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Breaking the Chains: Reversing the School-to-Prison Pipeline Through the Academic Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Black Males

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By
Folasadé Ogunbanwo
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MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

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Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project (or thesis) has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

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Committee Member*   Date

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

This case study explores the academic experiences of formerly incarcerated Black males. The goal of the case study is to inform policymakers and critical race scholars who take interest in the prison-to-school pipeline and ultimately dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline. The historical impact of slavery has manifested into this vicious pipeline and the overrepresentation of Black males in the prison industrial complex. This case study is to demonstrate how the net is casted on those affected by the incarceration system and that break the cycle for themselves by pursuing an education to create an upward academic trajectory.

CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Black males[1] are both more likely to be incarcerated than other youth and less likely to

find their ways back to educational facilities once released. Youth and adults of color, and Black

youth and adults in particular, are over-represented in every part of the school-to-prison pipeline

(Sawyer and Hodge, 2014). At the start of the pipeline, they are over-represented in school

discipline cases and are less likely than their white peers to graduate from high school. At the

end of the pipeline, youth and adults of color are more likely to be incarcerated than their white

peers. According to the Sentencing Project (2017), Black youth are more than five times as likely

to be incarcerated compared to white youth. Black males disproportionately make up the

majority of incarcerated youth within the U.S. As of 2003, 12% of Black males in their 20s were

in prison or jail, compared to almost 4% of male-identified Latinos and 1.5% of male-identified

whites in their 20s (Rios, 2006, p. 41). One in three Black youth, ages 20-29, are incarcerated or

on probation or parole (ibid). In fact, they are eight times more likely to be incarcerated as they

are to graduate from high school.

Despite California's recent efforts to pass and legislate propositions for incarceration and

correctional reform, the racial gap continues to grow for incarcerated juveniles and adults (Tiano,

2018). Black and Latino youth incarceration rates have not seen a significant drop in the past 20

years. While not broken down by gender, a report completed by the California Department of

Justice (2015) reveals that a greater percentage of Blacks were arrested for felony violent and

property offense. Nonetheless, Black youth with felony offenses are warranted to be "directly

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[1] Black males is in reference to self-identified, cisgender Black males

filed" to adult court and convicted for harsher sentences[2]. Research all over California's counties

has emphasized a push towards more equitable measures and services that divert and benefit

youth and adults of color from going into the prison pipeline.

Recidivism is also a growing issue when discussing the school-to-prison pipeline. In

California, nearly 74% of all incarcerated youth offenders get rearrested within three years of

their release (Tiano, 2018)(see Appendix A). Both youth on probation and those in out-of-home

placements[3] struggle to reduce recidivism and increase the retention of formerly incarcerated and

court-involved youth in an educational trajectory track. Carter (2017) added that juvenile justice

facility educational programs that serve in place of a reentry program, have been unsuccessful in

equipping youth with the necessary skills to transition back into an academic trajectory. Nearly

75% of formerly incarcerated and detained youth do not re-enroll in school (Thomas, 2014). If

youth engage with educational achievement while they are incarcerated, they would be more

likely to return to school and stand less chances of recidivism (Blomberg et al., 2011). Part of

that academic engagement stems from having a robust transitional program that addresses the

needs of formerly incarcerated youth.

This case study seeks to examine Black males who have been incarcerated or in an

out-of-home placement during their adolescent years going into adulthood, and how their

experience with a reentry program has facilitated the transition for them to get back into the

educational pipeline. This qualitative case study seeks to better understand the school-going

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[2] Although this is not the focus of this study, it is important to acknowledge that Latino youth
have the highest direct file adult conviction rates
[3] In 2004, it was discovered that nationally, approximately 100,000 of all youth, ranging in age
from 12 to 19, leave out-of-home placements each day (Thomas, 2014, p. 250). Out-of-home
placements are also part of the school-to-prison pipeline but will not be the focus for this study.

culture of the reentry program that the participants of this study were a part of and how they developed/rediscovered their academic identity in this type of program. The goal of this study is to utilize the academic experiences of formerly incarcerated Black males to address the gaps in the prison-to-school pipeline in order to reverse the school-to-prison pipeline.

Background and Need for the Study

Sawyer and Hodge (2014) wrote: "The school system is often a funnel for Black [and Latino] youth and it structures experiences that prime these students for entry into the prison system, also referred to as the 'school to prison pipeline". Youth of color internalize these experiences and it conflicts their motivation to do well in school and life. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) describe "Black misandry" as morbid way of viewing Black males that reinforces systemic oppression that is already set up against them because of their Blackness and their maleness (p. 558). Through this concept, Black males are socially disadvantaged, academically disenfranchised, and hyper-criminalized. While there is a plethora of research that identifies the factors that perpetuate the school-to-prison pipeline among Black males, there is not an abundance of research available that explores and understands their lived experiences in the prison-to-school pipeline.

For Black males specifically, they face the stigmatization of being hyper-criminalized (Ferguson, 2000). They tend to embrace these negative stereotypes of themselves. Rios (2006) wrote: "Because of this, they developed identities that they often wished they could renounce. They began to resist and as they resisted they began to embrace their own criminalization". Rios (ibid) also makes the point that being racialized and criminalized in the settings they attempt to navigate through is inevitable for Black and Latinx youth (p. 52). This case study is necessary in

order to further the academic footprints and demystify the perceptions of formerly incarcerated Black males.

Purpose of the Project

Black males are overrepresented in the prison pipeline. Black youth represented 7.8% of the state of California's population and almost 30% of juvenile detainees (Rios, 2006). Rios (ibid) also mentioned how mass incarceration has become a phenomenon among youth of color, being subjected to higher rates of being tried as adults. Thomas (2014) discusses the gaps that remain in research and resources dedicated to youth re-entry, especially in the prison-to-school pipeline. The purpose of this case study is to investigate a re-entry program that works with formerly incarcerated youth and adults, that keeps them on an educational trajectory which can ultimately help close the achievement gap caused by the school-to-prison pipeline.

