School-to-Prison Pipeline

It strikes a special chord in me every time I meet someone—someone in the field of education, especially—who has never heard of the school-to-prison pipeline. Ask a teacher or principal about it, and expect little more than a polite nod and smart use of context clues. No offense, but I’ve gotten that “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but something tells me I should” response more than a few times. I assume the problem is one of semantics. The term is not exactly part of everyday lingo, and across activist circles the mind-blowing idea that kids get funneled from systems of education to systems of criminal justice has been captured by a number of other nifty metaphors. I can think of three.

Metaphor One: Schoolhouse-to-Jailhouse Track

A close cousin to the language that I use is schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track. Both phrases highlight the fact that my profession is hardly the great equalizer it’s hyped up to be. But the phrase schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track points to something specific: It can be traced to work done by lawyers at the Advancement Project, a civil rights organization, who wanted to name the on-the-ground realities of “zero-tolerance.” By now, zero-tolerance in our schools and workplaces is as common as dirt, but most 1980s babies are too young to remember how things got this way; I know I can’t. The spike of juvenile
homicides, the resulting public panic, the racially coded media frenzy around teenage “superpredators,” and the passage of federal and state laws to mete them out—somehow, it all went over my head. To tell the truth, I was well into my doctoral studies when I caught up on this bit of U.S. history. And for a long while after, I carried a heavy stack of books and reports around in my catchall backpack, whipping them out like Bibles when I needed direction.

One spring semester I taught a class on urban educational policy, and the topic of “bad kids” emerged as a particular favorite among my students. Most everyone wanted to know how to run a tight ship, stay sane, and keep safe with so many “troublemakers” and “class clowns” in contemporary public schools. Whenever I pushed people to unpack the beliefs embedded within this kind of philosophy and everyday language, things always got ugly. Public schools were equated with city schools, and city kids with cultural poverty and dysfunction. The stock stories commodified by the mainstream media—the news, Hollywood films, cable network television, and the music industry—about pathological and dangerous youth poured. And the grapevine, with its salacious tales from the field, was cited as proof positive that some children—mostly poor kids and kids of color—will inevitably fall through the cracks.

As lively as these discussions were, no one ever seemed to want to talk about the connections between how we think and talk about children and how we treat them in social and academic contexts. A hush usually fell over the crowd when I suggested that demonizing ideology and discourse enables a whole web of relationships, conditions, and social processes—a social ecology of discipline—which works on and through the youth who rub against our understanding of “good” students. Part of my students’ silence was certainly rooted in the fact that challenging and unlearning what we assume we know is uncomfortable, and that finagling around contradictions and tensions is easier than diving into and grappling with them. But I discovered that profound ignorance also accounted for the group of 25 future teachers’ resistance to a deeper examination of the conversation around “bad kids.” Herein lay the teachable moment that I seized by reaching into my bag.

The schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track conjures a vivid, evocative and unambiguous image: poor and Black and Brown children being derailed from academic and vocational paths, and directed toward jails and prisons. Each year, as Civic Enterprises, a public policy firm reported in The Silent Epidemic (2006), almost one-third of all public school students and nearly one-half of all youth of color do not graduate high school with their class. The problem is particularly acute for African Americans, who represent about 15% of those below the age of 18, but make up 14% of all school dropouts, 26% of all the youths arrested, 46% of those detained in juvenile jails and 58% of all juveniles sent to adult prisons (Coalition for Juvenile Justice, 2006). This is not an ideological claim; the numbers speak for themselves.

Whole bodies of scholarship convey the magnitude of the plight facing Black adolescents, especially males, in our public schools. At all levels of the K-12 school trajectory—elementary, middle, and high—Black boys lag behind their peers academically. On every indicator associated with progress and achievement—enrollment in gifted programs, Advanced Placement classes, and otherwise enriched courses—Black males are vastly underrepresented. Conversely, in every category associated with failure and distress—discipline referrals, grade retention, and dropout rates—Black males are overrepresented (Nogueria 2008; Schott Foundation, 2004, 2010). Black boys have the lowest graduation rates in most states; nearly half of all Black adolescent males in the United States quit high school before earning a diploma.

My teacher education students sat up a little straighter when I pointed to the published material about the ways in which contemporary educational policies and practices—such as school discipline and the application of special education categories—work together to move young people like him from schools to jails.

School Punishment

It surprised them to learn that in 1994 federal legislation mandated a 1-year expulsion for any public school student in possession of i
firearm on school grounds (Advancement Project, 2005). Shortly thereafter, the Safe School Act revised and broadened the law to prohibit any student from bringing a “dangerous weapon”—just about anything that looks harmful—to school. Predictably, the number of school expulsions exploded, and disproportionately affected Black youth.

