Future Self: Service design for nurturing the dignity and autonomy of formerly incarcerated students

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ABSTRACT

This project explored dignity as a design principle for a service supporting formerly incarcerated students by helping them achieve their higher education goals and career ambitions. We highlight autonomy as the foundation of dignity and explore how autonomy and dignity are intertwined in the context of education. We conducted interviews with formerly incarcerated students and their educators to develop the "Future Self" service strategy. This service inspires the students to stay motivated by assisting them to design their future identities and connect with mentors who can serve as role models, and through income share agreement (ISA) financial plans to provide upfront funding, and ways of giving back to the community by empowering them to become mentors themselves.

Keywords: Design for Autonomy, Design for Dignity, Design Principle, Education and Design, Prison Education, Service Design

INTRODUCTION

About 2.2 million people are currently incarcerated in the United States, 95% of whom will eventually return to society (Gramlich, 2021; Hughes & Wilson, 2003). However, approximately 71% might be arrested again within 5 years (Durose & Antenangeli, 2021). Education has proven to be an effective way to reintegrate the formerly incarcerated into the community by directly reducing recidivism by 43% and increasing employment (Vacca, 2004). However, educational opportunities in prison are extremely limited. Even after their release, formerly incarcerated persons do not have access to the same educational resources as the rest of the population for numerous reasons, including a lack of support programs and government policies (Bacon et al., 2020).

Ploch (2011) argues that rehabilitation, especially education, is a fundamental human right. Singer (1971, p. 669) describes prison as an environment "designed to destroy the last remnants of the dignity of the individual," where dignity is constantly challenged. Studies have shown that an enhanced feeling of dignity positively impacts the incarcerated persons' wellbeing and perceptions of fairness, whereas living in an environment that does not promote dignity leads to depression, violent behavior, and higher suicide rates (Liebling, 2011; Singer, 1971; Testoni et al., 2020). The indignity continues after the individuals finish their sentences. Formerly incarcerated individuals experience various collateral consequences such as social stigmas, limited access to public assistance, and rejection from communities (Cobbina, 2010; Pinard, 2010). Internalization of such experiences can severely

impact individuals' self-definition and can create perceptions of being a "permanent outcast" (LeBel, 2012, p. 90).

In this paper, we present the case study of a service design project that explores dignity as a principle of service design to support formerly incarcerated individuals' education. Dignity is a fundamental principle of human-centered design (Buchanan, 2001), especially in the design of services in which stakeholder participation is essential (Kim, 2021). Among the many kinds of services, some require more active participation than others (Kotler, 1987); in particular, education requires conscious and active engagement from stakeholders (Bitner, 1992), as students are the subject and object of change simultaneously. Therefore, it is important to study the principles of how people collaborate with dignity in educational services.

Dignity is a concept with a long history and diverse dimensions. In this paper, we focus on the modern conceptualization of dignity, which highlights individual autonomy as its basis (Kant, 1785/1993; Pico Della Mirandola, 1486/1996). We conducted interviews with 15 formerly incarcerated students, as well as their teachers, counsellors, and reintegration service workers to explore the diverse relationships between dignity and autonomy in their contexts. We then developed the "Future Self" service strategy to facilitate holistic learning experiences for formerly incarcerated students.

1. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

1.1. Incarceration and Design

Arguably, incarceration is one of the oldest public services designed by mankind. As Foucault (1975/2012) proposed, its design reflects and furthers the historical and cultural contexts of societies, which has emphasized both retribution and rehabilitation (Morris & Rothman, 1998). During the Industrial Revolution, Bentham (1791/1996) proposed one of the most famous prison designs, based on the principle of retribution: the Panopticon, a circular building where the incarcerated reside along the perimeter, and the prison guard watches from the center. Foucault (1975/2012) discussed this design as a symbol of a modern disciplinary society. Nineteenth-century prison reform movements influenced today's prison architecture to emphasize rehabilitation, in relation to architectural ethics (Moran et al., 2019).

Design's influence is also reflected in prison educational programs. Graphic, interior, and UI design are taught as part of rehabilitation programs (Hurry et al., 2012; Makeright Design Academy). In the area of service design, there have been projects to develop virtual reality (VR) therapeutic simulation for re-entry preparation, music-based educational service programs, and digital content in various in-prison programs (Armani et al., 2018; Morris & Knight, 2018; Teng & Gordon, 2021). Our project builds on these efforts to empower the incarcerated with creative autonomy. However, our focus is on nurturing autonomy in the service itself rather than in the design process. Furthermore, we aim to intervene in a less-studied area: education in the post-incarceration period.

1.2. Prison Education

The rehabilitation-oriented perspective conceives prison as a place to provide educational opportunities for the incarcerated. Prison educational models include the following: a medical

model, which views criminal behavior as an illness and education as a form of treatment; the opportunities model, which emphasizes the direct programming of skills; and the new medical model, which considers social dimensions (Simon, 2013). The aims of prison education include personal development, social purpose redressing of socio-educational injustices and disadvantages, and community education with an emphasis on reintegration (Clements, 2004).

