

JUSTICE 101: SOCIAL REPRODUCTION OR REVOLUTION

Holly Ajala

It's a scene so familiar it's almost cliché: the quiet of a Friday afternoon is broken by the final school bell. As the school doors fly open, hundreds of excited students pour out of the building. The once-quiet streets suddenly fill with groups of friends chatting, making plans for the well-deserved weekend. At the Bayard Rustin Educational Complex in Manhattan, home to six relatively small, independent high schools including Humanities Prep Academy, the scene follows the textbook script—except for one critical difference. Interspersed within the groups of excited young students are roughly a dozen armed police officers stationed at various points along the blocks and intersections leading away from the school. These aren't the PTA moms in orange vests I remember from my own predominantly white high school in suburban Colorado. This is a distinctive NYPD presence surveilling the predominantly black and brown students as they make their way home.

The relationship between police and schools is a fraught one, and debates around whether or not police effectively make schools safer are commonplace. Proponents of increased police presence in schools point to statistics and argue that police could prevent mass shootings, like the tragedy at Sandy Hook in 2012, and serve as a deterrent to students committing a crime on campus (Brady *et al.* 458). Others vehemently disagree, arguing that the mere presence of police in educational settings is disruptive to the learning environment and often in practice ends up criminalizing minor infractions that would otherwise have been handled by school administrators (Sneed).

However, what many are currently debating as an abstract possibility is already an established reality in certain public schools. At least some degree of police presence in schools has become relatively common since the 1990s and is rapidly expanding. According to U.S. Department of Justice data quoted by Kevin Brady, Sharon Balmer, and Deniya Phenix in their work "School-Police Partnership Effectiveness in Urban Schools," "in the late

1970s . . . there were fewer than 100 identified school police officers in U.S. public schools; however by the mid-1990s that number had increased to more than 2,000” (457). They go on to cite more recent data saying, “[i]n 1999, 54% of students surveyed reported seeing a security guard or police officer in their school; in 2005, this number increased to 68%” (459). For better or for worse, some level of police presence in American schools has become relatively normal.

However, the intensity of that police presence is radically disparate from school to school. The PTA moms at my comfortable, middle-class, suburban high school were backed up by a single Denver Police Department “school resource officer.” Meanwhile, at the Bayard Rustin Educational Complex, at least a dozen police officers patrol the halls throughout the school day. At larger urban high schools in areas like the South Bronx, where Kathleen Nolan did research for her book *Police in the Hallways: Discipline in an Urban High School*, students can be expected to wait in line for up to two hours in order to go through a mandatory NYPD metal detector and pat down before entering their school in the morning (42). These realities are often critically divorced from debates that center around recent mass shootings as the impetus for increased police presence. In the *US News* article “School Resource Officers: Safety Priority or Part of the Problem?” Tierney Sneed argues that, “while many point to the 1999 Columbine shootings as the starting point for rapid increase of police presence in schools,” others acknowledge that “school policing is [actually] tied to the broken window, tough-on-crime era when [people] were panicked about the juvenile super-criminals that were going to start running the streets.” Despite the current debate on police in schools being framed as reactions to tragedies like Columbine and Sandy Hook, the realities of intensive police presence in schools is born out of the culture of zero-tolerance policies in the criminal justice system that have found their way into our educational practices, obscuring the once-distinct line between the two systems.

In New York City, the process of obscuring that line was very explicit. Nolan explains how under the national mandate of zero-tolerance, “in 1998, [Mayor Rudy Guliani] placed the New York City Police Department in charge of security and discipline in the city’s public schools” (1). As the 1990s turned into the early 2000s police presence in schools only expanded, with

January 2004 ushering in the New York City Impact Schools Initiative, the brainchild of Mayor Michael Bloomberg, New York City Public Schools Chancellor Joel Klein, and the city's police commissioner, Raymond Kelly (Brady *et al.* 461). As Brady *et al.* argue, "The Impact Schools Initiative was theoretically based on the dual principles of a 'broken windows' approach to crime prevention and a 'zero tolerance' approach to policing" (461). It relied on creating an atmosphere of "order" through high levels of aggressive policing for low-level infractions. According to the Office of the Mayor of the City of New York, schools targeted for the program were those with above average student suspension rates, reported police incidents, safety related student transfers, and with below average student attendance rates compared to other New York City Schools ("Mayor"). The authors also found extreme racial isolation as characteristic of schools targeted for this program, finding that "[New York City impact schools] had the highest proportion of African American students and relatively minuscule proportions of White and Asian students" (468). They also found that, "despite impact schools being among the largest public schools in New York City, impact schools had the least stable and experienced teachers, the largest student-teacher ratios, and the lowest per student expenditures among all New York City Schools" (468). The data reveals that schools targeted by the state for extreme police presence were also the schools devastatingly neglected by the state in terms of the allocation of resources. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the dynamics seen in society at large—where under-resourced communities are often the most heavily policed—were mirrored in the selection of under-resourced schools for intense police intervention.

