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Decarceral, Reimagined, and Reparative Futures in Higher Education

LaChan V. Hannon[1], Christopher Talib Charriez, and Samuel Quiles

[1] Director of Teacher Preparation and Innovation, Assistant Professor of Professional Practice, Department of Urban Education, Rutgers University Newark

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Abstract

In recent years, the intersection of higher education, identity, and carceral systems has required scholars and practitioners to actively work to interrogate carceral logics in educational settings. As an urban education teacher preparation program, collaborating with a higher education in prison program, we understand that educational gatekeeping practices have excluded collective knowledges, thereby deciding what expertise looks and sounds like – and who and where it comes from. In this paper, we present both the problems and possibilities of what it means to confront higher education practices and redefine success measures for educator preparation programs as well as higher education in prison initiatives. Using autoethnography, we interrogate interdependent phenomena in higher education – the decolonization of teacher preparation pedagogy, the practices of engaging the voices of those most impacted and disabled by teachers and school practices, and the reparative process of urban education towards advancing research of higher education initiatives in prisons.

Keywords: higher education, urban teacher preparation, prison education, reparations, disability

Introduction

Carceral logics, the practices of punishment and incarceration, encompass ideologies, policies, and practices rooted in the historical dehumanization and control of marginalized communities. Carceral logics, as defined by the Rochester Decarceration Research Initiative "refers to the variety of ways our bodies, minds, and actions have been shaped by the idea and practices of imprisonment—even for people who do not see themselves connected explicitly to prisons" (2016). Originating from the era of colonization and slavery, these logics extend well beyond the criminal justice system – influencing disciplinary practices, school policies, and pedagogical approaches in present-day educational systems (Rudolph, 2023). Within the educational settings of a carceral and colonizing culture, the erasure and replacement of *other* is used as a tool of the ruling class (Patel, 2019). In this frame, carceral logics shapes educational systems and perpetuates systemic inequalities that disproportionately affect children of color, especially the most vulnerable and youngest. By acknowledging the implications of carceral logics in education, educators can actively strive to reimagine institutions that prioritize equity, justice, and transformative learning experiences.

In recent years, the intersection of education and carceral systems has garnered increased attention (Drabinski & Harkins, 2013; Love, 2023; Stern, 2023). The importance of colleges and universities collaborating with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated scholars cannot be overstated, particularly in the context of researching higher education prison initiatives nationwide. An intentional collaboration of this nature not only facilitates the inclusion of diverse perspectives in academic inquiry but also amplifies the voices of those directly impacted by the school-to-prison pipeline, ultimately enriching the dialogue surrounding educational access and equity.

In 2020, the Department of Urban Education (DUE), inclusive of educator preparation programs at an anchor institution university located in one of the largest major urban city centers in the U.S. northeast, was tasked by senior university administration to engage in a self-study and program evaluation. The purpose was to not only assess the quality of its academic programming but also to explore the interdisciplinary possibilities of urban education in an urban city center. The self-study would last for two years and proved to be transformational. During this time, we met with interdisciplinary departments campus-wide inquiring with both faculty, staff, and students about how urban education could better support their curricular initiatives. Knowing we had areas in need of improvement, our engagement of critical reflexivity practices – an iterative process of evaluation and self-correction (Hannon, 2020) acknowledged blind spots in our perspectives and understandings. And, our department, as the only undergraduate teacher preparation program across three chancellor-led university campuses in the state, was interested in challenging the lowered expectations and inaccessible futures that P-12 schools often perpetuate for students in urban communities.

In preparation for our self-study, we asked three essential questions of our department and our anchor institution as a whole: who benefits from what we do, who is being disabled by what we do, and how can we repair the harm to whom we have disabled? Our essential questions use disability justice as a lens through which we imagine a reparative future because it centers the perspectives of those most impacted, specifically multiply marginalized people and communities. These questions lay the groundwork for the research questions addressed in this paper:

- How can a department of urban education leverage the assets in its urban community toward socially just educator preparation?
- How can the knowledges of system-impacted persons inform higher education and higher education in prison (HEP) initiatives?
- How can urban education be a catalyst for reparative justice work in higher education in prison initiatives and related educator preparation?

We knew that engaging in this kind of introspection could reveal that unless intentional, we, too, are susceptible to preparing educators to maintain systems of oppression in our urban schools and preparing students for the margins. Still, our goal was to prepare teachers to function as disruptors of such systems. As such, this article addresses and interrogates three very separate yet equally interdependent phenomena in higher education – the pedagogies of urban educator preparation, the practices of engaging the voices of those most impacted and disabled by teachers and school practices, and the reparative process of advancing the research of scholars in higher education in prison initiatives who have dis-abled by the educational and prison systems. Both in function and in conviction, reparative futures include decolonizing urban educator preparation in addition to collaborating with HEPs that adopt abolitionist teaching that contribute to reparative justice in both prisons and schools. These three main ideas underscore the importance of critical reflexivity, the significance of storytelling and perspective taking, and the necessity to disrupt carceral logics in higher education and schools.

Conceptual Framework

In 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois introduced the concept of double consciousness in *The Souls of Black Folk* to describe the profound internal conflict Black Americans endure as they navigate their identity within the broader society, including institutions of higher education. He asserted that Black individuals are forced to see themselves through both their own self-awareness and the often dehumanizing gaze of a dominant white society, leading to a sense of "two-ness"—being both Black and American, yet never fully recognized as either. He argued that the two-ness of double consciousness creates psychological struggles in which Black individuals must constantly reconcile their lived experiences within contradictory perceptions and societal expectations, thereby shaping a sense of self within a nation that marginalizes them.

