

There is a need
for many of us
to move past an
art pedagogy of
qualified
inclusion and
tokenized
representation,
and to
incorporate
what we teach
into *how we*
teach.

“Press Charges”: Art Class, White Feelings, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Albert Stabler

Illinois State University

I reflect on the decade I spent as an art teacher in a Chicago high school where so-called "behavioral issues" are rampant, as well on my experience working with incarcerated adults, in order to explain the concept of the school-to-prison pipeline with the aid of recent research on discipline and policing. I go on to talk about a September 2019 thread in an art teacher group on Facebook. On this thread, predominantly white teachers overwhelmingly called for a teacher who was hit while breaking up a fight to press charges against the student who struck him, purportedly for the students' own good. I examine all of these experiences in light of America's history of racial repression and control, and throughout the essay I reflect on the important role played by teachers' feelings in determining the material fates of students and their families

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Albert Stabler at astable@ilstu.edu

The Power of Feelings

I am a White teacher who taught art for ten years at a public high school that serves a low-income Black and Latinx neighborhood in the segregated city of Chicago, Illinois, USA. My classes comprised a vast array of personalities and interests, and my students brought all kinds of verbal, visual, kinetic, and musical creativity into my art classroom every day, as well as a wide variety of life experiences and cultural knowledge. Over the years they helped me more than I can express, in terms of fostering my own learning and growth as a person and as a teacher. There were great adults in the building as well, but the young people I was able to work with were some of the most perceptive, grounded, gracious, funny, generous, and thoughtful I ever hope to meet.

While I worked at the school, the numerous excellent qualities of the students and the community were not reflected in the material or political circumstances of the surrounding neighborhood, which I walked through every day on my way to and from work. The school is in an area that was abandoned decades ago by both industrial capital and White residents, and the neighborhood additionally suffers from longer-term structural and intergenerational effects of White supremacist violence, including the simultaneous over- and under-policing experienced by similar neighborhoods in the city (Kalven, 2016; U.S. Department of Justice, 2017). There were many students who regularly received in-school and out-of-school suspensions for what were perceived as disruptive actions. While my classroom materials and my dignity were sometimes damaged by rambunctious behavior, more dire consequences were regularly enacted on students by school officials (not to mention parents). In this essay, I plan to talk

about my own secondhand experience of official punishment, within and beyond schools, and how this relates directly to institutional racism on one hand, and, on the other, to art teachers and the culture of art education.

The idea of a school-to-prison pipeline has entered the public discourse over the last couple of decades (Curtis, 2014; Fuentes, 2013; Heitzeg, 2009; Meiners, 2007; Losen & Skiba, 2010; Nelson & Lund, 2015; New York City School-Justice Partnership Task Force, 2013; Peak, 2015; Rios, 2011; Rovner, 2016; Sojoyner, 2016; Thusi, 2011; Urban Youth Collaborative, 2011). This concept applies to schools like the one at which I taught, where harsh disciplinary policies and an on-site police presence contribute to the wider mass incarceration phenomenon disproportionately affecting young people of color. Our school resource officers would at times get involved in mundane incidents, handcuffing students and leading them away. The discretionary powers of parole officers were invoked by administrators and parents. Students not only regularly received lengthy out-of-school suspensions, but would also spend time in juvenile detention.

All of this was brought home to me after I left Chicago and began volunteering downstate at an adult prison, where in 2016 I encountered and spoke with a former student with whom I had worked in the high school, and who was incarcerated in the facility. He knew I was visiting the prison, and stopped by the education building while I was there to say hello. I was glad to see him, since I wasn't in touch with many former students, but simultaneously shocked and saddened to see him wearing prison blues. I was able to briefly talk with him once more at the prison, a few months later, on the date he was being released. As he was already completing his

second sentence at a young age, my relief was uncertain, hoping he would not return. But it should go without saying that the experiences of my former student and his loved ones were far more profound than my secondhand feelings.

