

Teaching
When the
World
Is on
Fire

Edited by

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Author of Other People's Children

To My Sons' Future Teacher,
Colleague, Sister/Brother, Co-madre,
Maestra, Comrade, Friend

Crystal T. Laura

Crystal T. Laura is an assistant professor of educational leadership at Chicago State University. By day, she explores leadership preparation for learning in the context of social justice with the goal of teaching school administrators to recognize, understand, and address the school-to-prison pipeline. During the second shift, she co-parents two marvelous boys who give her work in the field of education particular urgency.

YOU CAN SEE THAT I'M ALREADY UNCERTAIN—HESITANT ABOUT HOW TO address you, unsure about who we are and who we might become to one another. I'll admit that at this moment I'm a bit anxious, partly because I'll surely make some wrong assumptions writing to you now and perhaps I'll overstep or misspeak. My anxiety runs much, much deeper and wider than that—it's shaded with dread and flecked with fear—but I'll come to that further along. For now I want to put my doubts and worries to the side, plunge in and start a dialogue with you in the hope that if I speak plainly with the possibility of being heard and listen mindfully with the possibility of being changed we will find or create our common ground. Let's begin this school-family connection straightaway.

My name is Crystal Laura, Zachary and Logan's mom. I start there because that identity—Mom—has been defining and all-consuming

from the moment Zachary stepped into our world, eight years ago. Logan put the exclamation point on it five years later, and I've been rockin' the mom vibe ever since. So, defining, yes, but all-consuming probably overstates the case. I'm also a daughter, a sister, and partner, too. I am a Black woman.

I wake up every day thankful that I'm Black and breathing. A lot of Americans make the easy assumption—without much thought, with absolutely no effort—that their lives matter, but too many folks aren't so sure, and in fact the evidence—school funding, forced racial segregation, health outcomes, overrepresentation in prisons and jails—points to the reality that in the normal workings of the system, some lives are unimportant and even disposable. So, yes, I wake up grateful, and more than that, I wake up pleased and maybe a bit euphoric that my beautiful, energetic boys are Black and breathing. You may think I'm dramatizing or exaggerating, but I'm not. I know precisely what they risk being Black boys here in twenty-first-century America.

For all of that and more, I don't take anything for granted, and while it pisses me off and offends me, yes, indeed, I'm glad to be Black and breathing. In addition to mothering my boys, I teach teachers and principals in the College of Education at Chicago State University. As part of my university work, I travel often to lecture and lead professional development trainings on critical issues in urban education. Recently, I left the boys for a couple of days to spend time with older youth—kids of fifteen and sixteen, who live in New York City, on Rikers Island.

The name precedes it. Rikers Island covers 413 acres of land in the middle of the East River between Queens and the Bronx, adjacent to the runways of LaGuardia Airport. Sitting on that land is a complex of jails—ten of them. It is one of the world's largest correctional institutions—it's a penal colony, really—and from what I hear, it's one of the world's worst, too. It is notorious for the abuse and neglect of people who are locked up there. You might remember the story that surfaced a couple of years ago about Kalief Browder, who was falsely accused of stealing a backpack, refused to plead out, and couldn't afford bail. He spent three years on Rikers waiting for a trial that never

happened—two of those three years in solitary confinement—and he was so deeply impacted by his experiences there that two full years after he left the Island, and after Jay Z and Rosie O'Donnell and others donated materials and funds to get his life back in order, he hung himself.

There are over eleven thousand other men, women, and children on Rikers—the youngest of them are mandated to attend school. That means that we also have colleagues on Rikers—general grade-level teachers, special education teachers, counselors, social workers, paraprofessionals, principals, and district staff—who work with incarcerated students behind the walls.

I was invited to Rikers, as I am to other prisons and jails—places I've come to regard as sites of congealed violence—on the strength of a book I wrote called *Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline*. The book was born of love for my brother Chris, and rage at all the circumstances—self-inflicted and close to home as well as system-generated and as predictable as rain—that landed Chris in Illinois state prison doing a six-year bid.

