

# Journal of Prisoners on Prisons

*... allowing our experiences and analysis to be added to the forum that will constitute public opinion could help halt the disastrous trend toward building more fortresses of fear which will become in the 21<sup>st</sup> century this generation's monuments to failure.*

*Jo-Ann Mayhew (1988)*

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## JOURNAL OF PRISONERS ON PRISONS

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## EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

### **Transforming Carceral Agendas through Education: Considering the Importance of Teaching and Learning in Prison**

*Vicki Chartrand, Jennifer M. Kilty and Sandra Lehalle*

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The *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons (JPP)* largely explores and embraces the notion of 'writing as resistance', as well as the importance of re-centering marginalized voices, rather than speaking for and about criminalized men and women. These concepts function as guiding principles for the journal and reflect Paulo Freire's thesis in *The Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, where he contends that education should engender oppressed people to reclaim their sense of humanity through learning and the co-creation of knowledge. As Freire (1970, p. 4) writes:

No pedagogy which is truly liberating can remain distant from the oppressed by treating them as unfortunates and by presenting for their emulation models from among the oppressors. The oppressed must be their own example in the struggle for their redemption.

Given that the focus of this special issue of the *JPP* is on education in carceral institutions, considering Freire's (1970) work on critical pedagogy was something we encouraged the contributing authors to do in earnest. Following Freire, we asked contributors to consider how education, learning and the co-creation of knowledge are also political acts that serve political ends. This is especially true for marginalized or oppressed groups, for whom education can strengthen their socio-political positioning by nurturing the development of their minds and critical thinking skills, which can help them to challenge dominant hierarchies and ways of knowing. Education should foster the intellectual growth of students, rather than acting as a means to acquire power over them.

Many of the authors in this special issue express feeling empowered by having a positive educational space where their views and insights are heard and valued, often for the first time. Educational opportunities in prison settings are consistently described by the authors as significant and formative in their lives. Wilfredo Laracuenta and Michael Fiorini highlight this when they discuss the positive and transformative effects prison education has had on their time in prison and in their efforts to reintegrate post-incarceration.

Within educational spaces, people are accorded dignity, an opportunity to build meaningful relationships, and the tools and resources to support their families and contribute to their communities. These themes and others are taken up in the *Response* piece written by Samantha McAleese who conducted a content analysis of all of the special issues published in the *JPP* that discuss prison education. Importantly, her contribution showcases the continuity of the journal's contributions on the topic over time – that education is liberatory for many incarcerated men and women, and that the prison-classroom can function as a transformative and performative space.

Reflecting the principle of less eligibility (Rusche, and Kirchheimer, 2003), prison administrations and the public tend to refuse offering higher education for incarcerated people, often citing that a post-secondary education is not afforded to all non-incarcerated citizens. As a result, we continue to incarcerate people with no consideration for how this will affect their lives once they leave. As Chad Walton points out, however, education gave him the confidence and self-esteem to “become a better person” by adopting non-violent conflict resolution strategies. The transformation that can be achieved through higher learning supports the idea that there is a need to afford people an education outside prison walls and prior to incarceration as a means to prevent criminalized harms. Jermaine Archer highlights this need for better public education strategies when he reflects on his time in the Special Handling Unit where he “Witness[ed] the deterioration and degradation of human beings”. This is further supported by Shebuel Bel who argues that prisoners subsist on “regret, banishment, and dehumanization”. By offering better education opportunities, it is possible to avoid the many pitfalls that lead to imprisonment. As Ismael Bonano contends, the better educated people are, the more likely they are to be successful in this world. Without educational resources or tools, people are isolated from the supports and information needed to improve their quality of life and to reduce the potential for conflicts to arise while incarcerated or upon release.

Many of the contributing authors included in this special issue move beyond describing the obvious benefits of educational opportunities in prison by proposing compelling arguments for what constitutes “good” education in prison. Having experienced a wide range of educational methods, from correspondence to classroom settings both in and outside of prison, as well as more experiential approaches to teaching and learning, the authors share their knowledge on the strengths and weaknesses of these

diverse pedagogical methods. For example, Christopher Shea explains the advantages of in-class learning, given that the correspondence method of instruction forced him to problem-solve on his own, with little support. Several contributors also emphasize the value of teacher-student interaction in relational learning styles (notably Percy Levy, Christopher Shea, Vincent Charles Villebrun and Rachel Fayter). Christopher Shea explains how teacher-student interactions allow for a shared trust and bond, while Percy Levy highlights how this method opens the lines of communication with an authority figure that prisoners can respect and admire. However, it is not only the opportunities of teacher-student interaction that are valued, but more importantly the types of interactions and learning that emerge. The authors included in this issue defend their preference for a problem-solving approach to education as opposed to what Freire (1970) describes as the traditional banking-method of teaching. Vincent Charles Villebrun and Rachel Fayter both denounce the banking method as an oppressive, one-way, hierarchical transmission of information that situates students as passive recipients of knowledge, and which Percy Levy suggests denies the emotional presence and wholeness of students.

Drawing on Freire's (1970) critique, the banking method is analysed as part of the correctional philosophy that objectifies incarcerated students to make them fit the mandates of the system. For Vincent Charles Villebrun, this philosophy will make prisoners either reject the educational initiatives proposed by institutional authorities or fake it so as to "accept the correctional banking deposits" in order to survive the system. Both Vincent Charles Villebrun and Christopher Shea contend that the problem-solving approach to education is more liberating for prisoner-students. Percy Levy explains that learning critical thinking skills is "the genesis of all positive change" because it teaches prisoners to understand the flaws in their reasoning.

With the problem-solving/critical thinking method, barriers are broken as the teacher and student become partners in the co-creation of knowledge, as Freire (1970) suggested. In adopting a critical pedagogy, the teacher learns alongside the students as each shares valuable insights learned through their different life experiences. For example, Rachel Fayter explains how learning from another person's life experiences helps eliminate educational hierarchies, which promotes active participants in a pedagogical model that is more egalitarian and empowering. She argues that the circle pedagogy model used in the Walls to Bridges program builds a sense of community

within the classroom setting. The contributor also describes how, through group projects, the focus shifts from the individual toward “a collaborative understanding of more complex social issues” that promotes social justice praxis amongst its students. In this issue, we are also grateful for the insights of Simone Weil Davis, who was instrumental in the creation of the Walls to Bridges Collective and reflects in a second *Response* piece upon the insights of this issue’s contributors, notably their contribution to redefining education, advancing pedagogies that generate (un)learning, and producing much needed critiques concerning prisons, education regimes within them, and the societies of which they are apart yet hidden.

The authors of this issue demonstrate that the prison environment creates structural barriers to learning, teaching and pedagogy that are inherently difficult to overcome. In describing the politics of prison education, many contributing authors point out the different challenges and limitations of trying to secure an education while incarcerated. Reflecting these findings, Petey’s personal narrative describes her experiences in achieving her high-school diploma and taking university courses while living in three different carceral settings – a youth provincial prison, an adult provincial prison, and an adult federal penitentiary in Canada. Similarly, Kevin Sawyer describes his experiences being labelled a dissident by the California Department of Corrections because of the critical literature he kept in his cell – demonstrating how critical pedagogy is an inherently political enterprise. Following Freire’s (1970) argument that oppressed people must be involved in the co-creation of knowledge for critical pedagogy to be transformative, the entries Michelle Jones and Rachel Fayter highlight this by discussing the value of involving incarcerated scholars in prison research endeavours. Michelle Jones’ article showcases how the lived or material experiences of incarcerated scholars provide important counter-narratives to dominant ways of thinking about carceral histories and practices.

As guest editors for this special issue on prison education, it has been a privilege to work with the great and diverse minds who contributed to these important dialogues. The prison is not an ideal space for teaching and learning where education is encouraged or nurtured, largely because prisoners are consistently seen as less deserving. This becomes particularly true when considering access to higher education, where incarcerated students have to be creative to overcome many unique challenges specific to



the prison. We acknowledge their tenacity, celebrate their accomplishments, and in editing this issue have learned a great deal from them.

While the rewards of education are clear for those in prison, educating prisoners also benefits society at a large. History reveals that an educated population is a healthy and stable one. This is no different for prisoners who have had few if any educational opportunities either in prison or prior to their incarceration. Offering educational opportunities in prison does not reward criminalized acts, it is simply a path to a better world. Like the air we breathe or the food we eat, the mind must also be nurtured and cultivated. If we are concerned about individual and collective accountability, as well as living in a safer world, there is no better way than to invest in the growth of minds as the best route for self-transformation.

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## **An Unconstrained Mind in a Shackled Body**

*Michael Fiorini*

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Incarceration is a collision into one of the harshest realities a person may face. All you have ever known is stripped away, the freedoms of normal life left only as scars to look back on. Getting used to a new life in prison takes a while as there are many challenges for the individual to overcome. Getting settled into what one's life will be like for the foreseeable future, prisoners are forced to contemplate different options regarding how to pass the time. Some get jobs doing menial tasks for a small fraction of minimum wage, usually less than a dollar an hour, while others better themselves by getting an education. Electing to get a job does have its benefits; prisoners are able to support themselves financially and it helps to prepare them for future employment after they have served their time. However, opting to educate yourself can be very rewarding during as well as after incarceration. Educating myself not only had transformational qualities, it will also open doors for a life beyond prison. Earning an education while in prison transformed my views and helped me to develop the willpower that will carry me through the transition to community life upon release. It is my hope that this strength will stay with me as I strive to achieve lifelong goals outside the walls the currently confine me.

One of the most transformative aspects of education has been how it shaped my time in prison. When I first came to prison I had no idea what I wanted to do with my time, but after browsing through a college brochure, I noticed there was a computer programming class available. Suddenly my outlook changed from one of hopelessness and anger for landing myself in prison to that of ambition and perseverance. Long before I was imprisoned I had taken a college course on computer programming, so I was familiar with what the class might offer. Nevertheless, I was still amazed at what was being taught – Python, C#, C++, JavaScript, and Ruby on Rails were just some of the different coding languages I could learn. Being afforded the opportunity to be back in school was a privilege and I was going to take advantage of it. After I enrolled in the programming course and experienced the classroom setting, it felt like my world transformed and I was no longer in prison, but rather in a college classroom. Though I was still confined, just getting out of my cell and spending time in the classroom made me recognize that I was doing something constructive with my life. I learned a lot and was proud of myself for putting my time to good use. My days were spent building a website using HTML, PHP and JavaScript, as well

as a desktop application created with C# and also a 2D game I crafted with GameMaker. While I certainly learned a lot about games, I learned just as much about websites and different coding languages. A year after taking the class, which I passed with an A, I earned two one-year certificates in Game Development and Game Design. Most importantly, outside of learning from books and computers, my perspective about my future and myself began to reshape; I learned that I had something significant to work toward – a future that had value.

