

Redefining Possible: Re-Visioning the Prison-to-College Pipeline

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This article identifies college as the logical space for the articulation of civil rights through the complete integration of students with incarceration histories into the intellectual and social fabric of the institution. Academic institutions provide a fertile ground where possibilities for personal and social change are realized, networks are opened, knowledge is contributed and developed, and giving back is enabled. Using interview and focus group data collected from *The Gifts They Bring*, a participatory action research (PAR) project conducted with and for college students with incarceration histories, I analyze experiences of personal transformation through higher education, identifying the theme of possibility. I conclude with recommendations for creating a more inclusive environment in institutions of higher education for people who have been incarcerated and want to make a positive change in their lives.

While there is much research on the school to prison pipeline (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) that documents the impact of increased securitization in urban public schools and the outcomes for individuals and communities targeted by such policies, this article interrogates the prison-to-college pipeline as a strategic investment in individuals, families and communities to interrupt recidivism, enhance individual and collective outcomes and contribute to the intellectual, ethical and cultural diversity of higher education. Creating a welcoming space in higher education for people who are returning home from prison not only yields benefits to the affected students, but also challenges commonly held beliefs about the potential of people who have served time. Additionally, the inclusion of people with incarceration histories in the college community addresses racial disparities in both education and incarceration, putting institutions of higher education on the front lines of an important social justice issue of our time.

The current article uses data from *The Gifts They Bring*, a participatory action research (PAR) project with and for college students with incarceration histories that analyses the life journeys of individuals who have successfully made the transition from prison to college. A team of eleven co-researchers framed a research project based on the stories of participants who have attended college after getting out of prison. This study creates a counter-story that demonstrates not only that college after prison is possible, but that college can be a landscape within which multiple selves develop, networks open, knowledge is contributed and developed, giving back is enabled, and the university community is enriched. The current article addresses the research question:

in what ways do students who have attended college post prison describe their experiences of transformation?

BACKGROUND: THE BENEFITS OF COLLEGE IN PRISON

While there is considerable research demonstrating the positive ways college in prison affects students, families, public safety and recidivism rates, less is known about the journey from prison to college. Across a number of studies, substantial data demonstrate that rates of recidivism decrease dramatically for people who have attended college while in prison. Fine et al.'s (2001) research on a college in prison program at Bedford Hills correctional facility documents a three-fold reduction in recidivism for women who attended or graduated from college while in prison, compared to comparable women who did not attend college. In a study in Ohio, Batiuk, Lahm, McKeever, Wilcox, and Wilson (2005) documented a 62% reduction in recidivism rates for parolees who participated in a college-in-prison program compared with reductions in recidivism for GED, vocational training (VT), and high school programs which had reductions in recidivism of 16%, 19%, and 2%, respectively. In two Washington State Department of Corrections (DOC) studies, Kelso (2000) also documented greater reduction in recidivism rates among community college program participants (63.1%) than for high school (36.6%) or VT (61.5%) programs. Burke and Vivian (2001) recorded that those who completed at least one three-credit college course before being released from prison were 21.9% less likely to recidivate than those who did not take a class. Together, these studies demonstrate not only that college in prison substantially reduces recidivism, but shows also that it is more effective in reducing recidivism than other types of correctional education.

Higher education in the US is directly connected to employment, sustainable income, support networks, and bringing the next generation out of poverty for families with a parent who has been incarcerated, and yields a better return on investment than incarceration (Pew Center on the States, 2012; Western & Pettit, 2010a). Once incarcerated, people have a tendency to churn in and out of the prison system, with recidivism rates as high as 67.5% over three years for either new crimes or parole violations (Visher & Travis, 2003). While these *circuits of dispossession* (Fine & Ruglis, 2009) may appear to be inevitable, ample evidence has shown that access to higher education in prison drastically reduces recidivism rates, improves parenting relationships, saves tax dollars, and has positive outcomes for families and communities (Fine et al., 2001). While all of these are important, the current article focuses on the role that college community has in terms of issues of inclusion.

Torre and Fine (2005) reported that the cost of withholding access to 4-year college for 100 incarcerated men and women was \$300,000 for one year and \$900,000 for two years, based on the reduction in recidivism rates alone. Additional savings generated by access to higher education related to the cost of foster care, elder care, lost wages, tax contributions, and welfare dependency are not included in this calculation. The emotional, financial, and civic resources provided to families and communities by parents who have been to college after prison, are also not quantified (Torre & Fine, 2005). This indicates the high return on investment for college inside (and by extension, after) prison; whereas the return on investment for longer prison terms is quite low, yielding no reduction in recidivism, and a significant cost to tax payers (Pew Center on the States, 2012). The value of higher education indeed outweighs the costs.