Zero Tolerance: Resisting the Drive for Punishment in Schools (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001), a book that I assigned to the class, was written in response to this reality. Contributing authors to the edited volume examine the dangers of zero-tolerance policies and explore alternatives; they tell stories from the ground floor of schools and classrooms; they examine the legal precedents that zero-tolerance policies bring in; they look at how the media enable and promote zero-tolerance, and what it means for students with disabilities; they deal with broad issues of race and racism in education, and the political economy that supports zero-tolerance; and they provide the statistical landscape of the problem. In the closing chapter, Michelle Fine and Kersha Smith (2001) synthesize the research to assess the impact of zero-tolerance policies, given their intended purposes and “unintended” consequences. They argue, in a succinct and concise way, that zero-tolerance policies are neither effective nor worth their salt, that they are neither equitable nor educational. Fine and Smith note, “They do not make schools safer; they produce perverse consequences for academics, school/community relations, and the development of citizens; they dramatically and disproportionately target youth of color; and they inhibit educational opportunities” (p. 260).

In response to a flurry of books and reports by academics, organizers, and journalists that effectively show how zero-tolerance punishes select students by depriving them of an education, some school districts have scrapped these policies. In Chicago, where I live and work, zero-tolerance policies in the district’s schools were abolished in 2006 in favor of restorative justice approaches to harm and healing, but the number of suspensions has nearly doubled since then. Black boys in my hometown are five times more likely to be suspended than any other group of students in the city’s public school system (Catalyst Chicago, 2009). Black boys comprise 23% of the district’s student population, but amount to 44% of those who are suspended, and 61% of those who are expelled. One in four Black boys was suspended at least once in 2008. Black boys are the only group of Chicago Public School students whose suspension rates are higher in elementary school than in high school. In suburban Cook County, where my brother went to school, the racial disparity is also apparent: Black boys accounted for just 11% of students, but made up 35% of those suspended at least once and 44% of those expelled. At mixed-race schools, where Black male students comprise just 12% of enrollment, they make up 30% of those suspended and 54% of those expelled. The risk is great even at all-Black and predominantly Black schools, where the overall rate of suspensions and expulsions is highest.

The problem is much bigger than Chicago, however. Black youth, particularly males, are more likely than any other group in the United States to be punished in schools, typically through some form of exclusion. Black students are disciplined more frequently and harshly than their peers for less serious and more subjective reasons, such as disrespect, disruption, excessive noise, threats, and loitering, among others (Skiiba, 2001). As unbelievable as the overdisciplining of Black students may seem to well-intentioned adults, it is all too real for the youth who experience it. Young people are sharp and extraordinarily attentive to their own thinking and the thinking of others. They know intuitively what we have spent more than 30 years documenting; they are well aware of these disciplinary discrepancies (Ferguson 2001; Vavrus & Cole, 2002).

Rosa Hernandez Sheets (1996) reported that most students in an urban high school where she researched believed that race and racism were critical to the application of discipline. Although White students and teachers perceived racial disparity in discipline as being unintentional and unconscious, students of color saw it as conscious and deliberate, arguing that teachers often apply classroom rules and guidelines arbitrarily to exercise control or to remove students with whom they do not like. In particular, Black students felt that a lack of respect, differences in communication styles, disinterest on the part of teachers, and purposeful marginalization were the primary causes of many disciplinary moments.
More than 10 years ago (2001), Ann Ferguson conducted a study of Rosa Parks Elementary School on the West Coast—where Black boys made up one-quarter of the student body, but accounted for nearly half the number of students referred for discipline; where three-quarters of those suspended were boys, and four-fifths of those were Black; and where Black males as young as 10 and 11 were routinely described as “at-risk” of failing, “unsalvageable,” or “bound for jail.” She tried to understand empirically what my class was engaging in theoretically: how school labeling practices and the exercise of rules worked as part of a hidden curriculum to marginalize and isolate Black boys in disciplinary spaces and brand them as criminally inclined. To explore these processes, Ferguson paid attention to everyday life at the school, observing all the sites to which she was given access and talking to kids and adults about their beliefs, relationships, and the common practices that give rise to a pattern in which the children who are sent to disciplinary spaces in school systems all across the United States are disproportionately Black and male.

In *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ferguson, 2001), another text on our reading list, Ferguson described what she found. Peering through a critical perspective, which presumes that schooling is a system for sorting and ranking students to take a particular place in the existing social hierarchy, Ferguson saw that the politics of “misbehavior” played out in the labeling of Black students as substandard or deficient and in the application of school rules. She learned that what counts as “proper” behavior was filtered through stereotypical representations, beliefs, and expectations that school adults held about their children. Black boys, in particular, were refracted through cultural images of Black males as both dangerous and endangered, and their transgressions were framed as different from those of other children. Black boys were doubly displaced. As Black children, they were not seen as childlike, but as “adultified”; their misdeeds were “made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naiveté” (p. 83). As Black males, they were denied the masculine dispensation constituting White males as being “naturally naughty”; they were discerned as willfully bad (p. 80). 