Getting an education will also help me transition out of prison back into society upon my release by having encouraged me to focus on my end goals while facing the surrounding pressures and negativity. Drugs and fighting are constant threats in the prison environment, but education has helped me to distance myself from such activity so that I can concentrate on what is important. However, it is not always easy to avoid some of the pressures that I am faced with and I sometimes have to remind myself that I am not perfect, but I always try to do the right thing. Education teaches patience because transitioning out of prison is not instantaneous. People who have many years to serve tend to go into school with long-term goals in mind. I have aspirations that I have set out to accomplish. However, earning a degree or certificate does not happen overnight. While it was difficult adjusting to a life inside prison, it will be equally difficult transitioning to life upon release. Education has improved my confidence and self-worth, which I can lean on while adjusting to life outside of prison.

Educating myself will help set the conditions that will help me to pursue lifelong goals well after my time in prison. By choosing education over drugs and violence, I am choosing to overcome some of the common barriers that hinder reintegration. Education provides me with a solid foundation, as well as the resolve to avoid detrimental activities in prison. It will also help me to abstain from participating in illegal and harmful activities later in life and upon release. Another lifelong goal I have is to maintain close relationships with my family. Gaining an education will help make this possible. My family stood by me when I made poor choices that landed me in prison, but as they see me working hard and pursuing my education, they are proud that I am trying to better myself and stay out of trouble. Making positive decisions has been important in my efforts to stay connected with my family, whom I will be able to lean on for support and advice down the road when it comes to housing, employment and financial decisions.

Prisoners need moral support and positive advocates in their life to ensure they do not end up back in prison. Pursuing an education while incarcerated has allowed me to work toward developing greater independence, which is key to staying out of trouble while I pursue the path toward lifelong goals.

Living in prison can be challenging, especially for people who are faced with long sentences. How we overcome this challenge can determine whether we get another chance at life outside. Unfortunately, many prisoners choose other routes instead of education. Some choose employment to afford the simple luxuries that the system does not provide, while others choose gangs and violence to build a reputation and to secure protection, or drugs to mentally escape confinement. An education can transform a person with a poor upbringing and no formal education into someone who has a greater knowledge of the world around them. I am a better person today than I was when I was first incarcerated and it is because I chose to learn instead of other detrimental alternatives. In prison you have endless time to reflect upon what you have lost. Education may be the road less traveled, but it is also a gateway to creating a sense of purpose and worth. Though prison deprives you of freedom, an education can help to tear down the constraints of your own mind and awaken the drive to work toward short term and lifelong goals.

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## Prison Education: My Piece of Resistance

Shebuel Bel

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In fact, there is no human being of any race who, if he finds a guide, cannot attain virtue.

– Cicero, 2000

Without question, “bittersweet” is the word that best describes the indelible moment I was able to grasp the absolute enormity of my grandfather’s (James Milton, 1926-2005) words: “You need it [education]; it doesn’t need you”. Of all my aspirations, I found education the most elusive. Indeed, his insight was never so clear to me from within the embittering belly of the criminal justice system. “For your transgressions”, said society, “into my belly you shall go”.

Deep inside the bulging “belly of the beast” (Abbott, 1981), I subsist on a criminal’s ration of regret, banishment and dehumanization. My penance is the hellish reality of a time-locked sarcophagus, where I eagerly await my return to the dystopia that exiled me to this vexing necropolis. Meanwhile, Father Time ticks slowly and unaffectedly by my loathsome existence, adamant in his refusal to grant me the refreshing kindness of a sympathetic glance. Rather, he multiplies my misery by chafing the countenance of my memory and by vanquishing the vestiges of my legend. Ergo, as I forget, so, too, I am forgotten.

I am forgotten by those whom I cherish most, haunted by the post-captivity specter of unrequited love and devotion. As a reward for my efforts to maintain family bonds, loved ones fail to reciprocate interests, they insincerely apologize for their absenteeism and their unexcused neglect is a tacit truth. These cruelties impale me to the innermost marrow of my soul.

Compounding the woes of my abandonments, the darkness of Cimmerian contempt for academic endeavours to engulf me, relentlessly assailing me for the majority control of my animus (the source of my resistance). In preparation of an epic standoff, I summon my fiercest triad of war generals: Mind, Body and Spirit. But Cimmerian illiteracy envelopes me and proves itself as an indomitable force. In the throes of defeat, I beckon Cicero (2000) for guidance. However, his counsel is paradoxical amidst the untimeliness of battle: *Nosce the ipsum, facta non verba* (Cicero 2000) – the most difficult of all things is to know yourself. The nature of Cicero’s charge to me is unfamiliar to say the least.

While death rages at my doorstep, Cicero advises I embrace war as a means of attaining utter clarity of character, which will, in turn, ensure me victory over my stupor of Cimmerian illiteracy. Although wrought with peril, I am nonetheless compelled to embark upon such a journey of introspection and liberation. *Libe action*, which Paulo Freire (2000, p. 79) characterizes as praxis, “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it”.

But how do I fashion remedy from malady, nourishment from within the bowels of this monolithic monstrosity called “prison”? Carceral shades of psychological warfare designed to crush my public and self-image mimic the ethnic hijackings (of religion, culture, honour, etc.) perpetuated against my African ancestors. *Atque ipsa men sea, que future videt, praeterita meminit*. The same mind that foresees the future also remembers the past. However, in this instance of cultural illiteracy repeating itself, my ability to develop my power to perceive critically the way I exist in the world with which and in which I find myself; I come to see the world as a reality in process in transformation (Freire, 2000, p. 83).

My portending gaze is rudely interrupted by the discourtesy of obstructive prison walls with razor sharp trimmings. Academic ignorance not only renders me near-sighted, it also terrorizes me in my dreams.

Thirsting for a respite of understanding, I reconsider Cicero’s (2000) admonishment to search within. There, victory will be found. So I surmise: to affect that which is beyond my being, I must first affect that which is within. I must somehow come to know the duality of myself.

Therefore, I diligently dispensed with the business of knowing both versions of myself: the self who led me to my undoing and the new self who can – by resistance – repent for what my old self has done. But terribly unsettling, my old self and new self are mutually ambitious – both are determined to win. Perhaps they are one in the same, which would confirm that it was my old self all along who has been waging war against me. However, “if one is sacrificed – even in part – the other immediately suffers” (Freire, 2000, p. 87)

The origin of this inner conflict, however, predates my life as a belly dweller. I was a delinquent hell-bent on sabotaging my elementary school education when my grandfather told me I needed an education, it does not need me. In retrospect, I now realize that my old self resisted education, it resisted guidance and it resisted previous discipline from the criminal justice

system. And most regrettably, to my ensuing demise, it inconsiderately resisted a plea deal from the State.

All the while, my emergent new self-struggled for control of my animus, realizing that in regard to legal education and training it was drastically outgunned in a battle with the State. Nevertheless, in futility my fledgling new self desperately studied, learned and painstakingly endeavoured to alter the outcome of the climactic event that my old self heralded into actuality – proceeding to trial. The efforts of my new self dreadfully resulted in defeat.

It was then that my new self was able to perceive the level of self-destruction my old self was capable of. Nonetheless, *fas est et ab hoste doceri* – it is right to learn even from an enemy. And what I learned from my old self was that the time for parting ways had come and gone, and I needed to take back majority control of my volition.

My new self is committed to reading, writing and learning. The more I read, the more I learned and grew aware of how much of my life my old self had ruined. More importantly, I grew even more aware of a world I previously did not know existed, a world my old self had resisted to partake in. This world is one of family appreciation, accountability to society and of academic enlightenment that I had foolishly taken for granted.

By resisting my old self, my new self was able to experience an increase in power and awareness by completing several college courses, gradually ascending well beyond the influential reaches of my old self. I was proud of my new self; I was proud of resisting my old self. My educational growth and steadfast resistance to my old self ultimately led to my victory over darkness of mind and over the beast.

Thank you, Grandfather. Thank you, Cicero, for guiding me to the virtue of education. And now, although I feast in the belly of the beast, I will succumb to no evil because I know evil. I know it within and without. In the face of both, I shall resist.

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*Shebuel Bel* is a Washington state prisoner who enrolled and completed numerous UBB (University Beyond Bars) educational courses. He plans to further his college education upon his release in 2022.

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## Freedom in Education

*Ismael Bonano*

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I am a formerly incarcerated man from New York City. Gaining a better education while incarcerated was very transformative; it gave me hope and it served as a great filler of idle time, which prison has in abundance. Allow me to begin by describing my background in order to give you a better understanding of my educational struggles. My early life experiences played a role in my lack of productivity and illegal activity, and to me eventually becoming a detriment to society. In my experience, incarcerated individuals often suffer from low self-esteem, low confidence, have many learning challenges, and lack higher education due to their poor socioeconomic standing and environment.

I have struggled with education for a great deal of my life. Before I was born, doctors believed that I would go through life with some sort of physical disability or mental abnormality because of the circumstances that surrounded my conception and birth. While I am currently in pristine physical and mental health, this is not what my family expected. Throughout my childhood, there were ill-conceived preconceptions about my abilities given that my biological parents met each other in the psychiatric unit of the Rockland county medical facility where they were taking psychotropic medication. When the medical staff became aware that my mother was pregnant, they informed her that it would be best for me to be aborted. This preconceived notion that I would suffer from mental challenges labelled me before I was able to show my potential. As a result, I was treated as if I was slow. These views invaded my mind, causing me to lose self-esteem and to despise education as I assumed there was no hope for me. As time went on, I fell behind in my intellectual growth and decided to leave school and turn to the streets.

By leaving school, I felt that I could at least avoid the embarrassment of being so far behind my peers. Hanging out in my neighbourhood instead of going to class became normal. As time went on, out of boredom I began to cause mischief such as doing drugs, trespassing and fighting. Slowly, the negativity progressed and I acquired a criminal lifestyle, along with a severe drug addiction. Caught in the grips of addiction I began committing robberies, using and selling hard drugs, and repeatedly coming into conflict with the law. I was nothing more than a detriment to my community. Feeling that I had no other options, since I could not read, crime seemed to be the only way of life for me.

