

VIRGINIA
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Pipeline

By Dominique Morisseau

STUDY GUIDE

VIRGINIA REPERTORY THEATRE

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VIRGINIA REPERTORY THEATRE

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ABOUT THIS STUDY GUIDE

Age Range: *Pipeline* is recommended for grades 9-12.

Content Advisory: *Pipeline* is a modern drama that contains strong language throughout and some adult situations.

This play guide is a resource designed to enhance your theatre experience. Its goal is twofold: to nurture the teaching and learning of theatre arts and to encourage essential questions that lead to enduring understandings of the play's meaning and relevance.

We encourage you to adapt and extend the material in any way to best fit the needs of your community of learners. Please feel free to make copies of this guide. We hope this material will give you the tools to make your time at Virginia Repertory Theatre a valuable learning experience.



Sasha Wakefield and Trevor Lawson from Virginia Rep's 2021 production of *Pipeline*. Photos by Jay Paul.

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Dominique Morisseau

Dominique Morisseau is the author of *The Detroit Project (A Three-Play Cycle)* which includes the following plays: *Skeleton Crew* (Atlantic Theater Company), *Paradise Blue* (Signature Theatre), and *Detroit '67* (Public Theater, Classical Theatre of Harlem and NBT). Additional plays include: *Pipeline* (Lincoln Center Theater), *Sunset Baby* (LAByrinth Theatre); *Blood at the Root* (National Black Theatre) and *Follow Me To Nellie's* (Premiere Stages). She is also the TONY nominated book writer on the new Broadway musical *Ain't Too Proud – The Life and Times of the Temptations* (Imperial Theatre). Dominique is an alumna of The Public Theater's Emerging Writers Group, Women's Project Lab, and Lark Playwrights Workshop and has developed work at Sundance Lab, Williamstown Theatre Festival and Eugene O'Neill Playwrights Conference. She most recently served as Co-Producer on the Showtime series *Shameless* (three seasons). Additional awards include: Spirit of Detroit Award, PoNY Fellowship, Sky-Cooper Prize, TEER Trailblazer Award, Steinberg Playwright Award, Audelco Awards, NBFT August Wilson Playwriting Award, Edward M. Kennedy Prize for Drama, OBIE Award (2), Ford Foundation Art of Change Fellowship, Variety's Women of Impact for 2017-18, and a recent MacArthur Genius Grant Fellow.



PLAYWRIGHT'S RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

- My work requires a few “um hmms” and “uhn uhnnns” should you need to use them. Just maybe in moderation. Only when you really need to vocalize.
- This can be church for some of us, and testifying is allowed.
- This is also live theatre and the actors need you to engage with them, not distract them or thwart their performance.
- Please be an audience member that joins with others and allows a bit of breathing room. Exhale together. Laugh together. Say “amen” should you need to.
- This is community. Let's go.

— Dominique Morisseau

“The school-to-prison pipeline has national ramifications for students, teachers, parents, and families. I hope the story of Nya, Omari, and their struggles within a biased system inspire new audiences to push this important topic forward in their own communities.”

— Dominique Morisseau

PLAY SYNOPSIS *(Contains spoilers)*

The play opens on Nya, talking into her cell phone. She is leaving a message for her ex-husband Xavier about an incident involving their son Omari at the private school he attends. We then see that Nya is in her public school classroom and that she is a teacher.

In the next scene, we meet Omari in his girlfriend Jasmine's dorm room at their private school, where they talk about what will happen to them as a result of 'the incident'. Omari is worried he might be thrown out of school — or even arrested. Jasmine is worried for him and also for their relationship. Omari confides that he is planning on running away.

In the teachers' lounge back at her public school, Nya speaks with her fellow teacher Laurie, an older white woman who recently returned after recovering from a physical assault at school. They talk about the challenges of working with parents and school administrators to best help their students learn. They are joined by Dun, a school security guard who seems to have had a relationship with Nya. Nya doesn't want to engage with him but bums a cigarette from him before she leaves.

In class, Nya talks to her students about Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool." She asks them to examine the idea of kids getting in trouble — while hearing Omari recite the poem in her head. She is so worried about her son, she needs to step into the hall. Dun sees her and asks if she is alright, and she rebuffs him again.

Back in Jasmine's dorm room, she is on her cell talking to a friend from home about how she feels being a token student of color among so many privileged white kids. Nya is at the door looking for Omari, who has left school. At first, Jasmine challenges Nya about her relationship with Omari but she relents and shares all she knows — that he was probably heading to a train station nearby.

In the next scene, Nya is home, smoking in the dark when Omari comes home. They each try to explain themselves but they don't understand each other. Nya is wracked with worry. She asks Omari to please tell her what he needs from her. He goes to make them both dinner.

The next day, Nya's ex-husband Xavier goes to her classroom to talk about Omari and the incident at school. Nya is trying to explain what happened. Xavier thinks that Omari would do better if he stayed with Xavier and went to their local school. They argue about what they each think is best for their son — and about what broke them up in the first place. Nya gives in and they agree to try things Xavier's way.

In the teachers' lounge, Nya walks in on an argument between Laurie and Dun. There was another fight in Laurie's classroom. She broke it up before Dun got there by hitting one of the kids. They are both upset and defeated. Nya's mind turns to Omari and how he lashes out in anger. She spirals into a panic attack and collapses.

