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# Incarceration, Relationships, and Belonging: Insights into the Experiences of Two Male Youth Recently Released from Custody Facilities

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## **Incarceration, Relationships, and Belonging: Insights into the Experiences of Two Male Youth Recently Released from Custody Facilities**

April King and Steve Sider

### **Abstract**

This paper explores the family, school, and community experiences of two male youth who had recently been released from custody facilities and how these experiences contributed to their sense of belonging and self-esteem. Addressing the limited literature on self-esteem and belonging of young men who had been incarcerated, the exploratory study considers key themes of trust, family, friendships, and perceptions of belonging and self-esteem which emerge from interviews and guided journal writing sessions. A key finding is that alternative literacy programs, such as journal writing, provide mechanisms to engage young men in building their self-esteem and sense of belonging. The paper concludes with recommendations for teachers, community program facilitators, and social workers to support marginalized youth after having been released from incarceration as they re-enter family and community life.

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### ***Introduction***

Male teens who have been incarcerated face a significant number of challenges upon release from a custody facility. These might include difficulty in accessing educational opportunities, securing employment, dealing with health challenges, and restoring relationships with family and friends (Wallace, Strike, Glasgow, Lynch, & Fullilove, 2016). Although some literature has documented the school, familial, and community experiences of young men upon release from a custody facility (e.g., Tracey & Hanham, 2017; Wallace et al., 2016), there is limited literature which examines how these experiences contribute to their self-esteem and sense of belonging (Gibson, Gibson, Clarbour, & Clarbour, 2017). An exploratory study was conducted to address this gap in the literature and to provide voice to two male youth who were released from a custody facility as they reflect on their self-esteem and sense of belonging. This provides an opportunity for educators, community program coordinators, social workers, and others who support marginalized youth to consider how to effectively support the self-esteem and sense of belonging of male youth who have recently been released from incarceration.

Before examining the literature on self-esteem and belonging for young people who have been in custody, it is important to clarify key terms. Young offenders are defined as youth between the ages of 12-17 and who are under the legal age of traditional criminal prosecution (Youth Justice, 2017). In this study, the two participants are young men who had been recently released from a custody facility and were of young offender age when incarcerated. It is important to note that although incarceration refers to those who have been imprisoned, it does not always refer to the traditional prison system to which adults are often sentenced. Youth court judges may assign a convicted youth to sentences within the community or to custodial and supervised sentences, which include a period of time in a youth custody facility and a period of community supervision (Youth Justice, 2017). Youth

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custody facilities refers to correctional facilities which require special permission to enter and exit. The correctional facility that the participants spent time in only houses male youth between the ages of 12-17 and is located in a mid-sized city in Canada. While in a custody facility, there are opportunities to engage in an on-site school and participate in sports, trades, and chaplaincy programs. The goal of these supports is to help the young offenders develop life skills, academic credits, and alternative strategies for coping with conflict and challenging situations.

### *Literature Review*

We examine three bodies of literature as we consider the experiences of male youth who have been released from custody facilities. First, we describe the challenges faced by youth who have been incarcerated. Next, we examine the literature, although limited, on self-esteem and sense of belonging for young people, particularly in light of the role of schools. Finally, we provide a summary of some of the alternative educational programs which have been developed to support at-risk youth.

#### *The challenges faced by youth who have been incarcerated*

There are many reasons attributed to why youth might be at risk of engaging in criminal behaviour and becoming incarcerated. For example, in urban school settings, there appears to be low academic expectations of some youth and this increases the risk of failure in traditional school settings (Montero, 2012). Failure in school can result in involvement in deviant behaviour (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Challenging home situations, such as those which might include abusive family members or neglect in the home, can also lead to engaging in criminal acts (Howell, Cater, Miller-Graff, Schwartz, & Graham-Bermann, 2017). Substance abuse can also contribute to criminal behaviour (Ståhlberg, Boman, Robertsson, Kerekes, Anckarsäter, & Nilsson, 2017). Further, young people who live in communities where criminal behaviour is more evident tend to be more susceptible to

engaging in similar behaviour (Livingston, Galster, Kearns, & Bannister, (2014).