Taking into consideration the lack of educational attainment and diminished earning potential of the majority of those in the prison population (Pettit & Western, 2004), the effects of going to college post prison mirror those experienced by first generation college students. In their study of economically disadvantaged women who were the first in their families to attend college at the City University of New York (CUNY), Attewell and Lavin (2007) documented the power of higher education to produce benefits that extend to the next generation. Following up with nearly 2000 women 30 years after graduation, Attewell and Lavin found that, compared to women of similar racial and economic backgrounds, the CUNY cohort fared better in terms of median salaries. The women also reported change in their parenting styles, living in better neighborhoods, and an overall breaking of the cycle of disadvantage for the next generation because they were able to obtain a college degree. Like the positive impact of college on “first in the family,” the literature on college for formerly incarcerated adults documents reliably positive outcomes. Over 53% of all people in prison in the US are parents, marking the importance of concerns for the next generation (Glaze & Maruschak, 2008). While Attewell and Lavin’s study focuses on benefits to women and their families, there are 15 times as many men as women incarcerated in to the US (Glaze, 2011). The benefits of higher education are not limited to women and their families, but also to men and their families and communities.

College in prison and after prison not only bears positive impacts on formerly incarcerated adults, but on their children and families as well. In a PAR project with young people whose parents went to college after prison, Munoz-Proto (2010) identified that children witnessing their parent’s efforts and achievements in college programs developed positive relationships, were proud of their parents and saw them as role models. Positive outcomes of college post prison were both psychological and material, changing lives significantly for both parents and families. While incarceration has a direct negative effect on lifetime earning capabilities, Western and Pettit’s (2010a) research demonstrates that higher education among previously incarcerated populations yields opportunities for better jobs with higher pay, a greater number of paid days of work ensuring economic stability and breaks the cycle of poverty.

Two community-based organizations (CBOs) in New York City, College and Community Fellowship (CCF) and College Initiative (CI), believe that higher education post incarceration is a vital part of reentry, and have documented high success rates with clients who attend college after prison. Of the 240 previously incarcerated women CCF has worked with since 2001, 158 have earned college degrees and their recidivism rate over 12 years is less than 2%, compared with New York State’s standard recidivism rate of 30% over 36 months for women (College and Community Fellowship, 2010). College Initiative worked with 250 students between 2009 and 2010 and reports a recidivism rate for those enrolled in at least one semester of college as 3.2% (Sturm, Skolnick, & Wu, 2010). The striking reduction in recidivism has been achieved within the contexts of CBO’s that provide mentoring and support for those who wish to attend college after prison.

GUESS WHO’S COMING TO COLLEGE: HURDLES TO REINTEGRATION

For those returning home from prison who wish to change their lives, develop new skills, and form new, positive identities as students rather than ex-offenders, higher education is seen as

a space to foster such changes (Sturm, Skolnick, & Wu, 2010). Given the substantial evidence that college in prison facilitates successful re-entry, economic well-being, parenting skills, civic engagement and reduces recidivism rates and therefore the tax burden of mass incarceration (Fine et al., 2001), it is striking to note that colleges do not generally see the admission and support for formerly incarcerated students as being a part of their diversity and public service mission. In fact, the Center for Community Alternatives' (CCA) national survey of 273 colleges and universities in the U.S. reveals that most institutions of higher education use the application process as a way to screen out students with conviction histories (Weissman, Rosenthal, Warth, Wolf, & Messina-Yauchzy, 2010)

Sixty six percent of colleges that responded to the survey admit that they ask applicants about their conviction histories. At these institutions, once applicants admit a history of criminal justice involvement, they typically encounter requests for additional information to be included in the application process, e.g. a letter of explanation of the crime (90%), a letter from a corrections official (63%), a personal interview with the applicant (54.2%), evidence of the completion of community supervision (38.5%), and full documentation of their criminal justice histories, that is, the rap sheet (16%) (Weissman et al., 2010). The survey also reveals that many students who are asked for additional documentation withdraw from the application process.

Private colleges (80.6%) are more likely than public colleges (54.6%) and four-year colleges (74%) are more likely than two-year colleges (40%) to require applicants to self-disclose conviction backgrounds (Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2013; Weissman et al., 2010). The Common Application, used by 488 4-year colleges in the US, asks both about criminal background and youthful offenses, and private colleges are more likely than public ones to ask about youthful offenses (Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2013). Admissions considerations for these students are turned over to special committees in 75% of colleges that screen rather than admissions personnel and are assessed based on their criminal histories rather than on their academic credentials (Weissman et al., 2010).

Fifty-five percent of schools either supervise or enroll formerly incarcerated students in special programs, indicating that they are seen as a risk to be inoculated against (Weissman et al., 2010). While it may seem reasonable that a university would be cautious about risk and liability issues, the evidence indicates that the vast majority of crimes on campus are committed by first offenders (Drysdale, Modzelski, & Simons 2010; Runyan, Pierce, Shankar, & Bangdiwala, 2013). Additionally, colleges that screen students for criminal histories do not have lower rates of crime than those that do (Weissman, Rosenthal, Warth, Wolf, & Messina-Yauchzy, 2010). Rape and sexual assault—types of crime that occur at higher rates on college campuses than in the population at large, are also predominantly committed by first offenders (Baum & Klaus, 2005; Hart, 2003). This raises serious concerns about the actual necessity of procedures that signify exclusion and undermine students' civil rights in higher education.

