

# Transformative Justice Journal

An online free peer-reviewed public scholarly rolling issues journal.

[www.transformativejusticejournal.org](http://www.transformativejusticejournal.org)

ISSN 2643-9263

Building healing liberatory alternatives  
to punitive and retributive justice.

A Project of Save the Kids.

## Volume 2, Issue 1, 2020



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Dr. Letitia Basford & Dr. Joe Lewis

## ABOUT TRANSFORMATIVE JUSTICE JOURNAL

The *Transformative Justice Journal (TJJ)*, founded in 2012, is an online, open-source, peer-reviewed scholar-activist, anti-authoritarian, subversive, and critical penal abolition journal dedicated to promoting transformative justice. TJJ is organized and edited by a radical critical grass-roots collective of activist-scholars, community organizers, and current and former prisoners from around the world. TJJ was influenced out of conversations at the International Conference on Penal Abolition ICOPA in 2010. As a scholar-activist journal, TJJ was developed out of scholarly and community dialogues around promoting a decolonizing and anarchist criminology social justice penal abolition community-based alternatives to both the retributive, punitive, and utilitarian justice models used by most colonial criminal justice systems, which victimize offenders and re-victimize survivors of offenses, while promoting profits over people and corporate interests over community interests. The current punitive criminal justice system takes control, responsibility, healing, and accountability away from victims and offenders and instead gives them a powerless and victimizing experience. Transformative justice, a decolonizing and anti-oppression approach, however, views conflict not from the lens of the criminal justice system, but from the community; as such, those involved in the conflict are seen as individuals rather than victims or offenders. Moreover, transformative justice works to dismantle oppression by systems of domination, such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, elitism, statism, classism, transphobia, ecocide, speciesism, and ableism within all domestic, interpersonal, global, and community conflicts that foster theories such as, but not limited to eugenics, capitalism, and colonialism. In short, transformative justice is restorative justice plus social justice. Transformative justice expands the social justice model, which challenges and identifies injustices, in order to create organized processes of addressing and ending those injustices and providing space and place for marginalized voices. Transformative justice also builds off the principles of, anarchism, decolonizing, prison abolition, healing justice, Quakerism, liberation, revolutionary social justice resistance movements, First Nations in Canada, and restorative justice in order to dismantle oppression, repression, suppression, and domination.

## LOCATION

The Transformative Justice Journal is located in the Department of Criminal Justice at Salt Lake Community College.

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Please read these guidelines and then send your article, essay, review, research notes, interviews, reflections, poems, art, event summary, etc. to: [transformativejusticejournal@gmail.com](mailto:transformativejusticejournal@gmail.com)

### **Value and Uniqueness of TJJ**

- The Transformative Justice Journal was influenced in 2010 by discussions at the International Conference on Penal Abolition (ICOPA).
- The *Transformative Justice Journal* publishes rigorously peer-reviewed scholar-activist work of the highest quality.
- The *Transformative Justice Journal* provides the utmost respect and care during the review process.
- The *Transformative Justice Journal* is a free-to-access electronic journal.
- The *Transformative Justice Journal* charges no fees for publication.
- The *Transformative Justice Journal* supports and encourages submissions that are excluded from mainstream journals, such as, but not limited to use photographic, video, MP3, art, poems, raps, and new media work.
- The *Transformative Justice Journal*, is organized and edited by a radical critical grass-roots collective of activist-scholars, community organizers, and current and former prisoners from around the world.

