COLLEGE STUDENT AND INMATE:

A NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHY OF THE BE THE CHANGE PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS AT THE COMMONWEALTH CORRECTIONAL CENTER

A Dissertation

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by

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ABSTRACT

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With approximately 2.3 million people behind bars, the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Of those incarcerated, 95% will be released. The Bureau of Justice Statistics reports that over two thirds of prisoners released from state and federal prisons will be arrested again within three years. Prison-based educational programming, particularly postsecondary education, has proven to be an effective preventative tool in reducing reincarceration (Batuik 2005; Chappell 2004; Erisman & Contardo 2005; McCarty 2006). Prisoners who participate in college education report increased self-esteem and improved feelings of self-efficacy (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal; Solomon, & Lindal, 2009), and others describe improvements in problem solving, analytic, and social skills (MacKenzie, 2008; McCarty, 2006).

African American males have significantly higher incarceration rates and lower college graduation rates. To help address these issues, Virginia Community College (VCC) created a college retention program, called Be the Change, that offered support services such as tutoring and mentoring to African American male community college students. In 2008, a chapter of Be the Change was created in a prison in Virginia. The Be the Change community represents an avenue to explore the intersections of prison, postsecondary education, and the educational experiences of African American men.

Using emerging narrative ethnographic methodology, this research presents the stories of the Be the Change program's six members as they discuss their experiences in postsecondary correctional education to answer the overarching research question: How do self-perceptions change as a result of participation in college education in prison?

Data collected included semi-structured interviews, observations, and participant observations. Attention was given to the social and environmental context of the prison. Patterns emerged concerning how college and the academic community affected the Be the Change participants' identities and were presented in an analytic framework called the Agency Continuum.

Representing a nexus of labeling theory, social identity theory, narrative theories, and self-efficacy theory, the Agency Continuum presented five stages to frame how participants' developed new academic identities. In the first stage, Recognition of Potential, authority figures named the men's potential and encouraged them to start college. The men's stories of recognition demonstrated passivity about how they named themselves. In the second stage, Trying on Identity, the men explored the new academic identity, but were often unsure and uncomfortable with being described as college students. In the third stage, Building Confidence, the men experienced successes that affirmed their new identity and gave them a sense of belonging. With increased confidence, the men gained knowledge, credibility, and power, which they used to critically think about themselves and their community. The fourth stage, Discernment, represented moments when the men began to feel more established in their identity and was also a stage of application where the men self-reflected and applied knowledge from their college classes to make sense of themselves and their contexts. In the final stage, Claiming Identity, the men acted and made choices that aligned with their new identities. The men's stories communicated the evolving nature of how each man self-identified, and a nuanced understanding of personal identity with an emphasis on aligning beliefs with actions. Implications and future directions for research are discussed.

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APPROVAL OF THE DISSERTATION

This dissertation, *College Student and Inmate: A Narrative Ethnography of the Be the Change Program Participants at the Commonwealth Correctional Center*, has been approved by the Graduate Faculty of the Curry School of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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For the men of Be the Change

May each one teach one.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

The United States has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Approximately 2.3 million people are incarcerated in the U.S. today (West, Sabol, & Greenman, 2010). The Pew Center on the States (The Pew Charitable Trusts, 2009) reported that 1 out of every 100 Americans is incarcerated, with incarceration rates heavily concentrated among men, racial and ethnic minorities, and 20-and 30-year olds. In fact, among black men, 1 out of every 21 is incarcerated, as compared to 1 out of every 136 white men and 1 out of every 54 Hispanic men. Black males, ages 20-34, hold the highest rate of incarceration—one out of every nine is behind bars.

Of those 2.3 million people incarcerated, 95% will be released back into society (Travis, 2005). Yet, the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2010) reported that over two thirds of prisoners released from state and federal prisons will be re-arrested within three years. For many formerly incarcerated persons, being undereducated, lacking vocational skills, being poor, and having prior criminal convictions contribute to the likelihood of returning to prison (Erisman & Contardo 2005). The high rates of incarceration and recidivism lead many researchers to question prisons' effectiveness at preventing or reducing crime.

Prison-based educational programming, on the other hand, has proven to be an effective preventative tool in reducing reincarceration (Batuik 2005; Chappell 2004; Erisman & Contardo 2005; McCarty 2006). Inmates who have participated in higher education while incarcerated are far less likely to return to prison; in fact, postsecondary

education was found to be more effective than other educational programs in reducing recidivism (Batiuk, 2005). Prisoners who participate in college education report increased self-esteem and improved feelings of self-efficacy (Brazzell, Crayton, Mukamal, Solomon, & Lindal, 2009). Other researchers reported improvements in incarcerated college students' problem solving, analytic, and social skills (MacKenzie, 2008; McCarty, 2006). Even the label "college student" is thought to positively impact an incarcerated person's self-concept and self-esteem (McCarty, 2006). McCarty (2006) asserted that for incarcerated people, it is significant to identify with labels "other than criminals" (p. 93). To be labeled "a college student" is to be seen by others in a more favorable light. Identity, then, may be a significant factor linking postsecondary education in prison and reduced recidivism.

While postsecondary education holds promise for addressing the high rate of return, it also raises additional concerns. As reported in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, overall African American men and women's graduation rate from college "stands at an appallingly low rate of 42 percent," which is 20 percentage points lower than that for white students (Black Student College Graduation Rates Remain Low, But Modest Progress Begins to Show, 2006). Of the African American students, men in particular graduate at an even lower rate of 35%. Given African American males' significantly lower graduation rates, some colleges and prisons have developed programs to help address these issues. Virginia Community College (VCC) created one such support program called Be the Change. In 1998, Be the Change, a college retention program, offered support services such as tutoring and mentoring to African American male community college students. Ten years later in 2008, VCC created a new chapter at

the Commonwealth Correctional Center[1] for selected incarcerated African American male college students. Goals and activities offer students academic support and tutoring, leadership opportunities, and mentoring. The Be the Change pamphlet (2008) stated, "These activities are intended to provide opportunities to enhance the academic experience, promote adjustment to the college environment, and encourage the development of a positive self-image." The Be the Change community represents an avenue to explore the intersections of prison, postsecondary education, and the experiences of African American men.

In this study I took an in-depth look at incarcerated African American college students in the Be the Change program at the Commonwealth Correctional Center. The research seeks the stories of the program's six members as they discuss their experiences in postsecondary correctional education. Generally speaking, how does participation in college classes affect incarcerated students? In particular, how does college education change African American men's self-perception? What meaning, for example, does the label "college student" have to an incarcerated person who has previously been labeled a criminal? Because little research has explored incarcerated African American males' experiences in postsecondary education, this research contributes to that literature by focusing on their identity processes and changes in their self-concept. Also much of the existing research gives the perspectives of teachers who work with incarcerated students rather than the perspectives of those actually incarcerated. Given the research reporting low African American college graduation rates and higher incarceration rates, there is a

[1] In order to protect the incarcerated persons' identities, I will not disclose the name or location of the prison. "Commonwealth Correctional Center" (CCC) is a pseudonym.

clear rationale for looking at experiences of incarcerated African American college students in particular. To be clear, this is not a comparative study; rather my research will focus on African American males, contributing to knowledge about race, schooling, and identity in the context of prisons.

Research Questions

Given the contours of existing research and the problem scenario described previously, this study posed one overarching research question: How do self-perceptions change as a result of participation in college education in prison? The literature suggests five areas of inquiry that guided the data collection and analysis. In order to allow for emerging ideas, the following five themes and guiding questions were utilized:

1. *Significant Factors.* While enrolled in the prison's college education program, what factors, influences, and experiences were significant in students' changing mindsets with regard to identity and self-perception?
2. *Labeling.* How did participants use or not use labels to describe themselves in their narratives? Did college classes change students' beliefs about what labels apply to them? Did labels change and evolve (from before starting college to after being in college)? If so, how? How were labels created—from within students, from interactions with others or from both?
3. *Experience.* What kinds of experiences changed the incarcerated students' sense of themselves? While in prison, how did experiences in and outside of the college program change their self-perceptions (e.g., taking on leadership roles, being mentors and tutors) within the prison school? How were those experiences reflected in their identity narratives?

4. *Academic learning in classrooms.* How did specific classroom experiences (e.g., exposure to new ideas, specific books, a memorable group discussion) change the students' perceived identities? What newly acquired skills or competencies did the students describe as significant to how they perceive themselves?
5. *Social relationship factors.* How did relationships with fellow college students and professors as well as with other Be the Change members influence their self-perceptions? Did college classes provide the students with social and emotional benefits (e.g., the ability to vent in meetings, an opportunity to offer help or to show caring)? How did interacting with teachers and guest speakers influence the students' sense of self?

The net was intentionally cast wide into these five themes to permit the men's responses to guide the project's direction. The significance of college education could not be limited to academic learning and classroom experiences. Particular attention was given to the prison context, including the men's experiences of both the environmental and social landscapes. Acknowledging that narratives are situated in contexts, these thematic questions sought personal examples of the impact of college education. Changes in self-perception are not easily measured. Through storytelling, the men were encouraged to reflect on how they had thought about themselves, named themselves, and had been viewed by others at different times in their schooling. The following review of literature provides conceptual frameworks that address issues of identity, change, and the role of education.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Recidivism rates are lower for incarcerated people who take college classes while in prison (Batiuk, 2005). Researchers relate that lower rate of return to several benefits of college education. Some (e.g., Brazzell et al., 2009) found that participation in college increases incarcerated persons' self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy. Others have suggested that college may improve incarcerated students' problem solving, analytic, and social skills (MacKenzie, 2008; McCarty, 2006). McCarty (2006) explained that being known by a positive label like "college student" increases the self-esteem and alters the self-concept of people in prison. These observations indicate that postsecondary education may spur changes in self-perception and identity. This research builds a knowledge base for better understanding the relationship between college education and identity development.

This literature review draws from theories of identity that inform the relationship between education and self-perception. Relevant theories concerning the construction of personal and social identities are highlighted. Beginning with a brief background on identity, theories of identity are then situated within education and schooling. How is identity shaped by and within educational institutions? Then three significant theoretical frameworks—social identity theory, labeling theory, and self-efficacy theory—are described; these theories provide insight into how personal and social identities are formed and reformed. Attention is paid to how identity is developed from within a person

as well as influenced outside of a person. The final section provides an orientation to the context of American prison education, with particular focus on postsecondary education, identity, and change and the experiences of prison educators. Throughout the review of literature, connections are made to the context and participants of this research—the incarcerated college students of Be the Change and their prison school.

Identity and Education

Anthropologists have long understood the value of studying education. As Levinson (2000) stated, the "very foundations of the educational process are rooted in the human penchant for making meaning out of experience and communicating that meaning to others" (p. 15). Sociological and anthropological theories of education have been developed regarding the process of cultural transmission (how basic knowledge of culture is passed from one generation to the next) as well as cultural innovation and change. Spindler (1997) related a society's educational system with their culture; the educational system serves to maintain the culture. "This is done by inculcating the specific values, attitudes, and beliefs that make this structure credible and the skills and competencies that make it work" (p. 302). Interwoven within education, schools, and learning are patterns of culture—what the culture values and who people are as individuals as well as communities. Schools, then, provide anthropologists with fertile ground for study.

Identity and education have a rich and complex relationship. Schools have been sites of identity creation, reinforcement, transformation, and derogation. Scholars in the fields of sociology and anthropology of education have studied how experiences of school and education contribute to changes in individuals and communities (e.g., Fine 1991; Levinson 2000; Mead, 1928). While education is idealistically described as "the

great equalizer," it has often served to reproduce social inequality (Davidson, 1996; Fine, 1991). Yet, education holds potential for both individual and community change.

Schools as Sites of Identity Work

Identity is not created in a bubble. "Establishing identity…includes reflecting on one's family of origin and ethnic heritage, defining self as a part of a religious or cultural tradition, and seeing self within a social and historical context" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 49). Indeed, schools are an integral part of students' cultural and social contexts.

For Chickering and Reisser (1993), identity is developed in the context of schools. In fact, they described the purpose of institutions of higher education as ushering students through cognitive, social, and emotional development. They discuss what "development" for college students commonly entails: "College students live out recurring themes: gaining competence and self-awareness, learning control and flexibility, balancing intimacy with freedom, finding one's voice or vocation, refining beliefs, and making commitments" (p. 35). Colleges and universities as institutions guide individual students "to develop all the gifts of human potential" (p. 41).

Based on their research, Chickering and Reisser (1993) made claims about higher education's role in identity formation:

> In the global society of the twenty-first century, where change is the only certainty, not socialization but identity formation becomes the central and continuing task of education. With a firm sense of self as artist—as performer, composer, improviser, and conductor—tomorrow's graduates will not be bound to a single instrument. (p. 208)

These seemingly universal themes of college students' development demonstrate Chickering and Reisser's (1993) understanding that identities are not only formed in the social context of colleges and universities, but that this formation is "the central task" of

higher education. From the portrayal of education described here, a strong identity is a gift that universities can offer to students with the right development supports in place. From their argument, a school's job is to provide students with a "firm sense of self." Heavy-handed and uncritical, a school's role in identity formation is positive and locates the responsibility of identity-formation outside of oneself.

Other theorists (e.g., Davidson, 1996; Fine, 1991; Wexler, 1992) have been more critical of structure and power in schools; their perspectives help to problematize both how and what identities are formed in schools. Wexler's (1992) research in *Becoming Somebody* highlighted school as a site for varying experiences of identity negotiation. Within his high school site, Wexler discovered how the school structure contributed to patterns of class difference. Students' experiences of school and "becoming somebody" differed based on where they went to school as well as their social class, race, and gender. He called it an organized production and the product was "identity, selfhood, 'the somebody' which the students work to attain through their interactions in school" (Wexler, p. 8).

> These identities are not random or pluralistically tolerant and inclusive. In each school, types of selves are set by the central image of the school and the organizational devices used to achieve its image, whether of "school spirit" or "bright students" or college "prep." These images are social class emblems. They stand for important aspects of life for the social segment in which the school is located. (p. 9)

Wexler critiqued schools for their role in social reproduction—for producing students stereotyped into familiar social roles.

In Michelle Fine's (1991) critical ethnographic work, *Framing Dropouts*, she critiqued low-income schools for their role in perpetuating existing class problems. In her

study, some low-income schools "condone rather than critique prevailing social and economic inequities" (p. 61). Fine contrasted access and outcomes; although students may have equal access to public schooling, they experience vastly unequal educational outcomes. "Schools distribute skills and opportunities in ways textured by class, race, and gender asymmetries" (p. 199). Like Wexler (1992), Fine argued that educational institutions reproduce social inequities and work to silence dissent from students and faculty.

With data gathered from the inner-city high school in the South Bronx where she spent years doing qualitative research, Fine (1991) observed that the students who stayed in school were "markedly more depressed, conformist, self-blaming, and unwilling to confront a teacher about an educational injustice than those who left" (p. 137). Further comparing those who left and those who remained and graduated, Fine expressed concern about graduates touted as "'organic intellectuals' from among the poor and working class" and who "are more often than not those who dare not speak on behalf of their own collective interests" (p. 137). Schools, she said, control students' identities through a process of pushing out some and silencing the voices and consciousness of others who stay. With attention to individual students' experiences of education and identity, Fine problematized ingrained, systemic issues in education policy and practice.

Davidson (1996) found that the patterns of education have been more likely to be reproductive than transformative for students. Identity, from her perspective, "can be conceptualized as a process that develops in a matrix of structuring social and institutional relationships and practices" (p. 5). Based on a deficit theory model, failure in school is often blamed on students. Student deficiency is reflected in students' identities

and labels, which are assigned by teachers and administrators. “Because cultural explanations for academic failure do not occur to teachers, educators turn to labels, attributing inherent negative traits to their students, such as laziness” (p. 23). In this way, Davidson pointed out how schools create negative identity patterns for groups of students. “Thus, while failure is in reality co-produced by teachers and students, the explanation of such failure is institutionalized as deficiency” (p. 23).

For Davidson (1996), power is a key consideration when framing identity and education. “Because schools participate in negotiating the meanings students attach to identity, the ways in which teachers and schools handle power and convey ethnically and racially relevant meanings become relevant to the conceptualization of students’ behaviors” (p. 5). Students are not helpless in this process, however:

> Embodied and enacted in personal relationships, power relations are present as individuals make active efforts to force others into comprehensible categories. At the same time, individuals are not inert objects; rather, individuals can and do resist the meanings they encounter even as others seek to push them toward comprehensible categories. (p. 5)

Resistance and assimilation are used as students and schools negotiate students’ identities. While students’ senses of self are contextualized within the school, they are not solely dictated by the school. Davidson (1996) showed that studying identity in schools opens a window on how people, identities, structures, and society do not merely reproduce; they are produced in relationship and conflict with human agency.

Although schools represent a mixed bag of identity formation, maintenance, negotiation, and transformation, the pattern of social reproduction exists for many low-income, minority students and their experiences of school. Although none of this research took place in a prison, this work also has applications in the contexts of prisons and

prison schools. Identity negotiation is perhaps further complicated by the fact that the college students are housed in a prison. As mentioned in Chapter 1, many competing influences exist in prison. From his experience as a 15-year prison ethnographer, Waldrum (2009) reflects, "People change in prison, and not always for the better" (p. 5). Keeping in mind the anthropological and sociological work on identity in education, the discussion moves to a delineation of social identity theory, labeling theory, and self-efficacy theory.

Social Identity Theory

Social identity theory is the idea that individuals categorize themselves as members of groups (Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Brown & Capozza 2000; Strets 2006; Tajfel 1978), and these groups and the meaning that belongs to them are culturally defined (Strets, 2006). Social identity theory is defined as "self-conception as a group member" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). The father of social identity theory, Tajfel (1978), posited that each person "is a member of numerous social groups and that this membership contributes, positively or negatively, to the image that he has of himself" (p. 61). Tajfel described social identity as "that part of an individual's self concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership" (p. 63). Specifically, Tajfel turned his attention to the ways in which these memberships affect one's behavior. What, for example, does it mean to be a member of one group, and what is the significance of that group membership to those in the group as well as those outside of the group?

In choosing a group, people categorize themselves as like some people and different from others (Strets, 2006). In this process, the person's chosen groups hold

"corresponding implications for the search for some social coherence and self-enhancement" (Brown & Capozza, 2000, p. ix). In addition, identifying with a group "activates a sense of belonging and self-worth" (Strets, 2006, p. 89). All groups add, exist, and live amid other groups (Tajfel, 1978). The idea of social identity "is linked to the need for a positive and distinct image of the ingroup" (p. 74). Social categorization, belonging to one group as opposed to another, is a process that orients individuals to their place in society. Belonging to a group holds meaning to that individual as well as individuals outside of the group. Relationships among the groups as well as comparisons of different groups are common; it is in relationship and interaction that social action of the groups acquires meaning (Tajfel, 1978).

The theoretical foundation of social identity theory is symbolic interactionism. Deaux (2000) wrote, "Both theoretical traditions assume that the self is constructed in and dependent from the social context, and both assume a multiplicity of self-definitions" (p. 2). The self and identity are, therefore, understood to be a process. Abrams and Hogg (1990) added, "Social identity theory conceives of the self-concept as a collection of self-images which vary in terms of length of their establishment, complexity, and richness of content, etc." (p. 3). The images of the self can be thought of as holding places on a continuum ranging from personal to social. On one end of the continuum are personal, individuating characteristics, and at the other end are social, categorical characteristics. Self and social identities are not static or one-dimensional; rather, social identity theory is grounded in the assumption that the self holds many roles and identity is a process.

Social identity theory also offers an explanation of the role of society in creating and reinforcing the construction of self. Anthropologist Wendy Luttrell (1997) developed

the idea of the interplay between selfhood and social identity, asserting that self-formation and social identity are mutually reinforcing processes. While the self is being continuously formed (and informed) by current and past events and conditions, social identity is constructed by others' perceptions and evaluations of a person. "Social identities give us a sense of what we have in common with, and what separates us from, others" (p. 7). The construction of a person's social identity is a "cultural process by which traits, expectations, images, and evaluations are culturally assigned to different groups of people" (p. 7). The social process of identity formation includes how groups positively identify with some and exist in contrast to others.

Social identity theory has great potential as a conceptual framework for this proposed study, because it recognizes that the formation and reformation of identity is both an internal and external process. Choice and agency come into play as individuals choose some categories to which they belong. However, as social identity theory posits, not all categories are self-assigned. Incarcerated people have generally been placed outside of in-groups; they have been collectively "defined against" by other social groups. Thus labeling, both from within and without, is likely a significant factor for incarcerated persons' beliefs about who they are.

Labeling Theory

Labeling theory asserts that deviance is not inherent to an act. Instead, it draws attention to the linguistic tendency of majorities to negatively label minorities or those seen as deviant from norms (Becker, 1963; Ericson, 1975). Ericson (1975) stated, "Labeling is itself a process of giving objective meaning to something observed, a meaning that may be different from the subjective meaning in the mind of the actor

himself" (p. 41). Labeling theorists (Becker 1963; Ericson 1975) are interested in how labels are constructed, how the label affects present and future interactions, reflections and interpretations of motives for action, and how the label is redefined and negotiated over time. The theory is concerned with how the self-identity and behavior of individuals may be determined or influenced by the terms used to describe or classify them. It is associated with the concepts of the self-fulfilling prophecy and stereotyping.

Labeling theory was developed by sociologist Howard Becker in his 1963 book, *Outsiders*. Deviance, Becker argued, is socially constructed. Critical to his argument is his understanding that "deviance is not a quality that lies in behavior itself, but in the interaction between the person who commits an act and those who respond to it" (p. 14). Becker argued that whether or not an act is called "deviant" depends on how people react to it. Deviance is known because of the way an offender is sanctioned by others. Becker's focus is on the process by which offenders are labeled "outsiders" and how they react to that judgment.

Becker (1963) discussed how committing an act and being caught in public "reveals" the person as different. As a person is "caught" committing an offensive act, he is branded as deviant, and this label has consequences for the person's self-image as well as his ability to participate in society. The "deviant's" public identity is the most important consequence (p. 32). The label *deviant* carries with it negative expectations. A person arrested for committing a crime is likely to face significant social consequences. "Apprehension for one deviant act exposes a person to the likelihood that he will be regarded as deviant or undesirable in other respects" (p. 33). Becker's assertion is that other people begin to treat the person like he is generally deviant instead of deviant in one

specific area; because the person is labeled "undesirable," he is excluded from full participation in society. This stereotype or generalization may produce a self-fulfilling prophecy. "It sets in motion several mechanisms which conspire to shape the person in the image people have of him" (p. 34). Importantly, Becker drew attention to the effects of the label deviant. The treatment of the deviants prevents them from being able to do many day-to-day tasks and, therefore, these individuals may develop "illegitimate routines" (p. 35).

Why does it matter how others label deviants? Labeling theorists assert that people come to identify themselves by how others see them. Although primary deviance is thought of as "flirtation" or "experimentation" with deviant acts, secondary deviance involves deviant behavior being incorporated into the individual's self-concept (Maruna, LeBel, Naples, & Mitchell, 2009, p. 32). Secondary deviance is largely a product of societal reaction. "Drawing on the symbolic interactionist notion of the 'looking-glass self-concept,' the theory suggests that a stigmatized individual will come to view himself based upon what he believes other people think he is" (p. 33). Thus, the labeling process is experienced by individuals in two ways—in how society comes to see them and in how they come to see themselves.

Richard Ericson (1975) connected social identity theory with labeling theory. "The label 'deviant' upsets actors who are unfamiliar with a person of this type, and consequently do not know how to define the situation in which they must interact with him" (p. 65). In the process of socialization, people in society begin to treat the labeled deviant individual differently. Images and ideas of who the individual is are forced on him as he interacts with others. "As he is socialized—giving up and changing part of this

ideal individual identity in order to be sociable—he acquires a social identity. The individual is thus constantly engaged in a dialectic between his individual and social identities" (p. 66).

The label itself "is the socially meaningful definition that arises out of interpretative interaction, is referred to in future interaction, and eventually becomes taken for granted" (Ericson, p. 41). The labels are interpreted by actors in social contexts.

> In interaction—actually doing something with others—they learn first hand that the meaning of their behavior is contingent on individual identities, the situation they are in, the social identities they present, and other persons they may be concerned about, even though these persons are not present. These variables enter into their decision and exit in their action, and are perpetually reconstructed as action unfolds. (p. 44)

Ericson explained that labeling theorists draw from symbolic interactionism because they are interested in how people's interpretation of each other's actions leads to a collective act. In fact, Becker (1963) later asserted that he preferred calling it "interactionist theory of deviance" (as cited in Ericson, 1975, p. 33). Ericson (1975) said that interactionists "desire to study how the bias of their subjects affects what those people do." Likewise, labeling analysts study their subjects' "commonsense explanations" of their behavior because those perspectives are important in the study of criminal activity (p. 35). Ericson said that people behave in ways that make sense to them, and the goal of labeling theorists is to better understand the "meaning of the actions for the actors themselves" (p. 40). Labeling analysts argue that

> no matter what 'irrational' or 'senseless' behaviour an individual engages in, no matter what label is used to categorise that behaviour, and no matter what further 'irrational' or 'senseless' behaviour this label may lead to, the behaviour is still rational and makes sense to the actor. (p. 40)

One significant criticism of labeling theory is that "it removes 'human agency' from rule violation and rewrites it as a reaction to stigma," (West, 1985, p. 105). Although there have been many criticisms of labeling theory, Braithwaite (1989) argued: "When society's reaction to deviants is to stigmatize, segregate and exclude, such persons are left with limited opportunity for achieving self-respect and affiliation in the mainstream but are welcomed among subcultural groups of similarly stigmatized outcasts" (Braithwaite, 1989, as quoted in Maruna, Lebel, Mitchell, & Naples, p. 273). They added that reoffending, from this perspective, would naturally follow.

Labeling theory has many potential applications for this research study. First and foremost, the incarcerated men have experienced labeling ranging from "high school dropout" to "inmate" to "drug dealer" to "murderer" to "felon." Those labels have undoubtedly impacted their self-concept. Yet, while spending time in prison, they have chosen to take on other positive labels—General Educational Development (GED) graduate, tutor, mentor, college student. How do individuals understand and make sense of the positive and negative labels? Labeling theory provides insight into how their identities are socially negotiated and internally adopted.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy reflects a person's belief concerning his ability to perform actions that will result in certain outcomes (Bandura, 1977). People's sense of self-efficacy would determine if they felt they possessed the skills and competencies to bring about a specific outcome. Self-efficacy can be raised or lowered from internal and external sources. These sources that inform how people believe they will perform include performance accomplishments, verbal persuasion, vicarious experiences, and emotional

arousal. Performance accomplishments are also known as "mastery experiences." "Successes raise mastery expectations; repeated failures lower them" (p. 195). In other words, being good at a task increases people's sense that they will be successful at the same experience again. In addition, having mastery experiences in one area may also lead them to believe that they will have success in others.

Verbal persuasion is when people are encouraged to believe that they can do a task or accomplish something (Bandura, 1977). Often having someone rooting for a person increases that person's outcome expectancy. Being informed by vicarious experiences means that a person can benefit from "seeing others perform threatening activities without adverse consequences" (p. 197). Trying an unknown activity could be scary; however, seeing another person do it well may increase people's own feelings that they can do it, too. Emotional arousal also informs people how they may perform. Bandura explained that high levels of anxiety and fear will "usually debilitate performance" (p. 199), whereas, if people are emotionally calm, that may signal their confidence in their ability to perform a task. Self-efficacy theory increases understanding of how incarcerated college students build confidence in a new identity.

Postsecondary Education in Prison and Recidivism

It is important to understand the context of prison education, postsecondary correctional education, and the effects of education on recidivism. The Bureau of Justice Special Report (Harlow, 2003) painted a bleak picture of state prison inmates. The report said that approximately 75% of these inmates did not complete high school. In addition to low educational attainment, poverty and unemployment was also found to be high among incarcerated people. Forty-three percent of inmates reported making less than $9,600

annually; that is, slightly higher than the national poverty line (Erisman & Contardo, 2005). Approximately one third of state and federal prisoners reported that they were not employed in the month prior to arrest (Harlow, 2003).

> State prison inmates who grew up in homes without two parents, with an incarcerated parent, or on welfare or in subsidized housing were less likely than other inmates to have obtained a high school diploma or GED or attended a postsecondary institution. (p. 8)

Educational programs are common in prisons; in fact, 90% of state prisons provide educational programs for inmates. In 2003, over half of incarcerated men and women participated in an educational program since their recent prison admission (Harlow, 2003). In fact, 70% of state and federal inmates who had earned a GED as of 1997 achieved it in a correctional facility. Due to demand and need, prison educational resources in American prisons are concentrated on providing basic GED and vocational programs to men and women who lack a high school diploma (Harlow, 2003).

Postsecondary education programs, however, are much more rare. In their 50-state analysis of postsecondary correctional education policy in 2003-04, Erisman and Contardo (2005) of the Institute for Higher Education Policy stated that postsecondary correctional education is available to about 5% of prisoners and completion rates are low. They found that 62% of prisoners who took college classes in 2003-04 were enrolled in vocational certificate programs for college credit. When surveyed, most institutions indicated that lack of funding was a key barrier preventing prison systems from enrolling more incarcerated students in college classes. In addition, Harlow (2003) reported:

> In state prisons between 1995 and 2000, the percentages of prisons offering classes increased from basic education (76% to 80%), high school courses (80% to 84%), and special education programs (33% to 40%), while the percentage with college classes went down (31% to 27%). (p. 4)

Although postsecondary education lacks funding and has a low participation rate, postsecondary education in prison is valuable because it is thought to significantly reduce the likelihood of the inmate's return (Batiuk, 2005; Chappell, 2004; Erisman & Contardo, 2005).