When incarcerated, many young people do have access to educational and life skills programs. However, the effectiveness of these programs can be limited. For example, more than 50% of prison inmates under the age of 24 in the United States have not graduated from high school nor earned an educational diploma (Harlow, 2003). There are many other challenges that young people face when in custody facilities. For example, mental health disorders might go unrecognized or unsupported thus contributing to the obstacles the young person faces when released from the facility (Moore, Gaskin, & Indig, 2013).

Upon release from a custody facility, there are further obstacles that young people face. These include difficulty in accessing and engaging in school activities, finding a job, getting support for mental and other health disorders, and re-engaging in family life (Tracey & Hanham, 2017, Wallace et al., 2016). Recently incarcerated youth also have to deal with their own sense of self-esteem, which is often low, and belonging, which is often lacking, when re-introduced to the community in which they had previously lived or to a new community (Bateman, & Hazel, 2015).

#### *Self-esteem, Belonging, and School*

Self-esteem is defined as “the extent to which one prizes, values, approves, or likes oneself” (Robinson, Shaver, & Wrightsman, 1991, p. 115). Low self-esteem can cause youth to engage in problem behaviours as a way to support their self-esteem (Finn, 1989). For example, they may participate in “...alternate activities that are less sanctioned socially or by winning the approval of peers who have become nonparticipants in similar ways” (Finn, 1989, p. 121). Knowing that students often crave a connection with their own experience it is important to explore ways in which youth, in particular at-risk youth, can heighten their self-esteem (Hartigan, 1999).

Goodenow and Grady (1992) defined the concept of belonging as “the extent to which

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they feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others” (pp. 60-61). It has been demonstrated that the associations that students make “with cultural and ethnic groups, their families, and their friends (especially in adolescence) are fundamental aspects of this social fabric” (Goodenow & Grady, 1992, p. 60). Feeling a sense of belonging can also influence the value that adolescents give to their involvement and contribution to school work (Goodenow & Grady, 2002). It is not surprising that when youth perceive that the expectations for their success are limited, they do not make significant effort to change that perception. Conversely, “...almost all people find school (or other work settings) more enjoyable, worthwhile, and interesting when they believe that others in the environment like and value them” (Goodenow & Grady, 1992, p. 68). As a result, it is important to consider ways in which one can assist youth in increasing their sense of belonging.

One of the key places in which students develop their self-esteem and sense of belonging is in schools (Goodenow & Grady, 1992). Goodenow and Grady assert that an,

approach to understanding social influences on school motivation, especially among disadvantaged students, has focused on students’ subjective sense of school belonging ... unless students identify with the school to at least a minimal extent [...] they may begin the gradual disengagement process of which officially dropping out is only the final step (1992, p. 61).

Having a sense of belonging within the school influences the way in which students commit to their education and accept the values of education that are being placed on them. However, many urban adolescents may have a poor sense of school belonging and low school motivation (Montero, 2012).

When youth enter into criminalized behaviour, they become susceptible to a diminishing of self-esteem and sense of belonging. This is likely at least partly due to their removal from home and school communities (Jacobi, 2008). There are still positive opportunities to change this potential trajectory of lower self-esteem and sense of belonging. Long and Davis (2011) suggest that innovative educational initiatives, such as alternative

literacy programs, lead to positive behavioural and emotional changes in adolescents.

*Alternative literacy programs*

Alternative literacy programs are one way to support a young person's self-esteem and sense of belonging. Alternative literacy programs can "... lead to the identity work and sense of community that many juveniles crave. The documented practices of existing programs reveal a core set of benefits that emerge from sustained engagement with non-conventional learning tools" (Jacobi, 2008, p. 79). Alternative literacy programs can support a sense of identity, confidence, and motivation (Jocson, 2006). Further, Jacobi (2008) suggests that, "Offering juveniles opportunities to engage in both conventional and alternative visual and textual practices can enhance critical thinking and decision-making skills, resulting in a critical correctional education" (p. 74).

