



THE CLASSROOM AND THE PRECINCT

José Luis Vilson

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It's been twenty years since Mobb Deep released the album *The Infamous*, featuring street anthems like "Shook Ones Pt. II" and "Give Up The Goods." The most prophetic of rapper Prodigy's lines on the album came in the song "Survival of the Fittest," where he says,

*There's a war going on outside, no man is safe from
You could run but you can't hide forever
From these, streets, that we done took
You walking with your head down scared to look
You shook, cause ain't no such things as halfway crooks
They never around when the beef cooks in my part of town
It's similar to Vietnam
Now we all grown up and old, and beyond the cops'
control
They better have the riot gear ready ...*

1995 in New York City meant the elevation of the executive branch of government on a local and federal level. It was then-New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani's first year enforcing the Broken Windows Theory, a theory formed by social scientists who believed that if the government cut down on even the smallest crimes, society would see a decrease in crime overall. Critics immediately saw this as a means to throw thousands of men, women, and children, predominantly of color, into prison as a means of social conditioning and in turn making way for wealthier investors to gentrify the most solid blocks of poor and blue-collar neighborhoods. Just the year prior, President Bill Clinton had signed the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act into law, which on its face sounds positive, except that it guaranteed that the government could build more prisons, creating a domino effect that made non-violent crimes punishable by long prison sentences, as was already the case in New York State. (We won't even delve into Clinton's clandestine missions all across the world, bombing a Chinese embassy and throwing down economic sanctions in the Middle East.)

That compounded with the proliferation of crack cocaine and its after-effects in Queensbridge, the pernicious conditions of low-income projects, and the ever-growing financial gap between the rich and the poor might have led a young Prodigy to say one of the most quotable lyrics written in the 20th century. Mobb Deep and many other rappers (think Nas, NWA, The Notorious BIG) at the time began to reflect the menacing figures that adults thought they were. For too many of our youth, then as now, they see themselves less as equal members of society and more as prisoners awaiting sentencing, caught in the crosshairs of an environment that doesn't want them to prosper.

These same themes that emerged in the early 90s are still relevant to today's youth. In and out of classrooms, our students may have had some optimism with the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, but that quickly came to a halt with non-indictment after painful non-indictment of police officers who murder young men and women of color. Concurrently, and despite the best intentions, teachers have often sided ostensibly with the police officers and the (lack of) justice system, solidifying themselves and the rest of America's K-12 educators as agents of the state for them, not necessarily a separate entity that helps assure a modicum of equity for our students.

Frank Serpico, former NYPD cop turned whistleblower, said in a recent interview,

Many white Americans, indoctrinated by the ridiculous number of buddy-cop films and police-themed TV shows that Hollywood has cranked out over the decades—almost all of them portraying police as heroes—may be surprised by the continuing outbursts of anger, the protests in the street against the police that they see in inner-city environments like Ferguson. But they often don't understand that these minority communities, in many cases, view the police as the enemy. We want to believe that cops are good guys, but let's face it, any kid in the ghetto knows different. The poor and the disenfranchised

in society don't believe those movies; they see themselves as the victims, and they often are.

Replace the reference of police officers with teachers and it still holds true for many of my colleagues, too. Movies like *Freedom Writers* and *Dangerous Minds* perpetuate the myth of the one-white-person hero teacher trying to save urban youth from their destitution and uncivilized thinking, an ethos captured in alternative certification programs, most notably Teach for America (full disclosure: I'm an alternative certification program graduate as well). Teaching these days can often feel like a crapshoot, with 50% of a new teacher's peers leaving the classroom within the first three years of their time. The ones who stay cling onto many of the ideals, but they still feel generally unprepared for the task at hand. People never tell new teachers that inspiration and vigor only go as far as their pedagogy and understanding of the students in front of them goes.

That's where the crux of "good" policing and "good" teaching comes in. Demands for rules, routines, and discipline ought to have a specific purpose. But, if not executed well, we no longer serve the public, but ourselves.

The politics of being a teacher and being a police officer are far more complex and different than we could give credit for here. The president of the United States, for instance, would never make sorting out good and bad police officers a major point of his state of the union address, but so this goes with teachers. And even though police officers in many metropolitan areas have quotas for making arrests or tickets, they're not subjected to the sort of numerical legerdemain currently vaunted by policymakers around teacher evaluation. Experiences with having a bad teacher slip easily off the tongue, whereas even whispering an experience with a bad police officer is second-degree treason for some.

