A Review of *Homeroom Security: School Discipline in An Age of Fear*

Jessica Hoffman

Dr. Huey-Li Li
Philosophies of Education, Section 311
June 25, 2013
Abstract

A thorough review of the policies and procedures in place in public high schools based on the book *Homeroom Security: School Discipline in an Age of Fear* by Aaron Kupchik. Focus on zero-tolerance policies, school resources officers, student discipline, and school security. Alternative programs mentioned include Positive Behavior Intervention System (PBIS), and school counseling.
Homeroom Security:

A book review focusing on the problems with our current school discipline policies

Do zero tolerance policies make our schools safer? Is school discipline applied fairly among students? Are schools passing students through the "prison pipeline?" These are some of the questions that came to mind after reading Aaron Kupchik's book, Homeroom Security. This purpose of Kupchik's book is to examine school discipline policies across the United States and the flaws within them. For his book he conducted research within four high schools, two in the Mid-Atlantic region and two in the Southwest. Two of the schools had a high minority population and low socio-economic status while the other two had a white, middle-class majority. Kupchik discusses several different flaws with the school discipline policies, his greatest argument is that students are losing their personal freedoms in the name of school security. He argues that zero-tolerance is making our schools less efficient, School Resource Officers (SRO's) are muddying the waters between the school system and the legal system, disciplinarians are not trained teachers, and that schools do not allow for student involvement in the discipline system.

Zero-Tolerance in Schools

Kupchik opened his book with a reflection about a six-year-old Latino boy named Albert. Albert was arrested for threatening his teacher because she refused to give him his "treats." The judge dismissed the case, without an objection from the prosecution, and added that zero-tolerance policies were bringing an abundance of "counterproductive" cases such as this to his courtroom (Kupchik, 2010, p.12). This type of story is repeated over and over in the book seeming to prove the point that zero-tolerance policies are serving only to clog our justice system.
and scar young children for life. Imagine being poor Albert. Would you be able to trust your teacher, principal, or local police again? At six-years-old he learned that they are not looking out for his best interest. No one tried to reason with Albert and explain that he could not tell his teacher that he would bring a gun to school if she did not provide his treats. At six-years-old it seems illogical that he would even know how to use a gun, much less that it is not something that should be brought up in school.

According to Kupchik, instances like Albert's are a major problem in our schools. Teachers, security personnel, and administrators fail to try and correct the student's misbehavior, they merely have them arrested or removed from school. Zero-tolerance policies, which have existed since the 1980's, make it impossible for schools to take the time to perform these corrective measures by prescribing exact procedures and punishments for specific actions.

While Kupchik described the downfalls of zero-tolerance, it is still important to note that "Zero-tolerance is the most popular and widespread discipline reform effort in American schools today" (Gregory & Cornell, 2009). Many schools adopted zero-tolerance policies after the 1994 Safe Schools Act was passed. This act required public schools to expel students for at least one year for bringing a weapon to school or face the loss of federal funding (Kupchik, 2010, p.41). The schools that were used for the book adopted the policies not only because of the "incentive" by the federal government, but also because it allows students to feel more secure and it enable administrators to be consistent in punishments.

While each of the four schools that he described had set punishments for different offenses, they were often not used. He did note that the middle-class, predominantly white schools were harsher in their punishments than the urban schools even though the urban schools
had stricter written policies. In the middle-class schools, the punishments given were harsher, but were not consistently applied. Kupchik noted that parents could often get a student out of trouble simply by calling the school or scheduling a meeting. This was not the case in the urban schools. Regardless of parent involvement, students in all four schools had to interact with School Resource Officers or security personnel during their school day. Often the interactions with these personnel are negative and argumentative.

*School Resource Officers and Security Personnel*

Students in the schools that were discussed in the book, Unionville, Centerville, Fairway Estates, and Frontera High Schools, all had mixed feelings about their School Resource Officer (SRO) and security personnel. Many of the differences came from the ways the SRO and the security staff interacted with the students. It is helpful then to explain how the different SRO's were described in the book. Officer Brandon at Unionville High tries to interact with students during the lunch period, lends novels to students, and is a football coach for the school team. This has helped his impression with some of the students, but others feel that he is "sarcastic and sometimes cruel" (Kupchik, 2010, p.62). In contrast to Officer Brandon, Officer Malvern at Centerville High is friendly when in his office, but prefers a business demeanor in the hallways. Students are encouraged to talk to Officer Malvern when they feel it necessary, but he makes it clear he is there for a purpose, not to interact with them. At Frontera High there is a security staff and an SRO. The SRO is Officer Martinez, he spends most of his time either in his office with the door shut or patrolling the campus. Officer Martinez made it a point not to interact with the students. Officer Frederick at Fairway Estates has a good rapport with students and they often will give him inside information to help him solve cases. This is easier for Officer Frederick than other officers because he is not solely responsible for security, there are also five guards at the
school who help enforce rules. Regardless of how they were perceived by students, or their demeanor on campus, the SRO's faced many challenges in their positions.