Perhaps Ferguson’s greatest insight was that the youth themselves were acutely “aware not only of the institution’s ranking and labeling system but of their own and other children’s position within that system” (p. 97), a perceptivity that shaped some of the boys’ processes of disengaging from school.

The research is clear: Those who are absent from school—physically or mentally—perform poorly and are at risk of dropping out. A report published by the Civil Rights Project, a university-based thin tank, notes that:

Suspension is a moderate to strong predictor of a student dropping out of school; more than 30% of sophomores who drop out have been suspended. Beyond dropping out, children shut out from the educatic system are more likely to engage in conduct detrimental to the safety of their families and communities. (Civil Rights Project, 2000, p. 13)

Excessive discipline is often a critical first step out of schools for select youth—Black boys, in this case—who disproportionately find themselves in prison.

**Special Education Categories**

Being labeled as “disabled” nudges the other foot out of the schoolhouse door. We’ve known for decades that Black kids, especially your Black males, end up in subjective disability categories more often than other children. Critiques of the disproportional placement of Black youth in special education began circulating—at least among academics—as early as the 1960s, when people began to notice that schools had devised new ways to subvert the Supreme Court’s 1954 desegregation decree (Dunn, 1968; Ferri & Connor, 2006). The story of the over-representation of youth of color in special education is a familiar one, but the numbers are no less unsettling. Black children constitute about 17% of all students enrolled in school, but they account for 33% of those identified as cognitively disabled. Black students are nearly twice as likely to be labeled “learning disabled” as White students, almost twice as likely to be labeled “emotionally disturbed” as White students.
and three to four times as likely to be labeled "mentally retarded." Among all disability categories, mental retardation is the most likely to be assigned to Black youth, particularly Black males (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Parrish, 2002). Contrary to the expected trend, Black boys who attend school in wealthier communities are actually more likely to be labeled mentally retarded than those attending predominantly Black, low-income schools (Oswald, Coutinho, & Best, 2002).

The implications for Black youth of these three classifications in particular—Learning Disability (LD), Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Mental Retardation (MR)—are far-reaching. Students labeled ED and MR have the lowest graduation rates and the highest dropout rates (Hehir, 2005). More than half of all Black students with emotional and behavior problems leave school, and the majority of all students with emotional and behavior problems who do not finish high school are arrested within 3 to 5 years of dropping out (McNally, 2003). Young people without a high school diploma are more likely to be unemployed and underemployed, to earn less when they get a job than those with a high school diploma, and to be incarcerated (Petit & Western, 2004).

The data are consistent and robust, and many smart people agree that disagreement about the interpretation and application of these "judgment" categories is part of the problem. "Neither 'rationality' nor 'science' control the process by which a child is assessed for these disabilities and referred for special education, Beth Harry and Janette Klingner (2005) wrote in their book, Why Are So Many Minority Students in Special Education? (p. 103). Rather, Harry and Klingner noted six perspective-based factors that shaped the outcomes of conferences on eligibility and placement: (1) school personnel's impressions of the family, (2) a focus on intrinsic deficit rather than classroom ecology, (3) teachers' informal diagnoses, (4) dilemmas of disability definitions and criteria, (5) psychologists' philosophical positions, and (6) pressure from high-stakes testing to place a student in special education (p. 103). The meaning of each "judgment" category has been understood differently across states, applied inconsistently within schools and districts, and shifted over time. As the category of MR became overpopulated with Black students in the early years after Brown v.

Board of Education, the new label of LD gave well-resourced families of White children a different and purportedly less stigmatizing way to explain their children's difficulties, to gain access to special services, and to set apart their children's disabilities from those of their peers of color (Ferri & Connor, 2006). With increasing legal pressure during the 1970s and throughout the 1980s to minimize the number of youth of color diagnosed as mentally retarded, the same effects of racial bias that had once produced high rates of mental retardation among this group were expressed instead through LD diagnoses (Ong-Dean, 2009). This contextualizes Harry and Klingner's (2005) report that the number of students labeled MR between 1974 and 1998 declined from 1.58% to 1.37% while those labeled ED increased from 1% to more than 5% and those labeled LD increased from 1.21% to 6.02% (p. 4).

Certainly, some students do benefit from the resources and accommodations that a disability label provides, but research shows that many do not (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1995; Slavin, 1989). More specifically, it suggests that special education is often a dumping ground for youth of color, and that Black boys are especially susceptible to being undereducated—labeled, shunned, and treated in ways that create and reinforce a cycle of failure.

