

Educational Experiences: Voices of Incarcerated Male Youth & School-to-Prison Pipeline

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ABSTRACT

Youth who experience academic failure are at a greater risk for involvement in delinquency. While studies have revealed a myriad of factors for such failure, the perceptions of these youth regarding their educational experiences have proven to be one of the most valuable resources regarding the systematic barriers to academic achievement. The purpose of this study was to understand how incarcerated male youth perceive their educational experiences. Results indicated that some incarcerated youth make meaning of their educational experiences through a series of complex events, changes and circumstances occurring in their school and personal lives. Some of these were positive, while others often exposed them to unhealthy environments, substance abuse and criminal elements. Although their experiences varied, it was clear that failure was an ongoing occurrence throughout their academic journey. Their stories were also rife with suspensions, expulsion, truancy, retention, academic failure, school violence, poverty and parental neglect; furthermore, youth revealed personal challenges that had a direct or indirect impact on their academic journey, including feeling of inferiority due to their academic shortcomings.

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INTRODUCTION

Research shows that high-risk youth struggle with complex issues and circumstances related to childhood maltreatment, caregiver issues, unhealthy environments, and difficulties with social adjustment (Simmel, 2010), all of which can lead to poor educational performance and delinquent, sometimes violent, behavior. When that behavior results in incarceration, a vicious cycle ensues: these youth not only face further threats to their emotional and physical safety, they also experience gaps in

education, due largely to a lack of quality curricula and dedicated instruction in these facilities, which leaves them unprepared to reenter public schools upon release, if they are motivated to reenter at all (McCluskey, 2017).

Incarcerating youth also takes a tremendous toll on society. According to the Prison Policy Initiative's "The Whole Pie," on any given day, there are approximately 48,000 youth ages 13 to 18 confined to correctional facilities in the United States, all of whom are exposed to greater risk of

assault and other abusive treatment (PPI, 2019). There is also a substantial price tag. A report by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP) showed that 43,580 youth had been remanded to residential facilities during 2017, the payment for which fell to the states (OJJDP, 2020). “At a cost of approximately \$90,000 per juvenile in a facility per year, this is both a massive waste of taxpayer funds and an unconscionable waste of the potential of thousands of young people” (Carter, 2018, p. 373).

Perhaps most alarming is the overrepresentation of Black and Latino male youth housed in detention facilities, a statistic with a strong correlation to academic failure among these groups. More than half of young black males who attend urban high schools drop out and fail to earn a diploma (Lynch, 2017). Of the dropouts, nearly 60 percent will go to prison at some point via a phenomenon known as the “School-to-Prison Pipeline,” which funnels “students out of school and into the streets and the juvenile correction system,” depriving them “of meaningful opportunities for education, future employment, and participation in our democracy” (Tyner, 2014). This confirms the findings of Snyder and Sickmund (2006), who noted that adjudicated adolescents are more often denied opportunities around advanced education, stable employment, career advancement, and a variety of living choices as adults. Other researchers (Doren, Bullis & Benz, 1996; Bullis et al., 2002) have found that adjudicated youth are more likely to engage in future crimes and less likely to develop the essential life skills needed to become productive members of society.

In order to understand and begin to dismantle this alarming pattern, one must first explore how society views youth of color, both historically and in the present day, and the unequal systematic treatment they have endured as a result; namely, a racial caste system of institutional slavery, the Jim Crow era, the convict lease system, and racial profiling (Alexander, 2010). This study explores these

dynamics and attempts to give voice to incarcerated male youth around the challenges they face as a result of being exposed to the justice system.

America’s approach to juvenile justice has a complicated history which, like the criminal justice system as a whole, is tarnished by racial and socioeconomic biases. In fact, the evolution of the juvenile justice system dates back to the founding of this country, when courts were designed to handle both adults and juveniles in the same way. In particular, youth of color fell victim to the racial caste system, at first due to their status as slaves, then during the Jim Crow era when they were incarcerated on a mass scale and denied opportunities for any kind of rehabilitation, reform, or care by courts. Unfortunately, this inequity still persists today in the form of unfair policing, policy, and profiling practices that target ethnic minorities, especially black males (Bell, 2015).

The role of education and school attendance cannot be underestimated as a powerful tool in counteracting such inequities. Providing a quality education to these youth can create an essential protective element against delinquent involvement in the juvenile justice system (Development Services Group, 2015c); furthermore, education and school attendance is instrumental in the rehabilitation of incarcerated youth. Research shows that education decreases the recidivism rate of delinquency in youth; unfortunately, it also shows that the majority of this population falls at least two years behind their peers in terms of grade level (Farn & Adams, 2016). According to Gagnon and Barber, incarcerated youth typically read at or below their non-incarcerated grade level (2010). They are also much more likely to be classified, based on these reading deficits, as having a learning disability and served under of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (Quinn et al., 2005). National data show that traditional students account for seven percent of those classified with a disability, compared with one third of youth in the delinquency

system who have disabilities and need some form of special education support (Council of State Governments [CSG] Justice Center, 2015, p. 1).