One problem that all the SRO's faced was the fine line between school rules and legal processes. Officer Malvern for instance was required by the administration to arrest all students who were involved in fights during school. Something that without an SRO probably would not happen to these students. In another instance, a student named Carter was being investigated for several crimes off-campus and the SRO did not bring these to the attention of the school so that he could continue building his criminal case. This brings up the fact that SRO's typically do double duty (or more). They must investigate minor incidents at school, help with major incidents outside of school, and provide support to the administration when requested.

Another reason that SRO's were brought into schools was to counsel youth to avoid making poor choices. Kupchik pointed out that many of these officers do not have the specialized training necessary to be counselors, and in fact their training as police contradicts this idea. The officers are trained to use more force in a school setting than in the public sector because they are outnumbered and situations could quickly turn volatile. In order to be effective counselors the SRO's, as well as the disciplinarians, must be given training in how to counsel. One cannot expect to put a person into a high school (or middle school or elementary school) and have them immediately be the best counselor / police officer / disciplinarian / coach / teacher in the building. It is not practical.

**Disciplinarians Have No Formal Training**

Kupchik noted that at one school two of the three Deans of Discipline are coaches, not trained educators. This happens because "disciplinary roles can be "free hires" for administrators,
in that they can hire somebody who has skills in another area (e.g. coaching), and give that person duties as a disciplinarian to justify a full-time salary" (Kupchik, 2010, p.61). Not only do these disciplinarians lack formal education training, they often come from roles in which being aggressive is a positive thing. Coaches often have an "in your face" attitude and rule by fear, not through understanding. In many schools the disciplinarian (be it the trained administrators, or the "free-hires") is the last chance for a student to plead their case and get some help.

Imagine, as Kupchik and Fowler both frequently describe, a student who does not understand their coursework. Rather than being called upon by their teacher and looking foolish for not knowing the answer, they act up and get thrown out of class. The disciplinarians are not ensuring that these students get the help that they need to solve the root cause of their misbehavior. They are putting a band-aid on the problem by kicking the student out of class. The student then falls further and further behind as the cycle continues. Disciplinarians, trained or not, should be including in the discipline meetings a reflection as to why the student is misbehaving. This is not just something that elementary teachers should do. Students should be involved in the discipline process and begin to take ownership of their behaviors.

**Student Involvement in the Discipline System**

One of the important topics discussed in the book was that "school discipline must be done in a way that allows students to participate in dispensing justice and is perceived by them to be fair" (Kupchik, 2010, p.52). Students in several of the schools were told to "just follow the rules" whether they agreed with them or not. Many of the students reported to administration that the teachers they were being given referrals from were "picking" on them, and at times the administrators acknowledged later that it could be true. In the case of these students they were
told that the teacher is always right, whether they are right or not. The students had not say in
their education, or in how to defend themselves from what they viewed as unfair treatment. One
student went in to complain about a teacher and the administrator ignored him, until he realized
that the student had been issued a referral earlier in the week that had not been discussed yet.

More over, students are not given the chance to tell their side in many of the schools. Often times the administrator and the teacher had already decided on the punishment prior to meeting with the student. When the punishment is pre-determined and the referral is signed as completed, the student has absolutely no chance to defend himself. Even if they did make a convincing argument, it is too late, the punishment has been signed and sealed, needing only to be delivered. As described above, the students are not given the resources that they need when they are not listened to.

Given the arguments made by Kupchik, it is possible to believe that the problem with school discipline is in how we handle it. The problem is over-bearing SRO's and disciplinarians who choose not to listen to students and enforce zero-tolerance policies. Not all schools operate this way, even with these same structures in place.

*Opposing Viewpoints - Why Zero-Tolerance and SRO's are Effective*

There are very few pros to the zero-tolerance policies. The most often named positive is that students who are distraction in the classroom are removed to allow for further learning (Adock). The elimination of threats of violence provides a more conducive learning environment where teachers are not focused on behavior management as much as they are on student learning. While there may be more positives to the use of zero-tolerance policies, the majority of the
resources available currently discuss the harms of zero-tolerance policies on students and schools.

Although SRO's are not new to schools, there were SRO's in the 1950's, they have become much more common in recent years. The biggest advantage to an SRO, in the eyes of the community, is the perceived increase in safety at the school. Having an SRO means a uniformed, armed police officer is with your children all day, every day with the sole aim of protecting them from harm. For administrators, the advantage of an SRO is the ability to enforce legal consequences and an increase in the response time of police to the school. School administrators also see the resource officers as a deterrent to potential illegal activities. School resource officers can also conduct classes, and in some states are required a certain number of teaching hours (Kupchik, 2010). The use of a police officer to teach classes on law, or driver's education gives the courses some additional credibility that an otherwise "normal" teacher may not have. Some SRO's are also involved in D.A.R.E. education and offer support to all schools within the district.

Not only do SRO's provide a resource for educators, deter illegal activities, and increase perceived security, they are able to monitor the school for security purposes. A local sheriff's deputy is the SRO for one of the middle schools in the district and has several times, through the video surveillance, been able to spot potential threats and counsel the offending students to change their behavior. The use of the SRO to perform the duty of monitoring the surveillance system frees the administration to focus on other tasks. It also prevents small infractions from becoming large ones.