> There is also a correlation between educational attainment and recidivism. Data suggests that better educated inmates are less likely to relapse into criminal behavior after release from prison. Among prisoners in 1997, 34 percent of those with at least some college were first-time offenders, compared to only 23 percent of those without a high school diploma or GED, suggesting that better educated prisoners are less likely to be repeat offenders. (Erisman & Contardo, 2005, p. 5)

In her meta-analysis of the effects of postsecondary correctional education, Chappell (2004) found that recidivism rates for persons taking college classes in prison were 46% lower than for ex-offenders who did not take college classes. Batiuk's (2005) study reported that postsecondary education was more effective than other educational programs in reducing recidivism. Earning an associate degree while incarcerated reduced the likelihood of reincarceration by 62% (Batiuk, 2005).

Prisoner Educators' Perspectives on the Problem

While reduced recidivism is often attributed to educational programs in prison, especially college classes, there are many different understandings as to why educational programming has this effect on offenders. One must first consider how prisons affect the people they hold. In her description of how prisons may negatively socialize incarcerated persons, Kendig (1993) stated that the process of incarceration "deconstructs the inmate's image of himself and the world" (p. 197). In fact, incarceration is a rite in which the inmate is separated from "his familiar world and identity" and is placed in a "transitional setting marked by paradox, ambiguity, and extremes" (Kendig, 1993, p. 197). Brazzell et

al., (2009) agreed, adding that many incarcerated persons struggle with negative self-perception and low self-esteem. This process, called "prisonization," occurs when incarcerated people become "acculturated to the negative values of prison subculture" (p. 17); that is, they take on negative values learned within the prison culture. From this perspective, prisons have gained the public image of being "breeding grounds" for further criminal behavior. According to Brazzell and colleagues, however, offenders who participate in formal education often report improved self-esteem and feelings of self-efficacy, thus reducing the negative effects of prisonization.

Delving into possible reasons why educational programs positively affect inmates' self-esteem, MacKenzie (2008) stated, "Educational programs that increase offenders' social cognitions, ability to solve problems and belief in their ability to control events in their lives may reduce their future offending" (p. 3). She claimed that incarcerated students gain specific academic and social skills in their college classrooms. In her experience as a college instructor teaching a history course at San Quentin Prison, McCarty (2006) said that in comparison to her other undergraduate students her incarcerated college students more actively sought ways to apply the concepts they were learning to their personal lives. Her students connected reading and writing assignments with their personal experiences as Freedom Riders and ex-Black Panthers (McCarty, 2006). "They want to understand, not regurgitate," she said (p. 93). McCarty said that as incarcerated students learn the skills needed to become good analytical readers, thinkers, and writers for their college classes they are simultaneously applying those skills to how they think and make decisions in their own lives.

McCarty also questioned the impact of the label "college student" on offenders, explaining that it may positively affect the inmate's identity and self-esteem. "They have the opportunity to identify themselves as something other than criminals; they identify as students" (p. 93). She added, "They have the opportunity to interact with and be seen by people from the outside as something other than criminals as well" (p. 93).

In conclusion, while the perspectives of prison educators and prison statistics provide critical background information about correctional postsecondary education, these insights also raise further questions about education and identity. In a time when prison ethnography is declining (Wacquant, 2002; Waldrum, 2009) and because few studies focus on the African American male experience of college education in prison, it is particularly important to conduct research that highlights the voices and experiences of that community.

Summary

The theories—social identity theory, labeling theory, and self-efficacy theory—support the belief that identity development is ongoing. Social identity theory recognizes that the formation and reformation of identity is an internal and external process. Labeling theory provides insight into how identities are socially negotiated and internally adopted. Self-efficacy theory builds on these theoretical foundations, adding that through mastery experiences or verbal persuasion people's beliefs about their abilities can change. These theories provide a strong foundation for understanding how incarcerated college students may experience labeling, negotiate their identities, and increase feelings of self-efficacy.

CHAPTER 3

NARRATIVE ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS

As I approach my methods, I recognized the need for a thoughtful integration of narrative inquiry and ethnography to collect information about inmates' influential experiences in the college program. While the stories, perspectives, and experiences of the incarcerated students are central, the cultural context of the prison is also significant. This chapter begins with an orientation to narratives and a reflection on them as processes of identity construction and meaning-making. I argue that an ethnographic approach is also valuable because of the attention given to setting, relationships, and culture. Undoubtedly, the prison and the prison school are rich settings. Emerging narrative ethnography methodology not only highlights stories and experiences of people who are rarely heard, it also underscores the importance of the social and environmental contexts of those stories.

Narrative

Narrative is a "fundamental human activity," which "provides a very powerful means for understanding human experience" (Tappan & Brown, 1989, p. 185). Kramp (2004) described narrative as a "way of knowing" that "structures experiences and gives [them] meaning" (p. 106). The construction of self, others, and events are necessary in telling stories; in so doing, the narrator imposes meaning on actions, events, and characters. "In this way narrative reveals to us how the persons we are studying construct themselves as the central characters and narrators of their own stories" (p. 9).

Through the process of narrating one's story, narrative can be utilized for identity construction, self-reflection, and meaning-making. Luttrell (1997) stated, "Personal stories are also the means by which people fashion their identities" (p. 4). For Luttrell, the personal narratives she gathered from women returning to school were accounts that "reconcile their past experiences, feelings, and self-understandings in school with their current lives" (p. 4). It is through telling stories and integrating life events and characters into stories that "people make sense of what has happened and is happening to them" (Somers & Gibson, 1994, p. 38).

Because interactionists are concerned with meaning-making of behavior and action (Ericson, 1975), seeking stories and narratives about why a person acted is fitting. Ericson added that labeling theorists look to their "subjects' commonsense explanations" as to why the persons acted in that way. In asking for their stories, Ericson (1975) argued that the "process of engaging in criminal activity" is revealed (p. 35). Of course, the same could be said for asking why a person chooses to participate in *any* activity, including college classes. As the incarcerated students narrate their own stories, they will discuss their relationship with education—how they made the decision to start taking college classes, what college means to them, how certain classes or books impacted their lives or their thinking, and how their families feel about their decision to enroll in college classes. Through those stories, a deeper understanding will be gained about the incarcerated college students and how they negotiate their social identities.

Narrative Ethnography—An Emergent Methodology

Blending narrative inquiry and ethnographic methods was significant to this study because the participants and their stories were located in the social and environmental

contexts of a prison. Their narratives and experiences were set in the prison and the prison school. They referenced attending classes in a prison, studying in prison, and having limitations and challenges associated with prison life. Prison was not merely the setting or backdrop of their stories. Because the prison and the prison school were the men's social and cultural contexts, stories without attention to the prison context would be a shallow representation. Both narratives and contexts were critical textures and were given equal treatment in the study.

Narrative ethnography is an emergent field that acknowledges the social, environmental contexts of the storytellers and their stories. As defined by Gubrium and Holstein (2008), narrative ethnography "is a method of procedure and analysis aimed at close scrutiny of social situations, their actors, and actions in relation to narratives" (p. 250). Narratives take place "within circumstantially situated social interaction" (p. 251). The purpose of blending the methods of ethnography and narrative is to "provide greater ecological validity" (Paulson, 2011, p. 148). Gubruim and Holstein (2008) demonstrated the importance of narratives being told within a context. "Narratives comprise the interplay between experience, storying practices, descriptive resources, purposes at hand, audiences, and the environments that condition storytelling" (p. 250).

Paulson (2011) described that integrating ethnography and narrative interviews generates "deeper findings" than qualitative interviews alone (p. 148). Paulson added that storytelling is how communities develop shared identities. "Narrative research shows the importance of stories at both the individual and the community level" (p. 151). Methods that highlight the importance of narrative also point to the focus on the participants' voices and understandings of their experiences. "Open-ended questions are the

characteristic of narrative interviews and the researcher encourages the telling of stories through listening with a minimum of interruption and the use of silences" (p. 151).

Setting

Located in Virginia, the Commonwealth Correctional Center[2] was a medium-security prison (level two out of six) that housed approximately 1,200 men. The prison had two 30-foot tall razor wire fences enclosing the prison grounds. There were 12-15 large, gray buildings topped with bright turquoise roofs that include inmate dormitories, administrative buildings, a cafeteria, a school, a vocational building, a greenhouse, the doctor's and dentist's offices, a multi-purpose building that was used for indoor basketball, the dog training program, and events like the annual graduation ceremony, and the family visitation building. There was a softball field and shaded weight yard for recreation. Dividing the prison campus was a wide sidewalk that the incarcerated men call "the Boulevard." The incarcerated men in the horticulture classes maintained the flowerbeds, the flowers, shrubs, and mulch that line the sidewalks, the plants and vegetables in the prison's green house, and the shrubbery throughout the prison grounds.

The dormitories were divided into two sides that shared a correctional officer station. The station had thick glass windows and was elevated about 10 feet. Each side of the dorm housed 96 men in 48 metal bunk beds. The cinderblock walls were painted white, and the floor was gray concrete. It was noisy. Many men had small, personal televisions that they watched in their bunks. There was also a shared television and tables

[2] Commonwealth Correctional Center is a pseudonym.

and chairs in the front room of each side of the dormitory. Behind each dormitory, there was a paved, fenced in basketball court and two outdoor pay telephones.

Everyone entered and exited from the same point—the administration building. In addition to holding administrative offices, this building was the screening point for all entering and exiting the prison. Each visitor presented a driver's license, walked through a metal detector, and was patted down thoroughly by the officer on duty. When one entered the prison, he must walk through a series of locking doors and gates. While all correctional officers wore dark blue uniforms, all of the incarcerated men wore light blue denim shirts and pants. Because of this, visitors were not permitted to wear denim.

The Prison School

The Commonwealth Correctional Center's school building was a unique area of the prison. A prison officer sat at its entrance and monitored all who enter and exit. The officer collected the identification badges of each incarcerated man as he entered the school, grouped the badges by last name in a small wooden organizer that is bolted to the cinderblock wall, and patted each man down. As the men entered in the morning or returned to the school after lunch, there was often a line of 10-12 men waiting to go through the security checkpoint.

Despite the security, it *felt* like a school. The walls of the prison school were covered in framed posters including ones depicting African American history, religions of the world, and famous American women writers. The five academic classrooms were decorated with brightly colored educational posters and inspirational bulletin boards that were changed monthly. Often incarcerated students did the artwork for the bulletin boards. There was a library and a barber's shop housed in the school building. Barbering

was a program offered through vocational education at the school, and it was also a useful service for the incarcerated men. The principal's and administrative assistants' offices were located in the back of the school building. In the waiting area outside of the principal's office, there were two large framed posters located on the wall that sits across from a small sofa and chairs—one of President Barack Obama and the other of Martin Luther King, Jr.

The prison school offered literacy, Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes, GED preparation, and college classes (both academic and vocational) to incarcerated students. The prison also offered classes to Spanish speakers called the Plaza Comunitaria; the classes were supported by the Mexican government and are similar the American ABE and GED programs. Noncredit classes were also offered in creative writing, OSHA training, Anthony Robbins programs, transition/re-entry programs, personal finance, and career readiness. The Department of Corrections estimated that CCC served about 250 students per day (Department of Corrections, 2007).

Many of the incarcerated college students held paid positions tutoring and assisting the teachers in the literacy, ABE, and GED classes. In these positions, they earned about 35—45 cents per hour. The school employed the incarcerated students to assist with a variety of programs—administrative, academic, transition, vocational, library, dorm tutoring, and college. In total, the prison school employed approximately 65 incarcerated men in 2011; many of these men were either enrolled in the college program or had completed a college or vocational degree. Administrative aides helped the prison school administrative staff by setting up technology, making copies, working in the

library, and assisting the principal. Once incarcerated students graduated from the college program, a select few were hired to assist in the classrooms of the college instructors.

In 2011, Commonwealth Correctional Center graduated approximately 84 men with General Education Development certificates (GEDs). Three men graduated from Virginia Community College with associate degrees, and one man graduated with an associate degree in business from another college. Fifteen men graduated from the Plaza Comunitaria (both primaria and secundaria programs). In vocational classes, approximately 17 men earned a certificate in floor covering, 21 men earned a certificate in building maintenance, 23 earned a certificate in electricity, and 18 earned a certificate in masonry. Several men also completed apprenticeship programs in cooking, custodial maintenance, furniture upholstery, HVAC, plumbing, sheet metal work, and small engine repair. Graduation was celebrated annually in May and family and friends of the incarcerated graduates were invited. The graduates wore black caps and gowns (the same gowns that the Virginia Community College graduates wear on the main campus). There was a keynote speaker, an incarcerated college student speaker, and the prison choir performs. The administrative aides created printed programs that were given to graduates and their families and friends with the graduates' names and degrees. The students in the vocational cooking program prepared a large cake, snacks and punch for the reception that followed the ceremony.

Be the Change

Be the Change was a community college retention program for African American men started in 1998 by Virginia Community College (VCC). A newspaper article described the program's purpose:

> Historically, African-American male students have been significantly less successful than their female and white counterparts relative to retention and graduation rates. Southside Virginia Community College initiated Be the Change in the fall of 1998 in an effort to enhance the academic success of these students. (VCC, 2009)

Ten years later in 2008, VCC added a chapter at the Commonwealth Correctional Center. The program was primarily to function as a retention and support program for African American male incarcerated college students (Be the Change, 2008). "These activities are intended to provide opportunities to enhance the academic experience, promote adjustment to the college environment, and encourage the development of a positive self-image" (Be the Change, 2008). Be the Change members were chosen by the principal and the current members. The members make recommendations for who they deemed to be "good candidates" from their experiences and observations in the prison. New members were collectively interviewed by the group and principal and invited to join. With only six current members, the group was tight-knit and selective.

There were three stated goals of the Be the Change program. The first was the retention of African-American male inmates enrolled at VCC. Second was helping the Be the Change students maintain at least a 2.75 GPA. And the third was to serve as a bridge between the incarcerated Be the Change students and the VCC non-incarcerated Be the Change students. In addition, Be the Change hoped to "show that inmates are not negative like portrayed in the media but can give back to the community in positive

ways" (VCC, 2009). The VCC president also strongly believed that education is the key to stopping repeat offenders (VCC, 2009). The director of Be the Change (who was employed by VCC as a community college counselor) did not regularly attend the Be the Change chapter's meetings held at the prison. After over a year attending their meetings, I saw the director at the prison three times.

Internally, the Be the Change meetings functioned like a support group. The weekly meeting time was used for discussion, motivation, advice, and debate. Most meetings began with a check-in where the members speak about what was happening in their lives—highlighting struggles and joys that were both personal and academic in nature. In June 2010, the six Be the Change participants brainstormed about who they were and what the purpose of Be the Change was. After debating and editing, they asked that I type up the finalized list. Interestingly, these goals and purposes were not reflected in the official Be the Change pamphlet. The self-generated document read:

Be the Change: Who we are, Our goals and purposes

1. Giving back through community service
    - Outreach – serving others outside of CCC
    - "In" reach – serving incarcerated persons within CCC
2. Fundraising
3. Self-help
4. Coming together as an intellectual community
    - Discussion
    - Tutoring
    - Networking for resources and knowledge

- Staying current with news and events

5. Group support and encouragement
    - Mentoring
    - Giving and receiving guidance
6. Social outlet
7. Development of responsibility and accountability (Be the Change document, June 28, 2010)

Participants

The six members of the Be the Change program—Blink, Ben, Umoja, Tyshawn, Escabar, and Cally—were all African American men ranging in age from 27 to 59 years old. They had spent varying amounts of time in prison; the longest time incarcerated was 30 years and the shortest was 7 years. There are three Be the Change participants who graduated with an associate degree from VCC, and there were three who are currently enrolled. The Be the Change students took on different forms of leadership and service positions within the prison and prison school.

All of the men lived in the same dormitory. In January 2011, one dormitory in the Commonwealth Correctional Center was designated for the "College Within Walls" program. In an effort to create a stronger learning community, all current and graduated college students were moved into that dorm, which housed 98 men. Three of the men (Ben, Tyshawn, and Cally) were asked to be teaching assistants for the College Within Walls program. During certain office hours, they tutored and mentored current college students.

Ben Stone[3] was a founding member of Be the Change. He was a Muslim who was 59 years old, and he had been in prison for just over 30 years. He held an associate degree from VCC that he earned in 1994. As a teenager, he joined the Nation of Islam in New Jersey. When he turned 18, Ben enlisted in the U.S. Army and served in Vietnam. While he was in the Army, he converted to what he called "True Islam." Identifying as Sunni, he served as the imam of the prison and led Friday prayer. He was known to be a scholar and a poet. While Ben was the first in his family to go to college, he was also the first in his family to go to prison. Ben worked as the principal's assistant at the prison school.

Tyshawn was 32 years old and had served 12 years of his sentence and had nine more years to serve. Before he was incarcerated, he earned his high school diploma. After coming to prison, Tyshawn earned his custodial maintenance certificate and worked in the prison as a buffer technician. Years later and with the financial assistance of his family, Tyshawn enrolled in the college program. In June 2010, he graduated from VCC with an associate degree in general studies with a 3.7 GPA. He worked as a college aide, assisting college instructors and their students at the prison school. He recently returned to school to work on two certificates: one certified him as an electrician's helper and the other as a paraprofessional. He had three children ages 15, 13, and 11. Tyshawn often spoke empathetically, imagining what his children and parents have gone through because he was in prison. He loved writing, and he was interested in helping youth.

As a child, Cally did well in school, graduated from high school, and attended a state college on a football scholarship. After his first semester, he dropped out of college

[3] In order to protect the Be the Change students' identities, I asked them each to select a pseudonym. These names will be used throughout the paper.

and returned home because he needed money. He went to prison several years later. Cally was 43. He graduated from VCC in June 2010 and was also invited to join the Be the Change group that summer. In May 2011, he earned a certificate in masonry from VCC after attending a year of classes. He recently completed a paraprofessional apprenticeship program. He had four children, ranging in age from 17 to 24. Cally spoke about being a teacher and working with at-risk youth. Taking correspondence courses, Cally was only eight classes away from earning his bachelor's degree. Cally worked as the teacher's aide in the masonry class.

Blink was a founding member of Be the Change. Although he did not complete high school because he was incarcerated before the start of his junior year, Blink earned a GED after he came to prison. Blink was 27 years old and was currently enrolled in college classes at VCC. He had a 3.75 GPA and was working toward an associate degree in general studies. He started college because his GED teacher challenged him to take one class. After taking his first philosophy class, he decided to continue. He had two children.

Escabar, age 34, was currently enrolled in VCC's information technology certificate program, which was funded by a federal grant. He said in a Be the Change meeting, "Education makes things better. Once you start accomplishing things, it motivates you to just keep going." Escabar looked up to Ben and frequently went to him for advice. He joined Be the Change in the summer of 2010. Coming from a volatile and, at times, abusive home life, Escabar had been in and out of detention centers and prisons since he was 13. His father was also incarcerated. Escabar worked as a teacher's aide for

four years, helping men study for their GEDs. He worked in shipping for Enterprise making 45 cents an hour, the furniture manufacturer located in the prison.

Umoja, age 40, joined Be the Change in the summer of 2010. After he graduated from a Baltimore city high school, he went to work in the streets. He was shot four times and involved in drugs before coming to prison. A friend encouraged him to enroll in college. Because he had to pay his tuition from money earned in prison jobs, Umoja took only one class per semester. Sometimes he could afford only one class per year, but he was proudly working on his associate degree through VCC. For several years, he worked as a teacher's assistant at the prison school. Later, he worked at Enterprise and processed orders; he made 80 cents per hour. He described his philosophy on education, "Set goals because they give you something to reach for." Umoja hoped to return to his community when he was released and be a community activist.

Researcher Positionality

When I first met the six Be the Change program participants in January 2010, I asked them to tell me about what they did as a group. They described that their mission was support of each other and service to others. The Be the Change students told me about their hopes for the year; namely they wanted to do something to motivate "the guys inside" to pursue education. Several talked about how the GED and college students frequently felt discouraged and conflicted about getting an education. The students asked if I would help them with some of their projects. One project was helping them to organize a discussion group around a film or film series. Others requested that I bring in newspaper articles or academic articles on topics of their interest to discuss within their group in their weekly Be the Change meetings. After some thought, I agreed.

My role in the Be the Change community was that of a participant observer. Coordinating with the principal, I volunteered to assist with some of these requests, including facilitating some group discussions and helping to organize a film series. Upon their request, I presented my Master's thesis research about Islam and family planning in Senegal to a group of about 20 men. We watched two documentary films, "The Last Graduation" and "The Boys of Baraka." The Be the Change men and I led discussions after the films with about 25 incarcerated men. During Black History Month (February 2012), we organized a panel discussion on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail." I sat on the panel along side the six Be the Change members, the principal, and the Be the Change director. About 40 men attended. I invited two scholars from the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education to be guest speakers at Be the Change meetings in 2011. Diane Hoffman visited and spoke about her research in Haiti, and Howard Crumpton, recent Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology, visited and spoke about his research with young African American boys and their experiences being labeled "aggressive."

From February 2010—July 2011, I attended weekly Be the Change meetings. Since completing the interviews with the men in July 2011, I have continued to visit their meetings monthly. The men and I brought in topics for discussion including current events, the opinion page from the *Washington Post* or *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, or a topic from a college course, and we would discuss those topics. None of the presentations and projects were class assignments, nor were any of them connected to college classes that were graded. My main purpose was to be there, to listen, and to learn from them.

My research was inspired by a tour of the Commonwealth Correctional Center in April 2009. During this initial visit, I was surprised by the variety and depth of educational programs offered; these included literacy, pre-GED, GED preparation, dog training, horticulture, vocational classes (for college credit), and college classes. I learned that the prison offers college classes and college degree programs (certificates and associate degrees) to incarcerated persons. For the final project in my Qualitative Methods class, from October through December 2009, I visited the prison school weekly; I assisted in one Adult Basic Education classroom and informally observed a few others.

In January 2010, I observed a Be the Change group meeting at the prison. In that two-hour window, I heard the eight members[4] tell stories about their decision to start college. In their discussion, they spoke about wanting to do something to motivate "the guys inside" to pursue education. I was both surprised and intrigued by the level of social concern from a group of people often labeled "criminals." After gaining IRB approval, from January-April 2010, I conducted a pilot study in connection with my Advanced Qualitative Methods class.

As a former instructor of a dropout recovery program, I understand that not everyone had the kinds of positive school experiences that I had. I was the Middle College instructor at Virginia Community College from 2005-2008. Middle College is a dropout recovery program for 18-24 year olds that offered GED classes and introductory college classes. While there, I conducted intake interviews and asked each student to

[4] When I first began to attend the meetings, there were eight members of Be the Change (January-April 2010). Three men were released and one was transferred to another prison. Three new Be the Change members were chosen by the current members to be interviewed, and they were invited to join in the summer of 2010. Currently, there are six African American men in Be the Change.

speak about why they left high school. The students told stories of pain, of being made to feel stupid, unimportant, or "bad." They regularly reported that no one would miss them if they did not show up at school. Reliving those feelings sometimes caused tears and other times brought anger. High school teachers and administrators would offer me sympathy for having to work with "all bad kids." As far as I was concerned, I had great students.

During my time there, I saw over 130 young adult students earn their GEDs and begin college. More importantly, most of them had positive experiences in school, some for the first time. After three years of working with "the bad kids," my experience taught me that education could change lives.

In my second year with VCC, I was invited to Commonwealth Correctional Center to present two workshops on helping students write essays, one for teachers at the prison and the other for incarcerated tutors. I felt nervous walking into the classroom mostly because I was unsure of what to expect. These men were in prison; they had assaulted people, stolen things, not paid child support, and sold drugs to people in their communities. I questioned if they would even want me there. During my interactions with the incarcerated students, while telling a joke or sharing a story, there were several moments when I thought, "This could be any classroom." Reflecting on this, I discovered that I was holding onto the same labels in my head—good and bad—that I adamantly opposed for my community college students. Perhaps many of these students had also had negative childhood experiences of school. They were, after all, working on their GEDs (indicating they had not graduated from high school). And yet, they seemed quite resilient; in class they were listening, participating, and trying.

While at the University of Virginia, I served as a teaching assistant to Dr. Andrew Kaufman's Russian literature course entitled, "Books Behind Bars." In it, UVA students read Russian short stories and facilitated discussions with teenaged students at a local juvenile detention center. The teens liked that they were reading "college books" and having "college discussions." The UVA students spent hours debating and creating engaging activities and discussions that they hoped would resonate with incarcerated teens. These experiences shifted and expanded my thinking about correctional education. Correctional education has a unique opportunity to create positive educational experiences. Continuing to reflect on my experiences, biases, and assumptions was imperative for ethnographic work.

Data Collection

In order to glean educational narratives, I employed a blend of methods from ethnographic and narrative inquiry. I utilized four data collection methods— observation, participant observation, interview, and review of archival data.

Observation

I spent additional time (approximately 1-2 hours per visit) observing in the school and the principal's office over the course of three months (April, May, and June 2011). Observations included gaining general knowledge of the prison (e.g., the processes of prison, including entry and protocols), as well as knowledge of the school (e.g., the teachers, the staff, the students, and the school). Because of the significance of the prison context, I described the physical environment of the school, the classrooms, and the areas of the prison I saw in fieldnotes. Over the course of three months, April-June 2011, I also

observed six Be the Change weekly program meetings and recorded fieldnotes. While I did not use a specific observation protocol (e.g., checklist), observations focused on the behaviors, words, and actions of incarcerated learners regarding education, self, and community. I took fieldnotes, highlighting examples of the community and ways they discussed labels and labeling, social skills and community, academic learning, and significant experiences. Because I had limited access to writing while at the prison site, other conversations, physical descriptions of the school, interactions with students, teachers, and administrators, and events were dictated into a digital recorder immediately upon my leaving the prison; from these recordings, fieldnotes were reconstructed.

Participant Observation

In order to construct a more detailed picture of life and education for the students, I continued to be a participant observer in their weekly Be the Change meetings; I had been attending their weekly meetings since February 2010. Coordinating with the principal, I volunteered to help facilitate discussions in the Be the Change program. For example, the Be the Change participants would request that I bring an article in on a topic of their choosing and we would discuss it. Participant observation was a way to develop a deeper understanding of individuals and the community. As Marshall and Rossman (2006) state, participant observation involves firsthand involvement in the community being studied. That involvement may help the ethnographer to become immersed in the community.

Facilitating discussions with Be the Change created a space for me to contribute to the prison community, and it served as a time to interact with the students and build

rapport. I participated in discussions with the students when I felt it was appropriate (appropriate times include when I am asked a direct question). As advised by the prison school's principal, I did not share personal information like where I lived or details about my personal relationships. From these sessions (April-June 2011), I wrote fieldnotes regarding the discussions and interactions among the Be the Change participants. This data added significant insight into the group's purpose and how the group functions.

Interview

I conducted two semistructured interviews with each of the six Be the Change students in order to hear their personal educational narratives. The interviews lasted approximately 2-3 hours each. Because of prison restrictions, each interview was split into two or three interviews. Splitting the interviews into 45-minute or 1-hour sessions also addressed concerns of interviewee fatigue. Each interview was recorded on a digital recording device, and I transcribed all six interviews.

As narrative inquiry methods recommend (Paulson, 2011), the focus of my interview was to ask mostly open-ended questions that sought stories from each participant. As developed in my introduction and literature review, categories of my questions sought participants' stories and experiences related to labels and labeling, social skills, academic learning in college classrooms, as well as experiences in prison and school. See Appendix A for the interview protocol.

Review of Archival Data

In addition, I sought out contextual, archival, and secondary data in the form of published materials from the Be the Change program, Virginia Community College, and the Commonwealth Correctional Center. Few relevant documents were available.

Data Analysis

Data collected included transcribed interviews with the six incarcerated students as well as fieldnotes from the prison school and Be the Change meetings. Utilizing deductive coding, I found phrases, words, or actions that embodied the starter codes from five significant areas (as indicated from the literature review): labels and labeling, social skills and community, academic learning, and significant experiences as incarcerated college students. These starter codes helped me to develop categories and search for repeating themes and patterns.

The process of coding began with marking up typed transcribed interviews with colored highlighters to denote codes. When I found an example of a man speaking about a teacher calling him a "troublemaker," I highlighted that text with a color designated for "experiences of labeling." I then developed "baskets" for each of the five starter codes, meaning that I copied all examples of "experiences of labeling" from the interview transcript and placed them in a separate document. Next, common behaviors, events, and phrases that occurred several times within each code were broken out into separate word documents. For example, within the starter code "social relationships," I created separate subcategories for "influences of teachers" and "influences of peers." This process was repeated for each of the five starter code categories. I then copied and pasted exemplars

of each category into the corresponding word documents noting the participant, date, and source.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Marshall and Rossman (2006) stated that the goal of credibility is "to demonstrate that the inquiry was conducted in such a manner as to ensure that the subject was appropriately identified and described" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 251). Because I was the only lens and filter describing the students, the school, and the prison, I recognized the importance of credibility in my study.

