



Event Transcript

Education Justice: Centering Student Voices

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Harvard Radcliffe Institute

Description

“Education Justice: Centering Student Voices” is the second in a two-part series that explores education justice in carceral settings and through nontraditional paths.

As detailed in the docuseries *College behind Bars*, the power of education has profound positive ripple effects, and traditional classrooms are not always accessible or attainable for all learners. This student-led panel will highlight a range of educational experiences, both positive and negative, and will attest to the power of education in various forms. Their stories illustrate the critical importance of meeting the needs of all students and of ensuring that our systems are reconsidered and redesigned to center compassion, equity, and opportunities for all.

View the four-part documentary film series *College behind Bars* on PBS through December 31, 2020, or view the extended trailer for the series.

SPEAKERS

Zoë L. Hopkins, student, Harvard College Class of 2022

Katie Medrano-Escobar, graduate, The Loop Lab

Sebastian Yoon, graduate, Bard Prison Initiative, Bard College

Transcript

LYNETTE NICOLE TANNIS:

- Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you so much for joining us for part 2 of this two-part Education Justice panel series. This session specifically is focused on Centering Student Voices. I think it's pretty timely that this is happening this week, in that the America's Promise Alliance has also launched their Dear Adult Leaders with the hashtag Listen to Youth. And so we have

learners throughout our nation who are writing letters to their leaders and hope for positive changes within their schools.

This whole title of Education Justice, it's kind of like, what does this even mean? I mean, every time I think about the word justice, I can't help but think back to 1776. The second paragraph of our nation's Declaration of Independence reads, we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Although this was espoused, it is evident that equality only came in certain shades, especially considering that slavery was still legal during that time. Equality, certain unalienable rights, this whole idea of it's being impossible to take away or to give up, that's what we were promised. But unfortunately, those were just espoused truths, or perhaps espoused lies, hopefully truths that just haven't been actualized yet.

I think about Frederick Douglass, who once asserted that education means emancipation or liberty or freedom. And as you hear from today's panel, if you have never known us to be an unjust nation or that there are certain injustices that exist within the education spaces based on things you have encountered before, I am here to tell you that we've encountered many things. But unfortunately, the justice piece is definitely something that is still lacking. And so if you ever want to help realize this liberty and freedom, I think it's really important that we equip all learners with a high-quality education. In thousands of schools across our nation, zero tolerance policies and just even suspensions and expulsions and even this belief of who deserves a quality education has definitely forced a lot of students out of our schools. We sometimes use the term of school dropouts. And what we've come to learn over these last couple of years is like we are actually pushing children out of school.

A couple of data points I just want to share with you. One is by the American Educational Research Association that determined that if a child is unable to read at or above grade level by the end of third grade, they are four times less likely to graduate with their peers. And when poverty is added to the mix, they are 13 times less likely to graduate. Keep that in mind, and couple that with a study that Risler and O'Rourke did in 2009, where it was determined that an average 75% of our nation's incarcerated youth were school dropouts. So you do begin make that connection.

And if that weren't bad enough, another demonstration that we are pushing children out of school—and a lot of this came through the high stakes testing. There's one school district, for example, one of several, but the example that I'll just share with you is the El Paso Independent School District in Texas, where—this was a couple years ago. To avoid the English language learners—a very strong population of English language learners—to avoid them from taking the 10th grade standardized tests, you found that they were skipping students from the ninth grade to the 11th grade.

There were students who were graduating with a diploma who hadn't even completed the required coursework. This was their way to push the students out so that they would not have to answer to any accountability structures. It's really abysmal

Additionally, based on research that was done by the Justice Policy Institute, it's been determined that children of color are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled, compared to their

white counterparts. And children who are suspended or expelled are three times more likely to be involved with the justice system. I know school resource officers has been a debate, especially within these last couple of years. Based on that study, it's been determined that schools with school resource officers or police officers in those schools, those students are 11 times more likely to be involved with the justice system.

These are injustices that are happening in free spaces. Imagine what's happening in carceral spaces, where there is still this belief that punishment should be long-lasting. So education justice, education fairness or equity, this is yet to be realized. But change happens by action, not by inertia. And today, as you hear from Sebastian and Katie and Zoe, I hope that you listen intently and that you figure out what you should further investigate and/or just further take action on, so that the right change can happen that is desperately needed in these spaces.

Sebastian is going to serve as today's moderator. And each panelist will also provide a brief introduction. We just ask that you pose whatever questions you may have in the Q&A box that you see within your Zoom screen. And they will try their best to answer as many questions as possible within there, in the College Behind Bars docuseries.

