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Seen But Not Heard

Personal Narratives of Systemic Failure Within the School-to-Prison Pipeline

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Abstract

The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) involves harsh discipline practices and exclusionary processes that disproportionately affect students of color by excluding them from K-12 education and increasing the likelihood of their involvement with the criminal justice system. To curtail these unjust practices and end the negative effects of the STPP, much of the academic literature provides insight into the causes of the STPP and proposes solutions to this problem. However, the voices of those who have experienced the STPP are largely missing from the literature. Specifically, the perspective of academically capable but historically unsuccessful incarcerated adults is largely unknown. This paper uses first-hand narratives developed using evocative autoethnographic methodology to describe the K-12 experiences of currently incarcerated college students. The STPP literature and two developmental theories (Bronfenbrenner (1979); Maslow (1971)) frame the narratives that explore A) interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences within the STPP; B) the complex interplay of the systems the authors interacted with; C) unmet needs that prevented educational attainment; and D) unanswered questions such as: "Who could I have been if someone had intervened?" This article concludes with questions that challenge readers to become engaged in social justice actions that can prevent current and future K-12 students from becoming oppressed and controlled by the STPP.

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Introduction

The more completely they [the oppressed] accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (Freire, 1970, p. 73)

It [humanization] is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity. (Freire, 1970, p. 43–44)

In theory, education offers the promise that all people can develop into critically reflective, self-actualized, empowered contributors to society (Bell, 2007; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970). However, in the United States, inequities in school funding and discipline mar this promise (Gregory, Skiba, & Noguera, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006). These inequities unjustly affect students from historically marginalized groups, such as students of color, children of immigrants, and families of low socioeconomic status (Kim, Losen, & Hewitt, 2010). The school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) is, perhaps, the most egregious example of these injustices. The STPP is a metaphor used to describe the harsh discipline policies and exclusionary practices that disproportionately funnel African American and Latino students away from academic success and toward the criminal justice system (Losen & Gillespie, 2012; Scully, 2015; Wald & Losen, 2003). Students who experience suspension and expulsion because of harsh disciplinary policies are three times more likely to become involved in the criminal justice system (Fabelo, Thompson, Plotkin, Carmichael, Marchbanks, & Booth, 2011). Frequently, these students spend their adult lives as incarcerated individuals striving to survive instead of free individuals contributing to society (Skiba, Arredondo, & Williams, 2014).

In recent years, the STPP has garnered the attention of scholars (e.g., Skiba et al., 2014; Scully, 2015), governmental agencies (e.g., U.S. Department of Education, 2014), and professional organizations (e.g., American Psychological Association, 2008; National Education Association, 2016). These valuable contributions have provided awareness, understanding, and promising solutions to the STPP. However, with the exception of a few articles (Annamma, 2014; Winn, 2010), the voices of those individuals within the STPP remain silent, especially the voices of incarcerated college students. According to Freire (1970) “One cannot expect positive results from an educational or political action program which fails to respect the particular view of the world held by the people” (p. 95). Through dialogue with those impacted by the STPP, community members and professionals, such as professors, policy makers, educators, and mental health practitioners, can collaboratively challenge cultural myths and develop critical consciousness in order to “transform

an unjust reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 174) of educational exclusion into a just reality of educational empowerment.

The purpose of this article is to enter into the STPP dialogue through the presentation of our narratives developed using autoethnographic research methodology. As three college students, who are currently incarcerated, and a professor who teaches prison education, we “converse with the literature” (Wall, 2008, p. 40) through a vulnerable exploration of our interpersonal and intrapersonal experiences (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). In response to simplistic and deficit perspectives of students within the STPP (Pyscher & Lozenski, 2014) we examine how unmet needs and complex systemic interactions influenced our identity development (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Consistent with autoethnography we discuss “tensions between connectedness and otherness” (Jensen–Hart & Williams, 2010, p. 464) and grapple with difficult questions (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) such as: “Who could I have been if someone had intervened?” By raising awareness of the ways power marginalizes students from oppressed and vulnerable communities, our goal is to deepen readers’ empathetic understanding of individuals within the STPP (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Ultimately, we hope readers find themselves impelled with “more urgency to work for justice” (Bell, 2010, p. 6–7).

Kalinda Jones’ Narrative: The Context

I was leaving prison. While standing inside the 12 foot, electrified, barbed–wired, fenced sally port at Ivory State Prison (ISP), I looked up at the guard tower and wondered again, “How did we lose them? These intelligent, articulate, and grateful college students are great writers and diligent scholars. If they are flourishing in the prison education program, why were they not successful in K–12?”

The questions I was asking were not new to me. They began in the winter of 2016 when I taught two sections of undergraduate Human Service classes at ISP, a maximum–security prison. Previously, my work as a high school teacher, therapist, school counselor, and professor had intersected with the STPP, but when I began teaching Human Service classes at ISP, I became deeply immersed.