## We Seek

- **incarcerated writings and art** – of any length
- **research articles and essays** – 2,000 to 10,000 words
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- **course/class summaries** – no more than 2,000 words
- **research notes** – no more than 2,000 words
- **commentary** – no more than 2,000 words
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- **lecture/presentation summaries** – no more than 2,000 words
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- **action alert summaries** – no more than 2,000 words
- **film, book, art, and media reviews** – no more than 3,000 words
- **interviews and dialogues** – between 1,000 to 10,000 words
- **poems and rap** – no more than 10,000 words

## Style

- All submissions should have appropriate references and citations. Manuscripts should be single line spacing, 12-point font and conform to the [American Psychological Association](#) (APA) style format.
- Submissions must be sent in Microsoft Word format. Submissions in other software formats will not be reviewed.
- Authors should remove all self-identification from their submissions, but all submissions must be accompanied by a title page with author(s) name and affiliation, name of type of submission (e.g., article, review, conference summary, etc.), contact information including e-mail, postal address, and phone number.
- Authors must include an abstract of no more than 150 words that briefly describes the manuscript's contents.

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- Upon acceptance for review, the Transformative Justice Journal editors will send manuscripts, under a double-peer reviewed process, to no less than two, and generally three reviewers. Reviewers provide their recommendations to the editor, who makes the final decision to accept the manuscript.
- The Transformative Justice Journal holds to the utmost respect, love, and care when reviewing manuscripts. Each review we assure is constructive, positive, and hopefully useful to the author. We strongly welcome first time authors, students, nontraditional students, activists, youth, community organizers, prisoners, politicians, and teachers.

## Submissions will be assigned to one of the four following categories:

1. accept without revisions
2. accept with editorial revisions
3. revise and resubmit for peer review
4. reject

- Every effort will be made to inform authors of the editor's decision within 100 days of receipt of a manuscript. Authors, whose manuscripts are accepted for publication, will be asked to submit a brief biography that includes their institutional or organizational affiliations and their research interests. The Transformative Justice Journal only publishes original materials. Please do not submit manuscripts that are under review or previously published elsewhere.

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We are pleased to accept your submissions at any time and will move quickly through the review process to ensure timeliness.

For submission, please submit to:

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Volume 2, Issue 1  
March 2020

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Storying the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Personal Narratives as a Path toward Transformation

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### **Storying the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Personal Narratives as a Path toward Transformation**

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores what happens when individuals who have experienced the school-to-prison pipeline engage actively in the process of presenting their experiences to teachers and future teachers. Using interviews and written communication as data, we describe the various transformations that have occurred and consider their broader implications for teachers, school leaders, and teacher-educators. We also advocate for the important role of community experts in Teacher Preparation Programs.

*Key words: school-to-prison pipeline, transformative learning, teacher-educator practice, community experts*

#### **Acknowledgment**

We dedicate this paper to Philip Borer Nelson who was tragically killed in April of 2017. Philip had a profound impact on anyone who was lucky enough to meet him, as we hope that we have conveyed in this paper.

#### **Introduction**

The past several decades in the U.S. have seen a societal trend of mass incarceration. We arrest and imprison staggering numbers of our fellow citizens, six to ten times more than other



industrialized nations (Alexander, 2012), and the vast majority are low-income people of color, particularly Black and brown men. Something similar occurs in our public schools, where Black and brown boys are in much greater danger of experiencing disproportionate discipline and exclusionary punishment in school. This trend, known as the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP), often results in young men of color being pushed out of mainstream schools and into the criminal justice system (Lewis & Basford, 2014, Basford & Lewis, 2018; Christle, Jolivet, Nelson, 2005; Heitzig, 2016; Fuentes, 2011; Morris, 2016; Nocella and Parker, 2013; Rashid, 2009; Solomon, 2004). Teachers and school leaders have begun to learn about the STPP and the practices that contribute to it, whether through the stories of individuals who have experienced the school-to-prison pipeline (Lewis & Basford, 2014, Basford & Lewis, 2018; Laura, 2014) or through the school policies and classroom practices that contribute to its existence (Nocella, Pamar, & Stovall, 2014; Morris, 2016). Little has been written about the transformative effects of involving those who have experienced the STPP in the process of educating predominantly White teachers and school leaders about it.

