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FORMERLY INCARCERATED YOUTH AND THEIR MOTIVATION
FOR RE-ENTERING THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM**

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A NARRATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FORMERLY
INCARCERATED YOUTH AND THEIR MOTIVATION FOR RE-ENTERING THE
PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
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by

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ABSTRACT

A NARRATIVE STUDY EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF FORMERLY INCARCERATED YOUTH AND THEIR MOTIVATION FOR RE-ENTERING THE PUBLIC EDUCATION SYSTEM

Dominique Ramos

Nearly 34% of students who drop out of high school do so due to being incarcerated. Research has shown that students of color and those receiving special education services are at an increased risk of transitioning from the public education system to the criminal justice system in what is referred to as the School-to-Prison-Pipeline (Annamma, 2015; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Hart & Mueller, 2012; Pyle et al., 2016). A bigger issue than the graduation rate is understanding what motivates students to return to public education, post-incarceration, to complete their high school requirements as told by the students. For this study, four individuals who were incarcerated but have since earned their high school diploma or completed the General Educational Development test (GED) were selected to participate. All participants (n = 4) received case management services via an agency with a mission of assisting formerly incarcerated youths to reintegrate with society, but specifically with education for the purpose of this study. English is the primary language for all participants – three of whom are male and the fourth is a female student. This narrative study involves each participant engaging in a series of four semi-structured interviews discussing their perceptions of school and incarceration as well as the motivations behind their actions which led to incarceration and their subsequent return to public education. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed with the help of the software program, Dedoose. This study

sought to fill a significant gap in research relating to student incarceration and public education reintegration by allowing the participants to share their life experiences. The design of this study allowed for the participants to reflect on their experiences and express what motivated them to make the decisions they have made throughout their lives. Ultimately, this study serves to inform educators on how to best support students at-risk of incarceration and provide effective interventions based on the self-report of individuals who experienced these circumstances.

Keywords: narrative, adolescent, juvenile incarceration, motivation, youths, criminal justice, education

DEDICATION

First, I dedicate this body of work to my sons, Orlando Xavier, and Gary Benjamin, my two guardian angels who have stayed by my side through this entire process. And my daughter, Amelia Valorie Sage, my unexpected jellybean who has traveled the tail end of this journey with me through early mornings and late nights. My desire to make you proud of me is what pushed me through all the trials, stress, tears, and moments when I wanted to give up. Mommy loves you forever and always, this is for us!

Next, I would like to dedicate this to all the Black and Brown girls and boys who see me and know and believe that this is possible. We can become doctors. We can become anything we want to be with hard work, perseverance, and motivation! You are not alone, and you are deserving of all the beautiful things life has to offer.

Thirdly, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all the kiddos who were dealt a rough hand of cards, totally out of their control. You are stronger than you know and so capable. You are worthy, you are loved, and you matter.

Finally, I dedicate this to the participants of my study. This study has no value, no relevance and no importance without your voice, your stories, your insight, and perspective. Thank you for trusting me to not only listen to your experiences, but also for trusting me to share them in a way that will help others.

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CHAPTER 1

The high school dropout rate in the United States is a significant issue. While there are many reasons why a student may drop out of high school, a concerning number of students are dropping out of school due to involvement in the juvenile criminal justice system, or incarceration (Greenwood, 2008; Hirschfield, 2009; McFarland, J., et al., 2019). According to the Juvenile Residential Facility Databook Census as of 2018, there were a total of 37, 529 juvenile offenders being held in 1, 510 public or private facilities. In the state of New York, the number of juvenile offenders in a correctional facility totaled 891 in 2018 (Puzzanchera et al., 2020). The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) released their most recent data on high school dropout rates in 2018 indicating that of students, aged 16–24, who did not obtain a high school diploma, 33.7% were living in institutionalized settings. In this case, “Persons living in institutionalized group quarters, include[es] adult and juvenile correctional facilities, nursing facilities, and other health care facilities” (McFarland et al., 2020). According to NCES, there was a reported jump in high school graduation rates from 69% to 85% from the 2010–2011 school year to the 2017–2018 school year (McFarland et al., 2020). However, “Schools are a significant contributor to the current prison crisis with more than half of incarcerated individuals entering prison without a high school diploma” (Wilson, 2014, p. 49). This study delves into how educators can begin to address this concern from the perspective of the students.

Research has shown that disproportional treatment and practices across discipline and special education services have led to disproportionate representation of minorities and students with disabilities becoming incarcerated. This seemingly linear line from

school justice to criminal justice is called the school-to-prison pipeline, or STPP (Annamma et al., 2014). The STPP emerged in response to “zero tolerance” rhetoric in the 1980s which were enacted under the premise of reducing the war on drugs by “issuing mandatory prison sentences for certain drug related offenses” (McNeal, 2016, p. 288). By the 1990s, police officers became more visible in public school settings under the presumption that they would improve school safety. However, as McGrew (2016) points out,

A more accurate assessment of the related historical development of public education and juvenile incarceration in the United States, however, reveals that poor people have been targeted in related historical periods in an effort to undermine their growing political influence. (p. 350)

These tendencies toward harsher punishments seem to be directed toward impoverished students and students of color. And despite national trends of crime declining over the last two decades, "harsh disciplinary procedures, school-based police officers, mandatory reporting of behavioral incidents, and the use of school exclusion as a punishment have become commonplace" (Wilson, 2014, p. 50). This shows that national trends do not automatically translate to the school system and should thus be reviewed and critiqued more than usual.

Research has shown that African American males are at a much higher risk of disciplinary infractions and consequences (such as suspension or expulsion) than their White counterparts (McCarter, 2016; McIntosh et al., 2014; McNeal, 2016). There is also a discrepancy between students who are considered general education versus special education. Much like youth of color, students with disabilities, especially those classified

as having an emotional disturbance and/or a learning disability and overall delays in literacy are far more likely to be incarcerated than their general education counterparts (Annamma, 2015; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Hart & Mueller, 2012; Pyle et al., 2016).

Though research tends to focus on boys, the number of girls entering the juvenile justice system is steadily increasing (Chauhan & Reppucci, 2008) and the disparity among female juvenile offenders is significant with a majority being African American girls with a special education classification of an emotional disturbance (Gage et al., 2012). Additional factors that contribute to juvenile criminal detention of girls includes race, age at first arrest, familial criminality, and multiple forms of childhood abuse/trauma (Colman et al., 2008). Not exclusive to gender is the impact that family and school relationships can have on students; either leading them further down the pipeline to incarceration or being spared from it (Hart & Mueller, 2012).

School officials and staff within the juvenile criminal justice system are in a unique position to observe and work with students throughout the day. Given their close and frequent proximity, they have a chance to observe students naturally and make inferences based on what they know about the student (Ramos, 2020). With that information, these professionals have opportunities to intervene and potentially provide life-altering supports (McIntosh et al., 2014). However, many policies exist in school that result in the overrepresentation of students of color and those receiving special education services in the criminal justice system (Annamma et al., 2014; Scott, 2017). The school-to-prison pipeline is punitive, rather than restorative and oftentimes, this impacts groups of minority students at a higher rate than their white counterparts.

The research is not limited to the risk factors that potentially lead students to become incarcerated. It also speaks to programs and initiatives that can eradicate the school-to-prison pipeline (Scott, 2017). These programs are meant to assist students at-risk of becoming incarcerated and are initiatives that focus on supporting youth who have incarcerated family members (Weissman & LaRue, 1998). In addition, research has investigated methods that are designed to lower the number of students who become incarcerated in the first place (McIntosh et al., 2014). This research highlights a proactive approach to addressing STPP concerns. But it lacks the individualized and personal perspective of the youths who have been incarcerated.

Finally, those seeking to explore what motivates students who are or have been incarcerated are uncommon and much of their research is novel. Schlesinger (2005) posited that little is known about the motivation to learn among incarcerated individuals, especially Black males. While other research has noted internal motivation can be boosted by external support systems that offer encouragement to the incarcerated youth, especially upon release (Panuccio et al., 2012). And regardless of how they cultivate it, research indicates that students with higher self-esteem and self-efficacy (two important factors in the development of motivation) are more likely to not recidivate post-incarceration (Toldson et al., 2010). It is important to continue to listen directly to the student voice when attempting to help them.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this narrative study is to explore student motivation among those who were formerly involved with the criminal justice system as youths but have since reentered the public education system and completed their high school diploma or general

educational development (GED). As noted previously, research has long studied the causes of and indicators leading to a student becoming incarcerated; as well as the means to reduce the impact and number of students that enter the criminal justice system (Scott, 2017). However, little research has asked the student themselves to describe their experiences and explore their reasons for engaging in the behaviors that lead to their incarceration. Specifically, the intention is to capture the participants' life experiences: their childhood, their environment, their family, and their school life, to examine how it has influenced the decisions they made that led to their incarceration and to reintegrate into public education after their release.

Statement of the Problem

The school dropout rate for incarcerated students is a significant problem. Programs that are designed to prevent or lessen the number of students from becoming incarcerated (McIntosh et al., 2014; Scott, 2017) do little to address the individual issue – that of the student's own motivations, and understanding of those motivations, which lead to incarceration and those that motivate them when they are re-integrating into the public education system, if they so choose.

Researchers have looked at the problem of the STPP from both quantitative and qualitative methods. They have explored teacher and juvenile justice staff observations and biases to explain why some youths are more susceptible to becoming incarcerated than others (Annamma, 2015; Cole & Cohen, 2013). Yet, very few, have inquired of the student themselves what they believe the root causes of their incarceration are and how to successfully reintegrate and subsequently complete their formal education.

Theoretical Framework

This study will include two theoretical frameworks that balance each other and help shape the lens of the research. Both Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and Weick's Sensemaking theory (2015) explore how student motivations are affected by what needs have been met in their life and sensemaking theory will help the participant to better understand how their perceptions of others influenced their opinions of self and decisions. Sensemaking theory will also provide educators and administrators with more poignant information on what works for youth at-risk of incarceration and what does not.

The theoretical framework for this study is centered on Maslow's (1943) theory of motivation – the hierarchy of needs and how those impacts both internal and external motivation. In Maslow's theory of motivation, he posits that there are five sets of goals that can be referred to as basic needs. These five needs are physiological (food, shelter, water), safety (protection from dangers both natural and unnatural), love (a sense of belonging, friendship, romantic love), esteem (a desire for stability and self-respect), and self-actualization (a desire to do what ultimately makes themselves happy). While Maslow's hierarchy of needs is often presented in a pyramid style, Maslow himself acknowledged that most behaviors have multiple motivators and that at any given moment behaviors can be prejudiced by several, or even all, of the basic needs at once.

In relation to this study, Maslow's theory (1943) applies to uncover the motivations behind the actions of the individuals participating in this study. When thinking about students who engage in delinquent behaviors, one often looks to their family life and childhood experiences to explain their actions. Maslow similarly posited

that the five stages in the hierarchy of needs are best observed in babies and young children who do not inhibit their emotions. He stated,

Injustice, unfairness, or inconsistency in the parents seems to make a child feel anxious and unsafe. . . . Perhaps one could express more accurately by saying that the child needs an organized world rather than an unorganized or unstructured one. (p. 375)

We can expand on that statement and apply it to schools as well since children spend a significant amount of time there. Feeling safe, protected, and valued within the school setting can be greatly beneficial to keeping students engaged in school and farther away from the STPP.

By delving into the experiences of students who have been incarcerated and since reintegrated into the public education system and completed their high school diploma or GED, the goal is to identify what areas within the hierarchy of needs may not have been met which fueled their decision making. A better understanding of how students view their worlds and their rationale for the choices they make can influence how schools operate and support the social and emotional needs of the student body. This research can potentially aid in preventing entry to the school-to-prison pipeline, limit the number of students who enter the criminal justice system, and provide better supports for students who are reintegrating to reduce recidivism and increase the odds of the student graduating high school.

The participants will be sharing personal information and reflecting on their lives in a way they may never have consciously done before. However, Weick's *Sensemaking Theory* can offer a different perspective to stakeholders learning from the shared life

stories of the participants. According to Weick et al. (2005), “Sensemaking is about the interplay of action and interpretation rather than the influence of evaluation on choice. When action is the central focus, interpretation, not choice, is the core phenomenon” (p. 409). The participants in this study may feel as though they had no choice or options available to them other than the ones that lead them to becoming involved in the criminal justice system. Using Weick’s sensemaking theory can also help the participants to better interpret the events in their life rather than focusing on the choices themselves. By extension, it will also provide insight for educational leaders regarding the current academic experiences of other students and how they are navigating the public education system.

Significance of the Study

The topic of youth incarceration is multi-layered and complicated. Youthful incarceration often leads to students dropping out of school before they can earn a high school diploma. The benefit of this study to the participants is insight into their behaviors, and perhaps, a new level of accountability. The intention is also to inform key stakeholders in the students’ educational system about their impressions of school discipline and its influence on how they are motivated. Being armed with that information can change how school discipline is navigated. By involving the student, Mallet (2014) notes that educators can avoid the three side-effects of pain-based strategies:

1. A self-protective posture – “a focus on consequences and pain causes the wrongdoer to turn inward and protect himself or herself, rather than outward to understand the harm done by one’s own actions” (p. 157).

2. A sense of powerlessness – the adage speaks true that hurt people hurt people. And “when one person becomes less healthy, the whole community suffers” (p. 158).
3. A negative attitude – “Separation from the community as punishment (an event) fosters a negative evaluation of school and thus reduces commitment to learning” (p. 158).

Engaging the participants of this study and allowing them to freely express their journey can further aid in reducing the school-to-prison pipeline. According to the National Education Goals which were supposed to be attained by the year 2000, the second goal was to have a national 90% high school graduation rate (www.education.uslegal.com). However, many of the policies in place in schools are punitive; not restorative, and they do not leave much margin for extenuating circumstances and/or the student having appropriate cognition to be responsible for their actions. Mongan and Walker (2012) pointed out that zero tolerance and gun safety law were passed to protect students and provide a safe space for learning. Despite that, they explicitly detail how ineffective zero tolerance policies have been, saying

These policies do not directly address reintegration, rehabilitation, and restoration, and is ineffective at incapacitation. Zero tolerance weapons policies also fail to incapacitate since expulsion has been seen to be a major stressor, which could trigger more extreme forms of school violence. The policy also cannot act as a deterrent as it has the potential to be completely random, which illustrates the inability of the policy to correctly assign blame to perpetrators. (p. 239)

Essentially, the structures put in place to “keep students safe” ultimately became something harmful to students by increasing the disparity in treatment among students by race, educational classification, and gender. This study will examine the effects of the STPP but from the student’s direct perspective rather than a cold, detached analysis of documented causes of students succumbing to the STPP.

The research has highlighted the inception of the STPP’s origins from the 1990s to present day. Researchers specifically examined how zero tolerance policies created a punitive culture within schools (McCarter, 2016; McNeal, 2016; Miller et al., 2019), the known factors leading to students succumbing to the school-to-prison pipeline relating to race, gender, educational designation, and parental and school influence (Annamma, 2015; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Frey et al., 2009; Hart & Mueller, 2012; McDaniel, 2015; Pyle et al., 2016). In addition, past researchers also looked at what motivates students’ post-incarceration to return to the public education system (Panuccio et al., 2012; Schlesinger, 2005; Toldson et al., 2010). However, gaps in the research still exist.

While some researchers have sought to explain how the school-to-prison pipeline continues to occur and what resources may limit those outcomes, few studies have explored this topic from the perspective of the student. Particularly, the student’s introspection into how they believe they succumbed to the STPP and their own motivations for their behaviors and subsequent actions post-release. This study begins answering those questions employing a narrative approach to investigating student motivation as it relates to their previous incarceration and post-release. Ultimately the goal is to bridge the gap between research and life experiences and give voice to the contributing factors leading to our students becoming incarcerated as well as insight into

why some programs work for this population while others do not. The key lies within the individual. Consistent with the Vincentian mission of St. John's University, this study seeks to empower students who have been formerly incarcerated to share their life experiences and motivations to return to the public education system. Their unique voice and introspection are not a regular theme in research and thus this study allows their voice to take the stage so educational leaders can better structure their schools to best support all students; but especially those more at-risk of becoming incarcerated.

Research Questions

The purpose of this narrative study is to investigate the motivations behind the actions of students who have been incarcerated and are now reintegrating into the public education system. This narrative approach allows attention to be given to “the larger sociopolitical narratives in the context as well to the trust and relationship between researcher and participant” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 216). The intention is to discover, from the students' perspective, what they found motivating about school and returning to it once they were released from the criminal justice system and what school officials can do to better support students to prevent them from entering the criminal justice system and reintegrate post-incarceration. The guiding questions for this study are:

1. How do formerly incarcerated students make sense of the educational and institutional journey?
2. What motivates formerly incarcerated students to return to school?
3. What is the nature of support for these students?

Research Design and Data Analysis

This study is a qualitative, oral history narrative analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018) exploring the experiences of students who have been previously incarcerated as youths and have since reintegrated into the public education system by completing their high school diploma or GED. This study will be conducted in a suburban county in New York with participants of varying backgrounds and demographics. Data will be collected via a series of four interviews with each participant. The interviews will be transcribed and reviewed with everyone to confirm their statements and make any necessary adjustments.

Participants

The researcher will partner with a local trauma informed agency that started its work with survivors of domestic violence. They have expanded to offer a variety of services; including housing, health providers, mental health supports, substance recovery, legal services, LGBTQ+ services, child welfare and family supports. Oftentimes, individuals who have entered the criminal justice system have overlapping needs which the agency addresses. Four participants were selected to participate in the study. The sampling method used for this study was criterion based (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as the participants had to have been previously incarcerated and have since reintegrated into the public education to complete their high school diploma or GED. There is no personal connection to any of the participants. The canvassing letter detailing this study was posted in an open forum within the agency and individuals who were interested initiated contact.

Definition of Terms

Throughout the course of this study, the following terms are used:

Criminal Justice System:

The system of law enforcement that is directly involved in apprehending, prosecuting, defending, sentencing, and punishing those who are suspected or convicted of criminal offences.

Extrinsic Motivation:

Engaging in an activity or behavior to avoid or obtain a separable consequence rather than its inherent satisfaction.

Intrinsic motivation:

Engaging in an activity or behavior for its inherent satisfaction rather than for some separable consequence

Juvenile Detention Center:

A secured housing facility for minors who have committed a crime.

Public Education System:

The system of public funding to provide education of academic curriculum for all students from Grades K–12.

Reintegration:

Integrating back into the public education system post-incarceration.

School-to-Prison Pipeline:

“A complex network of relations that naturalize the movement of youth of color from our schools and communities into . . . permanent detention” (Scott, 2017, p. 41).

Special Education:

Receiving special services to access the general education curriculum under the category of 1 of 13 federally recognized classifications.

CHAPTER 2

This chapter focuses on prior research conducted that highlights the need for this study. In discussing the predominant characteristics of students who become incarcerated, such as traumatic, violent and/or unstable families (Frey et al., 2009; McDaniel, 2015) and their challenges in reintegrating into the public education system; including lack of resources or limited access to resources (Chung et al., 2011; Panuccio et al., 2012), one must discuss the history of the STPP: what it is, how it came about and how students succumb to it. As this chapter highlights, there are many known and documented paths to the STPP. However, using Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs provides a different perspective on how deficits in areas of physiological, emotional, and psychological needs can lead to disastrous consequences. In addition, Weick's Sensemaking Theory provides context and helps both the participant and educators shape the experiences of students who have been incarcerated and are returning to the public education system.

Theoretical Framework

A desire to focus on the motivations behind the participants decisions which lead to incarceration and their post-incarceration goals extended itself very naturally to Abraham Maslow's theory of human motivation. Maslow (1943) noted that,

Any motivated behavior, either preparatory or consummatory, must be understood to be a channel through which many basic needs may be simultaneously expressed or satisfied. Typically, an act has *more* than one motivation. (p. 370)

In five stages, this theory explains the importance of meeting basic human needs. When students are in school, they are expected to focus on their studies. However, this is quite a challenge when their basic needs have not yet been met. Expanding on that, while

speaking specifically about students, they need to feel safe, including at school, as it relates to this study. Moving forward, continuing to focus specifically on the students, these youths expect to feel loved and have the opportunity to love others as well; it offers fulfillment. Building one's self-esteem empowers an individual and improves their feelings of self-worth. Finally, self-actualization allows a person, the student in this case, to recognize their personal goals and aspirations, and pursue them.

Maslow (1943) was quick to point out that these motivators are not mutually exclusive. In fact, he believed that most behavior was multi-motivated. He went so far as to say, "Within the sphere of motivational determinants any behavior tends to be determined by several or *all* of the basic needs simultaneously rather than by only one of them" (p. 382). Intrinsic motivation is characterized by the individuals desire to experience feelings of competence and self-determination (Horyna & Bonds-Raacke, 2012); which corresponds beautifully to Maslow's motivational determinant of self-esteem. Extrinsic motivation corresponds to the more basic needs that Maslow discussed. Extrinsic motivation is driven by reacting to rewards and/or constraints (Horyna & Bonds-Raacke, 2012). Horyna and Bonds-Raacke were not studying students who had been incarcerated. Rather, they were investigating if a student's motivational tendencies, among other variables, influenced their choice to attend college. They had 283 participants who were enrolled in undergraduate programs: with 170 female and 113 males. They found that developing a student's intrinsic motivation improves their overall academic achievement. My study focuses on student motivation but also how students perceive their motivation. If students who have been incarcerated can develop their intrinsic motivation,

they may find even more of a desire to return to school and complete their high school diploma.

Intrinsic motivation is also linked to improved well-being and student achievement which is what adds to its value as motivation. Maslow (1943) discussed the importance of recognizing varying levels of motivation. He theorized that there are degrees of motivation and while some behavior is highly motivated, other behaviors are weakly or not motivated at all (p. 382). In their study, Klæisjen et al. (2018) studied teacher motivations and how that impacted this innovation in the classroom with students. From the two, 385 teachers who completed the questionnaire, the researchers found that the more teachers felt satisfied with their psychological needs being met, the more intrinsically motivated they were. Once again, while this study focused on teachers, it can translate to other individuals, or in this case, students. It is human to be more highly motivated when you do not have to be concerned about having your basic needs met.

Maslow (1943) quantified that when the most basic physiological needs are not met, that becomes the entire focus of the individual – to eat, to drink, to have shelter. However, when those basic needs are met, the individual can then give their attention to the other motivators within the hierarchy. As noted in the prior research, many students who have been incarcerated have a history of growing up in low-income families or experiencing or viewing violence (Colman et al., 2008; Frey et al., 2009). These childhood experiences can have an adverse effect on the students' ability to develop their intrinsic motivation as their focus is their physiological needs and safety.

When people are in the midst of trauma it can be difficult to make sense of what is happening. Often, there is no time to process what is happening and the focus is on

survival and finding a way to get their basic needs met, as Maslow suggests. The participants of this study have experienced trauma from being incarcerated, notwithstanding any other extenuating circumstances. However, it is possible to make sense of the chaos. “To trace something unknown back to something known is alleviating, soothing, gratifying and gives moreover a feeling of power” (Weick, 2015, p. 117). This study helps the participants to, not only identify the areas of need in their life that was not being met, but also to frame it to understand how that influenced their decision making. It also helps educators put concerning student behaviors in perspective to allow for a more proactive approach as opposed to the current punitive and reactive stance toward student behaviors.

Sensemaking theory is complex and intricate to explain, “It is usually an attempt to grasp a developing situation in which the observer affects the trajectory of that development” (Weick, 1999, p. 41). Sensemaking is comprised of seven properties which fluctuate in their relevance given the circumstances. But each of the seven influence individuals and can influence their perceptions and conceptions. The seven properties are: social context – relationships that are either encouraged and supported or discouraged and neglected; personal identity – an individual’s sense of self and if they feel valued or devalued; retrospect – the ability to reflect on past actions to provide context to events that already transpire; salient cues – how small indicators of a situation can be enhanced or disregarded as a means to confirm or dispute how the person is interpreting the situation; ongoing projects – the need to adjust to spontaneous experiences as they unfold; plausibility—the way the events are experienced are credible and consistent, when that is lost, it becomes uniquely challenging for someone to comprehend what is happening; and

finally, enactment—initiating an action to elicit a response to see how the circumstances may be effected (Weick, 1999, 2015). As the participants engaged in the interview process, they ascribed these properties to their experiences as they reflected through the process of sharing their stories. Their ultimate perception can be used to help inform future student needs of those with similar backgrounds.