This case study will better illustrate the connection between identity, re-entry programs and the academic trajectory of formerly incarcerated youth and adults, specifically when it comes to Black males. This case study is intended for critical race scholars who want to better understand how the school-to-prison pipeline is informed by race, to know where the line should be drawn and reverse the pipeline. This study is also intended to share the stories of those who have been affected by the school-to-prison pipeline and give them the opportunity to be part of the reversal of the pipeline. Lastly, this study is intended for other re-entry programs to know the best practice and policies that need to be in place in order to render the best support and services for formerly incarcerated youth.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Re-entry programs are created and informed by the social and academic success of formerly incarcerated youth and adults. These programs take a lot of time and research to measure the success that they have had on its participants. How does a re-entry program support the academic trajectory of formerly incarcerated Black males? How do formerly incarcerated Black males view themselves within the academic context and re-develop an academic identity within this program? Even though this study explores one intersection of race and gender, an expansion of this research is necessary to qualify and explore other intersectional reentry experiences.

Theoretical Framework/Rationale

Critical Race Theory (CRT) will be the foundation for this research framework but I will be drawing more of a focus to Black Critical Theory, also known as BlackCrit. CRT's theoretical basis is made up of "conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses" guided from a socio-legal standpoint (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, p. 3). CRT's movement is comprised of a collective group of activists and scholars that take a keen interest in challenging the dynamics between race, racism, and power (ibid). CRT recognized that both personal and structural racism is alive and reveals how racism within the American institution is normal. Brown and Jackson (2013) adds that racism is embedded into American culture and social institutions such as education. The rising issue of mass incarceration is an example of racialized social control. While CRT is a developing field of investigation in education among scholars and researchers, it does not validate the Black life experience (Ray et al., 2017). Namely, Hughes and Giles (2010) stated, "CRT must examine how educational policies and practices are developed and enacted to

bring about significant changes that re-centers the experiences and best-interests of people of color and communities of color" (p.47).

Subsequently, CRT is limited in its ability to adequately interrogate the specificity of Black people (Dumas and ross, 2016). BlackCrit allows readers to put CRT in a more critical perspective in regards to Black lives and their lived experiences in a white supremacist, hegemonic society. BlackCrit makes room for scholars and researchers to zero in on institutionalized racism as experienced and endured by the Black body.

Dumas and ross (ibid) bring up a clear distinction between racism and blackness. Racism being that it suppresses marginalized communities while focusing on whiteness and Blackness being an uplift of the Black diaspora. Focusing on Blackness exposes the inequities of racism and anti-blackness while highlighting the importance and contributions to Black identity. BlackCrit allows for an understanding of how Black bodies become degraded and disfranchised. More specifically, BlackCrit in education is intrinsic in analyzing how social and educational policies are informed by antiblackness and how these policies normalize Black suffering within classrooms (as cited by Dumas, 2014). BlackCrit is a way to enrich our understanding of concepts already developed in CRT. Dumas and Ross conclude the U.S. economy has been built on the backs of Black people so it is problematic that there is little acknowledgement and validation of the harsh Black experience (2016, p.425).

Afropessimism juxtaposes itself within BlackCrit which explains how racial slavery distinguished the social location of Blacks from that of other racial minorities. Gordon et al. (2017) argues that afropessimistic structuralism is the foundation and gateway to recognizing Blackness. Like CRT, Afropessimism argues that Blacks are excluded from civil society and are

living in the afterlife of slavery which is "evident in the way Blacks remain to gratuitous violence, as well as in the warehousing of Black in prison and lower income neighborhoods" (ibid, p.125). As stated by Ray et al. confirmed that afropessimists believe mass incarceration is a functioning modern day slavery that of which is being experienced disproportionately by Black males (p. 3).

While afropessimism shifts the focus of the binary between whites and blacks to the false idea that we live a racially progress society, celebrating nonblack folk's social success at the cost of Black suppression. My goal is not to perpetuate the Black/White binary and exclude other groups of color. Latino males also make up the majority of targets for the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration. My intention is to focus on the Black experience of reentry programs with plans to expand this narrative to other people of color who are marginalized and criminalized through mass incarceration. There is a lack of literature and research for youth of color.

Methodology

As mentioned before, this thesis is guided by case study methodology. According to Creswell (2013) a case study is a type of ethnography that can focus on individuals that are part of a specific program. The individuals who will participate in this case study have all been part of the incarceration system and have since participated in a reentry program. More specifically, this case study will be considered an instrumental case because it will bring attention to the prison-to-education pipeline and the development of academic identities for formerly incarcerated Black males (ibid, p. 465).

According to Creswell (ibid) qualitative research allows for narrative research design to be a methodology. Narrative research serves as a literary method to focus on individual stories rather than the bigger picture of cultural norms (ibid, p. 502). My research will carry narrative stories that are not culturally common. These narratives will also be presented to attest to the prison-to-school experience among Black males.

This case study is informed also by a critical race methodology. Critical race methodology, as a way to emancipate and empower while explaining the experiences of Black males that have been involved in incarceration, provides the space to share their counter-narratives to add to this case study (Also see Soloranzo and Yosso, 2002). I am tying the experiences and counter-narratives that are shared to lead this thesis in the direction of a critical ethnographic methodology; which in turn supports and advocates for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated individuals to participate in reentry programs that place them onto an educational trajectory. The critical ethnographic methodology will give way to allowing these young men's counter-narratives to be shared and heard in hopes to add to the literature and ultimately make a systemic change that supports the prison-to-school trajectory.

Recruitment and Site

I had started my recruiting based off of personal relationships that I had with two of my participants. One of my participants was part of the UC system and a reentry program that was housed on his campus. I also gained a participant via word of mouth from one of my college peers.

Participants

George has been serving a 13-year sentence for armed robbery. George has spent the majority of his twenties incarcerated and institutionalized. Since then, he has recalibrated himself to focus on going to school. During his sentence, George has constantly moved around the prison pipeline starting out in California, then relocating to Oklahoma, down to Arizona, and is now placed at a fire conservation camp that is a more leniently styled type of prison.