Students enrolled in my Introduction to Psychology of Human Relations course completed reflective papers that focused on the application of psychological concepts to their lived experiences. As I read their stories, I was shocked, saddened, disappointed, outraged, and inspired. Their courageous self-reflections and hard fought transformations energized my commitment to work for social justice. I sensed that other educators would benefit from reading their stories; I tentatively invited one class to “think about” forming a writing group to communicate their experiences within the STPP. Some students nodded their heads and some opened their eyes in interest, but no one inquired further until the last day of the semester when Anthony Ferguson (one of my co–authors) asked, “Remember that writing project you mentioned? Is there a way we can still work on that?” Two weeks later, our meetings began.

Methodology

The Writing Team

The four authors of this paper comprised the writing team. Kalinda Jones is a 46-year-old White female who holds degrees in biology education, school counseling, and counseling psychology. Currently, she is a professor of Human Services at Folsom Lake College where she strives to facilitate students' development of self-awareness, cross-cultural helping skills, and critical consciousness. Christian Ramirez, a 28-year-old Chicano man, hopes to complete his Associate's degree in Human Services before he paroles. Eventually, he expects to complete graduate studies in the social and behavioral sciences. Anthony Ferguson is a 34-year-old African American man, who has completed Associate's degrees in social and behavioral sciences, Arts and Humanities, and American Studies. Upon his release from prison, he plans to earn a Master's degree in social work and obtain employment as an Addiction Therapist. Mike Owens is a 45-year-old African American man, published poet, and student currently working toward a degree in Human Services. While serving his life sentence, Mike looks for opportunities to collaborate with community-based organizations with whom he can help create new models for restorative justice.

Evocative Autoethnography

We utilized evocative autoethnography to guide the development and writing of this paper. Autoethnography is "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). Evocative autoethnography, a specific type of autoethnography, uses description and emotion to create stories that promote empathy and compassion (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). Consistent with our goals in writing this paper, autoethnography has been used in educational research and is recommended to increase educational equity by raising "emancipatory narratives to a place of prominence, where they can challenge the fragmented and pervasive messaging of the mainstream accounts" (Allen, Hancock, & Lewis, 2015, p. 180). Autoethnography empowered us to voice our experiences within the STPP (Allen et al., 2015) and connect those experiences to the larger educational context in the U.S. (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Ethics and trustworthiness are key aspects of evocative autoethnography (Bochner & Ellis 2016). In alignment with relational ethics, we used pseudonyms for people and places (Ellis et al., 2011). When this was not possible, we either discussed the content of the paper with those mentioned or attempted to mask their identities. Drawing on Ellis, Bochner, and James' (2000, 2006, 2011, & 2016) writings on autoethnography, we viewed language as socially constructed and subjective; therefore, we trust the readers to create their own meaning from our stories.

Keeping in mind that readers determine the trustworthiness of autoethnographies when they connect to the stories by experiencing them as credible and useful (Ellis, James, & Bochner, 2011), we strove to express our memories in an authentic, emotional, and meaningful manner.

Theoretical Framework

Our research team met to talk through each person's STPP story, read one another's written work, discuss the direction of the paper, and review literature and theoretical frameworks. As the stories evolved through cycles of discussion, writing, and revising, our writing team examined ways in which our (Christian, Anthony, and Michael) stories illustrated and reflected key concepts from the STPP literature and the psychological theories of Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Maslow (1971).

Our narratives demonstrate the antecedents and negative effects of the STPP. Specifically, these include: 1) zero tolerance policies that lead to suspension and expulsion (Kim et al., 2010; Losen & Gillespie, 2012); 2) hostile school climates marked by bullying, neglect, and exclusion (Sussman, 2012); 3) educational trauma contributing to low self-esteem and a lack of academic success (National Education Association, 2016; Scully, 2015; Sullivan, 2004); and 4) involvement in the criminal justice system at school and/or in early adolescence (Skiba et al, 2014; Wald & Losen, 2003).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of ecological development explains our complex personal development across time. As students in K-12 settings, we interacted with the microsystems of school, family, neighborhood, mental health, church, and criminal justice. When these systems intersected, they created mesosystems that influenced our development, such as the mesosystem of family-school interaction. To a lesser degree, our stories demonstrate a lack of direct involvement with exosystems, such as the lack of mental health treatment systems to assist in meeting our family members' mental health needs. Overall, our narratives reflect the influences exerted by the larger ideologies and macrosystems of racism, classism, sexism, and nationalism.

As we moved within numerous systems, our needs were largely unmet. Maslow's (1971) theory of motivation provides insight into our relationships with school and eventual involvement in the criminal justice system. According to Maslow, people concentrate their behavioral efforts on getting their needs met in the following order: physiological, safety, love/belongingness, esteem/achievement, and self-actualization. We did not experience school as a place of psychological or physical safety, belongingness, or academic achievement. We sought safety, belongingness, and achievement through violence and gang activity. However, we had the potential to be accomplished scholars, as indicated by our current college successes and our involvement in the writing of this paper. Using Maslow (1971) as a guide, we wondered, "How our lives would have been different if schools had

facilitated our development by ‘see(ing) that the child’s basic psychological needs were satisfied?’” (p. 190).