When my students were sufficiently inundated with material, they urged me to help them sift through it and make sense of it all. I broke it down like this: What I gather from some of the literature on zero-tolerance, school discipline, and special education is that these policies are panoptic systems of surveillance, exercises of power used to continuously and purposefully monitor poor youth and youth of color (Foucault, 1977/1995). Black boys in particular are unevenly punished and tracked into educational disability categories in their early years, practices that tend to reinforce the very problems they are intended to correct. And although this is enough to make reasonable people want to holler, even more insidious is when those under surveillance internalize the experiences and labels assigned to them, when they believe the exclusion and isolation has been defensible, and when they learn to condition themselves. Then, Black boys who have been sorted, contained, and then pushed out of schools become
Black men—men whose patterns of hardship are pronounced and deeply entrenched; men who constitute nearly 50% of the adult males in prison; men who have been well primed for neither college, career, nor full participation in our democracy, but instead for punitive institutionalization.

I shudder as I write this. I am reminded that once upon a time, I was as sure as the sky is blue of how my brother got into such a mess—I was so sure that even Chris himself couldn’t tell me otherwise. About 3 months after Chris dropped out of high school, I recall leading him to explain, while sitting at a bistro table in a café, what it was about school that made him want to leave, what repeated suspensions and a special needs label had to do with it, and what a miserable, dream-crushing existence the experience had created. I pressed him to mime the perfectly sensible explanations that scholars had given to me. But this is Chris I’m talking about. My brother’s will is as strong as mine, and he said everything but “woe is me.” “I can’t blame it on nobody else” is the story he stuck to. I believed that Chris was being modest.

Today is not once upon a time, though, and in the span of the years since that spring semester, I’ve become less confident that I have Chris figured out. Not that the schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track doesn’t speak to my brother’s reality, but I am more open now to the fact that it isn’t the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

According to Chris, the problem all started back in his freshman year, which he reconstructed for me a few years ago with the kind of clarity that one can only have in hindsight. On one April morning, Chris said, he sat in the last desk of the farthest row from his English teacher, looking down at a notebook cradled in his arm. He silently read the words “Chris Lord” and grinned, tickled at the flair he had given the name by layering a Southern drawl atop of his distinctly Midwestern accent. “Chris Laud.” Chris had been doodling throughout the first block of his classes that seemed to drone on nonstop. Even when the teacher was conspicuously swaying toward him, rattling on about plot structure, sequence of events, and climax, Chris carefully added a cluster of stars and half-moons in chunky font to perfect the full page.

Chris was 14 and impressionable, though immune to the authority of most adults at the school. The 9th-grade English teacher, with her uncanny ability to deaden the one subject that Chris felt wholly capable of mastering, was by far his least favorite. Chris found it odd that he had been under her tutelage for months and yet she was still clueless about what made him tick. For instance, she had no idea that he thinks like an artist; original lyrics filled the bite-sized memory card of the cellphone she often threatened to take. And instead of tapping into his penchant for literary expression through song, rhythm, and rhyme, she triggered in him the stress of pure boredom that always ended badly. He fidgeted in his chair, took more trips to the wastebasket than necessary, talked, and talked back with impunity. He was also in the habit of escaping, as he had that morning, to the peace of his own mind, where he’d stay until the punishments of class had ceased. Occasionally he’d skip school altogether, which at that moment, he wished he’d considered much sooner.

But then there was the Blessing, a highly anticipated initiation, to mull over. Chris learned the day before that the Blessing would be planned, and here he was, imagining the celebrity attached to his new name with less than 4 hours until the school day was done, and contemplating missing the Blessing? Absolutely not.

The teacher hovered over his shoulder—arms crossed, brow raised—but rather than fight or flee, suddenly Chris went still, clutching his pad and pencil in midair, moving only his heavy eyes to meet hers blankly. They had a captive audience. All 20-plus kids in his class were watching intently, following the length of the teacher’s neck as it first stretched to study Chris’ drawing and then straightened in exaggerated emphasis.

“The climax,” she declared, according to my brother, “is the highest point of a story, surrounded by rising and falling action.” She surveyed the room and let her glare fall firmly on Chris. “For the character, it marks a change for the better,” she said, unfolding each of her hands and bobbing in synch, “or for the worse.” Chris detested the public shaming, but wasted few moments with anger, or humiliation, or wondering why the teacher did not simply call him out, write him up, and send him packing to the Dean’s office, again.
He emptied the warm air in his chest and thanked God, giving gratitude to a power that he neither knows well nor frequently summons, but that somehow came through for him in the nick of time.

A bell rang. Chris remembered rushing through the massive outpouring of classes, down three flights of stairs, and into the cafeteria, scanning the string of tables for a crowd surrounding Geronimo. At 17—3 years older than Chris—Geronimo was the quintessential cool kid, appealing to pockets of students in the school’s labyrinth of a social scene—the jocks, the potheads, the geeks, the thespians, the thugs, and the ghosts who, in a cruel teen spirit, some pretended not to see. Geronimo commanded respect; with a paternal confidence, he was equally adept at throwing his weight around his peers and charming the pants off the skeptics among them. With similar finesse, Geronimo wooed Chris and a flock of nine boys lingering over lunch, rehearsing details and doling out responsibilities to be executed to the letter. Chris, eager to please, committed his part to memory.