George has grown very familiar with this type of constant movement since his childhood. Being raised in a single-parent household of 6 kids, George is the second eldest. Taking a keen interest into computer science and technology, George was very gifted academically. Once he moved into the more urban neighborhoods and experienced poverty on a deeper level, his attention turned from the books to the streets. He found himself hanging out with other people who had the same ambitions to hustle, hoping it would make ends meet. George became deeply involved with armed robberies and it caught up to him sooner than he could realize. Just fresh of 18 years old, George received his 13-year fate behind bars.

During his time in prison, George started support groups with his peers that focused on "fringe" education as well as discussing their passions and interests. Expanding on this experience, George has been a part of a counseling group at the correctional facility camp where he is now. This gives him a space to redevelop his sense of self and identity. With George having a natural interest in gaining knowledge through meditation and self-awareness books, the facilitator and mentor for the group encouraged him to think about going back to school. With the incentive of having time taken off of his sentence, George did not hesitate to enroll full-time

into the partnering community college. He is currently invested into his studies, with plans to complete his associate's degree post-incarceration.

Prior to receiving his Master's in Public Policy from a public research institution, Charles became familiar with the school-to-prison pipeline beginning in the third grade after being suspended for child's play. Being raised by a single-mother, Charles found comfort in selling marijuana to provide for himself as he grew into his adolescent years. He started becoming court-involved by 16 years old and served his first felony charge just shy of 18. After serving almost four months in juvenile detention, Charles attempted to go to community college and worked part-time at a public health office in his community. Through a solid reference, Charles transferred to a college in Georgia.

With no solid income coming in, Charles went back to "slangin'" marijuana. The final conviction of three years in a Georgia prison halted Charles in his track. Charles was humbled through his time in the incarceration system, spending the beginning of his twenties in prison. He went on to finish his last three months in alternative care facilities that ultimately inspired him to want to go back to school and be a contributing member to the community.

Prince grew up in the San Francisco area while being raised by his grandmother. During his high school years, Prince started committing robberies with his friends in order to keep money in his pocket. He enrolled into community college although had no plans or aspirations for a career. At 18 years old, Prince caught a case of grand theft, criminal threat, threatening a witness, and conspiracy. His maximum sentence was a year in state prison. After doing a few days in county jail, he was advised to bail out and fight his case from the outside. From this point, Prince knew that he needed to reinvent himself in order to prove that he did not belong in

prison. He re-enrolled himself back into school and started to shift his focus on how he needed to create a more sustainable pathway for himself and his future.

After two and a half years of fighting his case, the judge dropped his charges to a misdemeanor. Prince transferred himself to a California State University to study Psychology. He gives credit to one of his fraternity brothers for helping him get his record expunged so that he could have the chance for a better life and future. Prince sought out organizations and support groups on his college campus to help him be accountable for his education and allow him to develop self-efficacy. Prince graduated from the CSU in the Spring of 2017. He is now working with youth from his community to give them a platform to develop their sense of self and support their academic aspirations. His hope is that his youth will learn from his past and choose a better pathway than he did.

Methods

I used the interview method to interview Black males who were and are a part of a reentry program and how that program supported their educational trajectory. Based on their shared experiences, I will discuss the themes that overlap from each story shared.

Limitations of the Study

One of my interviews took place at a fire camp correctional facility which created one of the most inevitable limitations for this study. For security purposes, I was limited to only paper, pen, and memory to recant all of the details provided by one of my participants. Another limitation of this study is that the narratives that are being shared would only be a small representation of the lived experiences of Black men within the prison-to-school pipeline. The stories that are shared do not make up or speak for the rest of the individuals who are part of a

system that doesn't make this pathway visible. The individuals who decided to participate have been far removed from their reentry program by at least a year which caused another limitation to my study. The recall of their experiences, transitioning out of or preparing to transition out of the prison system and into a reentry program, may not be as vivid as it was before. Lastly, a couple of my participants were apart of alternative resource programs that supported their academic trajectory in place of a reentry program.

Significance of the Project

This thesis is very important to me because my older brother has been incarcerated for the past 10 years, spending his entire twenties behind bars. His academic trajectory was very promising but was then completely eradicated when he was sentenced to 13 years in prison at the shy age of 19 years old. My brother was a self-taught computer hardware and software engineer without any formal training or schooling. I always wondered if my brother had had some type of program that engaged him academically and developed him personally when he first got caught up into the school-to-prison pipeline around the age of 14, would he have continued into the prison pipeline at all. My thesis research is dedicated to him and other youth that are like him, brilliant yet marginalized and pushed out. I hope to explore interventions such as reentry programs that support the educational trajectory of formerly incarcerated Black youth men to ultimately decrease and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. My hope is that through this study, more programs can be designed and developed to ensure the equitable opportunity and academic success of formerly incarcerated youth around the U.S.

Definition of Terms

Juvenile "juvie": Refers to any individual that has been processed and pipelined through the juvenile court system

Out-of-home placements: When the safety of a child or families is a concern or at risk, they are moved to a group home, foster care, alternative care, etc.[4]

Re-entry: It assists incarcerated individuals with a successful transition to their community after they are released. Used interchangeably with "formerly incarcerated".[5]

Direct file: Subjects juveniles to be tried as adults at the discretion of the prosecutor or judge.

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[4] https://www.childwelfare.gov/topics/outofhome/overview/
[5] https://www.bjs.gov/content/reentry/definition.cfm

CHAPTER II
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Alexander (2012) reminded us that "...we have not ended racial caste in the United States, but merely redesigned it through mass incarceration" (p. 10). From a historical context to modern times, race and hyperincarceration have led us to new forms of legal discrimination through social and educational policies. Through the fear created by the media and politics, many have been indoctrinated to believe that most Black males are criminals and belong in prison. This literature review will explore the history of mass incarceration of Black bodies, the school-to-prison pipeline and the criminalization of Black males.

