

**From Domination to Liberation:
Blurring the Line Between Prisons and Schools**

by

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Abstract

In this thesis I use a comparative socio-historical analysis of the systems of incarceration and education in the United States, along with individual interviews with nine formerly incarcerated individuals, to explore the consequences of blurring the boundary between schools and prisons. I detail the entrance of the criminal justice system into urban public schools and discuss how the rise of “zero tolerance” discipline coincided with test-driven education reform to push poor students of color out of schools and into prisons. I argue that schools and prisons have merged into a new structure of social domination that legalizes oppression under the pretense of protecting the “public safety.” I suggest that prison education programs, while fundamentally reactive, may provide a model for radical changes in our public education system at large that could move us from a structure of racist and classist exclusion and intolerance to a new paradigm of social inclusion and acceptance.

Introduction

“The system is broken. The school’s closed, and the prison’s open.”

– Kanye West, *Power*

As the teacher’s voice escalates, her face contorts into a mixture of anger and increasing frustration. I sit silently with my tutee, Lahna, and watch the show. The student she is yelling at is Tyshon, a small, friendly 8th grader with rectangular glasses and a goofy smile who waves hello to me every time I come to the middle school and asks “Why can’t you tutor me too?”. Today, he showed up 5 minutes late to this Language Arts “Intervention” class, and his teacher is less than pleased. In fact, she quickly becomes irate, firing out complaints seemingly unrelated to his lateness: “I don’t even get a living wage here, and I buy these materials out of my own pocket, and you don’t even take advantage of the extra help I’m trying to give you!” Much to my dismay, she soon brings me into the conversation as well, using my very existence as a threatening example: “Ask the Wesleyan tutor what happens when you’re late! You FAIL. In college if you come in late, you miss the lecture, and then you fail the class. Here, you get away with walking slowly into my class and you don’t even face any consequences!” I restrain myself from commenting that college students frequently come late to class, sleep through morning lectures or skip classes entirely, and rarely face consequences. As a college tutor to middle-schoolers, I straddle the line between teacher and student, working as best I can to earn the respect of both. Still, in times like these, I find myself identifying much more with the students. I sit in the middle-school desk next to my tutee in silence and watch the situation play out. Lahna leans over to me and whispers “this is what always happens in this class” and I smile to acknowledge that I too recognize the teacher’s overreaction.

Unfortunately, the teacher catches this brief exchange, and demands that Lahna tell her what she just said. I clear the smile from my face and hope the teacher does not turn on me next, but we are saved by the loud entrance of two more boys to the classroom. I prepare myself for what is bound to follow as the boys saunter in, speaking rapidly in Spanish and laughing as they push each other. The teacher, clearly unable to understand what they are saying, shouts at them to keep their hands to themselves and sit down. They barely acknowledge her presence, ignoring her command to be seated. I make out pieces of their conversation as they jokingly fight about something that one of them has taken from the other, using only the occasional English words of “Yo, gimme! Give me that!” She continues yelling at them, looking desperately at me between shouts as if seeking some kind of reinforcement. Within a few minutes she has threatened to send them to the office. They sit down, but keep talking to each other and laughing as they try to settle their dispute. Lahna and I decide to move to the hallway to work on her math homework, but we are both distracted as we overhear the teacher call down to the office to inform them that she is sending the students down. She tells the person on the phone that these boys already have multiple lunch detentions, but that they were acting out and needed to be punished. The two students soon exit the class and make their way slowly down the hallway, clearly unfazed by the whole interaction. She yells behind them to hurry up. I ask Lahna in a whisper whether this has happened before, and she tells me that this teacher sends 2 out of the 4 children in this “intervention” class down to the office almost daily. This class is supposed to be a place for failing students to receive extra help on their writing or to catch up work. Instead, it seems to be yet another place where the students who need the most help are criminalized and punished.

In public schools across the country, teachers are now being explicitly instructed to use punitive punishment as a way to remove the “problematic” children from class in the hopes of facilitating the learning of the “good” students. This teacher’s impulse to punish the students she could not get to “behave” did not seem to come out of malice, but out of a genuine desire to help the rest of her students learn—not to mention the fact that she was clearly stressed, tired, underpaid and overworked. From what I could tell, these students were subjected to this teacher’s verbal assault and disciplinary actions for doing nothing more than the average teenager: they showed up to class a little late, joked around with their friends, and took a while to get focused. In another, higher-track class in the same school, these same actions might not be interpreted as misbehaviors that even warrant attention from the teacher. Unfortunately, in pushing these students out of a class that is supposed to offer them additional help, this teacher is making it even harder for these students to succeed in a school system that has seemingly already abandoned them. These are the students who are already at risk of repeating a grade or failing out of school altogether. They are also predominantly students of color, consistent with larger trends of a racial achievement gap reflecting unequal patterns in educational quality, tracking, and punishment that put nonwhite children at a disadvantage. Why do we continue to hold students responsible for their “failure” when their very own teachers and administrators are pushing them out of the classroom without even listening to their personal needs or attempting to understand their circumstances?

We have reached a paradigm of educational ideology that naturalizes the failure of an increasingly large group of students and justifies the punishment of those who are already the most persecuted in our society. When I shared the story of Lahna’s class with another tutor, she told me that her 8th grade tutee has already been arrested twice, and

her friend piped in that his tutee was on probation. These punishments are not confined to Middletown, Connecticut: extreme punishments are meted out in similar, low-achieving schools across the country. In Chicago, 25 children between the ages of 11 and 15 at a predominantly black middle school were arrested in 2009 for “reckless conduct” for participating in a food fight, and spent 8 hours in jail after being fingerprinted and having mug shots taken. In Florida, a 6 year old was arrested in 2007 for “battery on a school official”, “disruption of a school function” and “resisting arrest” after having a tantrum in class. While these are extreme examples, it is becoming increasingly common for children of all ages to be taken directly out of school in handcuffs, and arrests now occur so frequently in many inner-city schools that they are not even considered newsworthy (Nolan 2011).

In this thesis I seek to explore how both the material and ideological reality of the criminal justice system has entered into the urban public schools serving the most marginalized populations in the United States, effectively blurring the line between schools and prisons. Along with the entrance of prisons into our schools, I investigate the entrance of schools into our prisons with the development of post-secondary prison education programs. In this process I aim to discover how the analysis of these seemingly inverse processes—incarcerating our students and educating our prisoners—can give us a better understanding of the role our social institutions are currently serving. I detail how the intersections between schools and prisons perpetuate a structure of social domination and explore whether it is possible to transform these institutions from vehicles of oppression to forces of liberation

Outline

In chapter one, I begin with a socio-historical analysis of the United States penal system. I trace our structure of punishment from the development of the penitentiary to the recent dramatic rise in incarceration, tracking the material and ideological changes in our approach to criminal justice over the past 200 years and highlighting the paradigm shift from rehabilitative ideals to punitive “tough on crime” policies. I discuss the social, political and economic consequences of mass incarceration along with possible theories of the motivations for this new use of punishment, concluding that our prison system operates to perpetuate legal structures of racist and classist oppression under the pretense of protecting the “public safety” while relieving us of the social responsibility to address the real issues facing those at the bottom of our social hierarchy.

In chapter two, I discuss how the shift to a culture of punitive social control prompted the rise of “zero tolerance” education policy, blurring the line between education and incarceration as impoverished urban public schools grew to resemble prisons themselves. I detail the entrance of the criminal justice system into the classroom, both physically, with the increasing use of security officers and police surveillance and ideologically, with the law-and-order mentality being introduced into classroom management. I discuss how this rise in punitive discipline coincided with test-driven education reform to push underachieving low-income students of color out of schools and into prisons, creating the “school-to-prison pipeline” and further marginalizing the students who already face the most serious social, economic and academic disadvantages.

After discussing the possible theories of social control at the end of chapter two, I conclude that the changes in our paradigm of social control in the past few decades have

created a new structure of social domination rooted in the *combined* function of our schools and prisons. I argue that this shift is best explained by the theories of Marx and Foucault, for our institutions are perpetuating a cyclical process of material and ideological domination. These theories can best be understood in a dialectical relationship, for the hegemonic construction of the “criminality” of those at the bottom of our social hierarchy both reflects and perpetuates the exclusion of these individuals from material economic, political and social rewards. I argue that it is also necessary to locate our current paradigm of control in the context of a history of oppression, incorporating Alexander and Davis’ analysis of the role race and class play in determining who gets trapped in this cycle of criminalization and exclusion. I ultimately reject Durhkeim’s argument that institutional control functions to “protect” the social order, arguing instead that this functionalist perspective serves an important ideological function of *masking* the true social domination of our schools and prisons under the pretense of benefiting the “common interest”, leading to widespread public support of a system that is actually contributing to “social destruction” (Davis 2003).

In chapter three, I discuss the effects of institutional structures of domination on the *individuals* that find themselves at the intersection of schools and prisons. I situate the experiences of nine formerly-incarcerated individuals within the broader theoretical and historical analysis of social control, using their individual experiences of education both before and during prison to shed light on larger processes of domination and liberation. I interviewed these individuals not only to get a better grasp of their experiences of schools and prisons, but also their experience of schools *inside of* prisons, a unique chance to see how both education and incarceration may be able to serve different functions when they are brought together for the purpose of liberation instead of control. I then engage

possible critiques of bringing education into prisons, including the inability of a “reformist” and reactive prison education program to address the larger structural problems facing our schools and prisons, and the overemphasis on neoliberal notions of “individual responsibility” that relieves us of the social responsibility to challenge our unjust system of social control. Still, I ultimately argue that prison education facilitates liberatory ideological and material changes in the lives of prisoners through a Freire-ian type of critical pedagogy, and reveals the potential to challenge the roles played by both of these oppressive social institutions. I suggest that prison education programs may be able to provide a model for radical changes in our public education system at large, but we will not be able to transform our social institutions until we publicly recognize and accept responsibility for the failures of our current structure of social control.

My thesis outlines the power of this multi-institutional approach to social control to perpetuate a historically-rooted system of oppression and exclude an entire “underclass” of Americans from full participation in society. Each time these institutions intersect—when prisons enter schools and when schools enter prisons—there are real, human lives caught on the boundary between two realities: the hope of a world that will one day let them in, and the fear of a world that will forever lock them out. As we blur the line between schools and prisons, we also blur the line between hope and fear, inclusion and exclusion, acceptance and intolerance. While educating prisoners does not ultimately undo the damage of incarcerating students in the first place, I argue that prison education programs may be able to provide a model for radical changes in our public education system at large that could move us from a structure of racist and classist exclusion and intolerance to a new paradigm of social inclusion and acceptance.

Chapter One

The Rise of Mass Incarceration

“America, with great armies deployed abroad under the figurative banner of ‘Freedom,’ harbors the largest custodial infrastructure for the mass deprivation of liberty on the planet”
- Glen C. Loury & Bruce Western

1.1 History of the U.S. Penal System

The American prison system began with the development of the penitentiary in the eighteenth century as a new method of controlling deviance institutionally. Before the penitentiary, jails merely served to detain defendants awaiting trial, rather than places of punishment aimed to address criminal behavior. In early American colonies punishments were seen as ways to deter individuals from future antisocial behavior through public shaming, and they were most often swift and severe, with harsh punishments and widespread use of capital punishment for crimes as minor as third-offense theft. This system was necessarily quick and efficient in a society where labor in sparsely populated small towns was in short supply. Changes in American society by the mid-1800s including population and economic growth caused public concern over maintaining order in an increasingly fluid society, and the need for an institutional response to potential disorder led to the development of the penitentiary. The prison system was originally conceived of as a more humane approach to criminal justice, an alternative to barbaric public embarrassment and overly harsh punishments.

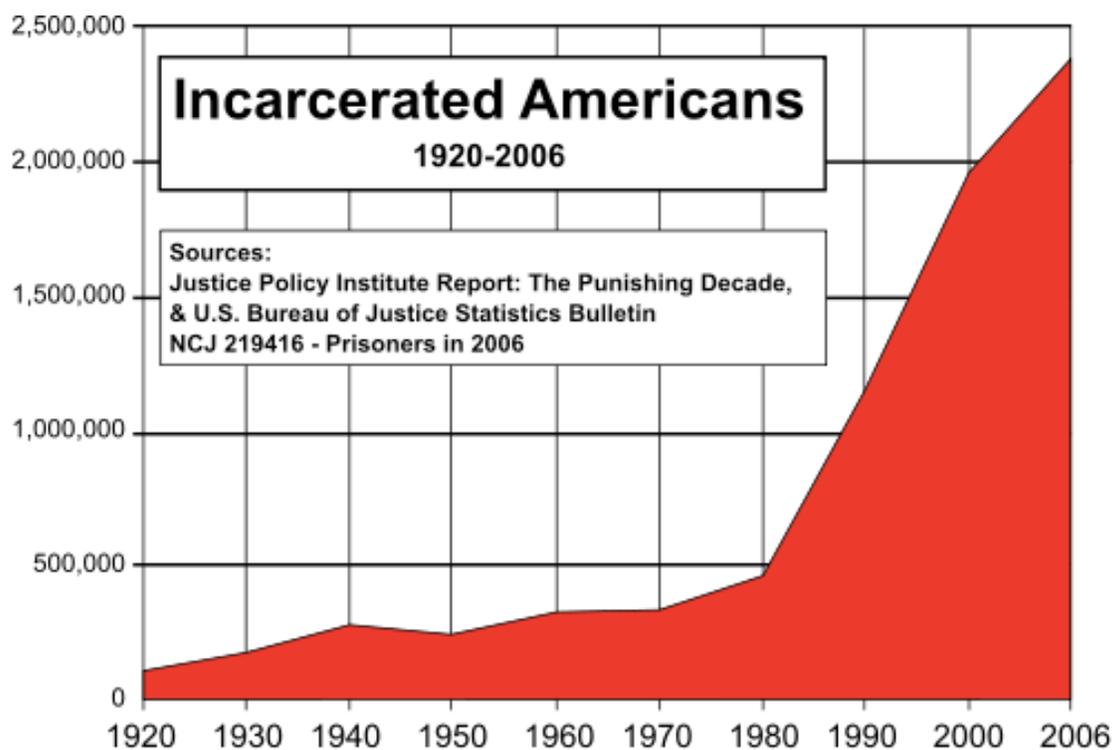
The penitentiary grew out of the Quaker philosophy that sinners should reflect on their mistakes through hard labor and religious study. Both of the first two models—the Pennsylvania model and the New York “Auburn” model—centered around isolation as

a form of rehabilitation, using solitary confinement to occupy offenders with labor and Bible study in cells, often prohibiting inmates from even talking (Mauer 1999). Marc Mauer (1999) of *The Sentencing Project* remarks that after two centuries of the prison in America, the institutional model has changed relatively little, for even as the stated goals of the prison have fluctuated, “the basic concept of imprisoning people in cages remains the central feature of the system” (p. 4). As the U.S. prison system has evolved, it has arguably lost much of the original Quaker philosophy of rehabilitation, even as the fundamental institutional model of isolated confinement seems to have changed relatively little.

It was not until the late twentieth century that what Mauer refers to as the American “incarceration experiment” began. This “experiment” of the massive, widespread use of imprisonment as a supposed new method of crime control was in no way announced as such, and the dramatic rise in incarceration that took off in the 1980s was entirely unprecedented in world history and would never have been predicted even by U.S. scholars. In fact, there were several big prison reform efforts in the 1970s due to concern that levels of incarceration were already too high. There was growing support for a moratorium on prison construction, and the National Council on Crime and Delinquency called for a halt to all institutional construction. The National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals issued a recommendation that all juvenile correctional facilities be closed and no new adult institutions be built, concluding that “the prison, the reformatory, and the jail have achieved only a shocking record of failure. There is overwhelming evidence that these institutions create crime rather than prevent it” (Mauer 1999:16). When this statement was issued in 1972, federal and state prisons held only 196,000 inmates and were imprisoning at a rate so

low that it is hard to imagine even returning to that level of incarceration. Yet for moratorium supporters in the 70s, this level of incarceration was exceedingly high.

Unfortunately, the early reformers' advice was completely ignored; beginning in 1985 at least one new prison was opened *every week* to account for the flood of incoming prisoners (Mauer 1999). The number of inmates held at federal and state prisons skyrocketed from under 200,000 in 1972 up to almost 1.2 million by 1997, a 500% increase in imprisonment in only 25 years (Mauer 1999). Since Mauer published his book on mass incarceration in 1999, we have continued to incarcerate Americans at an extremely high rate, and almost 2.3 million adults were incarcerated by the end of 2009 according to U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (2009). Including adults who were on probation or parole, a remarkable total of 7.2 million adults were under correctional supervision in 2009, around 3.1% of adults in the U.S. resident population (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics 2009). This rise in imprisonment in the past few decades is particularly shocking when compared to the relatively stable rates of incarceration before 1970. The scale of incarceration is often measured by a rate that records the fraction of the population in prison or jail on an average day, and from the 1920s through the mid-1970s, this rate remained relatively stable around 100 per 100,000 (Western and Pettit 2010). In fact, incarceration rates were so stable in this period that some criminologists began hypothesizing a “theory of the stability of punishment” (Mauer 1999:18). These theories were shattered with the explosive growth of the prison system, and by 1980 incarceration rates had already doubled. From 1980 to 2008, the U.S. incarceration rate climbed from 221 to 762 per 100,000, resulting in a rate nearly eight times its historic average (Mauer 1999). This sharp climb in incarceration is represented visually in the graph below.



Incarcerated Americans (U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics 2007)

This expansion of penal institutions in the United States—which has taken place at every level of government across the entire country—is historically unprecedented and represents a societal use of incarceration unique by world standards. The United States is now the world’s leading incarcerator, surpassing Russia, the leader of much of the 90s (Mauer 1999). With roughly 5 percent of the world’s population, the United States confines almost 25 percent of the world’s prisoners, with a rate of incarceration per capita 6 to 7 times most comparable countries (Loury and Western 2010; Mauer 1999). American penal policy is particularly distinguished by the length of sentences. The United States is actually quite comparable to many European nations in its annual admissions to prisons per capita, but the total incarceration rate remains higher in large

part due to lengthier sentences. Indeed, the United States locks up nearly as great a fraction of its population to a *lifetime* in prison as Sweden, Norway or Denmark finds it necessary to imprison for terms of any duration (Loury and Western 2010). As Glen C. Loury and Bruce Western comment, “No other advanced nation has been willing to tolerate imprisonment on the scale, and of the character, that has become commonplace and that goes virtually unremarked in the United States” (2010:6). Mass incarceration, as Loury and Western put it, is now a central element of American social policy.

Why is it that we lock up more of our own people than any other nation in the world? Is there something about American society that necessitates this extensive system of mass incarceration? If this high rate of incarceration is merely a reflection of a high crime rate, it could arguably be an understandable byproduct. Indeed, most public officials have little interest in these “record” rates of incarceration as long as they “work” to control crime, following a Durkheimian functionalist view that our system of punishment is necessary to ensure social solidarity. As it turns out, changes in crime rates cannot account for the rise in incarceration (Caplow and Simon 1999), and there is little evidence that investing in building prisons has had *any* greater gains in crime control (Mauer 1999). In fact, rates of delinquency and crime have not changed significantly in this new era of imprisonment, suggesting that the perceived necessity for increasing crime control was unfounded (Wacquant 2009). Incarceration rates did not mirror trends in crime, and in years leading up to the dramatic rise in incarceration in the early 1990s, crime rates had actually been decreasing. Michelle Alexander (2012) argues that from a historical perspective, the lack of correlation between crime and punishment is nothing new, as governments use punishment primarily as a tool of social control unrelated to crime patterns. Criminologists who have examined incarceration in

a number of European nations similarly found that differences in prison populations did not correlate significantly with crime rates (Mauer 1999). Mauer argues that even if there is a relationship between crime and imprisonment, it is not necessarily causal, as both official crime rates and prison rates may be affected by what he calls “the level of punitiveness in a society”—the attitudes towards crime and punishment that can influence both criminality and sentencing practices (1999:38). Other researchers suggest that a society’s penal climate is linked to its “relative egalitarianism,” for the greater a society’s tolerance of inequality, the more extreme scale of punishment is employed (Mauer 1999). A closer examination of the massive social impact of incarceration in the United States does not bode well for America’s “relative egalitarianism,” for if the prison system is any kind of reflection of our social values, we seem to have an extremely high tolerance of inequality.

1.2 “Tough on Crime”

If the growth of our prisons is not reflective of a parallel growth in criminal behavior, rising punishment was thus a policy choice, not a natural response to sustained increases in crime. Research has demonstrated that specific changes in criminal justice policy, rather than changes in crime rates, have been the most significant contributors to the rise in state prison populations. A regression analysis of the rise in the number of inmates from 1980 to 1996 showed that one half of the increase was explained by a greater likelihood of a prison sentence upon arrest, one third by an increase in sentence lengths, and just one ninth by higher offense rates (Mauer 1999). These changes in sentencing can be largely attributed to the sense of insecurity which produced the “state of emergency” and “tough on crime” mentality in the 1980s, even though the fear of

increasing crime was ultimately unfounded. Still, the public anxiety around violent and drug-related crime proved to be a large motivator for changing criminal justice policy, epitomized by the Reagan Administration's declaration of the "War on Drugs".

Politicians began espousing increasingly punitive policies to avoid being seen as "soft on crime", resulting in the enactment of three main reform strategies used to crack down on crime in America: mandatory sentencing laws, "three strikes" laws, and the "broken windows" approach.

Mandatory minimum sentencing laws were enacted by Congress in 1986, and require fixed sentences for individuals convicted of drug crimes, regardless of any other mitigating factors. "Three strikes" laws were passed by a number of states, and require a lengthy mandatory period of incarceration after the third conviction of certain crimes. Together, the mandatory minimum sentencing and "three strikes" laws led to both higher rates of incarceration and longer sentences without any taking into account the context or underlying causes of a crime. This approach to blind mandatory sentencing has resulted in a significant increase in the risk of incarceration once arrested (Bobo and Thompson 2006). The "broken windows" theory has had a widespread impact on criminal justice reform ever since its introduction in 1982 by social scientists James Wilson and George Kelling (1982). The theory of "broken windows" argues that small acts of disorder and vandalism in neighborhoods eventually lead to more serious crimes, because if one window is broken in a house, the rest are more likely to be broken as well. This theory has been widely adopted by police forces around the country who now accept that it is their responsibility not only to fight crime, but also to maintain order in urban environments. While this may have some validity in theory, in practice it has spiraled into a police assault on poor urban communities through aggressive policing of minor

offenses of low-level crimes, even though this has not been shown to have any effect in preventing more serious crime.

