The Inequity of Education

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The Black Educology Mixtape is an open-access mixtape that moves beyond academic articles to feature various art forms and voices that are typically muted. We feature a collective of Black people working to amplify and empower Black educational voices. Our scope and sequence focus on the past, present, and future of Black education, which has been historically and systemically caught in the underbelly of western education. Our work is grounded in creating mixtapes that are both revolutionary and emancipatory in the name of love, study, struggle, and refusal.

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ABSTRACT

The educational institution in the United States has become a contentious issue in previous and ongoing elections, with terms ranging from CRT to the “Don’t Say Gay” movement brought up more frequently, social issues have become more prevalent in discussions correlating with how we educate our future generations. However, despite all the discussion, we fail to recognize the core issue of all these ongoing conversations: discrimination. This track addresses the inherent biases within the current educational system impacting the learning experiences of marginalized people, as well as how this affects their lives. This track focuses on a widely known issue: the school-to-prison pipeline. Real-world, film, and historical examples/research are used to shed light on one of the United States’ most pressing challenges and propose a viable solution to such an inequitable predicament.

The system of education in the United States has been advertised as a safe space to cultivate a child's natural curiosity and hunger to learn. However, this is not always the case for every citizen's situation. The school-to-prison pipeline is one of the many systems found in the United States that refers to practices and policies that disproportionately affect students of color and cause them to be more likely to drop out or end up incarcerated—sometimes even both (ACLU 2008). It is a prime example of how the system in America is built to be against communities of color, and though it claims to be equitable, accessible, and unbiased, many factors play into how children are taught and provided for that show the racial disparities in the educational system present in the US today. The best course of action to address said disparities is to correctly address the underlying issues that apply to each student individually, instead of focusing on negative reinforcement.

It is crucial to the understanding of this pipeline to address the core issue that has had a tremendous effect on who and how its victims are chosen. Zero-tolerance policies refer to those guidelines that establish eligibility for expulsion and suspension based on infractions, breaking a zero-tolerance rule usually calls for immediate expulsion. This makes it so students are not given a chance at redemption or “restorative justice.” Rachel M. Perrera et.al. further explain in Survey: Understanding how U.S. public schools approach school discipline, these infractions can include “low-level, non-violent offenses.” (2023). Zero-tolerance policies are enforced in ways such as an increased number of school resource officers (SROs), law enforcement officials, and strict guidelines/rules in an attempt to keep the environment “orderly” – all of which usually exist in economically underprivileged areas (Kang-Brown et.al., 2013). These policies stem from the war on drugs and other state criminal laws that have disproportionately affected people of color living in low-income neighborhoods.

The war on drugs is one of the biggest events in history to increase the number of people of color who landed in jail due to these same policies, heavy policing, and corrupt government officials (History.com, 2019). President Nixon was responsible for mentioning the initiative, but President Raegan put the initiative into action and launched this war on drugs — putting a heavy emphasis on crack cocaine which could be easily found in low-income areas due to the income it generated (History.com, 2022). As a result, the Black community was heavily targeted (History.com, 2013). Instead of uncovering why these communities were handling so many drugs as well as the systematic issue, they chose to increase police presence in neighborhoods where drugs circulated frequently, further enforcing a new zero-tolerance policy when caught with even a milligram of crack cocaine. The issue lies in the immense underfunding of low-income cities. As the Film 13th stated: “Hundreds of Thousands of People were being sent to jails and prisons for simple possession of marijuana, for low-level offenses” (Stevenson, 2016). Astonishingly, this may come off as a simple political issue on the safety and health of the national public, however even Nixon Advisor John Erlichman stated:
The Nixon campaign in 1968, and The Nixon Whitehouse after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying? We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both heavily, we could disrupt these communities. We could arrest their leaders, raid their homes, break up their meetings, and vilify them night after night on the evening news. Did we know we were lying about the drugs? Of course we did (LoBianco, 2016).