Dun is sitting with Omari in the hospital, awaiting word from the doctors about Nya, when Xavier arrives. Dun and Xavier have a tense exchange when they each realize who the other is to Nya. Dun leaves and the conflict arises between Xavier and Omari. Xavier wants Omari to respect him, but Omari resents his father's absence. Omari finally explains what happened at school — and all his pent-up anger comes out. Xavier is defeated and he retreats. Omari is left on his own, waiting to hear about his mom.

The last scene takes place in 'undefined space' — Jasmine leaves a long voicemail for Omari, letting him go. A student voice can be heard over the school PA, reciting "We Real Cool." Nya addresses the disembodied school board, pleading Omari's case, while Omari tells his mother that he is ready to take responsibility for his actions. Nya and Omari finally see and hear each other. Omari has come up with instructions, like Nya wanted. He reads them to her. And she listens.

Synopsis from the Lincoln Center Production of *Pipeline*.

THE CHARACTERS

Dominique Morisseau wrote about the characters as follows:

Nya - Black woman, mid-late 30's. Single mother. Public H.S. Teacher. Trying to raise her teenage son on her own with much difficulty. A good teacher inspiring her students in a stressed environment. A struggling parent doing her damndest. Strong but burning out. Smoker. Sometimes drinker. Holding together by a thread.

Omari - Black man, late teens. Smart and astute. Rage without release. Tender and honest at his core. Something profoundly sensitive amidst the anger. Wrestling with his identity between private school education and being from a so-called urban community. Nya's son.

Jasmine - Black or Latina woman, late teens. Sensitive and tough. A sharp bite, a soft smile. Profoundly aware of herself and her environment. Attends upstate private school but from a so-called urban environment. In touch with the poetry of her own language.

Xavier - Black man, mid-late 30's. Single father - struggling to connect to his own son. Marketing exec. Wounded relationship with his ex-wife. Financially stable. Emotionally impoverished. Nya's ex-husband. Omari's father.

Laurie - White woman, 50's. Pistol of a woman. Teaches in Public High School and can hold her own against the tough students and the stressed environment. Doesn't bite her tongue. A don't-fuck-with-me chick.

Dun - Black man, early-mid 30's. Public High School security guard. Fit and optimistic. Charismatic with women. Genuine and thoughtful and trying to be a gentleman in a stressed environment. It's not easy.

THE SETTING

Dominique Morisseau wrote about the setting as follows:

Not necessarily NYC, but definitely modeled after it. Can be any inner city environment where the public school system is under duress. However, the quick pace of the language is NY-inspired and should be maintained in any setting. Present Day.

Also, we have Undefined Space. This is a place where location doesn't matter. It is sometimes an alternate reality bleeding into reality. It is sometimes just isolated reality that doesn't require a setting. Only words.



Photo by Bertrand Colombo on Unsplash

THEATRE VOCABULARY

Character: A person in a novel, play, or movie.

Climax: The highest, most intense point of a story.

Crisis: In the structure of a play the climax, or crisis, is the decisive moment, or turning point, at which the rising action of the play is reversed to falling action. It may or may not coincide with the highest point of interest in the drama.

Conflict: The essence of dramatic storytelling. Conflict may manifest as external or internal. External conflict usually involves the protagonist and the antagonist. A conflict in literature is defined as any struggle between opposing forces. Usually, the main character struggles against some other force.

Dialogue: A written or spoken conversational exchange between two or more people, and a literary and theatrical form that depicts such an exchange.

Exposition: The portion of a story that provides the listener with background information such as character names, relationships, details about the setting, and prior plot events.

Fourth Wall: An imaginary wall that separates the audience from the action of a stage play or film, which is said to be broken when an actor talks directly to the audience or starts talking as themselves rather than as their character.

Gesture: A movement of part of the body, especially a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning.
Improvisation: A spontaneous performance or rehearsal without specific or scripted preparation.

Inciting Incident: The event or decision that begins a story's problem or conflict.

Monologue: A dramatic monologue is any speech of some duration addressed by a character to a second person.

Plot: The main events of a story.

Setting: The place or surroundings in which the story takes place (in a house, on a plane, on the beach, during a war, during a school year, while working on a farm or in a factory, etc.).

Soliloquy: An utterance or discourse by a person who is talking to himself or herself or is disregarding or oblivious to any hearers present (often used as a device in drama to disclose a character's innermost thoughts): Hamlet's soliloquy begins with, "To be or not to be."

Story Arc: The path along which the story develops.

Story Structure: The major elements of a story, including plot, characters, setting, and theme.

Theme: The subject in a story. A story can have several themes. For instance, one theme is the life of a young woman; simultaneously, the story also follows a second theme, which is how the young woman's father is having problems at his work. The themes may influence each other or develop independently; in this example, the second theme may be the setting for the first theme (see "setting").



Ghost Light: A single bulb left burning whenever the theatre is dark or closed. This is a tradition practiced by many theatres. Some say the ghost light is to scare away ghosts, yet others say it is to welcome them. Or it is simply a matter of safety, lighting the dark theatre for people working late.

This photo is the ghost light on the *Pipeline* set when the theatre is closed.

THEME 1: THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE

Liberty, noun.