On this point, however, White people's feelings and intentions often have outsized consequences on People of Color (Sullivan, 2017). The White art teacher I replaced at my high school was said to have wept at the end of every school day. Near the end of her tenure, this teacher pressed assault charges against a Black student who cut off a lock of the teacher's hair. As the new teacher hired to replace her, I also dealt with feelings of frustration, humiliation, guilt, and anger. On the occasions when I reported infractions to parents or administrators, I too played a regrettable role in the consequences my students received at school and at home.

The downstream effects of White emotions were also keenly felt in my volunteer work at the prison. There I saw that primarily White prison officials would regularly revoke individual clearance and occasionally suspend all on-site educational and rehabilitation programming based on suspicions of romantic feelings between incarcerated men (nearly all BIPOC) and women volunteers (nearly all White). For me, this experience hearkened back to a long history of violent White panic around the corruption of White women (Wells, 2014).

These experiences of encountering White people's fear and disgust were not limited to institutional settings in which BIPOC populations were explicitly managed and contained. In the segregated college town where I moved after leaving Chicago, I saw the suspicious reactions of White neighbors to Black residents of nearby housing-voucher apartment complexes. I then

moved to a position at a predominantly White university, where I encountered indifference and skepticism towards persistent racism, and where BIPOC students reported frequent acts of racial insensitivity from White students and faculty. I have seen a range of diversity initiatives in higher education, which sometimes value the important work of educating White people on campus, enhancing their public relations all the while, but also tend to overlook the experiences and circumstances of BIPOC community members (Kraehe, 2015; Ritter & Dutt-Ballerstadt, 2020a; 2020b). All of these experiences bring to mind a phrase widely broadcast on social media in the wake of Black teenager Michael Brown's 2014 death at the hands of Darren Wilson, a scared White police officer: *Black lives > White feelings*. But it is often the case that when White feelings are weighed against Black lives, the intensity of the former is allowed to overshadow the value of the latter.

School and Prison: Separated at Birth?

Many Black and Latinx schools in low-income areas have metal detectors at every entrance, police officers on duty in the school, and security guards stationed throughout the building (Allen & White-Smith, 2014; Ayers, et al. 2001; Laura, 2014; Na & Gottfriedson, 2011; Reyes, 2006; Shedd, 2015). As history has shown, this state of affairs can't be separated from the visual media created and discussed in art classes. As David Wallace Adams (1995) demonstrates, the mission of the first White-administered schools for Black and Indigenous young people was to educationally uplift children of allegedly uncivilized origins, and this was partly to be achieved through employing round-the-clock surveillance and harsh physical punishment. Instructional programs in art and industrial

drafting played a significant role in both enacting and documenting this purported transformation (Lentis, 2018; Wexler, 1992). These schools evoke early penitentiaries (i.e., sites of penance) in Europe and the U.S. that claimed to offer moral rehabilitation with an emphasis on visual supervision (Foucault, 1977). The rise of harsh school punishment has been linked to high-stakes testing regimes and the deskilling of teachers (Advancement Project, 2010), and I would speculate that these factors have contributed to the formal and informal standardization of arts curricula in public schools that have inherited the civilizing mission.

Pioneering Black educator Carter G. Woodson (1933/2005) argued that instilling a sense of deficiency among Black students was the primary goal of White-run schools following the Civil War. Woodson cites, among a great many other erasures, the exclusion of African-descended artists from the history of classical art, noting that: "In the teaching of fine arts these instructors... omitted the African influence which scientists now regard as significant and dominant in early Hellas" (p. 33). Visual arts education in and beyond the U.S. has a long history of centering White cultural artifacts and promoting violent distortions of groups deemed external to a Western aesthetic canon (O'Rourke, 2018; Ozment, 2018; Sammond, 2015; Wolukau-Wanambwa, 2018). This legacy of marginalization and exoticized representations continues into the present, when even art lessons that include subjective experiences and token BIPOC artifacts tend to avoid larger structural questions. (Acuff, 2014; Kraehe, 2015; Lawton, 2018). In a wider sense, the continuing art education fixation on European and settler artists and techniques could be seen as a minor but not insignificant contributing factor to a

widespread hardening of racialized affect (Ahmed, 2004), manifested most visibly in a racialized expansion of school policies promoting punishment and control.