One way to engage in alternative literacy is through poetry. Jocson (2006) indicates that poetry has the ability to increase one's self-awareness: "Poetry in this light reveals the power of words as one means for youths to make sense of their lives" (p. 701). Another creative form of therapeutic release that some teens have taken part in is music therapy. Music therapy uses music to address physical, emotional, cognitive, and social needs of individuals (AMTA, 2004). Studies show that music and poetry therapy are beneficial for adolescents with mental health disorders, addiction problems, and those looking to explore their feelings while developing coping skills (Gooding, 2008). An additional alternative literacy program can involve reflective journal writing. Journaling can support a person's ability to be introspective, thus, helping connect values, personal styles, and approaches to dealing with one's lived experience (Langley & Brown, 2010). As well, mentoring has been demonstrated to support the growth of self-esteem of young people. Tewksbury and Stengel (2006) found that students value tutorial relationships and that self-esteem improved for students who were involved in mentoring relationships. Mentoring can provide modeling for stable and

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sustainable relationships with adults that many young offenders have not experienced (DuBois & Keller, 2017).

The literature on how to support the self-esteem and sense of belonging of young males, particularly those who have been incarcerated, is limited. However, alternative educational programs, such as those which use poetry, music therapy, journaling, and mentoring appear to have some benefit for young offenders. This exploratory study utilized aspects of alternative literacy programs, specifically reflective journal writing within a mentoring program, to engage the two participants in giving voice to their experiences related to self-esteem and sense of belonging.

### ***Methodology***

The research question that was the focus of this exploratory study was, “What are the family, school, and community experiences of male youth following release from incarceration and how do these contribute to their sense of belonging and self-esteem?” To explore the research question, we chose a case study approach within a qualitative research framework. Merriam (1998) indicates that qualitative research is conducted with the understanding that “reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds. Qualitative researchers are *interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world” (emphasis in original, p. 3). Thus, our goal was to provide voice to the two young men, not only to assist them in this meaning-making process, but to also provide opportunity for a broader understanding of the experiences of young men who have been released from custody facilities.

A case study method provides occasion to examine a situation and to bring meaning from that context. As stated by Merriam (1998), “The interest is in process rather than outcomes, in context rather than a specific variable, in discovery rather than confirmation” (p.



19). A case study approach allows a focus on the importance of insights, exploration, and understanding (Merriam, 1998). The case study approach allows the reader to come to an understanding of what this experience means to the participants and how the realities of the participants are able to inform the professional practices of those who attempt to support them. The cases in this study were two young men who had been incarcerated and who had been released from a custody facility at the time of the study. Thus, a case study approach was used to provide a detailed description and analysis of their perceptions of self-esteem and belonging.

Two forms of data collection were implemented in this project: interviews and journal writing. First, the two participants met regularly with the lead author to engage in informal conversations and semi-structured interviews about their experiences with incarceration, family, education, and community life. Informal conversations occurred with both participants on an ongoing basis over a six-month period of time. These informal conversations were situated within a volunteer mentoring program that both young men participated in to help them engage with their community after incarceration. As well, semi-structured interviews were conducted with each of the participants throughout the six months. Interviewing allowed for exploring topics and issues which came about in the casual conversations that had been taking place (Merriam, 1998). Interviews provided a deeper understanding of what self-esteem and sense of belonging meant to each participant, along with how they identified the communities they felt included in, excluded from, or hoped to be included in.

The interviews took place in environments chosen by each of the young men in order to ensure that they felt comfortable speaking about their personal experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Interviews ranged between 15-30 minutes in length and were recorded with a digital audio recorder. Transcripts were provided to each of the participants in order to allow them

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the opportunity to add or clarify any comments that they deemed necessary.

Second, the young men engaged in journal writing as a way for them to document their experiences and to express their ideas and insights. They were provided with direction about ways in which they could journal. They were also provided with notebooks and pens to facilitate the process. The journal writing time was structured with the lead author to provide guidance and support. This usually took the form of meeting for a short period of time with a guided journal writing session as the focus of that time. Writing prompts varied at each session and included writing about difficult moments in their past and others which focused more on positive life experiences. Each of the participants had a different level of involvement in the journaling sessions that they took part in. One participant participated in six journal writing sessions, whereas the other requested additional writing sessions and ended the study having met fourteen times to take part in reflective journal writing.