In this study, we explore what happens when individuals who have experienced the school-to-prison pipeline (STPP) engage actively in the process of describing and critiquing it publicly, and we highlight the transformative learning (Mezirow 1991, 2000) that occurs as a result. Our study suggests that the process has been transformative not only for our participants who experienced the STPP, as a form of restorative transformation, but also for students and faculty in Teacher Preparation Programs, who urgently need their White-dominant curricula and classroom practices interrupted.

### **Background**

During the summer of 2012, professor Letitia Basford—a White professor teaching predominantly White students in a Teacher Preparation Program (TPP)—taught a course called “Diversity in Education” with a student named Bridget. Bridget was a White woman in her mid-40s who had two bi-racial sons, both of whom identified as Black. Bridget spoke openly in class about her sons’ negative experiences in school. When her sons first began school, Bridget was a single mother on welfare and described herself as lacking confidence as a parent. She had hoped that the teachers

and administrators—whom she deemed as better educated and more mature than she—would help her sons and serve as mentors for the whole family. But not long into her sons' school experience, she began to sense that Black boys were often treated more harshly than their White peers. She saw it in the way teachers talked to her sons. She saw it in the way her boys came home angry. They complained that the White students seemed to get along better with their White teachers in almost every class.

As the years went by, she watched as mostly White teachers and school administrators monitored her sons' behavior more critically and punished them more harshly than White students. The schools themselves described these actions as a policy of "zero tolerance," though Bridget and her sons noted that the policy seemed to be enforced unevenly and with racial bias. Indeed, "zero tolerance" policies have been found to target and label marginalized students, especially young Black men, as "problems" in school, resulting in much higher rates of suspension and expulsion for youth of color and a pattern of pushing these youth out of mainstream schools and into the school-to-prison pipeline (Christle, Jolivette, Nelson, 2005; Rashid, 2009; Solomon, 2004).

Jordan, Bridget's older son, experienced zero tolerance policies for the first time when he was in third grade. For an incident in which he challenged a teacher, Jordan was suspended for 10 days, then transferred to a new school. Bridget was never consulted about the transfer, nor was Jordan given the opportunity to share his perspective about what happened or consider how he might have acted differently. Bridget recalled feeling "powerless" as her son's future was irrevocably altered. Jordan was being categorized as a "violent Black male" at the age of eight. This was the beginning of series of suspensions, expulsions, and encounters with the police that would lead, ultimately, to Jordan's imprisonment—a definitive example of the school-to-prison pipeline, with schools doing little or nothing to prevent it.

Bridget's other son, Philip, followed a similar trajectory. During his junior high school years, he was suspended from school more than 40 times for such things as smelling like marijuana or cursing, but he was never offered chemical dependency treatment or any sort of guidance in anger

management. Philip reflected, “Going on and off suspension for kids is like going in and out of jail for adults... it becomes acceptable in one’s life and leads kids to believe that they [cause] trouble, so they should just stay that way.”

In the same way that men of color are targeted for arrest and incarceration on a societal level, youth of color—especially boys and young men—are in much greater danger of experiencing disproportionate discipline and punishment in our schools. Boys like Jordan and Philip get labeled as “problem kids” or “bad boys” early on; they get pushed out of mainstream classrooms, experience suspension and expulsion at much higher rates, and often find themselves in the school-to-prison pipeline (Lewis & Basford, 2014, Basford & Lewis, 2018; Christle, Jolivette, Nelson, 2005; Heitzig, 2016; Fuentes, 2011; Morris, 2016; Nocella and Parker, 2013; Rashid, 2009; Solomon, 2004). Ironically, we dole out the most severe discipline to those kids who are most in need of support. They tend to come from single-parent homes and live in poverty; some live in foster homes; some are homeless. They are also disproportionately kids of color. Instead of providing these youth with the services they need, our schools have used “zero-tolerance” as an excuse to give up on them.