I was illiterate in almost every aspect of basic education and I seemed to have little hope. It was not until I reached the age of nineteen that I began to make an effort to progress, weary with the inability to read and write at a fifth grade level. I poured all my efforts into teaching myself by reading everything in sight, along with utilizing a learning method I devised that is vocabulary based and by listening intently to others and how they formed sentences. By learning more about speech and memorizing verbal structure, I was able to use the simple words I could decipher. Using this path, I excelled profoundly. The one thing I lacked was self-confidence and the desire to stray from the life I had grown accustomed too. Even though my reading advanced, I could not escape the hopelessness that was my life and everything that surrounded it – poverty, drugs, and violence. I could not see light anywhere and the only thing that I knew to be true was that I would be unsuccessful. Being that I still did not believe in myself, I reverted back to the street life of drugs and everything that came along with that life. My problems worsened and I found myself in legal trouble quite often.

Arrest after arrest I eventually found myself serving time in state prison. The time I spent at Marcy correctional facility had a very transformative effect because of the availability of prison education that was unavailable at previous facilities. I was intrigued by a book club at the facility that was run by a professor from Hamilton College. The three groups varied from philosophy, foreign literature and art. At first I hesitated to speak in the groups, but as time went on, I began to involve myself. It was so empowering to have people value my views and opinions of the readings. In those groups I found something I had been longing for. Developing the ability to express my thoughts and ideas gave me a great sense of self-worth and purpose. This opportunity assisted greatly in cultivating a tree of knowledge within me that bore fruit of science, history, poetry and art. I wanted more – I wanted to attend college formally.

It was not long before I was transferred to another prison, but I did not lose the ambition and desire for intellectual growth that I gained from attending those first college classes. I was first transferred to Lakeview, which is a mock military program for incarcerated men and women of different age groups. At one point, the librarian who facilitated the transitional class asked us what we wanted to do in the future. I told him how my sole ambition was to attend college one day. His response to me

was that this was an unrealistic goal and that I should set my mind on working at Home Depot. I could not accept that as my only option and would not allow his perspective or anyone else's who thinks less of my abilities to get in the way of accomplishing my dreams. It was not until I arrived at Wallkill correctional facility that the opportunity presented itself. As soon as I arrived, I learned that New York University (NYU) would be holding a prison education program in the facility. At that moment I said to myself, "I'm going to be in that program". But first, I needed to get my GED so I put all my energy into studying. Not only was I studying for my GED, I also involved myself in the Prisoners for AIDS Counseling and Education program (PACE).

In the PACE program I learned how to facilitate classes to educate other prisoners on HIV transmission and prevention. I made the most of every opportunity I had and the PACE program offered me the chance to gain more education. I could never have imagined what I would learn from that program. While running the PACE program and studying for the GED test, things fell into place quickly. Within three months, all of my efforts began to show. I scored exceptionally high on the pre-test, which increased my confidence especially since studying is not easy in prison. There were many obstacles I had to overcome dealing with other prisoners and officers, some of who frowned upon the success of prisoners. It is extremely difficult to navigate around all of the negativity in prison, the threat of danger, along with trying to maintain my health with few provisions and within the poor quality conditions of the environment in which we live. I did everything in my power to overcome these challenges, but separating myself from the chaos and pessimism of prison life was no easy task. That tenacity and determination paid off and my dreams were clearly becoming tangible.

After receiving my GED I immediately applied to NYU. Within no time, I received my letter of acceptance and I was overjoyed. Looking back at my life, I remembered where I came from and what it took for me to get to this moment. I felt ready for any battle. To prepare myself, I read as much as I could and devoted my time to studying. When I was in my housing unit and around the compound, I surrounded myself with positive individuals who were involved in prison education programs and others who sought to utilize their time as constructively as they could. We would converse about many things like books and articles we had

read, and we had debates on social, economic and scientific matters. We helped each other with writing assignments, gave our perspectives on close readings, but mostly expressed to each other our goals and how we planned to achieve them, and advised one another by telling stories about our past decisions that did not work out so well. Having a group of people who added to what I was learning and who were willing to assist me to facilitate my intellectual growth gave me the positive reassurance I needed to continue to move ahead. I was very nervous my first day in class, but I was not alone. Many of my peers, some of whom had not been in a classroom setting for quite some time, all felt the same way. We found strength in unity, pushing each other as hard as we could in order to make sure that everybody was on the right track and keeping focused.

The first class that I took was a writing course and the main research topic was Herman Melville's *Benito Cereno*. That course gave me a better understanding of history – a history that I did not know existed until then. I did a lot of my research on maroon culture; a group of African men and women who fled slavery, vanishing into the most inhospitable regions across South America where they formed their own communities. This course assisted me to greatly improve my writing capabilities. My professor Elaine Freedgood was an exceptional educator and did all she could to cultivate educational growth in her class. She and the other professors were truly invested in us, showing us an extraordinary amount of care, devotion, and tenacity to help us overcome the opposition that was put forth by some employees of the correctional facility. It was evident that our educational advancement was in the forefront of the professors' minds, for which I am truly grateful.

The long hours I put in studying in my cell were well worth it. At times, I felt broken while facilitating HIV/AIDS education classes and exhausted staying up long hours into the night to structure and write papers. It was extremely taxing, but I kept in mind that this was something I needed to get used to if I wanted to be successful and continue on this path upon my release. I remember when Professor Freedgood called me and two other students to ask if we would agree to become class tutors. I could not believe it – me, someone who in the past struggled so much with education was now going to help other students. Deep down I knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to give back to others what I had acquired myself. On one occasion a fellow classmate of mine came to my cell to ask me for help and he asked how education came so easily to me. I told

him that it does not and that I struggle very much every day. I told him that I sacrifice long hours, dedicate myself completely to the work, and that I always remind myself what I am fighting for in order to keep my goals and ambition in the forefront of my mind.

As time progressed, I continued to take advantage of every opportunity I could find. I next applied to the Justice in Education Scholars Program where I was able to take a humanities course at Columbia University. I was grateful to have gained a greater self-confidence when I was accepted and I will be taking that course this summer. Earning an education while in prison transformed me in a deeply profound way and has helped to make my transition back into society a lot smoother. Now I have goals, I have something to look forward to and I know that there are so many other things I can do with my life. I can say that it is because of prison education that I see myself, as well as other men and women who are formerly incarcerated, as benefits instead of as detriments to society. In prison, there are so many men and women who have great minds and are capable of many things. It is through education that they will be able to realize their potential and progress to a brighter future. From my experience, I have found that many incarcerated people lack fundamental educational opportunities and suffer from low confidence and self-esteem. The better educated we are, the more likely we are to be successful members of our communities and the world.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Ismael Bonano* was born and raised in New York City. At 28 years old, he currently works as a construction worker and resides in a shelter in Brooklyn, New York. He spent five years in prison and in that time he received his GED diploma and other certifications, including HIV/AIDS counseling and education. Since his release, he has had the opportunity to do fellowships with Columbia University and New York University. He is a founding member of Re-emergent Theater, performing arts group geared toward incarcerated individuals transitioning back into society. He also acts as a national councilman for Incarcerated Nation, a non-profit organization that helps raise awareness concerning prison issues. He is an avid collector of comic books, as well as graphic novels. In his down time, he always seeks new avenues of educational exploration including, but not limited to, self-education. His goal is to obtain a degree in environmental sciences in order to become a wildlife conservationist.

## Mis-Education

*Jermaine Archer*

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**A**ccused of murder at age 23; arrested at 24; convicted at 25; exonerated at 26; re-imprisoned at 27; and sentenced to twenty-two years to life at age 28. How does this reality impact one's education?

Growing up I enjoyed going to school. The teachers always told me I was smart and I loved the colourful stickers they put on my papers when I scored high grades. My favourite subject was math because from a young age I was great with numbers. I would help my brother who was in the sixth grade with his math homework. I was also good in science. I loved learning how different elements combined to create compounds. Overall, school came easy to me and I passed all my classes without trying too hard.

Unfortunately, local gangsters decked out in large gold chains, rings and earrings, neon, velour sweat suits and spotless white sneakers, would stand on the corner early in the morning and tease the boys and girls who went to school. They called us nerds, dweebs and geeks, and somewhere along the way I decided school was not for me.

Growing up the youngest of five boys, I learned to fight to survive early in life. I was smart enough to know that if I wanted the wealth and respect that others had, I needed to do what they did. Because I was good with my hands, I passed all initiations and easily transitioned into the underworld, mingling with gangsters just as easily as I did with "nerds". It was not long before I was fluent in street life. My block was my university, but I did not have to wake up early in the morning or travel miles to get to class. I witnessed and committed my fair share of high crimes and misdemeanours, including stealing cars, snatching necklaces off people's necks, and assaulting people. I quickly climbed the social ladder from small time petty criminal to drug lord.

I applied my math skills to make lucrative drug deals. I used my penchant for science to take four ounces of cocaine, one ounce of baking soda, and random elements like 7-up or yeast and turn it into eight ounces of crack-cocaine. I became a transportation expert, expanding my trade beyond Brooklyn and into other states. If the street was my university, firearms were my major. In lieu of traditional course credits, I amassed street credibility. In place of academic fame, I achieved hood notoriety. Instead of a degree, I earned Original Gangster status. The local youth followed me faithfully, marching to my tune of destruction as though I was the Pied Piper.

In 1995, Yoley, a girl I had been seeing, asked me, "Why do you waste your life selling drugs? You can do so much more. You should go

to college or something, anything, but get out these streets”. I told her that selling drugs was all I knew. By then I had convinced myself that I could only thrive amongst drug dealers, gangsters and thieves. I told her that I was comfortable in dark, smoke-filled basements-turned-gambling spots, where everyone was drunk and armed, but in an elevator filled with people in business suits, I sweated profusely. “I couldn’t relate to them”, I told her. She told me that she could not “wait around for me to grow up because she had plans for her life”. I never saw her again, but her cousin told me that she went on to Columbia University, earned a Master’s degree and later served in the Air Force.

By 1996, I was the undisputed drug boss of my neighbourhood. By 1997, I faced life in prison on a murder charge that began as an argument over a bicycle. Although I was perhaps a menace to society, I was convicted and sentenced to twenty-two years to life for a crime I did not commit. Today, eighteen years into my sentence, most of my childhood friends are dead, serving lengthy prison sentences or have been deported.