It was during English one day the previous semester that Chris had retreated to a remote bathroom in the building’s E Wing, and, upon opening the door, detected the familiar potpourri of tobacco and weed ablaze. He peeked around the corridor and followed the scent to the sink, where a young man was perched with silky smoke roaming overhead. Chris had seen the man around and knew him to be older from his fuzzy mustache.

Chris was about to turn to leave when the man asked, “What’s up, little homey?” flicking his chin at Chris. Chris paused for a moment to consider its meaning. In American lingo, the phrase “What’s up?” is nothing but a casual greeting, often spouted in passing with no expectation or pause for a response. In Chris’ world, “what’s up?” is a complicated code that must be deciphered exactly as it was intended, though no one, including Chris, knows of a foolproof way to do so. Yet he has never confused, let’s say, a challenge to battle with a proposition for sex, or mistook a blithe compliment for a bridge to sustained conversation. And so when the man addressed him while wearing a rogue smile, Chris safely assumed that he just meant he could use some company.

“What you doing over here?” the man inquired, extending to Chris what remained of a slim joint. Though school security guards rarely canvassed the E Wing, where special needs students were contained, he glanced over his shoulders before accepting the offer.


Chris hiked up his drooping pants and leaned against a cool basin to the side of him. The two of them shared a brief silence until the man broke in, admitting that he was a recent transplant from the city’s far south side, which apart from its geography, existed as an expression of Chris’ imagination. From television news, neighborhood tales, and his own periodic observations, Chris had gathered that the city was entrenched with crime, drugs, and violence; city kids were both dangerous and exotic. To Chris, this man—big, Black, and bold—was emblematic of this narrative, which is why his generosity and ease threw Chris for a loop. Chris tossed out the names of the few city blocks that he could remember, hoping for credibility and commonality upon which to build. The man grew up in the hood. With hesitation, Chris spoke of his background, all of it lived with our family in suburbs that were considerably less hectic than the city’s core. Chris was asked whether he belonged to one of the two street gangs that dominated the school’s student body, a question that Chris had prepared himself to answer wryly. “I’m a Vice Lord,” Chris said, having deliberately chosen the least populated group, to lessen the likelihood that he’d be forced to admit he couldn’t prove it. Lucky for Chris, the man needed no evidence. By the time Chris heard soles squeaking in the hall, he did not know how many minutes he and the young man had gone on talking about recreational drug use and favorite pastimes and rap music and girls and clothes. But within seconds, Chris had straightened his pearly white T-Shirt, nodded to the man, and headed back to class, the door swinging shut behind him.

It was only through the grapevine that Chris learned that he had just met Geronimo, who had single-handedly organized some 40-odd teenagers into a clique that was well known, ironically, as the Wild Foes. One week later, Chris formally introduced himself to Geronimo, and 2 weeks after that he was fist-pumped and high-fived by most of
the motley crew Geronimo had managed to band together peacefully. Chris was hooked, and for months he negotiated the tension of bearing witness to and often participating in the group's daily grind without permission to claim the Wild Foes as his own people. But now, finally, happy with Chris' salesmanship, they were breaking bread and going over the particulars of his last moments as a wannabe.

At the designated hour, Chris told me, the Wild Foes met discreetly behind a sandwich shop close to the school's campus, which they had gerrymandered to cut off opposing squads. Encircling Geronimo, the boys assumed a pose beyond their years—shoulders stout, hands over clenched fists, legs widespread—like men on security detail.

From his backpack, Geronimo extracted a worn copy of the Holy Quran and leafed to a page that had been marked by a folded sheet of spiraled notepad paper. He unfolded the note, reviewed its contents, and tucked it neatly into the pocket of his leather jacket. With the rise of Geronimo's palms, Chris first saw every eye shut and every head bow like clockwork, and then he reluctantly followed suit.

"In the name of Allah," Geronimo began, "most gracious and most merciful." The boys joined in the tongue twister: "Praise be to Allah the cherisher and sustainer of the worlds; most gracious, most merciful; master of the Day of Judgment. Thee do we worship, and thine aid we seek. Show us the straightway, the way of those whom hast bestowed thy grace, those whose portion is not wrath, and who go not astray." Though Chris did not understand most of the prayer that he regurgitated on cue, his stomach fluttered, and he bellowed a big "Amen!"

Geronimo noticed, and called his enthusiastic recruit toward the circle's center. Why, he asked Chris, do you want to join the Wild Foes? Wilting under the weight of Geronimo's arm, Chris eked out a hackneyed spiel about loyalty, girls, and big fun.

