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# Never Been: An Exploration of the Influence of Dis/ability, Giftedness, and Incarceration on Adolescents in Adult Correctional Facilities

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## **Abstract**

This dissertation study explores the experiences of incarcerated youth, specifically the relationships between dis/ability (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004), giftedness, and incarceration in the lives of these young people. The extant literature rarely addresses these relationships through the voices of young people who have experienced incarceration first-hand; furthermore, the research pathologizes incarcerated youth and removes the challenges they encounter from their systemically oppressive contexts. This research places the unique experiences of the participants in the larger conversations of deficit-thinking, racism, ecological systems and theories of critical praxis—specifically, through the lenses of Dis/ability Studies in Education and Critical Race Theory.

As a qualitative research study, this dissertation includes the stories and experiences of three formerly-incarcerated individuals who were held in adult correctional facilities as adolescents, as well as a non-profit leader who is deeply involved in prison abolition and movements that work to improve the lives of inmates. The focus on qualitative methodology and methods works to broaden conversations on juvenile justice and include perspectives on competence, youth's strengths, and resistance to deficit-oriented research. This dissertation argues that we must challenge deficit-oriented models to develop the best pedagogical practices for exceptional students and useful methods for disrupting oppressive systems within educational spaces. Through the centering of participant voices, this study provides implications for understanding dis/ability and the giftedness of young people in exceptional learning environments, the need for close attention to the final stages of the school-to-prison pipeline, and the development of new theories of understanding.

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NEVER BEEN: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF DIS/ABILITY, GIFTEDNESS, AND  
INCARCERATION ON ADOLESCENTS IN ADULT  
CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

Kelsey Marie Jones

A DISSERTATION

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NEVER BEEN: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INFLUENCE OF DIS/ABILITY,  
GIFTEDNESS, AND INCARCERATION ON ADOLESCENTS IN ADULT  
CORRECTIONAL FACILITIES

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## *Dedication*

This dissertation is dedicated to the participants who so graciously shared their stories with me. Your dedication to the young people on the inside is inspiring and your resilience admirable. I cannot thank you enough for all that you taught me during our time together; I can only hope that this dissertation reflects the importance of your work and the depth of your commitment.

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I dedicate this dissertation to my family: my parents, Maureen and Tony, and my sister, Kaila. It is only because of you that I had the opportunity to embark on this journey, and only because of your support and love that I am able to see it through. You have sacrificed without hesitation in order for me to make it this far and I cannot begin to thank you enough. I hope I’ve made you proud.

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## ABSTRACT

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## Chapter One: Introduction

I had the privilege of teaching special education in an elementary school for three years before coming to the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education. Though I have always had an interest in the lives of children, I naturally developed a particular interest in the experiences of children in special education; I found my students to be incredibly thoughtful and wildly creative—gifted, in a word—a view not always shared by my colleagues. When I started my journey as a doctoral student, I decided to focus on the experiences of Black and Brown special education students (overrepresented populations in special education) and the ways in which their contexts interacted with their racial and gender identities, possibly influencing their self-concepts and learner identities.

As I learned more about these theories and the current state of special education, I started to think about other “exceptional” spaces in institutions of learning; I felt compelled to include Black and Brown students in Gifted and Talented programs, hoping to use a comparative study to explore student experiences and identity development. But then I wondered what it would mean to open up some of these definitions—who are these exceptional students and how have the constructs of School worked to make them exceptional? What makes a student dis/abled<sup>1</sup>? And on what constructed continuum does dis/ability exist? And what makes their education “special”? How do we (and how should we) define “special education” for “exceptional”

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<sup>1</sup> In this proposal, I use dis/abled and dis/ability (Baglieri & Knopf, 2004) as tools for both the visual and ideological disruption of traditional narratives of dis/ability.

students?

I found myself in Houston the summer after my first year of coursework, working for an education reform organization. I became friends with an inspiring teacher who also expressed a deep passion for marginalized groups and pushed me to think about the experiences of incarcerated youth. I realized, despite my passion for focusing on the “exceptional,” I had managed to ignore a group of young people already subjected to extreme marginalization. I started thinking about children who are educated in other “special” ways and had another moment of realization: these were my students. The same children I’d taught, debated, cried over (for a number of reasons!), and loved deeply were being channeled into correctional facilities via the school-to-prison pipeline. I felt compelled by my heart and the many universal signs to include more special education spaces in my research, such as those within the walls of jails and prisons.

At the beginning of my third year of doctoral studies, I began working with an organization (ACT<sup>2</sup>) that works with young people who are charged as adults and incarcerated in adult correctional facilities. During my first visit, I noticed that the director of the organization (Caroline) had an iPod along with the materials for that day’s workshop; each week, Caroline would bring the iPod loaded with the youth’s favorite songs, playing them loudly through a set of speakers during moments of reflective writing. The first song they played was “Never Been” by rap artist Quilly Millz. I had never heard this song before, but, being a lover of all things music, wanted to understand the power of this particular piece and what it meant to the group. I started

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been used in order to maintain confidentiality.

to ask the boys questions about the song—what it was about, why they loved it so much. Once they had stopped laughing at me for being so out of touch, one young man cleared his throat and told me that it was a song about their lives, about all of the things they have never been or had the opportunity to be. As I began to conceptualize this dissertation study, I knew this was the only title that could accurately express the tension between the despair of denial and the power of possibility, in a phrase that could best represent the personal interests and experiences of the young people, and a powerful and poignant moment for me.

In this dissertation study, I explore the processes of marginalization in correctional facilities that are home to a number of young people being tried as adults. I am particularly interested in manifestations of dis/ability and giftedness as well as the ways in which youth understand their experiences during incarceration. The research questions for this dissertation study are:

- a. What is the relationship between dis/ability and giftedness in the experiences of incarcerated youth?
- b. How do formerly incarcerated youth and youth advocates make meaning of dis/ability and giftedness in the context of their experiences in the school-to-prison pipeline, broadly, and in correctional facilities, specifically?
- c. What challenges arise for researchers when attempting to develop new theories of understanding in educational research?



## Rationale and Significance

The larger societal views on special education are only a part of the injustice inflicted upon today's exceptional students. While schools are certainly subject to the whims of state and federal policies like No Child Left Behind (2001), there are within-school policies that support state-like procedures and methods of creating difference, notably the shift in the demographic of special education populations. With first-generation segregation no longer constitutional, many schools began to practice second-generation segregation—the isolation of Black and Brown students through tracking systems and special education referral (Mickelson, 2001; Tyson, 2011). Second-generation segregation is still effective in United States public schools. In 2000, a study comparing rates of dis/ability diagnoses between predominantly White and predominantly minority schools found that the rate of diagnosed Black male dis/ability was 88.9% higher in predominantly White schools, the rate of diagnosed Latino male dis/ability was 32.9% higher in predominantly White schools, and the rate of diagnosed White male dis/ability was 33.9% lower in predominantly White schools; as some of these data show, the effects of second-generation segregation are especially strong for Black, Latin@, and Native American students (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2007). The complicated history of special education requires advocates for an alternative project and institutional change to engage in a thorough understanding of school histories and to see School as flexible and fluid, not as a static space that can be acted upon. It is helpful for education reformers to re-imagine School not only as a space that supports power

structures and the idea of racial and ability-based difference, but also as an active space that continually creates these kinds of differences.

For many Black and Brown students, the context of School functions as preparation for experiences with incarceration. Literature on the school-to-prison pipeline describes the process that funnel these youth from hostile school environments into correctional facilities

In the last decade, the punitive and overzealous tools and approaches of the modern criminal justice system have seeped into our schools serving to remove children from mainstream educational environments and funnel them onto a one-way path toward prison. These various policies, collectively referred to as the School-to-Prison Pipeline, push children out of school and hasten their entry into the juvenile, and eventually the criminal, justice system, where prison is the end of the road. Historical inequities, such as segregated education, concentrated poverty, and racial disparities in law enforcement, all feed the pipeline. (NAACP, 2005).

The modern-day School has become a result of inherently racist backward design; prison is another site of segregation stemming from inherently racist societal structures and providing a space for excluded Brown and Black students who can no longer be “corrected” within schools. These children are quickly forgotten as they are moved to the outermost margins of society and left in the correctional facilities where many of them will live through the first decades of their adult lives (Davis, 2003).

In recent years, there has been an explosion of literature investigating racialized mass incarceration and racist structures supporting the school-to-prison pipeline. However, there is a need to understand the school-to-prison pipeline through the carefully developed lenses of educational theories (such as Dis/ability Studies in Education) that explain not only the racial and legal aspects of incarceration, but also the educational

structures that support these hegemonic projects. I believe, using a combination of educational, legal, and psychological theories, this dissertation study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the many oppressive structures that support the school-to-prison pipeline and justify the disproportionate special education referral and imprisonment of Black and Brown youth.

Specifically, there is very little research focused solely on the relationship between dis/ability and incarceration—or giftedness and incarceration—that steers away from the forensic, psychiatric, and/or pathological approaches to incarcerated youth (Ben-Moshe, 2011; Carey & Gu, 2014). Furthermore, this dissertation study seeks to understand experiences at *both* ends of the pipeline; research and interventions are often aimed at keeping children *out* of the juvenile justice system, but rarely provide support for youth who have already been swept up by mass incarceration. This research investigates existing strategies of resilience and opportunities for resistance for youth who are currently incarcerated.

While the extant literature shows a commitment to investigating the experiences of individuals with dis/abilities and, more specifically, students in special education, there is certainly room to explore these experiences through qualitative research methods. Most of what we know about the experiences of youth with dis/abilities comes from large quantitative studies and reports from national agencies. There is much to be learned through qualitative work and attention to the narratives of the dis/abled youth who are experts of their own experiences. The same is true of incarcerated youth if not more so; the voices of the incarcerated are rarely consulted and oftentimes blatantly ignored (Herivel & Wright, 2003). The United States Congress even passed the Prison

Litigation Reform Act in 1996 to deter “frivolous” prisoner litigation, making it impossible for many incarcerated individuals to challenge the dangerous practices and conditions of correctional facilities (Soler et al., 2009). I believe qualitative work can continue the work of quantitative studies and deeply explore the phenomena unearthed by statistical findings. I also believe, as evidenced by Michelle Alexander’s (2012) powerful and influential book, *The New Jim Crow*, there is a deep strength in sharing anecdotal evidence and the personal experiences of individuals who have first-hand encounters with the justice system. This kind of qualitative exploration seeks to give space to incarcerated youth, encouraging them to discuss, in their own voices, the specific external and systemic factors that affect their experiences, development, and perspectives.

Focusing on the experiences of a broadly defined exceptional student population may not only improve the quality of education for exceptional students, but also the quality of education for mainstream students who may benefit from new perspectives on learner identities and perceptions of ability in teaching and learning environments. This topic is also important because of its deeply personal nature. We are all in a position that may leave us open to inherit a dis/ability—this dis/ability may be physical and “visible”; it may also be the result of trauma, trends in psychological diagnoses, or the fundamental beliefs of those in positions of authority. For this reason, it is of great value to understand how various special education spaces are constructed, how social identities and group membership can dictate the moment an individual becomes dis/abled, and how learners (of all abilities) are affected by their experiences in these spaces.

## Researcher Goals

*Leigh-Cheri believed that she could use that privilege to help the world. “Fairy tales and myths are dominated by accounts of rescued princesses,” she reasoned. “Isn’t it about time that a princess returned the favor?” Leigh-Cheri had a vision of the princess as a hero.*

*As Queen Tilli put it when Max asked her what she thought their only daughter wanted out of life, “She wants to buy zee world a Coke.”*

*“What?”*

*“She wants to buy zee world a Coke.”*

*“Well,” said Max, “she can’t afford it. And the world would demand Diet Pepsi, anyhow.”*

*-Still Life With Woodpecker, p. 16*

I have always been deeply committed to work that can be useful to marginalized communities. But my commitment to this kind of work has become more complicated as I realize the ethical pitfalls of teaching and researching under a “helping” framework. Yet, like Leigh-Cheri, I believe I have been given a great amount of privilege that can be called upon to serve the interests of those without the extensive formal education and access (read: power) I hold. For a long time, I understood the proper address of these power imbalance and far-reaching inequity as what I’ll refer to as “pop problems”; everyone just needs a Coke! The answers seemed so clear and so easily attainable. Of course, I now understand practice and research require in-depth knowledge of contextual factors that lead to systems of oppression; great attention must be paid to every stone that builds the barriers to access and equality around marginalized communities and individuals. I believe Max’s remark about the world’s demands may also be read as an understanding that it is the *world* that knows and can articulate what it needs, not me.

So how can I work to avoid the Coca-Cola trap and a condescending approach to research in the real world? In addition to my understanding of the significance of this study to the fields of dis/ability studies, racialized mass incarceration and the school-to-prison pipeline, and psycho-educational praxis, more broadly, I hold a set of goals that guide my beliefs about the importance of this work. Maxwell (2013) discusses the importance of engaging with these goals as a qualitative researcher:

The goals of your study are an important part of your research design...These goals serve two main functions for your research. First, they help to guide your other design decisions to ensure that your study is *worth* doing, that you, or those you write for, get something of value out of it. Second, they are essential to *justifying* your study, explaining why your results and conclusions matter... (p. 23)

Though I will return to these goals as key components of my conceptual framework in Chapter Three, I take a moment now to discuss my personal, practical, and intellectual goals in the context of the significance of this dissertation study.

My personal goals are deeply embedded in my experiences teaching special education. When I made the decision to leave my students, I understood that it would be to effect change broadly, to make schooling experiences better for *all* exceptional students in special education spaces. Each decision I make in each step of this study must be linked to that purpose, to work towards making good on my promise and to keep the children at the focus of the work.

Practically, I hope to fill in what I understand to be a gap in the extant literature on juvenile incarceration. As I stated in the rationale and significance for this dissertation study, I believe qualitative work will provide much need context for the

statistics that guide criminal justice policy—context that is built upon the narratives (counter-narratives) of the Black and Brown youth who are pushed into prisons.

Intellectually, I hope to engage with the process of developing new critical frameworks for pedagogical and theoretical approaches to working with exceptional youth. Though I believe all research should eventually move into applications in real-world settings, it is also important to work through the more conceptual and, at times, abstract models of thought that lead to the systems influencing our very real lived experiences. Specifically, I hope to contribute—in whatever way possible—to the literature that resists the damaging effects of social constructs of ability and race and instead promotes strengths-based models of understanding Black and Brown youth.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Incarceration

**History of Incarceration.** Like most present-day institutions, incarceration has a long history of development and adaptation. The history of contemporary incarceration in the United States has strong roots in the late 1700s, a time when colonial America was experiencing a population boom and geographical expansion (Meskell, 1999). Gondles (1999) notes that, historically, there have been four reasons for the existence of prison industries: the raising of revenue through inmate labor, an increase in punishment, rehabilitation, and population management. Yet, much like dis/ability, incarceration has a long and complicated history of development and institutionalization. Specifically, development in incarceration in the United States has deep roots in the late 1700s and the country's independence. The colonial communities initially designed criminal punishments as a form of self-policing; most of these punishments were immediate and public, involving "either quick, corporal tortures or more prolonged humiliation." (Meskell, 1999, p. 841). However, a combination of a steep increase in population, the geographic distancing of communities, and the practical and intellectual pressures that accompanied the country's newly won independence called for changes in the nation's criminal codes. These broader social changes were mapped onto the prison system and are largely responsible for the shift to more "humane" punishments (Meskell, 1999). Responding to the harsh criminal codes of England, the colonials opted for alternatives to frequent capital punishment; instead of codes that "tended to harden criminals and engender hatred towards the government," influential



American thinkers (including Philadelphia's very own Benjamin Franklin) believed imprisonment was the best way to both control and rehabilitate the nation's criminals (Meskell, 1999). Instead of relying upon physical punishment, penitentiaries—developed by the Quakers—felt that a more humane way of treating the imprisoned would be to force them into solitude to focus on “penance as a form of rehabilitation...the shift in the methods of punishment went from punishing people's bodies to punishing their souls.” (Ware et al., p. 164, 2014)

Unsurprisingly, this philosophy led to neither control of nor humane conditions for inmates. Prison officials quickly realized maintaining control of inmates was no easy task and developed private cells for inmates, coupled with extreme manual labor (Meskell, 1999). The prison system found a way to exercise and maintain control of inmates and, with a newfound dedication to the reform and reconstruction of prisoners, developed the ideology (and physicality) associated with today's prison systems. Meskell (1999) notes

The idea of reforming prisoners through separation was relatively novel, and Americans had little in the way of precedent to guide them. Reformers received the most guidance in the area of prison architecture and design. Since the convicts were to be reconstructed in a way, everything in the new penitentiaries needed to instill the proper mental attitude. The building commissioners of Pennsylvania's Eastern Penitentiary opined that “the exterior of a solitary prison should exhibit as much as possible great strength and convey to the mind a cheerless blank indicative of the misery which awaits the unhappy being who enters within its walls.” (p. 853)

Prisons were seen as a kinder alternative to corporal and capital punishments—pain was moved from the body to the individual's soul through the act of penitence

(Foucault, 1977; Yang et al., 2009). The image of a dark and gloomy space is certainly in keeping with a desire to control and break the will of prisoners, although it raises questions about the promise of rehabilitation and humane treatment. The development of the modern-day prison eventually led to the use of solitary confinement in prisons and a series of psychological studies in the 1850s that confirmed the negative mental effects of the system—specifically, “mental breakdown and insanity” in the inmate population (Meskell, 1999). Unfortunately for the incarcerated, it was at this time in the development of the prison system that exposure to prison life decreased and the welfare of prisoners was no longer a public concern (Meskell, 1999).

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania had a major influence in the penitentiary movement. In 1790, the Walnut Street Jail housed the first state penitentiary in the United States; prisoners lived in complete isolation where they “ate, worked, read the Bible (if, indeed, they were literate), and supposedly reflected and repented.” (Davis, 2003, p. 47). This became known as the Pennsylvania system and laid the foundation for one of the most controversial sites of incarceration in the country—the Eastern State Penitentiary. In a reflecting upon his visit to the facility in 1892, Charles Dickens noted that the system was “rigid, strict, and hopeless solitary confinement. [I] believe it, in its effects, to be cruel and wrong...

In its intention I am well convinced that it is kind, humane, and meant for reformation; but I am persuaded that those who devised this system of Prison Discipline, and those benevolent gentlemen who carry it into execution, do not know what it is that they are doing. I believe that very few men are capable of estimating the immense amount of torture and agony that this dreadful punishment, prolonged for years, inflicts upon the sufferers...I am only the more convinced that there is a depth of terrible endurance in it which none but the

sufferers themselves can fathom, and which no man has a right to inflict upon his fellow-creature. I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain to be immeasurably worse than any torture of the body...because its wounds are not upon the surface, and it extorts few cries that human ears can hear; therefore I the more denounce it, as a secret punishment which slumbering humanity is not roused up to stay. (Dickens, 1900, p. 119-120).

It is clear that, from the beginning, this was a system that could not reform and rehabilitate as it claimed (Davis, 2012). Yet it was easy for the public to assume that prisoners were being rehabilitated because they remained in isolation and unseen by most of society. Over a century later, we find ourselves in a similar position, prison life and the negative effects of incarceration far from the public mind. In recent years, however, the deeply embedded systems of oppression and injustices present in the prison system have been exposed and critiqued by a number of scholars. The following section will explore systemic racism and ableism in the context of the prison-industrial complex, specifically in the form of racialized mass incarceration and the experiences of incarcerated youth.

*Racialized Mass Incarceration.* Mass incarceration, as the term would suggest, refers to the exponential increase in the number of incarcerated individuals in the United States; the population of incarcerated men and women jumped from less than five-hundred thousand before 1980 to over two million by 2000, resulting in a growth of over 600% (Yang et al., 2009; Alexander, 2012; Kilgore, 2014). However, mass incarceration cannot be discussed without explicit acknowledgement of the racial element of incarceration in this country. For more than a century, Black citizens have accounted for almost half of the population controlled by the criminal justice system—even though

they make up approximately twelve percent of the overall population (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001). In order to understand the conditions under which racialized mass incarceration became normalized and accepted, it is important to unpack the processes that continue to support the disproportionate imprisonment of Black and Brown women and men in the prison-industrial complex (Davis, 2011). These systems of control are found not only within prisons and the institutions directly-linked to correctional facilities, but are also ingrained in all of the processes that lead to racialized mass incarceration. We can understand this system as petit apartheid, a set of racialized practices that have become normalized and inherently identify an “inferior” race (Georges-Abeyie, 1990; Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001). Specifically, petit apartheid describes

the everyday insults, rough or brutal treatment, and unnecessary stops, questions, and searches of blacks; the lack of civility faced by black suspects/arrestees; the quality, clarity, and objectivity of the judge’s instructions to the jury when a black arrestee is on trial; the acceptance of lesser standards of evidence in cases that result in the conviction of black arrestees, as well as numerous other punitively discretionary acts by law enforcement and correctional officers as well as jurists. (Georges-Abeyie, 1990, p. 12)

Petit apartheid understands these practices as indicators of both racial microaggressions (Sue et al., 2007) and racial macroaggressions; macroaggressions are described as acts of racism that are directed at Blackness broadly, not at individuals (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001). Long before Brown and Black people are subjected to incarceration, they are forced to engage with the racial discrimination that occurs at the informal stages of the United States criminal justice system. It is at these

stages that the process of unconscious racism begins and lays the foundation for racialized mass incarceration (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001; Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012).

In 2000, thirty percent of Black men between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine were “under correctional supervision,” with the total number of Black men in prison reaching 572,900 (Kilgore, 2014). By 2006, one in fourteen Black men were imprisoned compared to their White counterparts who were imprisoned at the rate of one in one hundred-six (Alexander, 2012; Kilgore, 2014). Kilgore (2014) also noted significant increases in incarceration rates for other demographic groups. Between the years 2000 and 2001, the number of incarcerated Latino men increased by more than fifty percent while the number of incarcerated Latina women increased by eighty percent (Guerino et al., 2011; Kilgore, 2014). While Black men are criminalized the most by the prison system (Chomsky, 2003; Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001; Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012; Kilgore, 2014) and the rates of incarceration for Black men and women remain higher than any other demographic groups (Kilgore, 2014), other groups are experiencing the effects of racialized mass incarceration. No matter the shifting statistics, the results are the same: incarceration has a disproportionate effect on historically oppressed racial groups, people who are already experiencing the negative effects of systemic racism and discrimination—in this case, the overwhelming number of these instances involve Black men and women directly. Thus, we understand mass incarceration as *racialized* because it refers to the “hidden underworld of legalized discrimination and permanent social exclusion” that controls any and all people who have been classified as criminals against

the norm of a non-deviant Whiteness (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001; Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012).

It is important to remember the permanence of this social exclusion to realize the full reach of racialized mass incarceration. Black and Brown inmates face criminalization prior to incarceration due to their race, become the image of the criminal during incarceration, and—for those who have the opportunity to live on the outside again—face the shame of the “prison label” upon their release (Alexander, 2012). The stigma of the criminal record controls these lives in every sphere of the community, from strained social relationships to the denial of job and housing opportunities (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001; Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012). The new, subtle racism that emerges from the “hyper-segregation” of the prison-industrial complex blames former inmates for their failure to “match white performance in a supposedly now free, meritorious, and color-blind society.” (Street, 2003; Alexander, 2012). In addition to these external factors are the internalized attitudes and behaviors that stay with many former inmates in the form of prisonization. Prisonization refers to “the process by which inmates are shaped and transformed by the institutional environments in which they live...the natural and normal adaptations made by prisoners in response to the unnatural and abnormal conditions of prisoner life.” (Haney, 2003, p. 80). The effects of prisonization do not, however, result in a hardened “shamelessness” as has been suggested by many public figures; those who have been labeled society’s criminals experience all of the stereotypes that accompany the stigma of incarceration—poverty, severe isolation, distrust, and diminished love from even their own friends and family (Alexander, 2012). Much like slavery, slave codes, and the Jim Crow laws, racialized

mass incarceration creates a space for legalized discrimination and supports the perpetual criminalization and demonization of Black and Brown individuals throughout a wide range of communities (Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012).

At a broader social level, there are many concerns regarding the effects of the disproportionate and targeted use of imprisonment on Black communities. Haney (2003) reminds us that the “malign neglect” responsible for the incarceration of so many Black citizens—men, in particular—will also be responsible for consequences that have yet to be realized. What is perhaps one of the most heartbreaking effects of racialized mass incarceration is its seamless and normalized entry into the lives of Brown and Black young people. The social norms of their communities become distorted and “it becomes customary or ordinary for youth, especially young men, to expect to spend some time in jail or prison” (Roberts, 2004, p. 1281). At the turn of the twenty-first century, there were more young Black men under the control of the criminal justice system than were enrolled in college (Haney, 2003). This comes as no surprise, considering by the time they reach thirty years old, Black men in the United States have a twenty percent risk of being incarcerated, compared to three percent for their White peers. For Black men without high school diplomas, this percentage of risk skyrockets to sixty percent as compared to eleven percent for their White peers who do not hold high school diplomas (Massoglia, 2008). At the individual level, the reality of these statistics cannot be ignored. What does it mean for youth to *expect* to spend time in jail or prison? The normalization of this inequity is so deep that a young person’s perception of a “normal” life embraces legalized and discriminatory punishment. In many ways, these youth experience the effects of prisonization long before any of them are even incarcerated;

they take on the shame and stigma of a criminal record knowing—whether consciously or subconsciously—that their very *being* makes them criminals in the this society. This is a powerful and painful realization, proven by hundreds of years of institutionalized racism, yet these young people are shunned when they struggle and fail in a system designed to “keep them locked up and locked out.” (Alexander, 2012).

We understand these norms and processes to build the foundations of the school-to-prison pipeline, a

multidimensional process that funnels large numbers of minority students from the classroom into the adult prison system. This trajectory maps out the problematic continuities between mass schooling and mass incarceration, where one subset of students located at the complex intersection of race, class, and disability find themselves as *social outlaws* for almost the entire span of their lives in school and thereafter...[I] invoke the school-to-prison pipeline not merely to refer to the education and criminal justice systems but also to a complex network of laws, rules, and policies supported by the exploitative political economy of late capitalism that Michelle Alexander (2010) has called the New Jim Crow. (Erevelles, 2014, p. 82).

This pipeline is a powerful force, violently grabbing Black and Brown youth as it moves swiftly through marginalized communities. To better serve and support the youth who fall victim to the processes of petit apartheid and racialized mass incarceration, it is important to understand their experiences, their struggles, their resilience, and their success in the face of persecution.

**Experiences of Incarcerated Youth.** It is important to note that if we are to incarcerate youth, we must understand the nature of youth and how adolescence plays a role in the actions and understanding of young people. We know that adolescence is a time of heightened vulnerability, making it a period that is particularly critical for the



reorganization of regulatory cognitive and affective systems (Steinberg, 2005). Specifically, this period of reorganization brings about a number of risks along with opportunities for development in adolescents. A deep understanding of the stages of adolescence pushes us to question how developmental processes should/should not affect juvenile justice policies. Cauffman and Steinberg (2000) found that, when assessed for psychosocial maturity, higher levels of performance were significantly less common among adolescents compared to young adults; on average, adolescents scored significantly worse on socially responsible decision making tests. These findings raise questions about how competent adolescents are to defend themselves in adversarial court proceedings, how they are affected by their punishments, and, first and foremost, whether it is appropriate to charge adolescents as adults (Cauffman & Steinberg, 2000; 2012; Steinberg, 2009). Specifically, the literature from the field of developmental science strongly suggests that there should be a separate system for juvenile justice that is committed to judging and sanctioning adolescents in ways that are *developmentally appropriate* (Steinberg, 2009).

Many facets of incarceration remain the same across age groups, but the juvenile justice system has been conceptualized as more than a space for punishment. The “tough on crime” policies of the late 1980s coupled with a history of racial fear led a wave of prison reform and an exponential increase in the prison population. The public supported prison reform with the beliefs that adolescents who committed crimes were just as responsible as adults, prosecution in adult courts “teaches youth a lesson” and promotes deterrence, existing racial disparities are a fact and cannot be addressed, and young people are safe in government-operated correctional facilities (Soler et al., 2009).

The extant literature describes the juvenile justice system as “a set of community human service organizations” which are responsible for punishing criminal acts and controlling behavior seen as injurious to themselves, their families, and their communities (Alter, 1988). Yet, we know from the history of incarceration and racism, that prisons and punishment exist in a complex web of individual and environmental factors, making it impossible for any inter-organizational effort to see consistent and positive results using standardized methods in juvenile justice (Lambie& Randell, 2013). Though each young person will have unique experiences with incarceration, the literature suggests that there are overarching themes in the collective prison experience that highlight the damaging effects of incarceration on youth. The following sections of this review will explore racialized juvenile incarceration and its relationship to education, health, and dis/ability.

*Education.* Overall, the literature on the educational needs and services of/for incarcerated youth is lacking (Geib et al., 2010). We *do* know that involvement in the juvenile justice system is associated with a host of educational factors, including lower school achievement scores, dis/ability, specific learning dis/abilities, and emotional dis/abilities (Geib et al., 2010). Many incarcerated youth have histories of poor school achievement, are typically several years behind their age-appropriate grade level, have lower grade point averages than their peers, lower attendance rates, and are more frequently suspended or expelled (Blomberg et al., 2011).

Some of the extant literature suggests that incarceration can have positive effects on youth’s educational experiences. A number of incarcerated youth experience

consistent school attendance for the first time on the inside and are exposed to opportunities to improve their education achievement (Blomberg et al., 2011). These young people can experience strong attachments to education; they are more likely to return to school following their release and have lower rates of re-arrest, especially those who earn a GED during the time of incarceration. Studies show that mandatory school attendance in correctional facilities allowed for the opportunity to experience achievement and develop school attachment and functioned as an intervention for re-arrest (Blomberg et al., 2011).

Unfortunately, the literature also suggests that involvement with the justice system decreases the ability for youth to experience success in school (Ramirez & Harris, 2010). Youth of color experience “hyper-criminalization” in the juvenile justice system, which only intensifies the stigma they experience in their schools and communities; Latin@ and Black youth held for nonviolent offenses experience sentences that are common for violent offenders, and Black youth are overrepresented at almost every level of the justice system (Ramirez & Harris, 2010). Even in less-restrictive settings within the juvenile justice system (i.e. alternative or disciplinary schools), students are trained to be disciplined and shoot for “lower aspirations...Specifically, these students were taught to aim low for opportunities that were more consistent with what educators felt was more appropriate and realistic” (Inderbitzen, 2007). The truth is that the juvenile justice system has never claimed to take a particular interest in the education of youth nor has it engaged in addressing the specific educational needs of incarcerated youth. Geib et al. (2010) note “...the juvenile justice system has moved away from rehabilitation toward punishment, and the educational system has stopped short of enforcing IDEA...”

(p. 5). We see that, while educational opportunities are scarce for all incarcerated youth, they are especially inadequate for incarcerated youth with dis/abilities.

There are a variety of programs that work to provide effective and creative services for incarcerated youth. In a qualitative study of the experiences of adults and young people in correctional facilities, Kupchik (2007) found that school attendance at the “juvenile” level was high, although access to drug treatment and counseling was limited. Of course, traditional academic programs are available for young people in accordance with state and federal level policies that demand every child under the age of eighteen have access to a free and appropriate public education. In a review of the services provided for youth in correctional facilities, Gagnon and Barber (2010) found that, within correctional facilities, approaches to youth behavior are limited and punitive, calling for new program models that use school-wise positive behavioral interventions and/or cognitive behavior therapy as ways to promote improved outcomes for young people. Placement is also a powerful influence in the experiences of incarcerated youth: young people in juvenile detention facilities receive better counseling and health services than their peers in adult correctional facilities, and report better staff quality in the juvenile detention centers, including educational staff (Ng et al., 2012). Foley and Gao (2002) also note the challenges of delivering quality education programs for incarcerated youth, including the diversity of the student population (accounting for a mostly non-White group of young people identified as having dis/abilities), the lack of attention to educational services as a priority in correctional facilities, and the constant movement of youth between facilities.

Though the research on educational experiences of incarcerated youth is slim, most of the studies on juvenile education focus on traditional markers of academic achievement, in literacy, specifically. Research has shown the most effective ways to increase decoding, oral fluency, and comprehension rates in reading, including improved attitudes toward reading and motivation to continue reading outside of correctional facility programs and obtain higher levels of education (Drakeford, 2002). The extant literature also focuses on alternative programming that helps in these literacy efforts on the inside; Jacobi (2008) studied the benefits of alternative literacy education through the implementation of two programs (*The Beat Within* and *Ya Heard Me*) designed to improve reading, writing, critical thinking skills, communication skills, and self-efficacy. Domenici & Forman Jr. (2011) were also interested in alternative approaches to traditional learning, noting the work of the Maya Angelou Academy at the New Beginnings Youth Development Center to create a culture of trust that celebrates students' success through a leadership supportive of more positive policies and more engaging academic and GED curriculum.

Though the focus is on traditional schooling efforts, research on educational experiences for incarcerated youth also includes work on non-academic learning environments. Helfenbein et al. (2011) studied the positive effects of participation in the Peace Learning Program at the Indianapolis Juvenile Center, a program designed to provide opportunities for critical conversation and an increased sense of self-efficacy. Furthermore, with the exponential increase of Black and Brown girls in correctional facilities, more research has focused on the learning needs of girls within detention centers. Winn (2010a, 2010b) examined the benefits of playwriting and performance as

reentry tools for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated girls and makes the claim for providing these creative outlets and spaces for critical dialogue for youth as an activist stance and way to challenge youth and the juvenile justice system. Sharma (2010) also takes up the work of centering the voices of young women in incarceration research; focusing on the power of autobiography, Sharma works to transform the conditions of possibilities on the inside through the multiple interpretations of life stories shared by the young women.

*Health.* Just as important as the continuation of their education is the attention to the health needs of incarcerated youth. There are many negative psychological and behavioral effects for incarcerated youth, specifically on their sense of self-worth and self-esteem (Lambie& Randell, 2013). Incarceration increases an individual's likelihood of being afflicted with infectious disease and other stress-related illnesses (Massoglia, 2008). Specifically, incarceration itself acts as a primary stressor with the stigma, lack of financial opportunities, and social challenges presenting as secondary stressors for previously incarcerated youth. Furthermore, there is no evidence supporting incarceration as a meaningful form of punishment for inmates—the relationship between the mental suffering caused by prison environments and the “intended purposes of criminal sanctions—namely: retribution, deterrence, incapacitation and rehabilitation.” is still unclear (Yang et al., 2009, p. 294). We also know adolescents are still developing at the moment of the offense; they lack maturity and hold an “underdeveloped sense of responsibility. They are also more susceptible to external influences than adults—they may understand an act as inappropriate or dangerous, but peer pressure and/or short-

sighted decision-making may lead them to engage in criminal behavior anyway. They are also still forming their identities and developing their personalities.” (Soler et al., 2009).

Young people experience particularly acute attacks on their mental health during periods of incarceration. Due to the effects of petit apartheid and systemic oppression found in communities targeted by racialized mass incarceration, many incarcerated Black and Brown youth experience trauma (oftentimes in the form of violence) well before the moment of arrest (Massoglia, 2008). In fact, research shows that Black and Latin@ youth receive more severe punishments at every stage of the juvenile justice system—informal and formal—than their White peers (Maschi et al., 2008; Ramirez & Harris, 2010). The extant literature discusses the high rates of depression for incarcerated youth (Ng et al., 2011; Soler, 2002; Massoglia, 2008; Wilson et al., 2013; Haney, 2003) as well as the acute psychological pressures that accompany subjection to solitary confinement (Haney, 2003). In a study of trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in juvenile offenders, Wilson et al. (2013) found that 93% of incarcerated youth reported experiencing at least one traumatic event prior to incarceration, with 12% meeting the criteria for PTSD; this means youth are entering prisons and jails with a host of mental health needs that are neither recognized nor supported. Then, once they are incarcerated, youth are subjected to a series of experiences and the effects of prisonization that compound mental health challenges. In order to best understand the psychological effects of prison on inmates, Massoglia (2008) suggests

[we] conceptualize the prison as a neighborhood and consider whether the residential conditions of prisons are characteristic of the most disadvantaged neighborhoods: high crime, incivility, and stress...inmates are more likely to report and be diagnosed by a medical professional as

having health problems that appear to be associated with stress... [and] the stress of prison life may fundamentally damage the body and worsen some health outcomes. (p. 65)

We see that youth are then placed in equally stressful environments during periods of incarceration, which puts into question the ability to prisons to offer “rehabilitation” of any kind. This is complicated by the fact that more than half of youth in correctional facilities have a history of mental health disorder and/or prior inpatient or outpatient mental health treatment; the juvenile justice system is ill equipped to serve youth with mental health needs or provide adequate mental health care (Maschi et al., 2008). There is also a body of evidence that points to physical and/or sexual crime within correctional facilities as a major source of trauma and stress. Both boys and girls experience sexual victimization while incarcerated, oftentimes as a result of sexual abuse perpetrated by prison officials (Soler et al., 2009). Despite this knowledge of abuse, youth are still incarcerated at high rates and denied access to spaces that value their physical, mental, and emotional health.