Sebastian makes many poignant statements, but there's one in particular that most resonated with me. And he said a system—we currently have a system that lacks the moral foundation needed if, in fact, we believe in second chances. Folks, transformation is desperately needed. And I am pleased to pass the virtual floor to Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Lynette, thank you so much for introducing me. Hi, guys. My name is Sebastian Yoon. And I am currently employed with the Open Society Foundation, which is a global grant-making organization that provides support and grants to organizations that are committed to multiracial democracies, protecting and expanding voting rights, and making sure that the government remains accountable to its people.

I'm also currently a grad student at Baruch College, pursuing a master's in public administration. And when I was 16 years old, I was incarcerated for a manslaughter charge. And I served 12 and 1/2 years out of a 15-year sentence.

But what's most notable about my incarceration is that during that time, I was able to have this incredible opportunity to apply for a college program called Bard Prison Initiative. And after 7 and 1/2 years, I obtained a bachelor's degree in social studies. And I wrote a senior thesis that was 125 pages long.

And like earlier I said, I am part of a docuseries that you can watch on Netflix, which will show you not only the immense potentiality that exists within prison, but the humanity that exists within those walls. And through our panel discussions, I hope that you can learn a lot about the criminal justice system and how important education is to our society. And with that, I pass on to Katie Medrano-Escobar.

KATIE MEDRANO-ESCOBAR:

- Thanks so much, Sebastian. Yeah, so when everyone asks me, who are you, what's your introduction? I always start by saying that I'm a second-generation Salvadorian. And the reason why I start with that is because that, a part of my identity, has truly shaped my journey.

So my parents come from a small country in Central America called El Salvador. And they migrated here to America in the '80s. And their success as, not all, but a lot of immigrants that come to this country, is this American dream, the American success, where the real success you can have for my parents was either I become an accountant, a teacher, a doctor, or a lawyer. Any other thing that was not that career just seemed impossible. And I'm using that very loosely.

So right after high school, I went to a four-year college. And I actually had to drop out. And I like how Lynnette said, I don't like the term dropout, because really I was pushed out. The reason why I had to drop out is because my financial aid was canceled, and I was unable to afford staying there.

So once I dropped out, I moved back home. And it was just that constant journey of trying just, how am I going to pay to go to school? Because it was just pressure of—especially as a second-generation immigrant, is like, I can't let my parents down. My parents came here. They sacrificed a lot. I am their legacy, in a sense.

So a lot of it was me working three jobs in order to save up, in order to afford going back to school. But it just seemed impossible. And actually, it wasn't until one day I came across an old friend of mine who was dressed up in a suit, and I was like, where are you going? And he was like, oh, I'm actually doing this program called Year Up. And if you're based in Boston, you've probably heard of it, but it's a nationwide workforce development program.

And so I enrolled. I went through the finance track, because it was just like, this seems feasible. And so that led into where I currently am right now. My current position is I'm a payroll, benefits, and accounts payable manager at a health care nonprofit in Boston. And I've been there for four years now.

And because of that opportunity, I was able to be like, hey, no, I can do whatever I want. I don't have to be in a finance track. I don't have to go to college. I don't have to do these normal society things in order to be successful. It can be successful—success is such a very general term.

So I actually enrolled in another workforce development program called the Loop Lab. And it's a workforce development program in order to bring people of color and women of color into the media arts world. And so I was like, I'm going to take a chance. I'm going to do it. And so I enrolled, and I graduated this year in September.

What a crazy year to join a new program, I'm telling you. But just all that to say that my journey has—this is not what I thought. If you were to ask me in 2013, when I graduated high school, where would I be in five years, let's say—even though it's been more—I would not say I would be where I am now.

And that is because I've been—there are different alternatives to higher education. It doesn't just have to be that narrow path to college. Yeah, so that is my little introduction, and I am going to pass it on to Zoe.

ZOË L. HOPKINS:

- Thank you so much, Katie. I'm so excited to be here with you and Sebastian and conversation today. So hi, everyone. My name is Zoe Hopkins. I'm currently a junior at Harvard College, though I'm actually taking the semester off, so I don't really know how to refer to myself. Anyway, I'm a junior. I'm studying African-American studies and art history. I'm here as a proud Black feminist and prison abolitionist. And those two things have really shaped my entire worldview, the way I navigate my education. And those are the two primary lenses that I think have brought me to this panel, as a student and also an activist who is actively working to dismantle systems of carcerality.