Drugs increased in circulation due to the trickle-down economics that Raegan introduced, a Business Insider report titled A huge study of 20 years of global wealth demolishes the myth of ‘trickle-down’ and shows the rich are taking most of the gains for themselves reports that Raegans economic model only really increased the wage gap and led to an over-policing issue in minority-dominated areas (Kaplan, Kiersz, 2021). In the article “The Streets” An Alternative Black Male Socialization Institution by William Oliver (2006) from Indiana University, Oliver discusses “the social significance of ‘the streets’ as an alternative site of Black male socialization.” Oliver (2006) states:

The social significance of the hustler/Balla role among marginalized Black men is that it represents an alternative to more legitimate means of acquiring material goods, constructing a valued manhood identity, and achieving status in an environment in which many men believe that they lack the skills and resources to achieve success through legitimate means (Whitehead et al., 1994). Hence, street hustling may involve selling drugs, operating an after-hours joint, selling stolen merchandise or merchandise purchased wholesale and presented to the buying public as stolen, gambling, pimping, and so forth (Horton, 1972).

As the article argues, we cannot blame the Black community for trying to survive and provide for themselves. Enforcing zero-tolerance policies at a school level only deterres the problem and increases the incarceration rate. When discussing incarceration rates among black youth, Nancy A. Heitzeg (2009) stated:

The racial disparities are even greater for youth. African Americans, while representing 17% of the youth population, account for 45% of all juvenile arrests. (NAACP, 2005) Black youth are 2 times more likely than white youth to be arrested, to be referred to juvenile court, to be formally processed and adjudicated as delinquent, or referred to the adult criminal justice system, and they are 3 times more likely than white youth to be sentenced to out–of–home residential placement (Panel on Justice 2001; Walker et al., 2007) (Heitzeg, 2009).

Additionally, according to the Advancement Project, over 70% of students involved in school-related arrests/ referrals to law enforcement are Hispanic and African American — over 3,000 out-of-school suspensions are given annually, and only one out of every 20 white students is likely to be suspended at least once, however, one out of every six black students is expected to be suspended at least once (Advancement Project, 2013). Proving the inadequacy of zero-tolerance policies as they relate to suspensions, the infographic states: “Just ONE out-of-school suspension in the 9th grade DOUBLES a student's risk of dropping out before graduation.” (Advancement Project, 2013). This creates a graduation rate issue, as the more often students drop out, the smaller the graduating class gets. Because this is affecting Black/Latino students the most, this robs economic advancement opportunities for these communities, further contributing to the impoverishment problem.

The effects of zero-tolerance policies and over-policing are related and intertwined. The following examples from films, to real-life situations, are provided. Freedom Writers released January 5, 2007, gave the real-life account of a new high school teacher teaching at a high school in a low-income area, areas in which the school-to-prison pipeline can be seen. In a compelling clip demonstrating over-policing and racism in low-income areas, one of the main characters, Marcus, writes an anecdote about himself and his friend. After recounting that his friend had a gun and accidentally shot himself with it, tragically ending his life, it is narrated:

I sat there til the police came. But when they come, all they see is a dead body, a gun, and a n****. They took me to juvenile hall. First night was the scariest. Inmates bangin on the walls, throwin up they gang signs, yellin out who they was, where they from. I cried my first night. I never let anybody know that (Richard LaGravenese, 2007).
In another scene with the same character this time addressing hate crimes and injustices in the world: “When I look out in the world I don’t see nobody that looks like me with they pockets full unless they rappin a lyric, or dribbilin a ball, so what else you got in here for me?” (Richard LaGravenese, Director 2007). Marcus wasn’t given a chance to explain himself when he was caught next to his dead friend, he was automatically detained and taken to prison. As he’s grown up and he and his classmates have gone through life-altering scenarios such as this one, they have accepted that they aren’t meant to make it in the world and that the only way to rise in social class is to adhere to stereotypes given to them, giving up on their education. Though this story had a happy ending, with all students in the class graduating and furthering their education, this is not the reality in most situations.

