

PIPELINE

STUDY GUIDE



by Dominique Morisseau

directed by Ron OJ Parson

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COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2 Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.3 Write narratives to develop real or imagined experiences or events using effective technique, well-chosen details and well-structured event sequences.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.5 Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.6 Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7 Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2 Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.

COMMON CORE STATE STANDARDS cont.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.11-12.1-3 Analyze the impact of the author’s choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama (e.g., where a story is set, how the action is ordered, how the characters are introduced and developed).

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RL.11-12.9 Demonstrate knowledge of twentieth- and twenty-first-century foundational works of American literature, including how two or more texts from the same period treat similar themes or topics.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.RI.11-12.4 Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings; analyze how an author uses and refines the meaning of a key term or terms over the course of a text (e.g., how Madison defines faction in *The Federalist No. 10*).

NATIONAL CORE ARTS STANDARDS

TH.Re7.1 Perceive and analyze artistic work.

TH.Re8.1 Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

TH.Re9.1 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work.

TH.Cn10.1 Synthesize and relate knowledge and personal experiences to make art.

TH.Cn11.1 Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural and historical context to deepen understanding.

ASF wishes to thank the Education department at Indiana Repertory Theatre, who allowed us to reprint “The School-To-Prison Pipeline” by Richard J. Roberts, Resident Dramaturg.

PLOT

Nya, an inner-city public high school teacher, is committed to her students but desperate to give her only son Omari opportunities her students will never have. When a controversial incident at Omari's private boarding school may cause him to be expelled, Nya must confront his rage as well as her own choices as a parent. Will she be able to reach him before a world beyond her control pulls him away?

CHARACTERS

Dominique Morisseau provided the below descriptions of the characters in her play.

Nya: Black woman, mid-late 30s. Single mother. Public high school 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. Nya's son. 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.

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 30s. Nya's ex-husband. Omari's father. Single father. Struggling to connect to his own son. Marketing executive. Wounded relationship with his ex-wife. Financially stable. Emotionally impoverished.

Laurie: White woman, 50s. 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.

Dun: Black man, early mid-30s. 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.

SETTING

Dominique Morisseau wrote the following about the setting of her play.

Not necessarily New York City, but definitely modeled after it. Can be any inner city environment where the public school system is under duress. 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.

ABOUT DOMINIQUE MORISSEAU

Dominique Morisseau is the author of *The Detroit Project* (A 3-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 Theatre), *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 alumna of The Public Theater Emerging Writer's Group, Women's Project Lab, and Lark Playwrights Workshop and has developed work at Sundance Lab, Williamstown Theatre Festival, and Eugene O'Neil Playwrights Conference. She most recently served as Co-Producer on the Showtime series "Shameless" (3 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 Dominique Morisseau

PLAYWRIGHT'S RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

- You are allowed to laugh audibly.
- You are allowed to have audible moments of reaction and response.
- My work requires a few "um hmms" and "uhn uhns" 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



Credit: Ridofranz

Over the past 20 years, the term “school to-prison pipeline” has been used to describe how harsh school disciplinary policies and law enforcement policies work together to feed young people into the criminal punishment system. Researchers have found that excessive suspensions and expulsions lead to various negative outcomes for students, including dropping out of school—and studies have shown that high school dropouts are more likely to be incarcerated than those who graduate high school. In particular, black students are disproportionately disciplined in school—although statistics show that they do not actually misbehave more than their peers.

This trend can be traced back to the Columbine school shootings in 1999. Since then federal and state laws have instituted zero-tolerance policies that assign “explicit, predetermined punishments to specific violations of school rules, regardless of the situation or context of the behavior.” At the same time, in the streets, the war on drugs has led to more punitive criminal legal responses, such as three strikes and mandatory minimum sentencing.

Police officers in schools play a critical role in this pipeline. In 1975, only one percent of U.S. schools reported having police officers; today, most urban schools have police on site. In New York City, public schools employ more cops

than counselors. Many schools also have metal detectors and surveillance cameras under the pretext of keeping students safe. The presence of police officers in schools often leads to harsher, sometimes brutal treatment of students. According to a 2011 report from the Justice Policy Institute, “when schools have law enforcement on site, students are more likely to be arrested by police instead of discipline being handled by school officials. This leads to more kids being funneled into the juvenile justice system, which is both expensive and associated with a host of negative impacts on youth.”

The realization that zero-tolerance policies in schools have led to criminalization and incarceration for students of color, and especially black students, has prompted calls for restorative justice and other, less punitive discipline practices. Some advocates say that the best way to prevent future incarceration is to invest on the front end in providing excellent educational opportunities for all. The outlook for such investment, however, is bleak. Nationally, since 1990, spending on prisons has increased three times as quickly as spending on education.

This article was written by Richard J. Roberts, Resident Dramaturg at Indiana Repertory Theatre, and published in IRT’s *Pipeline* study guide.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

PRE-SHOW QUESTIONS

1. The American Civil Liberties Union defines the School-to-Prison Pipeline as “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? How do you think America’s schools can combat this pipeline?
2. Dominique Morisseau wrote a list of audience expectations she calls the Playwright’s Rules of Engagement (on page four of this guide). This list may be very different from typical rules you’ve experienced during live performance. 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 QUESTIONS

1. 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?
2. Omari writes a list of ways his mother can support him. He includes the following:

- | | |
|---|--|
| One: Hear me out. | Six: Don’t assume me for the worst. |
| Two: Let me chill sometimes. | Seven: Show up. In person. |
| Three: Know when to back off. | Eight: Be fair. |
| Four: Know when to keep pushing. | Nine: Forgive that I’m not perfect. |
| Five: Let me have some space. | Ten: |

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



Cledie Taylor’s design of “We Real Cool” by Gwendolyn Brooks, first printed by Detroit’s Broadside Press in 1966.

CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

1. At Your Desk: 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 does each work of art 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.
2. On Your Feet: Did your experience at *Pipeline* change your perspective or deepen your understanding of the School-to-Prison Pipeline in America? In groups, create a Public Service Announcement (PSA) to educate your peers about the issue. 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?