Title
Breaking Bars: Formerly Incarcerated Youth, Critical Consciousness and Schools as Conduits for Students’ Life Course Change

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Los Angeles

Breaking Bars:
Formerly Incarcerated Youth, Critical Consciousness, and Schools as Conduits for Students’ Life

Course Change

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Georgia Ann Lazo

2017
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Breaking Bars:
Formerly Incarcerated Youth, Critical Consciousness, and Schools as Conduits for Students’ Life Course Change

by

Georgia Ann Lazo
Doctor of Education
University of California, Los Angeles, 2017
Professor John S. Rogers, Chair

This qualitative study examined the social and academic needs of formerly incarcerated students upon reentry to public high schools with the goal of graduating. The sample consisted of a total of 17 participants across two public high schools in one large urban district in California. The research design consisted of semi-structured interviews with students, teachers, counselors, principals, probation officers, and delinquency court judges. The interview design was intended to gain insights into the participants’ perspectives on the needs of formerly incarcerated youth towards graduation. Findings are organized around three themes: oppression and control; dignity and agency; and, sense of belonging and turning point. Findings reveal that students experience psychosocial stressors upon reentry that are either diminished or strengthened based on adult actors’ responses to student behavior, students perceive adults use coercive control in their attempts to help them succeed, colorblind adults downplay their
influence and attribute student success to connectedness with family and students’ willingness to work hard in school, critical adults have a strong sense of agency to support student beyond a technical level, students perceive graduation as a means to change life course although the motivator to graduate and change life course is sense of belonging and connectedness with adults at school, and critical adults perceive students’ relationships with school adults as a driver to graduate and change their life course.

Implications of the findings include a focus on social and emotional supports for student learning and targeted allocation of resources for professional staff training and teacher education programs on race conscious and culturally relevant pedagogy. Moreover, implications include a need for targeted staff training on critical consciousness to reduce stigmatization and further criminalization of delinquent youth upon return to school. Five recommendations for policy and practice are made as a result of this study’s findings: (a) direct and additional resources to schools with high numbers of students returning from jail, (b) critical consciousness training for adult actors, (c) school-based interdisciplinary teams to develop individual student plans, (d) development of inter-agency communication and monitoring of students, and (e) service centers should be developed to render multidisciplinary support to students.

Limitations of the study include generalizability given that data were collected from participants at only two school sites. In addition, the participants were purposefully selected based on success with formerly incarcerated youth and may not be a representative sample of the majority of large comprehensive high schools. The two judges and one probation officer who participated did not have direct knowledge of or contact with the student participants in this study.
The dissertation of Georgia Ann Lazo is approved.

Christina A. Christie
Todd M. Franke
Tyrone C. Howard
Daniel G. Solórzano

John S. Rogers, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2017
DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my father, who has tenderly shown me the meaning of love and ethics, and to my mother, who has taught me the value in caring for the vulnerable. It is also dedicated to our nation’s incarcerated children who seek to be shown the same.
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## VITA

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CHAPTER ONE

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Key Terms

**Committed Youth**: Juveniles who are in secure and restricted residential placement after a court disposition.

**Delinquent Youth**: Juveniles involved with the juvenile justice system.

**Detained Youth**: Juveniles held in a secure and restricted facility after arrest and prior to adjudication or disposition or who are awaiting placement elsewhere.

**Group Home**: A secure and less restricted facility where juveniles are allowed extensive contact with the community (school or job). For data years 1997, 1999, and 2001, this category was included in residential facilities.

**Incarcerated Youth**: Youth in short-term detention centers/halls or residential centers/camps, not group homes.

**Juvenile Hall or Juvenile Detention Center**: A short-term facility that provides temporary care in a physically restricted environment for detained juveniles pending a court disposition or detained juveniles who are awaiting placement elsewhere.

**Residential Facility or Juvenile Camp**: A longer-term secure and restricted facility typically run by the County Probation Department (as opposed to State facilities) for adjudicated youth.

**Reentry**: The process by which juveniles return to school after detainment or confinement in a secure correctional facility.

**School to Prison Pipeline**: A set of local, state, and federal education and public safety policies that push students out of school and into the criminal justice system.

(U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, n.d.)

Current research has focused on the role of school principals and counselors and their leadership strategies as they relate to improving graduation rates (Brewer, 1993; Coelli & Greene, 2012; Janson, Stone, & Clark, 2009; Leithwood & Jantzi, 1999). Many factors account for attrition in high schools, particularly for low-income Latino and African American youth (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Greene & Winters, 2006; Losen & Martinez, 2013; Orfield, Losen,
Wald, & Swanson, 2004; Sweeten, Bushway, & Paternoster, 2009). For youth returning to public high schools from juvenile detention centers the statistics are even more alarming (Abrams, Shannon, & Sangalang, 2008; Foley, 2001). Aizer and Doyle (2015) found that detention leads to a decrease in high school completion and an increase in adult incarceration. Aizer and Doyle further stressed that providing additional support and resources for delinquent juveniles might be effective in decreasing the negative impact of incarceration on “human capital accumulation” (p. 41). Therefore, this dissertation explored the academic and social needs of formerly incarcerated youth from the perspective of the students, teachers, counselors, probation officers, and judges who work to support them in successful reentry to school towards high school completion.

National and State Context of Returnees from the Juvenile Justice System

Graduation rates in urban California public high schools are consistently lower than the national average, although near the national average. For example, in 2010 and 2011, California’s public high school 4-year graduation rate was 75% and 77%, respectively. For the same years, the national graduation rates were 79% and 80%, respectively (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). However, when we look at the statistics demonstrating the differences in graduation rates for Latinos and African American students, we find these groups lagging even further behind. For example, according to the 2014 report of the National Center for Educational Statistics, only 71% of Latinos graduated in the 2010-11 school year and 73% in the 2011-2012 school year. For the same years, African American students graduated at a national rate of 67% and 69%, respectively. Nationally, 84% of White students graduated in 2010-11 and 81% in 2011-12. Moreover, locally, in California, although the high school graduation rates have increased steadily from 2010-15, the rates are
significantly lower for African American students; In 2015, only 68% of African American youth graduated, 20 percentage points below their White counterparts. Latino students performed 9 percentage points below their White counterparts (California Department of Education, 2013). See Table 1.

Table 1

*California Graduation Rate Percentages, 2010-2015*

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Furthermore, to bring to the foreground the issue of race related to youth incarceration, it is necessary to begin by presenting some general youth population statistics. In 2010, the United States Census Bureau estimated that over 74 million persons nationwide were under the age of 18. In 1984 the juvenile population was 62.5 million, and since then has grown each year to 2010, increasing 19% (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014). Sickmund & Puzzanchera (2014)
indicate that in 2010 one in every four residents living in the United States was a juvenile under the age of 18. Furthermore, the Census Bureau estimates that between the years 2010-2035, the juvenile population will grow 10%, that is, 0.5% per year. By the year 2050, the juvenile population will be about 16% larger than in 2010. Breaking down the numbers by race or ethnicity, we find the national population of juveniles in the 2010 census as follows: Whites, 56%, Latinos, 23% and African Americans, 15%. In California in 2010 the population of juveniles was 30% White, 51% Latino, and 7% African American (Figure 1).

![California youth population in 2010](image)


Yet, minorities make up 68% of incarcerated youth in residential facilities nationwide (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2013). In 2010, 225 juveniles were committed or detained in the United States for every 100,000 juveniles in the United States population (Sickmund & Puzzanchera, 2014). In 2013 the number of youth committed or detained in the United States had declined to 173 for every 100,000 juveniles. However, in California in 2013, the number of detained or committed youth was higher than the national rate
for the same year: 197 for every 100,000. Furthermore, while the overall rate of juveniles in residential correctional facilities has decreased nationally since 1999 (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2013), as seen with graduation rates, racial disparities continue to be evident in juvenile incarceration rates as well.

As noted previously, in 2013, minority youth accounted for 68% of incarcerated juveniles nationwide, although non-White juveniles account for only 44% of the general population of youth nationwide. Moreover, in 2013, the national detained placement rate for African American youth was six times the rate of White youth and the committed placement rate for African American youth was four times the rate for White youth. African Americans represented 40% of juveniles in residential detention centers and Latinos represented 23% nationally in 2013. Despite the declines in overall detention, the rate of placement for minorities was 2.7 times the rate for White youth (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2013). In 2010, in more than half of the states, the ratio of the minority custody rate to the non-minority rate was more than 3.5 to 1. In Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Vermont, the ratio of minority to non-minority in custody was over 8 to 1 in 2010 (Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement, as cited U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs 2013). In 2013, while the total national rate per 100,000 juveniles in the population was 173, the rate for African Americans was 464 and for Latinos was 173. These numbers represent the disproportionate number of African American youth who are incarcerated.

Furthermore, based on data from the California Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice (2015), California and Los Angeles County continue to arrest and confine youth between the ages of 10-17 at high rates. Moreover, African American youth are arrested at four times the rate. In 2015, Los Angeles County arrested 2,134 African American youth ages 10-17 for every
100,000. San Francisco County arrested 7,575 youth ages 10-17 and the arrest rate for African American youth in San Bernardino County was 3,219 for every 100,000 (Figure 2).

![Graph showing arrest rates by race in San Francisco, San Diego, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Los Angeles counties.]

*Figure 2. Arrest rate in California per 100,000. Adapted from Juvenile Felony Arrest Rate, by Center on Juvenile & Criminal Justice, n.d., retrieved from http://casi.cjcj.org/Juvenile/. Copyright 2017 by the author.*

Incarceration rates (detained and confined) in California are also high. In 2013, the state’s rate of incarcerated youth was 197 per 100,000 juveniles in the population and the African American and Latino rates were 748 and 227, respectively. The rate for incarcerated White youth in California for the same year was 91 (Sickmund, Sladky, Kang, & Puzzanchera, as cited in Hockenberry & Sickmund, 2016). Based on data from the California Sentencing Institute, in 2015, California’s juvenile confinement rate was 236 youth held in juvenile halls or probation camps per 1,000 juvenile felony arrests. Los Angeles County ranked slightly higher with 245
youth confined per 1,000 juvenile felony arrests. Of the 5 counties listed below with similar demographics, San Diego has the highest confinement rate at 293 youth confined per 1,000 felony arrests (Center on Juvenile & Criminal Justice, n.d.; Figure 3).

![County Total Confinement Rates* Per 1,000 Felony Arrests](image)

*Data by Race Not Available

San Francisco
San Diego
San Bernardino
Riverside
Los Angeles

Figure 3. 2015 county confinement rates per 1,000 juvenile felony arrests. Adapted from Juvenile Felony Arrest Rate, by Center on Juvenile & Criminal Justice, n.d., retrieved from http://casi.cjcj.org/Juvenile/. Copyright 2017 by the author.

Furthermore, minority youth were detained for longer periods of time than White youth (U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, 2013). The majority of detained or committed youth come from high-poverty high schools, and most return to the public school within a year of release and attempt to graduate (Balfanz, Spiridakis, Neild, & Legters, 2003; Leone, 2015).
However, while formerly incarcerated students may return to their public schools, research findings indicate that educational outcomes for them are very poor (Abrams et al., 2008; Cavendish, 2015; Foley, 2001). Studies show that for youth detained in the juvenile justice system, the likelihood of graduation decreases and the likelihood of adult incarceration increases (Aizer & Doyle, 2015; Haberman & Quinn, 1986; Keeley, 2006). Harlow (2003) found that about half of all United States inmates are high school dropouts and 68% of state inmates did not receive a high school diploma in 1997. Data also indicate that the incidence of incarceration among youth who are 16-24 years old and who are dropouts is 63 times greater than that of comparably aged 4-year college graduates. Where attainment of higher education means higher earnings, a high school diploma is an indicator of future earnings and other labor market outcomes. Therefore, attainment of a high school diploma or equivalent is a barometer of the health of a school system and its population.

**Economic Impact of Incarcerating Youth**

According to a 2015 report of the National Center for Education Statistics, for young adults ages 25-34 that worked full time year round, higher educational attainment was associated with higher median earnings. This pattern was consistent for the years 2000, 2003, and 2005 through 2013. For example, in 2013, median earnings for young adults with a bachelor’s degree were $48,500, compared with $23,900 for those without a high school diploma, $30,000 for those with a high school credential, and $37,500 for those with an associate degree. Therefore, young adults with a bachelor’s degree earned more than twice as much as those without a high school credential (103% more), 62% more than young adult high school completers, and 29% more than associate degree holders. This pattern of higher earnings associated with higher levels
of educational attainment also held for both males and females and across racial/ethnic groups (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2015).

Attainment of a high school diploma is also an indicator of individual health. Less educational attainment is linked with worse health. Across racial and ethnic groups, adults with greater educational attainment are more likely to rate their health as less than very good. (Beckles & Truman, 2013). High school graduates have better health status and lower rates of mortality than high school dropouts. Furthermore, those with higher educational attainment are less likely to use public programs such as Medicaid and typically have jobs that provide health insurance (Cutler & Lleras-Muney, 2006). However, many high school students who enter the juvenile justice system have earned few high school credits (Keeley, 2006; Puzzanchera & Adams, 2011). Juvenile justice-oriented youth are also at higher risk for both negative school and post-school outcomes (Keeley, 2006). Investing in high school graduation means investing in the overall health and economy of the state and its population. This investment includes supporting students returning from juvenile detention centers.

The cost of incarceration is an increasing concern. Between 1987 and 1993, spending for corrections outpaced spending for higher education by 41% (Edna McConnell Clark Foundation, as cited in McMackin, Tansi, & LaFratta, 2004). Almost 20 years ago it was estimated the California prison population would reach 211,000 and consume approximately 18% of the state budget (Petersilia, 1997). Snyder and Sickmund (1999) found the average chronic offender cost to be about $1.5 million over a 10-year period. In a fiscal report on the economic costs of California’s high school dropouts, Stuit and Springer (2010) indicated that in 2008-2009, the average cost of incarceration per inmate was $48,536 per year. In the same report, the researchers showed that the annual incarceration costs of California’s 3.8 million dropouts would
decline by $374 a person if these dropouts graduated from high school, which would mean a potential savings of over $1.4 billion.

Therefore, from an economic and public health standpoint, investigating deterrents to recidivism in juvenile offenders is needed. Since research findings (Arum & Beattie, 1999; Blomberg, Bales, Mann, Piquero, & Berk, 2011; Foley, 2001; Major, Chester, McEntire, Waldo, & Blomberg, 2002; Natsuaki, Ge, & Wenk, 2008) indicate that higher educational attainment, including high school graduation or its equivalent, can lead to a decreased likelihood of delinquency, this study may contribute to the existing body of research that supports focusing on factors that serve as interventions to recidivism for juvenile offenders, such as high school completion.

**High School Completion and Recidivism for Juvenile Justice-Involved Youth: Theoretical Perspective and Data Linking Educational Attainment with Delinquency**

The theoretical frameworks girding this investigation were critical race theory and life course theory. Critical race theory served as the lens by which school and legal actors’ perspectives were analyzed given the disproportionate number of African American and Latino youth who are incarcerated. The literature suggests that disparity is most noticeable at arrest, which is the entry point into the juvenile justice system (Males & Brown, 2014; Sweeten, 2006). Given that traditional schooling practices and the current legal system have often overlooked the direct voices of imprisoned youth and those working with them most closely (and given that African Americans and Latinos lag behind their White counterparts in graduating from high school), this study explored the factor of race as it relates to the overrepresentation of incarcerated African American and Latino youth. This will be explained further in Chapter Two.
To complement the critical race theory lens, life course theory also framed the study. Life course theory is an approach that analyzes human development and an individual’s life course within social, cultural, and structural contexts. Elder (1985) defined the life course as “pathways through the age differentiated life span and involves decision processes that shape transitions and turning points” (p. 17). This study defined high school graduation as a potential turning point in students’ lives. Elder further stressed that “the interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions may generate turning points or a change in the life course” (p. 35). Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2005) life-course theory posits that having a disadvantaged structural position limits access to social networks.

The life-course perspective further stresses that salient life events influence behavior and may serve to modify trajectories. Laub and Sampson (2001) indicated that factors such as stable work and transformation of identity are correlates of desistance from criminal activity. This is relevant to the study of how high school graduation may serve as a pathway to opportunities for stable work and good health. As such, educational attainment may also lead to a more positive self-concept. Sweeten et al. (2009) posited that youth who drop out of school and lack a positive identity are more susceptible to recidivism. Huang, Ryan, Sappleton, and Chiu (2015) suggested, “A transitional point can also be a proactive intervention aimed at reducing antisocial behavior” (p. 198). This study operated from the premise that obtaining a high school diploma may serve as a turning point in life for juvenile justice involved students and may serve to influence a more positive self-concept. More recent research on the link between educational attainment and juvenile delinquency support this view and is discussed in the following sections of this chapter.
Major et al. (2002) found that juvenile camps that have higher quality education programs send more youth back to school and few youth back to the juvenile justice system compared to those programs with lower quality education. Lochner and Moretti (2004) found that earning a high school diploma lowers the probability of arrest and imprisonment. In an empirical study by Natsuaki et al. (2008), findings indicate that obtaining a high school diploma was significant in lowering recidivism rates for youth who have had their first encounter with the juvenile justice system after the age of 15 (i.e., late starters). Blomberg et al. (2011) also found that youth who return to school and attend school regularly post-release are significantly less likely to be rearrested. Blomberg et al. also found that educational attainment while incarcerated, followed by sustained school attendance, has a beneficial effect on transitioning away from delinquency. Moreover, Natsuaki et al. and Blomberg et al. attributed educational achievement during and after custodial release to the experience of a turning point in life experience.

**Problem in Local Context**

For students who are involved with the juvenile justice system, most return to the public school system within a year and attempt to graduate; in one study done in a large mid-Atlantic city, only 15% of reentering youth graduated. Nationwide, these students are concentrated in subsets of school districts’ high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods (Balfanz et al., 2003). Keeley (2006) also found that most students who have been placed in residential correctional placement will not obtain a high school credential before release and fewer will obtain one after release. Keeley also found that strong predictors of graduation for incarcerated youth are their age and plans to return to school.
Over 50% of students in one quarter of the nation’s poor, urban high schools fail to graduate due to factors such as suspension, expulsion, and chronic disengagement and failure (Braddock & McPartland, 1993; Gilson, 2006). In response to this issue, some states have created alternative schools to meet the needs of students who are at risk for not graduating (Gilson, 2006). Alternative schools may serve as places where at-risk students have one last opportunity to graduate (Masashi, Jianping, & Jianpang, 2015). In addition, more recent legal changes in California have affected the education of those returning from the juvenile justice system.

