

July 2020

"I Missed A Lot of Childhood Memories": Trauma and its Impact on Learning for Formerly Incarcerated Adolescents in the Age of Zero Tolerance Policies

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<https://doi.org/10.7275/17545358> https://scholarworks.umass.edu/dissertations_2/1948

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“I Missed A Lot of Childhood Memories”:
Trauma and its Impact on Learning for Formerly Incarcerated Adolescents in the Age of Zero
Tolerance Policies

A Dissertation Presented

By

ALBERTO JACA GUERRERO

Submitted to the Graduate School of the
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2020

College of Education

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DEDICATION

To paraphrase the iconic Notorious B.I.G.'s introduction to his classic rap anthem "Juicy," this dissertation is dedicated to all the people who were told by their teachers that they would never amount to nothing!

I also dedicate this dissertation to all the Puerto Ricans who preceded me and fought through the systemic injustices they faced to make it that much easier for the rest of us to accomplish our goals!

It is also dedicated to Kimberly, My Always and Forever!!!

¡Y, para mi Madre, Natividad Jaca, quien es la fundacion sobre que estoy construido!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In thinking of everything that has led me to this moment in time in my life, I find myself overwhelmed by all the people who have played an instrumental role in ensuring I ultimately wound up on the verge of earning a doctorate. While I cannot name them all individually, they know who they are; and I hope they also know how grateful I remain for their presence and guidance in my life!

There are certain people, however, who I will name since they have had a special influence on my journey. These people include Br. Dennis Lee, Br. Raymond Meagher (RIP), Dr. Anthony De Jesus, Andrew Lawton, Jolleen Wagner, and Bryan and Abbey Gilligan. I'd also like to acknowledge the people at UMass Amherst who have walked with me these past five years, especially Dr. Jennifer Randall, Itza Martinez (Prima), Megan Grant, Christina Bosch, and Gabriel Rodriguez! I also want to acknowledge Dr. Antonio Martinez (RIP) who helped me in bringing my random thoughts together to develop a coherent idea for my dissertation study.

While there is no way I cannot adequately express the immense gratitude I have for my committee in ensuring that I actually completed my dissertation, I nevertheless want to acknowledge them for all they did to get me to this point. This includes Dr. Richard Lapan, who agreed to be on my initial committee and played a pivotal role in getting me through my Comps Defense; Dr. Mary Cannito-Coville, who I met serendipitously, which proved to be a true blessing as she provided thoughtful feedback, guidance, and support throughout this journey; Dr. Michael Krezmien, who generously found time amidst his busy schedule to support me on this path, which included providing me with assistantships and connecting me with his vast network so as to ensure I was able to recruit participants for my study; and, finally, Dr. Keisha Green, who made the decision to be my committee chair despite me neither being in her department nor

concentration – do know that your skillful guidance and consistent support have helped me reach the light at the end of the tunnel and that I will be forever grateful for your guidance and commitment!

I certainly need to take a moment to thank the participants who helped inform my study. They willingly gave up their time in order to share their painful experiences and astute insights, which have proven to be the soul of this dissertation. There literally would be no dissertation without them! My hope is that their voices ring loud and clear so as to help shape educational policies for students in similar situations as them!

From the very beginning, my family has been my most ardent supporter. Back when we were navigating the struggles associated with growing up in an urban setting and me earning a doctorate was not even something that we knew was an option, they always provided me with the love and support I needed to survive the harsh realities of our daily lives. This accomplishment is as much theirs as it is mine! Papi, Benjy, Pablo, Gabby, and Jazmin, there is no way I could have done this – or anything else, for that matter – without you! Thank you and I love you!

Dr. Kimberly, I still remember the first time we met – it was Thursday, September 8, 2016 – and little did I know that this meeting would be the most important moment of my life! You have been by my side these last four years and, as a result, I am a much better person. While the path has certainly been rocky at times, you were always there to remind me that I would survive it, even carrying me when I was unable to lift myself up. Thank you for all of your unconditional support, confidence, and love – and for helping me to realize the best version of myself! This major accomplishment has been made all the more sweeter because we did it

together! I do not know what I did to deserve you in my life but I'm not arguing it ;) Thank you for being you! I LOVE YOU!!!

Before acknowledging my mother, I want to point out that although I do not have a middle name, I have decided to include my mother's maiden name as part of my name to both challenge the practice rooted in patriarchy of wives dropping their last name and honor the outsized influence she has played in getting me to this point!

¡Finalmente, quiero honrar y reconocer Mami! Sigues siendo el mejor educador más importante que he tenido en mi vida. ¡Todo lo bueno en mi vida te lo debo! Sus sacrificios aseguraron que pudiera perseguir y lograr sueños que alguna vez se consideraron imposibles. ¡Gracias por todo! ¡Tu eres mi vida y te amo con todo mi corazón!

ABSTRACT

“I MISSED A LOT OF CHILDHOOD MEMORIES”: TRAUMA AND ITS IMPACT ON LEARNING FOR FORMERLY INCARCERATED ADOLESCENTS IN THE AGE OF ZERO TOLERANCE POLICIES

MAY 2020

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The literature makes abundantly clear that trauma has a detrimental impact on students’ academic and behavioral efforts. It also challenges the notion of zero tolerance disciplinary practices being effective in redirecting student behaviors, making schools safer, and creating an environment that is conducive to learning. Yet, our current school climate consists of educators who have not been exposed to trauma-informed learning, while also incorporating disciplinary practices that are both draconian in nature and push students out of their learning spaces. This unfortunate reality is felt even more harshly by students who return to schools following an incarceration. This phenomenological study examined how seven Black and Latine students experienced the negative effects of being exposed to trauma as well as disciplinary practices that mirrored what they encountered during their incarceration. Just as importantly, it also centers the insights provided by participants to help inform educational policies that will better meet their academic and social-emotional needs. Through semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, this study found that participants encountered Institutionalized Criminalization of Youth Behaviors and Manifestations of Complex Trauma as barriers to their academic efforts. It also determined that Utilizing a School-Wide Trauma-Informed Care Approach and Healthy

Student-School Personnel Relationships can go a long way in better supporting participants to overcome the academic barriers they encounter upon their return to schools following their incarceration. These findings contribute to the current research since it provides a guideline, so to speak, for educational stakeholders to effectively engage and educate this segment of learners. As a result, the results from this study can be used to help inform educational policies and practices to better meet the needs of trauma-exposed students with carceral histories.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

To reduce ambiguity, I provide the following list of definitions for terms used in this dissertation.

Academic Pursuits: All aspects of a student’s schooling experience, including their grades, retention/persistence/graduation, and social-emotional well-being.

Adolescents: Anyone between the ages of 12-21.

Black: Used to refer to all descendants of African countries and territories (please note, that “Black” will always be capitalized as a show of solidarity to protest how Black people in the United States have historically been – and remain – oppressed).

Carceral: Relating to any aspect of jail/prison/being detained.

Formerly Incarcerated Adolescent: Anyone between the ages of 12-21 who was previously detained in a correctional facility and is now back in the community.

Latine: Used to refer to all the genders of people of Latin roots (please note that while the term Latinx has taken on increased use as an all-gender encompassing term to refer to this community, I use Latine because in the Spanish speaking community words do not typically end in x; therefore, using an “e” as an ending letter is more aligned with our – and I use “our” because I am a Latine myself – community).

Recidivism: The act of a formerly incarcerated individual being re-arrested.

Reentry: The process of incarcerated individuals returning to the community following their release.

School: Any type of academic institution.

School Personnel: An adult employed in a school in any capacity, whether professionally or as a volunteer.

School to Prison Pipeline: The phenomenon that describes aspects of the criminal legal system being used in schools stemming from zero tolerance policies, which includes, but is not limited to, the actual arrest of students, the use of metal detectors, the placement of police-trained resource officers in schools, and the criminalization of students and their behaviors.

Stakeholder: Anyone with an interest/investment in the well-being of students, schools, districts, and communities.

Trauma: An experience that either causes fear or the belief that you are going to be harmed and leads to mental or emotional stress and physical injury.

Trauma-Exposed: Either having experienced or currently experiencing trauma.

Zero Tolerance Policies: Practices that have been implemented by schools and districts that punish students for any infraction, including non-violent ones, and mimic in certain respects the criminal legal system in how they are carried out.

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“It's sad that another person gets booked for shit like that”
-Kevin

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

WHEN RESEARCH BECOMES “ME-SEARCH”

On August 3, 2018, at roughly 5:30am, I found myself using the downstairs bathroom in my three-flat apartment when I heard people rummaging around on the other side of the walls. At the time, I attributed the noise to the neighbors. However, I would soon realize I was wrong – very wrong. Just moments later, while sitting on the couch going through the monotony of my morning routine, I noticed a convergence of arms reaching for the top of my deck’s fence. The immediate thought running through my head was that my partner and I were about to be robbed. As the first person climbed onto the patio, my stress response kicked into high gear and I shouted, “What the fuck are you doing?” It was not until this individual demanded that I open the front door that I realized this person was a police officer. It then became clear to me that the voices and bodies I had noticed earlier were that of other police officers. At the front door, I saw the silhouettes of numerous other people, who also turned out to be law enforcement officials, waiting to enter the apartment. Doing as I was told I opened the front door and was asked by one of the police officers if I was Alberto Guerrero. After confirming that I was, he asked me to turn around and proceeded to inform me that I was under arrest.

After the standard procedure of being read my Miranda Rights and having my home searched, I was paraded outside where, by this time, most of my neighbors were looking out their windows to catch a glimpse of what was causing such a spectacle. Eventually, I was whisked away to the local police precinct where I was processed and fingerprinted. I was then taken to the

local courthouse where, after waiting for about five hours, most of which I spent alone with my downward spiraling thoughts, I was seen by the judge.

Despite having no criminal record and being a doctoral student, an adjunct professor at a local university at the time, and being charged with a non-violent crime, the judge assigned to my initial hearing decided against either releasing me on my own recognizance (ROR) or offering me reasonable bail. The rationale behind this decision was so that officers from New York City, where this charge stemmed from, were afforded the time needed to find a way to ensure my extradition. It should be noted that because I live in Massachusetts, my not living in NYC seemingly justified the large number of officers – at least twenty – sent to arrest me. At that point, I had no idea that I would be sent to a local jail that was overbooked – so much so that I was placed in the 23-hour lockdown wing of the jail, with incarcerated individuals who had committed violent acts. It would be three days before a bed became available in a general wing of the jail and another two days before I was extradited to NYC, where the judge on the case decided to release me on my own recognizance. Fourteen months to the day of my arrest, on October 3, 2019, my case was finally dismissed.

Despite the happy ending to this ordeal, this arrest and the five days I spent incarcerated have had a profound impact on me. For example, the day after my release I went into work. During the workday, while using the bathroom I heard rummaging outside the door and a walkie-talkie go off, as someone made two attempts to enter the locked bathroom. I immediately relived the aforementioned arrest, becoming convinced that I was going to once again be arrested. Needless to say, I was anxious and nearly experienced a panic attack. Writing this nineteen months later, I still become nervous when someone unexpectedly rings our doorbell or if, as was the case while I was writing this dissertation, I notice a police/unmarked car outside our home.

On top of this, I repeatedly found myself being unable to fully focus on completing my dissertation. Every now and again, even as recently as this winter, I still have dreams – nightmares – about being arrested. I have even experienced anxiety reliving this incident while writing this section and am admittedly nervous about what people will think once they read my story and of any possible consequences I may face if future employers find out about my arrest. This is just a partial glimpse of the lasting impact this experience has had on me.

Ironically, prior to this incident, I chose as my research topic the impact trauma has on formerly incarcerated adolescents upon their return to schools in the community. Although I had a brief involvement with the legal system during my time as a youth, this experience has opened my eyes to my topic in a new way. Admittedly, this ordeal proved to be too close to the idea of “me-search” that I have heard often mentioned during my time as a doctoral student. While I am blessed to have an amazing support system and an established network that I was able to turn to as I navigated this situation so that it neither defines nor completely impedes me, I shudder to think how I would have responded – and would continue to respond – if this were not the case. That is, if I was one of the adolescents I have interviewed and learned from/with during the course of my dissertation study...¹

ORGANIZATION OF THE DISSERTATION

It is important to note that this dissertation begins with a definition of terms in order to ensure that from the outset readers understand how I am defining certain words/phrases. Additionally, the rest of this first chapter consists of an overview of the dissertation topic. Included in this overview is the problem statement and the significance of the study. The second

¹ Please note that whenever an ellipsis is used it is done to invite the reader to reflect on the last point made before continuing.

chapter provides a review of the literature, which is organized into three sections: Trauma Theory, Youth Oppression, and Science of Learning. Each of these sections include smaller subsections. The third chapter details the research methodology used while conducting the study. Prominent sections of this chapter include the central research questions, the research design, and the process for selecting participants and collecting and analyzing the data. The fourth chapter introduces and discusses the themes generated from participants' insights and experiences: (1) Institutional Criminalization of Youth Behaviors; (2) Manifestations of Complex Trauma; (3) Utilizing a School-Wide Trauma-Informed Care Approach; and (4) Healthy Student-School Personnel Relationships. The fifth and final chapter discusses implications of the findings detailed in the fourth chapter, while also sharing possible limitations of this study and suggestions for future research projects.

Problem Statement

Research consistently indicates that trauma has a negative impact on students' ability to reach their academic potential (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; & van der Kolk, 2014). Despite a significant number of students entering classrooms having experienced trauma, future educators are neither being introduced to this information in teacher education programs, nor are they being provided with the preparation needed to effectively educate trauma-exposed students (Morris, 2016; & Rossen & Hull, 2013). Further complicating this reality is that our educational system over the past thirty years has adopted a zero tolerance approach to discipline, which has created school environments that further traumatize students instead of supporting them (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Kupchik & Ward, 2014; Merkwae, 2015; Morris, 2016; Noguera, 2003; & van der Kolk, 2014). Although an abundance of data exists demonstrating the consequences of educators lacking a trauma-informed awareness and of schools implementing

zero tolerance policies, our educational system nevertheless continues to enact pedagogical practices that fail to account for the needs of students who have experienced trauma (Adelman & Taylor, 2013). Such practices have proven to be problematic for these students as they are not placed in a learning environment best suited for their academic success (Goodman, 2018).

Instead, our schools are setting trauma-exposed students up for failure as current school policies and practices trigger past trauma that in turn produce extended trauma. Rather than being places that allow for students to be placed in supportive learning spaces, schools have become spaces that retraumatize youth. Along these lines, it can certainly be argued, and has been argued (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008), that when it comes to students of color our school system is in fact serving its purpose as it was intended. That is, schools were never intended to adequately educate students of color and instead were meant to ensure they were pushed out of learning spaces so as to remain part of a never-ending cycle of oppressed members of our society (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). Therefore, the following are the critical intersecting issues being explored in this study: students are entering classrooms having experienced trauma; school personnel are not being properly prepared to engage, educate, and support these students; and the zero tolerance approach to discipline is further traumatizing trauma-exposed students.

Extent of Trauma Experienced by Students

There are multiple assessment tools used to assess the extent to which children and adolescents experience trauma, including the Traumatic Events Screening Inventory for Children (TESI-C), the UCLA Child/Adolescent PTSD Reaction Index for DSM-5, the Cameron Complex Trauma Interview (CCTI), and the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) assessment calculator. It is important to note that regardless of the tool used, the findings make clear that

children and adolescents are being exposed to trauma far more often than we most likely believe (Wingfield & Craft, 2013). In fact, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative (NCTSI) found that as recently as December 2017, nearly 70% of respondents indicated that they have experienced at least one traumatic incident by the time they turned 16 (SAMHSA, 2017). This figure was recently confirmed by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2019).

Given the prevalence of trauma in our society, we know that we are much more likely to encounter youth who have been exposed to trauma than we are to find ones who have not (Everly & Firestone, 2013). The research also tells us that these trauma-exposed children and adolescents exist in all grades and districts throughout the United States (Everly & Firestone, 2013). This means that youth are bringing these experiences with them into our schools and classrooms. And because we know exposure to trauma has the potential to negatively impact students' learning and behavior, it only makes sense for school personnel to have access to the information, preparation, and guidance needed to effectively support and educate this population of students. Unfortunately, this is far from being the case.

Lack of School Personnel Preparation

First, drawing from my own experience as a former middle-school teacher, it is important to acknowledge that teaching is an incredibly difficult profession and that society currently asks A LOT of our educators; therefore, I want to be clear that it is not my intention to vilify or attack teachers and other school personnel. Importantly, what I am doing is openly calling into question the prudence of teacher preparation programs en masse failing to incorporate any aspects of trauma-informed care or curricular content into their courses of study (Wong, 2008). As all schools will have trauma-exposed students, it is important that educators realize the ways that

research demonstrates how trauma impacts students' learning and behavioral efforts, which include interruptions in students' ability to: pay attention, concentrate, and sit still; trust others so as to develop healthy and meaningful relationships; articulate their feelings; and distinguish innocuous gestures from acts actually meant to cause them harm (Blaustein, 2013; Hertel and Johnson, 2013; Moritz-Saladino, 2017; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018; Rios, 2011; Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, 2018; Traumatic Stress Institute, 2006; Treatment and Services Adaptation Center, 2018; van der Kolk, 2014; & Wiebler, 2013).

Unless school personnel take it upon themselves to either learn this information on their own or happen to be employed in a school district that has become trauma-informed, they may never be introduced to this information. And aside from the very clear implication that this will prevent educators from being fully prepared to effectively educate their trauma-exposed students, it also means that they will not be positioned to adequately understand behaviors exhibited by this population of students. It is this misunderstanding that becomes extremely problematic in the current age of a zero tolerance approach to discipline, which has serious consequences both for students' academic trajectory and overall well-being.

Zero Tolerance Approach to Discipline

The current educational climate in the United States has embraced and implemented a zero tolerance discipline approach, which has created a school-based environment that actually compounds adolescent trauma instead of being supportive places for our young people (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Kupchik & Ward, 2014; Merkwae, 2015; Morris, 2016; Noguera, 2003; & van der Kolk, 2014). Such disciplining approaches have created a "learning" environment where students are being excessively punished for seemingly minor and innocuous infractions leading to a rise in school resource officers and criminal justice-related practices,

including metal detectors and arrests, infiltrating our schools. These practices have come to be known as the school to prison pipeline (Dohrn, 2013; Durkin, 2013; Haga, 2013; Nelson & Lind, 2015; Rios, 2011; Sazura, 2013). Notably, Morris (2016) labels this practice “the school to confinement pathway” to account for the unique ways that Black female students are being pushed out of schools and into confinement spaces outside of jails and prisons, such as group homes. Even more problematic is that the students who are the most likely to suffer from these punitive discipline efforts tend to require more supportive interventions since they tend to come from communities that increases their exposure to trauma (Krezmien, Leone, & Wilson, 2014).

In putting zero tolerance approaches to discipline in conversation with both the large number of trauma-exposed students entering schools and the lack of trauma-informed information being made available to school personnel, what has been created is a critical issue in public education. This is because students who have experienced trauma are likely to manifest certain behaviors related to their unresolved trauma that are consistent with behaviors most likely to be punished in schools (Traumatic Stress Institute, 2006). Shockingly, we have created an educational climate where school personnel are not equipped to best understand their students; yet are encouraged to incorporate discipline practices that targets the very behaviors of students they do not fully understand. In effect, our schools are punishing students for having experienced trauma and, in the process, are adding to their trauma.

Significance of the study

There are multiple reasons to justify this study as being not only significant, but very much needed. At the top of this list is that it may be the first of its kind. The second reason is that it is centered on the experiences of the participants in order to learn directly from them. Thirdly, the results from this study can be used to revamp teacher preparation programs and ensure that

decisions made by school personnel come from an informed place. Finally, it has the potential to reduce recidivism rates for this population. All these factors ensure that we also reduce the inequities and injustices formerly incarcerated adolescents face in our society.

Introducing the Population/Problem

Currently, a plethora of studies and articles exist that look at trauma's impact on adolescents in general (Copeland, Keeler, Angold, & Costello; De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; & Widom, 1999), learning specifically (Mathews, Dempsey, & Overstreet, 2009; Slade & Wissow, 2007; & Strom, Schultz, Wentzel-Larsen, & Dyb, 2016), and incarcerated adolescents (Lambie & Randell, 2013; Mears, 2013; & Soler, 2002). However, a dearth of studies and articles exist that explore the intersection of all three when looked at through the specific lens of adolescents who reenroll in schools following an incarceration. In fact, I have yet to find any study or article that looks at this nexus of factors. So, on a very practical level, the significance of this study is that it may truly be the first of its kind.

As a result, it is my belief that this study introduces a population and problem that has been ignored/overlooked by the research community. Through this study I hope that an interest into this population will arise and efforts will be made to explore this issue in greater detail. I am of the mind that authentic efforts will then be made to better support and understand this population as they seek to change the trajectory of their lives through the mechanism that has been consistently proven to be a positive change agent for marginalized members in our society: education.

Participant-Centered Study

In thinking about how to best get the experiences of this essentially forgotten population to be shared and understood as genuinely as possible, I decided to conduct a study that focuses

on the experiences of the participants. Therefore, I am also of the mind that this study is significant since it allowed the experiences of the participants to be centered and shared authentically. As a result, a population that has historically been silenced and ignored when it comes to developing practices and policies that directly impact them was able to directly articulate what they need and require in their efforts to process their trauma, reach their academic potential, and develop an overall healthy sense of self. I also believe it warrants mentioning that hearing directly from the participants will permit those in our society who are hesitant to acknowledge the struggles and needs of this population to reconsider their stance and ultimately champion for improved services for these students.

Informed Teacher Preparation Programs/School Personnel

Based on the limited information that currently exists regarding the experiences of formerly incarcerated, trauma-exposed adolescents who return to schools in the community following their re-entry, the field of education is not fully equipped to understand what this population needs to succeed. Unfortunately, while outside the scope of this study, if being honest, I must admit that there is also a segment of educational stakeholders who are resistant to this changing. Highlighting the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated adolescents who have reenrolled in schools in the community allows for a genuine “bottom-up” contribution to conversations centered around educational policies, practices, and reform. This is because it is based on the perspectives of the people most impacted by and who have the most to gain/lose from our educational system – the students.

By heeding the insight and perspectives of the participants, we educators, social workers, policy makers, and all other stakeholders invested in this population will be better positioned to serve in our roles more effectively. I believe this to be true since it will be the narratives,

perspectives, and wisdom of the participants that can be used by teacher preparation programs and school personnel to inform how they account for effectively educating and supporting this segment of learners. We will not have to guess what they need because they are telling us and, if we choose to pay attention, we can be part of their successful reentry process. I also believe this study can be part of a societal re-envisioning when it comes to the extent to which we punish and incarcerate adolescents and the roles played by schools to be sites that cease perpetuating trauma on our students. This will then allow for schools to be places that both supports these students and challenges systemic injustices.

Potential for Reduced Recidivism

In thinking of the last significant reason for conducting this study, I am inclined to embrace the axiom of saving the best for last. And, if not the best, then, in my opinion, at least the most important: this study has the potential to reduce recidivism rates for this population. By most metrics, the purported rehabilitative intentions of redirecting the behaviors of adolescents by incarcerating them are vastly unsuccessful based on the number of young people who recidivate (Lambie & Randell, 2013). There are many different reasons that account for this. One is that incarcerated adolescents are exposed to more antisocial individuals while detained (Gatti, Tremblay, & Vitaro, 2009). Another reason is the need of adolescents to develop aggressive behaviors to survive being incarcerated that they then bring with them upon their return to the community (Anderson & Ranckin, 2007). Thirdly, the hardships and negative experiences these adolescents endured while incarcerated causes them to develop an anger and a dislike toward systems of power, which can then lead to increased self-damaging behaviors and a detachment to pro-social organizations once they return to the community (Lane, Lanza-Kaduce, Frazier, & Bishop, 2002). There is also the very real problem of a lack of culturally competent reentry

programs, as well as the failure of schools to best support this population. But, regardless of the reason, the bottom line is that something needs to be changed in order to ensure that when young people return to the community after their release they stay there. And with a reduction in recidivism rates, we increase the chances of students meeting their potential and avoiding many of the collateral consequences of repeated incarcerations, including failing to complete their education.

It is my belief that providing participants an opportunity to open up about their carceral experiences and what it has been like for them reenrolling in school following their reentry can potentially help with ensuring they do not recidivate. Although this study was not meant to be therapeutic in nature – that is, I did not engage the participants as a clinician – Young, Greer, and Church (2017) have found that when adolescents engage in talk therapy, they are much less likely to recidivate. This is because it helps to have someone care about your experiences, while also making an effort to reduce the stigma associated with having been incarcerated, which I believe participating in this study did for the participants. We also know from the research that education is one of the main factors that helps to decrease recidivism rates (Foley, 2001). So, since schools are uniquely positioned to help formerly incarcerated adolescents avoid getting re-arrested, it only makes sense that school personnel are appropriately equipped to support this population, which, to reiterate, they are not and underscores the importance of this study.

“We have metal detectors, wands. Shoes, belts, everything else gotta come off. That greets us every single day when we walk into school.”

-Dennis

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

A shoot-out just outside the classroom during a Math lesson in the middle of the afternoon leaves two people dead. As students leave the school building following a Halloween party, a series of gunshots ring out across the street causing them to run frantically back into the school, too scared to leave it again. A student returns to school after his family’s house was destroyed by a fire, leaving them homeless. Another student comes to school the day after her aunt was brutally murdered by her own boyfriend. Or maybe I am thinking of the student who lost his cousin to gang violence. Actually, it is possible that I am confusing that student with the one who lost his father to cancer or the student whose brother was arrested the night before...

The paragraph above provides a tiny glimpse into the realities my students – and, by extension, me as their teacher and the entire school staff – dealt with during the four years I taught middle school on the west side of Chicago. Unfortunately, it pains me to admit that more times than not, I was not equipped to adequately address these traumatic incidents that my students experienced – to say nothing of the more covert stressful experiences they were dealing with, which were not initially, if ever, brought to my attention. In thinking about these experiences, two words, that an educator should never feel or be, come to mind that capture my (in)ability to respond to these situations: helpless and ill-prepared.

In addition to experiencing adversities in life outside of the school building, unfortunately, students are often traumatized while in school. From my own experiences, I recall a student’s name being written in permanent marker on the whiteboard by a teacher to make

clear to the student – and the entire class – that he was “a problem child.” On another occasion, a different teacher told us that we would ultimately drop out, become drug dealers, and end up incarcerated – we were 8th graders. I could also point to the countless times where other teachers yelled at us for minor offenses, questioned our intelligence, or mocked us because of the clothing we wore. For myself and my classmates – and many others just like us – school failed to be a safe haven from our traumatic home lives and instead caused us further harm.

Despite this reality, during my many courses as an undergraduate elementary education major, not one mention was ever made of trauma. This explicit silence either implied that trauma did not have any impact on students’ learning or that our professors were not aware of the extent that students experience trauma. As a result, and arguably an even more egregious omission, learning opportunities to identify and address symptoms of trauma in our students were never provided – nor were we invited to consider the possibility that we future educators could, and would, traumatize our students. Regrettably, my experience was not unique as this is often the case in teacher education programs (Gross, 2017; Rossen & Hull, 2013; & Wong, 2008).

Regardless of the absence of trauma-informed pedagogy or curricular content in pre-service and in-service education programs, the fact nevertheless remains that students are entering classrooms having experienced trauma. This sober reality was perfectly captured by Denise Juneau, a Native woman who is the former Montana State Superintendent of Public Education, when speaking about the adolescents from her own reservation. She discussed how they were going to school with everyday trauma that they lived with, while also acknowledging the importance of addressing and treating these traumatic realities before students were able to sit in a class and learn (Yager, 2012).

Regrettably, as the opening of this chapter exemplifies, examples of children being exposed to traumatic incidents – including while in school – are not hard to find. A recent incident from January 2019, in Binghamton, NY, quickly comes to mind. During their lunch break, four sixth grade female students of color were accused of being on drugs due to them appearing giddy, which resulted in school personnel asking them to remove their clothing in an effort to find drugs on their person. While three of the children, and it is important to make clear these four students were in fact children, removed their clothing to various degrees, the fourth student refused to comply which, unfathomably, resulted in her receiving an in-school suspension (Herrerla, 2019).

In another, and highly publicized, example, the world stood shocked as a Black, high school female student in South Carolina was viciously dragged from her chair by a school resource officer and ultimately arrested for failing to provide him with her cell phone. Making matters worse, the student who captured the violent attack, Niya Kenny, also a Black female student, was arrested. According to Ms. Kenny (personal communication, March 7, 2017), neither she nor the other student was provided with any services by either the school or district to properly process this incident. In fact, Ms. Kenny was so negatively impacted by this unnecessary – and, dare I say, traumatic – incident that she never returned to the school following her unnecessary arrest.

Based on all that I have already shared, I believe a thorough discussion into how students are impacted when having been exposed to trauma is warranted. Through this literature review, I will delve into the intersectional exploration of trauma theory, youth oppression, and the science of learning to help contextualize the relationship between trauma and its impact on students' academic efforts and behaviors. This review of the literature will also focus on zero tolerance

policies, which have given birth to excessive and harsh disciplinary practices, enacted in school systems throughout the United States as the primary scope to explore how schools are sites where students experience trauma and/or are further traumatized. Through this literature review, I also underscore the importance of schools being places where students *do not* experience trauma, but instead find support, safety, and the opportunities needed to properly process their pain. In sum, I seek to demonstrate how schools might better support trauma-exposed students.

Trauma Theory

This section on trauma theory begins by detailing the extent that children and adolescents are experiencing trauma. Highlighting the degree to which trauma is a part of the everyday lives of youth underscores the severity of this issue and makes clear that this is an area of study that warrants further attention and research. Next, I describe the various levels of trauma and ways that students may respond to being exposed to trauma. I follow this up by exploring the limitations associated with trauma theory. This section then ends with discussing how students are negatively impacted to such an extent that it leads to the self-fulfilling prophecy.

Scope of the Problem

Currently, pre-service and in-service education programs fail to properly prepare teachers to identify and respond to trauma being experienced by their students. This would fail to be an issue if students were not being exposed to trauma; however, this is far from being the case.

While there are multiple trauma assessment tools, as discussed in Chapter I, available to gauge the extent to which children and adolescents experience trauma, for the sake of this section, I will focus exclusively on data that derives from the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) assessment calculator. Admittedly, I do so knowing that the ACE assessment calculator – as well as all other screening tools – fails to capture all the possible ways that children may be

traumatized (Ristuccia, 2013); therefore, it is safe to conclude that the subsequent figures, while disturbing in their own right, are actually on the low-end. Based on recent ACE results, nearly 35 million children indicated that they have experienced at least one traumatic event, while about 33% of adolescents between the ages of 12-17 have experienced at least two traumatizing incidents (Gross, 2017).

Furthermore, Mental Health Connection of Tarrant County (2018) tells us that in the United States 26% of children will either be exposed to a traumatic event before turning four years old, over 60% of youth ages 17 and younger have either directly or indirectly experienced crime, violence, and abuse, over one in ten children and adolescents have expressed being exposed to violence at least five times, and about 14% of children suffered some form of regular maltreatment at the hands of their caregivers. Along similar lines, there are over 15 million children in the United States living in food insecure homes, about 2.5 million children – and more than 14% of them are under the age of 2 – live in homes where at least one guardian has a substance addiction, over 5 million children are the reported victims of child abuse, and over 400,000 children are in the foster care system (Gross, 2017).

The aforementioned figures make clear that a significant number of children and adolescents are being exposed to unhealthy, toxic, and destructive trauma, which has the potential to negatively impact all facets of their lives – including their academic endeavors (Bloom, 1999; Duncan-Andrade, 2011; Ginwright, 2010; Goodman, 2018; Gross, 2017; Moritz-Saladino, 2017; National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018; Rios, 2011; Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, 2018; Traumatic Stress Institute, 2006; Treatment and Services Adaptation Center, 2018; & van der Kolk, 2014). These children and adolescents are students who can be found in all grade levels and districts throughout the United States (Goodman, 2018;

Rossen & Hull, 2013; & van der Kolk, 2014), which means they are bringing these experiences with them to school. Given this reality, in the next section, the human response to trauma is defined and ways that students may react when experiencing trauma in school situations are provided.