In order to discuss reentry, we must first explore how the United States' prison population dramatically escalated, having the highest incarceration rate in the world (Heitzeg, 2009). Next, I will investigate the school-to-prison pipeline and how the pipeline implicates the educational system in structuring a path that leads to prison. I will then discuss research that points out that Black males have become targets and criminalized in social and school environments that have become militarized police zones for many urban centers (Sawyer and Hodge, 2014). Lastly, I will present the current state of the reentry process that calls juvenile advocates to the table.

The History of Mass Incarceration of the Black Body

13th (2016), the documentary directed by Ava DuVernay, argued that although slavery was purportedly abolished in 1865, a clause in the Thirteenth Amendment legally embedded and allowed a malignant form of enslavement into the American institution. This clause is a devastating political tool that perpetuates mass incarceration and criminalization of the Black

body in America[6]. Throughout the Reconstruction Era, many changes were made to help

mobilize the economic growth for Black in the U.S. (Alexander, 2012). Yet these changes

imposed a threat to white control and, thus, Jim Crow laws and "black codes" were featured

throughout the South in an attempt to disenfranchise, convict, and re-enslave Blacks. It was not

until the Civil Rights Act of 1964, initiated by President John F. Kennedy and then signed into

action by President Lyndon B. Johnson, that the U.S. began to formally dismantle Jim Crow laws

and "black codes" (ibid). With the success of the Civil Rights Movement (1964), conservative

white people began to search for a new way to maintain the racial order – a way that was not

explicit or easily visible (ibid, 40).

While using a "law and order" rhetoric and with the help of media to win his presidential

campaign, Richard Nixon exploited the fear of civil rights activists to find new ways to control

the Black population and bring back (racial) order to the U.S. Following Nixon's era, President

Ronald Reagan mastered a racially-coded rhetoric that led him to his presidency in the 1980's

and eventually to declare a "War on Drugs" in 1982 (ibid). According to an article written by

James Cullen (2018) stated that the prison population began to increase in the 1970's when

politicians tactfully used fear and racial rhetoric in order to enforce punitive actions[7]. Nixon's

"Tough on Crime" and then Reagan's "War on Drugs", doubled the total prison population from

329,000 to 627,000 by the end of the 1980's (Cullen, 2018). According to Alexander (2012),

"Nothing has contributed more to the systemic mass incarceration of people of color in the

United States than the War on Drugs" (p. 30). Scholars also argue that mass incarceration

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[6] See https://educationforjustice.org/resource/film-discussion-guide-13th/
[7] See https://www.brennancenter.org/blog/history-mass-incarceration

became an ulterior method to controlling and enslaving the Black population in light of the abolition of slavery and as a backlash to the Civil Rights Movement (Thomas, 2013).

The Advancement Project (2010) agreed that zero tolerance-style policing strategies started with the "War on Drugs" and contributed to the massive expansion of the adult prison population. Eventually, this approach was funneled into schools, leading to an increase in the police and security presence on campuses and harsher responses to student behavior (ibid, p. 4). These policies and practices have blurred the lines between education and criminal justice systems. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) was had the same intentions as the "War on Drugs" on schools,which took funding away from underperforming schools that are mostly in urban neighborhoods. NCLB created punitive measures that have led to a large percentage of school-based arrests, out-of-school suspensions, expulsions, and referrals to alternative schools and placements which is the most direct route in the school-to-prison pipeline (ibid). The Advancement Project (ibid) discussed the relation between race and the school-to-prison pipeline, stating: "[R]acial disparities in school discipline are getting worse, as the use of suspensions and expulsions for students of color has increased since the passage of NCLB, while it has decreased for White students" (p.5). The study concluded that zero tolerance and high-stakes testing created schools to be alienating environments which displaces youth into the prison pipeline.

The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The school-to-prison pipeline has become a growing concern in the mass incarceration of Black youth. "The school to prison pipeline refers to this growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via 'zero tolerance' policies, and, directly and/or

indirectly, into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems," (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 1). In the post-Civil Rights era, there have been drastic shifts in educational policy and practice that exacerbate inherent inequities in public education, thus causing an increase in the blurred distinction between schools and jail (Heitzeg, 2009). The school-to-prison pipeline disproportionately impacts poor students, students with disabilities, and students of color, especially Black students, who are suspended and expelled at the highest rates.

Black youth are at increased risk of being "pushed out" of school and into the streets, the juvenile justice system, and/or into adult prisons and jails. The U.S. Department of Education indicated that "African-American students represented 24% of enrollment but made up 35% of on-campus arrests" (Mallett, 2016 p. 297). Young Black males are targeted for arrest on and off campus. A recent national analysis completed by Blad and Harwin (2017) revealed that "Black boys are at the highest risk, being three times as likely to be arrested at school as their white male peers".[8] Mallett (2016) suggested that "[T]he risk of dropping out of high school is doubled if a young person is arrested on or off campus grounds, and is four times greater if the young person is formally involved with the juvenile courts," (p. 297). Punitive zero tolerance policies indiscreetly target Black males with no cohesive mitigation of their circumstances, perpetuating and feeding the school to prison pipeline. This cycle continues to derails Black males off their academic trajectory.

The Criminalization of Black Males and the State of Reentry

According to Heitzeg (2009) zero tolerance rhetoric plagued schools and communities with the intentionality of criminalizing Black and Brown bodies. Along with political rhetoric

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[8] www.pbs.org/newshour/education/analysis-reveals-racial-disparities-school-arrests

surrounding "tough-on-crime" policies and mass incarceration, Heitzeg (2009) identified that the media played a huge role in illustrating and qualifying what the standard criminal looked like. Heitzeg (2009) found that "beyond their over-representation as 'criminals', Black offenders are depicted in a more negative way than their white counterparts" (p. 3). Heitzeg (2009) confirmed that the racial climate became normalized within communities and policies. The association of Black males as menaces to society became widespread and there was no way for them to deem themselves otherwise.