1. the quality or state of being free:
 - a. the power to do as one pleases
 - b. freedom from physical restraint
 - c. freedom from arbitrary or despotic control
 - d. the positive enjoyment of various rights and privileges
 - e. the power of choice

Earlier this year, on January 26, 2021, a video filmed by a student at Liberty High School in Osceola County, Florida went viral. In the video, School Resource Officer Ethan Fournier can be seen violently restraining and then body slamming a young teenage girl to the ground head first; she seems to lie there unconscious while he handcuffs her. The video sent shockwaves across the nation as more and more people saw it. For many, it presented the question, why would an SRO need to use that much force to restrain a student who has no weapon and is not posing a threat?

For many others, it is not shocking that a police officer would treat a student so harshly in a school because school discipline and the criminal justice system have been entangled together for a long time, in what is known as the “school-to-prison pipeline.”

According to the ACLU, the “school-to-prison pipeline is a disturbing national trend in which children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems. Many of these children have learning disabilities or histories of poverty, abuse, or neglect, and would benefit from additional educational and counseling services. Instead, they are isolated, punished, and pushed out.”

Trouble at school can lead to many students’ first contact with the criminal justice system and, in many cases, schools are the ones pushing students into the juvenile justice system, often by having students arrested in schools by SRO officers like Ethan Fournier in Osceola County, Florida. Data have long shown that this issue disproportionately affects Black and Brown students, for they experience suspension and expulsion at much higher rates than white students. As adults, they’re also disproportionately represented in the prison systems.

The ACLU states that “‘Zero-tolerance’ policies automatically impose severe punishment regardless of circumstances and criminalize minor infractions of school rules, while cops in schools lead to students

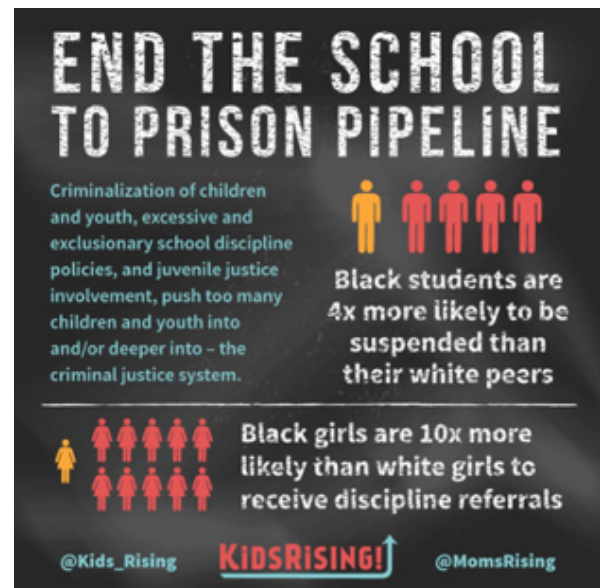


Image from <https://www.momsrising.org/campaigns/school-to-prison-pipeline/facts>

being criminalized for behavior that should be handled inside the school.” Under zero tolerance policies, students have been expelled for bringing nail clippers or scissors to school, for making guns with their fingers, for chewing a Pop-Tart into a gun shape, for bringing a camping fork for Cub Scouts to class- and the rate of suspension has increased dramatically, but most dramatically for students of color.

At the same time zero tolerance policies were taking over school districts, the broken windows theory reared its head there, too. This theory emphasizes the importance of cracking down on small offenses in order to make residents feel safer and discourage more serious crimes; in schools, it translated into more suspensions for offenses that previously hadn’t warranted them — talking back to teachers, skipping class, or being otherwise disobedient or disruptive. The problem isn’t that children are behaving worse as time moves on, nor is it lack of parenting.

The problem is the inadequate resources in public schools.

Across the country we are seeing overcrowded classrooms, a lack of qualified and dedicated teachers, and insufficient funding for necessary positions such as counselors, special education teachers, and even lack of funds for supplies like textbooks. The failure to meet educational needs increases disengagement from learning, increases the risk of later dropout, and

THEME 1: THE SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE *Continued*

the risk potential for court involvement. We know the failure to meet educational needs combined with harsh disciplinary practices pushes students down the pipeline and into juvenile justice systems. Suspended and expelled students may be left unsupervised so their guardians can work; being away from school they also easily fall behind in classwork, increasing their risk to be held back a year; all of which leads to a greater likelihood of disengagement and dropouts. This in turn propels the likelihood of justice system involvement.

School resource officers were never put in place to discipline or police students, they were originally intended to protect students in schools, in response to the 1998 Columbine shooting.

However, under-resourced schools that lack funding tend to place reliance on these officers, rather than teachers or administrators, to maintain discipline in the building. Students in schools like this tend to be statistically more likely to experience school-based arrests for non-violent offenses such as disorderly conduct and disruptive behavior in the classroom.

Boston University, the University of Colorado at Boulder, and Harvard University combined research efforts to study the school-to-prison pipeline, and findings showed that early censure of school misbehavior causes increases in adult crimes. “There is, in fact, a school-to-prison pipeline,” the researchers wrote in an article published in *Education Next*, “Any effort to maintain safe and orderly school climates must take into account the clear and negative consequences of exclusionary discipline practices for young students, and especially young students of color, which last well into adulthood.”

This research also found that school principals are the primary force behind the severity and frequency of school disciplinary action, as they often oversee the suspension and expulsion of students. While this specific research study did not address the issue of school resource officers, these positions are defined as law enforcement officers and they are employed through the local police departments.