The Narratives

In the next portion of this article, Christian, Anthony, and Michael present their STPP narratives, which are organized chronologically with the youngest author’s story presented first. Consistent with evocative autoethnography, instead of relying on explaining and interpreting, we employ storytelling to convey information, trusting our readers to draw their own meaning from our stories. This is also the reason for the interrogative structure of the conclusion that follows the narratives. When reading the narratives and the conclusion, we invite readers to extract whatever inspiration they may find to become better-equipped interrupters of the STPP.

Christian Ramirez’s Narrative

“Excuse me ma’am, we’re expelling your son. Could someone translate to Mrs. Ramirez that Christian is being expelled for stealing?” The school, Adams Elementary, expelled me in the middle of fourth grade.

Because this expulsion occurred at so early an age, it established me as a “troublemaker” in all schools I attended, but worse than the label was the zero tolerance policies I was subjected to for the smallest infractions. These policies created inconsistency in school settings and caused me to feel excluded from school. I never attended one school for more than two years. I was kicked out of three elementary schools and two middle schools. After attending two high schools, for one day each, I dropped out of high school. At 15, I was arrested; at 16, I learned to read.

“**Why you act like that?**” As a result of my family interactions, I developed an inability to communicate about serious topics, a low self-esteem, and a tolerance for violence. All of these negatively affected my school environment. Both of my parents were from Mexico. They were uneducated immigrants, who moved to the U.S. in “pursuit of the American Dream.” They only spoke Spanish and lacked healthy communication skills, but they believed their children would have better life opportunities as a direct result of the education given here. Unfortunately, they were unsure of how to interact with me about school.

Mother’s tolerance. After my expulsion in the fourth grade, my mother treated me to Burger King. There she asked me if I wanted to go to another elementary school. Scared and confused, I nodded my head “okay.” Because my mother did not discipline me for my school misbehavior, I formulated the belief that I did not do anything wrong and that school was not fair. Also, my mother seemed disappointed at herself and showed it by not mentioning my expulsion to my father.

Father’s contribution. While on my many “paid vacations” provided by school

suspensions in elementary school, I worked with my dad. While working with him, I had a great time. He was a different person sober: we joked around, he bought me fast food, and we never talked about my school troubles. My father believed his only duty was to put food on the table, so he never got involved in my education.

Brother's rejection. My parents were boxing fanatics. They encouraged boxing amongst siblings, friends, and family. As the youngest of three brothers, I had the most to prove. I wanted to hang with my older brother, which required that I become his "puppet." Anywhere we saw kids my age he made me fight them. When kids were his age, he compelled me to fight them by threatening me physically.

At about 10 years of age, I involuntarily became my brothers' verbal and physical punching bag. I did not mind it at home, but it bothered me mentally when, for the sole purpose of humiliating me, it took place in front of my friends, family, and classmates. His treatment became unbearable. I feared being around him and tried to avoid him in public. I began to resent him because I developed a low-opinion of myself.

Manifestation. Humiliation is something I try to avoid because it was the part of my childhood that caused me to detach from my family. Because of my brother's abusive rejection, I started elementary school with the core belief: "I am unlovable." I went through elementary school without learning how to read. I was too scared to ask my teachers for help and believed I was not worthy or deserving of someone else's attention. School became a blur. I passed along one grade to another without any teacher mentioning my inconsistent attendance, lack of class participation, or nonexistent homework. This perpetuated my violent personality in middle school, as I tried to hide the fact that I could not read.

Round trip airfare. In middle school, I received my first-class ticket into the STPP. My inability to read and numerous suspensions solidified my alienation from school. I became a short-tempered, class clown who compensated for academic deficiencies before they were exposed. In classes where teachers asked me to read, I wandered in the halls, started fights, or irritated the teachers. I did not want anyone to find out that I could not read, so I faked the persona that I was a violent class clown. This behavior worked. I gained confidence from the attention I was receiving—so I continued.

Having a "disruptive" reputation meant that school employees were quick to remove me from school. I acknowledged this and countered with being violent. The middle school suspensions, also known as "the only option to handle Christian," were the most damaging. They kept me out of school at the time when I needed to catch-up academically. Since I was not in school, I began to be curious about my neighborhood where there was a heavy gang presence.

My new big brother. Up until seventh grade, I was searching for someone to look up to, to connect with, and to show me a way—essentially a role model.

By eighth grade, I became a full participant in the criminal lifestyle. Within this lifestyle, I felt welcomed, included, and valued.

My introduction came via a gang member, Matt, who was 10 years older than me. Matt earned my full attention after he bullied my brother for trying to bully me. As a kid, I imagined someone magically appearing to make my brother feel the same pain he made me feel, so when Matt threatened my brother, he instantly became my new big brother. I emulated his attitude, beliefs, and behavior. To fit in and socialize with my new family, I smoked and sold drugs, carried guns, and committed robberies. School meant nothing to me. I only attended a few times a month so my parents would not get arrested for my truancy.

My “high school prom.” During the past ten years of my incarceration, I have wondered what it would have felt like to attend a high school prom. What would it have been like to ride in a limousine? What would I talk to my date about when I arrived at her house? How would it feel to be dressed up and have the attention of my friends and family? The closest resemblance to my prom came in ninth grade, when several police officers graciously chauffeured me to school on a truancy sweep.

