

The Lingering Effects of Zero-Tolerance: Perceptions of Educators and Former Students

Ruben Borrego
Phaar-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District

Gerri M. Maxwell
Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi

ABSTRACT

Long-term effects associated with the use of zero-tolerance policies and lack of restorative discipline strategies used with expelled students in a local Lower Rio Grande Valley school district revealed that students' lives were impacted negatively by educators who practiced a one-size-fits-all approach to school discipline. Marginalization of expelled students impacted transition back to their home campuses. This study informs a gap in the literature and overarching concerns regarding whether zero-tolerance policies have made schools safer (Hyder & Hussain, 2015). Results from the participant data in this inquiry divulged two perspectives. The educator perspective was that zero-tolerance was good for the school, minimally impacted the student body as a whole, taught students limits, and was an effective way to control student behavior. The former students' perceptions were very different as they revealed the escalation, separation and stigmatization as part of their lived experiences (Clandinin, et al., 2006).

Keywords: zero-tolerance, restorative justice, marginalization of students

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INTRODUCTION & LITERATURE REVIEW

School safety has taken center stage at local, state and federal levels (Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016). Over the past several decades, school officials have attempted to address this situation through the strict use of exclusionary practices such as zero-tolerance policies. These policies are applied to everyone equally across the board, regardless of a student's prior history or intellectual capacity (DeMitchell & Hambacher, 2016). Yet, in spite of zero-tolerance, schools face increased safety issues. Initially, these policies were implemented to ensure swift action towards the perpetrator and to provide safety for all students as well-being is one of the main goals of a civil society (Porter, Stern & Green, 2017). However, what is problematic is that these practices often marginalize these students for a lifetime as they matriculate into the waiting arms of the justice system (Kim, Losan, & Hewitt, 2012). Zero-tolerance policies are bereft of restorative measures that can have a positive outcome for students and the school community (Hernandez-Melis, Fenning, & Lawrence, 2016).

Restorative justice is an approach to that personalizes the crime by having the victims and the offenders mediate a restitution agreement to the satisfaction of each, rather than retribution proceedings. Offenders take meaningful responsibility for their actions, taking the opportunity to right their wrongs and redeem themselves, in their own eyes and in the eyes of the community. The approach is based on a theory of justice that considers crime and wrongdoing to be an offense against an individual or community, rather than the state (Price, 2000).

Restorative justice fosters dialogue between the victim and offender. Several major cities have begun restorative measures such as: Chicago, Illinois, which has circles of understanding, community service, peer juries, victim impact panels, and victim/ offender programs. The City of Chicago Board of Education's Student Code of Conduct specifically calls for the use of peacemaking victim offender programs (Castillo, 2014). These strategies are an attempt to bring together the victim and the offender to allow the healing of all. Peoria Illinois has replaced zero tolerance policies and implemented Community Peace Conferencing to replace referrals to law enforcement. This resulted in drop of discipline referrals by 35 percent within the first year of school-wide implementation (Castillo, 2014).

Low-income students, students of color, English language learners, homeless youth, youth in foster care, and students with disabilities are disproportionately affected by exclusionary policies such as zero-tolerance mandates (Kim, Losen & Hewitt, 2012). Zero tolerance policies reinforce security measures in schools, yet students with emotional or learning disabilities and behavioral disorders were predisposed to expulsions and suspensions (Henson, 2012; Losen & Gillespie, 2012).

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

According to Castillo (2014), there is a problem with the use of zero-tolerance policies versus restorative discipline strategies used with expelled Hispanic students. These policies have led to the marginalization of these students who get lost during the transition back to their home campuses (Garcia, 2017). There is a major gap in looking at the perceptions of those students who have these policies applied to them. This study contributed to the body of knowledge needed to address this problem by identifying factors that may be used to reverse this trend.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this narrative inquiry, in the tradition of qualitative research, was to examine the perceptions and attitudes of teachers and administrators in the Lower Rio Grande Valley towards students who commit expellable offenses, and how their actions can have an adverse effect on these students. The data gathered may inform future research to prepare future campus leaders and assist them to better equip educators who serve these students who are most at risk. Voluminous research exists with regard to the iatrogenic effects that the unbridled use of exclusionary practices imposes on students; yet, there is a critical shortage of studies that show the effects from the perspective of the student on the receiving end.

METHODOLOGY

In this qualitative narrative study, participants were interviewed to ascertain their lived experiences (Clandinin et al., 2006) whether as an administrator enforcing exclusionary or zero-tolerance policies or as a former student whom had been impacted by these exclusionary policies. This naturalistic inquiry utilized purposive and snowball sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Four Hispanic administrators including three males and one female agreed to participate. Three former Hispanic male students and one female, were interviewed as well.

