Inequality in Education: The School-to-Prison Pipeline

Abstract

This research project aims to address the school-to-prison pipeline that often victimizes minority students. In schools all across the nation, minority students are criminalized hidden behind disciplinary policies and practices within the school. These practices put students in contact with law enforcement. Operation Misdirect aims to change this by misdirecting students from the school-to-prison pipeline and back to the education and future they deserve. This proposal uses minority students in a local high school in Spartanburg County, South Carolina. Operation Misdirect will replace disciplinary policies such as Zero tolerance and provide different alternatives to discipline. A focus group of four students provided feedback on the proposal and stated that the biggest challenge for the project would be convincing schools to change their discipline policy.

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Operation Misdirect has one goal and one goal only…to stop the school-to-prison pipeline that targets minority students by providing alternatives to discipline other than zero tolerance. The zero-tolerance discipline disproportionately affects minority students. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, African Americans are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white counterparts. This ultimately translates to about 32% of in-school suspensions and 33% out-of-school suspensions. 70% of those suspended end up facing referrals to law enforcement and even school-related arrest (2014).

Essentially, the racism that is deeply embedded in the narrative of the United States education system has resulted in minority students such as African Americans not completing school and ultimately ending up as part of the school-to-prison pipeline. Operation Misdirect offers a solution to the glaring disparities in disciplinary treatment that affects so many communities in the United States today. Two such solutions are alternative discipline practices and providing cultural competency training. These solutions aim to eliminate the mandating of harsh punishments dealt by zero-tolerance policies and clog the school-to-prison pipeline, thus giving minority students a chance for success.

Recent research shows a strong connection between students who experience school punishment before age fifteen and contact with the criminal justice system. In fact, a majority of students who do not complete school have a high chance of being incarcerated at some point in their lives (Cole 2019). This is one of the reasons I chose this topic and this project. As a minority myself, I am all too aware of the disparities that occur when you are a minority in the education system thanks to policies such as zero tolerance. I hold the belief that zero-tolerance policies and policies like it are the reason that minority students often find themselves going from a school playground to a prison courtyard. However, many people will argue that zero-tolerance policies keep things fair when it comes to doling out punishments for disciplinary behavior. While it may be a good idea to have mandated consequences to certain disciplinary actions, ultimately all it does is hurt the student in the long run (Cheek & Bucchio 2017).

The school-to-prison pipeline is the marginalized process of criminalizing youth that is often hidden behind disciplinary policies such as zero tolerance. Students are put in contact with law enforcement and then find themselves pushed out of their educational environment and into the criminal justice system (Cole 2019). While strict mandated punishments may be the solution in cases where the student is threatening other students' safety, it is not the best way of punishing minor problematic behaviors (Cheek & Bucchio 2017). One such solution that Operation Misdirect offers is the use of what is called restorative justice.

Restorative justice is a theory of justice that emphasizes repairing the harm that was caused or revealed by criminal behavior or in the case of the education system, problematic behavior (Wadhwa 2015). According to the Centre for Justice and Reconciliation at Prison Fellowship International, this is done through a cooperative process that includes all stakeholders or those involved (2005). Simply, put students would learn from their mistakes and be able to focus on their personal development without having to worry about what is going to happen to their education if they are suspended. This solution can lead to students developing necessary life skills such as how to communicate in a more effective manner (Stoebig & Vega 2016).

Another alternative is a program known as CMCD or Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline. This program is designed to use students and teacher collaboration on setting the classroom rules to better the environment of inner-city schools. The program also provides support for three years to educational professionals through things like staff development and ongoing research data on teacher and students' perspective of their current school climate. The CMCD incorporates five themes to create strategies in which the students and teachers are partners in the classroom. The five themes are prevention: "classroom management is problem prevention rather than problem-solving." This reduces the need for intervention, caring: a environment where the students think the teachers car is the foundation of school reform, cooperation: great opportunities for student self-discipline, organization: a responsibility shared by teacher and student that adds valuable teaching and learning time, and community: parental and community involvement in activities and events that link school life to home life (Freiberg 1998). Through the use of these five themes, the CMCD can build resilience in inner-city schools and the environment.

Cultural competency training is another great alternative to zero-tolerance policies. Why? Because minority students are finding themselves suspended or expelled from schools for minor infractions at an astonishing rate. However, there is no evidence to support this statistic. In fact, there is no evidence at all that says that minority students, particularly African American students are more problematic than their White peers. So, if the problem is not that they act out more, then what is the problem? The racial disparity of the school-to-prison pipeline shows that the issue lies within the systematic racism that occurs in schools themselves. Cultural competency training aim is to resolve consequences from actions that may have been motivated by racism. In other words,…to stop systematic racism. Cultural competency training lets teachers self-report their decisions and shows them how their decision might affect the life of the student. Not only that, but it also raises awareness among teachers of different cultures while promoting the exploration of why certain racial beliefs exist in the first place. Once teachers are made aware of things like systematic racism and if they have the wrong racial belief then their interactions with students can change as well as their decisions to make choices that may be objective (Cheek& Bucchio,2017). All in all, cultural competency training could transform how students are disciplined, how teachers issue that discipline, and help to create successful members of society instead of people who are just another number in the

criminal justice system.

The target group for Operation Misdirect is minority students from a local high school located in a small town in the state of South Carolina. The school serves grades ninth through twelfth with a total of about seven hundred and seventy students. The ratio of male to female students is about the same. The school has a 24 percent enrollment rate of minorities with a majority being African American which is lower than the state average which is about 49 percent. The reason I chose this particular school is that it is known for having many rigid rules and strict disciplinary actions for breaking those rules.