In recent decades, state punishment has become central to life in lower-income communities of color. The 1990s experienced the introduction of zero tolerance school discipline policies and school-based police officers, as well as the expansion and intensification of the U.S. criminal punishment system, a boom chronicled by numerous authors (Abramsky, 2007; Alexander, 2010; Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Gottschalk, 2006; Herivel & Wright, 2003; James, 2007; Kilgore, 2015; Mauer, 2006; McShane, 2008; Parenti, 2000; Puryear, 2013; Raphael & Stoll, 2013; Richie, 2012; Useem & Piehl, 2008; Wacquant, 2009). In keeping with the analysis of the school-to-prison pipeline, it is easy to see similarities in the ways in which Black and Latinx people receive disproportionately severe disciplinary sanctions as both students and defendants. This disparity pertains not only to their presence in the general population, but in regard to the same infractions (Ferguson, 2000; Heitzeg, 2009; Huang, 2016; Kim, 2012; Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Morris, 2016; Rios, 2011; Skiba et.al, 2010; Weissman, 2014).

I will not deny that, from my perspective, the social atmosphere of the high school where I taught was sometimes fraught with aggression, and I did worry at times about the emotional and physical safety of my students. The institutional response, however, is my primary concern here. In my tenure as a high school art teacher, several initiatives were attempted to deputize teachers as hall monitors, and in-school punishments were constantly being introduced and revised for infractions like tardiness to class, dress code issues, and unsanctioned cell phone

use. Students received long suspensions not only for the occasional fight, but also for more commonplace acts of defiance, threats, and vandalism.

Ever since education began being used to assimilate BIPOC populations in the U.S., White commentators have lamented that communities of color reject educational opportunities and rules of social conduct (Feldman, 2004; Ferber, 1998; McRae, 2018; Pick, 1989; Stoddard, 1923). Lothrop Stoddard in his debate with W.E.B. DuBois (Taylor, 1981), and William F. Buckley in his debate with James Baldwin (Buccola, 2019), offer two among many examples in which conservative White intellectuals have rationalized social disadvantage through narratives of personal responsibility. The most famous liberal variation on this argument may be Daniel Patrick Moynihan's infamous 1965 report for the U.S. Department of Labor, *The Negro Family: The Case for Action*. Throughout this document, known widely as "The Moynihan Report," the unequal historical success of African-Americans is framed by a context of "injustice," but ultimately blamed on an epidemic of pathological "disorganization" within the Black family, exemplified by one-parent female-headed households.

Such falsely compassionate rhetoric is used to explain the ways that institutions, schools chief among them, operate dissimilarly in different areas of a segregated city like Chicago. As in the aforementioned examples, White people express the paternalistic view that people of color are like children who cannot appreciate what they are given, nor be trusted to look after themselves. And so, Black and Latinx people face the additional burden that White people are largely unable to recognize their own oppressive roles (Meiners, 2007). Within increasing BIPOC populations within public schools (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2018), much of the overwhelmingly White faculty and staff (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019) appear to have internalized a zero-tolerance attitude towards all students, regardless of race. While racial attitudes are at the origin of harsh disciplinary policies (Kafka, 2011), and racialized groups still bear the brunt of them (U. S. Government Accountability Office, 2018), it is common for White officials and teachers to claim that such policies are applied universally, and are thus not racially biased. Michelle Alexander (2010), among others (Han, 2015; López, 2006; Wise, 2010), has noted such a colorblind dynamic in America's historically and globally unique explosion of jails and prisons, which, while they incarcerate disproportionate numbers of Black and Brown people, are still punishing more White people than members of any other individual racial group (Nellis, 2016). In prisons and schools, the desire to punish is racialized, and the suffering of low-income White communities becomes collateral damage. The degree to which such a zero-tolerance viewpoint has taken hold among art teachers can be seen in a social-media event from fall 2019 that I elaborate on in the next section.

The Art of Retribution

As of September 28, 2019, there were 19,344 members in the Facebook group "Art Teachers." A post from September 25 had garnered 422 comments by the evening of the 28th, a total that would eventually reach 455. Hundreds of distinct people posted comments. The original post was from someone who appeared to be a White male art teacher, who was punched by a student, whose race was not mentioned, when the teacher was breaking up a fight in the school hallway. The teacher was seeking the group's feedback on whether or not to press charges.