Weick’s sensemaking theory ties nicely with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs because it involves organizing thoughts (Weick et al., 2005) and that kind of clarity can help the participants of this study regain a sense of accountability and can attain a feeling of “gratification of their ‘self-actualization’” (Bridgman et al., 2019, p. 81), which is one of the higher levels of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. This theoretical framework also provides a different lens for this study which has rarely been used in prior research. To follow is an extensive review of existing research relating to the STPP and what kinds of factors increase a student’s chances of ending up on that course. But they are not told in a narrative form directly from the student. In fact, it is even less common to circle back to the student and empower them to assess their circumstances and analyze how they navigated them. This study will inform students and educators equally on what types of interventions can be integrated into the public education system.

Review of the Literature

The articles used in this study were selected by the researcher using the St. John’s University library to specifically search for peer-reviewed articles from reputable search engines. Studies were limited to include only those conducted from 2010 to the present. Archived articles were vetted for their relevance when discussing trends in the STPP and their historical value in shaping and defining the issues. Keyword searches included:

school-to-prison pipeline, juvenile delinquency, risk factors, special education, race, gender, motivation, motivation theory, intrinsic motivation, sense-making theory, criminal justice, recidivism, re-integration, school personnel and criminal justice personnel. The literature reviewed throughout this chapter will aid in identifying the gaps in research creating the need for the current study.

The themes for the literature review are as follows: the history of the school-to-prison pipeline, the risk factors/indicators of students to enter the school-to-prison pipeline; namely, race, gender, special education designation and family influence, the perspectives of shareholders in identifying students at risk of the school-to-prison pipeline and finally, the motivations for students to re-integrate into the public education system while avoiding recidivism.

History of School-to-Prison Pipeline

While there is no literal pipeline that extends from schools to prisons, the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) has long been identified as a system that disproportionately sends students of disadvantaged backgrounds, select minority groups and special education students from excessive punitive actions in school to criminal activity that leads to the criminal justice system (Barnes & Motz, 2018; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2017; McNeal, 2016; Scott, 2017).

Dating back to the 1980s and 1990s (McCarter, 2016; McNeal, 2016; Miller et al., 2019), the national approach to the perceived national war on drugs and rising gun issues created the perfect storm for the era of *Zero Tolerance*. Originally designed to reduce growing crime, the *Zero Tolerance* policies were initially a criminal justice initiative. However, over time, schools began to adopt these policies as well, oftentimes instituting

policies that doled out excessively punitive responses to misbehaviors “without consideration of offense severity, mitigating circumstances, or context” (McCarter, 2016, p. 54).

Instead of encouraging rehabilitation, the STPP fosters an ongoing cycle of incarceration (Miller et al., 2019). Many researchers have documented the long-term effects of the STPP and their disparity regarding race. The noted inequities in severe school punishments on youth of color can directly impact the potential for arrest and incarceration later in life, leading to the inequities evident today within the criminal justice system (Barnes & Motz, 2018). For example, in 1995 when most of the *Zero Tolerance* policies had been implemented in the city of Chicago, they saw a spike in expulsions from 81 to 1,000 by 1998; with “43 percent of Black students in Grades 6 through 12 experienced suspensions compared with 22 percent Hispanic students and 16 percent White students” (McCarter, 2016). These numbers are reflected in the national mass incarceration numbers with the United States encompassing only 5% of the world’s population but 25% of its incarcerated population. And of those incarcerated, 40% are African American males despite making up only 13% of the United States population (Scott, 2017).

Delale-O’Connor et al. (2017) identified the following ten themes as the major contributors to the STPP:

1. Funding disparities
2. Lack of geographical or contextual opportunity
3. Unequal access to high-quality health, childcare, and educational services
4. Zero-tolerance disciplinary policies

5. Subjective teacher and administrative disciplinary practices
6. Lack of understanding/expectations by educators
7. Lack of educator preparation focused on race and class
8. Unaddressed trauma
9. Criminalization of school facilities
10. Inappropriate juvenile detention facilities (p. 180).

Some of the factors listed are spoken about frequently in current times. Society at large is aware of the disparities in school funding, quality health care and educational services and unaddressed trauma because of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it is rarely discussed how zero-tolerance policies vary from state-to-state and even town-to-town based on the subjective ideologies of the school leaders. In addition to the challenges that overly punitive, criminalized school facilities have on the students enrolled within them; we must discuss the challenges that students face when they are paired with teachers who are ill prepared to connect with students of a different race or socio-economic class. All these factors can unfairly impact a student and potentially lead them into the STPP.

In Scott's (2017) article, he sought to shift perspectives from the school-to-prison pipeline to how best to restore these youthful offenders to access education post-incarceration. He conducted a qualitative study in which he interviewed five individuals (four women, one man) who were enrolled in the Sister Jean Hughes Adult High School (SJHAS), an alternative school in the southside of Chicago, Illinois, for formerly incarcerated students. Scott referred to this program as the "prison-to-school" pipeline. He provided an in-depth history on the school-to-prison pipeline. Scott noted that

minorities, poor and uneducated individuals are more likely to be directed into the school-to-prison pipeline. As the need to impose stricter consequences for what is deemed to be delinquent behaviors, schools normalized this level of punitive action against students, having an especially adverse effect on

African American boys and other minority, poor, and non-gender conforming students, that is documentable, leading to increased detention, suspension, and expulsion rates of poor, minority, and LGBTQ populations... [which led to] increased probability of arrest, conviction, and incarceration. This is the core process that creates the school-to-prison pipeline. (Scott, 2017, p. 43)

Here again, research is showing that many of the factors leading students to the STPP are largely out of their control. Considering how many odds are stacked against students without their influence. My study will seek to address how the participants viewed their experiences and if it is through a deficit lens (what they never had) or if they are more open to being held responsible for their choices. More importantly, my study will provide a voice to the participants so they can share their motivations, despite their circumstances.

McIntosh et al. (2014) intended to inform and improve issues within the educational and legal systems rather than solely identify them. Rather than conduct a study, they used existing literature to support their conceptual framework to reduce implicit bias within the school system. They included articles from various specialty areas including education, cognitive and social psychology. The intervention methods they put forth in their article will be discussed in greater detail in the upcoming subheadings. To lay the groundwork for their study, they explained how the school-to-

prison pipeline they explained how “zero tolerance” approaches to discipline began to rise in the early 1990s. The more heavily schools relied on policing and law enforcement, the more referrals for suspensions and expulsions increased.

Researchers have long sought to find the reason for disparities in school discipline among various groups of students. McIntosh et al (2014) instead directly attributed disparities to race. The authors clearly reported,

A number of structural explanations for disproportionality have been proposed (e.g., poverty, different base rates of problem behavior), but none have empirical support. African American students are referred and suspended at higher rates than their White peers, even after controlling for individual SES and other demographic variables. (p. 2)

In addition, they noted that when White students were referred for office disciplinary referrals (ODRs) it was often for concrete problem behaviors like smoking or vandalism, whereas their Black student counterparts were given ODRs for more abstract, less definable reason, like “disruption.”

McIntosh et al. (2014) elaborated that the significance of the STPP is the unique position educators and schools are in as they have exceedingly early contact with students and are designed to have an impact on their lives and developing their potential later in life. By using the multi-discipline approach (education, cognitive and social psychology) the authors can broaden the range of ideas and methods available to reduce bias and disproportionality in schools and the STPP.

Identified Risk Factors for the School-to-Prison Pipeline

Researchers have long sought to explain, define, and conceptualize how and why students become more susceptible to the STPP than others. This section will delve into the various factors that can impact a student and lead to them entering the STPP.

Special Education. Special education has been researched as a leading factor on the STPP. Students who are classified as having a disability are often students of color (Mallet, 2014; Pyle et al., 2016). Regardless of race, research has shown that delays in verbal skills and/or a learning disability can also negatively impact a student's likelihood of being referred to special education and subsequently into the STPP (Barret & Katsiyannis, 2017; Foley, 2001). This section will focus specifically on the road to STPP via special education.

Pyle et al. (2016) conducted "A comprehensive search of the literature from 1979 to 2013 identified 85 articles of individual-level risk characteristics that relate to mental health, personality, psychological factors, social/emotional-behavioral issues, cognitive-intellectual development, academic achievement, victimization history, and substance use" (p. 172). They found four risk factor domains that put students at a greater risk for incarceration; they are: the individual, family, peers, and school and community. Within those domains, "Several characteristics pertain to individual risk factors for incarceration, including early antisocial behavior, high and low behavioral inhibition, poor cognitive development, low intelligence, and hyperactivity" (p. 172).

As Pyle et al. (2016), delved into the achievement gap between incarcerated youths and their peers, they found,

on average, juvenile offenders lag 4 years behind their peers in reading comprehension and arithmetic computation. . . . As a group, incarcerated youth demonstrated significant academic difficulty, attended school less often, and on average, only completed the ninth grade. (p. 179)

When students of color present with difficulty in school, whether behaviorally, academically, or both, they are often referred to special education at a higher rate than their White peers, which adds to their overrepresentation in special education and the criminal justice system.

Mallet (2014) also conducted research to see the trends in discipline and punishment for students classified as having a learning disability, versus students in the general education setting. He found,

School-related outcomes for youthful offenders included two findings: (1) that those with learning disabilities were suspended more than twice as frequently as their nondisabled peers; and (2) that this same group of youthful offenders with learning disabilities was less frequently behind in academic grade level, in other words, not held back from their peers. (p. 149)

However, even the results of his study were not without a racial component. As part of his findings, Mallet uncovered that while White youthful offenders comprised nearly two-thirds of offenders with a learning disability, they were only about one-third of students who were in the juvenile court population. Further, “It should be noted that the two-county population is majority (74 percent) Caucasian (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011); however, the juvenile offender population is disproportionately (68 percent)

minority” (p. 149). This once again shows that discrepancies in how special education students also overlaps with students of color.

Foley (2001) conducted a literature review to catalog the academic characteristics of incarcerated youth and the educational programs that support them while incarcerated. To accrue the articles for the review, Foley conducted a hand search of 64 journals across various disciplines, including but not limited to, criminal justice, social work, school psychology and vocational education, for the years from 1975 to 1999. In addition to that search, Foley conducted an internet search of peer reviewed articles from reputable journals for the years of 1975 to 2000. Finally, Foley consulted the bibliographies of the articles selected to expand on the research found.

Foley (2001) found that intellectually, most incarcerated youths fell within the Low Average to Average range of cognitive functioning. However, there was a discrepancy between their verbal and nonverbal abilities with verbal abilities showing to be a significant weakness and potential factor in recidivism. Academically, incarcerated youths were performing at a fifth to ninth grade level. Interestingly, higher math ability in incarcerated female students was an indicator that they would be less likely to recidivate (pp. 249–252). Recidivism is an important factor when determining risk factors for students:

Youth with disabilities make up a substantial portion (12% to 17%) of the incarcerated juvenile population . . . 20% of youth with disabilities had recidivated within 6 months of their release compared to 12% recidivism rate for youth without disabilities. (p. 249)

In their multi-agency and multi-cohort study on juvenile offenders and recidivists, Barrett and Katsiyannis (2017) sampled 200,000 youth, half of which had been incarcerated. The researchers were seeking to identify markers that would indicate a student would be more likely to commit an initial offense and the indicators that they would be more likely to recidivate. They obtained their data from various agencies in South Carolina and, including: the departments of mental health, social services, education, and adult law enforcement. Their work was an expansion on previous research they conducted on the same topic.

Barrett and Katsiyannis (2017) first detailed the initial predictors they found for potential juvenile delinquency and subsequent recidivism by citing their own prior research and that of other authors. Among the leading factors are family and social environment, mental health problems, and a history of early aggression. In relation to school specifically, the researchers found three specific areas to watch for as it may leave a student more at-risk for incarceration, and they are: academic achievement, suspensions, drop-out and special education eligibility (p. 2051). Additionally, the authors reported that “having a learning disability increases the odds of being in the delinquent group by 70%” (p. 2054). That statistic is incredibly telling as it demonstrates just how significant it is to be classified as a student receiving special education in terms of how much that increases a student’s odds of ending up on the STPP.

When thinking about students, from kindergarten through 12th grade, it is vital to consider not only who is being referred to special education, but why. The trajectory of their lives can be changed drastically by classifying students, especially students of color.

Family and School Influence. Students spend roughly six to eight hours a day in their school environment, depending on their schedule. Much of their free time is spent with their family. Both family and the interactions students have in school can greatly influence their choices which can potentially lead them down the STPP. Research indicates that there is a positive correlation between an individual's bond to their school and involvement in activities at school to the lower likely they will be incarcerated (Hart & Mueller, 2012). Similar positive correlations were found in students with stronger parental control and more academic motivation (Frey et al., 2008).

In a quantitative study, Hart and Mueller (2012), using Hirschi's social bond theory as a framework, looked at school delinquency and social bond factors that could potentially keep students from becoming incarcerated. These factors were social bonds—categorized as “parental involvement, bond to school, beliefs, commitment to sport activities, commitment to non-sport activities, and involvement” (p. 116) and school delinquency; specifically looking at differences by gender. The researchers used archived data from the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002. The participants were randomly sampled and only 10th grade students' data was used.

Hart and Mueller (2012) found that four of the six social bonds they analyzed had relevant implications for future delinquency for both genders: “Greater parental involvement, stronger bond to school, greater commitment to non-sport activities, and greater involvement were linked to lower levels of school delinquency” (p. 127). Interestingly, the two factors that displayed the highest correlation between social bonds and lower school delinquency (bond to school and commitment to sports) were stronger among boys than girls. The researchers provided suggestions on how to better engage

male students and potential programs to create to keep them from becoming incarcerated. Yet, recommendations for female students were notably absent.

Frey et al. (2008) sought to investigate the role of social attachment and family involvement in the development of negative behaviors among high schoolers. The authors used data from two longitudinal studies looking into the risk and protective factors for “problem” behaviors among inner city youth. They conducted a qualitative study using the Social and Health assessment (SAHA), they gave the survey to students in a public-school system in the Northeastern United States—engaging specifically with 17 middle and high schools. 1,246 eighth grade students completed the survey and just over half ($n = 652$) completed the survey again in ninth grade.

Frey et al. (2008) found that “students with consistently high attachment to school had lower levels of violent behavior and aggressive beliefs, perceived school climate more positively, and had higher academic motivation” (p. 6). The authors found that parental control was positively linked to academic motivation and negatively tied to violent behavior. Overall, students who had a good relationship with their parents and felt they had the support of their teachers, were less likely to engage in violent behavior, which could subsequently lead to the STPP.

In a similar vein, Hirschfield and Gasper (2011), explored the relationship between school engagement and academic success and school completion. The study was set in Chicago and used survey data from fifth to eighth grade students within 22 public schools. Students were surveyed twice a year over five years. Hirschfield and Gasper looked at school engagement through three lenses: behavioral, emotional, and cognitive engagement in school.

Hirschfield and Gasper (2011) found that the correlation between engagement and delinquency can be ambiguous. They identified, “evidence that both emotional and behavioral engagement have an effect on delinquency, whereas the impact of delinquency on disengagement appears relatively short-term and limited to cognitive engagement” (p. 16). Behavioral disengagement is highly predictive of higher rates of school delinquency and general misconduct. Regarding emotional engagement, they found that among African American and impoverished students, were more likely to have a reduction in delinquency when their emotional engagement was higher. Interestingly, however, increased cognitive engagement correlated to higher delinquency. The authors posited that the cognitive link to increased delinquency may be due to academic frustrations when the student does not perceive themselves as academically successful.

This section explored some influence that students can have in their own motivation—based on their level of engagement in school. However, family support can also influence student motivations but that is less in their control.

Race and Gender. Race and gender are two of the most thoroughly researched contributors to students entering the STPP. Students of color are noted as having a higher likelihood of entering the STPP and this is especially elevated for Black girls (Annamma et al., 2014; Chauhan & Reppucci, 2008).

Annamma et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative phenomenological study looking into the outlooks of teachers in the criminal justice system who work with young women of color. They note,

Lower achievement for certain racial groups can be connected not only to racial disproportionality in discipline, but also to special education and juvenile justice

assignment. In other words, it is disproportional treatment and practices across a number of interconnected educational systems that result in the disproportionate outcomes in the School-to-Prison Pipeline. (p. 54)

In Annamma et al.'s (2014) case study, they found that "Youth of color have historically been treated more harshly and have experienced higher rates of arrest, intake, adjudication, and detention than White youth" (p. 74). More specifically, in the state of Colorado,

The . . . average for the youth incarceration rate is 0.29%. American Indian/Native Alaskan students were incarcerated at a rate of 0.59%, Black students at a rate of 1.20%, and Hispanic students at a rate of 0.30%; all these historically marginalized youth of color are, therefore, disproportionately overrepresented in juvenile justice. In contrast, White and Asian/Pacific Islander students were incarcerated at a rate of 0.07% and 0.20% respectively. (p. 73)

The evidence is overwhelming with how different students of color are treated versus their White peers.

In a qualitative study using empirical data, Colman et al. (2009) selected a random sample of 499 girls who had been incarcerated in their youth, to track their outcomes post-incarceration, from the ages of 16–28. They were seeking to find the patterns of offending girls in their adulthood. One of the areas they explored in their research was that of the offenders' early indicators of individual and family functioning. They found that Black women and women who experienced multiple forms of childhood abuse or trauma (sexual and physical) were all more likely to recidivate (pp. 359–360).

In their discussion, Colman et al. (2009) posited, “examination of girls’ early risk profiles by both our recidivist and trajectory group categories suggests that juvenile factors, particularly those related to family functioning, may be useful for identifying those girls most vulnerable to high levels of early adult offending” (p. 364). Identifying early on students who are more likely to be at-risk and offering appropriate interventions and supports can limit their entry into the criminal justice system in the first place.

Chauhan and Reppucci (2008) also found a gap in the research as it relates to girls in the criminal justice system. They noted an increase in girls conducting both violent crimes and destruction of property between (p. 401). In their longitudinal research design, the authors, using a qualitative design, focused on the relationship between neighborhood disadvantage and exposure to violence as a predictor for violence and delinquent behavior once they were out of jail.

As indicators of future behavior go, the researchers found that parental physical abuse, peer physical abuse, and witnessing violence were significantly associated with violent behavior. When examining this at a race specific level, a discrepant pattern of results emerged in which physical abuse was a stronger correlate for White girls and witnessing violence was a stronger correlate for Black girls. (Chauhan & Reppucci, 2008, p. 407)

When discussing the differences among race when either experiencing or viewing violence, the authors reported, that Black girls may be exposed to more severe or a different quality of violence, given that they reside in more impoverished neighborhoods.

Students cannot choose their gender or race at birth and these factors unnecessarily influence the chances of students entering the STPP. It is important to

consider how their own motivations and perceptions of their circumstances and negate some of the factors they are unable to dictate; this is a considerable gap in the research. As notable as race has been in previous research, it is not the focal point of this study to allow the individuals narrative to shine through. Should the participants identify race, specifically, as a contributing factor to their prior incarceration, it will not be highlighted.

Stakeholders' Perspectives on At-Risk Students

School personnel are in a unique position to observe students daily and notice patterns of their behavior as well as their personality and ability to cope and handle situations. Teachers, case managers, juvenile justice personnel and school staff in general, all have different insights into the school-to-prison pipeline and their perspective and interpretation of the students' needs are important (Cole & Cohen, 2013; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Michals & Kessler, 2015; Weissman & LaRue, 1998).

Equally important are the biases school personnel may carry which could impact their perception of what makes a student at-risk. If a teacher carries a racial implicit bias, they may be more likely to refer African American youths for disciplinary infractions than their White counterparts for the same behavior (Barnes & Motz, 2018).

Annamma (2015) sought to investigate just that in her study exploring the dispositions of white teachers working with incarcerated girls of color with disabilities. Using Critical Race Theory as her framework, Annamma (2015) posited that teachers are trained in a manner that begrudges them from acknowledging the race of their students and the impact their race has on their education and lives. Adding to that, she notes that special education is not as prominent as it should be in teacher training programs (p. 294). She goes on to explain how Whiteness can be perceived as property given the

history of race relations in the United States. For her study, Annamma (2015) interviewed and observed 16 teachers, 19 school and security staff and 34 students in two different correctional facilities (one, an open-door community placement; the other, a maximum-security facility) in the Western United States. She triangulated her data with classroom observations, document analyses and participant data analysis (p. 299).

The major themes that emerged from Annamma's (2015) research were:

1. Teachers feel they have insufficient experience and training in working with incarcerated girls who also have special needs.
2. The absence of race in the curriculum.
3. The lack of attention to race and racial inequalities in the school setting (pp. 307–308).

These findings led Annamma to conclude that the inherent whiteness of the teachers did not allow them to see other perspectives and cultures and norms outside their own. Therefore, "in education, one way this is manifested is in the consistent patterns of overrepresentation of children of color in special education, particularly in emotional disabilities" (p. 308).

When students, especially female students of color, do not appear to fall within the typical expectations for teachers, there is a notion that they are disrupting the norms of whiteness. However, "Changing teacher dispositions and pedagogical practices honors the commitment of CRT to activism and provides children of color with a more equitable education" (Annamma, 2015, p. 311). Learning about how teachers perceive incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students allows insight and context into how they treat students of that circumstance. The opposite, understanding student perceptions and motivations

behind their own behaviors, can be equally, if not more insightful into how we need to approach students in the public education system.

In their case study on juvenile justice personnel, Cole and Cohen (2013) conducted individual and some group interviews with 31 various staff people in both managerial and non-managerial positions within the juvenile justice system. They found three major emergent themes relating to what factors make re-entry to the general population more difficult for students. First, they found that teacher/administration attitude and school culture play a substantial role. Not surprisingly, they found, “the schools with which the county juvenile justice center had developed the strongest collaborative relationships were also the schools where successful transitions were thought to be most probable” (p. 24).

The second theme that emerged was that the stigma alone of having been incarcerated is too much of a barrier for re-entering students to overcome. They are viewed more closely and often pre-judged based off what their offense was. In addition, they face the terms of their probation which can be easily violated depending on how they interact with others and comport themselves while in school. And finally, access to information was the third barrier. Transitions from prisons or jails to the public education system are complex and involved. Oftentimes case managers help facilitate the paperwork between the school, correctional facility and the parent/guardian; but this can take time, and schools may be reluctant to register a student without it. This creates a delay in the student returning to school and accessing the curriculum (Cole & Cohen, 2013).

Michals and Kessler (2015), studied the viewpoints of teachers working in prisons. They conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 12 teachers who have taught in some capacity in a prison facility in New York. Many of the teachers spoke positively of their experiences and expressed that they learned as much from the students as they taught them. However, they face many obstacles to supporting the students that are out of their control:

Maintaining the right balance between caring for the students and the imperative of being strictly professional is challenging. This is a challenge for teachers in any setting, but it is magnified in prison where the students' situations are so extreme and the prison rules so strict. (p. 54)

When the teachers interviewed by Michals and Kessler (2015) discussed recidivism, they expressed a desire to not only have the students not become incarcerated again, but also for them to find more fulfillment in their lives. They expressed concerns over the quality of their relationships with their family and children, the kinds of jobs they get, and whether they go to graduate school and develop careers. Half of the teachers talked about the importance of their students finding human fulfillment such as appreciation of beautiful literature or curiosity for interesting ideas (p. 54). These teachers recognize that a key component of avoiding recidivism is having a higher vision of self for the future and developing appropriate interactions with others.

Sanger et al. (2007) took a different approach to identifying teacher perspectives, in that, they interviewed female students to determine their perceptions of teacher and school roles in serving students of this population. They employed a mixed methods approach using Likert-scale surveys, open-ended survey questions and questionnaires

with their 31 female participants who were in a correctional facility at the time of their participation. However, to triangulate their data, Sanger et al. also included two additional separate surveys from principals and speech language pathologists (SLPs) because of their roles in serving students in general and those with special needs. Multiple themes emerged from their study and many of them overlapped among the SLPs, principals and students surveyed. Firstly, among the quantitative portion it was determined that students felt strongly about the four following statements:

1. Violence in school settings is an increasing concern.
2. Teachers should be involved with the educational efforts to plan prevention programs for students involved in violence.
3. Specialists should provide adequate services for children with learning problems involved with violence; and
4. There is a shortage of specialists in school districts to serve children involved in violence. (p. 75)

In this study we were allowed a small window into the student perspective. We find that, even students can recognize the need for teachers to play an active role, but more importantly for the environment to be safe and for student needs to be met. Without using explicit language, both school staff and students are asking for some of their most basic needs to be met within the public education system to improve outcomes.

