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This chapter addresses the challenges facing men of color who return to adult education after incarceration. It frames their experience as a war from a sociopolitical and cultural context, and then explains the support men need to succeed both in and outside the classroom.

Returning to School After Incarceration: Policy, Prisoners, and the Classroom

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There is a war between the rich and the poor, a war between the man and the woman. There is a war between the ones who say there is a war and the ones who say there isn't.

—Leonard Cohen (1974)

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War is hell, and war seems an appropriate metaphor for the depressing state of formerly incarcerated men of color who return to adult education. These men might be called the collateral damage of a war caused by history and failed policies. They continue to be punished by barriers to reentry into society and education. Men who have been incarcerated need strong support to rebuild their lives; if denied education, they will become recidivists, not necessarily by choice, but because they cannot adjust to society.

In preparation for writing this chapter, the authors completed archival research, informally talked with men of color who were navigating the complicated minefield of the American educational system, and also drew on their own experiences. We considered three factors that determine the impact of the drug war on men of color and their access to education: past and current policies of the war on drugs, the effects of these federal policies, and reentry into the classroom experienced by those exiting the detention system and entering and/or returning to school.

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As you reflect on our participants' experiences and thoughts, connect their voices to those of your own students and their struggle to find a classroom climate that is secure and affirming (Schwartz, 2014). Ponder as well your role in the war and in their lives.

Past and Present Policies: A War of Sorts

The war on drug policies continues to depress the economic, social, and educational outcomes of men of color, who are overwhelmingly the victims and targets of these policies (vanden Heuvel, 2012). While the war on drugs is not an actual war, law enforcement tactics produce real casualties: prisoners. Since its inception in 1961, 45 million people have been arrested (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People [NAACP], 2013). The effects of these arrests are lasting; the ripples affect both the arrestee and his community.

U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) defines drug abuse violations as state and/or local offenses relating to the unlawful possession, sale, use, growing, manufacturing, and making of narcotic drugs including opium or cocaine and their derivatives—marijuana being one of the derivatives (BJS, Office of Justice Programs, 2013). Drug laws were designed to disrupt the flow of drugs to the United States; however, more than four fifths of drug law violation arrests are for possession (BJS, Office of Justice Programs, 2013), not for trafficking or manufacturing. Taxpayers spend 70 billion dollars per year on corrections and incarceration, culminating in a price tag of one trillion dollars over the past 40 years.

In addition, this war is fought in certain neighborhoods, particularly neighborhoods of lower socioeconomic status, not in places like Wall Street, where possession of drugs is also reported to be high (Alexander, 2010). It is not surprising, but no less troubling, that a study by the Sentencing Project and NAACP (2013) found that 38% of all people arrested on drug charges are African American. Of the 2.3 million people currently incarcerated, 25% are incarcerated for drug offenses, mainly possession, and in many cases for possession of marijuana (BJS, Office of Justice Programs, 2013).

Historically, presidents have used rhetoric to underscore their political interest or the interest of the constituents they represent, and it was President Nixon who initiated the language of war into the public conversation relating to the “war on drugs.” Ronald Reagan would later add a heightened sense of urgency, declaring illegal drugs a threat to national security. In 1996, President Bill Clinton appointed an actual military general, Barry McCarthy, to the position of director of the Office of National Drug Control Policy (Associated Press, 2010). President Clinton did not select someone who understood the complexities and sensitivities of drug use in this country. Instead he chose a man of war, a choice that reflected both his views on drug control and those of a large swath of the population who elected him. It is tempting but fallacious to see the war on drugs as an earnest attempt to curb the flow and the use of

drugs. Drug control policies indicate that there was and is a war on men of color, particularly in poor urban neighborhoods (Alexander, 2010).

These policies and arrests resulted in the disruption of education for large numbers of men of color and the destabilization of their families. The welfare ban on drug felons is one example. In 1996, President Clinton signed into law the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a program that replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). The new program changed the amount of financial assistance available to formerly incarcerated individuals who have been convicted of drug crimes. The Welfare Reform Act of 1996 (Section 115) states that persons convicted of a state or federal felony offense for using or selling drugs are subject to a lifetime ban on receiving cash assistance and food stamps. No other offenses result in losing benefits (Allard, 2002). These policies seem targeted at those who need the most help.

