



Equity by Design Podcast Series

Episode 1:

Critical Reflections on Policy

This is a transcript of the above-named podcast, which can be found on the [Great Lakes Equity Center website](http://podcast.iu.edu/upload/glec/2d35ecf3-514f-48e0-ae82-b22ae3206a45/2012_11_9_PodcastFINAL_jap.mp3). To access the podcast directly, use the following address: http://podcast.iu.edu/upload/glec/2d35ecf3-514f-48e0-ae82-b22ae3206a45/2012_11_9_PodcastFINAL_jap.mp3.

Children: 3, 2, 1...[cheer]

Male Narrator: Hello and welcome to the Great Lakes Equity Center. Our mission at the Great Lakes Equity Center is to ensure equity in student access to and participation in high quality research-based education and to reduce disparities in educational outcomes among and between groups.

Female Narrator: Today's topic is our feature brief in our Equity by Design publication. Equity by Design briefs strive to provide educators with free, accessible, and applicable information. All briefs rely on current research and practice in the fields of educational reform and culturally responsive pedagogy. Go to Greatlakesequitycenter.org to access and subscribe to this quarter's brief and our other publications like our e-newsletter, the Equity Dispatch, and our e-bulletin, Equity Now!

Host Jada Phelps: Hello and welcome to our Equity by Design podcast episode 1. I am your host for today, Jada Phelps. Today we have Erin Macey here with us. Erin, along with Dr. Kathleen King Thorius and Dr. Seena Skelton, are the authors of today's featured brief titled "Engaging School Communities in Critical Reflection on Policy".

Now, that word policy...I'm hoping Erin, you can elaborate it for us. I know that we hear that word so many times during the course of just one school day as practitioners, as parents, and certainly as students, but can you describe to us what is meant by policy?

Erin Macey: I think people tend to think of policy as something fairly removed from schools. It's a formal written document that gets kind of handed down or pushed on schools and they are bound to implement it or maybe implement it unsuccessfully, but that's really their only relationship to the policy process.

In this brief we argue that there is something called policy-as-practice. It's an idea that comes from Peg Sutton and Bradley Levinson out of Indiana University. The idea is that individuals within a particular community make policy every day through their practices and we believe this to be true in school communities.

So the school board hands down a formal written dress code and all kinds of things happen as teachers read, interpret, and respond to this formal written policy. For example, teachers might resist and say, “The dress code says no hooded sweatshirts but today it’s cold and we’re going to wear hooded sweatshirts in the classroom today.” Or the dress code says you have to have a belt. Well, what counts as a belt? Today, you don’t have a belt. I’m going to take a piece of yarn and cut it and you can put it around your waist and we’re going to call that a belt and you’ll be in dress code.

So there are all kinds of things that happen in school communities in response to these written texts called policies. There are also unwritten policies that get made through the practices of teachers and members of the school community. The example we give in the brief is the idea that parents who volunteer get to choose their students’ classrooms for the next year. These types of unwritten policies or codes about what’s going to go on in the school tend to be very difficult to challenge because they aren’t documented.

Host Jada Phelps: So with that in mind, how can a school community identify those written or unwritten policies?

Erin Macey: Because school communities do have the power to determine how they are going to interpret and respond to policies and because school communities enact unwritten policies, we advocate that schools assemble a diverse group of stakeholders to continually review and critically reflect on the policies that are in place.

In the brief, we give some thoughts about who should be invited to be at the table, how to construct a space that facilitates full engagement from the members of the group, when and how often a group like this should meet, and then most critically the what – what the conversation might sound like. Today, we’re going to run a simulation using the four critical questions from the brief and apply those to zero tolerance policies.

Host Jada Phelps: Ok. Before we get to the critical reflection conversation, could you explain to us what a zero tolerance policy is?

Erin Macey: Sure. A zero tolerance policy is any policy that applies an automatic consequence for a particular kind of infraction. These started in the field of law enforcement and have migrated into our schools. In our schools, they remove discretion from administrators or school staff for particular actions taken by students. These could be bringing a weapon to school or being in possession of drugs. They could also be something like extreme disrespect or three times being sent to the office and you’re expelled from school.

