

Trapped in a Pipeline: The Plight of Too Many Children and Youth (Exposing the School-to-Prison Pipeline)

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Abstract: The poem that is central to this piece was written to humanize the abstraction of the school-to-prison pipeline. The author, who has worked in public schools over the past two decades, remains troubled by the vulnerable children and youth in our public school systems who increasingly face discriminatory and exclusionary practices, which funnel too many of them into the school-to-prison pipeline. The poem is preceded by a brief overview of the author's experiences and followed by observations and reflections about the young people hurtling through the pipeline. Hope is found in the possibilities presented by more restorative policies and practices.

Keywords: school-to-prison pipeline, restorative justice, narrative poetry, elementary schools, LGBTQ students, zero tolerance

The poem central to this piece is a narrative story to give voice to those whose voices often go unheard. I specifically chose a poetic representation to move readers beyond the words of the narrative, paying attention to the "mutual importance of how something is said along with what is said" (Madison, 2012, p. 239). This narrative poem follows a trajectory from the child in the womb capturing an inner dialogue with his pregnant mother to the subsequent life of the child entering and engaging a punitive public school system.

According to Winterson (2013), "[a] tough life needs a tough language—and that is what poetry is" (p. 40). The following poem is presented as a single story. It represents themes from many untold stories I learned as I worked with children and youth in our public school systems over the past two decades, first, as the director of a learning center at a homeless shelter, then as a lawyer and, finally, for 14 years as a school social worker. During this time, I became increasingly distressed by the discriminatory and exclusionary practices I witnessed, which funnel too many vulnerable students into the school-to-prison-pipeline. The students most often found within the pipeline are students of color, LGBTQ students, students with disabilities, and students of low socioeconomic status. While the school-to-prison-pipeline is not a physical construct like the Dakota Access Pipeline, its trappings are no less intrusive and devastating for those young people who find themselves caught within it.

I remember well the first time I felt its pull on a young African-American elementary school student I was working with. Like the student in the poem, there were many risk factors present long before he started school. I met him in the homeless shelter where he lived with his mother and younger siblings after they left an abusive home environment. I was establishing an on-site learning center at the shelter and his mother brought him for after-school tutoring because he was struggling academically. She forewarned me that he was likely to "act up" and "be disrespectful" when presented with schoolwork but she wanted him to receive the help he

needed and she did not have the skills to help him herself. It did not take long for me to discover that her son was a bright, resourceful child who responded well to nurture, structure and incentives. I had been working with him every day after school for a little over three weeks when he was suspended from school. His mother asked me to attend the suspension meeting with her. During the brief meeting, I was taken aback by the lack of interest in what might be going on with this young student and his family. As the conversation quickly moved to what needed to change with his behavior when he returned to school, I attempted to bring up some of the simple things I had found to be successful in working with him but I was summarily dismissed because the teacher “did not have time to cater to each individual student.” I was completely disheartened leaving that meeting and was deeply saddened but not surprised when he was suspended again.

Sadly, there are many, many other stories echoing within the walls of the school-to-prison pipeline. Yet, the marginalization created by the pipeline misrepresents the problem as individual rather than societal so readers are invited to see faces of multiple mamas and sons as they enter the pipeline poem. I wrote it in an effort to put down the narrative that is so often missing in school records, disciplinary meeting minutes, and case summaries. I wanted to find a way to give voice to the untold stories of too many of the young people I have worked with. I chose to craft these lines into a poem because I believe, along with Bell (2010), that “the arts provide a way to engage body, heart and mind to open up learning and develop a critical perspective” (p. 17). The read will not be easy but the lives of children trapped in the school-to-prison pipeline are not easy either as they face the soul-sucking struggle against systemic oppression. As you read the poem, try to imagine what it must feel like to live this. What would it be like to be this child? What would it be like to be his parent?

Humanizing the Pipeline Through Poetry

Mama:

As soon as I was sure I was pregnant
I started trying to buy healthy food
But the good stuff is just too expensive
When Ramen is under five dollars a week
I want this baby to be strong though
He’s going to have enough to deal with
Without being sickly and weak too

Son:

I’m not even born
And I already know hunger

Mama:

I know it’s a he
Which I worry about
Because boys are hard
I know my brother is
Always getting into trouble

Although I guess some folks would say
This baby is trouble
I won't think of him that way though
I figure enough other folks will

Son:

I love when my mama
Holds me through the
Layers of her own skin
I may not have been planned
But I can tell she loves me

Mama:

I know I gotta be ready to talk to him
My cousin in college
Says a lot of our people
Start out with a word deficit
I know my own mama probably found it hard
To decide between words and food
We could have words if she didn't have
To work so hard to put food on the table
But people never seem to want
To talk about that
It's always what we ain't doing
And not what we are

Son:

I love the sound of
My mama's voice
I hear it all the time
Being inside of her

Mama:

I'm trying to get ready for this baby
But every time I get something saved
There's another bill that takes the little I got away
Choices often don't feel like choices
I wish for a way out sometimes
But I feel so trapped
People don't seem to really see me
When I finally got to the clinic
They didn't even care enough to lecture me
About not coming sooner
I was trying to get my Medicaid
Straightened out

But no one even bothered to ask
It just would have been nice
To believe someone
Anyone
Cared about me and this baby
Who is going to be here
Any day now

Son:
I know those pokes aren't
My mama's hands
Because I've learned her touch
I know her voice too
Today she sounds sad

Mama:
He's here
My sweet baby boy
Who I fell in love with
The minute he arrived

Son:
I'm a sweet baby boy
My mama tells me so
I now clap my hands
Whenever I hear her voice
She talks to me all the time
I lean into her words
Like I do her affection
But time is precious
And there is never enough
With her

Mama:
He started walking
While I was working
I cried and cried to have missed it

Son:
I smacked her wet cheeks
With my chubby baby hands
She smiled at me
Through her tears
She always has a smile for me
Her sweet baby boy

Mama:

Now I get hit
With big man hands
My boyfriend
I step in
Before he hits my boy
I want him to go away
But he provides money
And I'm pregnant
With a new baby
So choices don't feel like choices
Right now

Son:

I want to grow big
So I can help my mama
I could be a doctor
Or a fireman
Or own a store

Mama:

My boy starts school tomorrow
I tell him he can be
Anything he wants to be
I didn't graduate
But I want him to
So he has choices
And isn't stuck like me

Son:

School starts tomorrow
I can't wait
I get to go first
So I can teach
Everything I learn to my sister

Mama:

How can a child
Who was that excited
About starting school
Dislike it so quickly

Son:

I wish I didn't
Have to go to school

I'm always getting into trouble
With my teacher
She never asks what happened
She just gives me that look
And sends me to the corner
Or the hall
Or the principal's office

Mama:
Every time the principal calls
For me to come and get him
I have to take off from work
And lose the little money I'm making

Son:
I wish someone would see
That I'm not bad
I don't like people picking on me
Or saying mean things about
My mama
Or my free lunch
Or my too small clothes
Plus it's hard to sit still
Doing worksheets for so long
I like the experiments we do
Because then I can see it
No matter what we do
I try hard
Because everything I know
I can teach my baby sister

Mama:
My baby girl is getting a head start
Through her brother
He loves to show her letters
And numbers
He's so good with her
He plays with her quietly for hours
So I can get my rest
To work another double shift

Son:
I don't want to teach my sister
Everything I'm learning
As the years pass I learn

More about how “stupid” and
“hyperactive” and
“impulsive” and
“defiant” I am
Than anything else
It gets harder and harder
To keep trying
When no one really sees me

Mama:
Now I’m going to have to figure out
What to do with him
For a whole week
It’s getting harder and harder
To be able to take any time off
Because there’s always someone else
Ready to take my job

Son:
No one ever asked me
What happened
When I got suspended
For a whole week
I was so tired of
Just taking the shoves
That I shoved back
I didn’t mean for him to get hurt
Just to leave me alone
But he hit the edge of a locker
And cut his head
So “violent” was added to
The words used to describe me
The list
Just keeps getting longer
And longer

Mama:
“Violent?!” I say
He may be many things
But I can’t see violent
You should see the way he plays
With his sister
Never a more tender moment

Son:

Now the word they are using is
Expulsion
I never intended to use it
I just wanted them to
Leave me alone
I tried “managing my anger”
By talking to a teacher
Or a guidance counselor
But their investigation
Only made things worse
I thought I could just show it
And they would know
Not to mess with me
Or my little sister anymore
Well someone told the principal
I had a knife
And now I’m hearing words
Like zero tolerance
For bringing a weapon to school
I wish they had zero tolerance
For me and my sister
Being picked on all the time
I feel so trapped
And instead of helping out
My mama
I’ve just made things worse

Mama:

Some lady called me up
And said I could ask for an evaluation
To see if he needed
Special education services
If he does
They might not be able
To expel him
I know he doesn’t have a disability
But I don’t want him expelled
What will he do all day
While I’m working
I don’t want him to end up
Like my brother
Dropped out and in “juvie”
So I might just ask for one
Because I don’t know what else to do

And no one ever asks me
What I need

Son:
I can't believe it's come to this
I can learn
If you teach me
I remember not so long ago
When I wanted to learn
Everything I could
To teach my little sister
I wanted to learn
Everything I could
So I could go to college
And get a good job
To make my mama proud
And help her with her bills
Now I just make things worse
I'm starting to believe
What they say about me
Maybe I deserve "juvie"
Like my uncle got
Even though I can't say
I've ever wanted to
Hurt someone
I just want to be left alone
So I can learn
But no one ever asks me
What I want

How the School-to-Prison Pipeline is Created

If you finished the poem feeling despondent, then your feelings mirror those I had while writing it. What else did you feel? Where did those feelings stem from? How do you imagine feeling if you were this young boy or his mother? What could have been different for this family? Every time I reread this poem, I am heartbroken anew at how many junctures there are where things could have gone differently.