In a more tragic and real-life story, Trayvon Martin who passed February 26, 2012, due to police brutality was revealed to have been serving an out-of-school suspension at the time of his death (Curt Anderson and Mike Schneider, 2012). He had no criminal record, though they did find traces of marijuana in his system, and had been suspended initially due to being caught with baggies that had traces of the substance (Jeff Burnside and Brian Hamacher, 2012). The zero-tolerance policies at his school called for immediate suspension once this was discovered. If he was given a chance at redemption or rehabilitation, perhaps this would've had a different outcome.

There needs to be a clear revamping of the justice system and the way educational institutions educate overall — especially in low-income communities — but how can this be done? Restorative justice is, “a system of criminal justice which focuses on the rehabilitation of offenders through reconciliation with victims and the community at large” (Oxford, 2009). This is the most important first step schools being affected by the school-to-prison pipeline must take. Due to Zero-Tolerance policies being so demanding and unforgiving students are never allowed to correct the problem. The purpose of education is to learn from and give students the proper environment to make mistakes. The Labeling Theory in sociology examines the process in which some individuals are labeled as “deviants,” In which they begin to think of themselves as deviant and may even enter deviant careers (Skaggs, 2023). Such negative reinforcement tactics are what is causing these students to feel as if they aren’t good enough for school and should just drop out and become what society is labeling them as. If we label children, it causes them to become unmotivated, and decide that there is no point in moving forward if their position in life is already established. To combat this effect, we must enforce Equity over Equality, which provides each student with the tools they need to succeed instead of providing the same resources (MHHS, 2021).

After addressing so many topics and ideas proving that this system exists, I’d like to close off on a more sincere note. As a first-generation child born to immigrant parents, I got extremely lucky. I was born and raised in a city in the Bay Area that has one of the best public education districts and is economically very well off. I grew up in a lower-class home, barely being able to scrape by, but I think this taught me to value my education to a great extent and become a big advocate for equal education. I have family in friends who are on the opposite of this educational spectrum and aren’t able to learn at the same pace I do. Looking at the quality of education my family members get in Southern California, Alabama, Indiana, New Mexico, etc, has made me realize that the fact that the school district in my area can afford at least one book per student is, sadly, a big privilege, and is only reserved for those who meet a certain economic level. We must ask ourselves: Are we getting ahead or getting together? The greatest myth the United States will tell is that anyone deserving can get ahead, however, in the pyramid-shaped economy that has been built by the ruling class, only a few can get ahead. Many are unfortunately destined to stay where they are or fall deeper into struggle. Change only happens when we get together as a society and move forward together. The fact that every student is expected to achieve the same result with unequal resources is absurd. I believe the only reason I’ve gotten the opportunities I’ve gotten is because of the amazing community that has uplifted me and looked out for me. As a student fresh out of high school, I would love to see more students of color get uplifted and rewarded with the same opportunities I’ve gotten, and it’s something I work towards every. I think the world would be extremely blessed with the remarkable minds out there if we just tried harder to bring them to fruition. There must be a change in our educational system as it overlooks multiple aspects of sociological thinking, childcare principles, etc. As James Baldwin states in No Name In The Street, “They were attempting to get an education, in a country in which education is a synonym for indoctrination, if you are white, and subjugation if you are black” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 60). The racial education gap is extremely evident and must be addressed immediately if we are to gain any traction toward a better future for the U.S.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).
Notes on Contributor

Kaylee J. Hernandez, kayulissaaa@gmail.com, is a fresh high school graduate and college student at Diablo Valley College pursuing an Associate's degree in Sociology and hopes to work her way up to a master's degree in Social Work. She is passionate about racial equity as it pertains to social systems in the U.S. and overall equity in child care. Though she has little background working in the field, she has gone through education pursuing her focused interests through her classes and gaining more knowledge through reading and media.

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