In 1952, Ralph Ellison followed with Du Bois's (1903) assertion of double consciousness, with the concept of invisible personhood which articulated that the dominant white culture further denigrates and portrays Blackness as inhumane and unworthy. Similarly, in 1967, Frantz Fanon published *Black Skin, White Masks and A Dying Colonialism* to dispel Eugenic-based narratives of racial pathology used to label the Black identities and bodies and challenged Black Americans to dispel internalized racism and anti-Blackness. In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw presented the construct of intersectionality to help us understand how our layered identities are inextricably related to access, or lack thereof, to power and privilege. More recently, Hannon and Vereen (2016) apply the humanistic philosophy of the irreducibility to Black men in which they emphasize that personhood is whole and cannot be defined by or reduced to a single identity, discreet measure, or decision. In this way, someone is not defined by a choice, mistake, or circumstance.

It is this line of thinking that guides our understandings of higher education and higher education in prison (HEP) programs because they challenge the pervasive belief that worth and worthiness are dependent on singular, able-bodied personhood rather than intersectional personhood. We assert that higher education in prison programs grounded in reparative justice have knowledges that redefine measures of success for higher education and system-impacted intellectuals. As such, it is long overdue that institutions of higher education critically investigate their responsibility, culpability, and complacency in who is 'worthy' of being educated and permitted to access its benefits.

This paper presents both the problems and possibilities of what it means to redefine success measures for educator preparation as well as education more broadly. We accept that our knowledges are often excluded given the hegemonic gatekeeping practices and narrow assumptions about what expertise looks and sounds like — and who and where it comes from. It is because of this that we draw inspiration from Bettina Love (2019) and abolitionist teaching which requires us to actively resist and abandon oppressive educational practices that harm Black and brown students and instead create educational spaces that love and affirm their personhood. In this way, we rely, methodologically, on autoethnography to unveil and challenge the constraints of carceral logics in higher education to provide insights into the multifaceted dynamics at play (Chang, 2016; Pitard, 2019). As Spry (2001) aptly states, "Autoethnographic texts reveal the fractures, sutures, and seams of self-interacting with others in the context of researching lived experience" (p.712). We would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the historic harm and ethical violations of research done to and on incarcerated populations. Our approach to this research positions justice-impacted scholars as in control of their narratives, realities, and understandings. Three concurrent narratives are presented, and each author addresses the research questions through conversations on identity, education, transformation, and reflection.

Throughout this paper, we use several words and phrases with specific intention: *critical reflexivity, system-impacted, justice-impacted, and disabled*. We define *critical reflexivity* as one's ability to engage in patterns of behavior that initiate a change in practices based on new understandings (Hannon, 2020). We make a distinction between system-impacted and justice-impacted in that *system-impacted* references persons who have been negatively impacted by any system or institution, while *justice-impacted* to refer to persons impacted by the criminal justice system, specifically. As such, our collective work takes a critically reflexive approach to understanding the roles of pedagogy and practice that support or inhibit justice-impacted communities in educational settings. Lastly, we recognize that there are clinical and educational definitions of disability. We assert that a person is only as disabled as the environment in which they are situated. To this end, we lean into the term *disabled* to reference systems, practices, or places that restricts one's ability to function freely (Shallish, 2020).

Our Positionality — Who I Am Matters

LaChan

I am a Black mother and educator in my late 40s. As a third-generation college student, I grew up around teachers and the profession of education. I went to school with mostly white students in my suburban schools, however my middle school principal and social studies teacher were Black women. My mother is a Black woman and was a high school teacher and principal. The halls of her schools were my afterschool playgrounds. In college, I resisted becoming a teacher. But now, I understand that resistance and appreciate the power in being an educator. My mother taught basic skills English, and, unsurprisingly, most of her students were Black in her urban school. Even the students who didn't need basic skills gravitated to her and her classroom. It was a safe space for them, and they would become my babysitters, big sisters, and sorority sisters. In retrospect, I created the same experiences for my children.

I am the mother of two adult Black children, one of whom has autism. My experiences have prepared me to be especially aware of educational spaces and their readiness to provide a safe learning environment for children, not just mine. As an autism educator, I come to the work of educator preparation as a general education teacher who appreciates the nuances and necessity of inclusive education in pursuit access and equity.

Now, I am an assistant professor of professional practice with an administrative appointment as the director of teacher preparation and innovation at an R1 research university. I earned my PhD in my 40s and rejoined higher education after a 15-year career teaching high school students. A primary function of my job is program evaluation. That means, I look for the areas in need of improvement and misalignment to then design strategies to address those needs. I am an innovator and systems builder using my experiences and research to push the capabilities of educator preparation. Educator preparation so often fails our own, and it is no surprise that it is

so difficult to diversify the teacher workforce. Understanding why and what educator preparation can do about it is part of my ongoing work.

As an academic, I am familiar with the politics and practices for publication, intellectual property, and collaboration. It is because of this that I consistently interrogate how these practices impact the co-authors—making sure that their words and sentiments are theirs and not my interpretation. In order to remain true to the essential questions, I work hard to interrogate all practices and ways of engaging with justice-impacted scholars to help ensure that I am not engaging in practices that colonize or confine. My desire to interrogate complex and layered problems leads me to the work presented in this paper.

Talib

Russian author Fyodor Dostoevsky once wrote that "the degree of civilization in a society can be judged by entering its prisons" (Vinitsky, 2019, p. 5). I originally read this quote from the required readings of a 100-level criminology course offered by a higher education in prison initiative. The curriculum, which included readings from Dostoevsky, Lombroso, Hobbes, and Locke, inspired me to critically analyze the philosophical underpinnings of carceral logics in society and their impact on fueling the school-to-prison pipeline phenomenon.

