

# SHORT FICTIVE REFLECTIONS ON THE PERCEPTION OF A POSTSECONDARY EXPERIENCE OF LONG-TERM INCARCERATED JUVENILES

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Article abstract

There is a gap in the literature regarding postsecondary opportunities for incarcerated youth. Research and curriculum design are rarely available for the purpose of improving juvenile postsecondary correctional education thereby not improving recidivism rates of formerly incarcerated students. The pilot program in this study attempted to provide a comprehensive university program for long-term incarcerated juveniles to get them on track to obtain a bachelor's degree. This study addressed the academic experiences, including the School to Prison Pipeline and the academic experience to provide information, justifying the importance of creating postsecondary academic opportunities for incarcerated juveniles. Then, the study analyzed interviews with recently released students of the program to give insight to correctional education experiences vis-à-vis artistic representations, in this case, short fiction. This article presents fictive artistic representations that give a closer look at the secondary and postsecondary educational experiences of two of the cohort participants.

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## SHORT FICTIVE REFLECTIONS ON THE PERCEPTION OF A POSTSECONDARY EXPERIENCE OF LONG-TERM INCARCERATED JUVENILES

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**Abstract:** There is a gap in the literature regarding postsecondary opportunities for incarcerated youth. Research and curriculum design are rarely available for the purpose of improving juvenile postsecondary correctional education thereby not improving recidivism rates of formerly incarcerated students. The pilot program in this study attempted to provide a comprehensive university program for long-term incarcerated juveniles to get them on track to obtain a bachelor's degree. This study addressed the academic experiences, including the School to Prison Pipeline and the academic experience to provide information, justifying the importance of creating postsecondary academic opportunities for incarcerated juveniles. Then, the study analyzed interviews with recently released students of the program to give insight to correctional education experiences vis-à-vis artistic representations, in this case, short fiction. This article presents fictive artistic representations that give a closer look at the secondary and postsecondary educational experiences of two of the cohort participants.

**Keywords:** juvenile justice education; culturally relevant teaching; arts-based research; correctional education; funds of knowledge

With the support of the local university administration and faculty, a pilot postsecondary program for long-term incarcerated juveniles began. The purpose of the program was to present long-term incarcerated juveniles who have graduated high school with higher education courses using more critical relevant approaches. We used the frameworks of Culturally Relevant Teaching (CRTe) (Ladson-Billings, 1995) and Funds of Knowledge (FoK) (Moll et al., 1992) with incarcerated (mostly Latino) students, with the understanding that CRTe and FoK gave the best possible direction on how to employ a different educational model within the institution. The program design used the students' cultural wealth and talent to awaken their capabilities to learn, rather than approaching with the dominant society's cultural capital to school for success, e.g., an essentialist educational model. The students' unique approach to learning revealed that we must approach our assessments with a similar uniqueness. Thus, we chose an Arts Based Research (ABR) methodology to reflect their learning. We found that incarcerated graduates demonstrate their potential when they are given increased access to academia and effective critical and culturally relevant learning approaches and strategies. Consequently, the ABR approach produced rich, beautiful works that reflected their experiences.

## **Narrative Method: Short Fictive**

This article exhibits how two cohort participants expressed their changing attitude toward academia vis-à-vis reflections on their lives prior to incarceration. In order to maintain the integrity of individual artistic expression and limit my influence on the artistic representation, I employed Prendergast's Arts Based Research poetic inquiry approach; but I modified it in order to include fiction-based expressions. Prendergast (2009) legitimizes poetry as inquiry by expressing that poetry allows for the success of qualitative research by finding lush, comprehensive avenues to relay findings through three main data—Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia, Vox Participare, and Vox Theoria—as reflective of the human experience, all centered around voice. This approach works with short story fiction as well. In fact, a combination of Vox Autobiographia/Autoethnographia and Vox Participare worked best. The former uses interviews and observations; the latter uses a collaboration between the researcher and the participant; both approaches work to present the participant's voice. Subsequently, I found that co-constructing the artistic representation with the participant brings a more authentic "voice" to the piece. As a result, this short fiction piece is a more "real" representation. The co-construction of the short story brings a truer representation of the experience. The short story blends Prendergast's theories with Iser's (1993) definition of a fictional work—empirical, combination, and self-disclosure—to create a work of fiction that uses real details to address the juvenile justice education and rehabilitation relationship, allowing the social and psychological issues to percolate (Barone & Eisner, 2012).