So I'm an organizer with the Harvard Prison Divestment Campaign, which is a group seeking to sever Harvard's financial and ideological ties with the prison industrial complex and to reinvest the divested funds into communities that have been most adversely affected by mass incarceration, hyper-surveillance, and policing, so namely, Black, brown, and low income communities. So I came to organizing through an understanding that my degree—I couldn't fully be proud of my degree until I knew that it was divested from systems of harm like the prison industrial complex. And I was motivated by the understanding that institutions of higher learning and other sites of knowledge production are really deeply implicated in the carceral state and in other systems that necessitate structures of oppression.

So that's sort of why I'm here today. I'm also just generally motivated by the idea of a world without prisons, a world in which education is not tied to carcerality, a world in which we can all learn to our fullest potential without things like the school-to-prison pipeline holding people back, without things like the conflation of blackness and brownness with criminality holding people back, without things like white supremacy and schooling holding people back. So I'm really here with a vision of liberating us all from those various structures that, as Lynette so aptly pointed out in the beginning of the panel, are really plaguing our education system and the country at large. So I'm so excited for this conversation, and I'm going to pass it back to Sebastian for moderating the conversation.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Thank you so much, Zoe. With the introductions concluded, we'll move on to four questions first, the first of which is, what went well or right in your Pre-K through 16 schooling experiences? In what ways and what went wrong, and what support did you need that you didn't have? Can you comment about any mentoring that you did or did not receive while in school? Katie, maybe you want to take the first shot at this.

KATIE MEDRANO-ESCOBAR:

- Yeah, totally. So I think that my perspective here is a little unique, in a sense, that I've been fortunate enough of never having to go to prison and never having to deal with the criminal justice system. But there's also still—there's that issue within the school, within education, but there's also just education overall. And so when I was reflecting back on my experience, I think that through elementary school and middle school, I had a lot of support.

So as I mentioned earlier, my family are immigrants from El Salvador, so Spanish was my first language. So the support of being able to take English as a second language classes and have that

support was very useful. And I also had a lot of support with my teachers and just trying to make sure that I was fed and all that.

But I think things drastically changed when I went into high school and college. I don't know what it is, but I just feel like you're older, so you have a little bit more independence. But that leaves a lot of room for negligence in the sense of not receiving the support that you need, and just teachers are so overwhelmed, and there's just so much going on that there is just a lot of room for error.

And I think that one of the things that really impacted me a lot was, in high school, I was just your average student, but I had gone to my guidance counselor and said, hey, I would like to know—colleges, I have to go to colleges, there's no choice with that. And she literally looked at me and was like, yeah, the best thing you're going to do is community college, which is not OK, right? There are different ways to support the students in ways that don't degrade them or belittle them.

And I think that was one of the main issues that I had throughout high school and college was that I didn't have that support that I needed. I asked the questions, but I just felt like I was unheard, and no one was really trying to guide me to the right way. And yeah, Zoe, I'm going to pass it on to you.

ZOË L. HOPKINS:

- Thanks, Katie. Yeah, so I mean, I'm the only one here for whom their pre-K through 16 education, or at least formally speaking, is still going. I think that's the case. So I might have a better answer to this question in two years when I have more retrospect. But as of now, this is the best I've got.

I would say my middle and high school education—I don't remember too much from earlier, but my middle and high school education, I remember having a difficult time, honestly. I attended, for most of my life, a relatively conservative all-girls school that was mostly white. I was one of, I think, three Black students in my grade, so really didn't have much support from other Black peers or from Black mentors, because there were no Black teachers at the school, which was extremely difficult to navigate, because I was figuring out what it meant to navigate the world as a Black woman.

And I am so thankful that I had family and my mom, who were able to show me those things. But when it came to schooling, there was really very little of that. And in addition, the curriculum at my school was—it was just really, really Eurocentric.

We learned the Enlightenment, like, three times. And it was taught as if it was this kind of thing that happened in a vacuum, right? It wasn't taught as a purveyor of global white supremacy and colonialism. We never learned that part of things.

And so when I got to college and started interacting with Black people and Black thought, and now I'm a Black Studies student, my whole world just shifted for the better. And I really come to understand my education as unlocking the imagination that it requires to think about a world without prisons or to think about a world without white supremacy. Because that does require a degree of imaginative thinking.

And so on the one hand, I really see my education as going hand-in-hand with the activism I do. But then there's this kind of double bind, in the sense that I know my education is financially tied to the very thing that I am fighting to dismantle. So it's tricky. It's weird to navigate. It's very murky.

And this is a panel about education and justice, and education in—for some folks here, education in carceral sites. And Harvard is definitely—it's not a prison. However, it does in many ways produce carceral logic.