On the first day of the visit, I toured the school sites on Rikers—sat in on classes, met with young people, asked the adults some questions, really became a student of that place—and then on the second day, I gave a reflective talk to our colleagues about what I learned. What I told them was this: without question, our current systems need a complete overhaul; but, in the meantime, they can work wonders—what one counselor called acting as a “cool drink of water in hell”—and with proper values and education, a strong network of support, and a whole lot of conviction, they can make great strides toward rethinking, reimagining, redesigning altogether how we approach harm, healing, and justice.

I see you, my sister/teacher and my sons' future teacher, like I saw them, as a cool drink of water in what is, quite frankly, for some young people, hell. I want us to put our heads together about how to better understand and radically shift the hellish contexts within which too many students find themselves marginalized and dismissed, and placed deliberately on the road to perdition.

I wonder if you know that, as a teacher, you are either engaged in incarceration prevention or incarceration expansion. It's just that real.

Because here and now, in the twenty-first century, we are seeing and experiencing an age of mass incarceration, a time when the prison is our go-to mechanism of isolation and containment, the central way that we adjudicate disputes, and the primary site where we deal with social trauma and social dilemmas.

Right now 1 in 31 American adults is under some form of correctional control—meaning incarcerated, on parole, or on probation: 1 in every 31. There are over two million men and women locked up in the United States—including my twenty-three-year-old brother—and besides the extraordinary number of incarcerated people, an even bigger problem is that we think that's normal. America of 2016 is a place that confines more of our people than any other country in the world, more Black adults than were enslaved in 1850. This is the contemporary context, and I wonder if you know that.¹

But it's important for us, as educators, to stay alive to our expanding prison nation. Not just when somebody escapes and not only when we catch a marathon of those juicy, addictive documentaries—*Snapped*, *Drugs, Inc.*, *Lockdown*, or if you're old-school, *Cops*. It's crucial for us to pay attention to prisons partly because our profession—and we—are parties to barricading people in them. It's true. On every measure of academic attainment—earning a diploma, a GED, or some form of postsecondary education—those who are incarcerated lag far behind those of us in the free world. They have lower literacy levels, fewer marketable skills, and a greater prevalence of mental and physical disabilities. With regard to education and schooling, incarcerated people are often those who, from us, once needed the most, and somehow got the least.

I wonder if you know that, and if you are keeping your eyes open wide to our current situation, which is largely defined by jails and prisons that are so full of Brown and Black bodies that most everyone who knows what I'm talking about and has good sense is practically begging schools to stop feeding them.

I want to say a bit about the school-to-prison pipeline, because it strikes a special chord in me every time I meet someone—someone in

the field of education, especially—who has never heard the phrase. I hope that uncomfortable, justice-oriented conversations are happening in your classes and in your school. But ask a classroom teacher, a director, a principal, a parent, or school board member who is not well-versed in critical issues of urban education or about the school-to-prison pipeline, and you can expect little more than a polite nod and smart use of context clues. I'm just saying. No offense, I've gotten that "I don't know what you're talking about, but something tells me I should" response more than a few times.

I often assume that the problem is one of semantics. Let's be honest, the term "school-to-prison pipeline" is not exactly part of everyday lingo, and even across activist circles the mind-blowing idea that kids get funneled from systems of education to systems of juvenile and criminal justice has actually been captured by a number of other nifty metaphors. Off the top, I can think of three: one is the "schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track," another is the "cradle-to-prison pipeline," and a third is the "school-prison nexus." All are school-to-prison pipeline derivatives, if you will, and each highlights the fact that our profession is hardly the great equalizer that it's hyped up to be. I want you to remember that schools and prisons are like close cousins, not twins—and this distinction is important, because if we're to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, which we will, then we've got to be clear about not only our language, but our deeper goals and how we're directing our efforts, and where to seek support from co-liberators.

For example, if you are deeply concerned about the ways in which school-based policies and practices help young people along to jails and prisons, then you have to take a look at reports published by the Advancement Project. The Advancement Project is a multi-racial civil rights organization founded by a team of lawyers who have taken on a variety of social issues, including redistricting, voter protection, immigrant justice, and the on-the-ground realities of "zero tolerance."

