

Ariana Hensley

Professor Colon

Prison Literature

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*Research Question: "In what ways does access to quality education impact a person's time in the penal system, as highlighted by both A New Jim Crow and A Place to Stand?"*

### **The Impact of Quality Education on a Person's Relationship with the US Penal System**

"Prison to me was like college to you; you just know that's where you're going to end up." This was said to me by a former coworker while he was reflecting on his childhood and time in prison. This sentiment, unfortunately, is not an uncommon one and often a result of a system that sets up children, especially children of color, for a second-class standing in society. This idea is first perpetuated in failing education systems and continues to follow a person through their lives in the penal systems.

As a result of underfunded and racially segregated schools during the 1970s, a large portion of African Americans was unemployed (Alexander, 64). This was a catalyst for the current state of mass incarceration in the US, seeing as many of those left jobless resorted to illegal ventures. "The decline in legitimate employment opportunities among inner-city residents created economic desperation, leading some to sell drugs—most notably crack cocaine." (Alexander, 65). This is an important point in the historical relationship between quality education and the prison system. Today, this relationship is stronger than ever because of the lifelong impact a prison sentence has on a person. It has evolved into a vicious cycle maintaining

racial and economic inequalities, and it can only be ended with a radical change in societal systems that have been intentionally set up to maintain the prison industrial system and racial injustice.

The relationship between the education system and a person's time in the penal system is evident in the school-to-prison pipeline, the access to education in prison, and re-entry into society among release, all describe in the texts *The New Jim Crow* by Michelle Alexander and *A Place to Stand* by Jimmy Santiago Baca. These three stages of a person's time in the penal can all be drastically changed as a result of quality education that has been denied to them because of unjust legislation and budgets.

### **The School to Prison Pipeline**

Growing up in low-income or predominantly black and Latino neighborhoods have social and economic disadvantages. One of these disadvantages is the result of failing school systems that prepare students for a life of crime and poverty more than they prepare for college or a career. This is because "schools located in ghetto communities more closely resemble prisons than places of learning, creativity, or moral development." (Alexander, 215). This shows the unhealthy learning environment many students are subjected to and expected to perform in. The way many low-income schools are regulated is similar to prisons: policed with suspicion and violence. "The wave of punitiveness that washed over the United States with the rise of the drug war and the get-tough movement really flooded our schools. Schools, caught up in this maelstrom, began viewing children as criminals or suspects, rather than as young people with an enormous amount of potential struggling in their own ways and their own difficult context to make it and hopefully thrive." (Sokolower). This shows students being set up for life under strict governmental control while normalizing harsh policing of youth, predominantly black and brown

youth. An example of this was the 2003 Stratford High School drug raid which involved SWAT teams searching for drugs using guns and handcuffing children, mostly all people of color (Alexander, 96-97). With this sort of behavior becoming more prevalent in schools, black and brown children grow up conditioned to the prison experience, believing they're a criminal.

With America's failing schools, it is no surprise that a result is failing students, not only in their education but in their lives and careers. There is a direct correlation between levels of education and a person's likelihood to have a criminal record. "About 70 percent of people with criminal records did not complete high school, and according to at least one study, about half are functionally illiterate. Many are tracked for prison at early ages, labeled as criminals in their teen years, and then shuttled from their decrepit, underfunded inner-city schools to brand-new, high-tech prisons. The communities and schools from which they come fail to prepare them for the workforce, and once they have been labeled criminals, their job prospects are forever bleak." (Alexander, 187). This shows the way education, or lack thereof, will impact a person's future and entire life.

With all this considered, there is not only a large-scale impact on low-income communities and communities of color as a result of failing school systems, but there are also personal consequences children face as a result of their time in a broken system. Ex-convict and writer Jimmy Santiago Baca recall his time as an illiterate child in the school system, saying that, "I was ashamed, not only of my old patched clothes but also because I didn't know anything the teachers were talking about. I couldn't talk to the kids because they were so much smarter than I was." (Baca, 24). He goes on to admit his feelings of being "worthless" and "nothing but a troublemaker" (Baca, 30). This reveals the insecurities and vulnerabilities children face as a result of poor education and society's labeling of children of color. Baca is an example of people

feeling outcasted from society as a result of poor schooling and, as a result, not receiving an education.

### **The Accessibility of Quality Education in Prison**

"Prison is a correctional facility in name only. A "long-term storage locker [...]" would be a more accurate description" (Experian). This is an example of a common criticism of correctional facilities, and one of the reasons it is true is because of the lack of educational resources accessible in prison. Prison educational systems are often lacking resources, quality teachers, and passionate students. "They are hollow and disconnected, designed for developing word attack skills and completing structured exercises" (Davison), and instead need to be a place fit for the prison environment rather than a normal classroom in order to "develop one's capacity for self-expression in the fullest sense" (Davidson). Not only is the actual education lacking, but it is also inaccessible to many. In Jimmy Santiago Baca's memoir of his time in prison, he recalls attempting to get an education. He was denied by the guards because of his crime and had to wait an extended period of time before getting a chance to learn to read (Baca, 162-163). Prisoners' attempts at receiving an education are hindered not just by guards but by other prisoners as well. "the inmates often face peer pressure where achievement and attendance in school are discouraged." (Vacca). With pressure coming from multiple sides, and the prison education lacking quality, there is no surprise that school is not sought out and helpful to many in prisons.