In 2014, California Education Code 48645.5 was amended so that pupils cannot be denied enrollment or readmission to a public school solely on the basis that they have had contact with the juvenile justice system. California State Assembly Bill 2276 requires the immediate enrollment of students returning from juvenile detention and since 1996, under the provisions of California Assembly Bill 922, state counties and school districts have had the responsibility to enroll expelled students.

Many districts now have alternative schools such as continuation schools and community day schools (CDSs). CDSs are designed for students in kindergarten through 12th grade as an educational option for expelled or other high-risk youth. CDSs are required to provide 360 minutes of daily instruction, low teacher to student ratio, and individualized instruction and assessment in addition to any needed support services. Per California State Education Code, the CDSs are also for students who may be on probation.

In contrast, continuation high schools are alternatives to the large comprehensive high school designed to meet compulsory attendance laws for students who are age 16 or older. The goal of a continuation high school is to get the student to graduate or transition back to the
traditional high school to graduate. Continuation high schools are required to provide at least 15 hours per week or 180 minutes per day of instruction and are designed for students who are credit deficient but do not necessarily have challenges with behavior.

Prior to AB 922, California students who were expelled were not protected under compulsory education laws. Many states in the nation do not afford students similar protections as in California. However, AB 922 and AB 2276 have also brought challenges to school districts regarding implementation. Although state legislation has required the enrollment of expelled and incarcerated students, the data tell us that enrollment is not enough. Administrators, counselors, teachers, and students are confronted with the demands of creating conditions that facilitate academic engagement and graduation success for this vulnerable student population. Therefore, this study explored conditions, beyond enrollment, that might be needed to get youth who are returning from incarceration engaged in school and to graduate. The study explored the following research questions:

- **RQ1**: How do formerly incarcerated students conceive of challenges and factors related to their successful reentry to school?
- **RQ2**: How do the administrators, teachers, counselors, probation officers and judges conceive of challenges and factors related to the students’ successful reentry to school?

**Research Population**

Most minority students who drop out of high school are concentrated in the largest cities in the United States (Balfanz et al., 2003). The research site was a large urban district that has a juvenile hall/camp returnee program. Juvenile halls are short-term detention facilities for youth who are awaiting adjudication of their cases. This type of facility houses youth who are charged
with new criminal acts and/or probation violations. The average stay is 20-30 days. Juvenile camps are longer-term correctional facilities that house youth for a few months to a few years after an order has been made by the Juvenile Delinquency Court. The goal of the probation camp is to reunify the youth with the family and reintegrate the minor into the community.

The juvenile hall/camp returnee program exists within the district’s Health and Human Services/Pupil Services Division. Over 15,000 students in the selected district come into some contact (arrested, detained, or committed) with the county’s juvenile justice system each year. This is approximately 50% of the total county number of 30,000 students who have some contact with the juvenile justice system on a yearly basis. The current enrollment of the district is approximately 600,000. Of this population, approximately 154,000 are high school students in a comprehensive school and about an additional 5,400 are in an alternative setting such as a continuation or CDS. A total of approximately 1,000 students have enrolled in some type of district school upon release from juvenile halls or camps. Seventy-one percent of those students are Latino and 10% are African-American. The majority of juvenile hall or camp returnees enroll at the district’s comprehensive high schools (40%) and fewer enroll at continuation schools (24%) or CDSs (14%). Fewer still attend some other type of independent studies program (12%) or charter schools (9%).

The district has about 15 counselors or psychiatric social workers assigned to the cases across the entire district. In the selected region of the district, there are approximately 50 secondary schools combined with a pool of about 50 counselors who were potential participants to be included in the study. Of this pool, three counselors (one per school and one district counselor) and four teachers (two per school) were selected for the sample. In addition, five students were included. Two schools within a sub-district of the larger district were selected.
based on their higher than average rate of enrolling formerly incarcerated students. One principal from each of the two schools was selected. In addition, two probation officers were selected since they have knowledge about the students’ probation requirements, school attendance, and grades. The probation officers were also included since they make recommendations to court judges about success in the community or return to jail. Two delinquency court judges were also participants.

**Research Design**

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain understanding about students’, counselors’, teachers’, principals’, probation officers’, and judges’ challenges and needs in supporting graduation goals for the student population in question. Judges’ perspectives were included as they are the gatekeepers in deciding which youth will be committed after arrest. Probation officers were included as they monitor youth’s compliance regarding school attendance and behavior. Teachers, counselors, and principals were included as participants since they have daily instructional contact with students and because they assign or monitor grades and monitor both social and academic progress towards graduation requirements.

**Significance of Research and Opportunities for Public Engagement**

Research findings indicate an increased need to focus efforts on credit recovery and alternative diploma options for juvenile justice involved youth (Cavendish, 2015; Foley, 2001). Principals’, counselors’, and teachers’ perspectives are crucial pieces of information when making policy decisions about how best to serve students, especially vulnerable student populations. This identified group of school leaders work closest to the students and have direct knowledge about the political, financial, and social challenges inherent to meeting the needs of this special population. The students’ direct voices are also needed to inform policy decisions.
and best practices for school practitioners. As a result of California Assembly Bill 922 and California Education Code 48645, and because enrollment in school is a condition of juvenile camp returnees’ probation, these students will continue to require attention by public school policymakers and administrators. For this reason, probation officers and judges were also included as participants. This study, then, serves to contribute to policy decisions about funding and development of legal and educational systems and school site level conditions to address needed interventions for formerly incarcerated students to optimize their success in school.
CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

As described in Chapter One, research on high school graduation since the 1990s has shown disparities between completion rates of poor youth of color compared to their White counterparts, despite an overall increase in graduation rates nationwide. Extant literature supports the notion that socioeconomic status (SES) is a factor related to high school graduation. However, literature focusing on the high school graduation needs of poor youth of color who return from detention in juvenile justice camps or detention centers is scarce. Lochner and Moretti (2004) found that among African Americans, high school completion leads to an eight percentage point decrease in the chance of being incarcerated as an adult. However, there is scant research that investigates these students’ secondary school completion needs and the social and economic impact of ignoring the national problem. This dissertation sought to fill a gap in the literature on alternatives to incarceration and needed supports for formerly incarcerated youth to be successful and stay in school to graduate.

This literature review is organized into five sections. In the first section I begin with a review of the historical, legal, and political influences that have led to the need to highlight the educational rights of and demands on students returning from the juvenile justice system to our public schools. In section two I present an overview of educational rights for delinquent youth since 1974. Section three explores the role that chronic poverty, race, adverse childhood experiences, and special education play in contributing to the disproportionately high number of minority students who are involved in the juvenile justice system. I will also demonstrate how these factors contribute to the school to prison pipeline.
Section four presents the theoretical frameworks grounding the notion that obtaining a high school diploma may serve as a factor in recidivism to delinquency. I present research in the areas of life-course theory and critical race theory. Critical race theory will serve as a lens by which the historical and educational systems are analyzed given that traditional schooling methods, which have often overlooked the input of the students and teachers, have not been successful in meeting high school graduation goals as evidenced by the data. Life course theory also served as a framework to investigate potential life trajectory changes as a result of obtaining a high school diploma.

In the fifth section, I will describe the research on the links between educational attainment and recidivism to demonstrate the effects that dropping out of high school have on delinquency. I will also show the connection between high school graduation and recidivism, the primary focus of my study, in an effort to add to the scarce literature. I will conclude with policy implications for district and school site leaders who may be impacted by challenges related to graduating juvenile justice-involved students and who are interested in diminishing the school to prison pipeline. Practical strategies will be synthesized from the lens of critical race theory and life course theory grounding the review of research to challenge current thinking and policy responses to support both educational leaders and the students they serve. Here, I will make the case that despite the currently bleak picture, the public school is still the conduit for curtailing mass incarceration of minority youth.

Part I: Historical, Legal and Political Influences

Eighteenth and 19th Century Models of Reform

The concept of educating juvenile justice-involved youth is a relatively new idea from a historical perspective. Throughout U.S. history, children were not afforded legal protections
under the constitution. In the 18th and 19th centuries, courts punished and confined juvenile delinquents, vagrants, and incorrigible children of all ages in adult facilities with hardened criminals (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). In 1825, the state of New York established the first House of Refuge, which led to the model for the American juvenile justice system and instituted legal reforms instituting separation of minors from adults in confinement. In 1859, the city of San Francisco established the Industrial School in response to addressing the needs of a vast number of abandoned children roaming the streets during the population explosion at the time of the California Gold Rush. The primary goal of the Industrial School was to educate and reform the confined youth. However, due to recorded staff brutality, gross neglect, and underfunding, the Industrial School was closed in 1891 as a failed endeavor (Center on Juvenile & Criminal Justice, n.d.). Nevertheless, despite criticism by child advocates of the House of Reform system and the Industrial School, traditional and punitive models such as these have continued for the last 2 centuries.

**Parens Patriae**

In 1967, the Supreme Court case of *In re Gault* held that juveniles are entitled to constitutional due process rights such as adults have. The legal doctrine of *Parens Patriae* is the base for the juvenile courts and gives states the authority by law to make decisions for the child as a parent might. However, poor and minority families have been historically vulnerable to abuses by this doctrine. In 2003, in the case of *Farrell v. Harper*, this seminal California legislation called for major reform of the California Youth Authority for documented abuses including physical brutality and failure to provide adequate health treatment and education of its wards. Chávez-García (2012) also highlights abuse of the Parens Patriae doctrine in California history, such as forced sterilization. In the 1970s, national attention came to other abuses such as
beatings, solitary confinement and rape. Legislation was subsequently passed to address the humanitarian and civil rights of arrested juveniles; however, the legal right to provide education to confined youth is a historically new concept.

**Part II: Overview of Educational Rights for Delinquent Youth and the Connection to Race**

**Educational Rights and Barriers to Quality Education for Juveniles in the Justice System**

The Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (JJDP) Act of 1974 is landmark legislation that serves to provide a federally supported comprehensive approach to juvenile justice and the prevention of delinquency. Prior to the 1974 act, detained juveniles were integrated with adults while in confinement. JJDP mandated that juveniles be separated from regular contact with adults, “sight and sound separation,” and mandated other provisions (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006, p. 97), but none related to the right to an education. In 1988, Congress passed further legislation mandating all states that receive federal funding under JJDP to address Disproportionate Minority Confinement (DMC) in their state plans. Amendments to JJDP granted DMC as a protection under the law and bounded federal and state funding to compliance of the law (Hsia, Bridges, & McHale, 2004). Nevertheless, African American and Latino youth continue to be represented disproportionately in the juvenile justice system across the nation (Alexander, 2010; Snyder & Sickmund, 2006; Wacquant, 2008, 2009a), and educational rights for juveniles in confinement have not been in existence until more recently with the passing of SB 81, State AB 922, and State AB 2276.

**The Changing Landscape of Legal Reforms**

California Assembly Bill 922 (AB 922) was signed into law in 1995 and gave school districts and counties the responsibility to ensure continued education of expelled students. Prior to AB 922, an expelled student was not mandated to attend school, nor were schools or counties
responsible for ensuring student enrollment in school. Although California ensures the provision of continued education for expelled students, some states do not afford expelled students the same provisions.

In 2014, the California legislature made further provisions for incarcerated youth exiting detention with AB 2276, which requires that students who have had contact with the juvenile justice system be immediately enrolled in a public school upon release from detention or confinement. The bill requires the county office of education and county probation department to have a joint transition planning policy that includes collaboration with relevant local educational agencies related to students who are being released from juvenile court schools. The bill mandates additional requirements on local governmental entities with respect to collaboration among the county office of education, the county probation department, and other relevant local educational agencies regarding the immediate transfer of educational records and enrollment of pupils transferring from juvenile court schools.

**Poverty and Racial Inequality**

Who is the typical juvenile justice involved student today? The majority of incarcerated youth are poor African American and Latino youth with a history of maltreatment (Sickmund & Puzancherra, 2014). Although early traditional criminology attempted to associate youth with the likelihood of continuing delinquency, research focusing on the age-crime relationship has shown to be inconclusive in its inability to link individual criminal behavior and delinquency as a direct cause of age or poverty (Brown & Rodriguez, 2009; Steinberg, 2011). That is, most persons living in poverty do not commit crimes. Age-targeted laws such as curfews and the prohibition of minors from purchasing alcohol and firearms assume that youth are more inclined to engage in delinquent behavior (Males & Brown, 2014).
Furthermore, a widely accepted notion is that crime diminishes with age (Delisi, 2006; Fox & Piquero, 2003). However, the age-crime literature has not traditionally controlled for SES and it has not focused its attention on the effects of long-term poverty and neighborhood poverty (Males & Brown, 2014). This literature review aims to show that SES indeed plays a factor in delinquency, although it is not the only factor. Race and maltreatment are also factors related to the incidence of delinquency and will be reviewed after the literature on poverty and delinquency.

Sickmund and Puzzanchera (2014) found that 22% of children ages 0-17 were living in poverty in 2010. Their research also found that African American and Latino children ages 0-17 are three times more likely to live in poverty than their White counterparts. Forty percent of African American children and 38% of Latino children were living in poverty nationwide in 2010. In an empirical study, Hay (2003) concluded that family poverty is linked to delinquency, especially when the family lives in a high poverty community. Balfanz et al. (2003) also highlighted that most of the high poverty neighborhoods in which minority students live are the very neighborhoods that produce the majority of juvenile arrests.

Moreover, Wacquant (2008, 2009a) further emphasized that modern day systems of mass incarceration are the result of chronic poverty, racial marginality, zero tolerance policies, and economic influences rather than the result of individual deficiencies. This is a salient point in that traditional responses to juvenile delinquency in the United States have demanded punitive measures in response to individual offenses, often low-level crime such as petty theft and drug sales. Therefore, analyzing the effects of poverty from a community and ecological context is also relevant when addressing responses to juvenile delinquency.
Consistent with Wacquant (2008, 2009a), Jarjoura, Triplett, and Brinker (2002) stressed that long-term poverty, or persistent poverty, increases the likelihood of delinquent behavior. In their quantitative study using 14 years of longitudinal data from a national sample of adolescents, they assessed the effects of the level of exposure to poverty and its timing on delinquency. Their findings demonstrate that exposure to poverty and the timing of the exposure are related to an increased likelihood of delinquency. The Jarjoura et al. study is unique in that it demonstrates that the effects of poverty vary by the duration of the poverty. That is, the effect of persistent poverty is linked with higher rates of delinquency.

The Wright, Kim, Chassin, Losoya, and Piquero (2014) study also highlights the need to study the effects of long term, generational disadvantage on youth delinquency and reoffending. In their empirical study of over 1,300 serious offending adolescents, they found that “concentrated disadvantage may influence the social and psychological processes that are conducive to criminal behavior” (p. 1,794). Specifically, Wright et al. found that concentrated disadvantage may contribute to a delinquent youth’s “goal blockage” (p. 1,781) in that they may seek deviant peers and engage in delinquent behavior to alleviate strain associated with poverty. This finding has implications for educators. The idea is that reducing community strain through counseling and skills training towards employment and educational opportunity may help reduce recidivism for delinquent youth. This approach contrasts with traditional responses, which have focused on individual and punitive measures.

The Wright et al. (2014) study is consistent with other empirical research, which indicates that youths from lower SES are more likely to engage in delinquent behavior (Rekker, Pardin, Keijser, Branje, & Loeber, 2015). Rekker et al. (2015) reinforced the relevant influence of SES on delinquency by demonstrating a statistically significant association both between and
within individuals. That is, the same youths in the study were more likely to offend and commit more serious offenses during times when their parents’ SES was lower compared to times when their parents’ SES was higher. The Rekker et al. study further reveals that youth from lower SES also have parents who experience higher stress levels, know less about their children’s activities, and spend less time with them. It is important to note, however, that while poverty does not cause delinquency, research findings also indicate that minority youth of lower SES are more likely to be arrested for acts of delinquency than are their White counterparts. Therefore, although poverty is a significant factor related to youth incarceration, race, too, is a significant factor.

For example, in a literature review of racial disparities found in youth delinquency, Males and Brown (2014) stress that impoverished youth populations may be more likely to be arrested due to discriminatory policing targeting African and Latino Americans and that high arrest rates among people of younger ages are more likely given that younger persons are more likely than older persons to be both poor and African American or Latino. More recent literature also supports findings demonstrating that an increase in racial discrimination is correlated with higher incidents of delinquency. Expanding on the link between the structural and systemic effects of racial discrimination on crime, Burt, Simons, and Gibbons (2012) found that experiences with racial discrimination play a significant role in explaining racial disparities in crime.

To elucidate this point, in their empirical study of almost 900 African American families, Burt et al. (2012) showed that racial discrimination has a statistically significant effect on youth disengagement from norms. Their study also demonstrates that racial discrimination has a significant and direct effect on offending. This study is unique in that it focuses attention on the importance of micro-level interactions with racial discrimination as a complement to macro-level
explanations of racial disparities in crime. Similarly, in an empirical study with over 400 African American delinquent males in non-urban communities, Evans, Simons, and Simons (2016) found that if individuals experience an increasing amount of discrimination throughout adolescence, they are more likely to follow a life course trajectory of increasing delinquency. That is, an individual’s life course may be influenced by environmental and political factors such as racial discrimination and delinquency and is not simply a result of individual choices and deficiencies.

Substantiating the complexities involving factors of race, racism, and delinquency, Tapia (2010) showed that racial status tied with both low or high SES increases the likelihood of arrest. Tapia found that low SES and racial status result in higher arrest and incarceration rates, but also demonstrated that racial status tied with high SES significantly increases the likelihood of arrest beyond low SES alone. The Tapia study is distinct in that it highlights the variables of race and discrimination as significant factors in addressing the disproportionate number of minority youth who are incarcerated. Further compounding the development of responses to addressing the needs of juvenile-justice involved youth is the data demonstrating that many of these students have a high degree of adverse childhood experiences beyond poverty and racial discrimination.