In keeping with the institutionalized racism and legalized discrimination they experience prior to and during the incarceration process, Black and Brown youth are over-diagnosed for conduct disorders yet—despite their majority status in the juvenile offender population—continue to experience disparities within the context of correctional facilities, specifically in health care, mental health services, and substance abuse (Maschi et al., 2008; Ng et al., 2011). These findings suggest that even under the supervision of the juvenile justice system, Brown and Black youth remain unsupported



as they struggle with mental health and psychosocial challenges (Maschi et al., 2008). The extant literature on health outcomes and neglect in correctional facilities provides a rich context for a system that has also been charged with the care of incarcerated youth with dis/abilities. This is a particularly important intersection of interests in the well-being of incarcerated youth with dis/abilities.

Given that prison is an oppressive, violent, dehumanizing environment that worsens existing disabilities and creates new ones, what does this mean for prisoners when they are released into the community? Many come out to the same poor living conditions and systemic discrimination they faced before being incarcerated. In fact, the situation may be worse because of the loss of housing, employment, and social supports that can result from imprisonment. Some people will have had their disabilities aggravated by prison conditions. Others may have developed serious health issues while inside, such as HIV or Hepatitis C, or be suffering from psychological trauma as a result of the isolation, loss of agency/autonomy, deprivation, and oppressive nature of the prison environment. (Ware et al., 2014, p. 174)

We must be sure that the conditions of the correctional facilities and detention centers that house Black and Brown youth are not so damaging that they leave these young people without hope or possibility when they come home. The next section will explore the experiences of these youth in further detail.

*Incarcerated Youth with Dis/abilities.* Juvenile offenders with dis/abilities have their first contact with the juvenile justice system at an earlier age than their peers and are at much higher risks for second and third referrals than offenders without dis/abilities (Zhang et al., 2011). Youth with dis/abilities are disproportionately represented in correctional facilities, with an average of 33.4% of all incarcerated youth receiving special education services; in some states, as many as 77.5% of incarcerated

youth receive mandated special education services (Quinn et al., 2005; Zhang et al., 2011). Though research suggests that improvement in academic achievement during incarceration leads to reduced rates of recidivism, effective academic instruction is denied to incarcerated youth with dis/abilities as they do not receive special education services that are consistent with special education policies, oftentimes working with correctional educators who report no formal training in either correctional education or special education (Soler et al., 2009; Zhang et al., 2011; Grande & Koorland, 1988). Furthermore, as of 2010, there was not a single research study completed that examined compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for incarcerated youth (Geib et al., 2010).

The literature suggests that there are high rates of learning and behavioral disorders among incarcerated youth—and that juvenile justice professionals have been aware of these special needs for decades (Quinn et al., 2005). The high rates of dis/ability have made juvenile justice a “default system” for “youth who can’t read or write well, who have mental health problems, and who drop out or are forced out of school.” (Nelson, 2000). It is highly concerning that professionals in the field confirm the damaging effects of the school-to-prison pipeline, although this body of literature doesn’t reflect a critical understanding of *how* these processes come together to affect youth in targeted communities.

Dis/abilities classified as emotional or behavioral dominate the literature on the experiences of youth with dis/abilities. Most of the scholarship focuses on severe emotional disorders, behavioral disorders, emotional disturbance, and a cadre of mental health challenges for incarcerated youth (Haney, 2003; Quinn, 2005; Maschi et al., 2008;

Massoglia, 2008; Soler et al., 2009; Yang et al., 2009; Geib et al., 2010; Ng et al., 2011; Zhang et al., 2011; Wilson, 2013). I struggle with reviewing the literature focused on incarcerated youth with dis/abilities because much of the work seems to conflate dis/abilities with responses to traumatic events and young people's subsequent mental health. While I believe trauma is inherently dis/abling, I also feel there is a need to differentiate between broader levels of dis/ability (as defined by hegemonies and the creation of social identities) and unexpected traumatic events that take place over the course of an individual's lifetime and require specific forms of engagement and support. I believe a deeper understanding of the work of dis/ability in a societal context will help to alleviate some of this tension and lead to a more comprehensive illustration of what is actually happening when incarcerated youth (or any young people) are diagnosed with a "dis/ability."

### **History of Dis/ability**

Most conversations centered on dis/ability root themselves in a history of difference. While difference is a concept important to the construct of dis/ability, perhaps more vital to understanding the roots of dis/ability is the myth of the normal body. Davis (2006) notes

To understand the disabled body, one must return to the concept of the norm, the normal body. So much of writing about disability has focused on the disabled person as the object of study, just as the study of race has focused on the person of color...I would like to focus not so much on the construction of disability as the construction of normalcy. I do this because the "problem" is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the "problem" of the disabled person. (p. 3)

The constructions of normalcy and the normal body are closely linked to a modern-day desire for an ideal. Unlike “classical ideals” that suggest absolute perfection, the ideal of the normal focuses on desires for progress and the elimination of deviance from the normal “template” (Davis, 2006). Normalcy becomes an active target, shifting with developing notions of societal progress and the agenda of dominant groups. Those in power manipulate the modes of cultural production in order to maintain their status as “abled” and the hegemony of normalcy; dis/ability is embedded in social systems as a tool of exclusion (Hughes & Patterson, 1997; Davis, 2006).

Manifestations of contemporary dis/ability are driven by a history of rehabilitation, stemming from the First World War; in the twentieth century, there was a push to repair and reintegrate the wounded veterans returning home (Stiker, 1999). Rehabilitation—unlike the notion of a “cure”— seeks to poke and prod and medicate until all individuals fit the template of normal and appear as identical. There is a move to make the dis/abled disappear and “with them all that is lacking, in order to assimilate them, drown them, dissolve them in the greater and single social whole.” (Stiker, 1999, p. 128). The dis/abled are pushed into positions of silence and passive acceptance as they are told they must adapt to society as it is, without taking a position of confrontation or social change (Stiker, 1999; Davis, 2006). Even in the moment of integration, the dis/abled are subjected to the dominant control of knowledge regarding dis/ability; the dominant control over consequences of dis/ability; and the group of societal “agents” that develop a language *for* the dis/abled, without the dis/abled (Stiker, 1999). The call for the rehabilitation of the dis/abled conceals what is actually taking place—the permanent

exclusion of those who threaten the goal of a perfectly identical society. Davis (2006) reminds us to consider this kind of thinking in the context of a myriad of socio-historical events. It is important to remember that horrific social and medical philosophies—eugenics, for example—were guiding by ideologies that sought broader forms of rehabilitation. With the promise of increasing intelligence or decreasing birth defects, leaders led entire nations to persecute “dis/abled” communities for the good of “normal” and “abled” citizens.

I focus on the history of dis/ability in this literature review in order to highlight several systems of oppression at work in the context of the proposed study. The notions of rehabilitation and dis/ability are relevant in other conceptual contexts, including race-making and racism, and the experiences of the incarcerated. I believe the history of dis/ability helps us deepen our knowledge not only of dis/ability, but also the dis/ablement that takes place for many communities of individuals with “deviant” social identities.

**Racialized Dis/ability.** In the same way that we must, as activists and advocates, define mass incarceration as inherently racialized, we must also acknowledge the effects of racial thinking and racist ideologies in the history of dis/ability. As “bodies at the intersections of multiple difference” (Erevelles, 2014, p. 85), Black and Brown youth with classifications of dis/ability represent the peculiarity of racialized dis/ability.

Erevelles (2014) takes up the “new Jim Crow” in order to fill in the gaps in Alexander’s (2012) historical framework. Illustrations of a “crippled” Jim Crow married race and dis/ability from the late nineteenth-century, taking up the work of the “ugly laws” of the same time. These laws stated that any person who was diseased of

deformed—anyone who could be considered “an unsightly or disgusting object”—could be fined or imprisoned if they remained in public view. Erevelles ties these laws together, revealing the ugly laws to the part of the same project as Jim Crow, eternally linking race and dis/ability. She insists that we must critically examine

the simultaneous process of ‘becoming black’ and ‘becoming disabled’” recognizing the “complex intersectional politics of race, class, and disability that is used the incarceration of ‘outlaw’ bodies that eventually become profitable commodities in the neoliberal prison-industrial complex...the historical continuities between Jim Crow, the ugly laws, and the contemporary context of mass incarceration mirror in many ways eugenic ideologies that imagined a ‘uniquely modern utopian fantasy of a future world uncontaminated by defective bodies—either disabled, racialized, or both at the same time. (p. 89)

Erevelles also tracks this project through the “(post) modern version of the Middle Passage/Jim Crow”, a devastating journey for Black and Brown children from self-contained classrooms and special education to alternative and disciplinary schools to prison—at times the only option available to low-income students of color who have been labeled with a dis/ability and tagged “superpredators.” (p. 95).

Understanding the complicated and racialized history of dis/ability paints a clear picture of the legacy taken up by the school-to-prison pipeline. The school-to-prison pipeline is not an exceptional phenomenon, but the current iteration of the many pipelines and policies that have marginalized and disenfranchised Black and Brown communities. This is just a piece of a much larger pipeline with a dark history, reaching all the way back to the enslavement of Black and Brown folks in the United States and stretching, unrestricted, into a future that seems intent upon policing and isolating these communities until they are once again completely enslaved.

## Giftedness

The most traditional definitions of giftedness are represented in statements put forth by the federal government. In 1978, the Gifted and talented Children's Education Act defined gifted children as possessing or demonstrating "potential abilities that give evidence of high performance capability in areas such as intellectual, creative, specific, academic, or leadership ability, or in the performing and visual arts, and who by reason thereof, require services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school" (Turnbull, 2010, p. 462).

The next definition of giftedness appeared in an amendment to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, an act directed to addressing the special needs of all exceptional students in the United States:

The term "gifted and talented," when used with respect to students, children, or youth, means students, children, or youth who give evidence of high achievement capability in such areas as intellectual, creative, artistic, or leadership capacity, or in specific academic fields, and who need services or activities not ordinarily provided by the school in order to fully develop those capabilities. (No Child Left Behind Act, P.L. 107-110 (Title IX, Part A, Definition 22) (2002)

Yet, historically, giftedness is an area of education that lacks the attention other areas in the field receive from researchers. More recently, there has been a focus on redefining giftedness and an attempt to create inclusionary classrooms that call upon best practices for educating communities of diverse learners.

I provide a brief history of major contributions to the field of giftedness studies to provide context for the development of theoretical and conceptual frameworks for this dissertation study. The history of giftedness, like the history of dis/ability, reflects a

series of temporal changes in a society constantly looking to recreate hierarchies of intelligence. In 1972, United States Commissioner of Education Sidney Marland, Jr. defined giftedness in the “Marland Report,” stating that gifted and talented children could be defined as demonstrating one or more of the following abilities: general intellectual ability, specific academic aptitude, creative or productive thinking, leadership ability, visual and performing arts, psychomotor ability” (Marland, 1972). In 1978, Joseph Renzulli, dissatisfied with the federal definition of giftedness, revised the definition to include motivational factors and an approach that considered accomplishments across domains. Specifically, Renzulli proposed a “three-ring conception of giftedness” that pointed to the interaction three trait clusters: task commitment, creativity, and well-above average ability (Kaufman, 2013, p. 76).

The field was still committed to creating more appropriate and inclusive definitions of giftedness, but the turn was to focus on a more generalized understanding of *intelligence* rather than giftedness. One of the most well-known psychologists in the field, known for his Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Howard Gardner continued to build upon Renzulli’s (1978) model of giftedness. Gardner (1983) argued for the recognition of seven intelligences, specifically: logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, and intrapersonal, claiming that schools were too concerned with the logical-mathematical and linguistic intelligences to the exclusion of the other five. Just a year later, Sternberg (1984) introduced the Triarchic Theory of Human Intelligence, arguing that intelligence is contingent upon the particular abilities a culture values, the degree of novelty of a given task, and the cognitive processes



necessary to solve the task. These “subtheories” became the factors of analytical intelligence, creative intelligence, and practical intelligence, a “teacher-friendly” break down of the triarchic theory (Kaufman, 2013). Embedded in this theory of intelligence was a theory that specifically addressed the synthesis of wisdom, intelligence, and creativity (WICS) in a model of giftedness. More recently, Subotnik et al. (2011) proposed the Talent-Development Mega-Model, integrating the “most compelling components” of previous models; the Talent-Development Mega-Model has roots in five main principles: abilities, both general and special, matter and can be developed; domains of talent have varying developmental trajectories; opportunities need to be provided to young people and taken by them; psychosocial variables, such as handling setbacks, adjusting anxiety levels, and so on, are determining factors in the successful development of talent; and eminence is the intended outcome of gifted education. But, according to Kaufman (2013)

The most controversial aspect of their theory...was their proposed goal of gifted education: ‘increasing the number of individuals who make pathbreaking, field-altering discoveries and creative contributions by their products, innovations, and performances.’ The implication here is that at some point in development, giftedness becomes what you do, not who you are. This means, of course, that people can flow in and out of giftedness throughout the course of their lives.” (Kaufman, 2013, p. 79)

Subotnik et al. (2011) incorporated the idea that the development of ability takes a lifetime, that there are many factors that can enhance or inhibit the development of these abilities and how individuals express their abilities and talents (National Association of Gifted Children, 2010). Building on the notion that people can flow in and out of giftedness, that the goal of gifted education should be to increase numbers of

gifted individuals and not engage in exclusionary practices, Scott Kaufman (2013) developed the Theory of Personal Intelligence, a model of explaining intelligent behaviors that states *intelligence is the dynamic interplay of engagement and abilities in pursuit of personal goals*. This theory is supported by four tenets: the self is a core aspect of human intelligence, engagement and ability are inseparable throughout human development, dynamically feeding off each other as we engage in the world, both controlled and spontaneous cognitive processes can be adaptive for acquiring a personal goal, there are no “ten-year rules” or “creativity thresholds” in which a person must attain a certain amount of knowledge to reach his or her personal goals. (Kaufman, 2013, p. 303-305). While I embrace this model of intelligence and gifted behavior, I believe Kaufman misses a crucial element of recognition of intelligence: social identities and social contexts. At no point in the Theory of Intelligence does Kaufman discuss the very real barriers that prevent low-income and/or Black and Brown youth from being included in the gifted communities. We know these students are underrepresented in gifted and talented school groups (Turnbull, 2010); this is a problem that must be addressed in future research that posits theories on exceptional intelligence and giftedness.

I appreciate the more contemporary approaches to giftedness because they create room for *many* gifted individuals to exist in our world and for intelligence to be recognized as exceptional throughout the course of an individual’s life. I know I can easily identify amazing gifts and intelligent behaviors in *each and every individual* I have ever encountered in my lifetime—as far back as my memory will allow me to travel. I am sure I am not alone. Thus, amidst all of the “objective” evidence for “true” giftedness, I

understand giftedness as yet another social construction designed to give the illusion of a hierarchy of ability and I struggle to make an argument for any exceptional mind or body that positions itself above or below the rest, regardless of a dis/abled or gifted classification. I believe a deeper exploration of the construction of giftedness will not simply bookend a spectrum of ability but shed light on the arbitrariness of dis/ability and normalcy, perhaps linking dis/ability and giftedness in useful ways for both theorists and practitioners.

Along this vein, the second tension borne of the absence of giftedness is one of practice and service. Though I argue for the acknowledgement of giftedness in incarcerated youth in this dissertation study, I recognize the complications of suggesting that some young people are “not normal,” regardless of the extreme classification as well as the complexity of even the notion of giftedness, as outlined in the first tension. This is especially true for Black and Brown youth who overwhelmingly excluded from gifted groups. As the National Association for Gifted Children stated in its position statement, “If we provide this group with a mediocre education we doom ourselves to a mediocre society a generation forward. Educators know how to provide an excellent education for these students, but it will not happen by accident or benign neglect...A moral society must care for and enhance the development of all its citizens. “ (National Association for Gifted Children, 2010). Thus, a Black and Brown problem is revealed to be *everyone’s* problem; if we deny the gifts of these children the opportunity to grow and flourish, we deny ourselves the change to grow as a society.

One of the purposes of this work will be to unpack constructions that confine Black and Brown youth and misinterpret their actions, which may be done by

acknowledging dis/ability and giftedness as these labels have been forced upon the young people and/or withheld from them. Therefore, in keeping with the National Association for Gifted Children's call to action for practitioners, I choose to understand labels of dis/ability and giftedness not as indicators of the value of the minds and bodies of these youth, but rather as tools of an oppressive system which may be re-appropriated to demand services, supports, and opportunities for young people in correctional facilities and benefit our communities, broadly.

## Chapter Three: Conceptual Framework

In this chapter, I begin with a discussion of the conceptual framework guiding the study. The conceptual framework is informed by six bodies of thought: the current context of the school-to-prison pipeline, emotion, Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory, Dis/ability Studies in Education, Critical Race Theory, and the possibility of a theory of “critical dis/ablement.”

To review, the research questions for the study are:

- a. What is the relationship between dis/ability and giftedness in the experiences of incarcerated youth?
- b. How do formerly incarcerated youth and youth advocates make meaning of dis/ability and giftedness in the context of their experiences in the school-to-prison pipeline, broadly, and in correctional facilities, specifically?
- c. What challenges arise for researchers when attempting to develop new theories of understanding in educational research?

These research questions are informed by a set of theoretical and conceptual frames that have influenced my ideas and approaches to thinking. Deeply engaging in these frames led to the development of the conceptual framework of this study.

There are many definitions for a conceptual framework, and it is important that I discuss my particular understanding of a conceptual framework to contextualize the

methodologies and methods I employ in this study. A key purpose of my conceptual framework is to provide a map upon which I can align my methods to both the interpretive processes that have influenced my thinking and my desire to unpack and disrupt systems of oppression. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) highlight the relationship between purpose, design, and method:

...if one's research seeks to investigate the influences of power, hegemony, and inequity on identity development with marginalized and oppressed populations, one's research methods must interrupt broad social trends that serve to marginalize the voices of these research participants given the power structures and how they become instantiated and enacted within the research process itself." (p. 55).

In an attempt to interrupt these trends, I turned to a set of methods I believe best represent my desire to center the marginalized voices of the participants in this study. The theories embedded in the conceptual framework of this research provide support for my methodological choices and subsequent analysis of the data.

I also want to take moment to return to the goals of the study, outlined in Chapter One. Maxwell (2013) reminds us to constantly and consistently consider our personal, practical, and intellectual goals in order to maintain focus on the reasons for studying specific phenomena. In addition to keeping me focused on my research question and the significance of the study, these goals, like my conceptual framework, guide my methodological choices:

...your goals inevitably shape the descriptions, interpretations, and theories you create in your research. They therefore constitute not only important *resources* that you can draw on in planning, conducting, and justifying the research, but also potential *validity threats*, or sources of bias for the research results, that you will need to deal with. (Maxwell, 2013, p. 23-24)

Thus, the influence of these goals on my conceptual framework is just as significant as the power of theories. To review briefly, my personal goals are rooted in a promise I made when I left teaching to keep the children front and center in all of my work. My practical goals guide me to highlight youths' stories in the hopes of revealing the damaging effects of the school-to-prison pipeline on the lives of Black and Brown youth. Finally, my intellectual goals remind me of the importance of imagining new models of research and practice in order to dismantle the tools of systemic oppression "on the ground."

With these connections between theory, method and goals in mind, I discuss the theories that most accurately highlight these goals and have deeply influenced my understanding of the phenomenon I investigate, opening up a space for consideration of a new perspective on critical theory and praxis. Specifically, I discuss the importance of temporalizing research on the school-to-prison pipeline and/or the exponential rates of incarceration of Black and Brown youth, the role of emotion in research, the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory, Dis/ability Studies in Education and deficit thinking, Critical Race Theory, and the possibility of a theory of "critical dis/ablement."

### **Current Context of the School-to-Prison Pipeline**

The conceptual framework of this dissertation is deeply influenced by the context in which the study took place. Specifically, I developed my research questions, conducted interviews, and analyzed these data from the years 2013 to 2015. During this time, much of the work on prison abolition that had previously remained within

academic and activist communities (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001; Abu-Jamal, 2003; Davis, 2003; 2011; 2012; Abu-Jamal & Hill, 2012) entered a more public sphere, arguably in large part to *The New Jim Crow* (Alexander, 2012). This New York Times bestseller highlights the ills of the prison system and mass incarceration through narratives that are accessible to readers who are not deeply engaged in the decarceration movement and/or the work of prison abolitionists; this also means that there is an emerging language for the prison industrial complex that has not always been present. This study is also written in a time of intense and controversial approaches to school reform, especially in urban communities with large populations of Black and Brown children. Currently, conversations around mass incarceration and school reform policies come together to support the troubling existence of the school-to-prison pipeline, describing a system that funnels Black and Brown youth through schools into prisons. These conversations reveal clear and disturbing connections between schools and prisons that put Black and Brown children at serious risk of incarceration just for being Black and Brown and classified as dis/abled, pathologized, and criminalized (Valencia, 2010; Ben-Moshe, 2014). We are at a moment when the President of the United States is drawing attention to the needs of Black and Brown boys (“My Brother’s Keeper Task Force One Year Report”, 2014)<sup>3</sup>; when school administrators, formerly committed to the most rigid disciplinary policies, are calling for a close inspection of rates of suspension

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<sup>3</sup> I am referring specifically to President Obama’s *My Brother’s Keeper* task force in an effort to highlight the level of publicity these issues have received during the time of this dissertation study. I also want to be clear that, even as I reference the importance of these kinds of initiatives, I understand the potential of this task force to further pathologize and criminalize Black and Brown youth. Finding the best ways to support Black and Brown youth in the face of such emotional and mental violence is a difficult task; I want to note that the mere presence of this initiative does not indicate a commitment to the most racially literate (Stevenson, 2014) approaches to dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline, but it does open up a conversation previously silenced in public spheres.



and expulsion in an effort to dismantle the pipeline; when the narratives of specific marginalized groups (i.e. the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated) are finally being pushed to the front (Alexander, 2012); and when there is a new energy around listening to what these stories reveal about the state of our nation. (Alexander, 2012).

## Emotion

I define emotion in this context as a feeling that overwhelms other simultaneously-occurring feelings, sometimes starting in my gut and slowly winding its way to my heart and mind. My emotions are *incredibly* important to me and I believe strongly in accessing my emotions as often as possible. While I maintain that all work is emotional on some level, I know the work I do with the young women and men in the correctional facilities creates emotions that push me to take pause and reflect deeply upon the context, the participants, and goals that have been set by both the organizations I work with and my research goals. These are spaces of hope, trauma, joy, loneliness—participants, facilitators, and organizers are encouraged to “feel their feelings” and make themselves vulnerable as relationships form and grow. Emotion is essential to the progress of the work. Additionally, because the work revolves around the accessing of emotion and the deep understanding of the history of emotion of an entire community (racial communities, communities of incarcerated peoples), it is incredibly important to recognize emotion not only as legitimate but as *necessary*.

Freire (1996) emphasizes the importance of emotion in his discussion of love in dialogue. I will discuss my methodological choices later in Chapter Four, but, at this point, I want to stress that they rely heavily upon interpersonal and intrapersonal

dialogue. Thus, it is important for me to engage with my emotions in a way that works in support of my methods and my goals for the research, not simply because “feeling my feelings” is something I like to do. When speaking of love as the foundation of dialogue, Freire (1996) notes

Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is commitment to others. No matter where the oppressed are found, the act of love is commitment to their cause—the cause of liberation. And this commitment, because it is loving, is dialogical. As an act of bravery, love cannot be sentimental; as an act of freedom, it must not serve as a pretext for manipulation. (p. 70-71).

I truly believe emotion contributes significantly to the work of disrupting hegemony, especially in the context of this study. We are operating within systems that have relied on empirical “evidence” and scientific “objectivity” to prove their value and legitimacy. Recognizing emotion as an important part of this disruption—as well as support in my desire to produce honest and transparent work—is thus imperative as an overarching frame, and integral to both the design and implementation of this study.

**Emotional Attention to Trauma.** Emotion is also crucial for the specific type of work I engage in during this study. Three of the four participants identify as Black and/or African-American, and will be speaking about moments of their lives directly connected to experiences of racialized trauma. It is essential for counselors and researchers to acknowledge and believe in the sociopolitical reality of racism, moving beyond traditional understandings of trauma to include racist victimization as a form of legitimate trauma (Bryant-Davis & Ocampo, 2005). This trauma may be caused by racial stress, a stress caused by interpersonal and intrapersonal racial moments that place

burden upon an individual as they navigate and cope with these interactions (Stevenson et al., 1997; Harrell, 2000; Carter, 2007; Estrada-Martínez et al., 2012). Perceived discrimination has significantly negative effects on psychological well-being, with the largest effects present in children (Schmitt et al., 2014). Young people find different strategies for coping with this trauma that may include a number of emotional and physical responses including aggression, depression, and anxiety (Smith-Bynum et al., 2014); in order to be effective as a researcher and an advocate, I must be prepared to appreciate the weight of these responses and conduct interviews with sensitivity and respect. Maintaining access to my own emotions will allow me to check in, manage my own stress, and hopefully be better prepared to take in the emotional responses of the participants. As a self-identified Black woman, I also believe accessing the emotions around my own experiences with racial trauma will help me to (verbally and non-verbally) relate to the participants and hopefully build lasting relationships that can act as a buffer to the negative outcomes of discrimination and promote feelings of positivity and connectedness (Wong et al., 2003)

### **Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST)**

As three of the participants in this study were incarcerated as adolescents and are currently in the later stages of adolescence, I believe it is crucial to understand the data through the lens of a developmental theory. Spencer et al.'s (1997) Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST) describes a perspective that explores self-system development as determined from other self-appraisal processes (Spencer et al., 1997). Specifically, the PVEST model looks at reactions in stressful situations; these may

be maladaptive or adaptive reactive coping methods or stable coping responses. The PVEST model shows that “...the individual is engaged in a life course process of unavoidable stage specific appraisal processes, series of environmental challenges (e.g., risks and stress) that are linked to diverse sociocultural contexts (e.g., expectations, attitudes, cultural beliefs and assumptions), and normative developmental tasks.” (Spencer et al, 1997, p. 820). PVEST will provide the opportunity to understand the experiences of these incarcerated youth as part of a larger process of responding to various and challenging environmental forces and acknowledge the coping strategies adolescents use in moves of resilience and self-preservation (Spencer& Jones-Walker, 2004).

### **Dis/ability Studies in Education (DSE)**

Dis/ability is “not an outcome of bodily pathology, but of social organization: it was socially produced by systematic patterns of exclusion that were...built into the social fabric.” (Hughes & Paterson, 1997, p. 328). Dis/ability as a social construct is a form of social oppression and encourages the restriction of individuals with impairments (Thomas, 2004; Baglieri et al., 2011). Schools in particular continue these patterns of exclusion through the reproduction of social order within classroom walls; educators exercise indirect control as they use a legitimized medical model to explain underachievement and unconventional ways of learning (Carrier, 1983). Unfortunately, by following this flawed model, many dis/ability researchers and practitioners ignore the social events that may be the true cause of students’ challenges in school.

It is also important to recognize that special education training does not necessarily include a critical perspective of, or deep reflection on, the experiences of students with dis/abilities. As a strong theoretical framework, Disabilities Studies in Education (DSE) helps to make meaning of constructs of ability and creates room for advocates for the dis/abled to think about inclusion and equity. The missions of DSE are to “first provide an organizational vehicle for collaboration and the exchange of ideas among DS researchers/activists in education. The second is to increase the visibility and influence of DS among all educational researchers. Ultimately, DSE’s purpose is to provide advocacy for, as well as the viable approaches for enacting, meaningful and substantive educational inclusion.” (Connor et al., 2008, p. 447). These missions are carried out through the work of the DSE tenets: 1) contextualization of disability within political and social spheres; 2) privileging the interests, agendas, and voices of people labeled with disability or as disabled people; 3) the promotion of social justice, equitable and inclusive educational opportunities, and full and meaningful access to all aspects of society for people labeled with disability or as disabled people; and 4) the assumption of competence and the rejection of deficit models of disability (Connor et al., 2008, p. 448).

DSE denies the existence of the “normal” child and instead considers the inclusion space as a space of activism, an opportunity to politically and ideologically resist discrimination against dis/abled learners (Baglieri et al., 2011). This framework, in many ways, reclaims the word itself, and re-defines dis/ability as a state of independence and empowerment. Dis/abled students can “...resist the imposition of identities founded on notions of impairment, the everyday value systems of other children and adults that differ from their own; and the processes of organization which structure their lives”

(Davis & Watson, 2001, p. 170), making dis/ability a space of promise and possibility, instead of proof of a problem.

I also believe DSE is the perfect space to understand dis/ability as an entry to a larger discussion of exceptional learners and, necessarily, of the presence of giftedness. Incarcerated youth represent a dis/abled population in more than just the overrepresentation of young people with special educational needs, but in that they represent the a community dismissed by the public and seen as in need of the highest form of societal rehabilitation. Understanding the experiences of incarcerated youth through the lens of DSE not only resists the narratives of deficit and damage associated with incarcerated youth, but also opens up the space of juvenile incarceration to other critical lenses.

**Deficit Thinking.** An understanding of dis/ability is useful in understanding how exceptional learners are marginalized, and DSE is helpful in highlighting the importance of researcher/educator stance and a rejection of dis/ability itself. Yet, this is not enough when conceptualizing what happens to young people in real-time and how it can happen on such a broad scale. I believe it is important to consider the deeply-embedded thought-processes that lead to categories of socially-constructed dis/ability. These processes are woven into everyday ways of thinking and directly affect how and when dis/ability is determined. As I continued reading the dis/ability literature and started data collection for this study, I quickly realized that dis/ability as a single framework is not sufficient if we want to understand how participants reflect upon their experiences and how their experiences are influenced by societal structures.

I turned to an understanding of dis/ability that I believe is better suited for new approaches to pedagogical and applied work, an application of dis/ability that could help me identify examples of deficit thinking that lead to classifications of dis/ability. Developed by activist scholars in the 1960s, the phrase deficit thinking is used to

[launch] an assault on the prevailing view that asserted the poor and people of color caused their own social, economic, and educational problems...Thus, the term deficit thinking appears to have its origin as a social construction stemming from the rising tide of nonconformist thought of the 1960s, a period in which deficit thinking discourse utilized its own socially constructed terms, such as, the “culturally disadvantaged child” (Black, 1966), “socialization of apathy and underachievement” (Hess, 1970), “cultural deprivation” (Edwards, 1967), and “accumulated environmental deficits” (Hess & Shipman, 1965). (Valencia, 2010, p. xiv)

Thus, deficit thinking is a useful frame not only for understanding dis/ability, but also for understanding how dis/ability is linked to dominant narratives that pathologize those pushed to live in poverty and/or communities of color. Deficit thinking also provides the foundations for a conceptual frame that seeks to understand the relationship between critical dis/ability and race studies, an area I will explore in further depth in the following sections of this chapter.

For the purposes of this dissertation study, I focus on the six characteristics of deficit thinking outlined by Valencia (2010): Victim-blaming, oppression, pseudoscience, temporal changes, educability, and heterodoxy. I will explore these characteristics in further detail in my discussion of data analysis strategies as well as in the discussion of themes in the data (Chapter Seven).

## Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Exploring the relationship between ability and incarceration in this work will require a deeper understanding of the power of social constructs as separate entities. I am thinking specifically of the construction of race, considering the disproportionate imprisonment of Black and Brown women and men. To understand the role of race<sup>4</sup> in special education classification, Critical Race Theory (CRT) is used as a foundational framework and critical lens. Specifically, (CRT) is useful for developing an understanding of how and why overrepresentation of non-dominant groups in special education works to strengthen discourse surrounding the academic and intellectual inferiority of minority groups. CRT describes the effects of racial matters (stereotyping, discrimination, racism) on both dominant and non-dominant groups. Rooted in legal studies, CRT can be used as a lens to understand the systems of racism at work in other disciplines, including education. CRT originated as a response to political activism and social change in the 1970s (Tate, 1997), and so I feel it can help to frame responses to injustice in education and support current educational reform movements, including those within correctional facilities. This proposal specifically focuses on the five tenets of CRT designed for the field of education: 1) the intercentricity of race and racism; 2) the challenge to dominant ideology; 3) the commitment to social justice; 4) the centrality of experiential knowledge; and 5) the utilization of interdisciplinary approaches (Yosso, 2005, p. 73-74). I will explore these tenets further in my discussion of data analysis as well as in my discussion of themes in the data.

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<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, race will be defined as both a social construct and lived reality.



## Dis/ability Studies in Education and Critical Race Theory

Historically, disability theories and race studies have not been considered together, critically, in research (Ejogu& Ware, 2008; Erevelles, 2014). Though newer research is starting to address the relationship between race and disability (Erevelles, 2011; 2014; Bialka, 2012; Ben-Moshe, 2014), there is still much work to be done in examining racialized dis/abled people, especially those who are in prison (Erevelles, 2014).

The work of the school-to-prison pipeline (NAACP, 2005) translates overrepresentation in special education spaces to overrepresentation in the prison-industrial complex.

Large numbers of incarcerated juveniles are marginally literate or illiterate and have experienced school failure and retention (Center of Crime, Communities, and Culture, 1997). These youth are also disproportionately male, poor, Black, Native American, or Latino and many have significant learning or behavioral problems that entitle them to special education and related services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). (Quinn et al., 2005, p. 339).

As I noted earlier in this chapter, deficit thinking is a useful start when thinking about the relationship between critical dis/ability and race studies. It is clear that the school-to-prison pipeline reifies the discourse of deficit thinking; the glaring racism inherent at all points in the school-to-prison pipeline make a marriage between DSE and CRT necessary for any study interested in the experiences of incarcerated youth. Bringing DSE and CRT together to understand these tools of oppression is a powerful

move when re-thinking approaches to working with incarcerated youth, specifically, and exceptional and marginalized youth, broadly.

Although they are not often thought of as occurring simultaneously, the relationship between the dis/ability and race reaches as far back as the Spanish Inquisition and the development of race thinking, or the belief that the people of the world can be separated into different groups or races (Silverblatt, 2004). Therefore, even as discourses of race and dis/ability are separated, they work together to support dominant hegemonies of ability and superiority. The concept of race thinking is now not only applicable to what is considered “biological race”, or difference that can be identified by skin color and other phenotypes. Classifications of ability can be understood as ability “races” that operate to advance and oppress groups of people based on biased definitions of intelligence and competency (i.e., classifications of mental retardation, emotional disturbance, and other health impairment). Furthermore, these definitions of intelligence are created by a White and “abled” population and therefore support its beliefs about intelligence and group hierarchies—this makes it almost impossible to examine ability without considering race and vice-versa. Just as we can use historical references to trace concepts of race, we can easily trace concepts of dis/ability *embedded* within race thinking throughout history, as well. Building upon arguments from Alexander’s (2012) discussion of the continued control of African American communities in poverty, Erevelles (2014) fully acknowledges that these groups are “legally subject to an explicit system of control and social and political exclusion, even among incredulous assertions that the United States is now a postracial society.” (p. 86). But she rightly argues that a racial read of the situation is not enough

Although Alexander claims that this group is defined largely by race, I argue that this group is defined at the crucial intersection of race, class, and disability...Here, Alexander seems unaware that disability as deviant pathology is utilized to assign African slaves a degraded self-worth. This unawareness results in her nonrecognition of the constitutive relationship of race and disability where racialized bodies became disabled and disabled bodies became racialized... (p. 86)

I find these understandings of racialized dis/ability to be particularly useful as they open space for understanding dis/ability that works outside of the thirteen categories of dis/ability outlined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (NICHCY, 2012). We see the deep and permanent relationship between dis/ability and race and the power of the inextricability of these two constructs. Over time, the relationship has become stronger and more nuanced, resulting in narratives such as the model of “cultural difference,” perpetuating problematic generalizations of children and families of color and promoting stereotypes that would see these communities as inherently deficient (Valencia, 2010).

What does this mean for dis/abilities research and work with exceptional students of color and Black and Brown incarcerated youth? As I examine the extant literature, it is imperative to scrutinize connections between race and dis/ability. This paper focuses on dis/abilities that are especially subject to personal bias. Specifically, the education spaces within correctional facilities include labels of emotional disturbance, intellectual disability, and/or suffering from unspecified and/or other health impairments. Through the CRT and DSE lenses, policy makers interested in education reform can begin to understand these constructed identities as tools that inform each other as they continue to perpetuate hegemonies of power in education. In order to truly

effect change for overrepresented minority groups in special education spaces, educational policy must work to re-evaluate special education referral processes and dis/ability categorization systems.

**Moving Toward a Perspective of Critical Dis/ablement.** The DSE and CRT frameworks help to further our understanding of the phenomenon of non-dominant overrepresentation in special education as they recognize both issues of race and ability. Beratan (2008) provides a strong link between these frameworks in highlighting the relationships between the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement (IDEA) Act of 2004, racism, and “institutional ablism”—all tools of discrimination in the United States. Institutional ablism refers to

the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their disability...there are discriminatory structures and practices and uninterrogated beliefs about disability deeply ingrained within societal systems and institutions that subvert even the most well intentioned policies and maintain the substantive oppression of existing hierarchies.” (Beratan, 2008, p. 339).

Institutional ablism oppresses those who have been diagnosed with a dis/ability and also leaves beliefs about the link between dis/ability and non-Whiteness unquestioned and strong enough to maintain racial hierarches in societal structures—including education.