Existing education programs in the United States can be divided into three groups. The first group focuses on general educational development (GED) test preparation, which is equivalent to a high school diploma. The second focuses on vocational training. The third focuses on higher education, including college preparatory classes, certificates, or bachelor's degrees in a limited number of areas, such as a mini-MBA. Our research focuses on the college degree attainment programs, as these programs are difficult to complete, while having the most impact (72%) on reducing recidivism (Vacca, 2004).

Our emphasis is on designing a service system that supports education in the post-release period. Design projects have focused on in-prison rehabilitation programs and education, but less attention has been paid to such needs once the incarcerated are released. However, research indicates that this transition period involves high stress, fear, anxiety, feelings of isolation, and financial hardship (Teng & Gorden, 2021; Western et al., 2015). This is in addition to coping with re-entry barriers such as housing and employment discrimination and feeling disconnected from support systems and communities (Seiter & Kadela, 2003), which further emphasizes the necessity of intervention.

1.3. Dignity and Autonomy

Education is not only a means of supporting the incarcerated as they reintegrate into society; learning is also its own reward, as it nurtures the individual's autonomy. From this perspective, education is more than a tool for reducing recidivism—education dignifies the student. The incarcerated are often seen as objects of either totalitarian control (retribution model) or humanitarian effort (rehabilitation model). In this project, however, we explore the perspectives of the incarcerated to learn about their needs and wants in relation to dignity and autonomy, with the aim to empower them.

Buchanan (2001) proposes dignity as the first principle in design. Kim (2021) argues that dignity should be considered as a key principle of service design in particular, as services are co-produced by direct participation by diverse people. She also proposes autonomy as a key dimension of dignity, in addition to human rights, merit, and interpersonal care. Approaches like transformative service research (Alkire et al., 2019) and social innovation in service (Kabadayi et al., 2019) also emphasize humanistic values like dignity. In practice, dignity is mentioned as a key consideration in several medical service projects and public service projects for vulnerable populations, such as participants of courthouse trials, patients, and homeless people (Foley, 2018; Hagan & Kim, 2017; McNeil & Guirguis-Younger, 2014).

Scholars suggest that there are multiple dimensions of dignity. For example, Nordenfelt and Edgar (2005) propose four notions of dignity: merit, identity, moral stature, and universal dignity. In this study, we utilize Nordenfelt and Edgar's model to organize design implications, but particularly focus on its relationship to autonomy, as autonomy is a key concept in education. Modern philosophers argue that autonomy is the fundamental basis of dignity. For example, Pico Della Mirandola (1486/1996) argues that dignity emerges from the creative

autonomy of becoming capacities of self-decision and the potential to transform oneself. Kant (1785/1993) proposes that humans have end value, or dignity, because we have the autonomy to set up moral rules and act in accordance with them. Today, autonomy is considered a key principle in many areas in which attention to dignity is crucial, such as in medical ethics (Childress & Beauchamp, 1994). Autonomy nurtures motivation and learning outcomes in the educational process (Ryan & Powelson, 1991), and is the ultimate goal of education (Rödl, 2016). Nunan (1997) proposes a learner autonomy model with five steps: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence.

Few studies specifically focus on autonomy in design, but its significance is emphasized in design theories such as value-sensitive design and inclusive design, again underlining the close connection to dignity. Friedman (1996) asserts the importance of user autonomy in technological design, suggesting that users should be regarded as agents with their own value systems. Davy (2015) argues for the inclusion of non-traditional populations in understanding autonomy. In the realm of service design, Kim (2018) emphasizes the role of autonomy as a vital principle in service co-production, especially in relation to dignity, and emphasizes the necessity of establishing a system that supports the autonomy of stakeholders.

We investigate the overlap between dignity and autonomy in the context of learning, to enrich our understanding about dignity and to organize research findings. In particular, we utilize Nordenfelt and Edgar's model of dignity and Nunan's model of autonomy as a framework for organizing our research findings in the Design Implications section.

2. METHOD

To better understand the needs of the stakeholders and attain a holistic view of their dignity-related concerns, we conducted IRB-approved semi-structured 60-minute interviews with 15 participants. Initially, participants were recruited through Boston Craigslist postings, and subsequently, we expanded our reach to New York Craigslist to increase the diversity and number of participants. Eligibility criteria for participation included having at least one year of experience as an incarceration counsellor, in-prison or after-prison educator, reintegration service worker, or being a formerly incarcerated student. To accommodate participants from different locations and ensure their anonymity, we provided both in-person and Zoom meeting options.

Table 1: Participants' demographic details

Participants	Gender	Race	Area
Counsellors (2)	1 female, 1 male	1 African American, 1 Caucasian	1 Boston, 1 New York
Educators (3)	1 female, 2 male	2 Caucasian, 1 mixed race	2 Boston, 1 New York
Reintegration service workers (2)	2 female	1 African American, 1 Caucasian	1 Boston, 1 New York
Formerly incarcerated students (8)	2 female, 6 male	3 African American, 4 Caucasian, 1 mixed race	4 Boston, 4 New York

We designed four sets of questions in addition to basic demographic inquiries. The first set focused on the participants' experiences related to education during and after incarceration. The second focused on the impact of education on the students' life. The third focused on the reintegration experience. The fourth focused on questions that elicited the interviewees' insights related to dignity and autonomy. Next, the team members thoroughly examined the interview script to identify keywords. Subsequently, we conducted a qualitative thematic

analysis together to gain insights into the relationships between these keywords, as viewed through the lens of the research questions.