"For you, my brother," Geronimo concluded, "I give my unity and vitality. I give you my undying love. Almighty!" And just like that, with Geronimo's simple Blessing, Chris Smith became Chris Lord. Later on, at the neophyte party, Chris lost himself in vodka until he grew sick, then hobbled three blocks from home to vomit someplace where the family would not see.

At half past 8:00 the next morning, Chris dragged himself onto his feet, dizzy, knees limp. Chris awoke with the feeling that yesterday's pain was the next day's gain, having come to a crossroads, a space of belonging and authenticity where he hoped to achieve some realistic power over the world within which he lived. After a half-mile schlep to school, Chris dozed through classes and cheered up between them; he walked the hall knowing that word of his initiation had spread across campus. At lunchtime, Chris made his way to the cafeteria where he mingled and schmoozed with his brethren all around. Geronimo was the only one missing. Along with Chris' place at the table came the disappointing news that Geronimo had to report for a stint in in-house suspension. So instead of parleying with the group's leader, Chris sat opposite Doug E., Geronimo's longtime sidekick and substitute, exchanging cryptic monosyllables.

"I like that phone," Doug E. said, pointing to a boy eating alone two tables over with a razor-thin mobile phone on his tray.

"Yeah?" Chris glanced behind him, indifferent. He planned an exit strategy, peeked over and around, sizing up each of four lunch lines.

"I like that phone," Doug E. said again, straight-faced and vigilant.

Back and forth they went like this until Chris finally got the drift.

"Come on," Chris said, swatting the shoulder of a lurking recruit who would do whatever he was told. "Let's get it."

Chris and the recruit, both little more than 5 feet tall and skinny, confronted the phone's owner. "Hey, my man over here likes that phone," Chris said. "As a matter of fact, I think that is his phone," he said, curling his fingers into tight balls.

"Fuck out of here, dude," the other student responded, shooing Chris off.

At first, Chris was more perplexed than moved by the boy's firm dismissal and the speed with which he offered it, taking no more than a nanosecond to see right through the Chris' smoke screen. Chris turned to the recruit, who looked to Doug E., who was observing every move; all were stuck briefly in a struggle of wills, gauging their own performance under bright lights.

And then Chris lunged. He wrapped his arms around the boy's neck, demanding that he give it up! The boy squirmed, wriggled a
way out of the lock, and then he was upon Chris. The recruit stepped in with a sucker punch to the boy's temple. The boy passed out in Chris' hands, flaccid, like a surprise trust fall caught out of obligation. Chris threw the boy to the floor, kicked him for a grand finish, and walked away with neither the phone nor the faintest idea that from here everything would slide downhill.

I don't know how any of this foolishness went unnoticed by my family, as nosy and tight-knit as we are. My people are strict and they have some old-fashioned sensibilities, especially about childrearing. I will never forget my last bare-bottomed whooping: I was 11 going on 21, pubescent, and mortified to receive the most coordinated thrashing-lecture of my life for traipsing to a local Walgreens without my mother's permission. My mother had bad nerves and she didn't set curfews because the idea of my sister and I doing whatever with whomever until whenever was the equivalent, in her mind, of child neglect. Our every move was usually the calculated result of premeditated thought and intense negotiations. My mama did not play. Her mother was another force to be reckoned with. When we were younger, my parents, my sister, and I shared a house on the far south side of Chicago, with my mother's mom and dad. On our long city block, Grandma designated a neighbor's front yard about four houses down either side of ours as the wanderlust boundary, which she dared us to extend a tiptoe beyond. Chris doesn't believe me and my sister when we tell him that we couldn't cross the street without supervision or stay out after the streetlights had come on until our early teens. By then, Mom was in her mid-30s. She had divorced, remarried, moved our newly blended family to a quiet suburb, and birthed the last of her children and her only boy. That is to say, Mom's views had changed about a lot of things.

My mother ruled her girls with an iron fist, but Chris less so. She brought us up in a village of extended and fictive kin. My brother's significant others were his evolving roster of friends. Mom sent me and my sister to public schools with kids and adults who looked like us. Chris went private. Mom was a constant presence in our schools—helping out, establishing relationships, building capital. For Chris, she was constantly on the defense and putting out fires. I am suspicious of people who throw parents—especially mothers—under the bus when children act up. But it'd be dishonest if I said that I haven't considered the possibility that my mother raised her daughters and loved her son.

Despite these differences, my siblings and I belong to the same imperfect, adoring, loyal clan, and everybody in it would be utterly appalled to hear my brother's version of events. Naturally, we'd eventually turn our gaze inward and mine old memories for telltale signs that were somehow missed. If I've done my math correctly, all of this must have happened around 2007, the year that Grandma's cancer began to dictate family matters. What I remember about that period was being absorbed by the tension in our house, the daily grind of round-the-clock care, and the incessant fear of losing someone so instrumental to our lives. When she died, we were crushed.