In their foundational 1982 article, Wilson and Kelling state quite blankly that the broken-windows strategy requires a violation of legal rights, noting that “none of this is easily reconciled with any conception of due process or fair treatment.” Yet they feel it is justified because “society” wants and needs an officer to “have the legal tools to remove undesirable persons from a neighborhood” (Kelling and Wilson 1982). Discounting the racist and classist underpinnings of this notion of “undesirable persons” for now, on a basic level this attempt to “remove” the disorder from urban neighborhoods has produced an influx of low-level, low-rate delinquents into the prison system without any greater efficiency in incarcerating especially dangerous or high-rate offenders (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). In fact, over half of prisoners nationally are incarcerated for nonviolent offenses, including nearly one half million in prisons and jails for drug offenses (Mauer 1999). Only 26 percent of felons sent to prison by state courts in 1994 were convicted of violent offenses, while 61 percent were property and drug offenders and over 10 percent were nonviolent offenders convicted of low-level crimes such as vandalism (Caplow and Simon 1999). While the “broken windows” and “tough on crime” mentality fed off the public fear of serious and violent crimes, in actuality this approach has done next to nothing to address violence in America. It has merely resulted in the imprisonment of large swaths of low-level offenders for minor crimes.

1.3 Legalized Discrimination

Incarceration is no longer an institution for a small subculture, but rather a pervasive experience in the lives of those at the bottom of the social hierarchy (Patillo, Weiman and Western 2004). Garland coined the term “mass imprisonment” to imply the state of a society which is no longer incarcerating individual offenders, but rather systematically imprisoning whole groups of the population (Garland 2001). Yet Wacquant argues that the impact of the American prison system is more accurately described as “*hyperincarceration*” to account for the fact that the expansion of policing and imprisonment has been finely targeted by class, race and place. He argues that it is precisely the fact that incarceration has *not* reached the masses that has allowed it to remain socially tolerable and workable as public policy (Wacquant 2010).

The risk of incarceration is in no way evenly distributed across the population, as interactions with the criminal justice system have become highly concentrated within a specific demographic. While “zero tolerance” strategies of crime control are lauded as “neutral” policies that enforce all punishments equally, this is far from the truth. Incarceration rates are highest for those in their twenties and early thirties, and men account for 90 percent of the prison population, although the rate of incarceration has been growing much faster among women in recent decades (Western and Pettit 2010:9). Wacquant argues that class is the first filter of selection for incarceration, for inmates are first and foremost poor people, and have been since the sixteenth century. Prisoners are drawn overwhelmingly from lower-income urban communities, and two-thirds of inmates come from households with an annual income less than *half* the “poverty line” (Wacquant 2010:79). Class inequalities in incarceration are also reflected in the low educational level of prisoners. State prisoners average a tenth grade education, and about 70 percent have

no high school diploma (Western and Pettit 2010:9). The legitimate labor market opportunities for those with no postsecondary education have declined as the prison population has grown, and fewer than half of offenders hold a full-time job at the time of arrest (Wacquant 2010:79). Mauer suggests that in a post-industrial economy with less demand for the labor of many unskilled workers, “imprisonment begins to be seen as an appropriate, if unfortunate, outcome” (Mauer 1999:12). Caplow and Simon similarly suggest that the economic restructuring that widened the pool of poor, unemployed youth simultaneously boosted public support of coercive control strategies to control these “dangerous classes” (Caplow and Simon 1999).

While differences in class and educational achievements can account for some of the disparity in incarceration rates, this cannot account for the racial disparity in incarceration, as the lifetime likelihood of going to prison is roughly 5 times higher for African American men with no high school degree than for white high school dropouts (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). While prisoners have always reflected class inequalities, racial disparity in incarceration has dramatically increased over time. Currently, 1 in every 9 black males in his twenties or early thirties is now in prison or jail on any given day, and 1 out of every 14 black children has a parent behind bars (Mauer 1999). This has not always been the case, and in fact, the racial makeup of convicts has completely reversed in the past four decades, changing from 70 percent white and 30 percent “others” at the end of World War II to 70 percent African American and Latino versus 30 percent white by the end of the century (Wacquant 2010:79). Western and Pettit (2010) suggest that the migration of Southern African Americans to the North contributed to the increased racial disparity in incarceration in the first half of the twentieth century, and the slow incorporation of African Americans as full citizens in

American society through the civil rights movement followed an inverse relationship to the increasing presence of African Americans in penal institutions.

The shifts in the risk of imprisonment of African American men do not appear to have been driven by large shifts in their relative involvement in crime (Wakefield and Uggen 2010), but seem more based in changing trends of incarceration. Studies have shown that in most cases whites are just as likely to commit crimes as blacks, and the share of African Americans arrested for the four most serious violent offenses (murder, rape, robbery and aggravated assault) has actually declined in the past few decades. Yet African Americans continue to be over 7 times as likely to be incarcerated as whites (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Much of this change in sentencing patterns can be attributed to the “War on Drugs,” for blacks and Latinos are now put in prison for drug crimes at higher rates than whites, despite the fact that people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates (Alexander 2012). In fact, several studies have shown that white youth are *more* likely to use drugs and to engage in drug crime than people of color (Wakefield and Uggen 2010; Alexander 201). Through a public opinion study, Bobo & Thompson (2006) similarly show that mass incarceration is largely a result of the war on drugs, not a correlation in rising violent crime rates. The treatment of drug abuse also reflects class differences in the approach to criminal justice. When millions of middle-class families experience drug use and addiction, this is recognized as a social problem necessitating interventions like high-quality treatment programs run on private insurance. When the same situations occur in low-income neighborhoods, where there are few treatment programs and almost no inexpensive options, the problem of abuse is more likely to go untreated be defined as a criminal justice problem instead of a health

problem (Mauer 1999). For nearly two decades the U.S. has engaged in a “war” against poor and minority drug users while rarely prosecuting middle and upper-class drug use.

The intersection of class and race in determining the cumulative rates of incarceration normalizes the experience of imprisonment for young black males in large urban centers. Penal exclusion is layered on top of economic and racial exclusion, deepening social divisions while both creating and perpetuating a “criminalized underclass” (Garland 2001). Prison time has become a normal life event for African American men who have dropped out of high school, and the percent of young black male high school dropouts in prison or jail grew from 10 percent in 1980 to 37 percent in 2008, a remarkable level of institutionalization given that the average rate in the general population was 0.76 of 1 percent (Western and Pettit 2010). The stigmatization of an entire “criminalized underclass” has dramatic consequences that extend beyond prison walls and continue influencing individuals long after their imprisonment.

This is not to discount the impact of serving time in prison itself—conditions in prisons range from unhealthy to inhumane, and long sentences often negatively influence psychological and physical well-being, exacerbating pre-existing mental and physical illnesses. Yet this abuse does not end when a prisoner walks out the door, for instead of receiving services to facilitate a healthy re-entry into society, ex-cons experience restricted eligibility for social services such as adequate health care. For many individuals targeted by the criminal justice system, the far-reaching stigma of a legal record becomes a formal and lasting classification of social status that regulates access and opportunity in social, economic, and political domains. Once someone is labeled a felon, they are faced with legalized discrimination in nearly every public sphere—employment discrimination, housing discrimination, reduced educational

opportunity, denial of food stamps and other public benefits, etc. Felonies also result in exclusion from jury service and denial of the right to vote, completely removing the political agency of those who arguably face the most direct consequences of our current social policy.

Former prisoners have much harder time finding stable and well-paying jobs, often due to discrimination in labor markets (Western, Kling, and Weiman 2001). Incarceration has been shown to reduce both the level of wages and the rate of lifetime wage growth, which Western (2002) attributes to the disruption of key life transitions that reduces prisoners' access to the steady jobs that usually produce earnings growth among young men. Criminal records also serve as a screening mechanism that leaves ex-cons almost half as likely to receive initial consideration from employers than comparable job applicants without criminal records (Pager 2007; Western 2002). One study even found that two-thirds of firms would refuse on principle to hire any applicant sentenced to prison or jail (Wacquant 2009). Employers have easy access to criminal information which is widely available online or through background checks, and ex-convicts are legally required to inform their employer of their judicial status in some states. The stigma of conviction is especially prohibitive of entry into high-status or career jobs; a felony record can temporarily disqualify an individual from employment in licensed or professional occupations, skilled trades, or in the public sector (Western 2002). Incarceration also erodes job skills, for time out of employment prevents acquisition of skills gained through work experience (Western 2002). By channeling ex-inmates into unsteady jobs with little wage growth, the penal system is essentially perpetuating existing inequalities and "punishing the poor" (Wacquant 2009). The prison boom may have in fact increased overall economic inequality by supplying the labor market with

unskilled ex-inmates who remain at the bottom of the wage distribution with no chance for upward mobility (Western 2002).

The impact of incarceration also stretches beyond individual offenders, influencing their families and communities. Mark Mauer and Meda Chesney-Lind (2002) refer to the “invisible punishment” of criminal justice policies that have transformed family and community dynamics and exacerbated racial division. Imprisonment can affect entire communities by removing large numbers of young men from concentrated areas and reducing neighborhood stability through extensive criminal justice supervision. The weakening of ties to family and shifts in family structure after incarceration can disrupt social networks of kin and friendship that typically promote economic opportunity and social stability.

Children of the incarcerated are also possibly subjected to poor mental health, decreased educational attainment, likelihood of delinquency and intense social stigma (Wakefield and Uggen 2010). Inner-city communities already faced with declining economic and political power along with the imprisonment of a substantial proportion of their young men are then faced with an influx of ex-prisoners coming back with little support for their reintegration (Mauer 1999). The creation of large pools of former inmates with few social supports, family attachments, or economic opportunities likely *increases* crime rates, undermining the entire purpose of the criminal justice system. This may explain the “revolving door” phenomenon noted by Devah Pager (2007), which recognizes that those who interact with the criminal justice system are likely to continue having interactions. While 95% of inmates are eventually released, 2/3 of those released are charged with new crimes and over 40% will return to prison within 3 years (Pager 2007). This is likely because the long-term adverse consequences of incarceration limit the

possibilities of having the stable economic and social situations which prevent crime. The expansion of the penal system may ultimately be a self-defeating strategy for crime control that produces more crime than it reduces (Pattillo et al. 2004).

1.4 The Prison Industrial Complex

Even as continued evidence accumulates documenting the ineffective, counter-productive, and socially destructive effects of mass incarceration, our prison population continues to grow at an alarming rate because the very system that is punishing those at the bottom of our social hierarchy is actually *benefiting* those at the top who are now profiting off of prisons. The expansion of the prison system has been in the direct interest of the corporate lobbying forces behind the massive prison industry, and any analysis of the growth of the prison system is incomplete without a discussion of the increasing economic motivations. Prisons have grown into large business enterprises that have become deeply entrenched in America's economic and political system. The extensive corporate investment in prisons results in a strong political backing of the expansion of the prison system. The term "Prison Industrial Complex" was coined by activists and scholars to acknowledge the extent to which the rise in prison construction has been driven by the pursuit of profit, fueled by economic and political structures and ideologies (Davis 2003). According to a report released by the U.S. Department of Justice's Bureau of Statistics, the U.S. spent a record \$185 billion for police protection, detention, judicial, and legal activities in 2003, a tripling of justice expenditures since 1982 (Alexander 2012). Over the last decade, the U.S. spent over \$7 billion annually on building new prisons alone. The expansion of economic interests practically ensures a set of institutionalized

lobbying forces that perpetuate a societal commitment to imprisonment, and the 700,000 criminal justice employees—including prison and jail guards, administrators, service workers and personnel—become a powerful political opposition to scaling down (Mauer 1999). Unionized prison guards have a large role in creating and shaping the prison industrial complex by backing anti-crime politicians and lobbying for get-tough legislation like three-strikes, along with protecting unionized correctional officers against any disciplinary procedures.

Prison expansion has also become a development strategy for many small rural towns with such extreme isolation and poverty that prisons are their only hope for economic survival. Rural communities have essentially become dependent on prisons for jobs and economic growth, especially in areas with increasing unemployment in recent years (Mauer 1999). Punishment has become such a big industry in the American countryside that according to the National Criminal Justice Commission, 5 percent of the growth in the rural population between 1980 and 1990 was accounted for by prisoners that were arrested in cities and moved to rural prisons (Parenti 2000). This phenomenon has also produced a transfer of wealth and influence from urban to rural communities, because the political reapportionment of federal and state funding relies on census data, which now counts prisoners in communities where they are imprisoned instead of their home communities (if they are even counted at all) (Mauer 1999).

Criminal justice is no longer just a marginal area of the economy, and with the increasing presence of corporations in the prison economy, there is now a growing punishment industry. Private corporations are contracted out to produce goods and services specifically for the punishment business, including buildings, electronic devices, hygiene products, food service, health care, transportation, and the list goes on. A whole

range of private companies are therefore profiting off the expansion of the prison system, ranging from phone companies that charge exorbitant rates, to gun manufacturers that sell Taser guns and rifles to prison guards and police, to private health care providers contracted by the state to provide poor-quality health care to prisoners (Alexander 2000). All of these government-backed corporations now have a stake in the expansion of the system of mass incarceration as a market venture, feeding into mutually-reinforcing corporate and political interests. Prison labor is also exploited by private and state-owned companies, a process that was legalized when the Federal Prison Industries Enhancement (PIE) Act of 1979 allowed private corporations to enter “joint venture” with state prisons (Parenti 2000). The U.S. military relies on prison labor to provide gear to soldiers, and corporations employ prison labor to avoid high wages. Most prison jobs pay only pennies per hour, and while PIE workers are technically paid minimum wage, after money is taken out for all the various “services” inmates receive in prison, they only end up receiving between 65 cents and \$1.50 an hour. While some scholars argue that this use of inmate labor is driving the prison expansion, Parenti (2000) argues that prison labor is not keeping pace with incarceration rates and is not ultimately a great source of profit, but still serves an important ideological function in making the prison look efficient, moral and useful.

Private corporations are not only entering into the punishment business through contracted services and exploited labor, but also through the privatization of prisons. Montana, Alaska, and Wyoming have turned over more than 25 percent of their prison populations to private companies, and New Mexico now imprisons 44 percent of prison population in private facilities (Parenti 2000). Federal, state and county governments pay private companies a fee for each inmate in a private prison, meaning the companies have

a stake in retaining prisoners as long as possible and keeping their facilities filled. In 2000 there were 26 for-profit prison corporations operating over 150 facilities in 28 states and holding almost 100,000 federal and state prisoners (Parenti 2000; Davis 2003). The largest of these, CCA and Wackenhut, control over three quarters of the private prison market globally. Private prisons cost taxpayers about the same amount as public, but the surplus goes directly to corporate profit instead of to the state. This means that private prisons can cut corners in order to maximize profits, often employing poorly-trained, non-unionized guards and giving prisoners limited access to services like health care and education. While for-profit lockups only control around five percent of the prison population, they make huge profits and spend amply to sway politicians and public opinion.

The huge investment of corporate interests into the prison system makes for a large lobbying force that creates political backing for the continual rise in incarceration. The Prison Industrial Complex has often been compared with the historical concept of the “Military Industrial Complex,” the alliance between the military and corporate worlds. Davis (2003) articulates this comparison:

[Both systems] generate huge profits from processes of social destruction. Precisely that which is advantageous to those corporations, elected officials, and government agents who have obvious stakes in the expansion of these systems begets grief and devastation for poor and racially dominated communities in the United States and throughout the world. The transformation of imprisoned bodies—and they are in their majority bodies of color—into sources of profit who consume and also often produce all kinds of commodities, devours public funds, which might otherwise be available for social programs such as education, housing, childcare, recreation, and drug programs (p. 88).

1.5 Institutionalized Injustice

It is clear that the our massive industry of incarceration is intimately linked to intersectional processes of “social destruction”; Sociologists have now overwhelmingly acknowledged that the penal system is not just the *product* of an underlying balance of social power, but rather an active force of its own in affecting large-scale patterns of social inequality and the distribution of societal resources (Patillo et al. 2004). Even scholars like Bobo, Thompson and Mauer who do not believe mass incarceration is *intended* to function as a system of oppression, still acknowledge the role it plays in perpetuating racial and class hierarchies. Beyond the potentially criminogenic consequences of mass incarceration, Bobo and Thompson (2006) theorize that the racialized character of incarceration threatens the legitimacy of the entire system, concluding that the “emergent social condition of mass incarceration reinscribes racial injustice into the body politic through a set of policies and practices that close scrutiny strongly suggests were unfair by design” (p. 465). By parading the stereotype of blacks as criminals in the collective consciousness of white Americans—through extensive media coverage and political sound-bites—the dominant discourse of criminal justice continues to legitimize and reinforce deeply embedded racial stereotypes that stigmatize *all* poor people of color, regardless of their criminal record. Davis (2003) points out that racism hides from view within the institutional structure of the prison system, which creates the “dominant social expectation that young black men (and increasingly women) will move naturally from the free world into prison, where, it is assumed, they belong” (p.103). The American public can thus remain apathetic toward this institutionalized injustice, because it only affects the individuals who already experience intense stigmatization for their inherent “criminality”.

As Mauer (1999) points out, “It is hard to imagine that this complacency would exist if the more than a million and a half prisoners were the sons and daughters of the white middle class. However, as the image of the criminal as an urban black male has hardened into public consciousness, so too, has support for punitive approaches to social problems been enhanced” (p. 12).

There is a disturbing irony that the system supposedly in place to secure the “public safety” now plays a crucial role in ensuring that an entire underclass of people remains caught in a cycle of unsafe and in fact profoundly destructive situations. On top of all of the direct social, political and economic consequences of mass incarceration discussed in this chapter, the prison also serves an ideological function as an abstract site where we can simply deposit those individuals that Kelling and Wilson refer to as the “undesirables” of our society, ultimately relieving us of any social responsibility to address the real issues afflicting their lives and their communities. Why is it that we continue to believe that our rights are protected by our current system of crime control, even when mass incarceration continues to deny almost two and a half million Americans access to anything even close to the dream our country supposedly represents? Why do we remain convinced that prisons are keeping our society safer, even as we have seen that increasing incarceration in no way correlates with crime rates, and possibly even perpetuates criminal involvement? Knowing that the majority of released prisoners will eventually return to prison, why do we continue to support a system of “corrections” that has a 75% failure rate? We as a society have become complacent with a system of social control creating a legalized structure of inequality unparalleled in world history. We have come a long way from the original rehabilitative aims of the penitentiary system, and we seem to be blind to the fact that the punitive approach to criminal justice that developed in the

past few decades is not only locking individual offenders *in* cells, but also locking an entire group of socially, economically and racially marginalized individuals *out* of full participation in our society. As Alexander (2012) notes, we have successfully created “America’s new undercaste”. While this continuation of social inequality is consistent with the legacy of racism and classism in our country, our current system of mass incarceration operates insidiously to legally continue structures of oppression while masking itself with the pretense of protecting the “public safety”. The question is, who are we really worried about protecting? In the same decade that corporations have gained the legal status of full American citizens, poor youth of color have been branded with the legal status of criminals.

1.6 Theories of Penal Control

It is clear that the prison system as it currently operates continues to perpetuate dramatic inequalities while doing very little to address or prevent crime, leading many social theorists to question how and why this structure of mass incarceration developed, and what social function it serves. Many current criminologists follow in the Marxist tradition of interpreting our form of punishment as a method of social control that serves to reinforce the existing economic structure. Within Marxist theory, all social organization is determined by the mode of production, and the ‘superstructure’ of political and ideological relations is built on the material economic base (Marx 1969). This mode of production consists of a division between two fundamental classes, the subordinate class of workers and the dominant class of Capitalists that exploits and profits off of the fruits of the workers’ labor. Marxism assumes that the economically dominant

class will strive to recreate class divisions through social institutions that serve to preserve and legitimize the unequal class structure. Sociologist David Garland (1993) summarizes the view of punishment in a Marxist perspective as a tool used by the ruling class to maintain its social and economic dominance over the subordinate classes in society.

One possible Marxist interpretation points to the Prison Industrial Complex as proof that punishment is functioning to reinforce economic inequality, as large corporations now directly profit off the expansion of prisons and prisoner labor is exploited in the interest of capitalist growth. Yet some scholars like Christian Parenti (2000) argue that the direct economic gain from prison labor and corporate profit is not substantial enough to account for the dramatic acceleration in incarceration, especially considering that incarceration is also extremely expensive. Even if direct profit cannot fully explain the growth of the prison system, it may have risen out of economic needs. Many theorists argue that our approach to penal management has paralleled changes in our economic structure. Rusche and Kirchheimer suggest (in Garland 1993) that in periods when there is an abundant supply of labor, “penal policy can afford to be reckless with human lives,” but when the demand for labor threatens to exceed supply, the state and its penal institutions are “less ready to dispense with the valuable resources which their captives represent, and more likely to put offenders to work in some way or another” (p. 93). The recent rise in incarceration in the U.S. could be understood in this Marxist lens as due to the changing economic conditions in an increasingly post-industrial society that has less need for laborers and can therefore “afford to be reckless” with punishment. Indeed, Angela Davis (2003) argues that the prison-building project began in the 1980s as a means of “concentrating and managing what the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be a human surplus”. Michelle Alexander (2012) suggests that the current

system of punishment is no longer designed to exploit black labor like previous methods of control in American history, but rather to warehouse this population deemed disposable and unnecessary to the functioning of the new global economy.

A less reductionist Marxist account of criminal law and punishment locates penalty not only in economic terms, but also within ideological and political methods of social control. In this light the penal institution could be interpreted as a state-controlled apparatus of repression and ideology, a legal articulation of the legitimacy of state power and violence, or a method of working with other social policies to police and “manage” the poor. French Sociologist Loic Wacquant argues that the American prison serves all of these purposes. According to Wacquant (2009), the criminal justice system in the U.S. is rooted in neoliberal politics of “free market” ideology of “individual responsibility” which lead to punitive and proactive law-enforcement policies targeting marginalized populations, street delinquency, and specifically the “black ghetto.” In this system the poor are essentially treated as criminals for their “violation” of the civic law of wage work, and the “dark ghetto” becomes stigmatized as the deviant area containing the immoral and welfare-dependent “underclass” that needs to be highly policed and systematically incarcerated, possibly explaining the rise of the “broken windows” approach.

