THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Welcome to INTEGRAL, a podcast production out of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University; exploring the question is there a common good in our common home?

I'm Theresa Ladrigan-Whelpley, the director of the Bannan Institutes in the Ignatian Center and your host for this podcast. We're coming to you from Vari Hall on the campus of Santa Clara in the heart of Silicon Valley, California. This season of INTEGRAL, we're looking at the ways in which racial and ethnic justice intersect with the question of the common good. Today we will explore the topic of the school to prison pipeline, considering the extent to which implicit racial bias amongst school teachers results in increased suspensions and expulsions among students of color. How might the development of cultural competence disrupt such implicit and explicit bias?

BRETT SOLOMON: Recent statistics from the US Department of Education show that African American students - from kindergarten through high school - are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than white students. Why is this?

MICHELLE ALEXANDER (audio clip): Our education system now has a zero tolerance policy for school discipline and functions and has led to this prison building boom unlike anything the world has ever seen.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: To unpack these questions today, we're joined by Brett Solomon, associate professor in the Child Studies program at Santa Clara, where she also serves as interim Associate Provost for Diversity and Inclusion and Bannan Faculty Fellow in the Ignatian Center. Her current research focuses on the school to prison pipeline and she directs the Future Teachers project, a program for students of color who want to teach in urban and underserved communities. Welcome Brett!

BRETT SOLOMON: Thank you Theresa. In 2015 I taught a class that I should never have had to teach. It was a class that I developed in the Child Studies Program at Santa Clara University because of the overwhelming and growing need to address an epidemic impacting a specific population of children in our country today. That class was called "The Pre-School to Prison Pipeline" and was met with lots of curiosity and concern from our students.

The fact that the phrase “The Preschool to Prison Pipeline” is part of our daily vernacular is a problem. Recent statistics from the US Department of Education show that African American students — from kindergarten through high school — are 3.8 times more likely to be suspended than white students.

Why is this? There are many assumptions that can be made about the behavior of the children being suspended, but that’s where the problem lies. Case in point

According to the US Department of Education, in 2013-14, nearly seven-thousand children in public pre-school received one or more out-of-school suspensions. This is a population that is mainly comprised of low income children of color. A 2015 article by *The Atlantic* showed that Black children accounted for 18 percent of preschool enrollment but almost half (48 percent) of the children suspended more than once. In contrast, white children were 43 percent of preschoolers, but only 26 percent were subjected to repeated suspensions.

So what are we assuming about the behavior of a preschooler, or specifically an African American preschooler, that would justify his or her suspension? What is really going on here and where is the justice for students in preschool through high school? What role does implicit bias play in the classroom and school context that contribute to judgements and expectations?

What are the judgements and expectations that are placed on a student who is repeatedly pushed out of the classroom? What are the judgments and expectations that are placed on their families, their communities, their future?

And, for children who are repeatedly suspended from school, what are their out-of-school options for engagement and how might the opportunities vary for a preschooler, an elementary schooler, a middle schooler or a high schooler?

And perhaps most importantly, what message are we sending to children when we say, “You’re not worthy of being in school.”?

Research indicates that a student who is suspended once is twice as likely to drop out of school compared to those who are not.

Furthermore a school age child who does not attend school is likely to engage in delinquent

activity that will ultimately result in their arrest and detainment.

Unfortunately, this pattern affects more African American males than any other population in the country. More black males between the ages of 18-24 are in prison than in college.

Identifying this as a grave civil rights concern would be an understatement. Michelle Alexander a noted civil rights advocate, lawyer, and author, says that the problem isn't mass incarceration, but rather mass criminalization.

MICHELLE ALEXANDER (audio clip): Millions of children in the United States today grow up believing that they too one day will go to jail. In our most segregated, ghetto-ized communities in the United States. Young people are shuttled from decrepit underfunded schools to these brand new high tech prisons. They're targeted at young ages often before they are old enough to vote - stopped, frisked, searched, interrogated about who they are and where they're going if they headed home with nothing but Skittles in their hand.