Despite the discouragement education receives in prison systems, many prisoners see learning as a way to change and improve and thus "demonstrate a considerable interest in learning how to read and write" (Davidson). Bacca describes the correlation between his view of education and his view of change. When denied his education, he exclaimed that "I'm trying to change! I'm just asking for a fucking chance!" (Baca, 163). This shows not only his frustration in

response to his failure to attain an education but also that he knew that education was a step towards positive change in his life. Throughout the entire memoir, he shows the impact his education had on his life and his time in prison, and this just further supports the idea that education, especially education in prison, helps correctional facilities live up to their names and provide some sort of rehabilitation and positive change in people's lives.

In order to actually improve the education system in prisons, there must be a radical change in the way schooling is conducted. Firstly, there must be a large focus on literacy because of its ability to nurture self-expression in people. Prisons must have a special curriculum that is focused not only on preparing prisoners for their future but also on reflecting on their past and current selves in order to get a real sense of rehabilitation. Literacy is the first step in doing this. Furthermore, "successful prison literacy programs are learner-centered, and they should be tailored to the prison culture" (Vacca). This supports the idea that prisoners cannot be treated like school children and are expected to maintain the same level of information. They are learning in a different environment, and therefore the teachings must adapt to fit.

### **Recidivism and Re-entry into Society**

One of the largest signs of the failing penal system is the failure of most prisoners to re-enter society once they are released. People have lasting effects of prison, as "prison is dehumanizing, leaving the former prisoner bitter and diminished. Just as some never recover from war or trauma, some never recover from prison." (Visher) When people fail to "recover" from prison, they often continue committing crimes and end up back in prison, resulting in a high rate of recidivism in the US penal system. The current state of societal re-entry into society is evidence of the idea of a "period of invisible punishment" (Alexander, 231). This entails a failure to obtain government housing and quality education as a result of laws that "operate collectively

to ensure that the vast majority of people convicted of crimes will never integrate into mainstream, white society" (Alexander, 231). Because of this legal discrimination, people released from prison are at an extreme disadvantage, especially "considering the vast numbers of inmates that do not possess the basic social and educational skills that they need to function in society" (Experian). This is another example of a broken system resulting in a cycle which traps those with criminal records in a second-class citizen status. As a result of their criminal record, they could not receive a quality education while in prison or after prison. This leaves them with limited options in their careers and futures, often resulting in them being led back to crime and eventually prison. In order to impact the high rate of recidivism, education and skills must be given to prisoners during and after prison to end the 'invisible punishment.'

There have been numerous studies that revealed the positive correlation in education to a person's return to prison, showing that "The overall reduction in recidivism associated with educational achievement was 11%" (Fabelo). This is because education helps to maximize career and social opportunities. Prisoners with higher education received a higher average income than those with no quality education (Fabelo). These economic impacts of education have a direct correlation with one's chances of prison re-entry. Not only does it provide visible economic and social advantages, but education also proves to have psychological advantages. Jimmy Santiago Baca describes his education as "a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me; it was a resource that allowed me to confront and understand my past, even to wring from it some compelling truths, and it opened the way toward a future that was based not on fear or bitterness or apathy but on compassionate involvement and a belief that I belonged" (Baca, 4-5). This feeling of belonging is rarely found in prisoners among release, and this hinders them from feeling socially accepted. Education, language, literacy, and general knowledge, as

evident in Baca's experience, are a way to bridge the gap between prisoners and society.

Considering the traumatic impact of prison on a person's mental state, it is important to consider how to reverse this, if not prevent it, in prison.

## **Conclusion**

To simplify the role of education in improving the penal system, consider the timeline of one cycle in the penal system. First, the policing tactics and harsh law enforcement are implemented as young as middle school, conditioning a person to inhumane treatment and cementing the label of "criminal" in their mind. This, paired with low-quality schools, will result in a mentality of criminality and being a social outcast. Given the more strict policing in these low-income schools, students are more likely to be caught for crimes happening at an equal rate at schools in more affluent areas. Once caught, they are subjected to the juvenile prison system, where they experience more of the harsh policing tactics and continue to fail to receive an education. Once in the system, they are stamped with the label of "criminal" and more likely to end up back in prison. If they fall victim to this statistic and are put back into prison, their education is at the whim of prison administration, and if that's only if they rise above the pressure of other prisoners to pursue an education. If they manage to get their education approved by prison officials, the education they are receiving is often not in line with their lives and doesn't resonate in the way it should. Once released from prison, they have unequal opportunities for housing and employment, leaving them in a failing economic state and leading them back to a life of crime to support themselves financially. This isn't even accounting for the psychological damage prison gave them. If they continued committing crimes, they would be re-entered into the prison system and further stuck in the broken penal system. It is obvious that there is a multitude of issues in this cycle, but one clear push towards improvement is bettering

school systems in impoverished communities and communities of color while also bettering the education accessible to prisoners, both during and after their time incarcerated.



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