I am a man in my 40s who identifies as Black and Latino from a large urban city in the U.S. northeast. I grew up in prison. Twenty-four of my forty-three years of life have been spent behind a wall. Growing up marginalized in an underserved community, my first encounter with the school-to-prison pipeline was in an urban public school system in the 1980's and 1990's. To this day, I can recollect the static of walkie-talkies and feel the tension those carceral spaces produced. I can still see the towering chain-link fence that hovered over the playground like a sentinel. I can almost replicate the feeling of shame that accompanied me as I stood in line to receive my subsidized lunch. And I will never forget the most traumatizing event of them all: the dismissive stares of educators and their willingness to criminalize my learning difficulties. I was 14-years old when I came to feel like the *other*—the marginalized child of color who is to be regulated, surveilled, and groomed for prison.

Education holds immense significance as a catalyst for personal transformation, especially in the context of transitioning from prisoner to scholar. Incarceration reinforces the cycle of limited opportunities, social stigmatization, and diminished self-worth that can be found in marginalized and underserved communities. However, education has the transformative potential to break these barriers and ignite positive change. By providing access to knowledge, critical thinking skills, and intellectual growth, education empowers individuals to transcend their past circumstances and redefine their identities. It equips one with the tools to challenge societal

stereotypes, develop a sense of agency, and envision a future beyond the confines of one's previous experiences.

Sammy

I am hypervigilant. Hypervigilance is a symptom common to those who suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder. I was born in Santurce, Puerto Rico, and my parents immigrated to NYC prior to my third birthday. My mom landed a job at a local Brooklyn hospital, but for dad the opportunities were grim – being illiterate in his native tongue and hampered by the English language barrier. His inability or refusal to work towards overcoming these barriers resulted in his return to Puerto Rico, never to be seen or heard from again. I was 5 and my sister was 2. I can remember waiting for what seemed like an eternity for him to return; more importantly, I remember that no one took the time to explain to me that he was gone forever.

As early as the second grade, a school child study team classified me as being emotionally disturbed and having a learning disability. I admit my behavior was erratic, disruptive, and at times violent; however, I do not recall any attention being given to my bilingualism, home environment, or the adverse childhood experiences (ACE) I was battling. I was always punished through exile, retribution, incapacitation, and violent methods for my behaviors. The public school system was one of the greatest perpetrators of these methods of punishment –in school suspension, detention, expulsion, and eventually alternative school, which very much resembled a prison. I became so disillusioned with school that I dropped out in the 10th grade. And, almost as if a self-fulfilling prophecy, I took to the streets at the age of 17, homeless and broken. Shortly after, the criminal legal system would waive me up to the adult courts and sentence me to 30 years in prison without the possibility of parole.

As a formerly incarcerated individual who was warehoused in the New Jersey prison system, policies ensured that obtaining a GED was the extent of one's formal educational attainment. The New Jersey Scholarship and Transformative Education in Prisons Consortium (NJ-STEP) changed this for me in 2014. This revolutionary higher education in prison program immediately afforded me the opportunity to take college courses and earn actual credits towards earning a college degree. In 2023, I graduated from Rutgers University, Summa Cum Laude, dispelling the child study team's determination of my capabilities or worth.

A Conversation of Themes

In this paper, we present three interconnected perspectives structured around the themes of identity, education, transformation, and reflection. Sammy's perspective foregrounds identity and disability in his intersectional perspective. Talib's perspective focuses on the transformational power of education towards identity formation. In the third, representing the

department of urban education, LaChan explores educator preparation in higher education in acknowledgement of how educator preparation is not designed for disruption but rather assimilation. Consequently, for those students who do not to assimilate in the predetermined and acceptable ways, school policy, practice, and pedagogy facilitate their segregation and justify their disabling. Together, these three accounts highlight the transformative potential of autoethnography in advancing higher education reparative practices toward disability justice.

Sammy: Unshackling Futures from Disability Labels

Identity and Education

The overlap of disability and incarceration is significantly understudied as is a nuanced understanding of the educational and social contributions of disabled, multi-lingual, system-impacted scholars of color. The urgency for this analysis is in recognizing that our own lived experiences are central to understanding how the intersectionality of urban education and disability justice must be realized to dismantle mass incarceration and, as Annamma (2017) describes America's prison nation obsession. I was forced to interact with systems of oppression and carceral logics from a very young age, especially in spaces that were supposed to foster education and opportunity. As a consequence, I remain hypervigilant and keenly attuned to threats and potential danger. Through my experiences, I adopted this behavior as a protective factor. It would become part of my identity.

As a single parent, my mother cared for 2 small children with no help. She worked long hours, and my sister and I were relegated to staying with babysitters or, at times, left to fend for ourselves. Our father's departure did not damper my mother's desire of fulfilling her version of the American dream. She devoted all her time to her career and finding a mate that could assist her in achieving this dream. In her relentless pursuit, my sister and I were isolated and emotionally neglected. There was very little time for love, affection, family outings or any of the luxuries that I saw other children experience. This neglect was compounded further when mom met her new mate, Berton.

Mom and Berton's relationship, like hip-hop artist Drake's song says, "went from zero to 100" real quick. Within the first year of their relationship, mom became pregnant with my youngest sister, and soon after they purchased a home in a New Jersey suburb. The house had 3 bedrooms, 2 bathrooms, and a huge backyard with trees and grass – all things we did not have in the city. While the outside of the house was beautiful, inside resembled a house of horrors. My middle sister and I were isolated to the basement of the house – a dark, cold, and unfinished area. Our sole purpose seemed to be hard manual labor and chores such as raking leaves, pulling weeds, shoveling snow, and the like. In my formative years, I learned that the slightest deviation from following Berton's rigid rules would result in the cruelest verbal, emotional, and physical abuse imaginable. I often interjected when this abuse was directed at my sister or mother, and I became

his human punching bag. Although, it wasn't always punches that I was hit with. I resented my mother and my extended family members for not protecting us. I also did not trust any government agency charged with protecting children. My mistrust became so ingrained that it is still difficult for me to decipher friend from foe.

