as well as schools in which these practices are not currently implemented. The responses obtained from the teachers willing to share their experiences allowed me to understand where the strengths and areas of growth occur when adjusting our approaches to discipline inside our schools. The answers received by the participating teachers allowed me to deepen my understanding and research of how these practices are implemented by current in-service staff within schools.

Results, Findings, and Discussion

This portion of my capstone project will be dedicated to answering my supplemental research questions, based on the responses received from completing my interviews with in-service teachers. Then I will expand on information from my sources that I have deemed relevant to my research topic. In this section, I will also be utilizing indirect quotes from the two in-service teachers who I interviewed. Finally, I will discuss my thoughts and observations on the implementation of various practices as approaches to school discipline and behavioral issues. The responses and answers given by my interview participants will allow me to answer my research question: How do disciplinary actions in schools affect the school-to-prison pipeline for students?

What is the school-to-prison pipeline? How has this issue evolved? I completed my interviews with two in-service teachers currently teaching in the state of California. I chose to speak with teachers serving different age groups as well as different districts to understand the various ways that alternative approaches are or are not being implemented in schools. Out of the two teachers interviewed, one is an elementary educator in Orange County, and the other is a high school educator in Santa Clara County.

Do you have any familiarity with the term "school to prison pipeline"? If no, what would you assume it means? The first teacher I spoke to, who will be referred to as Teacher A, is a high school teacher within the Santa Clara Unified School District (SCUSD). She has been teaching for 10+ years and has also completed numerous trainings in restorative practices and restorative justice approaches to discipline. Her response encompassed an understanding of the term, stating:

My understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline is that the consequences and discipline that we give students can help or shape their future actions. These things can potentially lead them to a life of crime, prison, or drugs, based on a lot of our approach within the schools…The way that we discipline and label them can lead them to continue to repeat the patterns and behaviors. (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 November 2023)

Similarly, the second in-service teacher I spoke with shared a similar understanding. Teacher B is an elementary school teacher with 34 years of experience, currently teaching in the Santa Ana Unified School District. Her explanation was:

It was maybe eight years ago that I was introduced to the concept through a principal at our school. He came in and shared his story, talking about the research that was starting to occur and his desire for our school to provide some restorative justice…and better options for students who were having disciplinary issues at the elementary school level. (Teacher B, Personal Communication, 20 November 2023).

In both of these experiences, the common starting ground for understanding the school-to-prison pipeline is understanding the requirement of a shift in disciplinary approaches that do not assist students in properly learning and adjusting from their own mistakes. This aligns with the findings of the American Psychologist Task Force (Reynolds et al, 2008), who found in their study that previously implemented policies, such as the zero tolerance policies, required a review and new implementation to better serve schools around the nation.

Do schools have policies and procedures in place to deal with students who have behavior problems? If yes, how do they implement them?

In Teacher B's school campus environment, there is a heavy focus on the utilization of restorative justice practices to combat behavioral issues. She highlights the implementation of these practices, explaining:

When there are either fights, or even smaller things such as a child being bullied or teased at recess, or classroom disturbances, we have a group of people whom we can email and explain what's going on. As soon as these individuals are on campus, about every other day, they'll pull the students individually to talk and then bring the two students together if needed to create and promote restoration in their relationships. They are able to come up with agreements for one another as well. (Teacher B, Personal Communication, 20 November 2023)

Teacher B also highlighted the tool of having resources outside of the classroom and school, leaning on the community. Unfortunately, this is not a resource that is available to each school district, but with the growth of restorative practices as an approach, we may hope to see more collaboration between communities to allow for this.