To Grandma's funeral, Chris wore a monochromatic scheme of black—an oxford shirt, tailored slacks, and an unauthorized pair of designer shades—deliberately chosen to deflect the light of day. Chris wanted to go unnoticed. He wanted to pay his respects undisturbed, in quiet meditation, with a soulful rendition of the hymn "Going up to Yonder" as white noise. Between sips of hot chocolate, Chris explained why. He said that 4 days earlier, the Wild Foes bore down on someone with whom Geronimo claimed to have bad blood and Chris got mixed up in the fallout of retaliation: He was spotted at a local pizza parlor, followed as he left the restaurant alone, chased and clobbered to settle the score. Chris thought the aftermath looked monstrous. He had arrived home late from school, battered and trembling, relaying a half-baked story about random acts of violence. How could Chris begin to explain that he'd befriended gangsters, that the thrill of pretending to be one had been reason enough to join a group whose raison d'être was being bad, that he'd mindlessly carried out marching orders, that some poor guy had felt and avenged his wrath—who and why exactly, he did not really know? What would people think?

Chris said he pictured how the whole scene might have played itself out. His father, Roy, would have taken a hard line. He would have neither believed Chris nor bothered to get to the bottom of
things; instead, he would offer Chris a few trash bags to collect the most essential of his belongings. Roy simply wouldn’t have had it in him to investigate another of Chris’ exploits, the third in as many months. School officials had settled the first. The law handled the second. And before these, there were 5 exhausting years of sporadic problems that nearly pushed Roy over the edge. His face glazed with oil after a 10-hour shift climbing poles for AT&T, Roy would have rested easily, gaze slight and heavy, on a stool at the breakfast bar across from me as I documented the unfolding drama. Chris imagined himself grinning and bearing my paying scrupulous attention to him, asking a gazillion questions, and scribbling illegible notes to later scrutinize and blow up beyond proportion. “It’s just me,” he would’ve said again and again. “Sis, this ain’t got nothing to do with school.” Andrea would have likely agreed and waxed philosophic about how our parents might have handled something like this back in our day. Mom would have blushed—while Roy surrendered, while I wrote, while Andrea reminisced—until she finally collapsed in agony.

These thoughts swirled in and out of Chris’ mind as he was simultaneously nursed and grilled by the whole family fussing over him at the front door. But Chris wanted to say nothing more. He pulled away from the crowd and skipped every other step up to his bedroom, where he hid until the funeral. He was low-key in the congregation, surrounded by countless relatives who, in their own grief, neither doubted his fashion sense nor asked questions whose answers would only deepen the lies Chris had already told.

**METAPHOR TWO: CRADLE-TO-PRISON PIPELINE**

Marian Wright Edelman and the advocates at the Children’s Defense Fund did not trademark the “cradle-to-prison pipeline” in light of families like mine. Still, I can appreciate the utility in any framework that tries to help wrap my head around the predictors of incarceration. In a seminal report written for the Children’s Defense Fund (2007), Edelman writes at length:

So many poor babies in rich America enter the world with multiple strikes already against them: without prenatal care and at low birth weight; born to a teen, poor and poorly educated single mother and absent father. At crucial points in their development, from birth through adulthood, more risks and disadvantages cumulate and converge that make a successful transition to productive adulthood significantly less likely and involvement in the criminal justice system significantly more likely.

Lack of access to health and mental health care; child abuse and neglect; lack of quality early childhood education to get ready for school; educational disadvantages resulting from failing schools that don’t expect or help them achieve or detect and correct early problems that impede learning; zero tolerance school discipline policies and the arrest and criminalization of children at younger and younger ages for behaviors once handled by schools and community institutions; neighborhoods saturated with drugs and violence; a culture that glorifies excessive consumption, individualism, violence and triviality; rampant racial and economic disparities in child and youth serving systems; tougher sentencing guidelines; too few positive alternatives to the streets after school and in summer months; and too few positive role models and mentors in their homes, community, public and cultural life overwhelm and break apart fragile young lives with unbearable risks. (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007, pp. 3–4)

This much I get. Some children are born on the path to prison. They aren’t derailed from the right track; they haven’t been given a fighting chance to get on it in the first place.