It began when my sister, also truant, allowed the police officers into our home. She ran to my room and said, “The cops are here!”

Half asleep, I immediately tried to escape out of my window, but was stopped when one cop asked, “Where do you think you are going?”

I did not have any shoes on, so I knew if I ran, the police would catch me. I replied, “Nowhere, what’s up?”

Another cop commanded “Get dressed, we’re going to school.” When we arrived at school, the cops escorted me to the front of a class. To make sure I stayed in class they sat behind me. Sadly, what the police officers did not know was that negative attention boosted my confidence. I, at the time, held the “trouble-maker” label as a badge of honor.

The truth. Another interaction with the police on March 10, 2006 resulted in my arrest for carrying a concealed weapon. When in juvenile hall, I received an additional charge of attempted murder for a crime I committed before March 10, 2006. At 17, I was sentenced to 27 years. It was here that the seeds of my one positive middle school experience grew.

An act of kindness. My sixth grade teacher, Mrs. Neil, was the first teacher to give me a second of her time. Every Friday, in her class, we had a spelling bee. I remember leaving my first spelling test blank. She noticed and asked me to stay after class. The other students left, and she tested me again. I still did not write anything. She seemed to realize that I could not read or spell, so she sounded out each word. As she sounded out each letter, I wrote it down. By nodding her head “yes” or “no” she gave me the information I needed to finish the test. Finally, someone taught me that a word is exactly how it sounds.

An act of inspiration. Mrs. Neil's act of kindness was reproduced when Ms. Adams, my teacher in juvenile hall, inspired me to begin reading. Ms. Adams, one of my maximum-security unit teachers, looked for what each student was lacking and attended to his needs. She engaged me in conversation and assessed that I did not have a mental disability, but she still could not pinpoint why I did not do any work in her class.

After fighting another student in her class, I was in solitary confinement. This meant I was on room confinement and would not get privileges for at least two months. Ms. Adams came to my cell. She said "Ramirez- that wasn't very nice of you to punch Mr. Smith." Then, she motivated me by asking, "You want some candy?" Being without privileges, of course I replied, "Yeah."

She handed me a book and stated, "you have to read this book, get 70% of the questions correct, and then I will give you a Jolly Rancher." That night I sounded out every word of that very thin book. In my mind, I was either going to boost my spirit or break it. In the morning, I took the test on her computer and passed. Finally, when I was 16-years-old, I tried to and successfully read my first book. My success got me a Jolly Rancher.

Acts of success. After two years in prison, I heard that the education department was offering the tests for the General Education Diploma (G.E.D.). I thought of taking the tests, but I still had doubts that I could pass. My doubts were really a fear of failing because I did not want to confirm what others said about me growing up. I signed up saying to myself "If I fail, I just won't tell anyone." I studied a G.E.D. book for six months, about eight hours a day. When I took it, I passed.

Getting my G.E.D. was vindication for past labels such as, "Troublemaker," "Fuck up," or "Dumb ass" that came from school officials, friends, and family. The confidence I received after passing the G.E.D. was and still is enormous. The knowledge I got from preparing for the G.E.D. helped me understand my past, including how I became the person I was before incarceration. I attribute my G.E.D. to changing my violent personality as well as my perspective of what really matters.

Beautiful struggle. As a 4th grader, I could never have foreseen the struggle I would endure because of low self-esteem. I attended the public school system, but I was blatantly excluded from education. My behavior in fourth grade was a cry for help that the school answered with expulsion, not help. I believe a school counselor, a teacher, or some other professional could have addressed and rectified my "disruptive behavior" and "academic deficiencies." Instead, I was suppressed by zero tolerance policies, kicked out of school, landed in the streets, and eventually earned a place in prison.

I essentially grew up in jail. I am now 25-years-old and serving a 27-year sentence for a shooting I committed at 14-years-old, simply to justify my acceptance into a gang. However, with the passing of Senate Bill 260, The Youth Offender Parole law, I have the opportunity for early release. Currently, I am pursuing my

college education. I hope to earn an Associate's degree, a Bachelor's degree, and eventually a Master's degree. The STTP is very much in business, and I am struggling to overcome it.

Anthony Ferguson's Narrative

I entered school with the necessary ingredients for a typical STPP experience. My father was not around, my mother struggled with alcoholism and depression, and my stepfather was addicted to drugs and alcohol. By age 4, I had witnessed and endured emotional and physical abuse from my parents.

My mother loved me a lot, and I loved her. She read to me regularly, engaged me in thoughtful conversation, and gave me a moral foundation that included the value of education. However, depression and alcoholism often got the best of her. When she drank, she was an entirely different person. I often felt afraid, embarrassed, and confused by her dramatically unstable behavior, which frequently vacillated from attentive, motherly love to rabid, angry outbursts. Unfortunately, my mother was unprepared to participate fully in my schooling. At an early age, I had developed a behavioral pattern that cried out for attention and some sense of tender understanding from the adults in my life.

This is the child who entered Pre-K in 1988.