Stress Response

In one of its definitions, Merriam-Webster (2018) defines trauma as “a disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe mental or emotional stress or physical injury.” Additionally, the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2018) defines a traumatic event as “a sudden and unexpected occurrence that causes intense fear and may involve a threat of ... or actual physical harm” (para. 1).

Since this chapter seeks to argue that trauma, in addition to impacting students’ ability to learn, also impacts their ability to effectively regulate their emotions and behaviors, it only makes sense to explore how people respond to trauma, which is known as the stress response. This will help to better contextualize the normalcy of certain student behaviors that tend to be seen through a negative and criminal lens and addressed through excessive discipline practices. Thefreedictionary.com (2018) defines the stress response as the “predictable physiological response that occurs in humans as a result of injury, surgery, shock... or the physiological response to stress” (para 1). Werrbach (2015) adds that the stress response is what happens when our bodies respond to situations that are viewed as threatening and that when in a state of stress response, our bodies respond in one of three ways – fight, flight, or freeze² – which allows us to feel safe and protected when in a situation we believe to be threatening to our overall well-being.

² I want to point out that there are those who believe a fourth “F” should be included as part of our stress response: flock.

Essentially, the stress response is our body's natural defense mechanism that is intended to protect us when we feel we might be in danger. Taking the stress response one step further, Maack, Buchanan, and Young (2015) point out that:

Gray and McNaughton's revised Reinforcement Sensitivity Theory proposes that fear is the underlying emotion of the fight, flight, freeze system which is part of the body's defensive motivational system. Fear manifests as flight (if escape is inevitable), freeze (which constitutes a more passive form of avoidance, as elicited by threats that need not be approached), or fight (if escape is not an option and defensive approach is required).
(p. 121)

It warrants underscoring that the stress response is a biological behavior that we engage in as a result of an evolutionary process that has taken place through countless millennia to ensure our survival both individually and as a species. In thinking about how students respond to trauma, I think it is important to outline how each of the stress responses may manifest in a school-based setting. Notably, before doing so, I want to highlight that it is not until we are in our mid-twenties, which is typically years after most teachers first enter classrooms, that our brains are fully developed (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Therefore, it is important to keep in mind when thinking of how trauma-exposed students respond to external triggering stimuli that we do so with the awareness that even if in the best of circumstances children and adolescents – and many novice teachers – are not biologically equipped to respond to such situations in an ideal manner.

Flight response

When feeling threatened, the stress response of flight will usually manifest as a student leaving either the classroom or school. While science has concluded that this is a natural response (van der Kolk, 2014), for various – and, at times, valid – reasons, schools find such

behaviors to be unacceptable, which results in students getting into trouble when employing this response. Hardly ever, though, is there an effort made to understand what has caused students to flee and an opportunity to address the underlying issue that prompted the behavior is lost. My professional experience has taught me that oftentimes students engage in the act of fleeing because they know that if they stay put things will only get worse; however, we do not give students the benefit of the doubt but instead punish them for what in reality may be a mature and logical assessment of the situation from which they fled. It also warrants mentioning that school personnel do not stop to ask themselves why students did not feel comfortable speaking to an adult before choosing to flee...

Freeze response

The freeze response to experiencing a stress-related incident usually comes with very little – if any – words being spoken by the student since they are unsure of how or unable to respond to such a degree that they essentially become stuck (van der Kolk, 2014). When this response is employed, it is not uncommon for students to be viewed by school personnel as being sassy, disengaged, not caring, etc., for refusing to speak or indicative of being guilty because of their silence. It is also very likely that these students are badgered with repeated questions that only causes them to retreat even further inwardly instead of serving the adult's intended purpose of getting an answer out of the student. Either way, such a response by the student tends to confirm the belief that they are in the wrong, which leads to them getting into trouble without any exploration as to what triggered the student in the first place.

Fight response

The third stress response, fight, seems to be of most concern to school personnel given the zero tolerance culture that has permeated many schools, which has become the impetus to

implement the use of excessive discipline (Rios, 2011). As is widely known, when any animal, which includes human beings, finds themselves in a situation where they are afraid, a possible option to engage in is to respond aggressively to defend themselves. However, and far too often, students are viewed through a criminal lens when engaging in such behaviors, which schools then use to justify decisions to employ the services of police officers and other punitive disciplinary practices to regulate them (van der Kolk, 2014). Yet, once again, rarely – if ever – do school personnel stop to think what may have triggered behaviors that the scientific community has come to embrace as not only being a perfectly “normal” response, but one that we (and I use “we” intentionally because this is something that all of us do) oftentimes engage in without even realizing it. And it is my belief that this is seemingly the result of a lack of understanding by school personnel of trauma and how behaviors associated with trauma manifest in students.

Before moving on, I believe it is crucial to once again underscore that each of the manifestations of the stress response is intended to allow us to take care of ourselves. Therefore, when we punish students for engaging in these behaviors, we are sending the message that their coping mechanisms are maladaptive. And while it is certainly possible that this may be the case, it is important to acknowledge that because traumatized students already have trust issues, they are going to be even more unlikely to be receptive to adults telling them to respond in different ways when the same adults are punishing them for how they already do respond. It is similarly important to acknowledge that the behaviors students engage in in response to being triggered may be the same ones that have allowed them to survive the trauma they have experienced (Bernard, & Newell, 2013). In sum, our approach to how students respond to trauma is not

helping them to process their trauma in healthy ways and significantly decreases the chances that they will be receptive to our intervention efforts.

Limitations of Trauma Theory

Although the idea of trauma theory has infused itself throughout various disciplines, such as social work, psychology, and psychiatry, the actual term, which was introduced in “Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History” (Caruth, 1996), is relatively new. Although an undoubtedly important contribution to the exploration, understanding, processing, and healing of trauma, an astute critique of trauma theory is its focus on trauma solely in response to a particular event that took place in a person’s past from which they continue to suffer (Duncan-Andrade, 2011). While certainly true for many people, this singular view of trauma does not take into consideration the reality of people who experience and suffer trauma on a consistent basis. This point was underscored by Durryle Brooks during his doctoral dissertation oral defense (2017, April 7) where he questioned how trauma theory accounts for the daily trauma experienced by Black, queer students in a racist and heteronormative society. Brooks’ point touches upon the underlying idea of microaggressions – a term coined by psychiatrist and Harvard professor Chester Pierce in 1969 to refer to the negative comments and messages Black people were receiving on a daily basis from the dominant - that is, white – race in the United States and the impact it was having on them (Sue, 2007).

Microaggressions

The concept of microaggressions is an important one. This is because it invites us to consider the potential reoccurring harm being done to students who find themselves in schools where they are being overpoliced/over-surveilled, passing through metal detectors, and/or consistently receiving messages that are unhealthy and upsetting. It also allows us to consider the

harm being done when students are provided with curricula that are not culturally aligned and that causes them to be undereducated, under challenged, and undervalued. Additionally, when such an unwelcoming and distressing “learning” environment is put into context with whatever unprocessed trauma students may be bringing with them into classroom spaces, student outbursts may take on a different meaning (Morland, Birman, Dunn, Adkins, & Gardner, 2013; & Rodhe-Collins, 2013). That is, the student who freezes, goes into flight mode, or fights back may not be an uninterested or unruly student deserving of punishment; they may very well be a child/adolescent who is going through a tough time and who can no longer/does not know how to handle the added pain that they experience while in school. To put it more bluntly, they may be students in need of support as an intervention, not punishment.

Complex trauma/PTSD

As previously indicated, it is not uncommon to think of trauma as related to a single event, more commonly known as Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). However, the idea that people find themselves in situations where trauma is experienced repeatedly and over a longer period of time has come to be known as complex trauma (Israel Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War, 2017). To emphasize this point as it relates to students, during his TEDx Talk, Duncan-Andrade (2011) indicates that a third of urban adolescents show PTSD symptoms, which means that they are actually two times as likely to suffer from this diagnosis as soldiers who saw real-life combat action during the Third Persian Gulf War (otherwise known as The Iraq War). It is important to note that other researchers have similarly made the point that urban youth, who are disproportionately enrolled in schools that incorporate zero tolerance policies, are more likely to be exposed to trauma (Rodhe-Collins, 2013; Rossen & Hull, 2013; van der Kolk, 2014; Wingfield, & Craft, 2013, & Wong, 2008). After explaining that PTSD is no longer an

accurate diagnosis that captures the traumatic realities of urban youth, Duncan-Andrade (2011) shares that professionals in the medical and mental health field have become so concerned about this misdiagnosis that they have begun to describe such adolescents as suffering from Complex PTSD (CPTSD). He continues to assert that this new description more precisely captures the realities of people living in urban neighborhoods since they return to the toxic realities of their environment on a daily basis, which ensures that they are consistently traumatized over and over again (Duncan-Andrade, 2011).

The extent that and frequency with which young people are suffering from trauma prompted Dr. Bessel van der Kolk (2014) and a series of other prominent psychiatrists and mental health clinicians to advocate for the inclusion of Developmental Trauma Disorder in the most recent edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM-V), which is the text used when assigning a mental health diagnosis. The impetus for making this recommendation was to ensure that mental health providers – and, really, anyone working with children and adolescents – are equipped with an accurate and thorough understanding of the extent that young people are exposed to trauma and the devastating impact of this repeated trauma on their overall well-being.

Unfortunately, the decision-makers behind the DSM-V rejected this suggestion and, as a result, young people are continuing to suffer from being misunderstood and, subsequently, misdiagnosed (van der Kolk, 2014). This then prevents them from getting the services they truly need and will almost certainly mean they will also continue to be blamed for behaviors related to their trauma. This reality is further upsetting given that these types of behaviors are the ones that cause most students to be punished in schools that adhere to a zero tolerance approach to discipline (Bernard & Newell, 2013).

The fact that students are entering schools having consistently experienced such high levels of trauma highlights the importance of teachers and other school personnel needing to be aware of this information so as to engage in pedagogical approaches and behavioral interventions that are trauma-informed, affirming, constructive, and truly in students' best interest. While the data tell us unequivocally that there are an overwhelming number of children and adolescents experiencing trauma and we know from decades of research that being exposed to trauma can impact how these young people respond in classroom settings, to me, it begs questioning why is more not being done to better support students who have experienced trauma. After mulling it over, I am left to conclude that the answer to this perplexing question has two prominent responses. The first is that we know from the data that most students who find themselves in schools that embrace zero tolerance policies akin to the criminal legal system are disproportionately Black and Latine and low-income (Hutchinson, 2019; & Laura, 2014). Therefore, it is safe to say these practices stem from the racist and classist practices that continue to plague larger society and may help to explain why our society is seemingly okay with these students continuing to be inadequately understood and supported. Secondly, I believe a response to this question lies, in part, with the oppressed status of children and adolescents in our society, which is discussed under the youth oppression section.

Self-Fulfilling Prophecy

In his groundbreaking work, Willis (1977) wrote about the acceptance of British students from working-class families regarding their future and how they became resigned to the fact that their futures were inevitably linked with menial employment. These students concluded that school had no value for them and, as a result, acted accordingly. They were unruly, had poor attendance, engaged in substance use, and demonstrated a general lack of investment in their

academic pursuits. In thinking about this section, I believe the experiences of the adolescents reported Willis' study accurately captures the self-fulfilling prophecy: coming to accept that an outcome is inevitable and then acting in ways to make the inevitable outcome a reality (Merton, 1968).

The gift and the curse of the self-fulfilling prophecy is that it can either have a positive or negative impact. Disappointingly, the personal and academic experiences of formerly incarcerated adolescents who return to schools in the community often times cause them to embrace a negative view of the self-fulfilling prophecy. This underscores the importance of ensuring that we develop practices in schools that support students instead of further adding to their pain and belief that they are somehow inherently flawed.

The Process

The term self-fulfilling prophecy was first coined by Robert Merton, who defines it as “in the beginning, a *false* definition of the situation evoking a new behavior which makes the originally false conception come *true*” (1968, p. 477, italics in the original). What really resonates from Merton's definition is that the self-fulfilling prophecy begins as a fallacy. That is, what we think is going to happen is based on a faulty assessment. However, because of this belief, which, to be clear, is based on what we experience as part of our daily realities, we ultimately engage in the behaviors that allow this false reality to become an actual reality. In other words, what we encounter impacts our behaviors to such an extent that they ultimately become our behaviors; therefore, what was once false becomes true.

The self-fulfilling prophecy process is poignantly captured by the Pygmalion, or Rosenthal, effect, which espouses that people meet the expectations others place on them, including doing better when interacted with in a positive manner and doing worse when the

opposite is the case (Chang, 2011). Not surprisingly, this phenomenon has been observed in schools. This process usually begins with the preconceived notions, whether positive or negative, that school personnel have of their students. Educators then interact with their students in a manner that reflect their biases. Students then internalize the way they are treated while in school. Finally, the behaviors of the students start to coincide with how their educators view and treat them. It should come as no surprise, then, that a strong correlation exists between teachers' perceptions of students and whether students attend college (Boser, Wilhelm, & Hanna, 2014).

Stereotype Threat

Another way the self-fulfilling prophecy is adopted is through stereotype, or identity, threat. A process brought to the research forefront by Claude Steele (2010), stereotype threat refers to the ways in which we are unconsciously impacted by the messages we receive from society about certain parts of our identity and how these internalized messages unknowingly influence our behaviors. So, when we are bombarded with consistent signals, such as female students being told that “girls” are not good at math, we, unbeknownst to us, start to see a pattern and embrace this pattern as true about the part of our social identity that is being targeted. This then plays out when we find ourselves in situations when the parts of ourselves that have been targeted by these messages are called into question. Interestingly, stereotype threat has been found to impact even the most successfully inclined students, to say nothing of students who have historically struggled (Steele, 2010). This makes clear that the actions of adults, including school personnel, have consequences that can truly damage students – something I wish all teachers realized and avoided doing.

In thinking about students with carceral histories who find themselves enrolled in schools that implement zero tolerance policies, stereotype threat can – and does – tap into the ways they

have been socialized into believing they are criminals (Laura, 2014). As a result, they then engage in behaviors that confirm this belief about themselves. Or, when they have consistently been led to believe that people who look like them are inherently unintelligent or prone to mischief, when asked to engage in scholastic endeavors in a classroom where a teacher taps into this internalized stereotype threat, such students will perform in ways that confirm their teachers' beliefs. They then underperform and fail to experience the type of academic success needed to challenge what they have accepted as true about themselves. In many ways, they encounter barriers to them being able to see themselves as good and having potential.

This section on the self-fulfilling prophecy highlights the pitfalls faced by students who attend schools that criminalize them and is consistent with the idea of complex trauma. It is a widely accepted fact that when students are constantly exposed to damaging messages that negatively influence their sense-of-self, this increases the chances of them embracing a deficit view of themselves (Laura, 2014). That said, when we take it upon ourselves to truly support students by seeing them as more than their social identity makers or past experiences, we then invite them into the possibility of a transformative experience. During this experience, they can begin to question what they have been led to believe about themselves. If successfully supported, students may then start to see themselves in a healthier light and begin embracing a positive self-fulfilling prophecy. And if schools are going to play an active role in this transformative process, it must include challenging youth oppression, which is where we turn to next.

Youth Oppression

Before delving into this section, I believe it is important to define youth. Legally, in the United States, the age ascribed to adulthood is eighteen; however, once again, research tells us that our brains are still in the process of developing into our early to mid-twenties (Perry &

Szalavitz, 2006). So to decide that upon one's eighteenth birthday they have somehow left adolescence and matured into adulthood seems... vapid. Thus, for purposes of this dissertation, I am viewing youth through the same lens as Tuck & Yang (2014); that is, as a "structural location" as students anywhere along the Pre-K-12th grade pipeline (p. 4).

While seemingly not included in mainstream conversations in the same way or to the same extent as other oppressed members of society when it comes to being subjugated, a quick exploration into the experiences of young people in our society yields more than enough reasons to justify their status as an oppressed group. And, as is usually the case for marginalized groups, the experiences of young people in our society tend to be silenced and ignored – even when it comes to areas that have a direct impact on their overall well-being and development, including their schooling.

Definition & Scope

Various authors (Bell, 2013; DeJong & Love, 2015; Love & Phillips, 2013) have explored adultism – the idea of adolescence being an oppressed group. Bell (2013) nevertheless argues that the notion of adultism is in the early stages of exploration and still has not been embraced as an area of research. This lack of acceptance, however, does not negate the existence of youth oppression, which has been defined as 'the systemic subordination of younger people as a targeted group, who have relatively little opportunity to exercise social power' (DeJong & Love as cited in DeJong & Love, 2015). Love and Philips (2013) further posit that because the oppression of adolescents is taken for granted in our adult-dominated society, this helps to explain why young people are not seen as a marginalized group and the lack of interest by the larger research community in exploring this impact on them.

Focusing exclusively on the experiences of students, Bell (2013) points out that schools help to reinforce the powerlessness of adolescents compared to adults and, as a result, the existence of youth oppression in such institutions. He does this by highlighting that while teachers face minimal – if any – consequences for yelling at students, when the roles are reversed, students are punished; he also mentions that students have their actions limited by hall passes, serve detention as a punishment, and are monitored by security guards. This point is underscored by Rios (2011), who speaks of uncovering what he labels a youth control complex that consists of interactions between adolescents and adults in positions of power where punishment becomes the norm since the actions of oppressed young people are seen through a criminal lens. At this point, I believe it warrants highlighting that there are differences in how students are viewed – that is, while youth in general are seen as being inherently unbelievable, we know that Black and Latine youth are seen as less believable than their white student counterparts.

Furthermore, due to their subjugated status, adolescents, especially when non-white, are not provided with many opportunities to utilize their agency and, when they do, they tend to be vilified and criminalized for engaging in behaviors that are usually applauded in U.S. society, such as assertiveness and a willingness to stand up for what one believes is right (DeJong & Love, 2015). Rios (2011) argues, once again, that all these efforts are done in order to control young people. Due to these practices, adolescents come to believe that what they value as important and find interesting are ignored by larger society (Dohrn, 2013). This is evident in the ways that students rarely are allowed input in curricular matters, are not consulted in the hiring of school personnel, and have minimal, if any, influence in identifying symptoms and mental health diagnoses that get placed on them. This acceptance of their diminished status leads to a

decreased sense of self and an inability to see oneself as having worth (Morris, 2016). Based on the ways that society – and, by extension, schools – has come to minimize the experiences and feelings of adolescents, it is safe to conclude that zero tolerance policies are a manifestation of youth oppression. And it is to zero tolerance policies that we turn to next.

Zero Tolerance Policies

Zero tolerance policies have been defined as practices instituted and implemented by schools that reflect an excessive and criminal justice-like approach to discipline (Hutchinson, 2019; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006, Merkwae, 2015, Noguera, 2003; & Yang, 2009). Mallet (2015) tells us that zero tolerance policies focus on a discipline approach toward disruptive behaviors that include suspending and expelling students, as well as referring students to the juvenile legal system through school-based arrests. He further points out that this is done despite the fact that these efforts neither make schools any safer nor prove to actually cause a positive change in student behaviors (Mallet, 2015).

To be fair, the idea behind zero tolerance policies arose from what appears to have been a sincere desire to protect students and school personnel following a string of school shootings – talk about trauma – in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Despite the seemingly benevolent motivation, in what hindsight has proven to be an ill-fated decision, policy makers – many of whom had very little actual experience either as educators or in working with children and adolescents – developed a course of action that would seek to be punitive and reactive instead of supportive and proactive, to say nothing of actually curbing school shootings. It bears acknowledging once again that these excessive discipline practices have disproportionately been enacted in schools with higher rates of financially poor Black and Latine students, which underscores the racial and class bias at play when it comes to zero tolerance practices.

Krezmien, Leone, and Wilson (2014) and Brady (2002) point out that following the passage of the Gun Free Schools Act in 1994, schools began to be financially incentivized by documenting when students brought weapons into schools and subsequently reporting these students to local authorities. Kupchik and Ward (2014) further point out that a manifestation of this crackdown on weapons in schools has been the Save our Schools (SOS) grant, which schools can apply for and, if chosen, the money received can be used to purchase metal detectors, locks, and any other items that the school believes may improve security. Merkwae (2015) thus argues that following this legislation schools throughout the United States embraced a zero tolerance approach toward discipline under the guise of safety, which is an argument that has been made by other scholars (Dohrn, 2013; & Rios, 2011). But what instead happened is that schools shifted their discipline methods to penalize students in ways that have had many negative consequences and fall outside the intended scope of the Gun Free Schools Act. While the ways that these zero tolerance approaches to discipline have manifested in schools vary widely – once again, we know they are enacted much more harshly and severely in schools that are predominately made up of Black and Latine students – the general consensus is that they are overly punitive and, more often than not, counterproductive (Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2019; Bernard & Newell, 2013, Krezmien, Leone, & Wilson, 2014; Kupchik & Ward, 2014; Merkwae, 2015; & Noguera, 2003; Ristuccia, 2013; Wing, 2018). Making matters worse, we now know that students who attend schools with stricter discipline policies are more likely to encounter the legal system as adults (Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2019).

To be clear, as a former middle teacher myself and current educator in higher education, I fully support ensuring the safety of our students and school personnel – especially in this age of increased school shootings where in the first twenty-one weeks of 2018 there were twenty-three

school shootings – yes, more than one school shooting per week (Ahmed & Walker, 2018). However, the current approach to discipline is not working. Case in point, despite the number of arrests in general in the United States decreasing since 2000, there has been a rise in adolescent arrests in schools (Nelson & Lind, 2015), which not so coincidentally overlaps with the introduction of zero tolerance policies. And this is because since zero tolerance policies aggressively target minor offenses, behaviors that were once handled internally by school personnel are now being referred to the criminal legal system (Dohrn, 2013; Durkin, 2013; Haga, 2013; Nelson & Lind, 2015; Rios, 2011; & Sazura, 2013). Stated differently, Rios (2011) asserts that:

In an era of mass incarceration, developed over the past thirty years, punitive social control has fed an out-of-control minotaur, allowing it to expand its labyrinth by embedding itself into traditionally nurturing institutions, punishing young people at younger ages, and marking many for life. (p. 161)

This is how we get inexplicable situations like the one mentioned earlier where Niya Kenny and her classmate can get arrested for an incident where one student refused to give up her cellphone (and was also physically assaulted prior to her arrest) while the other student simply filmed the assault. It also helps give context to the seemingly senseless decision to have three sixth grade girls be stripped-searched and to assign an in-school suspension to the fourth child who refused to comply. It further helps to explain why even to this very day far too many students must pass through metal detectors when on their way into and out of schools, have to contend with police-trained school resource officers, are subjected to “random” locker searches, and are viewed and treated as criminals instead of learners (Shigeoka, 2018). In many ways, such practices cause

students to be adultified, yet not in healthy ways, which robs them of their opportunity to be adolescents (Ferguson, 2000).

School to prison pipeline (StPP)

The experiences of these students are, regrettably, part of a disturbing national trend that I believe warrants special attention as a collateral consequence resulting from zero tolerance discipline policies. Once again, although youth incarceration rates have decreased significantly nationwide since 2000, adolescents coming into contact with the criminal legal system while in school have increased (Nelson & Lind, 2015). The relationship between juvenile detention rates and school discipline has led to the school to prison pipeline phenomenon due to the criminal justice-like approach to discipline that has emerged from these policies (Noguera, 2003). These practices include the presence of metal detectors at school entrances, police officers being hired as – yet, inappropriately trained to be – school resource officers, overly punitive disciplining decisions that has led to an increase in suspensions and expulsions, and, students literally being arrested while in school (Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2019; & Rios, 2011). Upsettingly, it is actually schools that are introducing students to the criminal legal system since getting into trouble in school oftentimes becomes the gateway for students’ involvement with this institution (Dohrn, 2013; Durkin, 2013; Haga, 2013; Nelson & Lind, 2015; Rios, 2011; Sazura, 2013).

Although there is no physical pipeline that usher students from schools to prisons, as just indicated, the StPP nevertheless is seen as existing within our educational system. The American Civil Liberties Union (2018) describes the StPP as an upsetting nationwide practice where students are removed from schools and placed into the criminal legal system. The American Civil Liberties Union (2018) further points out that a lot of the students who find themselves in the crosshairs of the StPP have been diagnosed with learning disabilities, come from financially

impoverished homes, and/or suffer from various abuses/forms of neglect and would be better served receiving additional services instead of harsh and punitive discipline. Given this reality, it bears highlighting that students who come from living situations where they are more likely to be traumatized find themselves exposed to additional trauma while attending school (Wegman & O'Banion, 2013). Given the abundance of data that shows the ineffectiveness of incarcerating adolescents, this reality once again underscores the importance of educators being able to adequately address the behaviors exhibited by students – especially since many of them stem from unresolved trauma – in ways that do not include the involvement of police/the criminal legal system. And that they instead respond to these behaviors in ways that prove to be healthy and constructive and, if being honest, culturally sensitive and informed (Goodman, 2018; & Yang, 2009). Unfortunately, this becomes difficult to do in the current era of zero tolerance policies.

Disproportionality

The students most at risk of suffering at the hands of draconian zero tolerance policies are the same students who are already the most vulnerable, come from living situations that increase the chances of them being exposed to trauma, and clearly require supportive interventions (Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006; Krezmien, Leone, & Wilson (2014); Kupchik & Ward, 2014; Merkwae, 2015; Noguera, 2003). They also tend to be non-white and come from financially lower-income homes (Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2019). While not a focus of this chapter, it nevertheless warrants mentioning that it becomes difficult to argue against zero tolerance policies being a civil rights injustice. And we as a society must explore in earnest why students of color, students who come from low socioeconomic homes, and students who are in special education/diagnosed as being emotionally disturbed – where we also see the

overdiagnosis of Black and Latine youth – are considered to be more deviant and deserving of being treated more severely than their student counterparts. This disproportionality in student treatment makes clear that the punishment of our most vulnerable students – and, thus, zero tolerance policies – is a social justice issue and in dire need of being eradicated and replaced with a more constructive, culturally-informed, and student-centered policy.

This section has shed light into why it might be that teacher education programs and schools are not at the forefront when it comes to adequately supporting trauma-exposed students. It also explored some of the consequences of youth being oppressed and how current approaches to school-based discipline may be impeding the well-being of students who have been traumatized instead of supporting them. Building off of this information, the following section explores the science behind how students learn, trauma’s impact on learning and behavior, and what role schools and educators can play to better support trauma-exposed students.

Science of Learning

Having spent the first two-thirds of this chapter discussing trauma theory and statistics, as well as youth oppression and zero tolerance policies, I now turn to exploring the science of learning. This is being done to better understand the way trauma impacts students’ academic and behavioral efforts and how this may be further exacerbated through a zero tolerance approach to discipline. In this section, I will discuss the cognitive development and social emotional learning of students when traumatized. This section will also include suggestions, which will be further elaborated upon in the Discussion chapter, for how teacher education programs and schools can support trauma-exposed students to process their adverse experiences and reach their academic potential more effectively.

Cognitive Development

According to Benassi, Overson, and Hakala (2014) and Mayer (2011), the science of learning, in a nutshell, is the scientific way that people go about learning. Along these lines, Billett (2009) tells us students come to believe that how they learn stems from their “capacities, earlier experiences, and ongoing negotiations” (p. 211) with their environment, which has the potential to either support or deter their learning. Having a deeper understanding of this process is important as it provides the foundation needed to truly grasp the impact that trauma has on learning and how zero tolerance approaches are only making this process worse for students.

Research indicates that the implicit theory, which are the core beliefs people have about their ability to change their qualities, held by students determines how they perform academically (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; & Yeager & Dweck, 2012). While Yeager and Dweck (2012) pay special attention to two implicit theories that they believe are important in the field of education – implicit theories of intelligence and personality – for the purposes of this dissertation, I focus only on the implicit theories of intelligence. Like the science of learning, intelligence theory explores how it is that people come to believe they learn. Dweck, Chiu, and Hong (1995) found that most people believe that learning takes either one of two forms. The first form, known as entity theory, indicates that how people learn is permanent and, therefore, cannot be changed, while incremental theory, the second form, argues that intelligence can be changed and improved upon over time (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995). This finding has significant ramifications in its potential to change students’ perceptions of themselves and their abilities since research tells us that no matter where students are in terms of their intellectual capacity, it is each student’s individual take on intelligent theory that dictates how they will respond when faced with academic struggles (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). (I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge, as indicated by Goodman (2018), that my support of

intelligent theory does not in any way excuse or ignore the structural factors that impede students' academic efforts and that we must work towards eradicating and replacing these unjust systemic factors with a more student-focused, culturally-informed approach.)

Science has found that students are able to think differently about themselves and their ability to learn, which means that students who have historically struggled academically or behaviorally are able to change these patterns with the proper support and guidance. It also means that they can overcome any internalized inferiority they may have embraced due to the negative messages and experiences they have received while in school. When thinking about students who have been traumatized, this seemingly becomes complicated and compromised by their trauma, which gives credence to the importance of knowing how trauma impacts learning and how to most effectively engage and support these students (Hertel & Johnson, 2013; & Morland, Birman, Dunn, Adkins, & Gardner, 2013).

Impact of Trauma on Learning

A review of the literature shows that researchers have taken a vested interest in the impact that trauma has on learning (Duplechain, Reigner, & Packard, 2008; Sitler, 2009; Van Thompson & Schwartz, 2014). This interest has taken various forms ranging from how trauma impacts learning for young men of color (Van Thompson & Schwartz, 2014) to ethnically diverse community college students (Edman, Watson, & Patron, 2016) to reading achievement (Duplechain, Reigner, & Packard, 2008; & Delaney-Black, Covington, Ondersma, Nordstrom-Klee, Templin, Ager, Janisse, & Sokol, 2002). Despite the focus taken, the literature makes one thing abundantly clear: trauma can, and usually does, have a significant impact on students' physical and mental health and ability to learn, as well as on their overall development (Buxton-McClendon, 2013; Carter, 2013; Fleischman, 2013; & National Child Traumatic Stress Network,

2018). (Please note that when I refer to “learning” I do so in the “accepted schooling sense” since many trauma-exposed adolescents develop adaptive learning skills that foster survival, coping, and analytical thinking but that are not embraced by schools (Bernard, & Newell, 2013; Hertel & Johnson, 2013; Rohde-Collins, 2013; & Wiebler, 2013).)

Moritz-Saladino (2017) further posits that several decades worth of research has demonstrated that one’s emotional state has the potential to impact the extent that they can learn and remember information. Scientifically speaking, “[w]hen under stress or anxiety, the brain blocks access to higher processing and stops forming new connections, making it difficult or impossible to learn” (Moritz-Saladino, 2017, para. 11). When considering students who have experienced traumatic experiences, studies conducted by the Treatment and Services Adaptation Center (2018) have also confirmed that unresolved trauma has the potential to directly affect how students learn. Along similar lines, research in the areas of psychology and neurobiology have found a correlation between trauma and how students learn and behave (Traumatic Stress Institute, 2006). As concluded by the Traumatic Stress Institute, (2006) a child who has experienced trauma certainly can experience difficulties learning and demonstrating (once again, as defined and accepted by schools) appropriate behavior.

While it is important to understand that there is in fact a correlation between trauma and learning, it is similarly important to understand the intricacies of this relationship. According to Bloom (1999), being exposed to trauma has an impact on every aspect of our being, including how we think, learn, and remember, as well as on how we make sense of ourselves, others, and the world around us. Some of the areas where trauma impacts learning includes “language, communication, and problem-solving skills; understanding cause-and-effect relationships; executive functioning; regulating emotions; and peer and teacher relationships” (Traumatic

Stress Institute, 2006, p. 59). The Traumatic Stress Institute (2006) also found that, since there is a connection between trauma and being impulsive and aggressive, students who have experienced trauma may find it harder to concentrate, sit still, and pay attention to lessons – in other words, behaviors that tend to get students into trouble while in school.