Preparing to become a teacher herself, Bridget was deeply concerned about what had happened to her sons and suspected that it might be happening across the country. We now know that her suspicions were well founded. Jordan and Philip were incarcerated at the ages of 14 and 15. Only later, through their participation in a research study about their story, did they come to realize that they were part of a much larger societal trend for young men of color, that of the school-to-prison pipeline.

After the conclusion of the “Diversity in Education” course, Letitia (the professor) felt strongly that Bridget’s story needed to be shared with others. Bridget and her sons agreed to reflect on and share their experiences in detail with Letitia and her colleague, “Joe.” Bridget, who was teaching in China, sent reflections via email; Jordan sent letters from prison; Philip, who had been released from prison recently and lived nearby, sent reflections via email and participated in face-to-face interviews.

Since that time, the family's experiences have been published in two books (Lewis & Basford, 2014, Basford & Lewis, 2018). Bridget served as a co-author for one book chapter and Philip presented at numerous academic conferences. Philip also became a regular guest speaker for educators in both teacher preparation programs and K-12 schools and served as a panelist in large university forums addressing the school-to-prison pipeline.

### **The Current Study**

Our initial goal with this project was simply to educate teachers and administrators about the school-to-prison pipeline and its damaging effects. We hoped to create a space for Bridget, Philip, and Jordan to share their stories and give educators some sense of what it must feel like to experience this type of injustice in school. We soon discovered that the work was leading to some significant transformations for Bridget, Philip, and eventually, Jordan (after his release from prison). Just as significantly, their presence in our classes was interrupting the White-dominant discourse and practices of our Teacher Preparation Program, a space that traditionally excludes people like Philip and Jordan. We recognized that their stories and voices were filling important conceptual gaps in our program and creating a lasting impact on future and practicing educators.

In this current study, we explore what happens when individuals who have experienced the school-to-prison pipeline engage actively in the process of describing and critiquing it, and we highlight the transformative learning (Mezirow 1991, 2000) that has occurred as a result.

### **Transformative Learning as a Theoretical Framework**

When does learning have the potential to change our lives and communities for the better? What kinds of learning experiences in teacher education would help to interrupt normalized structures of inequity in our public schools? This study uses Jack Mezirow's (1991, 2000) theory of transformative learning as a framework for addressing these questions. In Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, a learner moves beyond mere attainment of subject knowledge or technical skill and experiences a shift in fundamental belief structure. This occurs through the introduction of a

“disorienting dilemma” (Mezirow 1991, 2000) that disrupts the learner’s previous understandings of how the world works, creating the potential for transformative learning.

One possible result of experiencing a disorienting dilemma is that the learner comes to a deeper understanding of some form of oppression or marginalization that s/he/they ha(ve) experienced. The learner’s personal experiences are validated in a way that they have not been before, even by the learner/s themselves. Given time to reflect on their new understandings, they may build confidence and become better equipped to plan a course of action and implement some sort of meaningful life change. This is the type of transformative learning that we believe occurred for both Bridget and Philip in our study.

We see an important link between Mezirow’s theory and Paulo Freire’s (1970) concept of “conscientization” or critical consciousness. For Freire, critical consciousness focuses on developing a deeper understanding of society through the recognition of social and political inequities and contradictions. Critical consciousness often includes a plan of action against oppressive elements in one’s own world. In this view of learning, the purpose of education is social reconstruction—teachers seek to create spaces where learners can become agents of social justice, focusing especially on those issues that the learners themselves deem most important. Again, our study suggests that Bridget and Philip attained a level of critical consciousness as a result of participating in our school-to-prison pipeline project. Their plan of action included speaking about and critiquing the STPP in our education classes and in other settings.