I was driven to write this poem out of the desperation I feel having worked both as a lawyer and a social worker with countless young people who are bruised and battered from hitting the interior sides of the pipeline. There are multiple places in the poem where the mama and son expressed a desire to have their needs and wants heard but no one was listening to them. Years ago, I worked with an African-American elementary school student, who had been placed in kinship foster care with a loving, devoted grandmother. She attended every school meeting I ever participated in, and there were many, regarding her grandson. She and I both asked

frequently during those disciplinary meetings if there were any identified triggers that seemed to be causing his negative behaviors as well as anything positive that could be shared about him. Responses ranged from eye-rolling to snorts to “it’s impossible to focus on anything positive when he keeps disrupting class.” At home, he was kind and caring towards his younger siblings and cousins, most of whom were also in the care of his grandmother, so she was perplexed by his negative behavior at school. More than half of his elementary school career passed before he broke down and told his grandmother about the persistent, aggressive bullying he faced at school. His “outbursts” in class, which were being punished with increasing penalties, were his attempts to protect himself, including leaping out of his chair with a yelp when a lighter was being flicked against the back of his neck. When she asked him why he had waited so long to tell her, his muffled response from within her affectionate embrace broke her heart, “I didn’t want to make trouble for you. I did try to tell my teachers but they never did anything and then those kids just treated me worse and worse.”

More recently, I worked with a very similarly situated middle school student, who also reported telling his teachers and school administrators about being bullied. He did not dress or play sports or have the same interests as many of the other male students in his middle school. He was a talented dancer but faced constant taunting for his involvement in dance and the clothes he wore. He was given detention and suspended multiple times for self-protective reactions, which were typically last resorts as he did everything he could to avoid his tormenters. His angry grandmother alienated school personnel as she zealously advocated for her grandson. I found myself feeling the same anger as I heard excuses made for the bullying coupled with strict adherence to discipline policies which penalized the tormented student.

As a school social worker, I participated in many discipline-related meetings where my purported role was to share issues that I uncovered during home visits that directly influenced student behavior. However, the school system’s zero tolerance policies often mandated the student’s removal, regardless of the issues I found and my advocacy for alternative solutions. Students and parents were invited to these meetings where they were simply informed of the student’s suspension or expulsion. I found the same to be true when I was involved as a lawyer representing students in school discipline cases. One of my most memorable involved a mandatory expulsion for a high school student who was accused of bringing a weapon to school. The weapon, discovered when the student walked through a metal detector at the entrance of his school, turned out to be a razor that was embedded in a CD opener the student had received on a school-sponsored field trip. I found myself incredulous as the facts unfolded and were presented to a school administrator, who was unwilling to budge on zero tolerance policies that “were put in place to protect students.” How was the student I was representing a risk to other students? He didn’t even know he had a razor in the plastic CD opener he picked up at the table of an advertising sponsor at the electronics fair he attended with his class. What about the protections he deserved?

Often when the school-to-prison pipeline is discussed, school policies, like zero tolerance, are brought up because they tend to punish and exclude certain students, which leads to a premature exit from school and entrance into the juvenile justice system. Many school districts hold onto these policies in spite of the fact that studies have found they do not improve school safety but

rather have negative effects on student behaviors and increase the likelihood for further disciplinary problems (Teasley, 2014; American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). “In general, punishment serves to restrain a child temporarily but does little to teach self-discipline directly” (Amstutz & Mullet, 2005, p. 11). Furthermore, I have found that children and youth typically act out behaviorally to meet an unmet need. If we are so busy punishing them and sending them further along the school-to-prison pipeline, we lose the opportunity to uncover that underlying need and address it directly.

The Pervasive Nature of the Pipeline

Even when zero tolerance policies were not in place or triggered by an event, the responses to students’ difficulties were often mind boggling. Not only were they illogical but they served to funnel students faster through the pipeline. I could never wrap my mind around suspending students, even more so, sending them to juvenile detention, for truancy. Is punishing students by suspending them the best we can do to encourage school attendance? In the majority of attendance-related meetings I attended over the years, truancy was rarely the problem but rather a symptom of a greater need, like escaping harassment and bullying and/or needing to help provide financial support to the student’s struggling family. I will never forget the truancy meeting where we learned that a 16-year-old Latino student was working full-time, including closing for a local fast food restaurant, because his mother had lost her job and he was the only one in the family bringing in any income. He was late to school because when he got home around 2 a.m. each morning he was trying to do his homework before falling into bed. He had multiple alarms set in his room but often slept through them and arrived to school late. He was suspended for his heroic efforts.