Students who experience this can end up in juvenile detention facilities, many of which provide little to no educational services. Students of color, who are three times more likely to be suspended, expelled, or arrested than their white peers for the same kind of conduct at school are the most likely victims to travel down this pipeline.

According to Libby Nelson and Dara Lind in an article they published for Vox, “The broken windows theory in law enforcement focuses on the necessity of harsher punishment on small offenses, in order to make residents feel safer and discourage more serious crimes; in schools, it means more suspensions for offenses that previously hadn’t warranted them — talking back to teachers, skipping class, or being otherwise disobedient or disruptive.”

How do we change the way we discipline our students? Some of the country’s largest districts have been working to achieve better results for their students without the use of school resource officers, in ways that do not involve suspension and instead focus on a reformatory approach to discipline. Some counties have decided to forgo a partnership with local police departments, and insist administration at schools handle non-violent behavior so that students are not referred to the police. Some districts are no longer allowing the suspension of students under the grade of 3. Other schools are exploring restorative justice practices with a focus on forming relationships between students, teachers, and administrators. It gives students the opportunity to resolve problems by talking about them. A school district in Oakland, California has been testing this specific approach for ten years in a handful of their schools, and recently decided to expand it to all 86 schools in their district, after those using restorative justice reported suspension rates had dropped by half, graduation rates increased drastically, and chronic absenteeism dropped a substantial amount.

In the case of Ethan Fournier and the student he body slammed into the ground at Liberty High School, it seems liberty was not for the student. Taking into consideration the definition shared at the beginning, she suffered physical restraint, later had a concussion, memory loss, and still suffers headaches, and she did not return to school - removing her ability for the positive enjoyment of her rights and privileges to get an education.

How do we, as a community, promote equity and allow students to experience liberty in an environment that upholds severe punishment as a form of discipline? What would the outcome of our children be if we used counselors, therapists, and restorative justice practitioners instead of law enforcement and school resource officers? Would we see the whole person beyond what they appear to be? Would the pipeline erode?

THEME 2: BUSING AND SEGREGATION

In 1896, the landmark Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* upheld that racial segregation was constitutional under the “separate but equal” legal doctrine. According to the United States Supreme Court, racial segregation didn’t violate the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which guaranteed equal protection under the law for all American citizens. This amendment was approved and added to the constitution on July 9th, 1868 in order to give rights to the formerly enslaved people who were freed under the thirteenth amendment. According to the Supreme Court in 1896, having separate train cars for Black and white people was constitutional, so long as the amenities for different races were equal.

On May 17th, 1954, the Supreme Court overturned their previous *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision by ruling in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* that separate was not equal. Not only was keeping races separated unconstitutional, the spaces (restaurants, public parks, pools, hotels, housing, shopping, schools) and amenities (restrooms, water fountains, etc.) provided for people of color were notoriously lower quality than the public places that white people were allowed to occupy and the amenities that white people were allowed to use. In 1955, a year after the original *Brown v. Board of Education* decision, the Supreme court was dissatisfied with the speed and effort in which public schools were making to integrate. Many all-white schools in America still had yet to begin desegregating, so the court decided *Brown v. Board of Education II* (sometimes known as *Brown II*) in order to lay out a plan for desegregation in schools and order all-white schools to integrate “with all deliberate speed.”

A solution for desegregation was “Desegregation busing,” (also known as, simply, busing, race-integration busing, or forced busing by those opposed to it) the practice of transporting students by bus to schools in and outside of their school district in order to diversify schools - transporting white students to majority Black schools and Black students and other students of color to majority white schools. There was a considerable amount of opposition against busing from Black and white people alike, leading to the “Massive Resistance Movement” in Virginia that lasted until January 19th, 1959. Tactics for resisting integration included white families fleeing to the suburbs, enrolling their children in private schools, and creating Christian schools.

Despite the Massive Resistance Movement in Virginia ending, Prince Edward County transitioned all of their

public schools to a private school system in 1959 - the county refused to fund public schools for the next year, locked up the schools, and removed access to textbooks and other school supplies. While white students in Prince Edward received tuition grants to attend private schools, Black families were forced to figure out alternative solutions to educating their children. Many Black students did not continue their education - those who did went to understaffed schools with insufficient funds and a lack of resources. Prince Edward County public schools reopened in 1964 - ordered to do so by the Supreme Court.

When the Supreme Court ordered schools to integrate “with all deliberate speed,” that “deliberate speed” actually ended up meaning over 20 years. In 1971, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of busing again because Black children were still attending segregated schools, seventeen years after the original *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling. The case, the 1971 landmark case that upheld desegregation busing, was *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*. The court ruled that busing was an appropriate solution for “racial imbalance” in schools, and upheld the previous *Brown v. Board* decision. Desegregation busing in Charlotte-Mecklenburg county, North Carolina, officially ended on September 11th, 1999. Busing in North Carolina was seen as a success and an example to schools across America of how to successfully integrate their public schools.

While desegregation busing was looked at as a success in Charlotte-Mecklenburg, protests against court-ordered busing in Boston went on for months. These protests, sometimes violent, began to erupt in June of 1974 after the U.S. District judge W. Arthur Garrity ordered Boston public schools to desegregate. Similar protests happened across the country as earlier as 1957 in New York, Baltimore, Maryland and Louisville, Kentucky.