At the same time, a second type of disorienting dilemma occurred for our mostly White students. Through their interactions with Philip in class, students became better equipped to see and critique systems of privilege that exist in schools that many of them have personally benefitted from, particularly as relates to race and class. For the purposes of this paper, we define “privilege” as any unearned advantage. White privilege, specifically, is a systemic advantage that White people have in comparison to people of color who experience continuing forms of institutional racism. Peggy McIntosh’s (1989) metaphor of the “invisible backpack” has helped us to make sense of the hidden

benefits that White people “carry” in a society where Whiteness is normalized and racism is still widespread. See also Robin D’Angelo’s (2011) important work on White fragility. Privilege can also extend to other identity categories (such as class, gender identity, sexual preference, and ability). Privilege exists where any identity category (such as cis-male, hetero, able-bodied) affords the individual an unearned advantage.

As White Education professors teaching mostly White teacher candidates—all of us coming from positions of privilege—we saw the urgency of learning directly from Philip. Minnesota, the state where this study takes place, is home to one of the country’s largest graduation gaps between White students and their Black and Hispanic counterparts (Grunewald & Nath, 2019). With less than 5% licensed teachers of color in the state of Minnesota (Shockman, 2019), future educators, especially those who are White, need to experience some disorientation as they come face-to-face with institutionalized systems of racism and classism.

While the demographics of teachers and pre-service teacher candidates are unlikely to change in the near future under the current system, one practical short-term solution is considering the various roles that “community experts” play in transforming teacher education. Flesner and Magee (2012) speak to the role that community experts provide: they afford teacher preparation programs with critical opportunities to collaborate with individuals who represent specific communities being impacted by its program. By sharing their personal experiences, people like Philip can help teacher candidates better understand the various ways that racialized students get marginalized and traumatized in school, through forces such as disproportionality, tracking, and the school-to-prison pipeline. With this in mind, this study argues that community experts like Philip play a vital role in helping White students experience disorienting dilemmas that may set them on a path toward transformative learning.

## **Methodology**

We conducted an interpretive case study that drew from three sources of data: 1. Interviews with Bridget and Philip (audiotaped and transcribed for analysis); 2. Emails from Bridget and Philip; 3. Students' written reflections after interacting with Philip in class.

Our analysis included multiple approaches. We independently mined and coded the data and identified themes before sharing them with each other. The themes we found in our data were similar, but we also tried on different interpretations of the data to broaden our thinking and to challenge our analysis, a methodological practice Polkinghorne (2007) calls "different meaning interpretations." To attain a greater measure of credibility, we shared our themes and interpretations with our two major participants, Philip and Bridget, seeking to ensure that we had represented them fairly and accurately from their perspective. By gaining this feedback, we sought to add a "believability assessment" to the research findings (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

### **Findings**

In this section, we offer an interpretation of our data focusing on the transformative learning experiences that we have seen for Bridget, Philip, and students in our Teacher Preparation Program (TPP). We conclude with implications for ourselves (who have also been transformed by the experience) and for teacher education in general.

#### **Bridget**

Bridget's transformation began with her willingness to talk about her sons' experiences in Letitia's class. Ultimately, Bridget chose to write about her sons' experiences with the school-to-prison pipeline for her final course paper. Moved by Bridget's obvious passion for the issue, Letitia asked whether Bridget might want to share her story with a broader audience. Initially, Bridget was unsure. The process of sharing her family's story was disorienting because it compelled her to revisit painful and often "humiliating" experiences. Recalling her experiences as a single mom with "bad kids," Bridget shared:

People just aren't that sympathetic. If you have bad kids, then you're a bad mom. You must be really screwed up. I had been kind of living with that. I felt really judged by people.

Over time, as Bridget, Letitia, and Joe worked together to write and analyze her family's story, Bridget appeared to gain a greater understanding of what had happened to her sons. She had always had a "gut feeling" that racism and discriminatory school policies had played a role in her sons' experiences. As she learned more about the research on zero-tolerance policies and inequitable disciplinary practices, she came to see that the school-to-prison pipeline was a *real* phenomenon that she and her sons had lived through. She developed a heightened awareness that schools often criminalize, dehumanize, and give up on Black boys, and she came to believe that this was essential knowledge for future teachers if they were to act as agents of change. Bridget became inspired to play a role in educating mostly-White teachers and future teachers about the issue by sharing her story with others through publication and presentation. According to Bridget, the entire process has helped her to develop a greater sense of confidence and empowerment as a mother and teacher. After the publication of the first book chapter presenting and analyzing her family's experiences, Bridget shared:

It has been quite cathartic for me and alleviated some of the pain of living through this experience with my sons. I am no longer embarrassed. Our story is being used to educate and inform people about how schools can really affect the lives of children and their families. I feel like I have a little more fight left in me. I'm proud of this work.