Within the program, there were no limitations on artistic expression. This allowed the cohort participants to experiment with different art forms and determine the art

representation that fits their experience best. For this article, I chose short stories that represented the life experience of the incarcerated juvenile, thus giving an ethnographic representation. Fictional ethnography and narrative autoethnography—both forms of Arts Based Research—are the best representations for the research because both methods focus on the ethnographic foundation that permeates in juvenile justice education and life, creating a relationship of specifics that shape the story (Iser, 1993). Narrative autoethnography plays an important role by bringing forward particular truths and social meanings that connect a cultural context with an institutional context (Leavy, 2015; Iser, 1993). These stories are not fictional, per se. The emotions and thoughts give a reflection to a distorted mirror that gives a different reflection of reality and social life, adding meaning to the experience (Dewey, 1934). The autoethnographic pieces show positionality and allow one to gain trustworthiness (Leavy, 2015) through the inescapability of art (Dewey, 1934).

### **Arts-based Representations on Postsecondary Experience**

Even though the research and reflections took place after the cohort students were released from incarceration, I am using initials from pseudonyms to protect the participants' identities. Both persons who submitted a short story served multiple years in juvenile hall. Both graduated high school while incarcerated. "GC" and "RD" stand for pseudonyms; both sets of initials were randomly chosen and hold no importance.

GC is a very introspective person, and I was curious about what he intended on submitting. I heard from another participant that he was a very good illustrator, so I thought he would submit some sort of portrait or drawing. But when we met, he did not have anything and was having a hard time beginning the process. We talked about the program and his experience. As our conversation progressed, he began to disclose his regret for his incarceration and that his time in juvenile hall was traumatic. But his life is turning around and he is continuing his education and working at a major delivery company. Also, he just got back from his first vacation ever; he went to Disneyworld with his girlfriend. Since he wanted to write a narrative, I suggested he should write a short story about the experiences we shared in our conversation; while, using the experience of the college program as the underlying inference throughout the work. I told him that he could draw from all the classroom experiences and content. Last, I told him, "But I am going to give you a challenge. If you write a short story or poem reflecting on the academic experience, try to make it about you, about what you felt underneath the learning that allowed the learning to emerge; try to combine what was going on in your mind with what was going on in your heart." We continued our conversation and brainstormed the following short story. He and I continued contact by email to complete this story through several drafts that took about five weeks to complete. This is his voice.

## **Richie Dagger**

*Richie Dagger sat on a rock. The cool onshore breeze made his long black hair flow behind him. The warm ocean made Richie think of the lost loves. Everything seems to have gone in the past. All the ancient love stories about how this girl would last longer than the others. That was all gone, too. Looking into the future made him feel different. He forgot what it was like to be himself. But he sat on the rock overlooking the sea, staring blankly over the great vastness of the entity that was no longer for him. He sat alone in the breeze. The birds must have been asleep. Richie reached in his pocket and took out his American Spirit and papers. Rolled one, lit, and took a big hit. He watched the smoke go behind him.*

*He didn't know how to stop thinking. How to stop thinking that she was the one for him. The ocean looked great, and her heart was just as big. Too bad he could no longer swim in her big heart. A little girl's voice in the back of his head whispered, "What's the matter little boy? Don't be sad. What's wrong little boy? Please don't cry."*

*Richie heard the voice like it was right behind him, standing there, almost taunting him. He thought that it sounded like she was right behind him, as if the voice was in the past. Richie knew he was alone, though; there were no birds out in the ocean. There was only the voice inside his head. He wanted to get the voice out of his head. It pissed him off; a chorus of mockeries. He felt he needed a change. He got up and turned around to confront this constant reminder of his past.*

*He turned and saw the same brown city he just left a few hours ago. It is filled with rubbers and piss. The stink from shit alley thickens inside his lungs. There are no birds; there are no trees to see the wind breathe. On his left winds a road of industrialization, no imagination. On his right, a straight row of no civilization. Richie chooses the uncivilized path. He sees the used needle and rubbers from last night's partying. The hookers, junkies, and freaks hang out with the trash; some still jonesing on the night of the feast.*

*The buildings look empty. The bricks wear paint like clothes. Richie walks down the street until he comes to a dead end. A tall building he can never get by stands before him. Richie looks down at the building's feet.*