The prison alongside the ghetto becomes a system of forced confinement that marginalizes communities of color from mainstream economic life, for the “fusion of ghetto and prison culture” serves the political purpose of depriving poor people of color of the leverage to organize and protest. It follows that the welfare state has been replaced by a police and penal state that criminalizes already marginalized communities by reorganizing social services into an instrument of punishment and surveillance. Wacquant argues that the prison system was designed *intentionally* to perpetuate the aims of structural

domination, for mass imprisonment was the last of four historical stages in an evolving project to control and exploit African Americans, a project that began before the founding of the U.S. In Wacquant's view, it is no accident that prisoners come largely from working class families of color in segregated cities, for the explicit purpose of incarceration is "to regulate, if not to perpetuate, poverty and to warehouse the human rejects of the market" (2009:70). Parenti (2000) agrees that the prison system is an intentional structure of class control, containing and controlling those who violate class-based laws. It also produces a dependence on the state that is preferable to the welfare model because it "absorbs the dangerous classes without politically or economically empowering them", while simultaneously reproducing racism in a coded and ideologically palatable fashion (p. 241)

Michelle Alexander (2012) argues that mass incarceration has effectively maintained a racial caste system in America, serving as a comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in essentially the same manner as Jim Crow, even as rationalizations for racial exclusion have changed. Alexander (2012) argues that our current system of criminal justice allows for the legalized discrimination of African Americans in nearly all the same ways it was once legal to discriminate, but now under the veil of protecting "justice" and "safety". She suggests that "criminals" are controlled both in and out of prison "through a web of laws, regulations, and informal rules, all of which are powerfully reinforced by social stigma," and that they are ultimately "confined to the margins of mainstream society and denied access to the mainstream economy...much as African Americans were once forced into a segregated, second-class citizenship in the Jim Crow era" (p. 4).

Alexander, Davis, Collins, Rusche and Kirccheimer, Wacquant and Parenti all argue that our current prison system is operating primarily as a method of intentional social control, using racist and classist ideology to naturalize the “criminality” of lower-class communities of color and keep them out of full political, social and economic participation in society. It is unclear whether this is a *failure* of our system of punishment, or whether this system was actually designed with the *intention* of maintaining this type of exploitation as the previous theorists argue. While Bobo and Thompson do not agree with the theory that the prison system was designed intentionally as a system of oppression, they do conclude that the American penal system has inequality built into its very operation, arguing that differential racial involvement in the criminal justice system is primarily due to differential exposure to structural conditions of extreme poverty, racial segregation, changed law enforcement priorities, and the modern legacies of racial oppression. Mauer similarly suggests that it is not a “conspiratorial assault on minority communities” that has produced the current criminal justice system, but rather policy decisions that have disinvested in communities and chosen reactive punitive responses to systemic social problems instead of pro-active and constructive solutions (1999).

The functionalist tradition posits that systems of punishment are not formed out of a hierarchical power structure, but rather are the result of widely shared moral values and sensibilities. Durkheim argues that punishment comes out of the ‘collective conscience’—the totality of commonly held beliefs in a society—and serves to both express and regenerate society’s values, producing solidarity by reinforcing the moral bonds that allow for social cohesion (Garland 1999). Punitive response, according to Durkheim (1984), comes not from an overarching system of control, but rather from a public reaction to the violation of their deeply ingrained moral code. Punishment is therefore not aimed at

reforming individual criminals, but rather reaffirming norms in the larger social consciousness and serving a public moralizing function.

While Durkheim shares the Marxist theory that our system of punishment serves to reproduce the societal order, he *praises* this system as a functional and necessary method of maintaining the moral cohesion of society instead of criticizing it as a system of domination or class oppression. In this sense “control” and “liberation” are not opposed in functionalism, but rather intimately linked, for a certain structure of societal control is in fact *necessary* to enable individual freedom. Individuals must be socialized into a particular culture and a particular set of social and moral values in order to ensure the organized functioning of society and prevent the chaos of *anomie*, which Durkheim believes arises from a mismatch of personal standards and wider social standards. A shared social environment is required not only as protection against the suffering from egoism and *anomie*, but also in order to maintain a democratic society and to ensure individual rights and liberties.

If Durkheim is correct in viewing the prison system as merely a functional tool used to reaffirm the public moral order, the recent rise in rates of incarceration would seemingly be a response to the insufficiency of our current social norms or a lack of unified morality. According to Durkheim, it is possible that the decline of stable wage work and the removal of social services produced a state of social insecurity, which led to the collective desire for an extreme punitive reaction. Useem and Piehl (2008) adopt a theory of crisis mobilization to explain the large shift in the American public’s position on criminal punishment, and argue that the prison buildup was a failed attempt to achieve crime reduction and restore a sense of social order. Indeed, Durkheim (1984) suggests that high levels of criminality imply a certain moral corrosion, and therefore result in high

levels of increasingly ineffective punishment. Instead of expanding repressive measures, Durkheim suggests that we should “re-activate mainstream processes of social integration and control” (Garland 1999:31).

Yet Durkheim does not address the possibility that increasing punishment might *not* come from increasing crime or even any real increase in threat to the social order, but rather from political ideology and social institutions that create the public *perception* of threat. Durkheim’s functionalist perspective may actually be contributing to the growth of the prison system by instilling a sense that increasing punishment is in the best interest of the public and is an adequate way to respond to societal failures, when in reality it is evident that our system of mass incarceration is *not* in the common interest and is only reaffirming norms of racism and classism. Rusche and Kirchheimer (2009) argue that while the real function of punishment is to support the interests of one class against another, there is a process of “ideological distortion” that creates the perception of punishment as a functional institution that benefits society as a whole. In this way punishment is not actually a social response to the criminality of individuals as Durkheim suggests, but rather a mechanism of social domination.

Foucault argues that the very policing of social norms that the functionalists praise is actually the root of the problem. He theorizes that the rise of the prison created the category of the “delinquent” for those who deviate from the norm, ultimately producing a well-defined and tracked delinquent class as a strategy of political domination that divided working classes against themselves and contributed to the authority and power of the state. In this way the creation of the “normal” allows for the hierarchal differentiation of individuals according to their conformity to an accepted norm, and “normalization becomes one of the great instruments of power” (Foucault 1977:196).

This implies a very different conception of agency than Marx, for power does not exist as the property of particular classes or individuals who ‘have’ or ‘use’ it, but rather refers to an apparatus which “functions like a piece of machinery” and “sustains itself by its own mechanism” (Foucault 1977:192-3). In Foucault’s perspective, ‘discipline’ is not merely identified with one institution or one apparatus, but is an amorphous type of power that can be applied in a variety of settings. Foucault also argues that this normalizing gaze also extends beyond penal institutions into other social structures, including schools, hospitals, military organizations, and industrial processes. The development of similar disciplinary techniques in all social institutions and the frequent transfers from one to another lead Foucault to a conception of the “carceral continuum,” which stresses the link between institutions that identify deviance through departures from relevant norms. The process of punishment is therefore not essentially different from that of education, for the same overarching mechanism of power structures the disciplinary framework of both schools and prisons (Foucault 1977; Garland 1993).

In the next chapter I explore the way schools have grown to resemble prisons both materially and ideologically, illustrating Foucault’s concept of the “carceral continuum” as policy reform in educational and penal management has brought the systems closer than ever. I compare the political history of education to that of incarceration, exploring the validity of these theories of social control. I argue that both institutions not only serve a Marxist function of reproducing economic inequality, but also perpetuate hegemonic norms of racist and classist oppression under the functionalist pretense of protecting the “public safety”, blinding us from our social responsibility to address the real issues facing those at the bottom of our social hierarchy.

Chapter Two

Kicked Out and Locked Up: When Students Become Prisoners

“Our schools are being victimized, our children’s futures as participants in a democratic society literally *looted* by political leadership that privileges corporate interests at the expense of neighborhoods, families, and children. And schools have also become instruments of punishment themselves, as the criminalization of youth and difference, the mass-mediated amplification of some citizen fears and the muting of others, and a zero tolerance approach to difference and conflict increasingly erode the conceptual and material distance between the prison and the school” - William Lyons and Julie Drew

While the current practice of mass incarceration stands alone as an important crisis facing this country, it is also reflective of an overall societal shift to a culture of punitive social control that has worked its way into many other sectors of civic life as well, most notably our educational institutions. Indeed, aggressive punitive approaches to punishment have essentially become the norm in impoverished urban public schools across the country, specifically in schools located in low-income communities with high minority populations; these same trends do not seem to apply to wealthy, predominantly white suburban schools, revealing the targeted impact of these policy changes. This new regime of school discipline has injected both a criminal justice philosophy and structural apparatus into the classroom. The physical presence of police officers dotting the educational landscape represents a direct manifestation of criminal justice discipline. A similar yet more covert manifestation is the application of law-and-order approaches to classroom management. Taken together, these disciplinary models mirror and reproduce patterns of punitive social control, forging an intimate link between the criminal justice and educational systems. This begs the question: where do schools end and prisons begin?

2.1 The Rise of “Zero Tolerance”

While public schools have arguably served as institutions of social control and regulation in the United States from the beginning, approaches to education have changed significantly over time, paralleling the changing social and economic conditions in this country. As Bowles and Gintis and other Marxist scholars argue, schools have always functioned to ensure that we are producing the skills and training necessary for our economic structure and growth. Looking back, public schools first spread throughout the U.S. as a response to the perceived crisis of immigrants in the late 19th century and an attempt to “Americanize” lower-class and immigrant youth (Kupchik 2010:23). As we moved into the industrial age, schools adopted a bureaucratic organization with standardized curricula and administrative supervision, teaching the logic of an urban industrial society by training students in punctuality, efficiency, silence and precision to prepare them for future factory work. As we continued to modernize, our economic development produced a growing necessity for both schools and prisons to “preserve social cohesion by preparing the so-called dangerous classes to be productive members of what was then a growing labor market” (Nolan 2011:84). While individuals received a different quality of education based on their social positions, schools seemed to be following an overall path towards more inclusive education moving into the 1960s, with increasing racial desegregation, bilingual education and expanding college admissions. At the same time, prisons were used much more discriminately, with a larger emphasis on drug treatment, job training and even a growing system of prison education. Garland refers to this attitude towards social institutions as “penal-welfarism,” a paradigm recognizing criminals as economically and socially disadvantaged and emphasizing

individual treatment, social welfare and reintegration into society (2001). Yet within a decade, this attitude towards rehabilitation and inclusion began to lose ground with the introduction of a new zero-tolerance paradigm in both education and criminal justice.

This shift towards a culture of control followed a changing political and economic climate in the United States. As the New Deal political order weakened, politicians found a new opportunity to capitalize on public fear to gain support for anti-crime policy. As traditional industry and labor became increasingly replaced by a logic of global capital emphasizing labor outsourcing, decentralization and technological advancement, those at the bottom of our social ladder were no longer seen as economically valuable, possibly explaining the exclusionary school discipline regime and use of mass incarceration.

Along with the function schools play in reinforcing the economic order, Kupchik argues that schools often serve reactionary functions in times of societal conflict to manage the social order (2010). This provides another possible explanation of the current use of schools as a response to the perceived crisis of the past couple decades due to public anxieties around racial conflicts, fear of crime and youth violence. In many ways, this crisis-mentality seems largely unfounded, for crime has not in fact increased significantly, and while urban youth are perceived as overly violent, sexual and immoral, they are in reality using fewer drugs, drinking less and having less sex than a generation ago (Kupchik 2010). Still, much of the anxiety around our public education may come from very real challenges currently facing our country, including the erosion of our welfare system, elimination of industrial labor jobs, a growing gap between the rich and poor, reductions in public benefits, a growth in the number of mothers in the workforce and the average workweek, and an overall decline in the standard of living of the poor (Kupchik 2010). This puts schools under pressure to provide not only an education, but also social

services, supervision and in some cases a form of parenting. Yet instead of embracing a more supportive structure of schooling or seeking to improve other social services that could benefit struggling families and communities, the response to this crisis has settled into a profoundly punitive approach that blames and punishes urban youth, despite the fact that they have no control over society's disinvestment in their education and social services.

The rise of punitive school discipline and targeted policing of youth has clearly mirrored the rise in "tough on crime" policies, and the same ideological forces shaping the change in crime-control also influenced the direction of national educational reform. In the mid 1990s "zero-tolerance" school discipline was first instituted after increasing rates of youth gun violence in urban areas as well as isolated school shootings in predominantly white suburban schools. "Zero tolerance" is itself a term appropriated from the criminal justice system, and refers to the federally mandated aggressive stance on drugs and violence in schools that calls for police intervention and swift and harsh punishment for all violators, even first-time offenders of minor school infractions. The philosophy of zero tolerance assumes that there is no harm in responding aggressively, only a danger in not responding harshly enough. Along with the adoption of the "tough on crime" philosophy from the criminal justice system, the specific strategies used to implement punishment in schools were nearly identical to those that drove the expansion of the adult prison system. The imposition of mandatory punishments and expulsions for a wide range of student actions regardless of circumstances mirrors mandatory minimum sentencing laws, and many states now have various forms of the "three strikes" law as well. Colorado, for example, legally requires teachers to permanently remove students from classroom if they are disruptive three times in a year, along with a law mandating

expulsion if a student is suspended three times (Advancement Project 2010). Intensified punitive discipline became common in schools after Congress passed the “Safe Schools Act” in 1994 requiring public schools to expel for at least one year any student bringing a weapon to school or risk losing federal funding. Since then many schools voluntarily expanded this exclusionary approach to include non-violent and non-criminal behaviors as well, including defiance of authority, vandalism of school property, or excessive absences. In this way the “broken windows” theory has trickled into school policy as well, as many school districts now punish severely even minor and trivial actions. In Detroit Public Schools, activity like “insubordination,” talking or making noise in class, and public displays of affection can result in out-of-school suspension of up to 20 days and removal from the school entirely. Some places in Florida and Ohio have laws that make classroom disruptions a criminal offense, and require infractions to be reported to law enforcement officials (Advancement Project 2010). Supporters of this “tough on crime” mentality praise zero-tolerance policies as appropriately strict and equally applied, arguing that any individual should receive the same punishment for any violation of a rule, without regard to the specific context, the intentions, the seriousness, the age of the individual, or any other extenuating circumstances. Yet critics point out that this approach not only ignores the underlying motivations for misbehaviors, but also in practice does not end up being enforced equally among different demographics of students.

Zero tolerance disciplinary practices in urban public schools now bear a striking similarity to the strategies used to punish adults in society, relying on exclusion or ostracism as standard forms of punishment to retain the “safety and order” (Noguera 2003). As a result, the schools serving the most academically unsuccessful students end up

operating like prisons themselves, relying on guards and surveillance cameras to monitor and control students. The use of security apparatuses such as metal detectors, scanners and cameras have become a part of normal daily routines, and the physical structure of many schools have taken on prison characteristics as well (Nolan 2011). Along with security infrastructure, many schools are now devoting huge portions of their budgets to employ law enforcement personnel. Police departments are now solely in charge of security and discipline in many urban public schools, giving police officers and safety agents a great deal of authority and influence over daily life in schools. This allows officers to set the tone for school punishment, incorporating prison language into disciplinary rhetoric and everyday discourse of educators as they “pick up” students in hallways and have them “do time” in detention rooms. School resource officers (SROs) heavily police school hallways, confronting students for even small violations that would previously have been handled internally by school disciplinarians, like taking too long to get to class, shouting or wearing hats (Nolan 2011). Aggressive policing practices prevail over all other responses to disorder, and once officers get involved in any kind of infraction, school staff have to defer punishment to the criminal justice representatives as a “police matter”. The use of police force in schools raises legal tensions as well, as school disciplinarians and police officers typically have different standards when questioning students about crime or searching students and their property (Kupchik 2010). Police are generally held to higher standards of proof and need “probable cause” before searching, and yet when they enter schools they seem to adopt the more intrusive school disciplinary approaches that allow for questioning and searching students without any kind of warrant. Along with frequent hallway stops, students are subjected to routine strip-searches and drug-sniffing police dogs, and police still maintain the legal authority to summon students to court for what is

found in these semi-ethical searches. The partnership of the criminal justice system with school discipline risks jeopardizing students' legal rights, resulting in suspensions and expulsions without the same standards of due process that would be necessary on the street.

2.2 The School-to-Prison Pipeline

The forced interaction of students with police officers in their own classrooms and hallways leads to the well-documented phenomenon of the “school-to-prison pipeline” whereby students are channeled from one institution directly into the other. Police now intervene even in relatively harmless school infractions, resulting in the eventual arrests of students whose crimes would otherwise be too minor to even warrant police action. Students are often summoned to court for incidents that originally begin with breaking a minor school rule, like cutting class or being disruptive, and only escalate to behavior called “insubordination” or “disrespect” *after* students are confronted by law enforcement officials (Nolan 2011). In some cases the police intervention itself triggers this “criminal” behavior, leading to court summons for “disorderly conduct” and other equally vague disruptions. For a large percentage of current school-based arrests, it is inconceivable that the student would have been arrested if not for the close relationship between school staff and law enforcement personnel (Advancement Project 2010).

Most students do not actually take a direct path from school to prison after one run-in with the law as the “pipeline” model might suggest, but rather get arrested after a series of continual interactions with the criminal justice system (Nolan 2011). Students are “subjected to heavy policing in various domains of their lives,” both inside and

outside of schools (p. 15). As they accumulate court summonses for minor violations and school misbehavior, many students end up missing court appearances and ultimately gain warrants for their arrest. If they are then involved in even low-level criminal activity on the street, the fact that they missed court in school summons can lead to time in jail (Nolan 2011). It is clear that the entanglement of the criminal justice system in school discipline has vastly increased the flow of students from classrooms to prison cells, likely contributing to the rise in incarceration.

Statistics on the impact of school punishment are no more promising than those on our prison system, with very little correlation between increasingly punitive punishments and frequency of misbehavior. According to the Justice Policy Institute report in 2001, school suspensions and expulsions nearly doubled between 1974 and 1998 with no change in rates of student victimization. The U.S. Department of Education projected that 250,000 more students were suspended out-of-school in the 2006-7 school year than in 2002-3 (Kupchik 2010). In Pennsylvania the number of school-based arrests almost tripled in 7 years, and in Chicago Public Schools the number of district-wide out-of-school suspensions nearly quadrupled in 6 years under the leadership of then-Chief Executive Officer and current U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan (Advancement Project). In Milwaukee public schools nearly 40 percent of 9th graders were suspended in the 2006-7 school year alone (Kupchik 2010). In Florida there were over 21,000 arrests and referrals of students to the Department of Juvenile Justice in the 2007-8 school year, and over two-thirds of these were for misdemeanor offenses (Advancement Project 2010). This nationwide increase in exclusionary punishment helps explain the growth in the juvenile prison population that followed about a decade after the adult prison population began its climb. While this has been attributed in part to the growing youth gun violence

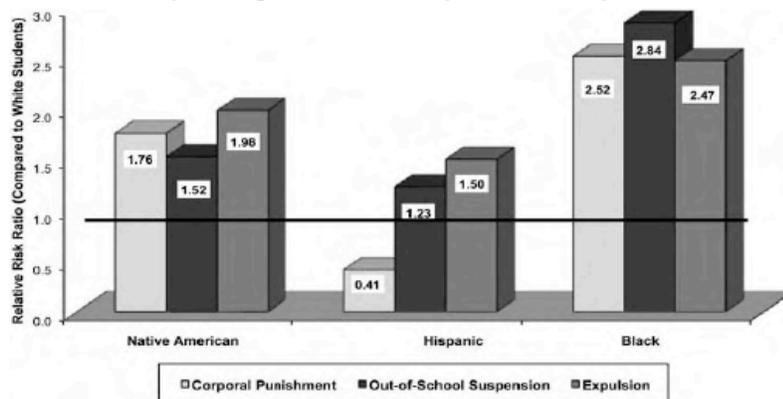
beginning in the 1980s, in reality youth gun violence rates have remained level since their peak in the early 1990s, while nonviolent youth incarcerations have continued to rise dramatically (Nolan 2011). The great majority of youth are in custody for non-violent behavior as opposed to more serious incidents, paralleling similar patterns in increasing arrests for low-level adult crimes on the street. In fact, while the political and social rhetoric of “tough on crime” speaks to growing violence and danger inside schools, school crime has actually been declining over the past two decades. From 1997 to 2005 the rate of crime against students dropped from 144 incidents per 1000 students to 57 incidents (Kupchik 2010). Furthermore, students are much more likely to be affected by violent crimes *outside* of school than inside. Yet even as crime seems to be decreasing, students are increasingly monitored, controlled and punished. The National Center for Education Statistics recorded that in the 2005-6 school year almost 70% of public high schools used security cameras to monitor schools, while six years earlier only 26% of public high schools had cameras (Kupchik 2010). During the 2005-6 school year 41% of middle schools and 61% of high schools also used drug-sniffing dogs at least once. It seems that what has changed in the past few decades is not the frequency or severity of youth crime, but rather the retributive attitude towards urban youth both inside and outside of schools.

2.3 Unequal Punishment

This link between schools and prisons may help explain recent trends in incarceration, as those most frequently and severely targeted for punishment in school are often part of the same demographic (in terms of race, gender, and socioeconomic status) as those adults most likely to be targeted for incarceration (Noguera 2003). Extensive

prior research has demonstrated that school punishments are not evenly distributed throughout student bodies, and schools most frequently punish those with the greatest academic, social, economic and emotional needs (Noguera 2003; Johnson, Boyden, & Pittz 2001). Minorities, males and generally low-achievers are more likely to be suspended or removed from the classroom for punishment in most school districts, and of those receiving severe punishments there is a disproportionate representation of students with learning disabilities, students in foster care or under protective custody, and students who are homeless or on free or reduced-price lunch (Noguera 2003; Meier, Steward, & England 1989). Low-income students and youth of color are far more likely than middle-class and white youth to be punished in school: black students are twice as likely to be suspended as white students, and being poor increases the probability of suspension independent of race as well (Kupchik 2010). The graph below, taken from a study by the American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force (2008), depicts the relative risks of students of different races experiencing school discipline in 2002.

Figure 2
Relative Risk Ratios of Students Experiencing Select School Discipline Indicators by Race: 2002–2003 School Year



Note. Data are national estimates from the U.S. Department of Education (2004), Office for Civil Rights 2002–2003 Elementary and Secondary School Survey. The relative risk ratio is the ratio of the target group’s risk index (percentage of group subject to the consequence) compared with the risk index on the same measure for White students. A risk ratio of 1.00 indicates exact proportionality (solid line). Ratios above 1.00 indicate overrepresentation in the selected indicator, whereas ratios under 1.00 indicate underrepresentation in that indicator.