In addition to experiencing some personal catharsis from the process, Bridget has also come to see herself as an agent of change for the K-12 schools. She has brought new awareness about the school-to-prison pipeline to mostly White teachers and administrators by helping them view her sons' experiences through her lens as a mother who once felt powerless.

### **Philip**

Like Bridget's "gut feeling" that racism and discriminatory school policies played a role in her sons' school experiences, Philip always had a sense that he was being pushed out of schools, but he had never been able to process exactly why this was the case. Like Bridget, Philip came to a new



understanding about what had happened to him in schools through sharing his story with educators—the same people whom he once saw as “derailing him” in schools.

Initially, when Philip attended conference presentations, he would sit back and allow Letitia and Joe to lead the presentations and would engage only toward the end to answer questions from the audience. Over time, Philip began to play a much greater role in sharing his own story. In each conference presentation, he learned about similar stories from audience members of color who had come to listen to Philip. In one instance, an audience member shared that she too had been pushed out of school more times than she could count with little effort by the school to attend to the issues that were affecting her school performance. Another audience member recognized that his school principal punished students of color disproportionately. There were many such stories and these experiences were validating and empowering for Philip.

Philip shared:

I always knew schools were messed up, but when I learned about the theory of the school-to-prison pipeline, it helped me understand more of what I experienced. That’s made an impact. But I think it made even more of an impact to meet people who have motivated and inspired me to take this knowledge and try to make a difference. I never realized the power I have to be an influence. I look at myself differently now.

Philip also spoke to classes of mostly White students in our Teacher Preparation Program, an experience that had an impact on his sense of self-efficacy and agency. After reading letters from students who shared how much they learned from him, Philip reflected:

[These students] make me feel like I’m somebody that they can learn from. It was very, very, very life changing for me. To take my story and be like, okay, I’m going to use your story and I’m going to make sure that I can reach a student such as yourself. I hope they can take some of those steps and be like, ‘I remember what Philip told me.’

Bridget also saw the impact on her son:

Philip gained a greater sense of optimism about the potential for change, given the reaction he received from audiences he would not have otherwise perceived as allies. He came to see the school-to-prison pipeline as an institutional epidemic, that Black boys are being targeted. [He] became motivated to be an agent of change.

In addition to visiting classes at our institution, Philip also shared his story with other teacher preparation programs in our area and participated in a series of events across our metropolitan area, sharing his story in front of audiences of 350 or more. He was eventually hired as a mentor and advisor at a school committed to “dropout recovery,” where many of the students had been suspended or expelled from their previous schools. He came to be known as the “best advisor the school had,” according to the school’s academic director, in large part because he could relate to his students and their experiences – he had personally experienced chronic suspension and expulsion from schools; he had been in gangs and had been in prison. Philip used these experiences and the wisdom he gained from them to push students toward a different path. Of his work at as an advisor, he shared:

I know what they’re doing... it’s easy for me to be able to read them. Once they see I know what I am talking about, it’s like they listen. I talk to them. I am real with them. I give them a metaphor for the choices they are making. I expose them to other alternative to selling drugs. I teach them how to write a business plan, how to pitch an idea, how to save their money and build their credit. If I had known that stuff, I might not have gone down the path that I did.

Philip developed a sense of restorative empowerment—recognizing that he could make a difference by mentoring youth and sharing his story with educators. He found inspiration in working beside teachers and administrators he once thought only wanted to derail him. And as we shall present in greater detail below, he began to have a profound impact on those teachers, administrators, and teacher educators.