*He thinks of the time they moved in together. She comes out of the shower nude. She's small, 5'1", and has a nice chest; the greatest thing about her is that her tits grow bigger every day. She has blonde hair and blue eyes. Her eyes are more than blue; they resemble the colors of the undying love of the Mediterranean. She likes him better when he sits on a rocker. She likes sitting on his lap. She starts rocking along with him, taking the initiative to go fast, then faster, and even faster. Finally, burning out. Just before her climax, her noticeable eyes change from the loving Mediterranean Blue to the killing California Green. She becomes dirty and everything is no longer the same. The drive is gone. Rocking*

*is no longer laughed at when both of them are done. Supper is always cold. Thinking about her, Richie remembers all the things that make her, but he can't exactly remember what she looks like. At the time she was beautiful; now she is just a memory, like trash-can sex.*

*As he looks at the building, the sight gets worse. People coming all over her. They spray their whiteness all over her beautiful chest. Every time she tries to wipe away the past, there is another person hoping to be famous. They spew their juices into her walls without the humanity of wiping. The paint on her stomach, the broken windows in her chest; they are all raping a whore for bread. No wonder she can't feel anymore; she doesn't want to feel anymore. Richie is glad he saw her before the broken windows. He's glad he tasted the innocence, but that is all gone now. The innocence of this dirty girl and the innocence of Richie is clearly gone, like the fading memory of the crystal ocean.*

*He starts to miss where he comes from. The big buildings, the trash, all making him into a boy looking at shit. As he leaves the uncivilized path, he looks at the skyline, and the sky begins to rain. Sometimes everybody rains.*

*The sun starts to go down. Orange highlights crawl over the stained belly of all he loves. The poor building never has a chance in such a big city. He hears the high heels of the first hooker behind him. Richie wants to hang out. He wants to stay with the freaks and the whores. He wants to watch them buy their bread. "Hey, little boy, what's the matter? What's wrong little boy? Don't be sad ..."*

*Richie turns around and only sees his past...*

*The ocean looked warmer when the sun started to go down. The shifting offshore wind kept him warm in the oncoming night. The serenity of the warm, salty bay at sunset put all the nightmares to rest, giving him a bit a peace. It felt like a poetic form of drunkenness, true poetry without mentioning a word. Quietness lingered with the smoke. People weren't around to offer a hit ... or a smack ... or ugly sex. Richie sat and watched the ocean's smooth back. She was clean. The green ocean ran over and through Richie. He was content to be there. Sometimes the rush of the offshore would send Richie's hair flying into his face. Richie wasn't alone anymore; out in the sea, a single pelican glided over her. It worked the smooth wave. It was going wherever the wind and sea took it. It was one beautiful, motionless, monotone, sex vibe. The voice from behind him returned, though, to break the serenity, to break the acceptance of his new place. "What's the matter little boy? Tchtchtch, do not be sad ..."*

*Richie wanted this voice from his past to leave him alone.*

*"Everything is going to be o.k. Tchtchtch. Do not be sad little boy."*

*Richie started to get upset again. He got up and turned to tell the hooker to go away, only to see a 6' Indigenous man looking down at him. His long, flowing, black hair flew like the bird out in the ocean. Richie stood transfixed by the blackness of his own eyes reflecting from the blackness of the eyes of the Indigenous man. Finally, Richie looked down and saw the ground reaching for the feet of the Indigenous man, but it was always one or two inches away. Richie kept looking down out of respect.*

*The Apache took a deep breath and bellowed from within in a deep voice, "STOP!"*

\* \* \*

The second short fictive piece comes from participant "RD." RD carried an air of cynicism and distrust. At the same time, he was open to explore academically and creatively when he was asked. He had a sly smile and would look at you sideways, not negatively, but maybe as a way to avoid eye contact. He gave a tremendous effort when we were composing the short story, while coming across as not trying or not caring. In other words, he "fronted" like he was not into the endeavor, but at the same time, he had a vivid recollection of dialogue, and we tried to represent that in the work. The dichotomy of not caring yet giving honest, deep retrospectives made his work especially important. It showed the importance of single events in the lives of incarcerated juveniles. After our interviews, he told me that he had the same feeling about the pilot program that he had with his brother; both were important events that he will never forget. Subsequently, the following work reflects both his feelings about his academic experience and his family.