## **PRISON AS EDUCATION**

I entered Gladiator School, otherwise known as the New York State Department of Corrections (DOC) with a General Equivalency Diploma and an attitude. My first counsellor informed me that I would need to study a vocational trade, undergo alcohol and substance abuse treatment, and “aggression replacement” training. I kindly informed him that upon my release I would be returning to the jungle of Brooklyn so if the DOC was sincere about preparing me for re-entry, I would prefer karate classes or hand-to-hand combat. He laughed, while I did not.

Within ninety days of reaching Gladiator School, I found myself in Sing Sing’s Special Housing Unit (SHU), a fancy name for solitary confinement or what we call “the box”, accused of assaulting three prison guards. I wore my anger like a vest. In hindsight, although I did not commit the act that led to my imprisonment, I confess to deserving a state sponsored vacation from society. At the time, however, I believed that I did not belong in prison and so I acted against the authorities.

The SHU gave me time to see life differently. In the box, I witnessed prisoners toss bodily fluids onto other prisoners and prison guards. I heard men howl into the night, arguing with their demons. Some of the

men expressed their anger by stuffing their towels down their toilets and repeatedly flushing until filth-infested water crept into everyone's cell. One man would give newcomers hand-rolled cigarettes stuffed with feces, which they did not realize until it was too late. I saw prison guards beat men until they begged for their lives and then charge the beaten men with assault. Some men entered the SHU with mental health issues that were made worse by the inhumane conditions, including routine threats and physical assaults by staff, denial of toilet paper and meals, and sleep deprivation due to the constant screaming throughout the night. Men came into the SHU mentally sound and eventually broke down, refusing to bathe, eat or shave until they were barely recognizable. Witnessing the deterioration and degradation of human beings told me I had to be serious about retaining my dignity, sanity, and humanity because individuals lost themselves in this environment. I would like to say that my initial trip to the SHU woke me up, but in truth it took several visits before I realized that if I wanted different results, I had to behave differently.

When I was released from the SHU, I was sent half-a-day away from my family to Clinton Correctional Facility near the Canadian border. There, guards politely cautioned me that if I assaulted one of their officers it would be the "worst day of my life". I had heard the rumours about the brutality of Clinton guards, so I did not take the threat lightly. I also knew that Clinton was said to house the "worst of the worst" so I exercised religiously, gaining thirty pounds of muscle, and practiced yoga and martial arts in order to better defend myself. I also dedicated as much time as I could to learning about the law. I spent years pursuing unsuccessful legal appeals, all of which were denied with boilerplate language. I initially believed that once I proved to the higher courts that I was innocent, they would recognize the travesty of justice and order me released. After the denials piled up, I slowly realized that I would do my twenty-two years in prison as release from the penal system was not forthcoming and no one would come to my rescue.

## **EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS IN PRISON**

I decided to enrol in several vocational and therapeutic programs that were available at Clinton. I earned a Mechanic Assistant Certificate in Air Conditioning and Refrigeration Repair. This helped to shake me free of my prior belief that my destiny was a life of crime. Earning that first



certificate gave me the confidence that I could practice a legal trade upon my release. I then studied French, buying audiotapes and books to become conversant. Soon I could speak the language of love and people commented that I sounded like I was from France. This spurred me to keep at it until I became fluent. I went on to complete a course on HIV/AIDS and became a Peer Educator; something I initially saw as another job-skill, but which I quickly learned was a way to mobilize important life-changing information. I took pride in whatever form of work I was doing, which led to new opportunities. For example, after diplomatically handling a disagreement with a correctional officer about how to buff floors properly, I was assigned to the facility industry program where I learned to operate various sewing machines. While I do not envision working in the garment industry, the dedication and hard work ethic I developed has come in handy throughout my incarceration. Although the \$50 I earned every two weeks was not great by societal standards, it was top prison pay.

Learning became an exciting means of escaping the everyday of prison life. While at work or in class, I did not feel the loneliness or despair that normally accompanies prison time. I used my afternoons to complete Aggression Replacement Training (ART) and when an opening arose to facilitate the program, my counsellor offered me the job on a volunteer basis. I continued to work in the garment industry program and the prison would allow us to work to our heart's content, although it would not pay us for more than one job. I used the educational program as an escape and encouraged others to think before they reacted. Somewhere along the line I bought into the non-violent conflict resolution strategies. I realized this one-day when someone stepped on my boots without my reacting. Previously, I would have addressed him. But that day, I told myself that footwear was not anything to get worked up about, and he probably did not even realize he had stepped on me as prisoners' minds are often consumed with everyday struggles and concerns of survival.

I then filled a vacancy in the Inmate Liaison Committee (ILC) to represent the prisoner population at meetings with the facility administration. Meeting with executives from the prison administration to express population concerns improved my communication skills, as I had to adjust my words and their delivery in order to be taken seriously. I still had concerns about my "image", but this time it served a positive end. My weekdays consisted of meeting with other ILC representatives on Tuesday and Thursday

mornings; facilitating ART every afternoon; and working in the industry every evening. During the weekends, I completed a Basic Legal Research course, an eye-opening experience that showed me that law is not an exact science, but is rather a matter of opinions and arguments. I also taught HIV/AIDS 101 classes because staying physically busy kept me mentally out of prison. With my days filled, some of the other prisoners thought I was a fool for working as hard as I did. A fellow prisoner once asked me if I felt like a slave toiling away for \$12 every two weeks. I told him I did not work for the money, I worked because I needed to stay busy so that I would not have time to feel sorry for myself and to avoid getting angry.

In 2004, I was granted a request to be transferred back to Sing Sing Correctional Facility so I could enrol in college. My counsellor supported the transfer request, possibly because I had worked for him on a volunteer basis. Nevertheless, his endorsement taught me the importance of relationships. I kept busy at Sing Sing, facilitating ART part-time while working as a paralegal in the Law Library. I joined the Prisoners for AIDS Counselling and Education (PACE) program and facilitated classes during the evenings. I felt empowered sharing life-saving information with fellow prisoners, especially when they expressed their appreciation of the easy-to-understand manner in which I delivered it. I also completed the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP), and began facilitating AVP classes in English and Spanish. Staying active in AVP reinforced the non-violent conflict resolution information I had already learned and I truly embraced a non-violent way of thinking. I was already smart enough to avoid situations, but AVP helped me resolve unavoidable situations non-violently.

In 2005, I was accepted into the Certificate in Ministry and Human Services Program (CMP); a one-year pre-college level program aimed at learning to be of service to others. At the time, college students would ask me to edit their papers, which furthered my desire to pursue higher education. Watching men with sizable street reputations take school seriously helped support my view on education. Hearing gangsters discuss psychology and sociology left me wanting to be part of those discussions. I completed various Osborne Association programs, including Basic Parenting, Men's Health, Breaking Barriers, and Healthy Marriages. I learned the importance of active listening, being involved in my children's lives, and "responding" instead of "reacting" to situations. I joined the Rehabilitation Through the Arts Program (RTA), which promotes self-awareness and self-reflection

through theatre, visual arts, and dancing. Portraying different characters on stage in a maximum-security prison helped me lower the masks and shields I had unconsciously developed over the years. I was slowly peeling away the defence mechanisms that had led to my criminal lifestyle. I was becoming the man Yoley believed I could be – the man my mother had raised me to be.

## **ATTAINING POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION IN PRISON**

In 2007, I enrolled in Hudson Link for Higher Education in Prison, which afforded incarcerated individuals the opportunity to earn college degrees. I took every class seriously, participated in class discussions and always turned in my work on time. I drank up the experience and always wanted more. When I was not in class or doing my schoolwork, I tutored fellow classmates and pre-college students. Some individuals tried to tell me I was wasting my time in school and jokingly call me a nerd, but I would quickly respond, “Call me nerd. Call me geek. But sooner or later you’re gonna call me sir, and then boss, and one day you’ll be calling me collect”.<sup>1</sup> Then I would continue on my way to school while others laughed.

My professors were impressed by my ability to communicate and get my point across in class. Some even suggested I pursue a career in public speaking upon my release. My academic advisor appreciated the way I carried myself in school and how I would help my classmates. Two years into my college experience, I was selected to participate in a debate involving incarcerated and non-incarcerated college students. This opportunity reinforced to me that I was capable and it was possible to live a different life on the outside.

I eventually earned Associate and Bachelor degrees, graduating *summa cum laude*. However, my favourite Hudson Link moment was seeing how my graduation brought a little bit of healing to my fractured family. My mother’s face beamed with pride when I finally gave her the one thing she always wanted; to see her baby earn a college degree. My wife and children cheered me on, and it was a small step toward showing her that she had not made a mistake in standing by me during my incarceration. My brother and nephews smiled, and it felt good showing them that I could be a positive role model, especially since I was the first man in my family to earn a college degree.

My professors and classmates often told me I should be a motivational speaker and they elected me to host the first ever TEDx event in a New York State prison with the theme of healthy communities. On the night of the event, the room was full with prisoners, entrepreneurs, philanthropists, prison administrators, actors, community activists, writers, formerly incarcerated people, and others. While I stared out at the audience, I remembered my conversation with Yoley when I told her that being in an elevator around these types of people made me sweat. I smiled, because the same types of people that once made me nervous now surrounded me, yet I felt like I belonged. That event cemented my reconnection with my community and society at large. Days later I awoke to a surprise – my picture above an article in the *New York Times* detailing the TEDx Sing Sing event.

Hudson Link also chose me as one of three men to be featured in a PBS film on higher education in prison entitled *First Degree*. The documentary shares the all too common story of how community youth waste their intelligence and talents to chase the smoke and mirrors of street life. However, *First Degree* has a positive ending – the film depicts how I went back to school, earned several college degrees, and learned to put my natural talents to constructive use.

Through Hudson Link and other organizations, I developed many constructive relationships that will help me stay focused when I am finally back on the other side of these prison walls. I now have friends who encourage me to be who I want to be. I have since earned a Master's degree in Professional Studies with a focus on Urban Ministry, from the New York Theological Seminary. Aside from the degree, going to school helped me to develop more positive relationships with different people that will help me to remain "me".

## CONCLUSION

Today, I continue to volunteer in the Hudson Link office, helping to coordinate classes and organize graduations. All of these educational opportunities changed my world. I no longer desire to be a criminal and I have more options to succeed legally than I did eighteen years ago. Instead of being a drug dealer, I can apply my math skills toward accounting. As opposed to mixing illicit substances, I can employ my love for elements to becoming a chemist. Most importantly, I am a credible messenger for

the youth that come through the rehabilitation and educational programs. Similar to how other brothers impacted me when I was young, now when the youth see me, a known gangster, pursuing higher learning, it tells them that it is cool to go to school. I am still a leader, only now I choose to lead in the right direction. Education taught me that everyone has talent, but utilizing and maximizing that talent is not easy or common. Education taught me to use the gifts I used for crime and to now support and bring people together, whether by participating in debates, tutoring students, emceeding TEDx events, or moderating conferences between clergy members and lawmakers.