Much like a deep understanding of institutional ablism, crip theory opens space for the exploration of the social construction of ability, broadly. Rooted in both Disability Studies and Queer Studies and drawing upon critical theory, crip theory

provides an analysis of socially constructed notions of normal and abnormal in a contemporary, neoliberal context. To explain the foundation of these construction processes, Robert McRuer (2006) calls upon “crippin” to explain critical practices that investigate how “cultures of ability/disability are conceived, materialized, spatialized, and populated...[within] geographies of uneven development [and] are mapped onto bodies marked by differences of race, class, gender, and ability” (p. 72). To “come out crip” is to “come out as what you already are (but not repeating the dominant culture’s understanding of that faithfully)... [as well as] coming out as what you are apparently not.” (McRuer, 2006, p. 70-71). To come out crip is to at once acknowledge the label that has been forced upon you and to engage with the possibilities that arise when identities deconstructed, opened up for exploration, and redesigned.

While I believe institutional ablism and crip theory to be powerful lenses for understanding the embedded discrimination in our society’s structures, I am left feeling somewhat unsatisfied. These are theories pushing for next steps and asking critical questions, encouraging activism and collaboration in academia—they are aligned perfectly with my goals for the study. But there seems to be a gap where the action—the attention to praxis—should be squarely situated, with a focus on how these constructs can be dismantled and disrupted through intrapersonal and interpersonal *practice*—much like the movements of Disability Studies in Education and Critical Race Theory. How do we address the act of “coming out crip” with responsible pedagogical approaches, ensuring that we are not further pathologizing our students of color, young people who have already been racialized, dis/abled, and criminalized? I also agree with Erevelles (2014) that tensions in the work of theorizing are exacerbated by the “very real painful

antagonisms that [disrupt] any easy possibility of alliance as we...sort through problematic relationships unearthed in our analyses of criminality, danger, disability, class, and race.” (p. 84). In this way, the most tried-and-true forms of oppression continue to interfere with even our best efforts to unite and pull apart the foundations of dis/abling, racializing identity construction. In the field of education, specifically, there is a particular urgency to uncover these tools of oppression in ways that will inform pedagogical practices and have an immediate impact on the ways we educate and support other people’s children, an issue that is both theoretical and methodological. Following this vein, I believe there is a need to understand the extent to which many marginalized, dis/abled, and raced communities can understand their emotional experiences as important and their social experiences as interrupted, if not through the language of dis/ability or the act of “coming out crip,” then through the process of *dis/ablement*.

Much like institutional ablism and crip theory discourse, a theory of critical dis/ablement acknowledges the *state* of becoming dis/abled and moves the locus of control away from the individual and back to the dis/abling institution. Dis/ablement is an entirely external process that *actively creates* very real difficulties for individuals within the boundaries of a society. Again, as noted by Davis (2006) it is imperative that we understand dis/ability as a construction; I believe a lens of Critical Dis/ablement could take up the work of institutional ablism, crip theory, DSE, and CRT—along with the active stance of the tenets of DSE and CRT—and speak directly to the need for service and support for *all* forms of societal dis/ablement. I am seeking to understand the

moments at which incarcerated youth are subjected to broader forms of dis/ablement, how this dis/ablement leads to the manifestations of dis/abilities, the relationship between their dis/ability and their giftedness, and how their dis/abilities are understood and supported within correctional facilities. Though my research questions focus on specific social identities and experiences, I believe a perspective of Critical Dis/ablement could provide a space to explore a wide range of dis/abling social identities. As I reviewed the literature, I realized it is oftentimes impossible to tell where the dis/ablement ends and the dis/ability begins—there must be a space to unpack these processes as we think through not only the services and supports these youth deserve and desperately need, but also the tools that are necessary to dismantle these processes permanently. I believe, by using the language of dis/ablement, we create a space to immediately acknowledge the need for supports to correct the dis/abling of a multitude of individuals and communities. Through the work in this dissertation study, I examine the usefulness of a theory of dis/ablement in the context of the experiences of self-identified Black and African-American youth incarcerated in adult correctional facilities.

## Chapter Four: How Should a Researcher Be?

*Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must re-examine themselves constantly. This conversion is so radical as not to allow of ambiguous behavior. To affirm this commitment but to consider oneself the proprietor of revolutionary wisdom—which must then be given to (or imposed on) the people—is to retain old ways. The man or woman who proclaims devotion to the cause of liberation yet is unable to enter into communion with the people whom he or she continues to regard as totally ignorant, is grievously self-deceived. The convert who approaches the people but feels alarm at each step they take, each doubt they express, and each suggestion they offer, and attempts to impose his ‘status’ remains nostalgic towards his origins.” (Freire, 1996, p. 42-43).*

Before I discuss the methodological approach to this study, I will speak to a crucial realization and the critical errors I made even as I developed the research questions and design for this study. Though I will spend more time exploring critical errors and positioning in Chapter Ten, I believe it is important to place my findings in the context of this critical error and a shifting understanding of my research questions.

At the beginning of this study, I was deeply interested in the ways in which specific identities and socially-constructed categories have been thrust upon marginalized communities and exceptional learners. I wanted to know how these individuals understood these identities and categories in the context of their incarceration and advocacy work, how they understood these relationships as complex relationships. As each participant sat down with me for interviews, answered my questions, and shared their experiences, I realized I had made serious assumptions about how and where these relationships function and whether or not they would understand their experiences in the context of identities working in tandem. My research original questions (See Appendix A)—and the subsequent research design—were developed



using these assumptions as a foundation for exploring and gaining a deeper understanding of these relationships. Although there were moments of shared understanding of the effects of social identities on an individual's life experiences, there were rarely clear and concise answers to questions of how a certain social identity affected the participants' experiences in jail or the roles as advocated for incarcerated youth.

I approached questions of dis/ability with a similarly narrow frame. I worked to complicate notions of dis/ability throughout my conceptual framework, looking into dis/abling features that exist within a range of societal institutions, not just schools. I hoped to better understand how participants were working to resist dis/ablement during and after their incarceration. Yet, I developed interview protocols that led participants to answer questions about dis/ability in mostly traditional educational environments. And even in the narrow scope of dis/abilities within institutions of learning, there were rarely clear answers to the question of how dis/ability was addressed in various learning environments

Throughout the interviews, I was consistently moved by the participants' powerful stories while feeling increasingly farther away from addressing my research questions—and feeling anxious about navigating my desire to let their stories guide the interviews. There was a creeping nervousness that the focus of my study, embedded in the set of research questions, was no longer in sight.

I believe, under the stress of trying to produce a powerful and impressive piece, it is easy to lose sight of what drives a researcher's interests, what makes her approach the research passionately. At the very least, it was in the moment of anxiety that I lost

that vision. Or perhaps it was the creeping up of an ego that I so desperately work to suppress in a world of egos that can lead to the same ideologies I am attempting to deconstruct. Either way, I am no Ozymandias and my goals for this study do not include causing the Mighty to despair as they look upon my works (Shelley, 1818). But I do hope that it will be meaningful and powerful in its practical and pedagogical applications. Fortunately, at the very moment when I believed I had lost control of my dissertation, the work took the reins and, through the power of some quality time with “the kids” and past reflections, put me back on the right track.

I have the privilege of volunteering with young people in jails and I was able to continue volunteering with ACT throughout the course of this project, outside of the scope of my dissertation study. During one visit in January 2015, I entered the women’s jail ready to facilitate a discussion about how we work through the sometimes painful perceptions others place upon us. At the time, there was only one adolescent on the block, an amazing young person who was also about five months pregnant at the time. It was just the two of us, so we started our conversation by catching up—I asked her how she was feeling, if “Nugget” (our nickname for her baby) was being kind to her, if she thought she would have a boy or girl. The time passed quickly; two hours had flown by and we were still deep in conversations about her future, her plans for school, her hopes for her romantic relationship, and the community she had built for herself –all over an intense game of Uno (she won.) Simply by allowing the conversation to run its course, I had provided a space for her to discuss serious concerns, laugh a little bit, and share hopes for a future she was only just beginning to realize as a possibility (Researcher Memo, 1/24/15). Letting go of my plan—and doing my best to acknowledge and let go of

some of my power as the facilitator—didn't lead us away from an important conversation, but rather toward a conversation that was important to her, in that moment. I learned more about how she saw herself and how she understood others' perceptions from that conversation than I may have had I not followed her lead. "Taking control" of the study was about letting go of control at the most crucial moments and trusting my instincts as a researcher and listener.

It was over this weekend in January 2015 that I re-read the memos I had written during the first few months of my time as a volunteer with ACT and memos that referenced this study, specifically. I came across the first memo I wrote that was linked to this dissertation, a memo that began with "I can't sleep and there's probably a reason why" (Researcher Memo, 2/5/14). This memo was written at a time when the terror of writing my dissertation proposal really hit—which just happened to be at 2:48am on February 5, 2014. The last lines of the memo read:

Why do *I* want to do this? Why *now*?  
Why memo?  
Why write? (Personal Memo, February 5, 2014)

I started thinking about how I answered these questions in my proposal and how I would answer them now, almost a year later, at the tail end of data collection. I revisited my goals for the study; none of my goals reflected the kind of anxiety that was creeping up and around me, and I realized that this kind of anxiety was not in the spirit of the work. These feelings did not match the excitement I felt during the dissertation proposal process, an eagerness for the possibilities that lay ahead.

At the time, I was reading Sheila Heti's (2013) book, *How Should a Person Be? A Novel from Life*. Reading through Heti's accounts of searching for identity and purpose helped me think through my work for this dissertation study. I realized that I was not only afraid of the kind of researcher I would be, but that this fear was deeply intertwined with a growing understanding of the kind of person I want to be in the world. How should Kelsey Marie Jones *be*? It is a difficult question at any time in a person's life, and asking myself how I should be during the research process made it particularly impossible to answer. To make matters worse, I was constantly fighting fears that my eagerness to delve so deeply into an understanding of myself as an instrument (Maxwell, 2013) was actually a cover for the worst kind of narcissism, the kind I could quietly feed under the guise of reflexivity. A well-known affliction of my generation! I returned to old researcher identity memos to get a better sense of who I was/am and who I believed myself to be in any previous moments of reflection. These included the researcher identity memo I wrote at the beginning of this dissertation study (Researcher Memo, 5/10/15) as well a researcher identity memo I've wrote for related pilot study (Researcher Memo, 2/3/12). Interestingly, my very first researcher identity memo was titled "Being Kelsey Jones: Researching the Researcher and Other Identity Tales." It seemed that, as is the case with many things, I'd answered the question of how I should be as a researcher a long time ago.

Before I had the opportunity to answer my question of being, I found myself deeply engaged in my connection to a past identity. In each of the researcher identity memos, I referenced my identity as a "former teacher," noting that this particular identity

would always influence my approaches to working in learning environments with young people. As a teacher, I held strong beliefs that guided my practice and helped me understand my professional identity even as I struggled with feelings of overwhelming stress and self-doubt in the classroom. I went back to notes and jottings from that time, mostly from readings assigned in my Master's program through the New York City Teaching Fellowship. I found an excerpt from Lisa Delpit's (2006) *Other People's Children* that jumped out at me.

In thinking through these issues, I have found what I believe to be a connecting and complex theme: what I have come to call 'the culture of power.' There are five aspects of power I would like to propose as given...:

1. Issues of power are enacted in classrooms
2. There are codes or rules for participating in power; that is, there is a 'culture of power.'
3. The rules of the culture of power are a reflection of the rules of the culture of those who have power.
4. If you are not already a participant in the culture of power, being told explicitly the rules of that culture makes acquiring power easier.
5. Those with power are frequently least aware of—or least willing to acknowledge—its existence. Those with less power are often more aware of its existence. (Delpit, p. 24, 2006)

This was exactly what I needed! My researcher goals had always been rooted in an understanding that power existed and that I needed to recognize my power and consider its influence in my work. Yet here I was, afraid of losing control of a dissertation study that was never meant to be *mine*, but rather an opportunity to hear how the participants took ownership of their own experiences; the world knows what it needs. My job was to listen and let the participants guide me to the answers that were

most valuable to them. My attempts to passively-aggressively enact power through my research were not going to help me achieve any of the goals I had set for myself or for my study. I decided to move forward with a deeper commitment to recognize the pervasiveness of this power and acknowledge it as a natural part of the process, but a danger to the work I value and understand as important in a social-justice oriented dissertation study.

I was (and am currently) still working to understand how I should be as a person, but I knew then that, as a researcher, I would be a person who was not afraid to return to the past for guidance in identity development. Who I am as a researcher will always embrace those histories and the set of values that are tied to those identities. Most important is that who I am as a researcher greatly depends upon my commitment to be a person who will work her hardest to respect and privilege the voices and stories of other people's children.

## Chapter Five: Methodology and Methods

### Review of the Research Questions

The research questions for the proposed study are:

- a. What is the relationship between dis/ability and giftedness in the experiences of incarcerated youth?
- b. How do formerly incarcerated youth and youth advocates make meaning of dis/ability and giftedness in the context of their experiences in the school-to-prison pipeline, broadly, and in correctional facilities, specifically?
- c. What challenges arise for researchers when attempting to develop new theories of understanding in educational research?

### Methodology

In deciding upon a methodology for this dissertation study, I was concerned about choosing an approach that would best represent my ethical concerns and activist stance. I feel that choosing a methodology is not only important for the research design, but is also a strong statement about where a researcher locates herself in the history of the institutions she is a part of. As a new researcher interested in the experiences of incarcerated youth, I have read far too many accounts of the injustices and horrors that take place “in the name of research” in correctional facilities. One study in particular reminds me of the disturbing casualness with which this is done.

*Acres of Skin: Human Experiments at Holmesburg Prison*, highlights the career of research dermatologist Albert Kligman, who was a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. Kligman, the 'Father of Retin-A,' conducted hundreds of experiments on the men housed in Holmesburg Prison and, in the process, trained many researchers to use what were later recognized as unethical research methods.

When Dr. Kligman entered the aging prison he was awed by the potential it held for his research. In 1966, he recalled in a newspaper interview: 'All I saw before me were acres of skin. It was like a farmer seeing a fertile field for the first time.' The hundreds of inmates walking aimlessly before him represented a unique opportunity for unlimited and undisturbed medical research. He described it in this interview as 'an anthropoid colony, mainly healthy' under perfect control conditions. (Davis, 2003, p. 89-90)

As a student at the University of Pennsylvania, it is disturbing to know that my work follows a history of inhumane and deeply disturbing research conducted by researchers from this institution. But I am also aware that it is the same institution that taught me to think through my methodological decisions in ways that push back against the unethical approaches of the past in order to center the wants and needs of participants and work hard to produce research that does not result in harm. It is not enough for me to choose a methodology because it seems like a good fit; it must also take a strong position of resistance and change in the context of a history of methodological choices in incarceration research.

This dissertation study is rooted in the methodology of phenomenology, specifically, a hermeneutic approach to phenomenology. The phenomenological method was developed in response to the science of psychology that "attempted to "apply methods of the natural sciences to human issues" (Lavery, 2003, p. 22). This methodological approach focuses on the need to understand how people view themselves and their world (Robson, p. 151, 2011). Hermeneutic phenomenology is



primarily concerned with human experience, the focus on creating meaning and achieving a sense of understanding or, the situated meaning of a human in the world. (Lavery, 2003). I was eager to call upon this methodological approach because of its attention to “a fusion of horizons, a dialectical interaction between the expectation of the interpreter and the meaning of the text...A ‘horizon’ is a range of vision that includes everything seen from a particular vantage point” (Lavery, 2003, p. 25). Specifically, according to Gadamer (1960)

Understanding is always more than merely re-creating someone else’s meaning. Questioning opens up possibilities of meaning, and thus what is meaningful passes into one’s own thinking on the subject...To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were (p. 375)

Furthermore, Gadamer (1976) embraced the subjectivity of the researcher and her methods; he rejected the notion of “bracketing” one’s views and instead focused on the ways in which acknowledging our positioning in a situation can play a positive role in the search for meaning. These methodological beliefs are well-aligned with my understanding of the purpose of research and my relationship to the participants and design of this dissertation study. Approaching the work in this way allowed me to understand the lived experiences of participants while constantly reflecting on how I was actively countering a tendency to form abstract or uninformed opinions about them (Starks& Trinidad, 2007).

**Rationale for a Rigorous Qualitative Approach.** In providing a rationale and significance for this dissertation study, I noted the importance of qualitative research in the school-to-prison pipeline literature, especially in understanding the experiences of incarcerated youth. Throughout the process of data collection, I was frequently asked how my particular qualitative approach would ensure the rigor of the study, especially given the abundance of dis/ability measurements already in use. These questions around rigor surprised me, as I believe rigor to be a necessary component of *any* study using *any* methodological approach. I was forced to think through *how* I could explain my understanding of rigor in this study and challenge myself to clearly articulate the logic behind my methodological decisions. While I do not feel the need to justify my use of qualitative methodology and methods as *legitimate*, I would like to briefly address my understanding of methodological rigor before I move on to describe the specific contexts and method choices of the study.

Designing the study pushed me to grapple with the wide range of understandings of methodological rigor. Earlier in this chapter, I describe a conceptual framework that addresses the theoretical justification for this dissertation study and articulates the strength of these theoretical concepts. In *Reason & Rigor*, Ravitch and Riggan (2012) state that

As guide and ballast, the development of a well-articulated conceptual framework supports your development as a researcher and a scholar. It drives you to articulate your reasons for doing the research you choose to do, and helps you to understand what it means to do that work rigorously. Both are necessary to do exceptional research. Reason without rigor is editorializing; rigor without reason is irrelevant. Ultimately, the utility and impact of your research will be determined by what you have to say, how clearly you can say it, the strength of your argument, and the evidence that supports it. (p. 158-159)

I believe rigor in the context of race and dis/ability studies has traditionally been defined by the perceived legitimacy of standardized measurements created by communities with vested interests in maintaining academic and social hierarchies. This is especially true when diagnoses rely on these assessments to classify and categorize. What does this mean for this dissertation study? While I appreciate the contributions of strong standardized measurement in the fields of education, broadly, and ability, specifically, I believe there is a need to re-think the ways in which we “measure” dis/ability, giftedness, and the many characteristics we place upon children and their communities, specifically Black and Brown children and their communities. A qualitative approach allows me to complicate what we mean by rigor in this area of education, as well as the terms I rely upon to explain my thinking and analysis; these are all in need of serious exploration and, when necessary, deconstruction. For me, the rigor lies in the fidelity to the experiences of the participants—those who are experts of their own experiences—and have for too long been subject to the biases of even the most “rigorous” of measurements. My hope in designing the study was to think about how to attend to the stories of individuals who have had numerous and direct experiences with classification and categorization but perhaps not as many opportunities to speak to these experiences without the boundaries of these categorizations<sup>5</sup>. I worked hard to ensure a rigorous methodological approach to this study and, while there is much room for growth and future work, I believe each component of the work—the conceptual framework, the methodology, the methods, the approach to analysis—to be deeply

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<sup>5</sup> The analysis of the data helped me to understand that these categories and labels are far more insidious than I realized, a challenge I will discuss as I share the themes that emerged from the data.

rooted in the experiential knowledge of the participants. As Freire (1996) states, “Who are better prepared than the oppressed to understand the terrible significance of an oppressive society?” (p. 27). For me, this is the best foundation for any rigorous qualitative work that seeks to understand the experiences of incarcerated youth.

### Overview of the Research Design

Participants from a non-profit organization that works with incarcerated youth (ACT) were asked if they would like to participate in this dissertation study. Doing my best to provide a safe space for young people and organization members, I asked participants to share their stories about time spent in correctional facilities and advocacy work in juvenile justice. I used a combination of qualitative research methods to gain a deeper understanding of the relationships between dis/ability, giftedness, and experiences with incarceration; these methods also allowed for triangulation of the data (Patton, 1990; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Methods included analysis of individual interviews and institutional documents (Patton, 1990; Creswell, 2007; Weiss, 1994; Carey & Smith, 1994). As the data were collected, I personally transcribed interviews in order to have a deeper relationship with my data and know them inside and out. All transcriptions were read thoroughly and moved into a qualitative analysis computer program (Dedoose) for further analysis, developing clusters of meaning through multiples cycles of coding (Creswell, 2007; Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Saldaña, 2009). I developed deductive and inductive codes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) working to combine and/or deconstruct these themes as I became more familiar with the data and gained a better sense of how my research questions were evolving.

Throughout the process, I consulted with two critical friend groups in order to increase validity and as a means of resisting the “lone researcher” stance and keeping myself open to fresh perspectives and alternative ways of interpretation and analysis (S. Ravitch, personal communication, March 31, 2014). Specifically, these critical friend groups included “Friends from the Field—Colleagues Who Work with Critical Race or Ability Studies;” and “Friends from Other Fields Who Care About Keeping Me Honest and the Work Accessible.” These groups had access to all transcripts from participant interviews.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants selected for the dissertation study were three previously incarcerated young people currently employed by the non-profit organization ACT<sup>6</sup> as well as the director of the organization. ACT is a small organization that works to fight against the incarceration of adolescents under the age of eighteen in adult correctional facilities in the Philadelphia area. Each week, ACT employees and guest facilitators work with the young people housed in Franklin Institute of Corrections (a men’s correctional facility) and the Women’s Corrections Center (a women’s facility). All of ACT’s work on the inside takes place at FIC and WCC in the form of weekly workshops that encourage youth to express their views on societal issues through the use of a variety of artistic media. During my time as a volunteer facilitator with ACT, I have developed relationships with its employees as well as with the young people involved in

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<sup>6</sup> Pseudonyms are used to for the organization and correctional facilities in order to maintain the commitment to confidentiality.

its workshops; they knew about my research interests and were interested in participating in this study. Though I am not in a leadership position in this context, I am aware that my status as a member of the University of Pennsylvania community complicates these relationships and required deep attention as I recruited participants; I address these issues in further detail in my discussions of validity and positionality in this chapter.

Participants were selected using purposeful sampling, a method of sampling that seeks individuals who can “purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study.” (Creswell, 2013, p. 125). The participants in this dissertation study were selected because of their direct and personal experiences with incarceration and roles in youth advocacy within adult correctional facilities, specifically, and the criminal justice system, broadly. The study included four participants, which is appropriate for a phenomenology (Dukes, 1984; Creswell, 2013) and common in qualitative research (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The participants who were incarcerated all identified as Black and/or African-American and the fourth participant, the director of the organization, identified as White; this racial representation was crucial for sampling in this study due to the racialized nature of mass incarceration and overrepresentation of Black and Brown youth in the school-to-prison pipeline (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001; Herivel & Wright, 2003; Davis, 2003; Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012; Ben-Moshe, 2014). Participants were between the ages of twenty-two and thirty-one, with all three formerly incarcerated youth somewhere between twenty-two and twenty-three years of age. Gender balance in research is important to me and though only one participant identified as a man in this

study, I understood that this was a matter of representation within the organization as well as a testament to issues of recidivism and the challenges of reentry that are not only specific for Black and Brown communities, but for Black and Brown men in particular (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001; Davis, 2003; Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012). Purposeful sampling in this dissertation study was also aligned with the tenets of Critical Race Theory and Dis/ability Studies in Education, seeking experiential knowledge, the power of counternarratives against the dominant voice, and the privileging of dis/abled voices (Yosso, 2005; Connor et al., 2008).<sup>7</sup>

I take a moment here to briefly describe the incarceration stories of the four participants. I want to emphasize that these accounts do not even begin to capture the complexities of their identities; these accounts are provided for context as we move into a more detailed description of the research design and interpretation of the data collected from their interviews.

### Daniel.

At the time of the interviews, Daniel was twenty-three years old and reconnecting with ACT as a guest facilitator. When he was fifteen, Daniel was tried as an adult for five aggravated assaults—robberies that involved the use of a gun. During the two years he spent at FIC awaiting sentencing, he was a regular participant in the ACT workshops and formed a close relationship with Caroline. He was charged and,

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<sup>7</sup> For a number of political, legal, and personal reasons—and because they are people with uniquely individual and important beliefs and priorities—participants were encouraged to exercise their right to either have their real names included in the study or choose pseudonyms. At any point in the research process (until the defense of the dissertation), participants had the option to remove themselves from the study; I reminded them of this option throughout data collection, data analysis, and three days before the scheduled dissertation defense.

with time served, was sent to a number of prisons “upstate” to finish the remaining two years of his sentence. Now, back at home with his wife and sons, Daniel is getting involved with decarceration efforts and working to use his new music career as a platform to mentor young people.

### **Lisha.**

Lisha is twenty-two years old and a paid employee with ACT. At the age of seventeen, she was incarcerated in an adult correctional facility for her involvement in a fight that involved weapons. Although Lisha was not in possession of the weapons during the fight, she was charged and spent a month and a half at WCC. During that time, she was not an eager participant in the ACT workshops, but she returned to the organization for employment when she came home. Now, the mother of a one-year old daughter, she works with the organization in its efforts to educate young people and change policy that allows young people to be charged as adults.

### **Meeka.**

Meeka, a twenty-two year old mother of two (a three year old son and a one year old daughter), has been working with ACT since she came home after a year and half on the inside. At the age of seventeen, she was charged as an adult after her involvement in a fight that resulted in another young person’s death. Meeka spent time with other girls under eighteen on a segregated unit until she was moved to the adult population when she turned eighteen. Now, Meeka is an advocate for incarcerated youth, visiting schools to help young people recognize and avoid the school-to-prison pipeline.



### **Caroline.**

At thirty-one, Caroline is the director of ACT, having worked with various iterations of the program for ten years. Each week, Caroline facilitates workshops for young people who are incarcerated in adult correctional facilities, bringing guest facilitators and advocating for their decertification at every step of the process—in the jails and in the courtrooms. Caroline was inspired to join this organization after being encouraged to take up the fight for racial justice in an undergraduate college course and has dedicated her life to various social justice initiatives ever since.

### **Methods**

**Interviews.** Each participant was asked to engage in a series of four to six one-on-one interviews. I conducted four interviews with Lisha, Caroline, and Meeka and two with Daniel, who was preparing for an upcoming hearing and sentencing on recent charges. This resulted in a total of fourteen interviews, all of which took place in-person. Throughout data collection, I used both open-ended and semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Using open and semi-structured approaches to interviewing allowed participants to guide certain conversations while giving me the opportunity to use the interview protocols (See Appendices B-D) to ensure that I remained focused on the study's research questions; participants did not have access to these interview protocols prior to the interviews. For the purposes of this dissertation study, I wanted their answers to be authentic in the moment as opposed to prepared. Each interview was approximately one-hour-long and the interviewing

process took place over the course of four months, between November 2014 and February 2015 with me as the sole facilitator. Participants received \$20 for each interview they completed, to include travel costs and potential time spent during the participant validation process (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). I will describe in further detail participant validation and member checks—the practice of inviting participants to be a part of the data analysis process and encouraging their feedback on data collection and data analysis findings—when I discuss issues of validity in this study. The protocols used for each interview were developed using the initial set of research questions for this study (See Appendix A) and the major components of the conceptual framework. Thus, each interview focused on a specific conceptual frame and/or set of experiences relevant to the central phenomenon of this dissertation study: experiences as an adolescent in an adult correctional facility and/or direct experiences working with incarcerated adolescents in adult correctional facilities.

The first interview asked participants to share their “incarceration stories,” allowing me to be introduced to the moments leading up to incarceration and how participants made meaning of their lives before and after their time on the inside. The second interview asked participants to discuss their experiences from kindergarten through high school (which, for two of the participants, included schooling provided by the Philadelphia Prison System), providing me with an understanding of the effects of the school-to-prison pipeline on their experiences as children and younger adolescents or, in the case of one participant, the role of school and academic learning in developing an interest in prison abolition and decarceration efforts. The third interview focused on conceptions of dis/ability and giftedness; these conversations asked participants to

define the terms in their own words, based upon their unique life experiences. This round of interviews allowed me to think through my own definitions of dis/ability and giftedness and challenge my assumptions and the relevance of my conceptual framework to what was actually taking place in the lived experiences of the participants. Finally, the fourth interview focused on participants' definitions of social identities (based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion, specifically) and how they understood the influence of these identities on others' perceptions of them and their relationship to the school-to-prison pipeline and their incarceration stories. These particular social identities were referenced frequently during ACT's weekly workshops and I noted that these identities were important to the young people on the inside. During my first year as a volunteer with ACT (December 2014-December 2015), I had the opportunity to pilot my research questions and rehearse the protocols for the first and fourth interviews with the incarcerated girls and boys during the workshops I facilitated<sup>8</sup>

All interviews were digitally recorded; during each interview, I took notes to help me remember follow-up questions and reactions to participants' stories and meaning making. Immediately following each interview, I began the transcription process, using ExpressScribe software to transcribe each interview to the highest level of detail and accuracy; interviews were fully transcribed within two weeks of conducting them. I also wrote reflective memos after each round of interviews—a total of four—to

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<sup>8</sup> I want to note here that ACT makes a point to refer to incarcerated youth as “young people,” “young women,” or “young men.” As I use the terms “girls and boys,” it is not my intention to infantilize the adolescents or show disrespect toward ACT and its mission statements and beliefs. Rather, I use “girls and boys” to challenge the notion that these are, in any way, “women and men;” adolescents have a myriad of personal, social, and mental skills that make them developmentally mature when compared to their younger counterparts, but I want to stress that they are *not* adults. I believe it is important for me to take this stance in an effort to remind readers that these young people are still developing, still working to make meaning of their environments, and are still our/other people's *children*.

help me make meaning of what was taking place at both the individual and group levels of the stories each participant shared with me. The goal of these interviews was to help me gain a better sense of how individual experiences, beliefs, needs, and desires contribute to the diversity of experiences of incarcerated youth as well as shared experiences in correctional facilities (Patton, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Weiss, 1994; Creswell, 2013); I explore these differences and similarities in my discussion of themes in Chapters 6-9.

**Institutional Documents.** Through communication with the University of Pennsylvania's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and talks with employees at the correctional facilities, I learned that I would not be able to conduct interviews within the walls of the jails where I volunteer. I was also restricted from including any documents or recordings that included direct references and/or the voices of incarcerated youth. In order to represent these institutions in this study, I included institutional documents from both ACT and the Philadelphia Prison System in the data set for this study; specifically, I reviewed ACT's mission statement and the following public documents from the Philadelphia Prison System: the descriptions and mission statements of the two correctional facilities where ACT holds weekly workshops, the Philadelphia Prison System's mission statement and history, and descriptions of all Philadelphia Prison System programs offered to those who are incarcerated. The documents were analyzed using the same coding process that was applied to the interview transcripts.

### Researcher-Generated Data.

*Research Journal.* While I hoped to (ideally) engage in the bracketing of my own experiences to focus on the participants' descriptions of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994), I knew that this was an absolutely impossible task. Throughout the length of this study, I continued to use a research journal as a means of documenting ongoing struggles, breakthroughs(!), and new perspectives on the research process and design. This journal included thoughts on the research design, questions about my frameworks and research questions, articles and books that were recommended to me, feelings about the study (concerns, excitement), and thoughts for future work that could take up the task of exploring some of the issues emerging that could not be addressed within the confines of this dissertation. My hope was to keep all of these reflections in one place so I could look back on the trajectory of the study and make connections between my reaction, the data, and the direction of the research.

*Memos.* I also wrote a number of memos (Maxwell, 2013) throughout the research process. Memos are designed to help researchers record ideas and use this form of writing as a way to facilitate reflection and analytic insight (Maxwell, 2013, p. 20). Memos can be written at any point in the research process, and I decided to begin with a researcher identity memo that was completed a shortly after the dissertation proposal was approved. The memo allowed me to push into the parts of myself that would be awakened by this research, the identities that would make me feel the most connected, the most distanced, and ultimately, have a strong influence on the dissertation. In order to develop an understanding of how I was approaching interviews with participants—and how I understood my approach to influence data collection—I completed a pre-data

collection memo as well as a post-data collection memo within a week of the beginning and end of the data collection period, respectively. As I stated earlier in my discussion of the study's interviews, I also wrote four reflective memos that helped me make sense of how participants were answering questions that were directly connected to my research questions and conceptual framework. These memos also illuminated the discrepancies between my theoretical frames and the lived experiences of the participants, which ultimately led to the removal and addition of certain research questions. Finally, I completed a post-data analysis memo that helped me work through the tension of what it meant to finish the analysis process and begin to write my interpretations in a formal setting with a certain level of permanency. I believe writing memos at these moments in the research process helped to address, embrace, and challenge my positionality at crucial moments of preparation and interpretation. These memos were included in the data set and analyzed using the same codes as the data gathered from participant interviews and institutional documents. I believe, by including them in the collection of data points, I have a better sense of *how* and *why* I interpreted the situations in the way that I did and how the analysis process was affected by my researcher bias (Peshkin, 1988; Starks & Trinidad, 2007).

### **Sequencing of Methods**

I chose to complete all of the participant interviews prior to reviewing institutional documents. The interview protocols and my approaches to data collection were based in a conceptual framework that looked to participants as the experts of their experiences; I felt that it was best to hear their stories first so as not to be influenced by

the frames introduced by the Philadelphia Prison System's descriptions of programming and purposes. As I noted earlier in this chapter, I included researcher-generated data in the data state for this study; as these memos were written at different points throughout the research process, memo-writing and data collection took place concurrently.

### **Data Management**

I personally managed all confidential data, specifically, all audio recordings of interview. Recordings of interviews were stored on work computers, using state-of-the-art encryption software; these computers were either located in a locked office in a building with 24-hour security requiring log-in credentials or they were in my possession at all times during use. Recordings were copied into a transcription program (ExpressScribe) and I transcribed all interview recordings. Transcriptions were transferred to an encrypted qualitative analysis/coding program (Dedoose) that I locked using a second encryption tool through the program. Participant names were changed to pseudonyms and were used consistently once all recordings were transcribed. After recordings were transcribed, they were permanently removed from these storage spaces (i.e. digital recorder and desktop files) and destroyed. For work with critical thought partners, these data were saved in an encrypted, secure, university-monitored cloud program (The Box, designed by the University of Pennsylvania for the storage of confidential data.)

## Data Analysis

Analysis of these data began as I conducted and transcribed interviews with participants; this analysis was preliminary and a result of my reactions to the emotional and conceptual components of the interviews. I started the formal process of data analysis by reading through all of the interview transcripts, institutional documents, and memos; this was not a read-through that included notes, but simply a chance for me to read through all of the data that had been collected. During the second round of reading, I began to record my reactions to the data through notes on the transcripts and in my research journal; I also noted the presence of any a priori or deductive codes (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), codes that were developed using the constructs outlined in my conceptual and theoretical frameworks for this dissertation. Specifically, I looked for examples of dis/ability, giftedness, and any references to the beliefs and stances taken up by Dis/ability Studies in Education, Critical Race Theory, and deficit thinking. During this time, I also engaged in open coding using an inductive approach (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), noting patterns in the data and recording them as codes; this marked the development of the first iteration of this study's codebook. The coding was completed using Dedoose, a qualitative analysis software. I engaged in a third round of reading with critical friend groups who, through their close reading of the participants' interviews, helped me to see different patterns emerging from the data, specifically, theoretical patterns and opportunities to expand the study's critical framework. At this point, I continued to engage in open coding and pulled in new codes that reflected these patterns, removing codes that were quickly falling to the side as less relevant to the larger themes of the emerging data set. I read



through the new data set for a fourth time, solidifying codes—and the codebook (See Appendix F) —and working to cluster them into larger categories, the themes emerging from the data. The majority of these themes are aligned with the categories presented in the conceptual framework, but inductive coding revealed cross-cutting themes that, while not tightly linked to dis/ability, giftedness, or specific experiences with incarceration, had a powerful presence in the participants' stories and opened up this study for new perspectives on the lives of incarcerated youth and implications for future research.

### **The Relationship Between Researcher Roles and Validity**

**Addressing Key Validation Criteria.** Whittemore, Chase, and Mandle (2001) outline the four primary criteria necessary for validity in a qualitative study: credibility, authenticity, criticality, and integrity. I worked to address credibility in this study through the use of member checks and the process of participant validation. Although the participants' schedules made in-person participant validation (Creswell, 2013) difficult, I was able to share both the written transcripts and audio recordings of the interviews with each participant within two weeks of each interview, including my initial reactions to the interviews. They had the opportunity to clarify, add, or withdraw any of the comments from the interviews and the option to withdraw was available to them at any point prior to the defense of this dissertation

Though the sample size of this study is small, the voices represented in this study address the issue of authenticity in the work. While the focus is on the experiences of incarcerated youth, I made sure to include the director of ACT to ensure that the study

included at least one participant who could offer the perspective of an “outsider,” of a person who, while still deeply committed to the work, had life experiences that could inform perspectives in different and important ways. As I noted in my discussion of participant selection, there was only one participant who identified as male; knowing this, I was especially careful to make sure his voice was represented to the same extent as the other participants as I presented themes from the data set in this dissertation.

Criticality and integrity were addressed in a number of ways. First, though my access to certain people and institutions was limited, I worked to find multiple sources, methods, and theories to provide evidence of the presence and relevance of the themes emerging from the data set—the process of triangulation (Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Second, I addressed criticality and integrity through my reliance upon critical friends and thought partners. Specifically, I organized group and individual meetings with critical friends and thought partners so I could get their perspectives on patterns and my interpretation of the participants’ stories. These groups and one-on-one meetings helped me work to deeply engage with my positionality and elements of reactivity (Golafshani, 2003; Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007; Maxwell, 2013). Furthermore, they helped me recognize when and where I needed to go back to the literature to address gaps in my theoretical and conceptual frameworks, pushing me to consider new modes of interpretation and analysis. Thus, they also helped me engage in criticality in a way that was unexpected for me at the beginning of the dissertation—through the critical appraisal of my review of literature and understanding of the bodies of literature I used to frame this dissertation study.