“Relative Risk Ratios” (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force 2008)

Compared to white students, black students are shown to be almost three times as likely to be suspended, while Hispanic and Native American students are almost twice as likely to be expelled (American Psychological Association 2008). The increasingly harsh disciplinary regime sweeping through schools has merely exacerbated this inequality in punishment, as the students who are already at high risk for suspension, expulsion, arrest, school failure and dropping out face a heightened risk of punitive harm. Current practices further exclude these “at-risk” populations from school instead of addressing the reasons they are most likely to be punished. Discriminatory school discipline is magnified by tougher crime-control laws outside of schools that have been specifically aimed to “manage” urban youth of color through the broken-windows aggressive street policing, strict curfews, anti-gang loitering ordinances, and increased police sweeps near schools (Nolan 2011:26). Youth of color are stopped and frisked by police far more often than white youth without much suspicion, and youth of color are more likely to do time for the same offenses, to remain in the system longer, and to be waived to adult court and ultimately sent to adult prisons.

There are a variety of theories on why poor students of color are most likely to be punished in the first place, largely stemming from unequal treatment on both individual and systemic levels. For one, the highly segregated nature of our public school system has contributed to a well-documented correlation between socioeconomic status and academic achievement, largely due to systems of sorting and tracking, and highly segregated neighborhoods that lead to “high concentrations of the most structurally marginalized and academically alienated students in particular schools” (Nolan 2011:28). The most economically disadvantaged students are concentrated in schools that tend to also adopt the culture of control of the criminal justice system. The most highly policed

schools not only include the most impoverished populations, but also have disproportionately high numbers of students with poor academic records, special needs, disciplinary records, and formerly incarcerated students (Nolan 2011). Public perception towards these schools, based largely on stereotypes and prejudice, demands tight police control due to their bad reputations, and yet they are also the most poorly funded and offer the fewest college-preparatory classes. Schools with large populations of students of color also tend to rely more on exclusionary discipline than predominantly white schools, and the same behaviors which trigger little to no response in white communities can prompt severe, lifelong consequences in communities of color (Advancement Project 2010).

Along with class and race-based segregation of entire schools, most research also suggests that there is unfair targeting within school discipline, likely due to a “systemic and prevalent bias” that causes teachers and staff to perceive the behavior of students of color as more threatening, disrespectful and inappropriate compared to white students’ behavior (Kupchik 2010). Investigations of student behavior, race and discipline show no evidence that the over-representation of students of color in suspension cases is due to higher rates of misbehavior; rather, studies show that students of color are punished more severely for more subjective and less serious infractions (Advancement Project 2010). Even if one were to defend disproportionate punishment by claiming that these students misbehave more, this logic absolves public schools of their responsibility to understand and address student behavior as a school community, as opposed to accepting essentialist assumptions of racial and class differences in achievement and behavior.

Indeed, it is often the failure of schools to meet students’ needs and provide a quality education that prompts misbehavior. The students who begin violating the rules

are generally those who know that they are not receiving the benefits and rewards of education—acquisition of knowledge and skills, admission to college, and ultimately access to good paying jobs—and therefore have little incentive to comply with school rules or even to comply with the law (Noguera 2003). While some scholars argue that oppositional behavior is a sign of a wholesale rejection of school or a form of political resistance to be celebrated, Nolan argues that it is more likely a response to a deep sense of economic and educational exclusion and penal management. Through ethnographic research with 33 students in a public school in the Bronx, Nolan found that students’ rationales for noncompliance were often a way of maintaining their dignity in the face of exclusion, and came with an assertion of self and indignation. In fact, there are a variety of reasons that students might be disruptive in class, including difficulty understanding course material, desire to draw positive peer attention and distract attention from personal academic struggles, or even just to avoid participation in class (Kupchik 2010). When students fall behind academically or are unable to meet their grade-level expectations, they often engage in disruptive behavior, most likely out of frustration or embarrassment. Children who experience abuse, neglect or peer harassment are more likely to act out in school (Noguera 2003). Misbehavior can also come from alienating classroom experiences, which can lead to a flow of students out of classrooms into the hallways and a perceived “need” for policing these “out of control” students. Unfortunately, the current approach to school discipline makes little attempt to address these personal or academic issues, but rather uses enforcement and punishment as ends unto themselves instead of exploring *why* students are misbehaving in the first place. This strategy contributes to the marginalization of the students who need the most support, often pushing them out of school altogether and ignoring the issues underlying

problematic behavior. Much like the punitive approach to criminal justice outside of schools, the root of the problem is ignored in the singular goal of prescribing punishment through proscribing misbehavior.

2.4 Not My Child Left Behind: Education Reform

Students' disengagement with their school curriculum may also be due to changing approaches to educational reform. The rising culture of control permeated schools not only in disciplinary practices, but also broader academic policy. National education reform was influenced by the same neoliberal corporate ideology of privatization and productivity that spurred the prison industrial complex (Nolan 2011), resulting in an increased emphasis on outcomes and greater school "accountability" in the form of standardized, state-mandated examinations. The equivalent to the "War on Drugs" in public education was arguably the crackdown on so-called "failing schools" following the 1983 publication of "A Nation at Risk" by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, a report that claimed America's future as an economic power was at risk unless our public education system was overhauled (Advancement Project 2010). While many scholars disagreed with this broad denouncement of public education, it sparked increasing focus on raising academic standards in schools, and led to the adoption of standardized high-stakes testing as the sole measure of achievement. The infamous "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) strategy implemented by George W. Bush in 2001 is a perfect representation of the ideology of punitive crime-control entering schools, for the rhetoric of NCLB places the blame on those with the weakest performance in the attempt to hold poor urban schools and communities "accountable" for their success

(Nolan 2011). Bush's education reform was both a product of the "zero tolerance" movement and a catalyst for its growth, and since NCLB the use of high-stakes tests and the severity of consequences based around test-scores have risen dramatically as policy-makers began using these results punitively against both students and educators (Advancement Project 2010). Just as students are being punished for poor performance without any additional support, entire schools now face punitive punishments and the threat of closure if they continue to produce poor results, despite the fact that they are often not given the resources necessary to improve their functioning. High-stakes testing encourages educators to focus on getting as many students as possible to "proficiency," instead of working with every child to reach their full potential. With the increasing consequences attached to test-scores, if a student acts up in class it is easier and more "efficient" to remove that child from the class through punitive discipline and focus on the remaining students. It is no longer in the educator's self-interest to address that child's unmet needs or to use the incident as a "teachable moment". Schools experience political pressure to "push out" underachieving students to boost test scores, and it has become common practice for schools to manipulate scores with strategies like withdrawing students from attendance roles, assigning students to alternative schools, coercing students to drop out or enroll in GED programs, or suspending and expelling poor-performing students. While ensuring a quality education for all is an admirable goal, in practice "No Child Left Behind" has done almost the exact opposite, punishing and pushing out poor-performing students, ironically leaving many children "behind". The zero tolerance paradigm sends the message that education is not for everyone, but just for those who "deserve" it (Advancement Project 2010).

While more high-stakes standardized tests are being used now than ever before, they have not been proven effective at improving overall achievement or closing the achievement gap between white students and students of color. In fact, there is a long record of research associating high-stakes exit exams with decreased graduation rates and increased dropout rates. Results from tests are often used to retain students in a grade, which is one of the largest predictors of student dropout (Advancement Project 2010). Along with reducing opportunities for students who score poorly and creating political pressure to push out these students, the current educational paradigm of high-stakes testing has also affected the quality of education and student experience in schools throughout the country. The formulaic, test-driven reforms produce tougher control over the official curriculum content and more teacher-centered instruction while undermining the importance of multicultural and relevant teaching. The more pressure is put on schools to perform, the more schools begin to look like test-prep factories, resorting to mindless drilling and rote memorization. It is no wonder that students become disengaged or disillusioned with school when their most recent test scores define their academic and personal worth, and they are subjected to narrow curriculae. Not only is this approach to education driving teachers out of the profession and students out of school, it is also neglecting to help students and teachers alike develop democratic agency and critical thought.

2.5 The Failure of Zero Tolerance

The combination of high-stakes testing and zero-tolerance discipline has transformed schools across the nation into hostile and alienating environments for students, treating the very children and communities they serve as disposable populations. While zero tolerance discipline treats students as threats to be suppressed or discarded, high-stakes testing treats them as products to be tested and measured. Together, these policies intertwine to force educators to focus on a narrow set of goals and exclude the students who are the most challenging to teach (Advancement Project 2010). Mirroring our societal approach to crime, there is an implicit assumption that safety and order comes from removing the “bad” individuals in order to protect the “good” law-abiding ones (Noguera 2003). When test scores rise for some children, policymakers can claim success while ignoring the broader damage caused by the process. As the rise in punitive discipline coincided with No Child Left Behind and other test-driven policies, these strategies became mutually reinforcing and served to push huge numbers of students out of schools and send them along the pipeline to prison in the name of “protecting our children”. This dynamic has resulted in more students enrolling in special education programs, more students retained and held back, more high school dropouts taking the GED, declining teacher and student morale, and ultimately plummeting graduation rates (Advancement Project 2010). Much like our societal system of “corrections,” there is actually very little attempt to “correct” any type of student misbehavior, as students are suspended or expelled based on specific incidents without any context (Kupchik 2010). The cyclical pattern of punishment in schools mirrors the same phenomenon happening to those entangled with the prison system—once the perpetrator “serves their time”, they

continue to be punished with a host of stigmas and obstacles as byproducts of their punishment. By removing students from classes while ignoring the underlying academic, social or emotional issues, these students merely fall even further behind. Instead of providing support and counseling to open up new opportunities for success or to create a more inclusive structure, we push out any students who are not succeeding within the current system. Students who are suspended or expelled are also more likely to drop out of school altogether, reducing their employment opportunities later in life. The United States school system is now graduating less than 70% of its youth population, and school drop-outs are more than 8 times as likely to be incarcerated as high school graduates. The graduation rates for Black and Latino students have dropped significantly since NCLB, landing at 51% and 55% respectively (Advancement Project). Graduation rates in the 100 largest school districts in the country—mostly large, urban districts that serve 40% of the nation’s Black, Latino, and Native American students—were improving up until NCLB, but have since declined (Advancement Project 2003). From 1996 to 2002, 68 of 100 districts experienced rising graduation rates, but after NCLB, 73 of 100 experienced declining graduation rates from 2002 to 2006. Seventeen of these districts experienced at least a double-digit drop in their graduation rate. As Michelle Fine notes in her book *Framing Dropouts*, this push-out system produces a “layering of social inequality,” as “youths who begin their lives at the greatest risk of class, racial or ethnic, and gender exploitation attend the most traumatized schools and receive the most impoverished educations. They are most likely to exit prior to graduation, and they are least likely to reenter within two years. To worsen their stories, their *relative* economic disadvantage as dropouts is today substantially greater than it was in the past” (Fine 1991:24).

Our current system of discipline further marginalizes the students who already face the most serious social, economic and academic disadvantages, and they are often the students who continually experience institutionalized discrimination. The overrepresentation of students of color in disciplinary cases combined with the increasing use of exclusionary punishment serves to widen the racial achievement gap (Nolan 2011). This further contributes to the type of labeling and stigmatization discussed in the previous chapter, as low-income students of color come to be viewed by their own teachers and classmates as inherently “criminal”. Nolan argues that marginalized students are now facing more serious repercussions for oppositional behavior in school, because “when they misbehave, they participate in the production of themselves as a criminalized class” (2011:37). When students have repeated negative experiences in school at a young age, they begin to recognize that their education is not working for them. It becomes clear that schools do not provide them the same types of social access and rewards as other students, and they are therefore more likely to internalize their negative labels and act out to match the expectations that have been set for them (Noguera 2003; Johnson et al. 2001). As students become accustomed to daily interactions with law enforcement and find few relevant educational experiences or viable job prospects, Nolan suggests they may themselves begin to “embrace criminalized identities as it becomes more and more difficult for them to change their life courses” (Nolan). Extensive research has shown that exclusionary labeling practices can create a self-fulfilling prophecy and result in a cycle of negative interactions and school behaviors, a cycle that is not easily broken (Noguera 2003).

The standardization of zero tolerance policies as the norm of discipline in the United States has clearly come more out of political capitalization on public anxieties

than it has from documented evidence or social science research on the actual impact of the enactment of this “tough-on-crime” school discipline. Along with putting “at-risk” students at even greater risk of expulsion and incarceration, zero tolerance school discipline has been shown to have other negative affects on school communities. The zero tolerance culture undermines the problem-solving efforts of teachers, parents and administrators, displacing democratic cooperation or compromise with punitive punishment (Advancement Project 2010). It makes no effort to empower students to learn how to resolve conflicts for themselves constructively, and gives students no model for how to effectively deal with conflicts that arise outside of school in their homes or communities. This regime of discipline discourages critical thought about power relations, rewarding the students who accept authority passively and uncritically (Kupchik 2010). In this way students come to believe that their own voice does not matter, and that they are powerless to change their school environment or challenge how they are treated. This further socializes students to expect and tolerate similar patterns outside of school, essentially normalizing the invasive security practices and police interactions predicated on the same value of assumed passivity to structures of power. For students who do not submit to the passive obedience to authority, rigid discipline can also become alienating and serve to create adversarial relations between students and faculty, along with possible psychological harm to students from intrusive and stigmatizing disciplinary actions. In this way zero tolerance policies may actually worsen student misbehavior, because students often rebel against the punitive disciplinary policies they perceive to be unfair (Kupchik 2010). While zero tolerance policing assumes that removing misbehaving students will deter their behaviors and allow others to continue learning in a safer environment, in reality studies have suggested that tougher rules, more suspensions and

increased security have little or no effect on student crime and misbehavior (Kupchik 2010). A review published by a task force of the American Psychological Association (2008) evaluating the impact of zero-tolerance school discipline found that these policies had not improved school safety at all, and schools are not any safer or more effective in disciplining students than before zero-tolerance was implemented. Furthermore, the American Civil Liberties Union (2008) argues that zero tolerance policies are a violation of human rights in four different areas: the right to be free from discrimination, the right to education, the right to proportionality in punishment, and the right to freedom of expression.

Kupchik suggests that the ineffectiveness of zero tolerance policing comes from the perception of students that the punishments they face are not fair. Most consistent findings in social science research on why students follow school rules (and why people obey laws in general) is that they believe these rules are fair, well-communicated, evenly applied, and result in fair outcomes (Kupchik 2010). The inconsistent enforcement of overly harsh punishments in school without any room for students' perspectives in shaping school rules or demanding explanations for how they are treated damages the perceived legitimacy of punishments and students' willingness to comply. To make matters worse, zero tolerance policing not only shapes students' interactions with authority, but also detracts from their classroom experiences as discipline eclipses other educational goals. Nolan argues that the introduction of the law-and-order mentality into schools changed the culture of education, noting that "the school, devoid of any culture of learning, had become a kind of auxiliary penal institution in which some of the city's most marginalized youth spent their days under heavy police surveillance" (Nolan 2011). Nolan goes as far as to say that the primary function of impoverished public urban

schools is now “the penal management of excluded youth” (Nolan). As Angela Davis notes, “When children attend schools that place a greater value on discipline and security than on knowledge and intellectual development they are attending prep schools for prison” (Davis 2003).

While zero tolerance policies were initially proposed as a way to gain control over “troubled” and failing schools, they have remained intact, and federal funding continues to be contingent on states adopting this policy (Nolan 2011). Most Americans believe any kind of pro-security response is an answer to school violence, despite the lack of evidence in social science research, because it resonates with the widely shared idea that more punishment and police officers will keep us all safer. Indeed, teachers and administrators seem to generally favor this form of discipline, as 93% of teachers said they supported zero-tolerance policies in a 2004 study of 725 middle and high schools (Kupchik 2010). This support may come from the desire to maintain control of the classroom, the argument of the potential deterrent effect, the ability to assuage parents’ fears about school safety, or the supposed fairness of treating all offenders equally and holding students responsible for their individual actions. This support may also come from the fact that school personnel have to learn to cooperate with police and have an investment in the success of police intervention to retain order. Nolan found in her ethnographic research that while school officials accepted order-maintenance policing as a legitimized response to disruption and school violence, they also acknowledged that it is not ideal. Their constructive, alternative disciplinary strategies were “constrained and overshadowed by the prevailing framework as incidents came to be defined by the actions and language of the police...school officials relied upon the moral rationales that support aggressive street policing as they struggled to ‘reach the students’ and make sense of the

new disciplinary policies while maintaining their identities as educators” (Nolan 2011). Yet with increasing evidence articulating the failures of “tough-on-crime” discipline, there has been a growing voice of resistance as well. The American Bar Association (2001), American Civil Liberties Union (2008), American Psychological Association (2008), and National Council on Crime and Delinquency all publicly denounce the use of zero-tolerance policies in schools. With rising criticism and evidence of negative consequences of zero tolerance, some states have begun modifying laws to give more power to school personnel, but the nation’s overall punitive response to school disorder remains unchallenged as the prevailing model.

The media image of the “troubled” urban school coupled with the stigmatization of urban youth of color as inherently violent and criminal serves to legitimize the enactment of zero tolerance policing as a “necessary” approach to restoring order and “protecting our children”. Still, the question remains of *whose* children we are really interested in protecting. The ultimate effect of zero-tolerance discipline, as Nolan suggests, is to “help to shift the locus of blame onto the most disengaged and structurally marginalized students while reformers, lacking any transformative educational vision for the classroom, applaud their won efforts to ‘take back our schools’” (Nolan 2011). “Zero tolerance” is an ironically accurate name for our current social paradigm, as we have effectively proven that we have zero tolerance for any kind of difference that might challenge the reign of our hierarchical social norms.

2.6 Theories of Educational Control

It is clear that the criminal justice system has entered into our schools, bringing with it a new regime of discipline that reflects an overall paradigm shift to a culture of punitive social control. After outlining the comparative political and historical analysis of our social institutions, I re-evaluate different theories of social control in relation to schools, and explore whether our educational system is currently functioning as part of an overall structure of domination in conjunction with our penal system.

Marxist theory argues that all of our schools, like our prisons and all other social institutions, operate as a force of social control to filter us into our positions in the capitalist labor force and inculcate us with an acceptance of these roles. Marx's concept of reproduction therefore informs a tradition of radical and socialist theories of schooling which argue that schools recreate the existing economic order. Contrary to the claims of liberal theorists that education facilitates individual development, social mobility, or the equalization of power, Marxist educators argue that schools function to reproduce the dominant ideology and the capitalist division of labor.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) make an argument for the validity of the Marxist view of schooling in the U.S., arguing that the education system reproduces the social relationships of economic life and maintains societal inequality by facilitating the integration of youth into a stratified labor force through supposedly "meritocratic" rewards that allocate students into distinct positions in the occupational hierarchy. They argue that this process does not happen through the conscious intentions of teachers and administrators, but rather through a correspondence between the social relationships governing the workplace and those in the education system. The school structure

essentially mirrors the job structure, for the hierarchical pattern of values, norms, and skills that characterize the dynamics of capitalist class interactions are mirrored in the social dynamics of the classroom: vertical relationships of authority and control, little control over curriculum or content, competitive motivational systems reflecting external rewards (grades or wages) instead of intrinsic social benefits or outcomes (knowledge). These attributes are currently becoming increasingly common in our urban public schools, yet Bowles and Gintis do not anticipate the changes in our economic structure that result in exclusionary educational policies that prepare students more for incarceration than employment.

Bowles and Gintis (1976) further argue that schools both recreate societal inequality, and justify and hide the exploitative nature of the U.S. economy by inculcating students with a fundamental acceptance of the social and economic imperatives of a capitalist economy (or in our present case, an acceptance of economic exclusion). They suggest that in the process of modernization, the once personalized authority of the teacher became a part of the bureaucracy of the school, reducing the teacher to the status of the worker and enacting a new structure of discipline that rewards students for conformity to the social order and submission to authority and penalizes them for traits of creativity and critical thought. In our current post-modern educational paradigm, these changes have only been amplified. The agency of both the teacher and student have been further reduced with the introduction of police officers into schools, raising the stakes with the threat of incarceration and forcing students to choose between submission to authority and exclusion from society.

While Bowles and Gintis outline the modern Marxist perspective on education as a system of control, other reproduction theorists argue that this position is overly

economistic. Michael Apple (2004) argues that this economic focus does not adequately account for the process through which the mechanisms of domination in schools *create* societal outcomes. Apple argues that a normative consciousness is not merely ‘required’ by a stratified society, but rather is created through ideological and cultural formations that mediate between the material conditions of an unequal society and the formation of consciousness of the individuals within that society (Apple 2004:2). Apple develops a theory of social control around the concept of “hegemony,” which he defines as “the central, effective and dominant system of meanings, values and actions which are *lived*” (2004: 5). According to Apple, schools act as agents of cultural and ideological hegemony by distributing the effective dominant culture until it saturates our consciousness to such an extent that we see it as “the only world” possible. This process happens largely through the “hidden curriculum,” the institutional expectations and routines of schools that teach tacit norms, values and dispositions and socialize students to accept as legitimate the limited roles they come to fill. As long as the most powerful classes maintain control over the production and preservation of knowledge, this cultural hegemony will remain unchallenged.

The functionalist perspective on schooling argues that maintaining control over the production of knowledge is in fact *necessary* to the functioning of society, for education serves the same function as incarceration: it is “an expression and enforcement of social morality” (Garland 1993:42). Education in this light is a moral endeavor to instill shared moral traditions, practices and ideals—a necessary process in the recreation of society’s very conditions of existence. The moral training of education creates a system of authority, and punishment merely attempts to limit the ‘demoralizing’ effects of disobedience and deviance from this system. Garland (1993) explains the Durkheimian

argument that “this reassertion of the moral order is the primary function of punishment, both in the classroom and in the courts” (p. 43).

Educational policy analyst and former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Education Diane Ravitch (2000) makes a case for the functionalist approach to education today, arguing that our schools should be “re-activating” a process of social integration and reaffirming a unified morality in the U.S. Ravitch argues that schools are currently failing to serve their socializing function of creating a shared moral order, for “as the academic curriculum lost its importance as the central focus of the public school system, the schools lost their anchor, their sense of mission, their intense moral commitment” (2000:16). She continues to say that schools must “reassert their primary responsibility” of teaching children “what knowledge has most value” and “how to use that knowledge” (p. 17), and specifically instilling national values of democracy, for “a democratic society that fails to teach the younger generation its principles of self-government puts these principles at risk...a society that is racially and ethnically diverse requires, more than other societies, a conscious effort to build shared values and ideals among its citizenry” (p. 466). Ravitch sees education not as a system of domination, but as a system of moral training which liberates individuals from the control of popular culture, commercial advertising, and electronic media. She seems to be worried that we are currently in a state of Durkheim’s social “anomie,” and we therefore need education to restore a shared value system in the U.S. and to “make a chaotic world coherent” (2000:18).