Stop, frisk, search and when they're arrested they're typically arrested for a relatively minor, non-violent often drug related offense - the very sort of crimes that occur with roughly equal frequency with middle-class white communities or on college campuses but go largely ignored. They're arrested, swept in, branded criminals and felons, and then ushered into a permanent second-class status, a status from which they will never escape. And this is happening to people by the millions in this country.

Today, there are more African American adults under correctional control, in prison or jail, on probation or parole than were enslaved in 1850 - a decade before the Civil War began. As of 2004, more black men were denied the right to vote than in 1870, the year the 15th Amendment was ratified, prohibiting laws that explicitly deny the right to vote on the basis of race. Now of course during the Jim Crow era, poll taxes and literacy tests operated to keep black folks from the polls. Well today, felon disenfranchisement laws in many states now accomplish what poll taxes and literacy tests could not.

Now this isn't a phenomenon that affects some small segment of the African American community. To the contrary in many large urban areas today, more than half of working age African American men now have criminal records are thus subject to legalized discrimination for the rest of their lives. These men are a part of a growing undercaste not class, caste, a group of

people defined largely by race relegated to a permanent second class status by law.

BRETT: What role does the pipeline play in contributing to the permanent second class status by law mentioned by Michelle Alexander?

The pipeline is a widespread pattern in the United States of pushing students, especially those who are already at a disadvantage, out of school and into the American criminal justice system. Schools that have discipline practices that rely heavily on zero tolerance policies are significant contributors to the pipeline. And the pipeline is considered a result of schools neglecting to properly address the educational and social needs of individual students.

Pedro Noguera, sociologist and distinguished professor at UCLA would suggest that many schools have become conditioned to the normalization of failure, that problems confronting African American males are so pervasive and commonplace that they have become normalized, and there's been a general weakness in responding to these problems.

So academic failure dropping-out, and get punished is no cause for alarm. Yet these patterns and attitudes are so pronounced and entrenched that they end up shaping adult outcomes for African American men in our country. According to Noguera, African American are males more likely than any other group in American society to be: punished (through some form of exclusion), labeled or categorized for special education (often without apparent disability), and to experience academic failure.

African American males are often assumed to be at risk because they are too aggressive, too loud, too violent, too dumb, too hard to control, too streetwise, or too focused on sports.

Noguera has argued that on every indicator associated with progress and academic achievement such as Enrollment in honors courses, advanced placement, African American males are underrepresented.

In every category associated with failure & distress: discipline referrals, dropout rates, grade retention, African American males are overrepresented.

They are not often thought of as potentially smart or talented. They are placed in schools where their needs for nurturing, support and loving discipline are not met. Rather they are labeled, shunned, and treated in ways that create and reinforce an inevitable cycle of failure.

So how do we move from the inevitable cycle of failure to African American males being thought of as smart and talented? How do we understand the role of implicit bias in the classroom and school context? How do we circumvent the school disciplinary practices that impact African American males? Who has the ability to give African American males the tools and skills that they need to demonstrate their brilliance?

Who can minimize the contribution to the pipeline?

Teachers.

I certainly don't want to give the impression that teachers are at fault or the sole contributors to the pipeline. There are many factors that contribute to a student being suspended or expelled from school. But as a teacher of aspiring teachers, I want to underscore the critical role that teachers play in advocating for children and circumventing the pipeline. Cultural competence is a critical part of that picture.

Last year, the Child Studies program at Santa Clara University adopted the tagline "On Fire for Justice" which was inspired by Cornel West who visited SCU a few years back. He left our students with a poignant question. He asked if we had become maladjusted to injustice.

CORNEL WEST (audio clip): The concern with human needs, very low concern with the least of these especially the children 22% living in poverty almost 40% children of color living in the richest nation of the world. If that's not a moral disgrace I don't know what is. But the question, is an existential one. Before you get to the politics, what kind of human being are you going to choose to be?