The beginning: Pre-K through 2nd grade. From Pre-K through the second grade, I was very hyper in the classroom. Starting in preschool, my teacher reprimanded me for pouring milk over my classmate's pizza. I forgot why I decided to do it, but I did. The teacher told my mother, who told my stepfather. As I was bathing that night, my stepdad stormed into the bathroom and beat me severely. I did not even know why I was being beaten—until after it was over. This was the beginning of a long and contentious scholastic disciplinary history that joined me, my family, and the school system in an antagonistic triangular matrimony wherein each party's reactions did not serve my best interests. That incident was my entry point into the pipeline.

In kindergarten and first grade I was very energetic and social. I loved to talk during class and found it difficult to sit still and listen while teachers spoke. As a result, my teachers often became irritated, which led to many phone calls home, parent teacher conferences, and being singled out in class. This ritual became so common that I began to think that it was just a natural part of being in school. My mother quickly became overwhelmed and reacted with increasing emotionality and hostility, which triggered my stepdad's wrath. Their reactions felt unfair and made me angry and resentful. I sought refuge and freedom in socializing and clowning around at school, which again prompted my teachers to call home, thus perpetuating the cycle.

The "diagnosis." Eventually, the school's vexation with me inspired a referral

to a psychiatrist. I attended a few sessions with my mother and grandmother. The psychiatrist asked some questions and prescribed Ritalin to “calm me down.” I felt like something was wrong with me. Why else did they say I needed pills? Why did teachers persistently call my mother and tell her that I was too disruptive? Why else would my teachers regularly send me to the principal’s office or require me to stay after class? I began to believe that this was what school was about. No longer did I see school as a welcoming experience for educational development. It simply became a place where, for whatever reason, I was required to be.

The teasing. I was a chubby kid, and other kids teased me because of it. Many of my classmates regularly called me demeaning names like “fatty,” “fat hamburger,” or “titty boy.” Rarely did the most enthusiastic bullies miss an opportunity to call me names in front of other students or play pranks on me. I often wondered why they hassled me so much. I got depressed and angry because, no matter how hard I tried, I could not make it stop. Unless I was amusing them by cracking jokes or being combative with teachers, I was the butt of the other kids’ jokes that made me doubt my social worth. Thus, schoolwork, academic achievement, and long-term success became background noise in the face of the immediate pain, shame, and embarrassment. Fitting in became my focus, and if being a “problem child” was the way to be accepted, then that was what I would do. I often felt guilty for the embarrassment and shame my behavior caused my mother and grandmother, but the intensity of the isolation I felt overrode my guilt.

A new start?: Third grade. In third grade, my mother decided to enroll me in Webb Elementary, in upscale Malibu. I believe my mother hoped I would fare better there because of the better education and relational atmosphere, where different teachers and a new environment offered new possibilities. I guess she figured, why not seize the opportunity to give her son, a poor black kid, the same educational experience as the privileged white rich folks whose racial and economic advantages made their children’s attendance at such a school a reflection of who they were.

Socioeconomic exclusion. Children from very affluent families attended Webb. The school held field trips to interesting places, such as the J. Paul Getty Museum or the beautiful beaches of Malibu. My class was planning for a weeklong trip to Yosemite National Park, and I was very excited to visit a place that I had only heard about. When I learned that the trip cost something like \$500, I knew I likely would not be going. I asked my parents anyway and the answer was “no.” I was upset but never mentioned it. I just went to school like nothing was wrong and listened to the other kids talk about how much fun they were going to have in Yosemite. Even though I sat with those kids in the same class every day, and I was good friends with many of them, I remained acutely aware of how different our experiences were. Our worlds were very far apart.

Stranded and alone. In 1993, a major fire in Malibu shut down large portions

of the Pacific Coast Highway, which was the only road between my house and Webb. The fire got close enough to the school that the city forced us to evacuate. We took shelter and stayed overnight in a makeshift Red Cross outpost until the highway reopened for travel. Once the officials cleared us to leave, parents came in droves to pick up their kids. They arrived terrified with uncertainty over their children's wellbeing and left with their loved ones in elated relief. One by one, two by two, I saw my classmates reunited with their parents, but mine never came because they did not have a car. A few of my friends' parents offered to drive me home, but school officials refused. Finally, I was the only child left. My principal, to his credit, drove me to the Board of Education building where my mother and grandmother picked me up. It stuck out in my mind that my parents were concerned, yet unable to arrive when I needed them. At the time, I could not comprehend the larger socioeconomic narrative that this experience represented. All I knew was that, once again, I was reminded of how different I was—par for the course.

A caring teacher: Fourth and fifth grade. In the same month of the fire, my family moved into the Los Angeles Unified School District. My mom enrolled me into Lowe Elementary. Of course, my behavioral problems continued. I still found it difficult to pay attention to the teacher's agenda at the expense of my own. By the fifth grade, schoolwork had become a nuisance. I did not have problems learning the material; it simply bored me. My intentions were set on impressing my peers by showing them how well I could entertain them and disregard authority.