Imprisonment can be a difficult experience to talk about; therefore, we prepared participatory tools to facilitate the interviews and capture the subtle emotions related to our subjects' sense of dignity and autonomy (Figure 1). We first asked the participants to share their stories as they attached emoji cards to a cyclic journey map. We then requested them to select the characters that best represented themselves at key points in the journey from a grid that included popular culture characters. Lastly, the participants were asked to place labels on an ecosystem map to represent the people, resources, and organizations that were important for their successful reintegration into society.

Figure 1. Emotional journey map, character association map, and ecosystem map

3. RESEARCH OUTCOMES

3.1. Formerly Incarcerated Students' Journey

We created a series of models to understand the incarcerated persons' educational journey. First, we mapped their experiences over time (Figure 2). When the students began their in-prison education, they had various motivations, including self-determination, utilitarian reasons, and depression about having nothing else to do. Finishing a college degree in prison was described as "impossible" due to common challenges such as a lack of available classes, resources, and funding. Nonetheless, the students described their education as empowering and transformative.

From the journey map, we confirmed that the most emotionally challenging phase was around the time of release. Our interviewees illustrated this difficult time as a "big jump into the world" and used the words "shame" repeatedly when describing their experiences. Existing re-entry support programs were described as disjointed and temporary. Formerly incarcerated persons had difficulty finding employment, and many wished to continue their education because they saw it giving them "second chances."
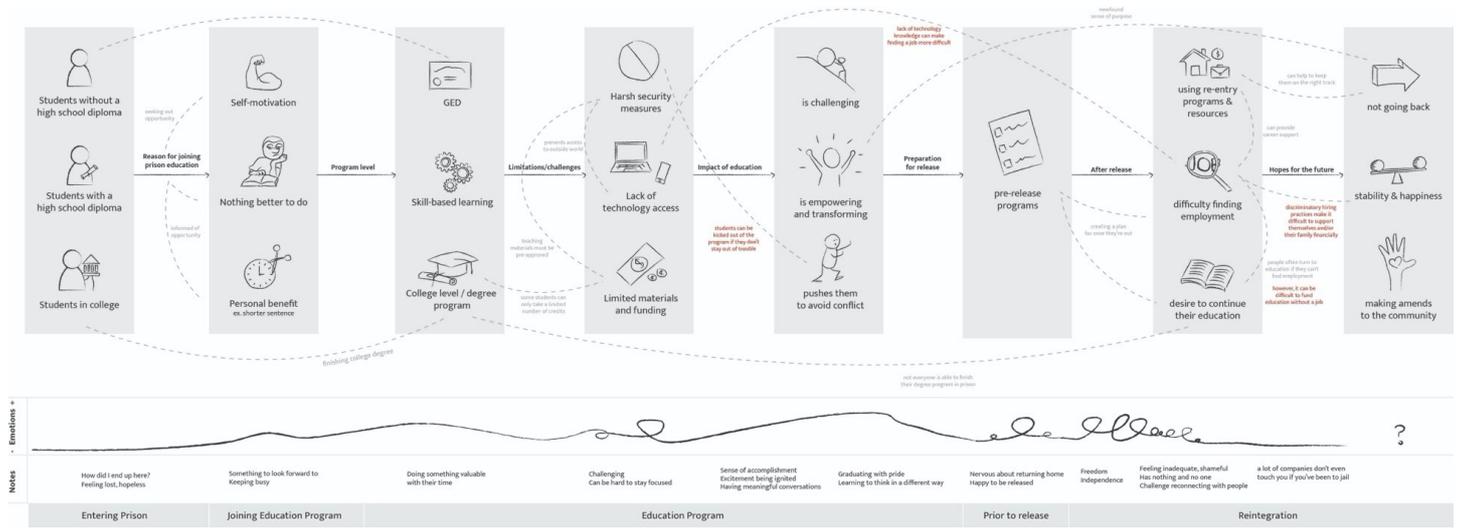
Figure 2. Current journey map

We also analyzed the character association map to better understand the participants' emotional journeys (Figure 3a). Many described the psychological state of the incarcerated before prison as confident and feeling invincible. When they began their incarceration, however, they reported feeling disheartened, gloomy, and unmotivated. As they started their educational journeys, their descriptions of their emotional states shifted. Rather than selecting Hulk or Darth Vader, they selected characters like Donkey, representing self-reflection and looking forward. Eventually, subjects started associating the incarcerated students' emotional states with Tigger who represents the excitement of learning and hope for a better future.