Both young men participated in a community organization which supports marginalized youth. It was through this organization that the young men and the lead author were partnered. The organization, Pathways to Community (pseudonym), provided permission and support for the study. Pathways to Community strongly believes in restorative justice practices and assisting those that have been incarcerated in any way that will help them create a more positive lifestyle. The purpose of Pathways to Community is to both reconnect youth to the community after incarceration and to support them in their emotional, psychological, and physical well-being. Youth involved in the program are able to get to know the volunteers from Pathways to Community when they attend recreational programming events two evenings per week. After receiving university research ethics clearance, two male participants of this program were asked if they would be willing to participate in the study to which they agreed. It was through these programming events that informal conversations were nurtured between the two male participants and the lead author.

What follows are the voices of the two participants as they share insight into their lived experiences with incarceration, education, and belonging.

### *Findings*

Prior to learning about the various experiences of the two young men that took part in the study, it is important to understand who these young men are and what life experiences brought them to the study. All names are pseudonyms.

#### *Johnny's story*

When we met Johnny, he was 19 years old living in an apartment with his older brother, in a mid-sized Canadian city two hours from his birthplace. He had lived in his current city for eight years and moved there on his own, although his mother had been living there for the past 12 years. The remainder of his family, including his three brothers, had recently moved to the same city. Johnny is the second youngest of four boys and lived in, by his accounting, more than 30 different places as a result of being in the foster care system. It was as early as Grade 1 that Johnny was getting in trouble at school. He had to repeat Grade 1, and he recalls continually got into trouble and eventually being expelled from school. Once entering high school, Johnny moved to a new city and was able to make it through Grade 9. However, in November of his Grade 10 year, he was expelled from school and sent to an alternative education school. That December, only one month later, Johnny ended up incarcerated and it was at the school associated with the custody facility that he earned most of his credits.

#### *Dominique's story*

Dominique was 16 years old at the time of the study, living with his mother and siblings – two sisters and a brother. Dominique had lived in a number of different co-op housing communities within neighbouring cities. He indicated that his biggest move was when he moved to his current city from Africa at the age of 5. Since arriving in Canada,

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Dominique had attended seven different schools. It was in Grade 7 that his experience with schooling became negative and that he began to be turned off by school. It was at this time that Dominique says he was first made aware of the racist attitudes of some educators. Being called a “Negro” in front of a class of his peers was a particularly upsetting experience. He indicated that it was at this point that he began to dislike the education system. In high school, he began to skip class in order to hang out or smoke marijuana with his friends. When Dominique was 15 years old, he spent six months in a custody facility. Schooling at the custody facility allowed Dominique to work on earning the credits that he was not successful in obtaining when in high school.

### *Key Themes*

The key themes which emerged from the interviews with Johnny and Dominique, and their journal entries, are trust, family, friendships, and perceptions of self-esteem and belonging. We explore these themes further in this section.

#### *Trust*

Although Johnny never wrote about trust in his journal entries, he did allude to it in conversations and interviews. Following his initial interview, Johnny said that, although he chose the location for the meeting and he felt comfortable meeting there, he was still concerned that people ten feet away may have heard him. It was through this comment that it became very clear that Johnny’s past experiences had led him to hesitate when trusting people that he was not familiar with.

While growing up in foster care and getting in trouble with the law, he encountered many situations which contributed to his decreasing trust in those around him. Johnny wrote about feeling alone while in foster care and lacking trust in others: “I felt like I couldn’t talk to anybody, because I didn’t trust anybody and the second that I would begin to they’d move me so it’s been hard to trust people and because of that I have felt alone.” Pathways to

Community introduced him to a community mentor and Johnny developed a strong sense of trust with this mentor. As well, Johnny relied heavily on his close friends and one of his brothers – all of whom he clearly trusted. Johnny indicated that one's actions are key in determining if they are worthy of his trust. He stated, "Just don't think you're above me just because you think you are. You are equal with me because that is what you are."