Mrs. Potter, my fifth grade teacher, saw through my façade and into the hurt little boy behind the antics. An energetic, 50-something white lady with a grayish blonde Afro-like hairdo, she truly cared for her students. Although I did not spare her any of the stress and grief that I gave my previous teachers, her reactions to my shenanigans were different. When she scolded me for disrupting the class or being off task, I got mad, but I did not view her responses as antagonistic. In her eyes I saw the same concern and love that I received from my mother or grandmother when they became fed up with my behavior. Something about those looks made me feel guilty for not "acting right" when I "knew better." Mrs. Potter talked to me about being considerate of others and never missed an opportunity to tell my mother or me that I was smart. Never did I feel that I was simply being "handled" or merely "tolerated" as was so often the case for me in school.

School becomes irrelevant: Middle school and high school. In middle school, my relationship with my parents became very tumultuous. My stepdad and I clashed constantly, partially because of his anger, drinking, and drug use, and partially because of my defiance and desire to escape the chaos at home by running the streets. His physical abuse was one-sided before, but at age 13, I started fighting back. We were unable to live together. Frequently, my parents kicked me out, which forced me to live with my grandmother and other family members.

Because of my relationship with my stepfather and my mother's seeming

indifference, I was so angry and resentful toward authority that school ceased to have relevance to me. I began ditching school, something that I never considered in elementary school.

Attention and relief through crime. Whether or not school was in session, I ventured into different parts of the city and started learning new behaviors. To gain approval, I followed my “friends” into the world of gangs, drugs, and crime. I joined a gang at 14 and started getting high and drinking daily. Soon, I was selling crack and marijuana. I began burglarizing businesses and schools to steal appliances and money. My crimes progressed from petty to felonious. I became what some people call “incorrigible”—unable to be reasoned with.

Criminality dominated my life. Before I turned 17, I was arrested 11 times (six times for felony offenses) for everything from Grand Theft Auto to drug sales and battery. My intense pain, anger, resentment, and feelings of emptiness temporarily subsided in the thrills I derived from stealing a car and joyriding with friends, vandalizing other people’s hard-earned property, or getting drunk and high until I blacked out. The only time I felt validated or important was when I got arrested or into some other kind of trouble. I remember one instance when the Los Angeles Police detained me for truancy and drove me onto school grounds in the middle of third period as the entire Physical Education class looked on. Back then, that was my idea of positive recognition, and I reveled in every minute of it.

Variable school involvement. Schools either expelled me or forced me to transfer because of enemy gang concerns. None of my teachers made an impression on me, nor did any of them take an interest in me, probably because I changed schools nearly every semester. I was only going through the motions of going to school. For some reason I never dropped out, but I abandoned any “delusion” that my attendance meant anything other than keeping my mother or myself out of legal trouble.

My only positive relationship was with Mrs. Cole, my eleventh grade civics teacher at Grove City High School. Everything about Mrs. Cole exuded dignity, and her aura commanded respect. A short, dark black woman with a stern but gentle demeanor, she tolerated ignorance but detested foolishness. She spoke with an authority that, ironically, I did not resent or try to rebel against. As I mentioned earlier, I understood class material but did not feel a need to work. When Mrs. Cole lectured on the mechanics of the Constitution or on the significance of the Bush vs. Gore election, and I engaged her intellectually, she immediately noticed. She took a liking to me, not unlike how Mrs. Potter had. She told me how much “potential” I had and, like Mrs. Potter, even her reprimands expressed a genuine regard for my wellbeing. Even though I was emotionally walled off and committed to being antisocial, Mrs. Cole’s belief in me did not go unnoticed. It was unheeded because I did not believe in myself.

End of the pipeline: Prison at 17. I succumbed to the STPP. By age 16, I

was a boy emotionally ruined. I saw no future for myself beyond my day-to-day routines of getting high and doing whatever I could to get money. Occasionally, I went through the motions of attending school. My final two years of school were a whirlwind of home school, multiple continuation (alternative) schools, and a short stint in adult school before the pipeline finally spat me out into prison.

On January 25, 2002, I committed assault with a firearm on three Santa Monica police officers, and was subsequently sentenced to 34 years in prison. I was 17. I was too immature to understand fully the magnitude of my crime or the true impact that my actions would have on the victims, their families, my family, and my life.

Coming of (intellectual) age. Being locked up provides ample time, much of which I decided early on to spend educating myself. My first five years were an autodidactic odyssey. I immersed myself in great works of literature, history, philosophy, science, and politics. Plato, Aristotle, and the American Founding Fathers taught me critical thinking and abstract reasoning; Swift, Milton, and Shakespeare revealed the immense beauty of the language I had taken for granted my entire life; Galileo and Darwin expanded my view of the cosmos and nature; while W.E.B. Dubois, Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass, Alex Haley, Malcolm X, and Harriet Beecher Stowe awakened me to my racial and cultural heritage. My chance encounters with those authors laid the foundation for an intellectual birth that impelled me on a journey toward self-awareness and a greater appreciation of the world around me that continues to this day. With my self-awareness has come a deeper understanding of my past and why I actively resisted education. I am proud of the person I have become and am continually becoming. The decision to educate myself is definitely one of the most important decisions I have made in my life.

Mike Owens' Narrative

Hobo, age 12

Momma used to say:

“boy, you must got hobo in your blood—
all you ever want to do is eat, sleep, and run the streets.”

Maybe momma was right.

Maybe I did have hobo blood.

