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Dignity in Schools: Addressing the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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How can we establish entire systems that first and foremost treat students as people in the image of God – capable of growth and success – rather than defining them solely based on their crime?

Several years ago, Rev. Dr. Harold Dean Trulear's father underwent a surgery performed by one of the world's top five surgeons. Chances for success were high. That's why Trulear was surprised when he received a message calling him home immediately. His father was not doing well. When Trulear arrived at the hospital—preparing to say goodbye—he walked into his father's room to find him sitting up in bed. He was ok. What happened? The nurse had forgotten to change the IV, subsequently causing a heart attack.

His question for us is while someone was certainly investing in the surgeon (enough to be named one of the top five in the world), who was investing in the nurse?

According to Trulear, Director of Healing Communities Prison Ministry and Professor of Applied Theology and Director of the Doctor of Ministry program at Howard University, this lack of investment in each layer of society defines systematic injustice. Systemic injustice exists in many different areas of society, including education. One pernicious form of this systemic injustice in education is the school to prison pipeline. Dr. Trulear describes the school-to-prison pipeline as a system which approaches education in such a way that leads young men and women away from future employment, away from positive life chances, and towards an increased likelihood of future incarceration. And when we don't invest in *each* student, it impacts all of us.

Researchers Wald and Losen describe the school-to-prison pipeline as a "punitive" and "isolating" journey. Examples of punitive and isolating measures include the overuse of suspensions and expulsions (commonly referred to as zero tolerance policies), "restrictive special education programs", and banishment to "alternative outplacements". Not surprisingly, those are the largest predictors for future incarceration.

Trulear tells another story. He is talking to his students about how to help a student who is falling behind at school, and each student is given the chance to suggest an intervention for this student. The majority of students suggest a tutoring program, and here is where Trulear makes his point about systematic injustice. By suggesting interventions based solely on the student's behavior, you make the assumption that there is nothing wrong with the school system. Trulear knows that to be false. The system is broken, and one of its forms of brokenness is the school-to-prison pipeline.

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Systems like school discipline procedures and zero tolerance policies do not affirm the belief that each person can grow and change for the better, and they do not display a value or investment in that student's education. We would never consider using a zero tolerance policy with our friends, and parents would never do that with their children, so how are those kinds of policies helpful in other settings—especially a school setting whose purpose is to provide a nurturing environment for *all* children? Suspensions and expulsions—while sometimes necessary—are decisions to only address a person's negative behavior rather than build on that student's dignity and inherent capacity for success. As part of Trulear's work with prisoner reentry initiatives, he often hears people say things like "I am defined based on the worst moment of my life". If we can only see a student's failures, then it is no wonder that many students who are subject to such school discipline policies often find themselves incarcerated later in life.

We should be alarmed by the deliberate system of over-incarceration of young people in this country because not only does it demonstrate our addiction to sending young people to prison, but it also violates their dignity and worth as humans and as image-bearers of God.

What do we mean when we say *human dignity*? Human dignity is the inherent worth that is part of being made by God. Contrary to popular thinking which generally ties human dignity to human behavior and a certain lifestyle, dignity belongs to all of humanity. When we affirm this dignity and worth, we not only recognize a person's bad behavior, we recognize them as a whole person.

As Christians, the concept of human dignity is fundamental to our way of life. We believe that God created *each* person in His own image; each person carries a little bit of God with himself or herself. With that in mind, even when our neighbors make mistakes, we not only are driven to treat them with respect, dignity, and care, but we also have to believe that human dignity belongs to everyone, especially those disregarded as not worth the investment.

So what should we do about the school-to-prison pipeline? How can we establish entire systems that first and foremost treat students as people in the image of God – capable of growth and success – rather than defining them solely based on their crime?

We invest. We invest financially and relationally and in every other way. And we invest in students while we have access to them in school even if their actions are not particularly admirable. "We invest in what we believe in," said Trulear. If we believe that human dignity and worth belong to each person, then we practice that belief by investing even in those communities where we cannot immediately see potential. And our investments cannot only be limited to individuals; we cannot only create tutoring programs. We must work to find solutions to *systems* such as zero tolerance policies.

One tool we can look to in order to help us put into practice our affirmation of human dignity is the Strengths Perspective—a tool coming out of the field of social work. The Strengths Perspective looks at creating solutions based on what is going well rather than trying to correct what is not going well. In some sense, it looks a lot like restorative justice—not something for which our prison system is well-known, and it is clear through trends like the school-to-prison pipeline that our schools could be better at restorative justice too. (We should not think of restorative justice as only applying to *criminal* justice, but we should apply it to acting rightly in all areas of life – justice in our everyday actions as well.) By using the Strengths Perspective, we use the principle of human dignity to not only look at what is going wrong but to rejoice with people in what can go well despite the negative aspects of life.

If we genuinely affirm human dignity and recognize God's image in every person, then when things are not going right, we consider ways to seek solutions rather than seek punishment through policies like overuse of suspension and expulsion. Instead of racing to punish bad behavior, we would first see that negative behavior as saying "something is not right" or "help me fix this broken system". Our first task in seeking solutions to systems like the

school-to-prison pipeline is to use our affirmation of human dignity as the lens through which we view our neighbors, even the neighbors that make mistakes.

-Melissa Lubbers graduates from Calvin College in May 2014 with degrees in social work and psychology and intends to pursue graduate studies in social work. She lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan where she spends her free time riding her bike, baking, and reading -- mostly Harry Potter.

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