Quantitatively, similar themes emerged with students noting the need for effectiveness of services, interventions, and suggestions, and relating to students (Sanger et al., 2007) as the major ways schools could intervene in school violence and the subsequent passage to the criminal justice system. The respondents alluded to the need

for alternative options to keep them out of trouble. If schools provide clubs, groups, activities, resources, etc., to students at-risk of violence, they can potentially prevent violence. Overall, in the participants opinion, “teachers lack experience in understanding feelings, needs, and motivations of students involved in violence” (p. 83).

In the previous studies conducted with the SLPs and school principals, similar themes were presented. SLPs noted that they were also concerned about increasing violence, but they felt they did not have enough training to address it and they also felt other educators could not recognize the role of the SLP and communication in addressing violence (Sanger et al., 2007). Among the school principals, consistent with the responses of the SLPs, the researchers found that while principals and school administrators in general, may understand how violence impacts various aspects of the student’s lives, they also lack insight as to how “communication skills can relate to learning and to violence” (p. 71). There is a fundamental need to support students while providing quality education and not only being cognizant of their needs but also trained in addressing those needs.

Preventing the School-to-Prison Pipeline and Addressing Its Long-Term Effects

Understanding that the STPP exists naturally leads researchers to explore ways in which to prevent the STPP. It is important to begin changing the trajectory of the STPP directly in the schools by reducing punitive infractions, employing cultural and racial sensitivities, and encouraging familial support and input (McIntosh et al. 2014; Scott, 2017; Weissman & LaRue, 1998). By addressing the school system directly, the researchers identified ways to slow down and eventually prevent the STPP and address its long-term effects.

In his article, Scott (2017) also offered research to take down the STPP which could prevent students from going down that path in the first place. The opposite of *Zero Tolerance*, restorative justice can lead to fewer suspensions and expulsions. Restorative justice forces school leaders to become creative in administering discipline so students are not removed from the school. Another alternative offered in the Scott article was that of revamping the special education process. As indicated throughout this review of literature, students receiving special education services are at a heightened risk of entering the STPP. Scott (2017) suggests that while there are various classifications available to provide special education services, teachers and administrators are drawn to the more subjective classifications for students of color, such as an emotional disturbance. “As a result, minority students usually find themselves in the school-to-prison pipeline not necessarily because of deviant behavior or incompetence, but because of inadequate decision making by schoolteachers and administrators” (p. 44).

Scott (2017) also suggested that higher education may potentially be another negative influence on the STPP and its overly negative impact on students of color. He posited that criminal justice and law enforcement program should teach through a different paradigm where they mold officers of the court who are more socially conscious of their own inherent biases and the culture of the community and people they serve. He also acknowledged the need to go deeper than that. The effort to eradicate the STPP must include creating “alternative methods, institutions, and practices that attack the root causes of the school-to-prison pipeline such as poverty, overcrowded schools, inadequate welfare systems, etc.” (p. 44).

Weissman and LaRue (1998), conducted a review of programs that were specifically designed to assist children of incarcerated parents. They looked at building trust among these children to support them through what can often be a difficult experience. While this article does not speak to working directly with incarcerated students, they highlight the curriculum used in these programs, which is designed to

help children to develop ways to deal with other children and adults regarding their absent parent; helps youths to make positive choices, set goals, and develop support systems; addresses substance abuse; and promotes an understanding of the corrections system (visiting, contact, parole, release) and legal issues. (p. 587)

These supports and interventions help at-risk students learn about their circumstances and emotions and how best to navigate them in an appropriate manner to avoid incarceration themselves.

As previously discussed, McIntosh et al. (2014) reviewed methods that could lessen the number of students who enter the STPP in the first place. They posit that focusing on quality instruction for all students can help mitigate some of the risks for suspensions and disproportionality based on academic success. Additionally, they tout the use of school-wide positive behavioral interventions and supports (SWPBIS) because it the focus in on

establishing a clear, consistent, and positive social culture. Identifying and teaching clear expectations can reduce ambiguity for both students (e.g., it is not assumed that all students know how to be respectful at school) and adults (e.g., expectations and violations are clearer, reducing ambiguity). (p. 12)

However, they also note the importance of involving families, students and the community when instituting these support systems. The reality is norms differ from culture to culture and it is vital to acknowledge these differences when developing school-wide systems that are meant to reduce disproportionality.

Addressing flaws within the public education system can encourage students; both existing and those considering returning. However, there remains a perspective that is lacking in how to address these areas of weakness: the student perspective. My study will allow the participant to share their perception of the school environment, what worked for them and what did not.

Motivators for Students Reentering the Public Education System

Previous researchers also sought to answer what motivated students to reenter the public education system after having been incarcerated. Researchers have found the most common reasons for students to make the decision to return to school consist of reconnecting with school and finding a passion that can be expanded on in school, the recognition that receiving a minimum of a high school diploma as important in securing gainful employment, and a sense of obligation or responsibility to family members and loved ones (Cummings, 2012; Iachini et al., 2013; McDaniel, 2015; Schlesinger, 2005).

Being motivated to earn a high school diploma or prevent recidivism in general can come from many sources—both external and internal. That is what McDaniel (2015), sought to explore in her study. Specifically, if the *Positive Selves (PS)* self-determination intervention could impact the short-term motivation of youth who have been incarcerated in a youth detention center and the implications for long-term recidivism rates. The 17 participants were selected from a youth detention center in the Southern United States.

All participants were male and between the ages of 15–18, 12 of the participants were African American and 5 were White (p. 12).

As part of her study, McDaniel (2015) had each participant complete a seven-part lesson curriculum broken up into two parts. The first explained what *PS* is, helping the participants identify their strengths and interests and expand on that to uncover their hopes, expectations, and fears, and designing their *PS*. In the latter half of the curriculum, the participants were supported on reflecting on their goals, planning for reaching their goals and then actively working to reach their goals (p. 9). In order to measure the effect of the curriculum, the participants also completed an *Intrinsic Motivation Inventory (IMI)*, measuring their interest and enjoyment, sense of competence and effort; and *Student Evaluation Inventory*, measuring the social validity of the *PS* for their specific population; as pre and posttests. McDaniel noted, however, that only the interest subscale was weighted due to its close correlation to the *PS* curriculum.

McDaniel (2015) found that the *PS* curriculum had a positive effect on their short-term motivation and goal planning. The author also followed up on the youth who participated to investigate if they recidivated. She found:

The documented existing recidivism rate at the local short-term juvenile detention facility was approximately 35%. Six months after receiving the *PS* intervention the recidivism rate for those participants who were released to the community was 21%. This indicates a 14% decrease from the average at the local facility and a 29%–55% decrease from the national recidivism average. (p. 12)

A primary reason for recidivism rates to persist is the high likelihood that incarcerated youths will not graduate high school. In fact, youths who have been arrested are 11%

more likely not to graduate than their non-offending counterparts. And offending youths are 26% more likely to drop out of high school (p. 6). By developing the motivation to develop and pursue their goals, these youths are less likely to recidivate and reach their full potential.

It is also important to review what motivates youths to participate in education while incarcerated. Many juvenile detention centers offer educational programs or academic curriculum that is on par with the student's grade level. However, given their circumstance in that moment, are youth motivated to take advantage of these academic opportunities? Schlesinger (2005) conducted a qualitative study where he interviewed 15 incarcerated African American males in Wisconsin to investigate their motivations for participating in educational programs offered in their correctional facility.

Schlesinger (2005) noted that most offenders have a history of school problems, tend to drop out of school and display lower than average academic skills than the "general adult population" (p. 234). But he wanted to explore learner motivation and see how it can be further developed the internal motivation for adults to learn. While incarcerated, youthful offenders still have access to education; however, Schlesinger highlights that their scholastic experiences are often, unfavorable.

Schlesinger's (2005) ethnographic study used sociocultural theory as its framework to identify their motivations. The data was also analyzed to provide "commentary on social relationships, for themes relating to motivation literature, and for relations between culture, learning, and motivation" (p. 236). He found that while their motivating reasons for engaging in correctional education varied, they all displayed a

strong understanding that limited, or no education would most likely lead them to recidivate.

Of the 15 African American male participants, many stated that they are motivated to participate in the educational opportunities provided because of their families; oftentimes explaining that they wanted to be able to support their children in an academic sense and they did not want to feel ashamed to express that they did not graduate high school. Overall, most of the reasons for participating in the education program were non-education related, with the leading response being that going to school allowed for more peer interactions. Of note though, is that the participants all agreed that education is valuable and that they are more likely to be motivated when learning about areas of personal interest (pp. 241–242). This is crucial for educators to acknowledge and incorporate in programs designed to engage students who are returning from incarceration.

Iachini et al. (2013) conducted an exploratory case study to gain insight into the motivations of students who dropped out of a traditional high school and chose to enter a charter school offering a credit recovery program. There were 31 participants altogether and they participated in semi-structured interviews and focus groups. The researchers investigated three areas to encompass their research: the reasons they were unsuccessful in their traditional school, their motivation for returning to school or transferring to the charter, and the characteristics of their current school (the charter) which promote success (p. 116).

In relation specifically to the participants motivation to return to school, Iachini et al. (2013) found that some students were motivated by a mix of external and internal

factors. Regarding the external factors, participants shared that they were referred to the new school by relatives, close friends, or school personnel that they trusted. Other participants shared that they wanted to prove something to themselves, earn their diploma and/or provide an example for their children. And finally, some participants were motivated by the convenience of the new school (p. 117). It is vital for educators to have direct communication with the population they are trying to reach. In this case, it is having an open dialogue with students who have been incarcerated to determine what will best encourage them to return to public education.

Cummings (2012) acknowledged that disinterest in school is especially common among urban youth due to dealing with “poverty, violence, adolescent parenthood, substance abuse, and incarceration within their community” (p. 18). Cummings entered a large metropolitan area to meet with two art teachers and conduct interviews with them throughout the course of the school year to offer guidance and support while also examining how they develop and nurture a sense of motivation among their students.

Cummings (2012) found “creating authentic and meaningful lessons, providing opportunities for student choice, modifying teaching strategies, and developing supportive relationships were identified as critical when attempting to motivate adolescents in the art classroom” (p. 19). The teachers interviewed understood that the students needed to be engaged by things that interest them, felt real to them. With that in mind, at the beginning of each semester the teachers asked the students to complete questionnaires that would provide insight into their interests and potential talking points for the teachers to develop a more personal relationship with each student.

Overall, the major findings to come out of the work Cummings (2012) show that to motivate students, teachers need to show genuine interest in their lives, meet them where they are at academically, and create creative opportunities for them to discover things about themselves (p. 23). Students benefit when they know their teacher is invested in them and that is demonstrated by their commitment to assisting the students.

In summary, the research shows a clear pathway from school to prison for some students more than others (Annamma et al., 2014; Foley, 2001; Hart & Mueller, 2012). We learned that school personnel often feel many conflicting emotions when working with at-risk and incarcerated youth. Prior research has helped us understand some of the motivators for individuals to return to school post-release (Iachini et al., 2013; Schlesinger, 2005) and what community and agency supports can assist in their endeavors (Cummings, 2012; McDaniel, 2015). This study will tell the story of individuals who were personally incarcerated as youths and were motivated to complete their high school diploma or GED. The intention of this study is to begin filling the gaps in research relating to incarcerated youth by creating the space for them to share their thoughts, feelings, and impressions in their own words. Specifically, what influence from school staff or existing supports did they find especially helpful or harmful; as well as how they perceived what options were available to them. The participants will also be able to explain how they feel they were perceived by school staff and how they wished they had been viewed. Finally, my study will relay the personal intricacies of a student's motivation to return to school and the factors that influenced that decision in their own words.

CHAPTER 3

Introduction

This chapter will discuss research methodology, the methods used to collect and code the data, the approach used to interpret the data and the analysis of the findings. This is a qualitative narrative study that used a series semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to explore participant perceptions of their educational and institutional journey, including their motivations for returning to school and the supports available to them. This chapter details the design and methodology chosen to address the research questions posed. It also includes an in-depth description of the data collection methods employed. Finally, this chapter will lay the foundation for the analysis, findings, and conclusion in the chapters to follow as well as the role of the researcher.

Research Questions

The following questions were used to guide this study:

1. How do formerly incarcerated students make sense of the educational and institutional journey?
2. What motivates formerly incarcerated students to return to school?
3. What is the nature of support for these students?

Research Design

This study is a qualitative, oral history narrative analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018) exploring the experiences of students who were previously incarcerated as youths but have since completed their high school diploma or GED. This study was conducted in a suburban county in New York with participants of varying backgrounds and demographics. The four participants have all received post-incarceration case

management services. The agency is multi-faceted but one of the supports they offer is assisting the participants with accessing education: which can range from re-entering a public high school program, a specialized program as recommended by special education, or entering a GED program; in addition to many other services which often overlap with the needs of individuals who have been incarcerated.

A narrative approach was selected because it “is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience... It is situated in relationships and in community” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 13) and to highlight the personal motivations that led the selected participants to engage in criminal activities and learn of the motivations behind their actions and thought processes post-release (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The qualitative data was collected via a series of four individually administered semi-structured interviews conducted virtually and by phone to comply with COVID-19 social distancing guidelines. The intention of conducting interviews is because a narrative approach is “about people’s experience, to understand each individual’s experience one must understand the social, cultural, familial, linguistic, and institutional narratives that shape, and are shape by, the individual” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 33).

The nature of this study is so personal and unique to the participants. This is their life, their insight, their experience, their secrets, and their truths. The topic alone lent itself to a narrative approach because it tells the “*stories* of individual experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 67). Through the course of interviews, I reconstructed the participants’ experiences with the intention of conveying a message (Creswell & Poth, 2018) to educators about how students experiencing similar events may feel and how to reach them. Of course, it can be difficult to generalize personal accounts of life events.

However, the individuals telling their stories did not experience things in a vacuum; in fact, “these stories are the result of a confluence of social influences on a person’s life, social influences on their environment, and their unique personal history” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 17). This study reveals stories with overlapping themes that are consistent with prior research regarding the school-to-prison pipeline; it also shows conflicting tales of how students potentially become incarcerated and what motivates them to reintegrate into the public education system.

Participants

The four participants for this study include three males and one female who have been incarcerated but are now acclimating to their return to society and the public education system. The participants were not selected randomly. “Qualitative samples tend to be purposeful” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 31). For the purposes of this narrative study, a purposeful sampling approach was employed to determine who the participants would ultimately be. While this method of selecting participants did not lend itself to be applied generally to a specific population; it did allow for the participants selected to best speak to the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All participants reside in a large diverse county on the East Coast of the United States and completed their high school diploma or GED. While school age, all participants were in a general education program. All of the participants grew up in fragmented families and were initially incarcerated between the ages of 15 and 16 (See Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Information

Participants	Current Age	Ethnicity	Length of Total Incarceration(s)	Age of Initial Incarceration
Shuri	26	Black	6 months	16
Tony	22	White	8 months	15
Bruce	31	Black and Latino	3 1/2 years	15
Samuel	27	Black	14 months	15

Given the narrative approach taken for this study, the data is limited to the experiences of the four young people in this suburban county. However, it is anticipated that the information collected will guide future research into student motivations and how school officials can inspire, support, and understand them better. The intention behind multiple interviews is to establish rapport and create a space for the participants to feel open to being vulnerable and sharing greater details about their life experiences. It is important to me that the participants feel secure and can trust that their stories will be told with fidelity and expressed in a manner that is accessible to others in similar circumstances as well as to those unfamiliar with this population to gain a better understanding of their motivations.

Setting

The purposeful design (Creswell & Poth, 2018) applied to securing participants included searching for individuals fitting the demographic need for this study—an individual who had been incarcerated and reintegrated into the public education system. It was both practical and convenient to procure participants via an agency serving the youth offender population and offering ongoing services into adulthood. Specifically, I

partnered with a multi-county agency that provides case management services to assist the juvenile offenders who are no longer incarcerated obtain and retain services relating to their needs, i.e., substance use, mental health, housing, employment and/or education. The agency has a chapter within the county that this study is based.

I previously worked as a case manager with youth who were at-risk of incarceration. That afforded me the opportunity to make connections with other professionals in related fields. I reached out to a social worker who has connections with the case managers in this agency who were willing to post the study description in a common area for potential participants to view it and initiate contact to participate if interested. Once contact was established, the candidates were given an overview of the topic, the time requirements, and the purpose of the study to address any initial concerns or inquiries.

In 2018, this Eastern County had a total population of 1.48 million people, comprised of 67% White, 19.8% Hispanic/LatinX, 7.8% Black/African American, 3.9% Asian, and 1.57% Multiracial (Data USA, n.d.). In 2019, the average poverty rate in the county of this study was 6.8%, with White people being the most common racial group living below the poverty line; followed by Hispanic/LatinX and Black (United States Census Bureau, n.d.). In 2018, the August four-year high school cohort had a graduation rate of 88%. However, only 82% and 78% of Black and Hispanic/LatinX students, respectively, graduated in 2018. In 2018, there were 121 new juvenile detention admissions, with 85% being 14 years of age or older, 24% were female, 46% Black, 37% Hispanic/LatinX and 11% White (New York State Division of Criminal Justice Services, n.d.).

I gained access to the organization via a common colleague familiar with the research topic who also has access to the organization in a professional capacity.

Data Collection Procedures

Interviews were used to obtain authentic and valid information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When the consent forms were introduced, the purpose of the study was explained in depth, along with the participants' right to stop their participation if and whenever they pleased. In addition, the time required for their participation as well as the intended use of the results from the study was reviewed with the participants to obtain their informed consent (Creswell & Poth, 2018). When the participants agreed to continue with the study after everything was explained, the consent was emailed to them to obtain signature. The original signed consent was then dropped off at the partnering agency where I was able to pick it up and secure it.

The sequence of interviews (see Table 2) and questions for each interview (see Appendices B, C, D, and E) were well thought out and reviewed by my mentor to ensure the participants would not be harmed by the wording of the questions or jarred by delving too deep into their experiences too soon.

Table 2

Sequence of Interviews

Interview Order	Anticipated Length of Interview	Purpose
First Interview: Introduction	20–30 minutes	Discuss the topic of the study, review the consent again, obtain basic demographic information and address participant questions and concerns
Second Interview: Childhood and Early Education	35–50 minutes	Explore the participants early childhood experiences both personally and academically
Third Interview: Incarceration and Post-Incarceration	35–50 minutes	Explore the antecedents to the participants incarceration, their incarceration experiences and their motivations to reengage in education post-release
Fourth Interview: Conclusion	20–30 minutes	Review the transcript to ensure accuracy and address any final questions and/or concerns form the participant

Interviews

In compliance with COVID-19 social distancing guidelines, the four individual interviews were conducted via Google Meet or Zoom, based on the preference of the participant. Interview dates and times were agreed upon with the participants to ensure their availability. My motivations and intentions behind the research topic and the purpose of the study were also thoroughly discussed with each participant (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interviews conducted were recorded, with participant permission. In addition, a voice recorder on my cell phone was used to supplement the recordings. After each interview the recordings were sent securely to my email for transcription, at which points

the voice recordings were deleted. Once the interviews were transcribed the transcripts were stored in a locked file storage drawer in my home that only I have access to. The consent forms for all participants were also stored securely with the transcripts. I was responsible for all forms of data collection—including the gathering of data and keeping it secure.

The first interview—the introduction—lasted approximately 20–30 minutes. In this semi-formal interview, I met with the participants virtually to discuss in more depth the topic of the study as well as my intentions with the findings. The participants also had an opportunity to express any concerns or questions they had so they would feel more comfortable being a part of the study. Once questions were answered and concerns addressed, I reviewed the consent again to ensure they were still comfortable with having signed it. If the participants decided they did not want to participate in the study, the recording of their first interview would have been destroyed and no further discussion relating to the study would have occurred; however, none of the original participants backed out of the study. This process ensured that the participants were fully informed of what was involved in the study and they were willing participants without any external influence or prior verbal commitment to participate. The questions were general and light in intensity (see Appendix B), again to provide a safe space for the participants to get to know me and open up in later interviews. As Clandinin (2013) noted, “most narrative inquiries begin with telling stories, that is, with a researcher engaged in conversations with participants who tell stories of their experiences” (p. 34).

The second, semi-structured interview (see Appendix C)—childhood and early education—ran about 35–50 minutes, dependent on how much detail the participant cared

to provide. In this interview, the participant and I delved into what they recalled from their childhood and school experiences. We discussed their awareness of any difficulties they may have had and what interventions they remember being offered to them, as well as what they wished they had instead. The third interview—incarceration and post-release—reviewed events leading up to their incarceration(s) and their release and subsequent journey to reintegrate into the public education system. This interview followed a similar format and lasted roughly 35–50 minutes with a new set of 10 semi-structured questions (see Appendix D).

The fourth and final interview (see Appendix E) lasted roughly 20–30 minutes. For this interview, the transcripts from previous interviews were available for the participants to review. I confirmed that the participants expressed everything they wanted to say and that the tone conveyed matches their feelings and emotions regarding the content of what they shared and they were able to provide additional information that they may not have considered the first time around. The participants had time to process and express the feelings that came up during the second and third interviews to decompress and limit any residual negative outcomes from reliving their experiences. Finally, they were again given the opportunity to ask any questions and/or express any concerns about the study. The semi-structured questions for all the interviews were piloted and refined to ensure relevant questions that would return quality responses that speak to the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Copies of transcripts were sent to participants for review.

Trustworthiness of the Design

There are many diverse ways to ensure that one's research design is trustworthy and Miles et al. (2014) outline a few that are relevant to this study. The first measure taken to certify the trustworthiness of the design was to check for representativeness. This is a narrative approach, so the stories shared were specific to the individual. Miles et al. posited that “people as information seekers—and as processors—are far more likely to see *confirming* instances of original beliefs or perceptions than to see disconfirming instances” (p. 295). Further reason why this narrative approach sought to be a voice for this population helps protect against the concern raised by Miles et al. (2014). I did not go into this study with preconceived notions, instead, I looked to the participants to paint a thorough picture of various situations, choices and circumstances that can lead to youthful incarceration. In addition, the purposeful sampling employed for this study guaranteed that the participants were appropriate representatives for this topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Miles et al., 2014).

A potential concern I faced given the sensitive nature of my topic was that of researcher effects on the participants. Miles et al. (2014) found that participants can, at times, be influenced by the researcher and want to provide responses that appear “amenable to the researcher and to protect their own self-interests” (p. 297). To actively work against this from happening, I made my intentions, the purpose of the study and how the results will be used clear, not only during the initial meeting with the participants, but throughout the course of the study. It was my goal to help the participants grasp how important their authentic voice and experiences are for the study

so they were open, honest, and transparent instead of worried about how they may be perceived by me or others reading the study.

As previously noted, the participants had the opportunity to provide feedback on their responses during the fourth interview. I “lay[ed] out the findings clearly and systemically and present[ed] them to the reader for careful scrutiny and comment” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 310). Getting feedback at the final interview was important for two key reasons. First, the transcripts were ready for review. Second, I got feedback that was more insightful and related to main factors, causal relationships, and interpretive conclusions (Miles et al., 2014).

Research Ethics

Ethics helps hold the researcher accountable. All participants must be protected. But this is especially true for narrative studies. By design, “narrative inquiry is a deeply ethical project. . . . We cannot separate the ethical from the living of the inquiry” (Clandinin, 2013, p. 30). Prior to meeting with the participants, I gathered St. John’s University approval from the institutional review board (IRB) for the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To obtain informed consent, I spoke with each participant prior to the signing of consent to thoroughly explain the purpose of my study and how data would be collected and used. Once the participant gave a verbal agreement to proceed, the consent was emailed to them and after they signed it, they returned it to the partnering agency where I was able to pick it up and file it safely. In addition, I reviewed how the participants’ names would be changed so their participation was confidential, but not anonymous. I also reviewed any known risks and expected benefits for their participation. And finally, the participants were informed that their participation was completely

voluntary, and they could withdraw from the study at any time with no consequence (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The language used in the consent form as well as the interview questions were all designed for maximum comprehension. The participants had to fully understand what they were signing for it to be considered informed consent. As a school psychologist, I am familiar with students who have had interrupted formal education or who have limited cognitive skills and need concepts simplified so they can best understand. The combination of a participant who experienced incarceration and had interrupted schooling required me to be especially cognizant of how questions were worded so the participants felt at ease but also to obtain accurate responses. In addition, my experience with special education means I work regularly with obtaining consent and explaining the purpose of certain activities in a manner that is accessible to all.