Of all the school-to-prison pipeline metaphors, the “cradle-to-prison pipeline” is probably the least off-putting for most people, after the visceral sensation of the imagery has passed. Personally, the phrase *cradle-to-prison pipeline* is too self-flagellating for my taste, too straight-shooting in its emphasis on everything that poor families don’t have and will presumably never have or on what they do have but shouldn’t. Not that sugar-coating the devastation of poverty will make it more palatable, but I can just see it now: all the neo-Bill Cosbys of the world, sasshaying on their soapboxes armed
with the “America’s Cradle-to-Prison Pipeline” storyline, urging the poor—understood as the Black poor—to pull themselves up and “Come on, people.” In fairness, I do realize that there are other layers to the metaphor, so I’ll turn down the volume now—way down—on the bootstrap rhetoric to free up mental space where I can think about them.

If all I took from the term cradle-to-prison pipeline was permission to attack adults who make choices that create chaos for kids, then I’d be missing the point entirely. Beside the fact that choices are inextricably linked to power—the more or less power you have, the greater or fewer choices there are available—they are rarely decided upon in a vacuum. What the cradle-to-prison pipeline really tries to holistically critique is a broad range of structural conditions under which extraordinary family dysfunction and a route to nowhere makes logical sense. It rails against macroeconomic policies and practices like those that inadequately regulate preventative health care, quality education, affordable housing, and living wage work as flat-out wrong and gravely dangerous. As Edelman notes, “Without significant interventions by families, community elders and institutions, and policy and political leaders to prevent and remove these multiple, accumulated obstacles, so many poor and minority youths are and will remain trapped in a trajectory that leads to marginalized lives, imprisonment and premature death” (Children’s Defense Fund, 2007, p. 4).

I am reminded of Michelle Alexander’s convincing book The New Jim Crow (2012) about why mass incarceration—of more than 2 million people at last count—is another piece of this larger social order that is in need of altering. Alexander argues that, much like slavery and the Jim Crow laws of our not-so-distant past, mass incarceration functions as a sophisticated system to relegate Black folks to second-class citizenship. Here, in a nutshell, is how Alexander says the system works: First, the police stop, interrogate, search, and round up an unprecedented number of people, primarily poor men of color, for minor drug crimes. Second, defendants generally have weak legal representation and face strong pressure to plead guilty—which they often do—whether they are guilty or not, especially when prosecutors use their prerogative to pile on extra charges. Third, after spending a great deal of time under correctional supervision—in jail or prison, on probation or parole—the vast majority of convicted offenders are released back into their communities with little more than a bus ticket. Forget rebuilding lives; they will never be integrated into mainstream society. Alexander (2012) reminds us: “They will be discriminated against, legally, for the rest of their lives—denied employment, housing, education, and public benefits.” Assisted by public consensus, White supremacy, and the criminal justice system, “most will eventually return to prison and then be released again, caught in a closed circuit of perpetual marginality” (p. 181).

METAPHOR THREE: SCHOOL-PRISON NEXUS

I don’t know what to do with myself when I read this kind of stuff, except maybe phone Chris, hug my sons a little tighter, and rush off to write or teach as though lives depend on it—all before resettling, eventually, in my cozy roost with some other disturbing manuscript to plow through. Not long before The New Jim Crow, it was my friend and colleague Erica Meiners’ book Right to Be Hostile (2007) that rocked my world. The book unpacks what activists and scholars have referred to as the “prison industrial complex,” or the politics and business of corrections, to which Meiners claims schools are parties. To build the case (which is persuasive from the get-go), she points out that some schools look and feel an awful lot like prisons. Meiners begins by describing the “schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track.” She builds on the same contemporary research on school-based practices that I’ve already described and then widens the frame to show interconnections among education, incarceration, and other important forces. For example, she describes changes in the welfare state and other economic shifts over the past 3 decades, explaining mysteries like stagnation in education-related funding alongside ballooning resources for prisons and policing: Basically, the mainstream media, private companies, and poor rural communities tell us that we need
them, and schools help fill them. Meiners riffs on the creation of sex offender registries to show how schools legitimate concepts, such as “the child,” that require protection and expansion of the prison industrial complex. She addresses the construction and management of identities: “Just as our schools produce gifted children, successful learners, good kids, we simultaneously require and produce the inverse, remedial learners, educational failures, bad seeds, and more” (Meiners, 2007, p. 167). Meiners’ book is hard going, but it helps me see that the conceptual and material movement of young people from schools to jails is neither neat nor direct. For these reasons, Meiners foregoes pathway metaphors altogether in favor of another one: “school-prison nexus.”

There are several ways, then, to talk about the school-to-prison pipeline, each of which offers a rather different lens. The schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track enables a heavy analysis of what is happening in schools, and what harmful policies and practices teachers, principals, and superintendents have some latitude to redress. The cradle-to-prison pipeline metaphor paints many systemic issues with broad strokes to highlight points of conflict and opportunity in family, community, and national priorities. The school-prison nexus pushes us to confront and debunk an even bigger system at work, and what it means for schools and schoolchildren. Not being so sure of myself, I tend to use the safest, most popular, and noncommittal wording in my own work, but name it what you will—so long as it is named.