Host Jada Phelps: So now we’re going to listen to a simulated conversation critically reflecting on zero tolerance policy. Erin, what’s one of the first questions you will ask the participants to reflect on.

Erin Macey: We’ll actually start with a pair of questions. The first question is “What is the policy’s intent?” and the partner question to that is “What is it we want to accomplish?” A couple of things could happen here. The group might discover that the intent of the policy – whatever its consequences – is something that they want to embrace. It’s also possible - as is often the case with unwritten policies like the one we described where parents who volunteer in the classroom get to select their child’s teacher for the next year - that the policy intent is to preserve the privileges of a particular group. That might be a goal that the group does not want

to embrace. Either way, this first set of questions is grounding the group in a shared vision for their policy.

Host Jada Phelps: Ok. Now let's go ahead and listen in on the conversation.

Male Committee Member 1: I think the policy is intended to create safe environments for children in schools, which is a very noble response to the many events of violence and harassment in schools. So the intention seems to be very noble.

Male Committee Member 2: I think we're trying to keep harmful objects/substances out of schools to make the learning environment more conducive for students.

Female Committee Member 1: I think the intention was to help practitioners know what to do and not have to make the call on the spot. It was intended to kind of facilitate their enacting some standard principles around behavior expectations and discipline. So the intention was to be helpful, I think.

Male Committee Member 2: I think the underlying goal for zero tolerance policies was to accomplish safer and more engaging learning environments. You want students to feel safe at school. You don't want them to feel like they're going to be threatened or harmed. That was the underlying premises for the enactment of this policy...the creation of safe learning environments for all individuals.

Host Jada Phelps: Ok. So Erin, they answered what is the goal or the intent of the policy. Now what?

Erin Macey: Yeah, I think it's really interesting that the group decided that the goal of zero tolerance policies is safe and inclusive schools. Now we're going to ask the group to unpack some of the assumptions or social constructions underlying the policy and to see if that view of the world fits with their own understanding of how the world works.

Male Committee Member 1: I think we are picking up on a critical issue regarding discipline and how society should perceive the role of discipline and education. The whole idea of almost incarcerating the offender frustrates the whole notion of allowing for engagements or infractions being a source or point of teaching and learning. Life is about resolving issues, resolving conflict. So if the policy doesn't allow for a mechanism where the practitioners can appropriate it in different ways for different circumstances, then we are missing out on an opportunity to teach kids certain things.

Male Committee Member 3: To build off that, it is a – very reactionary and punitive model. We are not looking at preventative systemic types of work that a policy could be done. We're looking at after the fact. "What happens after the fact that this incident has happened?" rather than looking at "How do we build a community of students to prevent a situation from even arising?"

Male Committee Member 2: We're just hoping that the punishment was severe enough that you do not do it again. It's very behavioristic...

Male Committee Member 3: It also sees students as deficient. Again, the unit of analysis is the student. "What is wrong with the student?" instead of "What is wrong with the system?" There's something that's causing the student to do it, but instead the policy is very narrow.

Host Jada Phelps: Ok. It seems, Erin, that the participants have what the policy is for and what it does. With that, it seems that they have discovered that there are some unintentional consequences that have arisen out of this policy.

Erin Macey: Right. So you hear them talking about missed opportunities to learn. You hear them talking about excluding certain students and the reactionary nature of the policy. With the next question - "Who benefits and who does not?" – they will go even further into their discussion of the consequences of this policy.

Host Jada Phelps: Ok. Let's get back to the conversation.

Female Committee Member 2: I think this policy also lends itself to disconnecting certain individuals from the learning community. So when a student is expelled, that student is no longer a part of the school system, but he or she is still a part of our society. Pushing them out the door doesn't really become effective.

Male Committee Member 3: Zero tolerance is really about making the solution short-term and not even looking at long-term solutions. We could get rid of a kid, and he's gone from my classroom, so I'm good, right, for the school year? What happens to that kid and many other kids in the same situation?

Female Committee Member 2: What was brought up earlier was that zero tolerance was implemented to reduce disparities, but the data shows that it has actually created more of a gap between certain groups of students. The data is showing that more minority students are being expelled under this policy than non-minority students – white students specifically. What I see is that this policy is probably embracing a particular social group and cultural group.