Exacerbating these issues is the pervasive lack of understanding with regard to the unique challenges and needs of youth served by correctional educational systems. Many facilities fail to give adequate attention to the educational rights of youth, as evidenced by their inability to provide a basic education to those in their care. For example, many facilities lack essential resources such as libraries or even books (Leone & Meisel, 1997), and many teachers lack the essential skills and knowledge to deal with the unique needs of incarcerated youth, especially those who come from marginalized and racially oppressed backgrounds. Furthermore, many correctional education programs are isolated and detached from public education systems, an issue that may be compounded by philosophical differences. For example, facilities may place a priority on securing youth while ignoring the important role of education in the rehabilitation process.

While traditional research can provide some guidance around addressing the educational needs of incarcerated and at-risk youth (specifically, for purposes of this study, African American males), there is an urgent need for more personal insights from the youths themselves regarding their perceived barriers to educational achievement, namely, how their experiences and challenges have shaped their perspectives, attitudes, and abilities. Indeed, it is only in capturing the voices of these young men that we can hope to gain a fuller understanding of the underlying complexities that impact their educational success and begin to shift the paradigm that has existed for centuries.

PROBLEM

Various studies have revealed that adolescent youth who experience poor academic performance

are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Maguin & Loeber, 1996) that may lead to justice system involvement (Ramirez & Harris, 2010). Evidence also shows that academic failure increases the risk for more serious violent behaviors later in life (Catalano, Loeber & McKinney, 1999; Maguin et al., 1995). However, little is known about the youths' perceptions regarding challenges or barriers to academic achievement. This information would be valuable in assisting reformers, policymakers, and academics advocating for effective practices in addressing the educational needs of incarcerated youth.

SIGNIFICANCE

This qualitative study is important for the following reasons: (1) a research gap exists regarding the educational rehabilitative practices designed to assist juvenile offenders in correctional settings; (2) most facilities are isolated and detached from mainstream public educational settings, making it difficult for juvenile offenders to gain access to the larger population. They are also often overlooked by service providers and research entities due to youth protection policies; (3) literature focuses on outdated pedagogy and minimal practices used to educate juvenile offenders and prepare them for reentry into society (Houchins et al, 2009); (4) most youth entering the juvenile justice system have high rates of academic failure, including a history of suspensions and expulsions when compared to their non-confined peers (Sedlak & Bruce, 2010), which creates challenges for correctional education staff; (5) These youth lack basic academic skills, perform below the appropriate grade level for their ages and peer groups, and are more likely than their non-confined peers to have been diagnosed with an academic-related disability (Leone & Weinberg, 2010); and (6) there is a lack of information regarding the challenges faced by youth today as compared to those in previous years; and, as most of

the information on educational background and status comes from the incarcerated youths themselves, it is critical to conduct interviews that capture their voices and reveal invaluable information regarding the underlying factors that impact their academic success or failure.

Research Questions

- How do incarcerated youth make meaning of their past and current educational experiences?
- What academic-related experiences are most prevalent in stories told by incarcerated youth?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Evolution of Juvenile Corrections

During colonial times, juvenile offenders were subject to the same punishments as adults, and they usually lived in inhumane conditions (Bartollas & Miller, 2001). Youth of color were disproportionately affected by this, as slavery was the law of the land, rendering Black people the property of white slaveholders and thus ineligible for basic rights afforded to “human beings” (Bell, 2017), including due process. Although legislation in 1804 brought an end to slavery in the North, the institution would persist in the South until the Civil War, after which it eventually evolved into the system of Jim Crow (Bell, 2015). As noted in Michelle Alexander’s book, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (2010), after losing the War and the institution of slavery upon which their economic system was based, Southern whites needed to create “a new racial order” of control. In the 1890s, the southern states enacted “Black Codes,” or vagrancy laws designed to establish a new system of forced labor. These laws affected youths and adults alike, and though in the mid-1800s penalties for juveniles decreased and the government established separate facilities to house youthful offenders, youth of color were still denied equal access to the services their white counterparts were afforded.