I would later come to learn that my behavior and mistrust, in fact, was normal for a child living in such a socially disorganized environment. Instead, the child study team, charged with assessing and classifying students with disabilities, labeled me as emotionally disturbed and weaponized the "language and power of science" to disable and debilitate me. This new identity and label would prove to be intensely restrictive. I was placed in special education classes, exiled to smaller classes, and exposed to lowered expectations and a dumbed-down curriculum. The classification would follow me throughout my entire schooling experience, and moral correction, compliance and respectable behavior would become the most valued aspect of my education.

As any good educator or educator preparation program should know, compliance is not a skill needed for learning. Yet, my schooling experiences of classification and segregation, attempted to force me into submission, passivity, and erasure. When my misbehavior, or in other words, my intentional resistance to these forms of control didn't improve and conform, the adults in my life cast me away to an alternative school which very much resembled a prison. It was here that I learned that going through a school metal detector meant you could also be frisked by a security resource officer on the presumption of guilt. Here, an infraction such as an unexcused absence from school, being in the bathroom too long, falling asleep in class or having a loud outburst would result in detention, in-school suspension, or outright suspension. I knew what a lifetime of perpetual punishment looked like long before I entered the judicial carceral space, because I was already experiencing it. Ultimately, I came to know what it does to your identity when you are labeled deviant, of defective character, unintelligent, having an emotional disability, a super predator, and a criminal, only to then be exiled from the mainstream and relegated to a lifetime of surveillance and punishment.

While countless other stories like my own might have a predictable ending, NJ-STEP would begin to shift how I viewed myself. NJ-STEP supports justice-impacted students both inside prison facilities and upon their release during their transition to a college campus. NJ-STEP is a transformative experience for how it contributes to the landscape of higher education broadly, especially our community at Rutgers and in the city of Newark, NJ.

According to Crowe and Drew (2021), "individuals deemed different, debilitated, disabled, or otherwise unable to contribute to the capitalist systems of production and labor were historically segregated and removed from society through placement in institutions and prisons," (p. 387). It is also known that incarceration, which is an inherently traumatic experience, can bring about mental illness and exacerbate it in those already struggling with psychological distress. I have

never received mental health services while in custody, but I am familiar with the subpar mental health services available to incarcerated persons. These trends will only continue if a rehabilitative, trauma-informed, and reparative approach to healing and education is not offered to all incarcerated persons.

Correctional institutions practices of isolating, medicating and constantly surveilling justice-impacted individuals presents a barrier to incarcerated persons getting access to the help they need. Additionally, masculine, cultural, and societal stigmas often deter men of color from seeking mental wellness care. In *Disabled Behind Bars,* Vallas (2016) reiterates how prisons are not designed to support disabled individuals which has led to more segregation and isolation in solitary confinement making the argument that having a physical, psychological, or emotional disability marks one for punishment within the carceral space as well.

This is not a problem relegated to the United States as a Wales study reports that more than 90% of incarcerated persons who served a sentence had at least one adverse childhood experience and 60.0% had four or more (Ford et al., 2019). Their study showed that parental separation, mental illness, domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, incarceration, poverty, food insecurities, verbal abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse and neglect are all forms of adverse childhood experiences. Like me, many people I have encountered in prisons share several of these experiences in common, and many begin at home leading boys to seek refuge in community centers, local businesses, libraries, and public parks. But, in these areas youth such as myself were labeled deviant, truant, accused of loitering or trespassing and often vulnerable to police harassment or arrest.

I experienced, firsthand, the impact of youth surveillance, hyper-criminalization, and placement into the criminal justice system. The negligence of other systems that are responsible for nurturing young people such as schools, families, and community centers failed me. My refusal to assimilate and be controlled became the prerequisite for my confinement, disability labeling, and ultimately my incarceration, thus proving that use of carceral logics was much easier than investigating the societal ills I survived in my daily life. Later, it would become clear to me that it was more profitable to those who benefit from my incarceration and lack of education to systematically withhold multifaceted approaches to restoration and healing such as policy changes, culturally responsive teacher preparation, culturally sustaining education, community support, and advocacy. And so for me, public schools played a significant role in advancing the crime control model and were arguably at the forefront of the youth control complex utilizing practices like zero-tolerance policies, suspensions for non-violent offenses – practices that have been known to be leading predictors of school dropout leading to unemployment and imprisonment.

Transformation and Reflection

It is my contention that school systems have used special education classifications as a tool to remove "unruly" children from mainstream classrooms, labeling their behavior as unacceptable. This application has allowed school administrators to frame defiant or non-compliant behavior as an inherent defect within the child and attributing it to biological, genetic, or hereditary factors, all while neglecting the broader familial, social, economic, and structural contexts that shape the child's life. Segregating students, like me, in special education had a profound impact on my understanding of my worth.

For me, a disability labeling coupled with the inattentiveness of my parents and schools ushered me into the school-to-prison pipeline. My personal experiences reflect the urgency for our collective liberation and the demand for reparations from educational institutions. My story stands as a testament to what is possible when individuals are met with holistic, trauma-informed teaching rooted in love and compassion. I have lived the transformative power of education through programs like NJ-STEP, which not only changed individual lives but also reshaped the environment within carceral spaces.