First, I entered the prison school aware of current trends and data of education in U.S. prisons; this background research provided a way of cross-checking data sources. Next, I utilized prolonged engagement in the field (17 months as of July 2011). In addition, I utilized researcher reflexivity by writing and thinking through my "researcher as instrument" statement. Disclosing my personal biases from the beginning increased my awareness of my biases. I reflected on my experience in the field after each visitation by speaking into my digital recorder. My fieldnotes included my personal reflections in brackets [ ], designating them as observer comments.

I utilized member checking. Although I had reservations about bringing typed copies of interviews through security and into prison, I believed member checking to be philosophically aligned with narrative ethnography. I gave the men secure copies with only the first letter of each men's chosen pseudonym. Each man read the typed transcript and was given the opportunity to voice any concern. No one requested any changes or rewrites.

In addition, I asked a colleague to serve as a peer debriefer. She read sections of the interviews, fieldnotes, and analysis and offered feedback. This peer debriefer served as an external auditor and asked thoughtful questions about coding, themes, and categories.

Limitations

This study was limited by several basic factors including setting, time constraints, and "off-limit" questions. My time in prison was structured by the prison context. I was granted access to interview the men in Be the Change, and those interviews and observations were conducted in the prison school. Due to safety concerns and regulations, I was not allowed to move freely throughout the prison. There were limits to what I could see and observe. This restriction of access meant that I did not eat meals with the men, I did not play cards with them in the dayrooms of their dorms, I did not hang out with them while they lifted weights on the yard, and I did not witness them interact with others during recreational time. During my time there, I toured a dormitory twice.

Importantly, I did not see how other men interacted with the men of Be the Change outside of the school setting. While I perceived the incarcerated men who were not in the Be the Change program treat the men of Be the Change with respect, I did not witness how they were treated outside of the school setting. I also did not interview incarcerated men who were not in Be the Change. My witness of the social landscape of the prison was limited because of the constraints of access. Because of this, I relied heavily on the Be the Change men's description of the prison setting and the social landscape. From my fieldnotes, I was able to add to the general description of social context of the school, the Be the Change meetings, and the prison.

The topics discussed in the interviews were also limited. I had some limitations in what questions I could ask the participants. To protect them from emotional stress, questions did not deal with certain sensitive areas including the crimes they committed. Also subject matter was restricted. Although I was aware of issues within the prison about gangs, this was not a study of gang culture in prison. I had no access to gangs or gang members, nor did I have any experiences of gangs in this prison other than what the Be the Change men disclosed.

Another limitation was time—both in the sense of number of hours on site and times of day. I could only spend certain hours with the participants during the day; those hours were from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Due to the 2-hour drive to the prison, my family and other personal obligations, and the hours of operation of the school, time was another limitation. And lastly, as mentioned earlier, my ability to take notes on site at the prison was also limited.

CHAPTER 4

IDENTITY NARRATIVES

In considering how to structure my findings effectively, I realized that each man represented an exemplar of how change happens. Identity, how we see and understand ourselves, as well as how others see and inform who we are, is something so deeply personal that it lends itself to be expressed in the first person. I have organized the findings of this narrative ethnography by choosing three or four exemplary stories for each of the six participants—Blink, Ben, Tyshawn, Umoja, Cally, and Escabar. Using analytic narrative, stories are re-told from their childhood, of starting points, of transition, of hard looks in mirrors, and of death and rebirth in the men's voices. This format allows each man to tell personally significant stories and gives readers an understanding of each man and his personal journey in education. The narratives describe the men's experiences in terms of how they have been labeled, how they came to question those labels, and how those labels changed.

This chapter begins with a description of the human landscape within the prison. The social groups are sketched to help readers contextualize the men, their stories, and the Be the Change group. Then, drawing from interview and fieldnote data, the chapter weaves key moments in individuals' stories with background information and description that deepens and contextualizes the experiences and narratives. While the chapter includes basic information such as age, family information, and educational background, the focus is to provide details that give the reader a fuller sense of each man and his story.

The narratives included in this chapter represent the participants' experiences in education, their embodiment of critical or epiphanic moments in the participants' lives, and/or their poignant moments of self-reflection. When appropriate and needed, descriptions of the prison, the school, fellow participants, other incarcerated persons, and prison staff are given. The goal of this chapter is to provide the reader not only with snapshots of incarcerated men and their experiences as college students, but also insights into human experiences of change and growth. In-depth analysis follows in Chapter 5.

The Social Landscape of the Prison

Although this study focuses on the narratives of the six men of Be the Change, the social context of the prison is also critical. The Be the Change men provided most of the information in this section; some I observed in my time there. Developing a sense of the human landscape contextualizes the men and their stories. They do not exist in a vacuum. The men live in a prison that houses diverse groups of men. Their stories are told in reaction to and in relationship with what they see and experience in the prison. At times, they strongly identify with some men and work hard to dissociate from others.

In a place where knowledge is power, groups are important. The men were clear that it was important to monitor personal information that gets out in the prison. Because of this, the men were very selective about those they allow into their group. When they were dealing with outsiders, they kept their cards close to their chests. Insiders knew more; therefore, it was important that they were trustworthy.

There were many ways that incarcerated men can serve their sentence. The men called this "doing their bit." Some spent several hours a day the in prison school. There, as described in Chapter 3, students could participate in a range of classes, including

literacy, Adult Basic Education, GED, vocational, and college classes. It was estimated that the school served approximately 250 students daily (Department of Correctional Education, 2007). There were approximately 1,200 men housed in the prison. That meant approximately 950 incarcerated men were not enrolled or involved in the prison school programs.

Groups formed around other programs. The Be the Change men discussed how participants in the Pen Pals program hung out together. The Pen Pals program was a dog training and grooming certificate program that placed local SPCA rescue dogs with incarcerated trainers for eight weeks. Those men lived in single cells with their dogs. In addition, men spending time together in other vocational programs tended to stick together, they explained. Men in masonry or electricity formed social groups because the programs were time-intensive.

Other social groups included religious groups. The Be the Change men described that within the prison, there were groups of Christians, Muslims, Jews, Native Americans, and Hispanic Catholics. Still, other men were involved in groups like Thinking for a Change, a therapeutic community program, and hung out together outside of meetings. Men also formed groups around activities and sports. There were groups of men who lifted weights together in the yard. There were softball and basketball teams.

Finally, the Be the Change men said that there were "nonparticipants." The Be the Change men could not agree on an estimate for how many of the 1,200 men at CCC were nonparticipants. Some said a quarter of the men; others said half. These men, they said, are "ITW" (which stands for "in the way"). One added that some of the

"nonparticipants" might have wanted to be in an educational program, but were waitlisted because there was not enough room in some of the classes.

Some of the nonparticipants got into trouble, were involved in illegal activities, or were in gangs. Within the nonparticipants was a group the men referred to as the "young'uns." Young in age and maturity, these men were wild and likely to return to prison. The Be the Change men said that these guys were about "table tops and ball" meaning that they spent a lot of time playing cards and basketball.

Be the Change as a social group

Within the prison, Be the Change was an exclusive and self-selecting group. There were currently six members. In the summer of 2010, there were eight members of Be the Change. Two members were released and the other was transferred to another prison. Three new members were interviewed and invited. The formal qualifications of the group were that members be African American, enrolled in college classes, and maintain at least a 2.75 GPA. Because this branch of Be the Change was located in a prison, the prison school's principal asked the current Be the Change members to give her recommendations of men who would be "good candidates." The Be the Change members took this charge very seriously. For them, the weekly Be the Change meetings were a safe place to talk and debate. They were very careful about letting other men in the group.

With the social landscape of the prison in mind, the narratives of the six members of Be the Change are presented.

Blink

Narrative 1, Troublemaker

> Ever since first grade, I've been called a troublemaker. When I started school, I loved it. School was like a big playground with lots of other kids to play with. As a kid, I was fascinated with drums and rhythm. Drumming and singing were God-given gifts that were praised at church, but I guess I didn't know how to control it. I got in trouble for drumming and singing in class. A lot. When I'd perform, the teacher would be angry with me for disrupting the class and send me to the principal's office. He would fuss and I'd listen. Then he would call my mama. She'd come down, give me a whoopin' and the cycle repeated itself again and again. On and on and on until finally they said, "This child here, he's different. He's too hyper, got too much energy. We think he needs some medicine." So they sent me to a psychologist for evaluation. After fourth grade, the school board told my mama that I needed to be taking Ritalin if I wanted to go to school. They thought I was off-the-chain.[5]

Blink grew up in southern Virginia and lived with his mother and two sisters. His earliest school experiences were problematic. He was a "problem" child who was passed from his teacher to the principal to his mother. This cycle of dealing with his "hyperactivity" peaked as Blink completed fourth grade and was required to take the Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) drug, Ritalin, in order to continue into the fifth grade. He took Ritalin, and later Dextrin, (both ADHD drugs) from age 10 until age 17, when he was arrested and incarcerated. Blink recalled that the drugs, the evaluations, and the meetings with the psychiatrist made him feel different, like he was not a normal kid. He described that the medicine made him feel "zombie-fied." Even after he was put on Ritalin, he felt that he could not shake the "troublemaker" label. Blink

[5] All of the narratives presented came from interviews with the men. These stories were not verified or fact-checked. They are presented here as they were told.

believed that his reputation continued to follow him throughout elementary, middle, and high school.

Perpetuated by his involvement in pranks like setting off firecrackers in a school bathroom and a spitball incident, his "troublemaker" label stuck with him as an older student. He believed that the negative labels he had been given led teachers and administrators to accuse him of wrongdoing and to discredit him. One instance, which was particularly hurtful, occurred when Blink was expelled from the opportunity school, an alternative school he attended during his middle school years. After being there for two days, his principal saw Blink and his friends laughing and accused him of doing something he did not do. He felt attacked and defensive. Blink explained, "He [the principal] wanted to penalize me and punish me for something somebody else did. I was like, 'Mr. Mason, I didn't…I had nothing to do with this, man. I'm just sitting here, laughing like everybody else.'" His principal did not believe him. Frustrated and angry, Blink cussed him out, and the principal expelled him from the school. He believed that his record followed him and caused teachers to prejudge him as a "problem child." In the case of his principal, Blink imagined, "But he's thinking, 'This is a troublemaker anyway, so he had to have something to do with it.'"

Having been expelled from regular school and the opportunity school, Blink was sent to the regional alternative school for seventh and eighth grades. That school, he said, only took the "worst of the worst." Blink could relate to the other kids in the alterative school and found them to be "not bad kids." He reflected, "They were just kids that might have been looking for attention or whatever the reason may be. But actually, all of us, we were in there doing our work and learning." He remarked that he never thought of

himself as a bad kid either, and he expressed empathy for the other children in the same boat.

Particularly damaging from his time in the regional alternative school was the school's policy that the children had to ride small buses from their neighborhoods to the school. Blink was embarrassed. He believed the school officials created the policy with the intention of humiliating of the "bad" kids. He explained,

> They tried to make it so embarrassing for kids and make it seem like, make us an example for the "regular kids" that they would have us ride short buses. We couldn't ride big buses like the ordinary kids. We had to ride the short buses. So they wanted us to be ridiculed, laughed at, and punished.

Blink compared that sort of humiliation to what he felt in prison. It was so embarrassing for him that he threatened to drop out of school, refusing to ride that bus anymore. He pleaded with his mother to take him to school every morning. Blink explained,

> I told her that I didn't want to be labeled as being retarded or this, that, and the third because if you look at—in the regular public school, the handicapped kids and those that are a little slow, them are the people that ride the short bus.

Blink interpreted having to ride the smaller bus as administrators questioning his intelligence or wanting his peers to think that he was not normal or intelligent. As expressed in his exasperated body language, Blink was clearly upset about not being considered "regular" or "ordinary." He continued,

> So if you're trying to label us with these people…that's bad [shaking his head]. So that caused a lot of other kids who were in the alternative school to lash out, because now they're feeling like their worth and their humanity is being scrutinized by the public school system.

Perhaps most upsetting to Blink was being placed in classes for children with learning disabilities in high school. He described knowing deep down that he did not

belong there. He recalled, “They put me in the learning disability class, and I didn’t need to be in that class because I could think, I could work when I was zombie-fied…” Throughout Blink’s childhood, he described instances where teachers, principals, school psychologists, and school board members made judgments about him, and this bothered him. He felt most hurt when he was not viewed as intelligent or normal.

Narrative 2, Faith

> The night after I was convicted I remember sitting in the jail. I was alone, isolated in a dark cell. All I could see, all I could embrace was death. That night, I tried to take my life because I felt I had lost everything and I wanted to escape. I didn’t want to worry about what was going to happen to me anymore. I didn’t want my mom to worry anymore. I tried to hang myself. The sheet kept tearing. Three times, it tore and I fell to my knees crying. I was so tired. I could see something in the corner of the cell. It was the Bible. I swear it wasn’t there when I arrived. That moment, I said, “Thank you, God. Here I am. Take this vessel and do what you want to do with me.” I didn’t know nothing about Proverbs, but I opened that Bible to Proverbs, and that book really spoke to me. It’s wisdom, you know? I have worn that Bible out. There’s a lot of tape on it.

When Blink was first incarcerated, he wrestled with depression that came over him on that first night in jail and attempted suicide. He believed God prevented his suicide and reflected, “I know someone was praying for me at that time.” Blink’s spiritual experiences continued through his reading of two books in the Bible—John and Proverbs. He said, “The book of Proverbs helped to shape my character, and the book of John has shaped my spirit.” Reading the Bible in jail, he explained, helped him to mature, consoled him, and refreshed him. “Proverbs 27:1 says, ‘Boast not yourself for tomorrow for you know not what the day shall bring.’ That speaks to me. I have to live for today and the choices I make today will also affect me tomorrow.”

When Blink's mother came to visit him in prison, he recalled that she broke down and started crying. She told him, "There's something different about you." Blink described his mother as a "a gift from God" and "a real spiritual lady." He explained that his mother parented with a humble spirit. As the family's protector and supporter, she guided Blink even when he went astray. Before the trial, his mother knew that Blink would not be coming home. He said, "Before we walked out the door, she said, 'Stop' and she began to pray on me. She began to anoint me. It was a simple prayer, 'God, whatever you do, protect my son and call him and let him get to know you.' And she anointed me and we left." He said he believed that through the whole process, her prayers had been answered. Blink added that these spiritual experiences also impacted his feelings about his education. He commented that he felt like he "couldn't waste a day." That motivation translated into working harder in school and having higher expectations.

Narrative 3, School Success

> After I was first convicted, I was transferred from the jail to a prison, and that was when I started school again. It was like in all those years of playing and clowning around in school, I was preserving my mind for now. In grade school, I played and thought I'd make it up in summer school. When I started school with DCE [Department of Correctional Education], I had so much energy for learning. I stopped taking my ADHD medicine. My teacher asked, "Man, where has this been the whole time?" I don't know, but my mindset was different. I didn't have time to waste, so I got to work in GED prep. When they thought I was ready, they gave me the GED test, and I passed the first time! Oh man, I was happy. I called my mama, and she was just all-to-pieces. She came to my graduation ceremony. As I walked across the stage, I looked back at her and she just broke down. It was one of those life experiences I had never imagined.
>
> After that, I didn't enroll in college. I worked in the kitchen. One day, the principal asked if I wanted a job as a teacher's aide in the school, and I said, "Sure, what the heck!" I tutored guys helping them get their GEDs. I was pretty good at it. I mean, they were coming in and I'd get 'em out! I'd been there about two years when the teacher I was assisting asked, "Why aren't you in college?"

> The truth was I didn't know anything about college. She told me, "We're going to get you enrolled. You're too smart not to be in college!" She talked to the principal, and they both agreed. I didn't ask to come work in the school. I didn't ask to go to college. I believe it was fate, a blessed opportunity. I believe they saw something in me. I don't know what. I decided that I was going to give it my all. I wouldn't make them look bad. I won't fail my family. I won't fail myself. So I took it and ran with it.

Because he did not graduate from high school, Blink enrolled in the TABE [Test of Adult Basic Education] program when he was incarcerated. He took adult education classes to prepare him for the GED. He enjoyed the classes, reflecting that all of his energy for learning must have been put "in a storage box or something!" When Blink's mother attended his GED graduation ceremony and wept seeing him on stage, he believed she was "all-to-pieces" because she had not imagined him graduating. Blink did not immediately enroll in college because, as he said, the possibility of going to college had not entered his mind. Because he had recently been through GED classes himself and passed the GED, Blink was able to help other guys succeed. He became animated when describing how he helped students pass the GED test as "getting them out!"

Blink gave credit for his college enrollment to the teacher who recognized him as "college material." However, he was the one who made the decision to enroll in college. Despite having never imagined that he could be a successful college student, Blink chose to step into that role and "give it his all." Calling the chance to go to college a "blessed opportunity," Blink felt it was up to him to take advantage of it.

Blink linked his success in college with the future success of his family. As the first male in his immediate family to work toward a college degree, Blink felt like a trailblazer.

> That made me strive even harder and go out there and break this generational curse. In my family, I want all the males from the infants on up to get their education. That's going to be something that I push hard.

For Blink that push began with his own 8-year-old children, who loved school and so far have gotten all A's. He joked, "I'm proud of them. They must not have gotten that gene from me."

Narrative 4, The Challenge of College

> My first semester in college, I signed up for two classes. I was so nervous, because it's college…. right? But I thought, "Maybe this will be easy like the GED and I can breeze through." But naw. In the first week or two, I felt the rate the classes were moving—BAM! I gotta let some of my activities go to make room for studying. So I watched TV less, played basketball less. I realized that they aren't going to give this to me when I got a C in biology. That stung. Woke me right up! I decided that I needed to make some more sacrifices. I persisted and studied more. I figured out that I needed time to review my notes right before taking tests, and I started coming out with A's!
>
> To me, education is like a piece of the puzzle that was hidden under the couch. I could never find it, but I was always looking for it. When I found it, I felt complete in a sense. Now, I have a 3.75 GPA, and that feels great. I feel emotional talking about it. It inspires me because if there were something higher than an A, then I'd strive for that. If a G was higher, I'd work for the G. I don't know where that drive comes from. I think it's always been in me. I think it comes from an attitude of me being labeled and feeling negative toward that label. I still feel that label's on me. You know, I still hear those voices in my head like I did when I was in the first grade. It's like I'm hearing them and I'm looking at them, but I'm working to shut their mouths up. That's what motivates me.

Blink described the nervousness he felt when he started taking college classes; he felt anxious because he did not know what to expect. Because he was the first male in his immediate family to go to college, that experience represented the unknown to him. He paused when he said, "It's college…right?" recognizing the gravity of the challenge. Blink then had to figure out how he could be successful. He realized that he would have to "sacrifice a lot of things" that he liked doing outside of class. He discussed

experimenting with several different approaches, making changes, and practicing the study habits that worked.

Several college classes held personal significance for Blink. He said that Ethics was his most powerful and personally meaningful class. One reason he gave was his relationship with the professor, Mr. Parker. Parker had a commanding presence and ran a disciplined classroom, he said. Although he was a practicing Baptist preacher, Blink said that ethics were presented from a moral perspective rather than from a Christian perspective. Laying down the law in the class's first meeting, Parker spoke about being respectful of each other and of one's self. For example, he did not allow the men to wear sagging pants. For Blink, this meant that Parker wanted his students to be successful outside of his class and outside of the prison.

Blink felt that his Ethics class had application to his own life. He explained that ethics "is dealing with you, face-to-face, your true self, who you are, how you act and behave." Blink felt he was able to take information that he learned in Ethics class and connect it with his reading of Proverbs. In that way, the class bridged academics with real life. "Both of them are dealing with character and how you act," he added. The class made such an impact on him that he said he would like to teach Ethics someday because it addresses "real life decisions." While Blink found the class challenging and worthwhile, not everyone would: "To a guy who refused to face his real self, he'd say that a class like this was boring, or a class like this has no meaning, or he'd question the purpose of the class."

Another favorite class was psychology, and he excitedly described the concepts and terms he had learned and how they applied in prison. He named examples of

schizophrenia in prison, as well as explained what practical conditioning was and how human brains develop. Of particular interest was motivation and what motivates humans—rewards and punishments, internal and external rewards. Again, applying the concept to himself, he said, "What motivates me is mostly internal. Internal like peace, joy, satisfaction, contentment in what I do." Blink wanted to apply concepts in his class to "real life" and also to help him better understand himself.

Helping others was also a major motivator for Blink. He described his effort to watch the news and keep up with current events. Having recently seen photographs of the devastating tornadoes in Alabama, he remarked,

> Right now, it hurts me to my heart because I would love to go down there to Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and just pick up some trees or help somebody rebuild their house. If there's something I can just do, I would like to do it.
> He spoke of helping others as "natural" to him and "a calling."

For Blink, his success in college proved his former teachers and principals wrong. Getting A's meant he continued to silence his childhood teachers and principals who labeled him a troublemaker and as having learning disabilities. His good grades, as he put it, "shut their mouths up!" Even at age 27, his statements communicated an active struggle—that he *still hears* their voices in his head. Speaking of his high GPA, he felt emotional. He was proud of what he accomplished, but he admitted that earning those grades was harder than he expected.

Ben Stone

Narrative 1, Motivation

> I grew up thinking that your exterior was more important than your interior. My upbringing, the images I saw, the guys I looked up to—just everything confirmed that. So as long as I have it on the outside, then there really wasn't a concern about what was on the inside. Just have it on the outside. The cars, clothes, and shoes were all for show! In my early years, I was motivated by a whole lot of tangible things—what you can see, touch, smell, and taste. So that drew me to the path that led me here.
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> You have to understand that I've grown old in prison, and in the process of living, you start to realize a lot of things. I know that for me, I'm not going to be content with anything that's outside of myself if I'm not content with what's inside of me. When I was younger, I could depend on my strength; now, I depend on my wisdom, my being able to see the true essence of things. I've come to believe that our debt is to be responsible enough to want to make some positive change in the world before we leave it. I think a lot of people believe that they're going to make an impact if they're in a certain location, you know? But I believe that you can make an impact no matter where you're at. I guess that's why I'm not only motivated by "I wanna go home! I wanna get out! I'm going to do this when I get out!" I want to contribute something to where I am. If I got to another place, I'd contribute something there too. That's just how I feel.

Ben Stone, the elder of the Be the Change group, will turn 60 years old later this year. He has spent more than half of his life in prison. Ben was born and raised in New Jersey, where he lived with his mother, who worked as a domestic. With four older sisters and one older brother, Ben grew up the youngest in his family. In stories, he affectionately referred to his sisters as "the heifers." Because he rarely saw his brother and his sisters stopped hanging around him when he was 9 or 10, Ben grew up entertaining himself. As a child, he described learning to be his own best friend and how to talk and listen to himself. Ben enjoyed school as a kid and a teenager. He was athletic and loved playing basketball and running track. Ben described school and learning as "kind of easy." He did not recall doing a lot of studying, but he made good grades. A

good student, he graduated from high school, joined the military, and later went on to college. In fact, he never made a C until he went to college. Ben said that he hung with a crowd where "most of the time, we were doing something wrong." Reflecting on himself as a teenager, he said that he wasn't a bad kid but that he mimicked guys in the street he admired in appearance and actions; sometimes, that got him into trouble.

At age 17, Ben volunteered for the draft. He joined the U.S. military to get out of town and away from trouble after his involvement with an incident. He spent 15 months in Vietnam serving as a door gunner on a medical evacuation helicopter. After his time in Phu Bai, he worked on a military base in Kansas. There he began working on his college degree and earned his first associate degree in Business Administration in 1973. He earned another associate degree in general studies 20 years later in 1993 from Virginia Community College while he was incarcerated. Ben was the first in his family to go to college; he was also the first in his family to go to prison. Ben's extended family, many of whom were sharecroppers, really did not understand or encourage formal education.

> The environment that I grew up in, it was more acceptable if not to be dumb then to act dumb, to be wise in ways that were detrimental to you, but not in ways that would be of benefit to you.

Ben knew early on that being street-wise was not the same as being college educated. However, Ben's mother encouraged her children to be educated and go to college.

Ben brought an addiction for opium home with him from Vietnam. He used heroin for years during and after his time in Vietnam, a habit that grew out of seeing friends use and trying it recreationally. "A lot of us came home with habits we really couldn't handle," he explained. For years, opium had physical and psychological holds

on Ben. Although Ben has not used for 32 years, he said he was "reminiscing about using" the day before our interview.

> I realized that my time with that is over. It's not only cost me my liberty, but it cost me everything associated with losing your liberty—not seeing your children grow up, seeing your family grow up, seeing nieces and nephews, attending graduations, weddings, and funerals, all that. I've done none of that.

In February 2012 Ben's mother passed away at the age of 95. Because the funeral was in New Jersey, Ben was not allowed to attend.

Narrative 2, Actions and Words

> I was raised in church. I was raised to believe in God. As a kid, I was in the choir and me and my mother, we sang duets. But I didn't know anything about God because I didn't know anything about myself. I believed, but I didn't know what I believed; I couldn't explain my beliefs. I had the idea that you could say that you believe in God, but you didn't have to act like you believe in God. If you said it, that was adequate. I got my X with the Nation of Islam in 1966. I was 13 years old, and again, I really didn't understand it. The Nation of Islam was more of a social organization than a religious one. Back then, I just wanted to belong to something. I didn't learn about Islam until I came to prison. I started reading and studying, and I came to the understanding that none of the prophets—Moses, Adam, Jesus, Abraham, Mohammad, Lot, Jonah, Jonas—none of them said this, but acted like that. All of them said this and then acted on what they said. All of them are men, all human beings that we still know about and talk about to this day. They are still on the tongues of human beings today and will be until the end of time because what they said and what they did were in line.
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> After 20 years of learning and practice, I think Islam plays the biggest part in my life as far as how I make decisions, how I process things. I know that good or bad, whatever I do, I am going to have to answer for it. As a Muslim, we believe that we were created just to worship God and that comes with personal responsibility. You're responsible for your family, responsible for your community, responsible for the world in which you live, you know?

Islam started out as an exercise in independence for adolescent Ben. Raised in the Baptist church, his parents were against his going to Nation of Islam meetings. He recalled, "But you know when you're a teenager and someone tells you not to do

something, it just makes you more curious. So I went." Later, while he was in the Army, he converted to what he called "true Islam" after meeting an influential, practicing Muslim. He identified as a Sunni and began to see the Nation of Islam as more of an ideology than a religion. In the prison, Ben served as imam for over a decade, leading Juma, the weekly sermon and prayer on Fridays. In prison, it meant something to him to be known widely as "the Muslim Ben" rather than being known by a physical characteristic such as his height or being black.

As part of his Muslim faith, Ben said he wanted his good deeds to override his bad ones. His focus on aligning his words and actions was rooted in seeing hypocrites professing their faith with words not deeds. This inconsistency is common in prison, he said, adding, "People say that they profess to be this with their lips, but their actions and behavior say otherwise." This kind of double-talk was particularly troublesome in the prison environment, where Ben wanted to be more open with Muslim brothers, but "being burned" by dishonest men had real consequences. Ben admitted that years ago he realized he had that problem as well, and it bothered him.

Consistency in actions and words was a common topic and concern in Be the Change meetings. Often guys were described as "all-talk" or "talking out of both sides of their mouths." The Be the Change group described observing other guys to see if their talk was for real. In one Be the Change meeting, Ben opened the discussion by reading the Story of Two Wolves. He described a Native American chief telling a young man that there were two wolves warring within each of us. One wolf represents jealousy, anger, greed, lust, and hatred; the other represents kindness, patience, compassion, justice, and love. The young man asked, "Which one wins?" and the chief answered, "The one you

feed." Like this story, Ben's focus in meetings was on the importance of positive words and thoughts aligning with behaviors and actions.

All of the Be the Change members spoke of Ben as a mentor and role model. They said Ben helped them get jobs in the school. Ben referred to Tyshawn, another Be the Change member, as his "heir apparent" and trained him to do his job in case he was released. Umoja and Tyshawn called Ben a big brother; Cally, Escabar, and Blink spoke of Ben as a "father-figure." Escabar said of Ben, "He teaches all day, not even knowing that he's teaching. He does it all day long!" With the Be the Change group, Ben joked, laughed, shared emotion, cried, and told deeply personal stories, although generally, he was a private person. His role as father figure and elder was apparent. Each man in Be the Change respected Ben's voice and opinion. While Ben was modest about his influence and mentoring, saying that he did not think of himself that way, he acknowledged that men came to him for advice. "I think people can talk to me because I'm going to be honest with them," he said. "I have to tell them what I've lived. And I live the truth."

Narrative 3, Responsibility

> For the most part when people come to prison, they believe that they're no longer responsible for anything. The staff runs the prison. Other than getting up in the morning and dressing yourself, not stealing or getting into fights—there is the belief that there's nothing we can do to help in the prison. That's not been my experience. I've always taken my jobs in prison seriously. A while back, I was the warehouse clerk at a prison, and I could use the phone and call suppliers. People would call and ask for me by name. But I was an inmate! Later when they closed the warehouse on the compound and opened a new one just outside, the warden and manager went to Richmond and petitioned so that I would be able to go outside and work. They were denied, but I thought at the time—you know, there are things we can do in prison, we can make a difference, we can be responsible. I feel that way about my job up here at the school. I've been working with Ms. Jane for 11 years. I have a lot of responsibilities at the school, like preparations for our annual graduation. If I don't do it right, it won't get done. I take great pride in

> making sure it's done right. I work at the school because this is one of the few places in the DOC [Department of Corrections] that you have people's attention the longest. In the building and on the rec yard, there are distractions—the TV and people talking and playing. The school environment lends to people being a little more serious, a little bit more aware of what you're saying and what you're listening to.