While Ravitch’s ideal of restoring a “shared value system” may seem liberating in theory, in practice the enforcement of social norms has not served to “make a chaotic world coherent”, but rather contributed to the chaos itself. As our schools have increasingly taken responsibility for teaching “what knowledge has most value” by

standardizing curriculums, we have only expanded the kind of ideological hegemony proposed by Apple, naturalizing the success of the students who are able to succeed in this system and punishing those who are already at a disadvantage. Her attempt to “unite us under shared beliefs” seems to come more out of her fear of difference in a “racially and ethnically diverse” society. While reaffirming shared American values is a politically powerful statement to rally public support, in practice the “values” that are taught are not representative of the so-called “diversity” that Ravitch discusses, for only certain individuals are part of the conversation in deciding what, and *whose*, values are taught.

Foucault argues that this type of socialization is inherently problematic and in fact the very root of human suffering, for defining normative values and systems of thought results in a totalizing system of power and control. Foucault argues that both schools and prisons rely on the “Normal” as a principle of coercion through standardized curriculums and examinations which “combine the techniques of an observing hierarchy and those of a normalizing judgment” (1977:197). The current use of high-stakes standardized testing combined with the interjection of criminal justice procedures into our urban public schools perfectly highlights Foucault’s theory that our social institutions function to maintain control over individuals through a complex network of surveillance and procedures of observation, a detailed and systematic knowledge of individual histories, and formalized systems of examination and measurement. Disciplinary methods, in Foucault’s view, are not ultimately meant to punish, but rather to develop a method of sanctioning rooted in a full assessment of an individual in relation to desired standards of conduct. The examination introduces a mechanism that links the exercise of power to a specific formation of knowledge, for the written record of an individual becomes a procedure of objectification and subjection in many different settings related to both

educational and penal records. Schools therefore *intentionally* resemble prisons, for both institutions serve as oppressive instruments that socially construct individuals by working the mind and body into conformity through a similarly structured division of time and space with bell tones and painted lines that establish the disciplinary schema. Foucault argues that education and punishment become the means to secure the authority of social norms, to maintain a common environment and to “assure that discipline reigns over society as a whole” (Foucault 1977:209).

Yet Foucault’s theory lacks a discussion of how this structure of discipline reigns over certain parts of our society much more than others. While all schools may serve a socializing role, only a very targeted section of schools are currently serving a *penalizing* role, arguably functioning primarily to discipline, punish and ultimately exclude poor youth of color from educational access altogether. While Patricia Hill Collins supports the Foucauldian perspective that social control comes out of a type of binary thinking that categorizes various social groups into “normal” and “deviant”, she argues that those at the bottom of our social hierarchy are consistently placed into the “deviant” category through continued racist and classist ideologies that become hegemonic as they begin to appear natural and inevitable. Angela Davis suggests that schools in poor communities of color treat this population as disposable, replicating the structures and regimes of the prison by placing a greater value on discipline than on intellectual development (p. 39).

Davis further suggests that criminality has been naturalized, as the dominant discourse produces the social expectation that young men of color, and increasingly women as well, will “move naturally from the free world into prison, where, it is assumed, they belong” (2003:103). Collins (2004) argues that it is ironically the very high visibility of black sexuality through the ubiquity of Black media and pop culture that renders these

racial stereotypes virtually invisible by creating a sense of the “naturalness” and inevitability of a form of Black deviancy, so that ultimately racism itself seems entirely “normal”. This “new” form of racism is in some ways even more dangerous than colonial racism according to Michelle Alexander, for it is highly disguised under the veil of a supposed “colorblind” approach, resulting in a silenced conversation about the continuing forms of both legal and informal racial oppression.

The changes in our paradigm of social control in the past few decades have created a new structure of social domination rooted in the *combined* function of our schools and prisons. I argue that this shift in our approach to educating and incarcerating lies at the intersection of Foucault and Marx, for it relies on a dialectic between ideological and material domination. As schools socialize students to accept their normative hierarchical social positions through discriminatory punitive punishment, the “criminality” of those at the bottom becomes naturalized, perpetuating an ideological distortion that then justifies the use of prisons to exclude them from the material economic, political and social rewards. In this way the enforcement of Foucauldian norms leads to the Marxist reproduction of our unequal economic structure. Yet the reverse process also occurs, for once these “delinquents” are punished for their deviance from the norm, they continue to experience a legalized system of discrimination that prevents them from re-entering society, and thus their material condition reinforces their permanent status as “criminals” in the public imagination. This creates an inescapable cycle of social domination, trapping millions of individuals on the boundary between schools and prisons, and excluding them from participation in the ideological or material reality of the privileged members of our society. Yet this picture is incomplete without the additional analysis of the role of race and class in determining who becomes trapped in this cycle of

criminalization and exclusion, and the theories of Davis and Alexander become particularly important in describing the “new” forms of legalized oppression that are rooted in both the hegemony of racist and classist ideology and the material history of racial oppression in the United States. In light of the socially destructive nature of schools and prisons, Durkheim’s argument that institutional control serves to ensure “moral solidarity” and protect the “social order” fails as a valid model of our social paradigm. Still, this functionalist perspective serves an important ideological function of *masking* the true social domination of our schools and prisons under the pretense of protecting the “public safety” and benefiting the “common interest”, leading to widespread public support of a system that is actually doing exactly the opposite.

In my final chapter, I explore the stories of the individuals who are most affected by this structure of domination that blurs the line between education and incarceration. I look at individual experiences of two different intersections of schools and prisons—the experience of schools that adopt the culture of prisons, and the experience of prisons that adopt to the culture of schools. By discussing individuals’ educational experiences both outside of prison *and* inside of prison, I question whether prison education can become a unique intersection that subverts the functions that our social institutions currently play. In the process of educating our prisoners, is it possible to reverse the damage inflicted by incarcerating our students? As I attempt to answer this question, I engage with larger theories of liberation and discuss the potential to overcome our paradigm of social domination.

Chapter Three

“I am Not What I Once Was”: When Prisoners Become Students

“To be honest with you, I don’t know if people even have a purpose for incarceration. I think they just don’t know what to do. And because people don’t care, they aren’t willing to look into the issues that affect people who don’t have a proper education, who don’t have access to resources on how to figure out what can be done to make sure that they have the quality of life that everybody else enjoys. No one cares, so there’s neglect...and incarceration is just somewhere to put them, get them out of society, you know...get them away from being a thorn in the side of the good citizens of society.” – Mike

While the comparative socio-historical analysis of our penal and educational systems outlined in the previous two chapters provides a helpful insight into the oppressive functions of our social institutions, it does not address the effects of these institutional structures of domination on the *individuals* who find themselves caught within them. In this chapter I aim to put these larger structures in dialogue with individual experiences that lie on the intersection between schools and prisons. I use the theoretical and historical context developed thus far to situate the stories of individuals who have experienced first-hand the effects of our systems of education and incarceration, while simultaneously using the lived experiences of those most affected by the state of our current social paradigm to ground this theoretical work.

The formerly-incarcerated individuals I discuss in this chapter not only provide a deeper insight into the connection between schools and prisons, but also speak to a unique intersection of education and incarceration that may open up the possibility to change or even reverse the function of *both* of these institutions. While the participants in this study share their own experience of the process outlined in the previous chapter of schools adopting the culture and ideology of prisons, they also speak to the parallel process of prisons beginning to adopt the culture of schools. I interviewed these

individuals not only to get a better grasp of their experiences of schools and prisons, but also their experience of schools *inside of* prisons. By providing a new kind of educational access to a population largely denied a quality education and using prison as a space for intellectual liberation instead of social confinement, I explore whether bringing higher education into prison has the potential to challenge the roles played by both of these oppressive social institutions.

3.1 Interview Methods

The central research for this study consisted of nine formal interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals. As an informal supplement to these interviews, I also incorporate informal interviews and conversations with faculty, staff and students from Wesleyan University involved in prison education programs. I do not choose to focus on the interviews performed with Wesleyan personnel, because their perspectives often came as a second-hand account of experiences that could be more directly accessed through interviews with formerly incarcerated individuals. However, the conversations I had with Wesleyan teachers and students helped provide a foundation for my understanding of prison education, and certainly influenced my own perspective. I also draw on personal observations made while facilitating workshops in two different prisons during my time as an undergraduate student at Wesleyan: Cheshire Correctional Institution, a high security men's facility, and York Correctional Institution, an all-levels women's facility.

I chose to interview formerly incarcerated people because they are the most deeply affected by the institutional processes I am studying, and their lived experiences reveal the intricacies of the connections between schools and prisons in our country. The specific participants in this study were chosen largely based on access, as they were the

individuals with whom I was connected through my involvement with the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education and the Coalition for Criminal Justice Reform. All of the participants were formerly incarcerated in high-security correctional institutions for periods of time ranging from 4 to 17 years, and the majority of them spent time in Connecticut state institutions. While the sample could not be randomly selected, I attempted to get a diverse range of perspectives that generally mirrored the demographics of the prison population. The individuals selected come from different demographics in terms of gender, race, class and age: of the nine participants, seven identify as male and two identify as female; three identify as Black American, two identify as mixed heritage of African American and Latino descent, and two identify as white; seven come from a working-class background and two from a middle-class background; two are 30 and under, three are between 31-50, and four are between 51-60 years old. All of the participants served their sentences between 1985 and 2011. Five of the nine respondents graduated from high school, and the other four dropped out of high school in their last two years and later got their GEDs.

The interviews ranged in length from twenty to sixty minutes and included questions about their experience of education before their incarceration, the factors that led to their incarceration, their experience of education in prison, and their thoughts on the functions our schools and prisons currently serve and what reforms they would like to see in those institutions. The interviews were performed either on the Wesleyan University campus or in an office building in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and the interviews were videotaped and later transcribed. All of the quotations in this chapter come directly from those transcriptions.

Mike and Antonio (“Tone”) took classes through the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education while incarcerated at Cheshire Correctional Institute, and they were both released from prison within the last year (2011-12). At 25 years old, Tone is the youngest participant. He was incarcerated soon after graduating high school, and he served almost four years of his twelve-year sentence in three different correctional institutes before he was released. He is of mixed African American and Latino heritage, and comes from a lower class background. Mike is 30 years old and white Irish-Catholic, and he was released from prison only weeks before the interview. He attended Catholic school as a child, but then entered the public school system and explains that he lost interest because he did not feel challenged or engaged. While he was doing well in his classes, he often skipped school and ended up dropping out of in tenth grade after being told he would need to repeat a grade due to absences. Mike was first incarcerated at the age of 21, and spent eight years at two different prisons from 2003-2011. He got his GED while in prison before being accepted to the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education (CPE).

Kenny, James, Daee and Fred are all part of the Bridgeport Ex-Offender Alumni Association, a support network for formerly incarcerated individuals in Bridgeport and a platform for criminal-justice related activism. All four individuals now work in different capacities for the non-profit “Family Re-entry,” an organization devoted to helping prisoners with the re-entry process as well as mentoring youth in areas of high incarceration rates to prevent their entanglement with the criminal justice system.

Kenny is 57 years old, African American and comes from a lower class background. He is the only interviewee who did not participate in any formal educational programs while in prison, but he began a process of self-education while in prison. He was incarcerated in his twenties in the late 1980s after graduating high school, and he

served thirteen years in prisons in both Connecticut and Michigan. Since his final release from a Michigan prison in 1995, he has devoted himself to prison-related activism, starting at a community center and working his way up to become the director of his own youth mentoring program. He now also runs several workshops for ex-offenders, including life skills classes, drug support groups and fatherhood programs. He expresses a clear passion and commitment to his work, and his eyes fill with tears as he tells me that he truly wants to make a difference and will *never* stop doing this work.

James is 42 years old, African American, and comes from a lower-class upbringing. He dropped out of school in tenth grade after his counselor threatened expulsion and was incarcerated shortly after at the age of 16. He served nine years in a Connecticut prison from 1988-2007 and took Community College courses in prison during that time. He fulfilled almost enough credits to graduate while in prison, and plans to take the remaining three classes this year to get his Bachelor's degree.

Dace is 45 years old, of mixed African American and Latino heritage, and comes from a lower class background. He was first incarcerated in 1987 at the age of 20, and he served 17 years of a 25 year sentence in Connecticut prisons. Growing up he was part of a school integration program called "Project Conserve" that bussed students from impoverished areas in Bridgeport to schools in Westport, a wealthier Connecticut suburb. Dace explains that he had to repeat a grade in Westport in order to catch up, and later forced to return to Bridgeport schools when the program was phased out. He comments on the stark differences between the two schools and how he lost his motivation when he returned to the "inferior" education offered in Bridgeport. Dace got his GED before his arrest, and was then able to take part in a college-in-prison program and ultimately graduated with an Associates degree while in prison.

Fred grew up in the same neighborhood as Dae. He is 56 years old, African American, and comes from a lower-class upbringing. He was expelled from school his senior year of high school and got his GED shortly afterwards. Fred was first incarcerated when he was 32, and he served a 17 year sentence from 1989 – 2006 at the same correctional institution as Dae. Fred was inspired to start taking college classes after attending Dae's graduation in prison. He was only a few credits shy of graduating when the program was taken out of his prison. He plans to finish the remaining classes on the outside in the coming years.

Along with being part of the Bridgeport Ex-Offender Alumni Association, Kenny, James, Dae and Fred are all part of the Coalition for Criminal Justice Reform (CCJR), a newly formed activist organization consisting of a diverse range of people pushing for criminal justice policy reform. I attended several of CCJR's monthly meetings on Wesleyan campus, and through that group I was introduced to many of the participants in this study. Through CCJR, I was also introduced to Deborah and Sandra, two participants in my study who were incarcerated at York C.I., the only women's prison in Connecticut.

Sandra is of mixed heritage including African and Caribbean descent, and comes from a middle class background. She was incarcerated at the age of 45, and spent almost three years at York from 2006-2009. Before her arrest, Sandra completed both an undergraduate and Master's program in social work.

Deborah comes from a white middle-class background, and was first incarcerated when she was 32. She spent time at York on two different occasions for a total of nine years, and at the time of her interview had been home for just a little over a year. Before prison, Deborah graduated high school and had a little college experience. Both Sandra

and Deborah participated in the Wesleyan University “Prison Outreach Through Theater” classes at York. These classes were not credit-granting and were not affiliated with the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education, but rather were connected to a separate service-learning class taught by theater professor Ron Jenkins that had a volunteer component for Wesleyan students to work with incarcerated individuals to study, write and perform theater pieces. Sandra and Deborah have both remained involved in Jenkins’ theater work since their release as well, performing in plays relating to their experiences in prison, working with Wesleyan students, and traveling to speak on behalf of prison-related activism and the power of bringing the arts into prisons.

The final participant was Fernando, a current Connecticut resident who is 43 years old, Latino and from a lower-class upbringing. After being arrested for a wrongful conviction in 1991, Fernando served almost 18 years in New York state maximum-security prisons before he was finally proven innocent in 2009 and exonerated. While in prison, Fernando graduated with a Bachelor’s degree from the Hudson Link college-in-prison program. Fernando now lives in Connecticut with his wife and three children, though he travels often for activist-minded public speaking engagements related to wrongful convictions. He has spoken at many different venues including a series of Universities. I conducted a short interview with Fernando before his speaking engagement at Wesleyan University.

It is important to consider the limitations of my research methods. The participants were selected on the basis of their accessibility and interest in participating. They are not a random sample, and while they do reflect the larger prison population in some ways—the majority are lower-class men of color—their stories cannot necessarily be used to generalize to the average prisoner’s experience. All of the respondents except one

experienced educational programs in prison, and there may be certain shared qualities among prisoners who have access to educational programs and who choose to take advantage of them. Furthermore, I found my contacts through my own volunteer and activist circles, and nearly all of the participants in the study are involved in prison-related activism in some way. This clearly affects their perspectives, as they have most likely had access to more resources and developed more politicized views than the typical prisoner and possibly even than the average participant in prison education.

In the effort to address this limitation, I draw on my personal observations and experiences facilitating prison workshops along with extensive secondary sources to contextualize and confirm the accounts of these individuals. The work of sociologists such as Nolan (2011) and Kupchik (2010) in the previous chapter provides a basis in larger-scale ethnographic research that can contextualize the individual perspectives of my participants. The use of individual experiences and quotes in this chapter is intended to provide a more nuanced understanding of the real impacts our social institutions have on particular individual lives. Needless to say, these nine stories should not be taken as representative of the experiences of the millions of prisoners incarcerated in our country.

3.2 “We Don’t Want You Here”: Education on the Outside

While the participants in this study came from different backgrounds—in terms of age, race, class, gender and location—they had many shared experiences of their education before they even entered the criminal justice system. Nearly everyone interviewed commented that growing up, they did not view their education as leading to future opportunities for personal, academic or career success. As Fred comments: “I just

looked at it as it's just something to do. I didn't look at it where it would be opportunities in life". School seemed to be a necessary obligation, but not something that would ultimately produce any benefit to their lives. Many of the interviewees describe school before prison as a "formality" (Tone) that involves "going through the motions" (Fernando) without producing any "instantaneous benefit" (Dae). Some of the interviewees did feel that education was necessary for social advancement, sharing Kenny's sentiment that school was "always promoted as 'the thing' that you needed to succeed". Still, they seemed to view school as enabling success for a *different* group of students, and did not view educational achievement as a possible benefit to their own lives. As James commented: "I thought school, going to school wasn't for me. It was for other people... I didn't see any value in going to school at that time...I thought I wasted my time, and so I didn't really go". This supports Noguera's theory that the students who end up misbehaving in class, abandoning school or getting pushed out are often those who do not see the value of education and do not see themselves receiving the societal rewards and benefits that others might receive from a school degree.

Most of the interviewees also seemed fully aware that they were receiving an inferior quality of education, which led to their disengagement with school. As Dae commented about the public schools in Bridgeport, Connecticut: "there was no interest there, there was no motivation, the education was an inferior one." Many others agreed that school was not interesting, motivating or inspiring, instead describing their education as a boring and "repetitive experience" lacking any "focus or direction" (Mike). Some of the interviewees attributed their disinterest in education to a narrow, slow-paced curriculum that did not allow for individual creativity or the development of skills. Mike comments that he found the curriculum limiting because "you had to really go at the

pace of the class” and there was “no room to grow in different directions”. “I was never a ‘go at another person’s pace’ type of individual,” he continues, “I always liked to press myself and I liked to do more and I liked to explore things on my own. So I thought school back then was kind of one-sided.” This description of a limited, “one-sided” curriculum that is neither relevant nor engaging falls in line with current reform strategies rooted in high-stakes testing that require a narrow curriculum focused more on test-scores than on personal growth or individual creativity.

Along with criticisms of the quality of education available, interviewees also lamented the lack of guidance throughout their schooling, suggesting that if their teachers, administrators or counselors had been more supportive and encouraging it might have increased their engagement and interest. Mike comments that “it was kind of easy to lose track of myself and direction in life. I didn’t have a guidance counselor early on to come and say ‘these are the options’”. This theme of being unaware of all the possible options and having little support or direction was common throughout the interviews. James elaborates that he felt that nobody in the school even cared about him or attempted to support him, leaving him feeling both unengaged and unheard. He argues that it would make a difference if educators made a more conscious effort to reach out to students like him:

And so as educators, I think we need to really think critically about what are we doing wrong? And what do we need to do to keep the kids engaged in education? Because if they’re not engaged in education like I wasn’t engaged in education...there were no teachers coming to me like what are we doing wrong, what do you want to know, what do you want to be, what are we not doing for you? No teacher ever came to me and said that to me. They just let me go. So I think that if we had more teachers that cared and figured out what these kids really want to do, then we would be at the heart of the problem.

Along with unsupportive teachers and counselors, nearly all of the interviewees discussed a lack of educational support from their families as well. Deborah comments

that “for my parents school was the place to go to get out of their hair, and so they didn’t encourage school.” Fred describes his father’s hands-off attitude: “he didn’t really sit me down and teach me what school was about. So while I was there I didn’t really understand what the purpose was, while I was at school”. Still, Fred clarifies that he does not blame his father, because he has a deeper understanding of the cyclical process of education and the inequality in historical access: “I don’t hold my parents responsible, because my father, he was a janitor, but his father probably didn’t teach him, and his father probably was on a plantation something doing something. So he didn’t know the value of education.” Many other interviewees similarly suggested that their parents’ devaluing of education was an important factor in their disengagement with school.

The inferior quality of education coupled with narrow curriculums, poor guidance and little parental support not only affected the interviewees’ experiences in school, but also ended up causing many to leave school altogether. Four out of the nine interviewees did not complete high school because they were pushed out for various reasons. In James’ case, his guidance counselor gave him an “ultimatum” in 10th grade, telling him that he could either go to the job core or they would throw him out of school. Mike ended up dropping out because he was forced to repeat a grade due to his poor attendance, even though he passed his classes. He did not see the point in retaking his classes after he did all the work and did “exceedingly well” on all his exams, this feeling of frustration and hopelessness led him to drop out altogether, supporting theories that grade retention is one of the greatest predictors of student drop-out. In other cases, students were explicitly excluded from school through suspensions and expulsions. While Kenny did end up graduating high school, he explains a pattern of disciplinary interactions growing up: “Coming up in school I used to get suspended at an early age, I used to get in trouble.

Reprimanded regularly by my teachers and things like that, so that kind of was a pattern from my early years until high school”. Fred, on the other hand, did not get into trouble in school until six months before his expected graduation. He laughs as he tells me the story of how he was suspended for smoking marijuana in the school bathroom, but the smile quickly leaves his face as he explains how this incident led to his suspension along with six of his friends, and ultimately spiraled into his expulsion from school and arrest:

We got caught in the bathroom and we all got suspended for that there. And then that was just the snowball of a lot of other things happening to me, because that was the first time I ever been suspended in school or anything like that. And that changed a lot of things after that, because they took that real serious. Although I laugh about it now, in hindsight that was a serious thing that I did there.

Fred’s story is just one example of the way that exclusionary school discipline can dramatically impact an individual’s life, and he elaborates on how this one incident “snowballed” into many other consequences and ultimately his arrest. “Because when I got suspended out of school,” Fred explains, “then I started hanging out. I started hanging in the streets, being around guys that I grew up with that wasn’t going to school, doing certain things.”