The most telling difference these days is the way

governing bodies react when any one of these public servants rebels in any fashion. In 2012, for example, Chicago Teachers Union president Karen Lewis led the most significant teacher rebellion in the last four decades when the CTU galvanized parents, students, and other concerned citizens in a strike demanding a better contract for the teachers of Chicago's public schools. After an intense battle with Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, all parties agreed on a better contract mid-September of 2012. In May of 2013, Emanuel, almost in a bitter retaliation, decides to close 50 public schools (and secretly invites charter school corporations to fill in those spaces shortly thereafter). With that sort of decimation, he simultaneously decreases the number of long-term teachers, many of whom walked the picket lines that fateful September, and tried to diminish the power of the reinvigorated CTU.

On the other hand, NYC Patrolman's Benevolent Association president Pat Lynch, representative for NYPD's 35 thousand police officers, has rebelled unabashedly against NYC Mayor Bill deBlasio, accusing him of having "blood on his hands" for the murders of officers Rafael Ramos and Wenjian Liu for helping to create conditions that are sympathetic to #BlackLivesMatter protestors in New York City and across the nation. With relations so intense in the city already after the non-indictment of Eric Garner, police officers from all over the United States used both Officer Ramos' and Officer Liu's funerals as protests of Mayor deBlasio, turning their backs simultaneously as he spoke about police and community relations.

Not one job threatened as of yet. Only more calls for unity in the face of trying times.

As police across the nation get more emboldened to murder young men and women of color with impunity, with little rebuttal from the judicial system, some factions of the teaching force have called for their unions to protect them as vociferously. When word got out that United Federation of Teachers president Michael

Mulgrew and American Federation of Teachers president Randi Weingarten would march with civil rights groups in Staten Island to demand justice for Eric Garner, a group of rebellious teachers galvanized against their own union and started to wear NYPD t-shirts in school, a kind of solidarity unseen in our city for the teaching profession.

To the eyes of the American public, it might seem like none of these are connected, but, to many people of color, the school-to-prison pipeline has been lifted out of the underground and become part of the mainstream understanding of how this country works. When teachers continue to reinforce their allegiance with the darker elements of police brutality, we signal to disenfranchised communities that in fact, their lives don't matter, from the time they step into the classroom to the time they've been pushed – not dropped – out.

According to the American Civil Liberties Union,

“Zero-tolerance” policies criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while cops in school lead to students being criminalized for behavior that should be handled inside the school. Students of color are especially vulnerable to push-out trends and the discriminatory application of discipline.

As early as five years old, students of color start seeing a education of a different type than that of mainstream America. Suspensions of pre-K students of color get served at three times the rate of white pre-kindergarteners. These zero-tolerance policies are more prevalent in public and charter schools that are predominantly comprised of students of color, so a student getting arrested for wearing the wrong uniform or insubordination becomes commonplace for many of them. Police officers patrol schools in the name of keeping them safe, but, with metal detectors and cell-phone vans serving as the gatekeepers for these schools, does the heightened focus on safety keep students out of school as well?

Many of these zero-tolerance schools laud their high test scores and perfectly uniformed students, but, akin to decreasing crime rates, do the numbers tell the whole story? Do the inhabitants of this system feel more or less safe than they once did? Do they have to behave differently than others in order to make it in their systems? Do they have to negate some parts of their culture just to bypass becoming another statistic?

Police and teachers have the power to humanize or dehumanize, depending on the elements at play. Centering police efforts on accountability has bipartisan support. The White House's latest recommendations include body cameras for police officers, re-training and support, reviews of special prosecutors in civil rights cases, and re-assessing community needs. Teachers, on the other hand, continue to feel under the thumb of federal and state mandates like Race to the Top, which overhauled teacher evaluation with a critical element of student test scores. On both of these ends, as teachers have noticed, these policies can be well-intentioned (or not), but, if they don't help either party serve their communities, most of this is hot air.

That goes for any person working at the behest of the people. People who work in these public services can't turn their backs on the people we serve. We can't use words like “war-time” to describe the work we do. We can't depreciate our communities by dehumanizing them, shooting at them at will, kicking them out of our rooms for not understanding a problem. We have to provide safe environments for everyone to feel welcome, and act accordingly. We can't blame the people for their given condition more than the people who perpetuate these conditions.

In many ways, we are complicit in the very systems we seek to change. If we don't actively work towards the change, we aren't just helping this amorphous menace. We are the menace.