BRETT SOLOMON: Were we maladjusted to injustice? This question is part of our vernacular throughout the major, and particularly during the "School to Prison Pipeline" course. In Child Studies, we're preparing students to work with children in school and community settings. Most of the children that we engage with come from low income, underrepresented and disenfranchised backgrounds.

An integral component of engaging with children and families from backgrounds that are different from our own means being culturally competent. But what is cultural competence? According to National Education Association, cultural Competence is the ability to successfully

teach students who come from cultures other than your own.

This means: developing personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, developing certain bodies of cultural knowledge, mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross cultural teaching.

I add to that the understanding of the interplay power and justice, and it's impact on children.

So why should we be culturally competent? The children that we are teaching in schools today are more diverse than ever. Ethnically, linguistically and religiously diverse to name a few. As teachers we need to understand that culture plays a critical role in learning. Cultural competence not only leads to more effective teaching, but serves as a bridge to family relationships.

A common good in our common home means that all children are valued and honored for the unique spirits that they are. It's up to us, the meaningful adults in their lives, to facilitate and nurture them. In an educational context, this means that we've got to prepare future educators for cultural competence.

Numerous researchers have highlighted the cultural disconnect between teachers and students in public schools today, and underscore the necessity of placing cultural competence and culturally relevant pedagogy at the center of teacher education and internship programs.

Gloria Ladson-Billings, professor of Urban Education at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, believes that teacher education programs should aim to prepare teachers to be effective in urban classrooms serving diverse students.

A global curriculum, the appreciation of diversity among all students, a belief in the value of cooperation and a belief in a caring community are all qualities that contribute to being an effective urban classroom teacher, and any classroom teacher, underscores the common good in our common home.

These qualities, when combined, equal cultural competence, which needs to be the thread that connects 21st century stewards of children with children, families and their communities.

Pursuing the common good requires the critique of structured patterns of racial privilege and

systemic racial injustice that adversely impact all of us.

How can the development of cultural competence transform not only our schools, but also our prisons, businesses, our families, our government, our nation? How can the development of cultural competence enable us to see and value the full and innate dignity of every human person?

Bell Hooks, activist and author, reflects: [quote] “Beloved community is formed not by the eradication of difference but by its affirmation, by each of us claiming the identities and cultural legacies that shape who we are and how we live in the world.” [end quote]

How can cultural competence develop common communities, beloved communities, that are capable of seeking, celebrating, and advancing the common good together?

We can all agree that the pipeline should not exist. But it does and it’s impacting our most vulnerable youth in the country. So although I taught a class that I should not have had to teach, it proved beneficial to our future educators.

Teaching the school to prison pipeline class provided students with the opportunity to dive deep into the issues that impact students who are chronically suspended and expelled from school. It allowed students to have a historical understanding of access and quality of education among African Americans in the United States today. It allowed students explore issues of power and justice and the impact on marginalized communities. It allowed students to realize the privilege that they had during their primary and secondary school years, and gave them space to become maladjusted to injustice. Most importantly, the preschool to prison pipeline class gave our students, the tools and skills that they needed to be culturally competent stewards of children.

And I can guarantee that the children and families that they will engage with as professionals will be better off for it.

THERESA LADRIGAN-WHELPLEY: Thanks for listening to INTEGRAL, a Bannan Institute podcast of the Ignatian Center for Jesuit Education at Santa Clara University. Special thanks to Professor Brett Solomon for her contribution to today’s episode.

Coming up next week is Margaret Russell, professor of law at Santa Clara, who will be exploring notions of racial justice and truth telling within the limits of legal provisions in the United States

today.

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Credits:

1. Michelle Alexander, The future of race in America: Michelle Alexander at TEDxColumbus, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQ6H-Mz6hgw
2. Cornel West, Cornel West: Black Prophetic Fire Intersections of Leadership, Faith, and Social Justice, Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1idwQRU7Bq0&t=1102s