On its material level, it funds prisons directly. And ideologically, it kind of supports the idea, because it is, in many ways, kind of embedded in legacies of white supremacy. It kind of upholds this idea that Black people, brown people deserve to be excluded from these spaces of learning, and our mechanisms of learning deserve to be excluded from the kind of foundations of knowledge production and learning that Harvard is really bound up with.

So I feel really lucky, on the one hand, to have so many phenomenal peers at Harvard, predominantly Black peers, who are supporting me, who I am learning from every day. And they really embody this idea that education isn't just institutional, right? It's really in people, as well. I think learning is people. Learning is experience and not just institutionality. So I feel extremely lucky to have encountered that at Harvard and hope that I can still hold that in relation to a goal of disrupting the institution's ties to the things that I know are causing violence. So I would say that's my somewhat scattered answer to the question. And I suppose I'll pass it to Sebastian.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Thanks so much, Zoe. I just want to tell the audience that I'm super glad for this opportunity, because I have met two like-minded individuals. And I cannot wait to share a cup of coffee with you in the future.

So the next question is, what happens when access to a quality education is only for some and excluded others? Particularly, what do you believe happens when we provide quality education to people we typically write off or underestimate? Why should society want an educated citizenry? Katie, I'll start with you again.

KATIE MEDRANO-ESCOBAR:

- Yeah. And Zoe, I think your answer was the perfect segue to this question, where in all honesty, I think when I was thinking about this question, I automatically thought about, isn't it kind of ironic that if you, as a parent, do not enroll your child in school, you get punished, but then the school that they're being—in public schooling they're not giving the greatest resources. They're really not—it's just like this weird dilemma of this is an expectation for society to be educated, but the resources that are given to the free public schooling are not up to par. And it's now come to a point where instead of education for all, it's education for those who can afford it, and good education, right?

And obviously, I think that is a clear issue. And I think that the reason why that is an issue is that here I am now, as a 25-year-old woman, learning things that I should have learned in high school or learning things that I should have learned when I was younger. And to think that when I have

conversations with my peers and it's like, wait, you learned that in high school? I didn't learn that.

And so there's obviously a huge, just inequality within the educational system. So when we think about what happens when we are given quality education to some, but not others, this creates a huge divide where it upholds white supremacy, because most of all those who can afford good, quality education are our white peers. And so it's really just holding up the white supremacy structure of people of color, Black, brown, low income, stay on the bottom, while folks who are able to afford this higher education, better quality education, can just exceed and do so much more. And we, as people of color, have to work so much harder to get just that same amount of quality education. Yeah. And so I'm going to pass it on to Zoe, because—it's so funny, because it was like a perfect segue to—exactly what Zoe said is exactly what my answer was for this.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- We'll discuss this.

ZOE L. HOPKINS:

- Yeah. I mean, you're absolutely right. I think the answer to this question is literally, you can see it. If you're asked, what does it do when we don't have equitable education, look around. We can immediately see the ramifications of segregated school systems, hyper-segregated school systems.

I'm from New York. New York has one of the most segregated school systems in the entire country. It's a complete mess, complete mess. And then you see it trickle down. You see it trickle out into the ways in which Black and brown people are disproportionately subject to a lack of resources.

It continues across the rest of their lives for—that's not to say that's the case for all Black and brown people, but at a disproportionate rate, it is the reality that that is the case. It is a lack of material resources that is continuous. And that is—when we think about where that comes from, it has a legacy.

When we think about the fact that slaves were literally prohibited from reading, we know it has a legacy. These things didn't emerge out of thin air. They're not accidental. And then I think there's kind of embedded questions within this broader question of, what is the impact of educational inequity?

I think another question we should be asking ourselves is, why does this country continue to fail to provide equitable education? Why? Why is this happening? And you could easily say white supremacy, which has led to the racialization and segregation of education, and capitalism, which has led to the monetization and financialization of education.

But then why do these systems exist? And they're ideological. They are learned systems. They are taught. Once again, they don't emerge from thin air. So then this really gets to the core, I think, of the problem, is what are we defining actually as quality education?

And on the one hand, yes, it's like learning how to read, learning how to write, learning how to do math at the highest levels. But what if we also included, within that rubric of quality education, teaching to divest students from white supremacy, teaching students to divest themselves from patriarchy, teaching students to divest themselves from carceral logic? And I don't think that we've gotten to that point yet.

And then we end up in this violent cycle, wherein white supremacy is produced in schools, because we're not taught that it's really a problem in schools. And then it shows itself, because the people who then go on to lead the schools allow this problem to persist, where Black and brown kids are getting behind, because our general kind of pedagogy and education does not take these problems seriously. And so what if a quality education was one in which students learned about white supremacy in kindergarten or where feminist studies was introduced into the curriculum in first grade? What if we embraced pedagogy that centered love and care?