**Part III: Adverse Childhood Experiences, Child Welfare and Delinquency**

Youth who experience neglect and abuse are at a higher risk of delinquency (Bender, 2010; Huang, Ryan, & Herz, 2012; Ryan & Testa, 2005). Ryan and Testa (2005) reported that delinquency rates are about 47% greater for adolescents who experience at least one substantiated allegation of mistreatment compared to youth who are not associated with neglect or abuse. Furthermore, about 16% of youth who are placed in the child protective system experience at least one delinquency petition by the juvenile court. In *The Crossover Youth*
Practice Model Report, Herz and Fontaine (2013) revealed similar findings; about 82% of the juvenile justice involved youth in the study were also in the child welfare system. For youth in foster care or out of home care, Courtney, Terao, and Bost (2004) indicated that about 50% experienced at least one juvenile arrest, about 33% experienced an overnight stay in detention, and about 20% were convicted of at least one offense.

Moreover, in an empirical study involving all youth in the Department of Children and Family Services (n = 346,754 in Los Angeles County between 2002 and 2008), Huang et al. (2012) found that 1,148 were dually-involved youth (both in the child welfare system and juvenile justice system) and of this sub-group, 55% were African American and 33% Latino and 92% entered the child welfare system before contact with the juvenile justice system. Sixty-six percent of the sample was receiving an out-of-home placement when arrested in 2003. Specifically, 17% of the dually-involved youth were in foster care, 23% were in a group home, and 20% were in a relative’s home, and 6% were in another type of court-ordered home.

Further substantiating the link between involvement with child welfare and juvenile justice, in their empirical study with approximately 100,000 youth using a matched-control group, Barrett et al. (2014) found that students who had involvement with Child Protective Services were 50% more likely to commit a second offense than those who had not been in Child Protective Services. The results of this study also indicate that even when controlling for personal characteristics, childhood maltreatment and school-related problems are predictors of delinquency and recidivism. This data is important to note for educators who are charged with developing educational goals and rendering educational services to those students transitioning back to school from detention. Given that the large majority of this student population does not
graduate from high school and yet do return to high school from detention, it behooves educators and law enforcement officials and legal actors to learn new ways of adapting to their needs.

**Special Education**

Research points to a strong overlap between students identified with learning disabilities and students who are delinquent (Bullock & McArthur, 1994; Burrell & Warboys, 2000; Rutherford, Bullis, & Anderson, 2001). The role of special education for juvenile justice involved youth warrants further investigation. Although the link between special education and incarceration is a topic of its own and beyond the scope of this study’s literature review, it is important to note special and recent findings related to the educational needs of the population in question, as the prevalence of learning disabled students is high among delinquent youths.

Bullock and McArthur (1994) indicated that the prevalence of special education disabilities in juvenile justice involved population is about four to five times greater than that of the general population. Rozalski, Deignan, and Engel (2008) indicated the percentage of school age children in the United States who have a disability is 8.8%. The most common disabilities are mental retardation, learning disabilities, and behavioral disorders (Bullock & McArthur, 1994). More recent findings indicate that the prevalence rate of special education identified disabilities in juvenile and adult correctional facilities is between 20% and 60% (Rutherford et al., 2002). Zhang, Barrett, Katsiyannis, and Yoon (2011) also found that youth with disabilities had about twice as many referrals to the juvenile justice system than youth without disabilities, and youth with disabilities are referred to the juvenile justice system earlier than youth without disabilities.

Furthermore, Oshima, Huang, Johnson-Reid, and Drake (2010) indicated that juvenile delinquents who are learning disabled are arrested, are adjudicated, and recidivate at higher rates
than their non-disabled counterparts. Morris and Morris (2006) found that disabled youth also recidivate at a higher level than their non-disabled peers, 77% versus 43.6%. Consistent with these findings, in an empirical study of over 100,000 juvenile offenders with and without disabilities, Zhang et al. (2011) found that youth with disabilities are four times as likely to have a second referral than those without a disability. Their findings indicate that, overall, delinquent youth with disabilities had higher recidivism rates than youth without disabilities.

Although the data looks bleak on the surface, more detailed analysis of the recidivism research indicates that educational attainment has positive effects on reducing recidivism for juvenile offenders, including those with disabilities, and is an area that warrants further attention (Cavendish, 2015). Before looking more closely at the recidivism research, I will present the theoretical frames through which the research findings will ultimately be tied to implications for policymakers and educational practitioners.

**Part IV: Theoretical Frameworks**

**Critical Race Theory**

The basic tenets of critical race theory are that colorblind laws serve to marginalize and obscure social and economic inequality; legal reforms that may benefit minority groups only occur when they will advance the dominant White culture, known as interest convergence; and that race is socially and legally constructed and is biologically insignificant. The foundation of my study, then, assumes that race consciousness is necessary and that colorblindness harms students; critical race theory insists on a critique of power structures and subordination and it is focused on counter-narratives (Capers, 2014). My study will contribute to the larger body of research on factors related to minority youth and high school graduation and is unique given its
lens on power dynamics in schools. It also highlights the important role of judges and school staff in sustaining or changing the life course trajectory of delinquent youth.

The intent of my study was to expand on existing research in the area of high school completion and the school to prison pipeline. Centering on the students’ and practitioners’ voices will work to develop conditions of genuine empathy to enact reform in the schools. Delgado (1996; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) emphasized that well intentioned leaders and lawyers often speak on behalf of their clients with the belief they are telling the story that is needed and how the client would want the story told; however, “real empathy, putting the client first and getting fully inside the client’s mind and experience, is rare” (Delgado, 1996, p. 5).

Delgado (1996) recalls the early Settlement House Movement where upper class women concerned about immigrants who worked in the houses taught them hygiene, housekeeping, and even English; however, they did not learn their languages or their ways. Similarly, traditional school reform efforts have often worked in this manner by setting higher academic standards, but fail to inquire about the specific needs from the source of those needs.

Furthermore, urban school educators and leaders make policy, create structures, and conduct practice in ways they believe are in the students’ best interests. However, the data tells us this is not working. What is lacking, then? To begin, listening: listening to the students’ stories of what they need. Listening to what teachers, counselors, principals, and probation officers think policymakers can do better (a tenet of critical race theory) to help students be successful in school and learn how to support a change in life course. I argue that educators, law enforcement, and judicial officials need to learn the juvenile-justice involved students’ perspectives and language before we enact policies and practices that traditionally have not
served them, as evidenced by the data. Further, my study investigated the structures that exist to support juvenile camp returnees from the perspective of social determinism.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) argued that our system, by virtue of its structure and its vocabulary, is not well equipped to right societal wrongs. Bridging this concept to the schools in this study means examining what alternatives to traditional school settings and policies exist for the juvenile-justice youth and how these schools are or are not being successful in meeting students’ graduation goals. Because the data demonstrates that schools are not meeting the needs of juvenile-justice involved youth, this investigation will contribute to the existing body of studies in presenting new and innovative ways to address the gap in empirical research and in schools’ performance. Given the data, traditional reform efforts are not successful with African American and Latino youth and even less so for African American and Latino students returning to school from the juvenile justice system. Addressing this problem is both an economic and moral imperative.

Therefore, how we focus our public resources and time matters. Alexander (2010) asserted that the question reformers should be asking is not whether or not reform is need, but how to engage in reform. Alexander stressed that if the ways we engage in reform do not contribute to a movement to disrupt a system that supports mass incarceration of Latino and Black youth, leaders need to reassess reform efforts. This study works from the premise that we need to look at solutions and factors that may help curb juvenile delinquency and address the needs of juvenile-justice involved youth already experiencing the effects of laws that support mass incarceration of minority youth.

Urban school educators have the responsibility to engage in innovative reform efforts given the statistics demonstrating that what we have traditionally done is ineffective and costly.
Milner (2015) posited that micro-level and macro-level structures are interrelated and have the potential to stifle or enable student development. Genuine progress for vulnerable students is contingent upon attention to both levels. For this reason, the intersection of Life course theory and critical race theory may serve as an innovative way to frame the complex work of supporting the needs of juvenile justice-involved youth and disrupting the school to prison pipeline. In short, we need to go directly to the source (the students, as well as the teachers, counselors, and probation officers who work with them) for viable solutions in order to gain traction in a movement that works to disrupt the school to prison pipeline.

To address critics (Kennedy, 1989; Posner, 1997) of critical race theory who assert that it is a nebulous construct that offers no practical solutions, I will also integrate life-course theory as a practical way to conceptualize benefits of educational attainment and as a way to frame the development of strategies that critics claim are missing from a critical race theory perspective alone. Using a critical race theory lens will guide the focus on students’ and educators’ voices to propose new solutions that are driven and permeated by the practitioners’ position and lens. Incorporating life course theory will serve to analyze how educational attainment and the school itself may work as a structure to change the trajectory of the youth offender. While the traditional life course perspective has focused on the individual students’ responses to the school and other institutions such as law enforcement, the life course perspective may also be viewed from the position of the school and legal actors’ (adults who work closely with the students) influence on the life course of the individual.

That is, if we look at the needs of the students and those who interact with them closely, from their positions, rather than from the dominant position (a theme of critical race theory), we may gain understanding about how to be more successful in helping reentering students. The
incorporation of these two theories may also work as a conduit for curing the silence (a theme of critical race theory) of the failure of the school system to successfully graduate youth returning from detention. Connecting critical race theory with life course theory grounded my study in its exploration of the history and future of juvenile-justice involved youth.

**Life Course Theory**

Life course theory is a framework that analyzes human development and an individual’s life course within social, cultural, and structural contexts. Elder (1985) defined the life course as “pathways through the age differentiated life span and involves decision processes that shape transitions and turning points” (p. 17). This study defined high school graduation as a potential turning point in students’ lives. Elder further stressed that “the interlocking nature of trajectories and transitions may generate turning points or a change in the life course (p. 35). Sampson and Laub’s (1993, 2005) life course theory posited that having a disadvantaged structural position limits access to social networks.

The life course perspective, however, emphasizes that salient life events influence behavior and may serve to modify trajectories. Laub and Sampson (2001) indicated that factors such as stable work and transformation of identity are correlates of desistance from criminal activity. As such, this may also lead to a more positive self-concept. These factors are relevant to the study of how high school graduation may serve as a pathway to opportunities for stable work and good health. Moreover, these factors have major implications for public schools that have an opportunity to influence the life course trajectory of their students.

Sweeten et al. (2009) posited that youth who drop out of school and who lack a positive identity are more susceptible to recidivism. Huang et al. (2015) suggested, “A transitional point can also be a proactive intervention aimed at reducing antisocial behavior” (p. 198). My
investigation operated from the premise that obtaining a high school diploma may serve as a turning point in life for juvenile justice involved students and may serve to influence a more positive self-concept. Research on the link between educational attainment and juvenile delinquency supports this view (Major et al., 2002; Moretti, 2005; Natsuaki et al., 2008).

Although attainment of a high school diploma may indeed serve as a turning point for vulnerable youth, there are indeed deep-rooted historical and social factors that continue to challenge urban school educators and high school students. These factors need to be understood and called to the forefront before beginning the work of addressing a student’s life course. Therefore, this study operated from the premise that attainment of the high school diploma is one small, albeit significant part, of altering the life trajectory of juvenile justice-involved youth. This study was grounded in critical race theory as the foundation for altering that life trajectory.

At first glance, it might appear that these two theories are conflicting or cannot be integrated. However, what makes my study unique is the focus on formerly incarcerated juveniles’ voices, traditionally unheard. It is also unique in seeking the voices of those in the legal and school systems to find solutions to alter the delinquent youth’s life trajectory. How are these two factors tied to the two theories? Current research tells us that obtaining a high school diploma is important in sustaining a healthy life course. The data also tell us that race is indeed a factor related to problems of mass incarceration and, I argue, cannot be ignored when addressing related solutions. It is imperative that we investigate the perspectives of the individuals who constitute and interact with the systems that influence their trajectory toward or away from delinquency.
Part V: Educational Attainment and Recidivism

High School Graduation and Recidivism

In an empirical study by Major et al. (2002), findings indicate that juvenile camps that have higher quality education programs send more youth back to school and fewer youth back to the juvenile justice system compared to those programs with lower quality education. Lochner and Moretti (2004) found that earning a high school diploma lowers the probability of arrest and imprisonment. In their empirical study using Census and FBI data, they found that the relationship between graduating high school and arrest rates is significant. They determined that a 10% point increase in graduation rates would reduce murder and assault arrest rates by approximately 20%, vehicle theft by about 13%, and arson by about 8%.

Furthermore, in an empirical study by Natsuaki et al. (2008), findings indicate that obtaining a high school diploma was significant in lowering recidivism rates for youth who have had their first encounter with the juvenile-justice system after the age of 15 (late starters). Blomberg et al. (2011) also found that youth who return to school and attend school regularly post-release are significantly less likely to be rearrested. Blomberg et al. also demonstrated that educational attainment while incarcerated, followed by sustained school attendance, has a beneficial effect on transitioning away from delinquency. Moreover, Natsuaki et al. and Blomberg et al. attribute educational achievement during and after custodial release to the experience of a turning point in life experience.

Dropping out and Delinquency

Sweeten et al. (2009) reported that dropping out of high school has negligible effects on delinquency. However, more recent literature indicates a significant relationship between these variables. In a meta-analysis of high school dropout indicators, Bowers, Sprott, and Taff (2013)
found that students who fail to graduate from high school experience higher rates of unemployment and incarceration and lower life time earnings in comparison to graduates. Henry, Knight, and Thornberry (2012) used data from the Rochester Youth Development Study including a sample of over 900 adolescents to study the effects of school disengagement on dropping out of high school and delinquency. Their findings indicate that in middle adolescence (ages 15-16), the variable of school disengagement, which was positively associated with dropping out, is significantly and positively associated with serious violent crime. Overall, Henry et al. found that school disengagement has significant effect on problem behaviors across various developmental stages in adolescence from ages 15 years to 23 years.

Consistent with these findings, Wang and Fredricks (2014) found that school engagement and delinquency and substance use are mutually reinforcing over time. This study is unique in that it is one of the first studies to investigate the reciprocal association between school engagement and delinquent behavior. Wang and Fredericks and Henry et al. (2012) suggested that school engagement may function as a protective factor preventing school dropout and delinquency. These findings have major implications for educators.

**Implications for Educational Practitioners**

Despite the grim data, the public school remains a significant and influential structure for creating pathways to detention or deliverance from delinquency (Burrell & Warboys, 2000; Losen, Keith, Hodson, Martinez, & Belway, 2015). School success alone may not stop delinquency; however, without it, the picture becomes even more grim and challenging for youth (Burrell & Warboys, 2000). How, then, can schools influence change of life course for their students?
Based on the literature, there are four major implications for educators regarding policy and practice toward graduating youth who reenter high school from juvenile detention: changes in curriculum and instruction, development of alternatives to suspensions, coordinated transition planning, and adequate teacher and leader training (Hogan, Bullock, & Fritsch, 2010; Hughes, Stenhjem, & Newkirk, 2007; Price, Martin, & Robertson, 2010; Shippen, Houchins, & Lockwood, 2014; Teske, Huff, & Graves, 2013). Although many high school students in juvenile justice programs return to neighborhood schools, they are significantly credit deficient, (Office of Program Policy Analysis and Government Accountability, 2010). Schools, then, should adjust their curricular programs to incorporate credit recovery programs and allow for more flexible use of instructional time. This requires training for teachers and school leaders.

In addition, alternatives to suspension, such as teaching and learning empathic strategies, are also needed (Boske, 2012). Furthermore, teachers, counselors, and leaders need training in how to address the needs of youth returning from detention and planning for those needs should be done in a coordinated manner with interdisciplinary staff teams (Abrams et al., 2008; Price et al., 2010). The task of disrupting the school to prison pipeline is a daunting one. Failure to address the problem is proving costly to our nation. Addressing the high school graduation needs of youth returning from detention is one piece of the complex work, but it is an important piece that research shows may yield significant results.
CHAPTER THREE
METHODS AND DESIGN

The overarching purpose of this study was to understand the social, emotional, and academic needs of youth returning from juvenile detention centers from their own perspectives and from the perspectives of those who work closest to them. Minority youth make up almost 70% of incarcerated juveniles nationwide and yet account for only 44% of the general population of youth. The majority of these youth come from high poverty homes and schools. Most return to the public schools within 1 year of release from detention and attempt to graduate. However, juvenile incarceration decreases the likelihood of graduation by 13-39 percentage points and increases chances of adult incarceration by 23 percentage points (Aizer & Doyle, 2015). Given that, in California, incarcerated youth are required to be enrolled in school upon release (AB 2276), school site leaders (administrators, counselors, teachers, and probation officers) are challenged with meeting the students’ needs with scarce resources to do so and under policies that have traditionally been issued by people who do not have direct contact with students and educators. Moreover, while enrollment is a fundamental requirement, the data reveal that students who reenter from detention drop out at significant rates; therefore, it is necessary to investigate the participants’ needs and experiences related to factors beyond enrollment.

Critical race theory grounded the research design, seeking insights into the needs of formerly incarcerated youth from the students’ perspectives and from the perspectives of those who work closest to them. Since the disproportionate number of African American and Latino youth represented in juvenile detention centers is significant and the current literature is scare in its investigations of race as a factor related to youth delinquency, using critical race theory served to fill a gap in the literature. This study investigated how schools can better incorporate
students who were formerly incarcerated to support them in advancing their educational goals and to reduce the school to prison pipeline.

**Research Design**

I used a qualitative design to answer the following questions:

- RQ1: How do formerly incarcerated students conceive of challenges and factors related to their successful reentry to school?
- RQ2: How do the administrators, teachers, counselors, probation officers and judges conceive of challenges and factors related to the students’ successful reentry to school?

A qualitative design was especially needed to gain insight into this particular population whose voice is rare in the research literature. Qualitative research provides insights into the meaning people construct of their experiences (Merriam, 2009). Additionally, grounding the research questions in the lens of critical race theory also required in-depth interviews with the students to elicit the counter stories of those whose voices are missing from the literature. I sought to include the “counter-stories” of the students and those working closest to them by “calling attention to neglected evidence” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 50) of what is needed and what has been lacking in the process of juvenile justice-involved youth attempting to obtain a high school diploma.

