



**RECONNECTING YOUTH TO THEIR HUMANITY:
IMPACT OF AESTHETIC EDUCATION ON DISRUPTING THE
SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE**

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Introduction

There's an insidious underbelly to our public school system that is hardly talked about in teacher education programs: the school-to-prison pipeline. It takes our students out of class and forces them into the criminal legal system which perpetuates cycles of poverty and crime. It sets students back years in their educational journeys, decreases their likelihood of ever receiving their high school diploma, and impacts their future success. In short, this system works to ruin student lives, particularly youth who are already disadvantaged. What role do teachers play in this system? Can aesthetic education have an impact on disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline? How can this influence future teacher education programs to better support all students, especially those at-risk?

My Positionality

Before we continue, it's important to understand my positionality as an educator. First, my research was inspired by one of the questions a group posed in class: How do you use aesthetics for political expression or action? Politicians have made schooling political through their book bans and "Don't Say Gay" bills, which is why this question stuck with me. Second, my core values include empathy, creativity, and learning. I ensure that these values are woven into everything I do, especially when I am teaching. Third, I greatly consider my background in theatre and criminology when designing my classroom and lessons because those are two important lenses to me. Fourth, I am working to adapt an anti-racist and trauma informed approach to my teaching. Taking care of my most vulnerable and at-risk youth is critical to my performance as an educator. I believe that we can all thrive when we take care of each other. Lastly, I am most dedicated to preventing and stopping systems of harm, violence, and poverty by disrupting and dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline. This is my reason for becoming an

educator. I believe deeply in the power of art, aesthetics, and community to achieve this goal, thus the creation of this paper.

Introduction to The School-To-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the relationship between school disciplinary policies and the criminal legal system. When schools enforce zero-tolerance policies, students can be sent to the principal's or dean's office for minor misbehavior. Then police get involved which can result in youth being arrested, receiving criminal charges, or getting juvenile detention referrals. Since policing tends to be biased, our Black, Indigenous, students of color are more likely to get involved in this system compared to their white peers. Additionally, youth who are deeply trauma impacted misbehave more often and in more severe ways than students who aren't as heavily influenced by trauma (Guillermo Villalobos & Bohannan, 2017, 8), which is why it's critical for educators to adopt trauma-informed practices. Youth who are considered at-risk either have been involved or are more likely to be involved in the juvenile justice system. A young person's likelihood of being system impacted increases when their risk-factors outweigh their protective factors.

Risk-factors are the conditions and variables that increase a young person's likelihood of getting involved in the criminal legal system (*Definition of an At Risk Youth*, 2021). Risk-factors typically appear in four main domains including individual, family, peers, and school or community (Guide, n.d.). Protective factors are the conditions and variables that work to prevent youth from entering the criminal legal system. There are actionable aesthetic considerations educators can take to increase protective factors for at-risk youth, which directly combats risk-factors. We will explore these impacts later on. As you continue to read, please consider

these questions: what can *you* do as an educator to keep your students out of the criminal legal system? How can aesthetics help you in your quest for justice?

Foundations of Aesthetic Education

Aesthetic education is a research based approach to teaching that humanizes the student experience through arts integration and sensory learning. For decades, our American education system has been concerned with standardization and test scores, thus indicating to youth that school is only for tests and not to seek genuine learning. Student learning outcomes and state standards dictate all schooling, and they don't allow students to be creative or make individual discoveries. However, when teachers implement aesthetic practices in their lessons, they offer youth opportunities to share their knowledge in ways that strengthen their learning. One example is by integrating CRISPA which is a research-based approach to instruction and planning that stands for Connections, Risk-Taking, Imagination, Sensory experience, Perceptivity and Active Engagement. CRISPA can be overlaid with most lessons to heighten the learning experience. The results of CRISPA and aesthetics are endless including how to make good judgements, how to understand multiple perspectives, and how to express feelings in safe, creative ways (Eisner, 2002). Aesthetic teaching transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary and allows for deep, impactful learning. When used effectively, aesthetics can enliven curriculum and change what it means to be a learner. Aesthetics promotes four ideas:

- 1.) The roads to knowing are many. Students are able to explore course material in different ways, find different pathways, or determine varying conclusions. This allows youth to make sense of their own learning in ways that best support them.

2.) The illusion of standardization and its sacrosanctness. Aesthetics cannot be standardized, nor should it be. It breaks the education mold that students are used to and introduces youth to new ways of approaching their learning.

3.) Aesthetic experience can abide against the backdrop of everyday experience - including classroom life. When youth are more engaged in their senses, they can create lasting memories and memorable classroom experiences. They also get more excited about coming to school when they are able to make their own decisions and dictate their learning.

4.) Can aesthetics be reimaged for classrooms? If so, what would be the implications for teachers and students? I explore this question as I relate aesthetic education to disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline. How can we intentionally use this method of teaching to fight the systems of injustice? How can aesthetics impact conversations around oppression and the criminal legal system? Can aesthetics increase a youth's protective factors?

Aesthetics and Increasing Individual, Family & Peer Protective Factors

Aesthetic practices like CRISPA can overlay current curriculum to create and establish protective factors for at-risk youth by targeting individual, family, peer, and community risk domains. Students who struggle with antisocial behavior, emotional factors, or poor cognitive development are more likely to become system involved (Guide, n.d.). By integrating aesthetic lessons, educators help youth build reflective relationships with themselves, discover their values or beliefs, and create deeper connections with their learning. In the example of CRISPA, active engagement, in particular, “necessitates student agency” which aids youth in building their confidence in and outside of the classroom, because they are able to make their own choices

(Saxe & Wilson, 2021). When students engage in lessons that center risk-taking, they learn how to creatively problem solve and to trust themselves and their decisions. Aesthetics may also increase a student's cognitive development which promotes further learning (Saxe & Wilson, 2021), and nurtures "a human capacity that is absolutely central to our cultural development" (Eisner, 2002). Because CRISPA and other aesthetics based teaching methods allow students to make deeper connections, they are able to achieve more academically, which increases their likelihood of graduating and being involved in prosocial activities.