Dominique demonstrated a similar belief in the need for trust and respect in order to maintain a positive relationship with others. Rather than trusting people immediately, Dominique said that he had been hurt too many times by people that he trusted and, thus, no longer extended immediate trust to people. Dominique stated that,

Honestly, I don't trust a lot of people. I trust my family. I trust my mom, I trust my brother and my sisters. I trust some of my friends, but I've given my trust to a lot of people and they used it against me, you know? So, I have trust issues. But, I see a lot of people that I think I can trust and there's a lot of people I know I can trust, but I still don't give them that trust just in case. There are people that I would never trust.

Before an interview, Dominique indicated that he wanted to go to a regular coffee shop to complete the interview. Upon approaching the shop, he realized that this location tended to be quiet and that other people might hear him when he spoke. Because of this realization, Dominique changed his mind about the location and suggested a much busier place to be interviewed. Dominique said that the busier coffee shop would prevent other people from hearing what he had to say. He indicated that he did not trust people around him.

Although Dominique indicated that he did not easily trust people, it was not impossible for people to gain his trust. He trusted the volunteers from Pathways to Community program and many of the staff that worked at the custodial facility while he was there. Rather than trusting people immediately, Dominique had a strong need to evaluate other's actions in order to determine whether he could trust them. When asked why he felt he was able to trust his Pathways to Community volunteers, he said, "Based on what I've seen throughout the years, all they want to see, right, is me do good. They do everything they can

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to just help me. So, there's no reason for me not to trust them right?" It was through the actions of others that Dominique felt that he was able to assess their character and determine whether he was able to trust someone.

Like Johnny, Dominique made it clear that he did not judge people based on what they look like or the way they live but that he respects anybody that shows him respect:

It doesn't matter if you're gay, you're retarded or you're white; I don't care. As long as you are respectful to me I will be respectful to you. I go by the Golden Rule; it's as simple as that. That's my top thing, just respect.

Interestingly, Dominique made it clear that he experienced shame when thinking about one of the crimes that he committed against his own friend and which had led to a break-down in trust. Dominique indicated that he used information that his friend entrusted him with in order to hurt this friend. In the same interview, he also shared a story about a time when friends he thought he could trust broke into his home and stole all of his mother's belongings while Dominique was in custody.

Although Johnny and Dominique spoke of earning trust in different ways, it became clear that they both found that trust was an important factor in their lives. Both of the young men apparently had learned that they could not trust a stranger to follow through on their word, which is why they looked to people's actions to determine their level of trust.

Dominique summed it up in a journal entry when he wrote, "I respect the people who want to see me do good."

### *Family*

Johnny spoke of his mother and one of his older brothers frequently in his interviews. He often spoke of the different things that he has done to help his mother. Although Johnny alluded to many negative experiences with his family, it was clear that loyalty to family was important to him. He often did things to help his mother and although some initially cautioned him about living with his brother, he did so anyway. The two of them relied on one

another when in need and made sure to keep each other accountable so that they stayed away from potential trouble.

When asked to write about a moment that he felt proud of himself, Johnny immediately wrote about being happy that he made a difference in his family when he was the first person to graduate from high school: “I felt proud because I was the first in my family to get my grade 12 on time. [...] What made me want to graduate so badly is the fact that I’d be the first in my family to graduate on time.” Johnny showed that he could be motivated to accomplish significant things when wanting to impress his family; family was clearly important to him.

Dominique also demonstrated a sense of loyalty to his family. Living with his mother, brother and sisters, Dominique made it very clear that he held a strong sense of love and responsibility for his entire family. Dominique felt a heightened sense of responsibility since, without his father in his life, he was the eldest male in the home. Dominique said that, “Family’s first for me; it always has been. I’ve been the man in the house since I was five.” It was important to Dominique that his brother not have the same experiences with getting into trouble that he did. Dominique made a connection between not having his father around as a role model in his life and his sense of belonging:

Until this day, I’ve never once seen my dad. I’ve been the man of the house for as long as I remember. I taught myself everything. Nobody showed me how to ride my bike, nobody asked me to come play ball with them, nobody was there with me growing up except for me. It’s been me, my bro, my sisters and my mom. That’s it. I feel alone every day. But god gives me the power to be a man; I want better for my brother.