MASS INCARCERATION, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND THE NEW DISENFRANCHISED MINORITY

The US's prison population is the highest in the world and is highly racialized. Harsh prison sentencing associated with the war on drugs is described as an "ill-fated experiment" by Visher

and Travis (2003)—one that has continued with the prison population increasing from 1.3 million in 2001 to 2.3 million by 2010 (Glaze, 2011; Visher & Travis, 2003). As Michelle Alexander (2010) has documented, race is a powerful factor in the prison system. The racial demographics of the prison population are striking with 1 in 87 white men, but 1 in 36 Hispanic and 1 in 33 black men in prison (Western & Pettit, 2010a). Young black women are the fastest growing demographic in prisons (Pfeffer, 2011).

Not only is the prison population distinctive in racial demographics, but also in levels of educational attainment. Thirty-five percent of young black men in the U.S. are unable to complete high school due to being incarcerated (Western and Pettit, 2010b). Rates of incarceration are 3 to 4 times higher for those who didn't complete high school than for those who attended college, regardless of whether they graduated (Pettit & Western, 2004). The rate of white men in prison with neither a high school diploma nor a GED is 1 in 8 compared to 1 in 3 for black men, showing a drastic interaction effect between race and education for criminal justice outcomes (Western & Pettit, 2005). As Fine and Ruglis (2009) discuss, disciplinary practices in public schools—especially urban public schools—act to physically move young people of color from schools into juvenile facilities and prisons. Additionally, the *school to prison pipeline* communicates a message to young people of color that they are not deserving of a quality education (Fine & Ruglis, 2009). Considering the strong correlation between lack of education and likelihood to end up in prison, the idea of higher education as a facilitator to successful reentry constitutes a turnabout, connecting those who historically have not had access to education to college. Also, the racial demographics of incarceration rates indicate that the inclusion of the new minority into colleges is a civil rights issue and those with incarceration histories should be viewed under the umbrella of diversity.

The size of the population of those who have returned from prison in the US is large—and growing. As 95% of all incarcerated people return home at some point, 700,000 people return home to their families and communities every year (Travis, 2005) comprising a large, and growing “new minority” of people with incarceration histories. 4.9 million people, or 3% of the adult population in the US live under some form of supervised release—either probation or parole (Pew Center on the States, 2012). Just as rates of incarceration are influenced by demographics, likelihood of landing back in prison, for either a parole violation or a new offense, varies with men, blacks, non-Hispanics, and younger people more likely than women, whites, Hispanics, and older people to recidivate (Langan & Levin, 2002) and “long-termers” are very unlikely to re-offend (Marquez-Lewis et al., 2013). Underlying high recidivism rates are systemic obstacles to reentry; making it more difficult to obtain housing, find a job, access higher education, or vote (Travis, 2005). In Pager's (2003) field experiment with black and white men with and without criminal records applying for jobs, employers called back black men without records (14%) less often than white men *with* criminal records (17%). Black men with records fared the worst with only 5% receiving calls from employers, demonstrating that the effect of criminal records on black men is 40% stronger than on white men (Pager, 2003). Not only do black men face the highest rates of incarceration, but they also face more discrimination when returning home from prison. This formal and informal discrimination post incarceration means that reentry and reintegration into communities and re-establishing relationships is more difficult than necessary, extending most people's sentences well beyond their release from prison.

THE GIFTS THEY BRING

Epistemology

PAR acknowledges and values various types of knowledge, both academic knowledge based in training in a particular field, and expert knowledge developed through life experience living in a particular community (Freire, 2004; Martin-Baro, 1994; Torre, Fine, Stoudt, & Fox, 2012). PAR is rooted in a commitment to social transformation. This social transformation must come from the *conscientization* of the effected group of people (Freire, 2007; Martin-Baro, 1994; Montero, 2009). Conscientization is the process of transformation through action and reflection where individuals change themselves through their interactions with others in their social environment, transforming their environments in the process (Freire, 2007; Martin-Baro, 1994). Paulo Friere (2004) originated the concept of conscientization as the imperative for education to be determined by oppressed groups, rather than being dictated by others. In liberation psychology, Ignacio Martin-Baro (1994) taught that the goal of psychologists is liberation, which requires researchers to address their participants' research concerns, rather than projecting their own ideas onto communities, challenging both their own beliefs and *collective lies* (Martin-Baro, 1994). College students with incarceration histories have already challenged the dominant perceptions of their social identities by re-claiming new identities as students, thus establishing a discourse of potential rather than accepting the dominant *discourse of risk* (Powell, 1997).