Today, this ideology seems to remain, but the words have changed. President Obama's 2013 budget proposed cutting services and assistance for formerly incarcerated individuals. The budget did not include federal housing mandates, giving states discretion to decide the level of assistance. In addition, there are federal bans to Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), which affect the formerly incarcerated individual and his family. Such adverse policies extend as well to federal funding for school-related expenses and restrict federal aid to anyone who has been incarcerated, on probation, on parole, or residing in a halfway house (U.S. Department of Education, 2013).

These restrictions encourage recidivism by limiting options and support, effectively forcing young men of color into the underground economy. Consider the experience of a man we will call (pseudonym) Jah:

I ended up doing dirt kuz I ain't have no choice. It was either I hustle 'n feed my kids, or I try to go back to school and hope the system feed me 'n my kids! That ain't no life. So, I made a choice—the wrong choice, I know, but I did what I felt was best. Then I got caught. Now I'm a felon and it's almost impossible to get a legal gig. Now I can't get a job or help.

Jah's experience is common to formerly incarcerated men, particularly those newly released. They are members of communities that have lost generations of capable men to the war on drugs. A father is incarcerated, then his son.

Education is not an option for them. Whole communities of people of color view education as the White man's dream, the same communities that need to participate in the restoration of the formerly incarcerated. These men face social, mental, and economic exile promulgated by policies that stigmatize them after incarceration (Alexander, 2010). Economic and social hardships cause culture shock when an ex-prisoner reenters society and, if he can manage it, reenters school.

Culture Shock: Returning to School

Exiting the prison system is as scary as going in. The world that was left behind has changed; the formerly incarcerated individual has likely failed to change with it, having acclimated to prison culture. Being out of touch is frustrating and confusing. Trauma suffered during incarceration leaves mental and emotional scars that burden an individual returning to General Education Development (GED[®]) or fast-paced college classes. The pressure can make for an outright terrifying experience—culture shock.

The effects of war do not end with incarceration. Zai was incarcerated in his early twenties, leaving behind a son. He was sentenced to 25 years to life. When he entered prison, there were no iPods or cell phones. Zai lacked access to computers or other technology, and he feared that he could not participate in this new world. During incarceration Zai achieved a GED[®], which he had not been able to do outside. He had never had a trade, but in prison he learned basic skills in carpentry, barbering, and manual labor. Once he was back in the community, however, Zai found that his skills were not suited to employment in the age of technology. Given his felony record and his limited training, he could not earn enough to meet minimum living expenses. Now he wants to return to school, but has neither the time nor the foundation. He initially stayed with relatives and received welfare assistance on the condition that he work 30 or more hours a week. He is granted less than \$200 a month in cash and just over \$200 from SNAP. He accepts any work, most of it on call, making attending school very difficult.

Obtaining a GED[®]. If one can manage to attend school, obtaining a GED[®] (or one of the other new high school equivalency exam certificates) has become a viable alternative to a high school diploma. Unfortunately, funding for GED[®] programs either outside or inside a correctional facility is limited (Spycher, Shkodriani, & Lee, 2012), even though research has demonstrated the efficacy of correctional education programs both in reducing recidivism and in gaining future employment (Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013). Therefore, many prisoners do not have the opportunity to pursue a GED[®]. Although many take the initiative to educate themselves, the majority become discouraged. Upon release, numerous formerly incarcerated individuals avoid pursuing higher education through a GED[®] for fear of being behind socially and academically.

The location of the adult education program or college is another source of culture shock. Many former prisoners want to attend school away from home to get away from “bad blood” in their neighborhoods. Others fear for their lives and avoid their old neighborhoods altogether. Some take long bus routes or subway rides to bypass neighborhoods where gang activity makes them vulnerable. Yet, even with these fears, for the sake of their children some opt to remain near home.