A primary feature of qualitative methodology is the intent and ability to understand meaning making from the “participants’ perspectives, not the researchers” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). Focusing on the students’ voices is in line with the idea of privileging their perspective, learning from the source, and is aligned with the tenets of critical race theory and qualitative methodology. Since this study aimed to describe, interpret, and provide a holistic account of the experiences of the students and the various professionals who support them towards graduation,
a qualitative approach was used. Creswell (2009) stressed that “qualitative research is a form of interpretive inquiry whereby researchers report multiple perspectives, sketching the larger picture that emerges” (p. 176).

Furthermore, using a strictly quantitative methodology and analyzing numbers alone would not have helped shed light on the multifaceted needs of meeting the social, academic, and graduation needs upon transition to schools. A focus on strict cause and effect would have oversimplified the complex processes involved with teaching, transitioning (reentry), learning, counseling, and navigating political and legal systems, including the courts and law enforcement, unique to this student population.

Moreover, since African Americans and Latinos make up a disproportionate majority of incarcerated youth, this study was girded in critical race theory. A methodological advantage of using critical race theory is that it helped emphasize the importance of race to the analysis of the participants’ experiences. To ignore the role that race plays in the participants’ understandings would have reinforced “structural determinism,” which is the idea that our systems, by reason of their structures and vocabulary, are ill-equipped to redress certain types of wrongs (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 31). Given that incarceration decreases the likelihood of graduation, and given that the majority of dropouts are African American and Latino youth, it is imperative that researchers use methodology that may lead to innovative solutions that are not traditionally considered. It is also important to speak about the explicit role that race plays in relation to incarceration and graduation. The study, then, demanded the use of a framework that explicitly addressed the relevance of race as a factor in the participants’ experiences.

If we fail to investigate and document the students’ actual experiences and ideas, we are neglecting to capitalize on opportunities for deeper learning that may contribute to the existing
literature. Therefore, this study also necessitated a qualitative approach since its focus was on understanding the participants’ perspectives regarding what is needed for successful reentry and ultimately high school graduation upon transition from incarceration in order to sever the school to prison pipeline.

Site and Population

The research site was a large urban school district that has a unique Juvenile Hall/Camp Returnee Program. This site was selected since over 15,000 of the district’s students come into some contact (arrested, detained or committed) with the county’s juvenile justice system each year. This is approximately 50% of the total county number of 30,000 students who have some contact with the juvenile justice system on a yearly basis. The current enrollment of the district’s students is over 600,000. Of this population, approximately 154,000 are high school students in a comprehensive school and about an additional 5,400 are in an alternative setting such as a continuation or CDS. Yearly, approximately 1,000 students have enrolled in some type of district school upon release from juvenile halls or camps. Seventy-one percent of those students are Latino and 10% are African-American. The majority of juvenile hall or camp returnees enroll in a district school.

The district separated data by subgroups of the population to identify between students returning from juvenile halls and those returning from a juvenile county probation camp. Juvenile halls provide short-term confinement to minors from ages 8-18 who are awaiting adjudication and disposition of legal matters. Confinement in a juvenile hall usually lasts from 1 day to a few weeks. Camps are county run facilities that provide longer-term treatment and rehabilitation for delinquent youth who are wards of the juvenile court. The average confinement period of a juvenile in a camp is 5 months.
In 2014-15, 34% of the district students returning from camp (n = 586) enrolled in an alternative school, 25% percent enrolled in a comprehensive high school, 18% enrolled in a competing charter school designed for high-risk youth, and 23% in another type of setting, which may include a county school through the County Office of Education. The data for students returning from a juvenile hall versus a camp are slightly different. Forty-four percent enroll in a comprehensive school, 18% enroll in an alternative school, 23% enroll in a county school, two percent enroll in a competing charter school and 11% enroll in a school setting defined as other, which could include an alternative school setting in a different district outside of the district under investigation. The alternative school was selected because it enrolls a high number of students returning from detention (both camp and juvenile hall) and they are designed to address the needs of youth with behavior problems or who are returning from detention, based on legislation such as AB 922.

The comprehensive school was chosen because it also enrolls a high number of students reentering from detention (camp and juvenile hall) and it is the default site for enrollment for students based on their residence, per district policy. In essence, the comprehensive schools are the students’ neighborhood schools and are typically within walking distance from the students’ homes. One CDS and one comprehensive school were chosen based on their higher than average rate of enrolling camp returnees to obtain access to the typical student reentering school from detention. The two participating schools were selected based on their reputation for success in working with delinquent youth. For the purpose of this study’s selection of sites, success was defined as having a large number of delinquent youth and retaining them in the same school towards graduation. In addition, the school’s principals were identified as having a disposition toward supporting juvenile-justice involved youth. I worked from the premise that the school
leader is the gatekeeper of enrolling and retaining or suspending and expelling students. For this reason, choosing two schools with principals who want to work with delinquent youth was important in attempting to learn more about effective approaches.

**Population and Recruitment**

The district has about 15 specialized central office counselors or psychiatric social workers assigned to cases for the juvenile camp returnee program across the entire district. These 15 counselors are in addition to the school site counselor working full time at a school, who are charged with providing academic guidance for every student at the school and not only those reentering from detention. In the geographic area where the two identified schools are located, there are approximately 50 secondary schools (middle and high school) and about 50 school site counselors.

Of the pool of 50 counselors, three counselors (one local district office counselor and one from each school site, combined) were included as participants. Four teachers combined between the two schools were included in the sample. Two principals, one at each school, were also selected since their role as the schools’ instructional leaders would also be important in informing the study. In addition, two probation officers were included. One probation officer worked at the comprehensive school and reported directly to the County Probation Department and indirectly to the school principal. The other probation officer worked primarily at a probation center and not at a school, but has direct contact with students grades 9-12 in the same geographic area as the comprehensive school in the study and similar demographic as the participating schools. Formerly incarcerated youth are required to report to probation officers who make general assessments about the students’ social and academic progress; they may influence decisions made by the judges regarding probation requirements and/or future
incarceration. Therefore, including probation officers’ perspectives served to further elucidate the experiences of the students and the school employees.

Additionally, two judges who work in juvenile delinquency courts were also included. The two judges were selected based on at least 3 years of work in juvenile delinquency court and their advocacy for children’s rights. The purpose of this study was to find alternative methods to curb delinquency and youth incarceration. Therefore, selecting judges based on their knowledge of juvenile court and disposition toward less restrictive sentencing helped to gather alternative perspectives and contribute to the existing body of literature. Although the two judges selected do not work for the school district, both judges conduct work to support advocacy and intervention programs for incarcerated youth and formerly incarcerated youth. The selection of two to four members of each participant group was needed to ensure one voice was not idiosyncratic to a particular participant.

Furthermore, since the units of analysis are the students within the context of having been formerly incarcerated and returning to school, it is important to also gain understanding of the ways in which the multiple actors in their lives make sense of their roles within that context. The phenomenon (i.e., the process of reentering school from incarceration) required a method of study that elicited meaning making from the participants. Moreover, this study was particularly interested in investigating how the various adults (the units of analysis) who work in institutions (the social context) governing students’ lives interact, or make sense of each other’s roles, as an ecology of actors in the students’ process (phenomenon) of reentry and graduation. According to Merriam (2009), “A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds” (p. 22).
Moreover, to ensure student voice was represented, five students who reentered school from jail were included. A purposeful sampling strategy was used. The five students were selected based on at least one reentry time from detention to school. That is, since the data tell us that once incarcerated, a youth is less likely to return to school, the criterion for selection of students was at least one incidence of incarceration and reentry into the district school. Students were recruited from the district’s juvenile hall/camp returnee program and were in grades 9-12.

The key informant was selected based on at least 2 years of work with the district to ensure knowledge of district organizational structure and knowledge of the juvenile camp returnee program. The role of the district counselor who acted as the key informant was to provide access to the pool of students, teachers, counselors, and principals. I chose to select participants from each type of staff member to obtain a cross-section of representation, a balance of numbers for each sub-group, and some diversity in perceptions. The participating teachers, counselors, and principals worked directly with the students in the study, as did one of the two probation officers. The two judges and one of the two probation officers did not know the students in the study. All the adult participants had at least two years of prior experience working with formerly incarcerated youth in grades 9-12.

Forty-dollar gift cards were provided to all five of the student participants. An additional $40 gift card was provided to four of the five students’ parents, those students who were under 18 years of age at the time of recruitment. The students were informed that they were under no obligation to participate and their parents were also under no obligation to provide consent for participation. The incentive was provided to a pool of five interested families who were informed they would receive the $40 gift card for returning the interest form whether they made a final decision to participate or not in an effort to minimize coercion. A $40 gift card was also
provided to each of the four teachers, three counselors, two principals, two probation officers, and two judges.

The probation officers and judges were selected based on 2 years of experience with delinquent youth, grades 9-12, from urban cities. The district counselor and key informant provided anecdotal information about the pool of adult participants. The key informant and district counselor has three years of working in the district’s Juvenile Camp Returnee program and had knowledge of successful schools that work with high numbers of formerly incarcerated students. All the adult participants were selected based on their reputation for effective work with delinquent youth, information provided by the key informant. Once the two principals were identified, a letter of information was provided to the principals to assist with the dissemination and selection of the other participants: the teachers, counselors, and probation officers. The key informant provided access to the judges, who were specifically identified as doing advocacy work for delinquent youth. The purposeful sampling was done with the intent of investigating successes with the student population and exploring alternative approaches for supporting formerly incarcerated students.

Given that I am an employee of the district in which this study took place, I conducted the research during off-duty hours and vacation time. I do not supervise nor have I ever held any supervisory role with any of the participants. In addition, the release of information and consent forms indicated that my role during the interviews was that of researcher and not one of district employee.

**Data Collection Methods**

In this investigation, the units of analysis were the students and the group of adults who work closely with them. The group of selected adult participants have influence over the
students’ social and educational trajectory, especially as it relates to staying in school or recidivating. Therefore, semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand students’, teachers’, counselors’, principals’, probation officers’, and judges’ needs in supporting academic and social goals for the students. Interviews took place in person at the participants’ schools and/or offices. Only two of the adults, one counselor and the non-school based probation officer, were interviewed via phone. Each adult interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. The student interviews lasted about 30-45 minutes. Each of the interviews was audio-recorded.

Data from interviews with the students allowed me to investigate conditions and factors related to Research Question #1, regarding challenges and needed support towards successful reentry to school. Data from the adult participants allowed me to investigate Research Question #2, about adults’ perceptions regarding challenges and needs to support successful student reentry to school. I used semi-structured interviews in order to adapt more fluidly to the participants’ responses or non-responses. Merriam (2009) stressed that semi-structured interviews allow “the researcher to respond to the situation at hand, to the emerging worldview of the respondent, and to new ideas on the topic” (p. 90). The semi-structured interview, then, provided for some flexibility in probing and rephrasing questions as needed to gain deeper insights into the worldview of the participants (See Appendices A-E).

Using all six sources of data (students, teachers, counselors, principals, probation officers, and judges) allowed for cross checking of theme development in the data analysis and impacted findings, while strengthening credibility of the results. In addition, obtaining data from various sources within each source group ensured that findings were not idiosyncratic to one person within that participant group. See Table 2 for an illustration of the alignment of the interview questions to the research questions.
### Table 2

**Alignment of the Interview Questions to the Research Questions**

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<tr>
<th>Research Question</th>
<th>Unit of Analysis</th>
<th>Interview Question</th>
<th>Units of Observation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ1: <em>How do students conceive of challenges and factors related to their successful reentry to school?</em></td>
<td>5 Students</td>
<td>(Student Protocol) 1a</td>
<td>Unwelcome school environment</td>
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<td>1b</td>
<td>Lack of a transition plan</td>
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<td>Lack of credits or transferability of credits</td>
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<td>1d</td>
<td>Lack of understanding about needed credits</td>
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<td>2a</td>
<td>Lack of contact with a counselor for periodic progress monitoring</td>
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<td>Lack of a mentor</td>
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<td>2c</td>
<td>Lack of trust with school staff</td>
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<td>Lack of tutoring support</td>
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<td>Rigorous academic goals</td>
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<td>Homelessness, Domestic Violence, Substance Abuse, Unemployment</td>
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<td>Lack of adequate nutrition</td>
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<td>Lack of self-confidence</td>
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<td>Parenting and daycare needs for students who are parents</td>
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<td>RQ2: How do the teachers, counselors, probation officers and judges conceive of</td>
<td>Challenges</td>
<td>Gang Association</td>
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<td>the challenges and factors related to the students’ successful reentry to school?</td>
<td>4 Teachers</td>
<td>3 Counselors</td>
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<td>Successes</td>
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<td>wraparound services</td>
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<td>Restorative Disciplinary Practices</td>
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<td>Research Question</td>
<td>Unit of Analysis</td>
<td>Interview Question</td>
<td>Units of Observation</td>
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<td>RQ2: How do the teachers, counselors, probation officers and judges conceive of challenges and factors related to the students’ successful reentry to school?</td>
<td>4 Teachers 3 2 Principals 2 Probation Officers 2 Judges</td>
<td>(Adult Protocol) 3a 3b 3c 3d 3e 3f 3g</td>
<td>Artifacts/Documents</td>
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<td>Weekly/monthly planning time with teachers and counselors</td>
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<td>Weekly/monthly meetings with teachers and counselors</td>
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<td>Correspondences between teachers and counselors and probation officers</td>
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<td>Correspondences or reports between judges and school officials</td>
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<td>Student transcripts</td>
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<td>Student attendance reports</td>
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</table>

**Data Analysis**

A thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was conducted. Themes and coding of the transcribed passages were grounded in the research questions: challenges related to graduation, successes related to reentry and graduation, and defined roles of actors. I used a
deductive approach to categorize the various codes around the three named themes, which are aligned with the research questions. Emergent themes were also identified based on repetition and patterns in the data. I used a descriptive approach to analyze the content of the data.

Credibility

A threat to the credibility of my study is the small sample size (two schools). Although the sample population is fairly small, choosing a variety of participants provided adequate detailed description from multiple participants. Merriam (2009) asserted, “User generalizability involves leaving the extent to which a study’s findings apply to other situations up to the people in those situations” (p. 226). A major purpose of my study was to contribute to the existing body of research and be of use to practitioners. In addition, obtaining data from selected students, teachers, counselors, principals, probation officers, and judges also provided for maximum variation and a greater range of transferability. Triangulation of the multiple data sources and their various perspectives (students, teachers, counselors, principals, probation officers and judges) also curtailed threats to credibility. Merriam discussed the importance of mitigating credibility and generalizability threats by obtaining rich description from a multitude of sources, even within a small sample size. In short, quality was not compromised with the small quantity of school sites and participants.

Ethical Considerations

During times that I met with the participants directly, I communicated clearly that my role was that of researcher. To minimize reactivity, I stressed that my role was to support the participants as experts and that I was genuinely interested in learning from them. I ensured their confidentiality and anonymity by using pseudonyms for all names and all locations. Meetings and interviews were conducted at the participants’ offices or school sites, except for the two
phone interviews (one counselor and one probation officer). In order to minimize bias, I also exercised diligence in reflection and reflexivity and I conferenced with my dissertation chair every 2 weeks during data collection and data analysis to discuss this point.

An ethical consideration was the potential use of district paid time to conduct my research. My work time is fairly flexible and I was able to meet with the participants during times that did not disrupt their work or mine as an employee. Interviews were conducted with me as a researcher, “A guest in the participants’ private spaces” (Merriam, 2009, p. 231). This was especially important when conducting the interviews with the students as the participants’ vulnerability and privacy needed to be respected and honored. I was also particularly reflective about the respondents’ need for complete confidentiality, especially when asked to respond to questions that might have generated frustration or embarrassment, as with interview questions related to perspectives on challenges. This was mitigated by interview questions that were designed to elicit advocacy and strengths. In addition, maintaining student confidentiality was crucial for the sample population as they are a particularly vulnerable group. All transcripts, files, and notes have been stored in a locked facility and will be destroyed within 1 year upon completion of the study.
CHAPTER FOUR
FINDINGS

This study explored the social and academic needs of formerly incarcerated students who reenter public high schools using a qualitative interview methodology. The data were organized into emergent themes through an open coding process. I used a constant comparative method to identify similarities and differences between and among the various participants. This chapter starts with a brief overview of the research process and a description of the setting and its participants. Next, I present a description of the students through vignettes. Within the student vignettes I embed their responses to a data prompt used as part of the protocol during the interviews, for the purpose of foregrounding the emergent themes through the lens of critical race theory. The interview data prompt shows two bar graphs with youth population and youth incarceration rates in California for Whites, Latinos, and African Americans. The data prompt also shows a significant disproportion of African American youth who are incarcerated (Table 3 and Appendix A).

Figure 4. Youth population and incarceration rates in California. Adapted from *Juvenile offenders and victims: 2014 national report*, by M. Sickmund & C. Puzzanchera (Eds.), 2014, retrieved from http://www.ojjdp.gov/ojstatbb/nr2014/. Copyright 2014 by the authors.
I then present the adults: the teachers, counselors, principals, probation officers, and judges. The adults are organized into three groups according to their responses to the data prompt. This grouping allowed me to examine different ways that adult actors made sense of the relationship between incarceration and race as well as how these understandings may shape their work with students. I compared similarities in responses to the data prompt to continue foregrounding issues of race. Comparing similarities of the adults’ responses to the data prompt allowed me to make sense of the adults’ responses to investigate differences in the adult actors’ approaches to supporting students based on their perceptions of racial bias in incarceration rates. The three categories of adult participants provide context for the emergent themes and the adults’ roles related to the students’ experiences upon reentry. After bridging responses from the data prompt, I present major themes related to the students’ and the adults’ perceptions about challenges and successes related to reentry and graduation. The three themes are: oppression and control, agency and dignity, and sense of belonging and turning point. I demonstrate alignment of the findings to the research questions through the theoretical lenses of critical race theory and life course theory. I conclude the chapter with similarities and distinctions between participant groups’ perceptions.