The findings by the Traumatic Stress Institute (2006) have been confirmed by many organizations with a specific focus on the impact that trauma has on student learning, including the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (2018) and the Treatment and Services Adaptation Center (2018), as well as by individual researchers, such as Blaustein (2013), Goodman (2018), Hertel and Johnson (2013), Moritz-Saladino (2017), Perry and Szalavitz (2006), Rios (2011), van der Kolk (2014), and Wiebler (2013). Specifically, the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (2018) found that:

Learning to read, write, take part in a discussion, and solve mathematical problems rests on many underlying foundations—organization, comprehension, memory, the ability to produce work, engagement in learning, and trust. Another prerequisite for achieving classroom competency is the ability to self-regulate attention, emotions, and behavior. Not surprisingly, trauma resulting from overwhelming experiences has the power to disturb a student’s development of these foundations for learning. (p. 2)

Similarly, the Treatment and Services Adaptation Center (2018) has found that students who have been exposed to violence and complex trauma get lower grades, graduate at lower rates, and are more likely to be unemployed, live in poverty, and become pregnant as teenagers when compared to students who have not experienced trauma.

The Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (2018), Treatment and Services Adaptation Center (2018), and National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2018) all found that trauma has

the potential to negatively impact a child's language and communication development, disrupt their ability to develop an intact sense of self, prevent them from fully focusing on classroom assignments and protocol, and interrupt how well they are able to retain lessons and organize what they know. Furthermore, trauma also is likely to interrupt a student's ability to engage in creative play, which has been proven to be one of the methods children employ when attempting to cope with difficulties in their lives (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, 2018).

While this section has looked predominately at the impact that trauma has on students' ability to learn, it bears emphasizing that trauma also impacts students' ability to function in other areas of their school life. These areas include developing relationships with school personnel and classmates and following rules, as well as on their attendance and punctuality.

Impact of Trauma on Social Emotional Development

For students who have been traumatized and those who find themselves affected by practices stemming from the StPP, schools "can feel like a battleground in which their assumptions of the world as a dangerous place sabotage their ability to remain calm and regulate their behavior in the classroom" (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, 2018, p. 4). A variation of this point was made repeatedly in the literature (Duncan-Andrade, 2011; Ginwright, 2010; Gross, 2017; Rios, 2011; & Treatment and Services Adaptation Center, 2018). Regrettably, while such students often develop coping skills that allow them to feel as if they are safe and have control, these tend to be behaviors that get them into trouble while in school and goes back to the stress response options of freeze, flight, or fight discussed earlier. When this happens, students are further traumatized, develop an even more established negative view of themselves, and become (more) disconnected from their schooling process (Laura, 2014).

Understandably concerned with their overall well-being given the horrific experiences they have had and may still be experiencing, when in school, students who have been traumatized find it difficult to trust school personnel and/or their classmates (Kilmer, Gil-Rivas, & Hardy, 2013). It has been documented that when students have experienced trauma and have unhealthy relationships with the adults they interact with outside of school this may negatively impact their ability to develop healthy relationships with the adults they encounter in school, as well as with their classmates (Goodman, 2018; Rossen & Hull, 2013; Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, 2018; & van der Kolk, 2014). It has also been found that when young people are exposed to trauma, it can negatively impact how they interact with other people and their efforts to control their emotions (Bernard & Newll, 2013; Hertel & Johnson, 2013; Perry and Szalavitz; & Treatment and Adaptation Center, 2018). This can then cause them to engage in behaviors deemed problematic by schools and may result in them missing out on important learning opportunities through the act of being suspended or expelled (Krezmien, Leone, & Wilson, 2014). Based on this information, we should seriously question whether trauma-exposed students can succeed when finding themselves in schools implementing zero tolerance policies.

Many researchers, in discussing how schools are unsuccessful in their efforts to teach trauma-exposed students, posit that the lack of adequate mental health information and available resources plays a part in schools being unable to appropriately support students who have been traumatized (Blaustein, 2013; Gross, 2017). Therefore, it begs contemplating and exploring whether our educational system is adequately making space to account for the academic experiences of students who have not only experienced trauma, but who also bring that unprocessed trauma with them into classroom spaces. Furthermore, it bears exploring what can be done to and for such students when they encounter trauma while in school. Having looked at

the impact that trauma has on students' learning and social emotional development, we now turn to the implications for teachers and schools.

Role of Educators and Schools

Due to the significant ways that trauma impacts student learning, research reveals the important role educators can play in supporting students who have been exposed to trauma (Burgess & Phifer, 2013; Devine, 2013; Fleischman, 2013; & Wingfield & Craft, 2013). This reality becomes crucial since, given the evidence-based ways in which trauma has an impact on learning and the harsh disciplinary practices employed by schools, it is reasonable to conclude that school-based settings can be difficult and scary places for students who have been traumatized. Regarding students who enter classroom spaces having experienced trauma, as previously indicated, it has been argued that navigating schools and their educational endeavors is challenging. This is in part due to school personnel not always being aware of what has happened to these students and the impact their traumatic experiences have had on them. This lack of awareness then prevents educators from being able to provide appropriate support to such students. (It should be noted that this potentially speaks to a systemic school issue and may warrant some type of collaborative process with school social workers/counselors to ensure that this information is made available to classroom teachers/other school personnel.) Since students who have experienced trauma during their formative years are less likely to be trusting, Gross (2017) argues this is an essential component of learning and something that educators must work to develop with their trauma-exposed students. And this will be difficult to do if school personnel are not aware of trauma's impact on students and/or excessively punish students.

As highlighted when discussing incremental theory, research has shown that as students age, they tend to change their beliefs regarding their ability to learn and the impact that trauma

has on them (Benassi, Overson, & Hakala, 2014; & Yeager and Dweck, 2012). This fact allows teachers to play an important role in ensuring that students ultimately come to believe that they are capable of being high achievers and learners and that they do not always have to be defined or negatively impacted by their traumatic past. Yeager and Dweck (2012) also found that when students are made aware of the possibilities for them to change and improve over time, they are more likely to engage in the efforts needed to alter and redirect their behaviors.

In order to make this happen, Rios (2011) argues that adolescents require a youth support complex where they find sincere encouragement and are taught how to avoid making the mistakes that get them into trouble. They also need access to role models, mentors, positive programming and resources, and healthy interactions with people who truly believe in them. When provided with a space where they can be properly supported and authentically believe they can change their situation, students' efforts to become more invested in their academics and personal responsibility increases, which leads to a transformative experience (Rios, 2011). That is, such students need the opposite of zero tolerance policies, excessive disciplining, and reprimanding while in school. This underscores the need for educators to start seeing students through a different lens and create a culture that is informed by students' interests, realities, and experiences (Duncan-Andrade, 2009; Ginwright, 2010; Gross, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1995; & Rios, 2011). Stated differently, schools must embrace a change to their culture, which should be guided by the interests and needs of students (Goodman, 2018; Gross, 2017; & Morris, 2016).

Benassi, Overson, and Hakala (2014) posit that in order to be successful in this regard, teachers must first come to realize that how students believe they learn is based on their prior experiences. With this information in hand, teachers can then work with students in assisting them to decide how to confront beliefs that are negative in nature and replace them with ones

that will encourage a belief in their ability to change for the better. Benassi, Overson, and Hakala (2014) have even gone as far as to assert that really knowing from where student behaviors stem is the primary step needed to engage in successful teaching. As also articulated by researchers at Deans for Impact (2015), a national nonprofit organization that seeks to improve how educators are prepared to teach and how current teachers engage in teaching, it is important that teachers understand students show increased motivation if they believe that their intelligence and skills can get better if they work at it. And, unsurprisingly, this is easier to accomplish when students find themselves in classrooms and schools that are affirming and feel safe (Laura, 2014).

While it may be taken for granted that schools and classrooms are inherently inviting and stress-free places for students, the reality is that we do not know on the surface what students may find triggering (Moritz-Saladino, 2017). This point underscores the importance of teachers knowing their students on more than just a superficial level to understand what it is that will trigger them (Burgess & Phifer, 2013). While educators may be sincere in their efforts to do this, because behaviors associated with having experienced trauma can come across as students being timid, lazy, or oppositional and confrontational, it becomes a common practice to misdiagnose these behaviors as not related to trauma – especially in schools that harshly punish even the slightest behavioral issue (Fleischman, 2013; Carter, 2013; & Traumatic Stress Institute, 2006). These students then find themselves in an escalating cycle of getting into trouble and becoming less inclined to engage academically, which usually ends with them losing the desire to remain attached to their schooling process (Ristuccia, 2013) and embracing the negative view of the self-fulfilling prophecy. This has then allowed educators to disregard such students because of their behaviors, which has created a school culture where students have been dehumanized and school personnel ultimately determine which students are deserving of learning.

Thankfully, many scholars and organizations have developed suggestions to assist schools to better support students who have experienced trauma. Included as part of their suggestions are schools developing partnerships with mental health workers in order to provide services for students and their families, as well as consultation to staff; beginning the school day offering students non-academic courses, such as yoga, dance, and music; and teachers developing sincere and caring relationships with students (Hutchinson, 2019; Traumatic Stress Institute, 2006; & van der Kolk, 2014). They also suggest that schools reconsider how they approach disciplining students, while considering the role played by trauma and other mental health issues (Hertel & Johnson, 2013). This last point certainly calls into question the rationale behind zero tolerance approaches to discipline in best serving the interests of students with a history of trauma.

In continuing to think about the ways that educators can better support students who suffer from unresolved trauma, another way to increase the chances of this happening is by ensuring that more information about trauma is made readily available to them (Blaustein, 2013). Realizing the role that trauma plays in students' academic and behavioral efforts decreases the chances of educators mislabeling why some students are struggling academically, social-emotionally, and/or behaviorally (Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative, 2018). Yeager and Dweck (2012) also remind us that encouraging students to embrace an incremental view regarding their ability to learn and redirect their behaviors can go a long way in offsetting trauma's impact in their lives. This magnifies the role that educators can – and, I argue, should – play in helping students to see themselves in a different, and healthier, light, which can help them to engage in the transformative process needed to ultimately reach their potential.

There is more than enough evidence to comfortably state that an overwhelming number of our students have either experienced trauma or are currently experiencing trauma. The data also makes clear that trauma has a significant – and usually adverse – impact on students’ learning and behavioral efforts and that zero tolerance approaches to discipline only seem to make things worse for trauma-exposed students. Such facts warrant exploring the intersection of these three realities.

Trauma, Learning, & Zero Tolerance Policies

While not all students who have experienced trauma find themselves in schools that implement zero tolerance disciplinary measures, all students who find themselves in such schools do run the risk of being (further) traumatized. As this chapter has made clear, students are affected by what they encounter and experience. With that in mind, if students are surrounded by supportive adults and caregivers, consistently praised, and afforded opportunities to learn from their mistakes in constructive and affirming ways, they are then placed in a learning environment that increases their chances of reaching their potential (Adelman & Taylor, 2013). However, if this is not the case, students find themselves in situations where their learning is potentially disrupted, which has significant consequences for their academic endeavors and, along with it, their future. This point was perfectly captured by Noguera (2003) when he asserts:

Often, it is the needs of students and the inability of schools to meet those needs that causes them to be disciplined. Children who are behind academically... often engage in disruptive behavior, either out of frustration or embarrassment. Likewise, children who suffer from abuse or neglect, and children who are harassed by their peers because they are different, are sometimes more likely to act out and get into trouble. Too often, schools react to the behavior of such children while failing to respond to their unmet needs or the

factors responsible for their problematic behavior. In so doing, they contribute to the marginalization of such students, often pushing them out of school altogether, while ignoring the issues that actually cause the problematic behavior. (Pg. 342)

To summarize, we may be doing harm to our students due to our own failings as educators and educational institutions instead of putting them in the best position to succeed.

By all accounts, zero tolerance policies have given birth to excessive and punitive disciplinary practices, which are in direct conflict with what the research tells us students – and especially trauma-exposed students – need to be successful. Such policies, which brings with it increased suspension and expulsion rates and interactions with the criminal legal system, also send problematic messages to students who find themselves in these schools. This is especially true for formerly incarcerated adolescents who find themselves in schools that mimic the carceral institutions from which they were released. These messages include that students are not to be trusted, are unable to control themselves, and have criminal tendencies. Undeniably, such messages have a negative impact on students and seems to fall in line with the consequences of being exposed to complex trauma. Practically speaking, they also decrease the chances of students believing any positive messages from their teachers, since what they witness from, and how they are being treated by, the school at large would conflict with what they are being told. This then makes it challenging for such students to engage in the incremental theory of learning that has been proven to be effective in helping students to alter how they see themselves and their ability to learn and behave. It also seems like it would make it difficult to engage in the trust needed to develop meaningful relationships with school personnel, which is another important component to effective learning. So, if zero tolerance policies are seemingly traumatizing students and actively working against what research has told us is most effective in getting

students to learn, does it not beg the question: Why has it become and continues to be prevalent in so many schools?

Summary

The author and motivational speaker Dr. Felice Leonardo Buscaglia once remarked that “change is the end result of all true learning.” If students who enter our classrooms traumatized and/or find themselves ensnared in unhealthy zero tolerance approaches to discipline are ever going to engage in true learning, certain changes must be made. One of these changes includes teachers being better prepared to acknowledge and effectively address symptoms of trauma demonstrated by their students. Another change is finding ways to address student behaviors in a manner not associated with zero tolerance policies. Ultimately, schools should be places where students feel comfortable, safe, cared for and about, and where they believe they can reach their potential to pursue and achieve their dreams. Unfortunately, as demonstrated throughout this chapter – as well as in what I have encountered both from my personal experiences as a student and educator and from what was learned from this study’s participants – this is often not the case for far too many students.

This chapter has made a compelling argument to reconsider some of the policies that have been implemented throughout our school system when it comes to how student behaviors are addressed/criminalized. It also made clear the ways that teachers are ill-prepared to engage students who have had challenging lives, while also providing suggestions as to how this can be changed for the better. The proverbial ball is ultimately in the proverbial court of the adults who purport to have students’ best interest in mind to engage in the introspection needed to see where they stand on this issue. In doing so, may we remember that we can choose to either enhance students’ trauma or be part of the process in helping them to overcome their trauma. To me, the

choice is clear and the decision an easy one. Given that nothing no less important than the lives of our nation's children and adolescents hang in the balance, schools and educational policies need to ensure that all our students are treated as the invaluable resource that they are. It is my hope time will prove that those of us in position to enact changes to our educational system agree to act swiftly and decisively in a manner that benefits all students – and especially those who have been traumatized. If not, in thinking of the study that follows, I am left to wonder what hope exists for students who enter schools and classroom spaces with the very real and terrifying trauma associated with having been incarcerated...

“I feel people go to school for different reasons... So it’s like a lot of things that happen in school affect your relationship and make you not want to go.”

-Carl

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY & METHOD

Because of the marginalized status of my participants, it was important that I designed a study that was intentional in affirming, centering, and highlighting their experiences from their own unique perspectives. Therefore, I sought to honor hooks’ (1989) call to include the experiences of participants who have been silenced in prior research endeavors. I also sought to follow the wisdom espoused by Cammarota and Fine (2008), who assert that members of marginalized groups have important knowledge to share regarding social injustices from which the rest of society can learn.

As such, a study that focused on the experiences of formerly incarcerated adolescents who are currently enrolled in schools in the community was warranted. This is because such a study allows us to learn firsthand from those individuals most impacted by our educational policies - that is, once again, students - who can assist educational stakeholders in our efforts to develop and implement effective trauma-informed practices. Based on the findings from my study, it is my hope that the current educational landscape from teacher education programs to classrooms reverse course and truly begin to embrace and implement pedagogical philosophies and practices that take into account the needs of trauma-exposed students with carceral histories in order to best support them in reaching their academic potential.

Central Questions

My study was guided by the following two research questions:

- 1) In what ways does carceral trauma impact the academic experiences of formerly incarcerated adolescents?
- 2) What factors do formerly incarcerated adolescents say help mitigate the effects of carceral trauma on their learning and overall schooling experiences?

The first research question made an effort to determine to what extent, if any, does carceral exposure interfere with the efforts of participants to pursue and reach their academic goals. The second research question allows the audience an opportunity to learn firsthand from the participants what they need to successfully navigate what we learn from the first central question. Additionally, the second question allows an opportunity for all adult stakeholders to be provided with the information needed to develop and implement pedagogical practices to effectively support these students. Furthermore, it also invites us to sincerely consider the harm being done to our young people when we incarcerate them and expose them to discipline practices while in school that are an extension of the criminal legal system. This is important in a society that continues to espouse the virtues of meritocracy. This is because it becomes difficult to embrace the idea that everyone can equally succeed if we are being told directly by students that we are implementing practices in schools that either do not best support them or that actively become barriers in their efforts to reach their academic potential. Both research questions also intentionally include the word carceral in order to capture the reality that the experiences of being incarcerated is not only limited to being detained but includes every step of the process from the arrest to navigating one's return to the community.

Research Design Overview

As someone with an undergraduate degree in Elementary Education and a master's degree in Social Work, both disciplines inform my approach to research. In thinking of the

theoretical framework that guided this study, what made the most sense was the Ecological Perspective/Person-in-Environment tenet at the core of the Social Work profession. Both approaches support the notion that we are all tied to and impacted by our surroundings and one another (Suppes & Wells, 2018). So, we cannot see formerly incarcerated students as independent from their home lives, their communities, the schools they attend, the people with whom they interact, and their carceral experience if we are truly going to understand them, what they have been through/are still going through, and how to best support them.

I also incorporated Learning Theory to assist in understanding the way that trauma impacted participants' to better conceptualize and provide context to their responses. Some of the main components of Learning Theory include that students' prior knowledge can either support or become barriers to their learning, their level of motivation also plays a role in their learning process, and that their current developmental level interacts with how an educational climate is structured to determine how they learn (Eberly Center, 2016). Utilizing Learning Theory ensured that my study did not make assumptions about the participants regarding how they understood and processed information, was structured in a way that engaged the participants, and framed questions and all documents in a manner that was accessible.

This study was also guided by a trauma-informed care approach so that it did not further traumatize participants. According to SAMHSA (2014), there are six principles to trauma-informed care: safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support and mutual self-help; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; & cultural, historical, and gender issues. Prior to embarking on this study, I reflected on these principles and intentionally structured it in a way that adhered to them, which allowed me to create a study that was affirming for participants. To that end, the third chapter of this dissertation discusses the research

methodology and method that will be used for the study. Specifically, it is divided into the following sections: research design, data collection, and data analysis.

Research Design

In thinking of my study's research design, I decided to conduct a transcendental phenomenological qualitative study. While conducting this study, the primary means by which I collected data was through interviews. I met with each participant individually at the outset of the study. I also met with participants at the end of the study when engaging in member checking, but because of distance and time, this took place remotely. I also conducted two different focus groups where participants were able to meet, although none of the participants participated in both groups. While a phenomenological study encourages the use of any material, such as journal entries, spoken word performances/poems, music, or artwork, that can help to make sense of the phenomenon being studied, while invited to do so, none of the participants opted to share any such materials. In an effort to ensure that my data analysis stood up to scrutiny, it was well organized so that others are able to determine how I drew my conclusions, which hopefully increases the reliability and validity of the study.

Please note that because this study is interested in how participants make sense of their experience as students while enrolled in schools subsequent to their reentry, it neither included the interviewing of participants' guardians/teachers nor of staff they currently work with in any other capacity. This study also did not include any observations as my focus was on how the participants articulated experiencing the phenomenon in question, not on what I might have observed while at their schools/in their classrooms or how others perceived the participants to have been impacted.

Research Methodology

Rossman and Rallis (2012) tell us that research methodology is the organized way researchers go about trying to make sense of and resolve an issue. It is the systematic process by which researchers plan the steps that will be taken to obtain the information they seek when they set out to study and ultimately explain the phenomenon they are researching. Stated matter-of-factly, even the most skilled researcher will be doomed for failure if they do not consider the best approach to take prior to engaging in research. That is, one's research methodology positions them to most effectively approach whatever they are trying to make sense of based on, among other things, the issue being studied, the population included in the study, and the desired outcome (Rossman & Rollis, 2012).

I would now like to quickly define both quantitative and qualitative research as they were the two different methods that I found myself debating to implement for my study. According to Babbie (2010), quantitative research seeks to objectively measure the statistical or numerical analysis of data and thereafter generalizes the findings across a group of people or to help explain a phenomenon; while qualitative research tends to focus on a specific phenomenon in its natural state (Silverman, 2011). Green (2014), in explaining her Double-Dutch methodology approach to research, states that qualitative research is about much more than what participants present on the surface, it is about the researcher committing oneself to truly trying to understand complex human interactions within a particular context.

Based on the goal of my study, it made the most sense to conduct a qualitative research study. As Denzin and Lincoln (1994) tell us, researchers who utilize a qualitative methodology “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (p. 2). Qualitative researchers also seek to understand how people have come to make meaning of their lived experiences (Merriam, 1998).

This decision is also aided by the belief that conducting a qualitative study invites participants to leverage their experiences, insight, and knowledge to contribute to scholarly research to ultimately change the world for the better (Creswell, 2013).

It is also important to note that, as asserted by Barone (2009), in qualitative research opportunities are created for marginalized individuals to articulate their experiences from their own perspectives, especially to ensure that their narratives can be shared with others. Therefore, it was paramount that I truly listened to what participants shared and that I was focused on learning about their actual experiences instead of looking for facts. Finally, if I was sincere about finding out what it is that trauma-exposed, formerly incarcerated adolescents need to succeed academically, it was imperative that my analysis centered the experiences of the very people who I was seeking to learn from and with (Irizarry, 2011; Lumby, 2012).

Research method

As previously shared, I chose to conduct a transcendental phenomenological research study. Rossman and Rallis (2012) inform us that people who engage in phenomenological research focus on the in-depth meaning of a specific aspect of an experience to be able to reveal the true meaning of that experience. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further assert that the goal of a phenomenologist is to capture the basic structure of an experience. While there are two main types of phenomenological approaches, hermeneutical and transcendental, the rationale in choosing a transcendental phenomenology stemmed from it being based on the participants' actual descriptions to develop an understanding of their experiences without allowing the researcher to put their own spin on it (Hall, Chai, & Albrecht, 2016).

Another defining feature of a phenomenological study is that it is intended to have a small sample size. Both Sauro (2015) and Creswell (2013) suggest a sample size of anywhere

from five to twenty-five participants, while Morse (1994) simply recommends at least six participants. Furthermore, Waters (2017) states that any way a participant chooses to describe their lived experiences can be used during a phenomenological study as a means in which to collect data, including through interviews, written self-reports, or aesthetic/artistic expressions.

Since a phenomenological study is committed to focusing on a phenomenon in order to be able to really capture and understand it, the data that results from this intentional focus can prove to be rich and extremely detailed. Furthermore, since it remains uncommon to hear about the perspectives of the population included in this study, I very much saw the value in focusing on a few people's point of view. By shedding light on this phenomenon via highlighting the experiences of a few participants I believe an opportunity has been created where readers of the study are provided with the unique opportunity to thoroughly understand this underrepresented phenomenon from the people most impacted by it. This hopefully increases the chances of more awareness being brought to this issue and, as a result, sincere efforts will be made to address and rectify it. At a minimum, the study undoubtedly allowed participants to tell their story and, as shared in the first chapter, there is significant value in doing this! Finally, given the limited number of participants, this made it easier to engage in member checking – albeit electronically – and for the participants to hold me accountable to their lived experiences, which, decreased the chances of my assumptions or misperceptions from making their way into the findings.

Research setting

While this study took place at two different locations in Western Massachusetts, both locations were part of the same organization that works with formerly incarcerated adolescents in providing them with the services they need subsequent to their reentry. Additionally, this agency is partnered with the Massachusetts Department of Youth Services (DYS), which is a state

agency that operates juvenile justice services. It is important to note that the participants who informed this study were DYS participants and came from one agency. However, there was not any actual partnership between this study and DYS. Please note that for confidentiality purposes, I am intentionally not providing the name of this agency.

Data Collection

Population

The population for this study was comprised of seven adolescents who were previously detained anywhere from two days to, when combined, over two years and have returned to being students in some capacity, ranging from traditional schools to a General Educational Development (GED) program. Additionally, the age range for the participants was 14-19. All participants also identified as being of color (Black and Latine), financially low-income, and straight, while four of them indicated they have been diagnosed with a learning disability. Two identified as females and five as males. It should also be noted that since this study explored instances of trauma, all of the participants demonstrated being of “sound” mental health, as evidenced by either current participation in mental health treatment or the lack of a DSM-V diagnosis.

Recruitment

Participants for this study were recruited through the assistance of one of my committee members, Dr. Michael Krezmien, and a classmate, Megan Grant. Both Dr. Krezmien and Megan connected me with the same colleague, “Sam,” who works with formerly incarcerated adolescents. In speaking with “Sam,” I shared with them my study’s purpose, the various consent forms, both the individual and focus group questions, my recruitment letter, and my IRB approval form. After receiving “Sam’s” approval to conduct my study with their participants,

staff members who work within the agency recruited participants who met the study's criteria on my behalf. Also, potential participants received the recruitment flyer detailing basic information about the study and my contact information should they have wanted to speak with me before agreeing to participate in the study, which none chose to do. (See Appendix A.) Since six out of the seven participants were minors, the recruitment flyer was also given to their guardians. While not utilized, the flyer also invited interested participants to pass along information about the study to people they knew who both met the criteria and might be interested in participating. This was done in an attempt to engage in snowballing recruitment.

Interviews

Denzin and Lincoln (1994) tell us that conducting interviews is frequently utilized in qualitative research so it should come as no surprise that the bulk of my data collection stemmed from interviews. It is important to note that, prior to this study, I had a wealth of experience conducting interviews from my time as a practicing social worker, where I conducted hundreds of interviews – many of which focused on extremely sensitive material. As a result of my professional experience, I demonstrated the temperament and skillset needed to effectively navigate interviewing participants about the trauma they have experienced in their lives. Included as part of this skillset was my ability to create an inviting space where it was made clear to participants that they only needed to answer the questions they felt comfortable answering and that we were able to go at whatever pace they felt most comfortable. I also reminded participants that every effort was going to be made to keep their responses confidential through using pseudonyms when referring to/identifying them. My experience in interviewing also afforded me the opportunity to develop questions that guided participants in a manner that allowed them to

feel safe and that they were in charge, while – and I do not intend to come across as being manipulative – ultimately obtaining the information I sought.

Individual interviews

For this study, I conducted two forms of interviews: individual and focus group. Conducting initial individual interviews allowed participants to begin developing a relationship with me. It also introduced them to the study in a way that enabled them to ask any questions they had about the study and to be honest and open when sharing their responses. Utilizing individual interviews also allowed for participants to become familiarized with the questions in order to be able to reflect upon them prior to their participation in the focus group and the final individual interview/member checking process.

Focus group interviews

Conducting focus groups created an environment where participants felt supported by the fact that they were recounting their experiences in a space where others were able to relate to what they had to endure and still are navigating. I believe this type of interviewing approach lent itself to participants being more likely to answer in ways that they may not have been comfortable doing during their initial individual interview. The focus groups also generated a thorough and rich discourse influenced by each participant being reminded of experiences they may have forgotten about during their individual interview upon hearing another participant sharing it. I also made it a point to inform participants in the focus group to honor the practice of confidentiality, while also establishing group norms that helped to create and maintain the safest space possible for participants to be as open and honest as they were.

Interview protocol

First and foremost, it is important to note that the initial interviews and focus groups were conducted in person to ensure they were inherently interactive (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). The protocol for conducting the interviews began with me introducing myself, reminding participants of the purpose of the study, and inviting participants to ask any questions they had. In order to abide by IRB protocol, I then provided participants with the appropriate consent form, which I thoroughly reviewed, for them to sign – and, as a reminder, for the six minors, their guardians were given a consent form to sign – which demonstrated that I was honoring their agency. (See Appendices B-E.) I then conducted the interviews. The initial individual interview consisted of forty-five core questions and the focus group interview consisted of twenty-eight core questions – each of these interviews consisted of the same set of standard questions and the only difference between the two sets of questions was that the initial individual interview had questions that inquired about participants’ social division markers. (See Appendices F & G). The initial individual interviews lasted between forty to sixty minutes, while the focus groups took ninety minutes. I also conducted an individual interview remotely at the end of the study to allow participants to engage in member-checking and provide final comments, each of which lasted between twenty-thirty minutes. I also recorded the interviews with participants’ consent and transcribed the recordings.

It warrants highlighting that I developed my questions to be asked in a semi-structured manner. This was based on my belief that each interview was going to be unique and free-flowing, which allowed me to engage in more of a discourse with participants than a rote question and answer process (Daly, 2007). Utilizing a semi-structured interviewing approach also enabled me to ask follow-up questions so that I got past superficial responses in order to truly understand the participants’ experiences and insight (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Whenever

follow-up questions arose, I was sure to document them and when pertinent to the overall goal of the study, I also asked them to the other participants. Once the interview questions were asked and answered, I once again invited participants to ask any questions they had, reminded them of next steps, and made sure they had my contact information should they needed to reach out to me before I followed-up with them. Each interview ended with me thanking them for their time and willingness to share their experiences and knowledge with me.

Confidentiality & storage/organization management

Since the interviews were audiotaped, the risk for a breach of confidentiality certainly existed. Therefore, the following storage and organization procedures were taken to protect the confidentiality of study records. First and foremost, I was the only person listening to and transcribing the recording of the interviews. I also did not use the participants' actual names, schools, or districts. Participants also chose their personal pseudonym, which was then used to identify all the information that derived from this study. The key that told me which pseudonym goes with each participant was kept in a locked drawer located in my University-appointed office where I was the only person with access. When the study was finished, I destroyed the key. All electronic files containing identifiable information was stored in BOX, which is a secure, password-protected website that allows the storage of files. I was the only person with access to the password. Once my dissertation is completed, the recordings will be deleted.

As previously indicated, participants – as well as guardians, for the participants who were minors – were provided with a consent form to sign that I explained to them, which provided details of the study, and informed them that they were allowed to withdraw from the study at any point without facing consequences. In my attempt to honor the experiences of my participants, all the information that derived from the study was shared with them first to both confirm that it

was accurate and that they were comfortable with me sharing it before I did so. Finally, I also refrained from even beginning the study until receiving University IRB approval.

Ethical considerations

In thinking of ethical considerations, please note that as a mandated reporter, and so as to be in accordance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act, while not necessary, had any of the participants shared with me that they were the victim of a sexual assault stemming from their incarceration, I would have reported the incident to the appropriate authorities as well as to the facility where the participant(s) was/were incarcerated.

Given that this study focused on trauma experienced while incarcerated, it was quite possible that by participating in this study participants may have experienced risks related to their psychological well-being. While thankfully not the case, I nevertheless wanted to point out that as a former a mental health clinician I am professionally trained and equipped to have adequately addressed any distress participants may have demonstrated during the course of the interview process. I also provided participants with the contact information for various 24/7 crisis hotlines and local facilities to turn to for support should they have experienced distress as a result of partaking in this study. (See Appendix H.)

The possibility also existed that participants would have experienced risks related to their social well-being if others found out that they were formerly incarcerated due to participating in this study. Since all the interviews were conducted at the same agency where participants were already enrolled and known to have prior criminal legal system involvement and their identities have been kept confidential, all efforts were taken to minimize this risk.

Data Analysis

In my efforts to honor the lived experiences of the study's participants, it was important that I engaged in an analysis of the data that was coherent, logical, and replicable. Therefore, it was essential that I followed a systematic data analysis process. In my efforts to do so, I conducted a thematic analysis, which allowed me to convey the data in a way that most thoughtfully, accurately, and precisely captured the goal of this study. This is because a thematic analysis includes a thorough process of inductive and deductive procedures that help to identify and examine themes that derive from textual data based on evaluating, interpreting, and synthesizing information (Alhojailan, 2012). To assist me in this process, I decided to utilize a systemic set of six phases, which follows.

Phase 1: Familiarizing myself with the data. In order to become familiar with the data, I personally transcribed all the interviews conducted during the study. Then I read over the transcribed interviews five separate times over the course of a week to allow me an opportunity to thoroughly reflect upon the data. In so doing, I asked myself questions intended to help me start making sense of the data, including, "What are the participants saying? What are they not saying? Why do they believe what they are saying is important?" The process of transcribing the interviews, repeatedly reading them, and asking myself questions allowed me to begin seeing what preliminary patterns, codes, and themes were emerging. Throughout this process, I documented in a data analysis journal these potential patterns, codes, and themes.