Mike expresses a similar understanding of how dropping out of school may lead individuals to commit crimes:

And its not a surprise that the people that leave school turn to these other means, because others that left school before them turned to those means, and others who are out now turn to those means. And everyone has to at the end of the day have the basic necessities of life, so they’re gonna do what they’re gonna do regardless. Not that that’s justification or rationalization, but it’s unfortunately a real aspect of life in this community.

He goes on to explain that in his own personal experience, after dropping out of school he found himself involved with crime out of a lack of other viable options:

I think in my own case, for example, I left school in the tenth grade. Now what do I do? Now the time that would be focused on my studies went to other things. And the level of skill I had, the level of viable skill I had to go out into the working world placed me at the bottom of the food chain. So what do I do? I have very few options and I think that the problem with many of the incarcerated is that they were in their own opinion optionless, and that leads you to turn to other things.

James holds schools responsible for pushing students out into this kind of “optionless” reality, arguing that exclusionary school discipline reinforces negative thought patterns and leads kids directly into the criminal justice system:

And I think that the worst thing that schools have done is to suspend kids from school. When you suspend kids from school, what are they gonna do? If you tell them too bad, *we don't want you here*, you're worthless, you ain't about nothing...and so a kid believes that, that he's never gonna be nothing, they don't want me here. And so if they go on the street and have nothing to do, nine out of ten times they will wind up incarcerated or in some type of system, in some type of criminal justice system. And I think that that's the worst thing schools can do is suspend kids. I think that you can work with them, I think you can keep them in school. I think that we have to learn how to change the education that we offer to the kids.

James himself dropped out of school in the tenth grade in part because he felt he had nothing to offer as a student, and he felt excluded from his school community: “I got more into doing the wrong things, because I wanted to show that I belonged, I wanted to fit in somewhere. I didn't feel like I fit in in my family, I didn't feel like I fit in in school.”

Dace shares a similar perspective of growing up with a lack of both parental and educational support, and therefore turned to crime as a “way out” of his seemingly hopeless situation. Like James, Dace believes that a different kind of schooling could have radically altered his life course: “I believe if I would have properly been educated, and educated with goal-orientation in mind, then my life would not have turned out the way it did despite my circumstances.”

Most of the interviewees similarly felt that their educational experience was directly related to their incarceration, confirming the existence of the “school-to-prison pipeline” in their own experiences. When asked directly about their opinions on this

“pipeline” concept, nearly all of the interview subjects responded that this was an accurate model of the path from classrooms to prison cells. Dace comments on the direct link between schools and prisons:

So if you grow up in an environment where the educational system doesn't prepare you on how to plan your life for success, then you've already planned to fail. And if you don't have a plan, you gonna be a part of somebody else's plan. And what happens with those of us that didn't have a plan, we became part of a plan of mass incarceration due to the fact that we had received an inferior education that did not prepare us to go out into the workplace and to the world with marketable skills that we could provide for ourselves a future for us and our family. And that's the direct link...with an inferior education, your options are limited, and prison is a place that you will either end up, or dead.

Dace's understanding of the school-prison-pipeline resonates with the Marxist viewpoint that in order to reproduce our economic structure, students who come from a lower class receive an inferior education that does not prepare them with skills or a viable entry into the labor market (Bowles and Gintis 1976).

Fred agrees that many schools are now serving essentially to prepare students for incarceration not only through an inferior education, but also by instilling in students a sense of their options being limited. Fred shares that the schools in his community in Bridgeport, Connecticut do not even have adequate resources: “If a kid aint got notebooks in school, how is he gonna learn? Where's the hope, where's the opportunity if he don't have a book? If he can't see himself doing something else, how's he gonna grow up to be anything?” This suggests that kids also internalize their position in society based on their treatment in school and accept their fate because they “can't see themselves doing anything else”. In this way they are essentially legitimizing capitalist rationality by devaluing their own self-worth and the value of their own education, and accepting their role at the bottom of our social structure.

The two interviewees who come from a higher class background did not seem to feel this same acceptance of their “natural” place in society, but rather expressed a large discomfort with being labeled “criminals”, possibly because they did not have an educational experience that socialized them into accepting this role. Deborah and Saundra, the two female participants who come from a middle-class background, argue that their educational experience had nothing to do with their criminal involvement. Saundra suggests that she just made “poor choices,” and Deborah comments that her crime came out of a bad relationship and therefore “no amount of education could have changed that, no amount of education could have saved me from the decisions that I made because they were emotional decisions, they were decisions based on fears”. In some ways, it makes sense that both Deborah and Saundra do not attribute their crime to their education, because they seem to have been privileged with a middle-class educational system that likely did not face the same challenges as the impoverished urban schools that most of the other interviewees experienced.

Yet interestingly, Deborah and Saundra felt that their higher educational and class status actually produced a kind of reverse-discrimination in their sentencing. Saundra explains that she felt the court was trying to “make a statement” out of her by saying that “because you’re educated you’re not supposed to do this, and this is not supposed to happen”. Deborah similarly notes that the judge remarked to her that her crime was not acceptable for someone of her educational privilege:

At sentencing the judge had remarked to me that this was unacceptable because I was an educated woman from middle-class America, that this was unacceptable, and you know what I had taken from that was, so in other words if maybe I had been from another ethnic group living in you know the projects on welfare, it would have been oh you naughty girl, you would have slapped my hands and that would have been acceptable. So I was angry on both levels, that you would expect that of one class, and then think that a different class of people don’t have issues, don’t have problems.

While Deborah and Saundra's perspective that they were unfairly judged because of their higher class is a valid critique of unjust sentencing in the criminal justice system, it also reveals the larger issue of the internalized expectation that "criminals" must come from a specific class and educational background. Deborah's bitterness, while in some ways justified due to her unfair treatment in the court, also seems slightly naïve in her perception that people of a lower class or a different race, or those who live in "the projects on welfare", do not experience as harsh consequences from their involvement in the criminal justice system. As discussed in the previous two chapters, it seems well-proven that lower-class youth of color are widely persecuted by the criminal justice system and in fact experience many more institutional disadvantages, and alluded to by Deborah in her mention of unequal expectations. Furthermore, Deborah and Saundra's comments that people of all class backgrounds commit crimes is an important reminder that the differences in incarceration rates are more reflective of classist and racist biases within the criminal justice system than they are of actual differences in criminal involvement.

Deborah and Saundra's experiences of their treatment in court and their own personal understandings of their criminality reflect the pervasive view that it is more "natural" for people of a lower class to commit crimes and go to prison. Whether or not people of higher social status receive disproportionately harsh sentences, they are clearly not the main target of the criminal justice system, and as Deborah and Saundra themselves suggest, they do not seem to experience the brunt of the connection between schools and prisons. Kenny elaborates that along with a class difference in school experience, there are also racial and gendered factors in the school-to-prison pipeline due to disparities in both the education and criminal justice systems. He highlights the

ideology linking the education system with the criminal justice system in his understanding of how “disparities have been dropped down”.

But there’s so many different mechanisms in place now, many of these kids, some of them can’t help get locked up, because it’s like they’re targeted...And there’s no secret about the racial disparities, about African American males being sent to prison. So now that’s taken to another level with the school-to-prison pipeline. Now those disparities that was once in the court system, those disparities have been dropped down to the youth system. And certain schools are just prerequisites, so to speak, to detention centers.

Do students end up entangled in the criminal justice system due to inferior education and discriminatory school discipline that limits their options, or is the larger problem their internalized belief that they will never be able to “succeed” and are “destined” to end up behind bars? If the latter is more accurate, and the problem is more an issue of ideology than actual access, then this sort of self-fulfilling prophecy of “failure” that leads to a life of crime could be prevented through the development of a more critical consciousness to stop the internalization of this form of oppression.

Still, it seems likely that the situation is more complex than mere self-image and internalized fatalism, for there are real limitations to accessing social rewards, such as well-paying jobs, social services, healthcare and political power, that prevent many of the individuals in the communities with the highest rates of incarceration and the poorest quality of education from receiving the same treatment as those with more social power. In either case, the introduction of higher education into prison may be able to address both the issues of ideology and the issues of access that keep prisoners locked out of participation in society. As I move into a discussion of individual experiences of education inside prison, I explore whether bringing college into prison can become an opportunity to radically alter the function of schools. In doing so, I question whether providing access to a type of “elite” education to a targeted “unclass” of our population can simultaneously

subvert the ideological distortion that serves to legitimize their criminalization and oppression.

3.3 The Rise and Fall of Prison Education

Before I move into a discussion of individual experiences with post-secondary prison education, it is important to get a sense of the historical context of prison education in this country. The rise and fall of support for prison education has mirrored the changing national trends in our approach to social control discussed in the last two chapters. The initial rehabilitative intentions of the penitentiary remained prominent up until the 1970s, and correctional policy operated under the assumption that criminal behavior can and should be reformed. Prisons were renamed “correctional institutions” in the 1960s to highlight the goal of “correcting” offenders (Rotman 1990), and this translated to criminal justice policy granting more discretionary power to judges, parole boards and correctional officers to determine when an individual was “fixed” and ready for release (Contardo 2010). This rehabilitative mentality led to the enactment of the Higher Education Act in 1965, a law allowing prisoners to receive Basic Opportunity Grants, also known as Pell Grants. Pell Grants award financial aid to support post-secondary education based on need, and the extension of these grants to prisoners reduced the reliance of prison education programs on private funding. These grants awarded less than \$1,300 per inmate, but were crucial in expanding access to postsecondary education in prisons across the country (Gorgol 2011). Support for vocational programs in prisons also grew throughout the 1970s, with increased access to trades ranging from construction and car repair to cosmetology and hairdressing.

This rehabilitative momentum came to an end as the political pendulum swung to a “tough on crime” mentality and the goal of “correction” was left as a distant memory. With the increasing emphasis on retributive punishment and the reduced need for low-wage laborers, prison education programs were seen as both too lenient and as a waste of resources. This anti-rehabilitative climate peaked with the passing of the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act under the Clinton administration in 1994, an extensive piece of crime legislation ending the distribution of Pell Grants to prisoners. The denial of Pell Grants was prompted largely by the sentiment that they were taking away educational opportunities from non-incarcerated students in need of funding, even though inmates had only been receiving 1% of all Pell Grant awards. However, in reality many of these students were turned down due to eligibility, not lack of funding (Gorgol 2011). The removal of this primary source of funding coupled with the dwindling of public support for prison education programs had dramatic impacts, and participation rates dropped immediately. While Congress revisited the issue of post-secondary prison education several times and enacted smaller grant programs for youth offenders, since the removal of the Pell Grant funding higher education programs in prison have remained sparse. The participants in the present study are therefore a fortunate group of prisoners who had the chance to experience prison education. While some of the respondents experienced prison education at its height in the 1980s, others who were more recently released were part of a small population of prisoners who had access to education programs. In the next section I discuss individual experiences with prison education, and the potential for this unique intersection of schools and prisons to serve as a source of personal and social liberation within an oppressive institutional context.

3.4 “A Source of Freedom”: Education on the Inside

“The experience of going to class...you kind of lose your awareness of where you are. You’re no longer walking down a prison hallway. You’re carrying books and you have thoughts in your mind that are outside of the general prison thought atmosphere. You have left the institution of wherever you’ve been located, on a prison level. You are now floating above the prison thought atmosphere. You’re now walking down whatever university you want to walk down. Whether it is Wesleyan, whether it is not. You have the freedom to imagine yourself anywhere, and the education does that. *It’s a source of freedom.*” – Tone (my emphasis)

For Tone and many of the other formerly incarcerated individuals I interviewed, having education in prison became a unique “source of freedom” that helped to liberate them from their own destructive thought patterns about themselves and their lives. On the most basic level, taking classes in prison created a positive respite from an extremely negative and oppressive environment. Mike describes the benefit of prison education: “I think that that’s very important because people in there, people in prison, they really need something positive to focus on, because it’s so easy to drown in the misery and sorrow. It’s a deluge of negative feelings that can overtake you at any and all times. So you need something positive to work for, you need reinforcement.”

Fernando describes college classes in prison as “one of the most positive distractions that I had in that place,” saying that, “it allowed me to concentrate in a positive way, where I was able to focus my energies on something outside of the grim realities of prison life. Now focus into somewhat like an academic world really, in which I just absorbed myself into books”. Deborah notes that she looked forward to the classes that would “break up the monotony of the week”. Saundra also found prison education to be a welcomed distraction, saying that the classes “helped me to get through the difficult times at York, because I had a place where I could go and that place was in my books and then cut off the rest of the world.”

Dace and James echo the importance of prison education in creating a positive mental space, sharing that before they began educating themselves in prison, they essentially continued the destructive activities they had been involved with on the outside, and were not even certain they would survive their whole sentence. “Before I got involved in educating myself,” Dace shares, “I’ll be honest with you I wasn’t sure if I was gonna make it through that 25 years without catching another 25 years or dying in prison, because my mind wasn’t occupied with anything constructive...I was in very destructive activities before I started educating myself.” James describes his experience of prison before beginning classes as similarly depressive: “It was a scary place, you know, a lonely place...I was doing pretty much the same thing that I was doing on the street, just in prison...and I was like so what, I have a long sentence. Who cares anyway if I live or die. So that was pretty much my mentality, before all my educational experiences.”

While almost all of the interviewees noted that just having the chance to get out of their cells during the day was a welcomed break from their routine, many also commented on how taking classes had a much more profound impact on them, and helped to them to feel fully human again within a deeply dehumanizing institution. “In prison,” Fernando comments, “often times you start feeling levels of eroded self-esteem based upon the incarceration, the humiliation, the deprivation. So much negativity in that place that you feel less than human. Education in prison for me was a way of regaining my humanity back and being able to express myself for what I thought was excellent work. That was my intention always in order to demonstrate that I could accomplish what I set out to do in freedom.” Deborah and Saundra also comment on the importance of education in prison as a humanizing experience. As Saundra comments:

Going to class is something we look forward to...you look forward to seeing other people who treat you as if you're a human being. Who understand, not knowing, but show some compassion in what you're feeling what you're going through being locked away...those are the only time I can really start thinking like a human being. Thinking and feeling hopeful that you know my goodness, yes, and I can breathe, wow this is something different, it's something new. It's not somebody that's putting you down every day.

Deborah adds:

A day with the class too is like that opportunity to touch humanity, you know to feel human again, because you have people who are coming in from the outside...And we were so ready to give to these programs, we were so ready to find *something*, anything that could bring us our humanity. That could give us a touch of freedom. That could help us to learn and grow, and develop and discover.

The fact that merely having classes in prison can provide an opportunity for prisoners to regain a sense of their own humanity suggests the massive amount of power these institutions hold over an individual's sense of self-worth—incarceration is capable of making someone feel less than human, while education is able to lift that same person back to a renewed sense of self. This suggests not only the amount of weight we put on each of these institutions in defining individual morality, but also the potential impact combining the two institutions can have on someone's life.

The transformative affect of prison education on those interviewed came not only through the chance to attend classes and to become immersed in academic literature and thought, but also through the opportunity to *succeed* educationally, a new experience for many incarcerated students who previously internalized that they were not capable of academic achievements. All of the subjects involved in college education programs mentioned their academic achievements, and often their specific grade point averages, honors, and dean's lists at some point in the interview. They expressed a great sense of pride in their academic work, and often explained that they surprised themselves with how well they were able to do in their classes.

Dace explains that the students in his college-in-prison program would “demand that we be held to the same standards and criteria that they held the students that went to school and were enrolled in that college on the street. And the professor would meet those demands and he would have high expectations for us, and we would achieve”. Dace graduated from college while in prison with a 3.93 grade point average, one of the highest grades in the entire college, including students both inside and outside of prison. Deborah had a similar empowering experience of realizing new skills while in prison:

I mean I know for me and for a lot of the women that I work with in these things it was like huh, I didn't know I could do that...I never knew I had those abilities and it's amazing to find them. And it's amazing to find the doors that got opened.

Fred was similarly surprised and empowered by his academic success: “It was real interesting reading to me, and I started getting 100s on tests from the very beginning. And it really showed me that, wow I could've done this a long time ago.” For Fred, success in college classes in prison not only gave him a boost of confidence in his academic abilities, but also a broader confidence in his greater potential:

I really understood that once I start getting these grades and passing them, that I could do whatever it is I conceive in my mind. You know before I had pride, but it really wasn't, it was false pride. But when I really started to get education and see that I could do certain things, it really showed me that my potential was in this.

Fred goes on to suggest that his experience is an example of how prison education provides an opportunity for individuals to complete a higher education who might never have had the opportunity to take college classes otherwise.

The fact that even those who are consistently denied access to higher education on the outside are able to excel in college classes in prison suggests that our educational system is not in reality filtering students into colleges based on their academic potential. Prison education therefore provides a unique opportunity to provide educational access to

a group who might otherwise never be able to experience it, but who are in fact equally qualified and capable. As Fred comments, “I really think if they had more education in prison for some of the people like myself, that the potential in them for education is there, but they never had the opportunity out here because the environment didn’t give them the opportunity. But if they had education more common in prison, you’d have a lot more people coming out of prison with a college degree like myself”. Mike suggests that the success of students in college-in-prison programs both generates and reflects their renewed sense of self-worth and pride in having an opportunity they previously thought unimaginable.

Succeeding in college classes in prison not only seems to allow prisoners to regain a sense of self-confidence and rediscover their strengths, abilities and passions, but also opens up the possibility of imagining an entirely different future for themselves, a new reality they might not have thought previously possible. All of the interviewees discuss the power of prison education to expand their way of thinking, and many emphasized that this brought them outside of the limitations of the mindset they grew up with. As Fred describes it:

[Prison education] would expand and broaden their horizon and their mind. Because coming from the hood, most of the people that come from the hood have the same mindset, something like mine. You know and we think that the world don’t give a damn. But it’s not about the world, it’s *you* have to give a damn. And through education you start to feel good about yourself, and understand that there’s some things that I can do man. And you start getting them grades and you start doing certain things, you start thinking man, I can do this here. I can handle this here.

Fred elaborates on how his own personal experience with prison education helped him to escape the narrow mindset he came in with, and to see how education might be able to offer him new opportunities to change his life-course:

Because once I started reading, my mind started expanding and I started really exploring the world, and I started living outside that box that I grew up in. I thought that this village in Bridgeport, Connecticut was the world, and it wasn't the world...growing up no one really told me to value education and what opportunities I can gain from education.

Dace discusses a similar transformative power of prison education that allowed him to see himself in a new light for the first time, and to imagine leading a different kind of life:

Education first allowed me to be able to even conjure up and develop a vision of myself outside a criminal element. Without education I would have been thinking with the same mentality. With the education I began to think that there were other possibilities or other options besides participating in criminal activity, so this affected how I thought, and this began to inspire and influence other thoughts where I began to see myself doing something else.

Tone similarly suggests that the combination of formal education in prison along with the “personal education you’re giving yourself” has the potential to produce “different perceptions and new realities for people who seem to be limited when it comes to thinking on how they look at themselves and the world.” Mike adds that “It’s almost like a lens is removed from your eyes, and you see a different way, and you see that you can go in any direction you want. It’s not as limited as you once believed, it’s not as black and white, the gray area expands.”

Education in prison serves the opposite function as schooling previously did for these individuals. Before prison, school was a place where they felt they could not succeed, a place where they were punished and often excluded altogether. It was a place that locked them into a narrow mindset, forced them to follow a limited, irrelevant curriculum, and led them to internalize the institution’s message that they were failures, delinquents and criminals. Education in prison, on the other hand, seems to have the power to release them from at least some of this control and liberate them from this mindset. Taking classes in prison allowed the participants to re-evaluate their view of

themselves and of the world around them, providing them with the confidence that they could find a new kind of success and access a previously inconceivable place in society.

For many of the interviewees, they had not only been denied direct opportunities throughout their lives, but also had been denied access to a way of thinking about their own situations. One of the most powerful aspects of prison education is the ability to foster a renewed sense of hope. As James notes, “it’s very important to have the education in prison so these guys can have some hope, or have access to that, because many of them don’t when they’re in the streets”. Fred shares a similar experience:

But when I started getting educated in there, I started seeing that there was hope for me in there. Without that, before I started going, I didn’t see that...I didn’t really care, it was like this is my house, this is where I’m gonna be til I die, and it didn’t matter. But once I started going to school and I started learning things, and having hope, and seeing opportunities from that, it changed me.

All of the interviewees emphasized the personal changes they experienced through prison education, and the deeply transformative power of beginning to view themselves differently. As Dace says, “once I educated myself, I got an opportunity to meet the one person that I hadn’t met yet: myself”. Deborah similarly comments that education “gives you an opportunity to discover so much more about the world in general and yourself. And I think for many people who are incarcerated, that that’s the place they need to start. They don’t even know who they are.”

Mike suggests that the kids who are pushed out of school often end up abandoning this process of self-discovery, leaving school “before we are able to fully develop a sense of self, a sense of who we are, a sense of direction, a sense of positive aspirations and goals”. Education in prison thus becomes a new chance not only to excel academically, but also to grow personally and discover a new sense of self. Tone argues that bringing education

into prison instigates a “mass identity crisis” not only for those taking classes, but for the entire prison, because it forces everyone to rethink themselves and their lives:

Seeing other prisoners carry books, go to school, have that discipline, that persistence, that drive to actually choose a different path on what they choose to do with their time can cause like I said, an identity crisis. *A mass identity crisis*. Because it makes the prison population rethink who they are. And that’s what I’ve seen. The information is that powerful, it will make you think twice, three times about who, what ego you have created, prior to prison. That ego’s gonna be challenged. Cause now you start to see yourself as a different person.

Tone points out that by transforming prisoners from “criminals” into “students”, prison education programs not only change the way prisoners view themselves, but also alter the way they view each other and begin changing the perceptions that others have of prisoners. Tone continues on to explain how he personally experienced this change of perception:

And I was just really surprised by the response I got from correctional officers and professors and it was just like, now in the eyes of the people in the prison, the prison authority, I was no longer who I once was. Which is the model of the Department of Corrections school district, Unified School District 1: “I am not what I once was”. And that’s amazing that once I gave my speech at this commemoration ceremony, whatever image or whatever identity they had of me, disappeared. And this is what happens on a personal level, so you know that’s what I’m saying, it’s that powerful. *You can become a different person*.

This change in the way correctional officers view prisoners who are educating themselves helps facilitate better relationships between prisoners and officers, which also helps retain safety and security in the prison. Furthermore, as incarcerated students begin to view themselves differently through their classes, it affects the way their own families and communities view them. Mike suggests that “a program like this just creates more links: to our communities, to our world, to our families, to ourselves”. He goes on to elaborate how prison education can impact families and communities:

People’s families can see a positive change in an individual that was once very recalcitrant, or was once very dangerous. This person is showing their family a different side of them, because they’re finding out and discovering different parts of themselves and their way of viewing the world...And our families are proud of us, and our friends are

proud of us, and it almost changes the community that we live in because now instead of wondering what type of person is gonna leave and if we're gonna go back to the same negative traits, the same areas, it gives them a peace of mind. It gives them a comfort that we have an opportunity if we choose to use it, to do better.

