**The Confined Voices of Education: The Lived Experiences of Formerly Incarcerated Students at a Four-Year University and their Perception of Self & Education**

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This study explores the lived experiences of formerly incarcerated students attending a four-year university within the California State University system, focusing on the systematic and social challenges they face within their institution. The research emphasizes the barriers these students face, such as stigma, housing instability, lack of academic and social support, and systemic discrimination (Alexander, 2012; Fine & Ruglis, 2009; Halkovic & Green, 2015). It also emphasizes the support systems already in place that they identify as critical to their success. Using a phenomenological qualitative research approach, this research seeks to address the gaps in educational literature regarding the unique challenges of this student population and the lived experiences they have undergone with special attention to their perception of self and education. While there is literature that revolves around education and recidivism rates, there is little research on the systemic barriers and stigmas faced by those re-entering higher education (Evans, Szkola, & St. John, 2019; Hernandez, 2019). Grounded in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of social reproduction, the study examines how structural inequities in higher education perpetuate the marginalization of students with overlapping and intersecting identities—low-income, racial minorities, first-generation college students, and formerly incarcerated individuals (Ladson-Billings, 2006).

The study’s primary aim is to give voice to students who are often stigmatized and excluded, shedding light on their academic and social challenges, including stigma, housing instability, and limited institutional support. Through in-depth interviews with students who identify as having a history of incarceration, this research identifies both systemic & social obstacles as well as support systems that are already in place and are effective. Through the narratives of lived experiences of formerly incarcerated students, the study can further support educational policy changes and develop inclusive practices that address inequities when it comes to how formerly incarcerated students are perceived and supported in higher education. This research aims to contribute to the growing discourse on equity and inclusion in higher education, and advocates for structural changes that challenge structural barriers and practice in order to better support marginalized students in their academic journeys.