The legacy of desegregation busing is contentious, and in the end, court-ordered busing only applied to less than five percent of public school students in America. The backlash that desegregation busing faced from families, courts, politicians, the media, and school administrators greatly outweighed the positive impacts of desegregation busing. Because of the legacy of anti-integration movements, many school districts remain segregated in the United States today. Primarily Black schools are still understaffed, underfunded, and under-resourced. This lack of resources unequivocally leads directly into the school-to-prison pipeline.

THEME 3: PUBLIC VS. PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Private school versus public school is an old debate that's been going on for years, for parents who are fortunate enough to afford introducing their children to the world of private schools.

According to *U.S. News*, "Experts and education researchers say parents should look at a variety of factors when choosing a school for their child including:

- Educational outcomes, such as rates of graduation and college enrollment.
- Class size.
- Teacher training.
- Affordability.
- Diversity.
- Availability of programs for learning disabilities."

Citizen tax dollars fund public schools and parents do not have to pay for their child to attend one of these schools. Private schools often charge high tuition fees and can further create economic struggle for a family. No doubt, privilege and money are significant contributing factors when deciding to send a child to a private school. It is obvious that the major advantage public schools have over private schools is affordability. Buses to the school are free, textbooks are given to students, they offer free or reduced meals, and there are affordable, low-cost before and after school programs. Public schooling costs nothing, making it the only viable option for many families who cannot otherwise afford to pay for their child's secondary education.

Academic programs in private schools hold a strong appeal for parents who are considering the option. Generally most private schools have much more demanding graduation requirements than do public schools, and, because of their selective nature, private schools tend to have students that are more prepared for academic studies and who are more engaged in those studies as well. Behavioral problems are also less of an issue in private schools. These factors, combined with the high expectations that private school teachers have of their students, result in above-average success. It is also important to mention that the student-to-teacher ratio is better in private schools than public schools, with fewer students per private school classroom than public school classrooms.

Statistics show that there is a lack of diversity in private schools compared to public schools. This includes the teaching staff. Student populations in private school settings tend to be under-representative of the nation as a whole, and particularly lacking in socioeconomic diversity. Public schools are far more diverse and provide their students greater opportunities to engage with others of different races, ethnicities, religious affiliations, and socioeconomic statuses, thus better preparing students for success in our increasingly diverse world. All of this contributes to students' ability to interact with different people, which in turn can better prepare them for an ever-changing and diverse society.

Information compiled from publicschoolreview.com, fatherly.com, and usnews.com

THEME 4: FAMILY DYNAMICS

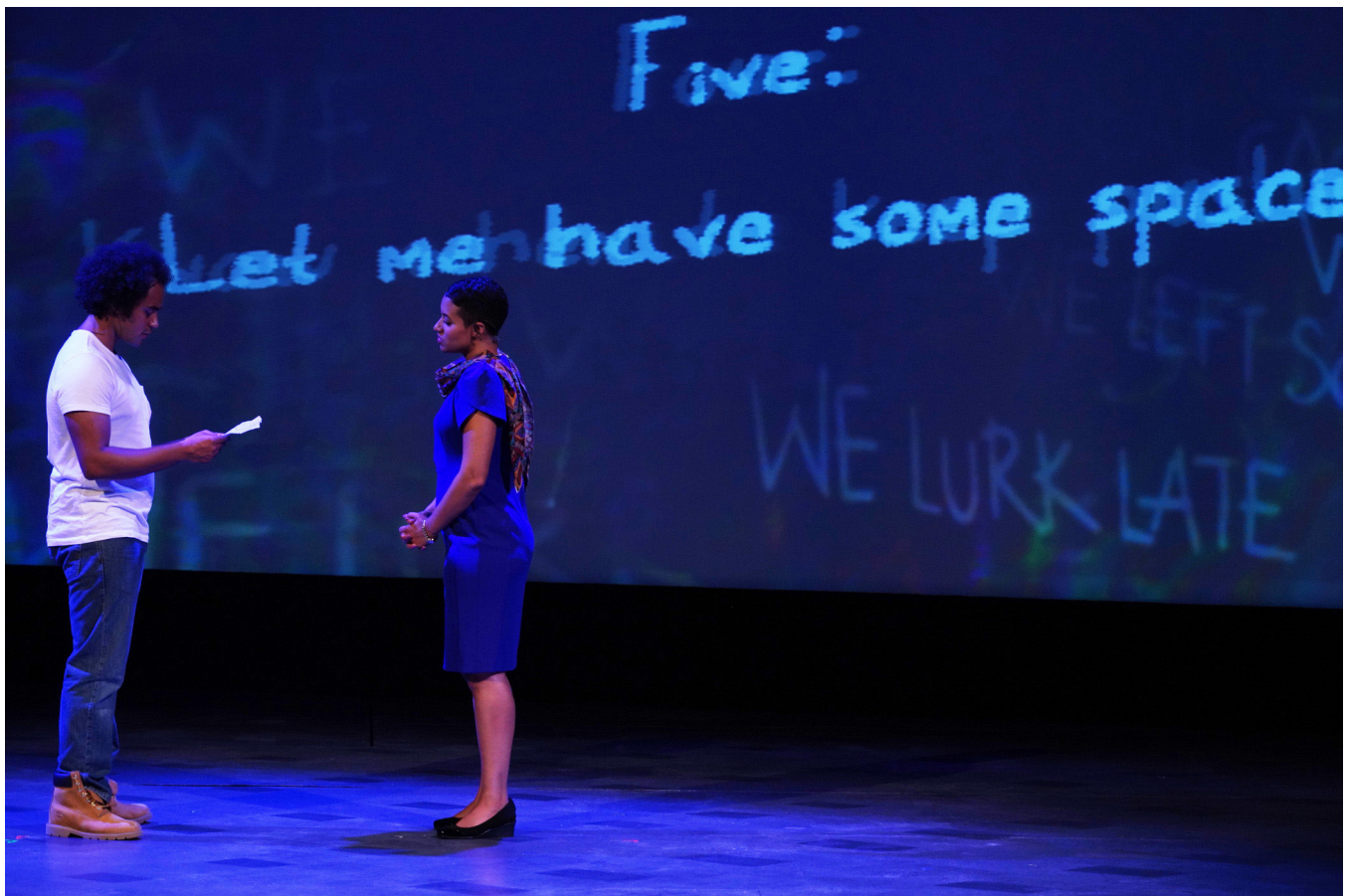
Family dynamics, in simplest terms, are the ways in which members within a family interact with each other - the things they express directly and indirectly to each other and the ways in which they express those things. A family dynamic is the arrangement of a family, informed by other hierarchies, patterns, and rules within the family and their interactions. What we think about ourselves is a reflection of what the people around us think of who we are - the concept of ourselves is shaped by our family and the people around us. Our families mold who we become.