During this era, rehabilitation for juveniles was defined as the act of isolating youth with the goal of punishing them and protecting society. “For the next seven decades, offender treatment reigned as the dominant correctional philosophy” (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989, p. 109). Furthermore, society’s perception of at-risk Black youth was that they were unworthy of redemption and in need of cruel punishment, much like the juvenile justice systems that operate today. Thus, Black youth placed in facilities were usually one-and-a-half to two years younger, experienced harsher treatment, and faced longer sentences and disproportionately high death rates than White offenders (Bell, 2015). In 1899, Chicago established a separate court, which eventually led to the creation of juvenile justice systems nationwide (Young & Gainsborough, 2000). During the early nineteenth century a number of reforms were introduced to create placements for juveniles in lieu of placement in adult jails. A greater emphasis was also placed on “due process rights,” making the juvenile justice system distinct from the adult system (Bartollas & Miller, 2001). A rise in the number of refuge homes for juveniles spiked during the early 1900s; however, these youth often endured treatment that would now be considered harsh and inhumane (Basta & Davidson, 1988).

In the 1960s, a sharp increase in the youth crime rate began to plague many communities (Tonry, 2004). During this time there was also an increase in civil action and protest from civil libertarians who were frustrated by the appearance of rehabilitation measures when youth were still being housed in overcrowded facilities, similar to adult institutions (Nellis, 2017). These efforts sparked the enactment of The Juvenile Justice and Prevention Act of 1974, which began a trend toward deinstitutionalization of juvenile offenders and set the stage for rehabilitative practices. The federal government began prohibiting the incarceration of juveniles and to prevent the placement of young offenders in jails, detention centers, correctional facilities, and other institutional

settings (Kobrin & Klein, 1983). These efforts resulted in a rise in community-based and diversionary correctional alternatives such as in-home detention programs and electronic monitoring.

In the early 1970s, however, there was a sudden and unfortunate reversal in the philosophical debate between rehabilitation and punitive treatment. This “prompted a general critique of the state-run criminal justice system” (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989, p. 109). Liberals challenged the philosophy of rehabilitation and accused the state of acting leniently toward youth who commit delinquent acts (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989). Martinson (1974) took the lead in an influential essay entitled “Nothing Works,” in which he asserted that treatment-based programs had little impact on a reduction in the recidivism rate for juveniles (Cullen & Gendreau, 1989). Martinson (1979) claimed during this era that nothing worked to rehabilitate or treat juvenile offenders. He, along with other criminal justice researchers, asserted that attempts to rehabilitate serious, violent, and chronic offenders were completely unproductive. During the 1970s these assertions cast a bleak shadow over rehabilitative approaches that were more therapeutic than punitive in nature (Tonry, 2004). By 1979, however, Martinson had renounced many of his earlier views by suggesting that some programs and practices may in fact be successful in treating incarcerated youth (Martinson, 1979). Some scholars believed that issues of racial unrest during the 1960s and 1970s influenced the “get-tough” policies in both the juvenile and adult justice systems (Feld, 1999; Tonry, 2009; Tonry & Melewski, 2008).

This punitive stance on juvenile crime persisted well into the 1980s and 1990s. During this time many states had policies that focused on more punitive consequences for delinquent youth and allowed more juveniles to be tried as adults. Grisso (1993) asserted that the primary objective of juvenile courts has been to provide community protections, punishment, and

retribution, especially with regard to juveniles who have committed violent crimes. He believed that many elected officials worked to enact stiffer penalties for juvenile crimes in response to concerned citizens. This pressure from the community persisted, despite recommendations from many professionals who believed that intervention strategies are the most effective way to deal with delinquent crimes (Howell, 1998). Federal entities worked to enact stiffer penalties for juveniles who committed delinquent acts (Bilchik, 1999), and both federal and state governments focused less on rehabilitation and increasingly on punitive measures (Cullen, 2005).

Another significant and racially discriminatory narrative emerged during this time, creating the devastating label of black youth as “super predators” (Bojhani, 2017). This idea sparked panic in the minds of citizens and communities by bringing into existence the notion of the dangerous and menacing Black child. This fear that was stoked by Princeton professor John Dilulio’s description of a new modern, and emerging kind of juvenile delinquent – a parentless and immoral aggressor who had little to no regard for the lives of his victims. Dilulio’s demeaning and animalistic depictions helped to support the long-term incarceration of many youth (NJISJ, 2020). It was not until 2005 that scholars began to use more sophisticated instruments to analyze data. They found that issues of abuse, abandonment, and neglect were preeminent factors leading to delinquency and crime (Cullen, 2005). These findings revealed that if juvenile rehabilitation programs are administered and structured well, they can substantially decrease rates of delinquent recidivism (Lipsey & Cullen, 2007). Data from these studies refuted Martinson’s earlier claims and revealed positive outcomes for juvenile rehabilitation programs.