If we had these things, would prisons exist? Would this cycle of educational inequity exist? I don't know. I don't know, so I think this is a question about—on the one hand, it's a question about what are we seeing, and on the other hand, it's a question of, where do these things come from? And I think the answer to that second question is, to a large degree, we forget these deeply embedded social problems when we think about our definition of quality education.

So I think there needs to be a really just seismic shift in the way that we're thinking about education in general. And I think it's going to take a while to get there, because as you remember from over the summer, the Trump administration just had this complete, visceral anxiety at the thought of critical race studies being a question that was engaged with in our education system. And I think that really just points to a deep flaw in the way that we understand knowledge and knowledge production in this country.

So I do think it's a question of just reorienting our approach totally. And then I do think we'll be well on our way, honestly, to a world in which we've gotten at the root of the problem of educational inequity. We won't have to think about Band-Aid solutions to all of the harm that has been done, because we'll have really fully transformed the way that people see each other. And I think that's what learning is about. I think learning is really about seeing each other and holding each other as human beings, because what else are we learning for? So yeah, hopefully, we can arrive there, and I think we can.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- I'm with you on that one. Well, we'll move on to the third question, which is, we learned that functions of prisons are, 1, punishment; 2, incapacitation; 3, deterrence. Do these functions work in ways society imagines or expects them to? How would you want to redesign or reimagine what we call a criminal justice system?

As a formerly incarcerated individual, perhaps I'll start here. I can tell you that from my experience of having been to six different maximum security prisons and three different jails, prison's full function seems to be to punish individuals. For the first several years of my incarceration, I spent my time sweeping and mopping floors. At the age of 18, I attempted suicide, because I just couldn't accept what my fate looked like at the time, this crippling sense of powerlessness and the lack of hope and just seeing four walls surrounding me all day and every

day and sweeping, mopping floors, which just wasn't enough for me. I couldn't even imagine myself doing 10 more years of this

And then I had the opportunity to apply for the Bard Prison Initiative, and I have to say that education saved my life in the literal sense. It gave me confidence. It gave me hope. It gave me—it inspired in me a desire to learn about my situation and my predicaments and to really delve into possible solutions.

So currently, there are approximately 2.1 million incarcerated human beings in prisons and jails in the United States today. And in New York state, for example, we taxpayers have to pay about \$60,000 to house and manage one individual in New York's prisons. If you think about it, \$50,000 could get one of you through college, Harvard, its tuition costs.

And there's something very wrong with that. If you look at the recidivism rate of the United States, it hovers around 60%. That means six out of 10 individuals who are released from prisons return to prisons within the first five years, and knowing that the government continues to refuse to do something about this massive, massive problem, and we need to come up with solutions. And education has proven through time and trial that education works, that if you provide access to higher education to prisoners, their recidivism rate will go down.

For example, graduates of the Bard Prison Initiative, the recidivism rate is under 3%. Compare 3% to 60%. It's something that works. It's something that makes society safer, because when people don't go back to prisons, less crimes are committed.

These individuals are able to return home and get jobs, increase tax revenues, be leaders in their communities. Because a lot of these individuals who come out of prisons, they don't get these jobs that you would think they would, right? Once they have an education, they're not working at McDonald's. You see them getting incredible and really well-paid jobs.

And I think one of the strengths that they bring to society is that they have this real deep passion for social justice. Having been dehumanized and treated in the way they had been, it makes us want to change the community. And that was the biggest inspiration for me. One of the things that I lacked in prison in my early years was that I lacked empathy. But there were social studies, and learning about other people's histories and cultures, it created empathy.

And it makes me see society as a reflection of who I am. And when I see other teenagers out there hanging out in the streets, I see me. I see lost kids who don't feel like they have power, who feel like they have no hope. And I want to change that. And I hope you guys are on the same ride as me. Zoe, would you like to add something to that?

ZOE L. HOPKINS:

- Yeah, absolutely. I think the way that this question frames incarceration and prisons in terms of these predominant structures of punishment, incapacitation, and deterrence, I think that's absolutely right. I do think on the one hand, this question of, do prisons function as society imagines or expects them to is difficult. I think that we have come to subconsciously understand prisons as necessary. And because of that, we don't question, until we ask ourselves to question, whether or not they are functioning as we expect them to.