There is extremely limited research that addresses college *post* incarceration, but much research that demonstrates the positive outcomes of college *in* prison programs (Burke & Vivian, 2001; Fine et al., 2001; Sokoloff & Fontaine, 2013; Stevens & Ward, 1997; Tracy & Johnson, 1994). In spite of this body of research, federal financial aid in the form of Pell Grants and state aid, such as TAP in New York, are still barred from college in prison programs since the Crime Bill of 1994. The few programs that exist are privately funded and therefore vulnerable to shifts in philanthropy or prison-specific policy. There are also very few programs that recognize college as a pathway to reintegration after prison (College Initiative, College and Community Fellowship, and The Prisoner Reentry Institute are noted exceptions). This raises the question: to what extent can we document the impact of college in, AND after prison; the obstacles to entering and completing, and the processes that facilitate college access for this highly motivated, and highly stigmatized population of college students?

Methods

In order to answer this question, The Prisoner Reentry Institute (PRI) at John Jay College asked Michelle Fine (the faculty advisor and co-PI for the project) and Alexis Halkovic (a doctoral student and PI on the project) to design a PAR project with and for students with incarceration histories. Keeping in mind the principles of PAR, including research being driven by the affected community and that it should have liberatory aims, we kicked off the project by holding a meeting with key stakeholders at John Jay College in New York City. Eighteen people deeply invested in the possibilities of college as a re-entry strategy, including faculty, community based organization (CBO) leaders, and students got together over dinner to determine the framing of the research question. During the meeting, we asked the students present if they would like to

become co-researchers in the project, or if they knew others who would like to join. A number of people volunteered and, over the next few weeks, we created a project team consisting of eleven students at varying levels (undergraduate, masters, doctoral) almost all having experience in the prison system and one faculty member with a career dedicated to educational justice in multiple contexts.

The research team met a number of times in the following weeks and held open discussions. The first topic was the purpose of the research. We collectively discussed and agreed that this project had to do more than the previous research that demonstrates reduced recidivism among people who have gone to college after prison—it also needed to lift up policy-related issues that people confront when navigating college after prison. We also discussed and agreed that individual lives must be central to the research so that we could illustrate how policies affect real people. The focus on individual lives is also important from a PAR perspective as the words of the participants/members of the affected community are raised to the level of evidence as well as expert knowledge. These are voices that are often excluded from policy discussions. Our focus on lives led us to select focus groups and individual interviews as our primary methods.

The entire research team worked together to create our research plan and research questions during meetings. We documented the results of our discussions in written form so they could be read and revised by team members before agreeing on our final version. Individual team members volunteered to participate in specific project activities, including: facilitating focus groups, transcribing and coding interviews and focus groups, and writing individual research papers. The entire team worked together to create thematic codes for the interview and focus group data and to revise the policy paper we produced for the Prisoner Reentry Institute (PRI), *Higher Education and Reentry: The Gifts They Bring* (Halkovic et al., 2013). *The Gifts* addressed the research question: What are the barriers and supports encountered getting into college after prison and what gifts do these students bring to the campus and beyond? PRI commissioned the report with the intention to use the report as the basis for discussions about policy issues with college and university admissions officers, faculty, students, and probation and parole in New York State and beyond. The focus of the current article is the discourse about personal transformation in the lives of the students who participated in the interviews and focus groups we conducted, addressing the new research question; *in what ways do students who have attended college post prison describe their experiences of transformation?* The audience is educators who are concerned about inclusion and the transformational possibilities of education. The responses to this question that I identified in the students' narratives are characterized within the theme of possibility.

Focus Groups

For this article, I analyzed data from four focus groups conducted with *experienced students*—those who have attended college after prison (N = 25). The experienced students were recruited through three organizations that focus on college as a re-entry strategy (CI, CCF, and PRI) who invited clients via email who had been to college after being released from prison and by word of mouth. Participants included five with master's degrees, eight with bachelor's degrees, six in the process of completing their bachelor's and two pursuing associate's degrees. Several are pursuing further graduate education, including three who are currently in doctoral programs,

three in master's programs, as well as two applying to law school and two applying to doctoral programs. These participants are diverse in age, race/ethnicity and number of years served: 62% identify as black, 22% Latino/a, 10% white, 5% mixed race, and 3% Asian. Nine are women and 16 are men. The average number of years served is 10.5. All participants were compensated \$25 for their participation.

Each of the 4 focus groups was co-facilitated by one co-researcher and a co-PI and lasted two hours. We started off each focus group by asking the participants to draw a map of their journey from prison to college. Drawing the maps gave each participant an opportunity to frame their journey as a story that they could share with the group. The maps enliven the memory of the story for the participant re-telling their experiences (Futch & Fine, 2014) and provide an additional lens to interpret what was said, allowing for the development of a more nuanced image of the transformation of identity through experiences with higher education (Katsiaficas, Futch, Fine, & Sirin, 2011). In addition, we asked participants to describe the networks of support that helped them get into and through college and to discuss the gifts that they bring to campus.