Efforts to ease the transition of formerly incarcerated Black male youth back into an educational trajectory must begin with an acknowledgement of the inequitable conditions in society, the cultural racism perpetuated by media, and the unjust "justice" system in this country. Thomas (2014) noted that although work to reduce the numbers of youth being returned to out-of-home placements by creating more programs of support are laudable, they must be seen as part of larger abolitionist efforts. Saywer and Hodge (2014) discuss the issue of reentry among youth and that the prison institution lacks the provision of services to teaches rehabilitation so that those who are reentrying learn behavior that will be conducive to their reintegration. Researchers pointed out that as long as reentering youth "lack access to mainstream institutions and support for investing in their own futures, their only option is to remain firmly embedded in street culture" (Sawyer and Hodge, 2014, p. 240). It is important that reentering youth have the necessary skills to navigate the world in order to find a job or go back to school, beyond what the juvenile detention facilities and adult prisons offer. Research has shown that among those released from prison, "almost two-thirds will be charged with a new crime and 40% will return to prison within three years" (Pager, 2003, p. 938). Thomas (2014) concluded that while there is

a lot of attention given to trying to help and educate young people to avoid prison, now is the time to give increasing attention to improving the process of reentry, such as mentoring, after school programs, and youth advocacy groups.

Carter (2017) viewed the state of reentry as a system that is failing to provide thorough support for formerly incarcerated individuals, regardless of their race. There's a lack of consistent reentry programs that give educational opportunities as well as addressing their social-emotional needs in order to prepare formerly incarcerated individuals for a competitive academic trajectory. Even with state and federal funding, there are legislative efforts like the Every Student Succeeds Act[9] that lacks literature and focus to address and build a cohesive prison-to-school pipeline.

Summary

It's important to understand the systemic structures that have been historically put into place that have ultimately altered the correlation between race and justice. The school-to-prison pipeline has been backed and influenced by politics, specifically targeting Black male students. Unfortunately, youth of color are becoming the main targets for the prison pipeline through media stereotyping and unjust school and criminal justice policies. (Heitzeg, 2009, p. 7). Along with the coercion of the criminalization of Black males, the school-to-prison pipeline has become the steadied systemic force that shifts Black males off a pathway for an educational trajectory. Heitzeg (2009) claims that the school to prison pipeline has already claimed tens of thousands of

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[9] "Congress passed the ESSA in 2015, which updated a series of requirements for the education for youth in facilities and the transition out...After the passage of ESSA, the Obama Administration's Department of Education passed regulations that, among many other topics, tried to create incentives for better information sharing between schools and juvenile justice facilities. Those regulations have since been overturned by Congress pursuant to the Congressional Review Act" (see Carter, 2017, p. 379-380)

young lives. These statistics and prior research showcase failed educational practices and social policies which set the stage for the work needed to counteract the impact of these lived realities faced by young Black males and males of color. The age of mass incarceration is a profitable institution that relies on youth of color to fill the burdensome role of keeping it running. The school-to-prison pipeline is a hyper-racialized, systemic institution that has been embedded in historical and social structures of power and persistence, created to keep and bury Black male adolescents. Juvenile advocates can warrant breaking the vicious cycle of mass incarceration and the criminalization of Black youth men and youth through the reentry process. While this is not the only answer, it can give more positive outcomes and interventions for those coming out of the system.

CHAPTER III
RESULTS

Introduction

Black males experience the school-to-prison pipeline to a greater capacity than most

populations. The perpetuation of this experience is the result of Black males being

overrepresented in prisons. They have to eventually figure out the best and sustainable ways to

re-enter back into society with the intentions of having accessible resources and support. How

does a successful re-entry program support the academic trajectory of formerly incarcerated

Black males? How do formerly incarcerated Black males view themselves within the academic

context and re-develop an academic identity within their program? George is still incarcerated

but is getting a headstart on his reentry process. Charles is a twice-convicted felon with a

master's degree. Prince has an expunged record and is a college graduate. The narratives that

were shared by Charles, Prince and George, represent different positions within the

school-to-prison pipeline. Their narratives are representations of counter-narratives to the

incarceration system and the reentry process.

Findings

Validation

The concept of validation[10] is described as the social recognition that a person seeks in

order to affirm that their feelings or decisions are valid and worthwhile. Validation can be

synonymous with affirmation and gratification. It can also come in positive and negative forms.

In some instances, it is hard to determine right validation from wrong. Most youth who become

court-involved or incarcerated battle with internal and, most times, external validation. Many

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[10] https://www.dictionary.com/browse/validation

youth proclaim that they are just products of their environment and doing what they know best. Others want to be reassured that they are doing the right thing by going back to school and making a better life for themselves. Yet, this idea of validation stems from of sense of wanting to be accepted in their actions, despite what the consequences can be. Most formerly-incarcerated individuals who have been in the system since their youth seek validation in wanting to find the right pathway for themselves, so that they do not fall back into their criminal behaviors. This type of positive reinforcement is a motivating factor for them to be sustained on an academic trajectory.

During Charles' transition out of the prison system and back into school, he found himself networking with any and everybody that he could in order to get onto the right pathway. Once he became a student for a program dedicated to helping students transfer his participation "reaffirmed" his decision to transfer to a research institution . His experience of being formerly incarcerated and wanting to go to a university was also validated by a retired professor who helped him get into his research institution. Charles' self-esteem was "shot" every time he thought about applying to the research institution. But the professor said to him "You did three years in prison! this institution will be a walk in the park for you" (Interview, 2019). Still with a lot of self-doubt, Charles continued to be open about his story and aspirations to continue his education, as long as it meant that he did not have to "slang" drugs anymore. Charles also gained a mentor through a job as a community advocate after serving time for a wrongly convicted offense. That mentor took Charles under her wing and helped Charles find his voice about social injustices against marginalized communities. Not only did this experience validate that Charles was an asset to his community but it also gave him a clearer pathway to pursuing public policy.