### **14 Hours**

*Memories defy gravity as they float up to gently brush the tip of the nose and penetrate the darkest memories. They become an oxymoron of beautiful lavender-like aromas surrounded by the dead cacti. That winter day was especially hot, and I could smell the lavender, rosemary, and sage fighting valiantly against the blood and crack-stained air of downtown Santa Ana. I didn't want to wake up; I wanted to sleep forever.*

*15 minutes after I woke up my brother called. It was about noon.*

*"Hey, what's up, Gianni?"*

*"Nothing. What's up with you?"*

*"Just called to wish you a Merry Christmas."*

*"Well, same to you."*

*There was a silent pause then I continued, "Hey...Who is this?"*

*"Jesus."*

*I could feel the distrust and anger creep over me, "Well, same to you, anyway."*

*"What are you doing today?" Jesus asked.*

*I couldn't imagine why the fuck he was asking me that question. "Nothing. Probably writing some poem about how the world is overcrowded with loneliness. Or maybe I'll have a beer or two."*

*"Ok. Well. I'm over at mom and dad's apartment. Do you think you might want to talk to them?"*

*"No. Just tell mom I said Merry Christmas."*

*"Why don't you tell her?" Jesus asked.*

*I had to think about that question for a while. I didn't have to think about the actual question, about why I didn't want to talk to mom or have her talk to her son. I thought about the absurdity of the question. He knew damn well why I couldn't talk to her; he knew I couldn't respect a woman who can be beaten down for years and never fought back. He knew I could never respect anyone who didn't fight back, but he purposely asked me, thinking I would tell him. I found it better to just change the conversation, put him on the hot seat, "Can I ask you a question?"*

*"You just did."*

*"Yeah. Anyway, why are you calling me? Is this holiday so sick that you feel compelled, almost obligated, to call me? Don't get me wrong, though. I appreciate you calling me, but I haven't heard from anybody in I don't know how long. Now you call me. Just when I was coming to grips with being alone, being by myself and not relying on anyone for anything. I almost forgot about your kind of love. I can't recall if anyone called me when I was down, so why call me now?"*

*There was dead air; Jesus never talks or pulls through when you put him on the spot. I had to keep on railing now that I had him on the ropes. "None of you cared when and if I was throwing my life away. Now you call me, and today of all things."*



*"I was just wondering what you were doing today, and I thought that since I was down in your part of the world that maybe we could hang out?"*

*45 minutes later there was a knock on my door. I knew who it was. I just opened the door; I didn't even look to see who it was. The door swung open.*

*"Are you ready?" He asked.*

*"Yeah. Let me get my coat."*

*On my way up the stairs I thought about them. They never could accept me for who I was, and what I wanted to do with my life. I could hear my dad's smoky breath trying to cloud my visions. "It doesn't seem rational. A boy with your kind of smarts should be a lawyer or something. You should try to better yourself."*

*That was his way of asking why. The funny thing is that I could never really answer him; I never thought he loved anything but himself.*

*With every step up the stairs another reason and another question came to my mind. Their questions pounded in my skull like my foot pounding on the step. What are you going to do? Where are you going to live; you don't know anything, do you? How are you going to live? What kind of fucking idiot are you? Yet, here I am without any need of them, without any want of them. There were bad times. There were times when I plowed through red lights on my bike hoping to get hit because I was too chicken shit to do myself in, times when I shot, smoked, and snorted dope hoping to get hit because I was too chicken shit to do myself in. But I pulled through, and now here I am at the top of the stairs, looking down at the very thing that symbolizes my fears. Jesus looking at how I lived, contemplating how I lived, judging how I lived. I knew I had to go and face him if I really wanted to pull through. I wanted to talk to him; I wanted to walk back down the steps.*

*I yelled, "Where are we going?"*

*About half an hour after Jesus picked me up we arrived at a restaurant and ate. In all, it took us about an hour to get on the road. We stopped to pick up a 6-pack before we started on the 5 North. I cracked open one. I downed about half of it in one drink. Then the whiskey. The best combination is half whiskey, half beer; I called it a "Slow yo roll." Jesus cracked his beer, and he took a pull. He denied me on the whiskey. He said that he never touched the stuff; said it brought out the devil in him.*

*About 10 minutes up the road, when we were just passing Disney, I pulled out my tobacco pouch. "Do you mind if I roll a cigarette?"*