Male Committee Member 3: If you look at a classroom example where a teacher...which the policy was intended to say that a teacher could say, "Yes, you're doing this. No, you're doing this. That's it." Right? It's a black and white issue. But sometimes teachers don't report things that are supposed to be reported.

Again, this policy was intended not to do that. It's to prevent those things from happening. Unintendedly, it has perpetuated that issue where teachers say, "I know that if I report this student, this is what's going to happen." So I am not going to report the student, because I know what's going to happen. Who do I report? Who do I not report? Who do I want to get kicked out? Who do I not want to get kicked out?

Male Committee Member 1: So we recognize that generally, discipline or the effecting of discipline is subjective...a very subjective practice. While the policy is intended to remove that subjectivity, it's actually not quite doing that. On the other hand, it's allowing for the same subjectivity but in this case, the practitioners are in a situation where they have to either implement or not implement at all. So the level of subjectivity is now tricky.

Erin Macey: So we heard that minority students don't benefit, society doesn't benefit, in some respects, teachers don't benefit from this policy. Really, an interesting conversation.

Host Jada Phelps: What I also heard was a connection made between who benefits from this policy and who does not spawned from a high level of subjectivity.

Erin Macey: So then the final piece of the conversation is, "What are we going to do about it? How do we redress the inequities that we see in our policies?"

Male Committee Member 2: With zero tolerance policy, there may need to be follow-up activities that occur, saying “Yes, you’re being removed from the classroom, but this is what we’re going to do to get you back in.”

Female Committee Member 1: I’m hearing two themes. One is that what we want to accomplish is an effective model of behavior management, and the second part is that it’s student-centered rather than system-centered around how do we protect academics and this system from the kids and their behavior. Rather, reshaping that to think about, “How can we support this child? What’s going on with this student?” thereby preventing some of the things that we’ve seen. Some of the acts of violence that we’ve seen....

Host Jada Phelps: Ok, Erin. It sounds like they are approaching trying to find an alternative to zero tolerance policies. What are the alternatives?

Erin Macey: Some of the alternatives that school communities have explored are frameworks like restorative justice. This would address the group’s concern that we’re not teaching anything by just kicking someone out of school. We need a way to ensure that problems are worked through and resolved. Another option that school communities have embraced is culturally responsive PBIS - positive behavior interventions and supports. This would be a way to address the group’s concern that they are not focused on building a safe and inclusive school, they are just focused on addressing problems. So those are two possibilities the group might explore as they are thinking about moving away from zero tolerance and moving toward something else.

Host Jada Phelps: Ok, Erin. Just to wrap things up, what advice would you give to school communities who want to use this critical reflection on policy? Where would they begin?

Erin Macey: One of the things we didn’t hear the group do today that would be really important for a group that’s examining any policy is to bring in some data to examine. We’d embrace a wide definition of what counts as data. So we’re not just looking at, say, suspension and expulsion rates, but we’d be looking at the stories of students who’d been suspended or expelled.

They can also look to research data. I could see a group reflecting on zero tolerance policies looking to someone’s work like Russ Skiba, who talks about disproportionality in school discipline and really went and investigated schools and discovered that black students were being expelled for infractions that white students were also committing but weren’t being expelled for.

Finally, I’ll just reiterate that it’s really important that this critical review team be composed of a wide variety of individuals. Include students. Include families who might not normally engage with the school and get their perspective. Get your teachers on board. Set a regular meeting time so that you’re meeting often throughout the school year and you have time to really dig in to these critical questions.

Host Jada Phelps: All right, Erin, I want to thank you for joining us today. Where can we find your brief?

Erin Macey: You can go online to glec.education.iupui.edu and find all of our publications there, including our Equity by Design briefs.

Host Jada Phelps: That conclude our podcast. We want to thank Erin Macey for joining us and we want to thank you for listening.

Female Narrator: For more information about who we are and what we do, go to our website located at greatlakesequitycenter.org or you can email us at glec@iupui.edu. That's g-l-e-c-@-i-u-p-u-i-.-edu.

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