Phase 2: Generating initial codes: During this phase, I began the process of determining initial codes to assign to the data. Since the initial coding process creates an opportunity for a more detailed analysis later on and is not intended to be linear, I approached this process knowing that it would take multiple attempts to adequately code the data; therefore, I continued returning to the data until I was satisfied with the selected codes (Alhojailan, 2012). I was also

mindful to explore past superficial meanings of the data and delve deeper in my efforts to fully capture what it is participants meant with the information they shared during their interviews. To aid in this process, my initial coding efforts included combining data, removing data, and creating subcategories within the data. These efforts were done to assist me in organizing the data, while also allowing other questions to emerge that helped me to better understand the data as I moved forward with the analysis process.

Phase 3: Searching for themes: The third step in the data analysis saw me beginning to identify themes that emerged, which derived from the codes identified in the second phase. In differentiating between codes and themes, I kept in mind that themes are phrases or sentences that start to explain what the data was telling me (Saldana, 2009). Additionally, themes consist of ideas and descriptions within a specific data set that can be used to help explain experiences, comments, and implications for the larger community (Saldana, 2009). During this phase, I began to consider any relationships that were forming between the codes and themes, as well as any differences between the themes themselves. During this step, I also sought to determine what was missing from the data.

Phase 4: Reviewing themes: During this phase, I searched for data that either supported or refuted the study's proposed theory. This allowed me to further expand upon or revise the selected themes. This was done by determining if any patterns started to emerge that coherently told a story about the collected data. Since clear patterns did in fact emerge, I knew that I selected the correct themes and did not misinterpret the data during the earlier phases of the data analysis process. This meant that there was no need for me to go back to ensure that new ones emerged that accurately captured the experiences of the participants. Ultimately, the

reviewing of themes allowed for the development of an accurate portrayal of the participants' experiences, how the data fit together, and what story the collected data told (Alhojailan, 2012).

Phase 5: Defining and naming themes: During this step, I officially identified the core themes that emerged from the data and named them. Thereafter, I defined and explained what each theme consisted of in a manner that indicated its significance and importance based on the experiences of the participants. I also explained how the core themes related to the entire data set and overall study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Phase 6: Producing the report: This final phase is intended to present the data as a coherent story that allows the reader to be convinced of the validity and merit of the data analysis. As my final report should support my research questions, I was sure to demonstrate how they helped to answer the two central research questions. To aide in this effort, during this step I identified direct quotes from the participants that addressed my research questions, which are appropriately inserted throughout the Findings chapter. Also, to increase the authenticity of the findings, I engaged in member checking to confirm with participants that the study's findings accurately captured their experiences and what they shared during the interview process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

“I don’t like it, the structure. I don’t know how to explain it, I just don’t like it; it is not for me.”
-Neo, in sharing his thoughts about school

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

The decision to conduct this transcendental phenomenological, qualitative study stemmed from wanting to ensure that formerly incarcerated adolescents who are currently enrolled in educational institutions were given the rare opportunity to speak about their experiences in an academic setting. It was my intent to learn from these experiences with the goal of utilizing the insight offered by participants to inform educators about how to better support this segment of learners. A transcendental phenomenological study intentionally centers the experiences of participants and allows these experiences to be directly conveyed to the audience without the researcher’s perspective impacting the findings (Hall, Chai, & Albrecht, 2016). I supported this research design by engaging in semi-structured individual and focus group interviews, which allowed for themes to emerge from the data that highlighted the struggles and triumphs experienced by participants as they navigate their lived realities as students with carceral histories. By conducting a systemic thematic analysis, the generous and courageous sharing of participants’ real-life experiences helped to explore the study’s two research questions:

- 1) In what ways does carceral trauma impact the academic experiences of formerly incarcerated adolescents?
- 2) What factors do formerly incarcerated adolescents say help mitigate the effects of carceral trauma on their learning and overall schooling experiences?

The findings detailed throughout this chapter seek to answer these two questions.

Through a thorough and structured analysis of participants’ responses, it became clear that despite encountering many hardships prior to their incarceration, while detained, and

subsequent to their release, participants still saw the value of an education and have tremendous insight to offer. Participants spoke powerfully and honestly about the paths their lives took prior to participating in this study and how these experiences inform the knowledge they have to share with educators and other stakeholders claiming to be invested in their well-being. But before discussing the findings, I want to honor my participants by sharing a brief “bio” on each of them.

Participant Profiles

Although possessing many similarities, each participant is unique, and warrants being seen and treated as such, which is why I want to ensure they are introduced first as individuals. Therefore, the following is a brief snapshot of each participant. Note that I am using pseudonyms the participants self-selected and intentionally keeping their profiles to a minimum to protect the confidentiality of this vulnerable set of participants.

Angie: Angie is a 14-year-old, Latine female who is in the 9th grade and attends an alternative high school. While she considers herself to be shy, she takes pride in the fact that her friends consider her to be “cool and funny.” She also has a strong bond with her older sister, as evidenced by Angie telling me that “trying to make [she names her older sister] happy” is important to her.

Carl: Carl is a 17-year-old Black male who attends a traditional high school and is currently in the 11th grade. Carl sees himself as “being chill” and as someone who his friends consider to be “reliable.” He takes pride in having a great relationship with his mother and always broke into a huge smile when speaking about her.

Dennis: Dennis, an 18-year-old Puerto Rican male, attends an alternative high school. He is currently in the 12th grade and is on pace to graduate at the end of the 2019-2020 school year. He describes himself as “very blunt” and shared that his friends see him “as smart and outgoing.”

while the adults who know him describe him as someone who has “a lot of potential.” Making his mother proud, graduating from high school, and staying out of trouble are things he indicated as being important to him.

Kevin: Kevin is a 17-year-old Black male. He is currently enrolled in a general education development (GED) program and hopes to earn his high school equivalency diploma soon.

While describing himself as “smart,” he stated that his friends see him as “nonchalant,” while the adults in his life describe him as a “good person.” He loves being an older brother to his sister and takes pride in working hard to be a positive role model for her.

Kristine: Kristine is a 19-year-old Latine female who is currently a senior at a traditional urban high school. While considering herself to be “outgoing,” she shared that her friends see her as “cool, funny, and smart.” Kristine sees her family as very important to her and is excited to be able to celebrate with them when she graduates in June 2020.

Neo: Neo is a 17-year-old, bi-racial (half Puerto-Rican, half-Black) male. He is currently a junior at a traditional high school. He described himself as “quiet and thoughtful,” while sharing that his peers see him as “somebody that be always thinking.” He enjoys challenging injustices and calling out adults’ hypocritical behaviors, which he admitted, with a sense of pride and frustration, “usually gets me into trouble.”

Prez: Prez is a 16-year-old ninth grade Black male. He attends an alternative high school for, as described on the school’s website, “students who have not thrived in traditional settings.” He considered himself to be “funny” and shared that his friends would describe him as “someone they like chillin’ with.” He takes pride in not giving up despite all the challenges and obstacles he has faced in life and all the adults, including teachers, who never believed in him.

Thematic Analysis Findings

While analyzing the data, the experiences shared by participants related to their carceral and academic realities provided a clear window into the way they understood these experiences and the impact it has/had on them, including academically. While it remains far too common for the stories of Black and Latine students to be ignored in academia (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), this study intentionally centers these voices to demonstrate a level of insight and rawness from which we can all learn. It is also being done to challenge the belief of adolescents – especially Black and Latine youth – with carceral exposure as not having anything positive to contribute to society. In sharing their knowledge, participants spoke powerfully against the policies, practices, and systemic injustices that have created barriers in their academic trajectory and negatively impacted their overall well-being, while providing concrete and practical suggestions to better support them.

In response to the study's first reach question regarding the ways that carceral trauma impacts the academic experiences of formerly incarcerated adolescents, there were two major findings: (1) Institutional Criminalization of Youth Behaviors and (2) Manifestations of Complex Trauma. In answering the study's second research question about the factors expressed by formerly incarcerated adolescents as helping to mitigate carceral trauma in the context of their learning and schooling experiences, there were also two significant findings: (1) Utilizing a School-Wide Trauma-Informed Care Approach and (2) Healthy Student-School Personnel Relationships. Participants also spoke at length regarding the reasons for wanting to receive an education. They similarly demonstrated a great capacity for empathizing with one another during focus group interviews for what they had to endure while navigating their carceral and educational experiences. However, these findings fell outside of the study's research questions.

Also, while there is certainly overlap between the various findings, for the sake of clarity, the findings are discussed in this chapter individually.

A Note on Language

Given that youth, generally, and youth of color, specifically, are silenced by larger society, it is important to me that their voices are heard clearly and authentically. As a result, I have decided to quote participants verbatim. Despite not speaking “perfectly,” their points are clearly made in their own words. Additionally, I refuse to take part in the deficit discourse that devalues the language practices used by urban adolescents. However, when participants used language that is rooted in historically dehumanizing marginalized members of our society, I begin with the word’s first letter and then place a dash (-) followed with “word” (or “words,” if plural) For example, I have chosen to use “n-word” instead of the actual word. This is my attempt to ensure that audience members do not encounter triggering words while engaging with this text, while still honoring participants’ voices. Please note, though, that some of the language might be considered strong language and may still be triggering. While I offer my apologies if this proves to be the case, I will not apologize for the language used by participants and how they speak...

Institutional Criminalization of Youth Behaviors

This section begins by looking at the systemic barriers, with a specific focus on the legal system and school-based policies, participants encounter in their efforts to resume their education subsequent to reentering society. Institutional criminalization of youth behaviors, as I am defining it, captures the way our society has placed adolescents – especially Black and Latine youth – in a perpetually existing marginalized state where they are the targets of racism, white supremacy, and dehumanization, including from systems meant to be nurturing. Whether talking

about school personnel, law enforcement officials, prison staff, or all three, each participant spoke to consistently encountering multiple harassing interactions with one of these institutions that left them feeling humiliated, belittled, and/or angry. The sharing of these experiences consistently broke down into two categories: the (1) impact of the legal system; and the (2) impact of school-based policies.

Impact of the Legal System

This section explores the way participants' encounter with various facets of the legal system negatively impacts their efforts to heal from their trauma and resume their education. Consistently, it has been proven that our legal system is an utter failure (Duncan, 2000). From the racial disproportionately that still exists (Alexander, 2010), to the lack of meaningful rehabilitation opportunities available (Morris, 2016), to the exposure to violence and other forms of dehumanization behaviors (Goodman, 2018), to the high recidivism rates (Lambie & Randell, 2013), the research makes clear that our legal system does not succeed in its stated mission. And while the conversation around the legal system usually revolves around adults, since they make up the bulk of those involved in this system, it is important to note that adolescents also suffer due to the legal system's ineffectiveness (Morris, 2016). This was evident from the experiences had by participants, which is explored in the following subsections: lack of academic engagement, being targeted, lack of school support, and unhealthy school relationship.

Lack of academic engagement

The seven participants in this study each have had multiple interactions with law enforcement and at least one incarceration. They each also had insight to share about the impact of the legal system on their academic efforts. While research tells us about the important role academic engagement can play in ensuring incarcerated adolescents resume their education

following their release (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindahl, 2009), none of the participants encountered any programming while incarcerated that can be considered educational in nature. As Neo asserted, “You go to jail and expect them to help you, because that’s what jail is supposed to do. But there wasn’t nothing they had that was helpful.” When further explored, Neo proceeded to declare emphatically, “They didn’t have nothing educational that could have helped me. Nothing!” This sentiment was also captured by Kevin when he articulated, “Being locked up is boring as shit. They didn’t have nothing for us to do – not even classes to go to or anything where we could have learned things, you know, things that could help us, like, when we got out and back to school.”

While Prez was exposed to academic opportunities while detained, it would be a stretch to call it learning or anything resembling meaningful instruction. In recounting one of his incarcerations, Prez reported, “We (meaning he and the other adolescents with whom he was detained) went to a room and they gave us these worksheets to do. But no one came to teach us how to do the worksheets or new ones when we got done.” When asked about the worksheets, Prez recalled,

They was the same for everyone but they didn’t let us talk to try to learn from each other.

So, if you knew it, it was too easy and if not, then it was too hard. So what was the point if you wasn’t learning nothing.

Disturbingly, what Prez encountered while detained is what happens consistently to students in urban schools: being given work meant to keep students busy instead of academically engaged (Duncan, 2000). So, even when provided with academic opportunities, these opportunities were superficial in nature, which technically allows correction facilities to claim that incarcerated adolescents are in fact being exposed to learning opportunities, despite these opportunities

lacking any substance. It is clear that these opportunities were not meant to ensure that the adolescents were engaged in actual learning. Nor did they appear concerned with ensuring that they would avoid falling behind in their studies while detained. As a result, an opportunity for meaningful academic engagement was lost, which only serves to further rob incarcerated adolescents of their learning and make it harder for them to resume their education following their release.

Being targeted

While the lack of educational opportunities during their incarceration was mentioned by multiple participants as impacting their educational trajectory and academic pursuits, many participants also stressed the impact had on their education following their reentry. More specifically, this took the form of feeling targeted by both law enforcement and school officials for nothing more than just existing. Prez, in talking about his experiences subsequent to his reentry, shared,

I feel like they [police officers] be trying to come at us young Black people and they... let you go and then they watch you like you're free but you ain't really free. They're watching you for one mistake. You can go to the store and steal a piece of candy. They get you and you're going down for that. They just be always watching you and they not gonna stop watching you.

Prez went on to indicate, with an intensity that made clear he was still upset and bothered by these experiences, that it is hard to focus on anything, including being a student, when you're constantly fearful of being arrested due to nothing more than the color of his skin and the fact that he has had prior interactions with the legal system. Since these are things that he cannot change about himself, it becomes essential that the changes are systemic, if he – and other

students of color with carceral experiences – are going to feel comfortable in their own skin and in their learning process.

This idea of being and feeling watched – and the racial implications of who is watched by police officers – was also echoed by Kevin,

Um, the legal system, it's just bad, Bro. This shit is just horrible. To be honest, I feel like... police around here is horrible. Like I mean police really anywhere is horrible. Especially when you're Black. Like they just, that's the first thing they just start acting weird. But most you can do, you know, be respectful, try to have them get out your face cuz the more they sit around you, the more they get to know you, the more they gonna bother you... I used to live around here. Every day I came outside, I'd see a police car; they would see me and slow down just to see if I run or something. And I'm like, "Oh, what you're doing that for?" I don't know. I guess they can say it's their job or whatever. But like in all honesty it's like, "What are you doing that for?" Because now if I run and it's like iight um I got something. But why you be slowing down for in the first place? I don't know, but yeah. It's fucked up. It's fucked up badly.

When further explored, Kevin shared, "How am I supposed to care about school when I gotta worry about police trying arrest me for no reason. And when I was in school, they didn't care cuz they also saw me as some criminal because of my arrests."

The narratives of Prez and Kevin underscore the idea of a societal panopticon where urban residents feel they are constantly under the watchful eye of law enforcement, which is further made a reality due to the presence of cameras on street corners (Goodman, 2018). This constant gaze sends the direct message that you are not to be trusted and acts as a mechanism of control (Koskela, 2003). And when schools employ similar tactics, it makes perfect sense that

students – especially those with carceral experiences – will find these approaches as threatening and a barrier to their learning. This is because the act of being surveilled is in fact a form of trauma since it is inescapable for urban young people with carceral histories. As indicated in this section, participants are surveilled when incarcerated, while in schools, and when in their neighborhoods. Just as they physically transfer between these spaces, so do their experiences, which is tied to the white supremacist belief that as students of color they are inherently flawed and require an incessant gaze constantly watching them to remind them that they are incapable of controlling themselves and doing the right thing. In other words, that it is only a matter of time before their true nature presents itself and it is back to jail they go since this is where they belong.

Lack of school support

Kevin raised a point that was repeatedly expressed by participants when it came to the role schools play in interfering with their academic trajectories following their release from a correctional facility. One such example is not allowing students to enter the school building. Kevin, during his focus group interview, with a combination of frustration and confusion in his voice, recounted a story about a Catholic school he was attending – where he had earned an academic scholarship – not only expelling him from the school following his incarceration, but also refusing him entrance into the building to reclaim his property. After hearing Kevin’s testimony, Carl powerfully shared a similar experience,

Um, they [his high school] kicked me out of school. Yeah, I was going to school and then I got arrested and I got bailed out. So like I came back, I got booked on a Friday. I came back on like Tuesday... So now, they’re like, ‘Oh, you can't come here.’ And then you feel like you're a threat to the school, like mad stuff. Like, and this [he names his high

school], like, everybody bad at [he names his high school], how am I a threat to the school going to [he names his high school]. Like so then, so then yeah they kicked me out and then I was at my house for like two months, cuz they wouldn't let me go back to school and they didn't want me nowhere else. And I was still enrolled at [he names his high school] so I couldn't go nowhere else and then my lawyer fought it and they let me back in the school and then I failed cuz I was gone for two months.

In unpacking Carl's experience, we see multiple ways that his incarceration clearly impacted his efforts at learning. He was literally prevented from returning to his high school – after only missing three days, which is ironic given the lengthy suspensions schools like the one he attends routinely gives students³. He was also kept educationally hostage. That is, while he was not allowed to return to his high school, his high school also refused to discharge him; thus, for two months he was stuck and literally prevented from resuming his educational efforts. It took his court-appointed attorney to threaten legal action against the school for the principal to finally relent and allow him to return. (As an aside, while not a focus of this study, it bears mentioning that Carl was assigned a passionate court-appointed lawyer who somehow was able to overcome the excessive caseload assigned to her to vigorously defend him both in court and against his school – a luxury, regrettably, most urban adolescents are not afforded.) And, due to being forced to miss two months of school, he was unable to meet the requirements needed to pass to the next grade.

In addition, we also see Carl start to have a diminished sense-of-self resulting from the way he was treated by his school following his release by questioning whether there was

³ To better understand the legality behind this, please see the following link:
<https://malegislature.gov/Laws/GeneralLaws/PartI/TitleXII/Chapter71/Section37H1~2>

something dangerous about him that warranted him not being allowed to return to his school. Given these very real struggles, it would have made sense if Carl chose to give up. In fact, this is what happens to countless urban students throughout the United States when schools essentially push them out (Morris, 2016). Making matters worse, we blame students for responding in such a logical manner (van der Kolk, 2014) when we should instead be faulting and critically critiquing schools for creating an environment that becomes unwelcoming to students. Thankfully, Carl was able to overcome these obstacles and currently is in excellent academic standing. Unfortunately, far too many students facing a similar situation do not and are not...

Unhealthy school relationship

Kristine introduced another aspect of how being incarcerated interfered with her academic trajectory. Recounting her experiences, she reported, “After I got home, I held grudges. I was angry and upset at the people in my school.” She went on to share, “Because I was arrested at school, I had no trust for the people at my school. I feel like they be out to get me.” When further explored, Kristine then added this important question to ponder, “Like, if they were okay with me getting arrested in school, you think I’m gonna believe that they be caring about me?” This last point addresses a vital component that was discussed in the literature review and will also be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter: the role of having a trusting relationship with educators in order to reach one’s academic potential. Clearly, Kristine felt that her capacity to trust the adults at her school was compromised. And while she is currently on pace to graduate at the end of the current school year, she also made it a point to comment, “I know I’m graduating, but it’s not because of my teachers helping me. It’s cuz I promised my mother I would. I bet the school wants to see me back in jail and not graduating.” OUCH!!!

Section Summary

This section explored how participants' experiences with the legal system and schools are meant to harass them instead of support them. Based on their insights, it becomes clear that participants are heavily impacted by their lack of academic engagement while detained and the way they are constantly being surveilled, as well as from having unhealthy relationships with their schools, which includes a lack of support. They also clearly articulated the impact this has on their sense-of-self and on their academic endeavors. Given all that they must contend with as a result of their carceral experiences, it seems to make sense why so many formerly incarcerated adolescents do not return to school once they reenter society and leave after only a few months if they do return at all (Morris, 2016). This speaks to our society needing to do a better job of supporting these adolescents if they are going to heal from their carceral experiences, reengage academically, and reach their potential.

Impact of School-Based Policies

While participants spoke in great length about the various ways being incarcerated interferes with and impacts their academic pursuits, they spoke just as passionately about the adverse influence of their school's policies, especially around discipline. I believe Angie captured the general sentiment of all the participants when she reported, "The way schools punish us ain't fair and it don't make no sense." As detailed in Chapter II, the discipline climate in most urban U.S. schools is draconian in nature, resembles the prison system, and, to be blunt, is an utter disaster and failure (Krezmien, Leone, & Wilson, 2014; & Noguera, 2003.) In other words, as Angie also pointed out, "The way my school punishes us don't make the school safer or help us do better with our grades."

This section about the impact of school-based policies on participants' educational pursuits focuses primarily on the school to prison pipeline. It does so by tying the vast literature

that currently exists about the ineffectiveness of this phenomenon that continues to plague our school system with the experiences of the participants. In doing so, the insights and lived experiences of the participants remain centered to provide tangible context and content from the very students who are directly – and negatively – impacted by this practice.

School to prison pipeline

This dissertation’s literature review discussed in detail the various ways that the StPP manifests in schools, while also pointing out the ineffectiveness of this practice. With that as a backdrop, the rest of this section will look at how participants experienced this pipeline during their academic pursuits. And how it has interfered with their learning efforts. It does so by looking at zero tolerance policies, excessive disciplining, social control, in-school arrests, and the role played by school resource officers.

Zero tolerance policies

Each of the study’s seven participants addressed the harsh and excessive disciplinary practices employed at schools they either currently attend or have attended in the past. Unfortunately, as the earlier quotes from Angie make clear, these practices ultimately prove to be counterproductive as they not only fail to make schools safer, they even fail to improve students’ academic performances (Kupchik & Ward, 2014; & Merkwae, 2015). That is, they do not accomplish their intended goals but instead create significant barriers for students.

In speaking about his experience with zero tolerance policies at his prior schools, Kevin recalled “all the bullshit that would get me in trouble. Like, it was a lot of bullshit, Bro.” This included chewing gum, getting out of his seat without permission, and laughing out loud, all of which resulted in Kevin getting detentions. While being willing to admit that he may have certainly done some things that he should not have, Kevin nevertheless questioned the rationale

in “punishing me instead of trying to help me do better.” This critique of zero tolerance approaches poignantly captures that these practices are reactive in nature and do little, if anything, to truly redirect deemed problematic student behaviors. That is, instead of being educational or constructive, they become another obstacle that students must learn to navigate in their efforts to learn and excel while in school-based settings. When inquired, Kevin indicated that he did notice that his teachers were more likely to punish him following his various incarcerations, which also calls into question how school personnel might be using zero tolerance policies to play out their preconceived notions about students who have been detained.

Excessive discipline

While the ways that zero tolerance policies are implemented in schools vary, some of the ways that this practice manifested in the schools attended by participants included receiving a detention for talking to their classmate during a lesson, being kicked off a sports team for fighting, and getting suspended for yelling at a teacher in response to the teacher initiating the yelling match (naturally, the teacher was not reprimanded). These practices also caused students to feel as if they lacked a voice, were implemented to make sure they got into trouble, and only exist with the intention of getting rid of “problem” students.

Despite her current standing as a first-year student, this is Angie’s second year of high school. She had to repeat the 9th grade due to the number of absences she accrued last school year. To avoid a similar fate, she and her mother made the decision that she would transfer schools prior to the start of this academic school year. When explored, Angie indicated that the biggest reason she missed so many days of school last year was due to the number of times she was suspended – both in and out of school. Upon reflecting on this reality, Angie noted,

It was my first year at the school and I came from a middle school where everyone [meaning the school personnel] was mad cool. If we got into trouble for small things, it was no big deal. They talked to us about it and then everything was cool. But at [she names her first high school], you couldn't do nothing without getting in trouble. And I'm not one to take bullshit from no one, even teachers. So when they wasn't treating me right by giving me a detention for getting out of my seat without asking, I would argue. After a while, I would get so mad and say things or do things that would get me suspended.

Angie's experience highlights the fact that zero tolerance policies do not account for creating an environment that factors the various ways students might respond when feeling slighted, especially after returning to school following the dehumanizing experience of being incarcerated. It is a one-size fits all approach to every situation that does not allow for students' specific experiences and personalities. This approach to discipline is consistent with how the federal sentencing guidelines during the "War on Drugs" forced judges to hand down previously predetermined sentences without being able to account for mitigating circumstances (Alexander, 2010). Whenever a school discipline policy reflects one of the greatest failed efforts of the judicial branch, it is safe to conclude that the educational policy needs to be changed.

Discipline as a form of social control

Rios (2011) argues that our society goes to great lengths to control young people, including through the way schools monitor student behaviors and attempt to limit their autonomy. This sentiment was captured by Kristine: "Even though how they be disciplining us don't work, schools still do it cuz they wanna be controlling us." The following is Kristine elaborating on this point,

By having all these crazy and stupid rules in place that don't work and, um, don't make sense, schools, they just be wanting to tell us what to do. Like, I honestly think schools be scared that we be too smart and, um, like, that if we didn't have these stupid rules we would call them out on the things we need and don't get, like new textbooks or more teachers that care about us, you know, things like that. By having these OD rules that get us in trouble for asking questions – you know, when they be calling us “disruptive” – they, like, they try to take away our voices; you know, they just be trying to control us.

Kristine's point about school's seeking to control students was supported by Dennis, who introduced the role that finances play in schools seeking to stifle students, “The reason why schools have so many rules to keep us in check is because of budget reasons.” In further explaining his point, he continued, “They don't want us students breaking stuff so that they have to buy new ones. But they should be buying new things anyway cuz all the stuff we have is old and don't work right.”

While not explicitly stating so, both Kristine and Dennis touched upon the way that students who attend urban schools are viewed as destructive and incapable of properly regulating their behaviors (Morris, 2016). This also captures the idea of the hidden curriculum (Duncan, 2000) found in urban schools where students enrolled in these schools, who overwhelmingly are non-white and financially low-income, are being prepared to work in menial positions where they are to be subservient, take orders, and not engage in any form of critical or higher order thinking. Duncan (2000) refers to this type of education as urban pedagogies where urban students of color attend schools that make them “less competitive economically by subjecting them to an education that emphasizes discipline and control and that minimizes intellectual rigor and the development of meaningful skills” (p. 30). He then argues that this makes urban students

of color unattractive to employers in high tech companies and regulates them to the types of positions that prevent upward social and economic mobility (Duncan, 2000). In many ways, this underscores that our schools continue to be influenced by white supremacist ideologies centered on the belief of the inferiority of students of color and the role they are meant to be play in larger society. The fact that the participants of this study are experiencing essentially the same thing Duncan wrote about nearly two decades ago underscores the way that ineffective disciplinary practices are working to negate students' ability to be competitive both in the job market and to institutions of higher learning. It also ensures they do not gain the capital needed to be free of society's oppressive practices.

This exploration into discipline being a tool of social control gained significant traction with other participants, as well. Neo, in sharing an example following his return from one of his incarcerations, recalled getting into trouble for challenging one of his teachers simply for asking why he was learning the same thing he had learned the previous year. In his own words,

I remember it was a Math class and the teacher, he was trying to teach something that we did last year. So, I asked him why was that and he came at me like I was being rude and, like, being disrespectful. Which was crazy cuz how he was talking to me was rude and disrespectful, but cuz I was the student I automatically got in trouble. I had to go to the dean's office and got lectured about how I need to sit quietly and not be disruptive and other kinds of bullshit. The funny thing is that I was trying to learn but I guess they don't want us kids asking no questions. Especially kids like me who got a record.

This scenario involving Neo underscores the notion that urban schools are determined to silence students of color, especially if they have had interactions with the legal system, and mold them into becoming complacent "bots" who should accept what they are told without thinking

critically or asking questions (Duncan, 2000). It also calls into question whether he was treated more harshly because of his prior incarceration and the potential implicit bias educators may have of students with carceral histories. This further highlights a manifestation of youth oppression: when students – especially of color – utilize their agency, which is seen as problematic and disruptive, despite this agential quality being highly prized and applauded otherwise in our society (DeJong & Love, 2015) and justifies school-based efforts to “ensure they stay in their place.”

In-school arrests

The clearest example of the school to prison pipeline and the way it disrupted participants’ academic efforts centers around students getting arrested while in school. Due to the excessive discipline practices employed in many schools, we are seeing a rise in arrests taking place in school despite the overall number of adolescents getting arrested otherwise declining (Nelson & Lind, 2015). One way this plays out is the coordination between school personnel and law enforcement, as evidenced by what Prez encountered. In beginning to tell his story, Prez, with his rising voice making clear the pain this incident still causes him, stated, “I got booked at school.” He then went on to say, “The principal called the police cuz somebody told him that I had four warrants. Then the police came, um, they came to school and took me outside. And then they arrested me.” While this arrest resulted in a two-day incarceration, the lasting impact done to Prez’ relationship with his school – and especially his principal – continues to exist. This becomes apparent when he asserted, “How I’m gonna trust the principal or how I’m gonna, you know, feel good at school when I gotta worry about them snitching on me and getting me locked up.”

While Prez' arrest stemmed from a coordinated effort between his school's principal and local police officers, other participants were arrested by resource officers hired at the school on a full-time basis. As shared previously, Kristine was arrested while in school, which had an adverse reaction on her relationship with her school. Similarly, Dennis reported that, "Hell yeah, my ass got dropped in school." While initially making light of his in-school arrest, Dennis grew more serious when stating,

You think I'm gonna believe that my school cared about me after allowing the officers to arrest me? C'mon, for real! Not only was it embarrassing, but everyone in the school knew about it so, um, so I couldn't escape it. Honestly, that was a big reason why I left my old school and transferred to my new school.

Dennis' rhetorical question is an important one for all educational stakeholders to be grapple with, as it challenges us to be mindful of the social-emotional well-being of our students when we expose them to the dehumanization practices associated with the legal system in institutions of learning meant to be nurturing and safe – especially when they return to the same schools where they were arrested.

The school resource officer effect

Dennis' point in addressing the impact had when other people in the school, particularly SROs, know about participants getting arrested was also touched upon by Carl. During his interview, Carl spoke of his own experiences of entering the school building and having school resource officers making jokes about the reason for his arrest: "It's a million jokes. 'Where the gun at, where the gun at?' Cuz they got metal detectors and they have to go through my bag, I can't avoid them, so, like it's always a million jokes." When asked how he responds to this mocking, Carl shared, "I don't really care; I just be laughing. Every time I come in. They go,

‘Where the gun at, where the gun at?’ Trying to be funny. Like, Bro, get outta here.” Although claiming that he does not care, the fact that Carl spoke about this with such frustration suggests otherwise, which has the potential to interfere with him feeling safe at his school by the very same people, ironically and disturbingly, hired to ensure his safety. And this understandably has an impact on his ability to be a successful student.

Prez also picked up on the way that school staff and resource officers remind students of their arrest,

Like, every time I go to school. When I go to school, once I walk in the building, they [SROs] automatically like on their walkie talkies, telling the other officers, “[Prez] is in the building, [Prez] is in the building.” Yeah, they be harassing me and making me feel like I’m some kind of thug.

These experiences, which also includes Kevin’s insight that, once school personnel know you have been arrested or locked up, “People in the school be looking at you weird. Like they scared of you” make clear that the impact of being incarcerated affects students’ academic efforts long after they return home and reenroll in school. In many ways, it appears to be akin to a scarlet letter they walk around with, constantly being reminded of their carceral experience and made to feel as if they are a threat or that their arrest is somehow a laughing matter.

Further adding to the pain experienced by participants following their incarceration and subsequent return to schools is the fact that SROs reminded them of correctional facility guards. From the way they spoke to students, to how they treated students, to their belief that they were given free rein to mess with students without any sort of accountability, participants found SROs to be triggering and a daily reminder of their incarceration. This is a classic example of complex trauma. Given these realities, how do schools expect that these students are going to be able to

focus on their studies and heal from their dehumanizing carceral experiences? Or, as the experiences of the participants suggest, maybe these schools just don't care – or know to care...