Next, I delve deeper into three researcher-focused challenges that I addressed and directly engaged with throughout the research process in order to remain transparent and address the key issues of validity: researcher positionality and reactivity, researcher bias, and researcher reflexivity.

*Researcher Positionality and Reactivity.* All of my thoughts, feelings, and hunches—like most thoughts, feelings, and hunches—come from interpretations of my personal experiences. First, as Black woman, I draw upon my own experiences as a student from populations that are oftentimes underrepresented and underserved in the spaces I reside, learn, and work in. I believe experiences with marginalization (in various forms) are catalysts for unique identity development processes and understandings of self-concept. As a former special education teacher, I believe the very act of labeling a student as having special needs or a dis/ability has a profound effect on how that student understands her/his role in the learning process. I also believe the labels placed upon the participants in this project (behaviorally challenged, emotionally disturbed, delinquent, criminal, shameless) have had a significant impact on their self-perceptions as individuals as well as perceived manifestations of their dis/abilities. This position also leads me to take a great interest in dismantling the school-to-prison pipeline that engulfed so many of my former students from the moment they entered the school building.

Many aspects of my positionality have granted me access to these spaces and have supported the relationships I'm building with the youth and organizations. However, I carry with me a great deal of privilege from my history of formal education, my connections to powerful institutions of learning and influence, as well as my ability

to leave these spaces (specifically, the correctional facilities) at any time. And, of course, many points of privilege I'm sure I'm not even aware of. I believe my positionality has had a significant impact on the researcher reactivity I brought to the work, as well. Maxwell (2013) describes researcher reactivity as “the influence of the researcher on the setting or individuals studied...[and] eliminating the actual influence of the researcher is impossible.” (p. 124-125). I am in complete agreement and recognize that the best I can do is embrace the inevitability of reactivity and account for it at all steps of the research process. Both researcher positionality and researcher reactivity had an impact on my work and my relationships and I engaged with these parts of my identity throughout the research process in the forms of memo-writing and meeting with critical friends and thought partners.

*Researcher Bias.* I also understand that I—like all researchers—bring a great deal of bias to this work. I am a firm believer in the prison abolition movement and recognize that I am strongly opposed to many of the practices of the criminal justice institutions that I study. While this dissertation study is designed to better understand the lived experiences of the participants, I also believe this left a lot of space uncovered and open to unconscious manipulation through my decisions about methods, participant selection, and every step of the research process. I am also aware that, beyond the goals for my academic program, I hold strong beliefs that are guided by my goals as a citizen, advocate, and activist (as I define these terms for myself.) So my work is vulnerable to an extreme threat of researcher bias without thoughtful acknowledgement of these beliefs. I incorporated the participation of critical friends from other fields of study and/or professional worlds distanced from education because I trusted them to challenge

aspects of this bias through our work together, which they did consistently and generously.

*Researcher Reflexivity.* Researcher reflexivity acknowledges that “the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them...it is emphasized that the production of knowledge by researchers has consequences.” (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 15). In order to engage in reflexivity, I built a series of checks into the structure of the research design; while engaging in reflection is important, structuring this reflection and engaging in disciplined reflexivity/subjectivity is the process that strengthened the validity of the research (S. Ravitch, personal communication, March 31, 2014). The study employed the use of several validity “checks” including structured times for memos and memo checks and the analysis of researcher-generated data. The incorporation of meeting with critical friend groups and resisting the “lone-researcher” approach also addressed issues of validity associated with researcher reflexivity. Though reflexivity is not a challenge that can be conquered, I believe the research design embraced and *continually* addressed the effects of reflexivity throughout the research process.

## EMERGING THEMES

In the following sections I discuss emergent themes that arose from my data analysis. Specifically, I explore the themes that I believe best illustrate the social constructs and identities that influence the experiences of incarcerated youth and those working to move them out of adult correctional facilities, the theoretical understandings outlined in my conceptual framework, and the cross-cutting themes that emerged from my analysis of participant interviews, institutional documents, and researcher-generated data. These themes include discussions of adolescence, dis/ability and deficit thinking, giftedness, race and racial interactions, and the tension between community and isolation.

The four participants in the study shared powerful stories that made space for limitless answers to any number of important research questions, and the institutional documents pushed me to think about other conceptual and theoretical frames that are important in research focused on incarcerated adolescents. It is important to note that the themes I present are *directly related* to the issues of racialized mass incarceration and, specifically, the incarceration of Black and Brown youth in the context of this study. Though the themes I present are bound by a commitment to the participants' stories in these interviews and the exploration to the specific research questions of this study, I am eager to continue analysis and discuss other emergent themes (see Chapter Ten for implications for future research) I will take up in future research.

## Chapter Six: Adolescents in Jails, Adolescence Incarcerated

This study focuses on the experiences of individuals who were incarcerated as adolescents and/or who work with adolescents who have direct experiences with incarceration. In developing the research questions and research design, I was specifically interested in the experiences of adolescents because of the unique positioning of adolescents in adult correctional facilities. I strongly object to the incarceration of young people under the age of eighteen in adult correctional facilities; it was with this stance that I approached the interviews, admittedly expecting to hear my beliefs echoed in the stories of the participants (Researcher Memo, 10/10/14). Though the data immediately highlighted a number of shared beliefs about the incarceration of adolescents in adult correctional facilities, a main focus in participant narratives was *adolescence*—the characteristics of this period in life and what felt reasonable to expect of adolescents. I believe these stories unearth a crucial part of the experiences of incarcerated adolescents that I did not carefully consider as I developed this study's research questions and design; I object to the incarceration of young people under the age of eighteen in adult facilities not simply because they are not adults, but because they are in a stage of adolescence, a period in their lives we know to be associated with a range of exploratory and distinctly “un-adult” behaviors. The perspectives the four participants shared with me provided a much clearer and more thorough explanation of how a deeper understanding of adolescence pushes back against a narrative that encourages and approves of the incarceration of young people in adult facilities. I became increasingly aware of the complex ways in which adolescent identities

influenced the Lisha, Meeka, and Daniel's understandings of their personal experiences in school and jail, as well as Caroline's stance as an advocate for incarcerated youth.

The following sections explore three sub-themes that emerged from discussions around adolescence: the nature of adolescence, knowledge and competency surrounding incarceration, and services and supports available to adolescents in correctional systems. While I focus on narratives shared by the three participants with direct experience in adult jails as incarcerated juvenile inmates—Daniel, Meeka, and Lisha—I also discuss Caroline's perspectives on adolescence in the context of advocacy and the prison system's approach to incarcerating young people in adult correctional facilities.

### **The Nature of Adolescence**

The first sub-theme that emerged from discussions of adolescence was a focus on the difference between adolescence and adulthood. This was particularly true for the three formerly incarcerated participants—Lisha, Daniel, and Meeka. These three participants—at the ages of twenty-two and twenty-three—were all incarcerated as adolescents and are all currently in the later stages of adolescence (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). While anyone is capable of reflection at any point in their lives, reflection on early adolescence during late adolescence provides useful insight on the importance of a developmental framework when doing qualitative work with any population.

**Searching for Adolescence in the Philadelphia Prison System.** Before moving into a discussion of the participants' views on adolescence and incarceration, I feel it is important to note that there was little to no discussion of adolescence within



institutional documents. In keeping with its mission, ACT clearly states its commitment to working with adolescents on the inside through a “youth-led movement.” ACT’s more explicit goals and beliefs also note the importance of educating youth and giving young people the tools they need to understand and avoid the school-to-prison pipeline. Conversely, the Philadelphia Prison System (PPS) does not advertise any programs that directly address the needs of adolescents who are incarcerated in any of the PPS correctional facilities. As the administrators and policymakers have deemed it essential to separate young people under the age of eighteen from the general population of inmates, I find it surprising that there is no programming—other than the mandated educational services—available to address the specific and unique needs of adolescents, given how much we know about the importance of providing supports for adolescents going through this stage of identity exploration and development. (Marcia, 1980; Feldman & Elliott, 1990; Larson & Richards, 1991; Susman et al., 1994; Hogue & Steinberg, 1995; Akers et al., 1998; Pettit et al., 1999; Steinberg, 2001; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

The men’s correctional facility that houses young people states that they are “separated by sight and sound from the adult population until they reach the age of majority (18)...Inmates under 18...are required to participate in the Pennypack School House Program. In addition to schooling we offer various elective activities such as Anger Management, Mural Arts, Religious Studies, Creative Writing and Group Therapy. Pennypack high school programs include tutoring, religious study, writing as well as drama and chess clubs.” (Philadelphia Prison System, Program Description). As a volunteer in this particular facility, I am limited by my volunteer agreement to discuss

the presence or absence of these programs and their availability to the young people who attend Pennypack. However, I would like to draw attention to the elective activities that are offered, two of which hold the expectation that these young people are in need of special education services that may also imply the assumption of dis/ability. It is also important to note that the jail housing young women under the age of eighteen who are tried as adults—and, specifically, housed Lisha and Meeka during their incarceration—does not mention the presence of adolescents in the facility, much less educational services provided for them (Philadelphia Prison System, Program Description).

**Lisha.** Lisha's particular narration of her adolescence included a focus on self and a desire for fun. These desires were prevalent even during her time at WCC. In explaining the various relationships she had with the correctional officers at WCC, Lisha noted one guard in particular who was "too strict," and didn't care that "...[the juveniles were] still young! We wanna enjoy our time out here too!" (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15). The expectation that the guards should be more lenient with their discipline policies was not, at this point, linked to Lisha's rejection of the structure of the prison system, but rather her frustration at the guard's refusal to acknowledge the tendencies and needs of a unique population within the jails—the adolescents. It is also important to note that, even while incarcerated, Lisha maintained her expectations for fun and enjoyment as a young person. Like many adolescents, she had very clear ideas of what adolescence should look like and how she should be treated as an adolescent, even while incarcerated with an understanding of why she was there. Given the controversial nature of juvenile incarceration—particularly the incarceration of young people in adult

prisons—this is an important point to consider when making decisions about what incarceration should look like for young people, assuming incarceration is the only option (a frame of thinking I discuss further in Chapter Ten.) If the purpose of incarceration is rehabilitation, a time and place to reflect upon crimes committed, is it developmentally appropriate to place young people in correctional facilities where the supports in place are purely punitive and leave little to no room for adolescents to process what has happened or how they can consider alternatives in the future?

This is not to say that Lisha was unaware of the systems in place around her. Another component of her adolescent analysis involved growing into an “adult” understanding of the criminal justice system and systems of oppression more broadly.

*Cause I didn't, I didn't never know that nothin about the system. Like I didn't pay attention to it, I didn't pay attention to how, to how like how much money they takin outta schools and, I ain't never pay attention to none a that. Cause all I was care about was goin to school and doin me. You know what I mean? Cause I'm still young, I'm still young. I didn't care about how much money was taken out and stuff, you know what I mean? But now, I do, right, so then, it was just like, like, you, I don't know. It's just somethin that I care about. It's like, um, bein young and actually going through the system and experiencin what you experience it's just like, um, like "Damn" like "We really can make this work. Like, change this law" Cause we don't want the next generation to go through it, you know what I mean? And now that I got a daughter, I don't want my daughter to go through it. So, yeah. It changed me, a lot. (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15)*

Lisha narrates her focus on self as a consequence of her youth and limited to going to school and “doin me.” One of the most striking things about her narrative here is that her age alone did not change the course of her thinking, but rather the combination of growing out of adolescence *and* having a specific set of experiences. She notes that going through the system and learning about tools of oppression while moving through adolescence was crucial to developing an understanding of systemic oppression

and her role as an advocate and a mother. Discussions of adolescence come to describe three important life stages over the course of two generations: adolescence to adulthood, adulthood to parent, these life experiences provide Lisha with the space to better understand her positioning in the world. Her narration of her adolescence is in keeping with the research on adolescents; we know adolescents begin to develop deep understandings of self and identity toward the end of adolescence into young adulthood (Steinberg, 2001) and begin to develop a deeper understanding of their place in social and cultural settings (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Lisha's focus on self is thus a developmentally appropriate mindset, a focus that shifts throughout the early to middle stages of adolescence. Lisha develops a deeper understanding of herself within a larger societal context as she enters the later stages of adolescence. In more recent years, researchers have determined that adolescence extends well beyond earlier estimations of adolescence, up to twenty-five years of age (Zarrett and Eccles, 2006). At the time of this interview, Lisha is actually making meaning of her adolescence *while in the midst* of her adolescence. I believe providing space for adolescents to engage in this kind of meaning-making—particularly adolescents who are thrust into isolated environments designed for adult incarceration—opens up discussions for the developmental appropriateness of incarcerating young people in adult correctional facilities.

**Daniel.** Of the three participants who were incarcerated, Daniel spent the most time on the inside—two years awaiting sentencing in a correctional facility and then another two years in an adult prison. Accordingly, almost all of his references to his adolescence include references to his time in jail or prison. In several comments

throughout his interviews, Daniel worked to make sense of the changes he experienced as a younger adolescent, prior to his incarceration.

*Like, I mean, I'm really like, all for, like all for like spoken word and expressin how, how, I mean expressin myself, period you feel me? I used to be real shy, I used to never, used to like, and nothin. I...I never used to like talking, I never used to take pictures...At a certain age like it just like came outta nowhere like, it was like boom! (laughs) This whole new person (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

Here, Daniel describes an awareness of the “dramatic changes” Zarrett and Eccles (2006) describe with the onset of adolescence and puberty. These changes were linked to a desire to be noticed by peers and to establish himself as someone of value and importance in his community. He speaks to this desire in the context of an increasingly salient gender-identity in earlier adolescence.

*But I mean--like, you know when you get in fifth-grade and you start likin girls, like that? Yeah, you just trying to be somebody, you feel me? (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

Daniel is describing a need to become an independent self and to make a positive impression on his peers (Susman et al., 1994; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). A guiding force behind his growing, independent self and desire to “be somebody” was the desire to become “a man.” Early on, this manifested itself as a dedication to strong principles. Prior to his incarceration, Daniel was expelled from his high school because he believed another student’s actions violated the principles of honesty and fair exchange. Throughout his adolescence—specifically, during the four years he spent as an adolescent on the inside—his dedication to strong principles continued to grow. For Daniel, being incarcerated is what made him “a man” and a person committed to things he understands as positive influences on his life.

*I found, I finally found out when I was locked up that's not really who I am...You know what I mean?...Like, that's like, it was like um, basically like a... whole perception, like everybody was doing it around me, everybody was playing with guns, everybody was doing this. And around that age, you know the age of fifteen and like, it-it was like, real like, it was like, that's what it was at the time, everybody was doing it... I don't know it was like, it was a humbling situation 'cause a lot of people say, um, jail will change people. Actually, jail actually made me a man. It made me realize like the things in life, there's more, there's more to life than just being a thug, than being in the streets (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

On the outside, in the later stages of adolescence, Daniel makes constant reference to the “distractions” that prevent him from staying “humble” and in touch with his moral compass, a set of beliefs that are also deeply intertwined with his religious faith. In fact, during the time of data collection, Daniel was preparing for another trial and defense against a charge that could send him back to jail (the reason why he was unable to complete the remainder of the interviews.) He understands this as a nature of “the hood” and the inability to escape an environment rife with “gang wars” and violence brought on by oppression, a raced issue I discuss in further detail later in Chapters Seven and Nine. Thus, regardless of how we on the outside understand the effects of prison on an adolescent, Daniel saw it as a time to better himself in the absence of complicating factors.

On the other hand, Daniel's discussion of adolescents' agency is complicated and, at times, confusing. While he speaks at length about oppressive systems that are “set up for us Black men to kinda fail” (D1, 3), he also believes that self-understanding alone will lead to failure or success.

*Uh, by being yourself, it's like, once you find yourself, you, you basically like, you, you know who yourself is. So if you feel as though you wanna be a criminal, that's who you gonna be. So if you feel as though you wanna be in the streets, that who you gon be. So like, you wanna be a lawyer, be that. Yeah, you feel me? (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

Given Daniel's story and his explanation of oppressive systems, it is hard to understand how he comes to hold this particular belief around self-determination. Like Lisha, I believe Daniel is making meaning of identity development at the moment that he is developing a more critical—or perhaps, more stabilized—adult identity. This is not to say that he doesn't believe what he is saying or that what he is saying is inaccurate in his contexts, but rather that the transition to adulthood and abstract thought is a complicated and lengthy process (Zarrett & Eccles, 2006) that is still taking place at twenty-three years of age.

Understanding the *influence* of incarceration on Daniel's adolescence is, in some ways, a more complicated process than analyzing the influence of incarceration on Lisha and Meeka's experiences as adolescents. Daniel grew up in jail and so it is hard to distinguish between what influenced his adolescence and what became an inherent and inextricable part of his adolescence as a consequence of his incarceration. I am left wondering: how much of this growth was linked to time in prison and how much of it was about allowing Daniel the time to grow through adolescence in the way we would expect any other adolescent to experience this stage in life?

**Meeka.** Like Lisha and Daniel, Meeka's story illustrates a marked difference between her identity as a younger adolescent and her current identity as a twenty-two

year old. She frequently describes her younger self as “rebellious” throughout her interviews. In describing the effect of her rebelliousness on her relationship with her mother, Meeka states

*Yeah, we, we, now that I'm older, like, we, we, we get along more than when I was a teenager. Like we couldn't, couldn't deal when I was a teenager. Like I was a rebellious teen, like sh-, I didn't-- like she used to be telling me like "No, like no, you can't do this, you can't do that. Like no, I'm tellin you!" And now I understand where she was comin from cause back then I was like "You don't know nothin! You don't KNOW! You don't know!" You know what I mean? (laughs)... Like I ain't wanna listen to her, I didn't wanna hear nothin that she had to say...I didn't just understand, like, my mom was tryin to protect me. Now, but back then, I think I was tryna be like everybody else: rebellious...Tryna be like everybody else and so, it was, I don't know. It was, I don't know. (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

Meeka describes a parent-adolescent relationship that is familiar to many and in keeping with everything we know about adolescents and peer relationships; Meeka is seeking approval and acceptance from a particular group of peers while grappling with a desire to be independent from her mother’s authority (Feldman& Elliott, 1990; Larson & Richards, 1991; Susman et al., 1994; Hogue & Steinberg, 1995; Akers et al., 1998; Pettit et al., 1999; Steinberg, 2001; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). However, unlike Lisha, Meeka does not bracket these experiences as directly and solely linked to *her* “rebellious” nature, but rather to a broader understanding of adolescent behavior.

*I was just like a regular teen, like wild like actin bad and wantin to party and wantin be around my friends and wantin to do what everybody else did at the time so, me being there I'm like "Damn, like I ain't know my life was gonna end up like this" (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

Meeka’s understanding of her adolescence is deeply intertwined with her incarceration experience. Even though she identifies as a “rebellious teen,” she normalizes her “wild” and “bad” behavior by accepting it as a “regular” part of being a



teenager, connecting her experience to everything we know about what to expect during adolescence (Feldman & Elliott, 1990; Larson & Richards, 1991; Susman et al., 1994; Hogue & Steinberg, 1995; Akers et al., 1998; Pettit et al., 1999; Steinberg, 2001; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Thus, she shares her surprise when this behavior leads to her incarceration in an adult jail.

I want to take a moment here to note that unpacking Meeka's description of her adolescence and the consequences of her adolescent behaviors is incredibly complicated. Given Meeka's personal narrative and the significant amount of fighting that marked her childhood and adolescence, it would be easy to respond to her surprise with surprise—*of course* this would happen. Why should she expect anything different given her actions? But this is not a pipeline that starts with adolescent behaviors and ends in incarceration—this kind of pipeline would not include a *racialized* mass incarceration and the disproportionate jailing of Black and Brown youth. In fact, in remembering her time in a group home outside of the city, Meeka shares that when it came to the actions of her White peers, “they used to be up there, the same thing. Them White people used to be smoking weed, sellin drugs. But they ain't get targeted...Cause they be in the suburbs. Like, they really in the suburbs, like big ass houses.” (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14). Meeka's story resists notions of deficit thinking and brings us back to the importance of engaging in heterodoxy at every step of analysis. It is not the nature of adolescence that pulls Meeka into the school-to-prison pipeline, but rather a *raced* and *classed* adolescence that marks her as different and criminal.

This is not an argument claiming that it is best to ignore the physical and emotional violence that Meeka both witnessed and engaged in throughout her childhood and adolescence. Rather, it is a push for appreciating the deep relationship between adolescent development and environment. In discussing her focus on self, it is important to keep in mind that the nature of her adolescent development does not exist in a vacuum, but rather within a specific context that requires a particular mode of adaptation and resilience.

Spencer et al. (1997) uses a phenomenological variant of ecological systems theory (PVEST) to describe “a more dynamic, culturally responsive, context-sensitive perspective for interpreting the individual’s own meaning making process: It captures the individual’s intersubjectivity.” (p. 828). Although this particular strength of the theory is specifically used to understand traditional schooling experiences and the academic achievement of African-American children, I believe the notion of intersubjectivity is incredibly relevant to understanding the complex experiences of Black and Brown incarcerated youth. Meeka’s story—as well as the stories of the other formerly incarcerated participants—must be understood and analyzed in the context of her intersubjectivity, especially given the fact that her intersubjectivity has been blatantly ignored by the institutions that have been such a large part of her young life. Applications of PVEST also reveal a need to consider vulnerability to violence and the stress management and coping strategies that Black and Brown youth rely upon in the context of exposure to violence—including engaging in violence themselves (Spencer et al., 2003).

Meeka's interviews reveal a need to address behavior *in context* and address the ways in which schools and jails work to incarcerate Black and Brown adolescents as well as Black and Brown *adolescence*. How can we delve into these participant narratives to understand adolescent behavior in a variety of contexts, accounting for norms that have been developed as a result of very real and very powerful systemic oppression and adolescents' responses to those norms (Valencia, 2010)? I believe this is the first step to imagining and providing alternative futures for young people like Lisha, Daniel, and Meeka.

**Caroline.** Caroline began working with the young people at PICC and RCF as an older adolescent, at the age of twenty-two. Although Caroline didn't explicitly discuss the influence of age on the advocate-experience within the jails, there was discussion of adolescence, broadly, in the context of juvenile incarceration. For Caroline, the strongest connection in the early days of advocacy work was between the young people and Caroline's brother.

*I knew that something was wrong about the criminal justice system, but like I didn't really understand what and I didn't really still understand that like, they're just like kids who in this system and my little brother was the same age as a lot of young people in the workshops when I started doing this, he was seventeen. Um, and they just like reminded me so much of him... Um, and I just remember that was the moment I was like "These are like just kids" like they're not-- and like, I didn't go in thinking they were gonna be monsters or something, I didn't think that. But like, you know, they're like young people who are charged with violent crimes and like, I didn't know what to expect. Um, and I just remember really being struck by like, how much they were just like goofy, weird, you know (laughs) teenage boys (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Caroline's description of expectations matches the expectations of many who believe adolescents should be incarcerated and that some should be incarcerated as

adults. But an appreciation for human development and the ability to separate these young people from their charges allows Caroline to engage with the “kids” and the work with an understanding that adolescence is a factor that cannot be ignored. The consideration of adolescence and adolescent behavior is necessary and important in order to best understand what these young people need from ACT’s programming. Caroline’s understanding of development is especially clear when outlining the goals of the weekly workshops.

*Both for them to like express themselves and to like, think critically about both--I mean, we try to do this, like walk this sort of line between both pushing young people to think critically like, about, like the system and systemic oppression and the structures that are impacting their lives and how to change those structures. And also, at the same time, like think about their own decisions and you know, like, recognizing that we're not gonna like, change the system overnight, so we need, we need to help young people develop the tools to make different decisions that aren't gonna lead them down this track into the prison, into the prison system. Um, so we try to create that space on Saturdays and also I mean, you know, also a space just to have fun sometimes (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Caroline thus connects the problem of incarcerated adolescents/adolescence to the larger problem of systemic oppression. Caroline—like Lisha, Daniel, and Meeka—understands juvenile incarceration as a broader societal issue as well as a specific problem for *specific* communities. This work leads Caroline to speak to the different reactions to adolescence in different communities, noting that this gives Caroline the ability

*...to talk from a different perspective of like “Well, I grew up with lots of young people who fucked up a lot and they weren't treated that way.” and to push the idea that. “this isn't like, actually like the normal, normal, this isn't the way that all young people are responded to. So like, if you've just grown up thinking that like, well somebody acts up in school and then they're kicked out or like somebody, like you're walking down the street with weed in your pocket and you're like*

*searched by the police. And like maybe you shouldn't have had the weed in your pocket, but like, but you're not realize--you may not totally be aware that in like, there's this whole other neighborhoods where nobody's ever [searched] (Caroline, interview, 2/27/15)*

While I am in strong support of Caroline's dedication to a social justice-oriented pedagogy in the weekly workshops, I also find myself struggling to reconcile an approach to adolescents that both pushes them to make different decisions while acknowledging that these decisions may be an inherent part of being an adolescent and working through an expected phase of identity development—in other words, unavoidable. Caroline notes the difficulty of this work and the tendency to “feel like kinda an asshole when you're tryin to push that conversation” (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15) but that is in the context of resisting an oppressive system while on the inside. I wonder how adolescent development may be inserted into this conversation as another important part of advocacy work that seeks to end juvenile incarceration in adult correctional facilities. How can we move these conversations toward a deeper understanding of adolescence and away from the speedy criminalization of Black and Brown adolescents?

This is not to say that Caroline and ACT employees do not engage in these critical conversations in their work. Caroline is particularly reflective when asked to describe what it is like to work with incarcerated adolescents each week. This includes an understanding of adolescent development and the ability of Black and Brown youth on the inside to parse out messages that may lead to internalized and self-harming attitudes.

*But, I think even though, like, the same young people who will have that conversation will like, will talk about like they aren't what the media portrays them to be and like, even, like even young*

*people who know that and say like "I'm not who they're saying I am" are growing up with the same, all the same stuff, they're like, absorbing all of, all of the messages all the time. (Caroline, interview, 2/27/15)*

Caroline's work is thus rooted in a developmental framework that accounts for the ability (or inability) of young people to develop a self-concept outside of detrimental images of self that are perpetuated by external factors (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). And, perhaps most importantly, it is this understanding of adolescence that allows Caroline to engage in the kind of reflection that keeps the young people—and not their charges or their incarceration—at the forefront of the ACT's work. In sharing the impact of ACT's earlier work in the jails—specifically, in the larger correctional facility that held adolescent boys in the earlier years of working with ACT—Caroline notes how quickly we can become institutionalized and how we must actively fight against that institutionalization.

*...it's a long cell block. And basically like, the classrooms at the front and like we would go in and there'd be--and they're like these old jail cell door where there's like a little window and someone could stick their head out if it's open. And so like we'd go in and people like--way down block-- somebody would stick their head out like, being like "Yo Caroline! Can I come to class today?" or like they might be behind the gate which means they're in the hole and then they can't come...And so it's just like this regular thing, like, every Saturday, like, just seeing this long row of teenage boys in cages and like, that just becomes like normal to like "Oh, yeah, like there's somebody waving out of a cage, fifteen year old kid saying hi to me." I'd be like "That's normal" And then, but like then, sometimes bringing somebody new in, just like "What the fuck is this?" you'd be like "Oh, right!..." "This is, like not normal" and this shouldn't...and it's like obviously I know that intellectually but you just get so used to like, how things are. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Getting used to “how things are” can lead us toward a comfortable justification of the incarceration of adolescents and away from the critical work of imagining new

spaces for the expression of Black and Brown adolescence, the importance of acknowledging its value, and its need to be appreciated and uncaged.

### “What’s Going On?”

Each participant spoke to the emotional burden and confusion that accompanies juvenile incarceration. This is not to say that only young people can experience these emotions during incarceration, but rather that there is a unique experience that adolescents encounter when they are taken to an adult correction facility. For example, Lisha spoke to an acute awareness that, as a young person, she was about to enter a population of adults; she noted that she felt nervous about being seventeen and wondering “what I’m a do in a adult prison[?]” (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15) This feeling was echoed in the interviews with Daniel and Meeka:

*Man, all I wanted to do was go home. I just wanted to go home, that’s all I wanted to...I wanted to go home. I didn’t want that stress to be on me anymore. (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

*And I’m just a little juvenile so I didn’t like, like I’m goin through it, I gotta get butt naked in front of them and strip and bend over and cough and they watchin me and it’s just nasty and horrible...It was horrible. Um it was like, I couldn’t talk to nobody about like the case, about what’s goin on. I couldn’t talk to the adults there because they on lock, I couldn’t talk to the adults, like I ain’t know what was going on. Like I ain’t know what was happenin or what was gonna happen so I was cryin and I was scared and I wanted to talk to my mom. I ain’t talk to nobody. So, um, they left me there for three days and I was doin all that like cryin and stuff like that, like, alone, by myself. (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

All three formerly incarcerated participants note the anxiety around not knowing what would happen next, the fear surrounding the uncertainty of their situations. Lisha identifies this feeling as nervousness, Daniel identifies this as “stress” and locates this

burden as being “on” him, creating an incredible powerful image of the emotional toll the stress had on him. Meeka’s story echoes the emotional difficulty in Lisha and Daniel’s interviews, as she describes days of crying, feeling scared, and being alone with an uncertainty surrounding her fate. Specifically, Meeka speaks to the processing that occurs when an individual enters an adult correctional facility. Alone and without any kind of adult advocacy, Meeka is subjected to what we would call in any other situation the *deeply troubling* sexual violation of a child. I find these accounts particularly difficult to read and analyze because of the ways in which the criminal justice system can humiliate, violate, and de-humanize individuals and, in this case, Black and Brown children, with such speed and ease. Daniel describes the conditions of the jail as supportive of this de-humanization and encouraging unrest and depression for incarcerated adolescents.

*So when it's hot, it's like you in the cell where the walls would sweat. Teen...I'm talking about teenagers, you feel me? They get so hot and bothered, it make us want to fight people. It make us so irritated, you feel me?*

*Juveniles, I'm talking about the juvenile block. Seen people get stabbed and jumped like (sighs)...like...people tried killin theyself in there, everything it was like, it was bad in there. You feel me? It was bad...It was just like, it was just like a scary experience because it's like, it's a scary experience because I was so young and I ain't know...I ain't know nothing about jail. I was really like, this where I was gonna be at for a long time, you feel me? (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

In addition to the trauma of being incarcerated, Daniel shares that young people are subjected to conditions that exacerbate the frustrations and emotional intensity of being isolated and scared. He alludes to the importance of a developmental frame when he explains that the extreme heat in the cells only adds to an adolescent nature and leads



to irritation and fighting. Furthermore, Daniel shares disturbing memories of young people in what can only be described as the most desperate situations with no relief or support. Clearly, this does not fit in the frame of an institution created to rehabilitate. Yet, this is certainly in keeping with spaces designed to focus on emotional violence, and the “punishing of the soul.”

The confusion and emotion of incarceration follow young people throughout each step of the decertification and/or sentencing process. It is frightening to hear how limited their participation in sentencing and negotiation is, due to the overwhelming nature of the process.

*At the time, I didn't really know what was goin on, like, it was just like "Get me home" so. And I'm still young so it was like I wasn't really like followin, I wasn't really like followin all what they was sayin so (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15)*

Considering the incredibly serious nature of these hearings, it is deeply troubling to hear a young person share that she was unable to follow the process and understand what her lawyer was saying about her future. Caroline also shared a number of stories confirming that this is a common problem for incarcerated adolescents.

*There are many more [lawyers] who take advantage of the fact that they're representing young people who don't necessarily always understand the system...I've seen--on a fairly, on a disturbingly regular basis seen lawyers lie to the clients, mislead their families about what's happening, not tell their families what's happening, um, take, um, many times seen lawyers--paid lawyers--take large amounts of money from people's families and then not at all provide the representation that they said they were going to... And like, even like, the thing about young people being tried as adults is that when they're being tried, when you're being tried in the juvenile system, you can have your parent or guardian there with you when you're talking with your lawyer, where when you're being tried as an adult, you can't. So when they go to court, their, the*

*young person and their family are not allowed to interact at all when they're at court...But if the lawyer comes into that room and like, says, like "Well, you know, I didn't realize the DA has this evidence and so, you really should think about taking this deal because like, if you go to trial, you could get eight years...Otherwise you're gonna be in prison for three times longer than you've been alive." But like you're talking about a child, a teenager, it's like a huge amount of pressure, and most of the time they say okay because they believe what this lawyer's saying. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

The classification of their charges as “adult” is enough to deprive adolescents of the opportunity to consult with loved ones about the best decisions for their futures. We know that this is a time when young people need support and guidance as they navigate their lives and transition into more independent life styles (Marcia, 1980; Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006)—why would we place them in situations that we know take advantage of this stage of development? The confusion that is already wrapped up in the incarceration experience becomes a foundation for the overwhelming decision-making process that young people are pushed out of due to their lack of knowledge of the criminal justice system without the “bumper” of family and friends to help them sort through their options.

Caroline points to other actors in this decision-making process that neglect to approach sentencing with a deep understanding of adolescence.

*I'm (pauses) probably not as forgiving as I should be that district attorneys are also human beings and they also like, make mistakes and that doesn't define them but like, it's really, it's hard to watch people who have no, know nothing about the young people...person they're talking about. And they're like pushing a judge to send him to prison for the rest of his life. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

A neglect to consider the developmental implication adolescence is described as problem that extends beyond the confines of the prison and through each component

and office within the criminal justice system. As Caroline notes, district attorneys do not know the people they are prosecuting; Caroline specifies that these are *young* people, not yet adults. Because they fail to see these Black and Brown adolescents as young people (Thomas et al., 2009), it follows that they cannot imagine a future for these youth that incorporates the changes and possibilities we know occur throughout adolescence (Marcia, 1980; Susman et al., 1994; Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006).

Finally, Caroline highlights another important factor that keeps Black and Brown youth trapped in the criminal justice system, what we might define as a need for high levels of cultural competency.

*But I think there's often--there's such a disconnect between...racial, socioeconomic, like such a huge gulf between like, the people representing young people at court and like, their lived experiences and the lived experiences of the young person that like, a lot, a lot of times, the lawyers repre-representing them have like, no way of understanding the young person who they're supposed to be representing and like, don't necessarily try to. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Stevenson (2014) stresses the importance of identifying racial stress and working to achieve cultural competence in schools in order to provide a supportive educational experience for Black and Brown youth. I believe it is the same racial stress that leads lawyers representing Black and Brown adolescents—and the lawyers prosecuting them—to view them as anything but young people, as other's people *children* (Delpit, 2006). Caroline highlights the importance of understanding the experiences of young people, but in order to *want* to understand these experiences, actors in the criminal justice system must acknowledge the racial and socioeconomic differences that exist; instead of ignoring these differences, they must embrace them as inherently intertwined

with the development of the criminal justice system and work to vigorously address raced and classed legal processes in their practice.

### Services and Supports for Incarcerated Adolescents

In the midst of narratives that reveal some of the most troubling practices of juvenile incarceration, it is important to note that there are services and supports for adolescents that exist within correctional facilities. First, there are informal supports provided by other adolescents and within correctional facilities. Daniel shares the importance of his cell and block mates in helping him realize his talents as a rapper.

*I got [my] name when I was in jail, I used to rap...A lot of people used to be like, "Damn what's your rap name, man? I ain't never heard of you out there" I was only fifteen, I'm like well, I'm like, I mean, they called me the Bull B, like that was my first rap name, the Bull B (laughs). So I'm like, alright, they're like "Yeah, Bull B" Outta nowhere somebody called me to the gate like "Yo B Boy! Yo B Boy!" I'm like, "What?" Said "Ain't you fifteen? Right, you're a young bull. B Boy, like, what's up, Let me hear somethin." I was like "Alright, alright, alright." I start rappin, I went by the name. I had the name like all the way until now, like B Boy (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

For Daniel, this was the beginning of a career that he is proud of and, at the time of data collection, had recently seen huge success. The support he received from other incarcerated youth on his block may not have been in the form of legal advice or directly-related to his case, but it was important for him to connect with and receive affirmation from his peers, peer relationships being something we know are of great importance to adolescents. (Marcia, 1980; Feldman & Elliott, 1990; Larson & Richards, 1991; Susman et al., 1994; Hogue & Steinberg, 1995; Akers et al., 1998; Pettit et al., 1999; Steinberg, 2001; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). ACTs workshops also provide space for these peer

relationships to develop and flourish; young people are given the opportunity to come together each week and bond over shared experiences. Caroline describes this as a space where they can “be goofy and...have any kind of space that’s theirs, that feels like their own space...in that system.” (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15). As I mentioned in Chapter One of this dissertation, the support that is provided through ACT is mostly channeled through the shared experience of listening to and creating music. In listening to music, young people are able to connect to experiences on the outside; in creating music, young people are able to express themselves and find support in their peers’ lyrics, understanding that they are not alone and that there is a community available to them on the inside.

The support on the inside oftentimes extends beyond the community of adolescents who are incarcerated to the adults who work on the inside. One form of institutional support comes from educators on the inside; Meeka shared memories of a teacher and a juvenile counselor who were particularly committed to their students’ academic achievement and personal happiness.