Individual Interviews

Our original research plan included 10 individual interviews with college students with experience in jail or prison. Towards the beginning of the research project, Benay Rubenstein offered us access to individual interviews she and Jeremy Robins conducted as a part of their film: *Passport to the Future: Accessing Higher Education in an Era of Mass Incarceration* (Rubenstein & Robins, 2012). We analyzed the fourteen videotaped interviews of students and experts on college in the re-entry process. The participants in the video interviews come from varying education and incarceration backgrounds and have spent an average of 13.8 years in prison. Four of the participants are women and ten are men, two are white, eight are black, three are Latino, and one is Asian. Interviews were viewed, transcribed and coded by individual co-researchers using codes that were collectively created by the whole group.

Data Analysis

The full research team collectively viewed sections of the video interviews and, through an iterative process of watching the interview segment, individually writing down themes, sharing and documenting themes that were either identified from literature on reentry by team members or were viewed as important aspects of reentry based on a team member's personal experience. We then clustered themes under broad categories, including support systems, probation and parole, and stigma. Individual co-researchers transcribed and coded the interviews using a quasi-grounded theory approach, identifying themes from the text itself (Charmaz, 2006). Each person listened to their interviews (seven of us transcribed and coded two interviews each) multiple times, making notes of significant themes we heard as we listened and read through the completed transcriptions. We met weekly to discuss the process, questions, and share the codes identified, updating our list of codes after each meeting to include any new codes we identified. An example of a new code was "family," as two co-researchers discussed that family could be a support, motivation, and a challenge to reentry.

For the current article, I independently conducted additional analysis of both the interview and focus group transcriptions, looking specifically for indications of personal transformation, and identified this theme in the lives of both focus group and interview participants. Because the topic of transformation addresses a story that unfolds over time, I chose to focus on two exemplars and discuss their stories in depth. I went through the selected texts and carried out line-by-line coding to ensure I had a clear understanding of the narrative. I then did several more rounds of close reading, identifying thematic codes as I read. Eventually, I developed the over-arching theme of possibility to encompass the various codes I identified as being central to transformation through higher education.

Limitations

As students with incarceration histories are an invisible community, our sample was recruited through community-based organizations that provide services to those who wish to attend college after prison. As such, our sample is special both in terms of having access to college post prison and to supportive organizations. While the participants represent a small population who are able to go to college after prison, they also represent potential for individuals who are motivated and have the support to attend college after prison. They are also diverse in terms of age, race, gender, and time served.

In the analysis of life histories, the focus on a small number—or even a single narrative is not uncommon (see e.g., Josselson, 1993, 2009). The exemplars chosen here are not meant to be a random sample or represent the larger prison population, but their journeys provide a context through which it is possible to understand both the challenges and benefits of higher education for those who have been in prison. Since men of color face the highest rates of incarceration, recidivism, and the greatest discrimination during reentry, focusing on the experiences of two men of color provides insight into the possibilities afforded by higher education for members of groups most deeply affected by incarceration. While their experiences, in some ways, may be exceptional, they demonstrate the significance of higher education for these men who have spent considerable time in prison. The themes they raise are compelling, illustrating some facets of transformation of both selves and communities.

ANALYSIS

Education as Possibility

When thinking about the research question: in what ways are experiences of transformation relating to higher education described, the major theme that I identified during my analysis of the narratives in both the interviews and focus groups was the theme of possibility. Possibility was framed in a number of different ways, including: motivation, recognition of individual capability, recognition of expert knowledge, contribution to new knowledges, and the creation of community. The theme of possibility was born out throughout the interviews and focus groups and was illustrated particularly clearly in the interviews of two individuals, Henry and Manny*

(selected from the 14 interview and 25 focus group participants who described their journeys from prison to college). I will use their narratives as exemplars to demonstrate the ways in which the theme of possibility was articulated across the various narratives.

Both Henry and Manny served long prison terms—Henry served twenty-five years for a crime that he contends he is innocent of and he continues to fight for exoneration. Manny served seventeen years in prison and was convicted at the age of eighteen. Both Henry and Manny had access to college in prison—this is not the case for all of the participants, particularly those with more recent convictions. Henry received his associate’s degree while Manny obtained a GED, associates and bachelors while inside. Having the experience with college in prison laid the groundwork for seeing higher education as a possibility in their lives once they were released.

Motivation for Education: Capability

Henry’s motivation to begin his education emerged as soon as he recognized that he didn’t have the skills to manage his own legal case. Henry viewed education as being crucial and was motivated to learn so that he would be more capable of taking care of himself.

And when I was inside, ah—I was incarcerated, I was in prison—a lot of the jobs that they like to give people are like porter jobs - jobs that guys don’t want to think. I was totally opposite. I always wanted to improve myself.

Henry talks about being different from other people inside prisons—distinguished by his desire to improve himself and his desire to think. He connects these two—thinking and self-improvement, demonstrating that for him, thinking—or learning is the way to improve himself.