Such a desire to change the perceptions of their family or community was a large motivating factor for several of the interviewees. James explains that his desire to be the first college graduate in the family and to make his family proud was one of the main reasons he valued his prison education. "I wanted to prove to my mother that I was gonna be somebody," James shares, "...despite my condition, I'm going to really be somebody that she can be proud of". Tone adds that it is not only the fact that these prisoners are taking classes that affects their families, but also the way that they change their interactions with their community upon release:

The individual who in prison becomes educated through programs like CPE, they go back to society. The people who they know—their family members, their community—they only have an understanding of who that person was prior to going to prison. When they're released and they're speaking and moving and acting in different manners, this can basically have an influence on their own community, their own family members, and people who see them and say wow that person has changed. So what it does is it can galvanize change.

Education in prison can also change the way prisoners' children view them, an important step in breaking down the intergenerational cycle of incarceration. Deborah comments that the self-discovery that has come through her education has "been really rewarding for not just myself, but even for my children." Fernando argues that his successful graduation from college in prison helps to change the future of his family: "It essentially encourages my children, that for myself I'm the first member of my entire family, essentially my immediate generation, to have graduated from college. And now they can do it too. It's changing the path that was previously walked on in a new direction."

By changing the perceptions of all those around them—their families, communities, professors, classmates, peers and correctional officers—students who educate themselves while in prison are also fighting to change the collective image of “who” a prisoner truly is. As the students of prison education programs experience dramatic shifts in the way they view themselves, they are simultaneously fighting against the stereotypes and stigmas that accompany incarceration. As Tone comments, “I’m fighting something, a war against negative perceptions about guys that go to prison, and I have to contradict it. I have to contradict the original perception of what a guy who goes to prison looks like, what he does with his time, and what he does after he leaves prison.”

This type of shift in perception not only originates in personal identity transformations, but also in powerful ideological shifts experienced by students of college-in-prison programs, that in turn change both how they see themselves and how others see them. Mike argues that in fact the main purpose of the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education is to “free the minds of the people that are incarcerated” in order to “take the veil off” and change their belief system. “Once you change your ideology,” Mike continues, “you change your thought process. And that changes your words, and then your actions, and then your whole way of being”. For Mike, this shift in ideology came out of the close connection between the academic and the personal in college classes in prison. Fred shares that developing critical thinking was “the most important thing that impacted [his] life in college.” Applying critical analysis skills to his own life helped Fred to think more deeply about his own personal strengths and potential:

I think it really opened my mind and challenged me to do some critical thinking. And I think that’s where I began to look at life differently...when you start to apply that to your personal life and where you want your life to go and how you see your life going, you start to do some analysis on that...you begin to say man

I've been in school, I can't keep going that way, I gotta make it better for myself when I get out of here.

Tone attributes his shift in mentality to the content of a liberal arts education that gave him the tools to understand himself in the context of larger social systems. He describes himself and the other students in the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education as the “New Political Prisoners,” explaining that they became “politically awakened” through higher education in prison as they began to see “how the system—the social system, the political system, the economic system—plays a role in their disposition.” Tone elaborates that through his Wesleyan education, he discovered that his “disposition from the beginning was political,” because there were “so many different political things that obviously were put into place to deter a group of people from progressing in society. He clarifies that in this process he was “not trying to remove myself from responsibility for my actions, but just to have an understanding of the larger picture.” Tone argues that this type of liberal arts education can actually help incarcerated individuals fight the oppression they face, by “providing information that more or less will bring about an awareness to guys that are incarcerated on how to overcome the challenges they face in society.”

Mike adds that prison education also gives incarcerated students the empowering experience of joining a larger educational network:

I think going to class there, being a part of something much greater than myself and much greater than the institution, and much greater than even Wesleyan...there was a vibrancy, there was a life there that, when you walked through the door, you felt the synergy, you felt the energy, you were part of that dynamic, and you were plugged into the world.

It is clear that the experience of education in prison can be powerfully transformative for the incarcerated students who have the privilege of being offered that

opportunity, and in many ways this type of education reverses the typical role of schooling in America, becoming a force of liberation instead of domination. By helping both prisoners and their communities break out of traditionally accepted stigmatizing notions of the identities and lives of “criminals”, prison education has the power to produce an ideological shift not only in those who participate in the classes, but in all those who are connected to them.

How is it that education in prison is able to take on this liberating function? What makes prison education different from school on the outside? Along with ideological shifts, is prison education capable of changing the life courses of incarcerated students and liberating them from their status at the bottom of the social hierarchy? I explore these questions in the next section as I attempt to lay out all the possible ways that prison education effectively reverses the function of schooling.

3.5 Pedagogy in Prison

“You need something that tells you, you can make it after this, and you can be something that you once dreamed about being. I never thought that I would be able to do the things that I did in that classroom, those classrooms. And early on I never felt that I’d have another opportunity to show myself and to be proud again, to actually think that I can make a difference.” – Mike

Education in prison clearly serves a different function than school previously did in the lives of the individuals I interviewed, helping them to expand their realities instead of locking them in a limited frame of thought. What is it about prison education that produces this change? Would all types of higher education brought into a prison produce a similar liberating affect, or are there specific aspects of the education my interview subjects received that produced this powerful experience?

Using my observations while facilitating college-preparatory workshops in a high security men's correctional institution to supplement the interviews, I have created a list of qualities of prison education that seem to contribute to its capacity to reverse the oppressive function of schooling and allowing for a new type of liberatory learning. Most of these factors apply across all of the types of prison education experienced by my interview subjects—including intensive accredited liberal arts college programs, non-credit college theater classes, and degree-granting community college programs—but in the cases where they may apply only to certain types of education, I make that explicit.

1. *Oppressive Prison Setting*

While this may seem obvious, the fact that the classes are taking place in the context of an extremely oppressive institution of punishment changes the power of the education. In this setting, classes become a positive respite from a negative and controlling environment, and therefore take on a liberatory quality just in their ability to bring individuals out of their cells and disrupt an extremely disciplined and regulated routine. The contrast between the classroom and the prison cell thus becomes magnified, with each location holding a different symbolic value in the lives of the prisoners. The urban public schools that most of the participants attended, on the other hand, are increasingly growing to resemble the heavily monitored and disciplined structure of the prison itself, adding to the feeling of negativity and insecurity that struggling students experience instead of providing a safe, positive space for learning.

2. *Inclusion & High Expectations*

While our public schools become increasingly reliant on exclusionary discipline and effectively work to exclude a targeted demographic of students, prison education works to *include* those very individuals that were previously excluded, as there is emphasis on retaining all the students who are in the class. Not only are students experiencing a new type of educational inclusion, but for many of the participants this was also the first time they were part of a classroom that held them to high expectations and believed that they would be successful.

Mike shares that the professors in prison “really appealed to the sense inside that everyone can learn, and you can learn from anything...and we were able to advance as far as we wanted to advance”. The professors and staff of the college in prison programs also *want* to see the students excel and are extremely invested in the success of these individuals, both out of a genuine care for the students involved and out of a desire for the program to continue. Prison education offers students access to a space where they are not only allowed to succeed, but actually encouraged and *expected* to succeed. It is no surprise that in this environment, students who did not previously perform well in school are now able to excel and far surpass their own expectations of themselves, facilitating the liberation of prisoners from their negative self-esteem as students. In this way education in prison allows these individuals to finally feel like their classes are designed entirely *for them*, escaping the perception of school as being “for other people”.

3. *Teacher-Student Relationships*

All of the participants who took classes in prison commented on the importance of their relationship with their professors, and how this was a very different kind of teacher-

student relationship than they had previously experienced. The participants in the Wesleyan Center for Prison Education in particular highlighted these relationships as being significant and powerful components of their experience, which may be reflective of the emphasis of liberal arts education on generating more intimate and supportive professor-student relationships. Mike commented that the professors were more “open” in their interactions and more “on the same level”, as compared to the distanced, authoritarian model of teaching often embraced in schools on the outside. Tone agreed, adding that they had “mutual” relationships with professors due to a “genuine respect for each other”. Tone elaborated that professors respected prisoners for their intellectual abilities, and prisoners respected professors for providing this opportunity and being “open-minded enough” to understand that prisoners can handle rigorous course material.

For many of the participants, this was the first time they experienced an educational relationship where they were treated as equally intelligent, capable students. In prison, students felt much more supported and respected by their teachers. With the exception of Kenny, who did not take classes while in prison, *all* of the interviewees commented not only on the impact their professors had on them at the time, but also the way that their relationships have continued. These participants all stay in touch with their professors, and many of them are either currently working with their professors outside of prison or are in the process of arranging collaborations. Even years after taking classes, these students are still communicating with their professors, suggesting that these relationships were mutually-significant and produced a type of connection that is rare in any classroom, and essentially nonexistent in their previous school experiences.

4. *Peer Community*

The incarcerated students not only experienced a new kind of relationship with teachers, but also with their classmates. Mike describes his classmates in the Wesleyan college-in-prison program as “an amazing support system,” saying “we found a camaraderie with one another, and we were able to lean on each other to get through...it was almost like we were family. We formed bonds that, regardless of whether I see those people again, they’ll always be a part of my life.” Tone explains that the college students in prison formed their community of a diverse group of individuals from different backgrounds who would not have otherwise interacted due to the nature of prison segregation. In this way prison education became a platform for a positive form of collective organization that directly contradicts the function of prisons to prevent any form of organizing or collaboration. Tone elaborates that it was a unique experience to have a diverse group of prisoners “forming a subgroup that was just founded on something positive, and not something negative like an actual gang. This was a positive coming-together for us as prisoners.”

Those in the Wesleyan program emphasized this communal aspect more than others, but many other participants did speak to the value of finding a supportive community of peers inside the prison. Several participants discussed how their classmates were able to be supportive both intellectually and personally, becoming positive figures in their lives who engaged with their thoughts and concerns. Mike comments that the relationships between classmates allowed for “positive growth for everyone”. Fred also adds that being in classes with other prisoners changed his perception of them, because those who he previously saw as threats or enemies now became fellow students and even role-models, enabling entirely different interactions than would not otherwise have been

possible. For many of the interviewees, like James in particular, this was also the first time they experienced a sense of belonging in a school setting, as they never before found a sense of community through academics.

5. Leadership & Status

Many of the participants discussed the empowering experience of becoming leaders and role models themselves in the prison due to their educational status. For students who previously felt like failures in school, this provided a unique opportunity to not only find educational success, but also begin to see themselves as capable of supporting others around them and taking on a level of leadership in their classes. They not only served as leaders in the classroom, but also gained a level of respect in the entire prison. By bringing what they were learning back to the blocks and sharing their education with others, they became role models for their peers in prison and felt a rewarding sense of being able to “give back” to others.

Some incarcerated students also saw their education as a chance to give back to those outside prison by becoming more productive and positive individuals, disproving stereotypes and challenging assumptions. As James comments: “I really wanted to give back because I have taken so much. And I wanted people to see, especially my peers who were in prison and my peers who were out, that you can change, you can really do it you know. And just put your best foot forward no matter how it may be, and good things will happen. Because you are really truly looking at a person that, you know I didn’t think I was gonna do it, I really didn’t think that id be sitting here talking to you.” While many of these incarcerated students may have previously been role models respected in certain circles for their crimes, they were now able to gain a kind of respect that is widely

validated as a social “good”, a much more fulfilling sense of status. This status also came from the fact that the higher education they were receiving in prison is extremely valorized in our society as a prestigious accomplishment. By providing access to college in prison, these programs also allow for incarcerated students to gain a level of social status that many of them would never have imagined possible.

6. *Critical Thought*

Another major difference between the education these students received in prison and their previous educational experience is the emphasis on critical thought and analysis as central to their learning. This is likely attributable more to the difference between higher and lower education than it is specifically to prison education, but nonetheless it is an important distinction between the types of education these students have experienced. The classes in prison do not have the same pressures as public high schools outside of prison to produce specific high-stakes test scores. Professors have much more control over the content they teach and the pedagogical methods they use to deliver it, and in general the skills of critical reading and writing are emphasized far more than rote memorization or test-taking. This makes the classes both challenging and engaging, offering the students a chance to view education as powerful and interesting instead of boring and repetitive. This also allows students a chance to develop an intellectual confidence and engage in challenging intellectual conversations and debates with one another, forming new forms of academic relationships.

7. *Connecting the Academic, Personal and Political*

By challenging students to think critically about themselves and the world around them, these classes also make the academic relevant to both the personal and political spheres. In my experience of facilitating workshops in Connecticut prisons, students applied the content of the classes in a more personal way than I have experienced in my own college classes on the outside. This seemed to arise out of the conscious intentions of both professors and students in the prison to make the classroom an important place for personal growth and learning. This also most likely arose from the reality that the classroom is one of the few places prisoners have to share or process their own experiences in a positive setting with other prisoners *and* individuals from the outside, so it becomes a unique setting to ground critical academic thought in personal reflection.

As discussed in the last section, bringing college classes into prison can also take on a political undertone as well, especially in the context of a liberal arts institution like Wesleyan. By sharing a liberal ideology that explores the broader political context of incarceration, a college education can produce a kind of political awakening in prisoners that gives them a stronger understanding of their own social positioning. This connection between the academic, personal and political realms is a powerful vehicle for individual growth and transformation. Indeed, many of the participants viewed education in prison as a chance to “better” themselves and make important changes in their lives, and therefore came into these classes with a level of personal and political consciousness and a desire not only to learn abstract content, but to connect their learning with their own lives.

8. *Student Commitment*

Another important factor in prison education is the intense commitment of the students to their classes. All of the Wesleyan professors and volunteers I talked to about their experience teaching in prison shared that they were extremely impressed with the level of intensity and commitment students brought to their classes, as well as their strong work ethic. There are a number of factors that may contribute to this. For one, prisoners do not have as many other distractions to take them away from their studies, so they are able to focus strongly on their education. Students also *chose* to take part in these programs, and they therefore had a level of agency in deciding to participate, giving them more motivation to succeed than they might have had in school when they were required to attend but did not see any purpose in their learning. Taking classes in prison is also a rare opportunity and therefore a privilege for those who are accepted into the programs, providing an added incentive to take advantage of their classes. Finally, students may also work extremely hard out of a desire to “prove” themselves—to demonstrate that they are intelligent and capable individuals and to make their family and friends proud. Many of the interviewees discuss a kind of “second chance” mentality, explaining that they feel fortunate to have another chance to be a student and to succeed academically, and want to take full advantage of this opportunity. Regardless of the motivation behind this commitment, it is clear that the level of intensity with which incarcerated students approach their education makes a difference in the quality of the classes.

9. *Breaking the Cycle*

One of the main reasons that prison education becomes liberating is that it is working in the interest of creating a different kind of future for students, opening doors instead of closing off opportunities. For many of these students, their experiences in school on the outside actually *led to* their interactions with the criminal justice system and possibly their arrest. Bringing education into prison reverses this flow, working to *prevent* future entanglement with the criminal justice system and to reduce recidivism. Without education, Fred argues that prison is just “preparing us to come back home and do the same things that we did,” because “most people know that once you go into prison, you’re not gonna come out a better person, because you learn how to be a better criminal in there. That’s just the reality.” Dace shares this sentiment that prison is not serving to provide any kind of liberation from previous lifestyles or patterns, or to open up any new options: “The options are going to be very limited for a person coming out of prison. If they don’t have a way to educate themselves and begin to see themselves in a different perspective and a different light, they’re gonna be stuck in what they feel comfortable with, it’s the behavior that they came into the prison system with.”

Prison education is thus capable of transforming the role that prison can play in students’ lives, and giving them an entirely different perspective on themselves and their potential than their school ever did previously. Dace shares how he experienced this process himself:

I began to see things from a different perspective, and see life from a different perspective and be able to interact with my fellow human beings from a different perspective. So it really affected me in a lot of ways and I believe if I didn’t begin to educate myself I would

be back in prison now. Because I wouldn't be able to operate out of a certain mode which was a criminal element.

Tone similarly suggests that “education can provide a foundation to deter individuals from making choices in their personal lives that would cause them to be incarcerated”, and that prison education “can help guys in prison figure out what they want to do with their life”. Fred adds that he truly believes his prison education is responsible for getting him to go back to school on the outside and to find the job that he currently has. In this way prison education is changing the path that other schools previously prescribed for these students, and working to “break the cycle” of both thought and action by fighting negative perceptions and simultaneously preventing future interactions with the criminal justice system. The simple act of providing access to higher education in prison is potentially capable of working *against* our socio-economic structure instead of merely reproducing it. For this reason Deborah argues that we in fact have the *responsibility* to provide education and other rehabilitative services to prisoners if we are going to continue using the prison system:

I'm not saying we don't need prisons, we do, but we have a responsibility in making that decision. And that responsible decision then has to be about rehabilitation. Providing something for that person who is incarcerated, so that when they are released they have the means to be able to make a decent life, to be productive members of society, and to change the way that they've been doing things. And so that is our responsibility. Or I guess we could just continue to pay all these people and keep growing our prisons until eventually everyone in America is incarcerated...

As Dace notes, “if education is not included in the correctional system, then they should just take the word ‘Correctional’ off of it and let's just call it what it is, a prison system...because nothing is going to be ‘corrected’”.

3.6 Critiques of Prison Education

While prison education has a lot of clear benefits to those involved, it is also clearly an imperfect solution, and there are a number of legitimate challenges that can be raised as to the impact education programs in prison are currently having. In this section I explore several possible critiques of bringing education into prison and how they might be reconciled.

The most basic critique of prison education is one that I do not feel is sound, because even a cursory evaluation reveals that it is not based on rational analysis, but rather on unfounded collective anxieties and reactionary bitterness. I am referring to the line of argument that prisoners do not “deserve” to have an education, not to mention a free education, because they have committed crimes and therefore should be punished and pay their “debt” to society. This was in part the logic that motivated the denial of Pell Grants to prisoners. At first glance, this logic seems understandable. If we have a system in place to punish individuals for behaviors that we collectively agree are unacceptable and go against the public interest, it might be reasonable to suggest that these offenders should not be given rewards, especially in the form of a valorized type of education that is already difficult to access for individuals who have *not* committed any crimes. Indeed, a college education is still generally reserved for a privileged part of our population: those students who are able to both receive the proper preparation and spend the money on expensive tuitions. Why is it fair for prisoners to receive this same privilege for free, often without the same admissions qualifications? It is understandable that this idea might feel upsetting and unjust to many families who have worked hard to put their children

through college and who do not believe that just “anybody” should have access to a college education.

In some cases this comes from a desire to keep the “prestige” of a college degree by reserving it only for an elite few. In other cases, the frustration may come from the fact that there are still students who have worked extremely hard but are either not admitted or cannot afford to attend the colleges of their choice due to challenging circumstances and the many real obstacles to accessing a college education. It is easy to see how in this light, even separate from the moral issue of whether or not these prisoners “deserve” an education, it might feel unfair to provide a college education to “criminals” while continuing to deny it to a vast majority of the “innocent” members of our society.

All this being said, the above logic does not consider the purpose or the practical and long-term impact of prison education. In many ways it could be argued that prisoners deserve this education even more than many others, as they have generally been victims of unequal treatment their whole lives, and have been consistently denied a quality education as discussed in the last chapter and in the individual interviews. Separate from this issue of morality, the argument that prisoners should not receive any education or rehabilitation as a form of punishment and a way to pay back their “debt” to society seems fundamentally misguided. If prisoners are expected to return to their communities as productive, positive, law-abiding contributors, then it is in society’s best interest to provide the services that can enable this successful re-entry. If prison education has the potential to positively impact prisoners, to change their life course and even to prevent recidivism, this also contributes to our overall public safety. Denying prisoners an education is therefore not only punishing individual offenders, but also punishing their families, communities, and our society as a whole.

The critique could also be made that educating prisoners is a waste of money and resources that could be used to support other educational initiatives that need funding. Yet if prison education helps prevent recidivism, in the end it is a much better investment, as it will actually save money. As Fernando notes: “It costs more money to incarcerate someone than to send them through a privately sponsored prison education program, which statistically demonstrates more gain for an investment than incarcerating someone with no meaningful opportunities.”

Even if one believes that prisoners deserve to receive an education, it is still possible that higher education is not the most valuable service to offer prisoners, for the kind of “mental” liberation it provides may not translate into actual increased opportunities or social mobility. Prisoners may not be able to fully access the social rewards of a college degree, as the discrimination and stigmatization they experience post-release from their criminal record may prevent them from taking full advantage of the benefits that a college degree might grant other graduates. In this way trade-oriented classes and jobs may actually allow for more practical applications upon release, as they can provide the skills necessary for easier employment. While higher education in prison helps break individuals out of an internalized fatalistic acceptance of their oppression, the positive outlook it inspires may be rooted in a kind of false hope if it is not actually able to impact their material reality. The empowering rhetoric of individual agency that many of the respondents expressed during interviews may not enable the kind of social mobility necessary to truly liberate themselves from their socio-economic positioning, as there is still not enough documented evidence to demonstrate whether this actually opens up new opportunities post-release.

On the other hand, many of the participants believe that the education they received while incarcerated was the main root of not only their changed perspective, but also their ability to continue their education and to find employment. In this way, bringing higher education into prison may in fact produce serious material changes in the lives of the individuals involved, and may even enable them to pass down this changed perspective and changed social positioning to their children and to break the intergenerational cycle of incarceration. Perhaps most importantly, every participant seemed confident that they would not ever return to prison, and that their experience of education in prison was largely responsible for preventing them from recidivating.

Still, for prison education to extend beyond individuals to have a legitimate impact in fighting the structure of inequality built into our social institutions, classes would have to be offered to a much greater proportion of the skyrocketing prison population, and creating that kind of institutional framework inside of prisons risks “bolster[ing] the permanence of the prison system” as a whole (Davis 2003). The most radical prison abolitionists argue that by attempting to “reform” our current prison system, we may actually be *contributing* to the growth of prisons by institutionalizing structures that rely on prisons to continue operating. Furthermore, normalizing education and other programming inside prisons throughout the country might be counterproductive in the fight to abolish prisons as the dominant mode of punishment, for if prison education is seen as the “solution” to our current crisis of mass incarceration, we may stop seeing the need to address the larger structure of punishment and the institutionalized racism and classism in our criminal justice system.