**Description of Participants and Foregrounding of Emergent Themes**

This study included interviews with 18 participants across two urban schools serving a large number of formerly incarcerated youth. The school-based participants included five students who had prior experience with being detained at a juvenile hall or at a youth probation camp. The 13 adult participants included four teachers, two principals, three counselors, two probation officers, and two delinquency court judges. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants.
For this analysis, the adult participants were grouped into three categories based on similar responses to the data prompt designed to elicit meaning-making about issues of race related to incarceration. This categorization also serves to highlight how adults make sense of their own roles with students and the way they make sense of students’ needs upon return from incarceration. I analyze responses to the questions and to the data prompt with a lens of critical race theory and work under the premise that for deeper levels of support to occur, adult service providers must have a greater awareness of the historical, racial, socio-political, and economic struggles of formerly incarcerated population of youth. Based on their responses, the three categories of adult participants are:

1. *Colorblind participants*, who rejected or did not address issues of racism or bias in their responses to the data prompt;

2. *Grapplers*, the adult participants who struggled to make sense of the data prompt beyond cultural deprivation explanations and who only tangentially called on issues of culture or race in their responses to the data prompt. The grapplers did not reject issues of race as did the colorblind participants and appeared to be dissatisfied with solely structural attributions for the incarceration rates; and,

3. *Critical participants*, who spoke clearly of racism or bias in their interpretation of the statistics from the data prompt (See Table 3 in section on *The Adults*).

I start with a presentation of the students through vignettes to humanize them and their experiences. Society and the schools within them form their laws and policies based on a larger cultural and moral climate. Sentiments toward minority and delinquent children are largely negative given the data on mass incarceration of youth. The students’ stories, then, serve to
challenge deleterious mindsets about the students themselves and help to contextualize their experiences as part of the process of being young, developing people.

Within the student vignettes I share some demographic information and I embed their responses to the data prompt, providing context for the emergent themes and the complexity of the problem. The students’ responses reveal insights into the relevance of race and bias in the experience of incarceration and schooling. Consistent with the findings of Delgado and Stefancic (2012), I choose to focus on the students’ voices as a starting point to counter their experience of being silenced. In order to better inform our policies and practice with juvenile justice involved youth, I argue we must call on “neglected evidence” (p. 50). Therefore, I use the vignettes as a means of counter-storytelling.

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) described counter-storytelling as a method of sharing the stories of people on the margins of society as a means of analyzing and challenging dominant stories of racial privilege. For this study, I use the students’ stories as a way to challenge the dominant discourse on incarcerated youth as delinquents who are dangerous and deficient. Recognizing and sharing the students’ insights, then, informs the overall analysis of emergent themes explained in the latter part of the chapter.

The Students

Kevin greeted me confidently and happily as he walked into his counselor’s office to meet me prior to the interview. Kevin is a 16 year-old African-American student. He is a tall, thin 10th grader who smiles frequently. His eyes brighten when he speaks. He was courteous, made good eye contact, and was eager to share his personal interests such as hip-hop music, rapping, and playing various sports, especially baseball. By his own and his counselor’s account, Kevin has minimal conflict at school and was eager to share that he has “all kinds of friends.” He
is pleasant and jovial. When I showed Kevin the data prompt that demonstrates a disproportionate incarceration rate for African American youth and asked him how he made sense of the numbers, he became serious and sat closer to be sure he was heard:

There’s more people in jail than from the streets. Me and my friend… We used to walk to school every day. They [the police] pulled me over and they was asking, “Is he messing with you? Is he harassing you and stuff?” She [my friend, who is Latina] was like, “No.” [The police said] “Oh, we’ve got to check him for weapons and stuff.” They made a big deal. I feel like some laws need to be changed because it’s stupid. Some laws are just meant for you to get in trouble. Just meant to lock people up. I guess people make laws just so their job can be easier. The more people they have in that jail cell, the bigger that check is. Even for the teachers. The same thing he [the warden in the juvenile hall] told us. He was like, “The more of y’all that’s in here, the more [for me]…” That’s what they see us as is money. I guess we all are just a number to society. That’s what I believe. I believe that we all are just a number. It’s like a slave trade. We’re all just numbers. We don’t mean nothing to the government. When you’re born, you’re a number. When you get into the system, you’re a number. You don’t have rights in jail. You have no rights. Technically slaves didn’t have no rights. If you don’t have no rights, you’re technically a slave to the system.

Kevin made strong and insightful connections to the history of Blacks in the United States, as well as to Wacquant (2009a) and Alexander’s (2010) implications that the U.S. prison system is an extension and continuation of slavery. Although the purpose of this study is focused on the social and academic needs of formerly incarcerated youth, it would be negligent to ignore the complexity and context of mass incarceration. Kevin’s comments relay his experience as a young Black male who has received demeaning messages from the jail wardens, implying the money-making aspect of the incarceration system. Furthermore, Kevin makes connections between the jail warden and his teachers. Although none of the teachers in this study ever made comments such as those described in Kevin’s short story, the fact that Kevin related the warden’s and the teachers’ roles is significant. The connection Kevin made between the jail warden and his teachers demonstrates his perception that the criminal justice system and the education system are one coherent system. Kevin’s comment reflects the erosion of boundaries between
poor urban schools and our juvenile justice system and the manner in which we treat children who have experiences in both those institutions. This idea is linked to an emergent theme of dignity and agency.

Michael is another student participant, a 17 year-old Latino. Michael was shy and appeared tense as two school police officers outside the interview room door managed a situation with another student. Michael was sullen and looked away when he talked. It was difficult to hear him, as he spoke very softly and sparingly. He appeared sad. Michael was in his counselor’s office when I arrived. His counselor was working with him to make sure he had completed some assignments as part of an agreement with the teachers. He is enrolled in a credit recovery program and is on track to graduate. During the interview Michael shared that he likes sports, especially football, but he did not speak with ease. When I showed Michael the data prompt, he looked intently at the graph and raised his eyebrows, then looked up at me with curiosity. He was silent, and so I again asked him what the numbers meant to him. Michael looked frustrated, his face turned red while he shook his head in disapproval. The following is our dialogue:

Michael: Stereotyping. [Long Pause]

Georgia: Say more about that, that’s interesting.

Michael: Just because of their skin or where they came from, it makes them different. Well, I see it all the time.

Georgia: You do? Can you talk about how you have experienced stereotyping?

Michael: Well when I was incarcerated, they would ... not ... [what I heard was that]...that only all the Latinos kick it together and then all the Black’s kick it together and all the Whites kick it together. But inside [the juvenile detention center] it’s different, everyone’s mixed, so everyone’s like communing together with each other.
Georgia: That’s interesting. And what about stereotyping when you get out in the community?

Michael: Well... I felt different when I came out. I just felt like it was a new world... Well you’re separated from the world, well that’s how I see it. Well, you’re missing out on what’s going on in the world. You’re... this could’ve happened or something horrible might have happened with the family, with your family or something.

Michael was reluctant to share more about stereotyping outside of jail, in the community, and shifted his response to the stress he has experienced in transitioning to school after being “separated from the world and my family.” Michael’s short yet poignant reply speaks to the trauma of incarceration itself. Michael speaks to the need for school staff to provide trauma-informed support to students who are adjusting after having been isolated from their family and peers. It also lays the seeds for the theme of sense of belonging.

Andrew is a multiracial (Black, Asian, and Latino) 18 year-old, who identifies primarily as Latino. He is very thin, wears oversized clothes, looks pale, and arrived at the interview sleepy-eyed. He was courteous, shook my hand, made eye contact, and apologized for falling asleep in his last period class. He was relaxed and trusting in sharing about himself. Andrew revealed that he has been in foster homes and group homes and has returned from having been away for several months in a juvenile camp. He shared that as a result of moving to different group homes, he has been enrolled in multiple schools and was credit deficient when he arrived to his current school. A counselor at the probation camp advised him of California’s AB 216, which accommodates incarcerated youth with a modified number of credits as a graduation requirement. Andrew spoke in a candid manner and let me know he likes his new school because they’re “helpful.” He became alert and appeared proud when he talked about being ready to graduate. However, when I asked him to respond to the data prompt, Andrew became more guarded with his thoughts:
I want to say something, but I don’t know how to say it… I don’t know. The way I see it is, Mexicans and Blacks compared to Asians and Whites and all the other “upper level races,” we’re known as a suspect automatically. We could be just chilling on a corner, we’ll get pulled up on asking about our day and our birthday, while Whites and Asians, they could walk down the street and nothing will happen. The little boy who shot up the theater or church or whatever, they took him to McDonald’s right after. If it was a Mexican person, they would have killed him on sight. Stuff like that, I don’t get. This right here, it just proves it to you.

Andrew, who was initially free and open in relaying his story, struggled to express his perceptions of the data. Like Michael, Andrew knew that something was amiss as he analyzed the data presented in the prompt. Like Michael, he seemed aware of bias against Blacks and Latinos. Both Michael and Andrew wrestled to finding the language to describe what they see in the data prompt, and yet, they emerged from their individual grappling with a story to contextualize their meaning-making of the statistics. Furthermore, Andrew’s individual identification with the “Mexicans and Blacks” in contrast to his personal categorization of the “upper level races” indicates an awareness of racial power structures and speaks to his own marginalization due to being Latino. Andrew’s insights are common with the ideas of marginalization and oppression and are further elucidated in subsequent sections of this chapter under the theme of oppression and control.

Similar to Andrew, Mateo is a 17 year-old Latino, who was comfortable sharing his story. When I met him initially, he wanted to participate in the interview immediately. I explained that I would need his parents’ consent and would return in a few days. When I did return, it was difficult to locate him. He was taking a break from playing basketball in the bright sun with a large group of boys. I could see Mateo from a distance on a play apparatus near the courts. He stood out from the other group with his burly body, swinging under the bars in childlike playfulness. Upon hearing his name called from across the yard, he became defensive
with the Principal who called him over. He asked her if he was in trouble. She calmly reminded him of the interview and he smiled in relief. He walked over to me and shook my hand.

Mateo shared readily that he likes his new school. He was the only student who asked me several questions about my line of professional work and more specifically about my research. He commented, “Wow, I didn’t know anyone would want to write a book about us.” Mateo’s comment was more profoundly about his own marginalization as a formerly incarcerated student, rather than a comment about my research. He let me know that “when the book is finished, I want to read it.” When I showed Mateo the data prompt, he became intense and he nodded his head in frustration in reaction to seeing the data:

I always noticed… it’s always Latinos and African Americans who are getting incarcerated. I know that I if I move out of that neighborhood I live in, I can do so much better. But it just sometimes, the neighborhood we find ourselves in, is what brings us down. You know? And you get judged by the company you keep. I mean, sadly it’s Latinos and African Americans who are being incarcerated by the speed of light. Why? Because we all live in poor neighborhoods, we all have this ignorant mentality, which I like to call the “Hood Mentality.” It attacks our hearts. And it even hurts me, makes me want to cry to see this … these numbers, you know? It’s bad.

Mateo went on to describe his struggles living in a neighborhood with gangs and poverty. He talked about the challenges of showing his peers that he is strong and bold, relaying stories of identity formation for a young male in a poor Latino neighborhood where his manhood is being tested constantly. Rios (2011) highlighted what Mateo described as the hood mentality as part of identity formation amidst the backdrop of poverty where poor Black and Latino males seek to bond with other males in rites of passage. This thrust to belong is explained further in the subsequent analysis and is a precursor to the major theme of sense of belonging and turning point.

Ingrid is a 16-year old credit deficient Latina 10th grader who recently returned from a relatively short detention period in juvenile hall; she has been enrolled in multiple schools.
Ingrid appears younger than her 16 years, with a fresh face, no makeup, and her hair in a tight ponytail. She talked about her brother and his experience with home schooling and shared that she thinks she, too, might benefit from home schooling. She repeatedly let me know she wants “to do right,” that she is “not a bad person,” and that she wants to make her mother happy. Ingrid was polite, cheerful, and eager to participate in the interview. During the interview she was easily distracted and informed me that she has a learning disability whereby she needs directions repeated to her frequently. Ingrid let me know she struggles with keeping up in school. She talked fast and fidgeted during the interview. Her response to the data prompt indicated that she struggled to make sense of the data given her belief that there is probably not a lot of difference between crimes committed between different ethnic/race groups, and yet Ingrid pointed out there is a disproportionate number of Blacks who are jailed:

I think Whites, Latinos, I think they do probably the same amount of crimes as African Americans but it shows here that most African Americans are [the ones in jail] - it’s a lot of them like that’s a big difference, a very big difference. Why? I don’t know. I mean I don’t know if it has anything to do with crimes.

Ingrid’s response indicates that she struggles to make sense of the disproportionate rates of incarcerated youth by race given her position that crimes are committed by all races and at the same rate. Ingrid grappled openly with the factor of race in disproportionate incarceration rates.

The Adults

The 13 adults varied in their responses to the data prompt in terms of a critical interpretation of youth incarceration rates. For the analysis, I have categorized the adults in three different groups: colorblind participants, grapplers, and critical participants. The colorblind participants are those adults who are not necessarily blind to color or race, but they did not make connections to race or rejected issues of racism or bias in their responses. I deliberately use the term “colorblind” (rather than “race neutral”). “Colorblind” is used in Critical Race Theory to
describe individuals who discount or minimize the presence of racism in society (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). The grapplers are those adults who struggled with making interpretations beyond cultural deficit explanations and peripherally touched on issues of culture or race in their explanations indicating their own dissatisfaction with claiming a completely cultural deficit rationale for the disproportionate incarceration rates. The critical participants are those adults who clearly spoke of race or bias in their meaning-making and largely rejected a purely cultural deprivation perspective. These three participant categories were developed to demonstrate the complexities involved with relationship-building between students and the various adults with whom they interact during their transition to school and upon their return to school. The categories also enable further investigation of how the adults’ perceptions of racially disparate incarceration rates might be associated with their role-identification and sense of agency in relationship to a life course change. Table 3 presents the adult participants by category of responses to the data prompt.

Table 3

Adult Participants (Pseudonyms have been used for all participants.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
<th>Category</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Burke</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Colorblind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Gonzalez</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Colorblind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Anaya</td>
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<td>Colorblind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation Officer Mason</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Grappler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Tower</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Grappler</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor Lopez</td>
<td>Latino</td>
<td>Grappler</td>
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<td>Counselor Cortez</td>
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<td>Grappler</td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Allen</td>
<td>Black</td>
<td>Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counselor Soto</td>
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<td>Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Peters</td>
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<td>Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probation Officer Rice</td>
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<td>Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge Jones</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Critical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judge Mui</td>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>Critical</td>
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</table>
The Colorblind Participants

Teacher Gonzalez readily called on cultural deprivation explanations for students’ challenges. He responds to the data prompt thusly:

I believe it has to do with a lot of socioeconomic issues because the majority of kids that are being incarcerated, there’s always family problems. They come from single family home or sometimes their parents are drug addicts. That’s what I’m saying, family dynamics has a lot to do in how the kids were raised because who I am is a reflection of my father and my mother.

Mr. Gonzalez’s perception that the racially disproportionate incarceration rates is a result of students’ lack of family support does not include a historical or political context.

Like Teacher Gonzalez, Teacher Burke also attributed community violence and a focus on materialism to students’ challenges. He stated,

I think a big part of that is just the family structure support at home. Nowhere to turn, with some of these kids, so they get involved with other groups. They don’t care how they make the money, they just want to make the most money they can, drive the nicest car. We’ll talk about the future, and how to save money, and they don’t show any interest in that.

Similarly, Principal Anaya linked structural factors such as “credit deficiency,” “behavioral problems at home,” “poverty,” and “family problems” to the disproportionate incarceration rates.

Moreover, the colorblind participants rejected implicit racial bias as a factor in the disproportionate rates. Principal Anaya stated, “I don’t think we purposely incarcerate Latinos or African Americans…but those two [groups] are in a much worse situation to commit…crimes.” Similarly, Teacher Gonzalez said, “Some people might say it’s like institutional racism and stuff like that…what I’m saying [is it’s] family dynamics.”

The Grapplers

In contrast, the grapplers also attributed the disproportionate incarceration rates to structural factors, but they did not reject issues of race as did the colorblind participants. The
grapplers also appeared to be dissatisfied with their own cultural deprivation responses as they touched peripherally on issues of culture or race. Ms. Tower reflected on her “White values” in response to incarceration rates:

I think that what kids are seeing out there if they’re socioeconomically challenged…everything is about getting money, I see it with their tattoos of dollar signs…literally slogans of get money. With our kids… I can’t impress white middle class values on our students that are coming from a different place. All I can do is try to be sensitive to where they’re coming from and…offer alternatives…They’re really isolated in this cocoon and it seems just like a negative cycle…. Seeing this number [youth incarceration rate] is really disturbing to me. It’s really disturbing. I don’t even know what to say about it.

Ms. Tower’s comments that she finds the numbers “disturbing” connects with Ladson-Billings and Tate’s (1995) premise that race, unlike gender and class, remains un-theorized, and that the discussion of race in our country has not been used systemically in the analysis of educational inequality. Ms. Tower’s struggle with meaning-making, which she cannot attribute solely to poverty and peer-pressure, calls her to question her own response. Her comment that she is “disturbed” by the disproportionate incarceration rates by race speaks to the need to explicitly discuss issues of race relevant to inequality in education.

Counselor Lopez, too, reconsidered his initial thoughts about external factors related to the students’ challenges, stating, “I know that some of our students, African American youth, appear to be very angry. The schools do not have I think sometimes the capacity to deal with all that anger.” Mr. Lopez seemed to acknowledge that formerly incarcerated youth may have unique needs that the schools are currently ill-equipped to manage, indicating that he attributes the higher incarceration rates for Black students to the school to prison pipeline. Counselor Lopez connected the idea of building school capacity to respond effectively to the needs of formerly incarcerated youth who have higher levels of trauma. Another grappler, Counselor Cortez, also provided a mixed response in her explanations of the data prompt. Ms. Cortez
replied, “I’m not surprised with these numbers…it mirrors the community…when I look at their behavioral history…there’s behavioral concerns.” Ms. Cortez talked about the students’ struggles with “enrollment at multiple schools,” “credit deficiency,” and “special education services.” Ms. Cortez went on to state, “One thing I’ve noticed is sometimes the service providers don’t mirror that [culture of the students]…I don’t know if it’s understanding their cultural needs differently and how we respond to their needs.” Similar to Mr. Lopez, Ms. Cortez questioned the educators’ roles and responses to the students’ needs using a cultural framework, albeit tangentially.