_Alt prevents small infractions from becoming large ones._

*Alternatives to Zero-Tolerance and Harsh Discipline in Schools*
A newer movement in schools is Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS). The aims of PBIS programs are to address the behavior issues rather than merely react to the issues, be more proactive with regard to student behaviors, and support students who need additional assistance with behavior objectives. Kupchik noted that in Centerville High School they claimed to have a positive behavior system (PBS). This was a rarely used ticket system where students were entered into a drawing for prizes based on good behaviors. Without specific training on how to implement a PBS teachers found it was difficult to keep track of the tickets and give them out appropriately. They were either giving them to the "bad" kids when they behaved or giving them to so many students that there was little chance of winning the prizes.

Positive behavior systems include student interaction. Students are encouraged to be responsible for their behavior and to help set behavior goals. At Centerville High, the students were meeting once a month before school to pick the prizes for the PBS. At Armstrong Elementary in the Hazelwood School District, the staff and students participated in a We Care Camp designed to reinforce the skills focused on in a PBIS school: respect, responsibility, cooperation, kindness, and safety ("Students at armstrong."). It is important to note that just because a school is involved in PBIS does not mean that traditional punishments are not utilized, schools still use consequences that match the behaviors, they just tend to encourage students to receive positive consequences for positive behaviors (Rogowski).

Conclusion

While it can be, and has been, argued that there are advantages to zero-tolerance policies, the nation as a whole is starting to see the problems with them. When students are not involved in their educational decisions, they are introduced to an environment contrary to the democratic
environment in which we live. Students should be given the opportunity to engage in their own discipline strategies, or at the very least be required to discuss the infractions and find the reason behind them. Students who are continually disrupting class have a reason. That reason needs to be discovered and dealt with. It makes absolutely no sense to continually eject a student from class for misbehavior related to misunderstanding of the material. While the student may need to be removed, they should be given additional supports to begin understanding the material. If they never learn, they will continue the cycle of misbehavior.

Similarly, administrators in charge of discipline need to learn to listen to students. More often than not, students have a reason they are misbehaving. Something usually has happened in their life that has caused the change. One example given by Kupchik was a student who mentioned family problems and moving the following day. The administrator ignored the student's pleas for leniency, disregarded the cry for help with personal problems and merely sentenced the student with a detention and a call home. This student had not been in trouble before, yet the administrator refused to listen and missed the opportunity to truly help the student when they needed it. Students must know that their school cares for them. If they believe that the school staff cares about them, they will be more engaged.

Students should be involved in setting the rules for their classrooms and feel that they are involved members of the school community. Again, if the students are engaged there will be fewer behavior problems because the students have been active participants throughout the whole behavior process. This is not to say that all students will be perfect. Just as was mentioned in the information about PBIS, students will still have consequences for misbehaviors, it will happen, they are children. They need to be treated as children, and young adults who are about to enter the world. The purpose of school is to guide them into productive citizens, without a voice
in the school system the students have no way to practice having a voice in the community when they become adults.

Through the reading of Kupchik's book, several problems with the current method of behavior management in our schools became apparent. First, the use of SRO's not as supports or bridges to the community, but as objects of fear in schools is outrageous. Students who previously may have been sent to the principal's office are now being sent to jail. Students like young Albert in the beginning of my paper have been exposed to the court system before graduating Kindergarten. This is not how schools are supposed to run. Schools are supposed to be a safe haven and a place of learning. If a student is constantly worried about how their behavior will be interpreted by the administration or SRO, they are not focused on learning.

Second, Kupchik described the use of zero-tolerance policies in schools. It is clear through his book that the policies are not being used as intended and need to be re-written. The schools featured had clear responses for each instance of misbehavior, but often chose to apply a different punishment. This ambiguity also caused students stress that could affect their learning. When the student doesn't know what the teacher will take offense to, or worse how the administration will react when the teacher takes offense, they are likely to be too concerned about outside circumstances and not concerned about learning. Especially the students who struggle. If they as too many questions, will they be considered a disruption and then ejected from class and fall further behind? This constant fear for lower performing students adds undue pressure to their day.

School should be a stress-free environment to the maximum degree possible. It is the responsibility of the school staff to ensure that students have a say in their rules and
consequences, as well as feel safe in their environment. Students should not fear asking questions or pointing out when a teacher makes mistakes. As long as students are behaving in a respectful manner and engaged in learning, they should be encouraged and rewarded. When they are not being respectful or engaged, their behaviors should be redirected prior to being removed from the class.

It is time to stop the prison pipeline and remove zero-tolerance policies from our schools. They are not effective, and not being used appropriately. When a six-year-old is suspended for bringing his camping utensil to lunch, or a soldier is suspended for a 2 inch multi-tool locked in his car, the policies have failed.
References


6-year-old scout suspended for bringing knife-fork-spoon utensil to school read more: http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,564605,00.html