Leadership was not something Ben sought out. Although he served as imam of the prison, assistant to the DCE [Department of Correctional Education] principal, and a founding member of Be the Change, he explained that he did not feel comfortable in leadership positions. When leading Juma, Ben suffered anxiety and used breathing techniques to calm his nerves. Even so, leadership positions continued to come to Ben. He has held trusted positions, including one as the anchor of a TV show run on closed-access cable within the prison called "News You Can Use."

Ben said he was unsure why he was elected to leadership positions. He suggested that perhaps it was because he was "low-key and calm." As a Muslim, Ben exudes humility, a valued Islamic principle, commenting that the Prophet Mohammad taught that people seeking leadership positions should not be given those positions. Ben's outlook on his leadership was humble, but he took his positions very seriously.

Grateful for the help he had received in prison, Ben credited advocates for much of his change and success. Ben held key positions in all of the institutions where he lived. Most recently, he worked with Ms. Jane at the Prison School as an assistant. Reflecting on what it meant to him to have staff members hire him, he said, "Having people advocate for me and believe in me, it means that I've come a long way. I just didn't give up on myself when I could have or probably should have." Speaking those words, he got emotional. Ben told his mother that he would use his time in prison to be educated; he

wanted to get his Ph.D. by the time he left. Although that was not possible, Ben still desired to be around education. He viewed education as a positive process, one that he said made him "a better human being."

Ben talked about how painful it was to witness men in prison become institutionalized:

> The worst part of being in prison to me has always been the way inmates view themselves and they view themselves through the lens of what's portrayed in society and on the television. You know? And we live up to that. It seems that we think the worst of ourselves when we come to prison.

He also worried about himself, commenting that after 30 years in prison, he knew he had scars. "You don't see them," he said, "but I know they exist." While he believed that prison educational programs have the potential to be transformative, he expressed concern about some guys participating for the wrong reasons. He explained,

> [Some] guys don't take advantage of it to better themselves. They take advantage of it to get out of prison two weeks earlier, four days earlier… you know? So their focus isn't on improving themselves, it's getting out of prison.

Guys who participated in educational programs without the commitment to self-improvement, he said, are "going out broke!"

Ben shared his passion for what he called "the process of learning." Working in the school, Ben heard many guys talking about wanting an A or a B in a class. He cautioned them, "It's not about the A or B, it's about the process! If you get a C or D and you really go through the process, you are going to learn what you need to learn." He explained that wanting an A or B was symptomatic superficial learning. Frustrated, he said, "That A or B don't reflect what you learn. It reflects what you memorized in 30 days!" Ben encouraged men to focus on the process of learning so that they not only

knew the material 30 days from the class, but also 30 years later. His philosophy of education was to integrate and utilize ideas in our everyday lives. He said,

> Formal education is the routine practice of everyday bringing out of ideas. If you go over something every day, when you get in the situation where you have to recall that, it's easy because you've been doing it every day.

Narrative 4, Realizations

> Being in prison, I've witnessed things and seen how people treat others in prison. Sometimes it seems like we think the worst of ourselves when we're in here. I've seen how this place changes men, how they become institutionalized. At first when they enter, they're prison-free and then you start seeing them do certain stuff you only see prisoners do in prison. I mean prison behavior like openly masturbating while looking at a female correctional officer. It happens. I thought about it… what if working as a correctional officer was the only job that my sister, my mother, or my daughter could find and she had to work here? I cannot say that it's all right to talk to you some kind of way, but not all right to talk the same way to my biological sister. I realized then—that means it's not all right for no one. There were things in here that I tried to digest that just didn't taste right. I started to tell myself, "Stop eating it if it don't taste right! Just stop eating it!"
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> I've put a lot of focus on learning about myself because I've realized that you and I are the same. We're human beings. We're so, so much alike that some of our parts are even interchangeable. Your heart has two chambers, and my heart has two chambers. If my heart goes bad and yours is good, then I can take your heart and use it, just like you could take my heart and use it. If I feel a certain way about a situation, then chances are that you might feel the same way. We might express it differently, but what hurts me will likely hurt you. It isn't about what color you are and what color I am. You know? You would try to do right by me, and I would try to do right by you. You would try to protect your family, and I would too. So I try to look at myself and I say, "Well, if it would hurt me if such-and-such would do something, then it would hurt you. And if I did that to someone, it would hurt them. I don't want to be hurt. So then, I won't hurt anybody else." I think that's what I learned about me—we're all the same. We're really all the same. I began to look at everybody as my family. Not that you're a Caucasian woman from Virginia, and I'm an African American man from New Jersey. No, you're my sister, like my birth sister. You deserve my respect, my protection, my caring, my integrity, and my honesty no less than my birth sisters.

For Ben, the ways people change was a frequent topic of conversation. Much of this came from his self-reflective nature, his 30-year experience of being incarcerated and

his gift for observation. “Prison stuff” described behaviors of incarcerated men who had been institutionalized and have forgotten their humanity. These behaviors were so pervasive that he called them “automatic,” meaning that they were done without thought or reflection. Some incarcerated people, he said, “continue to do stuff that’s detrimental, and in a way, kind of expected of us.” Ben questioned a key concern of incarcerated people—in an environment where most decisions are made for you, where you are assumed to be a bad person, how do you filter out those expectations and focus on your humanity, your true self? In Ben’s eyes, the problem was rooted in two issues—what society expects of inmates and what incarcerated people come to think of themselves. The expectations of society are negative, and Ben expressed sadness that some incarcerated people live up to that negative reputation. “Automatic” prison behaviors became facades, walls used to separate the inmate from the human within.

Ben’s personal journey in prison focused on “understanding the human in others” and helping others to see “the human in me.” Ben said that he did not have any misconceptions about the correctional staff playing any part in his being in prison. He reflected,

> I understand that for them, this is a living. This is how they survive, put food on their tables and clothes on their backs, and send their children to school. I understand that it doesn’t have anything to do with me. If I wasn’t here, this would still be their job.

Ben acknowledged that his actions brought him to prison, and so he was not angry with the staff. Ben’s concern with the staff and the incarcerated men dealt with the power differences that the staff uniform represented. Important for Ben was that each officer

treated him as a human being, not an inmate. But, as he said, it is a two-way street; Ben also worked to see beyond the officer uniform and treat the staff with respect as well.

Tyshawn

Narrative 1, No Motivation

> I went to good schools in the county. My mom moved us outside of the Richmond city limits for the schools. In seventh grade, I remember I used to always sit all the way in the back of science class and laugh with one of my buddies. So my teacher moved me all the way to the front. That way, I'd have to look back to see him, but by that time, she'd always jump on me. That was the first class I had a lab in and we dissected a frog, dealt with Bunson burners. I remember all that. In high school, something changed. I didn't have a problem learning, but I just didn't want to be in school and do the work. I don't know what it was, but I had no motivation and I missed a lot of days. My mom told me later that they encouraged her to take me out of school and put me in trade school or alternative ed school. That was something they were doing just because I didn't go to school; it wasn't that I couldn't do the work. She didn't want to do it. She said, "Naw, I'm going to keep him in this school." There was a teacher who took to me a whole lot, and she asked that they put me in her class. She helped me and tried to get me on point with my work. I don't think she was a special ed teacher, but I'm going to say she dealt with youth who showed low skills or no motivation. That class was stuff like that. And she stayed on me for the years of my school and she's the one who got me involved with a program where you go to school half the day and work half the day.

Tyshawn grew up outside of Richmond. His parents divorced when he was two, and he and his sister were raised by their mother. Tyshawn's aunts and grandmother lived close and were also active in their childhoods. His father lived on the other side of town for years and later moved to Ohio with his girlfriend. He saw his father occasionally. His mother moved her family into the suburbs for a better life and schools. His mom had a boyfriend who stayed at their home, and Tyshawn witnessed domestic violence directed at his mother at a young age. While he admitted not understanding why

she stayed in the relationship for about 10 years, he remained in the house with her to protect her. Although he strongly disapproved of his mother's abusive relationship, he commented that generally his mother's boyfriend was a good guy and helped to take care of the family.

Tyshawn said he grew up "the right way" learning to have conversations with adults and be polite. Around the age of 15, he began to hang out with his favorite older cousin. His cousin introduced him to the streets and taught him how to sell drugs. The violence of the streets did not attract Tyshawn. For him, the draw was just hanging out and partying. From the age of 15 to 19, Tyshawn said that he was caught up in the street life, and he sold drugs to fund his lifestyle. He had several "bad role models." He reflected, "You see how those guys you're hanging with get their money, so you do what they do." Thinking back on that time, he commented, "It was like everybody was headed in the wrong direction."

His involvement with the street life was also motivated by money. "I liked what you get from the street life," he said, "the money side, the material things—cars, clothes, and what came with that was females and stuff like that. I don't like the fighting and the shooting and the robbing." Not attracted to the "thug life," Tyshawn said he behaved conservatively. That included not participating in the violence, having regular 9 to 5 jobs, and not hanging on the corner all day. He reflected on himself at that time as "headed for self-destruction" and "not thinking ahead." Even though he lacked motivation to excel in school, he graduated from high school at age 18. Much of that he credited to his high school teacher who "stayed on him." For Tyshawn, her actions and expectations stemmed from the fact that she cared about him. He decided, however, not to go to

college. Being smart and eager, Tyshawn quickly rose through the ranks in the streets—moving from a small-time dealer who made a couple hundred dollars a day to one who made several thousand a day. But that all ended quickly. Incarcerated at age 19, Tyshawn entered prison on a first time offense.

Tyshawn recently turned 32. He graduated from Virginia Community College with an associate degree in general studies in May 2010. He served as a teaching assistant for the prison's GED program for years. He described himself as quiet and respectful as well as a good guy to be around. He also said that he was a good listener and an easy-going person, and he mentored many guys in prison, encouraging them to get a GED and go to college. Although he was involved in some bad situations, Tyshawn reflected that he did not feel that he has changed as a person—he was a good person then and now. "You know, it wasn't like I was evil at one point in time and now I'm moving more into being a kinder person. I've always been the same person," he said.

During his teen years in the streets, he admitted to having a good time, but he never felt like he fit in. He successfully hid his involvement in the streets from his family for years. Looking back, he commented,

> It was almost like I was living double lives. I always did family things, and I kept the other separate. You would never know that I was moving in the streets the way I did and all the things I was involved in.

Tyshawn reflected on his disappointment with himself that he had the opportunity to choose the right path and chose the wrong one. A lot of Tyshawn's street associates were born into rough situations where the street life was all they knew. Tyshawn said, "I look at myself as the bigger fool for choosing to go that way." Being in prison, one of the

hardest things to adjust to was being separated from his family; Tyshawn missed his family, particularly his mother and children.

Narrative 2, Self-Reflection in College

> I took an Ethics class. You know, I'm big on ethics, morality, and principles. All that means a lot to me. Our teacher threw out hot topics that we'd debate the moral principles of—abortion, affirmative action, other issues. In one class, he talked about ethics and etiquette at work, and the debate shifted to whistle-blowing. It got heated. He asked, "If you're in the workplace and somebody does so-and-so, what would you do?" Of course, a lot of guys in here unfortunately look at whistleblowers as snitches. The two are not one in the same. I hate it when this comes up, because you cannot use snitching in relation to whistle-blowing on the job. Snitching is a term given to guys or people who are caught up in street life and street crime when they tell on their co-defendants or co-conspirators or whatever. But it's like those guys can't see it—that term only applies in that particular lifestyle right there. You can't tie that over into people who are everyday civilians and law-abiding citizens who run across situations where they feel it's their duty to tell a supervisor because something could jeopardize the job or hurt other people. You just can't look at that as snitching. You know? That's one of the hardest things I see these young guys doing—they want to bring their street principles over to the positive life. You can't. If you want to change your mindset, you gotta put that street way of thinking to bed.

For Tyshawn, entering prison was a difficult process. "I'd never been incarcerated before, never had a run-in with the law, no arrest, no anything," he remembered. He struggled to make sense of being in prison and how he would get through all that. He spent the first year in a jail where his grandmother's boyfriend served as a chaplain. Tyshawn assisted him, and his painful transition was eased. A quiet, introspective guy, Tyshawn spent the first couple of years just observing the prison environment, the incarcerated men, the officers, the staff, and the procedures. He then began to hang out with older, positive guys. He described the decision to be selective about his circle as "unconscious" meaning that it felt natural to him.

Tyshawn had already earned a high school diploma before entering prison. Several years after being incarcerated, he decided to take vocational classes in commercial cleaning because he enjoyed janitorial jobs when he was growing up. "I went through the program there and liked it," he recalled, "Everything that I had learned in my younger life, the positive—it was all coming back." Tyshawn described a shift in his feelings toward school. He started reading more books. When he transferred to Commonwealth Correctional Center, he did not get involved in school or college right away. Although he had seen college flyers hanging up and read them, he commented, "It never clicked with me—why don't you take something?" Kendall, an incarcerated friend whom Tyshawn knew from Richmond encouraged him to get started. He admitted that before those conversations, he was not really thinking about his future or college. Tyshawn reflected, "Somebody had to challenge me to do it." After registering, his friend's challenge turned to advice about choosing classes and his major.

As he took more college classes, Tyshawn felt more and more serious about his future. In class, he described himself as "100% tuned in." He began thinking beyond the class and imagining that the class and the knowledge would create future opportunities for him. He explained how he thought about college, "You try to see yourself in your future, knowing that I know that all of this is going to pay off and this is what I'm going to be." Tyshawn called these moments where his life fast-forwarded to the future his "intellectual breakthroughs." In these moments, he said, "I try to see myself in a nice suit and in a work environment around working-class people, communicating with them." He pictured himself in the world of real estate. Although he called this dreaming, there was also an element of envisioning his future. He was imagining his life positively unfolding

as he made good decisions. He explained, "You have to dream in order for it to be there, to come true for you."

Tyshawn enjoyed the material in his college classes, particularly his psychology courses—intro to psychology, lifespan and human development, and abnormal psychology. Those classes deepened his understanding of human behavior and "the processes that we go through based on our environments and decisions we make." The lessons from those classes also held personal significance for Tyshawn because he could apply them to better understanding himself, his family, and others. "A lot of the things that I had been through in my younger years, I saw them in the book," he said of his human development class. It was of interest to him because he said he could "definitely relate them to my own experiences."

In his ethics class, Tyshawn described his professor as challenging his students to be respectful of each other and to think about the ethics of their own decisions and actions. He continued, "If you have personal ethics, then it will automatically roll over into everything else that you do. If you don't have them within yourself, in your personal life, in your personal choices, then how are you going to have them anywhere else?" Tyshawn gave examples of personal ethics from etiquette and manners to respectful debate practices. He recalled that the professor required his students to pull their pants up to their waists and call him and each other "Mr. So-and-So." He admired the way the professor "set the tone" up front and was "real firm" with those principles in his class. Tyshawn critically thought about ethics and how to apply them. Beyond that, he reflected on the problems experienced by others in the class as well as the general population of prison. Although he has had some personal, negative experiences with

snitching, he expressed that the concept of "snitching" was limited to street life. He explained that such concepts did not apply beyond street life, discerning differences in subcultures where principles did and did not apply.

Reflecting on his classmates who believed that whistle-blowing was wrong because it was like snitching, he said that they continued to hold onto the old way of thinking out of fear they would be judged or ostracized. He explained,

> I notice a lot of things that guys get involved in, they do it because of what people think. They want to impress somebody, want somebody to think this of them or have high regard for them, for their crime life or whatever.

Tyshawn believed that a lot of these guys "have some good in them" but he saw that they made choices based on "the outer rather than the inner." Rather than tapping into the good within themselves, they focused on what others thought of them. He explained, "But they can't…they don't nurture that good because they're so caught up in embracing the negativity for the sake of impressing everybody on the outside." This struggle Tyshawn witnessed in others, he also personally experienced. At one time, he was on the fence like the guys he described, but not anymore. Thinking back on his personal changes, he said,

> I've realized that at the end of the day, the criminal or the person that's caught up in the street life, he's looked at as a failure, you know, or as a joke. You couldn't tell me that back then. I thought I was the man, that I was doing everything right. I realize now that I was a big embarrassment to myself and to my family, you know? I definitely want to be looked at in a positive way because that only brings respect; that brings admiration, it brings opportunity.

Tyshawn also learned good lessons from his time in the street. He spoke about principles of loyalty and family. Even though he learned it from negative people, he reflected, "Loyalty is loyal. There's only one definition for loyalty." He said that loyalty

was a good basic principle of not crossing people who are close to you. Loyalty, for Tyshawn, translated over to the positive side.

Narrative 3, Finding Community

> In prison, it's important to figure out if somebody's "good people." I think even more so in here than on the outside. Out there, for some reason, we override our instincts. You will go against your observations of people making bad decisions; maybe it's because we're involved in that lifestyle, too. So what am I going to say about you when I'm also making bad decisions? See? So out there, with the guys I hung around, everybody just ignored each other's bad actions. But as I've grown up in here, I've come to understand that ignoring your instincts and being around the wrong people—it adds up in the course of your life. I'm a prime example of where it can land you. This is prison, so everybody's in here for some kind of wrong choice in life. So we have to be mindful of that and know that everyone in here is not on the positive path. Some people still have some growing up to do; others are planning to keep making bad decisions. So what we have to do is find a small group of individuals, as I have, that are on the right path. Those are your guys. Those are the guys you have to walk with. I pretty much from the onus gravitated toward positive guys, and I don't even think it was conscious. I became aware of it later, that by nature I had moved in the right direction.
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> I'm still in touch with my instincts, which I'm thankful for. When you get around some people, you can just feel it, there's something good about them. Sometimes, you feel something else—that doubt—something that makes you question them. I judge people on observation, looking at what you're doing. I hear the things you talk about with me or to others. Things have a way of coming out in your actions, in your character. Really, your character speaks for itself. You really don't have to do much talking.

For Tyshawn, Be the Change was something he held "sacred." He became involved with the group in 2009 when he was approached by Ben Stone, who asked if he had interest in joining them. Describing the selection and evaluation process, Tyshawn said that first they got to know him well and believed that his mind frame and direction were aligned with the group's goals. Once he expressed interest, they invited him to an interview. The members sat around a table in the prison school's library and asked him a series of questions to assess his philosophy toward mentoring, education, and his future.

The first question, Tyshawn remembered exactly, “If you run across a guy and you see that he is making bad decisions in his life, what would be your method of approach to him to help him get in the right direction?” Tyshawn answered, saying that he’d first develop a relationship with the guy and over time, he would approach him about making changes. They liked his answer. Another guy asked him about his GPA; he told them it was a 3.8. They also liked that.

While Be the Change was established as a retention program for African American men in college, Tyshawn believed at its core, Be the Change is about relationships. He said, “It’s pretty much like this—we hold our relationships near and dear, it’s pretty sacred.” He continued, saying that the men were interested in what happened in each other’s lives, and they encouraged each other to “stay on the positive track” and to “help out in the community.” They gave each other advice and tutoring. “We hold everybody accountable,” he said. “We need to show a sense of loyalty, a sense of responsibility, and a sense of accountability from individuals involved.” Comparing Be the Change to a fraternity on the outside, Tyshawn said that they took their responsibilities to each other and the group very seriously. Within the group, Tyshawn said he was closest with Ben and Umoja; he spoke of both as personal mentors. He shared a “father-figure relationship” with Ben, and Tyshawn warmly spoke of looking up to him, often going to him for advice. He believed that it is important for people who are moving on the right path to be around people who are also on that same path. Tyshawn viewed his joining Be the Change as making a significant change in how he chooses friends and associates.

Narrative 4, Changes in Company and Conversation

> I don't know how long I thought I was going to sell drugs or how long I thought I was going to get away with it. It just didn't occur to me, I guess we were just living for the day. I look back and realize that we weren't talking about anything. No substance in our conversations. We're just talking about the corner—this guy's doing this, this girl sleeps with him, we're going out here tonight. No direction. Same's true in here. So I tell guys that I don't want to talk about the street anymore. I have no interest. It comes down to trading war stories—you tell yours, I'm gone tell mine with a little twist on it, and we're sitting around laughing. But when it's over with, nobody has learned anything. Just hot air. And now, my conversations are 180. We talk about political topics, personal situations and different decision-making scenarios. The other day, we were discussing VCU's head basketball coach, Shaka Smart's decision to stay with VCU. Some guys said they would have gone with the better offer, but I said, "Nah, it may not even be about the money for him. It may be about loyalty." So we go back and forth about issues. We give our opinions and disagree, but in everything we talk about, we try to leave there with a deeper understanding. But the difference is this—when you leave a substantive conversation, you have some energy instead of feeling empty.

Tyshawn described his time in college as a period of intellectual and personal growth. Being around intellectual people, conversations helped him to grow. "You have to have one-on-one dialogues with people," he said. "Each time you have those conversations, we are constantly elevating." He added that the discussions test his reading comprehension. If he was able to take ideas from books and articles and use them in discussions and arguments he was making, then that meant he was getting it. For him, it is not only important to read; the true test of an intellectual is being able to share and communicate clearly what you know. "There's no sense for me being intellectual in book and I'm not able to articulate it or not understand it really myself," he said.

On a personal level, Tyshawn said that he had grown a lot as an intellectual. While not being completely comfortable with the label "intellectual," he said, "I think I'm a person you can sit down with and have an intellectual conversation with." He

enjoyed having conversations with teachers in the prison school as well as the Be the Change guys. Tyshawn and Umoja loved discussing Africa and African cultures. With other guys from Be the Change, he discussed health issues and personal training. One of the men attended school for exercise physiology and sports nutrition, and so he served as the group's personal trainer. For fun, they watched TV shows like "The View" and then debated political topics or real life situations. He said,

> We see what they're talking about and then we'll start talking about it. We try to get what we can get out of it, and try to apply our intellectual way of thinking to it and see how it turns out in the end.

However, there were a lot of guys in prison with whom Tyshawn felt it was difficult to have discussions. In his description, he drew distinctions—people who are inside the circle and those who are not. Those who are outside of Tyshawn's circle "don't understand," "haven't reached that point yet," and are "insecure within themselves." The topics they engaged in were not substantive; rather, they were shallow and empty. Often, they had the same conversations again and again, choosing to swap war stories from their days in crime and street life. He was frustrated that they were not learning anything. Tyshawn commented that he had tried to have debates with those guys and the conversations never seemed to work out. "They don't understand, and that can lead to confrontation—whatever the topic is you may be talking about. You may share something with a guy and he may not embrace it," he sighed. A disagreement about a hot topic had the potential to turn into a fight if the guys thought Tyshawn was judging them or saying he was better or smarter. He reflected, "When you have those conversations, you can see a look on the guy's face, you can tell that he's just not getting it. He's just not

getting it." For Tyshawn, his circle represented a place where he and his "guys" could safely debate and argue without hurt feelings or the potential for a fight.

Umoja

Narrative 1, Failing

> I wound up failing fifth grade. Elementary school was smooth sailing until I got sick. In the fifth grade, I hurt my ankle playing basketball and went to see the school nurse. She checked me out, gave me a sclerosis test, and recommended that I go to specialist. When my mom and I went, we found out that I had spinal cord cancer. With all the radiation and chemo treatments, I was in and out of the hospital, which meant I was out of school for a few months. I knew I was a little behind. I remember the last day of fifth grade. Our teacher, Ms. Hughes, walked around the room and passed out report cards to everyone. I remember sitting and waiting for mine, but I never got one. When the bell rang and everyone left, she came and sat down beside me. She told me, "I just can't push you through" and that I should have known that I failed. I was devastated. It was devastating, man. My first thought was—all my friends are going to the next grade, and now I've got to go outside and face them. I have to tell them that I didn't make it. To me, failing anything was devastating.
>
> So I went through fifth grade again, and I passed the next year. I went through middle school and started high school, and I didn't have any issues. I had some problems in 12th grade because I had started messing around with the drug scene. I didn't get in legal trouble, but you know, me and my mom stayed in arguments. She knew that I was involved. So my 12th grade year, I messed around and cut 10th period English and I ended up failing the class. I didn't get to go and walk the stage with my class. My mom was like, "You can do anything else, but just finish school. Just get your high school diploma." I went to summer school and got the credit I needed and they gave us a graduation. My mom asked me, "What are you going to do? You gonna go to college?" And I was like, "Naw man, I'm through with school."

At 10 years old, Umoja experienced his first significant failure, and it shocked him. Before this experience, he loved playing basketball and being successful in school was never an issue. Umoja grew up in West Baltimore. He went to schools with all black children. The youngest child in his family, Umoja had five older brothers and sisters. His mom worked part time and attended graduate school when he was a child, eventually

earning her master's degree. The family was "tight-knit" and always ate dinner together in their house; even when his mother had evening classes, Umoja and his siblings still gathered at the table. His older siblings took care of him a lot, and he liked that.

Times were tough for the family; both finances and his parents' marriage were strained. Sometimes, Umoja recalled, they did not have electricity in the summer time to save money for when they would really need it in the winter. His mother encouraged her children to go to school and excel. She said to them, "Know your history!" and she took them to museums and AFRAM (African American) festivals, so they could learn about African cultures. Umoja remembered that his mother wore traditional African garments, which embarrassed him as a kid but as an adult was a source of pride. Umoja's father was around during most of his childhood until Umoja's mother asked his father to leave after a couple of experiences of physical abuse; she also disapproved of his heroin use. Umoja recalled, "She didn't put up with it." Years after his parents split up, his father was diagnosed with lung cancer and his mother allowed him to move back in and she took care of him. Umoja's father died when he was just 15, an experience he described as "really heavy." After her children were grown, Umoja's mother joined the Peace Corps and spent 2 years in Thailand. In her sixties, she was working on her Ph.D.

Umoja had surgeries related to his spinal cord cancer that caused one leg to be slightly shorter than the other, giving him a limp. Because of that, many of his teachers treated him differently, like he was disabled. He resented that, stating that they gave him "a little too much attention" and hand-holding. He said, "That's what a lot of my teachers were doing—they wouldn't let me try it before they said, 'Nah, maybe that's not good for you.' That did not do anything but make me rebel." He resented that his mother often

did the same. He didn't like being treated like he was different; he wanted to be challenged. Since the fifth grade, he said he had developed a bad attitude. He described himself as overreacting to things and blowing up, but he was never suspended from school.

The teacher he recalled having the greatest influence on him was Ms. Broome, his eighth-grade math teacher. Umoja believed that Ms. Broome pushed him to do more or work harder. She told him, "Through all your challenges, you can't do anything but gain strength from them." He respected her for calling him out when he "didn't step up to the plate" and saying to him, "I know you can do better." Umoja believed that Ms. Broome saw him "swaying" meaning that she was concerned he could either go down the wrong path or choose the right one. Umoja saw her as a teacher who tried her best and encouraged him to do his best, too—even when he had a bad attitude.

Umoja repeatedly described his mother as his rock, his role model and his guide. He recalled a series of "awakening moments" where he was alerted to the dangers and risks of the street life he was involved in. One in particular stood out and involved his mother. Umoja was selling drugs in what he described as an open-air drug market in West Baltimore. The Metro bus pulled up, and his mother stepped off and walked toward him. He remembered her saying, "Listen! If you're gonna die out here, I'm gonna die with you." That moved and startled him. As he told the story, he was moved to tears; so was I. He continued, "So man, I had to leave. I had to leave that day." He and his mother got on the bus and went home. For Umoja, this represented the meeting of two worlds that he worked to keep separate. He did not want for his mother to see him selling drugs. He described what his mother's action meant: "So that was an awakening moment for

me, and I didn't take heed to it then. I tell her now, 'I should have left and never come back that day, huh?'" For Umoja, "taking heed" to awakening moments happened after he was arrested and incarcerated.

Narrative 2, The Challenge from Inside

> I was at odds with starting college and just being truthful, I'm still at odds with it. I'm always watching the news, and I see how educated people still can't get jobs. My thing is this—I provide for myself. I do everything for myself. I don't ask my family to do anything for me in here. When I get out, I want to provide for myself, so I'm real big on saving my money. That's how the topic of college came up. My friend Kendall sat me down and said, "Man, look—you need to be in college." I told him that I wanted to save my money so that when I get out, I can get me a spot and a car right off the bat. I said that I'm not really trying to go to school because I gotta' pay for it, and it's going to come out of my savings. Kendall listened and he said, "Yeah, but college is going to give you a chance. It's going to give you a better chance than you not having an education. This is the opportunity that you lost when you were at home. You say that you want to make a change. Well, this is a part of your change! Right here! Challenge yourself, man. Go ahead and go to school. I'm going to do what I can do to help you, man, but give it a shot."
>
> So I decided to take up his challenge, and here I am. I can't really afford but two classes a year, but I'm in college. My mom's proud of it, too. English was the first class I took. English has always been my worst subject in school, so I chose that class intentionally. At first, it was a rude awakening, but it turned out to be a great experience for me. That whole semester, I fussed and I cussed. I was nervous, but I thought, "I'm not in this to fail." I worked hard on that first paper; we had to write a 500-word essay on a particular story. I got my first A [smiling]. Getting that A meant everything, man. It meant that I would continue to go to school. It meant that I wouldn't give up. It meant that I could meet this challenge.