### **Students in our Teacher Preparation Program**

While the process of sharing their experiences served as a form of healing and empowerment for Bridget and Philip, something equally profound occurred for students in our Teacher Preparation

Program (TPP). As teacher-educators, we discovered the powerful impact that “community experts” like Philip can have on students. Before describing this impact, we begin by offering a critical analysis of our own TPP, which often struggles to interrupt a White-dominant discourse.

On its surface, our TPP appears to be equity-minded and progressive. Our school of education’s mission statement explicitly notes that we promote equity and social justice in schools. We also claim to have a deep commitment to urban education. Yet, like other TPPs, the faculty in our school are overwhelmingly White. Candidates from historically underrepresented backgrounds account for approximately 15 percent of students in our initial-licensure programs, but they have few opportunities to learn from people like them who have experienced racialization and have survived in a White-dominated field. Thus, TPPs like ours must grapple with a central dilemma: an aspiration to provide inclusive and representative perspectives about racial equality and social justice in an environment that is overwhelmingly White. The reality is that our TPP, like most others in the U.S., adopts what Feagin (2013) aptly describes as White racial frames, or “the dominant racial frame that has long legitimated, rationalized, and shaped racial oppression and inequality in our country” (p. x). Thus, by primarily learning from White American faculty, our pre-service teachers have primarily adopted White racial frames to interpret racialized Americans through lenses of deficit and pathology.

Philip successfully interrupted this pattern. Prior to his visits, our majority White students were visibly nervous about meeting an ex-convict of color who was kicked out of school and had spent time in prison. Many held preconceived notions about how he would communicate and the kinds of things he would share. But when they met Philip, who powerfully analyzed his school experiences, including his own mistakes, the school-to-prison pipeline was suddenly humanized in a way that was simply not possible through an academic article or a lecture by a White teacher educator. For example, to our classes, Philip urged teachers to reconsider the roles of teachers, sharing his own story while doing so:

*I probably have been suspended from school close to 40 times. I remember being suspended for three days for sticking up my middle finger. I've been suspended for smelling like marijuana but was never offered chemical dependency [treatment]. I've been suspended for fighting and cursing but never offered anger management. Kids from impoverished neighborhoods have other issues outside of school other than trying to get their education. Isn't it up to the schools to support all students and help them in all aspects of life?*

Another message he routinely gave to our classes was how dangerous deficit approaches are to youth like Philip:

*Once my teachers characterized me as a 'troubled kid,' I felt I had to continue to be that way, upholding an image I thought was cool, but an image I did not create by myself. [Eventually] I began to go to school to start trouble and I was a part of the "troubled kids..." Going in and out of suspension for kids is like going in and out of jail for adults. It becomes acceptable in one's life and leads kids to believe they are a part of the trouble, so they should just stay that way.*

These messages were profoundly influential for students. Of Philip's visits to our classes, students wrote the following:

*"Hearing from Philip made it real. It's one thing to read about this issue and quite a different thing to hear it from the source. It put a human side on the idea of the school-to-prison-pipeline."*

*"By meeting Philip, everything seems so much more tangible. I think everyone now understands better the important role they play as future teachers."*

*"I am now aware of the power that I hold as a teacher and that my actions will have consequences on my students. I am truly a more awake person now."*

*"He's helping us learn how we can change the experiences in our classrooms."*

In fact, many students identified Philip's visits as among the most powerful experiences they had in our classes (a humbling, but revealing, experience for us as White professors). Rather than

simply reading about the school-to-prison pipeline, they heard about it firsthand through Philip's compelling stories and his honest answers to their questions.