All consent forms, transcriptions and voice recordings of interviews were stored in a secure, locked filing cabinet that only I can access. Once audio recordings were transcribed, they were destroyed. The participants' names were changed and masked in the data to protect participant confidentiality (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis Approach

The process of analysis “involves organizing the data, conducting a preliminary read-through of the database, coding and organizing themes, representing the data, and forming an interpretation of them” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 181). In this narrative approach, I employed an oral history style which involves collecting the personal memories of situations and the cause and effect that had on the participant and use that data to follow the process of analysis as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018).

I created the data by conducting the four interviews with each participant. Once transcribed, I took notes on the data while reviewing it. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest reading all the transcripts multiple times to understand the interview itself and subject matter thoroughly before breaking it down. This process helped me begin coding. Codes are mostly used to gather and categorize related chunks of data to make it easier to use in relation to answer the research questions. My initial round of coding involved using deductive codes—or codes that were familiar to me—so I could begin chunking the information into appropriate clusters. The first round of coding yielded 42 codes. As I continued to read and reread the transcripts, I was able to develop inductive codes, or codes that emerge directly from the data collected from the respondents, using their own words. Coding is important because helped develop the themes within the data. Therefore, the “codes should relate to one another in coherent, study-important ways; they should be part of a unified structure” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 82).

In my second round of coding, I began to separate the patterns or themes that emerged directly from the words shared by the participants. I searched for both the commonalities among the participants’ words, but also for the internal differences that could possibly lead to a higher level of commonality (Miles et al., 2014).

I entered all transcripts into the software program Dedoose, to easily facilitate coding and pulling quotes to support codes, as well as to keep all the data organized. The themes generated were used to inform the results portion of the study.

Role of the Researcher

Over the course of this study, I maintained my professional position as a school psychologist and Committee on Special Education (CSE) chairperson. However, my

appearance may not immediately suggest that I am a professional. As a Black/Latina woman who grew up in an urban setting with limited resources, I can relate to the participants in terms of their ethnic makeup and childhood life experiences. Despite my personal familiarity with the experiences most of the participants went through as they were growing up, my journey took me in a different direction that did not lead to incarceration.

Despite some adverse childhood experiences, I dove into education as my “way out” of the environment I was in. I was able to assimilate with professionals as I continued to climb the academic ladder. My exposure to other like-minded intellectuals in my various programs of study allowed me a different world view and perspective on my place in it. This change from who I was and how that relates to the participants versus how I would identify now classifies me as an “indigenous-outsider” according to Banks (1998). Banks explained that an indigenous outsider is someone who “was socialized within his or her indigenous community but has experienced high levels of cultural assimilation into an outsider or oppositional culture. The values, beliefs, perspectives, and knowledge of this individual are identical to those of the outside community” (p. 8).

Banks (1998) warns that an indigenous outsider may be praised by their adopted mainstream community but their home, or indigenous, community may reject them or view them as illegitimate. By being transparent and honest with the participants in explaining the purpose and use of the study, I am hoping they will feel encouraged to share their stories and trust me to relay their experiences with fidelity and accuracy.

Given the potential for the participants to feel guarded toward me, it was of even more importance that the questions are appropriate, so the participant feel comfortable

discussing their experiences and what that means to them. However, to allow the space for the participants to feel at ease discussing very personal incidents and events of their life, I also demonstrated patience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was also essential for me to review the natural biases I brought to the study. As a school psychologist, I intrinsically feel a need to advocate for and protect students. I had to guard against emotions that arose within me as I listened to the participants share their stories. Therefore, I did my best to ensure I was objective and reminded the participants that their participation was voluntary, so they did not feel obligated to continue against their will because of my title.

Conclusion

This chapter highlighted how I collected and stored the data. Participant protections and rights were also reviewed. In the coming chapters, I will analyze and interpret the data and summarize the results.

CHAPTER 4

Introduction

This narrative study explored the experiences of individuals who were previously incarcerated as youths, who then returned to the public education system to either earn their high school diploma or complete their GED. Their lived experiences from early childhood through their incarceration and post-release, and ultimately, their motivation to return to school provided the foundation for this study. The intention is to provide insight for school staff and stakeholders in how to support students at-risk of incarceration and, ultimately, increase high school graduation rates. This chapter captures the lived experiences of the participants giving voice to their childhood and school influences that factored into their motivation and choices that led to their incarceration and ultimate return to the public education system, as shared directly by the participants, to analyze what supports helped them, what supports were lacking and what additional factors played into their decision-making process and motivations.

Three interviews were conducted with each of the four participants. A fourth and final interview was also conducted with each to review and confirm the information they provided. From these interviews, four major themes merged as influences in their decision-making process. The themes, as well as rich biographies of the participants will be the focus of this chapter. The four themes are: (a) Family Ties and Relational Bonds; (b) Variance of School Memories and Expectations; (c) Incarceration Experiences; and (d) Turning Points: Motivations for Change. Before introducing the overarching themes in detail, it is important to meet the participants sharing their stories.

Shuri

Shuri is a 26-year-old Black female. She completed the General Education Development test, or GED, at the age of 23 after attending high school up to 12th grade but leaving before she could complete the requirements for her diploma. Shuri is one of two siblings and the older sister to her brother who is four years her junior. Shuri is also a parent to her 4-year-old daughter. Growing up, Shuri lived with her mother and stepfather until her little brother was born. Shortly thereafter, Shuri's mother and stepfather separated due to a domestic violence incident. While Shuri does not recall seeing the violence directly, she was able to recount the memories of police involvement and having to move from Queens to Long Island in order to live with maternal relatives.

Once moving onto Long Island, Shuri reported that her immediate family—mother and brother—were always together. However, their residence fluctuated often after she completed elementary school. Shuri shared that she, her mother and brother often moved to live with various maternal relatives: aunts, uncles and other relatives who all lived within the same proximity, but different school districts. After elementary school, which Shuri repeatedly described as her best school experience, she lost some of that joy as she had more challenges setting up peer friendships due to her frequent moves and her interactions with teachers also declined.

As Shuri shared her story, she explained that elementary school had diverse clubs and activities that afforded her a sense of belonging based on her unique, but shared, interests with other students. She showed good attendance and participation in class discussions. She visibly beamed when describing how smart her teachers and family members told her she was. However, when she entered middle school, there was more of

a focus placed on sports as the primary after school activity. She lost her niche style groups, such as Scrabble Club. Instead, she began to spend more time with a small group of girls with whom she was able to develop a friendship.

The girls Shuri grew closer to did not necessarily share her interests, but they supplied a space for her to feel like she belonged. As their bond grew stronger, and she had less options to turn to in school, she began to follow in some of their negative behaviors: cutting classes, not attending for the day regularly, and eventually, engaging in theft which led to her incarceration as a teen. While incarcerated, she came to recognize that the girls she was spending time with were not the kinds of friends she wanted, and they did not display the friendship qualities she now looks for from her peers. In fact, as Shuri reflected on the events and decisions the led up to her incarceration, she shared that she was aware that what her “friends” were doing (stealing) was not something with which she agreed. However, her desire to belong and have a core friend group became more important and thus made it easier to go along with and engage in the same behaviors.

Upon her release, Shuri did re-enroll in her local public school. But she at once felt the stigma of having been incarcerated as a youth. She explained that her teachers and other students looked at her as though she did not belong. She felt confused and lost in the classroom and did not feel supported to engage academically. Fortunately, she did meet a guidance counselor who was able to provide some support that Shuri was able to receive help from. It was from that guidance counselor that Shuri was able to find out about the GED process; at a critical time when she was considering dropping out of school without a backup plan.

Shuri credited her mother, primarily, but also the guidance counselor with helping her find her proverbial way. The other significant turning point for her was finding out she was expecting her first child. While she had the information about the GED, and she had already withdrawn from her high school; it was not until she learned of her pregnancy that she took the necessary steps to complete her GED. Her motivation was for her daughter to have her as a role model and a starting point to aim for and surpass.

Shuri may have been the only female participant in this study, but her story has themes that were familiar across all participants. Next, we will be introduced to “Tony.”

Tony

Tony is a 22-year-old self-identified White male of Italian and Irish descent. Tony graduated from high school with his diploma. He grew up on Long Island, primarily with his mother, younger sister and family dog. Tony shared that his father lived with the family until his parents divorced when he was eight and his sister was three years old. Despite not having his father in the home, he did still see him and spend time with him on occasion. Besides his father, Tony had male role models in his life, consisting of his maternal grandfather and uncle. Tony shared that he internalized his parents’ divorce and that started his feelings of abandonment and fear that others, like his father, would leave him.

Many of the themes from Tony’s childhood related to those feelings of being alone and/or wanting to be alone. His favorite school memory was a field trip to see lighthouses and he recalled enjoying it because he was able to look out at the water, in solitude, and he felt at peace. Alternatively, one of his favorite memories outside of school was a family trip to Disney with his mother, sister, and uncle. In that moment,

Tony explained that even though he was experiencing negative feelings internally, it was a fun experience. Especially seeing how happy his mother and sister were.

Family was a consistent focus for Tony. Whether the moments were joyful or sad, many of his happenings were somehow related to family. So much so, in fact, that his least favorite school memory was when he got into a fight. However, the setting event for the fight, according to Tony, was prolonged bullying from a classmate. Tony endured a lot from this student without retaliating, until he said something inappropriate about his sister. Once his sister was mentioned, Tony responded with physical aggression which led to him getting into more trouble than the original instigator. Tony shared that upon hearing the news, his parents were, understandably upset. Unfortunately, because Tony had grown so accustomed to not talking about how he was feeling, he never advocated for himself to any school officials, or even his parents, about the real cause of the fight, which ultimately left him feeling even more isolated and misunderstood.

Tony's least favorite childhood memory was his parents' divorce. And while that is certainly understandable, his reasoning was once again, more related to family as a whole. He shared that after the divorce, he did not have many fond memories with his father. But the divorce itself was the hardest because he saw how hurt his mother was and how his sister cried repeatedly from missing her father and not fully understanding why he was not there anymore.

In school, Tony was academically successful, achieving good grades and taking part in scholarly events like a spelling bee. Tony developed meaningful relationships with some of his teachers over the years and shared that to this day, he keeps in contact with some of them. He may have been the kind of student who kept to himself, but he was able

to make connections with certain teachers who were not staunch about the rules, more accepting and generally made themselves available. He explained that teachers who were overly harsh or made the rules their priority over getting to know the students was off-putting to him. Similar to Shuri, Tony had a particularly good experience with his high school guidance counselor who took an interest in him and gave him the space to express himself freely and without judgement.

Unlike Shuri, Tony's first interaction with the police was positive. When he was about seven years old, his class had a visit from the local police and the officers interacted with the students, answered their questions and let them try on part of their uniform. At that time, Tony admired the police and even considered becoming an officer. However, years later, his next interaction with the police was not positive. At 15 years old, Tony was arrested for selling marijuana. He expressed that his first emotional response was fear. While incarcerated, he acknowledged that life did not have the levity of sitcoms like *Orange is the New Black*. While television programming has expanded in showing the underbelly of the criminal justice system, experiencing it personally is quite different.

Tony started selling marijuana in a quest to earn fast money. He reached out to an older student who was known to sell marijuana. Tony approached the student with the sole intention of learning how to become a seller as well. While having spending money and female attention was a bonus, Tony explained that he was initially drawn to selling drugs so he could help his mother with bills and provide his sister with things she wanted, like toys or to attend extra-curricular school activities. Tony was able to keep his selling separate from his relationships. After being introduced to selling he also used that money

to engage in activities with his close friends. He was also mindful of giving gas money to his friend who was old enough to drive for the group. Tony felt a sense of pride in being able to help his family, friends, and himself, independently.

During Tony's incarceration, he had familial support in the form of consistent communication and financial help. He explained that his parents, uncle and even friends, would make an effort to keep money on his commissary account. Unlike Shuri, Tony's experience with the criminal justice staff was also beneficial; even if he was not receptive to what was being said at the time. He recounted one correctional officer who made an effort to speak to the young men about ways to earn money in a legal way when out of jail. Although cryptocurrency and the stock market may have been over most of their heads, he appealed to their desire to make "quick" money with minimal experience or effort in terms of higher education.

Like the Correctional Officer (CO) who tried to encourage Tony and his counterparts while in jail, Tony's high school guidance counselor also aided him by introducing him to options that he did not think were available to him. In fact, she inspired him so much that he considered her the force behind his turning point. Conversations with his guidance counselor—who is one of the school staff that he continues to keep contact with—created a space for him to be okay with the unknown. She helped him understand that even if he did not know exactly what he wanted to do after high school, he had time to figure it out. Many adults will encourage students to attend college and select a major before they begin. Tony's guidance counselor discussed other avenues, like trade schools or a liberal arts degree while he explores his interests. She even touched on the significance of the internet in this age and told him he could

pursue a side interest like blogging/vlogging while he thought about his next steps. That freedom of thought made Tony feel excited to graduate and explore his options for adulthood.

While Tony undoubtedly faced adversity in his childhood, he was one of the few participants to find support within his family, school and the criminal justice system while incarcerated. His story differs greatly from that of the next participant: Bruce.

Bruce

Bruce is the oldest participant in the study at 31 years old. Bruce identifies as male of Black and Puerto Rican descent. Bruce earned his GED roughly five and a half years ago when he was 25, going on 26. Unique to Bruce when compared to the other participants is that he was incarcerated multiple times in his youth. However, he took opportunities to study for his GED while in jail. He proudly expressed that when the time came to take his GED exam, he was able to pass on the first try.

Bruce grew up in Brooklyn. He initially lived with his biological parents but when he was young (he did not specify his age at the time) his father became incarcerated and was expected to be in prison for an extended period of time. During that time, his mother was using illegal drugs, but it did not appear to impede her ability to help care for Bruce, according to what he could remember. Shortly after his father's incarceration, his mother's drug use became more rampant, and she was not able to care for Bruce appropriately. When he was eight years old, the Administration for Children's Services (ACS) was called and when it was discovered how he and his mother were living, he was placed in kinship foster care with his aunt. In addition to his aunt, there were her five children and her boyfriends who would occasionally stay in the home as well.

Bruce referred to the transition as being confusing but exciting. He was looking forward to living with his cousins as he did not have siblings at that time. However, as time passed, he was less enthusiastic about being in a home with so much activity and noise. As Bruce got older, he relied on his friends more and would often crash at their homes. Bruce reported that he felt his friends' homes were always better than his own home and living situation and that is why he preferred to stay with them when he could. Despite a challenging upbringing, Bruce relayed happy memories during the interviews. He recalled a time when he, his mother, aunt and all five cousins went to Sesame Place. He reflected that he was not sure how they paid for it all, considering they stayed for several days, and it was a lot of people, but he enjoyed himself.

Unfortunately, growing up Bruce did not have positive school memories. As noted previously, his mother often told him that the reason he had to live with his aunt was because the school contacted ACS. She also emphasized that he should not trust school staff. He was in third grade when custody was taken from his mother and that formative time influenced him to follow what his mother was telling him, and he became withdrawn toward his teachers as early as elementary school. Bruce was unable to specify a favorite memory from school. He recalled participating only if he was called on, but he was not interested in engaging and preferred to be left alone. In fact, Bruce described himself as indifferent to what occurred in the classroom.

Bruce had a natural ability to complete academic tasks. He was a bright student who did not have to study in order to achieve good grades. He felt this made the teachers suspicious of him which added to his feelings of isolation and disregard for the teachers. Oftentimes, Bruce reported that teachers would regard him in a manner that suggested

they did not believe he was capable of achieving the scores he did based on his own merit and skill. Due to his initial impressions of teachers from what his mother told him and his personal experiences throughout elementary and middle school, it was even harder for him to trust school staff and for them to establish a rapport with him. During one of his incarcerations, he did form a bond with one of the counselors who informed him about the GED process. However, at that time, Bruce still had aspirations of returning to high school and completing the requirements for his diploma in an effort to make his family proud.

Rather than seek out school-based activities, though he did not speak of any being available to him, Bruce became engaged in a variety of illegal activities with his friends from the neighborhood. Despite his mother's drug use, Bruce began selling drugs, though he was adamant about not using them personally. Bruce also implied, though he did not say it directly, that he was gang affiliated. He reported being a target of the police and that he and his friends were often watched by the police because of their associations and drug selling activities.

His first arrest at the age of 15 occurred after he had spent the day with his friends but was walking home alone. Bruce reported that he felt the police had been watching him and chose to arrest him while he was alone intentionally. He acknowledged that they probably had evidence of his wrongdoings up to that point so while he was initially angry at the circumstances surrounding his first arrest and how the police spoke to him, he was not altogether shocked that he had been arrested. Bruce's first two incarcerations were related to selling drugs. His third and finale arrest was an assault charge due to his fighting. Bruce shared that from a youthful age he had to learn how to fight as a means to

protect himself growing up. However, by the age of 13, he was a skilled fighter with a reputation for his fighting abilities. As he grew older, he said that he did not expect his fighting to be a reason for his incarceration, but he did not want to elaborate on the circumstances surrounding his third incarceration.

Bruce's extended family, which really was his primary family, effectively told him he was going to be alone while incarcerated. His aunt made it clear to Bruce that while he was out, he would have her full support and he could continue to live with her and his cousins. However, in an effort to not glamorize his lifestyle, she would not interact with him at all during his incarceration. She also forbade his cousins from interacting with him as well. Again, this was precautionary so as not to negatively influence his younger cousins from engaging in gang ties, selling drugs and fighting. So, Bruce did not have any familial support while incarcerated. He did not feel supported by his school, nor did he feel supported by the individuals in authority whom he came into contact within the criminal justice setting. within. He spent more time with and emulating his friends that were involved in illegal activities.

When asked what his biggest lesson learned was while incarcerated, Bruce shared that he learned, even more so, how to protect himself. Money and assets were still his motivation, so he learned how to trade items with his cell mates to get what he wanted/needed. Bruce was a self-described hustler prior to his arrest and while living in jail, repeatedly, he honed his survival skills even more. He further developed what is often called "street smarts" and became very perceptive and strategic in fulfilling his needs and wants. Bruce alternated between sounding proud of all he was able to do, in terms of survival and what led to his incarceration, but he also appeared to have some

conflicting emotions about how he “earned” his money by selling drugs. Bruce said that his sole motivation was money and the more often he went to jail, the more experience he gained, both on the inside (in jail) and on the outside (as a civilian). He was quick to explain, however, that he never used drugs himself. He was aware that his mother had a substance abuse dependency and he never wanted to take the risk that he would be the same. Ironically, he never spoke about how his father being incarcerated for an extended period influenced him. Ultimately, he followed in his father’s footsteps—to a lesser extent and for a different crime—but a very similar outcome.

Bruce’s turning point happened in between jail stints. While out, he had a girlfriend and shortly into dating, she became pregnant. Bruce wanted to create a different life for his unborn child, but he was still relying on old means to get money and he was incarcerated again. While he was incarcerated and his girlfriend was pregnant, Bruce had the realization that he had to move differently. During his final incarceration, Bruce connected with the counselor and explored his options after completing his GED. After his inquiry, he decided to pursue trade school after earning his GED. Like Tony, Bruce’s motivation was still money, but this time it was about earning it legitimately so he could support his newly growing family. Since then, Bruce went on to have three more children; another with his first child’s mother and two more with his current girlfriend. Bruce beamed when speaking of his children and being a provider but also consistent figure in all of their lives. His motivations became deeper than providing financially. It extended to being a role model and actively engaged father to each of them.

When asked about his motivations for taking part in this study, Bruce was the most forthcoming. He wanted his children to know he helped someone in “becoming a

doctor.” He took pride in his life story and the perceived mistakes that all helped him become who he is today. He was opened to sharing his story without trying to make himself “look good” or even look like a victim of circumstance. He wanted a memoir of sorts to share with his children as they get older so they can learn from his missteps rather than making the same errors in judgement.

Samuel

The final participant is Samuel, a 27-year-old New York native who identifies as a Black male. Like Tony, Samuel earned a high school diploma. However, he did not graduate in June, his graduation was delayed to the summer so he could make up a few missing credits. Samuel also grew up in Brooklyn, until he was 16 years old. After which his family moved to Long Island. For Samuel, “family” was made up of mom and maternal grandma, no siblings. When asked about his father, Samuel did not want to talk about him initially. He did mention later, in passing, that he viewed his mother as both his “mom and dad” in that she stepped up and supported and provided for him as one would expect from two parents.

Samuel’s impression of school and the criminal justice system were nearly one in the same. He felt that teachers and judges were mostly White. He felt the resources were outdated and the individuals who were meant to function as primary disciplinarians—principals and COs—were Black. There was an interesting dichotomy in how race played into his feelings.

In school, Samuel recalls that his attendance and participation were poor. His focus was not on academics. His concern was more about ensuring he did enough to advance to the next grade so his mother would not be upset with him. Unfortunately, he

did not feel motivated by his teachers to engage academically either. Living in a challenging neighborhood in Brooklyn did not do much to boost the morale of the school staff. Samuel recalled that most days, the teachers were giving their energy to keeping peace in the classroom and trying to gain the students attention for academic activities. In fact, he was only able to recall two teachers who stood out during his time in the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE): First, his third-grade Black teacher who assigned a book report during Black History Month and second, a math teacher who made learning basic math facts fun because it was presented as a competitive game amongst the students where the prize was bragging rights.

Besides those two standout assignments/activities from specific teachers noted above, Samuel recalls that his favorite experiences in school were lunch and recess because it afforded him more opportunities to socialize with friends without academic pressures. In fact, Samuel explained that school largely served as a “hangout” spot for him and his friends until they were older and able to cut school altogether and spend time at each other’s homes or at various public places in the neighborhood. Samuel reported that his attendance was not good and when he was in class, he rarely took part in academic discussions.

Growing up in Brooklyn, Samuel was extremely focused on building his image and popularity. He began associating with a mixed group of friends, some his age, others who were older and had dropped out of school. Samuel wanted to be well liked and considered cool. He described the basic structure of a gang, although he never used the word explicitly. Samuel spoke of how his friend group had a “leader” and in order to be a part of the group, they had to listen to what he said. Over time, Samuel found himself

engaged in stealing and fighting, at the request of the “leader.” He noted that if the group leader had an issue with someone, the whole group would then have an issue and if called upon to fight, he would have to fight them, regardless of his own personal feelings. Initially, he was ok with the activities because, again, it meant more time with his friends. In addition, the stealing also meant that he had money to spend.

Samuel often shared that while he was similar to other students in his disinterest of school, he wasn't the “worst”, and he would at least attempt to be respectful if the teachers asked for whatever they needed twice. He was not unsympathetic, but he was not invested. When he got involved with the gang, it was much the same. He did not want to engage in all of the activities, because some were “too bad”, even for him. But he wanted the brotherhood, the association, the affiliation and the perceived perks of being part of the gang, which included lots of female attention, money, street cred and respect, and a pseudo-family of brothers.

When Samuel was 15, he was out with his friends, including the group leader, and they ran into another group that his leader had issues with. A fight broke out, and true to his loyalty, Samuel engaged in the fight. Things escalated and he used a bottle that was on the street to defend himself. The other person sustained significant injuries and Samuel was arrested. It was in that moment that he felt anger—at the situation and at himself. He felt that he was simply defending himself and his friends, but once he was placed in handcuffs, and read his rights, the gravity of the situation really hit him and he realized, it was his own actions that led to his arrest.

While Samuel was incarcerated, his mother worked diligently to change their setting to offer Samuel a fresh start. She found a new job on Long Island and when he

was released, he, his mother and grandmother moved to Suffolk County, and he reenrolled in school and began receiving counseling through the agency that posted the flyer for this study. Once situated on Long Island, Samuel saw a marked difference in school supplies, they were updated and clean. Despite that noted difference, Samuel still was not motivated to attend school regularly. He was still in the habit of attending and doing just enough to pass his classes, so as not to disappoint his mother.