Umoja's decision to start college came from his peer's challenge. Kendall's argument that college would "give him a chance" and that taking college classes was going to be "a part of his change" convinced him to give it a try. For Umoja, there were many ideas embedded in college—change, opportunity, challenge, and a chance. Kendall, whom Umoja thought of as like a big brother, used his personal stories and experiences

from being in college and challenged him to look at things in a different light. Starting college classes and joining Be the Change helped Umoja "to step out of the convict mentality," which he described as acting tough and not showing emotion. He characterized the college program as personally "enlightening" because of the networking and community aspects, including the conversations and the opportunity to be around others who "think like you."

Umoja wanted to experience change and growth. Being "fed up" with his past life swayed his decision. He stated, "You know, before I didn't care if I was dead. I want to live now…I enjoy seeing change, seeing positive change." It was change that continued to motivate him. He stated, "As soon as you say you're going to change, the test is going to come around." Umoja said that as we all try to change, failure will happen. "But in failure, you're allowed to get back up and try again," he added. Umoja defined success as "a means to change my actions, a way to make my mom proud, and a way to provide legally for not only myself, but for loved ones." In addition, providing for his family had an educational element; specifically, it meant being able to help his family with homework as well as life problems. He proudly said, "They can ask me, and I know simply because I chose to go on and go to school."

Going to college was no small financial feat for Umoja. Being 39 years old meant he did not qualify for grant funding such as the Second Chances Youth Offenders Act, which assists with tuition for qualified incarcerated students ages 18-30. In order for him to take classes, he had to come up with the money. He made the decision to pay for all of his college expenses from working at the prison's wood shop, making 35 cents an hour. Paying his own way, he could only afford taking two classes per year. He admitted,

"That's hard. I mean scraping bones and knuckles. It's hard. But what means more? Once you get your priorities in order, you know you got to let some things go because you're looking ahead." For Umoja, this decision represented "looking down the road" instead of living for today.

Earning an A on his first English paper signaled to Umoja that he belonged in college. His choice to take the most difficult class first was his way of putting that belonging to the test. Because he had to take English in summer school his senior year of high school, Umoja believed he might struggle in English. Describing his feelings before taking that class, he used words like "hated" and "dreaded." He expressed gratitude for a teacher who helped him through the class.

Narrative 3, First Professor

> My first professor, Ms. Wilson, taught English, which I dreaded. She helped me and guided me right on through it. She'd get up on the board and make things a little simpler. But you know she did something very strange to me one night. We were the last two to walk out of the class, and we were standing in the hall and she said, "Mr. Umoja, look at me." I turned around and looked at her. She said, "What are you locked up for?" That's the one question that you aren't supposed to ask anyone here. I looked at her, and I told her what I was locked up for. She said, "How much time do you have left?" And I told her. Then she looked at me and said, "I'm looking in your eyes, and you're not a bad person." Whoa, that shocked me! I was like, this lady doesn't know me from nobody and she just said that!

As awkward and inappropriate as this interaction was, Umoja took his professor's words as an affirmation that he was on the right path. He described himself as so caught off guard that he answered the questions she asked, even though she was not supposed to ask them. Ms. Wilson had not taught in a prison school before; perhaps she was not aware of the social mores of working in a prison. Interacting with Umoja challenged her

assumption that incarcerated men would be "bad people." Umoja felt validated by her seeing him as "not a bad person", and he spoke of this experience as a moment of enlightenment for her. After that, they developed a positive relationship, and she often requested his help with classroom tasks.

In the final paper for that first English class, Ms. Wilson asked the class to write a persuasive essay on a topic of their choosing. Umoja chose to write an essay arguing the benefits and positive aspects of corrections. It shocked his professor. He said that he wanted to push himself to write that paper. "You know, we're locked up," he acknowledged, "and we can always talk about the cons of being locked up. Corrections has some good things for some people." For Umoja, corrections played a part in his becoming a man. He added that corrections allowed him to be educated and helped him learn to respect life and individuals. He added, "I think it's all about what you're making of it. If you're not letting the time do you, you're doing the time." His teacher told him that she did not think incarcerated guys could write a paper like that, saying, "You really showed me on this one!" Umoja was very proud of that paper as well as his success in that first class.

Narrative 4, Creating Change

> There's one young guy in here who's taken a liking to me. He's hanging around, and I've been spending time with him, talking to him. Our relationship started out a little rocky. I'd been thinking and reading about gang violence, and I'm fed up with it. I wasn't in a gang, but I played a part in the foolishness. I gave some guys in the dorm an article to read about gang violence and how we're killing each other. One guy erupted, yelling at me, "We kill each other because that's who we're around!" I was like, "Really?!" He's just acting foolish and angry. If he had a gun, I think he would have killed me over that. I was telling my mom, "How do I expect to go home and take a message into our communities when we got kids out there who are ten times worse than this guy?" I don't know. So I

> gave the article to the guy I now mentor, too. That day, he stormed off. About 20 minutes later, I called him back over and told him, "I just want you to know—you're my future, man. I didn't give you this paper to step on your feet. I gave you this paper to put something on your mind. Just think about what you read." Ever since, he's been hanging around. He came over and said, "Yeah man, I gotta do something different. My sister, my brother…I don't want them to join a gang like me." [Smiles.] I know our conversation, that article, what I said to him—that's where this came from. He's maturing, and I get to sit there and watch it happen.

In Umoja's story about mentoring, he presented his fears as well as his hopes. His mentoring involved leading by example and challenging others. Reflecting on his mentoring philosophy, he said that he put himself in the other guy's shoes. He believed it was important to find commonalities. Both Umoja and his young mentee have siblings and were raised by single mothers, both made a few bad decisions at a young age, and both were enrolled in the college program. Umoja advised his mentee, "The decisions that you make right now are going to affect your tomorrow, so take this college thing seriously. Go after it. Go out there and make your mom proud." And he encouraged him sincerely. His mentoring extended to academic advising and homework assistance. When his mentee was struggling in his philosophy class, Umoja started reading his papers and offering feedback. His grades improved. Umoja said, "I encouraged him to write more. Last night, he came back and told me, 'I got a 99 on my test, man.' I said, "All right. Good. Why didn't you get a 100?" Umoja expressed care to this man in prison by checking in with him, offering help when asked, and holding him accountable to his goals. He felt empowered by the change and maturing of this young man. The broad smile on his face as he spoke of his mentee and the changes he saw indicated that this work made him happy. He was proud.

Umoja's personal conviction about certain issues caused him to take action. The example from the story, giving anti-gang newspaper articles to gang members in prison, represented that risk but it was a risk he felt compelled to take. Taking college classes and having discussions in the Be the Change community, Umoja gained new, broader perspectives through which he sees the whole gang situation. He said, "I gave them that paper to see some reactions, and I got them." The responses he witnessed both hurt and encouraged him. Umoja worked from the assumption that his change could empower others to make positive changes. Sharing knowledge, he believed, would spur change and action. "If I'm living it and speaking it, it's going to touch somebody, and somebody's going to change." He reflected, "I'm trying to do whatever I can… if that means risking my life, that's what it's gonna be."

In Umoja's description of his work, there was a sense of training for what is next. He expressed his hope to return to West Baltimore and be a positive role model and community activist. He hoped to finish his associate degree while in prison and later earn a bachelor's degree in history. Umoja stated, "In the community that I tore down, you know, I want to start there." His quest for personal change extended beyond himself; in his mind, he linked his personal transformation with that of his community. It was as if he owed it to his neighbors to change; he called this "giving himself back to his community," and he believed this work was his calling. Umoja's fervor stemmed from his belief that his community does not have many examples of people who were incarcerated and then turned their lives around and did something positive. He planned to return as a counselor or teacher or mentor of sorts. "I don't know what it's going to be

exactly, but I know I'm going to be doing something in communities. And I'm going to enjoy doing it. That's going to be my pay-off—seeing somebody else succeed."

Cally

Narrative 1, College as a Family Tradition

> When I was on the land,[6] I went to college right out of high school. I was raised that this is what you do, that education is the key. My whole family on both sides—I honestly don't know anybody that hasn't gone to college. I had a scholarship to play football at Eastern New Mexico State, and I was doing well with my classes. Two weeks before the first year was over, I left school. I didn't even withdraw. Just left. You know, there are limitations to scholarships. I was far from home and needed spending money. As a man, I wanted to take care of myself. My family is mostly women, and I hated to ask my mom to send me $30 Western Union because I knew it took $30 to send it. I was like, you know what, I'm leaving school.
>
> When I got home, life wasn't like how I envisioned it. I was back to chasing money. When that got old, I started looking into going back to school. That's when I found out—if you sign a scholarship, it's a contract. Little did I know that in order to go to another college, I would first have to pay back that tuition to Eastern New Mexico before they'd even send my transcripts. It was a painful lesson, but I was still hell-bent on continuing my education so I did it. By hook or crook, I paid that money back.

Cally, his sister, and his brother were raised by their mother. They struggled financially. Cally recalled that his elementary school held a canned food drive and asked the children to go home and bring back cans of food. His mother got home and found him in the kitchen cabinets putting canned food into a grocery bag. She was angry. As he

[6] "The land" refers to being in society and out of prison.

explained the project, that they were getting food together for poor people, his mother stopped him. “We are poor people,” she said and made Cally put the cans back.

Education was valued and modeled in Cally’s home. Cally’s mother was in school and working when he was a child, but later she earned two degrees in finance and became an accounts manager at Caterpillar. His three aunts were all well-educated professionals. One was a teacher, another was a social worker who became Ohio’s re-entry director (responsible for programs that help formerly incarcerated people re-enter society), and the third was the director of the housing authority in Ohio. Cally’s sister earned a bachelor’s degree; his brother was also incarcerated but not college educated. Cally’s experiences in grade school were mostly positive. He played football in high school and was a good student.

Ideas about money and manhood weighed on his mind. While on the streets, he was ruled by “chasing money.” The desire for money had lured him into selling drugs. Reflecting on this, he said,

> You know, as a man, I want to be able to contribute. I don’t mind a woman making more money than me, but at least a man doesn’t ever want to be less of a man by not contributing to the household.

Not contributing, he said, was hard on a man; he added that being incarcerated and not helping out his family really bothered him. Money could entice him, he admitted. Worried that he might see people with money and once again be drawn back to his past life, he realized it was important to plan to rebound from his time in prison. Cally saw college as part of that preparation. “I realized that if there’s a possibility of me getting out of here, I need to do some things to prepare myself.” Preparing himself for the outside world meant being able to make money and support his family legally. “I don’t know

when my blessing is coming, but I want to be prepared. I'm going to take everything possible to position myself to prosper."

Narrative 2, Influences

> Demuwi and me, we didn't click right off. You know in this situation, you don't just let people get close, because there's so much foolishness going on in here that you don't know whether dudes are genuine or not. And a lot of them aren't. But we ended up bonding and started working out together. I always saw him with his nose in a book—scratching his head, going through the homework, or writing papers. I'm like, "Man, what-chou doing?" And he told me the deal—they have a college program at the school and I should go ahead and try it. I thought about it, and I made the decision that I'm going to do it. I don't have that far to go! I had a few college credits when I came into prison. I'm going to be here a while, so I might as well make lemonade out of this lemon. And honestly, college was something that I dove into to take my mind off of this bit. You're so consumed with trying to complete your assignments and stuff that you don't have time to worry about what's going on out in the world or about the situation that you're in.

Cally enrolled in the college program in 2008. Before enrolling, he was interested in college, but it was seeing Demuwi's pursuit of college that encouraged him to start. Unsure of whom he could trust in prison, Cally did not share with others that he had been to college or that he had interest in it. Sharing that interest represented a risk. When he saw Demuwi studying, that created a safe approach for Cally to ask him what he was studying. He was an example to Cally of someone *like him* – a college student interested in academics. This meant that there were others like him, others with similar interests.

In the fall of 2010, the prison began a new program called Campus Within Walls. One initiative of the program was creating a college dormitory, a unit of 96 men who had either graduated from college or were currently enrolled in college programs. As a college student, Cally decided to participate; that meant he would have to move from his building. One benefit of living in the college dorm was that he would be surrounded by

people who he said, “are smarter than he is.” He believed being around other people who were intelligent and making good decisions would help him continue to do the same. Still, there were men in the college dorm whom he “dealt with” and others from whom he kept his distance. Cally was aware of his environment and that he continuously evaluated and selected men whom he could trust to be in his circle. He explained that he has had to remain guarded in prison.

Cally was sentenced to over 30 years in prison. Although he often spoke about feeling discouraged by that amount of time, he wanted to use it well. Going to college was a constructive use, but Cally wanted to be around “like-minded” and “positive people.” The community Cally sought was one with others who were “into good health, their mind, physical, spiritual, and mental growth, and they’re positive.” In Be the Change, he found that community; he called Be the Change a fraternity, a brotherhood. Being in Be the Change helped Cally because it was an environment where “you are able to be spoken to and to speak genuinely about what it is you’re thinking and lay it on the table.”

Cally’s decision to go to college was also influenced by his children. He shared his concern that two of his kids have not graduated from high school, which he attributed to his “not being at home.” At age 42, Cally said he’d been locked up for seven years. He felt sick about the time away from his family. School, he said, was something they need. His going to college was a strong example to them and would help “break the cycle” for his kids. Whether through college or through vocational trade, Cally wanted his children to be educated and be able to provide for themselves and their families.

Narrative 3, Being Helped

> I'm not saying by any means that I like being incarcerated, but this institution in itself has been a blessing. I mean that I have been helped out… a lot. My final college class was math, and I was struggling. It was a speedy, 8-week class, and in only two months it's hard to grasp ideas that you haven't seen in 20 years! Especially in math! I had just failed another quiz, and I was stressed! I went into Ms. Jane's office and broke down. She was like, "What's wrong?" I told her, "I don't think I can pass. I've invited all of these people to come to graduation, and this is the last class that I need. I don't think I'm gonna make it." Now, Ms. Jane is tough. She told me, "You are not failing this class! You are going to pass this class!" Then she opened the school for me to come up and get tutoring on Saturdays and Sundays. Two guys from our college dorm, Raven and Craig, came out, bless their hearts, and helped me with some stuff that I just could not get. They made it simple. If it wasn't for them and Ms. Jane, I wouldn't have made it. I had people willing to inconvenience themselves to help another person advance. In turn, I feel it is my responsibility to take the same things that were given to me and pay it forward. Pay it forward! Pay it forward.\

Generally speaking, prison is not a place where care is easily shown, and displays of emotions are rare. Cally's display of vulnerability and need in the school signified his feeling that school was a safe place. Then he felt cared for when the principal made special arrangements for the school building to be open on the weekends and for passes to be given to Cally's tutors. Prisons are not known for their flexibility, particularly when security is a concern, and Cally understood that it was not easy for Ms. Jane to make these arrangements and that his peer tutors took time away from their weekend activities to work with him.

His statements that he must then "pay it forward" exhibit that he wanted to extend that support to someone else. He explained further, "When you find someone that shows care and concern and care not only about the betterment of you, but of society and the community in general, it makes you want to learn it or do it and be a better person." Cally believed that care began with self-care and then spread to others. He hoped that his care

"might rub off on others." Care can be shown in leading by example or questioning a young guy, "How does what you're doing benefit you?" He also encouraged young guys to go to college and "put something else on your mind and on your plate!" and told them to turn off the TV and study. For Cally, love was an action. He added, "A lot of people will tell you they love you, and I've always had a problem with that. I would always say, 'I can show you better than I can tell you.'" He felt that people's actions speak louder than their words and that he must show others that they are "genuinely cared about."

As Cally described, prison can be a dehumanizing place. A lot of men have been deprived of care in prison. Incarcerated men are counted five times per day. Cally compared this to having to stand up "there like cattle ready to be counted." The men must keep the schedule set by the prison authorities. Cally stated, "When you have people that are oppressing and suppressing constantly, it makes you buck! It's like, 'I'm a product of my environment! If you treat me like an animal, I'm going to react like one!" In contrast, he characterized the prison school as a humanizing place. Cally spoke of the care and concern he was shown in his college classes. In addition to the assistance he received during his struggle in the math class, he also discussed his English and biology teachers who made class interesting and "showed concern." Their approach to teaching was to tell their students to stop worrying about failing and focus on learning. Cally said, "It's like you go 'Ahhhh.' [deep sigh] And you're not so consumed with getting the best grade." He commented that he heard a saying on a TV program that fit his favorite college teachers; it was "I don't care what you know until I know that you care."

Narrative 4, Graduation

> Graduation. Yeah, it was one of the highlights of my…. Man, I get choked up even thinking about it. It was wonderful. To be able to finally complete some of the things that I didn't allow myself to complete. Man, it was just so rewarding. It's also sickening that I had to do it in a situation like this, but hey, the race is not always to the swift. To finally finish, I was real proud. My mom was able to come. I felt like I could finally show that I completed something. She was so proud. It was just great. First I had to fend her off from all the kisses and hugs. Then, she wanted to take the certificate, degree, cap, and gown home with her. I was like, "Mama, you can't take all this stuff!" But she was just so proud. She'll be back when I graduate in June with her sisters when I get my brick masonry degree. Now, I'm hell-bent on finishing anything I start. I'm blessed.

After two and a half years of taking college classes, Cally graduated with an associate degree in general studies. Sharing this moment of graduation with his mother was emotional. He had struggled in the past with his family being disappointed in him—in his dropping out of college, in his participation in selling drugs, in his arrest and incarceration. In particular, Cally grieved disappointing family members who were college educated and wished the same for him. His completion of his degree was healing.

Reflecting on his years in college, Cally expressed that it was a time of personal growth for him. He contrasted it to his time on the street when he "always had to be moving." He questioned, "I don't know if it was to take my mind off the lifestyle I was living. I may have been running from myself." Cally said that he has grown a lot. His maturing meant that he no longer compromised on things he believed in to be liked. It also meant that he learned to speak his mind. In a Be the Change meeting, the group had an intense debate about a magazine article discussing gay students at Morehouse College who chose to defy the campus dress code. Several men joked and made disparaging comments about the gay students. Cally spoke out. "As we were persecuted as blacks, you should be conscious of what it is you're saying about somebody that's being

discriminated against because they're gay." He continued and called their attention to examples of Christians who mistreated Muslims after 9-11. In prison gay issues were hot button issues, and it was not popular to argue for being respectful of gay people. Cally still chose to advocate for a respectful discussion; however, he quickly added that he was "not soft" and he does not personally agree with or practice homosexuality. By linking the persecution of blacks and that of gays, he made the issue more personal and relatable.

Throughout his time in college, Cally also redefined what it means to be a man through his mentorships. The prison community and the African American community have tended to encourage black men to be "hard" and tough. Cally added that in the area where he grew up, people take advantage of a guy who shows any signs of weakness. He realized his philosophy was different. Cally stated, "It's not what they call you, but what you react to." His new understanding of being a man meant that he could be comfortable and confident in what he was capable of, what he believed in and stood for. Being a man meant hard work, preparation, and education. "I try to be a man about everything I do," he said. "I like to be an example of what a man should be. I go to school." Cally believed while he did not represent the smartest guy in college, he was an example of the guy who put in extra effort and sacrificed to do well. "Success to me is to be complete, to be well balanced," he said. "Don't get me wrong—money is good, but at the same time, being a good person is more important…"

Narrative 5, Laying Foundations

> Masonry is something that you have to constantly learn. You can't know everything about brick. You've got people who've been doing it for 20 or 30 years and still can be taught some things. It's something I can see having a career in for once. I worked hard to get into the masonry program. I agreed that I would

> complete the class and then, upon completion, I would become the teacher's assistant. It's nice to be given a chance. That's what Mr. Smith gave me, and I plan on making the best of it. When I started, I found out that brick masonry is all about math. Math is not my favorite subject. In that college math class, I was thinking, "What will I ever use this stuff for?" But in masonry, we use most everything that he taught—slopes, intersections, fractions, decimals, pretty much everything. I know I have so much more to learn. I want everything to be perfect, but there is no perfect brick mason. Our teacher, Mr. Smith, tells us, "Practice doesn't make perfect. Practice makes improvement."
>
> As a T.A., I've learned more helping others learn than when I was going through the class myself. I tell our students, "I've been there before, man. Relax. Don't try to hurry to get through this. Get what it is that you need to know. You're going to make mistakes." Those are some of the same things that Mr. Smith told me when I got frustrated. Man, there were days when I wanted to kick the structure over and just leave outta there. But Mr. Smith was like, "Did you know how to do this before you came into the class?" I was like, "No." "So," he said, "you learned something today, right?" "Yeah." "Okay, continue on. Practice makes improvement." With that said, you relax, gather yourself and get back in it. Mr. Smith is very wise, and he's not so overbearing. He's genuinely trying to help people. You can go and talk to him—not only about brick masonry, but also in general. I look up to him and I admire the way he handles himself and how he treats people like people. Instead of looking down on them—"You're an offender. You're a convict!" or whatever. It's like he thinks, "Okay, you made a mistake. Let's move forward. Educate yourself and do something positive. Everybody makes mistakes. Don't let it hold you down forever. Let's move forward."

After he completed his associate degree, Cally took a vocational program in brick masonry. He regarded the teacher, Mr. Smith, as a professional and personal mentor. He described having respect for Mr. Smith as a man and a Christian. The back story of Cally winning the teaching assistantship with Mr. Smith was one of self-advocacy and persistence. For over a year, Cally hounded Mr. Smith and asked him to allow him in his class whenever he saw him around. When one of Mr. Smith's aides was released from the prison, he asked Cally to take the one-year class, earn the masonry certification and then work with him as a teaching assistant. Cally jumped at the chance. His role as a teaching assistant has been influential. He has learned in community—both from watching the

other more experienced teaching assistants as well as teaching concepts he learned in class. Both are examples of social learning. Reflecting on what those things taught him, Cally quoted Charles Barkley, "You don't want to be the smartest person in your group. If you are, then you need to get outside of that group and move to another one in order to grow."

Mr. Smith's nonjudgmental behavior toward his students had personal meaning for Cally. Imagining how Mr. Smith thought about incarcerated men, Cally said he did not treat them like "convicts," and he believed each man was a human capable of mistakes but also change. Cally reflected, "I've realized that in this situation I'm in, that not everybody here are as bad as people in the system make it out to be." As Cally described, Mr. Smith modeled positive behavior for his students. Coupled with masonry skills, he also taught them life and social skills—coping with failure, practicing patience, perseverance, and dealing with difficult people. In masonry and in life, as Mr. Smith advised, "Practice makes improvement." In his class, Mr. Smith allowed his students to make mistakes and then to fix them. He called those mistakes "learning experiences."

Escabar

Narrative 1, Fighting

> Some guys were fighting me, and my sister stepped in. I think I was eight and she's a little older. She still fought for me even though she's disabled. When we got home, some people in my family were angry about that situation. They were like, "You need to start fighting for yourself. Your daddy ain't no punk. Your mama ain't no punk." I didn't like to fight…it wasn't something I liked doing. So I made a shell for myself, created a mask for myself. At the time, I didn't understand it like that.
>
> I remember the first time I really got to fighting. This guy named Cory hit my sister in the head with a cane. It was bad, I mean, they had to call an ambulance. It

> hurt me. I think that all that hate that I had on the inside, it started coming out of me. I was upset, and I went looking for Cory. I mean, he didn't just hit her, he hit her with a cane. Cory's friend, Theo, walked up and said, "Ain't nothing gonna happen to Cory" and all that, so we got to fighting, and I knocked him out. I remember it well because it surprised me. I was just 8 and Theo was 10. After that, I was fighting everybody. No matter who it was, I was fighting them. I took on this macho-like attitude. There were people out there who were cheering me on for what I did. So I thought that was the right thing to do—fighting to take care of my sister and me. I'm thinking that this is what I have to do with every problem that I have. When I had any problems, I'd think that violence was the way to solve it.

Escabar grew up in a household where violence was an everyday norm. He told stories of his parents fighting each other and other people in their neighborhood. He described his mother as "the type of woman who'd fight men and have victories." They both drank too much and drinking often preceded fighting. Escabar's mother would get angry with him or his sister and become violent. He never really knew what would set her off. Once he recalled he was hit because she said, "You look like your no-good-ass-daddy." As small children (around ages 5 to 7), Escabar and his sister were left alone for days at a time. "Sometimes we'd be left up there with nothing to eat or nothing and she'd be out drinking and partying or whatever she was doing," he recalled. The children's grandmother sought custody and took their mother to court. Although they would be placed temporarily with their grandmother, his mother would come to her house, wanting her children back. Escabar's grandmother would give in, and he said, "It was the same things all over again." When he was about 9 years old, he began running away from home to stay with his grandmother or an aunt.

As a kid, he was afraid of his mother and father, and he was not the only one. He said, "I was seeing how people were afraid of them, and I got the respect and fear mixed up." He believed from a young age that to earn respect, he had to develop a reputation

for himself. The pressure to start fighting began with wanting to protect his disabled sister. He said, “That’s pretty much why I got my reputation, because people respect you if they know you’re willing to do whatever it is that you have to do to keep somebody up off you or somebody that’s close to you. So that’s how I got caught up into that mess.” After Escabar was fighting regularly, members of his family cautioned him and “got on him.” He was surprised because these were the same ones who had encouraged him to do it. “You know, it ain’t ‘do as you say’ anymore! That’s thrown out the window! Kids pick up on what they see, not what you actually tell them to do. They’re going to emulate what you do.”

Growing up in a volatile household affected him, Escabar believed. “You know, stuff like that happening to you when you’re growing up, it puts fear in you and makes you rebellious too,” he said. He described having conflicting feelings of not wanting to do anything that could set his mother off while at the same time being angry and feeling that he could be “just as mean and tough as she is.” One incident deeply scarred him. When he was around 10, he had run away to his grandmother’s house after a violent episode. His mother came to take him home. Escabar’s extended family was angry with her, but she insisted she would be taking him home. She pulled him into the backyard, and Escabar broke free. She provoked him, “You think you’re big enough to beat me?” and challenged him to fight her. He was so angry with her that he fought her and lost badly. Seeing her grandson with a broken nose and black eyes, his grandmother called the police. They came, but did nothing. He reflected, “That moment solidified the fear that I had for her. Really throughout life. Whatever she did, I was like, ‘Whatever.’ You know, I always stayed away.”

Escabar's criminal record started at age 6 when he was charged with theft. While at a convenience store with his mother, he took some candy. When confronted by the owner, Escabar's mother said that she was going pay for it along with other items. He did not remember the incident, but his mother told him that she believed the store's owner was racist. More serious charges came later. When Escabar was 9, he was arrested and locked up for strong-armed robbery. He remembered the incident well. A boy in his neighborhood hit Escabar's friend, Chris, and then took his bike. When Chris told Escabar what happened, Escabar found the kid and took the bike back with the intention of returning it to Chris. He stopped at his grandmother's house and the police came and arrested him for stealing. When they saw Chris and his mother, Escabar was stunned that Chris did not take up for him or tell the truth. "I was like, 'Man, you know I didn't hit you and take your bike! You know what happened!'" He pleaded desperately with Chris, Chris's mother, his grandmother, the police, and the judge, and no one believed him. He was locked up for a month in a juvenile detention center. That moment, he believed was when he "got his attitude." He said,

> I was sitting up there, I can remember crying in the cell. Once I got finished crying, I made my mind up, 'Man, if they think I'm doing all this, I might as well do everything that they say I'm doing.' I got real rebellious.

When he was released, he said he was back in two months later.

Looking back, Escabar said that he was releasing his anger, hate, and hurt in a negative way. He added, "I was torn up. A lot of resentment, you know? Feeling frustrated about it." Still, the cycle of committing crimes and getting locked up in juvenile detention centers continued, and he described himself as "hell on wheels." When he was 13, he bought a gun off the streets. He described buying this gun and

learning to shoot it as a rite of passage. As the youngest member of his crew, he experimented with the gun and he got praise and positive reactions from shooting it. He explained that shooting his gun gave him a rush or an all-time high. From there, he did it all—fought, robbed people, stole, and sold drugs. Money, however, did not motivate his activity. He said, "I never cared about money. I never valued clothes or jewelry or stuff like that because I could take my last and give to people. I'd just give clothes away or shoes away." He wondered if he did that at the time to compensate for the bad things he was doing. Still, most of what he stole he gave away to people in his neighborhood.

When he was 14, Escabar was to be tried as an adult for an attempted murder. Deemed a "menace to society," he was placed in protective custody in a juvenile facility for 7 months, which meant that he was alone in a cell during that time. Later he was moved to an adult penitentiary; again, because of his age, he was alone and "in the hole" in the adult jail. He stayed there almost 2 years. His father, who was also there living on the third floor, requested that Escabar be moved into his cell. While his request was denied, the correctional officers did allow them to get together and talk from time to time. His father blamed himself for Escabar's incarceration. He advised on how to survive prison. He said, "You gotta build that shell, man. You gotta build that shell. You can't show too many emotions in that type of environment."

Escabar reflected on what it meant to be a menace to society.

> I used to think I was dangerous because you know, you got your peers and you come up in the streets and you build this reputation for yourself. This reputation ain't just coming from making money or like that. It's actually coming from you in hand-to-hand combat, fighting.

Across his knuckles, there was tattoo which reads "Dominance." In the street, that was his nickname, and people in the prison still referred to him as "Dom" or "Dominance." He added, "You think that you're hard," he said. "You think that you're this monster that people say that you are. But you're actually not, it's just that they're placing psychological problems with you… not knowing."