Section Summary

The way participants shared about their interactions with the legal system and with schools – and a review of the data – make clear that they saw many similarities between the carceral state and their schools. Dennis captured this unfortunate – and unhealthy – connection when stating, “Yeah, my school feels like a prison. We have metal detectors, wands. Shoes, belts, everything else gotta come off. That greets us every single day when we walk into school.” Combined with Carl, Prez, and Kevin sharing how school resource officers add to the negative impact of having carceral experiences, Dennis’ insight highlights that these practices are in fact negatively impacting students’ sense of who they are, which has clear ramifications for their ability to be fully present as students. While each of these participants are enrolled in some type of educational institution – and many are excelling – they are doing so in spite of these discipline practices, not because of them.

This reality takes on an even added meaning when we think about the potential to be triggered by practices associated with the legal system. Personally, I continue to have flashbacks about my very brief incarceration. Therefore, it does not surprise me that participants are also negatively affected when encountering correctional facility practices being implemented in schools that employ zero tolerance policies. The research tells us that one of the healthiest and most effective ways to support students who have been trauma-exposed is to begin the school day with practices meant to help them unwind and reach an internal equilibrium (Traumatic Stress Institute, 2006). Therefore, how is it that anyone – most of all the very adults entrusted with students’ well-being – can think that exposing students, and especially formerly

incarcerated adolescents, to prison-like conditions, including when they first enter the school building, is a good idea... In a nutshell, it is not a good idea – clearly! Along these lines, the next section will explore the manifestations of complex trauma on formerly incarcerated adolescents who reenroll in an educational institution following their release and its impact on their academic pursuits.

Manifestations of Complex Trauma

This section focuses on the manifestations of complex trauma experienced by participants. Complex trauma is conceptualized as the repeated instances where people encounter adverse experiences from which they cannot escape (Blaustein, 2013; Duncan-Andrade, 2011; & Israel Trauma Center for Victims of Terror and War, 2017). Participants expressed being bombarded with trauma, whether from their communities, while incarcerated, or in school as a regular part of their lived realities. Although none of the participants technically used the word trauma, the experiences they articulated certainly falls under the scope of trauma. And as this section, combined with what has previously been shared in this chapter, will demonstrate, participants have indeed been (and, unfortunately, continue to be) consistently surrounded by external stressors that cause them to repeatedly feel distress and angst. These adverse experiences are best captured by a lack of safety.

Lack of Feeling Safe

By inviting participants to speak openly and honestly about their experiences, each of them ultimately acknowledged the fear they have about their physical well-being and the impact this has on them – both as students and as people. This fear comes masked in a protective bravado familiar to young people who grow up in dangerous neighborhoods and survive an incarceration. However, a deeper exploration of their comments belies a concern for their

livelihood. This justified preoccupation with their safety helps to explain why these participants may not be fully focused on their academics – especially when they find that their schools also fail to protect them due to aggressive discipline policies and see them as criminals. To help make sense of these impactful experiences, this section is broken up into the following three areas: environmental trauma, carceral trauma, and school-based trauma.

Environmental trauma

Including the impact that the trauma participants experience outside of school has on them is warranted because it is often these events that are manifested in the behaviors that cause them to “act out” and be punished while in school (Wingfield & Craft, 2013) or to become involved with the legal system. This becomes even more paramount when considering that each participant shared some of the difficulties they encountered in their lives outside of school.

Dennis, who referred to his community as “the hood,” specifically shared, “where I’m from, you see lots of shootings, gang-banging, and prostitution. You also see cameras on the lampposts cuz all of the crime that takes place.” It is important to point out that the presence of cameras is another manifestation of the trauma of surveillance mentioned earlier in this chapter. Angie spoke of her neighborhood as being “dirty with lots of fighting, homeless, and people dying cuz of guns or drugs.” This was echoed by Kristine, who similarly described her neighborhood as having “lots of drugs, addicts, and prostitution because of the drugs,” as well as “people getting killed cuz of stupid shit like arguing over a girl or for looking at someone the wrong way.” Neo added to this conversation by mentioning the harsh – and scary – reality that “you never know when you gonna die cuz things can pop off whenever.”

When describing his neighborhood, Carl pointed out that “I can’t even remember all the times I wake up in the middle of the night cuz of a shooting where I live.” Prez added the caveat

that “when you hear a bullet, you just be glad that you didn’t get hit cuz where I live it be like that.” Kevin further contributed to this discourse when he said, “[N-words] be crazy by me. These [n-words] be shooting like crazy. Sometimes you get used to it, but, if I’m being real, you don’t really get used to that kind of shit.”

While the above two paragraphs paint a grim picture of the daily experiences of the participants trying to literally survive their surroundings, what is not captured is that none of the seven participants, when asked about their neighborhoods in open-ended questions, said anything that would conventionally be conceived of as positive. That is, no one mentioned any community centers, places of worship, adults they look up to, parks or other forms of recreational opportunities and activities. Instead, to a participant, they each spoke about the ways that they are exposed to harsh realities that are part of their everyday lives, which in my opinion can accurately be described as complex trauma. At this point, so as to avoid anyone thinking the worst about the neighborhoods from where the participants come from, it is important to acknowledge that a reason to explain the exclusively deficit way that participants see their communities is tied to the internalization process that is very similar to the self-fulfilling prophecy. That is, when participants consistently see their neighborhoods flooded with police officers, are constantly surveilled, and only hear be talked about negatively, they internalize these messages and come to believe that their neighborhoods must be all bad; in other words, they accept the inaccurate belief that their neighborhoods have nothing positive to offer them. Furthermore, this is only further solidified when the schools they attend, which are located in their very communities, reinforce these negative messages. And, in my opinion, this resigned acceptance of their community of having minimal, if any, worth is another example of the complex trauma participants are exposed to and impacted by.

Another form of environmental trauma, which was briefly discussed earlier in the chapter, is the impact had on participants when they are constantly surveilled. As Goodman (2018) and Morris (2016) note, the act of being constantly watched – especially in relation to the legal system – takes a toll on the well-being to those on the receiving end of the incessant gaze. As Kevin found to be the case, this surveillance continues in the form of stop and frisk practices,

They (police officers) stop and frisk. Like they new excuse is, “Oh, yeah you're under investigation” or some dumb shit... And it's always, it always some dumb shit. They just feel like they always got the upper hand, which they do because when nobody's watching them, you know it's just you and them. What, what you can do? That shit be corny. But I don't know. Police officers out here, really be just picking on people. Yeah, they got an official law that they couldn't do that no more. But they still do it to people though. Police gonna come do all types of goon shit.”

Neo, in relating to Kevin's point, offered the following rhetorical question, “How you not gonna feel like a criminal in your own hood when cops be always looking at you like you up to no good?” Prez also captured the toll being constantly surveilled has on his well-being and how he sees himself when he stated, “Cops always watching me like I be some type of thug all the time. Shit, Ima keep it one hundred, after a while, you start to believe that shit and prove them [n-words] right.” Prez' poignant commentary raises two important points: victims of the long-reach of the legal system falling prey to the self-fulfilling prophecy and “acting out” as a means of adolescents utilizing their sense of agency. Here we also see a classic example of stereotype threat, which leads to a decreased sense-of-self for Prez and increases the chances of him never escaping the ways others see and treat him if schools do not intervene before it is too late...

The experiences and insight articulated by participants regarding being under the constant gaze of the legal system reminds me of the following assertion made by Morris (2016): “Our nationwide culture of surveillance and criminalization is much more pervasive and life-threatening than even the largest prison” (p. 180). In other words, the act of being viewed as a criminal and constantly under the watchful eye of the legal system has a devastating impact on urban adolescents that, in many ways, mirrors the impact of being detained. This is, regrettably, one of the lasting consequences of the United States being a carceral state that has become determined to view Black and, to a lesser extent, Latine, peoples as criminals. It also is tied to historical white supremacist practices that views people of color as being untrustworthy and always ready to engage in unlawful behaviors, which has, unfortunately, seeped into our school system through zero tolerance policies.

Carceral trauma

This subsection explores the trauma experienced by the participants during their time detained. Not surprisingly, the experiences of the participants are consistent with what the literature tells us happens when we incarcerate adolescents. They spoke of witnessing violence, being threatened with physical assault, and being dehumanized by correction staff. Regrettably, one even spoke of the horror of being placed in solitary confinement.

As someone who had never been incarcerated prior to the three days he spent detained on his recent court case, Carl shared, “I was arrested one time and, I ain’t gonna lie, I was scared cuz I had never gone to jail before. I mean, I ain’t no punk, but I also ain’t built for jail.” It is important to note that no one is built for the dehumanizing experience of being detained, although, some people do become socialized into believing they are. Although “only” three days, Carl, whose voice was noticeably lower, still recalled, “All the screaming and fighting I saw. The

biggest reason I ain't fight my case and just took a plea deal is cuz I didn't wanna have to go back if I lost." This point by Carl, although outside the scope of this research project, perfectly underscores the way that the fear of being incarcerated is leveraged by prosecutors to get defendants to accept unjust plea bargained deals (Alexander, 2010).

Angie was so worked up over her incarceration that she refused to speak about her experiences. While expressing a similar sentiment, Kristine nevertheless felt comfortable enough to share,

No one should go through what I saw when I got booked. It's like when you go to jail CO's (correction officers) think you are just some kind of animal. They curse at you, hit you, treat you like shit. Then the people in jail start to treat each other like that. I was lucky that people in there knew my cousin, so no one fucked with me, but it was still really scary.

Needless to say, adolescents being exposed to this type of maltreatment is counterproductive to their overall well-being and development. This has an impact on them long after they reenter society – especially if they return to violent communities and schools that fail to support them and instead treat them in ways consistent with the legal system.

While any form of being detained is challenging and dehumanizing, this is taken to another level when adolescents find themselves in solitary confinement. While Neo opted against talking about his experience of being placed in solitary confinement, claiming that doing so would not be good for him, Kevin felt grounded enough to talk about his experience. He began by acknowledging that his solitary confinement stemmed from getting into an argument with “a [b-word] ass CO” who he described as trying to “play me by disrespecting me.” In speaking about this impact on his overall well-being, Kevin poignantly shared,

How the fuck is keeping me in a cell by myself all fucking day gonna help me. Like, how that gonna help me? It didn't help me nothing, Bro. It only made me, it made me go crazy. Not having no one to talk to and not being able to go outside. COs talking all types of bullshit to me. Shit was crazy, Bro! Even now, I don't like being in, I hate being in small spaces by myself. And I was only in there for a little bit; like, I don't know how [n-words] who be in the damn hole for a long time deal with that shit. For real!

The adverse experiences Kevin suffered as a result of being placed in solitary confinement, while highlighting the importance of dialogue and connections, is consistent with the devastating impact this inhumane mistreatment has on incarcerated adolescents' well-being. It is also the catalyst for President Obama banning this form of disciplinary malpractice on youths detained in federal prisons in January of 2016. Yet, here we are four years later and far too many states still rely on this inhumane practice when it comes to their incarcerated adolescents.

In wrapping-up this subsection, I sought a quote that captured the various sentiments of the participants when it comes to the trauma inflicted upon them by their carceral experiences. While many powerful quotes stood out, I believe the following one, from Kevin – the first line of which you may notice is what I chose as the dissertation's title – is perfect:

I done missed like, I can say like out of my life, I missed a lot of childhood memories and shit. I missed at least three, four summers in jail. Sitting. The only way I kept my head was like, you see somebody and be like my shit can be way worse. I think about that in every life situation. I'm like anything you go through, Bro, it can always be 10 times worse. But that don't have to mean, you know, just give up. Still, like that shit be bad, Bro. I miss like a lot of summers. I remember being on the phone with my friends. They usually run around with [b-words] to the park going to the beaches and shit. “Yo, yo, yo,

we out here.” I'm like, Bro, this is crazy, another summer in here. This shit be tripping. I miss so much shit. Like it's crazy and boring as shit. You sitting there like this shit is crazy. But now that I'm getting older, I got family members that's doing like, 20, 30 years. Like I said, that don't mean that you feel me, that you should feel okay with that shit but like, it could always be worse. Just keep your head up, don't be moving downward like the rest of these people. That's shit crazy to me.”

While it certainly stands alone in making its point, there is certainly a lot to unpack in Kevin's powerful testimony. The impact of being incarcerated is such that after a while you start to be grateful that your situation is not as bad as someone else's experience. And, as evidenced throughout the history of the United States, this is how the status quo remains intact, which underscores the importance of creating spaces for the students most impacted by our flawed policies to speak truth to their power.

School-based trauma

Earlier in this chapter, the failure of school discipline was explored and there have already been quite a few instances shared of the many adverse experiences students have had in school. Adding to that, this subsection looks to draw the connection more clearly between these school-based realities and how they are experienced as being traumatic for students. It also will make the connection in how these adverse experiences negatively impact the academic efforts of the participants.

While most of the participants, like most children and adolescents, expressed liking to learn, they were also clear to point out that they did not like the way schools made them feel, especially after finding out they have had carceral histories, and that this played a major role in them both acting out in school and avoiding actually attending school. Interestingly, Angie

shared, “If I could just go to the classes I liked, I would go to school every day, have perfect attendance.” When invited to share more, Angie continued, rhetorically, “Why would I go to a class where the teacher yells at me and makes me feel like shit? And sometimes mentions me getting arrested to be embarrassing me” While Angie’s point may come across to some people as her complaining or coming up with an excuse to avoid going to school, when placed in context with what participants have consistently shared it makes perfect sense. When students, especially students of color and those with carceral histories, consistently encounter systemic oppression mired in feeling targeted and a lack of cultural awareness on the part of school personnel, as well as encounter stereotypes that punish them instead of understanding them, in their schools, it makes sense that they would feel unwelcome and want to avoid going. In fact, speaking as a clinician, it actually is a very healthy and mature decision; unfortunately, schools fail to see it as such.

After hearing Angie’s story in their focus group, Kristine added the following, “School would be more fun if they let you skip classes you didn’t like. If I liked the class or the teacher, then I would go all the time.” In further expanding on her point, Kristine shared,

Like, say there’s a teacher who be on some bullshit. Thinking it’s okay to yell at me, disrespect me in front of the class. I avoid these teachers cuz then I get mad and act out and then I get in trouble. Now, say there’s another teacher who’s cool, is respectful, tries to actually teach, doesn’t treat me different cuz they know I got locked up. I go to that class. But too many teachers be bad. But I know I gotta go to these classes if I’m gonna graduate.

Both Angie and Kristine captured nicely the unfortunate reality of their schooling experience. They want to learn, but they want to learn from teachers who respect and thoughtfully seek to

educate them, not from teachers who do neither. And when responding to the mistreatment they encounter in school, they find that they either get in trouble for standing up for themselves or must choose to skip these classes to avoid an assault on their well-being. When seen through the lens of these unacceptable options, as indicated earlier, it makes sense that students would choose to skip certain classes or school altogether to take care of their sense-of-self.

Unfortunately, the decision to take care of oneself by avoiding being exposed to such hurtful experiences comes with very real consequences. As Kristine articulated, this comes with the cost of not being able to complete your education. Students, if they want to graduate, are then left to choose the option that includes being exposed to potential harm and pain and, with that, an attack on their social-emotional well-being, which becomes even more concerning for students who return to schools following an incarceration.

Another way that trauma manifested in school-based settings was highlighted is through the violence that participants regularly witnessed. Neo talked about the constant “yelling, people making threats, and actual fights” he saw at his school. He also mentioned that, like his neighborhood, “you never know when shit’s gonna pop off. You always gotta watch your back.” Dennis recalled watching a student at his school get attacked by “four of five other students” and how “all of them just kept kicking him in the head and chest.” He also acknowledged that for about two to three weeks after this attack every time “I passed the spot where [he refers to the student by his name] got jumped, I would see it; it was like I was replaying it in my head. It kept fucking with me.” He also talked about witnessing similar incidents while incarcerated. In his own words, “Sometimes it’s hard to tell school from jail because both be violent.”

While some readers might conclude from the preceding paragraph that these examples support the need for school resource officers, participants were clear that the presence of SROs

does very little, if anything, to curb the violence at their schools. In addition to what was shared earlier about the ineffectiveness of SROs, Carl recalled, “School police don’t do nothing about all the fighting. Most of the time, they just stand there, either laughing or hyping the kids up to fight. They even be making fun of whoever loses a fight.” The ineffectiveness – as well as the unprofessionalism – of SROs was also mentioned by Angie. In speaking about the SROs at her school, Angie pointed out,

Sometimes they be making shit up. Like, they be going to this student and telling him that another student was talking shit about them just so that they can fight. And when the kids fight, they don’t do nothing to stop it. Sometimes they don’t even let other kids stop it. Then, the kids who be fighting get in trouble when it was the guards who started everything. What be crazy is that CO’s do the same shit. Like they not different at all.

While it is important to note that some of the participants did have nice things to say about certain school resource officers, the vast majority of the experiences shared by participants capture a constant critique of employing SROs: they fail to make schools safer, in part because they lack the training needed to be effective in their roles (Hutchinson, 2019). To be clear, students are not inherently anti-SRO’s – but they are against any school personnel who fail to make them feel safe and who only add to their sense of pain as is the case in many of the SROs they have encountered, including the ones who reminded them of COs. If students attending schools that employ zero tolerance policies have hired school resource officers in order to make the schools safer and these same students are clearly articulating that SROs are playing a part in making them feel unsafe, why, again, are they in our schools?

Section Summary

I believe it is fair to say that participants expressed poignantly the ways they are bombarded with trauma as part of their everyday lived realities, including while in school. And that these experiences are clearly having an impact on them. Yes, what they encounter in their lives outside of school is a direct result of decades (centuries?) worth of failed racist and classist policies that have created a dynamic where urban neighborhoods remain underserved and underresourced. Yet, what participants experience in schools stem from these same deficit-based policies. While schools may not have much influence on larger systemic injustices, they are able to ensure that what takes place within their walls challenges these inequities so that students feel safe and supportive and not as if they are back in a correctional facility. And there is no reason that this has to continue to be the case. Thankfully, as the rest of this chapter will demonstrate, participants have lots of insights to share that, if listened to and implemented, will help to alleviate the complex trauma they experience, including in their schools, and, with it, improve their academic pursuits and overall well-being.

Utilizing a School-Wide Trauma-Informed Care Approach

In beginning to address the study's second central question, this section about creating safe and supportive schools and classrooms is based on the concept of trauma-informed care and trauma-sensitive schools. While participants spoke about the multiple ways they have been impacted adversely by their experiences related to their neighborhoods, schooling, and interactions with the legal system, they also provided insights into ways to support them in overcoming these impactful experiences. And they did so with the same rawness and passion in which they described the hardships they have encountered and its impact on them. This demonstrates that they are actively engaged in thinking about how their lives can be healthier

and safer – and understand that schools and school personnel are well positioned in helping to make this happen. Angie captured this sentiment when stating,

Schools ain't supposed to be dangerous. They ain't supposed to be scary like my hood is. So, people in the schools gotta make schools safer cuz if not then we can't really pay attention or do the best we can cuz we always gonna be worrying about something happening. I know that students also shouldn't be acting all crazy and shit. But we do be acting that way sometimes. That's why schools gotta be sure we be safe no matter how we act.

Yes, as Angie honestly acknowledged, students will act out and engage in questionable behaviors; nevertheless, if also being honest, we as educational stakeholders need to admit that such is to be expected of children and adolescents since these are natural developmental behaviors – especially for those of them who are trauma-exposed. More importantly, what should also be expected is that schools are safe spaces that can address such behaviors in constructive ways that neither further harm these students nor their classmates. This becomes especially crucial, in thinking of this study's participants, if students are going to meet their academic potential following an incarceration.

As was shared in detail during Chapter II, having experienced trauma has a significant impact on students' learning efforts and behaviors. With this in mind, the following subsections, which include reformatory discipline and culturally relevant pedagogy, explore how participants believe their educational institutions can go about creating safe and nurturing learning environments that provides healing instead of additional trauma.

Reformatory Discipline

This subsection explores the insights provided by participants in addressing ways that schools can implement discipline practices that actually work. Participants' experiences with the discipline practices employed at their various educational institutions were felt by them to be trauma-inducing. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that they saw making discipline practices more affirming and supportive as a significant way for schools to become trauma-informed. For example, Kristine expressed her hopes that "my teachers that suck would learn how to treat me when I act out from the teachers I like." When further explored, Kristine continued by sharing, "If a teacher knows how to talk to me when I be acting up, how come other teachers don't know. The school gotta make sure all the teachers be learning from the ones that know." Other participants expressed similar sentiments, including Carl,

I'm telling you, if the whole school just talked to us kids with no disrespect, a lot of the shit that goes on in school would go away cuz I would say probably at least half of the problems start with teachers not knowing how to talk to kids with respect.

Based on what participants shared, it is apparent they felt effective discipline must include them being treated humanely by school personnel.

Effective discipline, in the minds of participants, also took the form of not jumping to conclusions when students have not completed an assignment. Participants were able to articulate that they know completing their schoolwork and homework are crucial components of being a student and passing. They also expressed their frustrations when teachers punish them for failing to complete their assignments without inquiring why it was not done. In the words of Dennis, "Have teachers get out of my face and understand that if I don't want to do my work right now, I don't want to do my work right now so getting in my face is not going to help." He went on to point out that when teachers do this, "They be trying to embarrass me in front of the

class and then I gotta save face and stand up to the teacher. Then I get in trouble.” He continued this line of thinking with the following,

And all the teacher had to do was ask why I didn’t do the work and I would tell them that I don’t understand it or that I had to help my Mom in the house and didn’t have the time to do it. But instead of trying to understand, they just try to play me, so I get a zero on the assignment and in trouble. And I think to myself, “What’s the point of even trying?”

Dennis’ insightful critique highlights that oftentimes it is not students being defiant or obtuse when choosing not to complete their work, but it usually stems from either a lack of understanding or an external factor. However, when schools are predicated on failing to give students the benefit of the doubt, opportunities to support and connect with students are not only lost, they turn into power struggles. This then turns into opportunities to enforce unhelpful discipline protocols, where students tend to wind up on the losing end.

Ironically, participants also expressed the reality that they found themselves being disciplined for attempting to redirect the behaviors of their classmates who were acting up and interfering with their own classwork. In the words of Kevin,

The thing is kids be acting all types of wrong ways in school. Like [n-words] be [r-words]. Like people running around like doing crazy shit. I ain't used to all that. I ain't like that type of shit cuz then you got to get out of character. Just telling somebody to do the right thing. That's none of my business. You know what I’m saying, so I don't know, I don't like shit like that. So I said something and then they talk shit and I gotta handle it. Then I handle it and I get suspended for fighting. But I was just trying to get these [n-words] to stop fucking with my learning. It’s just fucked up cuz I wind up getting

suspended for doing the right thing when the teacher was the one who was supposed to stop them but, the teacher wasn't doing shit to stop them. It's just crazy, Bro!

When asked, Kevin indicated that he did notice teachers were less likely to give him the benefit of the doubt once they knew of his various incarcerations and became known as a "problem" student. That said, Kevin's situation highlights the reality that the efforts of schools to regulate student behaviors are not working and when they do not work students sometimes take it upon themselves to intervene. So efforts to do the right thing still wind up causing students to be disciplined, which sends the message that regardless of your intention, the reach of our discipline practices and policies will ensnare you; therefore, as Kevin further questioned, "Why even bother doing good if it don't matter in the end?"

Kevin's experience ties in with the insight other participants offered regarding effective discipline in helping to offset trauma: implementing policies that are affirming and that truly work. And, according to them, this can range from giving students the option to step out of class for a brief time-out when feeling overwhelmed to providing additional opportunities for them to engage in extracurricular activities to reduce their stress to hiring more social workers.

Angie wraps up this subsection on how schools can develop better discipline practices to mitigate the adverse experiences being had by students in their efforts to become trauma-informed by sharing:

And don't be threatening me by calling my mom. I pretend like I don't care and I'm not scared in school but when I get home I am low-key worried because my mom ain't someone to mess with. I wish teachers know this so they wouldn't do it no more.

To be clear, Angie was not alluding to her mother as not being "someone to mess with" in a violent way. In fact, Angie was alluding to the fact that her mother is very hard on Angie and

punishes her for getting in trouble in school, while not necessarily helping Angie to think about how to better handle the situation. Angie's poignant point highlights that the act of calling a student's home can cause significant anxiety and added trauma. Schools calling home to report problematic student behaviors should be a last resort for this very reason (Morris, 2016).

Additionally, it supports the notion that the act of calling home does not guarantee that the deemed problematic behavior(s) will be addressed or redirected. And, as Angie alluded to, such a decision might wind up making the behavior(s) of these students more pronounced based on how their guardians respond (van der Kolk, 2014). This underscores the need for teachers to have a sense of a student's home life and for schools to be at the forefront of redirecting whatever behaviors they believe students need to improve upon by being trauma-informed. Furthermore, it also ties in nicely to the next finding in answering the dissertation's second research question – the importance of developing healthy and meaningful relationships with our students.

Mitigating missed instruction

Participants made clear that their school's discipline policies negatively impact their academic pursuits in terms of actual missed instruction. As previously stated, while zero tolerance approaches to discipline are intended to ensure students improve academically, participants' experiences seriously challenge this assertion. Neo discussed his perspective around this disconnect when rhetorically asking, "How is me being sent home for a week gonna help me do better in school?" In another example of participants engaging in critical thinking around this issue, Prez pointed out, "Even when I had an in-school suspension for cursing at a teacher, I got no work – and I was in the school." Here we see a clear similarity between an in-school suspension and an incarceration in terms of missed instruction as neither "behavior modification" approach seeks to improve the academic performance of participants.

In further exploring this issue, it is important to acknowledge that a few participants even saw the vicious cycle they were caught in as a result of zero tolerance policies. For example, during a focus group interview, Kristine recalled, “I got a in-school suspension for talking back to the teacher. But I wasn’t given work to do for the day that I was suspended.” She continued by stating,

So when I go back to class, um, the next day, I was behind and the teacher who kicked me out, she, um, she didn’t wanna explain what I missed. So because I didn’t know what she was talking about, I just didn’t pay attention.

Angie expressed encountering a similar situation, which she described as “stupid cuz it’s like they just want us to not pass.”

This significant critique by participants regarding the academic consequences of being excessively punished highlights the ways that zero tolerance policies disengage students from their learning. While such practices purport to be in the best interest of students, participants clearly did not see it this way. In fact, they encountered the exact opposite to be true. This underscores the importance of developing discipline practices that prevent students from missing out on important in-class instruction time.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Another way participants acknowledged how schools can be safer and affirming is through the use of culturally relevant pedagogy. While not using this exact language, they nevertheless spoke of the need for teachers, schools, and SROs to understand them and connect in ways that, to quote Carl, “speaks my language.” While scholars such as Django Paris have introduced their own contribution of what this looks like, the sentiment was first introduced to the educational landscape by Gloria Ladson-Billings back in 1995. In describing this educational

approach to engaging students, Ladson-Billings (1995) wrote, “culturally relevant pedagogy must meet three criteria: an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence and the development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness” (p. 483). As the rest of this subsection will highlight, these three criteria are what participants are asking of their schools to support them in their healing and development of an intact sense-of-self.

Developing students academically

The desire of participants to develop academically was a common theme throughout both the individual and focus group interviews. Consistently, participants expressed their frustration in feeling as if they were wasting their time in school since they did not believe themselves to be academically stimulated. Kevin, in speaking to this critique, expressed:

So I mean I, I feel like honestly that it's [school] just there for another thing to do. Like, I don't know. I know, I know a lot of people that graduated high school, I could say more people that graduated high school are less successful than people that didn't. And that's not, I mean, obviously it just that going to school, that's what that teaches you. Okay. Go to school, keep going to school, keep going to school. So it was just like, a lot of people get fooled spending like four or five years in high school and it's a mad waste of time in their life cuz they ain't really learning shit. These schools don't teach us what we need to be successful, just want we need to stay stuck. That's why I don't fuck no more with school.

While approaching this topic from a different angle, Kristine nevertheless came to the same conclusion as Kevin: “Truthfully, I’m about to graduate in June and am thinking about college. But I don’t feel ready for college cuz I don’t think I learned nothing these four years.” Once

again, we see another participant expressing a clear critique regarding the lack of academic rigor at their school and the negative realization of this on their future. In fact, Kristine felt so unprepared for college that she has decided against applying for college, especially when considering her record. In her own words, “I already know that they are gonna say no to me because I didn’t get the education I needed to do good in college. So how its gonna look when they find out I also have been to jail a few times?” Thus, Kristine feels hampered by both receiving an inferior education and having a carceral history, which prevents her from believing she is capable of pursuing higher education.

Dennis, during his individual interview, recalled the impact that a lack of academic development had on his sense-of-self. Reflecting upon preparing to take the SAT, he shared, “I remember sitting there and thinking to myself, ‘I must be stupid’ if kids in high school are supposed to know this cuz I don’t know none of it.” In further exploring this line of thinking with him, Dennis made the following point, “I just accepted that I wasn’t smart enough to go to college. Maybe what my teachers told me about not being smart was true.” In Dennis, we see a student who decided to enroll in a SAT prep course to make himself more “attractive” to colleges. Instead, he was hit with the realization that his schools failed to properly educate him on the content needed to feel capable of doing well on the exam, which caused him to embrace the deficit ways his teachers have described him. Regrettably, Dennis’ story is common in urban schools throughout the United States (Duncan, 2000; & Morris, 2016); therefore, even when students do successfully navigate high school, they are not prepared to pursue higher education. And, to be clear, I am not advocating that all students should attend college post-high school; however, I am unequivocally advocating that they should feel like such a choice is a viable option and not that it was taken from them due to receiving an inadequate education.

Willingness to nurture and support cultural competence

The definition of cultural competence takes many different forms (Sue, 2001). However, what is fairly consistent is that regardless of how you understand this term, tapping into students' culture has the potential to engage them academically and allow them to see themselves – and their lived realities – in a more positive light (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This fact was not lost on the participants, who spoke persuasively about wanting to experience this nurture and support in their learning spaces. For example, Prez stated, “When teachers be having us read stuff written by Black people, I’m more likely to read it cuz it connects to me. But most of the time they just be giving us stuff that white people write and it be always about white people.” Here we see the legacy of white supremacy and systemic oppression in schools, where the only material worth being exposed to is the works of white authors and scholars.

The material assigned to participants came up frequently as an example of ways that teachers either do or do not tap into the cultural competence of students. Neo recalled with excitement one of his teachers, “Making copies of ‘The Hate U Give’ cuz it was the first time a teacher gave me something to read that I could relate to.” In further exploring the impact encountering a classroom text that he could relate to had on him and his learning, Neo said, “It just felt good to read something and just understand it from the get. No one didn’t need to explain it to me cuz I live it. It made me think that maybe I could write a book one day.” While Neo had the good fortune of feeling connected to an assigned reading in one of his classes, Carl, unfortunately, encountered the exact opposite when seeking a similar experience. In speaking about one of his English classes, he reported, “I asked the teacher why she didn’t give us Nikki Giovanni or Maya Angelou or, even, 2Pac, who wrote poems; why we only reading poems by white people?” When asked how his teacher responded, Carl continued, “Like I was being rude.

But I wasn't. My Mom used to read Nikki Giovanni to me. I just felt like her stuff should be given in schools because Black people are poets and we need to know that." Carl, while clearly challenging the stereotypes of parents of color being uninterested and uninvolved in their children's academic well-being, encountered a reality that far too many urban students experience when they yearn to see themselves reflected in their learning: dismissiveness and being labeled as disruptive. Instead, as Carl and the other participants are poignantly expressing, they are seeking to be engaged and seen as being represented in their learning. Yet, when it is made clear to them that this is not important, they are being told they are not important. And, as a result, they continue to internalize negative beliefs about themselves and the stigmatized ways our society talks about their culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Another way that cultural competence presented itself in the data is through language. Participants agreed that when teachers – respectfully – incorporated adolescent vernacular in learning spaces, they felt as if teachers were respecting them and gave them a sense of belonging they oftentimes did not experience in schools. Dennis, in sharing about a teacher's efforts at doing this, stated,

You could tell he was from the hood. He could talk to us like how we talk to each other.

And it's not like he was trying to be down. He just knew that if that is how we talked then to talk to us he needed to talk like us.

In thinking about Dennis' assertion, I want to make sure the larger point does not get lost: his teacher made an effort to connect with his students by speaking to them in "their" language respectfully instead of judging them, engaging in cultural appropriation, or dismissing the important ways urban students communicate with one another.