The associate's degree program offered by NJ-STEP, along with the passion of those involved, inspired funders to support a bachelor's program in partnership with Rutgers University. This program creates a vibrant community where scholarly research and innovative learning thrive. It is a place where scholars have low stigma and high agency. NJ-STEP embodied this ethos, providing a space where those labeled irredeemable could find purpose, voice, and visibility while addressing the harms they committed. NJ-STEP understood that education for justice-impacted individuals had to go beyond academics. It prioritized addressing housing insecurity, food instability, access to healthcare, intergenerational trauma, and other barriers to reentry. While traditional metrics like retention rates, GPAs, and recidivism rates are often used to measure success, NJ-STEP recognized the importance of equipping individuals with skills and opportunities to secure meaningful employment.

We live in a world where credentials are often valued more than lived experience, but NJ-STEP participants leave the program equipped with both. As a result, they have become problem-solvers and leaders in their communities. Among my cohort, many hold positions such as Senior Program Coordinator, Chief Executive Officer, Co-Founder, Executive Director, Community Organizer, STEM Program Coordinator, and more. As for myself, I serve as a Case Manager at Newark Community Solutions, where I design social service plans and community service mandates for participants as alternatives to incarceration or burdensome fines.

The stories of NJ-STEP alumni, including my own, demonstrate the profound impact that trauma-informed, community-centered higher education in prisons programs can have on justice-

impacted individuals and the broader society. By addressing structural barriers and promoting transformative engagement, NJ-STEP not only reshaped individual trajectories but may also contribute to reversing harmful systems like the school-to-prison pipeline.

Moving forward, it is essential that we continue this work by advocating for the expansion of holistic educational programs, anti-oppressive teacher preparation, and calling attention to the injustices perpetrated by traditional educational and carceral systems. This paper represents an opportunity to explore how we can collectively reimagine education as a tool for liberation, equity, and healing. Together, we can push for systemic change that values every individual's potential, regardless of their past and inclusive of their identities.

Talib: Education Gave Words to My Identity

From Prisoner to Scholar

My initial exposure to carceral logics occurred within an urban public school system in the mid to late 1990s, an era marred by the myth of the super predator (Howell, 1998; Snyder, & Sickmund, 2000). The enduring images of a towering chain-link fence, metal detectors, security guards patrolling hallways, uniformed police officers stationed in squad cars, and disgruntled teachers and staff are indelibly etched in my recollections. Yet, the most distressing facet of my K-12 journey lay in the dismissive glances from educators and their readiness to label my learning challenges as criminal (Kroska, Lee, & Carr, 2017).

In my seventh-grade social studies class, I read an American recounting of the history of the Taino people of *Borinquen.* The narrative painted conquistadors as "brave" and "mighty" men embarking on perilous journeys across the Atlantic Ocean to explore and rescue supposedly benighted and savage individuals from their ignorance. The accompanying illustrations depicted Taino men kneeling before white figures clad in iron armor, brandishing muskets, with massive sea vessels looming in the background. At this critical juncture in my life, with an awareness of my Afro-Puerto Rican heritage from the small village of Aibonito, Puerto Rico, I saw the portrayal of my ancestors as submissive to a presumed "superior" race. This dealt a severe blow to my identity and concept of self. I had internalized a narrative about my heritage that was steeped in colonial myths that sought to diminish the strength and resilience of my ancestors.

During this period, I felt distinctly treated as the "other"– marginalized, subjected to regulation and surveillance, and systematically prepared for incarceration. It was a familiar narrative, reminiscent of the divisive sorting logic that once steered enslaved people from plantation house to the cotton fields– subtly but powerfully children of color are steered toward a path that presumes imprisonment rather than education. The day I entered the juvenile detention center and encountered many of my K-12 peers, remains a vivid in my memory. Of the three years I spent in that juvenile prison, I recall meeting only ten white males at different stages of my

prison sentence. Yet, the juvenile prison formerly known as the New Jersey Training School for Boys had a population of roughly 300 boys, a majority were boys of color. Without a doubt, the K-12 system and the school-to-prison pipeline were doing exactly what they were designed to do: we graduated to prison. This pervasive and harmful narrative continues to fuel the pathology and systemic injustices that disproportionately destroy communities of color and showcase a real need to incorporate reparative and transformative approaches into the training of K-12 educators.

The reconciliation of my identity as an Afro-Puerto Rican, combined with the societal ideals perpetuated by mainstream media—rooted in the same colonial myths embedded in textbooks—led to a clash between these external influences and my sense of self. This conflict profoundly eroded my concept of self. During this time, I did not meet a single educator who could understand and appreciate the intersectionality of my identities to support me through this critical stage of development. Maybe, they didn't know how to support me: maybe, they didn't care. Either way, I want students to have the teachers that I needed growing up in urban school systems, and that means examining teacher preparation. Today, we collectively understand that biases, whether conscious or unconscious, negatively impact the experiences of students of color within K-12 educational settings. These biases have materialized in discriminatory disciplinary practices (Noguera, 2003), tracking systems that disproportionately impact minoritized students (Hirschl & Smith, 2023), and a curriculum that marginalizes and neglects diverse perspectives (Thurlow, 2023). Such biases and lack of racial representation of Black and other educators of color not only negatively shapes the educational environment but also have detrimental psychological impacts on students of color.