While the notion of restorative justice did receive an occasional mention, nearly all of the commenters, a group that appeared to consist almost entirely of White art teachers, a large majority of whom seemed to be women, encouraged the original poster to press charges against the student.

The rationales offered by commenting art teachers varied in tone. "The real world is a tough place." "Violence is only getting worse, not better; if we continue to muffle and conceal." "Fuck any kid who hits a teacher. What's next? A parent? A cop?" "Unfortunately, he choose his path of violence not once but twice to physically assault two people in that fight. (sic)" There was a distinct pedagogical inflection to many of the comments. "The biggest injustice we are doing these kids is protecting them from the consequences of their shitty choices." "It won't go him any favours if he sees he can act this way and get away with it. (sic)" "Press charges or they will never learn!" "You're doing him no favors by letting it go." "Press charges and know that you are setting up this child to learn a life lesson." Some commenters framed punishment as benevolence, as in this remark: "...you can show grace by walking with him through the consequences." Some opted for melodrama: "Please know that your decision may save someone else's life." And, in another exemplary comment, a purportedly ethical stance thinly veils an expression of outright contempt for the community served by a school. "I worked in a small district that didn't press charges and most of those kids ended up in jail regardless. They wanted to 'help' them by never holding them responsible for their actions and all they did was create a community of jail birds, welfare recipients and drug addicts." Though the original poster at one point expressed gratitude for

those who showed him grace when he was growing up, the bulk of commenters repeated the refrain: "Press charges."

I contributed to the conversation as well. I noted the racialized character of this emphasis on legal punishment, in which a student, whom the original poster stated had recently turned 16, was being treated by many commenters as if he were an adult, both destined to and deserving of a lifetime of incarceration. And I forthrightly stated my view that the police do not and cannot solve interpersonal conflicts. This is a broad generalization, but it is a less untenable claim, in my opinion, than the repeated and uninformed assumption that a student who hits a teacher while fighting another student, and then fails to immediately apologize, is irredeemably dangerous and thus disposable. To me, this idea of permanent and unsalvageable savagery evokes the myth of inner-city unrest and chaos which drove White flight in the mid- and latter twentieth century (Gordon, 2008; Schneider, 2008; Thompson, 1999), and which resulted in the political and economic abandonment of the neighborhood where I taught.

In Chicago I was threatened on rare occasions by students, and over the years I have experienced a degree of secondhand trauma from violence I witnessed and heard about. In no way do I consider violence a trivial matter. I am certain that a number of my students experienced more frequent and severe physical violence than I did as a child. But I didn't care to review my own history on the Facebook thread, as I have done in this article, owing to my doubts about social media as a forum for sustained engagement with sensitive topics. My main concern in writing about this exchange is not with winning the argument, but is rather with the pedagogical and uniquely American insistence on

a vague combination of retribution and rehabilitation as a viable stand-in for accountability and restitution (Kaba, 2021).

Given how little information the original post contained, with little more added later, the clamor for punishment is noteworthy if unsurprising. What I saw on the thread was a disparity between violence experienced as an isolated event versus violence experienced as a permanent feature of the environment, or between the violence someone spontaneously encounters versus the unseen and ongoing violence undertaken on that person's behalf. Needless to say, these forms of sustained and intergenerational violence were not mentioned on the thread. It is ironic to recall the conventional notion that art class offers a space in school that is forgiving and free of judgment. But the emphasis on arrest and incarceration as a positive learning experience is perhaps the most salient aspect of this thread. For well over a century, the paternalism of the U.S. juvenile justice system has echoed the prevalent presumption of superior wisdom among the White educational philanthropists, policymakers, and administrators who assume control of, but not responsibility for, masses of poor and BIPOC children (Watkins, 2001).