*"No. Go ahead. Are you going to smoke it, too?"*

*"Of course," I answered in a flustered voice.*

*"Go ahead. I don't care."*

*I took out my tobacco pouch and started to roll. Straight fingers; stiff so nothing comes out, not even at the ends, trying to keep it all in the roll. Compact and roll; trying to keep everything together. Twist and lick, nothing wasted. Pack to make it last longer. I struck a white tip match. I thought I was like the match. All that I needed to get me going was something to rub me the wrong way.*

*I looked out at the dirty trees on the side of the freeway and I thought that all trees were the same; they try to reach higher than their brothers until one day they figure out they can't go any higher and just die, leaving their soil to their offspring. I saw my soul not unlike the trees, not unlike the red end of the joint. I felt myself rising with the smoke. It felt good.*

*"You want a hit?"*

*"Sure. You should have told me it was grass."*

*"You didn't ask... You know what Jesus? I don't even know you. We don't even walk in the same shoes."*

*We toked and the insane feeling came over me. Here on the 5 north with Jesus, feeling like I am heading south but going north at 86 m.p.h., I had whiskey and beer, so why the confusion? What was the reason he called me? Today is Christmas, but this is nowhere near a movie. They never wanted to see me before. Why today? Cities that smelled like shit reflected off my passenger window. I thought they forgot me now; I know I forgot them in all this time. Now Jesus calls me out of the blue. It must have felt like years since my orphanism.*

*We turned off the freeway on Eastern Avenue, right in the heart of East L.A. We made a left, then a quick right onto Eastern. I watched the Indians blend with the Mexicans and I felt home. Drunks walked on the sidewalk with their beers in paper sacks, drinking their flesh. I saw Mary's market and remembered all the times Jesus and I ran across the busy street. I saw my uncle Kiko sitting on the porch on the corner of Eastern and Eugene. He was holding his flesh in a paper sack; nothing ever changes. Half an hour into my stone, we pulled up to my Grandma's house. Jesus didn't waste any time.*

*"I'm going to the market for some beer. Want some?" He asked.*

*“Sure.”*

*We hung out at Grandma’s for about 2 hours before the kids started to open their presents. I just sat working on my buzz watching about 20 kids cry about how they didn’t get what they wanted.*

*Finally, I had to step in. “Relax kid. You never really get what you want, so you just settle for the best thing you can get.”*

*Everybody stopped what they were doing and looked at me. They all knew it was true, but they really did not want to believe it today. “Fuck ‘em,” I thought.*

*“It’s true. And you all are afraid to tell them that their life is going to be fucked up. They’re never going to get the girl they want, the car they want, or the present they want.”*

*“Gianni, could you come to the back with me to grab some beer?”*

*On our way back Jesus started doing what I feared he would always do. “What did you do that for?”*

*“It’s true. And sooner or later the kid is going to have to learn about truth. I just thought it would be better if he knew sooner.”*

*“Yeah. But show some respect.”*

*“Fuck that. Look fucker, don’t start with that preaching shit. Don’t even start, Jesus. I don’t want to hear that crap.”*

*“Just try, though, huh?”*

*“I’ll do my best.”*

*We left after the presents were opened, and I can’t say enough that it was not a minute too soon. It took about half an hour to drive home. I really didn’t want the day to end so I asked, “Do you want to go to a movie?”*

*“Not really.”*

*I invited Jesus into my house out of hospitality.*

*“You know what? I think I’ve changed my mind about the movie. There is a good one playing at the village. But I can’t remember what the name is. It’s an Irish flick.”*

*"The Snapper," I replied.*

*"What time does it start?"*

*"I don't know. Let me find out."*

*I looked the movie time up. "It starts in 45 minutes."*

*"What do you want to do until then?"*

*"Drink wine."*

*After the movie, we stopped at the liquor store to buy some beer before going to my house. We drank another 12-pack and smoked a few cigarettes. Finally, Jesus had to leave. Once again, I started the conversation. "Christmas is over."*

*"It has been for 2 hours."*

*"Really? Thanks."*

*"For what?"*

*"Just hanging out."*

*"No worries."*

*I saw Jesus leave my house, and inside I cried a little. I was sad he was leaving, but I was glad that I talked to him. I got to know the brother I never had. He always acted like a father and treated me like a son. I always hated him for that. But that day he was just my brother. That felt good. It's summer now, and I haven't heard from him since Christmas. I know Christmas will forever be in my thoughts. It's summer now, and that was Christmas. Yeah, Christmas, but that was a long god damn time ago.*