In the context of family systems, dynamic refers to the changing, growing, and progressing of individuals in a family and their relationships with one another. Dynamics are the parameters that shape how we grow. Just as people grow and change all the time, so do families. Calling a family unit a dynamic acknowledges that these things can change.

Family dynamics are influenced by gender roles and the views of society. For much of history, mothers were expected to stay at home with their children while fathers went to work to support their family. Obviously there are exceptions to this in history, including during World War II, where women worked to support their families and the war effort while men were shipped en masse to war.

Of course, the definition of family is extremely subjective. There are countless families across the world that don't follow the "traditional" one husband, one wife, three children family model. An objective definition of family would be considering only those related by blood or marriage to be family, while subjective definitions of family include those chosen to be family.

https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-assets/109149_book_item_109149.pdf



Sasha Wakefield and Trevor Lawson from Virginia Rep's 2021 production of *Pipeline*. Photo by Jay Paul.

CLASSROOM DISCUSSION

Pre-show discussion questions:

1. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) defines the school-to-prison pipeline as a “national trend wherein children are funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.” In the pipeline, students who commit in-school infractions are diverted out of schools and into jails, often because of zero-tolerance school policies. Have you seen the effects of the pipeline in your school and community?
2. How do you think America’s schools can combat this pipeline?
3. Dominique Morisseau wrote a list of audience expectations she calls the “Playwright’s Rules of Engagement” (included at the beginning of this guide). This list may be very different from typical rules you’ve experienced during other live performances. Specifically, Morisseau encourages her audience to react verbally to the performance. Why do you think Morisseau wrote this list, and what does it say about her work as a playwright that she felt it necessary to create this list?

Post-show discussion questions:

1. What was a moment in the show that stood out to you? Why did it stand out to you?
2. Did you have a question before the performance began? If so, was it answered? What questions do you have now about the performance?
3. Which characters stood out to you? How would you describe their character traits, and how did those traits affect events in the story?
4. How would you describe the show to someone who has not seen it?
5. Omari writes a list of ways his mother can support him. He includes the following:
One: Hear me out.
Two: Let me chill sometimes.
Three: Know when to back off.
Four: Know when to keep pushing.
Five: Let me have some space.
Six: Don’t assume me for the worst.

Seven: Show up. In person.

Eight: Be fair.

Nine: Forgive that I’m not perfect.

Ten:

He omits the tenth instruction. What do you think Omari should add, and why? How can your parents, teachers, and friends support you?

6. What assumptions are made about Omari? How do those assumptions and expectations affect him?
7. Nya teaches Gwendolyn Brooks’ poem “We Real Cool” in *Pipeline*. Read and evaluate the poem and compare the themes, language, and style to *Pipeline*. What do the poem and the play say about the African-American experience in America? Have things changed? Write a third piece (either a poem or short story) that illuminates your perspective.
8. Did your experience at *Pipeline* change your perspective or deepen your understanding of the school-to-prison pipeline in America? In what ways?
9. The end of *Pipeline* does not provide a clear picture of what happens to Omari and his mother. What do you think happens after the play ends?
10. What are the conflicts in the play? What are the issues and assumptions that create the conflicts?
11. What other situations in Omari’s life contribute to the conflict in the play?
12. Which character did you most connect with, and why? What advice would you give to that character?
13. What advice would you give to Omari’s parents? To Omari?
14. The character Nya breaks the fourth wall by speaking directly to the audience. What was the purpose of that choice? How does it change the relationship with the audience?

Questions written for the Lincoln Center’s study guide, adapted by Amber Martinez, Arts in Education Manager, Virginia Rep

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES Grades 9-12



We Real Cool / by Gwendolyn Brooks. Detroit, Michigan : Broadside Press, 1966. <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rbpe.33901800>

Activity 1

In the play, Nya teaches Gwendolyn Brooks' poem "We Real Cool" (shown above). Read and evaluate the poem and compare the themes, language, and style to *Pipeline*.