And there's this whole refrain of, the prison system is broken. We have to fix it. The reality is that the prison system is not broken. The prison system was designed to be this way. The prison system was designed as a reinstantiation of slavery in the modern era. That is what it is designed to do, to disproportionately harm people of color, to separate families, to quell moral resiliency. And so I think on the one hand, we expect—our expectation is, OK, we live in a democracy. America is a democracy. So the prison system is—the Founding Fathers were probably right, and all these other people who invented prisons in the 19th century were probably right. So I guess if the expectation is that prisons are going to keep people safe, then people kind of just rest easy on that assumption. But the reality is really that prisons are the opposite of safety.

And so we're talking here about education. And I think education is as much about learning as it is about unlearning. I think we really have to unlearn this idea that prisons are what keep us safe and relearn other modes of safety, other modes of taking care of each other that are not retributive, that are not harmful and violent, that are not racist.

And so that brings me to the next part of the question of how would you want to redesign or reimagine what we call our criminal justice system. I think I said this from the jump—I don't think that a criminal justice system as prisons should exist. I think the notion of criminality is directly produced from white supremacy. And I do not think that criminality as an idea should exist.

So I do think a way to reimagine this system is to look at what kind of work are Black and brown people doing in their own communities to keep each other safe? What are the mechanisms of care that have been used in these communities to promote safety and to promote love? And people have been practicing these for centuries. The conversations around transformative justice, that's really just naming something that's existed for a long time in certain communities. So practices of mutual aid, practicing healing circles or things like educating people from the jump and investing in everyone as deserving of an education, that's not a new idea. That's certainly been in existence for some time. It's just that we've chosen to look away from those things in place of a different system that has caused a great deal of harm.

So I think what Sebastian was saying about education is absolutely right. I think that education is in many ways healing, whether it's education in school and where have mentors and where you have peers that care for you, or just education in conversations with friends or education through experiencing life. I think in many ways, those things can lead to the type of healing that is deeply needed in this country to move us beyond prisons and policing and surveillance. So I hope that answered the question.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Thank you for that. I appreciate you backing me up, yeah. So now we're going to move to the Q&A. If you have a question for our panel, please submit it, using the Q&A function at the bottom of your screen. Please keep it short, as we would like to get to as many questions as time we have.

So in the meantime, we do have some questions. Katie, I think this one is for you. When you say, "things I should have learned in high school" that you are learning at a slightly later stage, what are those things, generally? What do you feel are the most important parts or themes within this?

KATIE MEDRANO-ESCOBAR:

- Yeah. So one of the things that just right straight off the bat that I can tell you is the actual history of this country, where there's so much of the history of this country that is just completely blacked out and just not even mentioned. And we're taught this very white history that makes like—the first example I think is Christopher Columbus. For a long time I was like, Christopher Columbus discovered America, and he is the man, and we're here because of him.

And then it wasn't until later, I was like, [GASPS] he was a rapist and a murderer and just was not this persona that I was taught when I was younger. So that's an example of, these are the realities. I feel like we're not—we're taught this very whitewashed, but also "safe" history, "safe" in the sense of it works in favor of white supremacy.

But it's also like, that's not the reality of life. That's not the reality of what happened in this country, of what is currently going on right now. So those are examples, that's one specific example.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Thank you so much, Katie. Zoe, a good one for you—what are the strongest talking points that can be leveraged when talking to those pushing back against change?

ZOË L. HOPKINS:

- Change, OK. I know change is a big idea. Is there a particular sort of realm of change to focus on, or just change in general?

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- I think I'll state that right now would be maybe someone who is opposed to providing high-quality education to incarcerated folks.

ZOË L. HOPKINS:

- Yeah, yeah. I think a lot of the arguments that are made by people who say incarceration, prison education systems should not exist, I think one of the chief arguments is, while people are serving time, they haven't—they don't deserve it yet. Let them finish their sentence, and then we can have that conversation, which is a completely ridiculous way of looking at things. Even if we're to say, OK, prisons should exist, even if we're to say that, the people who—the prisons were invented as—the original penitentiary was invented to enable people to repent for their sins. That's where the term penitentiary comes from.

And it was supposed to be a kind of transformative environment where you could, quote, "self-correct." And if we are to take that, let's say that we are to take those things as true, even though they are not necessarily true—even if we were to take them as true, we can understand that education, based on the statistics that Sebastian gave, based on common knowledge, based on our own understanding and education, we can understand that education is an important part of self-fashioning, of becoming a person.

Learning about the world, as Sebastian said, teaches empathy. It teaches other important things, such as care. It teaches important things like conventionally speaking, critical thinking skills, et cetera, et cetera. And those are all important facets of this idea of correction. Whether or not we choose to believe in the idea of correction as justifying prisons, we can understand that education should play a central role in self-transformation.

And I think education, as we reflected on in the final question about how has education—why do you think education, people should deserve equal access to education? As we reflected on, education is an important part of transforming people and transforming systems, as well. So I think that that's one part of the argument.