Philip was a charismatic person with an impressive (and seemingly intuitive) ability to connect with people, but he did not go out of his way to make White audiences feel comfortable. He spoke proudly using African American Vernacular English. One result of this in class was that students tended to "lean in" and listen to him in a way that they did not for White professors. An important form of linguistic transgression was at work here – the very voice that made Philip a "threat" as a student in school, gave him credibility and authenticity in our TPP classrooms. Our students wanted and needed to hear from him.

As Philip shared his own stories of experiencing the school-to-prison pipeline and described the various ways that kids like him can get marginalized and pushed out, he humanized the experience for our students and gave true meaning to the term "community expert." Though he might not describe it using these terms, he was a strong advocate for culturally sustaining, student-centered teaching. He reminded our future teachers that they would play a central role in modeling respect and in motivating kids to *want* to learn. He advocated for loving *all* kids, especially those who may seem "difficult" at first.

As White teacher educators, we are continually seeking ways to push our privileged, mostly White students out of their comfort zones, asking them to confront the realities of institutional racism in our schools. We want them to become more critically reflective practitioners and make meaningful changes to their teaching practices. Philip's visits to our classes provided an unexpected and impactful way to do this. He was able to "make it real" for our students in ways that we could not, as White teacher educators.

### **Implications: The Power of Personal Narrative and the Importance of Community Experts**

Since coming to know and care about individuals like Bridget and Philip who experienced the school-to-prison pipeline directly, we have felt a greater sense of urgency to expose and act on injustice in schools. We want our mostly White students to examine their own privilege and to confront

the systemic ways in which Black and brown boys get marginalized and pushed out of schools. As Philip presented at conferences and in our classes, we could see and feel that he was having a powerful impact. Something transformative was occurring—for him, for our students, and for us.

Then, on April 21, 2017, Philip was callously murdered at the age of 33. This was a tragic loss for all of us (most especially for Philip's mother, Bridget). It also served to underscore the vitally important role that Philip had played in our classrooms, as a community expert allowing our students to hear a voice from the margins.

We have seen direct evidence that individuals like Philip and Bridget who are willing and able to relate their personal experiences in schools can have a powerful impact on teachers, especially when they are able to describe specific examples of injustice (see Lewis & Basford, 2014, Basford & Lewis, 2018) that they have experienced in school. We urge school leaders and teacher-educators of all backgrounds to seek out community experts who can share their lived experiences and help teachers see how institutional racism functions and how it affects real people. As one of our White students wrote, "It's one thing to read about this issue, and quite a different thing to hear it from the source." Hearing directly from the source is a powerful way to create disorienting dilemmas that can lead to meaningful change for future teachers.

When it is not possible to have guest speakers share their stories, we recommend that school leaders and teacher educators collect real-life examples of injustice (see, for example, Monique Morris's *Push Out* or Crystal Laura's *Being Bad*) to share with teachers. Again, the goal is to help teachers of all backgrounds see how institutional racism functions. Ideally, these examples can serve as a springboard for conversations about how to create a student-centered, culturally responsive classroom and school community.

We also see great potential for individuals like Philip to impact younger students directly. Ironically, in some school settings, this is not possible (since Philip was a convicted felon, he was sometimes barred from interacting with students). Individuals like Philip can have a profound impact on students who may be in danger of experiencing the school-to-prison pipeline themselves. We

watched Philip engage in this kind of work at an innovative dropout recovery program where he served as an advisor. Because Philip had personally experienced many of the challenges that his students faced, he was well positioned to influence their decision-making and advocate for them in situations where they needed it.

Finally, we see a need for continued vigilance in pushing teachers to avoid problematic practices in their own teaching and confront institutional racism and classism in schools. Such work must never be relegated to one “diversity” class, but should recur in varied and nuanced ways throughout a teacher preparation program and continue to be a central component of professional development for practicing teachers.

While Philip is no longer with us, the work that he did for and with us will have a lifelong impact on thousands of educators and youth. We hope this study can serve as further evidence of his impact and the potential impact of other community experts like him, who can serve as collaborators, co-equals, and partners in our quest for equity in schools.

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