Dominique worried about his family as he stated that his “worst years” with getting into trouble with the law were when he was 11 and 12 years old. By this point, he had been exposed to guns and other weapons. His ultimate concern was that his brother was, at the time of the study, the same age that Dominique was when he first got into trouble and he knew that his mom often worried that he would be just like Dominique. It was clear that his

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brother truly looked up to him as his male role model. It was because of this admiration that Dominique worried and had a desire to make more positive choices in order to be a good example for his brother.

Dominique often discussed his family, particularly his worry for his mother. Dominique stated, “Some things in my life that really stress me out are things like seeing my mom down or upset...” Frequently, Dominique spoke of his responsibilities to take care of his younger siblings while his mom worked, and his desire to help her in any way. He appreciated how hard she worked and, because of this, he made sacrifices for her of which she was unaware. For example, Dominique was a very skilled basketball player that was scouted to play for a rep team that was based two hours away from his home. Although he was very excited at the possibility of playing for the team, Dominique informed the coach that he would not be playing as he did not want the undue stress put on his mother when it came to transportation and additional fees. He thought of his family often and of how much they had accomplished together; it was not uncommon for him to state, “I love them all”. Although Johnny and Dominique had experienced many hardships throughout their childhood, they both still exhibited a sense of loyalty and love for their families. Both Johnny and Dominique were able to look past some of the pain that family members caused them and continued to express love, loyalty, trust, and respect for them.

### *Friendships*

After release from the custody facility, Johnny believed that he had begun to surround himself with peers that would not encourage him to take part in negative behaviours. He felt confident with his current friendships and believed that he made amends with everybody that he needed to from his past. Dominique also reflected on his friendships in his interviews and journal writing. Dominique, like Johnny, was able to recognise that he has had some friends that were negative influences in the past. Dominique believed that one of the most negative



influences in his life has been his past friends:

There is about five or six of my friends from childhood that have not sold or smoked weed, drink, rob, steal, harm, or cause someone to be harmed, until this day [but] one of my friends is doing 11 years with no parole right now. He retaliated after a gang of white boys jumped his cousin. He ended up stabbing the guy four times. My friends could be the worst influences or the best.

Dominique had come to learn that it was better for him to eliminate the negative people from his life and focus on having a small circle of peers that he could trust.

Although Dominique wrote and spoke quite a bit about the negative friendships and influences in his life, he also spoke about the ways in which the positive friends took care of one another. Dominique shared an example of how he grew out of a pair of basketball shoes and decided that rather than selling them, he would rather give them to a friend in the housing complex who needed a pair. It became clear that Dominique had learned that friends were there to support and help one another and that he appreciated and respected the friends that showed him the same respect that he exhibited.

Overall, Johnny and Dominique agreed that, in order to be happy and to accomplish their goals of staying out of trouble, they needed to remove the negative friendships in their lives and stick with those that were supportive of their present goals. They both demonstrated the strong influence that peers have on teens. They also recognized the importance of surrounding themselves with positive role models in order to assist them in making positive choices that would decrease the potential of exhibiting poor behaviours that may lead them to get in trouble with the law.

#### *Perceptions of Belonging and Self-esteem*

An early journaling activity in the study asked each of the participants to define community and belonging. Johnny defined community as being as simple as belonging. He had difficulty identifying communities he was part of although he did refer to Pathways to Community as such a place. Dominique initially defined community by saying, "Community

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means a group of people all working together to build a structure.” He began the study already feeling like he belonged within the co-op housing community in which he lived. He felt part of the housing community:

I know all the people in the community. It is a good community because everybody knows each other and we work together to keep it clean and, you know, keep the violence and stuff out of the neighborhood, like for the kids and stuff, you know?

Although both participants expressed varying ideas of community throughout the study, they for the most part felt that they were on the fringes of the broader community.