Participants also talked about seeing themselves represented in their teachers and the impact this had on them. Kristine, in recalling the first time she had a Latine teacher, shared, “Honestly, I thought she was a sub cuz I ain’t never had a Spanish teacher before. The only Spanish workers I saw in school cleaned or cooked.” She continued by saying, “And then she spoke to us in Spanish. It was like I was home with my Mom.” Kristine’s experience highlights two significant points. The first is that given the low number of educators of color, students are more likely to see adults of color in helping roles instead of professional ones when in school. (To be clear, I am not criticizing or belittling being employed as a custodian or in the school cafeteria, but I am making clear the psychological impact had on students when they only see themselves reflected in positions of servitude instead of leadership.) Secondly, we also see how having a teacher who looked like her and spoke her language created a learning space that felt like home. While it is important to note not all students have safe and nurturing homes, Kristine’s important insight still illustrates perfectly that when students see themselves reflected in their teachers, this has the potential to make their classrooms feel safer and inviting. (As a quick aside, as a Latine who did not have a Latine educator of any kind – outside of my Spanish classes – until the final year of my MSW program, I can personally attest to the positive impact this had on my sense of belonging and excitement as a student in that class.)

Personal Boundaries

Cultural competence development amongst school personnel can also go a long way in addressing one of the primary concerns raised by participants, which was nicely indicated by Dennis when he asserted, “Respect my personal boundaries.” Participants repeatedly expressed the importance of teachers and other school personnel honoring their space and autonomy. While this took many different forms, it essentially boiled down to the same concept: the role of respect

in a healthy relationship, which is especially important in the reentry process when it comes reducing recidivism. Angie alluded to this when sharing the following advice to school personnel:

Do not get in my face and don't yell at me. Cuz then you ain't respecting me so I ain't gonna respect you. When you treat me like you one of the kids and talk to me with no respect, then I see you as one of the kids, no longer my teacher. Then good luck getting my respect back.

Angie's point is a crucial one: when school personnel have lost the respect of their students – especially those who have been trauma-exposed – they run the risk of never reclaiming it. And given the importance of relationships in the learning process, this has clear ramifications for a student's academic performance. This takes on an even greater level of significance in thinking of the participants – and other students with carceral histories – who find themselves having encountered adults in positions of power, whether in correctional facilities, their neighborhoods, or schools, who belittled and dehumanized them, which only added to their likelihood of being distrustful of adults. If we as educational stakeholders fail to find ways to earn students' trust and engage them meaningfully in healthy relationships, we prevent them the opportunity to authentically engage not only in their learning process, but also in their healing process, which has clear consequences for their lives moving forward.

Kevin also talked about the importance of personal boundaries but did so in relation to school resource officers. After recalling the number of times SROs were able to “get in my face and fuck with me,” he wondered, “How is that okay? The [n-words] can just get up in my space for no reason. Where I'm from, that be disrespect, and I ain't gonna let no one disrespect me.” Kevin articulated another consequence of SROs in school spaces – a lack of an awareness

regarding how their actions may be – and in many cases are – triggering for students. This point also ties in to the one made earlier in this chapter regarding the ways that students bring their out-of-school traumas into school. Prez alluded to this, as well, when commenting that, “In my hood, I don’t care who you are, if you roll up on me then I gotta handle my business.” He then continued with, “So, in school, it be the same – even if it be the teachers or security – if you in my face I’m gonna defend myself.” Therefore, schools, at the very least, need to understand that the lack of honoring students’ personal boundaries, which I argue is another manifestation of youth oppression, invites students to worry about, and defend, their safety and well-being. And when these students are ones that come from violent neighborhoods or have had been exposed to trauma, as Kevin and Prez make clear, their stress response kicks in and presents as preparing to protect themselves. Yet, we still punish students for demonstrating biological behaviors rooted in their exposure to trauma when responding to school discipline practices. Clearly, this is another example of how zero tolerance policies fail our students, while also potentially adding to their trauma. Because the idea of personal boundaries and respect are very much culturally driven, this awareness would serve educators well.

Development of a sociopolitical or critical consciousness

If you have spent any time with children and adolescents, you know that they are inherently curious beings who are constantly taking in information, processing it, and – much to the chagrin of many adults – questioning it. Unsurprisingly, as has already been demonstrated throughout this chapter, this was the case with the study’s participants. Their capacity to think critically and from a place informed by their sociopolitical realities was truly impressive. And, much to *their* chagrin, tended to get them into trouble when in school. Thus, it makes perfect

sense that they discussed a desire to be allowed to not only express their critical thoughts, but to be taught how to develop an even greater critical consciousness.

One area where participants demonstrated this yearning was around questioning the need to have so many practices synonymous with the legal system employed at their school. Prez captured this sentiment when he pondered, “Why they gotta treat us like criminals in schools, cuz we in the hood?” He also added, “I know they don’t be treating the kids in the white schools like this.” Here we see Prez point out the – very important – idea that the continued increase in racial segregation in our schooling system (Meatto, 2019) has indeed created white schools and non-white schools, which is another manifestation of systemic oppression and white supremacy. And he also demonstrates that he is questioning why it is that his school, which is predominately comprised of students of color from low-income homes, resembles a correctional facility that treats its students like detainees. Instead of silencing this line of thinking, educators can invite students to research where these types of discipline policies exist and what are the factors that allow them to exist. This gives students an opportunity to explore the ways our society views and treats certain segments of the population, all while furthering their ability to work on their critical thinking skills and consciousness. It also provides them with an opportunity to work on a project that personally impacts them and to also make suggestions to rectify these unjust practices at their schools (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

This line of thinking also manifested itself in participants wondering why they were unable to question their teachers and other school personnel. “What really pisses me off,” began Kevin, “is why can’t I question what my teacher tells me?” Kevin, in answering his own question, continued, “It’s cuz they want to keep us dumb as shit. They know that if we learn to question, we won’t put up with they bullshit no more.” Neo made a similar point when he

posited, “I just don’t know why teachers get so mad when we ask questions. Like, what’s the point of learning if we can’t use what we learn to challenge what we’re learning?” When schools fail to tap into students’ inherent critical nature and instead discipline or silence them, students begin to think their voices are not welcome in learning spaces or that they lack the ability to think critically. And, eventually, students are led to believe they are flawed in some way and, quite often, become disengaged with their schooling process. That is, it is students who suffer due to the ways that educational policies fail them.

Another way that this concept presented itself in the data is around the idea of why students were not allowed to have a say in matters that impacted them – both in and out of school. Carl expressed his frustration with this reality by sharing, “It’s crazy that we got all these rules for us but we never got a say in any of them. How is that fair, especially when a lot of these rules are not fair to us.” Dennis was thinking along similar lines when he pondered,

Why can’t students be allowed to come up with the rules at our school or what we learn?

If schools allowed that, it would make a big difference. At least for me, it would show that what I had to say was important.

Dennis’ question once again brings us back to the idea of youth oppression and the idea of how youth – especially Black and Latine adolescents – have nothing meaningful to contribute. And this is unfortunate given the level of insight students have to share that could not only make their learning more meaningful but would also do the same to the act of teaching.

Section Summary

At the end of the day, our schools need to be places where students find healing instead of pain and repeated instances of being dismissed. Clearly, as the insights of these participants demonstrate, the latter is more the case for them than the former, which is, to put it mildly,

problematic. Teachers and school personnel failing to develop the relationship with students needed to see beyond what students present on the surface is an area that warrants exploring, especially for students with both trauma and carceral histories. And it is to this relationship that we turn to next.

Healthy Student-School Personnel Relationships

It is consistently agreed upon that the greatest indicator in whether a professional in the social services will have success working with the people entrusted to their care is the strength of the working relationship (Suppes & Wells, 2018). It only makes sense this will also be the case in school-based settings. Just as importantly, it stands to reason that students fundamentally understand this and assess the effectiveness of their teachers through a lens that includes the nature of their relationship. And this certainly proved to be a running theme with the participants of this study. Frequently, they alluded to the relationships – or lack thereof – with their teachers and other school personnel, and even with the entire school and schooling process. Or, as Neo put it, “I gotta like my teachers and the school if I’m gonna like going to school.”

This section, which answers the second major finding to the study’s second research question, is centered on the relationship between participants and their schooling process. And it is framed in ways that include not only the positive impact this can have on participants’ academic trajectory, but also in their ability to heal from their past traumas and see themselves in a healthier light. Through the suggestions of participants, it will become clear that they are not seeking to become best friends with their teachers or for schools to change entirely to accommodate their every need. However, they do expect schools to take a vested interest in them, support them in their efforts to overcome the realities of their lived experiences, and assist

them in reaching their academic potential. This will be demonstrated through the following subsections: the roles that teachers can play and the impact had on students.

Roles School Personnel Can Play

In case it has not already been made clear, I want to reiterate school personnel are uniquely positioned to influence the academic pursuits and overall well-being of students. As a result, I believe it is important to highlight some of the ways that school personnel can demonstrate to students that they are committed to developing healthier relationships. By seeing and hearing students, using positive language, being fair, and apologizing when in the wrong, educators demonstrate to students that they are seeking to develop authentic relationships.

Seeing and hearing students

An important component expressed by participants in the relationship building process is authentically feeling seen and heard. This was captured by Carl when he stressed, “I wish that teachers would listen to us. Cuz they work with us, so take time to listen.” In support of Carl’s plea, the research is ripe with the experiences of urban students feeling neglected in their learning spaces (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Morris, 2016; Noguera, 2003; & Rios, 2011). And it also makes clear the way that this neglect is tied to a lifelong experience of being treated as invisible, especially for trauma-exposed students. This speaks to the importance of teachers and other school personnel seeking to honor the very existence of their students. As Kevin articulated in his advice to educators,

You ain’t got to be my [n-word]. But you gotta let me, let me know you see me. And not as some bad student or like, like a fucking criminal. But as me. Ask me questions about me and my life so you know why I do what I do. If you do that, then we can be cool, Bro. If not, then we ain’t gonna be cool.

We once again see participants asking to be acknowledged as individuals instead of through the deficit ways society has defined and labeled them. They want to know that their teachers and schools see their value and want to genuinely know them – that schools can be places where they can truly be themselves and have their humanity acknowledged and validated.

This point was repeatedly expressed by participants, such as when Angie claimed, “I just want teachers to know me, not what they hear about me.” Carl, in taking this point one step further by tying it to his carceral experience, asserted, “When teachers hear about what I got booked for, they just see me as thug. They don’t see the good parts of me. That’s why they be surprised when they speak to me that I’m respectful and polite.” The prominent point made by Carl exposes the stigma attached to students who have had interactions with the legal system. Participants, such as Prez, found that “when you get booked, people be talking all types of crazy shit, making shit up. Teachers be hearing that and they be believing it.” Since we know that teachers are influenced and impacted by their implicit biases (Buxton-McClendon, 2013; Goodman, 2018; & Wing, 2018) this speaks to the importance of them truly getting to know their students to get past whatever reputations precede them. They also need to get through the hard façade that their students have had to develop in response to growing up in dangerous environments. In doing this, they truly find out who their students are, how to interact with them, and, just as importantly, how to support and educate them. They also need to understand how to communicate with them, which will be explored in the next subsection.

The positive impact of language

Earlier in this chapter, Kristine expressed the positive impact had on her when she heard her teaching speaking Spanish – Kristine’s first language and the one she speaks at home. Other participants also expressed the way that teachers being able to relate and connect with them

through using respectful language allowed them to feel more comfortable in school-based settings, which makes sense given the power of language and its use in relating to one another. This subsection looks at the insight shared by participants around language and its ability to support their healing and academic engagement.

We begin with a story shared by Kevin, in recalling one teacher who used language to connect with his students:

There was this one teacher, a fucking white boy, who didn't know, he didn't know none of the hood words we be using. So, he asked us to teach him what the words meant and how to use them. But, cuz we in school, you feel me, they had to be good words and not cuss words or hateful words. And he made us make a deal that, um, that if he did his homework – yeah, he told us to give him homework – on the words we were teaching him, if he did that, we had to do the work he was giving us. And, Bro, that motherfucker kept his word. He even, no lie, he started using the words we were teaching him in class. That shit was crazy, Bro. But because he did that we did, the class did the work he gave us. Honestly, it was the first time I felt like I could really fuck with a white dude.

Kevin's example illustrates the multiple benefits possible when school personnel seek to incorporate the language of students instead of dismissing or diminishing them. This is evident in not only the increased engagement by Kevin's and his classmates to their studies, but also in how Kevin began to see ways that he was able to bridge racial boundaries, which becomes significant given that roughly 90% of teachers are white. It also speaks to the systemic barriers that create realities where students of color attend schools and live in neighborhoods that are racially segregated and potentially only interact with white adults through clearly delineated power

dynamics, such as police/correction officers, teachers, and judges, and where they are surveilled/experience racism.

The use of language also took the form of speaking to participants with respect. As was conveyed under the respecting personal boundaries subsection, participants expect to be engaged respectfully by school personnel, which includes the ways in which they are spoken to and referred. Carl captured this sentiment when articulating, “If you want me to respect you, then you gotta respect me. Don’t talk to me like I’m your kid or like I’m stupid.” Neo addressed how this also can take place with school resource officers: “There was this one school cop that always said, ‘Good Morning’ when we would come into school.” When asked how that made him feel, he continued, “Good cuz it’s like a respect thing. Cuz there be other school police that say, ‘What you hiding?’ when we be walking in.” Here we see Neo reiterate an important point made earlier: how students are greeted when entering school can influence how they feel about themselves and their presence in that space. In returning to Neo’s example, a greeting of respect versus a greeting of skepticism, while only a few words, can have a positive influence on whether students feel valued or devalued and engaged or disengaged with their schooling. And given that students who have been exposed to trauma are oftentimes entering schools already hypervigilant, it can also make the difference between feeling safe or remaining on guard (Rodhe-Collins, 2013). This has clear implications on students’ ability to focus, learn, and “follow the rules.”

The positive impact of language also manifested in how participants were questioned by school personnel when believed/accused of having done something that warranted an intervention. Angie recalled that while she was often approached with accusatory questions like, “Why did you do that?” when there was suspicion that she had broken a school rule, she also

remembered having an assistant principal approach her by asking, “[Name of teacher] said you were acting up in class. She told me what happened and now I wanna hear your side.” According to Angie, this approach of giving her the benefit of the doubt, “Made me feel like she wasn’t taking the teacher’s side. Like she was gonna listen to my side.” Angie alludes to the way that questions are posed to students can challenge the presumption of guilt that far too many urban students of color encounter both in their schooling and in larger society (Katz, 1997). Prez made a similar point when sharing, “Why do teachers always come at me like I’m wrong. Don’t be asking me questions like you already not gonna believe me.” In parsing out Prez’ underlying point, students want to be spoken to in ways that lead them to believe that they will be given the benefit of the doubt, heard, and respected.

Being fair

Another area where participants consistently indicated educational stakeholders are able to improve relationships with students centers around fairness; that is, teachers making sure they are consistent and treat all students the same, especially following a student’s incarceration. Kevin addressed this inequitable treatment when, upon reflecting on his experiences subsequent to returning to school, saying, “What gets me mad is when I be getting in trouble for shit other kids be doing but not getting in trouble for.” When further explored, Kevin continued with the following, “I just be no longer wanting to be in that class. Cuz, I don’t trust a teacher who don’t treat me like they do everyone else, especially after they find out I was locked up.” Kevin makes the important point that when he feels singled out or held to a different standard than his peers due to his status as a formerly incarcerated student, he loses all interest in that class and in wanting to connect with that teacher – that is, his learning and sense-of-self suffers.

Other participants made similar comments, including Carl: “I had this one teacher who always picked on me after I returned to school (following being detained). Like, if the whole class be talking I be the one she called out.” In further exploring this classroom dynamic with him, Carl then stated, “That be getting frustrating so one day I stood up and asked her why she be only picking on me. And then she kicked me out of class for being disrespectful and I got an in-school suspension.” Here we see how Carl’s act of utilizing his agency and inquiring about being targeted unfairly, which he felt was connected to him having been incarcerated, caused him to not only be asked to leave the class but in him also missing additional class time due to the subsequent in-school suspension. This is just another example of the failure of zero tolerance policies and its negative impact on student learning – and how these practices may be worse for students with carceral histories.

In the case of Kristine, her experience of being treated unfairly came at the hands of a school resource officer. She began by stating that, “I was dating someone who got into an argument with the SRO and he knew that we were dating. So, after they got into their argument, he be always bothering me.” When asked to elaborate, she shared,

Like, every time he saw me in the hallway, he would ask me – but not my friends – if I had a pass or if I was cutting. Or, like when I come into school, he always tells the other guards to check my bag to make sure I didn’t have nothing on me. It started to feel like he was harassing me.

I find it hard to believe that any educational stakeholder wants students to feel as if they are being harassed by school personnel – not only because of the potential impact it has on student learning, but also on their ability to feel safe in school. (While outside the scope of this study, it nevertheless bears acknowledging that the harassment Kristine speaks of, and how it is related to

her boyfriend, is explored by Morris (2016) in detailing the different ways school policies and discipline practices impact female students when compared to their male counterparts.)

The Act of Apologizing

While most of the suggestions participants provided were to be expected, there was one that, admittedly, truly caught me off guard: the act of apologizing. This makes sense, though, given the ways they have routinely been dismissed and failed by their schooling experiences – to say nothing of their interactions with the legal system. And based on participants' comments, this is clearly on the minds of students and something they wish they experienced more often from educational stakeholders.

The act of apologizing came up during one of the focus group interviews and was first mentioned by Neo, "What really gets me pissed is that teachers never have to say I'm sorry, even when they be wrong, but then we always gotta do it." This sentiment reached a consensus from the other three participants in that focus group. For example, it led Kristine to add, "Word! How is that fair? Especially when it be the teachers that piss us off and we gotta say sorry to them but how come they never have to say it?" When asked if any of them had ever encountered a teacher or any other school personnel apologizing to them or another student, Dennis responded, "One time, a teacher apologized to me for the way a resource officer talked to me." After being inquired what effect this had on him, he said, "It made me feel good. It's like the teacher really cared. And it made me think that the officer was wrong." In other words, Dennis experienced his teacher's apology as an act of empathy and validation, which increases the chances of him feeling safe and humanized while in school.

In exploring with the rest of the participants what impact they believed being apologized to by school personnel would have on them, Neo shared, "I honestly don't know. I'd probably

think they were trying to set me up.” While supporting his notion that his experiences with adults in school and in positions of authority have caused him to be skeptical of their motives and to protect himself, I then asked him if it would have any other impact. Neo stated, “I guess it would be good for them to say they did something wrong instead of them always telling me I did wrong.” Kristine shared a similar sentiment: “I mean, it would be nice to hear the teachers admit when they fuck up cuz then they would be more like people. I don’t know if that makes sense.” It indeed makes perfect sense! When teachers and other educational professionals take it upon themselves to admit fault and acknowledge that they too are fallible, it humanizes them, which removes any aura of them appearing incapable of being relatable. Or, as Carl succinctly captured, “When a teacher says they sorry, it makes them seem like a real person.”

Impact on Students

In thinking of the ways that participants articulated how they believe they would be better supported if school personnel were to implement the suggestions espoused in the previous section, it only makes sense to explore what type of impact this would have on them. This will be explored by discussing participants feeling supported, being believed, and having an improved sense-of-self.

Feeling supported

Participants regularly spoke about feeling supported as being crucial to the relationship building process. They wanted to know that if needed, teachers, as Neo put it, “would have my back” when feeling wronged or would support them if they were at risk of facing an adverse disciplinary sanction, especially after returning to school following an incarceration. This sentiment was captured by Kristine, when she stated, “What really gets me mad is when teachers be trying to be cool with you but when it comes to the principal they be all quiet.” When asked to

elaborate on her point, Kristine continued by saying, “Like, when we be getting in trouble and need a teacher to have our back, most of them be staying silent. They don’t be fighting for us, especially when we be singled out for being locked up. So, how am I gonna think we cool if you ain’t got my back?”

To be clear, participants were not looking to be exempt from consequences; they just wanted to know that teachers will get involved to ensure that whatever discipline they face is fair. This is captured by Dennis,

I know I be doing stupid things that gotta be punished. But when schools be OD-ing with the punishing, how come teachers don’t be trying to get involved. The dean or principal is going to listen more to what I gotta say if a teacher was saying the same thing and fighting for me.

Dennis’ point highlights that students assess the level of a teacher’s commitment to them, their learning, and their relationship based on their willingness to advocate for them. Neo expressed a similar sentiment: “If teachers had our backs when the principal be on some bullshit, we would have their back in class cuz they were there for us when we needed them.” For students with a history of trauma and being letdown – and for those who have felt victimized by adults in positions of power, including within the legal system – the act of having at least one school personnel stand by and defend them would speak volumes. It also increases the likelihood of students connecting with these adults and feeling more attached to their learning process.

Demonstrating support also took the form of participants wanting school personnel to check-in with them. “I don’t want teachers to be my friend,” began Angie, “but I want them to ask me how I be doing.” The simple act of being asked about their well-being has an outsized influence on students who have had adverse experiences since this is a form of validation (van

der Kolk, 2014). Carl once again tied this to his carceral experience: “There was this teacher at my school who was the only one to ask me how I was doing after I got back. I ain’t gonna lie, it felt good to know that she cared.” If students were to miss school for an extended time for any reason, teachers will, one would think, instinctively check-in with them to see how they are doing. Repeatedly, however, participants found this was not the case. This sentiment was captured by Kevin,

Honestly, I think these teachers just get used to us missing school so much that it don’t faze them. They just be thinking we cutting and don’t wanna be there. And when they be already thinking we be criminals, they don’t care that we were locked up.

When we as educators and other adult stakeholders entrusted with the well-being of students cease to believe that students are worth the investment of being asked how they are doing, or already see them as destined to be incarcerated, we send a very clear message to them: we do not care about you! Even if this message is inaccurate, what matters is that this is how students interpret our lack of checking-in. And it only adds to their conclusion that schools are not welcoming places for them.

Being believed

Given the marginalized realities of urban students of color, and the ways that schools are a microcosm of the oppressive, systemic practices present in larger society (Morris, 2016), participants found that one of biggest frustrations they encounter in learning spaces is being viewed as untrustworthy. This is reflected in the multiple participants who spoke about the importance of being believed by their teachers and school personnel. Carl hinted at this when saying, “I don’t know why teachers just assume I be lying. It’s probably cuz I got booked.” In inviting him to express the impact this has on him, he added, “It’s like, how am I supposed to

feel good about myself or wanna tell you something if you ain't gonna believe me or if you always gonna see me as a criminal?" Carl's rhetorical question highlights that when seen as dishonest and a criminal, it not only impacts his sense of self, but it also becomes a barrier in his efforts to form a relationship with school personnel.

Another way being believed manifested in the data is in participants accepting they will not be believed as a fact of life. Here we see Kevin articulating this,

Man, I be used to teachers not believing me cuz it's the same, it be the same with police. When they stop you and ask you all types, like, all these stupid questions, they never believe me. They still search me and shit even though I done told them I ain't got nothing. It be the same bullshit, teachers be doing the same shit. No matter what I tell them, they think we always up to no good so, after a while, you feel me, I just stopped caring about that shit. If they wanted to think I was no good, I gave them, you know, a reason to, Bro.

Kevin's clearly articulated association between the similarities in how he is viewed and treated by law enforcement and his teachers, that is, as a criminal, and the way he internalizes these experiences as being "up to no good," was also echoed by other participants. Prez stated, "It be crazy how fucking teachers be doing the same shit as cops. Asking all these questions, like we be lying. Why they gotta ask all these damn questions? Cuz we got booked! Just believe me the first time." In continuing his line of thinking, Prez, as he had done multiple times during his interviews, concluded, "I'ma be real, if the teacher gonna say that I be up to something I ain't supposed to be doing then that's what I start doing." Both Kevin and Prez make clear that when schools become places where students are made to feel as if they are untrustworthy, in their line of thinking, it makes perfect sense to embrace this identity. This self-fulfilling prophecy is

consistent with the ways the deficit treatment of students of color robs them of their humanity and desire to engage with their learning (Rios, 2011). As a result, to reiterate a common theme, we have created educational spaces that fail our (most vulnerable) students.

Improved sense-of-self

What consistently stood out about participants' experiences when they discussed their schools' discipline practices was the impact these practices had on how they viewed themselves. Several participants acknowledged that attending schools which mirrored correctional facilities caused them to think negatively about who they were as people and to be able to fully heal from their carceral experiences. This was captured by Dennis, when he inquired, "How am I supposed to feel good about being a student when the school I go to is basically a jail, especially after having gotten booked?" After inviting him to answer his own question, Dennis reported, "Honestly, it be making me feel like shit. Like, what's the point of doing good or being good in school, pay attention, and get good grades if they just gonna treat us like we be criminals."

Dennis' point was expressed consistently throughout the interviews, including by Kevin, who implored, "Why I gotta give a fuck about being a student when schools, you feel me, gonna treat me like I'm in jail." While participants stressed that they wanted to feel and be kept safe, such as when Carl stated, "Believe me, I don't wanna be in school where I have to worry about being shot," they also did not think that being kept safe required transforming their schools into a jail-like structure that has the added consequence of impeding their learning and reminding them of their carceral experiences. Per Carl, "I wanna be safe, but I also wanna be able to learn like a student in a real school, not some jail. I don't wanna feel like I'm back inside when I be in school." Repeatedly, participants espoused a desire to be both held accountable and to be able to learn in a safe environment; however, they also realized that this does not need to include unfair

and excessive discipline practices that mirror the legal system and remind them of their time spent incarcerated.

Section Summary

In reflecting upon this section, two ideas emerge. The first is that students clearly want to be engaged in their learning process and understand the crucial role educators can play in helping to make this happen. Secondly, what participants are suggesting is what we all want to experience with the people with whom we interact – especially those with whom we interact regularly: feeling seen and heard, supported, connected to, and believed. Thankfully, these are things that school personnel can implement rather easily. Yet, the experiences of these participants, as well as urban students throughout the United States (Morris, 2016), makes clear that they are not getting this. If we are going to sincerely support our students – especially those with a history of trauma and interaction with the legal system – we as an educational system need to start making this commitment. And, given how many students have already been failed and are currently in the process of being pushed out of their schooling process, we need to do so immediately! If not, I’m left to channel the rawness and honesty demonstrated by the participants in claiming, that be some bullshit...

“Get the right staff. Staff that are doing their job the right way. Go out to the community and connect. Teach things that kids wanna learn.”

-Dennis, sharing his advice for schools

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

Through a series of individual and focus group interviews, this dissertation study explored the carceral and academic experiences of seven formerly incarcerated adolescents currently enrolled in educational institutions. This fifth and final chapter is based on these experiences and is also informed by the literature review. It is intended to act as a call to action for educators and other educational stakeholders invested in the well-being of students who are trauma-exposed and have carceral histories. After discussing potential limitations associated with this dissertation study, the chapter offers future research ideas and ends with one last piece of participant insight.

Through the implementation of a structured thematic analysis, participants’ pains, struggles, and, in many ways, triumphs helped to provide insight in answering the following two research questions:

- 1) In what ways does carceral trauma impact the academic experiences of formerly incarcerated adolescents?
- 2) What factors do formerly incarcerated adolescents say help mitigate the effects of carceral trauma on their learning and overall schooling experiences?

This study explored participants’ carceral and educational experiences in order to utilize their insight to improve the academic experiences for this population of students. Participants relied on these experiences in sharing their knowledge into what they believe works and can be improved upon to better support them – and students in similar situations as them – in their

efforts to reengage academically following their incarceration. Just as importantly, these insights help to ensure that these students also remain engaged until their high school graduation and have opportunities available to them that they are excited about post-high school.

While it is not uncommon to blame students for failing to excel (Valencia, 1997), this dissertation made clear that participants have legitimate reasons that help to explain their struggles as students – both academically and behaviorally. And, if being honest, their struggles stem from a systematic failure of schools, communities, and other supposedly nurturing institutions in their lives meant to support them and provide them with the appropriate interventions they need. In many – and unfortunate – ways, participants responded to the difficulties they encountered in a manner that jeopardized their scholastic efforts and social-emotional well-being. Despite this, they remain committed to being students and engaging in the prosocial activities needed to complete their high school education and reach their academic potential.

In considering the findings discussed in Chapter IV, participants shared a series of insights regarding their experiences as students with carceral histories to ensure that schools are best positioned to support this segment of learners. This took the form of them speaking about the barriers of encountering institutional criminalization of youth behaviors and manifestations of complex trauma in their academic pursuits. It also covered the importance of utilizing a school-wide trauma-informed care approach and healthy student-school personnel relationships in better supporting their learning efforts and overall well-being. Not surprisingly, participants offered multiple insights during their interviews, which underscores their commitment to receiving a quality and affirming education, as well as their propensity to be introspective. In reflecting upon these four findings, I believe the following takeaways connect them and, if

implemented, will create learning spaces that will better support formerly incarcerated adolescents who have remained committed to their academic pursuits: 1) Impact of Race & Racism; 2) Punishment vs. Discipline; 3) Honoring Student Agency; and 4) What's Love Got to Do with It.

Many studies look at either trauma's impact on learning or the experiences of incarcerated adolescents (Slade & Wissow, 2007; Soler, 2002; & Widom, 1999). However, this dissertation sought to add to this body of research by looking at the intersection of these two factors for formerly incarcerated adolescents currently enrolled in educational institutions following their reentry. And it does so by centering the experiences and knowledges of the students who are being impacted by these two systems. Regrettably, it appears that the U.S. school climate will continue to rely on draconian zero tolerance policies, which increases the likelihood of students being excessively disciplined and encountering the legal system (Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2019). Therefore, it is my hope that educators, teacher preparation programs, and all other stakeholders invested in the well-being of this population take the time to truly grapple with and reflect upon the suggestions generated from the participants found within this chapter. It is also my hope – as well as that of the participants – that we will then implement these suggestions to better understand how to teach and support this segment of student learners. And while these suggestions are intended for school personnel to grapple with individually, it is important to note that teacher preparation programs, and entire schools of education, also need to start incorporating these suggestions so that future teachers are already grappling with these issues long before they first enter a classroom...

Impact of Race & Racism

I vividly remember the first time race and racism were discussed in one of my classes as an academic subject. It was, frustratingly, during the first semester of my MSW program. Our professor, an internationally renowned Freudian scholar with white-skin privilege, began the conversation by stating, “I know that this can be uncomfortable and awkward to talk about, but today we are going to talk about race and racism.” And, just like that, she demonstrated her own discomfort with the topic, creating an environment where an important conversation that needed to be had was compromised. I begin by telling this story because I have found my former professor’s (dis)comfort level with talking about race and racism – especially for people with white-skin privilege in mixed-race settings – to be rather normal. Given the way participants experienced being targeted because of their race – and the clear racial inequities that continue to exist in both the legal system and in school discipline policies that stem from white supremacy (Hutchinson, 2019) – we as educators need to become comfortable talking about race. To say nothing of also being comfortable with challenging racist practices and policies. And there is an added urgency in addressing racist practices considering that Milwaukee, WI, recently declared systemic racism a public health crisis (Dirr, 2019).

Anti-Racist, Anti-Bias Practices

The first suggestion under this section, developing anti-racist, anti-bias practices, stems from the understanding that there are clear race-based and biased practices being implemented in our schools that favor white students over non-white students. As a result, we must work toward ensuring that our schools do not engage in these biased, race-based practices that disproportionately negatively target students of color. And, admittedly, this might be quite the tall task given how consistently school policies disproportionately target students of color

(Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2019). However, this only underscores the significance of doing this work!

In thinking about ways that schools can do this work, one place to begin, clearly, is its discipline practices. If a school's data indicates that students of color are being disproportionately disciplined, this should be a bright red flag that something is amiss with these efforts. Paying attention to these signs invites us to explore why this is the case and what role students' race and our biases as educators may/does play in these disparities. It also invites us to question whether we are harsher with students of color or more likely to view their behaviors as deserving of discipline (punishment?). Regardless, the point is that we give ourselves the opportunity to ensure that our discipline practices are fair instead of adding to the disturbing legacy of disproportionately targeting students of color.