Educators can't fix or mediate familial issues that youth endure; however, they can provide youth the tools to do such. Young people who are at-risk may have conflict with their parents or siblings, or their families may not be positively involved in their lives or schooling. Educators can help combat this by being a trusted adult for that youth. Teachers can be positively involved in the student's learning by utilizing aesthetic methods to expose youth to multiple perspectives, which teach them "to use their imaginations, and to see and understand perspectives other than their own" in a variety of settings (Pinhasi-Vittorio & Vernola, 2013).

When students build their empathy and social-emotional skills, they are better able to handle conflict and find solutions that don't involve harming someone else. This is especially helpful in cases of bullying or rejection, which are the biggest peer risk-factor for young people. "Allowing multiple perspectives to enter the classroom" and imagining "what someone who is different from us may think or how that person understands the world" (Pinhasi-Vittorio & Vernola, 2013) are critical to solving the issue of bullying. This process is safe and structured. In a compassionate classroom, there are more opportunities for restorative thinking and practices to prevent students from being sent to the office for misbehavior. Social-emotional skill building

offers youth the space to take accountability and to repair the harm they may have caused their others; therefore promoting protective factors related to individuals, families, and peers.

Aesthetics as a Tool to Disrupt Systems and Promote School Protective Factors

The current education system sustains damaging cycles of power by focusing attention on standardization and test scores. Through this one-dimensional definition of “excellence” and approach to education, we show students that they are only as good as their grades. Education is also highly controlled, which can put immense pressure on “under-performing” and at-risk youth who feel inadequate and forgotten in the system. It is an unhealthy practice and it isn’t conducive to student learning, because the attention on standardization enhances differences and power imbalances between “groups, individuals, schools and locations” which leads to homogenization of the classroom (Conrad et al., 2015). Aesthetics combats this by putting every student in the center of their learning. It focuses on the individual student outside of grades, test scores, and grade point averages. Aesthetics empowers the whole student to lead their educational journey while breaking away from the chains of standardization. Therefore, more youth have the opportunity to grow, learn, and succeed in school and beyond.

At its core, aesthetic education is a form of disruption. Disruption “refers to a break in the practice” (Conrad et al., 2015). Youth and teachers can easily fall into sameness and redundancy. Aesthetic integration shows students that their experiences are valuable, that their voice matters, and their perspectives are important in the classroom. Aesthetics breaks that cycle to make the classroom fun again and more welcoming for students, including those at risk. It offers different entry points for students to connect with course content, and it promotes safe risk-taking that is paramount to student success. Disruption acts “as a force that blocks a diatribe of power” and it focuses on “a set of new ideas and issues to get at root causes of problems” (Conrad et al., 2015).

There are many power systems that at-risk youth experience in their school systems including peer-to-peer and student-to-teacher. When educators use aesthetics, they can create situations of “thoughtfulness and critical consciousness” where they “find themselves conducting a kind of collaborative research” that disrupts the traditional classroom power models (Greene, 1995, p. 23). This act dismantles all known power structures, which allows educators and learners to work in partnership. Therefore, we can re-vision educational aims that work toward an ontological disruption which “break[s] with convention all together and form new visions” (Conrad et al., 2015). When this type of intentionality is put into curriculum and lesson planning, educators have the opportunity to disrupt other systems that are tangentially attached to education, including the school-to-prison pipeline.

Through breaking these molds, there comes the opportunity to discuss power dynamics and systems of oppression in kind, respectful, empathetic ways. When we, as educators, practice this, we promote social justice practices in our classroom. Our youth begin to view each other differently. They begin to see our collective humanity and they can “come awake to the colored, sounding, problematic, world” (Pinhasi-Vittorio & Vernola, 2013; Greene, 2001, p. 7). An aesthetic and social-emotional foundation creates space for youth to have serious discussions about injustice and oppression. They are able to further explore themselves, seek understanding, and build their self-awareness, all of which impact how they integrate themselves into society. It impacts who they are as people.

Research Gaps & Considerations for Further Research

I offer an analysis of aesthetic education and its *potential* impacts on students, educators, and schools to hypothesize how it could impact the pipeline. More concrete research needs to be done in order to analyze the direct impacts (if any) of aesthetic learning on disrupting the

school-to-prison pipeline. This research would need to be intensive and over many years as a way to track students, their interactions with classroom aesthetics, and their run-ins with the legal system. I'm not sure how this research would be conducted, but I think exploring this question is critical to ask ourselves moving forward. I believe it might be necessary to integrate some psychological research into this work, because not every student's life can be shaped by their education or the teachers they come in contact with. There are other factors at play, and those factors would need to be considered as well. Regardless, students are being harmed by the school-to-prison pipeline, and it needs to be disrupted in some capacity.

Conclusion

The school-to-prison pipeline is a beast that targets our most vulnerable youth. As educators, it can be difficult to feel like we play a role in this system, but our classrooms and behavior management policies promote systems of power and oppression that harm young people. Through aesthetics, we can add humanity back into our schools while disrupting a damaging pipeline. Curriculum disruption and aesthetics let us reimagine and recreate an education system that protects students and promotes their learning at the same time. So, I ask again: what can *you* do as an educator to keep your students out of the criminal legal system? How can aesthetics help you in your quest for justice?

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