Relatedly, a common topic that arose throughout the interviews and journal entries was one’s self-esteem. When asked what word they associated with the term *self-esteem*, both Johnny and Dominique chose the word *feelings*. Another commonality between Johnny and Dominique was that they both felt like they had a high sense of self-esteem. When asked for a examples of self-esteem, Dominique said,

My self-esteem is like how much I could take care of something. You know what I mean? Let’s say I’m playing ball, right? And someone is talking a whole bunch of shit, saying that I can’t dribble or, you know, just making fun of me or something or whatever. My self-esteem is like, am I gonna listen to what he says and, like, break down because he’s telling me this or am I gonna just fight through it and ignore what he says and do what I can, you know?

Dominique believed that he had a high self-esteem and shared an example of how he responded to adversity when he was incarcerated:

I would always play ball with this other guy and he would always try to talk shit to me. He would always try to, like, put me down. Tell me that I’m tall for nothing, like, that, I can’t dunk, I’m a waste of height or, you know, like I’m never going to amount to nothing or just trying to put me down. Okay what I am trying to say is, when people try to put me down, I overcome that and I come and I show them that I can do what they’re saying that I can’t. Right? Like, I know I CAN do it.

It was evident through the study that the experiences of Johnny and Dominique led to many insights about relationships and a sense of belonging and self-esteem.

## *Discussion*

### *Trust, Relationships, Self-esteem, Belonging*

The experiences of Johnny and Dominique illustrate the many challenges that young men who have been recently released from a custody facility face when re-entering family and community life. Both Johnny and Dominique articulated that their self-esteem was connected to their sense of belonging, particularly with friends and family members. Being removed from their homes due to incarceration had also removed them from the place where they both felt strongest about their sense of belonging, even if not always ideal settings (Jacobi, 2008). Upon release from incarceration, both desired more positive peer and family relationships than they had before entering a custody facility. These relationships, whether with friends or family, were built on trust and contexts where they felt accepted, respected, and supported by others (Goodenow & Grady, 1992).

The opportunity to engage in journal writing, first introduced through the educational program of the custody facility and then in the volunteer community program, enabled Johnny and Dominique to reflect on the importance of friends, family, and mentors. They began to see the importance of trust in these relationships. Through the guided discussions and interviews, they also articulated how they were developing a greater understanding of what it meant to belong and how this impacted their self-esteem. Based on the experiences of Johnny and Dominique, the opportunity to engage in alternative literacy programs appears to be a positive way to support the self-esteem and sense of belonging of recently incarcerated young men. This supports Jocson's (2006) contention that alternative literacy programs can support one's sense of identity and Jacobi's (2008) suggestion that these programs support critical decision-making processes.

### *How Can Schools Support At-Risk Youth?*

The experiences of Johnny and Dominique serve as key reminders to educators and

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community workers of the importance that schools can play in the development of one's self-esteem and sense of belonging. When educators have low expectations of marginalized students, this can impact their future success (Montero, 2012) and can also result in deviant behaviour (Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). Conversely, those students who do experience support in schools, when they feel appreciated and valued, tend to find the school experience not only more enjoyable but beneficial (Goodenow & Grady, 1992).

Finn (1989) also reminds us of the importance of youth feeling a sense of belonging within the school system in order to be successful. Finn contends that if a student does not feel any connection or sense of belonging within their school, the youth will begin to gradually disengage and eventually increase the likelihood of dropping out. In order to combat this disengagement with at-risk youth in a traditional school setting, educators need to implement more opportunities for youth to actively reflect on their lives. Whether reflectively expressing themselves in writing in class or even in a club, the young men who took part in this study show the potential that this type of program may offer in assisting at-risk youth in increasing their self-esteem and sense of belonging within the school and community. Creating such a program would not be as simple as inviting students to write in journals. It is important to get to know the youth and authentically work to identify ways to gain their trust and respect. As at-risk youth engage in this type of programming, the feeling of belonging may encourage them to stay in school. Goodenow and Grady (1992) alert us of the importance of a high sense of belonging as students that have a strong sense of belonging in school are more motivated and academically successful in school.