However, Samuel did form a connection with one English teacher, again over a particular assignment and teaching style. The teacher was reviewing Shakespeare, Othello specifically, and the story resonated with Samuel. He felt like he could relate to a Black man living with White people, proverbially, once he moved to Long Island. In addition to the literature that Samuel found relatable, he explained that his teacher had a way of phrasing questions that made the class interesting. Once Samuel felt comfortable in his class, he felt that he could talk to him about other things, personal things, that were about his life, instead of academics. Samuel may not have confided in him often, but he had one adult in his school that he felt he could approach, if and when needed.

At his current age, Samuel was able to reflect on the supports the teachers had in the buildings while in Brooklyn. He recounted stories of old, decrepit books that were not really suitable for use in the classroom anymore. A general lack of funds to offer anything updated and interesting to the student body as a whole. And to top it off, he said the majority of students were “bad,” in that, they were not always respectful, and they were not motivated to engage academically. In retrospect, he felt the entire setting was not conducive for learning and the staff were too burnt out to try consistently.

When referencing the criminal justice system, Samuel recalls feeling like “just another Black man” who was passed along in the system. Like most systems, there’s an inherent inertia in how things move. He met with his legal aid lawyer, a White man, he was presented to the judge, another White man, he took a deal so he did not go to trial and he was transported by bus to the jail, mostly surrounded by White men, but once he was with the COs, the majority were Black or people of color. He did not directly say that their race played a part in how his circumstances played out, but he did explain that they did not seem to look at him as an individual. They were all just doing a job; he could have been anyone.

Samuel’s mother was tough, but fair, and she was always striving to get him to be more engaged academically. One of his favorite childhood memories was asking for an iPod for Christmas and his mother telling him he would have to pick his grades up. Eventually, he earned the iPod, but he did not get it at Christmas. He was gifted the iPod when he pulled his grades up; just as his mother asked. He also partially credits her with keeping him out of trouble once he was released from jail. One of Samuel’s biggest takeaways from incarceration was that he never wanted to go back. Being on Long Island put significant physical distance between him and his old crew. He indicated that he still spoke with his old friends, but he had a built-in excuse to not engage in the same activities anymore: he was too far away.

At the time of and prior to his incarceration, Samuel was not interested in how adults viewed him—with the limited exception of his mother. He was far more concerned with how his peers saw him. He wanted to seem cool and likeable, so he would be included in the group. He was seeking acceptance. He was not raised to fear the police,

but he was instructed to limit his interactions with them as much as possible. Samuel's mother told him to always be respectful but to try to get away from the police as quickly and safely as possible. This was especially important as a young Black man in a tough neighborhood where assumptions could be made about an individual based on where they were hanging out, who they were with, what colors they were wearing, etc. Again, he could have been "anyone," there was an unspoken understanding that these youths were not individuals, they were more like extras, on a film set.

Samuel shared that his short-term goals are to continue making legitimate money. He has a girlfriend now and he is contemplating next steps with her. He wants to continue making his mother proud. Unfortunately, his grandmother has since passed away so in an even more real sense, it is him and his mother, proverbially against the world. Samuel is also working toward opening his own business as his long-term goal. He did not want to share his business idea just yet as it is still in its infancy stage, but he is motivated to create something that is his own. Samuel again credits his mother with the motivation to set these goals and pursue them with fidelity. He shared that the combination of moving to a different location, counseling, and earning money the correct way helped reduce his anger and give him a unique perspective on life.

Overall, each participant had unique situations and challenges that they had to face growing up. But when analyzing their thoughts and feelings on school, their environment, their motivations and their time incarcerated, certain themes emerged that showed how they are similar. As previously mentioned, these themes will be broken down in four parts: family ties and relational bonds, variance of school memories and expectations, incarceration experiences, and turning points: motivation for change.

Theme 1: Family Ties and Relational Bonds

It would be difficult to discuss the motivations for students to engage in activities that lead to incarceration and then return to school, without discussing their family and the supports they had from relatives growing up. With that, the theme of family ties and relational bonds will be broken down into subthemes that provide a deeper understanding of the cards the participants were dealt from birth. The subthemes are as follows: (a) fragmented family, (b) desired familial supports, (c) perceived perceptions versus desired perceptions prior to incarceration, and (d) perceived perceptions versus desired perceptions during/after incarceration.

Fragmented Family Life

All participants reported having a fragmented family life. For the participants, the concept of family looked different for each of them. Some participants never knew both parents, some were raised by relatives other than their parents. Some had siblings while others did not. The one similarity that crossed all participants was that none of them consistently grew up in a traditional two-parent family; that is to say, raised by both their biological mother and father. In fragmentation came a lack of stability that affected how the participants viewed themselves and those around them. It impacted how they believed they were seen and the types of interactions they subsequently sought from others.

Fragmented families are unique to the individual. As noted previously, some of the participants grew up with only one parent or were briefly in a two-parent household that ended in a manner that produced some trauma for them. Other participants were raised primarily by extended family members of their biological parent(s). Both Shuri and Samuel grew up in blended households; both growing up with their mothers. But

Shuri moved around amongst her aunts and uncles with her mother and younger brother, while Samuel lived with his mother and maternal grandmother his whole life. Shuri spent her first years in Queens, until she was about four years old. She lived with her mother and briefly lived with her mother and her little brother's father. She explained,

We moved out here [Long Island] when she [her mother] had my little brother and then his dad left, so we had to go move in with my aunt, my mom's sister and her three kids. When we moved around it was with a lot of different family members, but me and my mom and my little brother were always together.

Shuri's mother was always her primary guardian and caretaker, but she grew up living with more relatives. In a similar vein, Samuel shared, "I lived with my grandmother and my mom." Samuel never lived with his father and did not have any interactions with him. Samuel did not have siblings. When asked to elaborate, Samuel did not want to discuss his father any further than to say he was not present. In fact, he specifically said, "I don't want to talk about him" when asked if he had contact with his father. In both cases, neither participant gave much attention to the lack of father figures in their lives. They developed close relationships with their mothers and as will be discussed, their mothers became a key factor in their motivation to return to school.

Tony knew his father and interacted with him sporadically after his parents divorced when he was eight years old. He shared, "So I live(d) with my mom. I used to live with my mom and my dad. They split up. So, then it was just my mom (and younger sister)." While he did have a period of time living with both of his biological parents, how he expressed his relationship with his father and the conditions growing up, he falls into a single-parent household category. He further went on to relate, "We always had

family passing by, but it was really just the three of us after they divorced. My dad came around sometimes but, you know, it wasn't the same." Tony's perceived relationship with his father and how he saw his parents interacting, led him to feel like he was solely raised by his mother. He did have other male role models in his maternal grandfather and uncle, but they did not live in the same home, unlike Samuel and Shuri.

Bruce's situation mirrored Tony's initially. He was born into a two-parent household but that did not last. Bruce's father was heavily engaged in criminal activity and his mother abused substances. At the age of eight, Bruce's father was incarcerated for a significant length of time and could no longer care for him. Around that time, his mother also became more unstable due to her drug use and ultimately, ACS was contacted. When Bruce was removed from his mother's care, he lived with his aunt and her children, his cousins. Bruce further explains,

It's a little complicated. So, I lived with my aunt, but I really, you know, I didn't stay there too much. There were a lot of kids in the house, so I didn't really stay there. You know what I mean? Once I had my own friends, I would ask to spend the night at their houses a lot. . . . It was my aunt, her boyfriend, sometimes, and five cousins. I didn't have any siblings at the time so at first, I was excited because it felt like I had a real family. A "mom and dad" and brothers and sisters. But it was crazy in that house, and it just made me realize that I liked being by myself.

Overall, all of the participants experienced untraditional upbringings. These factors may have played a role in their emotional development and feelings of self-worth. The foundation of their family life was atypical and another factor they had to overcome.

Desired Familial Supports

This section focuses on supports the participants wish they would have had in order to deter them from the activities that led to incarceration and the factors that assisted them post-release. This subtheme includes what the participants wanted and needed from their family and what they needed to support their emotional development. While they are written as two different concepts, the emotional and family needs overlapped with each participant.

Each participant was asked to reflect on a favorite childhood memory. Each participant shared a fond memory of their family being together and seeing their family be happy or earning a special gift. Tony and Bruce both had memorable vacations with their families. In retrospect as adults, knowing the cost of trips they were able to view those family vacations as even more memorable because of the level of sacrifice that goes into making that happen. Tony referenced a trip with his mother, sister and uncles where he recognized his mother saw a change in him and was trying to support him with positive shared family experiences, despite how he may have felt at the time. He explained,

My mom, we went we went on vacation to Disneyland one time, so it was like, you know, we went, we flew down to Florida. You know, I have an uncle down in Florida, too. We spent time there. Then we went to Disney World for like three days. I got to, you know, we got to ride the rides, you know, Magic Kingdom and the restaurant and it was really fun. . . . I think my mom knew I wasn't ok. Maybe she thought being in a fun place and seeing my uncle would make things better. I

had a blast, and my sister was happy. I like seeing her smile. My mom was happy too. It was my best vacation, I think.

That family bonding time is what stood out to Bruce as well. At a time when his father was already incarcerated, but he still had his mother's presence, his family arranged a vacation. Regardless of what else may have been going on in his life at that time, having that family vacation, especially with his mother, resonated with Bruce. He shared,

Well, one summer, we went to Sesame Place. Looking back now, I don't know how they were able to pay for that, but it was my mom, aunt and all of us kids.

And we went for like 3 or 4 days? I don't remember exactly but it was more than just a weekend. . . . It was a good time.

While Tony and Bruce experienced getaways with their whole family, Shuri and Samuel's memories regarded individualized attention. Shuri's 13th birthday was significant because even though she was surrounded by family, she was the main attraction. She had the undivided attention of being celebrated. For her, the tangible gifts were less important than having that quality time and devoted interaction for herself. She went onto detail,

I guess my favorite childhood memory outside of school was my 13th birthday because things were still kind of good then, and my mom really wanted to make sure that I had a good party and all of that stuff, so it was nice. It was. It was at my uncle's house in his backyard, and he has like a pool and everything. So, it was a big pool party for my birthday, and I had the cake that I wanted. I don't

even remember the gifts that I got that year. It was just nice, like being around everybody. Everybody seemed so happy, and it was all for me.

Shuri did not remember the specific tangible gifts she received for her birthday, but the gift of being the center of attention among her family left an impression in her mind. In comparison, Samuel's memory revolved around a specific gift request that he made of his mother for Christmas. But what made his memory so significant was that his mother turned it into a request that he had to earn. His mother held him to a standard and made the experience of earning the gift what stood out for Samuel. He said,

My favorite childhood memory was one Christmas I wanted an iPod shuffle. That should tell you how long ago that was. And I asked my mom and she said, you get your grades up. I'm thinking, damn, Christmas isn't supposed to come with trade-offs, but I try to go for it. I got some better grades; I went from mostly failing to a few C's. I wanted that thing, so I did it. I picked my grades up. But I didn't get it at Christmas because my grades still weren't good enough yet. But my mom still wrapped it up like it was for Christmas and she gave it to me after I got my third quarter report card that school year.

Each participant valued quality time with their family, whether it was through a vacation, celebration or earning a desired item through challenging work and making their family proud. While it is expected they would describe their emotions as "happy" when thinking about their favorite childhood memory, notice some of the other descriptors used: good, fun, nice. These were sentimental moments that supplied feelings of contentment and gratitude to be surrounded by love and have individualized attention.

As the participants grew older or their family dynamic changed, they looked to recreate those feelings through their peers. Trying to attain those feelings of belonging and a sense of family led them to participate in activities that they inherently felt were inappropriate. However, the reward of experiencing those reminiscent emotions of happiness, enjoyment and involvement allowed them to put their internal sense of wrongdoing to the side. For most of the participants, it was not until they were arrested or actually spent time in jail that they began to consider if the choices they made were worthwhile in the long run.

Alternatively, the participants were also asked to share their least favorite childhood memories. For Samuel and Shuri, that moment was at the time of their arrests. Samuel was a man of few words during his interview but when asked directly what his least favorite childhood memory was, he simply replied, "I cried when I got arrested." As mentioned, he went onto elaborate that he was concerned about how his mother would manage the news and he was upset when he thought about disappointing her. Shuri offered more detail when recounting her least favorite memory, which was the first night she spent in jail. She explained,

I was basically a baby, you know, it was the first time that I was really, really, really alone and that was scary because I didn't have anybody that I could turn to or talk to or anybody to explain to me what was going on. So, I just felt really scared and, yeah, really alone.

Whether it was fear of being alone or fear of disappointing people, both Shuri and Samuel had a challenging time navigating their emotions during their arrest. And while incarceration can be frightening and a generally negative experience, for the Tony and

Bruce, that was not their least favorite memory growing up. Tony reflected on his family and what felt like the dissolution of his family. He shared,

I mean, it sounds cliché, but I guess it wasn't good, you know, when my parents split up. You know, it wasn't fun. It affected me and my little sister. . . . She was a little bit younger, so it took her a little while to like, get it like, understand what was happening. But what she did, you know she was crying a lot and you know, and Yeah, I yeah, I think that was like a bad one. I don't have the best memories with my dad, but that one, seeing how it hurt my mom and sister. That was the worst.

Like Samuel, Tony was close to the women in his life, in his case, his mother and sister. For Tony, seeing their pain and sadness during his parents' divorce resonated within him as his least enjoyable childhood experience. For Bruce, after reading his story, one might expect that his least favorite childhood memory would also be tied to his family. However, his was based on his environment. He reported,

I guess I could say I've gotten into a lot of fights. Back then, Brooklyn wasn't like how it is now with Starbucks all over the place. Some parts of Brooklyn are still hard, feel me? But back then, every part was hard. So, I always had to be ready to defend myself.

Bruce did not speak of disappointing others, seeing his family hurt or feeling alone once incarcerated. Rather, for Bruce, his while childhood experience was a challenge and it forced him to learn how to defend himself at an early age. As was done with the favorite memory, let's look at the language used when describing the least favorite childhood memories: scared, alone, hurt, tears, crying, fighting, self-defense.

These participants were describing their feelings as children when faced with intense and challenging situations. In some cases, these situations were environmental and seemingly unavoidable based on where they lived. For others, it was a circumstance of the actions of others, such as their parents. And finally, for some, it truly was a consequence of their own actions which led to these negative memories and corresponding emotions.

At that time, the kinds of supports they needed were ongoing connections with the adults in their lives. While it may seem repetitive, the participants often spoke about the fact that they did not feel seen, heard or understood, especially while in school. Shuri, who was very enthusiastic about elementary school, felt that as she got older, teachers had less of an interest in her personally and the focus was almost exclusively on academic development. As she connected with the guidance counselor when she was in 12th grade, she explained, “it was just nice to have someone still believe in me. . . . She talked to me like I was a real person, like she understood where I was coming from.”

Samuel, on the other hand, had all but discounted what his school could do for him. But he remained grateful for his mother’s ongoing support in his life. When asked if he could remember anyone or anything coming into his life to supply support, Samuel said no. But he clarified, “But, through everything, my mom is who stuck beside me.” Developing and supporting resilient relationships between youths and adults is especially difficult as children enter teen years and their priorities shift from their family to their friends. The desire to fit in and seek out the emotional support from others that were lacking in their family ties was a strong motivator to do things they knew inherently were wrong. But it gave them something that outweighed the consequences: a sense of belonging.

Perceived Perceptions versus Desired Perceptions Prior to Incarceration

This section will discuss how the participants thought their family and friends would describe them before they became incarcerated and how they wished they were viewed. This is important because literature often focuses on how other individuals perceived the incarcerated party and what they thought of the person. It is rare to learn directly from the affected person how they thought they were seen. The participants based their feelings on their experiences and presumably, how people spoke to them at that time. But their feelings could also very much have been projections of how they saw themselves that they credited to others. The participants expressed very self-aware statements about how they were most likely perceived.

Shuri, for example, had diverse interests in school that were more scholastically based. She shared, “the adults that knew me knew I was smart. My family knew I was quiet, kinda in my head all the time. But I would think they would have described me as sweet.” She had selected friends in school, but she spent a lot of time with her cousins as well. She felt they would have also described her as quiet, a goody-goody or even a nerd because she was so interested in academics. Shuri also moved around a lot in her youth, so she struggled to keep connections she made. Based on her disrupted interactions with schoolmates, she felt they may have viewed her as “weird.” But because she dressed well, she may have been perceived as “cool” in that respect. Shuri believed there were a range of perceptions of her based on the individuals’ role in her life and the point in time they were interacting with her. Most of her perceived beliefs revolved around her academic scholarship and how adults often viewed that as “smart” or intelligent while her peers most likely viewed her as a nerd for the same reasons.

Bruce also expressed that other people saw him as smart. He said, “the other adults in the neighborhood, my aunt, my oldest cousin... I think they saw me as someone who could make it out. I was definitely the smartest of my cousins (laughs), so they all had high hopes for me.” Despite having limited contact with his mother early on, then no contact at all as he got older, he did not verbalize how he thought she may have viewed him.

While some people may internalize that and take it personally, with thoughts such as maybe I was not good enough or provocative questions of why there was no effort to make contact, Bruce chose to reflect on the individuals that were in his life. Even in his limited interactions with his father while he was incarcerated, Bruce’s father would ask him about school and would try to show interest in his daily life and activities. But Bruce noted:

I knew he cared, but all he could really tell me was to stay safe. I think he was proud of my grades but scared that I was a fighter. He didn’t want me to end up like him. I think he knew, deep down though, that there was a strong chance I would be like him.

Like Shuri, Bruce’s expressions of how he believed he was perceived were largely dependent on the role the person held in his life. Everyone a different side of them.

Tony’s feelings had less of a range than Shuri and Bruce. Tony explained that most people probably thought he was “chill” and laid-back. He was skilled at being relatable to all while keeping a close circle of about two friends. However, he also posited, “My mom could always tell when something was bothering me, but she knew I

didn't really like to talk so she wouldn't push. I think everyone probably just thought I was chill. Or didn't care." He felt that if people did not necessarily see him as a "chill" person, then they probably did not put in much effort to form an opinion in the first place, leading him to believe they did not care.

Samuel, like Tony, did not have greatly varying ideas of how he was perceived. He felt that the adults who knew him would have beliefs aligned with his own. He said, "I was a troublemaker, I guess. So, they would probably say that. But I wasn't the worst one. I should hope they would say that too." Among his friends and cousins, Samuel was the "cool kid." Samuel believed he was viewed as cool because he was popular, tough and sought after to hang out with. He worked to foster that perception amongst his peers because he needed to fit in.

Reflections are an important part of this study as it sheds light on how students may internalize the statements or behaviors of both peers and adults around them. The next important question is, despite how they thought others saw them, how did they wish they were seen? Not surprisingly, all of the participants wished to be viewed positively. However, some supplied more self-aware ideas about how much that could be the case given their actions. For example, Samuel said this about his mother, "I guess... I wanted her to see me as a good kid, but I knew I wasn't...doing everything I was supposed to be doing." Bruce had a similar view, expressing, "In the neighborhood, they didn't really see me as the smart kid either. I was cool. I could fight. I was funny. But no one thought about me as being smart." And for Shuri, who did believe she was perceived as smart, how would she have hoped to have been viewed? She reported,

I just wanted them to always see me. If I could go back and make sure that they saw me as a role model, I probably I would do that, but I just, yeah, I just wish they would know that I'm smart and I'm doing my best and I love them, and they love me. For my adult relatives, I wanted them to see me as someone who was maybe a little naïve, I guess, someone who made a mistake. But still, someone who was smart and meant well. I wanted them to think I was special and worth "it." Worth what? I'm still not sure. But important somehow.

Self-worth is a consistent theme of its own throughout the participants reflections. Whether it was to be seen as smart, cool, or accepted, it all came down to people finding them worthy of such desires. Tony also had similar feelings, saying,

I guess I could have been cooler. Maybe had more friends. But I wasn't really thinking about it. I had my friends, and I didn't really need more than that. They were my only friends, but they had more friends outside my small circle. I would hang out with them sometimes and it was ok. But maybe if they thought I was more interesting or something, we would have been friends too.

Each of the participants had some positive feelings but noted that they wished the opinions would have been more positive. However, this was only one aspect of their lives. As the participants became incarcerated and had to navigate the criminal justice system, they would now be exposed to the opinions and beliefs of a new group of professionals in a completely different setting. Once they were released and returned to the public education system, their original thoughts on how they were perceived may have changed as well.

Perceived Perceptions versus Desired Perceptions During/After Incarceration

This section will review how each participant felt they were viewed by their family and friends, as compared to how they wish they were perceived during their incarceration. The participants expressed varying levels of self-awareness when describing how they believe they were perceived given the circumstances of their arrest and subsequent incarceration.

A thread throughout the participants responses were that they acknowledged their faults, but they knew they still had qualities that were positive or redeemable about them. Samuel said,

My friends . . . I think they knew I was loyal. I was always there always down. But after I got out and we moved, they probably thought I was bougee cause I didn't come around like that anymore. My family, well, that's really just my mom. . . . And I think once we were out of Brooklyn, she saw the change in me also. I think she was proud of me.

Samuel felt deeply that his commitment to his friends was understood and appreciated. But he did not believe those impressions were sustainable once his environment changed. In a similar vein, Bruce knew exactly where he stood with his family while he was incarcerated, so his focus was more on his friends. He explained,

There was one time, I was inside at the same time as one of my boys. So, we got each other's backs, obviously. He was my man. I already told you how my aunt was. . . . She was there for me after, but she wouldn't see me or let my cousins see me while I was inside. So, the people I used to run with, if they were locked up with me, or the new crew I kind of fell into being inside, they were my family, so

to say. We had each other's back. We understood each other's story. We looked out for each other. I think we believed in each other. We didn't talk about it, you know, that's not what we do. But it was always there. We respected each other. And when we would talk about getting out, they always looked at me like, wow, you know, when I started talking about the GED stuff. I definitely think they respected me. Maybe looked up to me a little.

Bruce had a respect for his aunt's stance on his incarceration and her desire to protect her own children from making similar choices. But he felt respected among his incarcerated peers, especially on the rare occasions that they would discuss their goals for the future. Shuri and Tony, on the other hand, felt more embarrassment and disappointment from their families. Tony shared that he was aware that his family still loved him. Still, he explained, "I knew my family still loved me, but I wanted other people to see me as somebody that they didn't have to give up on, I guess." Shuri said, "My family was so disappointed . . . they were really looking at me like . . . Crazy. What are you thinking, what are you doing? This isn't how your mom raised you. . . . I know they were disappointed in me."

Despite varying levels of self-awareness at that time, the participants were also hopeful that they were seen beyond their incarcerations and poor choices. Tony spoke to that in his response, but it goes deeper than wanting to know they are still loved. Shuri explained, "I [want to] feel like they believe in me, they're proud of me . . . that's really all that matters." Bruce's response was similarly aligned, he said he hoped to be perceived as, "Someone who made mistakes, but someone who owned them and learned from them. And maybe even, one day, someone who helped other people because of how

I moved.” Both Tony and Samuel wanted to be seen for what they have done since their incarceration. They both have strived to work hard and want that to be what they are known for. Tony elaborated, “As an entrepreneur, if I’m being honest, I hope they see me as like a . . . hard-working guy. I play hard and I work hard, I want people to see that I give things my all.” Samuel had comparable thoughts, sharing, “[I want] for them to see what I’m doing now, compared to back then and for them to be like, wow. . . . That’s what’s up.”

Fueled by a desire to be seen for more than the circumstances that caused their incarceration, and more motivating factors which will be discussed, each of the participants went on to complete their high school diploma or GED. But they did not stop there. They all joined the work force in a legitimate manner and even have aspirations for new careers. Some participants became parents and wanted to set a higher standard for their children. Their goals and desired perceptions became more than just how they were viewed individually, but in their expanding roles as adults.

We have reviewed how the participants felt about their family ties before, during and after incarceration. Another significant period for the participants was their time in the public education system. It is important to discuss how they believed they were viewed by their teachers and general school staff and what, if any, benefit they saw to education. The next theme will highlight the participants school life.

Theme 2: Variance of School Memories and Expectations

Participants reported that school can be a blessing or an added detriment to development. The participants were asked specifically about their recollection of both positive and negative school experiences. This section is also broken down into

additional subheadings to explore how the participants viewed their school experiences in the following areas: (a) level of academic interest and teacher involvement, (b) availability of extracurricular activities, (c) emotional investment of educators, (d) desired social-emotional school-based supports, and (e) perceived versus desired perceptions before and after incarceration amongst school staff.