After their education, students felt wiser and stronger because they had a better understanding of the world. Many reported newfound feelings of pride, positive self-image, and trust in themselves. Simultaneously, students expressed a desire to turn their lives around and projected this desire into a future trajectory. When asked about what they want to be in the future, many of the participants chose Yoda and other superheroes. The interviewees explained that these characters symbolized their hopes for helping others who might be in the same situation as they had been in.
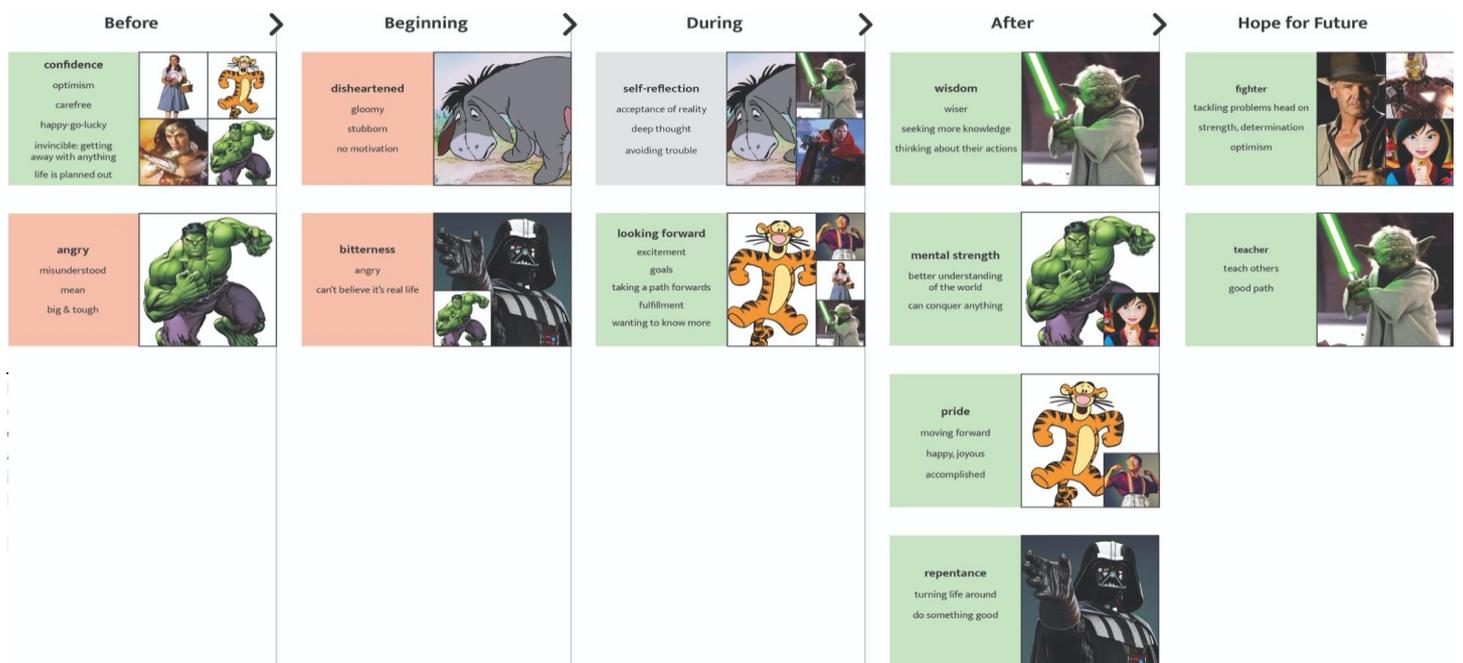

Figure 3. Character map

Lastly, we created a stakeholder map (Figure 4) to illustrate key influences. Family support provided a sense of purpose and meaning, but old peers from bad environments could often be a negative influence, instigating a continuation of the prison cycle. Although relationships with counsellors, teachers, and other students could be supportive, the connections were frequently lost when the students left the facility. Therefore, forging new supportive relationships with mentors and peers after release was seen as one of the key factors for success. Public interventions, such as government funds and re-entry support services, were also positive influences.
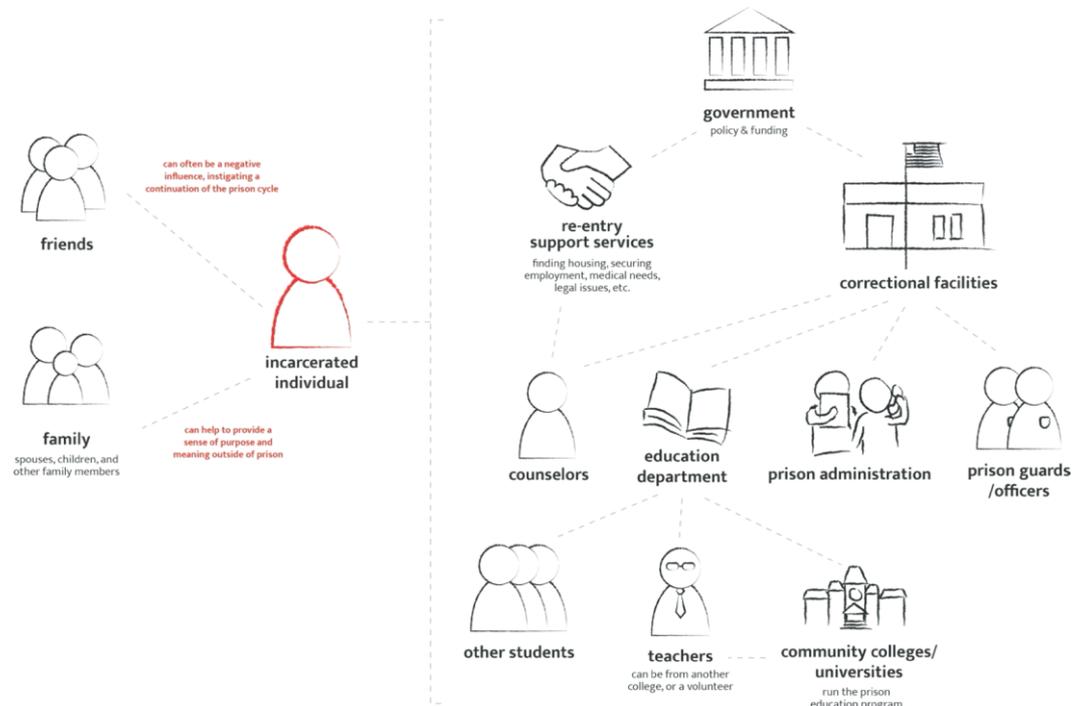