**Critical Participants**

In contrast to the colorblind participants and the grapplers, the critical participants readily provided greater and more explicit connections to current incarceration rates with the historical and economic struggles of Blacks and Latinos. In response to the data prompt, Judge Jones recognized the complexity of the challenges linked with successful schooling for formerly incarcerated students and called on issues of poverty and high levels of policing in urban inner-cities. She also went beyond these reasons, explicitly addressing race and prejudice. Judge Jones stated, “I think that there’s also institutional bias. There’s bias in the assessments, instruments that are used. There is implicit bias that’s rampant everywhere. I think a lot of that has lead to disproportionate rate of youth incarcerated.” Judge Jones works closely in the community organizing town hall-type meetings to coordinate services for formerly incarcerated youth. When I met with her, she spoke of some of the technical aspects of her work in ensuring immediate school enrollment for students who are coming out of detention. However, she also spoke enthusiastically about the need for “more restorative practices particularly for youth of color, who have difficulty engaging in school…which might be because of the quality of schools
in their neighborhood.” She recognized that her “work on the bench” doesn’t allow her to interact with the school staff to ensure the students’ success. Nonetheless, she conducts active work in the community by organizing and facilitating workshops on how to support this student population.

Similarly, Judge Mui stated, “The most challenged community is the African-American community and that’s just the vestiges of racism. It’s a whole gestalt of things. We still have segregation both by race and economics.” Judge Mui is aware of the long-term effects of segregation and explicitly attributed the disproportionate youth incarceration rates to “racism.” Judge Mui works actively to support students graduate while they are incarcerated. Counselor Soto, too, stressed the following,

I notice that because our Hispanic and African American youth are at a greater disadvantage, they don’t have the resources, or proper representation, or to have an attorney; It doesn’t mean that white youth are not committing crimes or being delinquent, but there may be more resources for them and they’re not necessarily detained.

The critical participants acknowledged structural factors related to the disproportionate rates, as well as the significance of race related to the disproportion.

Probation Officer Rice also perceives bias against Blacks in poor urban communities and related a personal story relevant to how he makes sense of the incarceration rates:

Me and my brother are walking home from a corner store at around nine o’clock at night time. It was cold outside. We both had on hoodies…a police car pulls up, four police officers hop out, and pull guns on us, and tell us to get down on the ground. They start screaming, “Get down on the ground. Let me see your hands. And they start saying, “You guys know where you’re at? Do you guys know where you’re at?” And I’m just like, “I live here. You know what I mean? I live here.” “Oh, our bad.” Then they helped us up, was trying to dust us off and was apologizing and stuff like that. There’s a lot of that in our communities. A lot of these police officers didn’t grow up in inner city, and they’re in fear of the inner city behavior. They don’t know how to control it.

Similar to the students’ accounts, Probation Officer Rice’s story reveals personal experiences of racial bias. Moreover, the notion of control that Probation Officer Rice described is related to
subtle power struggles that take place in schools between students and adults. This idea is
analyzed further under the theme of oppression and control.

The exploration of responses to the data prompt detailed previously provides the context
for continued analysis of emergent themes in the next part of this chapter. The themes are
related to the students’ and adults’ perceptions of both the challenges and successes related to
student reentry to school with goals of graduating. The following section of this chapter outlines
the three prominent themes that emerged and demonstrates alignment to the two research
questions.

**Alignment of Themes and Findings**

This section presents findings by key themes that emerged across the two research
questions:

1. How do formerly incarcerated students conceive of challenges and factors related to
   their successful reentry to school?
2. How do the administrators, teachers, counselors, probation officers and judges
   conceive of challenges and factors related to the students’ successful reentry to
   school?

The three major themes that emerged are oppression and control; dignity and agency; and, sense
of belonging and turning points. Figure 5 includes a graphic outlining the alignment of the key
findings/claims with the research questions; the themes and the theoretical frames and are
explained subsequently.

**Theme One: Oppression and Control**

A strong thread across all participant groups’ perspectives regarding challenges
(Research Question 1) for the students’ successful reentry and graduation were descriptions of
external and structural (outside of school) factors related to poverty, community violence or gang affiliation, substance abuse, and disruptions in family ties. Although it is difficult to separate those stressors that may have existed apart from incarceration, what stands as unique and are explored in this chapter are the stigma and use of coercive control linked to incarceration and its aftermath. Students described struggles with psychosocial stigma tied to incarceration and their own meaning-making of power relations and racism through their reflections on incarceration rates and their dealings with school and court staff. Figure 5 demonstrates the alignment of the two theoretical frames, the prominent themes that emerged, the research questions and the overall findings of the study.
Figure 5. Alignment of key findings with research questions.

Michael, the most soft-spoken of the students, described this experience:

I’m not seen as, probably like a normal, regular student. [I’m seen] like a trouble maker, been to jail, they probably wouldn’t believe a liar or anything, like I was always in trouble and they don’t believe in people that…people been to jail.

Similarly, Andrew described his experience with re-entry and enrollment at three different schools in between incarceration:
How can I say this? We’re always getting the fingers pointed at us. We’ll be doing nothing wrong, being regular citizens and still get fingers pointed at you. I’m not always messing up. I’m a cool person. I actually do good in school. Before I got locked up, I was playing basketball and football at my old school. I was really doing good, I had good grades…And then once you go to school, everybody’s perception of you is, “Oh, he’s an animal that’s always behind bars. He’s always doing something to get locked up,” and that’s not the story.

Andrew, who has been enrolled in multiple schools throughout his high school experience due to transiency related to placement in foster homes and group homes, also shared that prior to incarceration, “I was doing good.” He made it a point to reveal that the experience of incarceration itself has negatively affected the way the school adults perceive him, and this causes him stress.

Mateo also shares the stigma associated with incarceration: “I mean, people look down on you. People look down on you for what’s written down on a paper. For what says, ‘high-risk juvenile,’ people look down on us.” Kevin shared the stress he experiences with both adults and peers:

They look at me like I’m bad. They see me as a criminal, not like myself, like they used to see me. That they could trust me. Some people they just step away from me. And they say some ignorant stuff. Like he probably dropped the soap in there [referring to jokes about perceived sexual assaults in jails].

Ingrid also relayed her personal experience with humiliating jokes from peers and a difference in response from her teacher:

My friends will be like “You’re a criminal, remember?” They laugh and stuff but I mean that’s jokes or whatever but I know I’m not a criminal or like my teachers and stuff - I don’t know, I just feel like they sometimes - one of my teachers, I feel like he already gave up on me. Like, I don’t know, I just feel like that. I don’t know how it feels, it feels embarrassing. That’s a good word to put it.

Michael, Kevin, Andrew, Mateo, and Ingrid all experienced stigma and humiliation related to having been in jail. Austin (2004) and Schnittker and John (2007) highlighted the negative physical and psychological health effects related to the stigma of incarceration. Although the
five student participants are “trying their best,” they also struggle with regular attendance and have trouble focusing on their studies especially in light of this stigma and “embarrassment.”

Moreover, the students also describe how they deal with the tension inherent to power relations and the use of coercive control related to their probation. Another finding within the theme of oppression and control is that students perceive that adults frequently use coercive control in their attempts to help students succeed (Research Question 1). While it was sometimes unclear if students were referring to adults who participated in this study, when I asked them about challenges in returning to school, they described incidents of adults’ threats to punish them for minor infractions, threats to inform probation officers of misbehavior in school, or use of knowledge of the students’ experience in jail to scare or pressure them to conform to school rules or perform in class. All the students indicated that the use of coercive control caused them stress and was not helpful.

Ingrid expressed her fear and frustration during an incident when the principal threatened to share the student’s misconduct to the probation officer:

You can get in trouble so fast! I got kicked off the bus because I got off on the wrong bus stop [where I was not supposed to get off but not for smoking] and I felt like “how can you do that?” What if my PO wanted to take me right there and then or start drug testing me or something? I don’t need that extra stuff, like you’re causing conflict for me and my PO. I’m trying to get a good report and you’re over here trying to tell her that I got kicked off the bus for smoking, which is false information. I was like, “See, she don’t be believing me.” I’m not an angel. Some of the stuff, they do be right. But it be starting topics that just be out of the ordinary that are just not true. That’s messed up, like what are you doing?

The incident with Ingrid highlights the pressure the students feel with day-to-day power relations they navigate to stay on a positive path both toward successful school experiences and, more importantly, to fulfill probation requirements and not return to jail. This high-stakes tension seems unique to the experience of formerly incarcerated youth and it appears that they are under
greater scrutiny and surveillance amidst the backdrop of adolescence: an already challenging developmental period of identity formation. Ingrid’s question, “What are you doing?” reflects her own insights into the implications of having to deal with a relatively minor mistake or poor judgment, and the school and court’s power to make punitive, detrimental, and life-altering recommendations and decisions for her.

Wacquant (2009b) highlighted the criminalization of the poor, and the shift from public institutions as protectors of the people to becoming more punitive toward the poor. The students’ stories present insight into the tension that develops between the formerly incarcerated adolescent who is “not an angel” and may need guidance, and the bias against her because of incarceration. It’s important to note that the students frequently recognize their mistakes, and make a plea for their relatively minor infractions to be considered within a larger context and to be treated with dignity and fairness. Andrew described similar stress and tension from being identified as a formerly incarcerated student:

They [school staff] know I just got back. They know and they’re like, “Oh.” They read my history like, “Wow, I went to jail.” Or they know I’m on probation, so I’m not saying they use it against me, but they’re so quick to be like, “Oh, you’re on probation, I’ll call your PO.” Or, “I’ll get you removed from the school and that wouldn’t look good in court.” Stuff like that makes me mad. I’m trying my best, but you say these little things that get me mad.

Michael, too, described the punitive threats by school staff and his sense of powerlessness:

[They say], “You don’t wanna go back do you?”…they’ll [say] stuff like, “You don’t want to go back to where you came from.” Well, I was taking a test for the school…I was talking to another student and she [the teacher] sent me out the class, and they sent me to the Deans’ for that and I told the Dean, “Well, I didn’t do anything.” She’s like, “I don’t believe him.” Just looked at me; been to jail, done this and that, and well, I couldn’t say anything. Yeah, putting me down basically. Can’t do nothing ‘cause they’re teachers.

Michael’s story relates to the negative bias against him for having been in jail and his teachers’ bias against him in not allowing him the opportunity to explain his actions. While the adults may
not actually punish the students, their punitive threats result in a loss of freedom. Moreover, these power dynamics, the “little things” as Andrew describes, extend beyond common adolescent struggles for independence and adults’ challenges in navigating developmentally appropriate responses. What the students describe is more about implicit bias against students for having been in jail. The students’ stories, then, relay experiences with psychosocial stress from the daily power plays with school staff, fearing they “can’t do nothing” because of the adults’ authority and positional power, frequently used against them. However, another finding within the theme of oppression and control is that the students’ psychosocial stressors are either strengthened (as seen in the previous examples) or diminished (as will be noted with the critical participants in the latter part of the next section) based on the adult actors’ responses to student behavior. This is connected to a second theme related to the adults’ roles and attitudes about incarceration, which precede their actions in responding to students’ needs.

**Theme Two: Agency and Dignity**

When I asked the adults how they help formerly incarcerated students be successful (Research Question 2), several of the colorblind participants feel they have less power than they might actually have. The colorblind participants attributed students’ struggles outside of their control, downplaying a sense of agency over students’ trajectories away from delinquency. When Teacher Burke, a colorblind participant, reiterated his firm belief about the need to lower class size, I asked what school staff could do differently to support formerly incarcerated students if class sizes were lower and he replied, “I feel like a lot of it is just individual students. They come back, and they’re going to do it, or they’re not.” Similarly, Teacher Burke, another colorblind participant, downplayed his influence when responding to my question about his role or that of other teachers in addressing the students’ challenges, “We were pretty realistic in the sense that
like, you’re on your own. You have to be focused. If you’re going to tell us that you’re giving us a 100%, we’ll do everything possible.” These comments again indicate a power play whereby formerly incarcerated youth need to prove themselves to the adults before the adult will commit to her/him as a student.

Furthermore, these responses indicate an authoritarian mindset in that the teachers appear to reject their agency to cultivate the skills in the students unless the students first prove they have earned the teachers’ time to support them. Some of the adults, then, appear to relinquish their influence and downplay their role. Moreover, even when the adults revealed a commitment to the students, the colorblind participants frequently called on more technical levels of support as ways to facilitate the students’ success, without going further. López (2003) used a critical race theory frame to critique educational leadership that is overly focused on the technical areas related to budgeting, study skills, and test taking. López argued that school leaders must focus on creating conditions in schools that support the success of all children. This is not to say the colorblind participants are not helpful to the students. By the students’ accounts they are helpful. When I asked the students to provide examples of how the adults help them, Kevin noted, “They [the teachers] help us if there’s a time arrangement to come to the teachers.” Andrew said, “they [the teachers] ask me if I want extra work to take home or ask if I want extra credit [assignments].” However, findings of this study also indicate that formerly incarcerated students look for support beyond technical help; they seek a sense of belonging.

In contrast to the colorblind participants’ common blaming the victim narrative that describes students as fatalistic, unfocused, and materialistic, the students shared stories about wanting deeper connections with the adult staff and validation from their teachers. Mateo shared
a counter-narrative to the cultural deprivation mindset when asked what students like him need to be successful toward graduation:

Integrity to teachers. The teachers. Everything ... has to do with the teachers. You gotta keep a good relationship with teachers, teachers [and other staff] who can actually take their time and help you. That’s what keeps me going, that’s what keeps my mind away from the negativity, from the ignorance. To accept others, to admit that we all make mistakes. Just believe in someone’s change. You know, redemption, if you want to call it that.

Mateo moved beyond descriptions of the need for “more tutoring,” “better study skills,” or the need to “be more focused.” Instead, he described wanting a deeper, more meaningful human connection with his teachers and adults at school, to nurture him and understand him and accept him. Ingrid said, “I want you [adults] to take my hand and show me how I can do better…like the Big Brother/Little Brother Programs…I need a good role model who will show me, ‘you can be successful no matter what.’” However, it would be an oversimplification to blame teachers for their apparent frustrations with the complexities of their work and for what seems to be a narrowly focused approach to support as substantiated by the students’ comments.

On the contrary, this analysis seeks to highlight the intricacies related to the student-adult relationship. That is, the adults need and want to respond to students in a supportive manner within the context of fulfilling their regular work responsibilities. The complexity of the adults’ work involves establishing relationships with students while teaching to state standards, fulfilling academic requirements toward graduation, and making recommendations or decisions about the students’ progress toward fulfilling probation requirements. Yet, while the students attributed much of their stress and challenges to power dynamics with school staff, most of the Colorblind participants viewed “lack of family support” or “gang involvement” as major obstacles to students’ success in school. The colorblind participants’ responses revealed a primary focus on
technical support such as “credit recovery programs,” “mentoring or counseling,” and “family support.”

In contrast to the colorblind participants, when I asked what is needed for formerly incarcerated youth to be successful, the grapplers and critical participants provided perceptions about needed supports beyond a technical level. Counselor Cortez, a grappler, commented, “A lot of the times, these service providers do not mirror their own culture or race, and I wonder if that has something to do with it, if maybe there’s a lack of connection culturally that we’re not understanding.” Teacher Allen, a critical participant, spoke explicitly about the need for educators to be aware of their own biases and a sense of agency in helping students beyond technical interactions,

How we look at them. How we view them. How can we handle the things that they do differently. What changes can we make…suspensions, sending them home, bombarding parents with phone calls about what they’re not doing right. Those types of things can change.

Ms. Allen talked about the changes that she can control. Further, she spoke to the need to address educators’ beliefs about the students and has a deeper sense of how to support the students and their families.

Counselor Soto, another critical participant, also spoke about her own role in supporting formerly incarcerated students,

We think that because we are the authority figure, we’re allowed to demean and that can happen very easily. I am their advocate. I advocate for them with academics, socially and in anyway because I feel for a lot of these students, they don’t feel they have a voice.

Counselor Soto discussed her own agency and also spoke about supporting students to develop their own, which comes from cultivating their voice and not holding power over it.

Principal Peters, a critical participant, also works with students on developing respectful relationships and uses an asset approach to influence change with the students. She said,
I’ve done a lot of work with the staff on how to be okay letting kids get the last word, because they have to have it. If you’re going to win them, they have to have the last word. I think my impact has been creating the safe space, impacting the climate, insisting that it be kinder, gentler.

Principal Peters went on to talk about building trust with the students, and does so from the position of earning the students’ trust, like Counselor Soto, and not demanding it from a place of positional power. Principal Peters, said, “You can’t beat them into being a butterfly, you have to grow that with trust. We have to get the trust. We have to redefine accountability.” The grappling’s and critical participants’ responses reflect an awareness about their own influence in supporting students.

Furthermore, the critical participants also have a greater sense of agency to work alongside students as their “advocates,” while fostering “trust” and a commitment or “accountability” to execute their work beyond technical levels. Teacher Allen, a critical participant, addressed how students returning from incarceration frequently arrive angry, display disruptive behaviors in class, and have difficulty persevering. However, Ms. Allen views her role as a change agent and highlighted the significant role that teachers play in influencing students’ success. Teacher Allen summarized the situation like this:

I think if teachers particularly with the population we’re dealing with, if we learn how to not take everything that they do so seriously ... It’s hard, it’s really hard because we’re human too but you really have to think about it and process it and remember this is who I’m working with and we’ve got to give them a little more compassion and a little more understanding and a little more care because they haven’t received it. Once we begin to show it to them, [they] begin to change around and become different kids.

Ms. Allen is describing a commitment to the students as human beings. Like several of the other critical participants, their perceptions run beyond the technical aspect of their work and speak to norms and attitudes toward students. This idea is also shared by the students and is related to a third theme that emerged: sense of belonging and turning point.
Theme Three: Sense of Belonging and Turning Point

The students in this study perceive success in school and graduation as a means to change their life course, although the motivator to do so is a sense of belonging and connectedness with school staff. Andrew talked specifically about what he needs in order for schooling to be meaningful for him:

Yeah, ‘cause I mean, let’s be real. If a kid doesn’t have support or encouragement, he’s gonna be hitting the fence every day. He’s not gonna stay in school. He’s not gonna want to try…There’s two different kind of students. There’s a student that will try and doesn’t care if he’s being helped or not, he’s gonna go after it. But then there’s other kids like me who, if we don’t feel a support or a helping hand towards what we trying to learn, we’re gonna be like, We’re not doing nothing good here, I’m not learning nothing. Nobody’s helping me with my work.” So all it is, is us hitting the fence going somewhere else.