This exploration can also include the school's curriculum. This can take one of two forms. The first includes exploring whether our schools – especially those with a majority enrollment of students of color – are academically rigorous. We need to ask ourselves: “Is the curriculum preparing students for their academic and professional future or is it preparing them for menial tasks?”; “Is it challenging, exciting, and encouraging students to be critical thinkers or does it mirror the banking model of education (Freire, 1970/1999)?” The answers to these questions will go a long way in explaining how we view students of color and how deserving we believe they are to receiving a quality education. It also will make clear what role educational stakeholders are going to play in supporting our students.

The other form this exploration can take, as discussed in the culturally relevant pedagogy subsection in the previous chapter, is what scholars are students being introduced to. In reviewing our curriculum/syllabus, we should ask ourselves the following questions: “Are my

students being introduced to the ideas and works of scholars of color?; & Do students of color get to see themselves reflected in their learning?" Importantly, I would be remiss if I failed to acknowledge that even schools with predominately white students should be incorporating the works of scholars of color. This is because it will ensure their students receive a well-rounded education, while also making clear that scholars of color have made meaningful scholastic contributions that warrant being learned by all students. The decision to incorporate non-white scholars into the curriculum can help to invite schools to be more affirming to non-white students, while also creating a culture that is more inviting to them (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Acknowledging Race and Racism

While ensuring that our schools implement race-neutral practices is imperative, I believe the next step in supporting racially minoritized youth who have been on the receiving end of inequitable school discipline and legal system practices is to acknowledge race and racism. That is, note that race, while a social construct, has real-life consequences, that racism and white supremacy still exists, and that both continue to play a role in students' lived realities.

By acknowledging that race and racism remain a regular presence in the lives of students, educators make clear that these realities are no longer vestiges of a time long ago in U.S. history but remain an ever present barrier that students need to navigate. This acknowledgment then allows students of color who see themselves as targeted due to their race to be validated. This validation then enables them to better understand that their treatment by school personnel and law enforcement goes beyond anything inherently flawed about them and instead is rooted in historical race-based, white supremacist practices that continue to plague our society. While not eliminating the pain students encounter, it at least provides them with reassurances that they are not making things up and that what they are experiencing is real. This is essentially the

motivation behind Dr. Pierce coining the term microaggression in 1969. And, once we admit that racist practices continue to exist and negatively impact students, we become better positioned to ally with our students. This also puts us in a position to take this support one step further by becoming accomplices in actively challenging and eradicating these racial practices from our schools.

By acknowledging the continued presence of race and racism, we then allow opportunities not only for students to talk about their experiences, but for educational stakeholders to have these conversations among ourselves – and even with our students. When this topic is no longer seen as taboo or inappropriate to talk about in public/professional settings, we begin to remove the power it has and create opportunities to work toward solving it just like we would with any other problem. Granted, this specific problem is rooted in the very foundations of the United States and has shown an amazing ability to adapt to ensure its survival (Alexander, 2010). But when we are willing to name its existence, we position ourselves to talk about it honestly and openly. And then we also position ourselves to do something about it – including in our schools.

Doing Our Own Work

If teachers and other educational stakeholders are going to challenge the racism and racist policies and practices encountered by students – both in and out of school – we need to make sure that we are doing our own work. As stated in the previous chapter, educators are susceptible to implicit biases, which impact the way we see and treat students (Buxton-McClendon, 2013; Goodman, 2018; Morris, 2016; & Wing, 2018). However, unless we are willing to acknowledge that we are influenced by the insidious (and, sometimes, not so insidious) ways our race-based society socializes us into seeing and differently treating students based on their race, we will

never work toward overcoming these inequitable practices. And to be clear, admitting that we suffer from implicit biases does not make us bad people; however, failing to admit that we might suffer from them certainly runs the risk of allowing us to engage in and support the same racist practices that are currently plaguing students of color. This makes it imperative that we do our own work to be able to truly support our racially minoritized youth.

In thinking about how to accomplish this, one way is to truly pay attention to how we interact with our students and start asking ourselves the following questions: “Do I find myself treating students of color differently than white students? Do I have different academic and behavioral expectations for students of color than white students? Do I tend to attribute student performances to their race/ethnicity?” By beginning to ask these questions – and honestly answering them – we start the process of paying attention to how we may be allowing the race of our students to interfere with how we see, treat, and teach them. And we also allow ourselves the opportunity to make changes.

Another way to engage in this process of doing one’s own work is to just start doing it. This can take the form of forming groups with in-school colleagues to begin having these conversations, which has the extra benefit of starting to develop school-wide accountability around this issue. It can also take the form, when ready, of participating in anti-racism workshops, including the one offered by the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond (www.pisab.org). It can also include taking advantage of the various resources available to facilitate this type of introspection, such as the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD)’s “How to be an Anti-Racist Educator” (<http://www.ascd.org/publications/newsletters/education-update/oct19/vol61/num10/How-to-Be-an-Antiracist-Educator.aspx>) or from Teaching Tolerance

<https://www.tolerance.org/magazine/publications/the-march-continues/the-five-essential-practices-for-teaching-the-civil-0>).

Regardless of what one's process looks like, what is important is that we have a process and that we sincerely commit to doing our own work. Being able to support our students means thinking about trying to, in once again quoting Dennis, "Walk a mile in my shoes." While we will never know fully what racially minoritized youth with carceral histories are experiencing, we can at least start to get a glimpse if we take the time to challenge how we may be adding to the race-based struggles they encounter, which then positions us to be able to proactively do something about it.

Section Summary

When schools and educators start to grapple with the impact of race and racism and how they intersect with students' academic efforts, they help to validate students' experiences. They also start to acknowledge that students are impacted by what they encounter. This process can then begin to change the panopticon realities students of color regularly experience, including in their learning spaces. Once having this awareness, school personnel then position themselves to be able to explore other ways that students are being impacted in their efforts to learn. And this includes the form of discipline they encounter, which will be discussed in the following section.

Punishment vs. Discipline

Consistently throughout this dissertation, I have referred to zero tolerance policies as a disciplinary practice. This is because such policies purport to be disciplinary in nature. However, in this section, I want to complicate matters by arguing that such policies are in fact acts of punishment, which further serve to negatively impact the well-being of students and how they

see themselves. Suggestions are then provided as to what authentic and constructive discipline policies can – and should – look like in our schools to better support students.

Punishment

Punishment usually conjures up images of getting in trouble for some perceived inappropriate, unacceptable, or, in the case of the legal system, criminal act. Merriam-Webster (2019) defines the act of punishing as “impos[ing] a penalty on a fault, offense, or violation.” In other words, it includes the act of penalizing people who have engaged in behaviors that have been determined to run counter to what is considered acceptable. Punishment clearly has a negative connotation; it also is not intended to be rehabilitative (Yang, 2009). When we punish people, we hope that they learn their lesson not through education, providing them with new tools, or helping them to understand the “errors of their ways,” but simply through the act of being punished. In many ways, it is akin to allowing children to touch a hot stove so that they learn not to touch a hot stove. I also believe it is fair to say that such an approach does not work in truly addressing the behaviors that led to the punishment since they are reactive instead of proactive.

This is exactly what happens with zero tolerance policies. As participants regularly experienced – and articulated – when they are accused of acting out, they are given some form of punishment: a detention, an in/out of school suspension, or, in the worst case scenario, they are arrested. Not once did any of the participants express encountering an intervention that was meant to authentically address their “problematic” behaviors; however, they consistently experienced being punished in the hopes that they will somehow learn their lesson. This type of flawed logic is also rampant within the legal system; therefore, it comes as little shock that so many formerly incarcerated adolescents – and adults – recidivate (Lambie & Randell, 2013), just

as it comes as little surprise that it is the same students who are consistently on the receiving end of zero tolerance punishments (Ristuccia, 2013).

Discipline

One definition of discipline is “control gained by enforcing obedience or order” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). Another is, quite simply, “punishment” (Merriam-Webster, 2019). While the architects of school-based zero tolerance policies and those school personnel who implement them claim that these practices are in students’ best interest, clearly this is not the case (Bacher-Hicks, Billings, & Deming, 2019). This is because their approach to discipline has become heavy-handed and indistinguishable from punishment. Making matters worse, in a manifestation of youth oppression, students are not invited to provide input into how their behaviors should be addressed and redirected – or even if the selected intervention is effective. Instead, they are told that they must accept whatever “discipline” is handed down to them and deal with it or run the risk of being further punished. They are also told that they need to learn how to exist in classrooms and schools and that it is their responsibility to learn how to follow the rules. As participants made clear, this is done to control them, not effectively redirect them.

When schools implement discipline practices that do not truly seek to redirect student behaviors, it becomes difficult to believe that these practices are in students’ best interest. It then becomes a lot easier to accept that these discipline measures are intended to punish students. What is most upsetting about this reality is that, as expressed by participants, students fundamentally understand that when they act in ways contrary to expectations, they ought to be disciplined. But they also desire for this discipline to be effective and fair, not just another way to reinforce the message that they are problematic students. This point carries major significance when unjust and excessive discipline practices play such a big role in students feeling pushed out

of learning spaces (Goodman, 2018; Morris, 2016). Regrettably, as this dissertation's study highlighted, participants have instead come to believe that when they are disciplined, they are going to encounter unjust punishments that do little, if anything, to address the reason for them getting into trouble. If our educational climate is intent on disciplining students, we, at the very least, owe it to them to ensure that these interventions work, and that they do not further harm students.

Diminished Sense-of-Self Cycle

While frustrating on so many levels, what really stands out when thinking about the ineffective disciplining practices employed in schools is the cycle students find themselves in. Through no fault of their own, students are exposed to external messages – including from their teachers and other school personnel – that they are somehow flawed. These messages are consistently reinforced, which eat away at students' sense-of-self to such an extent that they begin to believe it. This belief, unknowingly to them, then presents as students engaging in behaviors that confirm other people's beliefs, which becomes the impetus for the self-fulfilling prophecy. Such behaviors then allow these external individuals to double down on their beliefs and actions toward students. This then leads to students further believing the negative thoughts they are being exposed to, which then causes them to continue to act in ways that prove these beliefs to be true. This loop, understandably, has a devastating impact on students' overall well-being. This is especially true when we blame students for their behaviors and/or lack of academic performance instead of paying attention to what is causing the behaviors and/or underperformance (Bowman, 2013).

The research tells us unequivocally that when students in school have been mistreated and exposed to dehumanizing experiences, it leads “to a diminished sense of self-worth and

increased anger, alienation, and distrust of teachers and other school authorities” (Goodman, 2018, p. 3). Upsettingly, schools do, at times, play an active role in tearing students down. This is important to know as educators as it should be a wake-up call to examine what we may be doing that adds to students’ seeing themselves in deficit ways and engaging in behaviors that confirm these beliefs. While not in a position to change what students encounter outside of school, educational stakeholders are at least well-positioned to ensure that schools are places that challenge these messages instead of reinforcing them (Gross, 2017). Thus, it is incumbent on school personnel to be intentional in supporting students to see and think about themselves in healthier and positive ways, including through discipline practices.

Challenging Faulty Beliefs

If we are going to ensure that our students will meet their potential, it becomes crucial that we allow them an opportunity to learn in spaces that are not triggering or further exposes them to negative messages about themselves. In thinking specifically about the study’s participants, this must include being willing to challenge the deficit ways our society has come to view students of color from urban communities with carceral histories. Instead of relying on tired tropes and stereotypes, we need be willing to allow students to show us who they really are; but for this to happen they need to believe that they are not being judged and that we authentically care about them. They also need to know that we, as educational stakeholders, will not hold their past against them or allow the negative ways that other school personnel talk about them to deny them the opportunity to make their own impression. This becomes crucial when thinking about the devastating impact labels have on students’ view of themselves (Morris, 2016).

Regardless of what students have been through, we know that they can develop the ability to respond positively to situations and overcome challenges (Everly & Firestone, 2013).

This includes overcoming the ways they have embraced the deficit beliefs they have internalized about themselves, which can begin to happen when they find themselves in a nurturing environment (Ginwright, 2010). If educators want to be part of this process, we need to stop seeing our students as “bad” and start seeing them as responding to bad situations. Once we start allowing students to be themselves by not holding them up against the unfair judgments that precede them, we will find that, yes, maybe there are times they demonstrate these behaviors. But, more importantly, we will also find that they are so much more than these behaviors. And this cannot happen if students find themselves in educational settings where they are caught in a self-fulfilling prophecy cycle where they are constantly led to believe that they are the problem, which they then start to internalize and act on, so forth and so on...

Constructive Discipline

In thinking about ways to engage in constructive discipline that will effectively address and redirect student behaviors, and allow them to see themselves more positively, I believe it makes sense to start with being proactive instead of reactive. By this, I mean it becomes imperative for schools to self-assess to determine if any of their practices may be triggering for students. This can include the presence of aggressive and harassing SROs, curricula that are neither engaging nor reflect the lived realities of students, or a lack of extracurricular activities that allow students opportunities to “blow off steam” from the stressors they encounter both in and out of school. I also argue that it needs to address why such a huge racial disparity continues to exist when it comes to students of color being on the receiving end of discipline practices when compared to their white student counterparts (Office for Civil Rights, 2019). By engaging in this level of introspection – and then being proactive in addressing it – schools may find that

they are well on their way to creating a culture where students are less likely to “act out” and, thus, warrant being disciplined.

Part of the efforts of being proactive must also include being honest in answering whether practices schools have incorporated in the past are working. (Spoiler alert: they are not!) If concluding they are not, schools need to seek to make meaningful changes instead of doubling down and blaming students for this failure. The insistence of schools continuing to engage in zero tolerance policies despite two decades worth of data making clear that they are not working reminds me of the colloquial definition of insane: doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. Instead of engaging in practices that may potentially make matters worse and remove students from their learning, schools may consider implementing ones that do in fact get to the root of the behaviors. This means investing in professionals, such as social workers and guidance counselors, who students can turn to in order to process what is interfering with their academic pursuits (Suppes and Wells, 2018). And this becomes increasingly crucial when, in this current age of zero tolerance policies, students are more likely to encounter SROs at their schools than they are social workers (Hutchinson, 2019).

Section Summary

The current state of zero tolerance policies have, unfortunately, created a reality where students are not being disciplined; instead, they are being punished. As a result, important opportunities to both understand why students are engaging in behaviors that are deemed to be problematic and to provide the tools and skills needed to truly redirect these behaviors are lost. Furthermore, and just as unfortunate, the efforts made to “address” these behaviors have consistently proven to be counterproductive and unsuccessful (Ristuccia, 2013), while causing students to embrace a negative self-fulfilling prophecy for their future. And, they have also been

found to push students out of learning spaces (Shigeoka, 2018). Unfortunately, too many schools, especially those with a majority enrollment of students of color, have unconditionally accepted that the only way to hold students accountable for their behaviors is through excessive discipline. These same schools have become perfectly content with treating students inhumanely and disengaging them from their academic pursuits. Thankfully, this does not have to be the case!

Yang (2009) argues that while many social justice educators view discussing discipline as off-limits since they believe it goes against the idea of being student-centered, if done correctly, discipline can indeed prove to be student-centered and create a more equitable learning environment. Once again, participants expect that their behaviors, when disruptive, will be addressed. And they even believe that such behaviors should be addressed. This underscores that students are seeking structure and the tools needed to respond to upsetting situations in more constructive ways (Yang, 2009). It also speaks to, in my opinion, their desire to be acknowledged and asked what is going on in their lives. That is, they want school personnel to take an interest in them instead of responding to what they see on the surface. Therefore, when we stop thinking of discipline as punishment and start to view it as an intervention that is meant to support students, we begin to challenge the damage done by zero tolerance policies. And, if we are lucky, we also stop pushing students out of school and instead create the type of learning environment where they feel welcome, invited, and safe. This decision will go a long way in determining whether students embrace a deficit-based self-fulfilling prophecy of themselves or instead see themselves through a strengths-based perspective.

Honoring Student Agency

As demonstrated repeatedly throughout this dissertation's fourth chapter, participants expressed a longing to have their voices and insights invited into and respected within learning spaces. Their experiences with the legal system and with schooling, however, have caused them to conclude that, for the most part, adults do not value their insight. Left without an invitation to be part of the conversations where decisions about them are made, not surprisingly, students find that they disagree with many of these decisions. And, understandably, they find other ways to enact their agency, which has serious consequences in an educational climate that embraces zero tolerance policies (DeJong & Love, 2015).

Agency as Acting Out

Despite their status as an oppressed group, the fact nevertheless remains that young people are autonomous beings with their own thoughts and ideas; and, as is the case with other marginalized communities, they will find ways to have their thoughts and ideas known. In thinking about students, this has consistently been proven to cause them problems (Morris, 2016). As articulated by participants, when feeling unfairly targeted or treated by school personnel, they sought to question these injustices. When finding their efforts to have their points heard and taken seriously to be unsuccessful, they then took it upon themselves to challenge their unjust treatment in other ways. And, as these agential acts proved to run counter to accepted school norms, it led to them getting into trouble and, in more than a few cases, feeling pushed out of their learning spaces, a practice quite common in our educational culture (Noguera, 2003).

As educators, when witnessing students engage in these perceived challenging and unacceptable behaviors, it is not uncommon to begin viewing such students as angry and aggressive instead of as utilizing their agency (Morris, 2016). As expressed earlier, when this is how we view students' response to their mistreatment, it taps into the biases we have of students,

which is connected to how we further treat them and comes back to the cycle of the self-fulfilling prophecy. This reality further underscores the need for educators to do our own work. Once we begin to understand that students are responding to their perceived mistreatment based on their oppressed status and prior experiences of being dismissed, which is consistent with experiencing microaggressions, we position ourselves to view students in a different – and more affirming – light. And, just as importantly, we can start to tap into that energy, passion, and insight to better engage them academically (Goodman, 2018). This becomes even more paramount when remembering that the incremental theory of learning states students are able to think differently about their ability to learn if they encounter experiences that challenge how they have been led to think about themselves as learners (Dweck, Chiu, & Hong, 1995).

In tying students' agential acting out to trauma, it is important to note that when students have had their ideas and presence ignored, "They probably will continue to seek help, but after they have been silenced they will transmit their cries for help not by talking but by acting" (van der Kolk, 2014, p. 244). As such, student "outbursts" may be the result of their unprocessed traumas and where being ignored not only becomes further traumatizing, it may cause them to seek help in potentially less constructive ways. These less constructive ways are consistent with behaviors that warrant the implementation of zero tolerance practices (Parekh, 2019). As a result, students with trauma histories fail to receive the support they seek and are "disciplined" in ways that further adds to their pain. Through such practices, we once again see that schools are essentially punishing students for having been exposed to trauma (Goodman, 2018). If we as an educational community were more aware of trauma's impact on learning and more likely to give students the benefit of the doubt, we would be better positioned to support them in their healing

and learning process. And one way to successfully accomplish this is by creating opportunities for students to be involved in the facets of their schooling that directly impact them.

Seeking Student Input

When thinking about school structures and climates, it is easy to conclude that adults are the ones who create these realities and leave it at that. However, what this fails to acknowledge is that, as indicated in the previous subsection, students are actively engaging in the structures and cultures that have been created for them (Morris, 2016). Essentially, students take what they find in their learning spaces and start to manipulate it. What then happens is a “game” where school personnel and students are responding to each other instead of working together. Unfortunately, in this type of power struggle, as participants repeatedly expressed, it is usually the student who loses, which serves to make them feel unwelcomed in their learning spaces. And since students will co-create the learning space, we should at least invite them into this process so that it is done in ways that authentically supports them, not punishes or pushes them out, and avoids this needless power struggle (Morris, 2016).

It has been my experience that many educators erroneously believe that when students are given any “power,” they will have lost their classroom. This clearly reflects a negative bias had by educators of students (or an acknowledgment of their inability to effectively manage a classroom). However, we know that when schools focus intently on academics and controlling student behaviors, they not only fail to provide students with a safe and healthy learning environment but wind up creating a space that decreases school engagement and lowers academic aptitude (Ristuccia, 2013). This reality also supports the argument for allowing students to have a say in matters that impact them during the school day. In the words of Morris (2016), “schools should develop an internal continuum of responses and agreements – created in

partnership with students – that allow for tailored responses that promote learning and inclusion rather than punishment and banishment” (p. 184).

Providing students the opportunity to actively create what their learning environment consists of sends the message that their opinions matter and that schools are invested in them feeling authentically wanted as part of the school community. It also allows them to become more invested in their learning and increases the chances of them being held accountable – and of holding each other accountable – since they will have been involved in the conversations where practices and protocols were established (Yang, 2009). Importantly, it also further develops the level of critical thinking students are already undertaking, which manifests in their agential behaviors and allows them to transfer this into more productive and mutually beneficial means. Thankfully, we have countless examples of the success of these efforts, including the now defunct Mexican-American Studies program in the Tucson Unified School District, the youth participatory action research done by Drs. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell with their high school students, and the work of the Restorative Justice initiative at Holyoke (MA) High School. At this point, the question is not whether this can work. We know that it does! Thus, the real question is: why are not more schools providing students with these opportunities?

Section Summary

If we are truly going to prepare our students to be adults capable of successfully contributing to society, we need to provide them with opportunities to engage in conversations where important decisions are made. When we create a learning environment where it becomes undeniably clear to students that what they have to contribute is important and, by extension, that they are important, we start to challenge the deficit ways that all students, but especially students of color, have been historically viewed and treated. This then provides them with an opportunity

to rewire how they have come to view themselves and, with it, the possibility of engaging in a positive self-fulfilling prophecy. Honoring student agency is a great way to ally with students, show them that we care about them, and prepare them for life as adults (Goodman, 2018). However, continuing to dishonor their agency, only serves to repeat the status quo, which clearly is not working for many students – especially urban students of color and those with carceral/trauma histories. We can continue to send clear messages to our students that we do not trust and value them; or we can engage in the type of transformative learning where they are seen as co-creators in the learning process. This can only happen, however, when educational stakeholders honor student agency. And once this is achieved, we are then able to create the type of transformative learning efforts described in the following section.

What’s Love Got to Do with It

Little did I know while listening to Tina Turner’s iconic song “What’s Love Got to Do with It” in 1993, that it would one day become the title of my Discussion’s final section. While clearly talking about different things, in thinking of students who enter our schools having been exposed to trauma, and those with carceral histories, the act of love has a lot to do with supporting them in their efforts to heal and become academically engaged. It also can – and has – played a pivotal role in eradicating the unhealthy zero tolerance policies that have consistently served to further damage students and replacing them with discipline practices that are humanizing, supportive, and effective (Laura, 2014). It is my unquestionable belief that the act of love threads the previous four sections together and creates the transformative educational experiences trauma-exposed students – and those with carceral histories – require and deserve to heal and reach their academic potential.

Teaching as an Act of Love

Being loved has been found to help offset the negative impact on adolescents who have been exposed to trauma (van der Kolk, 2014). Scholars have also espoused the role love needs to play in our educational system in better supporting students who have consistently found themselves on the receiving end of injustices and maltreatment – both in and out of school (Ginwright, 2010; Laura, 2014; & Morris, 2016). When participants repeatedly expressed a desire to have their voices heard, to have their humanity respected, to be invited into conversations around the aspects of their lives that impact them, for school personnel to actually know them, what was not stated is that they want to know that their teachers care about them. That they matter. That schools will see past their flaws, and still accept them. These are all acts of love.

I imagine it must be said: when endorsing teaching as an act of love, I am not supporting a romantic version of this emotion and feeling. What I am trying to argue is that teaching as an act of love means incorporating aspects of loving someone: making time for them, being patient and understanding, giving them the benefit of the doubt, being willing to forgive and move on, and providing the support needed for another person to see themselves as lovable, despite how they have previously seen themselves or have been treated. My view supports Laura's (2014) assertion that teaching needs to stem from an act of love and that it is difficult to effectively educate a student whom we do not have the capacity to love. Utilizing an act of love means supporting students in reaching their potential and challenging the ways they have been led to embrace deficit beliefs about themselves. And, in thinking of challenging zero tolerance policies, love "is a critical element to create a safe learning environment for students" (Shigeoka, 2018, p. 1187). Viewing teaching as an act of love also invites school personnel to be more open to creating trauma-informed schools. This is because becoming trauma-informed means we care

enough about our students to want to know what is going on with them/in their lives and how to best understand and support them. In other words, as we know from the literature, the process of becoming trauma-informed must come from a place of care and concern for our students (Blaustein, 2013). Without incorporating love into our teaching, we run the risk of being unable to engage in the transformative schooling experience discussed in the following subsection.

Transformative Schooling Experience

Toward the end of Chapter III, instances of what a transformative educational learning space look like were provided. In thinking of what participants shared and the preceding three sections of this chapter, what these efforts look like will be further explained. And, before doing so, I want to be extremely clear that by transformative education, I am unequivocally not endorsing a belief held by many educators of urban students of color that they are meant to save “these students” (Laura, 2014).

Goodman (2018) points out that transformative teaching is aligned with the daily experiences of students, as well as being rooted in understanding the various inequities they encounter, including racially and economically. He further explains that transformative teaching must include listening to and learning from students, as well as being willing to care for them (Goodman, 2018). The idea of being cared for and about was a consistent underlying theme shared by participants and has also been stressed as an important part of the learning process by other scholars (Delpit, 1995; & Shigeoka, 2018). These findings remind me of the teaching axiom: students will not care what you teach them until they know you care about them.

One way that this can be done is by educators spending time in the local community and getting a sense of what is going on within the community as helping to develop authentic relationships and feel connected to their schooling process, which was consistently expressed by

participants as having the potential to have a tremendous impact on students. Thankfully, opportunities for educators to have this type of impact on their students are consistently available; we just need to be willing to take advantage of them. And if we are willing to do this, we then create a dynamic where students begin to develop a sense of trust with school personnel. And, as is consistently espoused in the literature, this allows students to be more likely to engage in their learning process since they will feel comfortable with the adults with whom they are working (Bowman & Popp, 2013; Buxton-McClendon, 2013; Devine, 2013; Goodman, 2018; & Morris, 2016).

In thinking about the study's participants, it has been stated that transformative teaching “can create opportunities for student hope and self-empowerment” (Goodman, 2018, p. 34) for students who have had upsetting and demoralizing experiences with the legal system. This is because when students’ sense-of-self and holistic well-being are at the core of a learning philosophy, they are not seen or treated as criminals – or encounter racism. They then do not encounter opportunities to feel dehumanized when engaging in behaviors deemed unacceptable by school personnel since it is students’ humanity that is paramount. This allows school personnel to engage students “first with love, and then with the intention to support and repair the harm that has been caused” (Morris, 2016, p. 238). Therefore, when we are willing to incorporate love into our teaching, we open ourselves up to the possibility of engaging in the transformative learning students require to overcome the hardships they have encountered. And it allows us to create learning spaces that truly meet students’ needs.

Transformative Teaching in Action

As educational stakeholders, we are uniquely positioned to provide opportunities for students with trauma and carceral realities to experience a life where such realities are not meant

to be the norm (Laura, 2014). To that end, Kelley (2002) challenges us to create spaces where marginalized young people are able to engage in a radical imagination in order to allow them to believe that other possibilities are realistic despite their lives' overwhelming starkness. Taking this idea one step further, Ginwright (2010) espouses the importance of such youth experiencing radical healing, which he states, "is rooted in vibrant community life where love, hope, and goodness outweigh problems" (p. 10) and where such spaces inspire hope, love, and new possibilities for people's lives and communities. Through such efforts, Ginwright (2010) believes that adolescents will find healing from individual and collective trauma.

In thinking of the impact that trauma, exposure to zero tolerance discipline practices, and carceral experiences have on students, it makes sense that they must find ways to successfully overcome these challenging realities if they are ever to reach their full potential. The late rapper and social critic "Tupac Shakur referred to young people who emerge in defiance of socially toxic environments as the 'roses that grow from concrete'" (Duncan-Andrade, 2009, p. 186). Since growing a rose from concrete is an extremely difficult endeavor, this underscores the importance of students being provided with an opportunity to challenge the difficult realities they experience in their lives in healthy and supportive environments. This takes on added significance when being mindful of another axiom: hurt people, hurt people (van der Kolk, 2014). Along these lines, Duncan-Andrade (2009) argues that in order to provide a revolutionary educational experience for such students, teachers need to provide critical hope. He goes on to describe critical hope as educators who refuse to accept the seemingly dim prospects for students in challenging situations and who instead engage in pedagogical approaches that reflect a sincere belief in their students' capabilities to be successful (Duncan-Andrade, 2009).

Given the decreased sense of self that accompanies experiencing trauma, attending schools that embrace punitive disciplinary practices, and having been incarcerated, critical hope is a prudent concept for educators to embrace and provide. As Haga (2013) reminds us, for young people to be hopeful about the future, adults need to believe in them. Once again, the onus lies on educational stakeholders to take the initiative to bring about these transformative changes. This study makes clear students are not only ready for this but that they have long been waiting for the invitation and opportunity to join us in making such a learning environment a reality. Therefore, I'm left to ask: what is taking us so long and preventing us from extending the invitation?

Section Summary

I am reminded of hooks' assertion that "The classroom remains the most radical space of possibility in the academy" (p. 12). Although speaking about higher education, I nevertheless believe hooks' point is applicable to all educational settings. And, in order to tap into the radical possibilities of learning spaces, I believe love needs to be at the center of this process. This is because it not only invites us to truly ally with our students – especially those with trauma and carceral histories – but it also has the potential to create social change (Laura, 2014). As educators, we are tasked with the gift, and, if being honest, challenge, of preparing our nation's future to be fully engaged members of our society and ensuring that they are ready to address and solve problems not of their own making. This includes students who enter our schools having been exposed to trauma and the legal system. And this can – and will – happen when we decide to engage in transformative teaching. For, as van der Kolk (2014) reminds us, "At their best, schools can function as islands of safety in a chaotic world" (p. 353) where students are able to be acknowledged and validated, learn how to better manage their emotions and behaviors,

and develop the skills needed to overcome the hardships of their lived realities. In thinking of education as a transformative experience, I want to end by inviting all of us to heed the wise words of Morris (2016) when committing to this endeavor, “There is only one practice that can do that. Love” (p. 194).

Potential Limitations

Before exploring potential limitations associated with this study, it is important to complicate what are traditionally considered limitations in qualitative research. For example, I realized that because I also am person of color from an inner-city with a carceral history and shared pertinent parts of my lived experiences with the participants I developed insider status that enabled me to be trusted with certain aspects of participants’ narratives that they would not normally have disclosed to a stranger. This is because these mirroring identities, I believe, allowed participants to feel more comfortable opening up about certain aspects of their lived experiences than they would have done with researchers who failed to have similar identities and experiences (Bhattacharya, 2013). Therefore, while reading through this section, please note that not all limitations are negative – or maybe even limitations at all, which is why this section is entitled “Potential Limitations.”

While this dissertation ultimately proved to be successful in addressing and answering the study’s two research questions, there were nevertheless possible limitations. For starters, I am intimately connected to this study, aside from it being my life’s work, because of my brief carceral experiences at 19 and again as a doctoral student. Also, I was raised in a neighborhood where many of my family members and peers were always within the grip of the criminal legal system, hyper-surveilled, and criminalized. Admittedly, there were ample opportunities for my biases and expectations to impact how I made sense of the experiences of the participants while

analyzing the data (Simundic, 2013). However, this was mitigated by providing participants with a copy of their transcribed interviews to ensure their responses were accurately captured/allow them to let me know when they wanted something added, changed, or deleted (Palinkas et al., 2013). I also provided participants the opportunity to review the findings derived from the data to confirm that it was accurate and, when not, I was able to clarify/correct what needed to be changed. The combination of these two efforts enabled me to confirm the accuracy of the participants' experiences and that my findings were consistent with what they shared (Schwandt et al., 2007). As a result, I feel comfortable stating that I presented their lived realities and insights as authentically as possible (Chua & Adams, 2014).