Figure 4. Stakeholder map

3.2. Factors of successful reintegration

From the interviews and modelling, we identified factors that positively and negatively influence formerly incarcerated students' reintegration into society. Most participants wanted to continue their education after release but faced barriers. Lack of *financial support* was the primary cause of their discouragement. Generally, formerly incarcerated students do not qualify for traditional student loans, and they often cannot expect support from their families. Overall, continuing their education is challenging when their financial survival is at stake.

The interviewees also expressed that *maintaining motivation* was crucial to success. The general lack of classes and access to technology in prison inevitably prolonged the time it took formerly incarcerated students to complete degree programs. Therefore, being provided with a support system to keep their goals in mind and maintain a positive mindset was essential for continuing their education.

Forming *positive social relationships* to replace the negative ones they cultivated before imprisonment was also viewed as a key factor of success. Subjects reported that education was a way to establish new relationships. Participants also claimed that having opportunities to serve as peer mentors for each other helped them cultivate this positive outlook, again highlighting the importance of support groups.

Participants reported that *feelings of being accepted by the community* was another key factor of successful reintegration. Here, the theme of overcoming the past was repeated in terms of contributing to society. Participants expressed the belief that accepting the past is closely tied with regaining a sense of belonging to their communities. Therefore, service to others was seen as a ritual for forgiving themselves.

3.3. Factors of Dignity

We also collected keywords and stories that were associated with dignity. One major source of indignity was a lack of *connection to the system*, which many participants felt was not supportive, leaving them feeling disconnected from their environments. Interviewees described the system as dehumanizing, discriminating, or disrespectful. They felt discouraged and rejected by the system, leading to emotions of shame and regret. Furthermore, a lack of transparency or, conversely, overwhelming amounts of information both negatively affected their sense of dignity. The feeling of being lost in a foreign system can make people feel powerless and worthless.

Another factor of dignity that the interviewees reported was a lack of *belonging*. For example, students described that they felt humiliated when they could not develop close relationships with their teachers. This makes sense from the teachers' perspective because they are repeatedly trained by prison policies to keep their distance. However, these concerns on the part of the teachers were not communicated to the students, leading to the feelings of social stigma, which continued even after their release.

Meanwhile, there were also factors that could foster a sense of dignity. For example, participants described education as one of the most powerful forces of dignity because they believed that it led to *safety and stability*. Our subjects expressed that education would increase job opportunities and enhance internal factors for a stable life, such as gaining a purpose and striving for growth. Education also had a positive influence on building self-respect, another key aspect of dignity.

Respect was frequently mentioned by the interviewees. Feeling respected is related to a complicated cluster of social emotions such as love, understanding, empathy, and trust, as opposed to feeling judged for past actions. This is related to the theme of making amends for the past, leading to self-respect. Many interviewees also associated these concepts with making the best of their respective situations by growing as a person, which led to feelings of pride. In other words, self-respect is nurtured through education.