Child Care and Employment. If basic needs of employment and housing are not met, it is hard to focus on school. Some students are also parents

who have to feed children and, possibly, partners. Children may motivate or demotivate a pursuit for education; one parent may believe that his own education will provide his children a better life and a good example. Another may be discouraged by child care expenses and opt to focus solely on a full-time job. Formerly incarcerated parents may need jobs to pay court-mandated child support. Some GED[®] programs and many colleges offer employment assistance that prepares individuals with interview training, resume writing, job fairs, and searches. However, sometimes this feels like too little too late; the obstacles of housing, employment, and child care seem insurmountable.

Not Walking Alone: Advisement and Counseling in College. Counseling is different from advisement. Counseling is emotional assistance, and it is important that men have an opportunity to receive one-on-one counseling should they desire it. Something as simple as having a person to talk to, listen, and understand can make a world of difference. Friends and teachers are good to talk to, but in some cases professional help is needed. Trauma counselors are especially trained to address posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and to walk the formerly incarcerated through the shock of reentry and the pains of the past.

Ex-prisoners who are working on or have obtained a GED[®] and want to go to college will need to negotiate academia—another new culture. Many prospective students do not know which colleges or programs are shams that will take their money while promising lofty outcomes but delivering few. These men need coaching to identify legitimate institutions. The advising process should guide GED[®] graduates through the process of applying for college and registering for classes (National Academic Advising Association [NACADA], 2006). Good academic advisement will help men find majors that suit them. A skilled advisor will give them purpose for the present and confidence for their future, encouraging them to stay on top of things while in college.

The formerly incarcerated will need assistance with social constraints. The penal system limits a person on “extended supervision” in what social engagements he can engage in and with whom. It is at this stage that the new culture outside of prison becomes an obstacle and counseling a requisite for success. An individual may have been released with conditions such as curfew, social restraints forbidding association with any individual who has a felony (family or other), or restrictions on travel and leaving the state. These restrictions limit academic and social flexibility for meetings with tutors, advisors, classmates, professors, or just socializing with a love interest, friend, or family member.

College and Financial Support. Contributing to the culture shock are the economic realities of entering higher education. “How will I pay for it?” is a hard question to answer. Ex-prisoners can become discouraged when they try to negotiate the maze of financial aid regulations, especially because their eligibility for federal funds may be limited by the nature of their offense (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). A financial advisor who is familiar with guidelines for financial aid to the formerly incarcerated, and who will take time to discuss options, is key to academic success for the formerly incarcerated.

After enrollment, college advisors should be aware of obstacles facing the formerly incarcerated. Many students must work as well as take classes, but a felony conviction limits or excludes the formerly incarcerated from employment (Alexander, 2010). Some colleges also require students to report criminal offenses on admission applications. Advisors need to be knowledgeable about legal rights and be able to advocate for students with potential employers and college admission officers.

A Healthy Classroom Climate

When instructors create a healthy classroom (Wood, 2010), students will be comfortable and ready to learn in an atmosphere of acceptance, respect, enthusiasm, and freedom of expression. The formerly incarcerated need to adjust to a nonhostile climate. In prison, inmates had to be alert for danger; now they have to learn new behaviors. Their old behaviors may be misunderstood.

One particular behavior found special resonance with the authors and several formerly incarcerated individuals: refusing to sit with your back facing the door or a blind eye to the exits. This acute awareness of surroundings can be misconstrued as disobedience, but is an attempt to ensure safety or to preempt a perceived attack (Schwartz, 2014).

Formerly incarcerated students may have a problem with participation because of the fear of being wrong and the need to project an image of strength that protected them in prison. They may act in ways that appear awkward, absurd, guarded, or tough.

Some young men may act out when they sense a disparity in their level of skills compared to other students. They do not lack intelligence; they are trying to comprehend what is being taught. In addition, the formerly incarcerated are often older than the other students; this age disparity is an additional barrier to fitting in. Their prison experiences plus the age difference make it a challenge to relate to students just out of high school. The formerly incarcerated would be considered highly nontraditional students who experience a great degree of both cultural incongruence and dissonance (Ross-Gordon, 2005) upon entering academic environments.

An instructor needs to find creative solutions to bridge disparities between prison and school behavior. The classroom climate, coupled with the instructor's zeal for his craft along with compassion, helps the formerly incarcerated to engage while still challenging them at their current level. Schwartz (2014), in her research on engagement of young men of color in GED[®] programs, calls the creation of these classroom climates a type of counter-space. This effort is anything but easy, but the reward is great.