*I was still sixteen, so I was supposed to be gettin my credits. Ms. L., she was a great teacher. She was one of the best there...she was a great teacher and then Ms. B., she was a... counselor. And she used to like, like gather us in and stuff like that and talk to us and I loooved her so much. That was my heart, like, she used to be lettin me call my boyfriend on the phone and like callin home to my family and like, you know, just--I really really really really loved her for that. Cause it really took my mind off other things and I had to be there for all that time...she was so cool, she was so cool. Like, she looked out for me and made sure like I didn't get in trouble and stuff like that (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

As I discuss in Chapters Seven and Eight, these teachers were key in guiding Meeka to an understanding of herself as a smart and capable student while she was incarcerated. Arguably, these teachers provided Meeka with more educational and personal support than her teachers prior to her incarceration (See Chapter Seven) and, as she stated, helped her navigate the emotional toll of being locked up in an adult correctional facility. Correctional officers and prison guards also provided support for the young people during their incarceration. Some of the correctional officers took special care of the young inmates, as illustrated in Meeka's experiences on the inside.

*...certain C.O.'s had a type of love for me, like, DJ--she loved me like a daughter. She used to be like "That's my daughter" and she would not let me get sent upstairs. Like upstairs is the wilder units, it's the bigger units, so she know if I got sent up there, I woulda got in some trouble....And then like, uh C.O. G., he used to call me his daughter, too, and I used to work for him. At night they used to bring me food and bring me Pepsi, yeah....I wasn't runnin nothin, I just was being me, like I just was goin where I wanted to go and like, they was treatin me like a baby like, cause I was the baby, you know? And I mean like I was the youngest in there (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

Even within the structure of an oppressive justice system, actors within the systems were able to provide Meeka with developmentally-appropriate support, understanding that, as an adolescent, they would need to approach her incarceration with a different kind of care and guidance. This point is not to trivialize the needs of *all* incarcerated individuals, but rather to point to the need for developmentally-appropriate placement of adolescents who are charged with “adult-level” crimes—and the awareness of institutional employees that the current system does young people a disservice by ignoring their developmental needs.

Caroline echoes Meeka's story with memories from a decade of building relationships with both the young people on the inside and the correctional officers who work in the correctional facilities. First, with teachers who reject the current system:

*there's one teacher in particular at FIC who... feels really strongly that the young people shouldn't be in there, um, and we talk--when I see her at Family Day and stuff, we always talk about like, how she loves her students and, she has like teenage boys and we talk about like how-- it's like about strengths and also just generally conversations about how like, how they're like teenagers and great and shouldn't be there and stuff (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15)*

And then with higher-level actors who question the system they maintain:

*But at the same time, there's a lot of guards--especially ones who've been working on those units for a long time...who've developed relationships with the young people and, like, try to support them in ways that they can even, even given the system that they're in and, you know like, I'll regularly be like, coming back in and have a conversation with some of the guards who've been there a long time and be like "Oh, you know, like, I heard like from so and so's upstate and he said to tell you hi" and they'll be like "Oh, that's so great!" like "How's he doing?" and um, so it's not like, they're all like, just treating young people in this one specific way...Most of the wardens I talk to...who I, who I've had conversations with about young people being there, like don't think they should be in the adult systems... And I don't know that they'd be willing to like, speak publicly about that, but at least like in informal conversations. Because like, both whether they think like young people, I think--there's some of them who think it's like morally wrong, who think it's like, bad policy, that it doesn't like, help the young people. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Institutional support for adolescents continues on the outside, in the form of formal youth advocacy. Lisha shares her experiences with a youth advocate and the positive relationship that followed.

*I had a youth advocate I had...to go with ...they gave me a youth advocate...she's very, she very, she very supportive, too. Like she come to everything and I call her and she give me advice and, you know? (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15)*

Lisha continues to speak with her youth advocate, keeping her updated and asking for advice long after the court-ordered advocacy program ended. Lisha expressed a disdain for the programs her youth advocate accompanied her to, citing them as places that “don’t really help you,” but found the support she needed in her youth advocate. I believe this is an important relationship to highlight in that it emphasizes not only the implementation of these institutional supports, but the effectiveness of the program and the sustainability of the relationships. The youth advocacy program—when implemented effectively—illustrates how a developmentally-appropriate program can address the specific relational needs of adolescents through supportive mentorship programs (Karcher & Nakkula, 2010).

ACT provides similar supports for incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth in its work on the outside. ACT’s work is tailored to address the specific needs of young people; members of ACT go to court to support young people as they navigate the legal system, connect them to resources if they are transferred to prisons to serve time, and help them find college resources while they are in prisons. Caroline describes ACT’s work as addressing problems on the inside (supporting youth as they navigate the legal system, connecting young people to resources if they serve time in prisons “upstate”), intervention on the outside (producing poetry books and documentaries featuring the work and stories of incarcerated youth), legal and policy reform (fighting to repeal Act 33 which allows for the incarceration of young people in adult correctional facilities), and the needs of young people coming home (providing job opportunities and reentry supports.) (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15). Perhaps one of the most important supports ACT provides for young people is a group of formerly incarcerated adolescents who can



empathize with what they are experiencing. Lisha noted that while typing up the poetry of the young people who participate in the weekly workshops, “you can understand what they sayin, so I was like ‘I know how they feel!’” (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15). More than just traditional reentry support or a standardized workshop, ACT is able to provide, an atmosphere where adolescents can connect with each other in a community of shared experience and concern. Blending the important tools of mentorship and peer bonding, ACT is able to address the specific needs of adolescents in jail and the challenges of supporting an incarcerated adolescence.

## Chapter Seven: Dis/ability and Deficit Thinking

*Kelsey:* How do you define dis/ability?

*Lisha:* I don't know, I think, I don't know, I would, I would just define it as if someone got a um, like a problem with themselves like...Like a disorder or something...Not like a problem, they just got like, ill, they ill a little bit or somethin. Not like ill, but (pause) I don't know. Like they brains is not, I don't know, like I can't explain it. Like they fully not developed or something (Lisha, interview, 1/30/15)

*Meeka:* Like, I know from like, my neighborhood was like, people get disability checks...like, if they can't work or like, they back, and, or like, just any, any that cause them from not workin (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)

*Caroline:* Um, hmm (pauses) how would I define disability? (pauses) I guess I would say--I don't know--I guess I would say something that either...mental or physical that's like different about how somebody interacts with the world than how maybe most people interact with the world. Or take in information or um, something like, different from the mainstream or different from how most people perceive like, the, like right way to take in information or like process things (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15)

### Defining and Discussing Dis/ability

As illustrated by the participants' varying definitions of dis/ability, this is a concept that is difficult to understand and use as a frame without acknowledging its multi-faceted nature and complicated social construction. The interview protocols for this study were originally designed with a rigid understanding of dis/ability in mind (See Appendix D). As a result, dis/ability was primarily discussed in the context of traditional educational spaces and formal teaching and learning relationships. Even as I worked to complicate notions of dis/ability in the conceptual framework and move toward a theory of critical dis/ablement, I continued to locate dis/ability in school. Locating dis/ability in educational spaces isn't necessarily a bad choice, but it certainly

shaped and limited the breadth of the interviews. As I discussed in Chapter Five, I used a coding system that used the six characteristics of deficit thinking in my framework of dis/ability. Focusing on the characteristics of deficit thinking in the analysis process allowed me to broaden the discussion of deficit orientations and, ultimately, identify narratives of dis/ability, broadly, in the participants' interviews. Furthermore, these characteristics of deficit thinking allow for a reading of dis/ability that includes the tensions between ability and racial identity, pulling major components of my conceptual framework together in order to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the data.<sup>9</sup>

The six characteristics of deficit thinking include: victim-blaming, oppression, pseudoscience, temporal changes, educability, and heterodoxy (Valencia, 2010); I coded for each of these characteristics throughout the data analysis process (See Chapter Five). Here, I discuss the four characteristics that were most salient in the transcripts and worked together to form the larger pattern code of "Dis/ability and Deficit Thinking." These sub-codes include: victim-blaming, oppression, pseudoscience, and heterodoxy. Although I choose to follow these four distinct categories in my discussion of deficit thinking, I am also aware that these categorizations do not illustrate the ways in which the characteristics of deficit thinking overlap and inform each other. For the purposes of this dissertation, I believe pointing to the examples of deficit thinking within these categories is a useful way to understand the specific processes that lead to a broader deficit thinking orientation and, eventually, larger theories of dis/ability that disenfranchise criminalize Black and Brown youth.

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<sup>9</sup> While I understand the characteristics of deficit thinking to incorporate dominant ideologies surrounding race, I will address racial themes directly in my discussion of cross-cutting themes (Chapter Nine).

## Victim-blaming

*Victim-blaming* refers to the person-centered nature of deficit thinking and the ways in which the deficit thinking framework points to individuals' cognitive and motivational deficits as reasons for their poor performance and failure (Valencia, 2010). The first instance of victim-blaming appeared in the institutional documents put forth by the Philadelphia Prison System (PPS). Specifically, the PPS emphasizes a major goal, an effort to “promote more effective, positive coping behavior in inmates and reduce maladaptive actions of people under care.” (PPS Program Description, Mental Health Services). In speaking to the need of “positive coping behavior” and only addressing “maladaptive actions,” the system has failed to address the contextual factors that have led certain individuals to cope and act in specific ways. This is not to say that counseling is not a useful practice within correctional facilities, but rather to highlight that a blaming-the-victim approach to this kind of work ignores systemic influences and thus cannot provide a truly effective form of care. As I noted in Chapter One, it was the story of a cohort mate that led me to think more critically about how I was defining marginalized students; she helped me realize that I had ignored the stories of the children of the incarcerated. This is an example of just one group silenced by the deficit thinking of the PPS. Caroline and Meeka speak to the legacy of incarceration and the trauma that occurs for children when their parents are locked up—Caroline through the knowledge gained during her work and Meeka from painful personal experience. Programming that locates the deficit and problematic behavior solely *within* an individual can never truly “rehabilitate” because it only addresses inmates' reactions to oppressive environments.

Throughout my interviews with the four participants, victim-blaming appeared in a variety of forms, including external factors that influenced the lives of the participants as well as ideologies espoused by the participants about others in their communities.

Caroline's references to victim-blaming were the most aligned with Valencia's (2010) explanation of the characteristics of deficit thinking of the four participants. Caroline was mostly interested in the ways that victim-blaming was used as a tool in narratives that placed problems of inequity within Black and Brown communities. These victim-blaming discussions were most prominent in exchanges with institutional actors and within criminal justice settings, and varied according to the kinds of relationships these actors had built with the youth. Caroline noted a marked difference in the ways that many correctional officers and educators speak to the strengths and needs of incarcerated adolescents, that they talk about the young people's strengths in "a whole person kinda way, not just...little categories of a person kind of way, which is how the lawyers and judges tend to talk about them" (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15). Yet, even for those actors who build the closest relationships with the youth, it is easy to fall into victim-blaming narratives; Caroline shared conversations with officers who described the adolescents' behavior as "acting up," saying "they're...so immature. They all think they're tough." (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15). The assumption that these young people are behaving inappropriately because of an innate problem or issue of maturity strips away the two important components of their context: *they are adolescents* and *they are in jail*. What if, instead, we saw the youth as adolescents trying to make sense of their new environment, a space built for the punishing of adult souls and designed to induce fear

and stress? What new portraits of incarcerated youth might we imagine if we remembered that Black and Brown youth are constantly pushed to develop coping strategies and build resilience in a world that is not meant for them, even before they are locked in a cell (Spencer, 1997; Thomas, 2009)?

Perhaps the most unfortunate consequence of this kind of victim-blaming is that it doesn't stop at this stage in the "justice" process. During an interview, Caroline shared a particularly powerful story about a young man participating in the ACT workshops.

*...there was a young man in our workshops recently who--like I had a conversation with his lawyer that was his public defender lawyer, it just felt like we were talking about a totally different person. She was talking about how like, uh, sort of like, how low she thought his ability to like interact and function--like she thought he was like really low functioning in terms of like, his ability to like talk to people and things like that. And I thought that he just didn't talk to her cause she didn't know him and he, you know, he was like, one of the most talkative people in our workshops...So she thought he was like, something like mentally challenged, I think, in her words. And he was just like, just not talking*

*She was like, really surprised and um, I mean like, he had been through, he had been through a lot of stuff in his life, like I think like, and like--it was just like, it seemed like both her and the judge, who's very like, who was very like pathologizing and was like "This kid was damaged in all these ways, he had Fetal Alcohol Syndrome and like blah blah blah" and so like, he, these were all the products of these things and...the judge ended up, when he sentenced him, was talking about how...and in the con--and basically his attitude was like "This kid like might be too damaged to fix" or something. And like, I think his lawyer had somewhat of the same attitude...she was like really surprised when I was like "He's really like, great in our workshops and like, one of our--he was like a leader who set the tone for everybody" And it like--I think he's a person who takes a little bit to warm up to people and like trust people...like a lot of people (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15)*

Caroline's story highlights not only the discrepancies in interpretations of this adolescent's behavior, but also the power of what these interpretations can do in the context of determining a young person's future. What does it mean to decide that youth who have not yet seen their eighteenth birthdays are "too damaged to fix," knowing

everything we know about adolescent development, the importance of understanding Black and Brown youth in context, and the need for attention to cultural competence (Thomas et al., 2009; Stevenson, 2014)? And how do we understand the value of a practitioner's expertise (in this case, Caroline) in resisting the deficit thinking of actors with substantial amounts of power (lawyers, judges)? Victim-blaming attitudes do not stop at the level of abstract ideology, but continue to move on, influencing policy and the lives of too many Black and Brown youth.

In fact, it might be said that victim-blaming has an impact on *all* Black and Brown youth, whether it is in the form of coping and resilience against this particular form of deficit thinking or an internalization of these ideologies. Lisha and Daniel shared stories of moments when the victim-blaming ideology was placed upon them as students in educational spaces. For Lisha, victim-blaming was especially present during mandatory anger management courses she attended before and after her time in jail.

*Yeah, I only went for a day, I ain't never go back...Cause I didn't want to sit there and talk to them people...Like they don't really help you and help you, it's like, they try to make it seem like somethin wrong with you. There's nothin wrong with me, I know what I'm doin. It's just like, it just was frustratin too, to the point that I didn't wanna go back... [I wanted to learn] how to avoid certain situations and like, control my attitude, like, cause I know I do got a like, a bad attitude and I'm workin on it, but it's just like, I'm still human, you know (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15)*

Lisha speaks to the error of the victim-blaming narrative in her story, asserting that there is nothing wrong with her. We are reminded that having an “attitude” and working on handling difficult situations is not a result of an inherent deficit, but rather an effort that is inherently *human* and can be experienced by any individual. In their

interviews, participants frequently alluded to the problem of “anger management,” a discussion I will explore further in the *Pseudoscience* section of this chapter.

For Daniel, victim-blaming began during his first years in school

*Yeah, you just trying to be somebody, you feel me? Then, what Miss Heron used to say, she used to say "I don't know what Miss Vance used to say" she said "I don't know what she seen in you...You just, you just, you just a demon child, you just always in somethin, you always in somethin!" (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

*Miss Tatum was my first teacher. She was a Black teacher and she was like my grandmom. They used to be on my, they used to be on my a--they used to be on my behind so bad, like, my first grade teacher was like, she was like "You're so smart, but you just act so bad." Like, she said "You're so smart"...she said, "There's, there's nothing you can't do like if just, you get yourself, cause your behavior, um, like your be, your behavior, um, discipline." (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

It is somewhat troubling to hear that this form of deficit thinking used to blame Daniel for active behavior in childhood came from a woman he described as family, “like [his] grandmom.” Yet, it is not uncommon for narratives of victim-blaming to become internalized by Black and Brown folks who are themselves targeted by deficit thinking, and then use a deficit thinking model to create hierarchies of ability and competence within these already marginalized communities.

It is also possible to understanding victim-blaming in this context to emerge from a complicated frame of support and protection. In his interviews, Daniel also shared that he his Black teachers seemed to understand him in a way that his White teachers did not.

*Like, like, even if I did somethin bad, they wouldn't just get frustrated like "Get out! Get out the class! Go to coun--you're suspended" or whatever the case may be. They would be like, they be givin me chances, they would be like "You know, it's not you" you know what I mean. "You got a anger problem" so they would take their time wit me, stuff like that. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*



Even in their support, these teachers were still locating the problem *within* Daniel, as inherent to his identity. Daniel's experiences must also be analyzed with an understanding of the specific challenges Black boys face in school, specifically, and in society, broadly (Spencer, 1997; Spencer et al., 2006; Thomas et al., 2009). In her book *Bad Boys*, Ann Arnett Ferguson speaks to the troubling interpretations of Black masculinity in public schools. She notes,

For African American boys bodily forms of expressiveness have repercussions in the world outside the chain-link fence of the school. The body must be taught to endure humiliation in preparation for future enactments of submission...Black teachers are especially likely to advocate and enforce ways of presenting self in the world, strategies of camouflage, that will allow African American children not only to blend into and become a part of the dominant culture, but have survival value in the real world. Black boys must learn to hide 'attitude' and learn to exorcise defiance. Thus they argue for the importance of instilling fear and respect for authority" (Ferguson, 2001, p. 87-89)

Through their insistence that Daniel learn how to express his need to "be somebody" in ways that were not "bad" or the actions of a "demon child," it is possible that Miss Heron and Miss Tatum were attempting to prepare Daniel for life in a world that would expect him to be submissive to authority in order to survive in an environment that would not be receptive to his gendered and raced self. Blaming the victim simultaneously provides a problematic lens through which Black and Brown boys are viewed *and* the method by which Black and Brown communities resist the lens and raise their sons. I argue that Black and Brown girls are then subjected to this particular form of victim-blaming as they are not included in the "naughty by nature" narrative so frequently used to explain boys' behavior; as Black and Brown boys are rejected for

operating outside of a raced interpretation of acceptable masculinity in the classroom, Black and Brown girls are punished for operating outside of a raced *and* gendered interpretation of acceptable femininity (Blake et al., 2010). Thus, all Black and Brown youth take on the burden of deficit simply for existing in a society intent upon pathologizing them at every turn.

**Internalized Victim-Blaming.** It follows that, after being the target of extensive, racialized victim-blaming, Black and Brown youth would learn to internalize this ideology and begin to apply it to their communities and themselves. Meeka and Lisha were particularly vocal about their perceptions of individuals who were unable to attain traditional forms of academic and socioeconomic success.

*I'm like in the sixth, seventh-grade. Y'all givin us fourth-grade work...whoever failed was just dumb as shit... Like, how you ain't know fourth-grade work? Like, you dumb as shit or somethin, or somethin gotta be wrong wit you (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

*Some people is weak and can't get away from cert-certain situations. (Lisha, interview, 1/30/15)*

*Kelsey: And what happens to people who aren't street smart who are out on the street anyway?  
Lisha: I mean, they dumb, they—I don't know. They just would be in the streets, lost...wind up in jail, they are, I don't know, not paying attention. (Lisha, interview, 1/30/15)*

In describing others' failures, Lisha and Meeka are so focused on blaming individuals that they ignore larger systems at work in these situations. What experiences would lead a seventh-grader to have difficulty completing fourth-grade schoolwork? What kinds of situations might be so overwhelming that “weakness” is not the only factor contributing to an individual’s struggle to get out? Perhaps most striking is Lisha’s explanation of people who live in “the hood” who are not street smart. Though

she makes mention of the “lost” nature of this group of people, she notes that they are simply “dumb” and that, ultimately, their inability to “pay attention” will lead them to jail. It is unclear how Lisha understands her own incarceration in comparison to others’; throughout the interviews she describes herself as street-savvy and at no point does she believe her incarceration was due to her being “dumb” or lacking the ability to “pay attention.” Her reasoning begs the question of *why* a person might turn to this kind of deficit thinking to differentiate between herself and her community.

The young women also adopted the victim-blaming narrative as they spoke to the perceived inability of others to sustain relationships and take care of their families.

*You know, they don't want me, being a family, havin a family and bein happy wit my family cause I spend more time wit my baby father and my daughter...Cause, all the time, they find they people, and they don't last and stuff like that and then, it threw them off that we was together first and then we, we planned to have our baby and, like, um, like, some females don't have they baby fathers and stuff like that and not wit they baby fathers and like, they go through a lot wit they baby fathers and stuff and I don't have none of that (Lisha, interview, 2/10/15)*

*And someone people even say that they want kids and...like, it's a lot of, a lot of responsibility like, you think it's easy and definitely if you don't have no support, why would you want a baby? And why you don't got no job and dependin on welfare? No, welfare don't pay enough. I'm not sayin it don't come in handy, yeah, but people live on welfare all they life. Not me...I mean [I'm on welfare], for now...I don't have it like that. (Lisha, interview, 2/10/15)*

*Like, some of my classmates, they didn't have uh, the same type of mom or same type of dad as other--as, as me, or as other students. So they didn't have the ability to like, have that type of parenting in they life so...some of the students didn't really understand because they, they not gettin taught...you know how you go home and your parents help you and stuff like that, like they ain't have that, like type of parentin (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)*

This manifestation of community directed victim-blaming may be closely linked to the young women's desire to emphasize the importance of parenthood in their lives and to position themselves as particularly gifted (see Chapter Nine) in this area. Again, they share a number of experiences with the community members they pathologize. Although they are open about the tensions in their relationships with their own parents, children's fathers, the difficulty to prioritize as a parent, and need for welfare support, it is important to them to locate the ability to be a "good" and "responsible" parent in *the individual* because it points to a resilience that they have harnessed in themselves simply because they wanted to. This means that *their* complicated relationships are not as complicated as others'; *their* dependence on welfare is temporary and thus not an indication of need; it was not the school's shared responsibility to ensure children received an appropriate education, but rather the sole responsibility of parents in the home (Valencia, 2010). Victim-blaming becomes a protective strategy, much like the victim-blaming that takes place within classrooms in an effort to "protect" Black boys in schools.

Unfortunately, engaging in this kind of deficit thinking directed towards others lends itself to the adoption of victim-blaming in other, more personal situations—specifically, internalizing this mode of deficit thinking and applying it to an individual's personal life experiences. In a discussion of her schooling experiences and expectations, Lisha explained why she made the decision to leave college.

*I was gonna enroll myself back in, but then I didn't. But I applied like for my grants and stuff like that, but I...I was already, the only reason why I stopped goin cause I got lazy, that's why. I was pregnant, I'm not lazy...but. I coulda still been goin cause I still was workin. I was workin all the way up to nine months (Lisha, interview, 2/10/15)*

Lisha works to make meaning of her decision, weighing the options of “lazy” and “pregnant” as she explains the process of applying for funding to go to school and, unable to secure financial assistance, needing to work full time throughout her entire pregnancy in order to attend school and support herself. She describes her decision to leave as a result of her laziness, for a moment addresses her pregnancy as a factor in her decision, but then points to her ability to continue working as a reason to justify that it was in fact her laziness that led her to leave school. Though I resist the notion that pregnancy places individuals in a “vulnerable” state, I do believe it is important to acknowledge the significant physical and perspectival changes that take place during a pregnancy that would make it difficult for *anyone* to work full-time, attend college full-time, and prepare for a baby. Lisha’s internalized victim-blaming makes it difficult for her to examine the situation holistically and leads to her insist that she was simply too lazy to continue her schooling at that point in her life. Caroline takes up this argument while addresses a central theme in the Saturday workshops.

*But...I think it's really important cause if you don't understand that those systems are in place then you do just think like "I'm not doing good, I'm just like, like I'm just a fuck up and I'm just doing all these things wrong" and that's not the truth. (Caroline, interview, 2/27/15)*

For Black and Brown youth in these situations, even with knowledge of the school-to-prison pipeline and systemic oppression, the instinct to blame themselves and their communities for their struggles is powerful one. It is possible that internalized victim-blaming serves another purpose. Learning about these structures can be incredibly overwhelming for any one, especially young people who are still working to develop a deeper understanding of powerful and, at a certain level, abstract societal

forces. At a time when adolescents are working to claim independent identities, hearing that there are strong structures outside of their control may be unsettling, especially as they develop an acute awareness of the school-to-prison pipeline and its significant impact on the course of their lives. Asserting that all they need to do is “make better choices” may be a coping strategy that allows them to feel in control and avoid feelings of hopelessness in the face of this oppression.

### Oppression

The characteristic of oppression describes the “macro- and micro-level educational policies/practices fueled by class and racial prejudice [that keep] economically disadvantaged students of color in their place.” (Valencia, 2010, p. 9). Oppression is a theme that informs all characteristics of deficit thinking and allows individuals and communities to be easily targeted for deficit thinking and pathologized accordingly. While the characteristic of oppression runs throughout this section on dis/ability and deficit thinking, I take a moment here to focus on examples of oppression that are highlighted throughout different stages of the school-to-prison pipeline.

**Oppression at Home and in School.** As I entered each interview, I was prepared to hear examples of systemic oppression from each participant as they shared their experiences with me. I was surprised to hear that some of these oppressive acts began at home; although the home is not necessarily categorized as an educational institution, it is a space where teaching and learning take place and where informal policies and practices greatly influence the development of and opportunities afforded to Black and Brown

youth. Meeka shared memories of early oppression in the context of conversations with her grandmother.

*...my grandmom...she just one of them people. Like, I don't know. Like, she always callin us whores and hos, bitches, sluts...[saying] I ain't never gonna be shit... she used to be like "You ain't never gon be shit and this and this and that" she used to be sayin all this stuff...it used to make me mad, she used to be like "You gon be in jail" like, "You gon be in jail" she used to be sayin stuff like that. And it used to make me angry and I used to cuss her out. (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)*

In these conversations, Meeka's grandmother is participating in the same institutional practices used by schools and society to keep Meeka "in her place," to relegate her to a future with no possibility for success and certain incarceration. While Meeka resists these notions of herself, it is hard to imagine that, as a child, it would be easy to hear a family member describe you in these ways and not be influenced by these deficit thinking ideologies. It is also possible that, using a particularly complicated and problematic method, Meeka's grandmother was taking up the practice of so many Black teachers who use deficit thinking to guide Black boys in schools (Ferguson, 2001). Did Meeka's grandmother understand her words as instructive, supportive in guiding her family to make decisions that would keep them *out* of jail and on the road to gain a specific kind of social and financial success, given a family history of incarceration? Meeka's story highlights the need for further exploration into ideas of cultural competence in the context of teaching Black and Brown children. Here, we see that attention to cultural competence within homes and communities of color may benefit from a deeper understanding of how and why deficit thinking is a tool used so frequently by Black and Brown adults. In the effort to deconstruct these forms of deficit thinking, it is important to think about how these narratives are absorbed into communities of color

and how we can think about re-focusing potentially protective and supportive actions that become harmful due to their reliance upon pathologizing narratives.

Schools continued to pathologize the participants from childhood through adolescence. Daniel describes his experience in seventh-grade; upon returning to school after a suspension, he was placed in a third-grade class as an “in-school suspension” until he was allowed to return to the correct classroom.

*[I was suspended for] Damn near half the year. Then I came back and I wasn't in my, I wasn't even in my right grade. I was in, the third--I was in the third-grade gettin seventh-grade work. Like, they was sendin my work down...for like two or three months...Like--it was so boring, I didn't even wanna do my work. It was like, I'll go to summer school...I wasn't motivated. I was like "Man, y'all got me here around third-graders, I'm goin to sleep every day" And there'd be times I'd be fakin sick to my mom, I'd be like "Mom, I don't wanna go back to that class." Because they givin me worksheets when they out there workin in textbooks and all that. Like, they just givin me worksheets and stuff that I didn't--it was like fifth-grade work. And I was lookin at it like, I'm not doin that, you know what I mean?...it wasn't...a task. It wasn't somethin I could look up in the book and let me do this. I was like "Man, get me outta this place" (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

Daniel's story outlines the effects of oppression long after an initial oppressive act takes place. Having been denied access to an appropriate education, Daniel disengaged from school which resulted in him failing all of his classes that year. He became so disinterested in school that he made the decision that he would just go to summer school and effectively checked out of school for the remaining two to three months of school. While he passed his courses in summer school, he missed the opportunity to learn in an environment with his peers that year; summer school classes are designed to remediate and fill in the gaps for students who struggled throughout the year, but the assumption is that they have had at least one school year of instruction prior to summer school.



Although he officially passed his classes, Daniel still missed almost a full year of instruction.

Oppression at the broader school policy level was also a factor in Meeka's schooling experiences. During one of her interviews, she described her experience in a Philadelphia high school.

*It was, it was horrible. Like, the class was over-over crowded. It was so many students there, you, you... I lost count. Classes was dumb crowded--when I tell you, this room? It woulda been all this around. Chairs all the way around. Not a seat unfilled. Yeah, it used to get on my nerves. Then when I used to try to go to lunch--whoa. People after people after people. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

Here, oppressive practices take the form of underfunded schools with overcrowded classrooms and limited resources for students. Later in this interview, Meeka shared that she became so frustrated with the school environment that she stopped going to school; this led to a truancy charge and her placement in a group home outside of the city. This was the first step in a path that led to Meeka's involvement in the criminal justice system and, ultimately, jail.

Specific actors were also involved in oppressive practices in schools. During his first year of high school, Daniel was involved in a fight with a senior student, during which a female non-teaching assistant (NTA) attempted to intervene and break up the fight.

*So it's like, he was rushin me, there was a NTA lady holdin me. I had, I had pushed her to the side, like "Watch out cause this nigga bout to punch me and I don't want you to get punched." They suspended me for that...I felt like, it's corny cause like, somebody picked on me. I was just defendin myself. I understand violence wasn't the key to this situation, but I was just defendin myself...they tried to get me locked up and everything for that. I'm like "He hit me first!" like...the lady, she said "Yeah, he really hit him first." But she had to do her job cause, you know people "Oh, I got*

*pushed" --she didn't even fall or nothin. She left on injury, try to get injury leave and all that other stuff. But her doin that, it cost me my school time at [school]. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

Daniel takes responsibility for his actions while acknowledging that the following consequences were too severe given the nature of the fight. It is interesting that Daniel states the assistant “had to do her job,” given that the job description for an NTA includes maintaining surveillance over “the non-instructional activities of students” (School District of Philadelphia). Accordingly, her job would have been to prevent the fight from taking place from the moment the two boys started to argue. The NTA’s testimony and attempts to receive injury leave may not have resulted in misdemeanor charges against Daniel, but he was expelled and placed in a disciplinary school that only pushed him further along the school-to-prison pipeline and, eventually, into an adult prison.

Meeka also shared examples of institutional agents carrying out oppressive acts within schools. She pointed to a legacy of girls in her family in her neighborhood schools and their reputation as being unruly, noting “[my sister]...already got kicked out, like, the [girls from my family] was a problem, period. Like, everybody used to be talkin about it” (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15). Ferguson (2001) described this as the meeting of oppression and educability, another characteristic of deficit thinking.

Children are sorted into categories of “educability” as they get a reputation among the adults as troubled, troubling, or troublemakers. They are not only identified as problems, as ‘at-risk’ by the classroom teacher, but gain schoolwide reputations as stories about their exploits are publicly shared by school adults in the staff room, at staff meetings, and at in-service training sessions. Horror stories circulate through the school adult network so that children’s reputations precede them into classrooms and follow them from school to school.” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 95)

Meeka's future in school was determined by the reputation placed upon her before she even walked through the doors. As a result, Meeka's education was placed at risk; the teaching and learning practices used by her teachers would necessarily be influenced by this kind of deficit thinking, making her more susceptible to the micro-level practices of oppression in her classrooms. Oppressive acts followed Meeka throughout her schooling experiences; when she was placed in a group home, she was forced to change schools. During the transition, she shared that the administrators

*... couldn't find...my ninth-grade records. So they put me back in ninth-grade. I was mad as shit. Like, I'm not no freshman. So they sent me back to ninth-grade til they find my tenth--my ninth grade records...They ain't find it. Or they fuckin wasn't lookin. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

The administration's neglect in providing Meeka with the information necessary to further her schooling resulted in her repeating a grade and, as evidenced by her interview, invoking an (understandable) anger and distrust of the educational system. Oppression in this case stemmed from an indifference towards Meeka's educational needs and opportunities and effectively kept her at a disadvantage by blocking her access to the next educational step.

This is not to say that there were not actors within schools who resisted forms of oppression in the classroom. As she shared memories from her time in a self-contained special education classroom, Meeka spoke fondly of her teacher, Miss Corinne.

*Meeka: ...she was so wonderful. Like, she was all that. And um, she used to be so nice, like teachin us and everything. And she--it's like she really really liked her job, like she wanted to be there. And then, we wasn't, we was in a class where it was um, we had discipline-discipline behaviors. So like, she was a really really good teacher (laughs).*

*Kelsey: Why are you laughing?*

*Meeka: Cause we all was bad (laughs) That's a shame...We all was in there, we all was bad (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

In her description of the class and her fellow students, Meeka takes on the identity of a “bad” kid, noting that it was a “shame” that these students were in a class because of behavioral issues. However, she notes that her teacher was committed to her work in the class and treated the students well. As a former special education teacher, I find this to be a particularly powerful statement of the possibilities of resisting oppression in schools. In the case of many special education classrooms, oppression takes place the moment that students are isolated from their peers and denied access to an appropriate education that uses students’ strengths to challenge them and prepare them for a future of possibility.<sup>10</sup> These students *believe* they are bad. Yet, as evidenced by Meeka’s account, educators have the power to resist oppression in schools through their approaches to children and attention to inclusive and critical pedagogical practices, regardless of how students have been classified and categorized.

Caroline also plays the role of an institutional actor who consistently resists systemic oppression. Caroline shared a powerful story of discovery when discussing a memorable experience in a low-income neighborhood in Philadelphia.

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<sup>10</sup> I make this assertion in the context of racialized referral practices that result in an overrepresentation of Black and Brown students in special education classrooms and, consequently, the school-to-prison pipeline. I understand that there are also many students who benefit from the individualized education programs and services that special education classrooms and programs provide and I do not claim that special education services are inherently oppressive. Instead, I point to the oppressive nature of special education, broadly, in an educational system that uses racialized and classist measures to inform second segregation practices (Mickelson, 2001; Tyson, 2011). I believe this is an important move in the context of imagining new possibilities for Black and Brown youth and, specifically, Black and Brown adolescents who are incarcerated.

*So I just--I think I remember just, like, I was going into neighborhoods that I like, had been taught to fear for all these reasons--or not even reasons, like not even knowing like, why. But like, it wasn't scary...What was scary was that like, there's like houses falling down and that there's like, clearly people living with like, no roofs and like, you know, windows with boards over them and stuff like. And like, that's scary to think about like, what's that like to live, like, but like it wasn't, just that that like moment of like, when it breaks down, like everything that you like thought something was and it's not. And I remember, definitely remember feeling that way. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Caroline's analysis of this experience is a strong example of resistance to oppression and deficit thinking based on oppressive belief. Erevelles (2014) takes up the argument in a discussion of the creation of "the ghetto," noting

*...that the ghetto is not where black people live but rather where blackness is contained...Here, liberal discourses point to the racial and economic isolation in the ghetto as nurturing a culture poverty (a 'natural state of hopelessness...The ghetto is also imagined as a 'zone of violence' even though violence occurs not because of what 'happens' in the ghetto, but rather because of what 'is done' to the ghetto and its inhabitants (p. 90).*

Caroline correctly identifies the actual root of violence, its location *outside* of "the ghetto" and within the oppressive policies and practices that allow neighborhoods—homes to primarily Black and Brown families—to stay in condemned states without the societal support to improve them. Furthermore, realization of oppression in this context allows us to understand how the ghetto becomes much more than a location; Erevelles (2014) reminds us that "the 'ghetto' is not just a space but a portable status that can be cast onto bodies—some are temporarily and selectively branded, others inescapably so" (p. 90). Thus, the "ghettoization" of these communities reveals a systemic oppression that remains with Black and Brown youth in the form of deficit thinking, and, eventually,

dis/ability labels that stem from “the social construction of dangerous and depraved pathology (disability) assigned to underprivileged bodies of color (race and class)” (Erevelles, 2014, p. 90).

**Oppression in Disciplinary Schools.** Deficit thinking and the subsequent labels of dis/ability led to the mandatory enrollment of all three formerly incarcerated participants in disciplinary schools. Though these still fall under the umbrella of “schools,” I want to take a moment to pay special attention to the particular oppression that takes place within publicly funded disciplinary schools. Valencia’s (2010) explanation of teacher ideologies helps us understand how schools justify moving students out of community schools and into disciplinary schools.

Cooper (2003) asserts that the basis of such deficit thinking is rooted in the ‘power of teacher ideology’ (p. 103). That is, teachers who adhere to the view that society is meritocratic are inclined to believe that the schools are also. Cooper notes that such teachers are not apt to see schools as agencies of social reproduction that restrict the ability of students from families who possess few socioeconomic assets to acquire the necessary skills, knowledge, and cultural capital to move upward to the levels of their more privileged peers. In light of this meritocratic perspective, Cooper remarks, teachers can lapse into deficit thinking and display bias toward students and their parents. (p. 133).