\* \* \*

## **Theoretical Frameworks**

Taking a new approach to education within juvenile correctional settings was necessary, for problems exist within juvenile justice education settings. Mediocre academic preparation and an emphasis on "disciplinary" behavior modification are the norm for juvenile justice education. If engaging in academic conversation promotes higher order

thinking, then the skills incarcerated students bring to academia is their lived experiences. Nurturing their difficult situations in meaningful ways has the potential to transform, if it is nurtured in meaningful ways. So, the use of Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRTe) and Funds of Knowledge (FoK) became the foundation of our purpose with the pilot program. First, we wanted to provide the incarcerated graduates with the opportunity to experience a higher education model that mirrored a university setting. Second, the program wanted to understand the best possible instructional techniques to change the students' perception of academia with the hope of redirecting them from the School to Prison Pipeline (STPP) to the Corrections to College Pipeline. Using CRTe and FoK challenged the current curriculum implemented in traditional educational juvenile facilities and offered a different approach to education, thus, changing the educational experience for our students.

Culturally Responsive Teaching and Funds of Knowledge allowed the program to use cultural influences, such as values and behaviors (Smith, 1999), as a way to align the pedagogy with the student experience. The incarcerated juveniles' experience is complex, so understanding the culture and academic experiences of the students became a learning springboard for the students and the teachers. As instructors entering the facility, we had to distinguish and differentiate what we knew and what we didn't know about teaching within the institution and what we would learn once we were in the institutions (Berryman et al., 2013). CRTe and FoK allowed for us and the students to establish a shared learning experience. Consequently, the student-inmates learned the process of healing what had been broken in their educational experience and began to adopt a positive perception and identity (Cammarota, 2011) that transcended beyond prison walls. For example, in GC's piece *Richie Dagger*, the student's autoethnographic narrative indicates a realization that the life he had lived needed to change. The Apache figure is a representation of his past, while the symbolic use of the bird and ocean indicates the freedom he understood through education. In other words, he has found a new freedom, and the past has to "Stop!"

Based on my experience having worked with incarcerated youth and my research, three critical elements stand out as differences in education goals in the incarcerated setting: differences of teachers' goals, differences of students' goals, and differences of administrators' goals. In my view, the large umbrella that could ameliorate this seemingly contradictory triad of goals is CRTe. For example, according to Ladson-Billings, (1995) teachers need to be aware of daily cultural issues that our students face in order to fully engage them in learning; thus, serving to give students power and the ability to examine academic content and question their role in society. Then, teachers need to bring their students' FoK into the curriculum, including what students have learned—or already know from their homes and communities—into the classroom. Moll and colleagues (1992) developed this innovative teaching strategy where teachers develop their pedagogy using what they learned from the students' communities. An analysis of CRTe and FoK needs further explanation because these frameworks go beyond cultural perceptions; using these teaching approaches allow teachers to delve into the socioeconomic arena as well. Thus,

the teachers' and students' goals should be intertwined, as with CRTe, where there is a strong cultural or intercultural bond or connection developed between teachers and students. Postsecondary education within the incarcerated population becomes a fragile topic for some to accept because of the perception of criminality and criminal knowledge; and yet, this makes the alignment of goals even more important. Teachers must use their FoK and CRTe as part of their pedagogy to connect with students, but the students have to dive into their own understanding of CRTe and FoK to connect with the teacher and reflect on their own learning capability. Incarcerated students need to understand a form of culturally responsive learning and use their own Funds of Knowledge to accelerate their learning because they may not have experienced the same academic culture or schooling as their teachers. Then, they need to have the freedom to express their experience, positive or negative, without disciplinary repercussions. They need to experience a freedom within education, an experience that differs from their experience on the STPP.

The relationship between the STPP and zero tolerance policies is definitely connected. The pathway to the school to prison pipeline begins with zero tolerance where students are suspended or expelled for violating a subjective code of conduct whose only purpose is to disconnect students from the learning process (Potter et al., 2017). Subjective zero tolerance policies have arisen out of an anxiety to create a safe learning environment. Actually, school districts use these policies on discipline to force students into the criminal justice system and out of the classroom (Elias, 2013). Heitzeg (2009) connects the growing pattern of the STPP and zero tolerance: "the school to prison pipeline refers to this growing pattern of tracking students out of educational institutions, primarily via 'zero tolerance' policies, and tracking them directly and/or indirectly into the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems" (p. 1). It is not a surprise that the STPP has created a cause-effect relationship between education and discipline that disproportionately focuses on students of color (McGrew, 2016).