I experienced in the criminal justice system a lack of ability to operate or to deal with my lawyers because my education level was so low that I couldn’t even help myself. I saw that education was necessary; it was, like, mandatory. I started studying on my own even before I went to school.

Like many people in prison, Henry has a low level of education which he knows impairs him, making it necessary for him to teach himself. Henry identifies that education is directly connected to his capabilities—without education; he is unable to help himself. He is motivated to pursue education on his own, in order to develop his capabilities.

College as a Healthy Space for Reentry

Once he was out of prison, Henry required a healthy space in which to begin his transition back to his community. College provided that space for him. While colleges often consider the safety of the school in their admissions policies, it is important to think about the needs of students, and to create safe spaces to those students who need the supportive environment of a college to make the transition from prison.

* Both Henry and Manny were interview participants whose interviews appear in a documentary film about college after prison (Rubenstein & Robins, 2012) and have consented to use their real names.

I utilized school in so many different ways. I utilized the school systems through, socially, educationally, just being around an intellectual environment. It gave me a chance to um like - it's not just adjusting but in a healthy way to unwind to decompress in a healthy environment so that I can figure all these other steps that's in front of me.

College isn't just about education for Henry; it is a support system providing a context to plan ahead and to be. Henry refers to school as a place to adjust in a *healthy* way—a *healthy* environment. The unstated text is that prison was not a healthy environment and that healthy environments are unusual and invaluable for people returning home from prison. He continues:

Education has contained these variables for me to work with that where it will help me figure out other things. I know if I am sitting at a desk with a book, I would not only figure out my lesson plan, but other things in life as well. So education . . . has contained these variables for me to work with so I can figure other things out as well.

By talking about the various ways that college helps, Henry is saying that college provides much more than education—it provides a space and a way to think through the various things he needs to address in his life, which is essential considering the many challenges of reentry.

In spite of school being a healthy space for his reentry, Henry did not feel comfortable disclosing his history of incarceration at school.

I don't go around, you know, wearing it as a badge of honor. It's not a badge of honor to me—it's just an experience that I went through. I'm not proud of that experience—that situation. I will share it if it's called upon. But I won't go into a class talking about how I have been in prison before, like it's a good topic of conversation. Some of my professors know because the relationships was that close and we became friends somewhat—some of my professors. And so, there's a degree of people that know.

To a great extent, this means that faculty and students do not know Henry's identity and therefore are not aware of the challenges that he faces or the types of support that might be helpful to him, demonstrating the lack of awareness and support offered for students with records. The stigma associated with having a felony conviction therefore means that a large minority of students do not feel fully welcome in the classroom. This compromises the healthy atmosphere that is so important to Henry and his transition back. It is these students who have the most to gain from being in college and have a lot to offer as well.

Presenting Possibility: Becoming a Role Model

Being in college has provided Henry with the possibility of moving into a new social role—that of role model. His level of academic engagement and his achievement (getting into grad school) are motivations to other students. College provided a space for Henry to exhibit his abilities and to therefore be seen in this new, positive role.

I think I add a whole lot to my classes. I've got friends they call me all the time. Especially going to grad school. I came in—I went through so fast—like two years—you know like time goes by so fast its crazy. I know people they're still doing their bachelor's degree and they're saying, you're in grad school already!?! I'm like a motivation to them.

The social context that Henry describes here is a context of mutual motivation. When Henry says his friends call him all the time, it is to talk about schoolwork. When they remark on the speed with which he has progressed to graduate school, they are telling him they are impressed by his accomplishments. It is clear to Henry that his achievements motivate others, making him a role model for them. Seeing Henry excel is translated as possibility for others, meaning the benefit of higher education for him extends to others in his college community.

Engaging in Dialogue: Creating Spaces for Shared Learning

Henry expresses a genuine interest in engaging in dialogue with others. These conversations are spaces where new knowledge can be created.

The dialogue I have with my [fellow] students—I talk about the work—about the information. I talk about how do we improve ourselves. I feel sometimes I'm strange—a lot of people—they just want the paper, but there's some of us who really want to learn to implement these ideas and see if they work and if they don't work to try to find new ideas that do work.

Henry shares his belief in education as the way to self-improvement with his peers. While he thinks it is unusual, Henry has found others who want to implement ideas that work. As he expresses, it isn't the credential that is important to him, it is about learning and sharing ideas. School creates a space for this collaboration to take place.

Possibility: Role in Social Change

When asked what he hopes to get out of his education, Henry talks about being of service:

I hope to be of service. Hope to improve other people's lives if I can. If I am a social worker, I see myself being an effective one—a meaningful one. I'd like to be an agent of change.

He sees being a social worker as being able to improve other's lives. So education is linked to improving his own and other's lives. Beyond helping individuals as a social worker, Henry has a desire to be an agent of social change—improving lives and improving society. Again, this extends the value of his education to a larger community.