Gender of Instructors. An instructor may have difficulty understanding a formerly incarcerated student who brings prison defenses to the classroom. Research by Einarsson & Granström (2002) and Rodriguez (2002) explores the relationship between the gender of the teacher and its impact on student engagement. However, there is less research on how the gender of an

adult educator may affect some formerly incarcerated males. It is the view of the authors that male instructors may be perceived as possible threats, due to a learner's previous interactions with male police officers, prison guards, and inmates. Poverty-stricken environments are frequently like police states, and males tend to respond with aggression. The same scenario applies in prison. Prisoners who are respected are not harmed. Showing innocence and submissiveness will cause problems. Male students will not feel so threatened by female instructors.

Structure and Support in the Classroom. A class with clear expectations and goals will provide necessary structure. Men coming from prison, a very predictable, extremely structured, and controlled space, need structure in their lives. Establishing a code of behavior is effective classroom management. Being able to recognize the effort of the students and praising them is important for a student's progress. This is true of all students but, again, particularly for the formerly incarcerated. Learners should not be judged for a wrong answer. Making it known that it's fine to participate without being right is an effective way of learning, especially for the struggling or guarded student. Being able to use affirmation in the class creates a great environment. Words matter. Positive language promotes respect. Respecting classmates' opinions and ideas serves to motivate and creates a classroom where students and teacher agree to put their egos to the side and to accept constructive criticism.

Relationship is key. Many young men do not have individual counselors with whom they can discuss their trials around reengagement in school. In this case, the instructor becomes the counselor; there is no better way to create a deep connection with your student than an individual private session after class. This will formulate a sense of trust. Mentors and supportive relationships with faculty are crucial for many nontraditional students (Kasworm, 2002) and even more so for the formerly incarcerated.

Peers can become another support system. Adult educators can incorporate group work so that classmates can form connections that resonate with being a family. For former gang members, a new family system is essential.

Prison inmates often turn to reading to keep occupied. Reading gives inmates the opportunity to find out their history, to understand the justice system, and, most of all, to learn about who they are as individuals. Adult educators can build on that habit developed in prison by encouraging learners to continue to structure their days with time for reading. Time can be carved out in the classroom for quiet and solitary reading.

Meaningful Curriculum. Some formerly incarcerated males choose not to attend higher learning after completing a GED[®] or high school. One such young man explained his choice this way: "Some may say the lack of funding is the reason for not further pursuing an education, but in my situation it was both the lack of funding and my dislike with the current curriculum, which is geared to Eurocentric concepts." When it comes to the teaching of history, minorities generally find themselves marginalized. Not everyone has this view, but it does raise the point of how important it is to have a relevant

curriculum for students to apply to life outside of school (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Ross-Gordon, 1998; Ross-Gordon & Brown-Haywood, 2000).

The War Continues: The Battle Can Be Won

Leonard Cohen (1974), the Canadian singer-songwriter, declared that “There is a war between the rich and the poor. . . . There is a war between the ones who say there is a war and the ones who say there isn’t” (verse 1). In our current educational system, the poor are often minorities and are the victims of the war on drugs and the policies associated with it. Meanwhile, those who benefit from the policies (or are unaffected by them) either do not know there is a war or support it. This reality prompts first an acknowledgment of the war, its policies, and its casualties. Then the work toward a resolution can begin. There is no better starting point than the classroom, with support from the community and commitment from the individual. The process of healing is largely in the hands of the instructors who reeducate these individuals to find their place in society.

Educators who understand the signs and symptoms of culture shock in formerly incarcerated men will be able to assure them that they are not victims, but plausible future presidents. Ultimately, it is the adult educator who can impart the knowledge that is necessary to secure a lasting future and the greatest chance for success. Adult education programs can acknowledge the needs of formerly incarcerated students, not to give them special treatment, but to minimize the effects of culture shock. Formerly incarcerated men have been through war and back. Before these eager minds can excel in the classroom, they have to survive to make it there. For this, the war must end and policies must change.

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