By now zero tolerance in our schools and workplaces is as common as dirt, but some of us are too young to remember how things got this way. In the early 1990s, there was a spike of juvenile homicides, then a resulting public panic, fueled by a racially coded media frenzy around teenage "superpredators," and then the passage of federal and state

laws to mete them out—all of this could have easily gone over our heads. But the staff at the Advancement Project, and others, started putting out reports that really help us understand what it means when school adults have “zero tolerance” for children and youth in their buildings.

As absolute as zero tolerance sounds, we aren’t equally intolerant of all kids. Of course, I won’t argue that we should be, but why is it that poor students, students of color, LGBTQ students, and students with disabilities so frequently get the short end of the stick?

I remember one spring semester I taught a teacher education course on urban education policy, and the topic of “bad kids” emerged as a particular favorite among my students. Most everyone wanted to know how to run a tight ship, stay sane, and keep safe with so many “troublemakers” and “class clowns” in Chicago public schools. Whenever I pushed people to unpack the beliefs embedded within this kind of philosophy and everyday language, things always got ugly. Public schools were equated with city schools, city kids with cultural poverty and dysfunction. The stock stories commodified by the mainstream media—the news, Hollywood films, cable network television, and the music industry—about pathological and dangerous youth poured in. And the grapevine, with its salacious tales from the field, was tugged as proof positive that some children will inevitably fall through the cracks.

As lively as these discussions were, no one ever seemed to want to talk about the connections between how we think and talk about children and how we treat them in social and academic contexts. A hush usually fell over the crowd when I suggested that demonizing ideology and discourse enables a whole web of relationships, conditions, and social processes—a social ecology of discipline—which works on and through the youth who rub against our understanding of “good” students. Granted, these were young, pre-service teachers who had very little, if any, direct experience with children in urban schools. So, I’m guessing that part of their silence was rooted in ignorance. It’s also true though that challenging and unlearning what we assume we know about people, places, and things is uncomfortable, and that finagling around contradictions and tensions of implicit and explicit

bias is easier than diving into and grappling with them. But that's exactly what we educators ought to be doing, diving into the wreckage.

Because if we don't, we will continue to build schools like "Rosa Parks Elementary," a fake name for a real place, where educational researcher Ann Ferguson found that Black male students of ten and eleven years old were routinely and openly described by school adults as "at risk" of failing, "unsalvageable," and "bound for jail."² Help me out here: sticks and stones may break my bones, but what? Words will never hurt me. Bullshit, yes they will.

Because when our perceptions are so profoundly distorted that we can think and talk about our students in these ways, then we have no trouble acting accordingly. In a room of thirty students, with precious few resources to go around, and with the alphabet soup of standardized tests never far away—we have no space, no patience, zero tolerance for "misbehavior." The problem, of course, is that what counts as "misbehavior" depends.

Black boys, for example, are often refracted through cultural images of Black males as both dangerous and endangered, and their transgressions are sometimes framed as different from those of other children. Black boys are what Ann Ferguson calls "doubly displaced"—meaning that as Black children, they are not seen as childlike, but "adultified"; their misdeeds are "made to take on a sinister, intentional, fully conscious tone that is stripped of any element of childish naivete."³ As Black males, they are often denied the masculine dispensation that White male students get as being "naturally naughty"; instead, Black boys are discerned as willfully bad.⁴

So we put them out of class and out of school. We suspend them. We punish them excessively, usually for minor offenses, like talking about a Hello Kitty bubble gun, hugging a friend, and chewing a Pop-Tart into the shape of a gun. In Chicago, where I live and work, zero tolerance policies in the district's schools were abolished in 2006 in favor of restorative justice approaches to harm and healing, but still the number of suspensions has nearly doubled since then. Black boys in my hometown are five times more likely to be suspended than any other group of students in the city's public school system. Black boys comprise 23 percent of the district's student population, but amount

to 44 percent of those who are suspended, and 61 percent of those who are expelled. Black boys are the only group of Chicago Public School students whose suspension rates are higher in elementary school than in high school.