I think the other part of the argument, which is this question of why should we want an educated citizenry, I don't think we can have a citizenry—we can't call it a citizenry without education, I don't think. Because if people are disenfranchised from those systems, in what way is that a, quote, "democratic" citizenry? In what way? That's just reproducing completely medieval functions of political, social relations.

So I think for people who buy into the idea of American democracy, for people who buy into the idea of America being a great nation with great ideals, when we know that in many ways the ideals that this country were built on have not been fulfilled—prisons being a chief example of that—I think that argument would hold weight. Why would you want to live in a country in which people are not taught to care for each other and people are not taught about political and social bonds? That seems like a fundamental oversight for me.

But that was a more specific example of how we can push people to embrace change. I think more generally speaking, advocating for change really starts with imagination. I really think that if our education system at its core was about unlocking people's capacity to imagine and unlocking people's capacity to dream bigger than where we are today, I think everyone would believe deeply in change.

And that's something that I've come to really believe in deeply through the practices of Black radical feminism and Black radical pedagogy. Blackness itself is a practice of imagining better and imagining bigger. And I think if we were to really embed that in the way that we think about education, we would have a world full of people believing in change and a world full of change-makers and a world full of people who wanted to tear down the prison walls.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Yeah. I'm sorry, if I just may add to that, I think there's a problem in which we frame those who are deserving or who shouldn't receive opportunities through education. For example, a lot of the discussion for the College Behind Bars revolves around the incarcerated folks. But we also have to juxtapose that with the correctional officers, most of whom do not have a college degree. They just got a high school equivalency diploma, or they graduated from high school, and that's enough.

During one of my run-ins with an officer, he told me that he wants us to come back to prisons, because if we didn't, how would they have jobs? So with that in mind, we have to wonder, what does it really mean to provide access to education to the country? It's not just for this particular segment of the population. We continually, continually think, oh, just people of color, they're the

only one who wants access to education. Those in marginalized communities want access to education.

That is just not true. People everywhere in every community want education. That's what parents want for their kids. And we have a way of delimiting our sense of understanding of how this frame could undermine our progress and halt progress. So once we see education as something that everyone could not only obtain, but benefit from, I think we can make some substantial moves.

With that said, we have about six minutes. And we have a question specifically directed at Zoe. So let's go. Talented and gifted programs have been used for several years to segregate the education of Black kids and white kids, as they are predominantly white, despite being at the same school. However, it also provides the opportunity for social mobility for Black and minority kids if they are placed in it. Do you think we should try to fix these problems, like they have to meet a quota, or get rid of them altogether in order to address educational disparities within the schools?

ZOË L. HOPKINS:

- That's an interesting question. I'm going to do the annoying thing where I answer the question with a question, which is, why does this concept of social mobility exist? And I think it's produced in many ways, by legacies of racial capitalism that were invented during slavery and this whole kind of Booker T Washington notion of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps a little bit, which is also shaped very much by the idea of the American Dream.

I think with respect to gifted and talented programs, I mean, I think it would be wonderful if, in an ideal world, we could have people learning together all at the same time. I'm not really sure why we have to separate gifted and talented kids from their peers, because I think, as I've said earlier, a lot of learning happens between students and between folks. And so I think if people are all in the same classroom, that just produces more harmony, more beauty, more learning, more knowledge.

So I don't really think that there's any imperative to separate or form echelons in the classroom, because I think that just, as the person who posed the question stated, not only does that recycle segregation along racial lines, but it also recycles segregation along other lines, such as the way that people think, the way that people learn, which are also important in a classroom. And so I think if we're talking about how to equalize the education system, I'm not super sure it does us any good to have tracking or to have tracked learning or to have gifted and talented programs, because all that does is stratify knowledge and reproduce systems of hierarchy that we're seeing in our broader culture within the classroom.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Great, thank you. Maybe we have time for one more. And I would like to direct this to Katie. What can more people do on a daily basis to fight for educational justice and change, especially if they're not in academic institutions or public offices?

KATIE MEDRANO-ESCOBAR:

- I feel like this is the perfect question for me, because I am literally in none of these positions. And as I'm sitting here, I'm learning from both you, Sebastian, and Zoe. I think that is what you can do is that you need to educate yourself. And it's kind of ironic that we're talking about that, because that's the only way you can learn how to help.

I think that one thing, especially for me, is that I only have the perspective—I only have my perspective of life. My experience is what shapes my perspective of how I see things and how we do things. And if I continue living my life with just my perspective, I am not going to be able to make any change in the world. Because the way that I got to where I am now, where I am very passionate about social justice, and I'm trying to make sure that the work that I do is in honor of social justice, to make a change of the world.