Or maybe it was just that I preferred
the uncertainties of street life
over what I already knew
was waiting for me
at home.

As I contemplated my journey along the STPP, I found myself thinking about the pre-existing conditions that made me especially susceptible to the flush. I am

convinced that each was an essential, indispensable element of my slide. I do not believe the STPP can be examined apart from home and social conditions.

The roots of my dysfunction. My family's dysfunction was violence in all its forms. My parents were sometimes physically violent but regularly emotionally violent. They used the threat of violence, intimidation, and berating as their main tools of parental guidance. Having to work long hours, they left me in the care of my eldest sister. I am the youngest of three older sisters and one other brother. Several of these older siblings abused me sexually and emotionally. The effects of my traumatic home life severely handicapped my ability to recognize school as important.

Developing authority issues. Aside from the distrust I felt toward authority at home, I learned very early that I was somehow innately displeasing to most people of authority I encountered. I can best illustrate this point with two examples.

When I was seven or eight years old, a deacon at my mother's church was openly hostile to me. I do not know if it was because my father did not attend like most other dads, or if the deacon just thought I was a "bad seed," but he was always the first and most vocal person to criticize my every move. When I asked his grandson, one of my Sunday School playmates, why his grandfather did not like me, he answered, "I don't know, he just doesn't" and then skipped away.

Another instance occurred around the same time. Some friends and I were playing catch in a residential area down the street from my house. A police cruiser pulled up beside us and waved us over. I was excited because at the time, I wanted to be a cop, and I thought this might be a chance to get a peek at all the cool gear inside the patrol car. I pushed to the front of the group. The cop gave us an indifferent once over with his ice blue eyes and said, "You little niggers stay out of the street." As he pulled off, I remember thinking "Well, I don't want to be a cop anymore." These types of interactions reinforced my resentments toward authority that were born in my home.

Sub-culture and environment. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, my community was a hyper-masculine, violent, and racist environment. Violence was an acceptable form of communication, and fair fights were routinely encouraged to settle disputes. This is of course before Crack and the ensuing gun violence epidemic. Older kids taught younger ones, often through beatings, how to fight. Learning to fight effectively was seen as a responsibility in our community where people of color were outnumbered by poor whites, who were angry at their own economic misfortune. Any show of emotional sensitivity by boys was shamed or beaten out of those naïve enough to reveal it. At the time, talking to anyone about what I was going through or feeling was just not an available option. I had to be a man and in my world, men were hard.

Elementary school (K-5). School for me during the kindergarten through fifth grade years was an experience of strange duality.

School as refuge. School served as a refuge away from the chaos of home and the peer pressures of neighborhood politics. I felt safe at school because my sibling abusers were not there. At school, nobody knew my secret shames. Not wanting to reveal the truth of what was happening to me at home, I would feign excitement over approaching holiday school breaks. The other kids could not wait for Christmas or summer vacation, but I dreaded them. I never wanted to be home.

School as reinforcement. On the other hand, my K–5th grade school years reinforced every conclusion I made about distrusting people in authority. My school principal and all my teachers seemed interested in one thing: my obedience. The yoke of their expectations felt like oppression. It felt like an insult to my injury. I did not feel like anyone cared about whether I was happy or safe. I felt like I was just something to be managed; as if it was not me that mattered, but just whether my behavior made their jobs easier or more difficult.

The school held me back in the third grade. I seem to remember being told the reason was that I was “less mature” than the other kids. Coincidentally, that was also about the same time of my most traumatic sexual abuse. I do not claim to be an authority, but my misbehavior—lighting fires, fascination with weapons, and aggressiveness toward perceived bullies—should have prompted deeper investigation. Given the chance, I may have revealed hidden issues I was also suffering—night terrors, bedwetting, and suicidal ideation. I can acknowledge now that most of my teachers probably cared on some level; but I am not ready to forgive them for missing the signs that any competent adult should have been able to pick up. I wonder who I could have been had someone intervened.

Junior high school (6th–8th grade). By the time I entered middle school, I had already accepted that my place in this world was among the gangsters of the criminal subculture. The adults in my life—my mother, a few teachers, a principal—began telling me that I would be dead or in jail by 21. I believe they meant it as a kind of tough love warning. They had no way of knowing that I already felt my future would inevitably lead me to prison or an early grave. I felt safest when my peers feared me and most valued while participating in organized criminal activity. I accepted incarceration and danger as simply part of my fate. Whenever I tried to think about the future, I just felt an enormous black hole looming before me. At 12–years–old, I experienced but could not articulate this intense level of hopelessness.

Feigned participation. School became nothing more than a camouflage, a thin veneer of obedience I complied with because it lessened the scrutiny of my parents and probation officer. Even my older homeboys, as negative an influence as they were, encouraged me to go to school. The funny thing about it, no one—not my parents or probation officer—seemed too concerned with my performance at school. My grades were terrible. I was barely passing my classes, due mostly to the

fact I refused to do homework. I did classwork if I was interested in the topic, and I participated in testing. I never turned in homework, and my grades reflected it. My parents rarely asked for my school progress records. I guess they were satisfied that I was even showing up.