From Du Bois's influential work of 1903 to1940 when Kenneth Clark and Mamie Phipps-Clark conducted the "Doll Test," we learned of the psychological impact of integration on Black children. By presenting them with dolls of different skin tones and asking them to express their preferences, most children, regardless of their skin color, chose the white doll which revealed the profound psychological harm caused by integration and the narratives created by white people about Black people. W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) concept of double-consciousness and the findings of the 1940's Doll Test make it increasingly apparent that the educational system plays a pivotal role in shaping who we believe ourselves to be, especially when you are from marginalized communities. Subsequent studies, including replications of the Doll Test (Byrd et al., 2017), consistently affirmed the disturbing findings of the original experiment. These studies emphasized the pervasive existence of racial bias and its effects on the self-concept of Black youth. They further helped us understand the impact on students' high school achievement and shape their aspirations including post-secondary education (Kolpack, 2004; Smith-Snead, 2022). Indeed, these findings highlight gaps in teacher preparation and emphasize a need for anti-carceral teacher preparation programs with the inclusion of marginalized voices and experiences.

Fortunately, under the guidance and encouragement of abolitionist educators who intentionally created educational spaces where I felt seen, heard, and affirmed, I was introduced to the humanities. The curriculum encompassed a rich tapestry of contemporary readings, including Michelle Alexander's "The New Jim Crow," James Forman's "Locking Up Our Own," to excerpts from the Norton Anthology of African American Literature, where I first learned of Philis Wheatley, Olaudah Equiano, Ida B. Wells, James Baldwin and countless more (all of whom were absent from my K-12 experience and whom are under attack of academic erasure, yet again). We also explored classic philosophical works ranging from “Plato's Apology" to existentialist and contractualist texts.

These diverse readings served as the bedrock upon which my prison academic journey unfolded, fostering critical inquiry, and deepening my understanding of societal structures and historical injustices. Guided by these intellectual foundations, I not only acquired knowledge but also actively applied it in various contexts. What made this journey particularly enriching was the opportunity to debate and discuss these texts alongside scholars whose shared carceral experience and diverse backgrounds fostered the kind of critical thinking that threatens the very fabric of racialized bias. In this vein, I am reminded of our ancestors who were brutally punished or put to death for daring to learn how to read.

Transformation and Reflection

This is a deeply personal journey—a journey from prisoner to scholar within the context of a higher education in prison program. Through my experiences and research, I have come to appreciate the intricate dynamics of the school-to-prison pipeline and the pivotal role of educators in dismantling it.

It wasn’t until I was 35 years old that I came to learn about W.E.B. Du Bois and Frederick Douglass beyond the posters that accompanied my K-12 memories of them. Du Bois’ concept of double-consciousness informs my research on identity formation and Douglass’ writings and speeches continue to inspire my desire to abolish systems of oppression. In 2015, my college career began. Pursuing higher education within a correctional facility meant overcoming obstacles such as scarce resources and racial biases. This was familiar territory. Amidst these challenges, dedicated educators from NJ-STEP and the Department of Urban Education at Rutgers University shifted my perception of education.

John Dewey’s commonly-referenced but unverified quote asserts that "all learning begins when our comfortable ideas turn out to be inadequate.” One of the most inadequate of our comfortable ideas is the pervasive existence of racism and dismissal of intersectional personhood, particularly within the educational system. This inadequacy is perpetuated through the application of carceral logics, a system of thought that not only fails to address the root causes of racial and abled

disparities but actively reinforces and sustains them through eugenics. Critics, particularly conservatives who attack critical race theory, argue that discussions around systemic racism and carceral logics contribute to a divisive narrative and undermine a more nuanced understanding of historical and societal dynamics (Harris, 2022; Wilson, 2023). Despite these criticisms, proponents assert that acknowledging and challenging such systemic issues are essential for creating meaningful and lasting change (Love, 2023).

Racism and ableism, deeply ingrained in societal structures, find expression within the educational system. The notion that education is a neutral and unbiased space is brought into question when we consider the underlying carceral logics. Dewey's assertion prompts a necessary confrontation with the inadequacy of clinging to the notion that our educational systems are inherently fair and just. The uncomfortable truth is that carceral logics within education contributes to a cycle of systemic inequality, impeding the development and success of students and often funneling many into the prison pipeline.

Reflecting on my personal journey through the school-to-prison pipeline, the inclusion of culturally competent educators within this approach could have presented a transformative alternative to the carceral logics I encountered. Culturally competent educators may have understood or addressed the unique challenges faced by individuals in my community, fostering a more supportive and inclusive learning environment. This holistic approach not only promotes critical thinking but also equips individuals with the adaptability and interpersonal skills needed for success in diverse fields. In hindsight, a liberal arts education with culturally competent educators could have offered a different, more empowering option for myself and many of my peers navigating the challenges of the school-to-prison pipeline.

This brings us to an important example of the educational innovation that challenges carceral logics and fosters transformative and reparative futures in NJ-STEP. Since NJ-STEP's inception in 2011, graduates emerge as leaders in government, non-profit organization, education, and research. As we celebrate these successes, it is imperative to recognize the need for broader systemic changes. Eliminating carceral logics from educational settings becomes a critical imperative. Drawing from higher education in prisons initiatives, we must consider how these insights can be applied in broader educational contexts ensuring that all students have access to transformative opportunities, regardless of background or ability.

Our autoethnographic reflections continue to reveal the broken promises of an education system flooded with cultural dissonance between educators and students that renders some students vulnerable, invisible, and disposable. Instead, students need culturally responsive educators who recognize intersectional personhood and appreciate the inalienable value in all students. Our colleagues at the Department of Urban Education at Rutgers University-Newark have proactively engaged in measures to prioritize marginalized voices so that they are not only just

acknowledged but central to shaping discussions and decisions. The department has intentionally sought collaborations with formerly incarcerated scholars recognizing the significance of perspectives from those directly affected by the school-to-prison pipeline. Their involvement is crucial in crafting educational policies, practices, and pedagogy that authentically include and resonate with the lived experiences faced by justice-impacted scholars.