Students are blamed for their failure to succeed in community schools and, with the support of a meritocratic perspective embedded within administrative ideology, pushed out and into segregated educational spaces. These schools are advertised as places for rehabilitation to get students on the right track and ready for re-entry—invoking the language of correctional facilities—yet are often plagued by the same deficit thinking approaches to educating students. Alisha remembers

*Yeah, that's a disciplinary school...It wasn't like (pauses) a school to actually be at to learn or nothin. (Lisha, interview, 1/23/15)*

*...it's a disciplinary school. But I still applied to get outta school faster than [the disciplinary school] cause the disciplinary school] wasn't helpin me...I don't like how they teach and it was too crowded in the class. It was whole bunch of chaos, like you can't even learn in this class, it was like, um, people playin cards in the back of the room. How you playin cards and you in school?... And then it's math--it was math class--and that's a lot of thinkin, so I got frustrated (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15)*

As a student, Lisha was frustrated by the environment provided for her learning experiences. She is clear about what she needed to succeed academically and how the disciplinary school failed to support her. I find her discussion of the math class to be particularly powerful and it complicates the arguments set forth by Cooper (2003) and Erevelles (2014) in regards to socioeconomic assets. While I wholeheartedly agree that schools continue the work of oppression by relying on faulty meritocratic perspectives, it is clear that—even without a certain amount of cultural capital—Lisha is a strong agent in voicing her needs as a learner. I believe this raises some interesting questions around how we understand deficit thinking and, perhaps, the implication of deficit even in our resistance to deficit thinking models. Perhaps it is not always the case that Black and Brown adolescents from low-income communities lack the skills or knowledge to be upwardly mobile, but rather that we do not recognize the skills and knowledge they possess because the power of deficit thinking can blind even the most resistant among us.

With the explicit support of educational policy and practice to “discipline” these students, disciplinary schools further engaged in acts of oppression in the form of physical violence.

*If I started actin out in there, I remember the first time, I was in sixth-grade, he slammed me on my face. Like, they was allowed to physically restrain us in there. Put hands on us. I still remember [my teacher]. Because when he slammed me, I had rug burn all on my face, right here... The day before my birthday, yeah...All this was, rug burn. He picked me up off the ground, then slammed me to the uh, to the uh, the chalkboard. Yeah, he was slammin me like, on the floor, had my arms back like this...I think I was, uh, like cussin him out. But that still don't give him the right to put his hands on me because I ain't never swing on him or anything like that. So he was just slammin me cause he was mad. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

*It was like, disciplinarian--if you was in a white shirt, you had to walk wit your hands behind your back. Like that was like, it was like, you talk crazy to staff, they slammin you. Yeah, puttin you to restraints and all that. I got restrained like, twice...The first time, the teacher was talkin to me all crazy, so I start talkin to him like "I don't know who you talkin to...but like, at the end of the day, like, like, don't talk to me like I'm nothin, you talkin to me like I'm dirt, I'm not dirt."...He said "You, you, you are what I tell you you are...you gotta respect me..." He said "Step outside" and slammed me. I said...it was crazy. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

Meeka and Daniel share deeply troubling accounts of physical violence taking place within these publicly funded schools, violence that is condoned by the school's administration and a common feature of the disciplinary schools' pedagogical approaches. Daniel's interview also revealed that these disciplinary schools continue the tradition of preparing Black and Brown youth for prison, insisting that they walks with their hands behind their backs.

Daniel, Meeka, and Lisha all spoke about the categorization systems in disciplinary schools, with students placed in different colored shirts to indicate the level of “concern” associated with their behavior. Unsurprisingly, all three of them were quick



to tell me about their speedy ascension to the category of leader within the disciplinary schools.

*I was only there, at [the disciplinary school], for a year. Cause, they, they told me I had to leave. Cause I was a bulldog, like you--we had shirts. And like if we get to a certain stamina, like, it-- first it's, it's concern, neutral...positive, bulldog, and somethin else. I was a bulldog, the black shirt, I told the other kids what to do, like they gotta stand in line behind me. And, cause, I, I got that type of leadership, because I earned it or whatever. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

Meeka shared this information in the frame of her gift as a leader with “stamina,” perhaps unaware of how these hierarchies worked to reinforce the systemic oppression within these institutions. Furthermore, when it comes to Black and Brown youth, these categories are far from permanent. Ferguson (2001) explains the transient nature of these classifications in her ethnographic work with Black boys, separated in the good “Schoolboys” and the bad “Troublemakers” at school.

*...I gradually realized that to see Schoolboys and Troublemakers as fundamentally different was to make a grave mistake. As African American males, Schoolboys were always on the brink of being redefined into the Troublemaker category by the school. The pressures and dilemmas this group faced around race and gender identities from adults and peers were always palpable forces working against their maintaining a commitment to the school project. That is, of course, why schools across the nation witness the continual attrition of the ranks of the ‘schoolboys’ as they join those of the ‘troublemakers.’” (p. 10)*

Thus, the work of oppression in these disciplinary schools extended beyond negligence in the classroom and physical violence towards students. It made students believe that there was a way for them to escape the labels created by a culture of deficit thinking in schools when they were in fact in constant danger of slipping back into the “troublemaker” position. Even more disturbing was the insidious nature of this

particular kind of oppression; even as students pathologized their peers in an effort to make it to the top of the pyramid, they were, through daily practice and reinforcement, being prepared for incarceration, the final state of the pipeline.

**Oppression in Correctional Facilities.** Oppression within the correctional facilities was first evidenced through a review of the institutional documents put forth by the Philadelphia Prison System. As I mentioned in my discussion of adolescence incarcerated in Chapter Six, the Philadelphia Prison System (PPS) provides little to no information about its efforts to support adolescents who are incarcerated in adult correctional facilities. While this is clearly problematic in the context of services for young people, it also illustrates an oppression perpetuated by the criminal justice institution. The system's silence around the needs of its adolescent inmates simultaneously *silences* these young people and concerns for their well-being while on the inside. Furthermore, this particular prison system requires all volunteers to sign a contract agreeing to keep everything they see on the inside private, forcing volunteers to bear witness to a number of oppressive acts with the understanding that they cannot recount these experiences in the public sphere.

*...it's a challenging thing to be a volunteer because you can't like, I can't, I can't speak publicly about anything like that because it would be a violation of my agreement as a volunteer. Um, which can be really hard. There's like, I'm not gonna say anymore about that (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Caroline speaks to yet another form of oppression through silencing—the silencing of the same individuals who are encouraged to visit with inmates in an effort to help with the process of “rehabilitation” and preparation for re-entry. But if volunteers

are denied the opportunity to voice their concerns, it follows that there are potentially a number of inmate needs that go unacknowledged and unaddressed. This form of oppression is perhaps the most dangerous because it is impossible to fight against an oppression you do not know exists.

Of the four participants, Caroline was the only one who addressed the oppression taking place within the walls of the correctional facilities. This was also true across other forms of deficit thinking discussed in the interviews; while it is possible that the other three participants did not see oppression enacted in the jails and prisons, it is also possible that coping with incarceration requires adolescents to embrace the work of institutionalization in order to navigate an overwhelming and frightening situation, and the reality that the jail controls every aspect of your daily routine.

Caroline's discussion of the oppression within the jails focused mainly on ACT's efforts to reveal and resist this form of deficit thinking through the Saturday workshops.

*But at the same time then it's like, then I have to leave, and like every time--and it's very difficult, we get into the conversations, I think it can be very challenging, the conversations that are about, like, how do we, like "What would a Philadelphia look like where Black lives mattered?" or like...how can we like, change that. Like how can we prevent another like Tamir Rice from being killed. But like, it can be really--I think it can be really challenging to push that conversation about like, how do we make things different when like, everybody in the workshop is gonna wake up in jail still and like, nothing that we do is gonna change that. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Even as ACT pushes the young people to consider systemic oppression, Caroline acknowledges the difficulty in revealing forms of oppression to the oppressed. Freire (1996) discusses the importance the need for the oppressed to “unveil the world of oppression and through the praxis commit themselves to its transformation.” (p. 36).

The oppressed must be engaged in this praxis through “critical and liberating dialogue...The content of that dialogue can and should vary in accordance with historical conditions and the level at which the oppressed perceive reality...Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building.” (Freire, 1996, p. 47). Caroline is caught in the moment of revealing oppression within the jails and attempting to engage incarcerated youth in “reflective participation” through the workshops. The work with these adolescents is complicated because of the nature of revealing oppression combined with the need for attention to developmentally and contextually appropriate conversations about manifestations of oppression within the jail and on the outside in their communities.

*And like, a lot of young people in our workshops have like, seen a lot of people get, get killed...so I'm not gonna be like, "That's not...real, that there's like violence in your neighborhood that is, like a serious thing and it's different from, from how I grew up." But like, that's the main thing I try to do like, "Well, if we're gonna talk about who's criminal" to be able to bring from my perspective, of like, "Well, where I grew up, like, here's what's happening and here's how like, the system's reacted to it differently." And like...trying to have conversations like "What you're seeing is like, violence and crime in your neighborhood, why do you think that's going on?" and tryin to like get, have some of those, like deeper conversations. But, I think even though, like, the same young people who will have that conversation will like, will talk about like they aren't what the media portrays them to be and like, even, like even young people who know that and say like "I'm not who they're saying I am" are growing up with the same, all the same stuff, they're like, absorbing all of, all of the messages all the time...I think sometimes it can... the conversation we...had about this just the other day...somebody else in the workshop was like, really resistant to thinking about like, the school to prison pipeline was a thing and he was very like "You ju--it's just about if you wanna succeed, it's just about if you wanna succeed and like you just need to like, do right" and the thing is like, if you're tryin to navigate that yourself, it's a lot, like, it can feel in that moment a lot more empowering to be like "Well, if I just do good, then I'm gonna like succeed" versus like "There's all these forces that are set up to stop me." That's like a thing, that's a constant struggle for ACT...we really believe it's important for young people to understand that there are like these systems set up against them and to be able to like, know the trap, and so we*

*need to know how to not fall into that. But really helping them figure that out... in a way...that doesn't make you feel like "Well then I can't"...But...it's really important cause if you don't understand that those systems are in place then you do just think like "I'm not doing good, I'm just like, like I'm just a fuck up and I'm just doing all these things wrong" and that's not the truth. (Caroline, interview, 2/27/15)*

Caroline's attention to the delicate nature of exposing oppression to the oppressed includes a deep understanding of the extent to which oppression permeates through communities as well as a constant attention to positionality. Caroline refers to this positionality in acknowledging that a discussion of oppression cannot silence the narratives of young people who have witnessed violence; regardless of how oppression creates communities that experience these forms of violence, it is important to give adolescents the space and time to process what they have seen. Caroline is particularly sensitive to practicing a Freirean approach that does not deny that this violence is in fact *violence*, but rather asks young people to think through the root of the violence and to understand they do not come from communities that are inherently violent and criminal. The ACT workshops also guide young people to hopeful perspectives, even in the face of systemic oppression and seemingly inevitable "traps" set to catch and incarcerate Black and Brown youth.

Caroline also mentioned a conversation with a correctional officer that opened up new questions about forms of oppression that burden young people who are incarcerated in adult correctional facilities.

*...interesting conversation a couple weeks ago, walking in with one of the officers and, and Daniel who came in, who had not been in in a long time who had been locked up there. And they were...catching up...I mean, it's like a testament to her relationship with the young people, I mean, he was excited to see her and she was excited to see him. But then she was (laughs) going on about*

*how like... "These kids now are, like, they're like not tough like you guys were" and like "They like, are always, like, they're always like telling on us to the sergeants and they aren't like, basically like, they wouldn't have like lasted a minute when like, people were getting in fights all the time" and stuff like that here. (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15)*

This conversation between the correctional officer and Daniel is a powerful testament to the complicated and oftentimes confusing nature of oppression and deficit thinking. Although Daniel and the correctional officer have a warm relationship, this officer is clearly engaging in oppressive attitudes and actions. The officer describes the ideal criminal justice system as one where young people are expected to endure oppression and treatment—that would require them to “tell on” correctional officers, suggesting these are not formally condoned practices—on the inside without complaint. Much like the prison system’s volunteer contract, these are highly oppressive practices in that they *silence the oppressed*. Thus, the ideal adolescents who are incarcerated at this facility are the ones who willingly comply with unfair treatment and accept the burden of oppression without question. Furthermore, the correctional officer *praises* the “tough” attitudes of formerly incarcerated young men at the facility, adolescents who were participating in fights—fights we know were fueled by inhumane living conditions, frustration, and depression, as told by Daniel in his incarceration story. It is also important to note that the officer’s comments are deeply racialized. Creating this hierarchy between the young people reinforces the idea that these Black and Brown youth should embrace characters that are both aggressive and submissive (Ferguson, 2001), a notion that supports deficit thinking through its assumptions about Black and Brown children’s inherent traits as well as how to effectively “prepare” these children for

future “success.” The layers and complexity of Caroline’s story mirror the complexity and nuances of oppression in the context of deficit thinking; in this kind of research, in order to truly understand how deficit thinking is embedded within pedagogical and institutional practices of the school-to-prison pipeline, it is imperative that we deconstruct these images in even the most seemingly casual conversations about Black and Brown youth.

### **Pseudoscience**

*Pseudoscience* describes one of the foundations of the deficit thinking model, acknowledging that researchers’ negative biases toward people for color allow for uninspected and deeply flawed methodologies to guide their research and further the work of the deficit thinking discourse (Valencia, 2010). The Philadelphia Prison System’s approach to rehabilitation illustrates the prevalence of pseudoscience in methodological approaches to rehabilitation.

The psychologists at the Philadelphia Prisons have worked to develop and implement such programs. They are delivered typically in a limited duration, group format which makes use of not only group interaction but supplementary written handouts and worksheets for the participants to work on by themselves. Furthermore, we have found that often these materials are passed on informally to other inmates setting up a powerful social pressure to both take the desired behavioral changes seriously through the use of peer pressure but also to extend the limited resources of staff. Furthermore, such programs imbue the correctional environment with a humanizing effect and can serve as valuable incentives for inmates to engage in pro-social behaviors. Various researchers in correctional psychology have suggested that effective programs promote safer, less costly prison operations as measured by such variables as reduced inmate idleness, lower offender assault and rule infraction rates, better inmate-staff relationships and higher staff morale. (PPS Program Description, Mental Health Services)

In the case of these psychological sessions, deficit thinking prevents practitioners and researchers from engaging with individuals with respect and a consideration for context. Pseudoscientific beliefs guide a practice that assumes the key to rehabilitation is teaching individuals how to “work on themselves” through “peer pressure.” It is also unclear how the various researchers mentioned in the program description have validated these methods. Yet, we know that many individuals who are incarcerated—specifically, adolescents who are incarcerated—are working to navigate exposure to violence in the context of oppressed communities, racialized trauma, and identity development, all stresses that can lead to decisions that exacerbate the effect of the school-to-prison pipeline. In participant interviews, pseudoscience was addressed largely in the frame of anger management. As I discussed in my conceptual framework, I believe emotions are important for any form of research and should be considered legitimate tools for understanding theory and the process of analysis. I take up the work of deconstructing anger “problems” as described by the participants with the belief in the importance of emotions, especially when emotions are mislabeled as indicators of inherent deficits in Black and Brown youth.

Daniel and Lisha referenced their anger and attitude “problems” in the context of describing approaches to interpersonal relationships and self-improvement.

*I see now I got, I got a a bad anger problem, like...but I been tryna control it...like, by me just stayin to myself...and stayin by myself it's like, I don't got that much anger problem. And lot of people know me as havin a hot head...And it's like, I don't come off as disrespectful to nobody, I just don't wanna be disrespected...I'm cool, like, I wouldn't wanna be that person. I wouldn't wanna be no bully. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*



*Like I get real mad fast and then just be like (pauses) like, soon as I mad, I wanna fight. Like, I'm not gettin mad and then sit there and be mad...It's just, I don't know but I'm tryna change. I'm changin. I DID change, actually, but I'm tryna--I still got a little more changin to do. (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15)*

Conversely, Meeka did not mention a desire to change anything about her behavior. Yet, she described it as innate and worked to make meaning of the root of her inclination to fight.

*When she started talkin all this crap I was just like "What's up then? Like, what's up?" like, and that was my first fight--I wasn't scared, I wasn't even angry. Like, I just was like "What's up, like what's up?" Like, I was ready for it, it was in my nature... And then after that, that's when everybody like "Mike Tyson." Everybody start callin me Mike Tyson...I saw a lot of people doin it in my neighborhood, like, fightin and cursin...In my neighborhood, like, maybe in the suburbs, I would--if I was in a different environment, I wouldn't be doin them type of things or like, fightin and jumpin people and stuff like that but, in my neighborhood, a lot of people was doin it. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

In all three of these excerpts, participants are working to resist images of themselves that they find problematic. For Daniel, the idea that he is a hot-headed “bully” is troubling; he wants people to understand that he wants to be respected and is actively working on coping strategies. Lisha explains why and how she gets “mad” and shares that she has changed and is continuing to work on how she deals with wanting to fight. Meeka does not resist how people see her behavior, but her interview reveals a tension between her understanding her “Mike Tyson” identity as an innate characteristic and locating it in her childhood experiences. It is within this tension that we see the work of pseudoscience. A negative and common bias held towards Black and Brown people is that they are inherently aggressive (Ferguson, 2001; Thomas et al., 2009;

Erevelles, 2014) and this bias guides approaches to research and, subsequently, therapeutic and pedagogical approaches to working with Black and Brown youth. The resistance in these narratives is important, yet it is only one component of the effort to dismantle pseudoscientific beliefs. It is imperative to interrogate the very notion of an “anger problem” and why Black and Brown youth are unable to feel strongly in classrooms without their emotions diagnosed as problematic.

Caroline addressed the issue of anger management in a discussion of institutional programming and youths’ experiences.

*I mean, like, anger management, I think a lot of people might talk about--who've been through the system in some way might like be, say some--think they need like, say something like "Oh, I needed anger management" or like "I need that" because that's like what the system has said they need...somebody gets locked up for a fight or for like an assault or something like that and like, the system has like no ways of actually addressing like what is going on with them and like why they're, might have like some rage inside about a lot of things that have happened in their lives or that they've experienced...everyone who has ever been in them has told me they're like a total waste of time which is like, not surprising...it's not like anger that needs to be managed...people need to like, need space to like process through stuff that they're upset about...people are then being like put in like, sentenced to like live in a box for some number of years and like, put in all these situations that are gonna like, that are set up to like, escalate you and to like make you like, more anger to like, to just make, exacer-exacerbate that...I think [anger management] can be actually damaging because it like, tells people--especially like, young people--like, that like, this is just about something that you can manage and not about like--and a lot of times there's systemic things that are like part, that are like part of why people are angry. Like, they don't have access to housing or like, they don't have access to good schools or like, they can't get a job because they've got a record and like, instead of being like, let's address these things that make life really challenging and would make anybody angry, like you should just be able to like take this class and then, like, take a deep breath and not be angry, you know (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15)*

The anger problems that are ascribed to the young people do not describe an inherent flaw in their ability to control emotions appropriately, but rather responses to their environments that have been delegitimized and criminalized through the work of

pseudoscientific beliefs and approaches to research and practice that assume the presence of deficits within Black and Brown youth and their communities. Conversations around anger management are complicated by a model of pseudoscience; the resistance to this particular form of deficit thinking may provide new possibilities for Daniel, Meeka and Lisha, acknowledging that *anyone* who has been systemically and systematically oppressed would need to call upon their emotions to process their experiences and share these emotions with others in their communities.

I also want to highlight a comment from an interview with Lisha that ties a complicated rejection of pseudoscientific beliefs with a narrative of victim-blaming directed at her community.

*Because most [White people] is racist. When they see a Black person, they think all of us is the same...that's racist because you don't have to act as if everyone else--you don't have to act like everyone else to be Black... or because we Black and some, you know, people be actin a fool out here. All because we Black, um, that don't mean that you compare us to them, to them. (Lisha, interview, 1/23/15)*

In this excerpt, Lisha refers to the power of pseudoscience embedded in a racism she sees perpetuated throughout the White community. Her experiences guide her belief that negative views of Black people are widespread and lead White people to believe *all* Black people are “fools.” But her explanation of this racism also reveals Lisha’s own deficit thinking about a specific racial community in a specific location. She refers to Black people “out here” and makes a distinction between “us” and “them.” Lisha creates a clear distinction between Black people in a specific Philadelphian community (North Philadelphia) who should be viewed and understood differently than “us”, a

Black community that is not “foolish.” Although she is taking steps to unpack pseudoscientific thinking, she is using the tool of internalized victim-blaming to do so. While I believe this tension occurs in part due to the nature of adolescents’ developing beliefs and efforts to make meaning of what they experience through more abstract, theoretical frames, I also feel that Lisha is working to understand how she can resist the deficit thinking models she is becoming increasingly aware of in the world around her, but is choosing to use the tools most readily available, thus circling back to a mode of deficit thinking.

### Heterodoxy

Lisha’s attempts to unpack the work of pseudoscience open up a space to explore the work of *heterodoxy* in deconstructing deficit thinking. Heterodoxy encourages resistance to the dominant culture of deficit thinking and pushes practitioners and educational researchers to engage in reflexive practices that challenge all forms of deficit thinking (Valencia, 2010).

The young people in this study shared many stories of deficit thinking that blamed them for their struggles, kept them at a disadvantage through oppression, and caused them to internalize these ideologies and direct them towards themselves and their communities. Yet there were also examples of resistance to those modes of thinking throughout their interviews.

**Family.** We know that many Black and Brown families are torn apart due to the effects of a racialized mass incarceration that targets Black and Brown individuals—specifically, Black and Brown men (Milovanovic & Russell, 2001; Herivel & Wright, 2003;

Davis, 2003; Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012) . During one of our conversations, Meeka spoke about her experiences as a younger adolescent placed in a self-contained special education classroom due to her history of fighting in school.

*... some people was there for they behavior, like, I didn't care about them... I didn't have no care in the world. Like, I missed my dad. And like, I didn't like my mom boyfriend, like, I ain't have no care in the world. So I was just doin it just to do it...like, my dad was a part of my life for a little while, but when I hit uh, kindergarten, my dad got--was, he was away for almost ten years...Locked up...it was hard cause like, I'm a daddy's girl and I loved my dad. (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)*

Deficit thinking models rely upon the belief that Black and Brown youth are responsible for any disadvantages they experience because they simply don't care about their education or future success. But we see here that deficit thinking ignores the most important factors that lead to a young person's inability to achieve their personal and academic goals. Meeka was *sad*. She missed her father, was unhappy with the new family structure in her home, and it was difficult for her to focus her energy or attention on school; as she stated during the interview, she didn't have a "care in the world." These are not the behaviors of a criminal-in-the-making, but rather the reactions of a girl to overwhelming and unpleasant circumstances in her life, circumstances that are completely out of her control. The practice of heterodoxy encourages us to resist deficit thinking and, instead, look to all of the factors that lead to how and why Black and Brown adolescents' have such specific experiences under systems of oppression.

Dominant ideologies are circulated through the work of researchers and practitioners, perpetuating the belief that Black and Brown families are lacking the mental, emotional, familial, and moral foundations necessary to help their children

succeed. Meeka and Daniel share memories from their childhoods that push against the pathologization of Black and Brown families.

*I was her only child, so she used to be teachin me like everything. My numbers, like, like, like ask, raisin my hand for stuff, or like ask the teacher if I can go here or go to the bathroom, like, my mom, she used to already, already be teachin me that type of stuff, like, like, typical things that I should already know. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

***Daniel:** ...I used to wanna make my mom proud, like didn't like, always make her mad. Cause all the fights I used to get into, and like, she used to be worried about me so it would be like "But I can make it up in school" that's how I used to be thinkin about it. Like, one thing, if I brought like a bad grade home, I would make it up. I'd make that like a, I'd make that my priority, I would make it up...I think I got a F in like, was it readin? A D in readin. My mom was like "Make it up" I got it all the way to a B.*

***Kelsey:** Why do you think you had [the D] in the first place?*

***Daniel:** I mean like, when I'm not interested in somethin, I just like "Mmmm"... And readin, the readin class was all like, packet work. I don't like doin packet work. I like readin outta books. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

These participants help us to address the serious flaws in deficit thinking through their stories about parent-child relationships. Meeka remembers the care her mother took in preparing her for school, making sure to teach her “everything.” Daniel’s mother was aware of Daniel’s academic needs and pushed him to achieve at his highest level, to which he responded eagerly. We see that Black and Brown parents are engaged in their children’s school experiences, working to provide supports for their children, regardless of “traditional” family structures or other factors that many use to justify deficit thinking models. Understanding the experiences of Black and Brown families thus *requires* a heterodoxic stance in order to first reject the influence of deficit thinking

on perceptions of these communities and then open ourselves to seeing and hearing what truly exists in the lives of Black and Brown adolescents.

**School.** Active and activist observations are essential for researchers and practitioners who develop relationships with Black and Brown youth and their families. As I've demonstrated throughout this chapter, deficit thinking runs rampant throughout schools and fuels the processes that push young people through the school-to-prison pipeline. Many of these examples were in the context of school and the educational services provided to adolescents. Meeka focused specifically on the context of school to point to how her environment affected the teaching and learning process.

*It was different, it was bigger, it was cr-crowded. I'm, I'm, you might not believe me...I really don't talk to a lot of people. And I really don't like people in my business...I really ain't like it, like, I don't know, I really didn't like high school like that. It was too crowded and like, people's always in your business. So like, I stopped goin. (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

*I didn't like math there. Like, it was a big big class. So she couldn't really explain to us, like, how to really do it good, you know what I mean?...And she, she, she ain't really care. She act like she cared, but she didn't...She was sayin it sometimes, like "I don't care if y'all learn or not! I still get paid"...And if you try to ask her like "Can you come here?" or like, she used to be like, too busy to explain stuff. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

Meeka's memories illuminate the importance of context when unpacking deficit thinking. Her difficulties in school did not stem from a disinterest in learning, a dis/ability, or any problems innate to her character. Rather, Meeka struggled because she was in learning environments that were not conducive to *learning*. She faced overcrowded schools, teachers who verbalized their indifference towards students and their achievement, and a lack of resources to help her understand academic material—all

factors that create unwelcoming and overwhelming schools that cannot possibly provide the appropriate and student-centered education adolescents need to achieve personal and academic goals. Meeka also spoke to the specifics of her development in the context of schooling and achievement.

*[In] kindergarten, I was a good girl like, my mom, she taught me well, like, so I was like up to date wit the stuff and like, learnin and like, my numbers and stuff like that...fourth-grade, like, that's when I first, first started havin my like little problems or whatever. Like, you know, we gettin older and like, they, like, girls is, is, gettin girly and I'm still a tomboy and, you know what I mean? So, I had my first fight in fourth-grade. Um, but my education, education-wise, I was smart. Um, I wasn't failin or anything like that. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

I believe Meeka's explanation of her "little problems" reveals another important contextual factor that helps us to understand the dangers of deficit thinking. She conflates being a tomboy with being a "fighter," in a gendered account of her early school experiences, moving into a deficitized understanding of "naughty" boys in schools (Ferguson, 2001). But Meeka also describes a transitional period, moving out of childhood into adolescence, a period during which young people need the support and guidance of the adults around them, including their teachers. She also notes that she was "smart," evidenced by the fact that she continued to pass her classes. I believe Meeka takes up a heterodoxic stance, noting that a student who gets into fights is not damaged or disengaged in learning, but may be working through any number of factors that lead to physical expressions of anger or frustration in school.

**Experiences in the Courtroom and on the Inside.** Unfortunately, practitioners and other adults who work with youth are not always attuned to the needs of students in schools, leading them to criminalize and pathologize Black and Brown adolescents.



Young people on the inside and advocates, like Caroline, use heterodoxy to resist the deficit thinking that follows incarcerated adolescents through the criminal justice system. ACT takes a resistance stance in its organizational beliefs and goals.

We believe that it is very important to talk to youth both in the adult jails and in public schools to help them stay out of the system period.  
We believe that the more youth that we inform about the school-to-prison pipeline, the more progress we make because knowledge is power.  
We believe that the reason that youth in urban communities end up going through the school-to-prison pipeline and end up incarcerated is because most of them didn't realize that it was even in place. (ACT Mission Statement)

ACT's mission statement uses the power of heterodoxy to push back against a system that would justify the imprisonment of young people and deny the existence of a school-to-prison pipeline. Caroline also illustrates the importance of heterodoxy in stories from the inside, sharing horrifying examples of a legal system rife with neglect and deception. In one interview, Caroline recounts a particularly shocking instance of the legal system working to imprison a young Black man under false pretenses.

"J" was working with ACT as part of a work release agreement as he finished serving a sentence for a misdemeanor. When J is was longer allowed to leave the prison after refusing to plead guilty to an assault (in a separate case), Caroline became involved in the courtroom hearings. During the preliminary hearing, the district attorney (DA) informed the judge that there was DNA evidence against J—enough to hold him , end his work release, and charge him with assault. When they continued to hold J without formally charging him for the crime, Caroline confronted the district attorney and the judge.

*... I get in an argument with the DA on the case about like, "This is some bullshit like, what are you--why have you not charged him if this is the case." Well he gives me this ten minute speech about how J is not the person I think he is and like, I, like, basically I'm naive and I just don't understand that he's like this terrible monster and like all this stuff. Blah blah blah. Um, that afternoon... we get the defense lawyer to finally like try to like call the police detectives and like try to find out what's going on. Like the police detectives in the special victims unit, try to figure out like what's going on and like, why aren't they...filing charges and all this stuff. So basically... literally like hours after this happens in court and the judge hears all this and then doesn't grant his parole, they tell J's lawyer "We're not filing charges in that case." They never had a DNA match...That was just a lie. It was just totally made up... that's why so many people like believe that people in prison are guilty or that like, it works like it does on "Law and Order" where like in the middle of the trial they realize it's the wrong person and everybody goes like "Stop everything! We have the wrong person!"...Like, that's not how it works and like that, if you don't actually see it up close... I understand why it's hard to believe that that's going on (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

The practice of heterodoxy makes room for advocates like Caroline to speak out against deficit thinking and the work it does to disguise systemic oppression as a just criminal justice system. Caroline reveals that while deficit thinking maintains that Black and Brown adolescents need to be incarcerated in order to protect the innocent, there are far too many moments when the innocents are the Black and Brown youth who are trapped by a system engaging in objectively illegal (criminal) acts designed to incarcerate them without cause. Furthermore, Caroline speaks to the pervasiveness of this deficit thinking coupled with the belief that the criminal justice system is committed to justice. Heterodoxy dismantles more than the ideologies disseminated by deficit thinking; it also pulls apart narratives that would quickly assume all institutional agents use honest and legitimate methods to do their jobs. But we see through the power of Caroline's story that we must not only interrogate our beliefs about deficit thinking and the communities it targets, but also how we understand those whose actions go unexamined because of

the power of deficit thinking to direct our critical eye to specific, marginalized communities.

Caroline uses memories from childhood to encourage young people on the inside to explore the unexamined, as well. In an ACT workshop, Caroline pushed the youth to think about the high arrest and incarceration rates in Black and Brown communities.

*... K. was like "Well, you know cause like we're all, like there's more criminals, more of us are criminals" and I was like "You know, my" --and this was, I don't think this was something I had shared with them before--"my dad like, used drugs like most of my childhood and like into my teenage years...and he also got pulled over all the time for speeding..When he was driving, never, like never got searched. And if he had got searched, I'm sure they would've found drugs in his car. But they never did and so, like he's a successful [professional] and like, even though, he would've probably made some better business decisions were he like, not like, living a particular lifestyle and maybe would've been more present in my life and all kinds of other things...I had a dad who was there and was able to provide for our family (Caroline, interview, 2/27/15)*

Deficit thinking would have us believe that Black and Brown communities experience criminal behaviors at rates that justify a racialized mass incarceration. But Caroline's story reveals, through the power of heterodoxic thinking, that it is a matter of perception, how White individuals are perceived affects how they are approached by law enforcement and, consequently, what kinds of criminal justice procedures they encounter. Heterodoxy reveals that the roots of inequality and inequity are not located in the Black and Brown individuals who are most affected by deficit thinking, but rather in the systems that work to target these individuals and their communities.

Perhaps the most important example of heterodoxy at work in the ACT workshops is the humanization of the young people on the inside. Caroline shared a memory of particularly poignant moments during the group discussions at both of the

correctional facilities. These workshops took place the week after a facilitator asked the young people to reflect on a series of writing prompts that included: *In their eyes, I am; In my mother's eyes, I am; In my eyes, I am; and In our (the eyes of the other incarcerated youth), I am.*

*[A young man from the workshops] is being sentenced Tuesday, so [that] was probably his last [day] with us. Um, and he was like "You remember when we did that thing...? Like, can we do that again? Like, that was really great" So we ended up doing it at the end and, and then I did that with the girls at WCC, too, we wrote about how we see each other. Um, and then we read them, like, all together as a whole piece like, "They knew me this way, but my mother views me like, sees me this way" and like "My little sister sees me this way and I see myself this way" and...it was really powerful and like, just, some of the stuff that people said was like, just blew me away and was super inspiring to be thinking about how we see ourselves and, just like, reclaiming that. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Heterodoxy does more than resist the work of deficit thinking. It emphasizes possibilities for those who have been oppressed and marginalized and reminds them that they are more than the pathologies used to define their characters and their existence. Freire (1996) speaks to the importance of revealing oppression to the oppressed; I believe, in rejecting the ideologies put forth by deficit thinking, heterodoxy does just that. In this example, Caroline and ACT work to guide youth to a better understanding of who they are, to reclaim their identities, and remember how they exist outside of their cells and outside of their incarceration.

The participants in this dissertation study shared many examples of the deficit thinking that created barriers to success for Black and Brown youth and funnel them to and through the school-to-prison pipeline. Yet their stories revealed that they are actively working through the critical errors in deficit thinking ideologies, building a

space for resistance through heterodoxy, and generating hope for the liberation of pathologized Black and Brown adolescents and their communities.

## Chapter Eight: Giftedness/Personal Intelligence

*Kelsey: How do you define giftedness?*

*Lisha: We had a class, mentally gifted...It was like a real smart class... it was like a program...they have in there, but it's like, it's like um, real smart people, like, they so smart. They was, they was real smart people there...they just like, they was just top grades in school like, top, top of the class...Or, like, you got a gift or somethin... like, God gave you a gift or a somethin, whatever it is. (Lisha, interview, 1/30/15)*

*Meeka: Like, somebody has like, um, like, we each--each and every one of us got a different gift. Like, like, if one of us good at math or like, excellent wit readin and stuff like that. Cause I remember, my aunt, my mom best friend, that's like my aunt. She used to be like "No, Meeka, she's not bad, she's gifted." or "She's special" and say stuff like that. Um, so that's why I laugh, that's why I was laughin, cause she used to be sayin that all the time. Like, she understood me, she wasn't like--cause they used to be like "She bad" she used to be like "No, no, she's not bad, she's gifted and she's, she's special" (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)*

*Caroline: I guess like gifted would mean like, having like (pauses) unusual abilities, like, in a way that's framed as positive that like, other people don't have? I think that that word a lot of times comes up in a--it means uh--in a way that means like, "Oh, this Black kid's actually smart" it like, comes up in the context of like, this exceptionalism...and if somebody's actually like doing well in school, they're like really gifted, or that's the way that they're like talked about in a way that's also like, seems like it's about saying that's unusual or something for...so I think sometimes it can be, there can be complicated things about how that's used. (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15)*

Giftedness represents the other extreme of ability discourse and, in the context of a racialized deficit thinking model, may provide a space to explore other forms of heterodoxy and resistance to the criminalization and pathologization of Black and Brown youth. To gain a better understanding of giftedness in the conversations with the participants in this study, I use the tenets described in Kaufman's (2013) Theory of Personal Intelligence. This theory reminds us that "intelligence is the dynamic interplay of engagement and abilities in pursuit of personal goals...the focus of analysis is the *person*. All that exists for that individual is a series of *intelligent behaviors* that unfold across his or

her life.” (p. 302). This theory is not only more inclusive of characteristics not traditionally thought of as “gifts” than its predecessors, it is also a strong theory for attention to giftedness in adolescents. Young people hold sets of personal goals that may not always align with academic, social, and emotional goals set by school and structured learning environments. Additionally, the Theory of Personal Intelligence allows for the exploration of different forms of intelligence and giftedness over the course of an individual’s life; we can understand giftedness in youth as constantly evolving and strengthening as they hone in on their special interests. Thus, following my beliefs as outlined in the theoretical and conceptual frameworks of this dissertation study, to determine that an adolescent is “ungifted” would be just as reckless as a classification of dis/ability—we would miss the wide range of exceptional characteristics and behaviors that make each individual capable of achieving any number of personal goals. This theory is also useful in understand how we can push back against pathologizing narratives that are specifically targeted at Black and Brown youth; the Theory of Personal Intelligence calls for a deeper examination of the individual and the interests and goals of the individual, not each person’s ability to measure up to biased, standardized intelligence assessments. In this chapter, I call upon two tenets from the Theory of Personal Intelligence in order to discuss the participants’ understandings of giftedness in the context of the school-to-prison pipeline and incarceration.

## Looking to the Core: The Self is the Key to Intelligence

The first tenet of Kaufman's (2013) Theory of Personal Intelligence states:

*...the self is a core aspect of human intelligence. The self includes all of the personal characteristics that an individual has integrated into his or her identity...a consideration of the self, and the individual's need to express that self, is essential if we are to truly understand the person's goals, and the intelligent behaviors he or she is displaying. (p. 301).*

During our conversations, the participants who had been incarcerated spoke frequently about personal goals in the context of the identities they claimed and were working to develop. Daniel shared an inner intelligence, an "energy" that draws people to him in any environment.