Charles also became very involved once he transferred to his research institution. He highlights that his participation in a reentry program that focused on the prison-to-school pipeline, validated the fact that he and others like him belong on such an elite campus. His experience in the program reaffirmed and sustained Charles in his academic trajectory.

While speaking with George, the word "positive reinforcement" was constantly coming up for him. While he was involved in his criminal activity, he mentioned that he received "positive reinforcement" from his peers to engage more in this type of behavior. Once George got into the 12th grade, he had a counselor who helped him see what his future could look like. This experience helped reinforce George's academic trajectory to graduate high school and enroll himself into a community college. He believed that the rest would fall in its place. He believed that when he had graduated from high school, he would also be graduating from his criminal activity. But the negative reinforcement and 'validation' from his peers pushed him to re-engage in the criminal lifestyle and to actions which led to years of incarceration. It took George to hit rock bottom while he was incarcerated to see that everything that led him there had to with seeking some form of validation, although not the type he wanted to attract. He said that he was in need of receiving the type of validation that he was getting from his counselor in high school in order to motivate him to get back onto a more positive trajectory.

While talking with Prince, he discussed his need for "instant gratification" throughout his adolescent years. Since he wasn't getting this gratification from his classroom space, he sought it in more rebellious ways. Prince speaks on the antagonistic antics that he had received from teachers that he felt ultimately pushed him out of the classroom. Although he eventually graduated from high school and enrolled himself into community college while fighting a

criminal case, he still yearned to have some form of validation. He began seeking it out by dedicating himself to serving his community. During that time, Prince redefined what gratification looked like and what it meant to him. This mindset led him to seeking out the proper guidance and resources so that he could eventually transfer to a four-year university. Through these resources, he was able to find a counter-space for Black males that validated and allowed him to express the hood culture that he was used to and integrating that with college life. He said that this experience was one of many that helped him feel reassured and retained on his college campus.

With validation comes the idea of sustainment in what feels substantial and what feels wasteful. The participants in my study needed some type of gratification in how they chose to reintegrate and sustain themselves back into an academic trajectory. Most times, it is difficult for formerly incarcerated Black males to understand what positive validation looks like especially if their lived experiences prior to them being involved in the system lacked that type of positive exposure. It is important for these individuals to be in an environment that is conducive to their needs and that rehabilitates them to a transcending trajectory.

[Dis]Placement

Placement correlates to having a stable environment before, during and after institutionalization takes place. Placements are a key element when facilitating the reentry process for formerly incarcerated Black males. The most common placement in California is carried out at the local county parole office, where formerly incarcerated youth and adults are required to visit every so often for reentry resources. According to Charles, he pointed out that this placement is a flawed system within itself because the focus is on an individual's violations

of their parole rather than their actual rehabilitation (Interview, 2019). Displacement occurs here because there are very limited reentry resources available and the resources that are available are not referenced to any specific individual. With that comes lack of access and other needs that will be discussed later on in this study. Even for job placements, depending on the crime that the individual committed, most of formerly incarcerated individuals are automatically disqualified from applying. What is also not considered for formerly incarcerated Black males is how they are placed back into the environments that perpetuated their actions and behaviors prior to being incarcerated. For proper placement, formerly incarcerated Black males have to advocate for themselves and makeshift resources in order to be on a pathway of personal and academic success.

Although Prince was never referred to a reentry program, he sought out other resources like the African American Resource Center at a local city college and a mentoring program for Black males at his CSU, which he viewed as substantial resources to keep him on a college graduation track. Prince acknowledged his sense of being out of place when he finally transferred to a CSU after battling his case for over two years. He wanted social opportunities that gave him a different perspective of how Black males can be collegiate and successful individuals while not having to change and assimilate to "whiteness" and other cultural norms that disregarded his past. He also stated that joining his Black fraternity gave him examples of how Black men are able to present and carry themselves in a way that breaks the stereotype. He translated that experience into being more presentable and impressionable in the work that he was doing on campus and in his community. Prince feels that his placement at a community

college and then his transition to a four-year university sustained him positively in his community.

After being displaced in the Georgia prison system for three and a half years, Charles came back to California ready to involve himself in any and everything that was positive and that could bring financial stability. Once Charles learned about the reentry program and how its mission was to increase and retain formerly incarcerated individuals in the prison-to-school pipeline, his participation allowed him gained a support group and utilized the program to create a sustainable network for himself and his peers. Through word-of-mouth, Charles began applying to scholarship and fellowship programs that brought him the financial stability that he thought he had received from the parole office, but also gained opportunities that advanced his career pathway in public policy.

Although George is still incarcerated, his placement at his current fire camp has enabled him to have access to resources as if he were out in the real world. He has become part of grassroot efforts for a counseling group at his location. In this group, George is constantly leading and learning how educating the mind can result in a better understanding of himself and the world. George is also enrolled as a full-time student with a partnering community college which allows him to get a head start on his desired degree. He is able to receive time off of his sentence for every class he passes. George spoke about how there are educational opportunities in correctional facilities but it is up to the individual to want that trajectory. During George's interview, he had a unique epiphany about how the [incarceration] system thrives off the incarcerated body and how he would rather continue his involvement and efforts of pursuing an education after he is paroled. He is aware that the world is completely different than it was 12

31

years ago and that his adjustment will not be easy. However, he acknowledges his placement at the fire camp as a transitional tool in preparing for his release.

During my interviews with Prince, Charles, and George, the idea of being "products of their environment" also became a common theme. Each of them made conscious efforts to redevelop and positively change themselves, being that they are formerly incarcerated and court-involved individuals, because they wanted to have access and be placed in a position that would bring them upward mobility. It is a valid implication that each individual has a "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps" mentality in order to properly align themselves with an environment that is sustaining. In order to better understand how placement and displacement facilitates the reentry process for formerly incarcerated Black males, an exploration of how they see themselves versus how society sees them is essential.