Do I feel that my school failed me? Yes, that is true, but it is not totally fair. What I suffered as a child, the secrets coiled around my heart, led me to fail myself as well. For every betrayal I suffered, I betrayed myself in even worse ways. I could never see for myself a bright, shining future attainable through school and education. I did not believe that was possible for me. I just wanted to not be who I was—an emotionally terrorized, sexual abuse victim. And if that meant crafting a tough guy persona, living life as a criminal, or even becoming a murderer—so be it; the sooner, the better. That remains the most catastrophic decision of my life, and the thing of which I am most ashamed. In response to my own pain, I was perfectly willing to become a source of pain to others.

The school system marginalized and excluded me, and in response, I rejected the system right back. By twelve I decided all the folks who had prematurely written me off were right, I was not ever going to amount to anything. However, I could revel in the power I did have. If I was destined to go down, I wanted to go down on my own terms. I take full responsibility for the way I chose to live. As a teenager and young man, I was an urban terrorist, a true believer radicalized by my own rage, fear, and shame.

A people's education leads to liberation. Stokely Carmichael (1966) said, "We must begin like the philosopher Camus to come alive by saying 'No!'" My rejection of any meaningful school participation, my every act of defiance felt at that time like a defense of my personhood. Admittedly, the self I was defending was a shadow self, but that was who I believed was keeping me alive.

The school system failed me, but education was still a major factor in my evolution. I earned my G.E.D. while in Folsom State Prison at the age of 22. Soon after, I discovered the true power of education through the writings of Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Stokely Carmichael, and Amiri Baraka. These black men spoke directly to my experience as a young black man in America. They were putting words to the inexpressible despair I was feeling. For the first time in my life, I did not feel alone in my pain. Every chance I had, I read the works of authors like these. I clung to them, not only because they shared my pain, but also because they spoke of reasons to hope.

They taught me that I could, and should, struggle to create a better world than the one into which I was born. They taught me that it was my responsibility to search out the truth of who and why I was. The monster I had allowed myself to become was not an inevitability—just a tragedy. These men taught me I would have to fight for my humanity, and then fight again to have it recognized. They taught me that even a man convicted of murder and sentenced to life without the possibility of

parole can redeem himself if he is willing to do the work of self-cultivated justice. Twenty years later, I remain strengthened by that message.

Conclusion

Today we sit in prison much older and wiser than the people we were when we entered prison so many years ago. As we contemplate the lost possibilities, inevitable questions arise: Just who could we have become if none of the risk factors that converged to characterize our STPP experiences had been at play in our lives? What if our home lives had been different? What if our acting out behaviors were understood as cries for help? What if we were motivated by, instead of excluded from, the school system? What if our teachers took more interest in understanding and potentially meeting our needs for safety and belongingness? What if our families' language and culture were seen as strengths as opposed to detriments to creating a positive relationship with the school system? What if school employees collaborated with our parents and connected them to community resources? What if counselors, social workers, or psychologists intersected in our lives and in the lives of our families? What if our interactions with the school and criminal justice systems had been focused on restorative justice? What if we had not reacted to our traumatic experiences by seeking acceptance through acting out? What if we decided to take school seriously? The answers to these questions are not readily available and lead to more questions. One of the saddest ironies of the STPP phenomenon is that it defies simplistic answers and is bigger than any one person, intention, mindset, philosophy, or policy (Scully, 2015; Wald & Losen, 2003). However, who we have become provides a glimpse of what we could have accomplished had our experiences been different.

The question, "Who could I have become?," can be best addressed by diverting the current generation of STPP victims from the pipeline. What will happen for them if we, both individually and collectively, find the will to move beyond theoretical cycles of thinking, talking, and writing into implementing what the literature recommends? What will happen if we "address complex problems and glaring racial disparities with compassion, care, knowledge, and determination" (Wald & Losen, 2003, p. 14)? What will happen if schools create nurturing environments that embrace a "whole child approach" (National Education Association, 2016, p. 16), emphasize prevention (American Psychological Association, 2008), and enhance protective factors (Wald & Losen, 2003)? What will happen if educators are empowered to meet the academic, as well as the social and emotional needs of students by implementing early prevention strategies (National Association of School Psychologists, 2008), culturally responsive pedagogy (American Psychological Association, 2008), and restorative justice practices (National Education Association, 2016; Scully, 2015)? What will happen if schools use "emotional support to remedy" the causes of disruptive behavior by empowering school counselors, school psychologists, and social workers to address students' mental health needs (National

Association of School Psychologists, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2014)? What will happen if stakeholders “fight for the kinds of supports” (National Education Association, 2016, p. 13) needed by students and educators by collaborating with schools, families, human service agencies, the criminal justice system, and other community organizations (U.S. Department of Education, 2014)?

We hope that our stories motivate readers to engage in dismantling the STTP by struggling for justice and “the right to quality education that builds human dignity for all” (Scully, 2015, p. 1009)— particularly for students of color. Instead of asking, “Who could those currently incarcerated have become?” We challenge readers to ask, “Who can current and future students become if we move beyond merely seeing their behavior to hearing and understanding them? Who might they become if we utilize this understanding to adequately meet their educational, emotional, and social needs?”

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