Conscientization: Developing New Perceptions of Self and Community

For Henry, education itself is a space for conscientization—for the development of a new perception of what is possible, both for himself and his community.

Education represents life to me. It represents growth and development it represents a free mind, it represents critical thinking, deep thought, It represents all these things that allow a person to make a good decision.

The process of reevaluation and engagement through dialogue allows groups that have been historically oppressed to identify their own potential and to create new identities for themselves,

creating positive change for both individuals and communities; which is conscientization (Friere, 2004). This is the type of change that is facilitated by higher education for those who have been in prison.

Motivation: Envisioning a Possible Future (Recognition of Possibility)

Like Henry, Manny sees education as possibility. Reflecting on the impact of the college in prison program on the participants, Manny identifies that education gave him and his fellow students a purpose in life where there was no purpose before, allowing them to value themselves and to plan for a future.

We value our education, because we value ourselves now, you know. We value how people perceive us. We value our future. Many of us—the future was so bleak. We didn't have a future so what's the sense of even going to college? Now we think ahead—maybe I can be in this position five years from now. If I get my MSW maybe I can be the director of a program, helping people with homelessness, with drug problems, advocate for people. I see this now. When I was a kid I didn't see this. I just thought life was meaningless; life was fruitless. Why should I even go to college, I'm just wasting my time, why should I go on? Education is all—is everything, I think.

Manny describes education as hope where there was hopelessness. As a Latino youth, the messages he received from society told him his life had no value (Fine & Ruglis, 2009), but education provided a fundamental turnaround in his worldview. His own transformation changed him from believing that he had no future to being motivated to help others as a social worker, demonstrating that seeing himself as capable motivated him to help others.

Expert Knowledge

In another reflection back to his time in prison, Manny identifies that knowledge gained from the experience of living in prison is valuable in certain contexts.

Like many of these organizations—sometimes they get caught up in the same model of doing business—new ideas are not really being produced. Like with the prison what happens—usually somebody comes up with a plan in some room far away from the prison and implements it on the prisoners. What I used to see all the time is the prisoners saying, “Well, have you thought about this?”

As Manny mentions, those who run the prison lack a connection to the problems and come up with uncreative solutions. While those with expert knowledge, based on experience are able to come up with new insights.

We are experts at our circumstances. Our education—we are experts at producing ideas that can change the communities where we come from. We realize that certain ideas, certain programs that are implemented will not work because they are not really taking into consideration the reality on the ground.

Manny recognizes that the special knowledge the people inside prisons have is based in their experience spending time in prison and living in underserved communities and can improve

institutional models by incorporating their lived experience into the design and implementation of systems.

The Creation of New Knowledges

Manny became interested in theater through a program he participated in while in prison and is now a playwright. He explains how his presence on the set of a play transformed the meaning of Shakespeare for the students in the production:

I went to NYU—I'm acting sort of like a consultant on this play that they're doing—it's called Measure for Measure, you know, the Shakespeare play. And Measure for Measure deals with issues of forgiveness and mercy and it deals with issues of you know—incarceration, lawlessness, and all those things. I was invited by the director so I'm sitting there and the students are thinking, "Who's this strange guy in the room?" I mean, they don't know who I am. I had to go so I left—I said my goodbyes and everything and they was asking the director, "Who was that guy? Why was he here?" And she told them, partially my story—that I was incarcerated for 17 years and so on and so on and everything that I'm doing in terms of playwriting. And she told me that they were all shocked—they were all quiet—they was like, "We didn't realize how much this play could mean to somebody that was incarcerated and it makes me see the play now in a different light."

The awareness of Manny's background changed the meaning of the play for the students, making them reflect on its content from the perspective of his lived experience with incarceration, creating what Maria Torre (2009) calls a *contact zone*—a space where two groups meet and can engage in dialogue that results in new understandings being developed. Because the students learned about his background, his experience became central to the ways they interpreted the play. Being able to try on Manny's standpoint, or look through his perspective allowed the students to add another perspective to their own—expanding their "objective" view of the world to take in another, radically different experience (Haraway, 2004/1988). Both his presence and his perspective are a resource to the University.

It's little moments like that I run into all the time, just speaking to people in general and they find out, you know afterwards, that I've been incarcerated they're like "wow, I can't tell." Who can tell? I mean can you really tell that I've been to prison?

Manny's comment that people are surprised he's been in prison that they "can't tell" indicate that people hold some idea about those who have spent time in prison which is transformed when they meet someone like Manny who has. This highlights the importance of being able to share experiences and learn from each other.

Creating Community—Giving Back

Manny's vision for his future career illustrates his desire to facilitate conversations that bring people together across conflict. This incorporates both a value for community and of facilitating dialogue where there has been discord.