How do in-service teachers in the classroom identify students with behavior problems? Given the behavior problems of students, how could schools dismantle these behaviors and redirect disciplinary actions to avoid funneling them to juvenile detention centers and incarceration? At Teacher B's level of elementary education, the identification of behavioral problems is seen on a repetitive basis. She explains "Common behavioral issues are children making comments towards one another, so at our level, we don't see things like fights or weapons coming to school regularly. We do see them begin at this age with talking, teasing, or once in a while a push or a hit…" (Teacher B, Personal

Communication, 20 November 2023). When it comes to redirecting behavior with the scope of restorative practices in mind, she explains that her approach is fairly simple:

I'll simply stop and remind the individuals that in our classroom, we are mindful of the language we use. I haven't had to step it up and give out a consequence for disruptive individuals, so that's good. A lot of the time when it's between two children, the [students] involved spend time discussing with facilitators how things could be handled differently. We need to walk with [these students] through what happened, dig a little deeper, and get to the place where they are able to recognize they made a mistake and are able to correct it. (Teacher B, Personal Communication, 20 November 2023)

In contrast, Teacher A working with students at the high school level experiences differing behaviors and issues. She explained that although she has not had an experience with threatening behavior from students or any other extreme behaviors in the classroom such as fighting, it has occurred at the school she teaches. She explained that her largest-in-class behavioral issue is more of an issue of her students using their cell phones in class, but even in these instances, students respond well when she asks for the device to be put away. When asked why she believes that her students do not seem to have behavioral issues with her or in her classroom, she explains:

For me, relationships are number one in my teaching. You have to have a relationship with the students so that they know you and they trust you. Then, I'm able to push them harder to achieve. So, number one I'm building relationships with the individual students, and then when I call them out for putting their cell phones away they do it because they know I respect them and I care about them. I'm not being strict or

mean, and I know my students enough to have conversations with them about their behaviors if they become an issue. (Teacher A, Personal Communication, 2 November 2023).

These approaches allow for the affected students to have a personalized approach to their behavior correction, implementing a culture of restoration throughout the schools. Schiff (2017) discusses incident-based approach aspects of restorative justice practices, which we see at play within both classrooms. Teacher B's campus climate overall reaches for a whole-school approach to restorative justice which allows for more outside support. However, despite the implementation of a whole-school approach, Teacher A is utilizing restorative practices simply by creating the spaces and relationships between herself and students that can decrease the likelihood of an individual repeating behaviors and finding themselves funneled into the pipeline.

The information obtained from completing personal interviews as noted in my Results, Findings, and Discussion section, as well as the study of reviewed literature allowed me to answer my secondary research questions. The responses obtained from interviews suggest that the implementation of alternative practices such as the aforementioned restorative justice approach can shift the likelihood of a student's involvement in the school-to-prison pipeline. Teachers noted a more positive classroom environment as well as school climate when the restorative justice approach was utilized regularly.

Problems and Limitations

There are numerous limitations to consider when understanding the findings of both the literature review as well as the statements from current educators who were interviewed for this capstone project. Although there is knowledge regarding the school-to-prison pipeline, the literature studying the topic has been sparse in the last five to ten years. Alternatively, with the rise of restorative justice practices, many of the publications regarding the approach have only recently begun to be published in peer-reviewed journals and mainstream research consumption.

In my methods for data collection, I chose to forgo sending out surveys, as I intended to complete at least five interviews with in-service teachers and administrators. Due to the time restraint of one semester, it proved to be difficult to coordinate many interviews, and unfortunately, a lack of response from several school administrators posed limits to the amount of research conducted. Having a lack of response coupled with scheduling restraints for several initial interviewees led to choosing to interview a supplemental in-service teacher within a separate school district. As I developed this capstone project, I improved my communication and time-management skills. This also allowed me to revisit my literary review and look further into any resources given by my interview participants.

Recommendations

This section of my capstone project allows me to suggest ways in which schools can disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline, addressing one of my secondary research questions: *What alternative mechanisms could be used to prevent strict disciplinary actions to avoid the school-to-prison pipeline?* After conducting the interviews with in-service staff and completing a literature review, I was able to grasp a deeper understanding as to why some schools continue to utilize approaches that do not serve the population of students they work with. Additionally, I am now able to understand the restorative justice approach in its different forms of implementation.