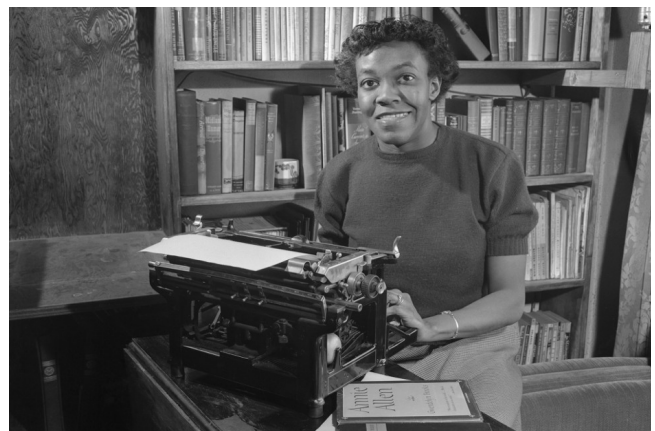
1. What does each work of art say about the African-American experience in America?
2. Have things changed?
3. Write a third piece (either a poem or short story) that illuminates your perspective.



Watch this video from Poetry Foundation

This simple, illuminative paper-cut puppetry, video imagines Gwendolyn Brooks writing her landmark poem, "We Real Cool." Recitation by the poet is also featured.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OUSvSvhue70>



Gwendolyn Brooks at her typewriter. photo from PoetryFoundation.org and courtesy of Getty images

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) was an American poet, novelist, and teacher, the first African-American author to win the Pulitzer Prize. She served as poetry consultant to the Library of Congress in the 1980s and was Poet Laureate of her home state of Illinois from 1968 until her death. Her work frequently focuses on the personal struggles and celebrations of ordinary people. She remains today one of the most widely read and anthologized American poets. Brooks wrote "We Real Cool" in 1959. It was included in her 1960 poetry collection *The Bean Eaters* and became her most famous work.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES Grades 9-12

Activity 2: PSA

In groups, create a Public Service Announcement (PSA) to educate your peers about the issue of the school-to-prison pipeline. Research facts about the pipeline and take a strong stance. Write a script and act out the PSA (or even film it!). What action do you hope your peers will take to combat the pipeline? Are you encouraging positive personal choices, or institutional change?

Activity 3: Improvisation

Part 1: Complete the following prompt:

**I am (*identity*), so people assume that
I am/that I know about (*assumption*).**

Next, share your sentence with a partner, and then discuss the following questions:

1. What do you notice about these phrases?
2. What problems might arise from these types of assumptions?
3. How have you responded, or how might you respond, to someone making assumptions about you?
4. How might this assumption benefit or be damaging to the person?
5. What consequences or conflict might arise as a result of that assumption?

Part 2: Devising an improvisation to explore assumptions about Identity

Improvisation is a spontaneous performance without scripted preparation.

- Students should form groups of three or four. In your group, share your responses from above, and then select one to develop further.
- Two members of each group will be creating an improvisation, and the other(s) will be writing down dialogue and actions as you devise them.
- All groups will devise an improvisation that explores how assumptions affect interactions.

- Each group will receive a slip with one of the scenarios from the improvisation starters handout. Student scenarios should be based on one of their own responses to the prior activity.
- Next, you will have time to develop and practice an improvisation based on one of the improvisation starters, incorporating the assumption that was made as the basis for the conflict. Your improvisation should be no longer than two minutes and the conflict might not be resolved.
- Select two people in your group who will be actors in your improvisation. The other student(s) will be the playwright(s). It is the playwright's job to write down key pieces of dialogue and action. What did the actors say and do in response to the prompt?
- If there are two playwrights, one should be responsible for writing down actions, and one should be responsible for capturing dialogue.
- Practice twice so there is time for the playwright(s) to write dialogue and actions. The improvisation does not have to be exactly the same each time. The playwright should give the actors feedback on dialogue that worked well. Your group may select useful dialogue and actions to repeat when you present. You are encouraged to develop and revise your scene.

Part 3: Peer Sharing and Feedback

Groups will present their scene in front of the class. Each group will have two minutes to present and two minutes for feedback.

Questions to guide feedback:

- What did you notice?
- What actions did you see? What did the performers do?
- What assumptions were being made?
- How did these assumptions lead to conflict?

Printable sheet for Activity 3 on the next page.

Activities written for the Lincoln Center's study guide, adapted by Amber Martinez, Arts in Education Manager, Virginia Rep

PRINTABLE LESSON FOR ACTIVITY 3

Make multiple copies as you see fit for your class, then cut each page into three strips, one scenario per section.

Scenario 1

Character A is the student about whom certain assumptions are made based on their identity.

Character B is a teacher who is basing their actions on those assumptions.

Scenario 2

Character A is the student about whom certain assumptions are made based on their identity.

Character B is a friend or peer who assumes they agree or have a shared interest based on a perception of shared identity.

Scenario 3

Character A is a student who has gotten into trouble at school or in another setting because of their response to assumptions being made about them.