By choosing the street life, I was mis-educated and almost missed out on a very different and more positive life. Education helped me see life and myself differently, which changed my behaviour for the better. I stopped seeing myself as a victim, and now understand that my actions and choices are the reasons why I have spent so much of my life in prison. Although I am not guilty of the crime for which I am in prison, I am far from innocent and have much atoning to do. Today, I wish I could show Yoley how I am moving forward as an asset to my community, instead of the liability I chose to be so many years ago. Is it ironic that I lost myself in the streets only to find my sense of self in prison? I once read in a fortune cookie, "The great aim of education is not knowledge but action". Thanks to the educational opportunities I have had, I now understand that jewel.

If education can change my outlook and enable me to positively influence others, one can only wonder how educating larger segments of the prison population could reduce crime and recidivism. More than 2 million people are incarcerated in the United States (see [www.sentencingproject.org](http://www.sentencingproject.org)) and 95 percent of them will be released one day (see [www.nationalreentryresourcecentre.org/facts](http://www.nationalreentryresourcecentre.org/facts)). These individuals can either return as assets or liabilities depending on their incarceration experience. Statistics show that those who receive higher education in prison recidivate at much lower rates than those who do not. Nationally, approximately 67.8 percent of people released from prison are rearrested within three years (Durose et al., 2014). New York state's recidivism rate is 42 percent; 34 percent of released prisoners are returned to prison for parole violations and 9 percent are rearrested for new offences (DOCCS, 2016). However, over sixteen years only 2 percent of Hudson Link's graduates have returned to prison (see [www.hudsonlink.org](http://www.hudsonlink.org)).

In my experience, public safety and security was obtained by affording me the opportunity to pursue higher education. Education showed me how to apply my intellect legally and positively. As Daniel Rose, speaker at the 2015 New York Theological Seminary's commencement ceremony at Sing Sing stated: "Education does not cost, it pays". That statement was proven true at Sing Sing on 18 August 2016 at a Strategic Partners Workshop where I was one of twenty-one incarcerated alumni and students that collaborated with educational program administrators to take on President Obama's higher education initiatives. This included re-instating federal Pell grants for incarcerated individuals, and creating "the best-educated workforce and the highest proportion of college graduates in the world – incarcerated and non-incarcerated alike – by 2020" (The White House, 2016). These initiatives support the view that investing in education has the potential to realize the concept of "paying it forward".

In closing, I would like to say that I am so enamoured with education that I currently participate in, a graduate level pilot course entitled the "Construction of Alterity in European Thought". While I will not receive credits for the course, I want to remain busy and academically active. Today, I am happily married to my soul mate. I left junior high-school knowing how to hide razors in my mouth. I left high school with a felony record. But I will leave prison with three college degrees. Is it ironic that I lost myself in the streets, but found my Self in prison?

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> New York state prisoners can only make collect phone calls.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

A product of Brooklyn, New York, *Jermaine Archer* is his mother's seventh child. He served approximately 18 years of a 22 years to life sentence for a murder he insists he did not commit. The Kings County District Attorney's Office Conviction Review Unit is currently reviewing his case and he is hopeful that he will be exonerated in the near future. He has spent his time inside as productively as possible, earning three college degrees and performing in theatrical dramas before community guests. He can be reached at:

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## **The Building Blocks That Lead to Higher Education: Programs Provide Direction Behind Prison Walls**

*Wilfredo Laracuente*

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**T**he pursuit of higher education in prison is a complex combination of thoughts, perceptions and fortitude. You have a large populace that exists within the confines of the prison walls who are muddling around aimlessly, biding time until their release dates become a reality or not. Those who act contrary to this ethos and custom of prison life are ridiculed and criticized. Similar to Hippocrates on a witch-hunt willing to charge anyone and everyone, a minority struggles to break from the prison norms.

The minority are men who constructively utilize their time to empower themselves with substance and knowledge vital for life post-incarceration. This drive for change is a fuel that ignites within the person like pitch from a tree. This change often does not begin with higher education. Volunteer therapeutic programs provide insight, sparking critical thinking and contemplation of self. Some men who participate in these programs find the courage to speak in an open forum for the very first time about their experiences that have never been explored. Comradery often develops within this peer system and men become support systems for one another. Collectively they can relate to each other, and become invested in themselves and others through attributes like integrity of character and self-worth. They begin to understand the deficiencies that led to their social, emotional, and cognitive development, which translates into a willingness to learn and explore alternative methods of problem solving. For many, it is the first time a comfortable atmosphere becomes a possibility. Prison does not cultivate comfort under any circumstances. Incarcerated people are subjected to endless repetition, including being counted at specified times throughout the day. Facility movements reoccur like clockwork, down to the synchronized second. Programming, recreation and exercise break up the monotony a little, but ultimately after a few years, they too become mundane. Mental conditioning and resolve are necessary attributes to help break free from the prison routine that hinders growth. Education and self-awareness can invoke a paradigm shift that alters “the routine”, acting as stepping-stones to enable and provoke success.

As participants continue to work on themselves, they develop a skill-set that includes organizational skills, improvisational competence, public speaking and an investment in helping others change. “When educators know that a constituency has no ability to challenge how it is being served,



where does the incentive come from to serve it well?" (Noguera, 2008, p. 75). Individuals from all walks of life, whether through sharing personal experiences or showcasing their success stories, have become – as a direct result of the program – what fuels the drive to change.

The Osborne Association was my first experience at volunteer therapeutic programming. Osborne is a non-profit organization funded by the New York State Department of Corrections and Community Supervision to provide and strengthen family services inside select correctional facilities. Until experiencing this program, I did not tackle the issues that were holding me back from becoming a better father. I was able to make peace with the anger I felt for my own father abandoning my mother and I at an early point in my childhood. This opened a plethora of communication, understanding, and trust between my family members and I, especially my daughters, and I became relevant in the lives of my children.

I also discovered a newfound confidence that enriched my existence and that led to other opportunities. Public speaking became a niche that I discovered I was very good at. Upon completing the program, I was asked to emcee and give a speech at the 2012 Osborne Graduation. A few months later, the Family Service Specialist asked if I was willing to work for the organization as an administrative clerk and caregiver. For the past four years I have worked closely with the Osborne staff as the primary caregiver in their in-prison Family Center at Sing Sing Correctional Facility. I give up many Saturdays, Sundays, and holidays to ensure that children who are visiting their fathers, grandfathers, brothers, or other relatives can do so in a child-friendly, non-threatening environment that helps to strengthen the family relationships and the efficacy of the children. In addition, I have created a curriculum for a pilot program called Fatherhood Forum on behalf of the Osborne Association. This forum meets four times a year and is co-facilitated by me in concert with Osborne staff. Educational experiences come in all shapes and sizes during incarceration and had it not been for this first stepping-stone I would not have been able to quantify the impact this program has had on me.

All men, regardless of circumstance, deserve an opportunity to live instead of merely existing. Taking advantage of the opportunities presented before me dismantles incarceration and generates a turning point. Through programming, I discovered the potential to make a difference. Once I began to view life differently, taking advantage of the college experience

seemed normal. Learning the power of words and developing a command of language became important. Frankly speaking, I no longer want to be perceived in a negative light. I want an accurate depiction of a constructive individual with the ability to excel and wholeheartedly accomplish anything I transfix my mind to. Complacency can easily enter the equation if one is not careful behind these prison walls. Remaining grounded in this environment is a delicate balance for most. “Stay hungry, remain humble, keep inventing and hone your craft” are words to live by to achieve your educational goals.

Thinking outside the box and stepping outside of your comfort zone are lynchpins vital in maximizing the opportunities in education while incarcerated. Everyone has something they do better than most and “that something” should become their focal point. The narrower the range, the more likely success is the inevitable outcome. My participation with the Council for Unity is what propelled me to venture out of my comfort zone. Based on the concept of Family, Unity, Self-esteem and Empowerment (FUSE), one of the aspects of the program encouraged introspection in ways that I had never explored before. I was asked, “What did you *not* accomplish?” I sat in my prison cell contemplating a response disentangled from pride and ego. I responded:

Throughout my life prior to incarceration, I had many opportunities. Whether it was in the realm of education, employment, relationships, or other areas. I felt any set back could be corrected because I did not foresee incarceration and squandered the possibility of a college degree. I failed at the opportunity to be a great father to my two daughters through my incarceration. I fell short of what a man should be for his family as set by the men in my life – such as my step-father, uncle, godfather, and grandfather. I could honestly say that I did not believe I had accomplished anything prior to my incarceration.

When I closed that portion of my journal, I had a realization and made the conscious decision to bring peace to whatever chaos occurred in my life, to refuse to allow the past to consume me, and to use my newfound passion to make me whole. I started to participate more in the discussion portion of the program and to establish my personality within the group. After completing the program, I was asked to partake in facilitator training and to start disseminating the curriculum to men in the prison population

with the hope of becoming an integral part of their transformation just as the program had done for me.

In prison, education is a journey. It stems from an instance where a switch turns on and suddenly one finally gets the gist. After sampling a glimpse of the new you, this sudden yearn to achieve another goal becomes an incredible motivator. Education is not limited to an institution of higher learning. Individuals enveloped in the educational experience transform themselves into role models who influence and provide hope to others that they too can achieve higher education. In turn, new minded men become attuned to new ideas and programs that improve the overall living conditions in prison. That is why it is imperative to expose as many prisoners as possible to the college experience, bolstering the chances of potential students who may be teetering on the fence in contemplating whether or not to apply.

As time passed, networking became the goal and I began to rub elbows with men who possessed similar interests and traits. The majority of the prison population misunderstands this fraternity as it challenges the norms of the prison that are contrary to the natural pecking order. In prison, I learned that if an issue does not concern you directly, you must choose to ignore it and concentrate on the things that do.

I later learned that the Mercy College Hudson Link Program was holding tryouts for a *TEDx Talk* event titled, *TEDx Sing Sing*. The subject matter was a three-minute talk on “healthy communities” and try-outs were open to anyone in the prison population. The talks were based on content, originality, presentation and public speaking. Those selected for the *TEDx Event* would have their talks filmed and streamed online. This was an opportunity that I did not want to miss. “Would I be able to pull this off?”, I asked myself. “Maybe this is not for me?” “Will I make a fool of myself?” Those were questions I repeatedly asked as I developed the content of my presentation.