Escabar described his time in school as an overall negative experience. Although he was smart, going in and out of detention centers made school difficult and stressful. His teachers put all the "bad kids" in the back of the classroom; he called these students "crabs in a bucket" because they were stuck where they were. Teachers, he said, pre-judged certain kids as being bad. He explained, "Before you come into the school, it's like it's being handed down year after year." He believed that whatever a kid did followed him from elementary school through high school. He also thought that his teachers made judgments about him based on his parents. "Just because your parents are being bad, doesn't mean that the kid's going to be bad. He might or she might can come up being bad at that time, but as time goes on, these are the same people that calm down."

After a time of living the street life, Escabar said that defending his reputation became tiresome. "'Cause I have built this reputation up that you gotta stand by at any given time because you know you're going to be tested. I never knew that." He explained that young guys looking to make a name for themselves would challenge more established guys in the street. As he had become more established, he was tested. "I'm supposed to fight or shoot or put myself out there in life or death situations so that I can be viewed as being a man," he said. He had also grown tired of being in and out of prison.

Narrative 2, A Realization

> I came back to prison; this was my third time here. I had already been thinking, "Damn, I can't keep doing the same stuff because I'm always going to be locked up. I'm either gonna be dead or locked up for life. One of the two, but I don't want either. I don't want to die, and I don't want to be locked up for life, so what else can I do? There's an in-between, you know, but that in-between means change. It don't mean straddling the fence of the two things, it means you gotta make a decision. You gotta make an important decision because the decision you make right now is life or death.
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> I was 29 when I made my decision; I kept telling myself that I wanted to do something good, but I didn't know what that good was. I decided to go to school, I started a therapeutic community program, and I worked as a librarian aide. I started doing things that I normally wouldn't do. I had gone to school before and got my GED, but I wasn't serious about it. I realized that I love school because it gives a good sense of pride about myself, knowing that I've weathered the storm. I've made it… not just made it, but I'm making it. I'm doing the exact opposite of what people thought would happen to me. I'm proving a lot of people wrong.

Escabar traced his decisions to "do something good" back to participating in the therapeutic community program in a jail. His friend Tone-Bone worked there as a counselor; Escabar knew him from the street life and was surprised to see him working at the jail. Not believing he had really changed, Escabar tried to persuade him to bring drugs into the jail, but he would not do it. Speaking of Tone-Bone, he said, "So when he did good, he wanted me to do good, too. He always reached out to me." Tone-Bone had hit his bottom years before, dropped out of street life and gone to school for counseling. His example and how he changed impressed Escabar.

In 1998, Escabar earned his GED but he did not take school seriously. Although he liked and respected his GED teacher, Ms. Houston, he admitted to coming to class high. With the GED under his belt, he started community college and took Western Civilizations in his first semester and Algebra in his second. He recalled, "At first I wasn't taking my grades really serious, and during this time I didn't know that if your

GPA drops, it's hard to get it back. My first semester in Math, I struggled. I was failing." His GPA dropped to a 2.7. He showed Ms. Houston his grades, and she sat down with him and asked, "What's wrong with you? You know this!" She told him to stop goofing around and pay attention. With a big smile, he recalled Ms. Houston fussing at him, saying, "You need to do better than what you're doing because this ain't gonna cut it!" And with that, he got on the ball and started making As. Escabar even worked for an A in English, a class where said he had to fight for it. He proudly reported that his GPA was back up to a 3.2.

Ms. Houston offered Escabar a position as a teacher's aide in her GED preparation class. The first student he worked with presented many challenges. Lance was a quiet guy, people picked on him, he smelled bad, and his breath stunk. Beyond that, Lance did not want to be in class and had tested at a low reading level. Escabar went to Ms. Houston for advice, and she told him, "You can't force it on anybody. Allow them to come into their own, but here and now, show them attention and make them feel comfortable." So he started bringing the newspaper to class and talking with Lance about the articles. Newspaper chats led to reading books together, and later Lance and Escabar even worked on math. Escabar learned about him—that this was his first incarceration and he had anxiety about being separated from his family. He realized that Lance found ways to keep people away from him. Escabar coached and encouraged him until he was ready to take the GED test. He passed. "That was amazing to me," Escabar said. "I know I gave him something that he can have for the rest of his life and can't nobody take it from him." Every time he saw Lance's family in the visitation room, they would thank him; that made him feel great. He commented that Lance was his first of many successes.

Escabar utilized his experiences from school in how he taught, especially the negative ones. Reflecting on how he was treated like a dummy in school when he did not know an answer, Escabar said he would never demean a student. Instead, he said to them, "Man, I didn't see it either. Somebody had to tell me, so now I'm telling you." He made an effort to help students know that he's on their side and tells them, "You're where I'm at. We ain't no different."

No one ever expected Escabar to become college educated. Very little was expected from him. "You know when you're living that life, that negative lifestyle, you got people saying that you ain't gonna make it to next week, blasé-blah. You ain't never going to be nothing. Things like that, that you think about it and you're like, "Damn, they did say blasé-blah, but this is what I'm going right now." Even his family was surprised that he was in college and working as a teacher's aide. He recalled telling them about his job:

> When I told my family that I'm a teacher's aide, they said, "A teacher's….what?" [laughs]. And I was like, "I'm a teacher's aide! That's my job! I get paid for helping people learn, right?" And they were like, "Your ass is a teacher's aide?" And again I'm like, "Yeah, I'm a teacher's aide! What… you don't think I can't teach?" And they're like, "Man, I would have never thought it, that you'd be a teacher's aide. Teaching nobody nothing." You know?

When Escabar's family visited, often his favorite niece came; he described her as 13 and "smart as hell." During the visits, Escabar and his niece talked about school and what she was learning. Often asking great questions, she kept him on his toes. One day they were talking about the gravitational pull of the sun and all the things on earth it affects, and he realized that his family was looking at them like they were crazy. He laughed, "It was like we were foreign to them. I kinda caught myself, and was like

"Damn, man… the same people I call a nerd, I do the same stuff that they do now! So am I the nerd?" It felt great to know things and to be able to help people. He even offered to help tutor his nieces, nephews, and cousins. He contrasted it to how he felt growing up; he was treated "like a dummy" when he did not know something.

He was currently enrolled in the community college's Instructional Technology program. If he graduates, Escabar will be the first in his family to graduate. To him earning a college degree would feel like he climbed Mt. Everest. He said that his family often asked him when he would be graduating. Even though his graduation was 2 years away, his family was already planning to attend the ceremony. Escabar was proud that even his mother was coming, although she has not visited him in prison because she does not like prisons. Beyond his IT degree, Escabar wanted to get an associate degree and take the apprenticeship classes in teaching. While he knew he would not be able to teach in public school, he felt it would build on his 4 years of experience teaching in prison. He hoped he might be able to teach at a private school.

Narrative 3, Challenges

> So Ben took me aside one day and he asked me a question. He said, "You attract what you are. You know what I'm saying?" I was like, "Yeah." Ben said, "It's like whatever energy or vibes I give out, that's what I'm gonna get back. Like if I like foolishness, that's what I'm gonna attract to me—foolishness. You know? If I'm a good person, that's what I'm going to attract around me—good people." I was like, "Yeah." Then Ben was like, "For real, you're a little twisted because a lot of people that are good are attracted to you, but you are attracted to something else than what you are. So my question to you is—are you really being who you are?"
>
> Dag, man. I had to think about that for a minute. I thought about that for about a year. I had to ask myself, "Am I still walking around with the same old mask on and I ain't even got to do it? Why do I keep doing it?" I think it's because I'm

> used to doing it, used to having it on. You know, wearing that mask became an everyday thing for me. It's something that's easy for me to do.

The positive path was unfamiliar to Escabar. He explained, "It's hard to stay on the road that's unknown because that's what it is—unknown. You're trying to get familiar with it." For him, it was the hardest path he has had to walk, because he was uncomfortable and afraid of the unknown. "When you come around things that you don't know, that you're not familiar with, you kinda tense up," he said. His strategy for dealing with the unfamiliar positive path was trying to be around positive people. Keeping positive people around, like Ben, Tyshawn, Umoja, Ms. Houston, and Ms. Jane, helped Escabar feel grounded and safe.

Escabar considered Ben a mentor, a teacher, and a father figure. As a trusted mentor, Ben's taking him aside in private and asking him some difficult questions served as a wake-up call. Ben's challenge, because it was done in private, was not taken as threatening. Speaking of Ben, he said, "He teaches all day long, not even knowing that he's teaching." Ben taught him how to be to be himself and be comfortable, to stay away from the crowd, and to be a man. Comparing Ben to his father who passed away in 2010, he said that while his dad would tell him, "Do it this way" without reason or explanation, Ben has taught him "what's good for you as a human being and as a man." His father focused on survival, but Ben focused on good living. Escabar trusted Ben enough to share problems and concerns. In turn, when someone stole something from Ben's bunk, Escabar used his resources to find the thief and return the stolen item. He said that it was his respect for Ben that made him look for the item.

Escabar also sought help with his new positive goals from the school community and Be the Change. “When you get a chance to be around people like that, you try to pick up what you can pick up,” he added. The teacher who gained his respect was Ms. Houston; she reminded him of his grandmother, but well-educated. He smiled, “She’s well-educated, well-grounded, she’s just a good person. Just a genuinely good person. I ain’t ever met nobody like that in my life.” He noted that she encouraged accomplishment, helped guys to look at the whole picture, and made him feel optimistic about things. He showed her his papers and grades from his college courses.

Ben’s concern about who Escabar was attracting stemmed from a long-standing Be the Change debate—how do we deal with the “young’uns” (the young, wild, foolish guys in prison)? Escabar felt that he helped to connect some of the more serious Be the Change members with these guys. Because they believed the young’uns are disrespectful, Ben, Umoja, and Tyshawn tended to avoid dealing with them altogether. Escabar took time with them, however. “I notice that in the building, that’s how they do, they work through me to get to the young’uns.” He could relate to the young guys because he also does not like people telling him what to do. “You can put something out there and suggest doing something and then give me my own choice to do whatever you suggested. But you’re not going to tell me what to do.” He asked them, “Do you think that’s right?” but never told them what do to. He believed that is why they want to talk to him. Several of the Be the Change members did not approve of his relationships with the young guys and feared the draw of Escabar’s past.

Summary

The analytic narratives of six men called attention to the diversity of the men's educational experiences in and out of prison. However, the complex stories and experiences of Ben, Blink, Tyshawn, Umoja, Cally and Escabar also demonstrated the commonalities they share. Perspectives about learning and relationships were frequently described and discussed in the men's stories.

Although none of the men strongly identified as a "great student" in middle school or high school, all of the men spoke about their love of learning. They spoke about their decisions to use their time in prison productively. Reading, substantive conversations, spiritual study, GED, college, and vocational education, as well as future planning were discussed as pursuits that brought the men joy and hope. Learning and reading contributed to richer discussions in their Be the Change meetings and their college classrooms. Identifying as a person who likes to learn unnerved some of the men, including Escabar, who joked about being a nerd.

In addition, many of the men's stories involved relationships built in their classes and Be the Change meetings. Relationships with Be the Change members were described as "sacred." In this way, the prison school represented a caring context where the men could learn. Experiences of learning in the prison school were the opposite of some of the men's experiences of learning communities in k-12 schools. Each man told stories about times when a teacher, the principal, or a peer acted in a caring, concerned way at the prison school.

CHAPTER 5

IDENTITY AND THE AGENCY CONTINUUM

The narratives in Chapter 4 created individual snapshots of the men's experiences of identity, education, and change. Their stories provided insight into how each man made sense of his journey from childhood to prison to college. The narratives also revealed how each man thought of himself and how he interpreted life events—relationships, struggles, failures, crossroads, opportunities, and successes. In Chapter 5, a collective look is taken at the men's narratives and shared experiences, and they are analyzed through the lens of a continuum of stages, deemed the Agency Continuum.

The men's stories illustrate patterns in how their identities changed as a result of various educational experiences. After examining the similarities of their experiences, identity changes were grouped in stages along a continuum of individual agency. Agency, the ability of a person to make decisions, act on one's will, and to name oneself, is fitting concept for grouping the men's changes in academic identities; agency is also of particular interest because the men are incarcerated and their choices are restricted. Representing a nexus of labeling theory, social identity theory, narrative theories, and self-efficacy theory, the Agency Continuum was created as an analytic framework to understand how participants in the study developed new academic identities as they moved toward increased active agency. This chapter describes and analyzes the men's stories that were presented in Chapter 4 through the emerging framework of the Agency Continuum.

The framework depicts processes in identity development; in particular, it places the men's common experiences in stages as they took on the identity of "college student" in prison. Schools, even prison schools, are sites of identity negotiation (Wexler, 1993). Through the men's experiences of deciding to enroll in college classes and being college students, there is a transformation in their beliefs about themselves—especially regarding their academic and personal expectations and capabilities. The participants used college as a way to claim, test, assert, and establish a new identity. Many of them experienced a transformation process in which they shifted from being passively labeled men to being active, self-naming agents (see Table 1).

Table 1

Agency Continuum Stages and Descriptions

Outside Recognition of Potential	**Trying on Identity**	**Affirming/ Building Confidence**	**Discerning Through Self-Reflection**	**Claiming Identity**
Positive label is given from an external authority figure; being "seen" as having potential	Open to a new identity; it is "tried on" with cautious detachment; old, negative labels are questioned	Experiencing small successes that affirm positive identity	Reflecting on past labels and social context, asserting authority to decide which labels apply to self and which do not	Claiming identity, giving own labels, making choices that align with positive identity

In the observations of the men, an outside positive influence often sparked an initial change in the men's beliefs about their own capabilities as well as the ways in

which they self-identified. On the agency continuum, the men moved from a passive state (being recognized by a person of authority as "having potential") toward an active state (claiming and asserting an academic identity). College education gave the men the credo or authority with which they discerned who they are. Identity, then, is an active process, something that must be thought out, worked on, and maintained. This chapter describes stages to explain how the men experienced changes in their beliefs about themselves and the experiences and relationships that were involved.

Stage 1: Outside Recognition of Potential

In Chapter 4, Blink, Tyshawn, Umoja, and Escabar discussed negative experiences in middle and high school. Blink and Escabar were often in trouble; Blink, Tyshawn, and Umoja described being labeled with learning disabilities or lack of motivation. Two of the men barely graduated from high school, and two did not graduate. None of the four identified as "good students," nor did they believe they would be college students in the future. Negative experiences from their pasts affected their present beliefs about continuing school. And yet, all four men enrolled in college in prison, and all four men hold college GPAs of 3.2 or better. From the perspective of identity and education, what changed?

In this section, the "Outside Recognition of Potential" stage is defined as an external authority figure giving a positive label to a participant. The participant then feels that he has been seen as having potential. The men's experiences of being at a crossroads are described. Moments of recognition and validation from an outside authority figure are presented and analyzed. Finally, examples from the men's narratives are contextualized within the literature, with particular attention to labeling theory and self-efficacy theory.

Crossroads

When most of the men went to prison, they described those initial weeks and months as a time of self-reflection. They said they often recalled situations and life lessons to which they should have "taken heed." In many ways, prison was the last straw; it represented a moment of self-reckoning. Once in prison, several men spoke about signs that they ignored and people who tried to alert them and steer them in a better direction. Embedded too deep in the street life, they could not hear those warnings at the time. In one powerful example, Umoja's mother stood in an open-air drug market with him and told him that if he wanted to die selling drugs that she would die alongside him. While that bold act made an impression on him, it did not cause him to quit the street life or stop selling drugs. The shock of incarceration presented a crossroads experience when the men looked back on their lives, tried to make sense of being incarcerated, and also began to look ahead. Most of the men said that they were fed up with their former lives on the streets, and all the men spoke about being ready for a change. Prison was a wake-up call alerting them that it was time to reassess their lives. Openness to change preceded the outside recognition of potential.

Most of the men gave examples of "crossroads" moments when a teacher, a principal, or a respected peer claimed to see potential in them and encouraged them to make positive changes. Blink and Escabar's GED teachers encouraged them to go to college. Blink's teacher called him "too smart not to be in college." Tyshawn and Umoja were challenged by another incarcerated college student to enroll in college. Ben felt recognized by administrators and was given important leadership positions in several prisons, including a position in which he assisted the principal at Commonwealth

Correctional Center. In a time of academic struggle, Cally's stories revealed how he felt seen as an important and valued member of the school's community. The men share the experience of feeling like they were *really seen* by another. Another person, often a person in an authority role, recognized them as having academic or personal potential. Being recognized gave the men the confidence to take a risk and try something unknown, like college.

Recognition Moments

Blink's first academic success, passing the GED, came while he was incarcerated, but it did not prompt him to enroll in college. After he passed the GED, he took a job working in the prison's kitchen. In his mind, college was still not a possibility for him. In Blink's story, being recognized or discovered is at the root of his identity transition. He did not actively pursue the job as a teacher's aide, nor did he actively pursue the possibility of college. In both examples, he described the teacher "seeing something in him" and encouraging him to try academics again. This example demonstrates a nuance of the "looking-glass concept" which suggests, "a stigmatized individual will come to view himself based upon what he believes other people think he is" (Maruna et al., 2009, p. 33). While Maruna (2009) used the "looking-glass concept" to illustrate reinforcement of negative labels, Blink's teacher's beliefs about his academic promise led him to begin to see himself in that light. Blink's academic gifts were visible to another, and he also felt visible.

Unlike Blink, Cally had already established that he could get in college. While he knew he had academic potential, he struggled with staying in college and graduating. His

final class—a stressful 8-week Algebra course—threatened to derail his college graduation. Upset and emotional, Cally turned to the prison school's principal for help. Hearing his words, "I don't think I'm going to make it!" the principal acted—opening the school during the weekends for tutoring and finding two strong math students who had graduated to help him. She saw his promise and told him, "You are not going to fail! You are going to pass!" Cally's story exemplifies a different experience of "recognition." It was through his principal and peers' displays of care that Cally felt recognized; their actions communicated to him that he was worth the extra trouble. In a time of stress and doubt, Cally was recognized as a member of the academic community where he belonged and was supported. Tajfel (1978) stated that there is "value and emotional significance attached to [group] membership" and that membership affects how an individual behaves (p. 63). Cally repeated several times that it moved him that others would "inconvenience themselves" to help him. Acquiring a social identity, as well as experiencing care and belonging were transformative experiences. In Stret's (2006) words, identifying with the college community "activate[d] a sense of belonging and self-worth" (p. 89) for Cally.

Umoja's narratives revealed two significant experiences of feeling recognized. The first came from Kendall, a respected incarcerated friend who had recently graduated from the prison's college program. Kendall sat Umoja down and simply said, "Man, look—you need to be in college." Having already made changes in his life, Kendall wanted to help Umoja to do the same. Kendall said, "College is going to give you a chance" and later added, "You said you want to make a change. Well, this is a part of your change!" Kendall's words of encouragement to Umoja demonstrated that he

believed Umoja had potential to make significant changes and that he saw Umoja's willingness to make changes. Bandura (1977) discussed how feelings of self-efficacy can increase with verbal persuasion. Kendall's urging Umoja to start college demonstrated his belief that higher education is critical to personal change. Because he was fed up with his past life, Umoja was open to hearing Kendall's advice. In this story, recognition took the form of a peer seeing the desire to change in another and encouraging college as a chance at a new life and a pathway to change.

Another recognition occurred in an awkward exchange between Umoja and the professor of his first college course. Umoja recalled that he and his professor were walking out of the class and she stopped, looked into his eyes, and asked him questions about his crime. Then she told him that he did not look like a bad person. While Umoja's professor made judgments about many of her students, believing them to be "bad people," she saw Umoja differently and she told him so. Coming from an outsider and an authority figure, Umoja felt validated that she saw goodness in him, and later, they developed a good relationship in the class. This recognition speaks to a kind of moral seeing. Recognizing "good" in Umoja made him feel better as a human being. That validation increased Umoja's sense of self-efficacy; his teacher's words are examples of verbal persuasion from authority figures (Bandura, 1977).

Like Umoja, Tyshawn was also mentored by Kendall. He had already earned his high school diploma, but had not considered college an option. Tyshawn was not thinking about his future, nor did he imagine himself in college. When Kendall, a successful, current college student and "big brother" figure told Tyshawn he should take college classes, Tyshawn started thinking differently about himself. Tyshawn said of starting

college, “Somebody had to challenge me to do it.” Tyshawn’s story illustrates recognition and encouragement from a peer. Respected peers, like Kendall, who have made life changes and attended college are compelling recognizers, and it helps that they often look like and sound like the men they are influencing. Kendall’s changes served as vicarious experiences for Tyshawn, and they not only helped him to imagine himself as a college student, but also increased his own feelings of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). Kendall and Tyshawn were from similar backgrounds, grew up in the same neighborhood of Richmond, and had both gotten caught up in the street life. Kendall’s success in college made it easier for Tyshawn to imagine himself enrolled and successful in college.

Ben’s many leadership positions in prison indicated that his potential was seen regularly by authority figures. Speaking about the significance of being asked to take on positions with responsibilities, he said, “Having people advocate for me and believe in me, it means that I’ve come a long way.” As he told this story, his eyes welled up with tears and his voice broke. For Ben, another person believing in his potential during a dark personal time touched a raw place. He added, “I just didn’t give up on myself when I could have or probably should have.” Ben said that he has gotten more support in prison than when he was in society. The recognition, which he called a “blessing,” came because he started to take work and his responsibilities seriously. Experiencing recognition meant that others could see Ben’s potential and gifts, and that felt good. Ben’s work experiences in the prison school also embodied the idea of increased self-efficacy through mastery experiences, and his advocates’ words of encouragement illustrate the power of verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1977).

Escabar had two distinct stories of others recognizing his potential—one from a peer and the other from his teacher. He spoke of his friend, Tone-Bone, who became a counselor at a jail where Escabar was held. Tone-Bone was Escabar's friend from the streets, but he had turned his life around. Tone-Bone reached out to Escabar and got him involved in the jail's therapeutic community program. Escabar recalled his influence, "So when he did good, he wanted me to do good, too." This was the first time he had seen a street friend on the right path, and it surprised him that Tone-Bone thought he could do the same.

Like Blink, Escabar was also encouraged by his GED teacher to start college. When he was failing college math, he chose to bring Ms. Houston his grades. Unhappy, she told him to stop messing around and do his work, adding "This ain't gonna cut it!" As he related the story of getting fussed at, he grinned. This is an unusual story of recognition of potential. His smile indicated that he felt seen, and that his favorite teacher saw his academic promise and expected more. Her understanding of his academic abilities and his grades did not match. Had he not been capable of doing the work, she would not have fussed at him like that; she attributed his blocked potential to his goofing off. Ms. Houston's rant was her way of reminding him that she had seen his potential and that he was not living up to it. Because she had higher expectations for him, that motivated him to work harder. Escabar's examples demonstrated two sources of self-efficacy: vicarious experiences in how he witnessed Tone-Bone's life changes, as well as verbal persuasion in how Ms. Houston reminded him of his potential (Bandura, 1977).

Summary

Within the context of prison where all incarcerated people hold negative labels, the prison school was a site where the men experienced positive acknowledgement. When the men were first incarcerated and at a low, having an experience where a person in authority or a respected peer "saw" your personal or academic promise was validating. The men's narratives provided personally meaningful examples of what it meant to feel visible as a human being and what it felt like to be positively acknowledged in school.

Incarcerated, marginalized, and disenfranchised, the men began their prison school experiences with feelings of low self-efficacy. Adding to Becker's (1963) labeling theory and Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy, the impact of an outsider's positive recognition demonstrates their lack of power to name positive attributes within themselves. The "looking-glass concept" adds to the understanding of how the men's self-concept was positively shaped by other people's perceptions of who they are. It is significant that in all of the men's stories, they were "seen" positively by someone else before or as they committed to change; these situations demonstrate a fundamental passivity. In this sense, the men are still confined to a position determined by others, although it is a more positively valued one. Their experiences of being recognized for a positive attribute countered the negative labels that they bore as incarcerated men. Another's beliefs about the students' academic promise or leadership skills led the men to see or re-imagine themselves in that way.

Stage 2: Trying on a New Academic Identity

The second stage, Trying on a New Academic Identity, involves the participants experimenting with what it means to be college students. First, the context in which the

new, positive identity is practiced is described. Next, social identity theory and self-efficacy theory is briefly contextualized within the prison school and men's experiences. Then a description of trying on a new identity is given. Examples and analysis are then presented and situated within the literature. Particular attention is paid to social identity theory and self-efficacy theory.

Context

It is significant to call attention to the social and physical context of where new, academic identities are being "tried on." Generally speaking, prison can be an identity-negating place. In many respects, the ways incarcerated people once defined themselves through everyday choices are no longer options in prison. The six men share an institutional identity—being an inmate. As Cally said, the men have numbers, they are counted five times a day "like cattle," and they do not set their own schedules and agendas. They eat when they are told, and they have little choice in terms of what they eat. The men have prison uniforms. In a prison that houses approximately 1,200 men, they sleep in a large cinderblock room with 96 men; there are 48 metal framed bunk beds lined up in 6 rows. Prison officers watch them day and night.

While the environment is one of control and order and presents little opportunity for everyday choices, incarcerated persons do make choices of a different kind. Even within prison, they choose social groups and friends, make decisions about education, choose to read certain books and have conversations, and choose religious communities and involvement. In the absence of defining oneself by one's dress or address,

incarcerated persons retain the ability to make moral decisions about their actions, words, and beliefs that are self-defining.

Theoretical Application

Social identity theory posits that a person is a member of many social groups and that membership contributes "positively or negatively to the image that he has of himself" (Tajfel, 1978, p. 61). Because incarcerated men are socially categorized as inmates, the men are not an in group. Where positively identifying with a group "activates a sense of belonging and self-worth" (Strets, 2006, p. 89), the incarcerated men were placed in a social group that society effectively defines itself against. Their place in society is indicated by their controlled environment and general disempowerment.

Belonging to a social group orients individuals to their place in society (Tajfel, 1978). For the Be the Change men, their default social group was given to them and it was negative. The men's choices of other social groups with whom they identify were limited. The prison school, however, offered alternative social groups the men could join. Displaying increased agency, the men could choose to enroll in college classes. As Strets (2006) explains, when people join a social group, they "categorize themselves as like some people and different from others." Social identities provide people with a feeling of what they have in common with others and what they do not share (Luttrell, 1997). By joining college students, the men reoriented their place in society (Tajfel, 1978), and they differentiated themselves from other incarcerated men.

Experiences of belonging in the social group, college student, are also related to feelings of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy reflects a person's belief concerning his ability to

perform actions that will result in certain outcomes (Bandura, 1977). It is not surprising that as a new college student, the men's feelings of self-efficacy were often low. His sense of self-efficacy would determine if he felt he possessed the skills and competencies to bring about the outcome (Bandura, 1977). Self-efficacy can be raised from internal and external sources. These include a person's gaining confidence through mastery experiences, through verbal persuasion or encouragement from a respected peer or professor, as well as through vicarious experiences. When a man sees another peer succeed in college, the men's feelings of self-efficacy are raised and the feeling that they can probably also do well is reinforced.

Trying on the New Identity

In the context of prison, a pattern emerged in which the men try on new academic identities. "Trying on" meant that they took on new responsibilities or new jobs, they joined new social groups, or they took risks with academic assignments. They chose to end old relationships or stop acting in ways that did not fit with the new identity. During this stage, the men did not wholeheartedly embrace the new identities. Rather, they experimented with new roles, sometimes with cautious detachment. Still figuring out what it means to adopt a new label or identity, they were not fully invested in the label. While testing out their new, positive identities in an effort to determine if they fit, they also questioned old, competing labels and sought to understand who they were.

Blink contrasted his negative experiences in elementary, middle, and high schools with his positive experiences in college. Entering prison and beginning study at the prison school was a transitional time in Blink's identity, in which there were two sets of

conflicting labels—the negative academic labels from his childhood and the positive academic labels from the prison school. Both of these sets of labels came from outside of Blink, as supported by Becker's (1963) labeling theory.

Blink was offered a job as a teacher's aide for a GED preparation class. When Ms. Houston offered him the job, Blink responded, "Sure, what the heck!" Having never held an academic position, this was a completely different role for him, and accepting this job was a risk. This response indicates his guardedness. Trying on a new identity with detachment was a way to begin identity changes without a threat to one's pride. His success as a teacher's aide then reinforced that the "too smart not to be in college" label fit him, and he enrolled in college.

In the moments of his teacher's positive recognition, Blink questioned the previous, negative labels and images of himself. In comments about his never imagining he would graduate, there is evidence that he had internalized the old labels. Later, those old labels were called into question by another school authority figure—the teacher at the prison school. Blink's past labels of being "different" and "learning disabled" did not fit with her comment that he was "too smart not to be in college." Both cannot be true. Being seen by his teacher meant that Blink would try on being a GED teacher's aide and, later, college student. In this example, Luttrell's (1997) understanding of the fluidity of identity is displayed. The self, she argued, is being continuously formed and reformed by current and past events and conditions. As Blink's story indicated, his competing past and current experiences in school complicated his self-concept.