Andrew’s comments tell us that he is willing and wanting to learn, but he wants to be cared for first. He wants to know his teachers are committed to him by showing care and encouragement. It is that human connection that gives him a sense of belonging and it that sense of belonging at school that has led to his turning point and will keep him from “going somewhere else:” going back towards delinquency. Kevin also shared insights into how valuable his teacher’s encouragement is to him in turning his outlook around:

I actually feel like she cares. Telling me that she cares. She tries her hardest to actually... She wanted me to be successful. She tells me she wanted me to be successful. She says that she sees things in me. She actually tries to boost my confidence way higher than it’s supposed to be. It makes me look at myself like I don’t want to fail for her. I don’t want to fail for myself because if I fail for myself, I’m going to fail for her. Since she wants to see me do right, I’m going to do right for her. Teachers like that make me want to just try more.

Kevin’s insights relate to what critical participant Ms. Allen described as being “more understanding,” and providing “a little more care” can help students like Kevin want to “try more.” Furthermore, Mateo highlighted a turning point in his connectedness with and care for his teachers:
The relationship I have with the staff is something I never had before with any teacher. I mean, I care when my teachers are out, and having an off day. I think, “Is he okay? Are they sick? Did he get in a car accident?” You know, God forbid. So I ask around, “Where’s this teacher at?” “Oh, she’s out today, she had a family reunion.” “Okay, cool. Because these teachers have taught me that they’re not here to judge me…they’re here to help me. And I realize…that teachers do care about us… I thought I’m just another picture. They don’t care about me. But here, in this school, they tell me, “Get your stuff together, turn it in, and I’ll give you the credit for it. You know what? Cool, I’ll get it done. I’ll go home, get it done, turn it in tomorrow.” And I do so, and this teacher looks at me and says, “Good job.” You know, someone said “good job” to me, it makes me feel good. You know?

Surprisingly, none of the students referred to wanting or needing affirmation from their families. The students specifically referred to wanting a sense of belonging from school staff. Andrew emphasized the importance of school in his life:

We just need the opportunity. People like me…I’m still trying to look for a way out. The best thing for me right now is school. School, in a way, is actually keeping me alive. I’m not running the streets… I’m actually here every day at school, trying my best… trying to graduate… that will the biggest thing in my family. Me and my older brother will be the only ones who graduate out of three brothers and three sisters… I’ve had a rough upbringing. I haven’t… had somebody really sit me down and school me on the situation. I would come home, get yelled at, I would go out and do it the next day.

Andrew sees hope and a change of life course via school. He acknowledges that his home life is a challenge, and yet views his opportunities through a sense of belonging at school. Andrew’s story also reveals that what he needs is a safe and nurturing environment that stands in contrast to the disruptiveness in his home life. Whereas the colorblind participants tend to look to the students to adjust their behavior and improve study skills, the students ask for teachers to accept them, be flexible with them, and adjust their skills to meet them where they are in the process of schooling.

Similar to the students being motivated to graduate by being connected with school adults, the critical participants also perceived that bonding with students is a driver for student
success. Teacher Allen, a critical participant, talked about being able to adapt to the students’ needs,

He saw that I cared so he started working a bit more. He had a set back and he stopped coming to school so I start calling his house and he showed up and he saw I’m never giving up. He stuck with it and he graduated.

When asked about how to support the students toward successes and graduation, Principal Peters said: “They bonded to us. We didn’t take the place of their family but we become an addition to their family. [The kids who don’t succeed] they don’t bond with us.” It is important to note that the critical participants do recognize that formerly incarcerated students may need technical support, such as tutoring and credit recovery, to help them graduate; however, they also see the importance of demonstrating care and perseverance towards their students. They also showed the students a place of belonging, of bonding, within the school community. When I asked Judge Jones what could serve as a turning point for formerly incarcerated youth, she responded,

Meeting somebody they connect to. It could be a teacher. It could be a counselor…somebody to feel heard, validated…I think it’s important for all institutions to look and see our young people have somebody they have a trusting relationship with.

The critical participants, then, perceive positive and trusting relationships with students as a driver to graduate and change life course.

Conclusion

Three themes emerged around participants’ perceptions about challenges and successes related to graduation for formerly incarcerated youth: oppression and control, agency and dignity, and sense of belonging and turning point. All the participants’ responses to the data prompt were analyzed by comparing their responses to the other questions in the interview protocol. Comparing similarities of the adults’ responses to the data prompt allowed me to make sense of the adults’ responses through the lens of critical race theory. Using this comparative
method specifically about the data prompt allowed me to investigate differences in the adult actors’ approaches to supporting students varied by their awareness or perceptions of racial bias in incarceration rates. The following themes emerged.

Findings within the theme of oppression and control indicate students experience stress from stigma as well as from the adults’ use of coercive control in responding to their behavior. The students’ stress is either diminished or strengthened based on the adults’ responses. Within the theme of dignity and agency, an additional finding is that colorblind participants downplayed their influence and attributed student success and challenges to external factors such as family support and students’ willingness to work hard. Critical participants revealed awareness of students’ needs beyond technical support and embraced a sense of agency to support students beyond technical interventions. Within the theme of sense of belonging and turning point, students perceive graduation as a means to change their life course, although the motivator is a sense of belonging and connectedness with adults at school. Similar to the students, critical participants also perceive students’ relationships with school adults as a driver to graduate and change one’s life course.
CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This chapter will begin with revisiting the research questions and theoretical frames to ground the significance of the key findings and reassert the purpose of the study. I will then present three key findings: (a) students perceive that adults use coercive control in their attempts to help students succeed, (b) critical adults (conscious of racial bias) have a strong sense of agency and awareness of students’ needs beyond a technical level, and (c) students perceive graduation as a means to change life course although the motivator to change life course is a sense of belonging and connectedness with school adults and not graduation itself. Next, I present the implications of the study’s three key findings and connect the importance with recommendations for school-based educators and policymakers. I conclude with sharing recommendations based on implications of the findings.

Revisiting the Research Questions and Theoretical Frames

This study started with the premise that different support is needed for formerly incarcerated youth given graduation and youth incarceration statistics. This study also sought to explicitly investigate factors of race given the lower graduation rates for African-American and Latino students and the markedly disproportionate incarceration rates for those two subgroups of students. Therefore, I employed critical race theory and life course theory to ground the two research questions around perceived factors linked with successes and challenges for youth reentering schools from jail. Also working from the premise that traditional schooling methods have ineffectively assumed an authoritarian position over this marginal student population, I sought to challenge the dominant narrative held about delinquent youth and position the students’ voices at the center of the study in the form of their stories or counter-stories. This
approach is consistent with assertions by Noguera (2007), who stressed the importance of creating spaces for student voice in school reform efforts. Given the dismal data on youth incarceration rates nationwide and in California, I set out to explore new avenues for reform working from the position of the students and those who work closest to them as the starting point for learning. Hirschfield (2008) posited that urban school discipline mirrors our modern day penal system and that “to the extent to which students confront school environments that weigh penological imperatives more than pedagogical ones is an empirical question that deserves more attention” (p. 95). Therefore, the research questions about what students need to be successful in school are derived from the premise that in order for us to systemically reverse criminalization effects on our students, we need to investigate the perceptions of the actors working in our schools and juvenile justice systems.

**Key Findings**

The first key finding is that students perceive adults use coercive control in their attempts to help students succeed, which this exacerbates students’ stress. The different adults expressed a need to help the students and a desire for them to have better outcomes, although the students reported that they experience frustration, worry, and discouragement when the majority of adults threaten to “send them back” to jail or when they threaten to make a “bad report” about them. When I asked the students what challenges they have experienced upon return to school, the students spoke clearly about their stigmatization. Kevin shared, “I feel like they know that I have a PO, so they try to ... kick me out [of class]... my record is already messed up...they’re not going to believe me.” Andrew said, “[The teachers say] ‘I’ll get you removed from the school and that wouldn’t look good in court.’”; Mateo stated poignantly, “I come to school and I’m in this jail cell that I can’t get out of because I’m a failure. Because I have an ‘F’...and in my
mind, I think school is just another cell.” In different ways, the students expressed that they experience a continued loss of freedom in school, extended outside of jail as a result of having been in jail. This finding corroborates existing parallels between discipline practices in poor urban schools and in jails (Hirschfield, 2008; Rios, 2006; Wacquant, 2009b).

Hirschfield (2008) stressed, “non-crime problems such as school failure can become criminalized in political contexts through the use of crime metaphors…that share the structure and logic of crime control” (p. 81). The students’ stories about being stigmatized and threatened to be jailed again offer examples of how school actors frame the problems and the solutions to any perceived student misconduct, even if it is not illegal. Consistent with findings from Rios (2006, 2011) the adults’ threats further stigmatize the students, creating an injurious cycle that strengthens students’ experiences with criminalization.

The second key finding is that what motivates students to change their life course is connectedness with school adults and not graduation itself. My initial instinct was that graduation would be a strong motivator for formerly incarcerated youth to change their life course. Aizer and Doyle (2015) and Moretti (2005) indicated that graduation is linked with a lower rate of delinquency and lower rates of recidivism. My hypothesis, then, was that students would be motivated to graduate in order to secure a higher quality of life. The surprising finding, however, is that while students recognize the positive implications of graduating, what motivates the participants to stay out of trouble both at school and with the law is the desire to have positive and encouraging relationships with adults, particularly the adults at school.

The surprising element of this key finding is that the students indeed see the value of graduating, but do not find graduation itself to be a motivator to change their life course as indicated by the following comments from Andrew, “To graduate, it opens up a whole new
world for you…but if we don’t feel a support or a helping hand towards what we trying to learn, we’re gonna be like, ‘What’s the point of being at school?’” Andrew believes and understands that graduation can help him change his trajectory away from delinquency, yet he expressed a primary need to believe the adults care for him. Mateo also shared a similar need when I asked him how schools could be different to help him succeed:

You know, see the world through each other’s eyes? I mean, you know, like, you feel my pain I feel yours. You see the [stuff] I see, I’ll see the [stuff] you see. And maybe one day we could understand what we both see, we could come to an agreement to say “I don’t like this, I don’t like that. Okay, let’s work together and make it a better place… I don’t want to see teachers fighting the students.

Mateo, like Andrew, expressed a desire to be understood and accepted by school adults.

The students revealed that the motivator to graduate and change their life course is a sense of belonging and connectedness to adults at school. Furthermore, the finding surprisingly reveals that the students acknowledge they are challenging to have in the classroom. The students disclosed that despite outward displays of oppositional behavior, they actually do want to have positive relationships with school staff and having those positive relationships helps them in their path towards graduation. Ingrid’s remark, “I’m not an angel,” Andrew’s acknowledgement that “I’m stubborn,” and Mateo’s comment that “I’m a person who made a mistake” reveal self-reflection and awareness about areas they need to develop in themselves. Nevertheless, the students seek the school adults’ validation in order to be successful and graduate.

Another important element of this finding is that students did not mention a need to be connected to their parents or relatives. In contrast to many of the adults, particularly the colorblind adults who said that in order for students to be successful they need more parental support, the students specifically mentioned a need to be connected with their teachers or other
school actors. Surprisingly, the students did not mention a desire or need to get validation from their families. Although omission of this information does not necessarily indicate the students do not need to be connected with family, what it striking is that all the students noted they need nurturing relationships at school. They specifically noted that they seek support, encouragement, and hope from the school adults.

This finding is consistent with the empirical findings of Johnson, Crosnoe, and Elder (2001) regarding school attachment for African American and Latino students. Johnson et al. found that Latino youth are more attached to school adults and peers than their White counterparts, and African American students are equally attached to school when compared to their White counterparts. Johnson et al. distinguished among attachment, the valuing of education, and engagement. They defined attachment as an affective component of the students’ experience as different from engagement, which they defined as a behavioral component, and defined from the belief that school will bring benefit to their lives (value). Although the Johnson et al. study is not specifically about juvenile-justice involved youth, these distinctions relate to a key finding in this study. That is, while students perceive graduation to be a means to change their life course away from delinquency (their values), the motivator and actions to do so (engagement) are to have a sense of connectedness with school staff (attachment). Obtaining a sense of belonging, then, and not obtaining the high school diploma, per se, is the driver for the students to turn their lives toward a positive path. In other words, in order for students to become engaged with school, which they indeed value, they must feel attached first. When I asked students what helps them be successful Andrew commented, “Teachers [that are] just really there for you…they’ll help you get through whatever you need to get through.” This finding is significant in that it challenges traditional narratives that youth who have been in jail
do not want to establish positive relationships at school, do not care about getting an education, and are anti-social.

Furthermore, although the students shared examples of coercive control that can be linked with the three categorizations of adults (colorblind, grapplers, or critical), the critical participants tended to express a stronger awareness of students’ social and emotional needs, which leads to a third key finding that critical participants have a strong sense of agency to support students beyond a technical level. There was a difference in the sense of agency between colorblind participants and the critical participants. When asked how schools can better support returning students, the critical adults expressed a need to support students with a humanistic approach, as described by Principal Peters: “Unconditional positive regard, the Carl Rogerian stuff...teaching people how to give someone what they don’t deserve and be okay in the process.” Although this study did not initially set out to investigate any differences between adult responses to supporting students based on awareness of race factors, an emergent finding is that critical participants also had a stronger awareness of students’ needs and defined their roles as being advocates or change agents in building connectedness to school. Unlike the colorblind participants who focus their support in technical ways, the critical participants actively support students socially and emotionally in addition to providing technical levels of help. Moreover, the critical participants see themselves as possessing the ability and responsibility to make interpersonal connections with students to support them in developing a new life course.

Given the differences found among the three categories of adults, there appears to be a relationship between a critical understanding of race and greater empathy in responding to formerly incarcerated students, as seen with the critical participants. In the same way, having greater empathic relationships with incarcerated students may lead to a more critical
understanding of the role that race plays in factors of youth incarceration, as with the grapplers. In student-adult school interactions, efforts to produce agency and a sense of belonging in delinquent youth requires adults to be able to take their students’ perspectives and empathize with them.

This act of perspective-taking is an interactive process whereby adults focus attention on students’ messages and adapt to their needs. In turn, students are more likely to engage and connect with the adults when they are treated with dignity, when their viewpoints and experiences are valued. Moreover, the process of working with formerly incarcerated youth requires an approach that acknowledges factors of race and bias. Ladson-Billings (2009) asserted, “CRT [critical race theory] becomes an important intellectual and social tool for…deconstruction of oppressive structures…reconstruction of human agency…and construction of socially just relations of power” (p. 19). Critical race theory can be used as a vehicle for working with delinquent youth, fostering genuine empathy and more positive schooling experiences that lead to student agency toward a productive life course.

**Implications**

**Schools as Entry Point for Reform**

Given that youth exiting incarceration are legally required to enroll in school and given that students in this study expressed a need to be connected to school adults and understand the benefits of schooling to change their life course, schools should serve as the entry point for students’ transformation. The findings of this study are important to school practitioners and policymakers because they indicate that formerly incarcerated youth are looking for educators to support them in developing a positive and productive path to adulthood. The students’ stories of
wanting to connect with school adults is a significant finding and one that has implications for
the role of the school in supporting a life course change for juvenile-justice involved youth.

Although California has passed legislation to support the reentry and graduation of
formerly incarcerated youth with AB 216, schools should do more than provide short-term,
technical supports alone to support students returning from jail. Although legislation such as AB
216 is helpful for students, it is not a replacement for a nurturing school climate where student-
adult relationships are at the center of cultivating conditions for learning. The students in my
study clearly express that tutoring and credit recovery options are helpful, but that they also need
to feel connected to school adults first. This finding implies that school practitioners need to be
trained in how to foster connections with students that include academic and socio-emotional
supports for learning. Although states such as California are moving in this direction, as seen
through the new Statewide Accountability measures that now incorporate student engagement
indicators like absenteeism and suspension rates, the new accountability system operationalizes
the goals in ways that seem disconnected from the deeper need for genuine student engagement
and a sense of belonging. Reports on student absenteeism and suspension rates in and of
themselves will not support more meaningful human connections between educators and
students.

Nevertheless, given that local educational agencies are provided flexibilities to determine
how they will meet their social and emotional learning goals, findings of this study can be used
to develop approaches that support formerly incarcerated students beyond tutoring, credit
recovery, and lowered suspension rates. Findings of this study imply that professional
development for school adults should include training in the development of learning supports
for students beyond academics alone to foster positive connections with formerly incarcerated
students. Data from this study indicate that technical supports such as credit recovery and afterschool tutoring should be integrated within greater social and emotional learning supports, such as mental health counseling and mentoring. Moreover, these learning supports must be part of regular and positive interactions between students and adults to build students’ sense of belonging with school.

**Adults as Advocates**

Given the finding that students feel a loss of freedom and dignity in their perceptions of being threatened with return to jail by adult actors who attempt to help them, it is important for educators to be informed about the negative consequences of further stigmatization of this student population. Rios (2006) highlighted the significant role that teachers, probation officers, and school administrators play in controlling formerly incarcerated youth punitively while they are out of jail and in school. The implications of these findings indicate that in order to counter the pernicious effects of this continued stigmatization and punishing control of students, it is necessary to look for alternative methods to guide delinquent youth in a manner that is not penalizing.

Furthermore, in order for students with incarceration experiences to access school opportunities like any other student, free of stigmatization and oppressive control, adults should learn ways to advocate on their behalf. School administrators and counselors are well positioned to assume this role, although efforts need to be led by district level leadership. This means providing schools with adequate and direct fiscal and human resources to respond to the needs of formerly incarcerated students. The process of adults’ advocacy involves four major components: (a) identifying strengths of formerly incarcerated students and building from those strengths, (b) recognizing the effects of sociopolitical and socioeconomic factors on the students’
environment and on their development, (c) recognizing oppressive school structures and interactions, and (d) providing students with skills and individualized plans for success. In order for adults to act as advocates, district leaders need to provide schools with adequate training and resources and consult with school site leaders in how best to allocate those resources. School adults must also be trained in how to work with adults outside of the schools in order to offer students greater inter-agency support.