I chose to discuss the idea of exposing young men at an earlier age to the importance of fatherhood. The title of my Ted Talk was “A Good Role Model of What Not to do”. I was one of the eight men selected to speak on 4 December 2014.<sup>1</sup> It was an epic event and I savoured the accomplishment. After the event, it was the first time I heard my mother say, “I am so proud of you. It’s great to finally meet the man I knew you could always be”. Those words remain a rallying support whenever I need to recharge, refocus and reach my next goal.

I was then accepted to enroll in the Mercy College Hudson Link Program. I now long for these opportunities, where I once used to wander around prison aimlessly unable to place a finger on what I was going to do for the next twenty years of my prison stint. I am guilty of having cawed at others who carried books, schoolwork and program materials. Prison infuses a mentality and perception of hopelessness that makes it hard to sway from “the routine”. Ironically, a man’s greatest obstacle is his undisciplined self that most often only education can change. One of the great crimes of oppression is that it suspends your ability to dream. Education is a door and we must find it within ourselves to invest in our futures, develop confidence in our abilities, and understand our self-worth.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> This *TedX* talk can be found on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b3tPitKP0KA>

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Wilfredo Laracuenta* was born and raised in Bronx, New York. This is his fifteenth year of incarceration on a twenty-to-life prison stint. He was recently accepted to enroll in the Mercy College Hudson Link Program.

## **A Purpose Driven Life: My Journey from Student to Teacher**

*Chad Walton*

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I am 37 years old and was sentenced to life without parole at the age of 19. The judge told me that just because I was going to do the rest of my life in prison, it did not mean that my life was over. I still had the ability to be a decent man. At that point in my life I had no idea what he was talking about. I figured my life was indeed over and the only thing the future held for me was a lot of hard time in prison.

I arrived at the Washington State Penitentiary in Walla Walla eight days before my twentieth birthday. I had no idea what life had in store for me there. The only thing that I could think about was how I was going to survive. Looking back, I see that when life is at its hardest your needs are boiled down to necessity. Primal instincts set in and self-preservation is an easy purpose to focus on. When you are twenty years old your ideas about how best to go about securing your existence in a place where the only thing that seems to be respected is violence can easily lead you down a very hard road. I traveled a long way down that road before the words the sentencing judge spoke could set in. To say I found education in a school of hard-knocks is fitting.

Education provides incarcerated people with feelings of self-worth and confidence. Ultimately, education leads prisoners to want to become better people. For example, I came to prison at the age of nineteen with almost no education, but I possessed the will to learn. I enrolled in the GED program at Washington State Penitentiary and took education seriously for the first time in my life. Once I began to understand the information being taught, my confidence began to soar. Before I knew it, I was taking tests as fast as I was allowed and passing them with little trouble. This created a drive in me to want to achieve more and to focus on something positive for the first time in my life. In fact, upon completing my GED I signed up to take a college level psychology course. I began to understand that with the right amount of drive and effort, I could set positive goals and become a success story. As a result of being afforded the opportunity to educate myself in prison, I realized that I had what it took to become a contributing member of society by becoming a better person in prison.

Shortly after completing my first college course at the state penitentiary with a B grade, a 2010 bill was passed in Washington State that significantly cut funding for prison education. Opportunities for education beyond obtaining a GED and taking court ordered classes such as Anger Management

and Victims Awareness became nearly obsolete. Without the opportunity to obtain positive forms of education, prisoners had to seek education elsewhere. Incarcerated men are extremely intelligent when they put their minds to figuring out problems. I have seen prisoners light their weed with three pieces of pencil lead and an electrical socket when they did not have a match. However, is this the type of education that you want incarcerated men bringing back to the community? Negative education leads to negative consequences in life. For instance, it was not long before I was testing my new found knowledge obtained through the prison's best criminals, when positive education was no longer available to me. Ultimately, this led to a lot of time in segregation. Prisoners are hungry for education and if positive education is unavailable, they will fall back on what they know and are comfortable with – criminal activity.

Fast forward nineteen years and we get to where I am today. My ideas about what my purpose in this life is have taken many forms and in the prison environment your options are limited, although I have tried not to look at it like that. I believe a man must do the best he can with what he has, and not to waste time dwelling on all the things he does not possess or what he cannot do because of his circumstances. I have spent a lot of time reading books and trying to understand new ideas so that I can better understand myself and elevate my level of thought. For a long time, my purpose was education through which I gained the self-confidence required to begin to share my ideas with others.

My purpose slowly began to change from self-education to educating others. I began by teaching younger prisoners about their heritage and culture through the pre-Christian religion known as Asatru. When I became aware of the positive sense of self this helped to generate as we learned what our ancestors had gone through, it became my purpose in life to do my part to carry-on their teachings. I believe that it is impossible to know where you are going until you know where you have been. I also believe that one has to possess a solid foundation of who you are before being able to build a personal life philosophy of your own. Confidence comes in knowing who you are and what you want for your future. My goal is to give younger prisoners a reason to go back into the community and to help bring something positive into their lives, which requires moving away from the thoughts and behaviours that led them to prison in the first place. Without a change of ideas there will never be a change in behaviour.

I eventually came across the T.E.A.C.H. (Taking Education and Creating History) program here at the Clallam Bay Correctional Center (CBCC). T.E.A.C.H. is run by a diverse board of directors made up of prisoners and offers classes so that prisoners can work toward an AA degree. I found T.E.A.C.H. while working as a janitor on the school floor. I noticed that there was a room set up for prisoners to teach classes to other prisoners. I would slide by the door with the dust mop and hear math, sociology, writing, and many other classes being taught. This was not a place just to go and hangout, it was school with the same expectations that any other school would have of its students. In fact, the expectations were often a lot higher because the prisoner that was teaching the class had put his own time into the course and was typically a well-respected member of the prison community. To be disruptive in class is considered a sign of disrespect, which is not tolerated among incarcerated populations. Prisoners are expected to come to class voluntarily in order to better themselves, not because they are being made to attend by prison authorities. From the teacher's perspective, you better come ready to do the work because there will be work to do.

I was astounded by what I witnessed and I knew a lot of the prisoners running the program. I approached the President and Vice-President of the T.E.A.C.H. program and asked if I could teach a course on the History of the Vikings. I was told to submit the course content. I had already been teaching a course to the Asatru group at CBCC, which I proposed to the T.E.A.C.H. Board. They accepted and, in time, I also joined the T.E.A.C.H. Board.

The amount of work that it has taken to get this program up and running is beyond most people's imagination. To say that it is impressive is an understatement. Members of every race came together in an effort to better themselves within these walls. For those of you that have never had any experience with prisons this may not seem like a big deal, but let me assure you that different races working together in prison is uncommon to say the least. T.E.A.C.H. allows different groups to work together to teach their cultural values to anyone that wishes to learn about them. More than that, it offers prisoners that would otherwise have few opportunities to go to school the ability to learn. Being able to attain an education will help prisoners to make better decisions and to successfully reintegrate upon release. In this way, education can help to foster a new purpose in life – to give back to the community some of what was taken through criminality. Henry David Thoreau (2006) said that if he was a spider that was contained in the corner

of an attic, his world would still be vast so long as he kept his thoughts about him. Through T.E.A.C.H. a vast new world is possible and it makes this corner of the attic seem to shine with a new light of possibility.

Over the years I have spent in prison, I have educated myself enough to begin to understand the importance of educating others. For young prisoners, there is no better place for positive education to originate than the older prisoners they look up to as peers. If older prisoners emphasize the importance of a higher education, the younger prisoners are more likely to listen. These young prisoners show up to class and pay attention for the full three-hour session and are excited to come back at the next opportunity. Through this privately funded organization, prisoners are able to give back to the community by facilitating courses that will help younger prisoners on their path to success. Eventually most of the T.E.A.C.H. students will be released back into the community, taking with them the education and work ethic that they have developed from working with incarcerated facilitators. The prisoners that facilitate courses have high expectations of their students, which in return creates a sense of responsibility in them. In short, I am fortunate to be a part of the T.E.A.C.H. program here at CBCC and to help educate my fellow prisoners; this work simultaneously gives meaning to my life, as well as the lives of my students.

Education affords people in prison the opportunity to understand that they are capable of becoming successful and of making a difference in their lives, along with their communities. I gained a sense of confidence and self-worth from education, and now feel that I am moving in the right direction in life. Without T.E.A.C.H., I would have continued to educate myself in a negative manner. Instead of standing in front of a class and teaching about the importance of European culture through the history of the Vikings, I would likely be standing in the prison yard teaching people how to be smarter about breaking rules. These are the things that we need to take into account when we are considering the importance of education in prison. The public has a choice to spend the money that is needed to educate the nation's incarcerated people or they can spend that money on housing them in prison for the rest of their lives. Speaking as a prisoner with nineteen years of incarceration under my belt, I can tell you that without actively working to change the minds of prisoners, you will never be able to change their behaviour. If we believe that people are redeemable, it is our responsibility to help them on the road to redemption



by educating them about how their choices are going to affect their lives and the lives of others.

Many people in America today have a hard time seeing the value and meaning of education in a prison setting. With the economy in the dumps there is hardly funding for educating our youth, much less our incarcerated youth. Thus, when it comes to spending money on prisoners, education is the last thing that comes to mind. Some people fail to understand that it costs this nation more money to deny incarcerated people a means to educate themselves. Without teaching the criminalized that there is a better way to achieve their goals, they will continue to rely on crime, which will cost millions in tax payer dollars. If prisoners were afforded the opportunity of higher education while incarcerated, the recidivism rate would drop dramatically, saving the nation money in the long run. Although some might deny the value of providing education in a prison setting, I argue that there is hardly a better place to demonstrate its value and meaning for those involved.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Chad Walton* is incarcerated in the Clallam Bay Correctional Center in Washington State. Sentenced to life without parole at the age of 19, he is currently 37 years old. He spends much of his time in prison reading, studying, and enrolling in different educational and vocational training courses. He has also become a teacher and is currently facilitating a course on the History of the Vikings. He can be contacted at:

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# **The Value of Education in Prison: Beyond the Quantitative Data**

*Percy Levy*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

My name is Percy Levy. For the last fifteen years, I have been incarcerated within the Washington State prison system. During this time, I have been continuously involved in prison educational programs – post-secondary, as well as vocational including, but not limited to, Janitorial Certification all the way up to obtaining an Associate of Arts degree. At some point during this educational journey, I gained an incredible sense of self-awareness that allowed me to evolve as a person. Not only was I expanding my worldview through reading, writing and arithmetic, but there was also an awakening of consciousness taking place. Simply put, the world started looking differently when viewed through a fact-based and analytical perspective. In essence, my nihilistic views of existence began to morph into a much more reasonable and rational view of the world, my place in it, as well as my responsibility to it. It is my hope that this article sheds light on the value of critical thinking and student-teacher interactions within the prison setting. My experiences as a student and as a teaching assistant for the past several years afford me some authority to write this article.