Today, opponents of correctional-based treatment argue that being in lock-up facilities only exacerbates the United States' teenage crime problem. Some believe that youth committed to institutions are more likely to be treated like adult criminals than minors. They are often deprived of familial and other healthy environments, stigmatized by labels, and considered to be socially deviant (Stanton & Meyer, 1998). Furthermore, racial disparities still persist, with Black youth less likely "to see their cases diverted" (p. 1) and more likely to be sent to secure facilities. The history of racial subjugation that seeks to dehumanize and justify individuals of color being incarcerated in many ways parallels our modern-day justice system (NJISJ, 2020). "Today's youth of color often receive harsher sanctions than their White peers charged with the same offense, 41 resulting in their overrepresentation in youth prisons" (NJISJ, 2020).

Throughout the twentieth century, state policies and practices evolved to focus primarily on rehabilitative models tailored toward the offender and reflected in individualized sentencing (Tonry, 2009; Warren, 2007). Major developments in the twenty-first century brought about further changes and triggered landmark decisions in the areas of juvenile justice and social work (Springer, 2007). Greenhouse specifically noted March 1, 2005, when the U.S. Supreme Court deemed it unconstitutional to execute juveniles in the case of *Roper v. Simmons* 543 U.S. 551, bringing an end to thirty years of precedent (2005). Before this decision and subsequent policy changes, youths as young as thirteen could be sentenced to death for their criminal acts (Equal Justice Initiative, 2007). Other researchers pointed to studies and data on physical and sexual abuse among youthful offender groups, which changed the way many professionals perceived this population. Studies reveal a high rate of abuse among female offenders due to traumatic and unresolved issues around abuse (McNeece, Tyson, & Jackson, 2007).

Juvenile court judges have been charged with making some important decisions regarding youth cases, particularly the placement of youth based on circumstances and offenses. These judges have a duty to protect society and ensure that effective treatment and rehabilitation measures are administered. This may require them to detain or remand youth to facilities that specialize in providing a safe and secure environment where acute and long-term needs can be met. Undoubtedly, prevailing attitudes and beliefs regarding treatment have affected the type, structure, and setting in which youth are detained. In recent years, Juvenile Justice Research has shown that correctional-based settings seem to be the least effective in providing treatment when compared with diversion and community-based alternatives (Pottorff, 2012).

Disproportionate Representation

During a single year, an estimated 744,451 youth under the age of 18 are arrested in the United States, with approximately 1.7 million delinquency cases reaching juvenile courts each year (Sickmond, Sladky, & Kang, 2020). Even more alarming is the vastly disproportionate numbers of children who are poor and members of racial and ethnic minority groups populating the delinquency system, and the greater likelihood that youth of color will be incarcerated than their White counterparts (Sawyer, 2019). Indeed, the data reflect the unequal and discriminatory treatment society continues to impose upon poor children of color (Sawyer, 2019). It has been consistently documented that African American and Native American youth are most often removed from their homes, retained longer in child welfare systems, and overrepresented in juvenile facilities. This is also true for many Latino youth, as evidenced by the data from certain states (Sawyer, 2019; Texas Department of Family and Protective Services, 2010). Multiple placements within those systems can be a destabilizing force in a youth's life and increase the likelihood of his/her involvement in the juvenile

justice system. This is especially true for African American and Latino youth (Barth et al., 2010; Ryan et al., 2007). Serious offenses require the courts to impose stiffer sentences, which have risen apace with the increasing prevalence of violence, gangs, and drug-related crimes. As a result, the juvenile justice system has become flooded with youths, at the expense of taxpayers. According to Justice Policy Institute's 2014 report, *Sticker Shock: Calculating the Full Price Tag for Youth Incarceration*, the median cost youth in the most expensive detention placements is \$148,767 a year" (JPI, 2014). These statistics, as well as the costs, has brought recidivism centerstage for juvenile justice officials, who are charged with equipping youth with essential skills for success (Tolbert, 2003).

According to Coccozza, Trupin, and Teodosio (2003), an increasing number of arrests are overwhelming the juvenile justice system. Moreover, Sawyer (2019) noted that judges decide at pretrial phase to detain approximately 26% of these cases, meaning that these youths are being housed in juvenile facilities before their cases are even adjudicated. The resulting overcrowding has in turn led to a greater number of youths being released before the end of their sentence, oftentimes without the proper tools to reintegrate successfully into society (Pace, 2018).

The number of juveniles moving through facilities fluctuates daily and weekly. The frequent flow of juveniles through the system, compounded by problems obtaining data, proves to be a challenge when seeking to gain an accurate picture of the distinctive characteristics of youth who are delinquent (McCroskey, 2006). As juvenile justice systems work to meet the unique needs of delinquent youth, challenges persist and impact rehabilitation. The juvenile justice system must create ways to respond to this population while working to protect

their welfare and decrease high rates of re-offending and its impact on the community (Grisso, 2008).