Because Umoja and Tyshawn were treated differently as children in school, going to college in prison was healing for them because old, negative labels like being "learning

disabled" or "not intelligent" or "unmotivated" were put to the test and proven false. In college classes, the men were challenged and held to the same standards as the other students. Umoja tested out his belonging in college by choosing to take what he thought would be his hardest course first—English. He described this decision as intentional, because if he was not going to excel, he wanted to know up front. Had his experience in college been negative or the old labels continued with college professors, most likely Umoja would not have continued. Because identity is a continuous process where the self is constantly being constructed and influenced (Abrams & Hogg, 1990), Umoja sought the evaluations of his professor to gauge his belonging as a college student.

For Tyshawn, trying on his new identity as a college student meant pushing himself to think beyond the classroom. He looked to the future and imagined how he would use the information and concepts in his college classes. While sitting in class, Tyshawn had what he called "intellectual breakthroughs." These were moments where his life would "fast-forward to the future" and he would see himself years from now in a suit and working in real estate. His trying on a college student identity did not solely affect his view of himself in the present; it also positively impacted his concept of where he will be in the years to come. Although the trying on took place in a future fantasy, it felt real to Tyshawn. He saw this time as preparation, and he believed that college would "pay off." Years from now, he would be able to have intelligent discussions with clients and co-workers because he was learning and practicing that knowledge and those intellectual social skills in his college classes.

Trying on a new identity was not always a clean, neat process for the men. After starting college, Escabar continued to hang around with "young'uns" and his dealing with

the young, wild group caused concern among the other Be the Change members. Several members questioned him about his continued involvement with guys who were not interested in change and were still getting into trouble. Escabar told a story about Ben's counsel. Ben took him aside and asked him, "Are you really being who you are?" Ben continued to question Escabar's relationships with the young guys who were not making good use of their time in prison, and he described Escabar as being attracted to "something other than what he is." Ben believed that he was consciously or unconsciously repeating old patterns. Choosing a social group holds "corresponding implications" (Brown & Capozza, 2000, p. ix), which for Escabar potentially meant that he was not fully committed to change.

Escabar reflected on Ben's question and observations for a year, and he asked himself, "Am I still walking around with the same old mask on?" For Escabar, "the mask" represented a false identity that he created for himself—a persona that was violent and domineering. Because he had been putting it on for so many years, he did not even realize that he was still doing so until Ben pointed it out. The ease of old patterns concerned several other members of Be the Change. Because Escabar still strongly identified with the young'uns, they were unsure of his commitment to change and the principles of the group. Escabar's keeping a foot in both the young'uns and Be the Change groups indicated his uncertainty about who he was. His continued relationships with young'uns suggested that he still felt that he belonged to that group. Luttrell's (1997) assertion that people tell stories to confirm commonalities, belonging, and group membership raised the question, Do Escabar's stories indicate that he still felt commonalities and belonging to two very different groups? From the perspective of

identity development, Escabar provided an example of old masks and labels being hard to shake. Because he had a "sense of belonging" (Strets, 2006, p. 89) with the young'uns, there was comfort and stability in sticking with a social group that he knew. Trying on sometimes represented a liminal, or in-between, stage in identity.

Negative labels within prison are a given. Incarcerated people are labeled "bad people," "criminals," "felons," and "offenders." People from the outside have ideas about what kinds of people are incarcerated. Even the participants in this study spoke about their fears and distrust of some incarcerated people in prison. Yet, even in prison, the Be the Change participants use their environment as a site where they tried on new, positive academic identities. Stories from the six participants indicate that change and personal growth happen in the prison context. It is not a uniform or clean-cut process; rather their stories give insight into how men's identities are formed, challenged, maintained, and re-formed in the context of prison.

Stage 3: Building Confidence

The third stage of the Agency Continuum is Building Confidence. In this stage, the men experienced small successes that affirmed their new, positive identity. These successes represent times when the men made positive choices and saw positive results in school, in their relationships, or personally. The men's new identities were strengthened and reinforced with successful experiences.

This section begins with a brief description of the emotions tied to the men's experiences of success. Then examples from the men's narratives of decision-making, defining moments, and confidence building are paired with analysis. Connections with

existing literature, particularly self-efficacy theory, that demonstrates the interplay of theory and data are interwoven.

Emotion and Change

In the interviews and Be the Change discussions, reflecting on their successes or the long journey to their successes sometimes sparked emotional responses. Emotional topics included talking about going back to school, keeping promises to family members, getting a good grade on a test or paper, or graduating with a GED or college degree. Experiences of change, especially positive change, were heartfelt and deeply personal.

In particular, speaking about what their successes meant to their mothers often preceded tears or a break in their voices. Feeling that they had caused their mothers disappointment and shame wounded them. Tears reflected self-pride, a feeling that they did not give up; tears also were an expression of relief, that they were rebuilding and restoring themselves as well as their relationships. Undoubtedly, emotions conveyed that their change was personally meaningful and touched raw, emotional places.

Building Confidence

That Cally had not completed a college degree represented a difference, a lack of belonging to his well-educated family. His college graduation in May 2010 was a demonstration of both his personal change and the realignment of his choices with those of his family (see Strets, 2006). As it acknowledged and restored his positive, personal changes, it also served as a moment of acceptance and belonging. The graduation ceremony was a ritual that allowed his family to see the changes he made and validate his new academic identity; he was choosing to be like them. He recalled that his mother was "just so proud." Cally's emotional state, his feeling "choked up," showed that this was personally validating and redeeming for him—particularly because he was able to share that proud moment with his family. Like Cally, other Be the Change men spoke passionately or emotionally about their education's meaning to their families. Cally's experiences embody two examples of self-efficacy—mastery experiences and verbal persuasion (Bandura, 1977).

As previously discussed, Blink built his confidence on contested grounds. He held two sets of academic labels that came from authority figures—from childhood, he was a troublemaker with learning disabilities, and from the prison school, he was a smart student who was college material. After being called academically promising in the prison school, Blink acted to take advantage of what he called "blessed opportunities." Authority figures in prison named something in him, attributes in him that he believed to be true, that he then translated into action. He worked hard as a GED teacher's assistant. He said, "I was pretty good at it. I mean, they were coming in and I'd get'em out" meaning that his students quickly passed the GED. It felt good to help others learn. This

is an example of a mastery experience increasing Blink's feeling of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977). His teacher noticed Blink's hard work and success and recommended that he enroll in college. His actions gave meaning and experience to the new academic identities—teacher and college student. The new labels meant that he was seen for the person he believed himself to be becoming. The actions he took confirmed that he agreed with the labels the GED teacher gave him.

As a college student, Blink's academic successes continued to affirm his new identity and build up his confidence. He asserted himself as a college student by making sacrifices. He played less basketball, watched less TV, and studied more. Through this experience he learned that if he studied more, he could make A's. Blink's personal commitment to his college student identity was evident in his choices and actions; that identity was then reinforced by the feedback and evaluations he received from his professors and peers (Bandura, 1977; Luttrell, 1997). Not only did making A's "feel great," but it proved to himself and others that he belonged in college. In this way, Blink used college as a way to assert and establish validity to his new identity.

For Umoja, earning an A on his first essay in his first college class was a signal that he belonged in college. As he tried on his new academic identity, he took English first because it was his weakest subject in high school. Working on that first paper, he was anxious. He had a peer read his paper and give feedback. He "fussed and cussed." When his professor returned the papers and he received an A, it was a relief and a joy. Umoja said, "Getting that A meant everything, man. It meant that I would continue to go to school. It means that I wouldn't give up." Earning an A was an example of a mastery experience that boosted Umoja's feeling of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977).

Personally for Umoja, becoming a college student demonstrated his being on the right path. College classes and discussion provided times where he felt he was able to "step out of the convict mentality." This meant that by affirming the college student identity, he could momentarily set aside being an inmate. Being a college student made his mother proud and helped to heal their relationship. Umoja spoke about being heartsick that he had disappointed his mother by selling drugs and being in prison. By choosing to take college classes each semester, he was able to show his commitment to change.

Taking college classes also displayed Umoja's values. He chose to spend the small amount of money he earned working a prison job on educating himself. Initially, he explained that he was torn between wanting to save his money to buy a car or a place to live when he was released from prison and spending his money on college classes. Choosing the latter was a demonstration that he had set his priorities—that he was investing in himself. This provides an example from social identity theory of what Strets (2006) would call an increased sense of self-worth from belonging to a social group. Wrapped up in college were redefined ideas of who Umoja was. College become Umoja's vehicle to become a man, value knowledge and education, serve his family and others, mentor other incarcerated men, and be an example of success and change for his home community in Baltimore.

Summary

During the Building Confidence stage, the men acted on their new identities. Their experiences of success affirmed that they were tested and true college students.

Their actions and hard work demonstrated their personal investment as well as their belonging to the group. Positive experiences reinforced their belonging and raised their feelings of self-efficacy—experiencing verbal persuasion, mastery experiences, and vicarious experiences. Confidence was built from within and included experiences of working hard on a paper and making a good grade; but it was also affirmed from outside themselves—from teachers, their families, and their peers. Having already tried on "college student," this stage was one of proving themselves growing in their comfort with their academic identity, and moving beyond the awkwardness or unsuredness of being in-between identities. Experiencing change felt good to the men; they felt it and others, like their family members, noticed their changes, too. With increased confidence, self-awareness, and feelings of self-efficacy, the men gained respect and began to feel more established in their identities.

Stage 4: Discernment Through Self-Reflection

In the fourth stage of the Agency Continuum, the men's narratives described a pattern of self-reflection and discernment. In this section, observed patterns of the discernment stage are generally described. The men's processes of rediscovering their authentic selves are then discussed; through these processes, they seek to understand who they really are and what they value. Authentic communities develop from like-minded men who are seeking change. In the process of discerning oneself, the men's evaluation of others helps to define them as "like these" and "not like these" (see Strets, 2006). Examples of discernment and evaluating people are given from the men's stories and contextualized within the prison and their college experiences. These examples are also analyzed, and connections to the existing literature are drawn.

Having been recognized by an authority figure, tried on the new identities, and built up confidence around that new self-concept, the men turned to critically looking at themselves, their social contexts, and the communities to which they belong. Gaining power through this process, the men worked to define who they are, understand what motives them, articulate what they value, thoughtfully evaluate people, and choose their social groups. Some of the men used academic concepts from college classes as tools to make sense of their pasts, their childhoods, and their relationships. During this stage, often the men rejected past labels and asserted their authority to decide which labels apply to themselves and which do not.

Authentic Selves

At the core of identity development and change for many of the Be the Change men was questioning themselves—Who am I? What do I value? Who do I want to be around? What motivates me? What do I want to learn? It was through examining these fundamental questions that they sought what I term their "authentic selves." Through confronting areas of their lives that needed attention, the men peeled back many old labels, masks, and layers that they had held onto for years. They told stories of how they genuinely looked at themselves. For each man, there were different principles and experiences in college and prison life that helped shape their process of personal reflection and discernment.

Many cited examples of how college courses, like Ethics and Psychology, prompted them to better understand themselves and their choices. In this way, college courses sparked self-questioning and exploration, gave the men a broader vocabulary to

apply to their lives, and provided new lenses through which to see themselves and others. For several of the men, college provided the mechanisms for discernment—both in respect to how they viewed themselves and how they evaluated others.

Authentic Community

For the Be the Change men, finding others who were in college and actively pursuing personal growth signified that they had a community. In prison, having a community of like-minded people was particularly important because the members create a circle of accountability and guidance. Identifying with a group "activates a sense of belonging and self-worth" (Strets, 2006, p. 89). The men spoke about having a community in which they could be themselves with relief.

The descriptions of the Be the Change community were enlightening—"sacred," "a brotherhood," and "a fraternity." Within the prison context, this group was particularly significant. In this group, the men could put down their guardedness and their masks and be themselves. It created a sense of freedom; they could enjoy intellectual debates and could pursue college and other interests without judgment or fear. These men's relationships were "sacred" because they acknowledged each other as they actually were. Collectively, they peeled back old masks representing vulnerability and risk, but had a safe place in which to do it. Once known as their authentic selves, the group encouraged the men, as Tyshawn described, "to stay on the positive track." As the group's elder, Ben led by example and demonstrated how to create relationships and build community by helping others.

Membership in Be the Change allowed the men to set themselves apart from others in prison. They were in prison, but even within prison, they sought to define themselves against other incarcerated men by their words, values, and actions. Through their stories, they sharply categorized the people they "dealt with" as well as those who they "did not deal with." This separation was strongest when they spoke about the "young'uns."

The young'uns were described as incarcerated men who are young in age (approximately ages 18-35) and lacked maturity; some were thought to still be involved with illegal activity in prison. Most of the Be the Change members said these men were wild, shortsighted, ignorant, materialistic, immature, careless, thoughtless, likely to return to prison, uninterested in learning from their mistakes, and unwilling to look critically at themselves in the mirror. Interestingly, the Be the Change participants felt they knew them because they used to be like them. Although at times their critique of the young'uns sounded harsh and judgmental, it was similar to how some members spoke about themselves as teenagers and young men. Their criticism focused on differences in actions and beliefs more than differences in age and maturity.

In separating themselves from the "young'uns" group, they were denouncing their own past street lives and poor decisions. They were also differentiating themselves positively against men who represented examples of what they opposed and actively worked against within themselves. Authentic community, then, had as much to do with the men's aligning themselves with like-minded people as it did with defining themselves against those who they did not deal with.

Discernment

In the over 30 years that Ben had been incarcerated, he witnessed how prison changes men. He said, "It seems like we think the worst of ourselves when we're in here." It pained Ben to see men institutionalized, which he defined as negative behaviors that incarcerated men participate in that they would not do outside of prison. His discomfort seeing other incarcerated men openly masturbating while looking at female officers led Ben to turn inward and think about himself. Ben's statements about his fear of institutionalization apply to incarcerated men as a whole, but they are also personal. Although as Becker (1963) described that once a person is labeled a "deviant" in one area of his life, society assumes that he is also deviant in other areas, Ben's being in prison did not mean that he did not have personal ethics. It took Ben's observation of negative institutional behavior to develop a personal philosophy and practice toward the women who work in the prison. That observation helped him to define himself *against* that behavior and those men who acted in that way.

In order to avoid the relaxing of moral beliefs and actions associated with institutionalization, Ben began to imagine that his female blood relatives worked at the prison and considered how he would want the incarcerated men to treat them. He reflected, "I cannot say that it's all right to talk to you some kind of way, but not all right to talk the same way to my biological sister. I realized then—that means it's not all right for no one!" Just because prison behaviors were common does not mean he had to do them. As he described, "There were things in here that I tried to digest that just didn't taste right. I started to tell myself, 'Stop eating it if it don't taste right!'" In this example

of resisting institutionalization, Ben's defining who he was not helped him define who he was.

Blink's college experiences helped him gain tools to better understand himself. These tools held personal significance and application. Blink spoke about his college Ethics class as a place where men could "confront their true selves." While he found this class challenging and beneficial for that reason, he said that some in the class thought it was boring or not worthwhile. He interpreted those comments to mean that those men were unwilling to face themselves or not really do the work. In his psychology class, learning about motivation impacted how he thought of his personal drive; reflecting on changes in his spiritual life, Blink understood that he had become more internally motivated than when he was a teenager. Blink also connected concepts in his Ethics class to his spiritual beliefs and applied them to his understanding of how he acts and who he is.

Discernment for Blink took the form of being able to reflect on his old and new labels and decide which fit. Blink's motivation to succeed in college represented a struggle against the negative labels from his childhood. His stories demonstrated his carrying two conflicting academic identities. Getting A's in college meant he continued to silence his childhood teachers and principals who labeled him as having learning disabilities and being a troublemaker. His good grades, as he put it, "shut their mouths up!" These statements communicated an active struggle—that he *still hears* (in the present tense) their voices in his head. Not only was Blink's story an example of the lasting effects of negative labels on children, it demonstrated how a labeled child can become an adult engaged in a war within and outside of himself to prove himself to be

worthy, intelligent, normal, and deserving. His successful experiences in college and increased self-efficacy gave Blink confidence to discard some old, negative labels.

Evaluating People

As personal, core beliefs were established and value statements were made, the Be the Change men often turned their focus to evaluating and understanding other men who were also incarcerated. In particular, they made judgment statements about "young guys" who were incarcerated and did not "get it." Because they once believed and acted like the "young'uns," they understood why they were making mistakes. Practically, evaluating others also had implications for safety. As Tyshawn pointed out, having a debate with a guy who "does not get it" can be dangerous, as he might interpret disagreement as a challenge or threat. Beyond safety, evaluations of others were used in decisions about mentoring and growing their own Be the Change community.

Tyshawn described himself as a good person, but he recognized that in the years before coming to prison, he had ignored his instincts about the people he hung around. Reflecting on himself and his past, he believed that his community was poisonous; their values were not good and did not match his. Although Tyshawn was conscious of the differences, he questioned how he could say anything because of his own involvement in illegal activities. Tyshawn's process of change centered on reawakening his instincts and using them to evaluate the intentions and actions of others around him. He had instincts, but unfortunately he had set them aside while he was involved in the street life. Awakening his instincts meant being able to watch others and discern their character.

Tyshawn also evaluated people by what motivated them. He spoke of having personally evolved from being motivated by "outer things" (like money, material possessions, and what others think of you) to "inner things" (like respect and joy). While he said that a lot of men in prison "have good in them," he did not believe that they tapped into that good. Worried about impressing guys with tales of their crimes, those men did not work to really change. They were stuck in the old pattern of thinking. Tyshawn used his Ethics class discussion about whistle-blowing to illustrate the struggle of incarcerated college men who hold tight to street principles. Some guys believed that whistle-blowing was wrong because it was the same as snitching. For Tyshawn this issue divided men into guys who "get it" and others who do not. He believed that in order to change, the men had "to put the street way of thinking to bed."

Discernment for Tyshawn involved thinking critically about himself, his old patterns, and the patterns of incarcerated men. He stepped outside of himself to think about how others see everyday ethical decisions. He imagined instances where he was on a job and his reporting a co-worker's drug use could keep others safe. Using meta-analytical skills and empathy, he worked to understand and explain underlying motivations that prevent personal growth and change of incarcerated college students. He also made the imaginative leap to see himself and the other men through the eyes of "everyday civilians" discerning that the street principles did not make sense in their worldviews.

Like Tyshawn, Ben evaluated other men in prison based on their commitment to change; this was evident in how the men approached learning and knowledge as well as how they handled their classes. Ben found two kinds of men in college—men who were

going through the motions of college and were into superficial learning and men who were personally invested in college as a way to change. Ben hoped that the men's valuing the process of learning meant that they would move beyond surface and superficial learning. Disappointed in the men who "just went through the motions" to get an A, he encouraged them to learn from the larger experience of college and see that the process itself was preparation for what's next.

Going through college classes in a deep, committed way represented the opposite of how many of the men went through school as children and teens. Now was their opportunity to really learn. Ben's focus on the process was the antithesis of focusing on the end result—on the A, on the score, or on the material gain. He was driving home that *it mattered how* men achieve, how they learn, how they earn, and how they gain. The process mattered. Underlying his concern was—that people who had committed crimes in the past needed to heal by focusing on the means (the experience, the process) rather than focusing on the ends. That process was a critical part of their change. To Ben, even how one learned was a moral process.

Summary

The fourth stage, Discernment Through Self-Reflection, was described as a pattern where the men critically reflected on themselves—their past labels and social contexts. Standing on the authority of being a "college student" or a "college graduate," the men discerned which old labels applied to them and which they could discard. Starting college also gave the men tools and concepts to apply to themselves and their social contexts. Then doing well in college held a great significance for the men because

it helped them awaken a part of themselves that at times they doubted existed—an authentic self. Once found, success continued to build confidence and affirm a rising sense that "this is who you really are." Evaluating people helped them to decide if men were on similar paths of growth and change. The men defined themselves against some men in prison and like others. Being a member of an authentic community aligned them with people of common values and distanced them from being an inmate.

Stage 5: Claiming Identity

In Stage 5, Claiming Identity involves the men actively embracing the new academic identity. At the end of the agency continuum, this stage represents active agency, meaning that the men have gained comfort in claiming and living out their new academic and personal identities. The men's decisions, actions, and choices are in alignment with their academic identity. The men feel comfortable naming themselves as well as their social groups.

In this section, further description of "claiming identity" is given, relating the men's efforts to align their actions with their beliefs. Examples of the men claiming their identity are paired with analysis. Claiming identity examples are broken into the men naming themselves and the men planting seeds of recognition in others. Emerging claims are situated in the literature, with special attention to social identity theory, self-efficacy, and agency.

Aligning Actions With Beliefs

The men's stories demonstrated a pattern of reflecting on themselves, learning from their mistakes and successes, and then applying that knowledge. Some men took on

the characteristics or actions of a mentor, respected peer, or favorite teacher. The idea was to "pass on" that mentor's knowledge, experience, or lessons. For some, the desire to continue the work of a respected teacher or mentor stemmed from their own personal experience of growth and gratitude for influences and help along the way. They sought to embody that influence by sparking similar growth in others.

The Power to Name

Social identity theory states that humans are active agents who choose who they are and the groups to which they belong (Tajfel, 1978). Contrary to this theory, most of the men in this study lacked the power or influence to name the groups to which they wished to belong. As embodied by Blink's experiences, the agency to choose one's social groups required a certain amount of power or credibility. What power he lacked as a child, he later gained as an adult. His experiences in prison education provided him with an opportunity to re-write his painful school narrative. After being recognized by a teacher, trying on the new academic identity, building confidence as a college student, discerning which labels applied to him, and actively claiming his academic identity of "college student," Blink's process in identity development exemplified this shift in power.

With his education and academic successes came a newfound power to question labels, to reject labels, and to actively create and pursue new ones. College classes brought new perspectives; Blink gained the authority to see himself and his situation with new eyes. Standing on the authority of success in college, Blink was able to determine

whose eyes really saw him and what labels were accurate. Most significantly, he gained the power to name himself.

Tyshawn claimed his identity when he named and clearly defined his social group. In the "Discernment" stage, Tyshawn critically reflected on himself, his instincts, and the people with whom he hung out. Luttrell (1997) discussed how social identities help people discover commonalities and differences with other people. Belonging to a social group that shares one's values confirms and reinforces those values. Tyshawn made several decisions based on his self-reflection. He believed that his survival in prison depended on his finding a small group of positive guys who are on the right path. He said, "Those are your guys. Those are the guys you have to walk with."

From his experience, being around the wrong men had consequences; Tyshawn was angry with himself for ignoring his instincts about people with whom he socialized on the outside. Because he believed being with the wrong people contributed to his being in prison, it was a significant change in his life when he "got off the fence" and made a decision about those with whom he was going to walk. Applying that knowledge, Tyshawn chose to walk with an inner circle of Be the Change participants—mostly Umoja and Ben. The group served as a family on the inside; they supported each other, helped out, challenged and encouraged the others. Tajfel (1978) described this as the "part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." Indeed, being a member of Be the Change held great value and emotional significance.

Tyshawn also made it clear that he did not want to tell the same stories from his past. That, he believed, was a waste of his time and a sign of people who are stuck in broken patterns. “They don’t want to learn anything, and they don’t want to talk about real, present topics,” he said. Luttrell (1997) asserted, “Personal stories are the means by which people fashion their identities” (p. 4). By not wanting to retell stories of his past life as a drug dealer, Tyshawn actively sought to break ties from his old identity and group. He wanted to learn, and he sought out a community that also valued learning. In choosing to have substantive discussions, to tell new, positive stories, and to find a learning community, Tyshawn refashioned his identity.

By choosing to be in college, the Be the Change students associated themselves with a positive label—college student. Adding membership with the Be the Change program gave them another positive label and another social group with value and emotional significance. Choosing to associate with higher education and mentoring groups, the men actively aligned with what they saw as positive and distanced themselves from what they saw as negative.

Sowing Seeds

Using their personal evaluations of others, the Be the Change community made decisions about mentoring and helping other incarcerated men grow and change in prison. Recall that Cally, Tyshawn, and Umoja were challenged by an incarcerated peer to enroll in college. Because they were “seen,” the men spoke about wanting to pass that on through mentoring and helping other incarcerated men to start college. In this way, the men became seed planters, sowing seeds of recognition. After observing and evaluating a

potential college student's integrity, reliability, desire for change, and follow-through over time, the men would discuss the college program with that man if he was seen as a good candidate. Sometimes this was done individually; other times, it was done in pairs or collectively. In this informal process, the invitation and encouragement to enroll stemmed from the recognition of the individual's seriousness and desire to change.

While not formally connected with the college enrollment process, several Be the Change men worked at the school, knew the principal and college instructors, and therefore could help the potential college students navigate the system. Equally important to note was that there were generational transmissions of seed planters. When a potential student became a college student, he also might also participate in the process of informally evaluating, inviting, experience-sharing, and mentoring other potentially promising college students.

It was because Cally received extraordinary help from his peer tutors and the prison school principal, that he wanted to "pay it forward." Like many of the other men, he then took on the characteristics or actions of a mentor, respected peer, or teacher. Later, after working as the masonry teacher's assistant, Cally gained respect for Mr. Smith as a man, a teacher, and a Christian. Watching Mr. Smith, Cally reflected that his teaching helped students learn more than laying brick. He believed Mr. Smith helped his students learn life and coping skills. He appreciated Mr. Smith's nonjudgmental attitude with his students and that he treated each man like a human being. It struck him. He spoke of how his own teaching had evolved to include Mr. Smith's sayings like "Practice doesn't make perfect. Practice makes improvement" and "Let's move forward." He

worked to let his students know that he cared about them. Moved by Mr. Smith's wisdom and compassion, Cally also worked to "treat people like people" and help others.

Umoja also identified as a mentor or an agent of change in prison. Prison is a tough place to mentor. Umoja's decision to give out an anti-gang article in his dormitory was an example of the possible risks and rewards. He could be jumped or he could help turn a life around. At his core, he believed, "If I'm living it and speaking it, it's going to touch somebody, and somebody's going to change." His friend, Kendall, reached out to him and encouraged him to start college and make some important life changes. Continuing Kendall's influence, Umoja decided to mentor and encourage others. In some ways, prison will be training for Umoja. The resistance to change he has faced from others in prison will be comparable to what he will face on the street as a community activist. His "pay-off," he stated, will be seeing other people succeed.

Influenced by Islam, Ben believed that humans are created to worship God, and the human debt is personal and community responsibility. For Ben this meant making a positive impact wherever he was, even prison Ben also spoke of incarcerated persons' views about their influence and responsibilities in prison. As a part of institutionalization, it bothered him that men believed they were no longer responsible for anything in prison. Ben spoke passionately about his jobs in prison and how he believed that he has helped others. Ben commented that he would seek to make a difference no matter where he was. As an assistant to the principal, his work in the prison school illustrated that desire. He chose to work there because he said that the school was one of the few places in prison that you really have people's attention, and he believed that education made him a "better human being." In that job, he encouraged and mentored incarcerated students both in

adult education and the college program. Essentially, through his work in education, a process that has made him a "better human being," he was personally combating institutionalization.

Summary

Within the context of prison, the Be the Change students took risks and tried on the identity of "college student." As the men moved through the five stages of the Agency Continuum, they perceived themselves differently. As represented in the continuum, they became increasingly agentive. Before they started college, the men's stories of recognition demonstrated passivity about how they perceived themselves. Whether a negative identity like "troublemaker" or a positive identity like "college student," those identity determinations were made by others. After their potential was named by an outsider, in the second stage, the men tried on the new identity. Because they were unsure and uncomfortable with the new identities, both stages one and two were tentative and treated with caution.

Experiencing successes that affirmed their new identity, the men built their confidence. Those successes also gave them a sense of belonging. With increased confidence, the men gained knowledge, credibility, and power, which they used to critically think about themselves and their community. The fourth stage, discernment, was a turning point because it represented moments when the men began to feel more established in their identity and began to make decisions that reflected that comfort. Discernment was also a stage of application where they took knowledge from their college classes and utilized it to make sense of themselves and their contexts. In the final

stage, claiming, the men acted and made choices that aligned with their identity. Most significant was the men's embodiment of the work of their mentors. Because their mentors had recognized and positively shaped them, they sought to do the same for others in prison. In this final and increasingly agentive stage, the men's choices, actions, and beliefs worked in alignment with their new identity.

Limitations and Cautions

The Agency Continuum is proposed as a hypothetical heuristic to understand the identity processes that the men go through in prison. This continuum is proposed alongside a consciousness about identity and how identity is situated and contextualized in place and time. The men did not move through the Agency Continuum in the same way or at the same pace. Rather, the men were living in a situation, performing in a specific context at a specific time.

In creating and using the Agency Continuum as an interpretative tool for analysis of narratives, there are reservations. Of course, there is danger involved in utilizing stages, categories, and labels, and there is unfortunate irony in critiquing how incarcerated men are oppressed with labels and then further labeling the men as "in a stage." To be clear, the Agency Continuum is not intended as a way to categorize and label the men. These stages and the process are not rigid, nor are they meant to be yet another constrictive box. The description of the process is an interpretation of how identity change happens. Certainly, not all of the data collected neatly fit into the analytic framework of the Agency Continuum. Escabar, for example, was represented in the first two stages, but not in the last three. His experiences did not fit beyond the first two

stages. The Agency Continuum makes sense as a guide if partnered with an understanding of identity as situated and contextualized. The framework would not hold the same rich meaning without also delving into the context of the prison, the prison school, the Be the Change community dynamics, and the personal relationships of the men.