Redesigning and Reimaging Urban Education

Identity and Education

With a charge to reimagine the Department of Urban Education and its impact in our urban community, we revisited our essential questions but with more specificity. Who benefits from having qualified, capable, and compassionate educators? Who is being disabled by not being provided with said educators? What can educator preparation programs do to intentionally create disruptive educators? Moreover, equally as important, when there are formerly incarcerated persons who desire to reengage with the very school systems that disabled them, what professional opportunities do they have? This led us to document our patterns, assess our strengths and shortcomings, listen to our students, and carve a path forward that would leverage our communal assets and impact the students in urban schools. So, what did we learn? We learned that we were not who we thought we were (Fanon, 1967).

First, we learned that our curricular checkpoints did not consistently assess students' dispositions to work in urban schools. In other words, we lacked a consistent mechanism to evaluate students' attitudes, beliefs, and expectations working with students in urban schools and the challenges they encounter. Second, we learned that we were not intentional about the recruitment of Black and brown students in the field of teacher preparation. Third, we learned that we were perpetuating colonialism but not celebrating and leveraging the multilingualism of our student population. In short, we needed a better evaluation system, we needed to make teaching more attractive, and we needed a more diverse faculty. We needed to expand our departmental identity within the local university context as well as across the state.

From one teacher preparation program, we would expand our academic offerings to two undergraduate minors, three undergraduate majors, three alternate route teacher certification programs, three teacher endorsement programs, and two master's degree programs. A total of 13 programs with course offerings in a variety of departments would be actualized in less than four years. To do this during our self-study, we would engage with departments across campus inquiring with both faculty and students about how urban education could be better support to their curricular initiatives. The need for critical reflexivity assumed that there were unexamined areas in our perspective, and the Department of Urban Education wanted to address our responsibility in repairing the experiences of teachers and students in K-12 schools.

As a consequence of our self-study, in 2021, the Rutgers-Newark Department of Urban Education founded the first disability studies program in the urban center of our university's multiple chancellor-led anchor institution. Our mission states that we are a community for and by people who are system-impacted and those who identify or are targeted as disabled. We are the first program of its kind at our university and one of only a few in the nation. This particular program interested the administrators and students of NJ-STEP.

NJ-STEP, which is connected to the School of Criminal Justice, was particularly interested in how our Disability Studies courses could serve their students (both currently and formerly incarcerated). Over the stretch of one academic year, we met consistently with administrators, students, and instructors to imagine how urban education could become a partner in liberation instead of oppression. We worked together to create a third space (Bhandari, 2020) that values the lived experiences of its students while concurrently working to prepare teachers for an unjust educational system. One example of this injustice is the disproportionality and the overclassification of marginalized student populations with emotional, learning, and behavioral disabilities. We also recognize the ongoing disparities of the overrepresentation of persons with disabilities experiencing incarceration (Vallas, 2016). As such, we thought it was critical to begin offering courses on disability studies, which are now taught both inside to incarcerated scholars and on-campus. Coursework that specifically draws attention to how institutions systematically dis-able students and communities was groundbreaking at our urban-situated university. Furthermore, while urban education is not disabled, urban schools, by policy and practice, systematically disable students and are often staffed with the most underprepared teachers, whether through teacher education programs or ongoing professional development (Larkin & Hannon, 2020).

NJ-STEP has created a legacy of affirmation and promise. Over the past 13 years since the program's inception, many graduates have pursued advanced degrees and are emerging leaders in various industries. Scholars have earned 136 BAs, 23 MAs, and 2 PhDs. This journey underscores the profound impact of abolitionist educators in reshaping narratives, dismantling barriers, and providing individuals with the tools for personal and intellectual transformation. The program has played a vital role in creating a community of justice-impacted scholars and subject-matter experts actively involved in meaningful work within the community. Some individuals now hold positions in local government, serve as executive directors of non-profit organizations, engage as entrepreneurs, educators, and more.

Together, they exemplify the transformative power of education to inspire positive change, reinforcing the program's significance in contributing to a more just and equitable society. Therefore, it only made sense to form a relationship between the Department of Urban Education and NJ-STEP. Urban Education is supposed to serve the needs of students in urban communities. Our collaboration was an opportunity to fulfill this mission by creating equitable access to

students who have been failed by harmful school systems and underserved by education in juvenile justice and prison settings.

Transformation and Reflection

Acknowledging the transformative potential of education, we must actively work toward dismantling carceral logics to ensure that every educational setting becomes a catalyst for positive change and equitable growth. So, what does this mean for teacher preparation and urban education? Rooted in social justice, the Rutgers-Newark Department of Urban Education is committed to preparing educators who understand the challenges and strengths of urban communities and the schools who educate them. This prioritizes those who have been secluded, excluded, or marginalized in public schools. Considering that urban education can be both a place of harm and healing, our imagining of a reparative future begins with critical reflexivity. As such, when we return to our research questions:

- How can a department of urban education leverage the assets in its urban community toward socially just educator preparation?
- How can the knowledge of system-impacted persons inform higher education and higher education in prison initiatives?
- How can urban education be used as a catalyst for reparative justice work in higher education, prison initiatives, and related educator preparation?