## **THE VALUE OF TEACHER-STUDENT INTERACTION**

Prison administrations across the country pay close attention to teacher-student interactions and with good reason. There is no disputing that such interactions may sometimes lead to the introduction of contraband and other inappropriate behaviours, and on very rare occasions, escape attempts. The truth is that miscreant and manipulative behaviour is simply part-and-parcel of the prison microcosm. However, it goes without saying, at least to any reasonable and conscionable person, that education in prison is an essential component of the rehabilitative and redemptive process.

Why is it important for prisoners to interact with teachers? Well, the answer is complicated, but definitely worth exploring. In short, teachers step into an environment where unspoken rules regarding how both prisoners and officers are to behave have stripped away the softer side of human existence. Instead of adhering to the status quo, teachers promote, encourage, and model normative social behaviour, often working against or ignoring the problematic

friction that exists between prisoners and officers, opposing gang factions, and conviction-based institutional hierarchies that position murderers and drug dealers at the top and child molesters at the bottom.

The idea that teachers must somehow rise above the “authority figure” conundrum is not a new one. Paulo Freire (2003, p. 165), in his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, states,

From the outset, (the teacher’s) efforts must coincide with those of the students to engage in critical thinking and the quest for mutual humanization. (the teacher’s) efforts must be imbued with a profound trust in people and their creative power. To achieve this, they must be partners of the student in their relations with them.

In an environment that heavily promotes anti-authoritarian propaganda, unlike any other member of the prison staff, teachers are able to exercise authority in a way that prisoners can accept or admire by providing a little background information about where they are from and about their personal hobbies. This is in contrast to guards and other archetypal prison-authority figures who do not engage in the sharing of personal information, as per their training instructions, in order to maintain emotional distance from prisoners and to avoid establishing relationships of familiarity.

Once teachers have established a “personal relationship” with prisoners, positive things occur. I have personally seen this process play out many times. Prisoners come into class apprehensive and tentative, only to be transformed shortly thereafter into confident and enthusiastic students – sometimes even having to be calmed down during animated group discussions.

## **THE VALUE OF THE CLASSROOM SETTING**

Sadly, education is not respected and valued as much as it should be amongst prison populations, with the exception of vocational programs such as a welding and automotive repair that offer more direct potential opportunities for employment. For the most part, prisoners believe that jobs outside of the blue-collar realm are unattainable. Some cite lack of experience and work history as an obstacle, whereas others cite their status as convicted felons as an obstacle, and of course there is a group who cite the defeatist belief that the world is against them, so why even try!

It is because of these negative views that prison classrooms are so important. They offer a space to escape the adverse opinions of prisoners and to find comfort in the positive energy that exists in the learning environment. The classroom offers a working space for teachers to engage minds that have gone hard and brittle as a result of poverty and criminalization so that they can become more open, critical, and reflexive. Lastly, classrooms are a place where prisoners are exposed to teaching figures that they come to trust and respect, and who are there to help them, rather than being there to enforce the dominate/subordinate roles that are the status quo in prison.

### **THE VALUE OF CRITICAL THINKING**

Once a classroom is ready for learning, a teacher will steer discussions in a way that stimulates critical thinking. Even though students may not know the proper terminology and phrasing (academic jargon), they learn in an abstract way to appreciate the benefits of understanding causes and effects, unfair emotional appeals, hasty generalizations, and most importantly, the age-old problem of jumping to conclusions.

Critical thinking is the genesis of all positive change. That more prisons do not incorporate critical thinking as a core aspect of rehabilitation is an outright tragedy. To speak to a convict indoctrinated by criminal rhetoric requires understanding the flaws in his or her reasoning in order to move them away from what is too often the standard response to any opposition; namely, to become aggressive.

I have seen the satisfaction in teachers' eyes when hostile arguments turn into well-reasoned debates. Even more, I have seen the tipping point where students who pick up critical thinking skills roll their eyes at those students who continue to make flawed and unreasonable arguments and assertions. During these transformative moments I felt like the recidivism rate was receding by the minute.

### **CONCLUSION**

If teachers are not allowed to come inside prisons and teach in classroom settings, many of these young, easily persuadable minds are doomed to get their education from hardened convicts teaching out on the big yard.

This, of course, is not a winning set of circumstances for anyone involved – convict, prison staff, or society as a whole.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Percy Levy* is 46 year old African-American male who has been incarcerated for the past 15 years. During his incarceration, he obtained an Associate of Arts Degree, as well as published several books (African-American urban books with a message). He works as a teaching assistant in the AA program at the prison. In his spare time, he does his best to mentor those that are seeking mentorship.

## Development through Different Forms of Pedagogy

*Christopher Shea*

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For over two million prisoners across the United States, access to educational opportunities enable them to develop the skills needed for effective reintegration into society and employment. As a student at five colleges, three of which have been in a carceral setting, I have experienced a variety of methods of instruction including correspondence courses, procedural classroom learning and more holistic classroom education. Each of these experiences has given me insight into the unique challenges of trying to attain higher education in prison and the efficacy of various pedagogical methods. While I did find some methods more effective than others, the one commonality that all instructions shared was the ability to expand my understanding of the world and of others. Once I was released, these skills were key in my ability to obtain a good job at Caterpillar, communicate with my co-workers and eventually obtain promotions. According to a 2013 RAND Corporation study, “inmates who participated in correctional education programs had 43% lower odds of recidivating than inmates who did not” (Davis et al., 2013, p. 57). Looking back, there were aspects of each curriculum that hindered their effectiveness. Overall, however, I have found that being offered higher education while incarcerated enriched every aspect of my life.

My first experience with higher education began in the Missouri Department of Corrections in 2003. At the time, the GED was the only education offered. My only option for higher education was to find a school that offered correspondence courses and pay for them myself. I decided on the University of Arkansas, but due to lack of access to Pell Grants or any other financial assistance, I was only able to take one course at a time. Initially, this worked well because although I was excited about the opportunity, I was a little unsure of my abilities. The correspondence method of instruction had many weaknesses, but it also had its strengths. The drawbacks included the lack of interaction with the instructor and not getting answers to my questions while working on the material. The only instruction I received came in the form of red inked corrections or notes written in the margins of returned assignments. This, however, forced me to problem solve on my own. I would often check out supplemental texts from the prison library to familiarize myself with concepts I was struggling with. I believe this led to a firmer grasp of the material once I had my “Aha” moment. Another positive aspect of this method was the fact that

it forced me to read the text thoroughly. I came to this realization after my release and the experience of classes in a traditional classroom setting where I would, at times, neglect the readings and would instead rely on the lectures and my notes. With correspondence classes, the reading was all I had so I not only read it, but often reread it more than once. This was a very effective form of learning for me.

Once I was released in 2010, I was approved for Pell Grants through the FAFSA program. The online application was a little problematic, but once completed, the information was immediately transferred to the schools, and all I had to do was walk in and register. I was able to attend community college at no cost to myself and was even given a stipend each semester to help with the everyday cost of living. This kind of help would have been beneficial while I was incarcerated. It would also be beneficial for the countless number of men and women who want to take classes, but cannot afford it.

The comparison between correspondence courses and classes on an actual campus was like night and day. I now had access to my instructors, peer interaction and resource rooms. I had become accustomed to doing things on my own, but quickly made use of all the available assistance. I attended Illinois Central College for two years then transferred to Midstate College to pursue my Bachelor's Degree in Business Administration. Unfortunately, before I was able to complete the program, I returned to the prison system.

I arrived here at Danville Correctional Center in June 2014. I was shocked and excited to hear of all the available education opportunities offered and quickly enrolled. This would be my first experience with higher education in a classroom setting inside a correctional facility. The experience was twofold: the first part was my experience with Danville Area Community College (DACC) and the second part was my experience with the Education Justice Project (EJP) offered by the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. There was a stark contrast between the two experiences, but overall I would say both helped my learning in a number of ways. The DACC program offered courses in a liberal arts program and the opportunity to achieve an Associate's Degree in Arts and Sciences. The method of instruction was what I would call procedural or in the words of Freire (2003, p. 72) the "banking method". Instructors mostly taught by lecturing and students were seldom asked to use critical thinking. This method of pedagogy denies the

emotional presence and wholeness of students, and focuses on facts and data, often with no regard for listening to and hearing from students. It made the classroom a setting where optimal learning cannot and will not occur. I was often left with the feeling that instructors lowered their expectations because they were in a carceral setting, and I wondered if they had preconceived notions about the abilities of incarcerated men and women. I knew that they were handcuffed by budgetary and security constraints, which only made things worse. The texts were often outdated and some were even missing whole chapters, while instructors had no real connection with the students. I interviewed a former DACC instructor who was initially told by prison officials to “keep students at arms length”, because “they always have an ulterior motive”. I cannot think of anything more disruptive to fostering a healthy learning environment. Open lines of communication between students and teachers have an enormous impact on what is learned and how well it is understood.

In the spring of 2015, I was accepted into the Education Justice Project and began taking three and four hundred level courses from the University of Illinois. Shortly thereafter, I was offered a unique opportunity to return to the DACC program as a student teacher in an Applied Mathematics course. The experience gave me a new perspective on the many challenges that instructors face in a carceral setting. Not only was I able to better understand the student-teacher relationship, but it gave me the ability to implement different methods of instruction and see the effects first hand. The opportunity could not have come at a better time because I am currently taking CI499: Teaching and learning Numeracy from the University of Illinois. The course focuses on teaching through problem solving as opposed to the “teach by telling” or the banking method that is most common today. In CI499, the instructor Dr. Lubienski showed us the think-write-pair-share technique that requires students to work through a problem then pair up with fellow students and discuss the concepts used. The very next day I was able to implement the technique with my students in the DACC class. As I sat back and watched the students explain to each other the different ways they solved the problem, it was as if I could see lights turning on in every head. Even students who usually showed a lack of interest became engaged in meaningful discussion about mathematics. The atmosphere was so much different than it was when I would teach from the text.