The reason why I got here is because I was able to learn from other experiences, learning from my peers, from my Black peers, from my Asian peers, from my white peers even, of just like being able to change my perspective and to empathize. I think that is so important, is that when you learn and you hear the experiences and just of what is going on, you gain empathy. And that's—I feel like for me it was like the starting point of being able to create change. Without being able to learn or educate myself with these problems that are currently going on, how am I—it's like that thing, how am I supposed to change anything if I don't know that things need to be changed?

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Yeah. I certainly agree with you, Katie. We're going to do our final question, and we're going to make this interesting by making it kind of like a speed round. So my last question to each of us will be, considering your position now and what you've learned, how would you like to mentor the younger generation? About a minute each. Katie?

KATIE MEDRANO-ESCOBAR:

- Yeah. OK, so I think the way that I would like to mentor the younger generation is kind of leading by example of, I did not go the traditional route of college, but yet still, here I am with a career, and I am successful in my own way. And just because there's these societal—society says you have to go to college, you have to do this, you have to do that, does not mean that it's the right thing to do. So yeah, that is my little—just because society says you have to do it or your parents or your school or whatever does not mean that is the path you have to go.

There are so many different things, like there's the workforce development. There's vocational trades. There's just so much that college doesn't have to be the answer for everyone. There's so many different options.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Awesome. Zoe?

ZOË L. HOPKINS:

- Yeah. I think Katie's answer to that question was spot on. I think also I would teach people that, the younger generation—I don't know. I don't know if I speak on much authority, because I'm

20. But I think what I would tell folks younger than me is love and education and care and thinking don't have to be separate.

I think that our education system teaches us that there is a part of us that thinks, and that's up here, and then there is a part of us that loves and cares, and that's here. And those two things we keep separate. But I don't think that those things are separate at all. And I think what I would really seek to center is finding ways of learning and teaching oneself that are motivated by love and that see one's position in the world as intimately bound up with other people, as completely inseparable from other people.

And so encouraging the practice of study as something that is done collectively and learning as something that is done collectively I think is really important to the way that I understand mentorship and teaching and education and all those things.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Great.

ZOË L. HOPKINS:

- That was fast.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Yeah, that was good. Thank you. I'll finish it with you by saying this—do not see education as a form of obtaining a piece of paper, a degree. I hope that you all can walk away from this panel starting to see education as a form of power. If you look throughout history, totalitarian governments, oppressive governments, they had a kryptonite, right? If you look into history, what was it? It was students, students and student uprisings.

And therefore, governments tried to suppress education, and there's a reason for that. Education is frightening to those who want to suppress others. And you have that power in your hands. You're on the right path. And just continue to harness that energy.

And I really look forward to seeing you change the world, because I'm a little older. So it's up to you young folks to take the helm. And this was really a great opportunity for all of us. And I just want to say thank you once again. And I will hand it off to Abbie Cohen for the concluding remarks.

ABBIE COHEN:

- Hi, everyone. I'm Abbie Cohen, community partnership lead at the Radcliffe Institute. I want to close today's program by first giving my sincere gratitude to you, Katie, Zoe, and Sebastian, for your thoughtful perspectives and powerful ideas, and an extra thank you to you, Sebastian, for both moderation and participation in this phenomenal conversation. This program wouldn't have been possible without your wisdom and your willingness to share your experiences. So thank you all so much. I know I'm not alone when I say how critical your insights are as we reimagine our educational spaces, both inside and outside prisons.

Thank you also to Lynnette Tannis, who is the author of *Educating Incarcerated Youth* and an adjunct lecturer at HGSE, for your wonderful and very informative opening. And last but not least, thank you to our audience for your terrific questions. Sorry we weren't able to get to them all, but I'm sure Sebastian, Katie, and Zoe will be happy to answer follow-up questions. Before we sign off, I also want to encourage you, if you haven't already, to watch the full docuseries, *College Behind Bars* on PBS. The link is posted on the Radcliffe website. And we posted it in the chat during this panel, as well.

I also want to make sure to mention another Radcliffe webinar that may be of interest to you for next week. The title is *The Impact of 2020 on Higher Education—Colleges, COVID-19, and a Time of Racial Reckoning*, which will be held on Thursday, November 19, at 4:00 PM. You can find more information about this and other programming by going to Radcliffe.Harvard.edu. Thank you again for joining us today, and take care.

SEBASTIAN YOON:

- Bye, all. Thank you so much.

ZOË L. HOPKINS:

- Thanks so much.