The data was obtained through face-to-face interviews, journals and recordings of these individuals to maximize discovery of patterns and problems (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, Allen, 1993). A set of prepared questions was asked to each participant as a lead into the subject. This allowed the participant and interviewer to follow new leads and uncover new paradigms that they may have experienced to facilitate their sharing (Bernard, 2006). The researcher as the filter provided the optimal instrument to analyze the data and interpret it (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Interviews were conducted at the administrator's place of employment, a central office in a local district in the Lower Rio Grande Valley. The site provided a comfort level for the interviewees and allowed them to share their experiences more readily. Strategies to ensure trustworthiness and credibility of the study were implemented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The researcher employed triangulation to ensure each piece of relevant data collected was validated by another interview with a second individual. Shenton (2004) attests individual viewpoints can be verified against others to construct a better picture. Member checks were also used to provide opportunities for the respondents to clarify, correct errors, or validate the data collected. The coding exercise sought to synthesize the themes, "connect the dots," explore, and find relationships from the interviews (Creswell, 2014).

RESULTS

Introduction and Perspective

Results from the participant data in this inquiry divulged two perspectives that were at the opposite ends of the spectrum. The educator perspective was that zero-tolerance was necessary, taught students limits, was good for all involved and a very effective way to control student behavior. Juan shared the following:

I mean, the education, the foundation does start at home, and depending on what type of environment the student has been living in, that has a lot to do with his or

her education. I mean, we can have a student where we had zero-tolerance and was sent to an alternative center, but that student still had a great opportunity to continue, to graduate, to even get a high school, a college education.

The educators did not keep tabs on the students that were expelled. The students got expelled to the DAEP or JJAEP and learned to adapt to their new school environment. For many students it took them to places that changed their lives and it was not for the better.

The former students' perception was very different. To them the zero-tolerance experience was surreal, incidents escalated quickly. Their side of the story did not matter. They felt that educators treated them with a heavy hand, and it sent them to a dark place socially and emotionally. Former student Francisco shared:

I already knew what was going to go down as soon as I saw the administrator walk into the security office. I was going to have a five-day weekend (suspended Wednesday thru Friday) regardless of what I had to say, so why waste my breath. His mind was made up as soon as he heard my name on his radio. By this time, I was only going to school, so they wouldn't take my mom to truancy court and she would have to pay a big fine.

Francisco learned quickly in school that there were protected classes amongst the student body and he was not in them. Francisco pointed out a sub-theme that impacts student staff relationships; many times, it has a detrimental effect on the students. The silent lucidity that Francisco and others like him experienced day in and day out resonates to this day as the researcher himself was impacted by zero tolerance policies. Andre another former student shared his with the following:

We wanted to belong. We wanted to be part of UIL. UIL didn't give us a chance. We made a mistake, we weren't bad people. But because of our upbringing, we didn't have the right . . . How could I say it? We didn't have the advantage that these kids that had everything thrown on a silver platter to them.

Themes

After interviewing the eight participants (four educators and four former students) and coding their responses, several key themes emerged. The themes were generally not congruent, in fact they were polar opposites of each other, although there were some surprises. The educators' main themes relative to the use of zero-tolerance included that zero-tolerance provided safety on campuses, afforded control by the administrators, and that the policy was generally viewed as "good for all." These themes resonate with the extant literature in that safety, especially in educational settings, has become a top priority (Sheras & Bradshaw, 2016).

However, themes based on former student interview data were relative to relationships including feelings of alienation, adversarial views of educators, and general experiences relative to stigmatization. The extant literature relative to zero tolerance affirms these themes (Fries & DeMitchell, 2007). Former students felt that many times, minor incidents escalated to the point of crisis because the educators were not willing to hear them out. All the former students had many personal obstacles to overcome including being raised in poverty, struggling to learn English (a new language), lack of a family role model, lack of positive influences and stigmatization at school. In several cases, in their perception, a single incident that triggered an expulsion was started by something as simple as being late to class.

Compounding the sense of alienation, once the former students had been expelled for a specific length of time from their home campus, it became painfully aware to them that they were no longer viewed as being part of the school community thus marginalizing them further. As soon as the former students would return from the alternative campus, they would be targeted for removal for every incident no matter how minor. This was a major obstacle for the former students' goal of earning a high school diploma. The former students felt that the educators had given up on them and they all stated that this alienation was a factor in the students almost giving up on themselves.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The educators who participated in the study made the assumption that zero-tolerance was good for all students. They believed that zero-tolerance by name had to have no exceptions; however, a couple of the administrators did provide personal reflection that highlighted they too questioned the impact of zero tolerance on students at times. The former students shared their struggles and the pain that they endured when they felt no one was there to help. One theme shared by former students was that nobody wanted to listen and talk to them about why they were doing what they were doing.

It is important to note that none of the former students in this study were expelled from their home campus for an act of violence, bringing a weapon to school, assaulting a school employee or selling and distributing illegal drugs. They were expelled for misbehavior. The negative effects were detrimental to them. The educators who punished these students were following policies and protocols that they had been trained to use. The students felt that the educators had zero-tolerance for them and it damaged their relationship and connection to the school community. As a result of this study educators and future leaders can benefit from this lived data and use this study to be able to make informed decisions to reconnect students to the school and community instead of connecting them to the justice system.

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