The racial context of the school to prison pipeline is significant because it shows that children of color stand a greater chance to receive more punitive actions (Tyner, 2014). The cause of students of color being unfairly directed into the STPP is the fact that schools with higher concentrations of students of color are scrutinized with more intense surveillance; thus, an increase in school resource officers has effects on the philosophy of managing behavior, and on increasing the chances of entering the STPP by five percent (Nance, 2017; Bleakley & Bleakley, 2018). The disproportionality of these trends, masked by laws that use safety as the foundation, strike a concerning tone (Potter et al., 2017; Wald & Losen, 2003). Students of color, especially students of color with disabilities, over represent participants in the STPP, and the students gaining experience in the STPP are getting younger every year (Elias, 2013; Heitzeg, 2009). "In summary, the literature in this area demonstrates convincingly that minority youth are more likely than their white counterparts to receive exclusionary discipline in the school system and to be referred and prosecuted...that directly contributes to their overrepresentation in the justice system" (Nicholson-Crotty et al., 2009,

p. 1007). Knowing that the conscious and unconscious aversion to school exists by the time students end up being incarcerated, the pilot program's intention focused on reversing this narrative vis-à-vis giving the students back their silenced voice. Thus, art was used to ignite the smoldering, yet important, voice of our silenced students.

## **Finding the “Voice” through an Arts-Based Research Methodology**

Soon after beginning the program, the purpose of providing a positive higher education experience included the process of finding and developing their “voice.” The motivation behind the research stemmed from questioning the efficacy of the juvenile justice education system. Frequently, students participate in education within the boundaries of incarcerated units because they have no choice, but the importance of the positive educational experience may never happen for students in juvenile justice. It is especially at this crux when the education community needs to understand this special student population and be more critical of the pedagogy that is employed because juvenile justice purports to “rehabilitate” students so that they can reintegrate into society. But if the students leave the incarcerated facility and educational experience with the same attitude and perception about education, about life, and without hope; then, that approach to education has done the students a disservice and should be questioned and improved. This research's approach is based on my experience that when incarcerated students are given a more progressive form of education, like the one experienced at the university level, they tend to understand that the true nature of education is to be learners and change agents versus pacified students. In this case, we used Arts Based Research (ABR) as a methodology to reflect on the students' perceptions of their academic experience in the postsecondary pilot program.

Using ABR as the methodology to reflect the experience in the pilot program led to students' producing an array of artistic reflections. An artistic reflection is any arts based work with the purpose of reflecting experience; in this case, the artistic works reflected the student-inmate experience in the postsecondary pilot program. The hope with using an arts based reflection was to gain a more accurate, more reflective look into the students' changed or unchanged perceptions about school. Examples of artistic representations included poems, photographs, paintings, and short stories. For this article, I present two short fiction narratives created by two student-inmates. Part of insuring that we capture the intertwining relationship between art and research is the use of interviews, reflections, and member-checking in the methodology. Using this methodology, attempts to give an accurate picture of their academic experiences.

Using interviews and arts-based reflections that include member checking, hoping to capture the insights of their experience, was the logical place to concentrate the study. Exploring student concerns and needs through interviews and arts based reflections gave a better understanding of the issues that should be addressed to provide these students with a more effective and appropriate education, which could likely result in limited recidivism.

There is significant data showing a disconnect with academia, (whether intentional or unintentional), that reflects poor academic performance and a loss of interest in school. As educators, we need to provide a more directed focus to helping youth and adult offenders overcome the lure of criminality by giving them necessary academic skills and preparing them for jobs, job placement, and vocational exploration (Steurer & Smith, 2003) following their release. This program attempted to give the students the focus, and the artistic reflections attempted to indicate a change in perception.

## **Inside Voices—Personal Narratives and the STPP**

Research literature has ignored the students who have experienced the STPP (Jones et al., 2018). Limiting the voice of the students who have experienced the STPP adds to the psychological impressions of dominance and crime and punishment (Irizarry & Raible, 2014). Only a few articles communicate the voice of the incarcerated college student (Annamma, 2016), even fewer attempt to communicate the voice of the incarcerated juvenile experiencing postsecondary education. As the voices of the students emerge, it should motivate educators to question our role and education's role in juvenile justice education.