Pathway to Delinquency

By the time most juveniles enter the justice system, they have already displayed a downward trend in all areas of their life (Rider-Hankins, 1992). They likely began to express delinquent behavior at an early age and are defiant, hostile, resentful, and frustrated. Much of this is exacerbated by "structural, systemic, institutional and societal challenges and barriers that produce inequity, inequality, racism and various other forms of discrimination" (Milner, Cunningham, & Delale-O'Conner, 2018, p. 33). Studies on the school-to-prison pipeline indicate a strong correlation between males of color who experience discipline in K-12 schools through suspensions and expulsions and "those who end up incarcerated later in life" (Lynch, 2017). In fact, Black students are almost four times likely to be suspended than their White counterparts; moreover, since the 1970s suspensions involving Black high school students have grown eleven times more quickly than White counterparts. Students who receive suspensions during their freshman year are twice as likely to drop out altogether, which, when considered along with the aforementioned factors, explains in part why nearly 68 percent of all adult men in federal prison have not earned a high school diploma (Lynch, 2017). Clearly, this is a trend that "pushes these youth towards prison as soon as they are born" via the Pipeline (Milner, Cunningham, & Delale-O'Conner, 2018, p. 33).

What we need to understand is that most youths entering the system have been traumatized both physically and emotionally. Delinquents have frequently expressed feeling that they are victims of society (Rider-Hankins, 1992). Furthermore, in schools, "our black males do not enter a domain that represents their community. The textbooks that are

used, the authors that are esteemed, the art on the walls, and the ideas that are embraced are those that emanate from a system that sustains itself by requiring the participation of Black males as “workers,” members of the “underclass,” and “prisoners” (Woods, 2018, p. 5). Studies have demonstrated that the incarceration rate in the United States is one of the highest in the world and has a strong correlation to racial discrimination experienced by African American youth in schools (Walmsley, 2015), which hinders their ability to establish healthy social bonds and impedes their opportunities to pursue educational dreams, goals, and aspirations (Unnever & Gibbidon, 2011).

The work of Unnever et al (2016) has shed light on the connection between racial discrimination and the probability of offending. For example, racial discrimination has been linked to diminished mental health, higher levels of stress, psychological, and compromised physical health (Assari et al, 2017). It also increases the likelihood that African American youths will drop out of school and engage in delinquent acts. Research shows that a perception of racial discrimination by youth in the school environment is a determining factor in delinquent and deviant behaviors. The lack of social bonds mentioned above also has a profound negative impact on school identity, which is a predictor of educational outcomes, including GPA, educational outlook, and school perception (Unnever et al, 2016), and causes many youths to act out and rebel against authorities (Rocque, 2011 & Unnever et al, 2016). Unfortunately, this has led to the adoption of Zero-Tolerance and other harsh policies that have the effect of criminalizing African American youths for minor infractions such as verbal “outbursts” that could be dealt with in much more compassionate and effective ways (Alexander, 2010).

Such policies have perpetuated the cycle of victimization of, and recidivism by, these youths. The majority of the incarcerated young men in this study were not first-time offenders; in fact, most had

an extensive arrest record and a history of dealing with the institutionalized racism described above. According to McChristian (2017), “Any attempt to justify these staggering racial disparities based solely on their offenses speaks to our inability to address and redress the systemic racism which has led to their restraint. This is not about the individual. It is about a system that has existed for well over a century to strip childhood from black children” (McChristian, 2017). These youths appeared quite “street smart,” yet lacked the skills to make an appropriate living or to appropriately process feelings of anger and frustration. Without intervention, they experienced educational failure and grade retention and exhibited behavior problems (Rider-Hankins, 1992).

The nature and quality of intervention on their behalf must also be examined. Many of these youth were placed in alternative homes at a younger-than-average age, and these homes were often unsuccessful in providing stability. Rider-Hankins (1992) believed that many youths who engaged in delinquent behavior were not successful in previous placements due to their progressively disruptive behavior. These circumstances were also some of the earliest indicators of later delinquent behavior (Rider-Hankins, 1992).

Many educators view Black youth from a “deficit model” (Howe & Lisi, 2019), i.e. merely as products of their home and community environments. This approach focuses on what “poor” Black children have been lacking and don’t have, due to their race. Although prejudice, discrimination, poverty, crime, substance abuse, and poor education are very real issues that impact Black youth, they should not be seen as victims or as individuals to be pitied or “rescued” (Howe & Lisi, 2019). Generally, these young people come from a low socioeconomic environment, are highly mobile (Rider-Hankins, 1992); they are also “experiencing significant conflict at home and at school, some have left school early, and many are socially isolated, have poor

communication skills, anger management problems and low self-esteem” (Delaney & Milne, 2002). Similarly, Wright and Wright (1994) suggested that delinquency is a failure of socialization, specifically crises within a youth’s family or school, along with the inability to cope with feelings (Wright & Wright, 1994).