The rhetoric of “individual responsibility” often found in prison education programs may further remove us from the responsibility to address the systemic injustice

of mass incarceration. Prison education programs are plagued with the neoliberal ideology of “personal” responsibility that assumes a meritocratic society that fairly rewards those who work hard and punishes those who do not earn their success. Whether or not this type of “meritocracy” is even possible, the United States is not even close to reflecting this supposed ideal, as evidenced by the extreme disparities in access to opportunities and social services. As discussed in previous chapters, our schools and prisons are perfect examples of the dramatic inequalities in the functioning of social institutions. By putting the responsibility on incarcerated individuals to change their paths in society, does the rhetoric of prison education simultaneously release us from our social responsibility to challenge the systems that lock them up first place? As Sandra eloquently articulates:

So then if you're not helping me, what are you asking of me? You cannot ask nothing of me other than back to a life of crime. And this is why I'm constantly saying, somebody has to be responsible, not just the ex-offenders who keep offending, re-offending and going back to prison. Yes, they should take responsibility, but what about the community? What about us as a country? What about us as a people? You want me to come home and become a productive member, how am I gonna do that when I cannot find a job...and you're removing all these programs that can help me.

As Tone noted, the motto of the Connecticut Department of Corrections Unified School District #1 is the Latin phrase ‘Non Sum Qualis Eram,’ which translates to English as “I am not, what I once was”. While Tone is justified in seeing this motto as an empowering validation of the possibility for prisoners to change themselves and transform their lives, it can also be interpreted as an overly individualistic account of change rooted in neoliberal ideologies of “personal responsibility”. The motto does nothing to implicate anyone other than individual prisoners in the process of breaking down cycles of incarceration, and may actually perpetuate the hegemonic acceptance of the inherent “criminality” of those at the bottom of our racial and class hierarchies. The slogan

suggests that prisoners must change something fundamental about “what” they once “were” in order to liberate themselves, playing into accepted notions that certain individuals in our society simply “are” inherently criminal and need to change something fundamental about their very being in order to be included in our society.

The Department of Corrections website lists their goal with this mission statement, explaining “the hope is that through education, offenders will be provided with one of the core tools required to change their path in life” (Department of Correction 2012). While education is undeniably a powerful and rare tool for prisoners, and does indeed seem to contribute to individuals’ desires and abilities to “change their path in life”, when are we going to start taking responsibility as a society for limiting the “paths” that are available to our own people in the first place? When are we going to replace the “I’s” with “we’s” and begin changing not only our institutional policies, but our own racist and classist perceptions and actions? As a country rooted in a history of oppression, when will we be able to say with confidence that *we* are not who *we* once were?

3.7 Education as Liberation

Prison education has powerful liberating impacts that ripple from individual students out to entire prisons and whole communities, but it still remains a fundamentally reactive band-aid solution to a problem that is rooted in our systemic approach to social control. Tone explains that college programs in prison are in reality “responding to something that is flawed in our social system...the fact that I had to go to prison to get into college, it seems that there’s a reactionary response there”. Without an awareness of the “flaws in our social system” that lead to mass incarceration in the first place, prison

education programs run the risk of falling back on neoliberal notions of “individual responsibility” that place the blame on oppressed groups for their own oppression, creating a sense of “false hope” in the possibility of achieving the “American dream” through hard work and self-improvement, without taking responsibility as a society for making the necessary structural changes to make this dream even close to an achievable reality. Dace encourages a more preventative approach to reform that addresses this structural inequality, suggesting that we “begin to look at what the real problems are and re-direct those resources into areas which will prevent us from having the sort of problems we have, instead of trying to correct them on the back end.” With the increasing evidence of the role targeted schools now play in sending students down a pipeline to prison, it seems that if we could change our educational system on the outside, it might prevent students from entering the criminal justice system in the first place.

Even if prison education does not ultimately address the “real problems”, it is still a uniquely liberatory structure of education that might be able to serve as a model for broader structural changes in public education on the outside, as it reveals the potential for education in any setting to facilitate personal and social transformation instead of merely reproducing existing belief systems and power structures. Prison education programs like CPE and the other models experienced by the individuals I interviewed work to transform the prison cell into a space for positive intellectual growth and the classroom into a structure for personal liberation, reversing the roles that both of these rooms would otherwise play as confining cages of social repression.

There is a great irony that the prison, arguably the most repressive of all our social institutions, can become the setting for a rare form of liberatory education. Yet I argue that the very oppressive nature of the prison actually *enables* this type of liberatory

pedagogy, by making visible the reality of institutional control that is present in all educational structures, but is normally masked behind the supposed ideals of protecting the “common interest”. The material and ideological domination over those at the bottom of our social hierarchy is impossible to ignore inside the prison. The incarcerated students’ complete exclusion from the material rewards of society is extremely visible, for the students are literally caged and cut off from the outside world. The structure of ideological oppression is also exposed in this setting, for as prisoners succeed as college students, they simultaneously challenge the hegemonic acceptance of their inherent “criminality”. Prison education is therefore able to expose the dialectic that exists between the ideological acceptance of those at the bottom of our social hierarchy as “criminals” and the material reality of their exclusion from society—the intersection of the Marxist and Foucauldian theories of control. As long as the “underclass” of our society remains excluded, their criminal status is never questioned; as long as they are perceived as criminals, their exclusion is never questioned.

Prison education becomes liberating in its ability to break this cycle by creating a space where supposed “criminals” interact as social and intellectual equals with academics, challenging the entire legitimacy of the naturalized criminalization of those at the bottom of our social hierarchy. While the process of social control is hidden from view in schools on the outside through political rhetoric and exclusionary discipline, inside the prison education is capable of exposing the injustice of our system by revealing the very humanity of those individuals that we otherwise treat as disposable. When prisoners enter the classroom, they transform from “criminals” into “students” in the eyes of those around them, challenging societal preconceptions of their social value and demonstrating that they are equally worthy of inclusion in our society. This process also gives the

incarcerated students a framework to re-evaluate their view of themselves and their reality, helping to break them out of internalized self-conceptions and giving them the confidence to believe they are not only capable of academic success, but also capable of a finding a new place in society that was previously inconceivable. In this way education in prison serves to reverse the function of schooling in America, opening minds and opportunities instead of closing them, and turning the intersection of schools and prisons into a force of liberation instead of domination.

In his foundational text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, education theorist Paulo Freire argues that that the path to liberation begins with the development of a “critical consciousness” of the system of oppression and our place within it, a process that seems to occur in prison classes (2000). Freire argues that this liberating consciousness develops out of a more critical approach to teaching and specifically a form of “critical pedagogy” that seems to cover exactly the methods used in prison education programs. Unlike the exclusionary, punitive practices sweeping urban public schools, the schools inside of prisons rely on inclusive, communal spaces that encourage critical thought and personal growth. This is a stark change from the participants’ previous schooling, which exemplified an extreme version of the “banking” approach to education that Freire criticizes, a type of education relying on a vertical transmission of information that now functions not only “to project an ignorance onto students” (Freire 2000) but also to *criminalize* these students, creating an even more striking oppressive relationship. In this way students were completely alienated from their learning process, as their school became an instrument of punishment and their teachers increasingly acted as disciplinary authority figures, socializing them into an acceptance of their exclusion from society and their inability to alter their reality. Prison education radically changes the function of

education, as all of the pedagogical strengths of the prison classroom previously discussed—inclusion, supportive teacher-student relationships, peer community, leadership and status, critical thought, personal and political relevance, and student commitment—ultimately facilitate a fundamental resistance to the control of the prison, working to break the cycle of social exclusion and internalized oppression. Freire argues that through this kind of change in pedagogy, education can become a tool for political liberation, for the politics of the classroom and the way that students learn shapes the way they interact with and construct their own reality. In truly liberatory education, Freire suggests that “people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (2000:83).

For nearly all of the individuals I interviewed, prison education was the first time they were able to imagine a different path for themselves, and realize that they might actually be worthy of the opportunities they were consistently denied. Judging from the impact prison education had on even just the small sample of participants in this study, it is clear that it can produce profound personal and ideological shifts for those involved. This change in perception extends beyond the prison walls as well, challenging prisoners’ families, friends and communities to rethink their own assumptions, which facilitates material changes in prisoners’ lives as well, helping to “break the cycle” of incarceration by preventing recidivism and opening up future educational and employment opportunities. While future studies could explore in more depth the statistical impact of prison education programs on recidivism rates and future life chances, it is clear from the sample I interviewed that education can have a profound effect on prisoners’ lives upon

release, possibly even encouraging them to become more actively involved as leaders in their communities and positive role models for their friends and families.

Prison education not only reveals the underlying structure of oppression, but also reclaims the very tools of social control as a force of resistance. Prison education facilitates both ideological and material shifts in prisoners' lives, using the connection between the two to *break* the cycle of domination—indeed, Freire argues that critical pedagogy gives individuals the power to transform their own conditions through this dialectical relationship between their material base and their subjective ideology, suggesting that the very process of control theorized by Foucault and Marx can be restructured as a force of liberation. In this way, education can serve a humanizing role in the midst of a dehumanizing institution, because instead of merely “integrating” students into an existing structure of oppression, it allows them to actively reconstruct their own reality and become “beings for themselves” (Freire 2000:74). In a truly humanizing pedagogy, education ceases to be a tool for the manipulation of students, “because it expresses the consciousness of the students themselves” (p. 68).

While prison education is a reactive approach to deeply unequal social formations, studying the successes of this uniquely liberatory and humanizing institutional intersection can provide us with a glimmer of hope for possible changes we could replicate throughout our education system. Angela Davis argues that schools are capable of becoming “the most powerful alternative to jails and prisons,” for through a transformation of our educational structure, we can “transform schools into vehicles for decarceration” (2003:108). Prison education may provide a model for this transformation. If we could apply some of the intentionality and pedagogy behind prison education to our approach to education on the outside, we might be able to use our schools to facilitate

broader social change, subverting their current function as enforcers of social hierarchies and precursors to detention centers and turning them into humanizing institutions that work to include and empower *all* members of our society.

Conclusion

“It’s fine when it’s not you. That’s what it is. And then when it affects your world, when it’s you yourself, or your niece or your nephew or your daughter or son, or your father or mother or wife or husband, when it touches home, when it comes close, everyone changes their perspective. My family had a set perspective...but I think me being incarcerated changed that. I think that it showed them just how human the people [in prison] can be.” – Mike

In the last few decades the United States has undergone a dramatic shift in paradigm in our approach to social control, riding a wave of “tough on crime” rhetoric to our current strategy of zero-tolerance punitive discipline that washes away any ideals we once claimed of social inclusion or meritocratic societal equality. With the use of both our schools and prisons, we have effectively created a comprehensive system of legalized social control unparalleled in world history. Even more disturbing is that a closer look reveals that our system of institutional control is also a complete failure. Extensive social science research has demonstrated that the use of zero tolerance policies in both educational and penal reform have been ineffective in addressing the real issues facing our schools and communities today. As Tone suggests in the end of our interview, “maybe imprisonment as a theory has proven false. It doesn’t work.”

On the other hand, it is possible that our social institutions are not failing at all, for in many ways they are performing their intended function very well. Both our schools and prisons are operating to recreate the societal hierarchies that allow those at the top of our social ladder to continue benefiting from this system. Prisons have effectively taken on the “larger societal project of the penal management of marginalized, low-income youth of color” (Nolan 2011:43), a project that remains necessary to retain the uneven distribution of social power in our country. This falls in line with a Marxist perspective that our social institutions reproduce economic inequality and class hierarchy while

socializing our students into an acceptance of capitalist rationality. Yet instead of integrating our youth into their roles within a stratified labor force, we are now locking our students *out* of the labor force and channeling them into a growing infrastructure of incarceration.

American social institutions have experienced a dramatic shift in paradigm in the past few decades. Our penal system has shifted the focus away from any kind of rehabilitative or re-integrative function, now operating almost exclusively to manage and warehouse a growing proportion of our population. Our educational system has begun implementing the rhetoric of “tough on crime” street policing and penal management into everyday practices, using structures of surveillance to monitor and control students and relying on law enforcement officers to police student behavior. Yet the power of our schools and prisons comes from their *combined* effect, as policy reform in both education and penal management has brought the systems closer than ever, making it hard to tell where one institution ends and the next begins. The two institutions have grown to resemble one another both materially and ideologically, exemplifying Foucault’s concept of the “carceral continuum” more than ever as they work individuals into conformity by defining the “normal” and the “deviant” and ensuring that these categories are carefully policed. With the combined influence of zero-tolerance discipline and high-stakes testing, impoverished urban public schools are beginning to look more like prisons, arguably serving more to regulate and control students than to teach them. The fixation on punitive discipline and test-score improvement outweighs all other goals, eclipsing even pedagogical priorities and “creating an environment that is so repressive that it is no longer conducive to learning” (Noguera 2003).

As schools and prisons come to resemble each other in both their physical structures and their ideological operation, they have also come to interact closely with one another, facilitating the creation of the school-to-prison pipeline that pushes students out of impoverished urban schools and into prisons, blurring the boundary between once separate domains. Both schools and prisons have left behind their supposed ideals of liberation and social inclusion (though it is debatable whether these were *ever* the intentions of our institutions) and adopted the role of disciplinarians and punishment enforcers as they police the boundaries of social norms and perpetuate existing structures of power. They have both become increasingly focused on individual records as prerequisites to “success” and social mobility, as students are treated as test-scores and prisoners are treated as criminal-records. Both institutions have also become increasingly punitive, relying on severe exclusionary discipline and mandatory sentencing without taking into account the underlying causes of deviance or the specificity of individual circumstances. Perhaps the most devastating intersection of prisons and schools is their shared ability to reflect and perpetuate structures of inequality as they work to control and manage those who are already socially, economically and racially disadvantaged in our country. Both institutions treat lower-class youth of color as disposable and effectively work to keep them out of full participation in our society.

The power of this pervasive multi-institutional approach to social control is that it markets itself as protecting the “common interest” while simultaneously functioning to relieve us of the responsibility to *actually* protect those parts of our society that need the most help. While the dramatic growth of the penal system and the increasing use of zero-tolerance school discipline have not shown any correlations with crime rates, public support for punitive social policy was made possible by the political capitalization on

widely shared fears of crime and the “corrupted” urban youth viewed as responsible for it. Even while evidence shows that the growth of the prison system was largely an overreaction to a perceived crisis of increasing crime and violence, the ideological stance of “tough on crime” was an easy sell to a society unable to address the many real problems it faced with the ending of New Deal economics and the erosion of social services. This structure of social control was able to grow to unparalleled levels in part because the very people whose fears motivated this change—largely white, middle class America—did not experience the devastating impacts of the policies they put in place. While suburban parents fought to “protect” their children through supporting increasingly pro-security and zero-tolerance attitudes, they remained apathetic to the brutal attack on urban youth that these attitudes created, sending a message that only some children in this country are worth protecting.

In fact, the very policies in place to “protect” us are largely responsible for the vast assault on the most marginalized members of our society. In our attempt to secure the “public safety,” we have put an entire section of our population in extreme danger. Yes, many of our impoverished urban schools are dangerous. They are dangerous not because they are filled with inherently “criminal” and “at-risk” urban youth, but because we have *put* our youth at risk and *branded* them as criminals. Our schools are dangerous because we are now using them to invade our children’s legal rights, revoke their democratic agency, deny them a quality education and send them on a path to prison. Our schools are dangerous because we are withdrawing our resources from the social services that are most needed and disempowering the very communities that are already pushed to the bottom of our social hierarchy. It is not our children that are dangerous, it is our children that are *in danger*, and we are the ones destroying their very safety. It takes an extremely

nuanced and well-manuevered political rhetoric to turn worries about the well-being of our youth into *fear* of those children—to turn a desire to protect our public safety into a broad attack on the safety of an entire section of our society. As fewer children are returning to school and more adults are returning to prison, it is about time that we recognize and take responsibility for the failures of our schools and prisons.

Our blindness to the growing crisis of our institutions of social control comes not just from the fact that it affects only a very targeted section of our population, but also from the hegemonic acceptance of this group as a “natural” criminal underclass. By stigmatizing the “other” that needs to be policed and controlled—and effectively hardening into our public consciousness the stereotypical image of the “criminal” as a young, black urban male—we are able to legitimize the vastly disproportionate filtering of lower-class students of color out of our schools and into our prisons. As Angela Davis comments, there is now a “dominant social expectation that young black men (and increasingly women) will move naturally from the free world into prison, where, it is assumed, they belong” (2003:103). In this way the current discourse of both education and criminal justice policy continues to reinforce deeply embedded stereotypes by stigmatizing *all* low-income youth of color regardless of their criminal involvement. This both motivates and justifies our racist and classist use of institutions, because as our schools and prisons reproduce the power structure of the outside world, they simultaneously reproduce the acceptance of our unequal social structure as “natural”.

The terrifying reality of this hegemonic system of oppression is that it not only works from the top down, but also operates by “simultaneously annexing the power of the energy of those on the bottom for its own ends” (Collins 2000). The formerly incarcerated individuals who participated in this study all expressed an internalization of their own

position in society, in large part due to the influence of social institutions that taught them they would never be able to change their path. With the exception of the two middle-class participants, all of the respondents shared negative experiences of school before prison, explaining that their education locked them into a narrow mindset by forcing them to follow a limited, irrelevant curriculum without any guidance or support. School was a place where they were either ignored or punished, if not excluded altogether, leaving them with the feeling that they were not capable of academic success and did not deserve the same social rewards as other students. Their educational experience led them to internalize their view of themselves as failures, delinquents and criminals, a perception that was reinforced by their subsequent incarceration. By the time they flowed down the pipeline from the classroom to the prison cell, they had already accepted their fate of social rejection and exclusion.

For most of the participants, taking classes in prison was one of the first times in their lives that they stopped to question how they arrived at their social positioning and realized the dehumanizing truth of their own social exclusion. Becoming a student in prison was a way of regaining their humanity, liberating them from their fatalistic internalized self-conceptions and giving them a new hope in their ability to change their prescribed path and find a new place in society that was previously unimaginable. Through their educational success, incarcerated students were able to regain a sense of self-confidence and pride while simultaneously challenging the hegemonic acceptance of their inherent “criminality” by changing the perceptions of those around them. Along with these ideological changes, prison education also produces material changes in prisoners’ lives post-release, improving their chances of finding employment, continuing their education, and preventing recidivism. In this way these programs help to “break the

cycle” of incarceration, reversing the function of our social institutions by turning the intersection of schools and prisons into sites of resistance.

While prison education can become a positive respite from the dehumanizing reality of prison, it is still a fundamentally reactive solution that does not address the underlying structural factors that lead to mass incarceration in the first place. Prison education programs often fall back on neoliberal notions of “individual responsibility” that blame prisoners for their own oppression without taking responsibility as a society for the changing the structural forces that led to their incarceration in the first place. Some critics of prison education further argue that institutionalizing “reformist” programming within prisons actually contributes to the permanence of our system of social control. While prison education is not a solution to our current crisis of social control, it is undeniably a liberating experience for the individuals involved, and provides a unique insight into the possibility of reversing the way our institutions are functioning.

The oppressive nature of the prison ironically allows for a unique type of liberatory education. While educational structures on the outside arguably serve a similar function of social exclusion, this form of oppression is masked behind a political rhetoric. In the prison, this structure of domination becomes highly visible. Prison education is therefore able to expose the dialectic that exists between the hegemonic acceptance of the “criminality” of those at the bottom of our social hierarchy and the material reality of their exclusion from society. In revealing the underlying structure of oppression, prison education is then able to *break* this cycle of domination by empowering incarcerated students to reclaim their agency over the construction of their ideological and material reality. This form of empowerment comes through a change in pedagogy, incorporating specific strategies of “critical pedagogy” advocated by Paulo Freire. Classes inside prisons

often become safe communities that emphasize inclusion and encourage critical thought, a striking difference from the emphasis on testing and exclusionary punishment that the majority of incarcerated students experienced in school previously. Prison education reveals the possibility for broader social change, for if we could recreate this type of liberating educational space in our mainstream educational system, we could conceivably transform our schools from institutions of social domination into vehicles of liberation.

Yet we will not be able to transform our institutions until we transform ourselves—until we open our eyes to the current destruction being caused by our massive multi-institutional approach to social control. While the highly targeted impact of our current social institutions allows those who are not directly affected to remain apathetic, complacency is no longer an innocent position. Michelle Alexander argues that public apathy is actually perpetuating this system of racist oppression, for “racial caste systems do not require racial hostility or overt bigotry to thrive. They need only racial indifference” (2010:14). By merely remaining complicit with the merging of our prisons and schools into our current structure of social control, we are not only justifying the caging of over 2.3 million people, we are also supporting the belief that an entire race and class of people in our country are inherently criminal and therefore entirely disposable. In a society that systematically excludes its most marginalized members from social, economic and political participation, it is time for us to rethink who the real “criminals” and “victims” are in this process.

Bowles and Gintis suggest that “social transformation will only take place when basic social institutions lose their appearance of normality and inevitability to reveal their fundamental irrationality to such an extent that even individuals benefiting from their progress consciously seek alternative social arrangements” (1976:40). I can only hope that

I have made a solid case for the irrationality of our current social institutions over the course of this thesis. Furthermore, while the privileged members of our society may be “benefiting” from this process in some ways, in reality they have a lot more to lose in allowing this structure of social control to continue. The example of prison education reveals the value not only of breaking down the barriers of access to social rewards, but also of breaking the barriers that prevent us from interacting with people who are different from ourselves. The education I received at Cheshire and York Correctional Institutions ended up being the most personally powerful and transformative learning experience I have had in my entire time at Wesleyan, because it forced me to step outside my familiar social structure and challenged me to question my own internalized assumptions. As I got to know the many brilliant incarcerated intellectuals in these workshops, I was ultimately forced to confront the internalized racist and classist beliefs that I never even realized I had.

By segregating us into radically different experiences, our institutional structure prevents critical intercultural dialogue that could help to break down our reliance on oppressive hegemonic ideologies and allow us to begin thinking critically for ourselves. The blurring of prisons and schools into our current paradigm of institutional control not only excludes a targeted group of people from full participation in society, it also locks *all* of us into limited realities, preventing us from embracing and learning from the true diversity of perspectives in our country. We *all* have something to gain in opposing the current system of social domination, for true liberation does not come from the policing of normative uniformity—it comes from the acceptance of radical diversity. While only some of us are systematically kicked out and locked up, until we overcome our fear of difference, we will all remain imprisoned in our own isolated social realities.

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