Critical Consciousness

Findings of this study also imply that critical adults might serve as the conduit for an entry point to make needed connections with the students. Extrapolating on findings from the Johnson et al. (2001) study and the authors’ distinction between student attachment and engagement, the critical adult participants might be considered more engaged with his/her students to build stronger interpersonal bonds that may support increased engagement on the part of the students. Furthermore, students and more critically conscious school adults understand the humanistic endeavor of schooling, particularly with this vulnerable student population. Given data from the grapplers, it also appears that empathy and critical race consciousness can be developed with training. Interestingly, the grapplers were not satisfied with their own responses to the interview questions and appeared open to learning more about how to work with the students. Data from the grapplers in particular imply that critical consciousness is not a fixed attribute, but rather is one that can be developed with appropriate support and training. That is, upon probing during the interviews, the grapplers appeared not only dissatisfied with their own cultural deprivation explanations, but also curious about alternative explanations.

Therefore, the key finding that the critical participants are more aware of the students’ desire for a sense of belonging and have a sense of agency to help the students has implications
for educator training both during teacher and administrative credentialing and post-credentialing for ongoing professional growth and development. It is important to begin this training during the credentialing phase to prepare prospective public school teachers with awareness of this neglected student population. Prospective teachers should be aware of the link among exclusionary school practices, oppressive school systems, and youth incarceration. School districts and schools should also provide ongoing cultural competence training for its teachers, counselors, and administrators post-credentialing to learn how to identify oppressive structures and work on developing culturally responsive approaches for delinquent students. Ferguson, Phillips, and Rowley, and Friedlander (2015) highlighted the importance of developing agency in students of color. However, this work must begin with the adults, which is discussed further in the subsequent Recommendations section.

Borrowing from life course theorists Hitlin and Elder (2007), Ferguson et al. (2015) posited that students and educators have an “existential capacity for exerting influence on the environment” (p. 13). Their report outlines necessary components for creating classroom conditions that can cultivate a greater sense of agency for students and teachers, and that I propose can be extended to other adults such as counselors, administrators, and probation officers. Some of these elements include demonstrating care and conferring with students, which means taking their perspectives into consideration.

Moreover, the key finding that critical adults have a sense of agency to support formerly incarcerated students beyond technical levels implies that race consciousness is also a necessary component of developing agency toward effective interactions with delinquent youth. Bonilla-Silva (2003) and Sue (2013) affirmed the importance of addressing race when combatting racism and educational inequality. Given the indisputably disproportionate number of African
American and Latino youth who are imprisoned in California and nationwide, it is imperative to understand the negative effects of a colorblind approach to interacting with formerly incarcerated students. Rios (2006) stressed the importance of creating more self-reflective interactions with criminalized youth to begin undoing the negative effects of criminalization. My study’s finding that adults who are more critically-minded about issues of race are more apt to support students in feeling connected with school and in graduating, implies that school practitioners and educational policy makers need to rethink accountabilities and support to schools to reach goals related to social and emotional components of learning. The accountability should incorporate critical consciousness training, particularly for adults working with formerly incarcerated students.

**Recommendations**

I make five recommendations that are aligned to the implications of key findings and are largely intended for educational policymakers to support school site practitioners working closely with formerly incarcerated students.

- District level leadership must provide adequate fiscal and human resources to directly support school site leaders working with high numbers of formerly incarcerated youth.
- School staff must be provided with training in critical consciousness and components of advocacy.
- Schools should identify an interdisciplinary team combining school-based and community resource adults designated to serve as the students’ advocates.
• Executive leadership and policy makers in districts, county probation and county social service departments should develop inter-agency teams that monitor and evaluate programs that support formerly incarcerated students.

• Service centers should be developed to render multidisciplinary support to students.

**Recommendation #1: Resources to Schools**

I suggest that designated resources such as trained counselors and social workers should be allocated directly to schools with a concentrated number of formerly incarcerated students to provide on-site mentoring and mental health services in conjunction with academic services. Additional funding should be provided directly to schools to develop structures tailored for personalization and enrichment activities with trained staff to provide daily and ongoing support to delinquent youth outside of the penal system. Although Local Control Funding provides for additional funding for foster youth and students who meet poverty criteria, school districts should provide additional and direct resources to schools with large numbers of formerly incarcerated students. The additional funding and human resources should support initiatives for mentoring, work-based opportunities, and extra-curricular activities to motivate, engage, and provide hope for the juvenile-justice involved student.

**Recommendation #2: Critical Consciousness and Advocacy Training**

Critical awareness among adults is necessary, given the key finding about students’ stress related to adults’ use of coercive control. Practitioners need training in recognizing internal and oppressive structures and interactions related to formerly incarcerated youth. In addition, findings of this study tell us that the adults need support in conflict resolution and developmentally effective strategies for working with delinquent youth. I propose that delinquent youth require a different type of support that includes race conscious awareness and
actions that lead to purposeful and strategic approaches for positive student discipline. Targeted training in advocacy and critical consciousness are needed to nurture our most vulnerable students into positive and engaged citizens. This work begins with the adults who work most closely with the students.

Advocacy training and critical consciousness training begin with the premise that students’ strengths are valued and that the onus is on the adult actors to create conditions where those strengths are honored and cultivated. Critical consciousness training is needed in order for the adult actors to begin the work of acknowledging that the ways they perceive and respond to students has an impact on the students’ engagement and on their performance outcomes. District leaders and school site leaders should incorporate professional readings on addressing cultural differences and addressing race directly. This training should be extended and cultivated throughout the district’s and the schools’ regular professional development sessions where spaces are created to have courageous conversations (Howard, 2010). The training should not be done in isolation from the district’s initiatives. Rather, the training should be part of the district’s larger strategic plan and integrated throughout its initiatives toward student engagement and learning supports.

This training should begin in teacher credentialing programs with theoretical and foundational components and be expanded further with professional development at the school district level to address professional competencies. Ferguson et al. (2015) outlined specific examples of how to develop greater agency with students of color; this can serve as one model for attempts at reform for juvenile justice involved youth. The Ferguson et al. model specifically addresses the need to demonstrate care for the students and confer with them regarding their needs. This idea is explained further and tied to Recommendation #3.
**Recommendation #3: School-based Interdisciplinary Support Team**

Moreover, to challenge traditional thinking about teaching and school related services, I propose that teachers and counselors alone cannot and should not be burdened with rendering social and emotional supports for formerly incarcerated students. I recommend that an interdisciplinary team of trained teachers, counselors, administrators, probation officers, and mental health professionals develop individualized plans for the students, where the students’ voice is a central part of the plan. These plans should identify students’ strengths and progress, and they should be modified with appropriate supports throughout the school year. The individualized student plan should incorporate academic goals, probation goals, and social service supports and should include family and student participation. Collaborative efforts between disciplines is needed, given that many juvenile justice involved youth have been in foster care and have high levels of trauma. The interdisciplinary team should meet quarterly to develop and monitor the students’ plans.

**Recommendation #4: Inter-agency Support**

I suggest that executive leadership in school districts, county probation departments, county mental health, county social services, and community-based organizations should develop inter-agency support teams to monitor the progress of formerly incarcerated students. The inter-agency support team should be formed to monitor the students’ progress upon release from jail, during matriculation in school, and until completion of high school. This team would serve as a case management team and act as a system of checks and balances for inter-agency accountability. The team would operate in three ways: (a) service provision, (b) reflection on professional work towards students’ success, and (c) inclusion of student voice.
The service provision component of the team would ensure the students are receiving identified supports and make adjustments as needed. It would ensure that each agency is accountable for providing adequate supports and resources to the students, their families, and the teachers. The reflective component would include opportunities for the team members to learn from each other, creating an interdisciplinary approach to rendering services. Some of the sessions should work as a seminar. This approach would be for the purpose of fostering inter-agency communication and working toward integrated goals related to reducing youth incarceration and disrupting the school to prison pipeline. Moreover, a commitment to learning from the students is crucial. Opportunities should be provided to encourage students to reflect on their learning experiences and voice their concerns and needs in an emotionally safe space. The students’ voices would serve to inform the adults’ practice.

**Recommendation #5: Interdisciplinary Service Centers**

I recommend the formation of service centers that would provide holistic interventions with the collaboration of multiple agencies. These service centers would be located in a neutral facility in communities or geographic zones with a high number of students returning from incarceration. The service centers would provide mental health counseling, medical services, parenting workshops, educational services, enrichment activities, and athletics. The service centers would also provide work-based opportunities for the students (Figure 6).
Figure 6. Interdisciplinary service centers.

The holistic approach would serve to address the complex needs of the youth and serve to bridge transitions from incarceration to school to productive life in the community. The service centers would provide supports for prevention, intervention and enrichment opportunities to build on students’ strengths. Data-driven conversations about the students would ground the inter-agency meetings.

**Limitations of Study**

While this study is unique in its incorporation of multiple adult actors in an attempt to demonstrate the importance of inter-agency support for students, the judges in this study have no direct contact with schools or any of the other participants in this study. Although their insights may help to inform us about perceived challenges with delinquent youth, given their lack of direct contact with school adults, their perceptions may provide limited data. Furthermore, given the number of different adult participant groups across the two schools (teachers, principals, counselors, probation officers and judges), it is sometimes unclear if students specifically felt
oppression from adult actors who did not participate in the study. A third limitation is generalizability of the findings given the selection of schools with success in working with formerly incarcerated students and adult participants with a reputation for good work with delinquent youth. The selection of sites and participants was not random but purposeful and may provide limited data given the participants have a higher than average knowledge of incarcerated youth and have a disposition to support them.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

My study paves the way for further research on adult agency, critical consciousness and students’ sense of belonging. The findings of this study tell us that students have a need to feel connected to school adults in order to be successful in school and ultimately graduate. The findings of this study also indicate that for school adults working with students who have experiences with incarceration, critical consciousness is an important tool for their professional efficacy in supporting students’ life course change. Continued research might explore the relationship between agency, critical consciousness and students’ sense of belonging. To what extent might higher levels of critical consciousness and awareness of racism and its historical context be associated with greater levels of the individual adult actors’ sense of power to change students’ life trajectories? My study also provides opportunities for continued research on adult efficacy in building students’ sense of belonging in school for sustained student success.
APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR STUDENTS

Goal: To understand the ways students returning from detention experience transition to school and experience social and academic supports after reentry.

Setting: Each interview will take place in a suitable setting of preference (school or district facility) for the participant and will take about 60 minutes in person.

Background Information:

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself.
   a. How old are you?
   b. What grade are you in?
2. What kinds of things do you like to do in your free time?
   a. What are you good at?
   b. What would you like to be better at?
3. Who is someone you admire?
   a. Tell me about that person.
   b. When you are older and out of school where do you see yourself?

I. Now, I’d like you to think about yourself or someone like you, who has experienced challenges when they come back to school. Tell me about that experience and about what those challenges are like. (RQ1)

   a. From your point of view, what are some challenges students like you face toward graduation? (CRT)
   b. How does the school staff try to address these challenges? (Life Course)
   c. How do you deal with those challenges? (Life Course)
   d. Look at the data chart (Attached, Appendix A).
      d.1 What do these numbers mean to you?
      d.2 What do you think about these numbers? (CRT)
   e. What do you think the school could do differently to provide more support for students like you who may want to graduate? (Life Course)

II. How do you think the detention has affected the way other students and staff treat you? (RQ1)

   a. Describe your relationships with school staff. (CRT)
   b. Describe your relationships with the other students at school. (CRT)
   c. What do you think the school staff thinks about you or students like you? (CRT)
   d. How do you think school staff feels about you when you return from detention? (Life Course)

III. Now I’d like you to think about yourself or a returning student you know. Tell me what you know are some things that help students returning from detention be successful in school?
(RQ1)

a. How might school staff work differently to help you be successful in school? (Life Course)
b. If you had your dream school, what help would you get from school staff to be successful in school? (Life Course)
c. What kinds of programs or activities do you think would be helpful to you and other students like you to graduate? (Life Course)
APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR TEACHERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

**Goal:** To understand teachers’ and school site administrators’ perspectives related to successful reentry for formerly incarcerated youth.

**Setting:** Interviews will take place in a suitable setting of preference (In person, video conference or phone) for the participant and will take about 60 minutes.

**Background Information:**

When did you start your work as a teacher or administrator?  
What led you to select this work?  
What kinds of students do you serve?  
What is interesting to you about these students?  
Why is work with students returning from incarceration important to you?

**I. Now, I’d like you to think about one or two students who have experienced serious challenges in the context of returning to school and staying in school. Tell me a little about them and their experiences. (RQ2)**

a. From your perspective, what are some challenges the students face toward reentry?  
b. How are these challenges addressed?  
c. How do you in your role address some of the students’ challenges?  
d. Look at the data summary graphic (Attached, Appendix A). How do you make sense of these numbers? (CRT)  
e. From your perspective, what do you think the school or district could do differently to provide more support for formerly incarcerated students’ efforts to graduate? (CRT)

**II. Now I’d like you to think about a returning student you’ve worked with in the past who represents a success story to you. Tell me about this student and his/her experience at your school. (RQ2)**

a. From your perspective what are some factors that contribute to the success of students who are returning from incarceration?  
b. In what ways do you think that you help students to succeed?  
c. Describe some of the events in students’ lives, which may have served as turning points for these students’ success. (Life Course)
d. How might the school or district act to support events that may serve as turning points for students’ lives? (Life Course)
e. If you had the power to change policies, how would you equip the school or district with resources, staff and guidelines to ensure a change of course for formerly incarcerated students? (Life Course and CRT)

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<th>III. Now think about your own role in working with reentering students. Tell me how you define your own role. (RQ2)</th>
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<tr>
<td>a. When trying to figure out and define your role, what are some documents you refer to?</td>
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<td>b. Now think about the roles of the other adults who work with returning students (counselors, social workers, probation officers and judges). What are other staff members’ existing roles in supporting student reentry?</td>
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<td>c. Describe how you might work with the other staff members such as the counselors, social workers, probation officers or judges?</td>
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<td>d. If you were to envision schools or district to function differently to support students, how might other staff or interagency roles (counselors, probation officers and judges) be different? (CRT-Counter to Structural Determinism and Dominant Narratives)</td>
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<td>e. How do other staff members help these students to succeed? (Counseling, mentoring, special activities or programs, other?)</td>
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<td>f. What kinds of training or learning opportunities are you interested in that you think would be helpful to you and your students?</td>
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APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR COUNSELORS AND PROBATION OFFICERS

Goal: To understand teachers’ and school site administrators’ perspectives related to successful reentry for formerly incarcerated youth.

Setting: Interviews will take place in a suitable setting of preference (in person, video conference or phone) for the participant and will take about 60 minutes.

Background Information:

When did you start your work as a teacher or administrator?
What led you to select this work?
What kinds of students do you serve?
What is interesting to you about these students?
Why is work with students returning from incarceration important to you?

I. Now, I’d like you to think about one or two students who have experienced serious challenges in the context of returning to school and staying in school. Tell me a little about them and their experiences. (RQ2)

a. From your perspective, what are some challenges the students face toward reentry?
c. How are these challenges addressed?
d. How do you in your role address some of the students’ challenges?
e. Look at the data summary graphic (Attached, Appendix A). How do you make sense of these numbers? (CRT)
f. From your perspective, what do you think the school or probation department could do differently to provide more support for formerly incarcerated students’ efforts to graduate? (CRT)

II. Now I’d like you to think about a returning student you’ve worked with in the past who represents a success story to you. Tell me about this student and his/her experience at your school. (RQ2)

a. From your perspective what are some factors that contribute to the success of students who are returning from incarceration?
b. In what ways do you think that you help students to succeed?
c. Describe some of the events in students’ lives, which may have served as turning points for these students’ success. (Life Course)
d. How might the school or probation department act to support events that may serve as turning points for students’ lives? (Life Course)
e. If you had the power to change policies, how would you equip the school or probation department with resources, staff and guidelines to ensure a change of course for formerly incarcerated students? (Life Course and CRT)

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<td>d. If you were to envision schools or the probation department to function differently to support students, how might other staff or interagency roles (teachers, administrators and judges) be different? (CRT-Counter to Structural Determinism and Dominant Narratives)</td>
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<td>f. What kinds of training or learning opportunities are you interested in that you think would be helpful to you and your students?</td>
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APPENDIX E

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR JUDGES

Goal: To understand judges’ perspectives related to successful reentry for formerly incarcerated youth.

Setting: Interviews will take place in a suitable setting of preference (In person, video conference or phone) for the participant and will take about 60 minutes.

Background Information:

When did you start your work as a judge?
What led you to select this work?
What is interesting to you about these youth?

I. Now, I’d like you to think about one or two students who have experienced serious challenges in the context of returning to school and staying in school. Tell me a little about them and their experiences. (RQ2)

a. From your perspective, what are some challenges the students face toward reentry?
b. How are these challenges addressed?
c. How do you in your role address some of the students’ challenges?
d. Look at the data summary graphic (Attached, Appendix A). How do you make sense of these numbers? (CRT)
e. From your perspective, what do you think the schools, districts, and juvenile delinquency courts could do differently to provide more support for formerly incarcerated students’ efforts to graduate? (CRT)

II. Now I’d like you to think about a returning student you’ve worked with in the past who represents a success story to you. Tell me about this student and his/her experience at your school. (RQ2)

a. From your perspective what are some factors that contribute to the success of students who are returning from incarceration?
b. In what ways do you think that you help students to succeed?
c. Describe some of the events in students’ lives, which may have served as turning points for these students’ success. (Life Course)
d. How might the schools, districts and juvenile delinquency courts act to support events that may serve as turning points for students’ lives? (Life Course)
e. If you had the power to change policies, how would you equip the schools, the districts and the courts with resources, staff and guidelines to ensure a change of course for formerly incarcerated students? (Life Course and CRT)
III. Now think about your own role in working with reentering students. Tell me how you define your own role. (RQ2)

a. When trying to figure out and define your role, what are some documents you refer to?
b. Now think about the roles of the other adults who work with returning students (counselors, social workers, teachers and administrators). What are other staff members’ existing roles in supporting student reentry?
c. Describe how you might work with the other staff members such as the counselors, social workers, probation officers, teachers or administrators?
d. If you were to envision schools and the courts to function differently to support formerly incarcerated students, how might other staff or interagency roles (counselors, probation officers, teachers and administrators) be different? (CRT-Counter to Structural Determinism and Dominant Narratives)
e. How do other staff members help these students to succeed? (Counseling, mentoring, special activities or programs, other?)
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