Level of Academic Interest and Teacher Involvement

It is a New York state requirement for students to get a certain amount of seat time, or formal hours in the classroom setting as part of their advancement to the next grade. Attendance was not really an issue for most of the participants in elementary school. In middle and high school, however, attendance declined. The participants attributed the decline in their attendance to newly developed friendships and a desire to be with those friends rather than in school. However, that did not necessarily affect their ability to understand the curriculum. Bruce explained, “I’m one of those people that I don’t really have to study. I could listen and then take the test and do well. People don’t always think there are smart kids in Brooklyn, but I was smart.” For Bruce, teacher engagement was not necessary for him to understand the lesson.

In contrast, when Tony spoke about his academic life, he included how he felt about his teachers, which were a factor for him in being a successful student. He shared, “School was all right. . . . The teachers were good. Well, I think the teachers were OK. I was like a solid, like maybe, B student. I got an A in some classes in middle school.” Tony’s favorite subject was math and that is something that stuck with him over the years, partially because of his innate skills but also because of the support of his math teachers. Tony engaged as he was expected because he did not have a reason not to. He

had a lack of interest as some would expect from students his age at the time, but he pushed through and did what was asked of him with minimal resistance. And from there he developed meaningful relationships with some teachers that he keeps contact with to this day. Shuri also had a subject preference, but hers was science. Shuri supplied a deeper explanation of how she felt about her academics over the years and why. She elaborated,

I always really liked science. I was always really good at science. I think it helps me when I have to, like, do things with my hands and interact like that. So, you know, like experiments and stuff. But everything else, it was kind of boring. So, it was hard for me to do it on my own again. Elementary school, everything felt easier. It felt like the teachers were nicer. So, it was more interesting for me to do the writing assignments like we would watch a movie and have to write something about the movie. And then as I got older, it was like, oh, read this book, but by yourself and draft a book report. And that just, it wasn't fun to me. So, once it stopped being fun, I'm not going to say it was hard, but I just didn't care about it.

Shuri thrived when she was provided with a multi-modality approach to academics. She received help from verbal, visual and kinesthetic instruction which helped bring the lessons to life for her. As the expectations and type of instruction changed as she got older, she became less interested. But not all students have a set interest that keeps them engaged, even if they do not like their teacher(s). For Samuel, he struggled to become engaged because school, in general, was not appealing to him. He explained,

I didn't really like school too much. I just wanted to hang out with my friends, chill out. I mean, I'm not going to lie, I didn't really do any homework, nothing like that. I was wrong. All my friends and I, we just wanted a spot to be together. To chill. To talk to girls. School was basically that spot unless we were able to chill at someone's house. . . . The hardest part of school, I definitely say, was passing. I'm not . . . I don't care about none of this stuff, so I'm just trying to just care until, you know, they sit you down and say you're not going to have to repeat whatever grade it is. That was the only real goal. It didn't matter if I learned, I just had to make it to the next grade so my mom wouldn't lose it on me.

For Samuel, school was social setting and rarely anything more. While he did have a couple of teachers that were able to reach him, it was not related to academics. This is important to note because not all students have an intrinsic motivation and aptitude for learning and academic activities. Some students need external motivation to spark an interest or desire to learn and take part in academic instruction.

For example, in Samuel's case, the few teachers who resonated positively with him were those who made the lessons interesting, asked abstract questions and assigned work that had a significant cultural meaning. Samuel enjoyed unique learning experiences because standard instruction did not appeal to him. He explained, "How's it going to be relevant to me? You know, I'm trying to I'm trying to . . . I ain't worried about math like theorems or whatever the hell it was." Samuel was willing to relate to his teachers, if he felt like more than just the curriculum they were expected to teach was involved.

Bruce had a notably unique experience. As noted previously, he was not heavily engaged in school, but he was able to pass his tests and explain his answers if called on to speak during class discussions. However, the early introduction of mistrust of teachers and school officials by his mother, created a lack of interest in the school setting. Bruce's own teachers added to his feelings of mistrust and disinterest due to how they managed his ability to perform well academically despite his lack of engagement. He shared,

I didn't trust them, and they didn't trust me. Like I said, I didn't go out of my way to talk in class, but I did well on tests, so they thought I was cheating. Like, somehow, I couldn't know what I knew. I think it was worse, too, because most of my teachers were White. So, I felt like they were looking at me like, this little mixed kid can't be getting these answers right.

Each participant had a different school experience despite intuitively feeling like they were intelligent. Shuri and Tony showed their skills voluntarily through their participation and good grades and, in turn, had those feelings validated by teachers who made them feel like they also viewed them as smart. Samuel was able to speak with select teachers on a more human level that went past the curriculum, this was valuable to him because he had no personal stake in school outside of associating with his friends. For Bruce, his intellect and natural abilities were disregarded because of the expectations of his community and the preconceived notions of his teachers. The dismissal of Bruce's academic strengths added to his negative feelings about school and distrust for school staff.

As noted, the primary function of school is to support learning for all students. While this is generally done through academic instruction and application, school also

fosters the development of social skills and interests. Findings reveal that the availability, or lack thereof, of diverse afterschool programs and activities changed the participants' feelings of connection to their respective schools.

Availability of Extracurricular Activities

The offering of various extracurricular activities may be enough to keep students in school and in a safe environment. It offers the opportunity for self-exploration and the development of unique skills that are not solely academically based. As the participants shared, this can often vary from school district to school district and be largely dependent on funding and administrative support to present diverse areas of interest. Shuri, again, supplied considerable context on this topic as she recounted,

In elementary school, I feel like that's where they did everything. I was in the Scrabble club in fourth grade, so it was, you know, I really enjoyed those types of things. But as I got older, they didn't offer that as much or they only had things relating to sports, and that was never really me. You know, I'd rather watch a game like with my friends than try to play it, so it became harder to find fun things to do in school. . . . It was just hard to feel like I belonged to something. You know, I was used to being in clubs and groups and having friends. And then, you know, I guess just what everybody was focused on changed. But what I was focused on didn't change.

The diversity of clubs and activities offered to Shuri were engaging to her, in elementary school. She was able to make friends who had the same interests that were considered less mainstream. She found her niche, so to speak. But as she got older, the districts she moved around in were more focused on sports activities. While she enjoyed

spending time with her friends to watch a game, she lost her areas of personal interest to take part in directly, rather than passively.

Tony also shared his interests in school, saying,

I participated in a spelling bee once. It was all right. We had chorus, so you know, I was in that too. And I did a little bit of music class, you know, I played clarinet. I think by the time I got to middle school, I had stopped playing with it, but in elementary school I played clarinet and it was pretty cool.

Interestingly, neither Bruce nor Samuel, who grew up in Brooklyn, part of the NYCDOE, shared anything about extracurricular activities. For Bruce, he did what he had to do academically but had no desire to engage with the teachers. So, if there were other offerings, he was not familiar with them, nor did he have an interest in learning about them. Without those options, the participants found other past times. Bruce said, “The teachers were annoying and sh*t, but it wasn’t hard. The hard part was dealing with the other kids. Everyone had a chip on their shoulder man. Everyone was always ready to fight.” For Samuel, his highlight of school was explained quite simply. He said, “Definitely recess.” There was nothing else to pull him in and develop his interest at that time. Unstructured times like lunch and recess allowed him the freedom to associate with his friends during the school day.

The dramatically different experiences of the participants who experienced elementary and middle school on long Island versus in the city highlight the need for equitable funding for all students. This lets each student experience new activities that can stimulate them and encourage them to develop new connections and ideas they may not have had exposure to otherwise. And for the communities that are wealthier and are

able to provide substantial extracurriculars, Shuri's experience highlights the importance of maintaining diversity in offerings to maintain student engagement.

Emotional Investment of Educators

The level of teacher/staff interaction with the participants and how the participants felt about the school staff's involvement varied from grade to grade, teacher to teacher and ranged from excellent to extremely poor. Again, we see some of the disparities between poorer and more affluent districts, but also the importance of representation in the classrooms. The subject of representation was especially important to Bruce. As noted previously, he was a student who did not have to study to do well. In his observation, this did not sit well with his teachers. He reported,

It wasn't good. I didn't trust them, and they didn't trust me. Like I said, I didn't go out of my way to talk in class, but I did well on tests, so they thought I was cheating. Like, somehow, I couldn't know what I knew. I think it was worse, too, because most of my teachers were White. So, I felt like they were looking at me like, this little mixed kid can't be getting these answers right.

Bruce could have potentially had a different outlook on school, or the staff at least, if he felt that his abilities were recognized and valued instead of dismissed or viewed as cheating. Bruce did not verbalize what he wanted, but he was clear on what did not help him feel included and interested in his teachers.

Samuel only had two teachers that stood out to him in a positive way. One was a math teacher who used flashcards and games to keep the students interested. The students were able to compete for bragging rights while learning their multiplication facts. The other teacher was one of his only Black teachers (in third grade) who assigned a book

report for Black History Month. It was that teacher's passion for the topic that had Samuel interested. He even recalled who he read about sharing, "We actually had to go to the library and take out a book about some Black leader or whatever I did. I think I did Wilma Rudolph." Aside from those two teachers, Samuel had this to say about his interactions with school staff,

I think for a lot of the teachers, it was just about keeping everything together and making sure, you know, we didn't run off . . . because there are fights in the hallway and they [the students] wanted to see or fights with each other over dumb stuff. And I don't I remember which one, but one teacher, she'd get mad, and she started yelling at us because we weren't paying her any mind. . . . We didn't care. So honestly, it was more just, you know, keeping the peace cause most of us was bad ass kids. . . . Back then, I'd say, you know, teachers are whack like they weren't really doing nothing like none of this stuff is relevant.

Samuel felt the subtle impressions that teachers may not have been emotionally invested or mentally engaged with the students and he attributed that to them not wanting to be in that particular school or district. Of course, the teachers may have said otherwise if asked directly, but that was the feeling Samuel had based on his observations. The expectations may have been different depending on the community they were serving. From rough neighborhoods in Brooklyn, to calmer areas in the suburbs of Long Island, there was variability in how the participants inferred their teacher engagement and level of interest in teaching. For example, Tony had a different outlook on what made him like his teachers. He said,

[I liked] any teacher that that passed me, I guess. And it seems like, you know, they didn't take school seriously because, like there's so much more in the world than just like, you know, learning what's in a book or whatever. So, any teacher that was like, I know you . . . and I know I have to teach this to you. Yeah, maybe you won't need it in the future but . . . I'll try and make it interesting. You know, like, this is just being straight up and real about it. So, I respected that a lot.

[Conversely there was a teacher who] definitely didn't like me at all. I would just try to keep to myself, you know. And she would call on me to answer even if my hand wasn't up. It was like she was trying to catch me not knowing something. I always felt like she wanted to embarrass me.

Tony was focused on getting the grades he needed to move forward, and he preferred not to feel added pressure from teachers about his academics. Unlike Bruce and Samuel, he did not interpret the laid-back nature of some teachers as dismissive of the students, rather he viewed it as them being honest about the validity and usefulness of some of the curriculum. Notably, so far, the participants have not directly expressed what they would have wished for from their teachers; rather they expressed what largely did not work or what made them feel comfortable in the moment.

Shuri had consistently good experiences in elementary school. She felt that her teachers were interested in her and the topics they were teaching. They made school fun and appealing. As she grew older, and the expectations changed, so did her perception of the teachers. When Shuri returned from her incarceration, she felt that the teachers were judging her. But school staff is not solely formed of teachers. Shuri was able to have a

wonderful experience in high school, after she returned from her incarceration, with one of her guidance counselors. She shared,

So, I know I said when I got back into high school, it was just awful, and it was.

But on my way out there was one guidance counselor. I think she could tell that I probably wasn't going to come back, and she's the one who got me the information about the GED, where I could go to get study help, and what I would need to know about it. And she, you know, she really made me feel like I could do it. And it was just nice to have someone still believe in me, even though, like, she wasn't trying to convince me to stay in high school. She talked to me like I was a real person, like she understood where I was coming from, and because of that, I took her at her word and looked into the GED stuff, and I'm really happy I did.

The participants felt like they could relate most to teachers and staff that were genuine with them—whatever that meant for them individually. They preferred the adults who did not try to “catch them” doing something wrong or being unprepared, but the ones who showed general empathy and understanding. Even though it was not said explicitly, it is clear the participants wished more, if not all, of their teachers and school staff carried themselves the way the staff they spoke highly of did.

The teachers and staff who made an effort to be honest and transparent with the students made the school experience more tolerable, regardless of the community and how much money there was to put into extracurricular activities. A real approach to human interactions went a long way in establishing connections with the participants that went beyond the classroom.

Desired Social-Emotional School-Based Supports

It is hard to separate the supports the participants actually received from what they wished they had received because they often expressed it in the same breath. Understanding, patience, genuineness, authenticity, interest in their personal lives, mutual respect and passion were the underlying themes behind what the participants often found lacking in their teachers and school staff and what they alluded to needing more of, even when it was present to a degree. Ironically, those were the same qualities that were clear in the staff that they felt drawn to. There was an unspoken need from the participants to have their emotional well-being and mental health cared for as much as, if not more so at times, than their academic growth.

Shuri summed it up nicely when reflecting on her elementary school experience saying,

The biggest thing was feeling like I had a place where I didn't have to try so hard. I could just be myself and people liked me. And, you know, feeling that that kind of . . . I'm not going to call them family because it was school but feeling like they cared was probably the nicest part.

As noted previously, in high school, Shuri was able to connect with a guidance counselor in particular. Tony also had a positive experience with a guidance counselor. He shared encouraging feelings about being checked on that made him feel like he mattered. Those check-ins and genuine interest in not only his life, but that of his family who meant so much to him, went an exceptionally long way. He elaborated,

I think it's just the fact that I think that I felt important, I guess. You know, you pay attention and keep up with kids, you know, especially like . . . I know she [the

guidance counselor] knew about like my family situation. She was always asking me about my mom and how my sister is doing and . . . how everything is after . . . I got, you know, arrested, whatever. So it was, yeah, she was really cool.

The participants were able to notice subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, impressions from the staff that they did not want to be there. Bruce explained, “they seemed checked out. Brooklyn was a tough place back then. Knowing what I know now, I am sure they didn’t want to be teaching there. I can’t remember any teachers that actually acted like we were their first choice.” Staff contentment for their location of service was transparent to the participants and it effected their own desire to engage in and their feelings of support throughout the school day.

During the final interviews, each participant was asked if there was anything else they would like to elaborate on that they may not have been asked or answered as thoroughly as they would have liked during the earlier interviews. Bruce went on to reflect on his own daughter’s current school experience and he shared,

I look at my oldest daughter and she will come home from school talking about mental health and social emotional—whatever it’s called—and I don’t remember hearing that in school. It didn’t seem like people cared about that. And especially where I grew up, therapy and that, that wasn’t something we talked about.

Especially in Black and Hispanic families. So, maybe having that back in the day would have been good. I’m glad it’s a thing now. I like that.

Bruce was able to look back on his experiences in hindsight and compare it to how the school system has grown in offering supports to students. Growing up without a focus on mental and emotional health made him realize just how important it is and how

it could have potentially affected him differently. Shuri repeatedly touched on the need for more inclusivity of extracurricular activities for all ages to help keep students engaged. In her reflection she noted,

I don't think I realized how much I just wanted to be a part of something. And so, I was looking at my answers for a lot of things because I made a lot of dumb decisions off the strength of thinking that people were my friends and not wanting to lose that friendship, wanting to feel like I belong somewhere.

The emergence of consistent ties among each participant became clearer in their reflections, especially when looking back on their experiences as adults now. Several decisions they made were fueled by a lack of foresight and typical development at that age. However, there was also a stronger force driving some of their actions; a lack of awareness of what their needs were and how best to meet them. In turn, they looked to fill those needs in ways that they would not have likely chosen as adults, or if other options were available to them.

Perceived versus Desired Perceptions Before and After Incarceration Amongst School Staff

All participants shared how perceptions of them shifted pre and post incarceration amongst their families and friends. Perception also varied considerably for the participants as students who were academically engaged and did not display maladaptive behaviors in school as compared to those who appeared uninterested or who were struggling academically. But it was not only a matter of academic perception, but it was also truly a matter of validation and encouragement in how the participants viewed themselves and thought school personnel saw them too. Unlike the consistency the

participants shared when discussing how they believed they were perceived amongst their family and friends, there was much more variability in how they thought they were perceived versus how they desired to be seen amongst their teachers and school staff. This section will be broken down into the following sub-themes: participant impression of teachers and support staff perceptions and the aftermath of incarceration on student perceptions by teachers and staff.

Participant Impression of Teachers and Support Staff Perceptions. As noted in previous sections, the participants thought of themselves as smart, though they made some mistakes. In the school setting, however, the perception of their own intelligence was often based on how they believed their teachers and other school staff perceived them for various reasons. For a natural scholar like Bruce who faced challenges because he did not have to study, he said, “it felt like the teachers . . . were always hating on me.” On the other hand, Samuel, who was not as easily drawn to academics and who did not have options for typical extracurricular activities shared, “Most people probably just wrote me off . . . it seemed like everyone knew who everyone was, but I didn’t really care about them, and they didn’t really care about me. We all had the crews we ran with and that was all that mattered.”

Alternatively, Shuri said, “the adults that knew me knew I was smart.” She had no doubt in how she was perceived. Tony also, felt confident in how school staff perceived him saying, “I think my teachers thought I was cool too. I did what I had to do, got ok grades and was pretty smart so I think they thought I was ok.”

The stark contrast in how the participants believed they were perceived was not just a momentary snapshot. They based their opinions off of how the teachers and staff

interacted with them on a daily basis, the feedback they received about their work and the staff's own level of interest in working in that particular building/district.

When the perceived views were negative, some participants became even less engaged and no longer sought that validation. When asked how he wished to be perceived by school staff, Samuel said, "I didn't really care, honestly, at that time, anything about them. It was just my mom I really cared about." Shuri was well received until she was incarcerated, and in thinking about that, she said, "For the whole time I was in school, [I wish] people looked at me like I was smart because I know that I am." She experienced a shift that the other participants may not have been able to connect to in the same way. She was a student in good standing who was considered in high regard, but that changed when she was incarcerated.

Tony did not offer an idea of how he wished staff would have perceived him. He felt confident on how he believed he was perceived so there was no need for him to add to it. However, for Bruce, he explained,

I didn't have any expectations for school. Looking back now, it would have been nice if they saw me as the smart kid that I was. It could have been a different experience for me if they believed in me, even a little. Even if they faked it but made me believe it, that would have been better.

While we cannot go back in time, it is important to reflect on the differences between how the participants believed they were seen as compared to how they wish they had been seen. As Bruce shared, even if it was not true, but convincing enough to him, he would have felt more supported if he thought the teachers believed he was as smart as he

knew himself to be. Again, validation and encouragement were underlying themes throughout the participant responses.

The Aftermath of Incarceration on Student Perceptions by Teachers and Staff. Each participant returned to the public education system for varying lengths of time once released from jail. But it was difficult for the participants to reflect on the change once they returned to school. For the most part, once they returned, they were focused on how to get out, without going back to jail. Shuri reflected,

The adults that didn't know me or the adults that, you know, saw me after I came back from jail, they wouldn't really make eye contact with me. Or if they did, they would look at me like, you know, they couldn't trust me and stuff like that. So, I didn't really like that because I didn't do anything to them. But I guess I get it. They just came off as judgmental.

There was a general lack of trust and idea that somehow, the participants were beyond redemption upon their release. Tony further elaborated, "I wanted other people to see me as somebody that they didn't have to give up on, I guess." Tony did not lose sight of who he was or how he was perceived. He wanted to continue to be seen as relatable, and he explained, "I play hard, and I work hard, I want people to see that I give things my all."

For Samuel, he no longer had a personal stake in what his teachers thought of him, even once moving to Long Island. His obligation was to make his mother proud. He did what he had to do in school so that she would be content and by extension, the teachers did not have anything negative to say about him. This section reflects the importance of setting up positive connections with students. As the participants shared,

they were looking to be welcomed, well received, and viewed as worthy . . . if they were still interested in being considered at that point.

Theme 3: Incarceration Experiences

This section is devoted to the experiences the participants faced while incarcerated and their feelings surrounding it. The subthemes in this section are (a) emotive reactions to incarceration and the lessons learned while incarcerated, (b) desired supports while incarcerated, and (c) perceptions during and after incarceration. For many of the participants, arrest and incarceration were a significant turning point in their lives making them reassess their goals and how they went about reaching them.

Emotive Reactions to Incarceration and Lessons Learned While Incarcerated

The participants evolved as individuals and grew into adulthood through their arrests and incarcerations. In this section, the following sub-themes will be addressed: the participants arrest stories and the lessons they learned while incarcerated.

Arrest Story. Each participant was between the age of 15 and 16 at the time of their first arrest. When asked what they were feeling in the moment of their arrest their initial responses fell into one of two categories. Both Shuri and Tony reported feeling “scared” while both Samuel and Bruce expressed that they were “mad.”

The participants reflected on their arrest and while those were the first feelings they experienced; they went onto elaborate the deeper emotions beneath their initial response. There were other feelings relating to self and how their families would feel about their actions that had not come to the surface yet. Samuel felt the handcuffs on his wrists, which angered him, but then he thought about his mother and how angry she would be as well. Samuel said, “It was more I was so mad that I got caught and I was

mad at myself. I was mad. I was just mad at everything. I was just, you know, didn't want to be in that situation." Anger may have been his first expression, but evidence of frustration is embedded in his response as well.

Bruce also described himself as feeling mad when he was first arrested because he did not believe he had done anything worthy of arrest in that moment. Additionally, his interactions with the police were generally negative to begin with. Being arrested, seemingly without fault, added an extra layer of anger and defeat. He recounts,

I was heading back home after chilling with my boys, and I got caught up. I was 15 at the time. I guess they had been watching me for a little bit because I got surrounded and it was wild because I didn't even really do anything crazy that night. So, I was tired from hanging all day and then I was mad cause they were yelling at me and cursing at me. So, me, who I am, I was cursing back cause you're not going to talk to me like that. And they put the handcuffs on so tight. Man. I was mad. It wasn't at a time where everyone had the cameras on their phones. I don't even remember if anyone else was around actually. Every time I dealt with the cops; it always went so fast. Or maybe that's just how I'm remembering it.

Bruce had prior experiences with the police that led him to already have negative feelings toward them. But unlike Bruce, Tony had fairly positive interactions with the police. He was not raised to have a "respectful fear" of police. In Tony's case, the police were the good guys. When he was arrested, he had a rush of thoughts, as he explains, "I was scared I'm not going to lie, I was scared. I . . . was upset and scared. . . . I was thinking like, oh my god, am I going to jail today? Am I going to have a record now or

something?” Tony did not offer more details about his arrest. It is not clear if he was arrested while alone or if while in the midst of committing a crime.

Shuri was arrested while with her friends who were engaging in theft. As noted previously, Shuri reported that she would limit the extent of her involvement in the activities her friends were taking part in. So, for Shuri, there was a mix of fear and confusion as to how and why she was getting arrested. She said,

I knew that I wasn't doing the right thing, but I didn't realize how bad it was. So, like some of my friends . . . [would] steal maybe like some earrings or something like that, and they never got caught. You know, so I started doing it too. . . . But then they started getting into other things and stealing more and because I was with them, I got caught up in that too. . . . I still hung out, but I wasn't stealing money and stuff. So, when we did get arrested, I was so shocked and I was just trying to explain that I really, you know, I was with them, but I wasn't part of it. So, it was really scary.

Given the initial age at the participants first arrests, their emotional responses were certainly understandable. The underlying emotions that were implied but not directly expressed include: disappointment, confusion, frustration and disassociation.

After their initial arrest, came the experience of incarceration. For most participants, they were only incarcerated once. But each participant learned valuable, lifelong lessons during their time in jail that they were able to transfer into their daily lives once released.

Lessons Learned While Incarcerated. The participants takeaways from their experiences while incarcerated were mixed. But in a more realistic sense, the lessons

ranged from concrete applications to more abstract and subjective. Tony's response was definitely concrete. He expressed, "I just didn't want to be there. So. You know, yeah, I just I just didn't like it. It was just bad. So, my biggest lesson was to not do things that would bring me back there."