Johnny and Dominique also provided specific advice for teachers. Johnny urged educators to remember that teaching does not have a one size fits all approach. In order to gain the respect and trust of one's students and, thus, engage the youth, it is essential to find the teaching approach that works best for each individual educator. Once the educator

understands their personal approach, it is important to remember that each student also needs to be identified as an individual and, thus, be treated in their own unique way. Dominique stated it this way:

I could learn easily if I have a good teacher. You know, like, if my teacher is respectful, uses a calm voice, you know, like, lets me work at my own pace, let's me get my things done... if I do the things I'm supposed to do, like, I expect the same thing back. If I respect you, I expect you to respect me.

Allowing youth to work at the pace that is best suited for their needs is something that, to Dominique, would cause less stress and show that the teacher understands, respects, and cares about each individual's needs. In order to create an environment where at-risk youth feel comfortable, educators should consider their tone of voice, the set-up of the classroom, and the pace at which they are expecting students to work.

*Recommendations for Those Working in the Field*

Community service workers, teachers, and social workers play a significant role in supporting the self-esteem and sense of belonging of young people (Tewksbury & Stengel, 2006). These workers, when serving as mentors, can provide modeling of what stable and healthy relationships with adults are like (DuBois & Keller, 2017). At the same time, those who work with young people face increasing challenges. For example, educators and social workers are increasingly responding to mental health concerns of those who have been previously incarcerated (Moore, Gaskin, & Indig, 2013). As noted earlier, youth who have been released from custody facilities are often dealing with low self-esteem and lack a sense of belonging, both within their community and their family (Bateman & Hazel, 2015). A key aspect of positive mental health is developing positive relationships with peers and mentors. These relationships do not always come easily for young people who have been incarcerated. Trust is difficult to develop but seems to be crucial for nurturing these relationships.

When asked if they had any advice for community support workers and social

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workers who may encounter youth in a similar situation as Johnny and Dominique, both shared a similar view about the need for trust and respect. Johnny cautioned those working with youth to not, "...go out there expecting them to listen to them just because you want them to... most of them don't take initiative well so just come into it with a friendly [attitude]." It was clear that Johnny did not appreciate youth workers and educators who assumed their role entitled them to automatic respect and trust from young people.

Both participants urged those people who work with marginalized youth to simply try and spend time with them. Conversations need not be pressing for information about their past choices and their current potentially difficult situations, but talking to the youth and treating them as if they were just like every other young person. Dominique and Johnny indicated that although they had engaged in criminal behaviour, and may have had a more troubled past than some, they still have common interests, hobbies, and desired forms of entertainment as other youth. Dominique stated this when he said

...so many people in my life just see me as a piece of paper. And I hate that people just automatically think that this guy is trouble, before they see me. I think everybody deserves a chance, no matter who, how big, small, gay, straight, black or white I don't care. Everyone deserves a chance.

The two participants articulated that no matter the past choices that a youth may have made, young people want to feel accepted and do not want to be treated with judgment.

### ***Conclusion***

This exploratory study has provided some insight into the lived experiences of two young men as they have returned to family and community life after incarceration. Further examination of the experiences of young men who have been released from incarceration could explore greater insights into the types of programs, both within and external to custody facilities, which benefit them when returning to their homes and communities. Particularly, further research is needed on the variety of alternative literacy programs and their impact on young people.

As well, this study focused on two young men who had been recently released from custody facilities. It is important to consider whether their experiences are reflective of others who have been incarcerated. Further research could examine the experiences of those in different jurisdictions to see what similarities and differences might exist. Similarly, there is limited research on the experiences of young women who have been released from custody facilities. Research needs to be conducted to explore what unique aspects of self-esteem and belonging exist for young women when returning to family and community life after incarceration.

It was clear from the experiences of Johnny and Dominique that the role of mentors through the community organization (Pathways to Community) that they spent time with after release from incarceration were very valuable to them. In an era of limited budgets and tightening resource allocations, further work needs to be done to explore the role of mentors and community organizations in supporting marginalized youth. As well, further consideration needs to be given to how supports in community organizations and those within schools can be more deliberately coordinated to support marginalized youth.

The experiences of Dominique and Johnny, including those within their family, school, and community contexts, provide powerful examples of the challenges which face youth who have been released from custody facilities. This exploratory study provides an opportunity for those who work with such young men to consider how to support their self-esteem and sense of belonging through community organizations and alternative education programs.

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