*So how I look at it, other people, they just around me 'cause who I am. 'Cause of the spirit I give off, the energy I give off. People love that and some people envy that, from the energy I give off and give to people so it be like "Aww, Daniel, aww he a good, he a good person" you feel me? (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

Lisha often referenced her strength as being central to her identity both in her resolve and as a parent...

*...I am a strong person...like um, physically, mentally, whatever...like most people can't, take care of they kids how I can. (Lisha, interview, 1/30/15)*

...as well as in her ability to integrate a new kind of strength into her life in an effort to attain new goals, post-incarceration.

*[I am strong] as like, not lettin anyone bring you down. Like, just stayin on top of you. Like, someone can say what they want and things like that, but you don't let that get to you. So that's why I say I am strong...And, just like, knowin your surroundings. And, like I said, don't, far as not hangin wit the wrong crowd and stuff like that. I was strong enough to get away from people...Some people is weak and can't get away from cert-certain situations. (Lisha, interview, 1/30/15)*



These intelligent behaviors, these gifts, are located at the very core of Daniel and Lisha. They both speak to these characteristics as integral to who they are; Daniel understands his charisma, his “spirit” as central to his identity—powerfully magnetic, and, at times the root of the jealousy felt by his peers. For Lisha, strength is something she has always possessed and, presently, prioritizes in her life in order to achieve new personal goals attached to her identity as a mother.

Their gifts of energy and strength were central to another theme that emerged from the data: leadership. For Lisha, Daniel, and Meeka, leadership was a major factor in determining whether or not they were reaching personal and social goals. Social goals were slightly more prevalent in the interviews than others types of goals (academic, emotional) which I believe is due in large part to the nature of adolescence; relationships with peers are incredibly important to young people (Susman et al., 1994; Steinberg, 2001; Zarrett & Eccles, 2006). Noting their roles as leaders allowed the participants to share a type of giftedness that, while different than a high IQ or exceptionally high level of performance on academic assessments, is largely recognized as special and something to be valued by even the most traditional definitions of giftedness.

Daniel’s role as a leader came naturally during school; he spoke about his leadership in the context of popularity amongst his peers.

*When I come, when I came to school, it was like I was somebody. “Oh there go Daniel! What’s up?”...They used to be like “Damn, what’s up Daniel?... Yo, what’s up, D?”...I felt good in school! Yeah, I felt good in school. I was popular, I was popular. (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

*I mean I had friends...in every class, though. I always had, I always had like a little, like people that like flock to me. It's like, I'd be the leader over everybody...I felt like, not like a celebrity, but it was like I always was in the in-crowd. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

Daniel's description of his leadership quality is rooted in an understanding that his gift is innate; all he had to do was be present in order to have people around him, to have classmates "flock" to him. His leadership intelligence brought him popularity and the overwhelming approval of his peers. What is especially important to note in Daniel's memories is that being a leader, being popular, made him feel *good* in school. When we think about giftedness and intelligent behaviors, we must also remember how important it is for individuals—for young people (for Black and Brown young people)—to have opportunities to feel good and valued in their school contexts, to feel included and liked by those around them. While the focus on giftedness led to a discussion of leadership in this dissertation study, any giftedness that is recognized and valued can be priceless in the experiences of adolescents.

For Lisha, leadership was also rooted in the perceptions of her peers, although she exercised her leadership in ways that were different than Daniel's. She shared one story of a teacher who was being mocked by students in her class.

*Lisha: ... they like always used to mess wit her. At first, it was funny, I always used to laugh and stuff, but then I was like "Leave her alone!"...Af-after a while like, I saw her one day, she was cryin like "This is crazy" stuff like that. So then ever since I was like "Leave her alone!" stuff like that, I'd get mad*

*Kelsey: I'm sure she appreciated that*

*Lisha: Mmhmm. She said that to me at the end, cause they really stopped messin wit her, they stopped. I wasn't playin wit them, they know I wasn't playin wit them. I was gon beat them right in they head (laughs) (Lisha, interview, 1/23/15)*

Lisha used to her leadership—along with the threat of a physical altercation—in order to right a wrong in the classroom. It is interesting that she mentions it was her teacher’s emotional response to the students’ mocking her that made her change her attitude about the humor in the teasing. Lisha possessed the quality of leadership, but it had to be “activated” in order for her to see the need to call upon her gift. Thus, leadership is understood as a gift that cannot be acknowledged unless there is an opportunity for a leader to emerge.

Meeka’s interviews reveal a similar experience in taking on the leadership role and using her gift as a leader.

*...I got the leader instinct like, every, like group home that I went to, I swear to God I controlled. Like, I put that on everything I love, I controlled it. (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

*... I realized [I was gifted] at a young age... I was...really really good in school like, until like, I started hangin wit the wrong people, then I started like, bein real bad...Like, at first like, I was bein a follower and stuff like that. And then I became the leader. That's how I knew like, like, I was gifted. People started followin after me...I always been popular, everywhere I went...Like I got the gift to lead people...I used to be like, be like everybody else like "I wanna do this and I wanna do that" my mom used to be like "They not my kids, you are"...So I just started doin my own little thing...Like, I learned how to be a leader, like, of course you gotta learn how to be a leader, you know what I mean? You're not just born wit it, it don't come naturally...Like, I learned how to be a leader, cause I used to be wantin to do what everybody else wanted to do. (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)*

Like Daniel, Meeka places an emphasis on her popularity in school, which is in keeping with the adolescent desires to be liked and included by their peers (Susman et al., 1994; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). She takes it to the next level of leadership, noting that people were not only drawn to her, but following her lead, regardless of the context. Yet, Meeka differs from Daniel and Lisha in that she spends time processing moments

when she did not access her leadership intelligence and took up the role of “follower.” When she talks about wanting to “be like everybody else,” she defines this time as absence of her leadership; it is important to acknowledge that Meeka felt like a follower, yet I am also quick to note that this period of time may have also been marked by developmental processes that are expected in adolescents as well as by the difficult situations at home with her mother and stepfather. Meeka also mentions the influence of “the wrong people” on her follower status as well as the influence of her mother on guiding her back to a leadership role. Like, Lisha, Meeka points to a moment of activation; the difference between these activation points is that Lisha did not describe a transition from follower to leader, whereas Meeka is specifically referring to a transition within herself. Giftedness draws upon innate qualities, but it needs support and nurturance from external factors and time to grow into the intelligent behaviors that make giftedness easily identifiable by even the most rigid of standards. Meeka explains that while she has the leader “instinct,” she still had to learn how to be a leader with guidance from her mother and after experiencing what it was like to be a follower with the “wrong people.” While I appreciate the focus on the individual in the Theory of Personal Intelligence, it is clear that the adolescent Self still needs support in order to best cultivate a set of intelligent behaviors that will allow a young person to achieve personal goals.

The gift of leadership can only be recognized in an interpersonal setting with the right conditions and opportunities to be in a leadership role. Thus, it is not surprising that all of the accounts of giftedness include conversations about others. But it is the focus on *comparison* between the participants’ leadership intelligence and the leadership

abilities of those around them that is of particular interest to me. While describing specific, unique, and personal intelligences, it is important for Meeka, Lisha, and Daniel to speak about their gifts in juxtaposition to others who *lack* these particular characteristics. I believe this is the nature of how we have been socialized to think about special intelligences and gifts; it is not enough to possess a gift and claim it as a part of your identity—the very nature of gifts place you in competition or a hierarchy with those around you. Even in the context of the Theory of Personal Intelligence, a theory that attempts to individualize giftedness through flexible tenets (as opposed to criteria), it is easy to see how these traditional constraints on giftedness are difficult to avoid. I highlight this observation not to label Daniel, Meeka, and Lisha as conceited or narcissistic, but to point to how this tension may complicate even the most culturally competent of theories of intelligence and giftedness, theories that break tradition and open up space to explore the very real intelligent behaviors of Black and Brown adolescents who have historically been left out of the conversation.

### **Engagement and Ability in Intelligent Behaviors and Giftedness**

Though the problem of hierarchy in conversations around giftedness is still pervasive, it does not mean that external factors should not be ignored when making meaning of individuals' intelligent behaviors.

...engagement and ability are inseparable throughout human development, dynamically feeding off each other as we engage in the world. Our interests and passions direct our attention to key aspects of a stimulus, and cause us to ignore other aspects...our continual engagement builds up the expertise base that allows us to reach higher and higher heights of performance. (Kaufman, 2013, p. 304).

Giftedness requires interaction with the environment (people, institutions, experience and exposure, resources) in order to grow and guide us towards specific interests that speak to our strengths. The more we engage with our passions, the more skilled we become and the stronger our intelligent behaviors in our area of giftedness. The participants shared specific examples of their gifts and how these intelligent behaviors were cultivated throughout their adolescence.

*I came up with my own idea, like "Damn, man, I did all the showcases, I don't benefit nothin from it...How bout I do my own show and get other performers to perform at my showcase, I get paid off it, and still, and still get to get heard on my own time?" ...like who thought I would be throwin my own showcases, you feel me? So like, I never...limit myself to nothin, cause you could be anything you want, you know what I mean? And that take some time...I went through a lot of bumps and bruises, I'm still here. (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

*I like writing. I'm a writer. So that's why I don't mind writin stuff. Like my, my writin is on point...I know how to write. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

*...I really loved writing. Like, I really like writing and stuff...I think I was really good at it--I really like things that I'm good at, so (laughs) there was that. I knew I was good at it so I um, like positive feedback...I was like really shy also in high school and middle school. Um, like I, I, barely ever spoke in class unless...I was called on or was a thing that I really, like I needed to say...I think like writing was a space where I didn't feel as shy and like could like express more stuff and like, I wrote a play in high school at some point that was like a finalist for some award...I like like creating imagined things and being...I think I felt like, a little more like freedom, a little more free in writing...my writing teacher...suggested—I wrote it for class and she suggested that I submit it. It was pretty cool (Caroline, interview, 1/25/15)*

As Daniel, Meeka, and Caroline each discuss their engagement with their gifts, it is clear that they are driven by a special interest, a particular passion for their talents. Intelligent behaviors need to be identified within a field of interest for individuals and, specifically, for adolescents who are developing new interests and skills as they become more and more independent and aware of their strengths. This is especially true for

Black and Brown youth who may experience their interests and passions at the intersection of cultures with different notions of intelligent behavior. Though there have been plenty of theories addressing the concept of multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983; Sternberg, 1984; Subotnik et al., 2011; Kaufman, 2013), the focus on achievement in school settings is still largely centered around academic achievement (as measured by standardized assessments) and a lack of cultural competency makes teachers less likely to understand the intelligent behaviors exhibited by Black and Brown youth (Thomas et al., 2009; Stevenson, 2014). For many of these students, “gifted” is an identity that is overlooked and denied in educational spaces that do not want to expand rigid beliefs about intelligence and ability.

During our interviews, Caroline continued to answer the question of “Who is gifted?” complicating the notion of giftedness with an understanding of how opportunities to engage with our gifts and interests place certain individuals at an advantage, highlighting their intelligent behaviors in ways that are not possible for other young people in other situations. First, through personal experience during school:

*There [were] two kindergartens...it's like, wealthy White kids need an extra year of kindergarten? I mean...I don't know why there's junior and senior kindergarten...I went to this private school that like, um, was like mostly White, like, mostly like middle upper class kids...I just remember a lot of like individual attention and like all the classes were like relatively small and...there was that, like, non-competitiveness, but then like, at the same time it was in an environment where like, it was understood that like, you were gonna go to a college that people had heard of, like, people had so much access to that and like, parents had gone to like, Yale or Princeton or whatever school they wanted to go to and like, um, thousands of dollars to spend on like, the Pre, Pre-SAT prep and things like that so it was like, kind of like a false non-competitiveness. So there was a lot going on that gave people a huge edge and that (Caroline, interview, 1/25/15)*

And then through a broader analysis of what it means to be “gifted”:

*... I definitely always like excelled in school and I feel like that word maybe has been--like was used at different points from teachers and things like in references to me. Like, my like, like writing abilities and things like that. Um, which I always felt was sort of like not really, like, was more about like, the school that I had and the education that I had access to, not like a natural gift or something...I think like, the idea that some, someone's like gifted often like, hides a lot of like, education and class privilege and things of like why somebody has certain skills that somebody else might not and, I don't know (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15)*

Caroline touches on two important points here. First, there is additional attention to the fact that adolescents' gifts must be supported by the adults in their lives, people who can help them hone in on special skill sets and encourage them to continue to dive into their passions. Second, Caroline fills in what Kaufman (2013) has overlooked, reminding us that socioeconomic status and racial identity—so often interconnected in the context of the United States—have a deep and powerful impact on the perceived giftedness of an adolescent. Caroline's discussion of an extra year of individualized instruction in a school with substantial resources in a community possessing a great amount of formal knowledge and extended social and academic access reminds us of the stark differences between the schooling experiences of wealthy White children and adolescents and their Black and Brown peers from lower-income neighborhoods. Thinking back to Meeka's discussion of crowded classrooms—so overwhelming that she stopped going to school—or Lisha's frustration at the indifference of her teachers and peers in classroom that wasn't meant for learning, how can we expect their intelligent behaviors to be nurtured in the same way as Caroline's? Or even recognized? Caroline is describing an incredible advantage received because of race, wealth, and location. Understanding what traditional notions of giftedness “hide”



is important if we are truly committed to providing opportunities for engagement and growth for *all* young people who *all* express intelligent behaviors.

In addition to the deep engagement in and pursuit of personal goals, the participants spoke to the specific dynamics between engagement and academic ability. I must admit that I was surprised to hear them (specifically, the two participants who spent the most time incarcerated, Daniel and Meeka) speak to their academic achievement and giftedness within restrictive learning environments with such eagerness and joy. I wrongly assumed that their time in disciplinary schools and correctional facilities would be detrimental to their attitudes about school, but these two participants described experiences that brought pride and self-assurance. They had opportunities to develop their gifts through the ACT Saturday workshops and Caroline's mentorship

*... that's why me and Caroline, we click so good like, when I used to come, like they used to, like its be times I used to like be depressed and Saturday mornings, I just wouldn't be myself...then it be like, Caroline was there every Saturday. And she used to be like, "Is Daniel there?" And she'd ask for me and I, I used to always come. And it be like, damn, then she used to be wantin me to be in charge of the whole thing and everything and it used to be like, alright, boom...she would be like, "Well, you know, you, you, you could do a lot of good work, you know what I mean? You ever thought about doin anything on your own?" I say "Yeah" I say "I rap as a hobby" but I never thought about being big, but... I got a mind, I got a mind I mean, I can only imagine...just me putt in my mind to things... I make it happen. (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

*I came in Saturday and...I was like "Caroline, I wrote a poem"...I was like "You wanna hear it?" and I'm sayin it to everybody, everybody like "Ohh, that's good, that's good!" and that's when I started gettin into it, like, like, the art and poetry workshops. (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

as well as through the educational services provided by the efforts of the School District of Philadelphia and the Philadelphia Prison System (the Pennypack School House):

*Aight, real wrap. I was sittin in the cell and the teacher was like, uh, like “Daniel, would you like to get your GED?” I’m like “Yeah, anything to get out the cell. Hell yeah!” So they do, they did a pre-test, I passed that with flying colors. And then they just was like “Well, well since you just passed that, well you might as well take your GED.” And I took it and I passed it one time...It felt good. I mean, I always liked school. The thing is, like even though I did my little things in the street, I liked, I always went to school. Because it’s like, alright well...I always knew that one day—like, my mom always told me, “One thing nobody can ever take from you is your education.” (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

*...at RCF, when Miss Lowe used to be there, like she used to be sayin how smart we was (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)*

*...I been wantin to take [the GED]. But [Miss Lowe] said I had to get prepared and do six weeks and trainin for the GED. I ain't even wanna do all that, I just wanted to take it...Passed on the pre-trial thing, pre, pre-test. And I was the highest one in there, that passed on the test. She used to be like "Oh my!!" She was like "Look! Meeka, look! Look, look, look!!!" I'd be like, she hype! (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

It seems as though the best supports for their academic identities came from within the most restrictive and isolated learning environment! Daniel and Meeka describe mentors and educators who presented them with opportunities to succeed and supported them throughout the process of achieving their goals. Turnbull (2010) asserts that educators must focus on enhancing students’ innate strengths and honing students’ thinking abilities through an engaged pedagogical stance (p. 478). These adults helped them recognize their strengths and maintain focus on the things they had always valued (i.e. getting an education) but had not previously had the opportunity to attain in supportive and nurturing environments.

The truth is that there are a number of institutional agents who believe in the giftedness of incarcerated youth, and not just those who are charged with educating the young people in more formal academic settings. In our conversations, Caroline shared insights on the perspectives of correctional officers and wardens who interact with the young people on a regular basis within the correctional facilities.

*... sometimes like an officer will ask what we, what we did that day and we'll talk about how like "Yeah, a lot of them are like really smart and like creative or talented, it's a shame they're in here" Um, and, a couple weeks ago, actually, we did like a freestyling, somebody did like a freestyle workshop, and one of the kids um, like was rapping at the end, just like, off the top of his head, and did a really powerful piece right when an officer like came in the room, um, and it was like about--it was like, it was like sort of being critical of the whole system and um, just really good. Um, so when were walking out then the officer was like just talking about how like talented they are and how it's so upsetting to see them there. Um, so like I've had that, like those kinds of conversations. And with some of like the sergeants and wardens about like, like I think there's a good number of people who work in the system who recognize like, there are a lot of like, really smart like, talented young people there, um, and who don't necessarily think they should be there. (Caroline, interview, 2/1/15)*

It is important to remember that systems of oppression are not always staffed with people who *want* to oppress. The Philadelphia Prison System, like many corrections systems, is a complex institution with layers of inequity at every level; being a correctional officer is one of the highest-paying jobs in the city for someone with a high-school diploma, with a salary of approximately \$35,000 a year. (Officer XX, personal communication, 1/10/15). Some institutional agents have a strong understanding of these adolescents' gifts; they are able to identify with them racially and socioeconomically, they understand their stories and can connect with them. They do their best to support these young people even as they work in a system that is a constant source of oppression.

I say this to end the discussion of giftedness and personal intelligence in incarcerated youth on a hopeful note. Although the school-to-prison pipeline is responsible for negligence when it comes to understanding the gifts and exceptional intelligence of Black and Brown youth, there are individuals working within the confines of the pipeline who are resisting these pathologizing narratives and working to highlight and nurture the very real goals and achievements of these young people along the way. I believe this is crucial to keep in mind as we think about the challenges we face in this kind of research and begin to imagine new possibilities for incarcerated Black and Brown youth.

## Chapter Nine: Cross-Cutting Themes

Throughout the analysis of participant interviews and institutional documents, there were a number of cross-cutting themes that were strongly linked to a deeper understanding of dis/ability and giftedness in the context of juvenile incarceration in adult correctional facilities. I use this chapter to discuss the themes of race, community, and isolation that emerged from the data.

### Race

Given the racialized nature of the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration (Milovanovic, Russell, & Russell-Brown, 2001; Herivel & Wright, 2003; Davis, 2005; Davis, 2011; Alexander, 2012), it is not surprising that race was a cross-cutting theme throughout the data set. In keeping with the beliefs outlined in my conceptual framework, I look to Critical Race Theory in order to best understand how the experiences of the participants are aligned with the goals of this study and an activist stance towards race in the school-to-prison pipeline. Specifically, I use four of the Critical Race Theory tenets outlined in my conceptual framework: the intercentricity of race and racism, the challenge to dominant ideology, the commitment to social justice, and the centrality of experiential knowledge/racial socialization.

**The Intercentricity of Race and Racism.** Discussions of race and racial interactions were frequent throughout interviews with the participants. Some of the examples they shared were direct references to the racism endemic to societal structures we navigate on a daily basis.

*Like, my skin color is, is worth way more than a jail cell..., like the system is, is set up for us Black men to kinda fail, you feel me?... it's like how the hood is set up, it's- it's like designed for, for a Black man to fail, (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

*Well, me, like, I'm Black African-American and like, I know like, it's a lot of like, White people in this world and it's a lot of racism. So like, in their opinion, they don't look at us equal. You know what I mean? Like, but me, like, I know that I'm equal, and I could be whatever, just like how they became what they became. Like, but a lot of people like, in our race, probably feel as though like, they're not where they should be or they're not like, what they need to be because of race and because of all the stuff that we, that we got put through. You know, it's a couple make it out, you know what I mean? Like, and a lot of us can't...Like all the things that they put us through like, like they target our communities and stop-and-frisk and you know, like, lock up majority of young Black people when it's other like, communities that's doin the same things like, suburbs they sell drugs. (Meeka, interview, 2/28/15)*

Daniel and Meeka express an acute awareness of a system that is designed to target and oppress their community. In these excerpts, they share observations of this kind of targeting with clear ideas of what racial oppression looks like and how it operates. However, discussions of race and racism were not as clear when participants described their direct, interpersonal relationships involving racial moments and the potential for racism. These conversations—specifically for Lisha, Daniel, and Meeka—were hazy and unsure, with the three participants identifying potential examples of racism only to insist that tensions had nothing to do with race. Take for example Daniel's explanation of his relationships with Black and White teachers:

*I clicked with more of Black teachers than my White teachers...Cause they looked at me as a good kid, like. I don't know, like, I felt more comfortable with them, you feel me... race have nothin, didn't have nothin to do wit it, it just like, the African-American teachers, it was like they took*

*more time wit me...they wouldn't just get frustrated like "Get out! Get out the class!"... They would be like, they be givin me chances...I had another teacher, too. She worked at FIC. I forgot her name, but she was a good teacher. She wasn't, she wasn't African-American. No, she wasn't—she was Caucasian. But it, it, it had nothin to do wit that. It didn't have nothin to do wit the race. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

Although Daniel specifies race as a factor in his relationships with teachers at the beginning of this excerpt, he denies the importance of race in these relationships twice. This is not to say that all of his relationships with Black teachers were perfect or that all of his relationships with White teachers were damaging, but it is the frame that *he* constructs at the onset that he is continually grappling with and working to undo as he shares his experiences. These theoretical oscillations occur throughout Daniel's meaning making processes. This is perhaps most apparent in his description of a friendship in high school, with a White student named Zach.

*I had this White boy in my class, his name is um, his name is Zach...This dude was like the most racist, funniest dude and we was best friends...Cause it was like, he was like—it was the smart stuff he used to say, and I, I would laugh at it cause like I wasn't ignorant, like worryin about it, we would joke a lot...it was somethin like "my n\*<sup>11</sup>"—he used to do—he used to do it like, knowingly, like, thinkin I would like flip, but when he first did it I laughed at him, like, "Yo, that's funny" like, I never had had a White person come to me say somethin like n\*, so he was like, I was like "What's up, my cracker?" (laughs) and we used to go back and forth like, he was like, he's like, he said "Well, you's n\*-ERS" and I'd be like "Well, you's crack-ERS" we used to be playin, but we also was like best friends like, it used to be like, alright, when we put that to the side, we be like "Damn, you brought lunch?" "Naw" "You can have some of mine"...stuff like that. It used to be our like little playin around thing... he was really racist like, he was brought up like, really bein*

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<sup>11</sup> I would like to address my representation of this word as n\* in this dissertation. I have very emotional reactions to hearing this word used and seeing it in print, even with the vowels asterisked as a form of "censorship." While I understand the ways in which many Black and Brown people have reclaimed the word and use it frequently, I personally do not feel inclined in any way to reproduce this word through my own work. I understand that I have made the decision to alter the participant narratives in this way and I am comfortable with acknowledging the power I enacted when making this decision.

*racist... he was like "No, I, I, I, love Black people, like, I'm cool, like. We sit out here." But it just like, it ju-just, I'm like, it had to come from his parents. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

It seems that Daniel was willing to excuse the clear examples of Zach's racist views because he believed Zach's racial socialization, the way he was raised to understand race and racial interactions (Stevenson, 1997) was the responsibility of Zach's parents. This is not to say that Daniel and Zach did not have close relationships—they looked out for each other and, as Daniel shares at another point in this interview, spent a lot of time together outside of school. But the glaring racism—that Daniel acknowledges—is striking when juxtaposed with Daniel's concerns about systemic oppression and the targeting of Black men. Furthermore, Daniel speaks to a specific policing of his emotions in the context of hearing racist language; he notes that he wasn't "ignorant," because he laughed at Zach's use of racial slurs—and then returned the language through his own use of racial slurs. It is surprising to me that Daniel, as a Black man who expresses deep pride in his racial identity and possesses an awareness of the intercentricity of racism, would feel that it would be "ignorant" to do anything but laugh when called a racial slur. While this is, at first read, a disturbing exchange in my eyes, I also believe it speaks to the need for a temporal-developmental lens when interpreting adolescents' language and meaning making. I believe Daniel's understanding of how he and Zach were making meaning of race and racism are deeply rooted in the processes of adolescent development and a specific time in history. First, this exchange takes place a time when the Black community has reclaimed the N-word. Second, Daniel, through his continual denial of the existence of racism in his closer relationship and daily experiences, seems to be embracing some elements of a post-racial ideology; nothing is



about race, it is beyond the conversation of race—everything is about the relationships with *people*. We see this again in Daniel’s discussion of his friendship with Zach in the context of their high school.

*but for real me and Zach was like...that was my dawg. But there wasn't a lot of racism [in the school], it was like, the Whites hang wit Whites and the Black hang wit Blacks. You never see like the mixture sometimes. It be like the Blacks wit Blacks and the Whites wit Whites. (Daniel, interview, 1/8/15)*

Even as he described a racially segregated school, Daniel insisted there wasn’t a lot of racism; it is unlikely, given the freeness with which he and Zach used racial slurs and the racial segregation of the school, that there wasn’t a significant amount of racial tension in the high school. But, again, it was important to Daniel to make sure I understood that racial tensions were not present, *even as* he returned to the discussion of systemic oppression that Black and Brown communities must face in their lives throughout his interviews.

Meeka had a similarly tense relationship with racism in her conversations, although this tension appears more in her discussion of her emotional responses to two racial moments that she defines as explicitly racist, the first at the school affiliated with her first group home and the second during a presentation with ACT.

*So, I went [away]. And, I was going to the school with all these White people... I didn't really like it. It was like, a lot of racism up there. It was like, majority White, and like three Blacks...like the teachers and like, some of the students, like, the way, they looks and feel, the snickers, and the smart remarks, stuff like that. Like, stuff like that. But it was alright, like, it had choir and all that, all that extra stuff. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/14)*

*I just did somethin wit[a university], uh, wit Caroline. Uh, it was recent, like a day ago or two days ago and um, it was this White guy and he--everybody else acknowledged me and her, like "Thank you guys for comin" He would not acknowledge me, like, he just looked at her, said "Thank you for coming." Did not look at me. And then again, as he was leavin out, he looked at her and was like "Thanks for comin" and would not acknowledge me...My race had somethin to do wit it [but]...I ain't feel no type a way. First I was like "Oh, he funny" but I already knew what it was when he acknowledged her and didn't acknowledge me. It didn't make me feel any type a way, I just knew, I know that racism is still alive. (Meeka, interview, 2/28/15)*

Meeka described racial moments that would understandably result in racial stress, yet is unwillingly to discuss the emotional effects of these moments. The extant literature tells us that the effects of racial stress are real and that there are many coping strategies used to combat the effects of this stress (Stevenson et al., 1997; Harrell, 2000; Carter, 2007; Estrada-Martínez et al., 2012). Like Daniel, Meeka is willing to dive deeply into the work of racism at the macro-level, but is reluctant to discuss how racism affects her in the more personal and direct moments of her daily life. I again describe this as a coping strategy and I also point to the possibility that this is a developmental process at work; as an older adolescent, it is possible that Meeka is still working to make meaning of her experiences in ways that connect “small” occurrences—like the racial microaggressions she experienced in these settings (Sue et al., 1997) to the larger challenges her community faces. Meeka’s stories reveal the vulnerability that accompanies situations that potentially trigger stereotype threat, when knowledge of stereotypes can affect performance and produce self-doubt (Steele& Aronson, 1995); in order to combat these feelings, Meeka may rely upon a denial of her feelings about the situation in order to *survive* the situation—especially if she knows that there will be many other presentations with many other racial microaggressions in her future.

### The Challenge to Dominant Ideology and the Commitment to Social Justice.

These tenets of Critical Race Theory were most prevalent in Caroline's interviews. Given the nature of ACT's work, it is not surprising that Caroline would address a commitment to social justice and work to continually challenge dominant ideologies throughout the series of interviews. It was clear that this commitment began in Caroline's undergraduate studies after being charged with the fight for racial justice

*...at the end of my time at [college] like coming to North Franklin more and getting, thinking more about, like, race and social justice and class in Franklin, um, like from my own positioning in the US. And like wanting to get more involved in racial justice work and thinking like, sort of like abstractly about issues of incarceration...there's this amazing professor... and she teaches a bunch of courses where people read James Baldwin, The Fire Next Time, and she basically, like, really pushes mostly White classes of students to like, first recognize that they're White (laughs) and recognize that that means something and talk about like, think about how racism impacts daily lives and all the structures that we live in. Um, and then like, basically challenges her students at the end of the semester to like, "Are you gonna like, take on the fight for racial justice? And if you're not, then you're part of upholding racism and White supremacy and all of those things." Um, and she's sort of like, "That's cool, that's fine (laughs) but like, you need to make that choice." Um, and, like, I took that pretty seriously...in that class and then like, on my own...thinking about how like, slavery tied directly into like, the emergence of the prison system and, conflict, convict-leasing and all of that, um, and how that led to like, what we see is mass incarceration today... and so like that, there was that like intellectual stuff happening and being pushed by a couple professors in particular, um, to think about my role in the fight for racial justice. (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Caroline's approach to the weekly workshops is thus deeply rooted in these tenets of Critical Race Theory and the work Caroline does through ACT is necessarily racial. It is interesting to hear Caroline track an interest in social/racial justice with roots in college, given that Caroline was raised in "liberal" household. Caroline

remembers the ways in which racial socialization took on complicated forms in a “progressive” home.

*You know...my parents are like, good progressive liberals, whatever, um, and it's not like they were ac-actively racist in anyway. But they certainly didn't like, actively challenge racism, right? Or talk about race in our house growing up. Um, and so like, it was like, we didn't, we just like didn't go the South Side of Chicago and it wasn't talked about why, but it was like, understood and...people in my school would joke about the housing projects a mile away and they were like "You don't go over there" and like, make like really shitty jokes about the people who came, like, in their neighborhood to trick-or-treat and being scared (S1, 7)*

Caroline’s story is incredibly important in the context of those who claim to work within a Critical Race Framework. Challenging ideologies and taking a social justice stance requires more than an avoidance of problematic narratives; as Caroline notes, it requires *actively* challenging racism. Caroline’s understanding of this work is also deeply connected to a sense of identity; being a White person who has never been incarcerated, Caroline engages in constant reflection around positioning and the racial dynamics that emerge while working in ACT.

*I think it's really important for any White people who are really actively engaged in this kind of work--especially in work with like, people on the inside, people who are targeted by the prison system--to be, like always thinking about their own race, thinking about like White privilege and how that plays into like, kinda all the interactions that we're having. I think, like, for me, I think like a couple of specific ways that, that it plays, that like, being White person going in and working mostly with people of color...we talk a lot in our workshops about like, inequality and about racism and like, you know recently we've been talking a lot about Ferguson and you know, young people--primarily young Black men being targeted by police, um, and then whenever we talk about race (laughs) or um, White people doing something, the kids'll be like "No offense" (both laugh) and I'm like "Really, we can talk about, I'm not offended" (Caroline, interview, 2/27/15)*

As a facilitator and mentor, Caroline recognizes that an essential part of the work is to take up the practice of reflexivity, constantly thinking about issues of race, privilege, and personal positioning. I believe her attention to the racial maneuvers of the young people is especially powerful; Caroline has developed a cultural competency that allows for authentic engagement with Black and Brown youth (Stevenson, 2014) and, as a result, has developed the coping strategies necessary for dealing any racial stress that may arise during difficult racial conversation (Stevenson et al., 1997; Harrell, 2000; Carter, 2007; Estrada-Martínez et al., 2012). Caroline's attention to these skills and strategies allows for the mental space necessary to address the needs of the young people without the burden of attempting to hide racial stress or overcompensate due to a lack of cultural competence. When the adolescents express hesitance or a discomfort around engaging in discussion about Black and Brown life, Caroline is able to invite them to speak candidly because of the time that has been invested in a self-directed interrogation of privilege. We see that following a practice aligned with Critical Race Theory is not only important for decarceration efforts and work with incarcerated youth that is social justice-oriented, but *specifically* important to working with Black and Brown adolescents on the inside, to be able to acknowledge racial tension while addressing developmental needs.

**Other racial themes.** Though the tenets of Critical Race Theory were useful in interpreting the emergent themes in these data, there were two other racial themes that seemed to stand outside of the theory, with equally powerful influences on the perspectives and stories of the participants.

### *The n-word.*

In order for me to live, I decided very early that some mistake had been made somewhere. I was not a “n\*” even though you called me one...I had to realize when I was very young that I was none of those things that I was told I was. I was not, for example, happy. I never touched a watermelon for all kinds of reasons. I had been invented by white people, and I knew enough about life by this time to understand that whatever you invent, whatever you project, that is you! So where we are now is that a whole country believe I’m a “n\*” and I don’t.” (Baldwin, “A Talk to Teachers”)

Throughout the series of interviews, participants referred to the N-word in their experiences—sometimes casually and sometimes in direct reference to race. In our first interview together, Daniel discussed challenging to a common phrase used to describe “real” Black men.

*I hate using the term real n\* ‘cause that’s not really a term, like, what’s a real n\*? A real, a real ignorant person? That’s what people say that “Oh, he’s a real n\*” Oh, he’s real ignorant, oh (laughs). Yeah, it’s a n\*. So when people say “Yeah, I’m a real n\*” you basically sayin you real ignorant. You feel what I’m sayin?... “He’s a real n\*” yeah you’re real ignorant, basically. To even be saying you’re a real n\* like that. No, I’m not—I, I don’t even like sayin I’m a real n\*. (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

Here, Daniel explained his rejection of a specific form of re-appropriation of the N-word and based it in the literal meaning of the word and a rejection of the label of “ignorant.” Throughout the interviews, Daniel used the word n\* frequently, but never the phrase “real n\*.” However, it is important to note that he only used the word when referencing other Black male adolescents with whom he fought, young Black people who he found to be offensive and, for the most part, bullies. Thus, Daniel used this language in a very specific, raced, and gendered way. I found this to be interesting and wonder what

it means for Black and Brown folks who have taken a social justice and/or racial justice stance to reclaim the N-word in such a *specifically* raced way. I include Meeka's use of n\* as another example of this. When referring to Black men who were involved in untoward behavior (as defined by Meeka), she called them n\* consistently. So, again, this word is used to describe a specific group of Black men, to draw a clear line between them and other Black men. Again, not only is the word n\* specifically raced, but it is also gendered; at no point was this word used to describe anyone who did not identify as male/as a man.

Given my position when it comes to the use of n\*, I understand that I approach this conversation with a specific stance on using, reclaiming, and/or re-appropriating this word. But I do believe, regardless of opinion, it is important to understand how reclaiming of n\* is working to create new categorizations, intra-racially. What does it mean for those engaged in the work of racial justice and how we approach conversations about powerful language within our communities? In what complicated ways can moves of racial empowerment also work to reify the dominant ideologies that exist in original iterations of reclaimed words and phrases? While I have no answers to these questions, I believe they are important to consider for anyone working with Black and Brown youth who are or have been incarcerated; if there is a possibility that these dominant ideologies are being reabsorbed in Black and Brown communities through re-appropriation, incarcerated youth are among the most vulnerable to be further criminalized by this language and to internalize negative perceptions of themselves.

*Outside of the black/white binary.* Finally, discussions of race revealed what I call in this dissertation study the Black/White Binary. The Black/White Binary reflects many of the conversations that take place throughout the United States, with a focus on relationships between Black and White communities and individuals. In the context of the school-to-prison pipeline, racialized mass incarceration, and the incarceration of Black and Brown youth, it is not surprising that conversations with three Black and/or African-American participants and one White participant would follow suit. But it is important to emphasize the presence of the Binary for several reasons. First, Black and African-American communities may be the most widely targeted communities for these systems of oppression (in many if not most regions of the United States), but they are not the *only* communities who are affected. Starting with special education classification, we know that Latin@ and Native American communities are also overwhelmingly targeted for oppressive forms of categorization that lead to incarceration. A conversation about the experiences of Black and Brown youth who are incarcerated must, at some point (whether through methodology, methods, analysis, or implications for future research) address the diversity and diversity of needs of *all* Black and Brown communities.

Second, the Black/White Binary exposes one of the most troubling truths about the experiences of all youth in the United States—they are living in a country that is still largely segregated by race. Throughout the interviews, it became clear that the formerly incarcerated youth did not have opportunities to interact with people outside of their race. In a conversation about racism, Lisha asserted that most White people are racist. While her experiences are important and real, it is also important to note that Lisha



doesn't know many people who are White...or who aren't Black or African-American, for that matter.

*Lisha:* Because most of em is racist. When they see a Black person, they think all of us is the same...

*Kelsey:* Do you interact with a lot of Caucasian people?

*Lisha:* (shakes head)

*Kelsey:* No? Uh, most of the people you interact with, how you do think of them racially? Are they also Black and African-American?

*A:* Yeah

*K:* Okay, any other racial groups?