Parting Shots

The phenomenon of White people unleashing violence against (primarily) Black people, on seemingly any pretext at all, has a long and tragic history, continuing well past the end of legalized slavery. From 1877 to 1950, nearly 4,000 African-Americans were lynched in the U.S., averaging more than one murder per week for 73 years (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017). Perhaps the most publicized lynching in U.S. history occurred when a Black 14-year-old boy, Emmett Till, was brutally murdered in Mississippi in 1955 for allegedly

grabbing and harassing a White woman, Carolyn Bryant Donham, who recanted her accusation over 60 years later (Pérez-Peña, 2017). Till's death, which helped to launch the 1960s civil rights movement, followed a pattern of lynchings prompted by baseless accusations of Black men and boys sexually harassing or assaulting White women (Equal Justice Initiative, 2017).

A pattern continues to this day wherein White citizens and police officers react with disproportionate violence to perceived threats to the racialized social order. Frivolous calls by Whites to police in regard to Black people's everyday behavior has become a regular occurrence (Fleischer, 2020; Hutchinson, 2018; McNamara, 2019), and majority-BIPOC K-12 schools with on-site police officers have long been settings for displays of severe punishment and excessive force (Adams & Richardson, 2021; The Advancement Project & The Alliance for Educational Justice, 2018; American Civil Liberties Union, 2003; Brown, 2015; Justice Policy Institute, 2020; Kamenetz, 2020; Lee, 2015; Pinkerton, 2015; Ryan, et al., 2018; Shaver & Decker, 2017; Work, 2021). The assumption of authority among White Americans puts pressure on the justice system to sustain a feeling of safety and comfort for White people, at the material and physical expense of poor and BIPOC families. On the Facebook thread I witnessed, one teacher's understandable and sympathetic experience of humiliation, rage, and temporary physical pain was considered, among an audience of largely White teachers, exchangeable for the freedom, opportunities, and safety of a young person dropped into the criminal justice system. While this Facebook thread is very far from a lynching, to me it still offers a textbook example of the overvaluation of White feelings.

There's no reason to expect that the most enlightened school discipline policy will overcome the weighty traumas of historic and contemporary racial violence, let alone the efforts of the best-intentioned individual art teacher. With that being said, I do hope to convince art teachers reading this that their actions regarding discipline do have a very real impact on the lives of young people. Teachers, individually and collectively, can work to change the disciplinary culture of their institutions. One way to do this is by making instruction as meaningful, relevant, and engaging as possible, and for every teacher to integrate their classroom a management approach that is aligned with their teaching philosophy. In other words, there is a need for many of us to move past an art pedagogy of qualified inclusion and tokenized representation, and to incorporate *what* we teach into *how* we teach. Speaking for myself, I did include critical projects on policing and prisons in my own art teaching, but at the same time always struggled (and sometimes failed) to perform some elusive form of classroom management that would allow my students to feel relatively relaxed and safe. Put simply, I want to resist the colorblind presumption that any public space in the U.S. can be racially sanitized, purged of all historical conflict.

For this reason, I don't think a handy list of tips and takeaways is the proper response to the ubiquity and weight of the problem under discussion. Making occasional gestures in the art classroom toward multicultural education (Acuff, 2014) or culturally responsive pedagogy (Lee, 2012) is not as comprehensive and meaningful an approach as incorporating ideas and knowledge of teaching learned from BIPOC communities (Ballengee-Morris & Staikidis, 2017;

Rickford 2016), embracing anti-racism (Rolling, 2020), and drawing on approaches rooted in police and prison abolitionism for leading and managing our classrooms and schools (Abolitionist Teaching Network, n.d.; Kaepernick, 2021; Project NIA, n.d.; Shalaby, 2020). Enacting an abolitionist and anti-racist pedagogy, within which an abolitionist and anti-racist disciplinary philosophy is a crucial element, will be a process that varies from teacher to teacher, classroom to classroom, school to school, community to community. It involves being frank about White people's abuse of power; but more than this, it involves decentering that Whiteness (Carter Andrews et al., 2021), in order to learn from historical narratives that have been suppressed. For White teachers in particular it can involve personal reflection on our social roles (Spillane, 2018), but also involves getting outside of ourselves, and becoming curious about the places where we teach, and about the people we are serving. Listening to students and their caregivers is vital. And, in light of what we learn as White art teachers, it requires getting over ourselves. This means understanding that our feelings matter a great deal less than the lives of the young people we have taken it upon ourselves to care for.

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