

Beat: Politics

Public Schools and Prison

Training for survival

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USPA NEWS - Have American public schools failed the children they were designed to educate? Have they become so institutionalized that they are now nothing more than prep schools for prison life? An in depth look at the American public school system will leave you wondering where we went wrong.

How many ways can there actually be to compare the public school system in America to prison life? Obviously not every school is created equal, so for the sake of argument we shall use the Baltimore City School system as our Petri dish and see what we can discover. The first thing I remember about going to school in Baltimore was the violence. It seemed that every day I was in a fight or looking over my shoulder for the next attack. Violence was a way of life and even though the school did not allow violence, it also failed to stop it. Most fights were over quickly with a few hits and perhaps some humiliation or degradation.

Then you would get the three or four days of followup bullying from everyone who got a sadistic thrill from the experience. The loser almost always was picked on in a cascading sort of motion that went through all of the popular kids. So what was I able to learn from this? Simple. Violence makes you a star. The meaner and more violent you are, the less likely you were to be hurt or picked on. The pretty girls like the guy who wins the fights and the kids who are not as tough as you, line up to be your friends as they don't want to be on your bad side. Violence in the Baltimore City school system was the key to the kingdom. Isn't it interesting that in prison that rule holds true.

The Baltimore City Schools train kids to survive the violence of prison. They teach them how to respect the pecking order, how to climb in that pecking order, and how to thrive in a place where your very life may be in danger. Another aspect of violence is that groups, cliques, or gangs rule the day. Get some friends together and you suddenly got protection. If you are a loner you are likely to be the victim of one of these cliques or gangs as they shall see you as a weak target of opportunity. This rule holds true in school or prison. Numbers equal strength.

The second thing I remember about the schools is the horribly drab paint scheme. I spent so many hours sitting outside of the principle's office staring at those drab walls. A sort of yellowish or graying color or perhaps somewhere in between. The bleakness of those walls was depressing. The windows were barred and a fence surrounded the school. If you tried to go anywhere it was with great difficulty. You had to sneak and evade the teachers, the hall monitors, and the security guards who are actually Baltimore City Police Officers. Trying to escape and cut classes was like a prison break. If you got caught you were hauled into the principle's office and they would call your parents.

Then you got suspended which meant you got out of school after all. Prisons use the same drab colors. They are meant to be a thing to subdue emotions and keep the inmates calm. The doors all are locked just like in school. The windows barred just like in school. The places are surrounded by fences or walls all meant to keep you in just like in school. What is most funny about the last thing is that in school we are told the fences are to keep bad people out and we are stupid enough to believe it. I remember attending a school board meeting and listening to the School superintendent tell the parents that "School is a place to house troublesome kids.

It is not our job to teach them, it is our job to keep them off of the streets while you are at work." Isn't that what prisons are for? A place to keep the unwanted out of the way. In both public schools and prison you are held captive for long periods of time. For children in school, forty hours a week is forever compared to their very short life span. For prisoners the time turns into years but they have at least had to time live. Unfortunately much of that life was in a school locked away from the world and then a prison locked away some more.

The state shall keep you safe. That is what we are taught from childhood onward. "The state shall protect you from bad people. Put your kids in school to keep them safe from bad people on the streets. Put your kids in school where a cop is on duty to protect them. Put your kids in school and we will watch over them. The state is here for you. We shall protect them. think of the children." these are all sentiments I have heard in varying forms for decades. The flip side of that is we can change some words and get the same sentiments regarding prisons. The state is our guardian and schools or prison they shall keep you safe. In many states the law is that

children must attend school.

The law does not say that children must be educated. They go to school to be corralled. To be made docile. To simplify them and break them of unwanted tendencies like free thinking. Sounds like prison to me.

A paper from Rutgers University states, "American schools increasingly define and manage the problem of student discipline through a prism of crime control. Most theoretical explanations fail to situate school criminalization in a broader structural context, to fully explain its spatio-temporal variations, and to specify the processes and subjectivities that mediate between structural and legal forces and the behavior of school actors."

"A multilevel structural model of school criminalization is developed which posits that a troubled domestic economy, the mass unemployment and incarceration of disadvantaged minorities, and resulting fiscal crises in urban public education have shifted school disciplinary policies and practices and staff perceptions of poor students of color in a manner that promotes greater punishment and exclusion of students perceived to be on a criminal justice "track".

In the paper *Preparing for prison? The criminalization of school discipline in the USA* by PAUL J. HIRSCHFELD we learn that the disciplinary system used in schools is nearly identical to that of the prison systems. It makes us ask the questions like, "Why are there police in schools?" "Why do schools have rules that when broken result in criminal prosecutions?" "Why are children receiving only rudimentary educations?" The paper is interesting and though long winded, well worth the read.

Are not our children the future of America? If they are what is our school system training them to become? My grandkids have proven to me time and time again that they are being taught to be snitches. They tell on each other and their friends over even the slightest infractions. As I investigated the why of the matter I learned that the school is teaching them to do so. They have been given questionnaires about their family with questions about smoking, drinking, and drug use habits. They are rewarded for ratting out their friends. In prison, the rat is hated by all but he gets rewarded by the Man for his good deeds. As we see, another example of our schools being turned into prison training yards.

"The school system has been transformed into nothing more than a prison preparation industry," says Umar Abdullah Johnson, president of National Movement to Save Black Boys.

In many schools, when kids act up they are diagnosed as having diseases like ADD, ADHD, and other disorders. So many kids in fact have been diagnosed with mental illness and learning disorders, that one has to wonder what happened to my generation where these diseases were almost unknown. Sure it can be argued they were simply not diagnosed. I argue that the diagnosis are being done in order to get these kids drugged up where they can be more easily controlled.

Guess what? In prison they do the same thing. they diagnose mental illness and prescribe drugs in order to keep the inmates docile and calm. Another example of the school/prison relationship.

In several lawsuits around the country we have learned that kids are being handcuffed in school. They are being treated as criminals many times for minor infractions. This means they are becoming hardened to things like handcuffs and cops and the intimidation factor these tactics represent.

Mr. Johnson, a Pennsylvania certified school principle said, "When you put handcuffs on a six or seven year old there's no need for that six or seven-year-old to fear incarceration when they're 17 and 18-years-old." Think about that for a moment. What the hell kind of cop would put handcuffs on a six or seven year kid. What kind of fucked up cop is that? The answer is simple, it is a cop who wants to see that kid in those cuffs for the rest of his life. It may be because the kid is Black, or Indian, or Hispanic or simply pissed that cop off. It is a sickness and we are allowing it to exist.

My last and final proof of the school/prison connection is perhaps the most scary. In order to effect change in school you need to have an uprising. When the students band together and protest publicly, things get changed. If they riot, the school bends over backwards to make sure it never happens again. The media gets involved and things get done differently. People may even lose their jobs. In prison violent uprisings are the stuff of legend. They can cause change, both good and bad. If there is media attention the prisoners tend to get what they want. If the media is kept in the dark the inmates get the crap beat out of them and things go back to normal. So ultimately in both setting, insurrection affects change.

Now I know you are thinking, "My school isn't like that." Well that may be true. Not all schools are created equal. Some schools are actually places of education. Schools like those in Baltimore are nothing more than a pipeline to prison. Especially for young black men. How can we stand by and allow the system, that is supposed to educate our children, be perverted into nothing more than a jailhouse training ground? Don't you think it is time we did something to fix this problem?

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