According to Barnert et al. (2017) many delinquent youths have endured extreme hardships throughout their lives that contribute to poor health outcomes. They often deal with chaos in their home, school and community environments and eroded the safety and security they needed to sustain a healthy existence (The New York State Council on Children and Families, 2008), and have experienced social and economic disadvantages, racial and ethnic disparities, disrupted social networks, and negative “social” credentials (Barnert et al., 2017). They are exposed to a life of abuse, violence, neglect, drugs, gangs, and poverty, which usually worsens as they move through childhood, forming new relationships and experiencing greater exposure to their immediate environment. Repeated trauma creates a sense of unfairness and eventually leads to displacement from those environments and contact with the juvenile justice system. This upheaval continues to affect their sense of security, adequacy, and purpose (New York State Council on Children and Families, 2008).

When youth come in contact with the juvenile justice system, their stability is weakened further by its constraints (New York State Council on Children and Families, 2008). More alarming is the system’s role in escalating the lack of support and opportunities for youth. Research shows that overlapping processes that entail numerous agencies and officials create poorly “designed policies for the adjudication, incarceration transition and education of justice-impacted youth” (Carter, 2018, p. 395). Although officials are well meaning, the sheer size of agencies make it difficult to provide effective

services that help youths and families resolve issues and hinder services and provide the ongoing support necessary (Carter, 2018) for success. Furthermore, each year countless youths “age out” of the system without being properly placed in a healthy home environment or engaging in meaningful relationships (Pecora et al., 2009; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). This places them at risk of becoming homeless, recidivating, being unemployed, and suffering from depression (Courtney et al., 2009).

As mentioned above, youth entering the juvenile justice system have been on a self-destructive path for a lengthy period of time, and have a number of issues that create challenges for staff. Unfortunately, disruptive behavior often hinders the ability to receive adequate treatment and many become trapped within the system as they transition from placement to placement. As mentioned above, the juvenile justice system may also be ineffective in creating support for the family unit and in addressing issues that youth face upon release. Parental divorce and separation, for example, greatly influence a youth’s ability to sustain a feeling of support, security, and stability.

Unnever et al (2016) agree with Rocque (2011) that, “experiences with racial discrimination weakens the ties that African American youths have with their schools” (p. 142). In addition, other relevant studies have clearly demonstrated that community issues, including racial discrimination, factor into the creation of criminal offenses. In other words, racial discrimination leads to a lack connection between African American students and school culture and increases the likelihood of disruption, low academic performance, and increased dropout rates, as well as the likelihood of offending. Theoretical perspectives on African American offending suggest that the lack of community efforts is directly correlated with the

increase in said offending, a finding that holds true even when controlling for other potentially relevant variables.

Findings

The goal of this study was to capture the educational experiences of incarcerated male youth and understand the essence of their experiences and how they internalized or perceived what they have experienced (Patton, 1990). The fifteen participants were each 18 years of age and housed in a state-operated juvenile correctional facility. Several of them have committed at least three or more felonies, one violent offense toward another person, and may have mental health problems or other specialized needs. Others have a long history of criminal behavior, substance abuse and delinquent behaviors, as well as patterns of academic failure and truancy that often resulted in suspension and expulsion. Many participants have been victims of parental neglect, multiple out-of-home placements, and poverty. During the interviews these young men provided insights into their educational experiences and circumstances, from their earliest memories to the time they were incarcerated, including detailed descriptions of their personal lives, family structure, economic conditions, educational background, types of delinquent behaviors, and relationships with their parents, teachers, and peers.

An analysis of data revealed five overarching themes that impacted their lives, namely, (1) relationships; (2) educational disconnect/disparities; (3) personal “demons”; (4) earliest educational outlook; and, (5) future outlook, as it relates to short- and long-term goals. Participants were asked a series of semi-structured questions about their educational journey and answered based on their own unique experiences, perceptions, and perspectives. In an effort to maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to each participant.

Design of the Study

A qualitative phenomenological approach was used for this study, this approach allowed me “to illuminate the specific, to identify phenomena” (Lester, 1999, p. 1) and how participants perceived the phenomena of their educational experiences. This translated into extracting and compiling in-depth information on perceptions by way of qualitative methods such as interviews and discussions (Lester, 1999). I searched “for essentials, invariant structure (or essence) or the central underlying meaning of the experience and emphasize the intentionality of consciousness where experiences contain both the outward appearance and inward consciousness based on memory, image and meaning” (Creswell, 1998, p.52).

My intention was to describe the phenomenon, holding true to concrete facts and nothing more (Groenewald, 2004). This approach allowed me to carefully link various parts of the discussion between myself and the participants as themes emerged. Good rapport had been established with the pool of participants identified for this study through the classification phase of their detainment. This allowed me to gain information to provide rich thick data to be analyzed (Lester, 1999).