Identity

Identity is the fact of being or who a person is. Our identities are constantly changing and developing every day. Many individuals do not have the privileges of accepting or denying certain identities. There are also experiences that can shape who we are and how we identify with ourselves. Many Black youth and adults are socially aware of how their Blackness plays a part in how they are disciplined in school and in the criminal justice system. To carry this awareness along with the title of being "formerly incarcerated" or "ex-offender", the individuals that participated in this study described having to constantly work at redefining who they were and who they were trying to be. In order for formerly incarcerated Black males to create a positive identity for themselves and to have an academic trajectory, there is a need for exposure, space to understand their Blackness and opportunities to curate their knowledge.

George said: "they took my freedom but gave me my time" (Interview, 2019). Through

this, George was able to self-reflect on how he came this far and how much further he wanted to

go. He went into detail on how he spent countless hours reading self-development and

self-awareness books, gravitating towards learning about the philosophy of knowledge. Prior to

his realizations, George felt ignorant about the criminal justice system. He also felt that the street

life was part of his identity, which he admits made him spiral out of control. When George first

gained possession of a gun at 14, he said that he felt powerful. George has now translated this

experience to seeing the knowledge that he gains as the true force of his identity. He mentioned

how he sees himself as a helper for his literacy group, a mentor for youth who are headed down

the same path as his. He aspires to be a future professor. George stated that if he had had a

consistent mentor that helped him outline a life plan that put into perspective how he could make

his goals a reality, he would have been more susceptible to being a more positive student and

role model early on in life. In his opinion, he believes that the way he identifies moving forward

"is all a matter of choice and perspective" (Interview, 2019).

Prince had the most interesting perspective of how his Blackness dictated the decisions

he made which led him to being court-involved. He stated that he always had pride in himself but

not in being Black, which led him to not care about how he was perceived as a Black male. Once

Prince went to jail, that is when the reinventing process of his identity started. After his release,

Prince went back to community college and started learning concepts that uplifted the Black

experience and applied them to his life. He made his focus on what his academic plans were

more narrow and aligned with what he wanted to see in his community. Prince began to have a

more positive vision as to why he was still in school, while still fighting his court case. He said

that his involvement on campus helped him see himself as a leader and be part of the creation for critical dialogue on how disenfranchised Black students can identify, navigate and succeed on a college campus.

What Charles credits as his most successful and developed part of his identity is his ability to network and build relationships. For him, this was an integral part of his reentry process. Charles' motivation to break the cycle, from going in and out of court to being college bound, came from the people he met and from building up a supportive network. He said that his self-esteem started to increase through his network. During his interview he mentioned moving with purpose and intention in order to see what was substantial and what was not. Charles' purpose and intentions to share his turbulent journey became part of his manifesto so that he could contribute to the conversation surrounding the struggle of being formerly incarcerated and being a Black man. Part of Charles' identity has developed to being an advocate for social justice and for policy change that affects formerly incarcerated individuals. In his experience prior to being convicted, Charles was always a victim of mistaken identity by cops. He internalized the fact that he was surveilled more closely because he was a Black male. But he redefined that internalization through a network that believes in him and he uses that experience as part of his counter-storytelling for the prison-to-school dialogue.

Summary

One finding cannot fully function without considering the other. In order to validate one's experience, we must access the environment(s) the individual is coming from and where they aspire to go. To ensure that an individual has a cohesive understanding of their academic trajectory and experiences, we must examine how they see themselves and how society views

34

them. All three of my participants had many moments of error and realization during my interview with them. For each of them, creating meaning by gaining an education is important in different ways. They forged a path towards an academic trajectory that best made sense for their lives with minimal tools and resources available to them. My participants made-shifted opportunities and resources to put themselves on a path for upward mobility, regardless of what their criminal records hold. What they wanted was to be reassured in the choices that they made outside of being incarcerated. They needed space(s) in order to fully develop and see their potential to some capacity in academia. Lastly, the importance of knowing themselves and how the world perceives them shaped how they navigated the spaces that they occupied.

CHAPTER IV
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussions

Saywer and Hodge (2014) stated that it is important that reentering youth [and adults]

have the necessary skills to navigate the world in order to find a job or go back to school, beyond

what the juvenile detention facilities and adult prisons offer. During a follow up interview with

Charles, he indicated that the reentry resources that the county parole office offers are very

limited and not part of the focus when individuals are doing their check-ins. If research indicates

that academic and social tools are necessary for a successful reentry, then those tools should be a

required part of the rehabilitation that is supposed to take place during incarceration. I also

observed that none of the participants were given any direction upon their release, they had to

want direction for themselves in order for them to have some type of pathway to follow. George

was reassured that if he had a mentor or guidance counselor when he started becoming

court-involved to help him build a solid plan for school and learn about what his passions were

and put that into perspective on how to get there, he would not have continued down the pathway

that he did.

The concept of "Black misandry" becomes prevalent when discussing placements and

identity development for formerly incarcerated Black males. Each of them could point to an

encounter in their K-12 experience where their Blackness made them unwarranted targets for

disciplinary action and they see how that experience has translated into the way they are treated

within the criminal justice system. They internalize these experiences. The participants from my

study mentioned the labels of being "formerly incarcerated" and "being Black" as an indicator

for them being displaced from job opportunities which informed their decision to go back into

school. Black misandry becomes hyperactive in the sense that not only are the participants Black but that they also have criminal records, which leaves them stigmatized to beneficial opportunities and resources. This is one of the primary goals of reentry.

Another finding that is relevant to discuss is how each participants' identity changed over a course of time. George and Prince in particular both discussed the need to keep up with the "bad boy" image because of all the attention and notoriety they had been gaining from it. I believe the idea of being "products of their environment" comes to life in the sense that their criminal behaviors were being normalized and praised. Because they were already viewed in a specific way and expected to engage in such behavior, they did not have the proper guidance to know what wrong looked like. It took being incarcerated or in jail for them to understand that the bad boy mentality was only leading them down a destructive path. It was difficult to maintain that identity without attracting unwanted negative energies from the environment they'd known. That is when the lens switch had happened. If they continue to identify as the "bad boy", then eventually they would face bad consequences. However, if they wanted to be students and scholars, they would have to put their head into school and develop more sustainable passions beyond living the street life.