As stated, before the ultimate goal of Operation Misdirect is to stop the school-to-prison pipeline by providing alternative disciplinary policies other than zero tolerance. Minority students are being pushed out of schools at an alarming rate and mostly because of minor infractions. This needs to change as minority students are fighting a battle to stay in school that they did not even know they needed to fight. Operation Misdirect is determined to give them that chance by offering schools alternatives to discipline against minor infractions instead of the rigid discipline they might be using to punish misbehavior. Operation Misdirect aims to clog the school-to-prison pipeline by simply not providing it with anything to move along the pipeline. Between 2011 and 2012, The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights reported that African Americans accounted for only sixteen percent of school enrollment yet thirty-one percent of out of school suspensions and thirty-four percent of expulsions (2014). The outcome of Operation Misdirects success would be the lowering of these rates.

As previously discussed, the solution to stopping the school-to-prison pipeline is by offering schools an alternative answer to disciplinary behavior. Achieving this solution can be accomplished in one of three ways. The first solution is through what is known as restorative justice. Operation Misdirect wants to change the way schools address the harm caused by another student. Instead of simply suspended them or expelling them, Operation Misdirect emphasizes repairing the harm by having the offenders, in this case, the student, take responsibility for their actions, make the wrong into a right, and address why they may have acted in such a way. Some practices of restorative justice that Operation Misdirect would like to use are victim-offender meditation, circles of support and accountability, and family and group conferencing (Weeks 2018). These practices, when used properly, would decrease the disparity between African American and White students and decrease drop out rates as it did in the Oakland Unified School District which has seen a significant decrease in suspensions, expulsions, and dropout rates (Weeks 2018).

The second part of the solution that Operation Misdirect is offering up is known as Consistency Management and Cooperative Discipline. This solution goes beyond the school to include the environment surrounding the school, especially regarding inner-city schools. The goal of this solution is to encourage student-teacher collaboration. It turns students from “tourists” into “citizens” by encouraging teachers to create classrooms where cooperation, participation, and support are the cornerstones and then expanding those cornerstones as the student continues throughout their school career (Freiberg 1998). The CMCD has seen success in transforming classrooms which lead to sustained gains in student achievements and reductions in student discipline referrals to the office (forty to eighty percent fewer kids are sent to the office) in schools all over Houston, Texas, Chicago, Norfolk, and Amsterdam (Freiberg 1998).

The third solution that Operation Misdirect offers is cultural competency training which holds

teachers accountable for actions and decisions that may be motivated by racism. Not only this, but it also allows teachers to self-reflect on their decision and how that decision would impact the life of the student overall. Cultural competency training will also teach educators about certain cultures and explore why certain racial beliefs exist in the first place. Then once this is complete, teachers' interactions with their students will change because they will no longer be a sort of systematic racism affecting their decision-making process and they will be able to look at a decision objectively.

The timeline of Operation Misdirect differs depending on which solution the schools decide upon. Restorative justice is a solution that can be implemented pretty quickly as the only thing that changes is the way the school responds to misbehavior. CMCD includes many components such as community which means that people other than just the educators and students would have to get involved. Getting the community involved especially when they are not used to be being involved may take a little longer. As for cultural competency training…I believe it should be a continuous practice. By this, I mean that it should not be just take the training once and be done with it. I think that teachers and educators should be required to take the training two-three times a year just as a refresher. Also, every teacher should have to take it before they even become a teacher that way they can go into a school already prepared to make decisions that are not motivated by racism and that are objective.

My focus group was composed of four students. The first student was a Multi-racial female in ninth grade and she was fifteen years old. She is half Hispanic and half African American She has spent her entire life in going to the current school system in our small town. She was born and raised here in South Carolina and we know each other because she is my little sister's best friend. I recruited her by asking if she would mind asking some questions for me for a school project. The second individual I recruited was an African American male also in the ninth grade and fifteen years old. He is from Ohio, but his family moved here for his dad's job. This is his first year in the South Carolina school system. We know each other through my sister and I recruited him by asking if he wanted to answer some questions about what he thought of the schools so far. The third student I recruited was another Multi-racial male. He is half African American and half White. He is a senior in high school and is eighteen years of age. I know him because we are related, as he is my younger brother. I asked him to be a part of the group because I believed he would have more experience being that he went to public school all four years of high school. The last individual I asked to participate in my focus group was my neighbors' daughter. She is a sophomore in high school and is white. She has grown up in our small town her whole life. I recruited her because I believed she would offer a unique perspective as she is not a minority.

The general consensus of the focus group was that my project was a good idea. Everyone felt like the issue was definitely something that needed to be addressed especially here in the south. All members commented on how they felt some of the punishments given out by the schools for certain actions were overkill when considering the misbehavior. Everyone believed that Operation Misdirect could be successful but only if I had a better plan in place and if I went directly to the school board instead of just to the school themselves. They also felt like some of the teachers may not like the idea as most of the teachers have been teaching for a long time and are stuck in their ways.

I was not surprised that everyone felt the way that they did about zero tolerance. The fourth individual did admit that she felt a little awkward commenting as she, herself had never faced

discrimination though she had seen it happen to other people and some of her other friends. Something they all agreed on though was that they felt that punishments for misbehavior were definitely harsher on minority students then on nonminority students. They also felt like some of the teachers kept a closer watch on the minority students they believed might be a problem.

One thing that I would change about the project is probably how I enact the plan. So, far the only thing I have is just going to the school and providing them with whatever statistics and facts I have managed to find on racial inequality in school concerning discipline. This definitely needs to be thought out more before any action is taken.

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