Data Collection

In preparation for conducting the interviews, I identified the information I needed and from whom, then sought their informed consent. The purpose of the interview was reiterated to all participants, as well as the reason why each was selected and the expected duration of the interview. Participants were informed that their responses to the interview questions would be kept confidential, unless they contained information about an imminent threat to the safety of the student or others associated with the facility. Data, which were collected through the use of a recorder and a reflective journal, were summarized and processed immediately following the discussion with each participant.

Research Approval

Research approval for this study was granted through the CSU Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the protection of human subjects. Additionally, the approval for participant selection was granted by the Department of Children Services (DCS), Research Review Committee. The purpose of this committee is to ensure that research requests are reviewed, approved and executed in accordance with relevant state and federal laws and regulations and with DCS policy. The policy applies to research requests involving possible use of human subjects and confidential DCS data. All of the participants in this study were males age 18, had been remanded to DCS custody through an order imposed by a judicial magistrate or court, and were housed in a state operated juvenile correctional facility.

Instruments

As mentioned, the dialogue between each participant and myself was captured via audio recording. The recorded information, as well as my observations of the participants' behavior, was then manually transcribed in a journal for the purpose of extracting relevant data. This provided an opportunity to reflect on our interactions during the interview to see if other information would emerge as a result of the questions being asked. The interviews all took place in an office that was once used to conduct therapy sessions with youths.

Data Analysis

After recorded sessions with the participants were transcribed, these transcripts were reviewed several times so I could gain a holistic understanding of what each participant was trying to convey, and identify and uncover any themes and patterns. A list of topics and sub-topics were then created based on this information, the goal of which was to develop a system for coding each of the themes or patterns that I identified. After a code had been developed for

specific content, I began the process of categorizing specific themes and patterns in an attempt to link them to research questions developed for this study. Throughout this process I continually revisited the transcripts to ensure that no information was overlooked, and that any additional patterns were documented and coded.

Conclusion and Implications

This study provides strong evidence of the need for additional research on, and initiatives addressing, school truancy. Both the literature and the participant interviews indicate that truancy is often a starting point on the path, or "pipeline," to delinquency, due to the disconnection from the academic culture. The findings suggest that the impact of truancy reaches far beyond the scope of educational entities, however. Truancy and poor school attendance have a direct connection to poverty and crime, and places hardships on various legal, justice, and governmental systems. While it is true that there is no one cause of youthful offending, adjudication and incarceration, truancy is arguably one of the biggest culprits and indicators of these problems. The greatest opportunity to prevent this downward spiral lies in the realm of public education. That said, efforts to curtail truancy cannot solely be the responsibility of schools; nor can it fall exclusively upon the courts and families. When truancy leads to criminal behavior, society as a whole suffers, legally and economically; therefore, community organizations must also play a larger role in supporting at-risk youth. Youth who are truant throughout their school experiences are usually poorly prepared for the workforce, are more reliant on health and social services, and demand greater output from criminal justice resources than individuals who have successfully obtained a diploma (Heilbrunn, 2007). The costs of services are usually absorbed by local and community tax dollars. As this and other studies

show, truancy does have an impact on youths as they grow into adulthood, and chronically truant youths are at a greater risk of having physical and mental health issues, living in poverty, and continuing the cycle with their own children who may learn to emulate their behavior (Baker et al, 2001).

As gleaned through the interviews, attaining a high school diploma or some other type of secondary certification (i.e., GED) is critical for at-risk youth to break negative patterns. This is the minimum requirement for many jobs, as having such credentials suggests that a candidate has certain basic skills needed to successfully perform tasks. Laws and policy are largely ineffective in ensuring that students reach this important milestone; depending on state of residence, youth may only be required to remain in school for a total of nine years or until age 16, which falls short of the average age of high school graduates, 18. No state requires young adults to earn a high school diploma (Education Commission of the States, 2004).

During the course of this study, it became apparent that some of the participants will transition back into the community without having attained their diplomas. Each is due to be released in the months or days leading up to their nineteenth birthdays. They will often return to the community facing the same challenges they had when incarcerated, namely, poverty, lack of family support and academic issues, and without effective transitional measures in place they are extremely vulnerable to recidivism (Lichtenberger & Ogle, 2008; Redcross, et al., 2010), an escalation of their criminal behavior, and possibly entry into the adult criminal justice system. On the other hand, the research shows that gaining the basic skills evidenced by a high school diploma, GED or HiSET expands their opportunities to obtain future employment and decreases the likelihood of recidivism. Almost all incarcerated youth will eventually return to their respective communities (Burrell & Moester, 2014), therefore, vital services

to assist and ease their transition are critical. “Jurisdictions have invested in these services to allow for some level of post-release supervision of youth, with the goal of increasing the likelihood of safe and successful transitions of youth back into their homes and communities” (Clark, 2014, p. 76). Some examples of these services could include independent living options that offer life skills; employment opportunities; and social skills education (Liddell et al., 2014).