4. DESIGN IMPLICATIONS

Based on what we learned from the research, we created a map that depicts the ideal experiential path of a learner (Figure 5). This process is split into four main stages: education, transformation, reintegration, and contribution. With each stage, both autonomy and dignity increase as demonstrated by the growing circles. They correspond to Nordenfelt and Edgar's (2005) model of dignity (universal, merit, identity, moral statue) and Nunan's (1997) model of autonomy (awareness, involvement, creation, and transcendence). Intervention can occur throughout the process via the service system.
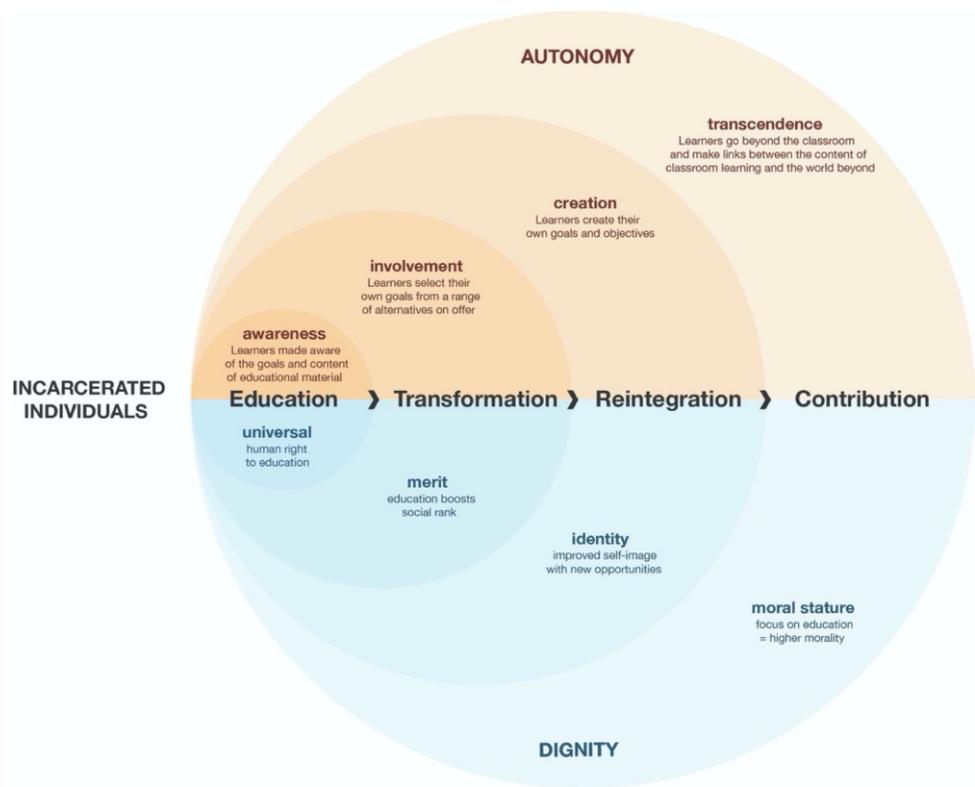
Figure 5. Map of dignity and autonomy

4.1. Education: Universal dignity and the autonomy of awareness

The incarcerated persons' most pressing concern was how to survive in a brutal environment. According to the interviewees, they were not welcomed back into society after they were released, and they felt the system was discriminatory and judgmental. The formerly incarcerated had to fulfil basic needs like making a living and finding a place to live rather than pursuing their long-term goals such as earning a degree. In this context, dignity can be construed as universal rights for *safety and stability* through the transition to reintegration. Thus, systematic *financial support* to nurture the condition that would enable formerly incarcerated students to pursue educational opportunities and plan for the future seems most urgent. In our service design, we proposed a novel financial model to help students fulfil their basic needs and focus on their educational goals.

4.2. Transformation: Dignity as identity and creative autonomy

The concept that the interviewees most frequently associated with dignity was *respect*. For the formerly incarcerated, overcoming their stigma and re-establishing self-respect was a long and painful process. Meanwhile, incarceration gave them time to reflect on their past, which inspired them to change. Education served as a turning point in the incarcerated students' transformation, as it helped them to cultivate a more optimistic outlook. One problem, however, was how to help them create a positive yet plausible self-image for the future without the benefit of role models around them. Another issue was how to help them sustain this self-image despite the lack of *positive social relationships*. In the service design, we aimed to address these issues by providing a means for the formerly incarcerated students to design and to be reminded of their ideal future self. In addition, we connected them with mentors who represent the dimensions of the future self.

4.3. Reintegration: Dignity as merit, and autonomy as involvement

Our interviewees also associated dignity with their perception of how their actions *connected to the system*, affecting and being affected by it. This feedback loop motivated their future actions, as dignity was interpreted as a merit for effort. For example, interviewees viewed degree attainment as the reward for hard work. This idea of merit as approval from the system contrasted with the indignity of being overwhelmed by, feeling lost in, or being manipulated by, the system. The belief that one's actions translate to positive outcomes can *maintain motivation*. In our service design, we aimed to help students maintain their aspirations through an educational process that can take years, by creating a system that clarifies the connection between their immediate efforts and their long-term goals.

4.4. Contribution: Dignity as moral stature, and autonomy as transcendence

Another notion of dignity that came up repeatedly in our research was the sense of *belonging*, which is closely tied with the positive impact that *feelings of being accepted by the comm*unity had on their reintegration. Participants repeatedly expressed a desire to overcome regret and shame by helping those who reminded them of their past selves. This type of ethical participation had broader implications than interpersonal help between individuals—the interviewees pursued a collective sense of contribution to the community, which was represented by the person they helped. For this reason, our proposed service system assists formerly incarcerated students to transcend themselves by encouraging them to serve as mentors in their journeys' final phase.

5. SERVICE STRATEGY

Based on the research outcome, we designed the "Future Self" service strategy to nurture the formerly incarcerated students' dignity and autonomy via the attainment of a degree and a job (Figure 6). The strategy includes the following: (1) providing upfront funding for students to offset financial barriers, (2) fostering motivation by connecting them with positive self-images and mentors who can serve as role models, (3) creating a transparent system that helps maintain motivation by showing the causal relationship between their efforts and positive outcomes, and (4) proposing ways to give back to the community to which they belong.

This entire system runs on the concept of dignity: first, funding is provided to sustain systemic practices that promote dignity as a universal human right; second, the service system keeps students motivated by reflecting and furthering the dimensions of dignity as both identity and merit; third, paying back to the community nurtures dignity as moral stature by helping others who may be facing challenges similar to those experienced by formerly incarcerated students.