Also the idea came to me when I was talking to [my mentor] about combining theater with my MSW. My biggest dream is to bring theater to the places I work—you know detention centers, utilizing the arts to effect change to make people aware of their situation, to get them to talk. Sometimes civil discourse is absent from our communities. We're not talking to each other. We're arguing with each other. You see what's happening—you know Republicans, Democrats they're all fighting each other—when are we going to start working together? That's what I want, that's what I want in terms of my education and my art to produce—discussion that can lead to a bridge to us working together.

Manny has a vision for a new possible future where he contributes to positive social change. He sees his own role in the community as facilitating constructive dialogues—dialogues that produce solutions to social problems—problems that others have not been able to solve. This demonstrates that Manny sees himself as a facilitator of social change. He identifies that the spaces where there are arguments are opportunities for people in communities to develop new, shared understandings of their living situations. The process he describes of a community coming to a new awareness collectively is conscientization (Friere, 2004; Martin-Baro, 1994; Montero, 2009). Manny's education has not only transformed his life, but it has provided the catalyst for change in his community as he now has the desire to act as a facilitator for social change—and he recognizes not only his own ability to contribute to this process, but sees that others in his community can contribute as well. Higher education is the catalyst that has allowed Manny to envision his role in the community. The transformational effect of higher education on Manny has a ripple effect—extending beyond his personal transformation into his community. The possibility that is enlivened in him and through him is the spark that higher education has ignited in his life. Fostering such transformations is both the duty and the privilege that institutions of higher education have.

Summary of Findings

Both Henry and Manny's narratives provide evidence for the positive impact that college can have on individuals—creating possibility in people's lives, turning people into role models, providing a space for dialogues and the creation of new knowledge. College is also seen as a “healthy space” for making the transition away from prison, but, as Henry described, isn't always a comfortable place to reveal an incarceration history. Not being able to share this prevents students from bringing their whole selves to school and deprives other students of the possibilities for the development of new knowledge. Both Manny and Henry engaged in dialogues both within and across groups yielding powerful outcomes with the possibility to transform communities. As both men chose social work as their profession, their access to higher education is an asset to their communities as both are committed to social change.

Colleges as the Gatekeepers of Possibility

The thought of a possible life is only an indulgence for those who already know themselves to be possible. For those who are still looking to become possible, possibility is a necessity. (Butler, 2005, p. 31)

According to Butler (2005), possibility is essential for existence. For many, possibility is taken for granted as the messages communicated throughout life refer to possibility and potential. For those with a history of incarceration, the discourse of potential is replaced with a discourse of risk (Powell, 1997), as people—both faculty and students, make assumptions about what a person who has spent time in prison is like—sometimes without being aware that someone they know has been in prison. All too often, colleges participate in creating a negative environment for these students for whom education is the pathway to possibility. As we have discovered, colleges are contact zones, providing the space to build connections, transform one’s sense of self, share knowledge and develop new knowledge through dialogue. This potential that institutions of higher learning have should not be neglected, since “possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread” (Butler, 2005). Taking on the mantle of education for citizenship, colleges have the opportunity to help re-conceptualize a world of possibility, by re-thinking inclusion and cultivating contact zones where new futures can be born.

Currently, most institutions of higher education are doing little to create safe learning and growing spaces for students who have been to jail or prison. Most institutions are making things more difficult through their admissions policies and lack of awareness of both the needs and potential these students have. Failure to address these issues makes colleges and universities complicit with the racialized institutionalized inequality born out through mass incarceration and the school to prison pipeline. Institutions of higher education have the unique potential to address these issues for individuals and communities by creating a climate of inclusion for students with records.

Rethinking Inclusion

In order to facilitate the inclusion of students with incarceration histories, I offer these suggestions:

Opening Admissions

Questions about conviction histories should be removed from college applications in order to ensure all students are admitted on the same criteria and that those with records are not discouraged from applying. If colleges feel it is necessary to ask about criminal convictions, they can ask students after they have been admitted, but should limit questions only to felony convictions for crimes committed after the age of nineteen (Weissman, Rosenthal, Warth, Wolf, & Messina-Yauchzy, 2010). If considerations of admissions are to be made that include the disclosure of a record of incarceration, each case should be reviewed individually, taking into consideration efforts the applicant has made to change his or her life. Additionally, colleges should provide an appeals process.

Identifying Allies

Because you can’t tell if someone in your classroom has spent time in jail or prison by looking at them, it is important that instructors make it visible that they are allies. Faculty with criminal justice histories or who focus on related issues in their research are invaluable resources for both

students and other concerned faculty. Instructors who conduct social justice-oriented research on issues related to mass incarceration can demonstrate that they are allies by discussing their research with their students. Addressing topics like mass incarceration in the classroom is one way to both teach other students about the large number of people who are affected by incarceration while putting out the message that you are an ally.

Advocacy

Whether students choose to disclose their past histories or not, they will need a safe space on campus where they can connect with allies and other students with incarceration histories to advocate for services, programs, scholarships and opportunities specific to their needs, and to share information about available resources. Information about safe spaces should be made public in a confidential manner, such as a college website, to create awareness without generating stigma.

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