These parallel dynamics are especially salient in Nolan's work as she articulates how the increased police presence in the high school she studied normalized what she calls a "culture of control" (1). She observes that, "[p]olice and prison language was common place. Students got 'picked up' in the hallways and 'did time' in the detention room" (4-5). The debate over police and school safety obscures the question of how drawing together the educational and criminal justice systems has reproduced and normalized disparities found in society. In his work "Social Reproduction in Classrooms and Schools," James Collins offers a general chronicling of reproductionist thought as it pertains to schools. "The basic reproductionist argument,"

according to Collins, “was that schools were not exceptional institutions promoting equality of opportunity; instead they reinforced the inequalities of social structure and cultural order found in a given country” (34). Collins goes on to specify that “[i]nculcated knowledge and dispositions in class-differentiated social subjects, [prepared students] for their dominant or dominated places in the economy and society” (35). Collins’s work highlights the observations made by Nolan. If we understand schools to be spaces that both describe and inscribe an individual’s worth in society at large, the kinds of dynamics fostered in schools become that much more critical. Not only are students attending schools with policies that reproduce the over-policing they see in their communities, but the reproduction of these dynamics produces students who accept themselves as perpetual targets of the criminal justice system within school walls, in their communities, and in society at large.

Social reproduction theory takes the question of police presence in schools way beyond material questions of safety and forces us to reckon with how we believe certain people should be encouraged to understand themselves and their place in society. If schools are understood as unique spaces for social conditioning, dynamics in schools can continue to reproduce existing inequalities and disparities or be uniquely transformative spaces in revolutionizing the ways we come to understand punishment, justice, and accountability.

Zero-tolerance policies are popular within the criminal justice and educational systems because of how we as a society define justice. The layman’s definition of justice is the “[m]aintenance of what is just or right by the exercise of authority or power; assignment of deserved reward or punishment giving of due deserts” (“justice”). Our understanding of justice and safety rely upon an outside authority inflicting punishment for “deviant” behaviors. It instills the idea that individuals must be coerced into doing what is right either by sanction or the constant threat of sanction. In practice, it encourages individuals to understand themselves as disposable, as simply receiving their “just deserts” for violating established norms. This disposability becomes especially problematic in a context where certain bodies have been historically rendered as disposable. Zero-tolerance policies in schools manifest this disposability in the huge disparities they produce between who is sus-

pended and expelled. According to the Urban Strategies Council "African-American boys made up 17 percent of the district's enrollment, but 42 percent of all suspensions, and were six times more likely to be suspended than their white male classmates" (Brown A13). These disparities mirror those found in the criminal justice system, which uses incarceration as its main vehicle of punishing those found to be acting outside established community norms. Within this system 1 in 3 black men can be expected to be incarcerated at some point in their lifetime compared to 1 in 17 white men (Bonczar). These disparities point to a critical failing of zero-tolerance policies within both the criminal justice and educational systems. They prove that disposability is not inscribed equally on all bodies. They pressure us to radically reimagine the conception of justice that rationalizes these disparities.

Understanding the school environment as an important space of social reproduction, the logic of justice takes on special salience. A radical reimagining of justice and accountability within school spaces can have a truly revolutionary impact on how we understand justice as a society. Reimagining these concepts is already being done in some schools, specifically through the adoption of restorative and transformative justice models. In her article "Opening Up, Students Transform a Vicious Circle," Patricia Leigh Brown looks at the restorative justice program currently offered at Ralph J. Bunche High School in Oakland, California. Restorative justice programs are increasingly being utilized by school administrators who recognize the failings and dangers inherent in the zero-tolerance framework. At Ralph J. Bunche High School, students who are found to be out of compliance with school rules are brought into restorative "talking circles" where students and teachers work together and, as articulated by Brown, "come up with meaningful reparations for [the] wrongdoing while challenging them to develop empathy with one another" (A13). This restorative emphasis upon community, collaboration, and a communal agreement on reparations fundamentally redefines justice. In his piece "Restorative Justice and De-Professionalization," John Braithwaite offers a general definition of restorative justice where "all the stakeholders affected by an injustice have an opportunity to discuss how they have been affected by the injustice and to decide what should be done to repair the harm" (28). It also radically reconceptualizes how individuals are brought in line with community standards.

Braithwaite stresses that rather than being told they committed a crime and then being punished for their indiscretions, offenders are asked to acknowledge their crime and attempt to atone for it. The offender assumes “active responsibility” as opposed to “passive responsibility” (1). Restorative justice understands itself as a collaborative endeavor that critically values the input of all stakeholders, defying the logic of disposability that undergirds punishment and coercion. In practice, restorative justice models have seen great success in the schools where they have been adopted. Within just one year of its implementation, Ralph J. Bunche High School saw a 4 percent drop in its suspension rates (Brown A13).

Responsible debates on whether or not police presence makes schools “safer” can only happen after our socialized conceptions of safety and justice have been thoroughly unpacked. The racialized disparities inherent in society’s current understanding of justice highlights the failings of zero-tolerance and punishment-oriented justice. The premise of the current debate is flawed from its inception: “safety” has very little meaning in a context where individuals have come to understand themselves and those around them as disposable. This is even more salient in schools targeted for police intervention in racially-isolated communities that have historically been seen as disposable. Social-reproduction theory places special emphasis on schools, identifying them as critical spaces that can either reproduce existing social inequities or be a site of radical reimagining. However, reimagining the dynamics of justice and accountability in our schools through restorative justice does not necessarily end the debate over police in schools. While some restorative justice programs have chosen to eschew police intervention altogether, some include police officers in restorative circles as community members. Even if the debate rages on, it is important to reveal and problematize the logic of punishment and disposability inherent in our social conception of justice—not only for the sake of the students walking home on Friday afternoons under the watchful eye of the NYPD, but also for the sake of the society whose future their experiences reflect.

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