Chicago has its issues. Chicago is the epicenter of neoliberal school reform, the third-largest school district in the country, and one of the few without an elected school board. We've had over a hundred neighborhood school closures since 2001 and an eightfold increase in money going to charters. One hundred twenty-six schools don't have libraries. You know what, don't get me started. School politics in Chicago is for another letter.

Let's be clear—wherever you work or live likely has its issues, too. But the problem is much bigger than where we work because when we have zero tolerance for our kids, we not only suspend them, but we expel them. We not only suspend and expel them, but we arrest them—in schools, not only do we have cops or school resource officers on deck (as we saw in South Carolina), we've constructed booking stations in the school buildings to make school-based arrests easier, faster, and more efficient.

When we have zero tolerance for our kids, we lose all concept of kids being kids—wiggling, jumping, giggling, fidgeting somehow gets diagnosed and labeled and medicated.

And when that doesn't work, we beat them. Yes, beat them—with canes, straps, paddles, and yardsticks. Corporal punishment is still allowed in twenty states.

When we have zero tolerance for kids and their “misbehavior,” we even fine them. Back home, a single network of charter schools collects about \$200K annually from student discipline fees—\$5 per infraction for things like missing a button on your shirt or being seen with a bag of chips—add that to the revenue from a summer behavior class at \$140 per registrant and you've got yourself a promising fundraiser on the backs of the poor, Black students, and their families.⁵

And if the kids for whom we have zero tolerance have not yet dropped out, we transfer them to other schools or counsel them toward programs like the Job Corps, which has been called the U.S. Department of Labor's boarding school for the “bottom of society” and

what I would argue is an intermediary or pit stop in the schoolhouse-to-jailhouse track.

I could go on, but I think that you get the point, which is that these school policies and practices are systems of surveillance, exercises of power used to continuously and purposefully monitor poor youth and youth of color.⁶ I am a Black woman, a mother of two beautiful Black sons, so you'll understand why I am particularly attuned to the ways that schools wound Black boys. Black boys are unevenly punished and tracked into educational disability categories in their early years, practices that tend to reinforce the very problems they intend to correct. And although this is enough to make reasonable people want to holler, even more insidious is when those under surveillance internalize the experiences and labels assigned to them, when they believe the exclusion and isolation has been defensible, and when they learn to condition themselves. Then Black boys who have been sorted, contained, and pushed out of schools become Black men—men whose patterns of hardship are pronounced and deeply entrenched, who constitute more than one-third of the adult males in prison and are six times more likely than white men to be incarcerated—men who have been well primed for neither college, career, nor full participation in our democracy, but instead for punitive institutionalization.⁷

If you are moved by this—this brief description of how school policies and practices nudge some youth toward dropout—then I hope you'll consider grounding your approach to teaching in dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, and in reframing your work in such a way that the school is not a place of punishment, that the school doesn't label more people ID and LD than it does PhD and JD, that the school is not the primary gateway to degrading labor, the streets, and permanent detention. I think your job is to yearn for and create the kinds of classrooms and schools that folks don't need to recover from. I want you to look at your position as disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline and as engaging in anti-prison work. And I think we can agree that a classroom that foregrounds love, justice, and joy is where we can begin—and where we will begin again.

I am happy to support you in this endeavor. All love, All/ways.

Notes

1. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2012), 180.
2. Ann Arnett Ferguson, *Bad Boys: Public Schools in the Making of Black Masculinity* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, reprint, 2001).
3. Ferguson, *Bad Boys*, 83.
4. Ferguson, *Bad Boys*, 80.
5. Traci G. Lee, "Chicago Charter Schools Rake in Thousands in 'Disciplinary Fees,'" Melissa Harris-Perry/Education on MSNBC, January 3, 2013, <http://www.msnbc.com/melissa-harris-perry/chicago-charter-schools-rake-thousands>.
6. Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, rev. ed. (Gallimard, in French, 1975; New York: Vintage Books, 1995).
7. E.A. Carson, *Prisoners in 2016*, Washington, DC: Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2018, <https://www.sentencingproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Trends-in-US-Corrections.pdf>.