Drawing lessons from the transformative power of higher education in prison, where abolitionist teaching has reshaped lives, we must apply these insights to broader educational contexts. Abolitionist teaching, as defined by Love (2019), extends beyond reform in that it is a radical commitment to educational freedom that seeks to dismantle the oppressive structures sustaining racial injustice and systemic inequality. Rooted in principles of justice, equity, and empowerment, abolitionist teaching challenges punitive educational practices and instead fosters joy, creativity, and critical resistance. By embracing these principles, we can work to eliminate carceral logics in schools and create learning environments that nurture, rather than police, students—especially those from historically marginalized communities disproportionately impacted by over-surveillance. In the carceral system (i.e., K-12 and prison), we have witnessed firsthand how a punitive and dehumanizing approach hinders intellectual growth. The same principles apply to institutions of higher learning, where punitive disciplinary measures and restrictive policies disproportionately impact marginalized students and reinforce societal inequalities (Skiba et al., 2014).

Furthermore, collaboration with justice-impacted individuals is essential in crafting educational policies and practices that resonate with the realities of those who have experienced the carceral system. In the higher education in prison initiative, the involvement of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated scholars played a pivotal role in shaping a curriculum that addressed their unique

needs and aspirations. As a result of our collaboration, there were several areas where we could make immediate strides in educator preparation and community impact.

Reparative Practices

Implement reparative disciplinary practices that prioritize understanding, dialogue, and personal growth over punitive measures, creating a culture of accountability and empathy. When it comes to educator preparation, we can teach and use asset-based language to talk about classroom management, student discipline, and rapport building. We can teach educators how to engage with students in urban schools from a holistic and intersectional perspective and acknowledge the funds of knowledge students bring to the learning environment as whole people. We can seek to understand versus seek to punish when it comes to students' patterns of behavior and ways of engaging. We can create opportunities for shared power and decision-making with regard to reparative practices.

Inclusive Curriculum

Develop and implement curricula that reflect diverse perspectives, histories, and experiences, challenging dominant narratives and fostering a more inclusive and equitable educational experience. The Department of Urban Education must be intentional about its readings, assignments, implications, and assessments of success. We understand that a person's disposition reflects their beliefs, values, assumptions, and behaviors. To disrupt teacher candidates' dispositions that look at students from a deficit lens, we reexamine the curriculum to specifically attend to the ways that educator preparation programs educate teachers to teach to the middle. This means designing coursework that interrupts whiteness and internalized racism, calls out anti-blackness, and interrogates the ways that gender roles and heteronormativity stigmatize and penalize students who do not conform. This also means hiring, preparing, and protecting faculty and staff of color who will inevitably encounter the aggressions that come with challenging students' beliefs about themselves and others while affirming cultural and linguistic diversity in the higher education classroom.

Professional Development

Provide ongoing professional development for educators on abolitionist teaching principles, implicit bias, and cultural competence, empowering them to create anti-racist and justice-oriented classrooms. This means creating courses and modules for those who work with incarcerated individuals on topics that specifically address the emotional and learning needs of the learners. Additionally, oftentimes, there are incarcerated individuals who serve as tutors for other students on the inside. One way to honor the knowledge of tutors is to provide professional

development and training to them. The urban education, NJ-STEP collaboration provided access to this type of tutor training from a nationally recognized educational organization.

Community Engagement

Foster community engagement and collaboration with justice-impacted individuals has led to educational policymaking, curriculum development, and program implementation in the Department of Urban Education, thus ensuring that the lived experiences of all students are central to our mission and vision for urban education. In our initiatives, this is reflected in a grant-funded seminar series that highlights the intersectionality of disability studies and system-impacted individuals. This year-long series is designed as a mechanism to share knowledge, elevate marginalized narratives, and address the ways individuals and organizations are working towards inclusivity.

Advocacy for Policy Change

Advocate for policy changes at the institutional and legislative levels that align with abolitionist teaching principles, dismantling carceral logics, and promoting educational environments that prioritize equity and transformative learning experiences. The core objective of a policy advocacy agenda is not merely to divert individuals from prisons into educational institutions but rather to fundamentally eliminate the necessity for carceral logic within educational frameworks. By spearheading initiatives that challenge and deconstruct punitive paradigms, any advocacy must create educational landscapes where equity flourishes and students are empowered through a holistic and transformative educational journey. This involves urging policymakers to embrace innovative, restorative approaches that promote a sense of community, understanding, and empathy, ultimately obviating the reliance on punitive measures.

Conclusion

More than a century ago, DuBois asserted that people of color continue to grapple with the internal conflict of navigating racial identities in a society that imposes a dual perspective. This struggle involves confronting the psychological tension of a sense of "two-ness," feeling like the inferior non-white other (Joseph & Golash-Boza, 2021) and being acutely aware of how one is perceived by oneself and others. In educational settings, this complex dynamic is not limited to the experiences of people of color alone; scholars have found that it also implicates white individuals in the shaping and reinforcement of societal attitudes in classroom settings.

Decarceral, reimagined, and reparative futures in higher education require courage and intentionality. Abolitionist teaching, rooted in a commitment to human dignity and transformative potential, challenges the status quo and advocates for a paradigm shift in our

approach to education. One crucial lesson learned from prison education is the need for a curriculum that goes beyond imparting knowledge to fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and empathy. Abolitionist teaching recognizes the inherent worth of every individual and seeks to create inclusive learning environments that empower students to question, analyze, and challenge societal norms. It encourages educators to move away from punitive practices and towards restorative approaches, prioritizing growth and understanding over punishment. Collaborations like the one presented in this paper should be extended to all educational settings, ensuring that diverse voices are heard and valued in the decision-making processes. In the current political-educational climate during which this article was written, the charge to interrogate the cultural norms is even more pressing. As such, we challenge institutions to ask and answer the following questions: Who benefits from what we do, who is being disabled by what we do, and how can we repair the harm to whom we have disabled?

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