

# THE CRIMINALIZATION OF STUDENTS IN SCHOOLS <sup>1</sup>

## ADULTISM, ZERO-TOLERANCE POLICIES, AND EDUCATION

### Elementary Education

Creating a safe and comfortable classroom environment is a goal for every teacher. However, zero-tolerance and strict discipline policies should not be implemented to make students feel like criminals. The job of the teacher is to use the "teachable moments" when a student makes a bad choice and teach about what other options and choices the student could have made. By simply suspending and expelling students we are missing the chance to grasp these "teachable moments" and use them. I personally believe that at the elementary school level most of the discipline regarding students should be dealt with by that student's classroom teacher. In extreme cases, I believe the parents and principal should become involved. The ideas of police officers handling discipline at the elementary school level seems over the top and unnecessary. By allowing zero-tolerance to take control of our school, we are losing the chance to set good example for our students and teach them about becoming good citizens. I found the following quote to be very relevant to the role of a teacher in a child's life and the importance of seizing the "teachable moment":

"Also, a policy that results in expulsion will sever any positive attachment students may have in school, since expulsions minimally bar students from returning to school for the remainder of the year. While students who violate zero-tolerance policies may not have strong attachment at home, there is a possibility that they have an attachment to a parental figure at school" (Mongan and Walker, 2012).

### K-12 Education

Education is deeply affected by Adultism. Previously outlined are historical events that increased Adultism in schools, as well as the current environment. According to the Advancement Project (2012), we can see effects in education in six ways:

- 1 Academic Difficulties
- 2 Truancy
- 3 Acting Out
- 4 Self-Defense
- 5 Psychological Trauma and Mental Health Consequences
- 6 Dropping Out or Being Pushed Out of School

Most importantly, the intersections of Racism, Classism, Ableism, and Heterosexism described on the Current Status page create an environment that systematically restrains particular groups of students from attaining social and economic success, particularly male youths of color.

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<sup>1</sup> From the website Adultism and the Criminalization of Students in the Schools. This section accessed 13 Nov 2016 at <http://957414677668313364.weebly.com/effects-on-education.html>.

**EFFECTS ON EDUCATORS**

Student misses class time, falls behind, becomes frustrated or embarrassed, and becomes more disruptive.

Teacher has to take time to catch student up, taking time away from other students and hurting overall academic performance.

Student's actual problem not addressed, and alternative behaviors not taught, making it likely misbehavior will be repeated.

Student becomes less connected to school, less trusting and more resentful of teachers, more likely to engage in risky and unlawful behaviors, and harder to teach.

Increasingly alienated student contributes to overall deterioration of learning environment.

Student resentment of what is experienced as oppressive conditions makes it more difficult to create productive and healthy learning environments.

Culture of violence and hostility created in school, making teachers less safe.

**Unnecessary Pushout of Students Using Harsh Disciplinary Practices**

**Unnecessary Criminalization of Students Through Arrests, Referrals, and Overall Police/Security Presence in Schools**

**EFFECTS ON LAW ENFORCEMENT**

Student left at home or in the street, often unsupervised, making criminal activity more likely.

Student more likely to drop out of school, making criminal activity more likely.

Student who enters the justice system may become more dangerous and more likely to commit future crimes.

Student resents excessive involvement of police, becomes distrustful and even hostile toward law enforcement generally. Law enforcement is less effective, compromising safety.

Being forced to spend time on minor or trivial matters takes law enforcement personnel away from more serious criminal behavior, compromising public safety.

Chart is taken from Advancement Project, 2013

# ADULTISM AND THE FIVE FACES OF OPPRESSION

## Exploitation

Students in low-income schools with severe discipline policies set into place are often educated in a military like system. Some of the students expelled from public schools are also passed on to military schools. This is a form of exploitation because it prepares these students to go into the military after high school. Often, students are not asked if this is a profession they would like to pursue but rather "recruited" at a young age. This is sending a message to students that they not worthy of a college education, and are therefore expendable.

## Marginalization

Students face marginalization when criminal charges are brought against them for school based arrests. This often leaves students with a criminal record which can affect their chances of getting into college, receiving scholarships, or being hired for a job.

## Powerlessness

Students are treated as "childlike" and therefore considered not capable of making decisions for themselves. Due to their lack of choices and severe consequences to behavior students are powerless. By not allowing students to make their own choices like adults, but then holding them accountable for their actions on the same level as an adult is a severe injustice. The students are put into a situation where they have to take orders daily, but rarely have the right to give them.

## Cultural Imperialism

Students often have the feeling of "double consciousness" where they begin to look at one's self through the eyes of others. Therefore, when we continually treat students as if they are criminals, they start to internalize these perceptions.

## Violence

Violence is brought against students in many forms. One form that is shockingly still taking place in our schools is corporal punishment. In nineteen of our states, corporal punishment is still allowed in schools. This makes it legal for a teacher to physically hit a student, but not for a student to hit a teacher. Violence is also enforced in a form of verbal abuse, in the way students are talked down too and treated with disrespect.

## References

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