The concepts of BlackCrit overlap with the findings of my study in the sense that Black scholars try to find a space to develop their academic identity and educational efforts while being Black that is validated in academia. Along with that, Black scholars need to have the resources and support to understand and articulate their educational pursuits and academic identity as it pertains to their Blackness. Formerly incarcerated Black males that have found an academic pathway are subjected to undergo the same process with the added layer that they have a criminal

37

past. If Black males that are currently in jail or incarcerated had the opportunity to learn about BlackCrit and how institutionalized racism targets the Black body, they would feel more inclined to pursue an academic pathway that confronts this and other forms of racism.

Conclusions

Mentality, environment, and positive reinforcement are part of the equation in order to create a well-grounded reentry process for incarcerated youth and adults. It is hard to analyze the academic experiences of formerly incarcerated Black males without also examining their backgrounds and how their identities morphed into being school-going from being a menace to society. There is a holistic approach that has to be considered and implemented in order for rehabilitation to also take place while reentry is happening. Reentry beyond formal programming is taking place. Reentry is an individual assessing their own wants and needs after being incarcerated or in jail and them deciding how they are going to retain themselves into society. Many individuals do pick their own selves up by their bootstraps, but they still have to deal with the stigma and limitations of being formerly incarcerated. Furthermore, networking and positive reinforcement are also necessary tools for individuals who want to create a more positive trajectory for themselves. Formerly incarcerated Black males face more challenges and exclusion, which continues to widen the achievement gap for them compared to their counterparts.

I believe that although there may be reentry programs for formerly incarcerated Black males to participate in, they are not made easily and visibly accessible. There is also a lack of what qualifies a reentry program and what measures the standards success. For the sake of this study, I do believe that the initiative that each of my participants took to develop an academic trajectory for themselves and for those after them is a success story that goes against the status

quo of formerly incarcerated Black males. The historical context that was provided in the literature review demonstrates that racism is still thriving and pervasive when discussing the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration.

Recommendations

Ellis, Rowley, Nellum, and Smith (2018) stated that "...it is imperative that school systems continue to implement practice and policy strategies that address the unique conditions facing Black males to improve their academic outcomes" (p. 900). And even further, consideration for strategies to bridge reentry programs into schools would yield more success and opportunities. There is no intentional placement besides the county parole office for formerly incarcerated individuals. One implication that is drawn from my research is that local counties do not mandate initiatives for formerly incarcerated individuals to receive wrap-around services through a reentry program that not only addresses their academic wants but also their social-emotional needs as well. Both Prince and Charles mentioned that although they wanted to go back to school, they were not fully in tune with what was going on around them or how to fully engage with others. Prince was able to name it as a form of post-traumatic stress disorder, that he had to work through by himself. George has yet to know what will be available to him upon his release but he knows that he's going to need transitional therapy to help him cope.

Another implication that is made about the academic experiences of formerly and currently incarcerated Black males is that they need to be reaffirmed in the pathways they aspire to participate in. Furthermore, their counter-narrative being from a formerly incarcerated and Black lens should be validated as part of their academic journey and success. For example, Prince's engagement with a program aimed at Black males from urban areas at his college, gave him a counter-space that validated his Blackness and his maleness and helped him reaffirm that

he could be who he is in a collegiate space and still achieve. Each of my participants forged a space for themselves with programs that they treated as a reentry resource to support their academic trajectories. The participants created unconventional ways to validate their experiences before and after incarceration took place but they found that pursuing an education was the most reassuring and sustainable. Further research should investigate why reentry programs are not part of mandated legislative efforts, if reducing recidivism is a national concern. None of my participants were recommended to a reentry program and instead found similar or alternative resources to fulfill their needs to be back on an academic trajectory and ultimately be college bound. Policymakers should use narratives like these to be part of the conversation when creating legislative measures that addresses reentry programs for formerly incarcerated individuals.

There is also a need for more in-depth research about how Black males fall into the school-to-prison pipeline in the first place by examining external factors like their environment, mental health, and home life. Thomas (2014) referenced how mentorship and self-efficacy can help facilitate a more opportunistic reentry experience. Culminating a space where these external factors come together could help further the design of a reentry program that is tailored to the needs of Black males specifically.

To say that reentry programs are not happening at all in California would be false because there is a diversion plan that is being rolled out by the Los Angeles County Board of Supervisors that is aimed to youth away from detention and incarceration by placing them alternative programs (Tiano, 2018). While this plan is still in it's grassroots stage, incarceration, recidivism and reentry among Black males is happening at exponential rates. Reentry may not

solely eliminate the school-to-prison pipeline but if the strategies of reentry could be introduced

earlier in the pipeline, a net can be cast on those systematically affected by the pipeline.

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APPENDIX

Appendix A

Table 14. Three-Year Recidivism Rates by Race/Ethnicity, FY 2011-12 Releases

Race/Ethnicity	Number Released	Return to DJJ		Return to DAI		Any State Custody		Arrest		Conviction	
		Number Returned	Return Rate	Number Returned	Return Rate	Number Returned	Return Rate	Number Arrested	Return Rate	Number Convicted	Return Rate
Hispanic	336	35	10.4%	87	25.9%	102	30.4%	234	69.6%	166	49.4%
Black	246	49	19.9%	99	40.2%	126	51.2%	207	84.1%	164	66.7%
White	70	7	10.0%	15	21.4%	18	25.7%	43	61.4%	26	37.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	17	2	11.8%	4	23.5%	5	29.4%	15	88.2%	5	29.4%
Other	6	0	0.0%	1	16.7%	1	16.7%	2	33.3%	2	33.3%
Total	675	93	13.8%	206	30.5%	252	37.3%	501	74.2%	363	53.8%