From their arrest to incarceration, each participant reported that their time incarcerated instilled in them a new outlook or lesson learned. The participants' lessons were trust, safety and self-reliance. Bruce said, "everything was just survival, just learning how to survive when I move." Shuri had a similar thought, "the most important thing was not to trust anybody. . . . Once I was in jail, I really didn't have any friends, so it was just about relying on myself." Even Samuel had a related thought, saying, "There are a lot of things you have to learn on your own. . . . In jail, you have yourself. That's it. If you don't learn how to read people and situations, you're not going to make it."

Outside of surviving their time while incarcerated the participants did reflect on what led them to be in such a position. The lessons they took from that were essentially about the importance of not engaging in those activities/behaviors again. Shuri further explained,

I guess more importantly, what I learned was not to do the stuff that got me in there in the first place. You know, I never want to go back. So, I just, you know, and I want to be a good example for my daughter. So, I really just try to respect the law, follow the law, do what I'm supposed to do because it's not worth it otherwise.

Tony and Samuel's reflections were analogous, they expressed simply, "my biggest lesson was to not do things that would bring me back there" and "Jail isn't where

I wanted to be. I just wanted to get out,” respectively. Each participant made it clear that no matter how gritty TV and movie depictions are of jail and/or prison, none of them truly come close to describing what it is actually like to be incarcerated. The participants were ill prepared for the challenges that were waiting for them once incarcerated and they had to learn to adjust quickly to their unique environment or suffer grave consequences.

Bruce was the only participant to be incarcerated multiple times. He had this to say of his time incarcerated,

You’re going to get into a fight at some point in time, you’re going to have to fight whoever gets in your face and whoever else gets involved. . . . You learn how to get drugs and get paid for that stuff. It was honestly, everything was just survival, just learning how to survive when I move. And I did it well. It didn’t hurt that I went back a few times. I was hard-headed (laughs) but eventually I found my way.

The other participants did not offer as much detail as Bruce, but Samuel did explain how he would try to divert attention from what was happening when speaking to his mother. He said,

I wouldn’t tell her all the stuff that happened. I didn’t want her to worry about me. You know, you don’t want to be on the phone like the phone was in, like the middle of the day room. So, you know, all the dudes can hear you too. You know, they talk to their moms and stuff, too. But . . . you can’t sound like a bitch on the phone. So, I would tell her I’m doing good.

There were elements of his life during incarceration that Samuel felt would scare his mother or even potentially have her worrying for his health and safety. He also spoke

to the importance of ensuring you did not carry yourself in a way that would make you appear vulnerable. Interestingly, Shuri did not report feeling like a potential target, quite the opposite, she said, “Everybody in jail is really cold, like they don’t really talk to you. They don’t really look at you.” She experienced isolation from her loved ones and friends and from the other inmates as well.

From feelings of fear and anger to learning how to be even more self-sustainable without a matter of choice, the participants had to grow very quickly in order to adapt to their new environment. Despite returning to jail, even Bruce ultimately reflected on the need to not return. Avoiding future incarcerations was a consistent lesson for all of the participants as they reflected on their decisions and what they wanted their lives to be.

Desired Supports While Incarcerated

All participants reported wanting more support, in general. For the participants, support could come in the manner of emotional interactions, financial supplementation or general advice. Shuri reflected on what was *not* provided as a potential deterrent to reincarceration. She said,

My aunt called every now and then. They would try to send stuff to me that would remind me of home whatever they could send me. But. Hmm. Any other supports? I guess that was really it. . . . I wasn’t getting anything out of being there. If they do that on purpose so you won’t want to go back . . . it worked.

Shuri did not receive any meaningful supports from the staff within the criminal justice system. However, Tony appreciated the interaction and conversation with the COs. One in particular would go out of his way to speak to the youths that were incarcerated. Tony said,

I guess the correction officers, the COs, you know, well one of them, he was kind of cool. He would talk to us. He used to talk to us like, you know, about life and stuff like that. And you know, he like, gave us ideas of like stuff people were doing. He knew a big thing for most of us who were locked up was having our own money. So, he would talk to us about the stock market and everything like that.

Tony had someone that showed a genuine interest in keeping the inmates from returning; especially those who were incarcerated because they were motivated by money. The understanding of why they were in jail extended itself to the CO to supply a distinct perspective and means of reaching the same desired outcomes in a legitimate way. Where Tony was able to find support in a CO, Bruce also made connections, but with fellow inmates. He did not find much support from the system itself. But as he was learning more about survival, he relied on select inmates, mostly those he knew from his time outside before becoming incarcerated. He explained,

My boys will hook me up like my boys that were, I guess we'll call them the friends that I've made in jail, you know. We trade up. They would hook me up with some food or whatever drugs and then I could keep what I wanted or keep trading for other stuff. In that way, we supported each other. Cause when you're inside, who else can really understand you but someone else who is inside or has been inside.

Samuel is the only participant who touched on the education within the criminal justice system. By law, all of the participants had to be provided a corresponding curriculum for their grade level while incarcerated. Samuel noted,

We still had school but most of the guys always found a way to get out of it. And it felt like the teachers still didn't care and the books were trash. That was the only part that seemed, "normal" you know what I mean?

So, while academic resources were offered in a technical sense, they were not supported and encouraged. Once again, there was a lack of engagement and interest, seemingly among both the teachers and the incarcerated students. Most of the participants found comfort, support and solace in their family and friends who supplied monetary support and connection through phone calls while they were incarcerated.

Similar to the responses for what the participants wished they would have received in school, their responses regarding the criminal justice system were more focused on what they did not receive or the rare helpful individuals. In analyzing that, one can assume that if education and Correctional Officer interactions were emphasized and strived for, the participants would have felt better supported.

Perceptions During and After Incarceration

As noted in multiple statements by the participants previously, once they were incarcerated, they were not viewed in the same way, whether by family or by school staff. There was variability in how they were perceived once they were incarcerated. However, the participants ideas about how they believed they were perceived by criminal justice staff reflected more frustration than acceptance of how they were viewed. In their retrospection the participants had varying opinions of how they wished they were perceived, ranging from indifference to wanting to be recognized for more than their incarceration

Feelings of being overlooked, unseen and dismissed ran rampant. Shuri's reflections were very much negative, she said,

I don't think they cared, like they thought we were all the same person. It didn't matter what you were there for. It didn't matter if you didn't really do it and you just got caught up or whatever it was, they didn't care. So, they just looked at everybody like we were trash.

The way she felt she was viewed made her less interested in thinking about how she wishes she were seen. She explained, "part of me wishes that I could show them that I have my GED and I'm in school. . . . But I don't even know if it's worth thinking about them or worrying about how they would view me now." For Shuri, even if the people she interacted with while incarcerated knew she had made significant changes in her life for the better, she did not feel it would be worth her time. The way Shuri felt she was perceived made it hard for her to believe that any change would come, even if the criminal justice staff knew she turned her life around in a positive manner.

Bruce also felt like he was insignificant. He reported, "They look down on you. They don't care about you. It was just. . . . They don't care about you, you know, just another day on the job for them." If he could express how he wished to be viewed, Bruce said, "I'm just a hard-working dude, a good father, just trying to just raise my family, you know, do right by them, do better by them, you know, honestly. . . . I want people to just see me as a hardworking man." Bruce felt like a moving piece on a board with no individuality to speak of. The staff were doing their jobs and it did not matter who he was, specifically, or why he was there. All that matters was that he was there. However,

for Bruce, he would want the criminal justice staff to see him differently, to know that he was a multi-faceted person: a father, a diligent worker.

Samuel expressed like thoughts to Bruce about how he was viewed. He said, “to them, I was just another Black man, you know, just arrested, you know, there’s no hope for me.” Instead, he would have preferred to be seen in this way: “I would like them to think that maybe I had more going on. Maybe I would become something. Maybe I was worth getting to know because I was more than the reason I got arrested.” Again, like Bruce, Samuel wanted to be seen as more than just the incident that led to his incarceration. He had an entire chain of circumstances that affected his life and the choices he made. For Samuel, a recognition of that would have gone a long way.

In respect to the severity of how they were viewed, Tony appeared to have the easiest go of it with his interactions with all parties in the criminal justice system. When revealing how he wished he was viewed, he shared:

They [the correction officers] were pretty cool about that. You know, they just said stay out of trouble, you know, and I can get out. You know, it’s not the end, I guess, even though I mean, it felt pretty bad because again, like the judge and the COs and everything like that, it was just like a normal day on the job for them. So, I was kind of like I was kind of anxious, scared, and I kind of wanted them to see me as like a kid still, not a criminal.

In Tony’s experience, he was not necessarily made out to feel like he was unredeemable. However, he carried a lot of internal guilt because of his actions and the later consequences despite not at once dismissed by those working around him. He did note though that it was still like any other day for the staff. They were kind to him, but he

still did not perceive himself as “special.” When thinking about how he would like to be viewed now, he said, “As an entrepreneur, if I’m being honest, I hope they see me as like a . . . hard-working guy.” While Tony did not have a similar sense of how he was perceived to the other participants, he still wanted the opportunity to be viewed as successful, after the fact. It is noteworthy that Tony is the only White participant, and his incarceration experience was notably different from the three other participants of color. He described being spoken to kindly and offered meaningful advice from the criminal justice staff— supports that none of the participants of color reported receiving.

Whether their experiences were negative or positive, each participant eventually left jail and went on to complete the requirements toward a high school diploma or GED. And for most of the participants, the chance to have their successes be seen, heard, known and recognized, would have been what they wanted. The next theme will investigate their motivations to make these significant and positive changes on a deeper level.

Theme 4: Turning Points: Motivations for Change

The heart of this study is to look at what motivated the participants to return to public education and complete their high school diploma or GED, post-incarceration. This is especially important as the dropout rates for students who become incarcerated is a significant problem in the United States. For the participants of this study, their turning point, or significant moment that changed the participants course of action, often sparked their motivation to return to the public education system. For each participant, their motivators fell into one of two categories: financial security and family. But both categories were heavily intertwined.

Samuel credits his mother and their move to Long Island as his turning point. Being removed from the environment and people that led to his incarceration provided him with a fresh start to focus on the goals he wanted to do. He was no longer in the same environment with the pressures of conforming and engaging in activities he did not agree with because of loyalty. Samuel is still motivated by making money and making his mother proud, but he is now in a relationship, and he wants to be better for her as well.

His short-term goal is to continue making money, in a legal way, so he can eventually open his own business and work for himself. When asked what motivated him to set such a goal, he responded without hesitation, "It's my mom's. For good, bad, ugly . . . she never left my side. She was always looking out for me, so I want to take care of her." Samuel was strongly motivated by family.

Tony's turning point was a fresh perspective on a movie. He credits the film *Fight Club* with helping him see that while money is valuable, it is not everything. He explained,

That movie was like the first time like I watched a movie and it like opened my mind, like how society works and stuff like that. American society like, you know, how like how much we rely on material things, and you know, like maybe like, you know, money isn't everything.

Once Tony received his high school diploma, he began to work, and he still helps his mother with bills. His relationship with his sister stays a priority and he is looking forward to seeing her off to college. Tony is eager to continue working and find better paying jobs along the way. But his ultimate goal at this moment is:

The normal stuff, you know, getting a girlfriend, get married. I mean, I have a girlfriend now, but you know, like getting married, get an apartment or house of our own. All of this stuff, you know, just to live a good life. And staying out of jail!

Tony is motivated to live a life reminiscent of the “American Dream” where he earns a livable wage and has a family to share it all with. Notably, he is the only participant who expressly said his long-term plans include not going back to jail, though it was implied at various points by all of the participants.

Shuri’s turning point was finding out she was going to be a mother. Shuri explained, “It wasn’t until I found out I was pregnant that I was like, OK, now I have to [get my GED].” But Shuri’s goals did not stop with earning her GED. She had both personal and professional reasons to look into nursing. Not only was inspiring her daughter a major motivating factor, but Shuri also wanted to honor the little girl inside that still loves science. She expounds:

I’ve always kind of been into science, I’ve liked the hands-on things. I’m smart, but I didn’t have the grades or money, to get into medical school and I really wasn’t trying to spend eight to 12 years of my life back in school. . . . But I knew I wanted to help people, and I knew I wanted to keep busy, and I want to show my daughter that it doesn’t matter, you know, even if you’ve made bad choices at some point in your life, you can still turn it around. So, I want her to see her mom be successful and I want her to be proud of me and everything that I’m doing.

Like Tony and Samuel, Shuri also had a familial part that motivated her, but it was the realization that she was going to become a parent. Bruce had a similar turning

point; his life changed when he found out he was going to be a father for the first time.

He explained,

I was messing with a girl in between my last two times being locked up—I was locked up three times altogether. So, I called her up one day and she tells me her period is late. Oh my gosh, here we go. You know, one of those times. So, then you know . . . a couple of days later, I call her, and we talk, and she tells me, you know, I'm pregnant. I'm like, you sure it's mine? But you know, it's that kind of realization like, I'm about to be your dad. And I was like, oh sh*t, like, I am barely out of jail. That was like one night, you know, I went outside, and I just teared up. I was like, Dang, what am I doing? I had already been in jail twice. By this point, you know, I got into mad fights, all this sh*t. And that was when I was like, ok, I gotta do better. I went back to jail one more time but that was on some other sh*t that I don't want to talk about. But I knew, that had to be the last time.

Both Shuri and Bruce realized that they had to make major changes in their lives when they learned they were going to oversee another life, that of their child. While it was their own turning points, it was also a major life event that would give most people pause and make them reflect on their lifestyles. Shuri and Bruce wanted to rise to the occasion to give their children the best possible chance at having a “good” life and not necessarily repeating their actions prior to incarceration.

While the motivations for the participants were loosely related and fell into two major categories: family and finances, they each had a unique rationale, not only for the goals they selected, but also for the motivations behind those choices. Each participant

shared how they wanted to be viewed as more than their errors and their goals reflect a desire for greater experiences, lives and situations than they came from.

Conclusion

This chapter offered an in-depth narrative of each participant: their childhood experiences, in and out of school; their incarceration experiences; their motivations and what fed their dreams and what lessons they learned from their incarceration. It was vital to take this detailed look into the lives of each participant to uncover themes that were consistent throughout their stories, but also what made each of their experiences unique. These stories, though individualized, can be generalized to answer the research questions posed in this study.

The first research question sought to answer how the participants viewed their educational and incarceration journeys. At various times, each of the participants felt neglected, dismissed, isolated, ignored, rejected and/or frustrated, when they were looking for belonging, compassion, understanding and respect. It was challenging for the participants to feel seen throughout their time spent in school and while incarcerated. The highlight for each participant was an individual who acknowledged them and made a concerted effort to support them; be it a family member, correctional officer or guidance counselor.

The second research question examined the motivations for the participants when returning to public education post-incarceration. The participants were motivated by family and finances. They wanted to make their loved ones, old and new, proud of them. They also felt the magnitude of wanting to support their loved ones in a legitimate way. It was important to each participant that the people they cared for most be taken care of and

see the effort they put into making better decisions in their lives. They also wanted to enjoy the feelings of personal success and pursuing their dreams for their own benefit.

Finally, the third research question regarded the supports available to the participants. In their responses, the participants indicated that supports were minimal. While in school, the participants would have liked a wide range of extracurricular activities to engage in. But on a deeper level, they longed for emotional supports where their personal battles were acknowledged, and they were given a space to be validated. They had a desire to be cared for by the various adults in their lives and to be seen as kids who needed guidance over discipline. The desired supports were the same while they were incarcerated. They wanted to be viewed as individuals who were worthy of respect, fairness, kindness and a voice. They often acknowledged the error of their ways, but they needed compassion and empathy from the adults in their lives to see past those mistakes.

The next, and last chapter will explore the application of these lived experiences. We will discuss how educators can better adjust to support students and hopefully, keep them from entering the criminal justice system. The limitations of this study will also be discussed to help guide future researchers in how to expand on this work. The focus of this study is the individual and the next chapter will prove how that dedicated focus can help others.

CHAPTER 5

Introduction

This narrative study explored the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated youths who returned to the public education system to complete their high school diploma or GED. This study gives voice to the experiences of the youths' journeys through education and the criminal justice system and tracks their motivations at different phases of their educational and criminal justice journeys. This chapter will focus on the implications of the data collected from four individual interviews with four participants.

The participants shared their experiences and consistent these shown through each of their stories. The participants felt dismissed, ignored, undervalued and neglected by both the public education system and the criminal justice system at various times throughout their journeys. Whether it was a direct cause of their race, socio-economic status, incarceration or familial circumstances, they felt as though their options, in school and their community, were limited and, in an effort, to seek belonging and safety, they were drawn to individuals who directed them to activities that ultimately led to their incarceration.

Chapter 4 dove deeply into the lived experiences of the participants relating to their childhood family experiences, their early education experiences and their involvement in the criminal justice system. Not only did the participants share their memories, but they also offered their emotional state and reasoning into the choices behind their actions. The emotional impact of their shared events can help influence how school leaders and stakeholders mold how they support the students in their respective schools. This chapter will address the research questions posed at the outset of this study

as well as limitations of the study, how future researchers can expand on this study and how stakeholders can use the data to improve student graduation outcomes and experiences.

This section will address the three research questions that were the focus of this study. The first research question aimed to address how the participants, the individuals themselves, understood their institutional journeys—both within the education and the criminal justice system. This overlaps across three of the four emergent themes: (a) fragmented family, (b) school experiences, and (c) incarceration experiences. The second research question directly queries the participants to identify and explain their motivations for returning to the public education system after they completed their time within the criminal justice system. This research question aligns directly with the fourth theme: motivations and goals. Finally, the third research question addressed the types of supports the participants received and what they wished they had received—in various forms, which is consistent with all of the themes identified in the fourth chapter.

Much of the current literature relating to youth incarceration stems from discussion of the school-to-prison-pipeline and disciplinary actions in schools that unfairly target youths of color (McGrew, 2016). But it is rare that the research comes from the perspective of the incarcerated youths directly. Often, it is speculation of what has created a situation for the student to be at-risk. Research has leaned heavily on the impressions of disparity of incarceration amongst youth of color, males, and youths from disadvantaged economic backgrounds (Annamma et al., 2014) as told by the adults who have observed them.

As previously noted, this chapter will offer direct responses to the three research questions presented. In addition, this chapter will help link the prior research to the current findings while also explaining the limitations that impacted the scope of this study. Those limitations will suggest additional questions that future researchers can seek to answer to expand the scope of this study.

Interpretation of Findings

Research Question #1

The first research question was: How do formerly incarcerated students make sense of the educational and institutional journey? This question allowed for open-ended discussions about how the participants viewed the support, or perceived lack thereof, that they received from both the public education system and the criminal justice system. The participants also reflected on how they believed they were viewed by the adults and peers they interacted with within both systems, as compared to how they wanted to be perceived and how that influenced or played a part in their respective journeys.

The data revealed that when the participants were struggling with feelings of neglect from home, they sought a sense of belonging while at school. This need for belonging and love aligns with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Maslow, 1943). The participants often expressed that they wanted to be seen as individuals, as people who were meant to be part of a collective. There was a consistent thread of wanting to have a place or group of people where the participants felt appreciated, acknowledged, wanted and even, admired, for their personalities or attributes. Considering the amount of time youths spend in school, it makes sense that individuals, especially from fragmented families, would be more interested in establishing relationships with the adults and peers

they see most regularly. Being able to engage appropriately with school staff and peers would likely reduce the risk of entering the criminal justice system (Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011).

The participants spoke of resources available to them while in school and while incarcerated. They sought out groups, activities and adults that took an interest in them specifically, and what they felt were their strengths. Oftentimes, these types of activities and personal interest were demonstrated in elementary school. One participant, Shuri, in particular spoke of the diverse offerings for after-school activities during elementary school that appealed to her. As she grew older, she, and the other participants found that there was a limitation to the extracurricular activities and the teachers were usually a bit harsher as they tended to be more academically focused and less invested in the personal experiences of the students.

Teachers may be inclined to enforce harsher rules and regulations as students get older to manage their classroom and limit disruptions (Delale-O'Connor et al., 2017). For two participants, Bruce and Samuel, who grew up in NYC, they felt that the teachers were usually trying to keep the students from getting involved in fights, or reducing classroom disruptions, so there was less time for conversations about who the participants were as people and what was occurring in their personal lives. Each participant expressed a need for more social emotional attention and consideration of their circumstances, especially as they got older and faced more challenging situations. While corrective action may be necessary at times, the participants spoke of wanting more individualized support as a proactive approach to engaging them academically and in school generally.

Three out of four participants also spoke of feeling overlooked and disregarded during their time spent incarcerated. The outlying participant, Tony, the only White participant, had a much different experience where he was able to engage in dialogue with some of the Correctional Officers and he was offered advice for how to improve his life once he was released. They explained that they felt that they could have been “anyone” who was incarcerated. However, to some extent, each participant spoke of feeling like they were not viewed as people the majority of the time, that they were written-off, so to speak, due to the simple fact that they were incarcerated. Each participants longed to be seen as the youths they still were, not hardened criminals.

Three participants, all but Bruce, specifically expressed that prior to their incarceration, while in their early childhood, they wanted extracurricular activities that they could enjoy while associating with like minded peers. The one remaining participant had developed such a strong mistrust of the public education system and the staff employed within that they had no desire to spend more time than necessary in the school setting. As they grew older, and academic expectations came to the forefront, they all expected curriculum that better related to what they would need in order to be successful adults, they wanted real-life applications for what they were learning. There was no expectation that the work would not be challenging. But there was an expectation that the school staff would support, not only their academic progress, but also their social and emotional development and unique interests.

Feeling dismissed before they even began to engage in negative behaviors was a significant catalyst to their illegal engagements. Most of the participants were open to joining clubs and after school programs. However, they were not encouraged to do so

specifically by staff nor by an availability of options that appealed to them. For Bruce especially, the lack of school staff support and interest became such a disappointment to him that he rejected all considerations of attempting to engage in school beyond what was absolutely necessary.

While incarcerated, all four participants recognized that their decisions and actions were the catalyst for their arrests. However, they still wanted to be seen as people who were worthy of redemption and not just the sum of their mistakes. It was challenging for the participants to navigate their time incarcerated and their return to the public education system because they were usually not given much interaction or encouragement. They would have appreciated empathy and interest in their lives regarding the circumstances of their incarceration.

Overall, the participants implied that they were shortchanged on their journey with both the public education system and the criminal justice systems. They received some benefits, but they were inconsistent, at best, and significantly reduced as they grew older and were all but lost once they became incarcerated; with the exception of a few adults who did show interest in them and help guide them along the way.

The path to incarceration was established long before the participants engaged in illegal activities. There was a lack of funding for appropriate books and classroom equipment which instilled early on that the participants were somehow undeserving. For the participants in more affluent areas, there was a lack of diverse options to engage them. As they began to withdraw and turn more toward their friends, there was a lack of vested interest at the home and school levels to intervene and offer alternatives to activities they were engaging in.

Research Question #2

The second interview question asked the participants about their motivations to return to school after their incarceration came to an end. The resounding responses involved supporting their family and making money in an honest way that would avoid future incarcerations. While some of the participants had become parents by the time they were interviewed, all of the participants reflected on the family members who they felt were there for them throughout their life and their desire to help support them, usually financially, but the emotional desire to also make them proud.

The participants were all only incarcerated once, apart from one, Bruce. While they were incarcerated, there were allowances made to continue their education, but most did not discuss participating. However, they felt that they had a strong academic foundation and general intelligence to return to school when they completed their incarceration. Upon their return, most participants experienced feelings of distrust, isolation, and neglect from the staff. While half the participants completed their educational experience typically, and graduated with a high school diploma, the other two participants chose to leave the traditional school system and pursue their GED.

Both Shuri and Bruce were inspired to complete their GED when they discovered they were going to become parents. When they reflected on their academic path, they recognized a need to set an example for their unborn children. They wanted to provide a model for their children to follow. Samuel felt indebted to his mother for the sacrifices she made for him and her unwavering support as he navigated his peer relationships, schooling and incarceration. He attributed her directly with his successful completion of his high school diploma. Tony also felt an obligation to complete his high school diploma

so he could pursue legitimate work that would allow him to continue to provide financial assistance to his mother and sister. The participants undoubtedly had some intrinsic motivation to follow through, but the additional social component of their family's influence also provided an extra boost of motivation (Panuccio et al., 2012).