This study also illustrates need for early intervention programs that address truancy among at-risk youth. Research shows that truancy reduction programs, particularly those that include early intervention, have been shown to result in the decline of criminal behavior of school-age youth (Heilbrunn, 2007). Most youths who enter the juvenile justice system have a history of poor school attendance, often leading to chronic truancy and leaving school altogether; therefore, existing policies should be examined and their effectiveness assessed in addressing the risk factors these youths face as they relate to truancy. This may give us more insight into the causes of youth truancy, for example, school climate and culture, and reveal new resources that can be used to curtail behaviors before a path to delinquency has been established. That said, identifying these issues are not enough; schools must go a step further and establish stronger, creative, and more progressive protocols that address patterns long before youths enter the juvenile justice system.

Recommendations

As mentioned above, this study revealed the potential value of further research in the areas of education, delinquency, and incarceration of male adolescent youth. The following recommendations emerged from the research and are proposed by the researcher:

1. Practicum and observation phases of teacher candidate programs are valuable aspects of the training of teacher candidates and preservice

- teachers, they should be restructured to ensure that candidates are aware of disparities that place some students at risk for incarceration. It is important to address the disproportionate rates at which students (particularly males) of color experience the School-to-Prison Pipeline and other systemic issues present in K–12 settings. Research shows high rates of suspensions and expulsions among students of color. Undoubtedly, the academic and social conditions of Black boys can get better if the majority of their time is spent inside the classroom rather than outside classroom spaces (Howard 2014; Wright & Ford 2016). Perhaps more importantly, White K – 12 educators must evaluate and change their disciplinary measures, which often result in the dehumanization of Black boys. This shift may create opportunities for teacher candidates to see fair and restorative practices being used to address student behavior in the classroom. "It can also produce teachers who come to value Black males and set examples for White students who spend years of watching White teachers mistreat Black males in classrooms" (Bryan, 2017).
2. Capture the educational experiences of incarcerated youth, then follow them beyond the confines of a juvenile detention facility. Regardless of the reason for their incarceration, the ultimate goal is to rehabilitate youths and help them transition back into the community. Such a study could help educators, administrators, and other advocates gain valuable insights into this transition period; specifically, it can help them identify and utilize the most appropriate tools and resources available to help youths continue on a path of success, avoid recidivism and become productive members of society.
 3. Conduct a national study to assess the effectiveness and rigor of educational programs in juvenile correctional settings and determine how these programs can be improved. Most programs in juvenile settings have been designed to provide minimal services to youth. Educators within these settings are bound by outdated pedagogy, limited technology, poorly trained teachers, and a transient student population. This is compounded by administrative issues such as the transfer of previous school records and multiple school placements. A large percentage of incarcerated youths have been diagnosed with some type of mental health issue that requires other specialized services; and if they are to successfully transition back into their respective communities, correctional facilities must look beyond preventing recidivism and toward preparing them for employment and other aspects of daily life. It should be noted that one positive aspect of many of these programs is mandatory attendance and participation, which eliminates the truancy issue and presents a real opportunity to effect change.
 4. Identify interventions that improve juveniles' educational, employment, and recidivism outcomes in less-restrictive settings, such as alternative and traditional schools. Evidence shows that incarceration in and of itself may hinder educational achievement and increase the likelihood of recidivism, as opposed to placements in less restrictive settings (Aizer & Doyle, 2013). A current positive trend shows a decline in the number of juveniles incarcerated in correctional facilities in the United States; in fact, between 1997 and 2011 the number of youths apprehended, redirected, or committed in this country dropped from 105, 000 to 61,000. While it must be acknowledged that

incarceration is often necessary for violent and serious crimes, one can make the argument that juvenile correctional facilities should be reserved for the most dangerous youthful offenders.

5. Determine effective methods, strategies, and decision-making around race-based disparities in the juvenile justice system. While crimes being committed by youth appear to be similar regardless of race, social class, and environment, it appears that youth of color have higher rates of incarceration than their White counterparts. Data revealed that in 2010, youth of color comprised of 17 percent of juveniles

committed to facilities, but accounted for only 31 percent of total arrests (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). There has been little to no change in this rate from previous decades; however, the data with regard to ethnic disparities appears to be limited (Puzzanchera & Hockenberry, 2013). We do know that their issues usually begin in school, with higher rates of truancy, suspensions and expulsion far exceeding those of White youth. Examining these disparities could reveal more concise information regarding the racial and ethnic makeup in the juvenile correctional populations.

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