

University Classrooms as Sites of Reentry for Women and Mothers Impacted the Carceral System:
An Autoethnography about Teaching, Trauma, and Healing

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Abstract

The United States of America is one of the leading carceral systems in the world for women. Nearly 2.2 million adults are serving time in America's prisons and jails (BJS, 2016). Over 200,000 of these incarcerated people are women (Sentencing Project, 2018). In Illinois, 2,300 women are incarcerated in jails, most of whom are serving time for non-violent offenses like drug possession and property offenses (Sweeny, 2018). Moreover, in Illinois 8 out of 10 incarcerated women identify as mothers of children under age 18 – most of whom are the primary parent (Sweeney, 2018). Still, over 600,000 people are released from state and federal prisons annually (Carson, 2015). Of those, 81,000 women are released from state prison each year (Sentencing Project, 2018).

Given that higher education access reduces recidivism, college and university classrooms are critical reentry sites for women and mothers. Utilizing an autoethnographic investigation, a qualitative research method characterized by the self as subject, this talk will draw on *my* memories, reflections, and dialogue pertinent to working with students, namely, women and mothers, impacted by the carceral system. Specifically, the following research questions are posed: 1) How does my identity as a state university professor inform my pedagogy with returning citizens enrolled as my student? 2) How does my identity as an African American mother inform my pedagogy when supporting the academic needs of returning citizen-mothers enrolled as my student?

This autoethnography will also provide university teachers of varying academic disciplines working in a diverse context with useful tools and tips to support classroom engagement of students impacted by the carceral system. As America's prison population is disproportionately African American and Latinx; 33% and 23%, respectively; this talk will emphasize the specific needs of students of color. Centering the unique and often marginalized

experiences of Black and Brown women impacted by the carceral system, this investigation will draw on the tenets of Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality Theory, and Historical Trauma Theory. This investigation will also explore implications for college teaching and discuss best practices for the implementation of culturally responsive classroom engagement strategies used with returning citizens in the areas of: culturally responsive course readings, fostering equitable group discussions, and developing innovative course assignments that celebrate women and mother's healing.