The potential impact of my biases was also minimized through constantly being aware of my positionality. I continually reflected on how my own connection to this topic was the driving force behind conducting this study; as well as having the potential to impact how I interacted with participants and tried to make sense of the data. And I was able to successfully do this by utilizing a reflexive journal where I documented how I believed my positionality may have been impacting this process and interfering with honoring the experiences of the participants. Additionally, I repeatedly returned to the data to confirm that my conclusions were in fact supported by what participants shared instead of what I was thinking/wanted them to conclude. It should be noted, once again, that my intimate connection to this topic helped me to navigate any wariness participants had of trusting a complete stranger with their narratives, which allowed for a quick developing of trust since I was able to personally relate to some of what they shared.

According to Andrews, Richards, and Hemphill (2018), engaging in conversations with external researchers increases a study's trustworthiness. As a result, I also shared my findings with my dissertation committee and other doctoral students, all of whom were not connected to

this study. This allowed them to bring to my attention where I missed my biases injecting themselves into the study/analysis and, ultimately, confirm that my findings made sense. While admittedly not believing that one's biases are ever fully absent from the work we choose to do, I nevertheless was able to minimize this limitation to the extent that it was realistically possible.

Given that I conducted a transcendental phenomenological study, another limitation is that my findings have limited generalizability since the data comes from the perspective of the study's participants, which makes it unique to them (Priya, 2017). Related to this limitation, the approach taken by a phenomenological study inherently puts into question the ability to demonstrate reliability since it is difficult to objectively prove something as subjective as how a person experiences a phenomenon (Priya, 2017). Compounding these realities is the fact that I had a small sample size, which also significantly decreases the chances that I captured the majority of possible experiences of the phenomenon being studied. Another limitation is that the participants in the study were all formerly incarcerated in a DYS facility, which calls into question adequately capturing the experiences of adolescents incarcerated in other types of correctional facilities.

An additional limitation is that the participants who informed and guided this study all came from the same agency. Therefore, it is certainly possible that they felt pressured to respond in a certain kind of way due to having concerns that they may jeopardize the services they receive, despite it being made clear to them at the outset of, and throughout, the study that such will not be the case. This limitation also prevented my access to a wide range of participants with various social identity markers, such as Black female participants, non-straight participants, or gender non-conforming participants. Distance also prevented me from being physically present to review transcripts and the findings with participants; therefore, this was all done

electronically. Furthermore, while a phenomenological study utilizes artifacts in understanding how participants make sense of a phenomenon, none of the participants in this study chose to share any artifacts. So an important opportunity was lost to better understand how they made sense of their carceral and academic experiences; nevertheless, I do not believe this negates the power of their verbal recollections. A final limitation is that some of the participants, for various reasons, had difficulties recalling their carceral experiences since their reentry, which led to memories fading or the potential that what they remembered was compromised. Regardless, it bears mentioning that what they remembered were still their experiences and affects them no matter how they remember it, which means it is important, valuable, and real.

Future Research Ideas

While I believe important findings arose from conducting this study, I also believe that there are plenty of opportunities for future research endeavors that will allow educational stakeholders to better support students who have been trauma-exposed and have carceral histories. This includes conducting an ethnographic study where as a participant observer, the researcher(s) is/are able to get a better sense of participants' experiences through witnessing it as it unfolds (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). This element, in my opinion, provides even more depth to the experiences of adolescents with trauma and carceral realities, as it allows for an additional lens from which to make sense of these experiences. This is not to say that participant experiences need validation or are not real. But, it is to say that when researchers are able to document a process as it is happening in real time, it gives an added layer to what participants recall when reflecting on their experiences and allows for the researcher to remind them of incidents that they may not remember (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). As such, it enables for a richer exploration into these experiences.

Additionally, given that this study failed to incorporate any artifacts as is common in a phenomenological study, future research efforts should make it a point to do so. Regrettably, time and distance prevented me from being able to meet with participants regularly enough to incorporate artifacts in this study. If employed in future research endeavors, I believe the use of artifacts will allow for an even greater reflection on participant experiences to assist the audience in better understanding these realities. It should also be noted that future research studies would benefit from incorporating Black, female participants as this is a population that is disproportionately detained in juvenile facilities (Kajstura, 2019). Given the way that Morris (2016) also made clear that this population experiences trauma, carceral realities, and the school to prison pipeline uniquely when compared to their student counterparts, incorporating their insights will only add to the depth and breadth of how to better support all students with trauma and carceral histories. Along these lines, this study did not disaggregate participants' social identity markers, which runs the risk of the audience concluding that adolescents of color with carceral and trauma histories are monolithic. Thus, future research may consider exploring this issue along more clearly delineated social identity markers, such as race, gender, class, and sexual orientation.

In 1997, Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum posed a question that remains just as poignant more than two decades later: "Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria?" In my opinion, the answer to this question is consistent with why so many urban adolescents choose to join street organizations (otherwise known as gangs). It stems from the comfort they receive from being around people who look like them and have shared similar experiences – especially when they otherwise find themselves in places that are hostile and unwelcoming to them. This underscores the importance of future research exploring the fourth stress response: flock. Doing

so starts to bring this often forgotten stress response to the forefront, while also potentially producing significant data in better understanding adolescent behaviors and how to properly engage and support our youth.

Last Words

My biggest reason for conducting a transcendental phenomenological study was to center the experiences of participants and allow their knowledge and insights to inform this study. As a result, it only makes sense that the last words of this dissertation should come from one of the participants. As it underscores that the work ultimately falls on us to change our educational system to better support our students, I want to end by asking all educational stakeholders to heed the wisdom espoused by Carl: “I wish that teachers would listen to us. Cuz they work with us, so take time to listen.”

APPENDIX A

PARTICIPANT RECRUITMENT LETTER

Dear Potential Participant,

My name is Alberto Guerrero and I am currently a doctoral candidate in the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. As a part of my program, I am engaging in a research project to learn more about adolescents who have been formerly incarcerated and are now back to being students after returning home. In particular, I want to explore what impact having been locked up may be having on your current academic efforts with the ultimate goal of helping teachers to be better prepared to educate students like you. The reason I am interested in this study is because few people are writing about this important issue. I believe it is not fair to those adolescents, such as yourself, who are being negatively impacted by this lack of information!

If you have received this flyer, it means that your worker believes you both qualify for this study and may be interested in participating in the study, which I think is great!

If you are interested and are at least 18 years old, please let your worker know and I can arrange to follow-up with you to answer any questions you may have. Also, if you feel comfortable doing so, you can contact me directly at (917) 392-7095 to ask me your questions. ***If you are not at least 18 years old, I will first need to speak with your parent(s)/guardian(s) and get their permission before being able to speak with you.*** Additionally, if you know of anyone else who might be interested in this study please feel free to give them my contact information.

Please know that by speaking to me you are not agreeing to participate in this study. Also, whether you choose to participate in this study will not negatively affect you in any way.

Thank you for taking the time to consider being a part of this study and I hope to speak with you soon!

Con Paz,
Alberto

APPENDIX B

IRB INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

University of Massachusetts Amherst

Researcher(s): Alberto Guerrero, Student Researcher
Keisha Green, Faculty Sponsor

Study Title: "I Missed A Lot of Childhood Memories": Trauma and its Impact on Learning for Formerly Incarcerated Adolescents in the Age of Zero Tolerance Policies

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?

This form is called a consent form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. We encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?

To be eligible to participate in this study, participants must be between the ages of 12-21, have been incarcerated/detained for any length of time, and be enrolled in any type of educational program in the community since being released. Additionally, please note that individuals who have a DSM-V diagnosis and are actively participating in mental health treatment are also eligible to participate in this study.

3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this research study is to better understand to what extent formerly incarcerated adolescents have experienced trauma during their incarceration and how this trauma is impacting their academic efforts upon their return to the community.

4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

This study will take place in Massachusetts from August 2019-January 2020; however, the interviews will take place between September 2019-October 2019 and will last a total of 3.5 hours. Please note you will not be contacted after the study has been concluded.

5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to dedicate a total of 3.5 hours, which consists of:

- one individual interview session that lasts one hour
- a second individual interview that will serve as a member-checking session that lasts thirty minutes
- one group interview session that lasts two hours

The interview questions are designed to help me understand how the trauma you experienced while incarcerated is impacting your current efforts to learn and focus as a student. Please note that you may skip any question you feel uncomfortable answering.

6. WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

A potential benefit to be gained as a result of participating in this study is that you will have an opportunity to share your story in your own words. Additionally, you will also walk away knowing that you played a crucial role in raising awareness to this issue and helping educators be better prepared to educate this population. That said, please note that there may not be any direct benefit for participating in this study.

7. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

The following addresses any potential risks included as a result of being in this study:

Physical Well-Being:

There will not be any risks you will face related to your physical well-being for participating in this study.

Psychological Well-Being:

Given that this study focuses on trauma experienced while incarcerated, it is quite possible that by participating in this study participants may experience risks related to your psychological well-being. As such, as a social worker who has previously been employed as a mental health clinician, I am equipped to adequately address any distress you may demonstrate during the interview process. That said, you will also be provided with the contact information for various 24/7 crisis hotlines, such as the Crisis Call Center - Call: 1 (800) 273-8255, Text: "ANSWER" to 839863 - to also turn to for support should you experience distress as a result of your participation in this study.

Economic Well-Being:

There will not be any risks related to participants' economic well-being for participating in this study.

Social Well-Being:

The possibility certainly exists that participants may experience risks related to your social well-being if others find out that you were formerly incarcerated due to your participation in this study. That said, since all interviews will be conducted where you are already a participant, are known to have prior criminal legal system involvement, and your identities will be kept confidential, all efforts will be taken to minimize this risk.

Breach of Confidentiality (Including Audio/Video Taping):

Since the interviews will be audiotaped, it is possible that the risk exists for a breach of confidentiality. This will be minimized by keeping the interviews stored in my personal, password-protected BOX account, by using pseudonyms for the participants, and deleting the recordings after the study is completed.

Please note that as a mandated reporter, to be in accordance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act, should you share that you are the victim of any sexual assault stemming from your incarceration, I will report this incident to the appropriate authorities as well as to the facility where you were incarcerated.

8. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records. All aspects of this research will be conducted and presented with complete confidentiality. I will not use the actual names of participants, schools, or districts. You will have the opportunity to choose your personal pseudonym. I will be the only person listening to and transcribing the recording of the interviews. Any identifying information will be recorded using your pseudonym. During the study, the key that tells me

which pseudonym goes with your information will be kept in a locked drawer where I am the only person with access. When the study is finished, I will destroy the key. All electronic files, including the recorded interviews, containing identifiable information will be password protected in BOX, which is a secure, password-protected website that allows the storage of files. I will be the only person with access to the password. At the conclusion of this study, all recordings will be deleted.

9. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Please take as long as you like before deciding whether you would like to participate in this study. Should you have any questions about this study, I will be happy to answer them. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact me, Alberto Guerrero, at (917) 392-7095. Additionally, you also can contact the study’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Keisha Green, at (413) 545-1118. Furthermore, if you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

10. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate either now or at some point during the actual study.

11. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?

The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating participants for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but I will assist you in getting treatment if necessary.

12. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT

When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

- I agree to be audio recorded as part of my participation in this study.
- I do not agree to be audio recorded as part of my participation in this study.
- I agree that both direct quotes and segments of the recordings made of my participation in this research may be used for conference presentations, as well as education and training of future researchers/practitioners.
- I do not agree to allow direct quotes and segments of recordings of my participation in this research to be used for conference presentations or education and training purposes.

Participant Signature:

Print Name:

Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Print Name:

Date:

APPENDIX C

IRB GROUP CONSENT FORM

Group Consent Form for Participation in a Research Study
University of Massachusetts Amherst

Researcher(s): Alberto Guerrero, Student Researcher
Dr. Keisha Green, Faculty Sponsor

Study Title: "I Missed A Lot of Childhood Memories": Trauma and its Impact on Learning for Formerly Incarcerated Adolescents in the Age of Zero Tolerance Policies

1. WHAT IS THIS FORM?

This form is called a consent form. It will give you information about the study so you can make an informed decision about participation in this research. This consent form will give you the information you will need to understand why this study is being done and why you are being invited to participate. It will also describe what you will need to do to participate and any known risks, inconveniences, or discomforts that you may have while participating. We encourage you to take some time to think this over and ask questions now and at any other time. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to sign this form and you will be given a copy for your records.

2. WHO IS ELIGIBLE TO PARTICIPATE?

To be eligible to participate in this study, participants must be between the ages of 12-21, have been incarcerated/detained for any length of time, and be enrolled in any type of educational program in the community since being released. Additionally, please note that individuals who have a DSM-V diagnosis and are actively participating in mental health treatment are also eligible to participate in this study.

3. WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?

The purpose of this research study is to better understand to what extent formerly incarcerated adolescents have experienced trauma during their incarceration and how this trauma is impacting their academic efforts upon their return to the community.

4. WHERE WILL THE STUDY TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?

This study will take place in Massachusetts from August 2019-January 2020; however, the interviews will take place between September 2019-October 2019 and will last a total of 3.5 hours. Please note you will not be contacted after the study has been concluded.

5. WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to dedicate a total of 3.5 hours, which consists of:

- one individual interview session that lasts one hour
- a second individual interview that will serve as a member-checking session that lasts thirty minutes
- one group interview session that lasts two hours

The interview questions are designed to help me understand how the trauma you experienced while incarcerated is impacting your current efforts to learn and focus as a student. Please note that you may skip any question you feel uncomfortable answering.

6. WHAT ARE MY BENEFITS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

A potential benefit to be gained by the participants as a result of participating in this study is that you will have an opportunity to share your story in your own words. Additionally, you will also walk away knowing that you played a crucial role in raising awareness to this issue and helping educators be better prepared to educate this population. That said, please note that there may not be any direct benefit for participating in this study.

7. WHAT ARE MY RISKS OF BEING IN THIS STUDY?

The following addresses any potential risks included as a result of being in this study:

Physical Well-Being:

There will not be any risks facing the participants related to your physical well-being for participating in this study.

Psychological Well-Being:

Given that this study focuses on trauma experienced while incarcerated, it is quite possible that by participating in this study participants may experience risks related to your psychological well-being. As such, as a social worker who has previously been employed as a mental health clinician, I am equipped to adequately address any distress you may demonstrate during the interview process. That said, you will also be provided with the contact information for various 24/7 crisis hotlines, such as the Crisis Call Center - Call: 1 (800) 273-8255, Text: "ANSWER" to 839863 - to also turn to for support should you experience distress as a result of your participation in this study.

Economic Well-Being:

There will not be any risks related to participants' economic well-being for participating in this study.

Social Well-Being:

The possibility certainly exists that participants may experience risks related to your social well-being if others find out that you were formerly incarcerated due to your participation in this study. That said, since all interviews will be conducted where you already are a participant, are known to have prior criminal legal system involvement, and your identities will be kept confidential, all efforts will be taken to minimize this risk.

Breach of Confidentiality (Including Audio/Video Taping):

Since the interviews will be audiotaped, it is possible that the risk exists for a breach of confidentiality. This will be minimized by keeping the interviews stored in my personal, password-protected BOX account, by using pseudonyms for the participants, and deleting the recordings after the study is completed.

Please note that as a mandated reporter, and so as to be in accordance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act, should you share that you are the victim of any sexual assault stemming from your incarceration, I will report this incident to the appropriate authorities as well as to the facility where you were incarcerated.

8. HOW WILL MY PERSONAL INFORMATION BE PROTECTED?

The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your study records. All aspects of this research will be conducted and presented with complete confidentiality. I will not use the actual names of participants, schools, or districts. You will have the opportunity to choose your personal pseudonym. I will be the only person listening to and transcribing the recording of the interviews. Any identifying information will be recorded using your pseudonym. During the study, the key that tells me which pseudonym goes with your information will be kept in a locked drawer located in my University-appointed office where I am the only person with access. When the study is finished, I will destroy the key. All electronic files, including the recorded interviews, containing identifiable information will be password protected in BOX, which is a secure, password-protected website that allows the storage of files. I will be the only person with access to the password. At the conclusion of this study, all recordings will be deleted.

Please be advised that although I will take every precaution to maintain confidentiality of the data, the nature of focus groups prevents me from guaranteeing complete confidentiality. I would like to remind participants to respect the privacy of your fellow participants and not repeat what is said in the focus group to others.

As previously indicated, as a Mandated Reporter, should you share that you were the victim of a sexual assault while incarcerated, this information will not be kept confidential and will be shared with the appropriate personnel. Additionally, should you share any thoughts or desires of either hurting yourself or others, this information will also not be kept confidential and will be reported to the appropriate personnel.

9. WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?

Please take as long as you like before deciding whether you would like to participate in this study. Should you have any questions about this study, I will be happy to answer them. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem, you may contact me, Alberto Guerrero, at (917) 392-7095. Additionally, you also can contact the study's faculty sponsor, Dr. Keisha Green, at (413) 545-1118. Furthermore, if you have any questions concerning your rights as a research subject, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

10. CAN I STOP BEING IN THE STUDY?

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to. If you agree to be in the study, but later change your mind, you may drop out at any time. There are no penalties or consequences of any kind if you decide that you do not want to participate either now or at some point during the actual study.

11. WHAT IF I AM INJURED?

The University of Massachusetts does not have a program for compensating participants for injury or complications related to human subjects research, but I will assist you in getting treatment if necessary.

12. SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT

When signing this form I am agreeing to voluntarily enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

- I agree to be audio recorded as part of my participation in this study.
- I do not agree to be audio recorded as part of my participation in this study.
- I agree that both direct quotes and segments of the recordings made of my participation in this research may be used for conference presentations, as well as education and training of future researchers/practitioners.
- I do not agree to allow direct quotes and segments of recordings of my participation in this research to be used for conference presentations or education and training purposes.
- I agree to maintain the confidentiality of the information discussed by all participants and researchers during the focus group session.

If you cannot agree to the above stipulation, please see me as you may be ineligible to participate in this study.

Participant Signature:

Print Name:

Date:

By signing below I indicate that the participant has read and, to the best of my knowledge, understands the details contained in this document and has been given a copy.

Signature of Person
Obtaining Consent

Print Name:

Date:

APPENDIX D

GUARDIAN PERMISSION OF A MINOR CONSENT FORM

University of Massachusetts Amherst

GUARDIAN PERMISSION FOR MINOR TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

“I Missed A Lot of Childhood Memories”: Trauma and its Impact on Learning for Formerly Incarcerated Adolescents in the Age of Zero Tolerance Policies

Alberto Guerrero, doctoral candidate and Principal Investigator, and Keisha Green, Faculty Sponsor, from the College of Education at the University of Massachusetts Amherst (UMass Amherst) are conducting a research study.

Your child was selected as a possible participant in this study because they meet the criteria for the study, which includes having been previously incarcerated/detained for any length of time and currently enrolled in an educational program since their release. Your child’s participation in this research study is voluntary.

Why is this study being done?

The purpose of this research study is to better understand to what extent formerly incarcerated adolescents have experienced trauma during their incarceration and how this trauma is impacting their academic efforts upon their return to the community.

What will happen if my child takes part in this research study?

If you agree to allow your child to participate in this study, we will ask them to:

- participate in one individual interview that lasts one hour
- participate in another individual interview where we will review with them what they shared in our prior interviews that lasts thirty minutes
- participate in one group interview that lasts two hours
- answer questions based on their experiences while incarcerated and their transition back into a community-based educational program
- do the interviews at the agency where your child currently is a participant

How long will my child be in the research study?

Participation will take a total of about 3.5 hours and will take place during the months of September 2019-October 2019.

Are there any potential risks or discomforts that my child might experience from participating in this study?

The following addresses any potential risks included as a result of being in this study:

Physical Well-Being:

There will not be any risks facing your child related to their physical well-being for participating in this study.

Psychological Well-Being:

Given that this study focuses on trauma experienced while incarcerated, it is quite possible that by participating in this study your child may experience risks related to their psychological well-being. As such, as a social worker who has previously been employed as a mental health clinician, I am equipped to adequately address any distress they may demonstrate during the interview process. That said, you and your child will also be provided with the contact information for various 24/7 crisis hotlines, such as the Crisis Call Center - Call: 1 (800) 273-8255, Text: "ANSWER" to 839863 - to also turn to for support should they experience distress as a result of their participation in this study.

Economic Well-Being:

There will not be any risks related to your child's economic well-being for participating in this study.

Social Well-Being:

The possibility certainly exists that your child may experience risks related to their social well-being if others find out that they were formerly incarcerated due to their participation in this study. That said, since all interviews will be conducted at the agency where your child is already a participant, is known to have prior criminal legal system involvement, and their identities will be kept confidential, all efforts will be taken to minimize this risk.

Breach of Confidentiality (Including Audio/Video Taping):

Since the interviews will be audiotaped, it is possible that the risk exists for a breach of confidentiality. This will be minimized by keeping the interviews stored in my personal, password-protected BOX account, by using pseudonyms for your child, and deleting the recordings after the study is completed.

Please note that as a mandated reporter, and so as to be in accordance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act, should your child share that they were the victim of any sexual assault stemming from their incarceration, I will report this incident to the appropriate authorities as well as to the facility where they were incarcerated.

Are there any potential benefits to my child if they participate?

Your child may potentially benefit from the study by having an opportunity to share their story in their own words. Additionally, they will also walk away knowing that they played a crucial role in raising awareness to this issue and helping educators be better prepared to educate this population. That said, please note that there may not be any direct benefit for your child participating in this study.

What other choices do I/my child have if my child does not participate?

The only other choice you and your child have if your child does not participate in this study is to be provided with the list of resources to turn to for the emotional and mental health support mentioned earlier.

How will information about my child's participation be kept confidential?

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can identify your child will remain confidential. It will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. The following procedures will be used to protect the confidentiality of your child's records:

- I will not use your child's actual name, school, or district.
- Your child will have the opportunity to choose their personal pseudonym.
- I will be the only person listening to and transcribing the recording of the interviews.
- Any identifying information will be recorded using your child's pseudonym.
- During the study, the key that tells me which pseudonym goes with your child's information will be kept in a locked drawer located in my University-appointed office where I am the only person with access.
- When the study is finished, I will destroy the key.
- All electronic files, including the recorded interviews, containing identifiable information will be password protected in BOX, which is a secure, password-protected website that allows the storage of files.
- I will be the only person with access to the password.
- At the conclusion of this study, all recordings will be deleted.

What are my and my child's rights if they take part in this study?

- You can choose whether you want your child to be in this study, and you may withdraw your permission and discontinue your child's participation at any time.
- Whatever decision you make, there will be no penalty to you or your child, and no loss of benefits to which you or your child were otherwise entitled.
- Your child may refuse to answer any questions that they do not want to answer and still remain in the study.
- Since the involvement of your child's agency in this study is exclusively limited to their staff members providing potential participants with the recruitment flyer your child received, should your child not participate in this study or chooses to end their participation early, this will in no way impact their involvement with their agency.

Who can I contact if I have questions about this study?

- The research team:
If you have any questions, comments, or concerns about the research, you can talk to the one of the researchers. Please contact:
 - Alberto Guerrero at (917) 392-7095
 - Keisha Green at (413) 545-1118
- **UMass Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO):**
If you have questions about your child's rights while taking part in this study, or you have concerns or suggestions and you want to talk to someone other than the researchers about the study, please call the HRPO at (413) 545-3428 or email humansubjects@ora.umass.edu

SUBJECT STATEMENT OF VOLUNTARY CONSENT

When signing this form I am agreeing to allow my child to enter this study. I have had a chance to read this consent form, and it was explained to me in a language which I use and understand. I have had the opportunity to ask questions and have received satisfactory answers. I understand that my child can withdraw at any time. A copy of this signed Informed Consent Form has been given to me.

- I agree to allow my child to be audio recorded as part of their participation in this study.
- I do not agree to allow my child to be audio recorded as part of their participation in this study.
- I agree that both direct quotes and segments of the recordings made of my child’s participation in this research may be used for conference presentations, as well as education and training of future researchers/practitioners.
- I do not agree to allow direct quotes and segments of recordings of my child’s participation in this research to be used for conference presentations or education and training purposes.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR LEGAL GUARDIAN

Name of Child

Name of Parent or Legal Guardian

Signature of Parent or Legal Guardian

Date

SIGNATURE OF PERSON OBTAINING CONSENT *[include only if consenting in person]*

Name of Person Obtaining Consent

Contact Number

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent

Date

APPENDIX E

ASSENT FORM FOR MINORS

Project Title: “I Missed A Lot of Childhood Memories”: Trauma and its Impact on Learning for Formerly Incarcerated Adolescents in the Age of Zero Tolerance Policies

Principal Investigator: Alberto Guerrero

What is a research study?

A research study is a way to find out new information about something. You do not need to be in a research study if you do not want to.

Why are you being asked to be part of this research study?

You are being asked to take part in this research study because I am trying to learn more about the impact that trauma experienced from being incarcerated has on your ability to learn while a current student in a school in the community. About 6-8 participants will be in this study.

If you join the study what will you be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to dedicate a total of 3.5 hours, which consists of:

- one individual interview session that lasts one hour
 - a second individual interview session that lasts thirty minutes
 - one group interview session that lasts two hours
- Please note that as a mandated reporter, and to be in accordance with the Prison Rape Elimination Act, should you share that you are the victim of any sexual assault stemming from your incarceration, I will report this incident to the appropriate authorities as well as to the facility where you were incarcerated.

How will being in this study affect me?

Since this study will explore any trauma you may have experienced while incarcerated, it is possible that your participation in this study may cause risk to your psychological well-being. As such, as a social worker who has previously been employed as a mental health clinician, I am equipped to adequately address any distress you may demonstrate during the interview process. You will also be provided with the contact information for various 24/7 crisis hotlines, such as the Crisis Call Center - Call: 1 (800) 273-8255, Text: “ANSWER” to 839863 - to also turn to for support should you experience distress as a result of your participation in this study.

A potential benefit to be gained by being in this study is that you will have an opportunity to share your story in your own words. Additionally, you will also walk away knowing that you played a crucial role in raising awareness to this issue and helping educators be better prepared to educate this population.

Do your parents know about this study?

This study was explained to your guardian(s) and they said that we could ask you if you want to be in it. You can talk this over with them before you decide. If you want to be in the study, your guardian(s) will need to sign a form too.

Who will see the information collected about you?

- The information collected about you during this study will be kept safely locked up. Nobody will know about it except me.
- The study’s information about you will not be given to your guardian(s) or teachers. I also will not tell your friends.

What do you get for being in the study?

- You will not receive any financial compensation for being in this study.

Do you have to be in the study?

- You do not have to be in the study. No one will be upset if you don't want to do this study. If you don't want to be in this study, you just have to tell us. It's up to you.
- You can also take more time to think about being in the study.

What if you have any questions?

- You can ask any questions that you may have about the study. If you have a question later that you didn't think of now, you can call me at (917) 392-7095.
- You also can contact the study's faculty sponsor, Dr. Keisha Green, at (413) 545-1118.
- You can also take more time to think about being in the study and also talk some more with your guardian(s) about being in the study.
- If you have any concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the University of Massachusetts Amherst Human Research Protection Office (HRPO) at (413) 545-3428 or humansubjects@ora.umass.edu.

Other information about the study:

- If your guardian(s) agree, the decision is up to you if you want to be in this study.
- You can change your mind and stop being part of it at any time. All you have to do is tell me and you will not get in any type of trouble.
- You will be given a copy of this document to keep.

If you want to be in this study, please sign and write your name below.

Signature _____

Date _____

Participant Name _____

Date _____

Name of Person obtaining consent _____

Date _____

APPENDIX F

INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What name would you like for me to use when speaking to you?
- 2) What name would you like for me to use when referring to you in my writing?
- 3) How old are you?
- 4) Where are you from?
- 5) What are your social identities, such as race, gender, sexual orientation, etc.?
- 6) What grade are you in/last grade you were enrolled in?
- 7) What school do you attend?
- 8) Tell me about yourself./What three words best describe you?
- 9) How would your friends describe you?
- 10) How would your teachers describe you?
- 11) What is important to you?
- 12) Tell me about your neighborhood.
- 13) What do you do for fun?
- 14) What do you think about school?
- 15) Tell me about your schooling experiences, including any suspensions, expulsions, or interactions with school resource officers, prior to your arrest?
- 16) What did you think about these experiences?
- 17) How did these experiences make you feel?
- 18) Did these experiences affect your relationship to school and people in the schools?
- 19) Were these experiences related to your incarceration? If so, how?
- 20) What are your thoughts about the criminal legal system?
- 21) How old were you when you were arrested? If multiple times, please share each time.

- 22) Regarding your most recent case, please tell me about each step of your carceral experience, from the arrest to seeing the judge to interacting with your lawyer to the actual incarceration to being released to trying to move forward.
- 23) What type of correctional facility/ies were you placed in?
- 24) For how long were you incarcerated?
- 25) What were some of the things you experienced while incarcerated that has affected you?
- 26) How did your incarceration make you feel?
- 27) In what ways was your incarceration helpful/harmful?
- 28) Who, if anyone, have you been able to talk to about these experiences/what do you do when feeling overwhelmed?
- 29) Who at your school knows about your incarceration?
- 30) How did they learn about this?
- 31) If people at your school do know, please share anything you may have noticed about how them knowing this information impacts how they interact with you?
- 32) If people at your school do know, how does it make you feel knowing that others know about your incarceration?
- 33) If people at your school do know, what impact does other people in your school knowing you were incarcerated have on you?
- 34) What are some of the differences you notice about being a student now compared to before your incarceration?
- 35) If you have noticed differences, what do you think led to these differences?
- 36) What do you think about your school's discipline policies?
- 37) Does your school have school resource officers/metal detectors?
- 38) Do these practices make your school any safer?
- 39) Do they help you focus on your academics?
- 40) Why do you think they exist?

41) How do your interactions with the legal system/school's discipline policies impact the way you see/think about yourself?

42) Why do you attend to school?

43) What do you want teachers and other school personnel to know about how your incarceration affects you as a student?

44) Is there anything that you want to share with me that was not asked in this interview?

45) Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX G

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- 1) What do you think about school?
- 2) Tell me about your schooling experiences, including any suspensions, expulsions, or interactions with school resource officers, prior to your arrest?
- 3) What did you think about these experiences?
- 4) How did these experiences make you feel?
- 5) Did these experiences affect your relationship to school and people in the schools?
- 6) Were these experiences related to your incarceration? If so, how?
- 7) What are your thoughts about the criminal legal system?
- 8) What were some of the things you experienced while incarcerated that has affected you?
- 9) How did your incarceration make you feel?
- 10) In what ways was your incarceration helpful/harmful?
- 11) Who, if anyone, have you been able to talk to about these experiences/what do you do when feeling overwhelmed?
- 12) Who at your school knows about your incarceration?
- 13) How did they learn about this?
- 14) If people at your school do know, please share anything you may have noticed about how them knowing this information impacts how they interact with you?
- 15) If people at your school do know, how does it make you feel knowing that others know about your incarceration?
- 16) If people at your school do know, what impact does people knowing this information have on you?
- 17) What are some of the differences you notice about being a student now compared to before your incarceration?
- 18) If you have noticed differences, what do you think led to these differences?

- 19) What do you think about your school's discipline policies?
- 20) Does your school have school resource officers/metal detectors?
- 21) Do these practices make your school any safer?
- 22) Do they help you focus on your academics?
- 23) Why do you think they exist?
- 24) How do your interactions with the legal system/school's discipline policies impact the way you see/think about yourself?
- 25) Why do you attend school?
- 26) What do you want teachers and other school personnel to know about how your incarceration affects you as a student?
- 27) Is there anything that you want to share with me that was not asked in this interview?
- 28) Do you have any questions for me?

APPENDIX H

PARTICIPANT'S LIST OF RESOURCES

24/7 Crisis Hotlines:

- 1) Crisis Call Center - Call: (800) 273-8255, Text: "ANSWER" to 839863
- 2) Crisis Text Line – Text HOME to 741741
- 3) Samaritans Statewide Helpline – Call or Text: (877) 870-4673
- 4) National Suicide Prevention Lifeline – (800) 273-8255
- 5) Emergency Services Program/Mobile Crisis Intervention (ESP/MCI) – (877) 382-1609

Mental Health Facilities:

Please note that under this section I provided the names, locations, and contact information for the facilities close to participants' homes that they could have visited if they experienced any distress as a result of their participation in this study. Additionally, I am intentionally not providing this information here in my continued attempt to honor participants' confidentiality.

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