What is essential for making this service plausible is the idea of the income share agreement (ISA) model. This non-profit semi-honor system is an innovative way to finance education for this population that does not have access to traditional student loans (Kelly et al., 2014). The students borrow the funding upfront and pay back a specified percentage of their future income once they get a job and exceed a certain income threshold. This model reduces the student's risk because the investors, who are taking a significant risk as they may not recoup their investment if the student does not reach the income threshold, are therefore motivated

to help the students be successful. Once the students pay back the loan, it is returned to the funding pool to support other students.
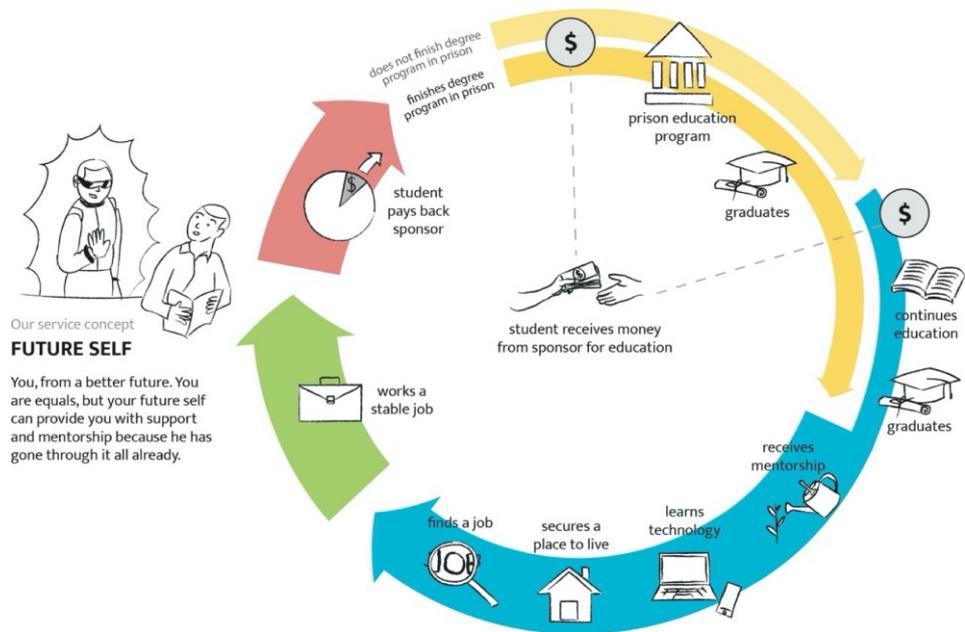

Figure 6. Conceptual model

Figure 7 introduces the ideal service experience of the students in the form of a storyboard. At the beginning of their journey, students meet and discuss their plans with the sponsoring non-profit organization to learn about the service before they receive funding for their education. Together, they study financial options and plan a loan and payment terms for the future. Students also join a workshop to learn about the options for classes they can take in prison and after release.

During their in-prison education, students embark on a parallel path where they learn to design their future selves. Students are invited to participate in counselling seminars to co-design their future self-personas. They are also guided in planning their career path, which includes classes that provide the knowledge and skills they need for the job they want. After release, students meet with funding advisors to sign a contract so that ISA funding can be allocated to support their long-term education.

The service system also assigns mentors to the students. The mentors are former graduates of the program whose profiles and careers align with the future self-personas designed by the students. In addition to this mentor-mentee pairing, the system provides formerly incarcerated students access to support groups and events such as speaker series by mentors. Simultaneously, students are provided with transition workshops where they can learn new technologies, financial planning strategies, and social skills.

To maintain long-term motivation, students are invited to create mutual support groups to nurture routine study habits. When the students are ready to search for a job, they are introduced to a network of other formerly incarcerated students, graduates, and businesses that supports them for additional mentorship and job opportunities. The service system also supports the students through practical workshops about how to prepare a résumé and for interviews. During this process, students are motivated by visualizing how much closer they are to the future self that they have designed.

