



Laura, Crystal, T. (2014). *Being bad: My baby brother and the school-to-prison pipeline*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.

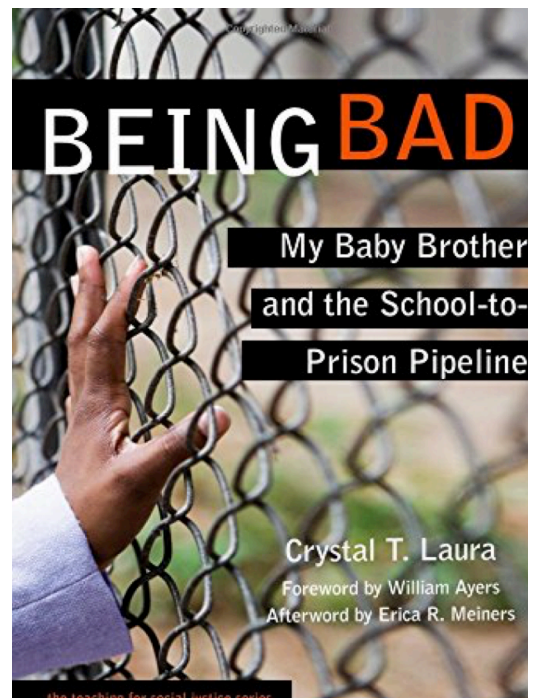
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ISBN: 978-0807755969

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Documenting the school-to-prison pipeline, while disturbing, is not difficult. In schools across America, Black males are disciplined, suspended and expelled more often and for more minor transgressions than any other group of students (Losen, 2014). Black males are more likely to be identified as having a learning disability, or a behavioral or emotional disorder, and be exiled to a special education classroom (Harry & Klingner, 2014). Nationwide only 59% leave high school with a diploma. Outside of school, Black males are six times more likely to be incarcerated than White males (NAACP, 2015). All of these numbers become real in *Being Bad: My Baby Brother and the School-to-Prison Pipeline* by Crystal T. Laura (2014) published by Teachers College Press.

Laura puts a face on the school-to-prison pipeline by introducing readers to her brother, Chris. What is different about Laura's book about the school-to-prison pipeline is that it tells the story from the viewpoint of family. Laura chronicles her brother's journey on the all-too-common track for young Black males in urban areas, in this case



Chicago, from student to dropout to prison. In doing so, Laura uses the micro-level of individual experience to illuminate the larger complex and intertwined issues of school discipline, academic failure, and labeling students as troublemakers or special education, that along with broader failed social and economic policies produce the school-to-prison pipeline. In the words of the author, “there’s a story here – not just about my brother but about huge, crashing issues” (p. 2).

Laura struggles to unravel how her brother Chris, who grew up in a suburban, Black, middle class environment, became labeled, and became, a “bad boy,” and how his schools, teachers, and programs failed him. Laura thoughtfully weaves together Chris’s story with academic literature on dropouts and the school-to-prison pipeline. As a family member, education scholar, and Black woman, she is able to provide insight, and a privileged way of knowing, that cannot be gained through study alone (hooks, 1994).

Laura’s account also shows how very difficult it is to change this course, even when the student is from a middle class family, with some financial and social capital, and with some knowledge of the system, including a mother with a degree in teaching and a sister (Laura) in graduate school – soon to be a professor of education. And, while not affluent, the family is able to afford counseling, some stints in private Catholic school, and tuition at Illinois State University, where Chris lived in the dorms.

Laura uses personal narrative to explain and make sense of Chris’s journey, for herself and for her readers. Drawing from Lopate (1995), she adopts a conversational, essay style of writing that is informal but intentional, as if talking intimately with a friend. Her narrative is grounded in qualitative research methodology, including observational notes and recordings of informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with her brother, and immediate family members, as well also her own experience as Chris’s older sister.

The book is relatively short, just over 100 pages, with 5 chapters. The first chapter “My Brother, Chris” provides an introduction to Chris. Chris is a 21-year-old Black man who has been in and out of Cook County Jail in the five years since he dropped out of high school. He has been to the emergency room, and then to jail, after driving drunk, and

crashing into a light pole; totaling a car he has had for 24 hours. The used car was gift from his family, a reward for staying out of trouble for an amount time. Later he is arrested for stealing a pair of jeans from his dorm mate. And, in other incidents left untold, he is facing 5 felony charges and possibly decades in prisons. The family has learned difficult lessons about the indignities that families are subjected to by the detention system, such as how they must navigate visits to Cook County Jail. Fortunately for Chris, his family is able to gather together enough money to post the half-million dollar bail. And somehow, in spite of being a high school dropout, Chris is able to attend Illinois State University.

In Chapter 2, *School-to-Prison Pipeline*, Laura discusses three metaphors – the school-to-jail-house track, cradle-to-prison pipeline, school-prison nexus – used in current research literature to describe the process in which her brother, and thousands of others like him, are “funneled from systems of education to systems of criminal justice” (p. 13). She explains the deleterious effect of the zero tolerance movement in the 1990s, overly harsh school discipline policies, and the gross racial disparities in school punishment. Into this she weaves issues of special education and racially biased labeling of students. Citing Foucault (1995), she asserts that “zero-tolerance, school discipline and special education ... policies are panoptic systems of surveillance, exercises of power used to continuously and purposely monitor poor youth and youth of color” (p. 21). She draws examples from her brother’s experience to illustrate how these intertwined systems play out for individual students and their families with devastating consequences.