*A:* No (Lisha, interview, 1/23/15)

When Lisha expresses the belief that most White people are racist, she is not speaking from directly from a collection of personal experiences or a wide range of experiences with many different White people. I find this to be incredibly troubling, in the same way that I am concerned about White students having the opportunity to interact with students of color or more diverse communities, broadly. In fact, when Lisha learned how I described my racial identity, she told me I was “making things up.”

*Kelsey:* So yeah, I would say, I think I like identify more as like Jamaican-American, probably because of my parents.

*Lisha:* (laughs)

*Kelsey:* Is that funny?

*Lisha:* (laughing) What is a Jamaican-American? You makin up stuff

*Kelsey:* How is that making up stuff?

*Lisha:* Asian-American, Jamaican-American

*Kelsey:* No, that's real! (laughs)

*Lisha:* It is (slowly) *African. American.* (Lisha, interview, 2/10/15),

Without a chance to engage with different racial groups in real and authentic ways, young people can only rely on socialization (which can have both positive and deeply negative effects), media images, and stereotypes to form an understanding of other communities and individuals. While I can appreciate that the term Jamaican-American is near and dear to me and not as widely-used in the national community, I was surprised that Lisha had never heard anyone use the term “Asian-American” to describe their or someone else’s racial identity. She was only familiar with the “Ethnicity-American” formula as it applied to *her* identity and the racial identities present in her direct community. I believe this is major component of the tensions that exist between communities and cause increasing racial stress for individuals when they are confronted with new racial interactions and dynamics.

The Black/White Binary also opened space for the marginalization of individuals who did not fit into either racial category. In our conversations, the marginalized racial figure in these situations was *always* identified as Asian.

*Meeka: ...it was like this one boy, he was like, uh, she called it like Kah-bodian or some type of Asian. Whatever type of Asian it was. I remember, somethin had happened and we was pickin on him...we was like, throwin stuff at him...But EVERYBODY was doin it...*

*Kelsey: So, um, do you remember why you all started making fun of this little boy?*

*Meeka: I forgot, we did, but I think he couldn't talk right (laughs) or somethin like that. Then he used to talk like wit his, like his teeth used to be pointed out and they used to be sayin like little dumb stuff. I think he was sl--I don't know, cause he used to act slow. (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)*

*My aunt, she don't care--she fight Chinese people, she fight em all. So she gon get it...Ch-Chinese, she fight all--down [the street], it's Chinese people down there (laughs)... I thought they knew karate...she was tearin her...up (laughing) (Meeka, interview, 1/30/15)*

Meeka's understanding of Asian identities, broadly, is limited and based heavily upon stereotypes. A lack of understanding creates an environment ripe for marginalization and, as we hear in her story, leads to an ideology that uses difference as a justification for bullying. It was okay to make fun of this boy because of his marked racial difference—emphasized by the fact that he was the only Cambodian student in the class—which justified calling him “slow” or making fun of the way he spoke. Throughout other interviews, Meeka showed a thoughtfulness towards difference that made her attentive to the needs of others who might need support because of their differences or different needs. But this student's specific racial difference made him a target in the classroom. A Critical Race Theory perspective tells us that this understanding of difference is deeply oppressive and actively working in favor of dominant narratives about racial differences and against the work of social justice. It is important to unpack the Black/White Binary in order to address the ways in which we alienate allies who are experiencing marginalization in ways that have been ignored and trivialized. Research that addresses racialized issues in the school-to-prison pipeline should also be sure to consider other pipelines that have yet to be widely recognized so as to avoid reproducing the same forms of oppression that we are actively working to dismantle.

### **Community and Isolation**

Another theme that emerged from the data was the tension between community and community-building and self-imposed isolation. Throughout the interviews, ideas of

community were incredibly complicated and deeply connected to participants' understanding of their "bad" behaviors and challenges to avoiding the school-the-prison pipeline. Meeka's stories, in particular, illustrated the struggle to maintain a sense of community within a context that was deeply intertwined with and made more children vulnerable to the pull of the school-to-prison pipeline. She started by discussing the special memories she held from community celebrations, moments she shared with a close group of family and friends.

*All my girlfriends, my cousins, we turnt up we deep, it's like, like fifteen twenty of us at the festival. We havin fun, like, you know how the fest-festival is? Everybody be down there, and everybody--it's just like, for the young people. We all down there, we like gettin turnt up. We all in the cameras and we, we doin like, we havin fun. Like everybody there that we know and you know, everybody know each other from different neighborhoods. So we all showin each other love (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

Meeka describes a community of friends and family that are eager to "show love" and just have fun. She describes a group of young people who are focused on having a good time and, in a way that we can all relate to, just being kids. This was two days before she and the same group of family and friends participated in a fight that resulted in the death of one young woman and Meeka's incarceration for the next year and a half. But the connection between community and physical violence started long before the fight that led to Meeka's incarceration. During one interview, she described a rivalry between schools during her childhood.

*It was school versus school, like. C. Elementary School versus G. School. Like, to fight them. Like they used to be jumpin our people, we used to be jumpin their people. Like I don't know how the,*

*how the, how the battle begun. But I remember they jumped my girlfriend, then we started jumpin them, and we started fuckin them up, like anybody--so they school used to have to get let out early before our school but we still used to catch some of the G. School kids cause they used to be jumpin us in the morning. (Meeka, interview, 1/9/15)*

It is important to emphasize that Meeka is referring to a school rivalry between elementary schools. Children were building communities at a young age, and, as the sense of community was connected to an on-going “battle” between the schools, being a part of the community meant that you were forced to engage in physical altercations. For a child—for anyone—this is a difficult sense of community to grapple with; to find a way to maintain the social protection and affirmation of your peers while adhering to the rules of an educational system that does not account for contextual factors that may cause you to break the rules in order to remain a part of a community you feel connected to.

This tension emerged in conversations around loyalty in the context of communities and community-building. Daniel shared his perspectives on loyalty in the frame of how he approaches interpersonal relationships and, more specifically, friendships.

*I see like, having a relationship with people, doesn't mean somebody like, see I'm a loyal person. That mean if I'm loyal for you, I'm lookin for you to be loyal the same way. If I give you a hundred percent, I'm not lookin for fifty. And like I see fifty, I don't really, I don't really have nothin to do with you. You feel me? It could be a “hi and bye” thing, it's not gonna hurt me. It's only gonna hurt me, you feel what I'm sayin? So basically like, that's what I had to look at, like, a lot of things in there, like, just, you just can't, you can't have everybody be your friend and be in your business and stuff like that. (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

For Daniel, a community of friends must be able to offer loyalty all of the time, every time. He starts by saying that he is a loyal person and expects the same level of reciprocity; what is interesting about his discussion of loyalty is that he places it in an emotional framework, a conversational move that is unusual in the scope of his interviews. For Daniel, demanding a hundred percent is not only about reciprocity, but also about self-protection. He does not want to be hurt by someone who does not have his best interest at heart. Though his understanding of loyalty and friendships may benefit from a slightly more nuanced understanding of interpersonal relationships (i.e. even the people who love you the most may disappoint you at times; friendships are complicated), it is important to note the ways in which Daniel's hard lines are established as a means of protection. Community is not something he takes for granted or believes is easily attained; membership in his community must be earned.

Meeka's understanding of loyalty was similar, but she seemed to be more aware of the complexities of loyalty in certain situations. She spoke to the expectations she held for her aunt after the death of another adolescent ended with them in police custody.

*And I'm like "What? Somebody got killed?" I'm like "Ebbie, you don't know nothin, you don't know nothin" I told her, told her that from the rip, like "You don't know nothin, you don't know who Fina is, you don't know who Fina is" and then they separated us. They came back in the room like "You know your aunt already said somethin" I'm like "What?"...I started cryin, cause I swore she was gonna stand tall. You know, like we was gonna take this together, like you know what I mean? Cause like Fina didn't have nothin to do wit it. She was just there, you know what I mean? So I'm like, damn, I thought she was gonna stand tall, we was gonna take this case together, (Meeka, interview, 12/26/14)*

Because of the expectations of the community they were a part of, Meeka expected her aunt (Ebbie) to “stand tall” and stay quiet when questioned by the police. Yet, the expectation of loyalty in this situation is incredibly complicated and perhaps unrealistic given the nature of the arrest. The trauma of watching another adolescent shot to death alongside the pressure of a police interrogation means that notions of “loyalty” must operate differently as young people navigate overwhelming stress and grasp for coping strategies during these moments of trauma and shock. During the interview, Meeka also noted that her aunt—who was fifteen at the time—was scared because of the intimidation tactics used by the police. In fact, it was Ebbie who told the police that Meeka was the one who gave the instructions to shoot the young woman who died, a lie that led to Meeka’s incarceration in the adult correctional facility. Although Ebbie did not meet Meeka’s expectations for loyalty at the time, Meeka also noted that she understood why Ebbie did it and forgave her, because she was “only fifteen” and Meeka could appreciate why Ebbie would react the way she did. I find this to be an incredibly thoughtful analysis of the situation and an important consideration when thinking through the structure of communities like the one Meeka describes. Community members are not acting in senseless and solely violent ways, they appreciate each other and think through many of these situations with sound reasoning. So, when we raise the question of “why?” it is important to remember that these are not community values that are innate to the very being of Black and Brown youth, but rather community values that are formed in response to long histories of violence that arise from long histories of oppression.

On the inside, community takes on a new shape under the Caroline's guidance in the workshops. During the interviews, Caroline spoke directly to the importance of creating community for the young people through the ACT workshops. On the outside, it is clear that Caroline's work to establish community is important for many reasons, not just for the opportunity for creative expression; Caroline shared a powerful story of an ACT participant who was falsely accused of attempted murder.

*... and his co-defendant was in that exact same situation with like, his lawyer in front of the terrifying judge, Judge W, being like "You need to plead guilty or, like X, Y, and Z" and didn't have the kind of community support John had and he's in a different situation. He pled guilty. He's doing--he was sentenced to two to seventeen years on the case. For something that he didn't do either... I mean and these are just like the kinds of things that happen on a daily basis to like, young people and to everyone in the system and, most of the time, like, it just happens and people don't have like, community support. They don't have like, networks to mobilize like, it's, like I was able even to push for John, to advocate for John in that situation, when he couldn't get out for work release because like both, I like had the time to be calling people all day and like, because I've worked in the system for years, I like know like to ask for the shift command--I like know certain things, like, how to try to like, who to try to talk to at the facility to figure out what's going on but, like, a lot of people don't know that. And most people, when they're on work release...they would just be fired cause they're not coming to work you know? The person won't even be like "Why aren't you letting this person come to work?" (Caroline, interview, 1/4/15)*

Although Caroline's efforts to support young people when they come home have clearly had a powerful impact on the lives of these adolescents, it is also important to remember that community building on the inside is outside of the context of the factors that draw young people into—and back into—the school-to-prison pipeline in other iterations of community. What is important about the ACT workshops is that they provide a structure for membership in this community on the outside through employment and informal legal support, but ACT is constantly fighting against the



pressures of neighborhood and context that either pull young people back into the behavior that leads to incarceration, and/or the desperation and frustration associated with the reentry process that has a similar effect on possibilities for success on the outside. For this reason, many young people—including the formerly incarcerated participants in this dissertation study—choose isolation over community.

**Isolation.** Lisha and Daniel spoke the most intensely on an understanding of self-imposed isolation as the most powerful and positive action they could take against negative influences in their lives. In sharp contrast to ACT's work to build community, Lisha and Daniel hold a deep suspicion of others' motives and how those motives may affect their personal plans for success. Daniel based much of this others' jealousy, both in jail and on the outside.

*People hate on you because, it's, it's always hate in jail, like you feel me? People might hate on you 'cause you got a TV or you got somethin. So at least like I was better off like being by myself, and I al-I always like, even learned this out here on the streets, being by yourself, like, you get in less trouble. 'Cause if you, you by yourself, like you ain't gotta worry about the next person beef. Or "This my friend, so I gotta do this wit my friend." Or "I gotta stand up for my friend." I don't have do that, you feel me? If I'm by myself. If I'm by myself, I'm not gettin in no trouble. You feel me? I'm not pickin fights with nobody, you feel me? I'm not doin nothing. Everything I, I stay—a lot of trouble I got in, was because of me and my friend, basically...So, I read a lot, I read people if they got, if they got good spirits. And sometimes, and sometimes I can't read em, and it be the people around me that say they, they're bad people. And I don't look, see a person like me, I always look for the good in somebody. And give them the benefit of the doubt or the bad. I mean, you have, you have to prove me wrong. (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

Daniel's experiences on the inside taught him that staying away from others was the best way to avoid trouble. From his perspective, it is other people who cause trouble,

who have distorted understandings of friendship and loyalty that lead to fights, and who disrupt paths to success. Though Daniel mentions that he always looks for the good in people, he also notes that “you have to prove [him]” wrong, indicating that he remains guarded for a significant period of time. Additionally, he has developed a method that he believes helps him stay away from negative influences.

*I don't like indulgin in like pointless conversations, you feel me?...I call it swervin... Swervin is...alright, um, say somebody is sayin somethin that's, that's, that doesn't have anything to do with anything? I'll just be like "Ahhhh, well, I'm a holla at you later" you feel me?...I swerve, swerve out of the conversation. Actually swerve, you feel me? (laughs)...I say swervin is, is a good part of discipline because like you are what you, what you speak, you feel me? So you speak nothin but ignorance, you gonna be a ignorant person, you feel me? If if, like, a person that doesn't have any like, kind of discipline or have, doesn't have any type of knowledge like, it's just like, it's just all about how—you see how a person talk, or what a person would talk about, like you just know who the person is from a conversation. I'm really, I'm not judgmental, but I can read, I'm a good reader from me bein in jail, you feel me?... And that's why I allowed myself to stay outta the hole, like, like, leave shit alone, leave people alone. And be by myself, like I had to really isolate myself, (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

Again, Daniel references his time in jail as an influence in his approaches to isolating himself. He refers to the “hole,” or solitary confinement; we see that isolation was not only a strategy for avoiding bad friendships, but a necessary act in order to survive further oppression within the correctional facilities. After experiencing the emotional and physical trauma of solitary confinement several times during his first two years of incarceration, Daniel worked to do everything he could to stay out of “the hole.” The act of “swervin” is a coping strategy, a tool of resistance and resilience (Spencer et al., 1995; 1997; Stevenson et al., 1997). Unfortunately, while swervin may keep Daniel from conversations and friendships he sees as frivolous or negative, this approach may

also keep him from building important relationships that can provide support and help him build a community that will look after and care for him as he navigates the reentry process.

Lisha takes a similar approach to avoiding others and staying isolated on the outside.

*I don't be out here fightin and I don't go out and hang wit people...I just, I don't do none of that. It's just, like, my friends, they was negative anyway. So I left everybody alone so I can work on me and my daughter. (Lisha, interview, 1/14/15)*

*I don't hang wit people...I don't talk to people... like I don't have, I don't have friends, I don't associate wit people. I just stay to myself...It's less drama (Lisha, interview, 1/30/15)*

Lisha's understanding of community is based upon past experiences with "negative" friends who bring "drama" to their relationships. Like Daniel, Lisha uses her incarceration as a reference point; she is working to make sure that she avoids the path that led to her incarceration. As a mother, she places the care of her daughter above all else, and it is easier for her to focus on those responsibilities without friends.

The tensions between community and isolation are complicated and layered for the participants. In many ways, being part of a community provides love and support for young people. As Caroline shared, community can be a major factor in situations that literally determine where youth will spend the rest of their lives. Communities like ACT can help guide young people through the reentry process and provide a setting for community building opportunities with correctional facilities. I find it understandable and concerning that, after bad experiences with friends, formerly incarcerated youth

would reject the idea of community and attempt to make it on their own, with no support system. It is understandable that they would want to make adjustments and avoid trouble, to think critically about who they allow into their lives. But as young people who have endured traumatic experiences, as parents who are working to raise children, and as individuals who are still developing into the adults they will become, communities of support are vital to their pursuit of successful lives—whatever that success may look like. For researchers and practitioners who work with incarcerated and formerly incarcerated youth, we must think about how we can support young people as they navigate the process of embracing independence without alienating themselves from the supports they need in order to achieve that independence.

## Chapter Ten: Conclusion

In Chapter One, I shared three research questions that framed and shaped this dissertation study. Those questions are:

1. What is the relationship between dis/ability and giftedness in the experiences of incarcerated youth?
2. How do formerly incarcerated youth and youth advocates make meaning of dis/ability and giftedness in the context of their experiences in the school-to-prison pipeline, broadly, and in correctional facilities, specifically?
3. What challenges arise for researchers when attempting to develop new theories of understanding in educational research?

Now, I will address each of these questions—not with definitive answers, but with thoughts on how this work has helped us understand these relationships and challenges, and how future research and practice can fill in the new pedagogical and research spaces it has created.

## What is the relationship between dis/ability and giftedness in the experiences of incarcerated youth?

Though I began this work with clear ideas of what dis/ability and giftedness would look like in the context of incarceration and the experiences of young people, the participants' stories have revealed that the influence of these social constructs is oftentimes too complicated and far-reaching to define with such brevity and a certain degree of "theoretical confidence." Turning to the characteristics of deficit thinking allowed me to think more deeply about the tools that are used to create categories of dis/abilities that are inherently *racialized*, a connection that is at the core of racialized incarceration. This work has pushed an understanding of these relationships (and relationships between social constructs, broadly) beyond the notion of intersectionality. Intersections are instant and cannot capture the complexity of the build-up and long-lasting effects of socially constructed relationships. These relationships do not begin behind the walls of a correctional facility, but are rather deeply embedded in every experience offered to Black and Brown youth by the world around them. Relationships are fluid and their effects cannot always be articulated by referencing a moment with a clearly defined beginning and end. To locate the question at this historical moment and within the confines of these particular experiences of incarceration was to ignore the very foundation of the school-to-prison *pipeline*; it is an active system that begins from the moment the world races and, consequently, dis/ables a child at birth. Understanding the relationship between dis/ability and giftedness in the experiences of incarcerated youth requires research that approaches the pipeline at every stage along the way in order to understand how these specific experiences have been shaped. Future research should

seek a deeper understanding of the pipeline and the nature of relationships, thinking about ways to use longitudinal studies to follow Black and Brown children through their experiences or using cross-sectional approaches that include the stories of Black and Brown youth of different ages who are experiencing the effects of the pipeline at different moments.

This is not to say that important themes did not emerge from these data. Participants shared personal stories that revealed the power of dis/ability and deficit thinking in moving them to and through the school-to-prison pipeline and demonstrated how quickly modes of deficit thinking can be internalized and directed towards a person's community and themselves. We learned deficit and dis/ability are "discovered" within Black and Brown youth as easily as their gifts and intelligence are ignored by the institutions they attend and are incarcerated in. Yet, the participants shared the wonderful moments when institutional agents resisted deficit models and encouraged these adolescents to recognize their gifts, pushing them to redefine how they see themselves and how we see these young people. The relationship between giftedness and dis/ability depends heavily on the *people* who decide what they will see in the youth when they work with them. Will this action be an example of innate deficits or an expression of a special gift? Does this behavior need to be corrected and punished or explored and nurtured? As *social* constructs, it follows that the definitions and relationships of these categories are determined purely within social contexts, based upon the interpretations of interpersonal exchanges and interactions that later lead to pseudoscientific theories circulating through research and practice. Future research should include the perspectives of a wide range of institutional agents working within the school-to-prison

pipeline in order to develop a better understanding of how the relationship between these classifications is developed and maintained.

**How do formerly incarcerated youth and youth advocates make meaning of dis/ability and giftedness in the context of their experiences in correctional facilities and educational spaces?**

As with the relationship between dis/ability and giftedness in the first research question, I was working to understand the experiences of these young people within incredibly specific spaces, bounded by my assumptions about where classification takes place. Though any research on the school-to-prison pipeline should consider experiences within schools and correctional facilities, making meaning of dis/ability and giftedness in these contexts requires the consideration of experiences outside of these contexts, as well. The participants in this study highlighted the importance of many factors (including neighborhood, religion, family, parenthood, gender, and developmental stages) that influence the process of meaning making. Lisha, Daniel, and Meeka understood dis/ability and giftedness in more concrete and traditional ways, thinking about the dis/abilities they'd learned to identify and organize into deficits—often through the work of stigmatization—and giftedness in the conventional ways encouraged by schools and standardized assessments. Caroline, however, had a more nuanced understanding of dis/ability and giftedness, drawing attention to contextual factors that lead to racialized and classed definitions of these characteristics. It seemed that two factors were highly influential in Caroline's description of these processes, the first being engagement in higher levels of formal education. Caroline noted that



participation in college-level courses on racial justice were key in helping to investigate the oppressive structures that lead to inequality and racial injustice, referring to these moments as crucial in developing critical perspectives on biased classification and policies. The other three participants were able to speak to issues of racial injustice based on personal experience, but did not engage in the same kinds of dismantling in order to unpack *how* oppression operates in the construction of the ability spectrum. Second, Caroline, at thirty-one years old, is almost a decade older than Daniel (twenty-three) and Lisha and Meeka (twenty-two). Again, a thorough understanding of adolescent development is crucial in studies that examine participants' perspectives on their experiences and the macro-level structures that influence those experiences. Further exploration of meaning making may consider working with Black and Brown youth and their advocates across a wide range of ages in order to understand how these perspectives develop and at what point young people begin to incorporate a more abstract understanding of oppressive systems into their analysis of their personal experiences.

### **What challenges arise for researchers when attempting to develop new theories of understanding in educational research?**

While it is important to note that *many* challenges arose during this dissertation study, I will focus on the three that will certainly influence the way I approach and conduct future research. First, there was the challenge of balancing my researcher “rebellion” with researcher “interference.” Throughout the interviewing process, I—with

the help of my critical friends—noticed that I tended toward the more informal interviewing style, even as I began each interview preparing participants for a “less expressive” version of myself (I didn’t want them to be confused by my lack of emphatic nodding and affirmations, two features of my conversational style that are expected by those who know me.) Though I was disappointed in my inability to be “professional,” I was excited by the idea that I was practicing my very own form of resistance and heterodoxy. I was approaching interviews with a sense of authenticity and a desire to disrupt a potentially distancing participant-interviewer dynamic that would feel unnatural and highlight the privileges of power. This rebellion made room for conversations that, while at times outside of the scope of this dissertation’s focus, helped me learn a lot about participants’ lives and allowed me to make important connections between their lived experiences and the conceptual framework I developed for this study. Upon further investigate, however, it was clear that rebellion shared a fine line with interference. As two critical friends from other fields of study/work noted:

*I do, however, think there were times when you shut down interesting conversations...You could have asked [Caroline] to talk about how she felt instead of imparting your own biases...that could have potentially altered her communication with you.(Hannah S., personal communication, 3/31/15)*

*In terms of questions, there were some points where I think you might have probed further into the thought process of behind the behaviors (e.g.: “What was going through your mind when you hit her? What did it feel like? What do you think she felt? What did you think might happen after the fight? Talk to me about the role anger played in your life. etc) You do ask questions to that effect in several places, but I kept wondering about the psychology/emotion/decision making behind the behavior and think you could ask even more questions that get at those. In terms of the tone of your questioning and interaction, it was really interesting because you seemed to be striking a balance between professional detachment and personal connection and even*

*friendship... However there were a couple parts that...struck my ear as kind of a personal side bar (Ben S., personal communication, 4/4/15)*

A third critical friend also noted that I avoided questions that would push participants to think about accountability and their thoughts on the seriousness of their actions (Tony M., personal communication, 3/28/15). It became clear that there were moments when my investment in personal relationships and my commitment to counter-narratives, while important at the core of this research, became barriers as I worked to achieve the practical and intellectual goals I set at the beginning of the study. Specifically, my emotional responses to the stories and the situations discussed throughout the interviews prevented me from following through with my responsibilities as an interviewer, such as asking important follow questions throughout the interview. Thus, the challenge of knowing when to resist traditional forms of “professionalism” and when to draw boundaries affected the data collection process and, ultimately, the data analysis process in this dissertation study. Although I was able to vet my interview protocols and rehearse, I must make sure to rehearse these protocols with critical friends who can help me focus on my tendencies to “interfere” and consider the benefits of working with another researcher during interviews, especially with participants who I am familiar with.

The second challenge I would like to address is the work of language in developing new theories of understanding. An incredibly thoughtful comment from a critical friend pushed me to think about how I thought about the power of language in this work.

*Through your research, we get to learn who [the participants] are, but reading transcripts is very different than meeting people...it's very hard to read and empathize with transcripts in a way because you can't understand intonation and you become distracted by the way someone speaks...colloquialisms and speech patterns also affect the way I read the transcripts and imagine each person...I think when presenting these narratives to 'outsiders' you need to tailor it to each 'type' of person. Depending on the demographic you are reporting to, the narrative is slightly different even though the facts are the same...Each demographic will respond differently depending on their baseline, so it's important to gauge who your audience is. (Hannah S., personal communication, 3/31/15)*

This is a crucial challenge in the work of all practitioners and researchers who are dedicated to thoughtful address of representation. I learned just how difficult representation through language could be during my ongoing battle with autocorrect as I transcribed the participants' interviews and placed excerpts from the transcripts within the body of this dissertation. There are standards that have been created and linguistic expectations that exist in every community, for every group of people that have developed criteria for authenticity and worthiness based on their personal and institutional values. I would like to think that writing this dissertation in a way that is most comfortable for me is enough, but Hannah's feedback reminded me of my beliefs as a researcher with a commitment to community-based practice.

How and for whom should we write? If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for a union between poetics and science, if we wish to reach a variety of readers, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we need to *foreground*, not suppress, the narrative within the human sciences. How and for whom we write lives matters." (Richardson, p. 65, 1990).

As I shared in “How Should a Researcher Be?” I asked myself questions about why I write. Implicit in this question was the question of “And for whom?” The challenge of language in developing new theories of understanding is part of a larger question of how researchers approach (or decided not to approach) the task of sharing their work with a range of communities while maintaining of focus on the narrative of the participants’ lives. In the case of this study, I must continue to think about how language plays a role in the framing of the interviews and sharing of language with different people and institutions. For example, when sharing emergent themes supported by excerpts from interviews with members from the same communities as the participants, I may choose to include neighborhood-specific language and phrases as they may provide important access points and opportunities for connection. When sharing with practitioners, should I include language that may be classified as profanity? Throughout this dissertation, I made decisions about which words I felt comfortable including in their written form, and which words I refused to reproduce in writing; would these decisions be the same during oral presentations? This is not to say that there is a right or wrong answer to these questions, but rather to note that these are complicated and important considerations; these considerations affect how I represent participants and their stories in my work, and how these representations are aligned with an ethical approach to developing a new lens for understanding their experiences in the context of theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Finally, the central challenge of developing new theories of understanding: developing the theory itself. A seemingly simple task when thinking about filling in the gaps left by extant literature, it became painfully clear that it is a process that must be

approached with humility and time. First and foremost, it must be done with a commitment to heterodoxy, regardless of methodology and methods. In order to build upon or disrupt existing theoretical frames, researchers must recognize the importance of challenging the foundations of the same frames. As I shared in my discussion of dis/ability and deficit thinking, this is much more difficult than it seems. For me, developing a new theory of understanding is about more than critiquing existing theories. It is about devoting the time to acknowledge and sort through all of the ways in which dominant and problematic ways of thinking have become deeply intertwined with even the most “rebellious” of my own research, pedagogical, and personal stances. New theories of understanding must also be vetted through conversations with and attention to the needs of the communities who are most affected by new or developing theory. Though I constructed a conceptual framework and interview protocols I believed would get to the heart of social constructs and lived experiences, the participants in this study offered *so much more* through the sharing of their stories. Theorizing must be carefully balanced with individuals’ and communities’ lived experiences and the reality of the world they live in; as I understand it, the problem with theorizing or what happens “when the abstract hits the ground,” is that the scales may tip too far into theorizing with no address of participants’ lives or too far away from theory when the purpose is to develop broad understandings of how to use specific lived experiences to understand macro-level systems.

The scope of this study—while designed to address the research questions—is still not enough to get to *everything*. Beyond the cross-cutting themes discussed in Chapter Nine, the interviews revealed that there were many complex relationships

involving neighborhood, religion, parenthood, and gender that require further research dedicated to unpacking these specific and unique relationships. Though it is not *inherently* better than other forms of qualitative research—any form of research requires a commitment to ethics and care on the part of the researcher—participatory action research does allow for different opportunities to recognize the interests and needs of communities than research that is developed outside of communities, without the constant contributions of community members. Freire (1996) reminds us that

A revolutionary leadership must accordingly practice *co-intentional* education. Teachers and students (leadership and people), co-intent on reality, are both Subjects... in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as its permanent re-creators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement.” (p. 51)

In future research, I hope to take a participatory action research approach to work with Black and Brown youth at all stages of the school-to-prison pipeline to ensure that I am addressing problems as defined by the youth and their communities instead of solely relying upon my limited experiences and literature-based beliefs to guide my research and research design. And so, for now, the future of a theory of critical dis/ablement remains in need of further attention and care, even as it remains wonderfully possible.

It is the possibility of possibility that makes these challenges, on stress scale of one to ten, a seven. These challenges are a mountain to be climbed; they simply require a little more time and effort to get to the top (H.C. Stevenson, personal communication, C.

Stevenson, 9/12/11). But Freire (1996) reminds us that “Hope however, does not consist in crossing one’s arms and waiting. As long as I fight, I am moved by hope; and if I fight with hope, then I can wait.” (p. 72-73). I have a lot of fight and endless patience, and I remain hopeful that there are new ways of understanding embedded in this work. Striving to develop a theory of critical dis/ablement may not end with a theory of critical dis/ablement and that is okay. What it will do, regardless of the outcome, is perhaps far more important. The process of developing a new theory of understanding has allowed me to struggle with the task of imagining. In the work of restorative justice, decarceration, and prison abolition, imagination is crucial.

Most people are quite surprised to hear that the prison abolition movement also has a long history...In most circles prison abolition is simply unthinkable and implausible. Prison abolitionists are dismissed as utopians and idealists whose ideas are at best unrealistic and impracticable, and, at worst, mystifying and foolish. This is a measure of how difficult it is to envision a social order that does not rely on the threat of sequestering people in dreadful places designed to separate them from their communities and families. The prison is considered so ‘natural’ that it is extremely hard to imagine life without it...An attempt to create a new conceptual terrain for imagining alternatives to imprisonment involves the ideological work of questioning why ‘criminals’ have been constituted as a class and, indeed, a class of human beings undeserving of the civil and human rights accorded to others.” (Davis, 2003, p. 9-10;112)

One thing I am convinced of is that more punitive measures, tighter discipline, greater surveillance, more prisons—the very path that our society seems to be determined to pursue—is not the approach to take. Perhaps, allowing ourselves to imagine the possibilities—what could, should, and must be—is an indispensable first step.” (Ferguson, 2001, p. 235)

Ferguson (2001) and Davis (2003) remind us that there is a history of imagination behind the progress that has been made in decarceration movements thus far and that we



still have a long way to go in imagining a society that understands the prison as “unnatural.” But the participants in this study are fiercely committed to the work of imagining.

*I always tell em like “Look man, y’all see me, I went through a lot of stuff. I could tell you a lot of stuff. I ain’t been through this stuff (clears throat) for nothin. All this stuff made me strong, made me who I am today...But me going through these things, it made me see that God has a plan for me. You feel me? And that’s what, that’s what, I used to, I tell them everyday “Man, you go through things it make you strong, it doesn’t, it doesn’t mean you weak.” You feel me? (Daniel, interview, 1/5/15)*

*I want people to know like, how I came my own way...Me like, achievin my goals...I want people to understand like, it took me so hard to get to where I wanted to be, you know what I mean? And that I’m not the same person that I used to be. I really want people to get that through they head...Like, people--my name used to be Bang Bang...people be like "Oh, Bang Bang!" That's not me no more, like, that's not me. You know what I mean? People don't understand, like, I came a long way and I'm not tryin to be that same person. (Meeka, interview, 2/28/15)*

Daniel and Meeka have used their experiences and their incarceration as fuel for imagining new futures for themselves. They have been pushed through the school-to-prison pipeline, bravely walked its length and come out on the other side, still ready to push back and move towards their goals. This takes an enormous amount of imagination and also an enormous amount of resilience. In sharing their stories they are inviting us to imagine with them, to understand that a past should not define a future, reminding us that the story of becoming the person we want to be is a shared journey. Throughout this dissertation, I have tried to present the participants and their stories as *human* stories with themes that are at once specific to the lives of Black and Brown youth and built into the foundation of a shared personhood.

*...no matter what your circumstances, people are just people — we all want to be loved, want to be loyal to our friends and family, we all want to be accepted... (Ben S., personal communication, 4/4/15)*

This is at the center of everything. In some respects, the boys at FIC were right—in many ways, they have never been. They have never been valued in the eyes of a society intent upon criminalizing them. They have never been given the opportunity to be children, to explore their adolescence with the support of an understanding and nurturing school system. But in so many wonderful ways, they already *are*. They are gifted and talented, thoughtful and generous, loving and motivated. They are individuals doing their best to survive and thrive, adolescents trying to make sense of their environments, parents trying to change the world for their daughters and sons. They are other people's children, but it is our responsibility, as practitioners and researchers, to embrace them as our children, too. It is my hope that, through this dissertation study and future work, I can open up space for us to acknowledge where they've been, love who they are, and imagine all of the possibilities for who they might be.

Onward!

## Appendix A

### Original Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between dis/ability and giftedness in the experiences of incarcerated youth?
2. How do dis/abilities and gifted behaviors manifest themselves in the juvenile justice system and, specifically, within correctional facilities?
  - a. How do correctional facilities identify and address dis/ability and giftedness in their juvenile populations?
3. What are the relationships between reported manifestations of dis/ability and perceptions of strengths/deficits (both youth's and facilitators') in detention centers and correctional facilities?
4. In what ways do other social identities (specifically, race, gender, sexual orientation, and religion) interact with the dis/ability and giftedness and influence incarcerated youth's experiences and self-perceptions?

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol, First Round

1. Have you ever been incarcerated? If so, would you please share your incarceration story? If not, can you please share the experiences that led you to the work you are doing with ACT?

2. Can you tell me about the work you do now as it relates to the incarceration of young people?

## Appendix C

### Interview Protocol, Second Round

1. How do you remember your early school experiences (before fifth grade?)
2. How do you remember your school experiences in middle school?
3. How do you remember your school experiences in high school? (This includes and schooling experiences you had while incarcerated.)
  - 3a. (*If applicable*) How do you remember your school experiences post-high school?
4. What were your favorite subjects in school? Why?
5. Which subjects did you like the least? Why?

## Appendix D

### Interview Protocol, Third Round

1. How would you define the word dis/ability?
2. Can you give me examples of dis/ability?
3. Is dis/ability (according to your definition) a word that was used to describe you or your actions in school?
4. Is dis/ability (according to your definition) a word that was used to describe you or your actions during your incarceration (*if applicable*)?
5. How would you define the word gifted?
6. Can you give me examples of gifted?
7. Is gifted (according to your definition) a word that was used to describe you or your actions in school?
8. Is gifted (according to your definition) a word that was used to describe you or your actions during your incarceration (*if applicable*)?

## Appendix E

### Interview Protocol, Fourth Round

1. How do you describe your racial identity?
2. Do you feel your racial identity has an influence on your daily life? If so, how?
3. Do you feel your race had/has an influence on your experiences on the inside? If so, how?
4. How do you describe your gender identity?
5. Do you feel your gender identity has an influence on your daily life? If so, how?
6. Do you feel your gender had/has an influence on your experiences on the inside? If so, how?
7. Would you describe yourself as a religious person? If so, how would you describe your religious identity?
8. (If you describe yourself as a religious person) Do you feel your racial identity has an influence on your daily life? If so, how?
9. Do you feel your religion had/has an influence on your experiences on the inside? If so, how?
10. How do you describe your sexual orientation?
11. Do you feel your sexual orientation has an influence on your daily life? If so, how?
12. Do you feel your sexual orientation had/has an influence on your experiences on the inside? If so, how?

## Appendix F

### List of Codes (Final Iteration)

CODE	DEFINITION
<b>Race Relations/Racial Interactions</b>	Examples of significant racial moments
Instances of Racism	Examples of racism/racist acts
Racial Meaning Making	Processing of racial moments/interactions
Challenge to Dominant Ideology	Resistance to dominant narratives about race
Intercentricity of Race and Racism	Endemic nature of race to all societal structures
The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge	Focus on individuals' stories, sharing of experiences
Use of Interdisciplinary Approaches	Multiple access points to racial meaning making
<b>Community</b>	Building/forming communities
Loyalty	Loyalty to others in specific communities
<b>Deficit Thinking</b>	Beliefs that pathologize Black and Brown communities
Educability	Belief that Black and Brown youth are inherently academically disadvantaged
Heterodoxy	Resistance to deficit thinking
Oppression	Systems designed to consistently oppress
Pseudoscience	False scientific beliefs about Black and Brown communities, individuals
Temporal Changes	Shifts in deficit thinking over time
Victim-Blaming	Placing responsibility of failure on Black and Brown communities
<b>Family</b>	Discussion of family
Parenthood	Discussion of parenthood
Giftedness/Strength	Examples of gifts, talents recognized or used
Isolation	Self-imposed or structural isolation
<b>Leadership</b>	Examples of leadership
Popularity	Popularity in community, with peers
Nature of Adolescence	Examples of adolescent development/adolescent thinking
Rebellion/Resistance	Rebelling/Resisting formal structures



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