Once the students start working in a stable job, they consult with sponsors about financial options for paying back their loans. Students continue to have a clear view of how much they are paying back every month, how much they have already contributed, how many years of their program they have left, and how much money is going to the donation to support other formerly incarcerated students. In the final phase, the service system introduces the graduates to speak at events, gradually joining the pool of mentors who help new students. Ultimately, the former student becomes a mentor for others in the program.
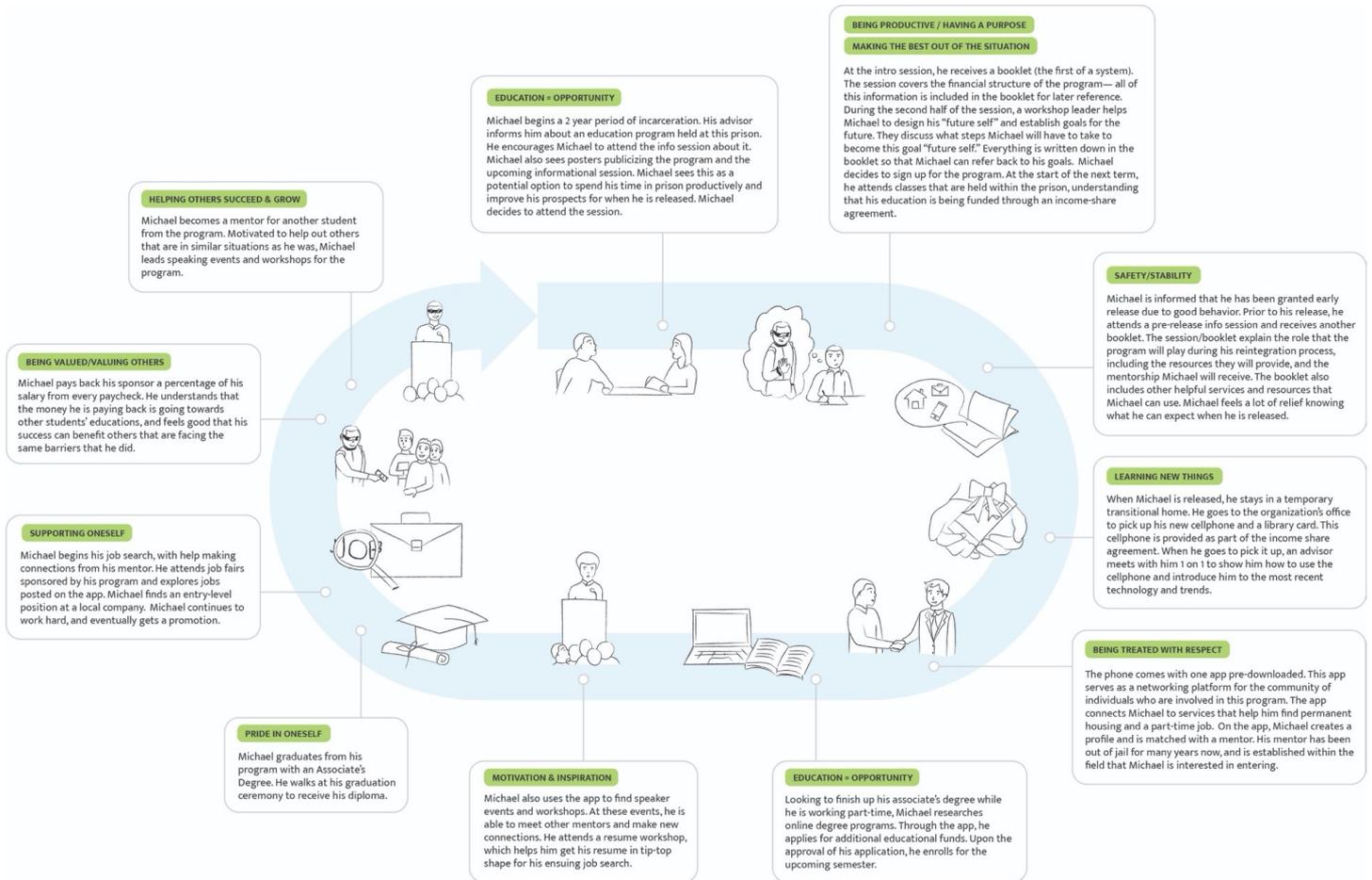

Figure 7. Storyboard

6. CONCLUSION

Our research indicates that education not only serves as a means of reintegrating formerly incarcerated individuals but also as a means to promote their dignity and autonomy as ends in themselves. However, the existing system for post-release support is fragmented, and the immediate struggle for survival often takes precedence over the students' aspirations to pursue further education. In this project, we focused on developing a comprehensive strategy that connects crucial touchpoints and establishes clear objectives, aiming to provide a persistent, long-term, and systematic service. It is important to note that this project was conducted within the context of the United States, and we acknowledge that other regions may have distinct incarceration systems and approaches to prison education that would require the development of different strategies. Nevertheless, dignity and autonomy as universal moral principles can still provide valuable guidance for such strategies.

This case study can contribute to the advancement of the field of design by showcasing how moral values can be a basis for design strategy. The co-creative, holistic, human-centered, and experiential (evidence-based and procedural) nature of service (Stickdorn & Schneider, 2012)

emphasizes the importance of stakeholder participation. Placing participation at the core of service design highlights the significance of designers considering the human values of dignity and autonomy for stakeholders. While our primary service strategy focused on dignity as creative autonomy of individuals to transform themselves, we also integrated other dimensions of dignity to enhance different phases of the proposed service. We contend that these diverse facets of dignity should be strategically acknowledged and integrated into service systems. Future studies should investigate the intricate relationships between dignity and autonomy to develop moral strategies for domains and areas in which designers directly influence people's decision-making, collaboration, and relationships.

The study has limitations as participants were only involved in interviews. Next, we will explore how the design process itself can promote autonomy by inviting formerly incarcerated students to ideas evaluation and co-design activities for developing specific touchpoint materials such as toolkits, digital systems, and workshop content. Furthermore, it is important to examine the ethical implications of this service, such as how long-term financial relationships between investors and students can be a double-edged sword in its impact on autonomy. Concrete design solutions, such as a practical system for employment, must be developed to support student reintegration. Government involvement and legal protection are crucial, with a long-term goal to reform the rehabilitation system and cultural perceptions. These ethical and policy issues need discussions, co-design, and testing with specialists via interdisciplinary collaborations, again highlighting the value of universal principles like dignity and autonomy.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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