In Chapters 3 and 4, the narrative continues with more details provided about Chris’s educational experience in school and in detention facilities. Chapter 3 includes “How Chris Got Labeled.” With Chris continually in trouble, multiple school changes, and continued lack of success, a string of authorities (his pediatrician, principal, school psychologist) insist that something is wrong with Chris. They urge that he be medicated and/or placed in special education. While Chris and his mother initially resist these labels, his mother, desperate to help her son, concedes. Unfortunately, the educational accommodations and interventions promised and hoped for, fail. Chris

drops out of school and is flushed through the pipeline toward the prison system.

In the last chapter, *Walk the Path*, the author turns to her call to action and her vision of education and teaching that is based in love, justice and joy. Love, she writes, is “the action we take to enhance or alter our own or someone else’s well-being; love is what we do to make people happier and healthy. . . love seems inextricably connected to the world of education and schooling” (p. 78). Here, Laura insists that teacher activists do justice in their schools, and work to make schools more equitable. Laura calls for schools that value all students, are responsive to student backgrounds and individualities, and give them the opportunity to succeed in their own ways, creating joyful places of learning.

Several important and compelling themes are present in *Being Bad*, only a few of which will be discussed here. One is the socio-ecological nature of these problems, and the tension between institutional, individual and family responsibility. Clearly the school system failed Chris as much as Chris failed in school. While Laura places most of the blame on the school system, Chris steadfastly refuses to be a victim, claiming his own agency in events. The author also (but briefly) considers the role of parenting, writing that, her mother “ruled her girls with an iron fist, but Chris less so,” admitting “I’d be dishonest if I said I haven’t considered the possibility that my mother raised her daughters and loved her son” (p. 29).

A second compelling theme is labeling and the failure of special education. Chris and his family resist attempts to label Chris as deficit, as ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder), and as in need of medication. When they relent, the accommodations and extra services are lacking, and make things worse rather than better.

A third theme is school discipline and the act of being pushed out or dropping out. There are clear examples in the book of various attempts to push Chris out of school. For example, one private school principal advises Chris’ mom his needs could be better met by public school – and provides directions to the local school district. In another case, a school counselor suggests that Job Corps may be better suited for Chris. In the end, it is easier for Chris to drop out than stay in school. As Laura explains, Chris

mentally “checked out of school long before he dropped out” (p. 70).

There are numerous other themes that can be pulled from the book, including curriculum and instruction that is not relevant or engaging, the effects of peer socialization, and education carried out in correctional facilities. Throughout, the constant theme is the “knot” the author has been trying to “untangle” about how her brother and so many other promising young Black men end up in situations like this. Laura concludes that while she has “credible hunches,” she doesn’t have a definitive answer (p. 73).

Laura’s book has much to offer. She connects academic research and statistics about Black males, the school-to-prison pipeline, school discipline, disabilities and labeling, dropouts, and other issues with real experiences of her brother and family. This macro to micro linkage expands and helps to nuance our understanding of these several issues, and the plight of many children and young men of color. In doing so, she also provides insight into the powerlessness that families feel as they struggle to help their children. It is perhaps this impossibility of finding answers that marks this narrative – how intractable these problems can be and how difficult it is to interrupt the process.

While Laura’s narrative offers insights into the school-to-prison pipeline, it falls short in a few areas. First, the book could benefit by more examples to support and illustrate many of the assertions she makes about Chris and his schooling experiences. More details about Chris’s behavior, resulting disciplinary consequences, and explicit links to the juvenile justice system are called for. Another problem is that, at times, the book can be confusing. It can be difficult for the reader to reconstruct Chris’s story as she jumps back and forth in time and circumstance, and between story, personal thoughts, and commentary. This may be in part due to the writing genre employed but, nonetheless, the timeline could have been clearer. Finally, she leaves out some details that would be worth knowing. For example, how is Chris, a high school dropout, with drug and alcohol problems, and out on bail for multiple (serious?) felonies, able to be accepted to and attend college?

In spite of these shortcomings, *Being Bad* is a compelling narrative with an accessible writing style,

appropriate for a variety of audiences. Students in education programs, learning about the achievement gap, racial disparities in educational outcomes, or the school-to-prison pipeline, stand to augment their understanding of these difficult issues, to heighten their sensitivity to the needs and experiences of their Black students, and hopefully to inform their practices in the classroom with this book. School administrators can also learn from Chris' experience, allowing an opportunity to reconsider how children are labeled, disciplined, and sometimes subtly and sometimes forcefully asked to leave school. This book also offers students of criminal justice a different perspective than those often offered in such programs. In each instance, the lesson is often that answers do not come easily, that clarity is rare, and that educational practices and priorities must be reconsidered.

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Supported by the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, Arizona State University

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