Character B is a parent or guardian who has been informed of the problem and must confront their child about this issue

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: Books, Music/Playlists, Poems, Films

How the Systemic Segregation of Schools is Maintained by Individual Choices:

This interview on *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross features Nikole Hannah-Jones, a reporter focused on education and racial injustice provides insights into the complex individual decisions parents of students of color might consider when choosing a school for their students. <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/01/16/509325266/how-the-systemic-segregation-of-schools-is-maintained-by-individual-choices>

New York Times Review: *Pipeline* by Dominique Morisseau <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/10/theater/pipeline-review.html>

Pipeline author Dominique Morisseau, on seeing the whole person: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xervHKqk9FQ#action=share>

New York Times article about American Promise documentary: <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/18/movies/american-promise-a-documentary-on-dalton-students.html>

American Promise trailer: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yfA939LmPbU>

“We Real Cool,” Gwendolyn Brooks

Text: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/poems/28112/we-real-cool>

Recording of the author: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0USvSvhue7Q>

Using simple, illuminative paper-cut puppetry, this enchanting video imagines the moment of witness that inspired Gwendolyn Brooks to write her landmark poem, “We Real Cool.” Created by Manual Cinema in association with Crescendo Literary, with story by Eve Ewing and Nate Marshall and music by Jamila Woods and Ayanna Woods.

Schools and the New Jim Crow: An interview with Michelle Alexander, author of *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* <https://rethinkingschools.org/articles/schools-and-the-new-jim-crow-an-interview-with-michelle-alexander/>

FILMS TO CONSIDER

Native Son (2019) HBO

If Beale Street Could Talk (2018) Barry Jenkins

Notes from the Field (2018) Anna Deveare Smith

Moonlight (2016) Barry Jenkins

FURTHER READING TO CONSIDER

Invisible Man by Ralph Ellison. Addresses many of the social and intellectual issues faced by African Americans in the early twentieth century as well as issues of individuality and personal identity.

Native Son by Richard Wright. Novel that tells the story of this young black man caught in a downward spiral after he kills a young white woman in a brief moment of panic.

If Beale Street Could Talk by James Baldwin. A 1974 novel that tells a love story set in Harlem in the early 1970s. The title is a reference to the 1916 W.C. Handy blues song “Beale Street Blues” named after Beale Street in Downtown Memphis, Tennessee.

The Bean Eaters by Gwendolyn Brooks. Groundbreaking poetry collection first published in 1960, author of “We Real Cool.”

The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas. Young adult novel about an African American girl navigating the aftermath of her best friend’s fatal shooting by the police.

Piecing Me Together by Renée Watson. Young adult novel about an African American teen in a predominantly white private school.

All American Boys by Jason Reynolds & Brendan Kiely. Young adult novel about two young men, one black, one white, confronted with the problem of police brutality.

Black Boy White School by Brian F. Walker. Young adult novel about an African American teen from East Cleveland who attends a private boarding school in Maine attempting to navigate between two different worlds.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES: *Continued*

MUSIC PLAYLIST INSPIRED

BY THEMES IN PIPELINE

They School – Dead Prez (Explicit)
Thieves in the Night – Black Star (Explicit)
The Charade – D’Angelo
Lost Ones – Ms. Lauryn Hill
Ooh Child – The Five Stairsteps
Dear Mama – 2Pac (Explicit)
To Be Young, Gifted and Black – Nina Simone
Someday We’ll All Be Free – Donny Hathaway
Did You Hear What They Said? – Gil Scott-Heron
Respiration – Black Star, Common (Explicit)
What’s Going On – Marvin Gaye
Living For The City – Stevie Wonder
Who are You – Bilal
Rasool – Jill Scott
You Got Me – The Roots
Hungry Hippo – Tierra Wack
Rooftop – Jordan Rakei

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https://penumbra theatre.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/Pipeline-Study-Guide_10.11.pdf

American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on School Health, “Out-of-School Suspension and Expulsion,” *PEDIATRICS* (Vol. 112 No. 5, Nov. 2003), p. 1207. See also: Johanna Wald & Dan Losen, “Defining and Redirecting a School-to-Prison Pipeline,” *NEW DIRECTIONS FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT* (No. 99, Fall 2003), p. 11.

<https://www.aclu.org/issues/juvenile-justice/school-prison-pipeline>

<https://www.mercurynews.com/2015/01/14/oakland-school-district-to-expand-restorative-justice-programs-to-all-86-schools/>

https://www.naacpldf.org/wp-content/uploads/Dismantling_the_School_to_Prison_Pipeline__Criminal_Justice__.pdf

<https://www.usnews.com/news/education-news/articles/2021-07-27/study-confirms-school-to-prison-pipeline>

ABOUT US



Virginia Repertory Theatre is a nonprofit, professional theatre company and the result of the 2012 merger of Barksdale Theatre and Theatre IV. With four distinct venues, and an educational touring arm, Virginia Rep is the largest professional theatre and one of the largest performing arts organizations in Central Virginia.

We are dedicated to the development and production of new plays, and we seek outside producing collaboration to ensure the play has a life beyond its development and production at Virginia Rep.

For 68 years Virginia Rep has served Virginia's adults, children, families and schools and contributed to the cultural, educational, and economic life of our city and region.

Our Signature Season operates under an annual contract with Actors Equity Association.



MISSION

Our Mission: To entertain, challenge and uplift our communities through the power of live theatre.