Prior research often focuses on maternal instincts and the perspective of women becoming mothers as a turning point. However, Bruce's story highlights the intrinsic paternal instinct for a man to want to protect and provide for his children while setting a good example. Bruce innately felt the need to make dramatic changes in his life when he learned he would become a father. As a man, but especially a man of color, this form of intrinsic motivation and paternal drive is not often highlighted.

The other significant motivator for the participants was financial freedom. When discussing their families, a discussion of money was intertwined and nearly inseparable as a source of motivation. All three male participants spoke of wanting to cultivate their own businesses at some point while they were working steadily now to save money and support their families. Shuri was the only participant to pursue additional education to follow her dreams of becoming a nurse, which would ultimately, provide a higher and steadier income for herself and her daughter.

Money was a driving force behind many of the choices the participants made as youths which led to their incarceration. Money helped them attain the prestige and notoriety of having money to spend, the extra money to help provide for and support their family, and even the luxury of being able to splurge on clothes, jewelry or activities that they wanted. The approach to earning money changed after their incarceration

experiences, but it was still a considerable motivator for each participant and worth returning to the public education system for.

Research Question #3

The third research question surrounded the nature of supports for the participants and other students in similar situations. As the participants shared their stories, we learned more about what did not work to identify what they wanted. In their youth with their family, there was a lot of discussion regarding a lack of stability. Bruce and Shuri both relied heavily on additional family members for shelter and provision of basic needs. Shuri regularly moved in between several school districts as she, her mother and younger brother had to move frequently amongst different family members homes. Bruce's maternal aunt gained custody of him when he was eight years old, and he lived with her and his cousins the rest of his childhood. At the most basic level, each participant had disrupted households which sparked a need to find stability and belonging elsewhere.

The most obvious place to seek refuge and inclusion was at school; the place they spent the most time outside of their homes. The participants needed stability and a consistent routine. Academically, they were given that. Whether they perceived it as positive or negative, each participant came to know what to expect from their teachers and the school staff. A resource they all would have appreciated directly from their teachers was empathy, understanding, patience and genuine concern for their lives and needs. Each participant noted that at various points in their educational journey, they felt that the school staff may not have been interested in what they were going through.

In addition, race emerged as a factor in the supports the participants received as well. It is noteworthy that the two participants who grew up in the inner city

acknowledged the disparities in the school staff being majority White and that observation continued when they were incarcerated. In addition to the city participants acknowledging the mostly White staff that they worked with, they often emphasized the lack of understanding on the part of the staff to relate to their needs and environmental circumstances. That disconnect led the participants of color to feel unseen, misunderstood and undervalued in both the education and criminal justice systems.

Each participant went into detail about how they felt insignificant and as if they could have been anyone. They did not have a face or a voice as they traversed both systems. They simply existed and their presence was the reason why the staff in both systems had a job, nothing more, nothing less.

Teacher support aside, the participants were also looking for extracurricular activities that would engage them and allow them to explore their interests while developing meaningful friendships. Shuri spoke often of the different groups and clubs that were available to her while in elementary school and how much she enjoyed them. However, as she entered middle and high school, the districts she was in had a focus on sports and much of their funding went to promote that. For students not interested in sports activities, there was a gap in accessible activities.

On the other hand, Bruce and Samuel could not note a difference in what they preferred and what their respective schools were emphasizing due to a general lack of funding for after school programs. They relied on neighborhood parks to play various sports and spend time with their friends. However, their time away from school and family was largely unsupervised which permitted easier access to engaging in illegal activities. Academically, they also described an evident disparity in the books and tools

utilized within the classroom for academics. The books were old, falling apart and visually very unappealing. The state of the books and classroom furniture reenforced that the students were not enough of a priority to somehow warrant quality supplies. The lack of funding only exacerbated feelings of neglect.

When the participants returned to school post-incarceration, they were often viewed as students who could not be trusted, and they were shunned or ignored. Once again, they desired compassion and understanding. Fortunately, some of the participants were able to share positive experiences involving school staff where they did feel supported. That support looked like the school staff taking a genuine interest in them, and their families. Concern was expressed about their futures and followed up with action in the form of ideas on how to attain their goals and encouragement to follow through on those goals.

While incarcerated, as mentioned previously, the participants had access to education. However, teacher engagement there was lacking as well. There was a culture of disinterest in academics while incarcerated and the participants rarely spoke about their involvement. In fact, only one participant noted that he was especially disinterested because of the quality of supplies. Like the resources in his home school, the books inside the jails were outdated and disheveled. Learning was not appealing when the resources meant to be used also appeared to be an afterthought.

Relationship to Prior Research

As indicated by the prior research, a major focal point to describe youths as at-risk of entering the criminal justice system revolves around their race—predominantly male youths of color (Barnes and Motz, 2018; Delale-O'Connor et al., 2017; McNeal,

2016; Scott, 2017), their gender—research supports that girls of color are especially at-risk (Annamma et al., 2014; Chauhan & Reppucci, 2008), having an educational disability and receiving special education services (Barrett & Katsiyannis, 2017; Foley, 2001) and youths who witnessed violence in the home are more susceptible to youthful incarceration (Frey et al., 2008). This study attempted to reflect a diverse range of youths who had been incarcerated. Despite that, three out of four participants were male, and three out of four participants were people of color. Each participant came from fragmented families. And two of the participants witnessed domestic violence or domestic disturbances in their childhood. None of the participants received special education services.

Prior research also indicated that students who had a close bond with the staff in their school environment as well as involvement in school activities often had a lower rate of entering the criminal justice system (Hart & Mueller, 2012). Each participant spoke to the lack of afterschool activities available to them, especially in middle and high school. The lack of resources was due to poor funding or a narrow set of interests that did not appeal to the participants. The lack of funding to provide any extracurriculars is telling. As noted previously, if the participants, particularly those living in Brooklyn where the neighborhood was known to be rough and dangerous, did not have resources to keep them engaged and safe while in the school setting, it exposed them to more risk of falling into negative activities.

Hirschfield and Gasper (2010) found that having an emotional connection with school staff also dramatically reduces the risk of incarceration, especially amongst Black males in impoverished communities. Recounting Bruce and Samuel's stories of mistrust

for teachers and feelings of inferiority when their academic strengths were dismissed supports Hirschfield and Gasper's (2010) findings. For both Bruce and Samuel, coming from fragmented families and living in communities with rampant gang activity, school could have been a safe resource full of supporting adults who were interested in their lives and engaged in getting to know them as individuals. Having that level of involvement and support could have been a significant advantage in keeping them from participating in activities that ultimately lead to their incarceration. When youths have people who hold meaningful roles in their lives, such as teachers, believe in them and support their strengths, it can be a turning point for them and help avoid delinquency.

Prior research generally looks at at-risk or incarcerated youths from the perspective of the adults who are interacting with them. Michals and Kessler (2015) interviewed multiple teachers working within the criminal justice system in NYC. The teachers interviewed reported feelings of optimism and contentment to work with the incarcerated students. They expressed thoughts that rehabilitation was more than likely for the students they were teaching. However, reports from the participants of this study directly contradict the results of Michals and Kessler's (2015) study. Bruce, in fact, was the only participant to speak on the state of education while incarcerated. He explained that the other inmates often sought reasons and made excuses to not attend classes and there was no push back for staff to make education a priority. It is important to note, however, that Bruce was incarcerated prior to the study from Michals and Kessler, so it is possible that circumstances had improved. It is still important to acknowledge that the perspective from the student, or incarcerated individual, can be vastly different from what

the adults, or staff want to report for various reasons. Therefore, it is vital to consider the feelings and views of all parties involved.

Continuing the perspective of adult staff that works with at-risk and incarcerated youths, research has conducted interviews with judges, criminal justice staff and additional school support staff to gain their insight on the behavior patterns and potential needs of the youths they serve while accounting for inherent bias amongst White staff toward students of color (Annamma, 2015; Cole & Cohen, 2013; Hirschfield & Gasper, 2011; Weissman & LaRue, 1998). Research found that there are inherent and learned biases against students of color with thoughts prevailing that students of color are more likely to engage in delinquent behaviors and be less redirectable; despite not having evidence to support that way of thinking.

For Bruce, this was evident in regard to how his teachers perceived his ability to test well and attain good grades. There was an assumption that he must have been cheating somehow, despite not having any supporting evidence. All three participants of color: Bruce, Shuri and Samuel, expressed feelings of being overlooked and dismissed when they entered the criminal justice system which was a stark contrast to Tony's experience as a White male. This is a significant departure from the research which typically focuses on the perspective of the professional. The teacher and general school staff perspective is that they are doing a good job of connecting with students, they report that they believe in the students and the work they are doing. However, the first person accounts of the participants indicate that there is a disparity in those views. The participants did not feel supported by their teachers, they did not feel connected to them, and they did not feel as though the teachers were invested in their lives and success.

The research highlighted in Chapter 2 also discussed motivations for individuals to return to the public education system, post-incarceration. The research was directly aligned with the motivations the participants expressed as their sources of motivation. Completing their high school education opened opportunities for meaningful employment and a fulfillment to their families and making them proud (Cummings, 2012; Iachini et al., 2013; McDaniel, 2015). Love and survival are the primary motivating force for most actions. The participants loved their family members, including their own children, enough to drive them to make major changes in their lives to support them and make them proud. The secondary motivating factor was earning money. The experience of having been incarcerated, usually relating to gaining money illegally, was also a factor in returning to school. Legal opportunities became available to earn money and continue supporting themselves and their families.

Weick (2015), also highlighted, “We see what our concepts single out (believing is seeing) and we conceptualize what we see singled out (seeing is believing)” (p. 24). Each of the participants described themselves as smart but their confidence wavered when their beliefs were not consistently reinforced by the adults around them. Based on the support of select family members and some school staff, each participant found their intrinsic motivation but also had the external motivation of those relying on and believing in them. As they gained more self-reliance and it was further supported by outwardly, they were able to pursue their goals despite the obstacles they faced.

Overall, the research regarding risk factors and motivations are consistent with the data collected for this study. However, there are discrepancies when looking at the perspectives of how adults view at-risk and incarcerated students and how the youths

describe how they believe they are perceived. In addition, there is not as much research regarding the intrinsic motivation of paternal instincts when discussing men making changes in their lives to support and shape their children.

Limitations of the Study

Because this was a narrative study delving into the specific lived experience of the four participants via interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018), it can be difficult to generalize the findings to other individuals with their own unique experiences. In addition, this study only considered four individuals all living in the state of New York, though in different settings—urban and suburban. The data collected cannot be generalized to other people living in different geographic areas with different family compositions, funding for schooling and community influences. Finally, regarding the participants specifically, they were reflecting on their childhood experiences as adults. Youths who are actively incarcerated or at-risk of becoming incarcerated may have a different set of ideas or perspectives on what worked for them, what did not, and what they need currently.

Another limitation is that there was only one female participant in the study. The prior research referenced noted that female youths of color are beginning to be incarcerated at higher rates. It would be beneficial to interview more female participants to gain more insight into their perspectives. It would also be useful to interview a more ethnically diverse group of participants. Prior research tends to focus on Black youths, but they are not the only youths who become incarcerated. For this study there was one White male participant, but the other two male participants were Black and Black/Latino.

A final notable limitation of the study was that only four participants were interviewed a total of four times each. To truly gain a deeper understanding of how the participants were affected and influenced by their families, schooling and incarceration, longer interviews with more detailed questions would be appropriate.

Recommendations for Future Practice

When making considerations for lowering the high school dropout rate and preventing students from entering the criminal justice system, educators and stakeholders should reflect on the statements made by the participants. There should be a push for more diverse afterschool and extracurricular activities in Grades K–12 to entice and engage students. Some schools have student councils where a discussion of extracurricular activities can be held which would directly involve the students and include their opinions. For schools that do not have student councils, it may be a good consideration to allow for open discussions between students and staff, so they feel heard and validated. It is important that the open dialogue be continuous from elementary through high school so the students feel engaged at all grade levels, especially as interests may change as students grow older.

There should also be a higher level of importance placed on fostering meaningful relationships between students and staff. This may mean having smaller class sizes so teachers can get to know their students better. It is important for school officials to be advocates for the students and families but also for the teachers in their respective buildings. Teacher burnout is real and that is even more evident as the public education system continues to recover from the long-term effects of the pandemic. Smaller class sizes allow for teachers to have a more manageable caseload and build more effective

classroom management. In addition, it allows an opportunity for teachers to get to know their students individually, not just for what skills they demonstrate academically. As each participant pointed out, they felt a desire to be considered and valued for who they were as individuals. Each student enters the classroom with an entire life of experiences and perspectives based on their family life, socioeconomic circumstances, and other variables. School administrators should make a concerted effort to work with local politicians to secure funding for building space that will allow sufficient space for enough classrooms and staff to keep class sizes lower.

Besides limiting class sizes, administrators would do well to check in with students and their families to gain a sense of how they perceive teacher and staff support. As noted in the findings, the participants rarely felt seen and understood, despite research suggesting that teachers feel like they are doing a good job of interacting empathetically with students. More opportunities need to be created for students to provide feedback about what social and emotional supports they feel are lacking and, when appropriate, they should be given the space to explain why they feel such supports are lacking.

Ensuring that school staff and criminal justice staff take a vested interests in the youths they are working with calls for taking a closer look at hiring practices. Human resources and other stakeholders involved in the hiring process should consider the kind of culture they want to promote within their buildings. School and prison culture require mindfulness and sincere thought about how they want to approach student/youth supports. Each participant felt like they were ignored, dismissed and mistrusted when they returned to the public education system post incarceration. In addition, each participant also spoke about how they felt unseen while in the criminal justice system and

like they were cogs in a system that did not view them as individuals. Trainings can be required to build empathy amongst existing staff as there is a push to shift the culture to a more sensitive and emotionally engaging atmosphere.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future qualitative studies investigating student motivation to return to school after incarceration should continue to do so from the students' perspective. Much research has been devoted to the viewpoint of the adults' supporting students and youths in their community and their interpretation of what the students are experiencing and feeling (Annamma, 2015; Barnes & Motz, 2018; Cole & Cohen, 2013; Michals & Kessler, 2015). While it is meaningful to understand how the teachers and staff who support these individuals feel, it is essential to learn how the students perceive their experiences and what they need, directly from them. This can be better accomplished by completing a longitudinal study where students are tracked during their incarceration to gain direct data regarding their mindset and choices that led to their incarceration. As the student progresses through the criminal justice system, they will be able to provide feedback on what resources, or lack thereof, are helpful and/or needed while incarcerated. And finally, as they return to public education, they can provide insight into their own thoughts and impressions about their motivations as well as their sentiments about school staff. By gathering the data in real time, rather than reflectively, future researchers can offer even more detailed information on how to best support these individuals.

Future researchers would also do well to consider group interviews with a mixed panel of incarcerated youths and the adults working directly with them. The discrepancy between how teachers view their work and how students interpret the support they

receive would be interesting to discuss together to gain more clarity into why there is such a difference in interpretation. It will be important to challenge the view of both students and teachers so they can express themselves openly about their intentions, their concerns, their perceptions and their overall feelings to make better sense of the discrepancy between views from participant and teacher.

When considering motivating factors to return (or remain) in public education, it would also serve stakeholders well to investigate young men who became fathers immediately prior to or after incarceration to determine if the male participants of this study were outliers or part of the majority of men who feel deeply motivated by fatherhood to make improvements in their lives for the sake of their children. Identifying what family and fatherhood means to the participants, especially when they have experienced coming from a fragmented family can provide insight into how to support them from an early age, not just once they become a parent.

Conclusion

The collective interviews conducted highlighted a deep desire from the participants to have their needs for belonging, stability, financial freedom, empathy and understanding and genuine interest about their needs, wants and emotions from the adults holding meaningful roles in their lives. Education is not just about academic readiness and preparation for college studies. It is a chance to develop deep relationships with peers and adults that support and encourage you.

This study highlighted a vital need to see beyond the curriculum and view the student as a whole person. It brought Maslow's hierarchy of needs from the basic: food, shelter and water, to the most elevated level: self-awareness and acceptance to the

forefront in how all of those needs can be met, in some capacity, within the school setting. This study also noted Weick's sensemaking theory in how the participants made sense of their journeys and the benefits and damage that can be done when the interpret the adults in their lives as either open and listening or closed off and judgmental. Taking into consideration the emotions and personal lives of the students will lend more empathy to how school norms are established which will hopefully lead to more successful outcomes for all students.

APPENDIX A

Letter of Consent to Participants



School of Education

Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership

(Spring 2021)

Letter of Consent

Title of Research Topic: A narrative study exploring the lived experiences of incarcerated youth and their motivation for re-entering the public education system.

Researcher: Dominique Ramos

Institution: St. John's University, Queens, NY

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn more about what motivates young people who have been incarcerated to return to public education. This study will be conducted by Dominique Ramos, a third-year doctorate student at St. John's University. Her faculty sponsor name is Dr. Catherine DiMartino, St. John's University, Department of Administrative and Instructional Leadership. The study will consist of interviews conducted by the researcher. These four-part semi-structured interviews will be the foundation of the study. The purpose of this study is to better understand what leads young students to become incarcerated as well as what motivates them to return to school, in their own words.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to be available for four interviews, the first and last ranging from 20–30 minutes and the second and third lasting about 35–50 minutes. The interviews will be conducted via video-based platform, such as Google Meet or Zoom, at a date and time the researcher and participant agree on.

Although every effort will be made to prevent it, you may find the sensitive nature of some of the questions upsetting. In that event, the researcher will provide you with a referral to a counselor with whom you may discuss your feelings. In addition, the

participants are offering their time to complete the interviews. The benefits of participating in the study are a better understanding of how your experiences have shaped you, which can help process feelings associated with those events. The participants will also be furthering research by providing a first-person perspective on what motivates students to return to public education after having been incarcerated. This will help educators shape their instructional approach and disciplinary practices. If you choose to participate, you may refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without penalty. During interviews you have the right to skip or not answer any questions you prefer not to answer. All participant names will be changed to protect confidentiality. All transcripts and consents with any identifying information will be stored in a locked file that only the researcher has access to.

If you have any questions about the purpose of this study, please do not hesitate to contact the principal researcher, Dominique Ramos, at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a human participant, you can contact the St. John's University Human Subjects Review Board at St. John's University at [REDACTED], or, Dr. Catherine DiMartino at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED]. Your participation in this study is voluntary.

Agreement to Participate

Your signature acknowledges receipt of a copy of the consent form as well as your willingness to participate:

Printed Name of Participant

Signature of participant

Date

APPENDIX B

Initial Interview Protocol

Welcome:

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of this study and sharing your personal stories about your childhood, your schooling, the time you spent incarcerated and what motivates you. Your participation in my study gives a voice to others in similar situations and will hopefully show educators how to best help students that are going through things you may have experienced and feel the way you feel. Before we begin, you have the right, now and throughout the length of the study, to withdraw at any time with no consequences. Please share any questions or concerns you have now before the interview starts.

Overview of the Process:

For each interview, there will be a set of questions that I will ask you to answer. I may, at times, ask you to give more detail in your answer; if you do not wish to, that is ok. If you want to give more detail without being asked, that is ok also. This interview is expected to last about 20–30 minutes. I will be recording the interviews so I can use the information later in my study. However, I will use a different name so anyone who reads it will not know who you are. You will also have an opportunity to review the interviews once it is typed up to confirm, change or add to your answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Interview One Questions/Actions—expected time 20–30 minutes

1. Greeting
2. Review study: topic, purpose, use of the findings

3. Review consent
4. Address any questions/concern
5. Please share some of your personal information:
 - a. Age
 - b. Gender you identify as
 - c. Race/Ethnicity
 - d. Number of credits achieved toward graduation
6. What do you hope to gain or learn from participating in this study?
7. Do you have any questions for me?
8. Is there anything else you think I should know?
9. Close

APPENDIX C

Second Interview Protocol

Welcome:

Thank you for your ongoing participation in this study investigating individual motivations post-incarceration. Your participation in my study gives a voice to others in similar situations and will hopefully show educators how to best help students that are going through things you may have experienced and feel the way you feel. You have the right, now and throughout the length of the study, to withdraw at any time with no consequences. Please share any questions or concerns you have before the interview starts.

Overview of the Process:

For each interview, there will be a set of questions that I will ask you to answer. I may, at times, ask you to give more detail in your answer; if you do not wish to, that is ok. If you want to give more detail without being asked, that is ok also. This interview is expected to last about 35–55 minutes and will focus on your early childhood experiences—in and out of school. I will be recording the interviews so I can use the information later in my study. However, I will use a different name so anyone who reads it will not know who you are. You will also have an opportunity to review the interviews once it is typed up to confirm, change or add to your answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Second Interview Protocol—expected time 35–50 minutes

1. Where did you grow up?
2. Who did you live with growing up?
3. What is your favorite childhood memory?

4. What is your least favorite childhood memory?
5. How did you feel about school in general (Probe: attending, participating, curriculum)?
6. How did you feel about your teachers when you were growing up? (Probe: “supportive” and “unsupportive” characteristics over a span of grade levels)
7. What was the hardest part of school for you and why?
8. What did you enjoy most about school and why?
9. Who or what, if anything, do you remember stepping into your life to help you; and what did that look like?
10. Who did you admire the most?
11. Tell me about your childhood friends and what things you would do together.
12. How do you think people viewed you?
13. How did you want people to view you?
14. What kind of supports would you have liked?
15. Is there anything else you think I should know?
16. Close

APPENDIX D

Third Interview Protocol

Welcome:

Thank you for your ongoing participation in this study investigating individual motivations post-incarceration. Your participation in my study gives a voice to others in similar situations and will hopefully show educators how to best help students that are going through things you may have experienced and feel the way you feel. You have the right, now and throughout the length of the study, to withdraw at any time with no consequences. Please share any questions or concerns you have before the interview starts.

Overview of the Process:

For each interview, there will be a set of questions that I will ask you to answer. I may, at times, ask you to give more detail in your answer; if you do not wish to, that is ok. If you want to give more detail without being asked, that is ok also. This interview is expected to last about 35–50 minutes and will focus on pre and post incarceration events. I will be recording the interviews so I can use the information later in my study. However, I will use a different name so anyone who reads it will not know who you are. You will also have an opportunity to review the interviews once it is typed up to confirm, change or add to your answers. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Third Interview Protocol – expected time 35–50 minutes

1. Tell me about your first experience with police.
2. What were you feeling when you were first arrested?
3. What was the biggest lesson you learned while incarcerated?

4. What do you believe were your motivations to engage in activities that led to your arrest?
5. What supports, if any, did you receive while incarcerated?
6. Describe the most recent “turning point” (an event or powerful realization that made you change how you acted before) in your life.
7. How did you become involved with the agency you are working with now?
8. Tell me about your experiences with the agency. (Probe: types of support/needs)
9. What are your short-term and long-term goals (things you want to accomplish in the next six months and 3 years from now?)
10. What inspired you to make those goals?
11. How do you think people viewed you while you were incarcerated?
12. How do you want people to see you now?
13. Is there anything else you think I should know?
14. Close

APPENDIX E

Final Interview Protocol

Welcome:

Thank you for your participation in this study investigating individual motivations post-incarceration. Your participation in my study gives a voice to others in similar situations and will hopefully show educators how to best help students that are going through things you may have experienced and feel the way you feel. You have the right, now and throughout the length of the study, to withdraw at any time with no consequences. Please share any questions or concerns you have before the interview starts.

Overview of the Process:

For each interview, there will be a set of questions that I will ask you to answer. I may, at times, ask you to give more detail in your answer; if you do not wish to, that is ok. If you want to give more detail without being asked, that is ok also. This final interview is expected to last about 20–30 minutes and will give us a chance to look over all the interview transcripts to confirm, edit, add to, or remove parts of your responses. I will be recording the interviews so I can use the information later in my study. However, I will use a different name so anyone who reads it will not know who you are. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Fourth Interview Protocol—expected time 20–30 minutes

1. Greeting
2. Review transcripts
3. Confirm edits (if any)
4. How do you feel about your participation in the study?

5. What questions did I forget to ask, that I should have? What else should I know?
6. What, if anything, have you learned about yourself or gained from being a part of this study?
7. Address any closing questions/concerns
8. Close

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