



A review of *Prelude to Prison: Student Perspectives on School Suspension* by Marsha Weissman (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015. 301 pp., ISBN 978-0-8156-3376-1) reviewed by Ricardo Y. Smith (Ricardo.smith@cincinnatiastate.edu), Adjunct Professor, Humanities and Sciences Division (Psychology); Advisory Board, Black Male Initiative; Cincinnati State Technical & Community College.

The “prelude to prison” in America is focused on a targeted segment of society which becomes a type of social control propagated by the prison industrial complex within the criminal justice system. One view of social control can involve a societal process used to regulate individual and/or group behaviors. People of color are often labeled criminal according to Michelle Alexander’s (2010) rendition of the *New Jim Crow*. Young Black people, particularly boys become the targets of educational penal codes that promote the prelude to prison (school-to-prison pipeline). In this book, Marsha Weissman is effective in her method of giving power to voice through student perspectives on school suspension. These perspectives illuminate the disparity rates that show how the school-to-prison pipeline is directly connected to race, class, and gender.

More people are incarcerated in the United States than any other industrialized country. African-American men are disproportionately incarcerated at higher rates relative to other racial groups or minorities. Weissman indicates that the prelude to prison concerning youth of color dropping out of school has heightened. “By the time they reach their early thirties, 52 percent of young, male, African American high school dropouts have spent some time in jail or prison” (p. 6). While the U.S. prison system money-making schemes increase via state and federal budgets, funding for public education is continuously undermined, and “by 2009, the United States had imprisoned 1.94 million people” (p. 5). The persistence and use of incarceration is activated consistently through the crime control industry; it is the view of *racialized* prison systems operating through a prison industrial complex.

The “prelude to prison” in education is explained by Weissman in her introduction, she notes that “The role of school in pushing young people into the prison system contradicts the view of public education as a transformative institution in American culture” (p. 6). She contends that despite the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, there has not been total equal educational opportunities before or after the landmark case.

More importantly, the author shows that based on the 2007 Sentencing Project report, there were 905,600 African Americans incarcerated in 2006; this powerful statistical data indicate that now, more than nine times the number of those are locked up today than at the time of the landmark case (*Brown v. Board of Education –Topeka, Kansas*) in 1954.

This very important Supreme Court case illustrated major changes in America but it did not completely end segregation, and the prevalence of incarceration did emerge in mass numbers, especially for African Americans. In 1954, there were 100,000 incarcerated African Americans. This number has escalated to over 900,000 according to the Sentencing Project. There seems to be an illusion of inclusion; a false appearance of racial equality without the reality of inclusivity. There is still race, gender, and class exclusion in many social settings. For youth of color in the educational process, the stressors of zero tolerance policies that foster suspension, expulsion, and alternative schools have expanded the school-to-prison pipeline. The inference of exclusion from zero tolerance policies tend to do more harm than good, relative to the long term repercussions connected to the prelude to prison.

The book explains the *prelude to prison* from education being entwined into the state, perpetuated by alternative schools (exclusion as a type of punishment) and zero tolerance. Weismann is able to give voice to student perspectives that show the occurrence of marginalization through the labeling of kids as “bad” students, and the use of alternative schools and processes for suspending students, although many students want to meet the expectations of teachers and adults in their lives; they desire encouragement that will be the prelude to excellence in behavior and performance.

According to the author, one reason that this school to prison situation persists is because “School suspensions and expulsions have increased despite the rarity of violent crime or weapons possession in schools” (p. 45). Thus, it is the order of re-labeling students that initiates criminalizing their behaviors, and to hear the labels of thug, gangsta, bad kids, or bad people does criminalize student behaviors that can lead to suspension and alternative schools as the school-to-prison pipeline becomes the steady flow of students from targeted communities that play into the stereotypes of criminalization.

The power of negative labels seems to have a debilitating psychological effect on students in academic achievement. And to not succeed academically becomes a type of self-fulfilling prophecy for the labeled suspended and marginalized student who is not expected to achieve excellence. In society, the ex-offender suffers the continual bias of being labeled criminal; once a criminal, always a criminal. Prison administrators and those in society achieve social control by labeling the prisoner as criminal, felon, and deviant. The prelude to prison for the suspended student who goes to an alternative school shows how the child has been “criminalized” via labels and “other” successive behaviors. Yet, students have a different perception of how they are viewed and labeled because of the rejection and stigma tied to the label.

Weismann reports that one student perceived “suspension to be a rejection or dismissal of his essential humanity” (p. 183). Students (youth) are not oblivious to the moral exclusion of being labeled. The expectations of youth from teachers, principals (administrators), school police, and authoritative adults are connected to the labels. When these authority figures see the student as bad, trouble-maker, worthless or a nothing (p. 195), the child may live up to the label through his/her cognition and/or behaviors. “Systemic violence is surely illustrated when a school administrator calls out a fifteen year old girl as a Mike Tyson” (p. 195). Hence, the criminal class is the scapegoat for America’s social ills and people of color are relegated and defined as criminal (Alexander, 2010).

Student perspectives differ from adult views and evaluations on what “kids” think make a difference in education. “In essence the recommendations offered by the youth comport with a significant body of research about best practices in education. Yet educational policy in the United States has neither listened to students nor heeded research. Instead, it has been held hostage to social control policies that place order maintenance ahead of learning” (p. 196). It is significant to note that many students when pushed (with encouragement) to expected higher standards will attempt to reach such established goals.

The essence and importance of understanding educational achievement for future success is not far from the mind of these students who want equal opportunity and equitable treatment. “The kids want to learn and they know that education is important for their future” (p. 208). Students (children) want to make the adults in their lives proud. “The kids want outlets for their anger; they need and respond to adults who give them space to vent, time to cool off, and advise for ways to handle the challenges in their lives” (p. 209). Moreover, “the reliance on zero tolerance is not due to a lack of alternative ways to address kids’ problem behaviors, but rather larger socio-economic issues and structural racism that marginalizes and excludes a large percentage of the US population” (p. 216).

In sum, I concur with Weismann that schools alone cannot change trajectories for poor youth of color, but they can do better at fulfilling the role of opportunity makers rather than prisoner producers. She asserts that schools can eliminate or reduce mechanisms of social control that are pervasive in poor urban schools. Thus she notes that “Zero tolerance policies should and can be replaced with more sensible, student-centered approaches to school discipline that involve changing the whole school culture, teacher training, and involving students in the building and maintaining of safe and respectful school environments” (p. 235). People are still labeled, classified, and categorized in society for power purposes. Labels on students have long term debilitating affects beyond education. Race, gender, and class play a huge role in how people are classified and categorized in relation to power. However, the book provides only a small sample of student perspectives on school suspension as a *prelude to prison*. Nevertheless, this volume is an invaluable resource for leaders and policy makers concerning this “unnecessary” prison pipeline.