To obtain a school-wide approach to restorative justice practices, which would better serve the needs of all students, in-service teachers will need unwavering support from their administrators at the school level. District-wide training to educate all staff on how to utilize restorative practices has proven to be effective in beginning the process of implementation. Educators at every level must understand that restorative justice practices are not a lack of punishment, but rather a more individualized approach to creating a climate of individual accountability while promoting a more positive school environment for all students. The involvement of community-based programs for after-school enrichment can also be utilized, allowing teachers and administrators to work in partnership with outside agencies to support their students.

Taking the time to make relationships a priority early in the academic year is an approach that on its own allows for a better understanding of students, therefore having a positive impact on the student's success in school. A secondary recommendation is for teachers and parents alike, to work in partnership to build relationships in the school

setting. Parents who routinely check in on their students aside from their grades, but check in on their child's support in school will have the ability to connect with their child's teacher if the need arises for intervention. Students are more commonly willing to cooperate or adjust their behaviors when they also feel understood and respected by their teachers and administrators. Utilizing a blanket punishment when there is no relationship built between the student and the enforcer leads the affected student to blindly follow punishment without creating reparations, which can negatively affect their experience, causing them to repeat behaviors and begin the cycle of the school-to-prison pipeline.

Having well-rounded support from administrators, teachers, and the community at large to drive change within the schools would create a strongly developed sense of community climate in schools for students. Allowing students to have the space to process, understand, and at times repair the relationships hurt by their actions will allow for a more personal approach of self-reflection rather than punitive discipline, dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline and decreasing the effect of the pipeline on students involved.

Conclusion

In each area of this senior capstone project, I have continually developed into a well-rounded educator as well as a well-rounded student. Engaging in communication and interviews with experts currently in service with schools has invited me to consider different and adaptive solutions for student behavior management as well as student discipline at each level. Engaging in a literature review allowed me to deepen my understanding of restorative justice practices, how to implement them, and the challenges that are faced by invoking change with these topics. This capstone project allowed me to better understand the students who are easily labeled as "troubled" or "misunderstood", inviting me to push further into building relationships with my future students. As is true with any change, the discussion of reinventing disciplinary policies in schools at a nationwide level will continue to have its difficulties. The discussion of a topic such as the possibility of prison or jail time continues to be seen as a taboo subject, which does not allow for adult educators to discuss the lifetime effects that discipline may have on children. We must change the narratives to allow space for these topics to be discussed so that change can occur at all levels for our future generations.

As discussed in the literature review section of this senior capstone, substantial evidence suggests that zero-tolerance policies are not proven to decrease behavioral issues in schools. These policies provide an across-the-board policy to be implemented without understanding the children facing punishment. Utilizing a restorative justice approach, either in school-wide or incident-based approaches, allows affected students to rebuild their trajectory.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions for School Administrators

1. Are you familiar with the term "school-to-prison pipeline"? If not, what would you assume it means?
2. What approach to student discipline does your school implement?
3. What are common student disciplinary actions taken within the school? Common issues with students?
4. As an administrator, what is your role in student discipline?
5. What alternative methods to student discipline does the school outsource to?
6. According to you, what are the advantages and disadvantages of the school's current approach to student discipline?
7. What would it entail for a school to reshape its approach to discipline?

Appendix B: Interview Questions for School Teachers

1. Do you have any familiarity with the term "school to prison pipeline"? If no, what would you assume it means?
2. Do you know what a restorative justice approach to discipline is?
3. What are common behavioral problems you encounter in your classroom?
4. How do you identify behavioral issues in your classroom?
5. What processes are in place to help teachers assist students with behavioral issues?
6. In your classroom, how do you redirect or respond to students who may be causing issues or disruption?
7. According to you, are there any advantages to strict disciplinary action with students? Disadvantages?
8. What are ways that schools can take different approaches to student discipline?