Person, Community, Care, and Acceptance

The Be the Change students gained personal ownership of their education, and the experience of college was personally beneficial. By making their college education personally transformative and owned, the Be the Change students resisted and distanced themselves from the larger prison system. The recognition, the experiences in the classes, the personal relationships developed with professors, peers, and the principal, the effect on their families, the pride and healing of graduation, their personal growth and emotional learning—all centered on *the man, on his process of becoming himself*.

The community was involved in each individual's struggle with his changing identity and self-perception. Other actors played key supporting roles in recognizing, affirming, supporting, reminding, and protecting a man's identity. This was particularly true of the Be the Change members, the principal, and the teachers at the prison school. Caring for others allowed them to "care for" themselves in some sense. The mentoring activities also involved gaining knowledge and appreciation of what they could give back to the community and thereby they further engaged in self-validation.

Throughout the participants' collective stories, there is evidence that attending college in prison creates space and opportunities for critical thinking, self-reflection,

choice, and change. The meaning of college education to incarcerated persons, in particular the Be the Change students, is self-application and action. Their interpretation of their educational experience in the prison school and in college is positive, and they speak of their experiences in education as personally transformative. Education has real-life application and meaning for the men.

Through this process, the Be the Change men discover what it means to be seen by another as having potential and being worthy. Empowered by that experience, they could see themselves and others more clearly. In turn, their new vision helps them identify others as worthy. These men's aspiration for belonging in society is what drives their pursuit of the new identity, college student. The simplest of desires, wanting to have substantive conversations, displays a hunger for basic human connection and belonging. They are motivated to learn because they want to be able to have conversations outside of prison. The men want to be understood and accepted by general society.

CHAPTER 6

BECOMING MYSELF: IDENTITY, CHANGE, AND ACTION

This narrative ethnographic research offered the stories of six incarcerated men to answer the overarching research question: How do self-perceptions change as a result of participation in college education in prison? As indicated by the research question, the narratives and analysis focused on the individuals, their lives, their stories, and the ways they viewed themselves and their education. The heuristic, the Agency Continuum, is an analytic tool that also focused on the individual's journey. The research centered on each man and the meaningful or painful moments that have shaped and defined him.

This chapter centers on theoretical implications of this study. I build on the question, what do the narratives of incarcerated college students teach us about identity? In qualitative work, generated concepts can be used to see the larger reality anew. In this chapter, the narratives are collectively examined to present broad understandings of identity—how it changes, how we discuss identity change, how education relates to how we change, and why identity matters in prison.

Beginning with narrative, this chapter presents observed patterns of storytelling. I contend that narratives reflect a person's evolving sense of himself. Next, the theory of possible selves adds to the understanding of how a person's self-concept changes. I develop the theory of embodied identity from the Be the Change men's narratives to refocus attention to identity as performed through one's actions. Then, I offer reflections

on possible criticisms. Finally, ideas for further research and concluding remarks are given.

Although it might be useful to discuss the possible changes to policy and practice, making sweeping policy, practice, and research recommendations based on individuals is a challenge. This is a limited study, and I recognize that the men of Be the Change are not a representative sample of all incarcerated men. In addition, Commonwealth Correctional Center is a unique prison in that its principal has written grants for funding and has sought out and developed innovative programs and partnerships with Virginia Community College. And yet, individuals have much to teach us about the whole.

Theory-Building on Identity and Narrative

Chapters 4 and 5 described and analyzed the Be the Change men's narratives. The stories of the men were presentations of themselves. Although certainly not all of their stories were warm, innocent, or heroic portrayals of themselves, the stories reflected their sense-making of situations, conflicts, and relationships. Being in prison and in college, they actively struggled with the question—who is the "real me"? After Ben confronted Escabar about some questionable actions, Escabar poignantly asked, "Am I still wearing the old masks?"

How do we make sense of the ways in which the men recreate their identities in prison, an institution that supposedly strips people of their identities? In telling stories, two levels of sense-making occur. The man telling the story is using the story as a means to understand situations, events, and relationships and communicate a self-image. The person listening to the story uses it to better understand the storyteller.

There were distinct patterns to the men's stories of change. Each man often utilized contrast to communicate how his stories about himself, his family, his friends, his activities, and his values changed over time. In the past, the men spoke about having beliefs and values, but that their actions did not match them. Their stories reflected this shift. Ben's statement about his new personal philosophy, "If it don't taste right, don't eat it" expressed that sentiment.

Changes in how each man self-identified were communicated through stories of awareness and realization followed by narratives about resulting changes in action. First, they spoke about being aware that their beliefs and actions did not align. Then, they reflected on being more intentional about their decision-making. Third, they acted in alignment with their beliefs. Blink became aware that his study habits were not enough, so he decreased his time playing basketball and watching TV and increased his study time. Ben realized that institutional behavior was not for him, so he made an effort to remind himself to treat female prison officers like biological sisters. Tyshawn realized that hanging around the wrong people meant that everyone ignored their moral instincts, so he made changes to his circle of friends. The stories shared a man's moment of realization, and then a lesson he learned. There was an action that followed—a change in his choice of friends, a shift in how he spends his time. The changes that were made concern how he self-identified and what he valued. Transitional, incremental change was reflected in these stories. Through the stories, listeners gain understanding about how a man saw himself evolving.

Possible Selves and Education

Nurius (1991) described a theory of possible selves, shedding light on how changes in self-concept occur. The role of the self, she said, is to construct, maintain, and plan representations of the self. There are many possible selves that one creates in one's mind. She explained,

> Self-conceptions also carry both positive and negative beliefs about what could come to pass in the future and about what is possible. These possible selves are thus the future-oriented components of the self-concept; they personalize and give enduring cognitive form to one's goals, motives, and hopes and fears for the future. (Nurius, 1991, p. 242)

Stories matter, not because we can certify their truth, but because they communicate the *evolving nature of one's self-identifies*.

Practically, in a setting like prison, how one self-identifies is communicated in story and action. "Identifies" is a verb, allowing for process, change, and contrast. Reflection on the old mask is expressed in narratives about how one used to be, what one used to be involved in and specific body language—lowered eyes, shaking head, nervous laughter, sarcastic statements with accompanying facial gestures. The epiphanic moment is expressed in self-reflective questions like the one Tyshawn posed, "How long did I think I would get away with selling drugs? I don't even think I thought about it."

For these men, prison was a shock and a wake-up call. It was through telling stories that they make sense of what happened in their pasts and where they are headed. Nurius (1991) described this moment, "When individuals strive to realize a desired future or to avoid or resist an undesired future, it is likely they have acquired or fashioned a vision of the new or changed self" (p. 243). As the men came to terms with their former, present, and future selves, the prison setting was the place of stories—the complex

context of where they stories were created, told, and reworked. For these men, prison served as more than a setting for personal growth and change; it was a place to start over.

Two significant ideas relate to this study—the self-concept is future-oriented, and the self can create a new or changed self-concept in order to fulfill or resist an outcome. These ideas relate to the way the Be the Change men "tried on" new identities. The men perhaps "perform" an identity, a college student, until it begins to feel natural. An identity is created, then from the internalization of the performance, the man believes that identity is "the real him." Those are the stories where the men described being comfortable enough to remove their masks or act out what they believed. Identity is created from the outside in as performance becomes natural.

Performance can have a negative connotation. To perform can mean that one is acting, being fake, or pretending. In this case, performance means that they are trying on an identity that they are unsure of. When the men spoke of starting to change, they told stories of adjusting to being a college student or mentor. They described self-questioning, frustration, and confusion during this transition. Often outsiders also question the legitimacy of their change. Why are the descriptions of incarcerated college students' positive identity changes often viewed with skepticism? When some of the men "performed" as drug dealers, no one seemed concerned if those were their "true selves" or performances. How is taking on the identity of a college student different?

The theory of possible selves relates to education. Identity is a process, and it changes. From the narratives of the men, education gave them the language and ideas to help create a new vision of themselves. Their possible selves expand with education and the support of an educational community. They viewed education as a way to self-fulfill.

Positive experiences in education fuel a person's beliefs about "what is possible" (Nurius, 1991, p. 242). In the case of the men of Be the Change, academic study and community influenced their goals and hopes for the future. It was through experiences in college that the performance of a possible self became authentic; the performance felt right to the men.

True Self

The men's discussions of their "true selves" were not static. They were evolving and growing. Yet, there were fundamental truths about themselves. None of the men believed he was a bad person. Each man's journey on the Agency Continuum provided insight into his becoming himself. Chodorow (1999) described and contrasted Winnicott's idea of the "true self" and "false self." Being one's "true self" meant he or she has the "the ability to experience oneself as an effective emotional and interpersonal agent" (p. 60). This meant that he or she has the power to act and to manage his own emotions as well as relationships with others. On the other hand, she described,

> By contrast, a person who develops a 'false self' develops reactively. A 'false self' emerges on the pattern of conformity or adaption to or rebellion against the unsatisfactory environment. Its aim is survival in minimum discomfort, not full vigorous, spontaneous creative selfhood. The result is either tame goodness or criminality. (p. 60)

The Be the Change men described a rebirth, a becoming their "true self." With that in mind, what would correctional education look like if one of its goals was guiding men and women toward a path of personal self-fulfillment and agency? What would postsecondary correctional education feel like if it aided men and women from "patterns of conformity or adaption to or rebellion against the unsatisfactory environment" and "survival in minimum discomfort" toward "full, vigorous, spontaneous, creative

selfhood" (p. 60)? How would incarcerated person's experiences of college education in prison change if they were given more opportunities to makes choices, think critically, and lead, teach, and assist with other educational programming?

Embodied Identity

The men's stories present a nuanced understanding of identity. The men's interviews shift the focus from identity as self-concept produced from cognitive-focused beliefs, values and attitudes toward an embodied identity. Embodied identity means that the men's beliefs about who they are develop from "I am what I do" and less from "I am what I think I am." Seeking to align their beliefs and values with their actions, the men are reintegrating what they do with who they are.

Embodied identity puts forth the idea that one's identity is displayed through action. Shedding light on this idea, Tyshawn discussed how he can tell if someone is "good people." The first quality he spoke of was his intuition and instinct, explaining that when he is around a good person, "you can just feel it." Second, he said that he judged people on observation; specifically, he looked at what the person was doing and saying. He added, "Really, your character speaks for itself. You really don't have to do much talking." In some ways, being in prison, they learned that they cannot solely trust men's words. Embodied identity is on display, and it is observable. It is communicated through action; one's actions and general way of being speaks to one's character. Embodied identity assumes one's character is performed.

Before incarceration, the men told stories about how they distanced (or sometimes divorced) their self-concepts from their actions. Tyshawn described that it would be hard to call others out for doing wrong when he was doing some of the same things. He saw

friends doing things that he thought were wrong, and he said that it bothered him. After incarceration, the men questioned if their actions and behaviors fit their beliefs and values. In another example, Ben was frustrated that some of the men taking college classes "didn't get it." If those men were just focused on getting an A and not the process of deeply learning the material, they were continuing a pattern of false appearance. The valuing of how one works, acts, and learns represents a new embodied identity; the learning (an inward process) is more valuable than the A (an outside symbol).

Gecas (1991) theorized about motivation and self-concept. He stated, "By virtue of having a self-concept the individual is motivated to maintain and enhance it, to conceive of it as efficacious and consequential, and to experience it as meaningful and real" (Gecas, 1991, p. 174). He then categorized the self-motives as self-esteem, self-efficacy, and authenticity. In most basic terms, people are motivated to feel good about themselves, they want to make a difference, and they desire to live meaningfully.

The men believed that their positive actions would spread in their community. Their stories expressed their hope that they could affect change. Umoja said, "If I'm living it and speaking it, it's going to touch somebody, and somebody's going to change." His words link with two of Gecas self-motives—Umoja wanted to be himself (authenticity) and to positively affect others and create change (self-efficacy).

When the men spoke about "who they really are," the language was strikingly essentialist in nature. Several described a "true self" hidden behind layers of masks, faux masculinity, or cultural expectations. They thought of real identity, what they described as the "real me," as aligning what they do with what they say and believe. The definition was practical and meaningful; for some, like Ben, it was spiritual.

Important to note, each man's stories expressed his belief that *he had a self*. Pushing back on postmodern theory that there is no self, the men clearly demonstrated that they perceive themselves as having "a self," and that they understood that their selves are changing and evolving, are open to influence, and are revealed by their actions and performance. The men talked of a process where they removed the mask or peeled back layers to reveal their true selves. When that mask was off, they acted differently. The new actions, they felt, better matched their belief, values, and character. The stories also brought to the surface the men's fear that their change would be seen as a façade. They expressed concern that what they called their façade or their mask would lie dormant and resurface in tough situations.

The men tried on a new academic identity. The possible self that resonated was the one that they chose to pursue. As Gecas stated, that was the self-concept that they were motivated to protect and build on. The men focused on action, on embodying the identity of college student. Participation in educational programs, leadership opportunities, their jobs at the prison school, their academic work, their roles as mentors—all of these actions support and enhance the men's embodied identity. As Gecas' theory suggested, these actions and choices reflect their desire to maintain and enhance the new self-concept.

Throughout this study, the application of the terms identity, academic identity, personhood, and self became increasingly fluid. The men's childhood and adolescent stories provided insight into the ways their academic identities had been disparaged. As the men reformed and pieced together an academic sense of self, so grew their sense of personhood. The academic identity and personal identity of each man became

interwoven. Discoveries in college classes impacted and enriched the men's personal lives; ideas, discussions, essays, and books were shared with family members and friends. The men gave many examples of how learning was deeply personal. In addition, they also defined themselves within a community. They chose to be active members of Be the Change, and Be the Change was the context for self-reflection and self-definition. Their selves were informed and influenced by the community. The lines between personal and academic identity blurred within this community.

Reflection on Criticism

This work may be criticized for presenting the men's essentialist understanding of identity and self. A postmodernist perspective on self would be that there is no "self" much less an "authentic self." The focus of the presentation of this research was the men's narratives and experiences.

Perhaps even this study could be viewed as an overly rosy portrayal of the men of Be the Change, the general prison experience, and postsecondary education in prison. I would like to restate and remind the readers of the limits of this study and the constraints of access in a highly secure and structured environment.

Reflecting an overarching question of identity and narrative, I must consider that there are differences in storied selves—how one presents oneself. Underlying these questions about "truth" and identity is another more difficult question—does it matter if the details of men's stories are not really factual? This study would answer that last question with an assured, "No." In this study, the "truth" is not the point. Identity rather is storied; what one believes about oneself is reflected in his stories. What matters, then, is whether their stories reflect the truth about themselves.

This study confronts how we think of identity and if it matters who is telling the story and whether or not we believe them to be credible. We are more likely to believe that someone who looks and sounds like us is credible. When people look and sound different, our assumptions about their credibility change. Perhaps there is a fundamental distrust of incarcerated men being asked to tell stories about themselves, and thus the stigma of their incarceration spills over into other areas. As the researcher, I listened to the stories and presented them. I was not with the men in the dorms, nor in their first grade classrooms, nor in their college classrooms. My approach was to honor their stories and to believe that their stories were true to them.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this research make a compelling case for increased research in prison schools and on education in prison in general. From the stories and experiences of the six Be the Change participants, this study builds momentum for understanding how experiences in college can affect a person's identity. Higher education's impact, role, and responsibility in supporting and presenting different visions of "possible selves" for incarcerated men and women could be significant. Perhaps the larger lessons are for education scholars and prison educators to think about how students in correctional education at all levels could be better served by curriculum and programming that is aware of how student identities change. Of course, more research needs to be done and many questions loom.

In the research process, qualitative work can sometimes be the first step in creating theory through in-depth observation and analysis. This study has identified phenomena that beg for follow-up in different prison education settings. Does this

Agency Continuum hold true for other incarcerated people in different college education programs? If so, may this tool be used by prison staff and faculty to help guide and facilitate transformation? In addition, I am interested in the importance of the Be the Change community and support. Does the Agency Continuum apply to incarcerated college men who are not in support groups like Be the Change? Are the transformations experienced by the men of Be the Change due to the newfound community, the academic experiences, or both? A comparative qualitative study might reveal differences outcomes between college programs that utilize support groups for students and those program that do not.

Another approach would be to develop this line of inquiry utilizing participant action research. Training a team of incarcerated peer interviewers to ask their college classmates questions about experiences in education might help gain different perspectives and empower the students to learn the qualitative research process. They could also learn more about their own educational journey as well as their classmates.

Concerning this study and the men's stories in the years and decades to come, how do the Be the Change men's narratives change when they re-enter society? How do their experiences of college and Be the Change influence their philosophies and processes of re-entry? Do they continue their relationships with the Be the Change community after their release? How does a college degree and participation in Be the Change affect their rate of recidivism and their ability to find employment? What professions do they enter? How were those decisions influenced by their time in prison and in Be the Change?

There are many questions about others' perspectives of college and Be the Change in the prison. How do the teachers perceive the effects of college education on incarcerated men? Do correctional officers witness differences in incarcerated men who take college classes? Are there fewer incidents of violence or conflict in the prison's dormitory that houses college students as compared to the dormitories that house the prison's general population?

In addition, from the perspectives of the families of incarcerated college students, what changes in behaviors or language do they witness? What are the generational effects of an incarcerated parent attending college? How do the children of incarcerated students interpret their parent's choice to pursue college education? Does their parent's college attendance affect their decision to attend college? How so?

Concluding Remarks

Prison, at its best, has the potential to facilitate lasting, meaningful change. It could be a site of change and rehabilitation. Having a deeper understanding of identity processes and identity's relationship with education could reshape and guide correctional education policy and practice. The men's stories are hopeful. Even in the setting of prison, people are seeking self-fulfillment and personal growth. Supportive teachers, fellow students, and a mentoring community help facilitate that change.

Waldrum (2009) stated, "Keeping in mind that most inmates eventually return to our communities, what goes on inside the walls should be of intense interest to us all" (p. 5). Narratives from incarcerated college students provide readers with a window into personal experiences of college in prison. Stories explored identity, self-empowerment,

rehabilitation, and postsecondary education within the context of prison as incarcerated men gained skills and confidence to prepare them for life outside of prison.

On a personal note, I have found working and researching in the prison to be compelling. After almost three years of visits, I continue to attend the Be the Change meetings on a monthly basis. Two things keep me returning to the prison and to the Be the Change group: their personal growth and their desire to help others to change. Prisons are highly controlled and emotionally desolate places. It inspires me that personal change and growth can occur even in forgotten, broken places like prison. TV shows often portray prisons as "training grounds for criminals." While I am sure some of that occurs, the more interesting story is the one that largely goes untold—prisons can also be sites of change and growth. Education, particularly college education, is a bridge and a healing experience for many incarcerated people. Correctional education programs—secondary, college and vocational—offer substantive help, training, and rehabilitation. It is through these programs that people can re-imagine and re-shape their lives.

About 75% of people entering state prisons lack a GED or high school diploma; that means a lot of people have left our K-12 system for a variety of reasons. If incarcerated people have experienced little success in the public school system, they lack the confidence to believe they are "college material." I call the Be the Change members "seed planters" because they plant seeds of potential, hope, and encouragement in prison. When another guy who looks like you and may be from your old neighborhood encourages you to give college a try, the impact is significant, even more so if he is also enrolled in college, earning As and Bs, and making some changes that you have been

considering. I think sometimes we forget the effects of providing real life examples of educational empowerment in prison.

Reflecting on what I have learned from this experience, I have felt inspired being around people coming into their own. College education has helped the men of Be the Change make some powerful connections in their lives and reorder their priorities. Most importantly, the men remind me that *education is contagious*. The men read, debate, discuss, and share articles and ideas. Even while I was sometimes behind on reading for classes and this project, I would scramble to read four or five news articles so I could keep up with them. When we start learning, often we want to know more, and as we know more, we want to utilize and apply that knowledge. Personally, I reflected on the simple question—where is my joy for learning? Going to the prison school made me aware of how I was taking school and learning for granted.

The men's desire to help others and their living belief that "Each one teach one" reinforced my passion for teaching and learning. As Dr. Maya Angelou says, "When we know better, we do better." Many of us in education are fueled by personal relationships, connections, and growth. I have benefited from finding communities of learning, caring mentors, and safe places to be personally and intellectually challenged. Be the Change has certainly become such a circle for me.

EPILOGUE

Walking into a café in Richmond, I greeted Kendall warmly. We embraced for the first time. He was on my side of the razor wire now. I asked about his mom and his family. Having only been out a month, we talked about his adjustment to life on the outside. I smiled as he spoke about his joy going to the grocery store, a place that he said he spent hours. "There are just so many choices now!" he said, showing me a colorful photograph he took with his cell phone of a large display of peppers, zucchini, and greens at Whole Foods. "It's beautiful," I said.

Kendall was a member of Be the Change and was released before I started interviewing. He told me that he spoke with "the guys" [referring to the men of Be the Change] that morning. "You know, Ben's mom passed a couple days ago," he said. His head immediately turned down, his eyes to the floor. "Oh no. I hadn't heard," I responded. I told him that I was going to Commonwealth Correctional Center the next day for a roundtable discussion we organized for Black History Month. "How's Ben? Are they going to allow him to go to New Jersey?" Shaking his head, "Naw, he can't go. It's a long way. I think he's doing okay with it. You know, he and his mom were tight."

Kendall had recently lost his father, just a month before he was released. Because his father was in Virginia and he was a low security risk, he was allowed to attend the funeral. "When I lost my father, Ben was really there for me." He paused and added, "I think in some way that helped him prepare for losing his mom. But you know, we're never ready to lose the people we love. It always hurts."

We looked up to see Raven, another released Be the Change member, entering the café. He was happy to see both of us, Kendall in particular. Out of breath, he apologized for running late, but he had class. After completing an associate degree in prison and taking prerequisite classes for engineering at a community college near his mother's home, Raven was accepted to Virginia Commonwealth University's School of Engineering. He'd been out about a year and a half, and this was his first semester at VCU. He was learning the ropes and telling us about his classes, the gym, new friends, and his work with a student volunteer group. Everything was new and exciting. He was clearly in his element.

I continued to think about Ben and his mom throughout our lunch. So did Kendall and Raven, and we talked about it. His mother was 95. I thought about my grandmother, who also passed away at age 95 about four years ago.

When I saw Ben the next day at our Be the Change meeting, I told him how sorry I was to hear about his mother. He said that he was okay, but he didn't really want to talk about it yet. Minutes later, the meeting started in the large visitation room of the prison. The typical set up of tables and chairs clustered for visits with family and friends had been replaced with seven or eight rows of gray plastic chairs. Be the Change organized a panel discussion of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from a Birmingham City Jail" in honor of Black History Month and opened it up to the men at CCC. About 40 men came to the discussion. The six Be the Change men, the principal, the director of Be the Change, and I sat on the panel facing the group. All of the panelists offered personal reflections and asked questions of the group, but Ben was unusually quiet for most of the 2-hour discussion.

As Tyshawn gave closing remarks and thanked everyone for their participation, Ben asked for the microphone. He said,

> Martin Luther King, Jr. is still at work putting something positive on our minds. Let's think about what he stood for and spoke about. He didn't talk about having slick shoes or a fly ride. He didn't talk about being a misogynist or talking down to women. He didn't talk about making a lot of money. He's talking about us—our minds and our values. He talked about being a man. We need to take his words and apply them. We need to go after education. We need to take something away from this and make some changes. It makes me think about our fathers, our mothers, our grandfathers, our grandmothers…all of those people who came before us. Us being in here, we're spitting in their faces. We are disrespecting their hard work and their legacy by being in this place. You know, my mother worked as a domestic. She just passed away last week and I can't even go to her funeral. I've missed out on so much and now this. I urge you to think about this letter beyond today. Take it and do something with it. Go to school, be respectful of each other, talk to female officers respectfully, put something positive on your mind.

The room was silent. Ben spoke from the heart. Tears rolled down my cheeks. The Be the Change members wiped their watery eyes. The principal and the other men in the audience were also moved.

I thought back on the almost three years that I've gotten to know Ben. In his interview, Ben told me that he felt like he would try to make a difference anywhere he was, and prison was no exception. Those words came back to me as I watched him speak. I remembered his stories about his mother and his tears in his interview when he spoke about disappointing his mother. Even in the heaviness and disappointment of a personal tragedy, even as he struggled with the heavy-hearted separation from his family for more than 30 years and missing his mother's life and death, even in that time and in that mind frame, Ben spoke about critical self-reflection, making positive changes, and learning.

"Take it and do something with it," he said.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR BE THE CHANGE PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS

1) What are some of your earliest memories of school? Tell me what school was like for you when you were growing up.

2) Reflecting on experiences growing up, tell me about being African American male in school.

3) Have your experiences of school changed from high school to adult education? If so, how?

4) Tell me about your decision to start college.

*What influenced your decision to take college classes?

5) Tell me about what it was like when you first started college classes here.

*Who was your instructor?

*How did you feel starting something new?

6) Where are you currently in your program (semester of study)?

*What is your area of study?

*Why did you choose that major?

7) Tell me about some of your best experiences in college.

*How about a moment in college that was not a positive experience?

8) Tell me about your mentor or role model. How has he/she influenced you?

9) What does it mean to you to be a college student?

*Did you view yourself differently before starting college?

10) How does being an African American male impact or influence your experiences here? In prison? In college?

11) Tell me about a time when race was discussed in one of your college classes.

12) What does it mean to be successful?

*Is education important to success? Why or why not?

13) What educational goals have you set for yourself?

14) What are your vocational hopes for life after leaving CCC?

15) Has being involved in college classes changed the way you think about yourself, about others, or about the world?

16) Describe an insight into your life that you have learned in college classes. Describe an experience in a class that that really made a difference for you.

17) What motivates you to go to school?

18) Tell me about the "Be the Change" program. What does being a member of "Be the Change" mean to you?

19) Describe the relationships of the BTC members.

*Do you support each other in college classes? If so, how?

20) Is it important that Be the Change is for African American men only? Why or why not?

21) I understand that one of the tenets of "Be the Change" is giving back to the community. Describe an example of giving back. What did that experience mean for you?

22) How would your experience at CCC be different if you weren't in the "Be the Change" program?

APPENDIX B

OBSERVATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

There are 2.3 million people incarcerated in the U.S. and one out of every 31 American adults is in prison, on probation, or on parole. The high rate of recidivism paints a picture that prison is a revolving door for over half of incarcerated people. While TV shows often portray prisons as training grounds for criminals, the more compelling story is that prisons have the potential to be sites of change and growth. The stories of the Be the Change program participants indicate that education (particularly college education) is a bridge and a healing experience for many incarcerated people.

Utilizing the finding of my research and the Agency Continuum, I discuss the effects of providing educational empowerment in prison. What were impactful components that lead the men to self-fulfillment and agency? What helped these men move along the continuum? What made them progress? From the Be the Change men's personal experiences, there are practices that could positively affect other incarcerated people and potentially the recidivism rate.

Recommendations for prison educators, administrators, and leadership

1) **Recruit and hire caring teachers who are comfortable fostering student development.** Remarkably, every man discussed positive interactions or relationships with a caring teacher and described how those interactions shaped how he thought about himself. Building relationships with a caring teacher representing turning points for the Be the Change men. This is particularly

important because college can be a healing process for incarcerated people to reflect on past, negative labels and experiences in K-12. With the caring teacher in place, correctional education can be healing and contrast past experiences in public school.

2) **Provide incarcerated people with opportunities for meaningful choices.** College experiences increase their choices that could lead to personal growth. The men expressed excitement over choosing research paper topics and the subjects of their end of semester projects. Being able to choose what they study was described as personally meaningful to the men.
3) **Recognition ceremonies, like graduations, are vitally important to incarcerated students' identity development.** Rituals like graduations also allow the students to demonstrate changes and commitments to their families. When their work is recognized by a community ceremony, it also affirms their new sense of self.
4) **Increase mentoring and support group opportunities for incarcerated students.** Groups, like Be the Change, provide students with opportunities to "activate a sense of belonging and self-worth" (Strets, 2006, p. 89). As the men indicated, there is emotional significance of being a college student. Luttrell states that self-formation and social identity are mutually reinforcing processes. That means that having social groups who are interested in and committed to personal change and growth is critical.
5) **Provide leadership opportunities for incarcerated persons.** Leadership within prison schools or the prison help incarcerated men and women gain a sense of

leadership and responsibility. By actively participating in the community, they feel good about things that they do and have some ownership over what they contribute. The CCC prison school's teaching assistant program where incarcerated men are assisting ABE, GED, and college teachers is an example of providing leadership opportunities. The men witnessed other incarcerated men's sense of responsibility and purpose atrophy. While Ben said that men in prison hold the belief that they are no longer responsible for anything, he added that his work at the prison school made him proud. Positions such as teaching assistants, resident advisors, and tutors create an environment where incarcerated students contribute to the community by helping others learn. College educated people who are also incarcerated peers can be strong, influential educational leaders in prison. Change is contagious. With increased leadership opportunities should come increased teacher and professional training for incarcerated people.

Recommendations for K-12 Educators

It is important that K-12 teachers be aware of how much influence labels have on children, and in particular, how negative labels follow them and can lead to a low-sense of self. I would recommend teacher trainings where teachers learn about the power of their words. Perhaps watching incarcerated men tell stories of being in school would help teacher gain a sense of their potential impact on children. They need to know how Blink felt being made to ride a "short bus." They need to hear a grown man reflect on how it felt as a boy to be labeled with a learning disability and then years later find out that he

did not have one. Reading incarcerated people's stories about their experiences in schools or watching a film could be informative and impactful.