The trend towards suspending students for “typical adolescent developmental behaviors as well as low-level type misdemeanors: acting out in class, truancy, fighting, and other similar offenses” has occurred across school systems but particularly, in those that are overburdened and underfinanced (Mallet, 2016a). My experiences also suggest that the pipeline is widening and lengthening, and some children, like the son in the poem, are born on the inside as opposed to entering from the outside. “The injustice of inequality actually precedes birth as its corrosive effects are at work already in the womb” (Komlos, 2015). Komlos, a professor emeritus of economics and economics history, describes many of the factors this mother experiences in the poem—stress, anxiety, poor nutrition, abuse, and infrequent doctor visits or no visits at all, as having a deleterious impact on a child’s life long before he enters school. If a child is lucky enough to be born healthy, chronic stress in early childhood impacts cognitive development, making it harder for him to concentrate, control impulses, and follow directions (Snellman, 2015). These behaviors often lead to problems as soon as the child starts school. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, disparities in the children receiving out of school suspensions start as early as preschool with black children receiving more school suspensions than their white peers (U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Additional studies of school exclusion report evidence of disproportionate punishment, particularly based on race, sexual orientation, and ability (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Mallett, 2014; Snapp, Hoenig, Fields, & Russell, 2015; Wilson, 2013).

Restorative Justice as a Dismantling Tool

It is easy to feel hopeless when confronted with the realities of the school-to-prison-pipeline; however, increasing evidence is finding that school discipline codes, including zero tolerance policies, can be modified to include alternatives, which actually improve school environments and make schools safer for all students (Mallett, 2016b). Restorative justice is a promising philosophy and set of principles, which can disrupt and dismantle the pipeline when it is embraced whole-heartedly and implemented effectively. It can have many different applications but it is based on an alternative paradigm of justice that focuses on healing and relationship building rather than punishing (Zehr, 2002; van Wormer, 2004). Several school districts have successfully implemented restorative justice programs, including ones in California and Illinois (Skinner, Silverman, & Frampton, 2010; Ashley and Burke, 2009). A restorative justice approach can be used with a specific incident but it is even more transformative as a proactive measure to bring people together as a way of building community and strengthening relationships before problems arise (Morrison & Vaandering, 2012).

For the son in the poem, a restorative justice circle convening would have given him a chance to be heard. He would have been asked to identify his needs as well as his responsibilities. The restorative justice process is about seeking solutions together. It is not about pointing fingers at the student misbehaving or the administrator suspending but giving both the chance to identify their needs and responsibilities and then creating accountability to each other, which builds relationships rather than reinforcing anger and isolation.

I have witnessed firsthand the marked difference in demeanor of a student sitting in a meeting where he is being punished versus a restorative justice process where he is being asked to participate in finding a solution. The student leaving the disciplinary meeting was suspended and angrily left the building escorted by school security. The student leaving the restorative justice process was committed to taking responsibility for his behavior while receiving support and resources to meet his identified needs. As he left, he shook hands and made eye contact with all participants before heading to a room where he was given time to write and reflect on the process. The student who was suspended possibly learned a school rule and the consequence for breaking it; the student who participated in the restorative justice process had the opportunity to develop important life skills, like empathic listening, collaboration, creative problem-solving, responsibility, and self-awareness.

Uniting to Pull the Pipeline Apart

Societal factors and institutional practices that lead to inequities, marginalization, and oppression can be identified all along the pipeline. It seems to me we cannot expect vulnerable young people to willingly participate in restorative responses to disciplinary incidents if we are unwilling to employ those restorative approaches to address the systemic marginalization and oppression that impacts their daily lives. Resiliency is evident in the continued efforts of vulnerable children and youth to resist the pipeline but too often hope wanes as efforts prove useless. As the poem progresses, you can hear the despair and defeat creep into the son's voice.

What might have been different for the family in the poem if there had been more resources and support available early on? What might have been different for them if the principal had offered a restorative justice process as soon as the son started “getting into trouble” instead of sending him home to an empty house or a parent who was in danger of losing her job by missing work to be there? How can we ensure that our school environments foster open, inclusive communities as opposed to rigid, oppressive pipelines? In an educational setting, should we not view every incident as an opportunity to provide our children and youth with valuable life skills?

I believe we must create spaces for voices, like those of the mama and son in this poem, to be heard and their needs considered in order to interrupt the pipeline, and hopefully, ultimately dismantle it. We also need more research on how restorative practices benefit students and school communities as opposed to exclusionary practices, like zero tolerance policies. When the pipeline is reinforced and stream-lined, it not only negatively impacts our vulnerable children and youth, it threatens us all.

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