The role of “the voice” plays importance because it gives an in-depth view into the experience of the student; therefore, it gives us—the educator and researcher—the pathway to stopping the school to prison pipeline. “Telling the stories of [the] incarcerated and formerly incarcerated...begins to disrupt and dismantle the stereotypes people have of incarcerated youth and re-educate people on the critical issues that lead a nation to jail its children” (Winn, 2010, p. 315). Contrary to the belief that incarcerated people of color can have a scholarly voice vis-à-vis personal experiences, personal narratives focus on the heartlessness that occurs in prisons and the issues that lead to prison (Sanchez, 2019).

## **From Loud Whisper to Silent Roar: The Emergence of Voice**

Finding one's voice is difficult, especially when that voice is consistently suppressed. It seems that the suppression of voice happens frequently in traditional education; and as a result, the students who experience the STPP tend to silence their voices even more and in different ways. The pivotal moment in this research was when students began feeling liberated and started to express their own voices. It is one thing to have independent, critical thought, but it is something entirely different to express those thoughts without fear or anxiety. Student inmates were quiet at the beginning of the program, but two important events occurred that gave them a greater sense of voice. The first was participating in the pilot program with student interns. The student interns' academic influence brought their voices to the “inside” walls of the correctional facility and encouraged the student inmates to express their voices from the inside as well. The second was when the student inmates noticed they could express their thoughts without repercussions. This recognition gave them the courage to begin expressing their voices and asking critical inquiry questions



authentically without fear of disciplinary action. This sentiment was supported by one of the student inmates beginning to ask critical questions to people of authority. He has to recognize his guilt, but at the same time, he has to “STOP” the behaviors that got him incarcerated and “STOP” suppressing his voice. Additionally, the seagull flying over the ocean represents Richie Dagger’s voice and mind, which has now become free. The emergence of voice is an expansion of critical thought. GC felt a freedom that was otherwise stifled in his current situation, a freedom that was reflected in his short story. For RD, the recognition of his past and the significance of his experiences that lived in his memories became the reflection of his “voice.” RD’s story offers an honest approach to looking at the significance of, and sociocultural importance of, the lives of our incarcerated juveniles. It also gives us an idea of how to navigate our education by tapping into the lives of the students and using that as part of our pedagogy, e.g., CRTe and FoK. The beautiful, yet direct, blending of all of these ideas and feelings suggest that the program was having an important impact on everyone’s academic perceptions, thereby showing the importance to disrupting the STPP.

## **The Prison to School Pipeline**

This study began because of my interest in expanding postsecondary options for long-term incarcerated juveniles. The recognition of the lack of postsecondary academic opportunities led to questioning whether providing postsecondary academic opportunities could impact incarcerated juveniles’ perceptions about academia. The findings in this study suggest that participating in a non-traditional postsecondary academic program could positively affect the mindset and perceptions of incarcerated youth about higher education. This is especially true given that the experience included positive inter-relationship building with general college students and opportunities for the emergence of student voice.

Other correlations that surfaced were the benefits of peer relationship building and its effects on the educational experience. When the student-inmates were encouraged to develop academic relationships, they began to understand some of the benefits of the entire academic experience. There developed a special collegiality that was embraced by the student-inmates and the university interns. Interestingly, the creation of “friendships” became the most motivating, most significant factor in the success of the program. All the participants in the program seemed to learn more deeply as a consequence of creating these academic friendships that transcended the prison walls.

The findings affirmed and advocated positively for the provision of a postsecondary education program for long-term incarcerated juveniles. One overall implication is that a culturally relevant pedagogy that centers on the student experiences—CRTe and FoK—has positive outcomes for incarcerated youth and their education. The pilot program left us with insights into how higher education for incarcerated juveniles might be designed in the future. It exposed an effective pedagogical approach for educating individuals who have had prior

negative schooling experiences by giving a sense of “normalcy” to students who had experienced an abnormal education for most of their lives. Finally, and most importantly, postsecondary education for incarcerated juveniles encourages and gives these students an avenue of hope in what is otherwise a dark world, where the sense of hope is not just a four-letter word.

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