As I said before, opening lines of communication between teacher and student, as well as between students themselves is, in my experience, the most effective learning environment. Being that I am in the same situation as the men I teach, there is an inherent trust and bond shared, which makes teaching that much easier. I can only imagine how hard it is to enter this position as an outside teacher and try to gain that same respect. The instructors in the Education Justice Program have come up with what I have seen as an extremely effective way to overcome this challenge. Through the implementation of additional workshops and resources, they have opened lines of communication not only between instructors and students, but amongst the students themselves. Twice a week students are given access to resource rooms where they can have instructor consultation or just work with others. My brief experience with the EJP program has been the most enjoyable and eye-opening I have had with higher education up to this point. The method of instruction used is more metacognitive and is focused on challenging the students to engage the material, instead of the usual lecture-based format where the teacher stands in front and the students learn passively. EJP uses a discussion group setting where students and teachers sit in a circle and freely discuss topics. I found this method to be highly effective in engaging the more reticent students and in encouraging free-thinking. In an interview with a fellow EJP student, I was told that “hearing other students share their perspectives, which is often different from my own but equally valid, helps me to understand things more clearly”. EJP has found a way to create an interactive and thoughtful environment in the classroom that highlights human diversity. This, combined with the many programs offered outside the classroom such as English as a second language, Family and Community Engagement, Mindfulness, and the opportunities to contribute to symposiums on higher education, are in a class of their own.

Higher education for me has been a key that has unlocked many doors. From the experiences I have discussed, I learned that simply providing that opportunity, as well as the resources a program has to offer, greatly affects the program’s effectiveness. We cannot allow the efforts to educate prisoners to stagnate. By advocating the implementation of not just college in prison programs, but good programs such as EJP, we can change the lives of many, and reshape the way society sees the incarcerated men and women.

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## If a Red Horse is Red, is a Blue Horse Blue?

*Vincent Charles Villebrun*

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When it comes to education within prison settings, one of the biggest benefits is the potential to raise the self-esteem of incarcerated men and women. There are also other benefits as education and vocational training programs broaden prisoners' opportunities to enter the workforce upon release. This can also improve their self-esteem and socio-economic status, and make it less likely that they will re-engage in crime. But when making this argument about education, I am distinguishing between two forms – the elementary/secondary system and the post-secondary system of education. These are more properly distinguished as the “banking” and the “problem-posing” systems of education respectively. According to Freire (1971, pp. 73-74), the banking-system of education is paternalistic and narrative in character.

This relationship involves a narrating Subject (the teacher) and patient, learning objects (the students)... The banking approach to adult education, for example, will never propose to students that they critically consider reality. It will deal instead with such vital questions as whether Roger gave green grass to the goat, and insist upon the importance of learning that, on the contrary, Roger gave green grass to the rabbit. The “humanism” of the banking approach masks the effort to turn women and men into automatons – the very negation of their ontological vocation to be more fully human.

The problem-posing system of education differs from the banking system insofar as the students are called upon to be cognitive, rather than to memorize what has been narrated by others. As Freire (1971, pp. 80-81) explains,

The problem-posing method does not dichotomize the activity of the teacher-student: she is not “cognitive” at one point and “narrative” at another. She is always “cognitive,” whether preparing a project or engaging in dialogue with the students. He does not regard cognizable objects as his private property, but as the object of reflection by himself and the students. In this way, the problem-posing educator constantly re-forms his reflections in the reflection of the students. The students are no longer – docile listeners – but are now critical co investigators in dialogue with the teacher. ... Whereas banking education anesthetizes

and inhibits creative power, problem-posing education involves a constant unveiling of reality. The former attempts to maintain the submersion of consciousness; the latter strives for the emergence of consciousness and critical intervention in reality.

Others, like Fromm (2010), would go further in denouncing the banking system of education as a system that not only does not allow for growth, but rather promotes social death. When considering parental direction as a banking system of education, this is a strong indictment of how much of our child rearing is at the root of societal ills.

When I was a child, I did not talk much. I was fairly confident that no one was interested in anything I had to say. I was raised to believe that I was worthless, which is how my adoptive parents shaped me. “You are a good for nothing, dirty little Indian, whose mother the squaw-whore gave away”. “No-one will ever love you, you little bastard. You are not even good enough for a squaw-whore to love and that’s why she gave you away”. “Indians are to be seen and not heard”. “You have a strong back, but a weak mind and you will never amount to anything”. “You’re a stupid, worthless, good-for-nothing Indian and we don’t know why we adopted you”. These were the banking deposits I often heard from them. I was not a person with the autonomy to develop my own identity. I was an object who had an identity imposed upon me by my oppressors. I was less than human. As a result of this, along with my introversion and hypersensitivity, I developed drug and alcohol issues, and a long suppressed anger, among many other negative emotions. I came to prison as a high-school dropout, with low self-esteem, and no concrete life-goals or direction. It seems obvious to me now where I was headed, but at the time, this was not apparent.

Mine was a transracial adoption from a Métis (Cree and French) home community of Green Lake, Saskatchewan to the suburban community of Surrey, British Columbia by a husband and wife who were second-generation Canadian born from Dutch-Russian-Welsh backgrounds. My experience of adoption was not unlike a form of “cultural invasion” as discussed by Freire (1971, p. 160): “cultural invasion, which serves the ends of conquest and the preservation of oppression, always involves a parochial view of reality, a static perception of the world, and the imposition of one world view upon another”. As a member of a defeated society, having been invaded through a process of colonialism, my experience was of the

colonized where I was made a ward of the state at birth, being adopted by a non-Indigenous family, and having their cultural context imposed on me. More than a cultural invasion, it was a cultural immersion and assimilation supported by the psychological and alcoholic abuse of my adoptive parents. Where Freire (1971, p. 153) argues that “all domination involves invasion”, I would further argue that all invasion involves domination, along with cultural immersion and assimilation. The immersion and assimilation of a member of one culture into another assumes the dominance of the latter.

Cultural conquest leads to the cultural inauthenticity of those who are invaded [immersed and assimilated]; they begin to respond to the values, the standards, and the goals of the invaders [assimilators]. ... For cultural invasion [immersion and assimilation] to succeed, it is essential that those invaded [assimilated] become convinced of their own intrinsic inferiority. (Freire, 1971, p. 153).

In striving to talk “white”, walk “white”, dress “white” and act “white”, I denied my ethnicity to anyone who asked if I was “native Indian”. I struggled with feelings of inferiority and the belief that I was incapable of learning or ever amounting to anything. It created much emotional and internal conflict as I struggled with resisting the words of my adoptive parents about who and what I was, and where I came from, while at the same time becoming convinced of these things. Being that our parents are ordinarily our most significant authority figures, the things our parents or parental figures say to us as children have the most impact.

If you believe your oppressor, you tend to block learning before you even try. My low self-esteem prevented me from trying to reach goals that I believed were unattainable. The only jobs I applied for were those I was considered by others to be “suitable for”. I did not have autonomy, self-confidence or self-determination. I relied on the support, advice and assistance of others. I believed others understood things I could not understand and I would try to hide this from them. My school friend Dalmas would often explain teaching instructions to me as I did not trust my own ability. He was a peer and not an adult or an authority figure, so I was able to receive the information more readily from him. Dalmas was not the one assimilating me and, although he was Caucasian, I did not view him as a superior like I did with respect to adult authority figures.

Without him, I would have failed my classes. I was piggy-backing on his self-confidence, independence and self-determination as though I was only able to learn through others who accepted me as a person as opposed to as an object.

My low self-esteem, feelings of worthlessness, negative self-concept, hopeless outlook, and lack of direction all increased my anger exponentially. My inherent deference to authority and my lack of independence curbed what might otherwise have been an authentic and possibly important rebellion. I needed to release my pent up angst and take back an expression of my own autonomy, and perhaps even my own culture. Instead, I engaged in forms of destructive action (Freire, 1971, p. 155).

Those who engage in and are convicted of criminal forms of destructive action, such as myself, find themselves in an even more oppressive environment than the culture in which they originated. Canadian correctional philosophy (to use the expression loosely) requires the immersion of prisoner-subjects into an even more dominant culture of correctional programs and ideology that relies on the same banking education system that objectifies the now criminalized subject. It follows logically from the banking notion of consciousness that the “educator’s [correctional program facilitator’s] role is to regulate the way the world ‘enters into’ the students [prisoners]. ... The educated [rehabilitated] individual is the adapted person, because he or she is better ‘fit’ for the world” (Freire, 1971, p. 76).

With this said, immersing and assimilating people who commit crimes into a more oppressive atmosphere that is similar to what frustrated their potential as children, can only lead to further rebellion, indifference, alienation, and destruction. This can help explain the recidivism rate in Canada. Prisoners recognize the correctional banking education system of reform as more of the same authoritative oppression they initially rebelled against, only now it is being forced on the prisoners by a regime that has much more power than that of their grade-school teachers or parents. Prisoners can openly reject the correctional program initiatives and ethos by rebelling and refusing to participate in “voluntary” rehabilitative programs, but they must then suffer consequences ranging from loss of institutional pay, to withholding of transfers, to lesser security, to denial of conditional release and prolonged imprisonment. Alternatively, prisoners can fake it and “jump through the hoops”, pretending to accept the correctional banking deposits when they secretly recognize its immersive and assimilationist

logic. In either case, the banking system of rehabilitative programs in a correctional context fails miserably.

The challenges faced by correctional educators are great. Not only are the prisoner-students those who have rebelled to the point of transgressing laws, but most of them reject a banking system of education which they understand simply as being told what to do by people who are part of a system that is oppressing them; an oppression far greater than what they experienced throughout their childhood in primary and secondary school. A child, who has been oppressed and possibly abused throughout his or her formative years will resist more deposits and impositions through more education. Conversely, if willing to learn, lingering self-doubt and fear of failure will make it very difficult to enjoy learning. It is important to break through these barriers in order to learn. Moving beyond the psychological impediments to learning requires internalizing a self-concept that is contrary to believing that you are less than human and incapable.

After I came to prison I decided to get my grade 12 equivalency. First, I was subjected to a Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) to measure my grade level. When tested, the teacher told me that I was refused entry into the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Program because my SAT scores were too high. Instead, she offered me a job as her assistant for the ABE Program. I accepted and started taking classes in the humanities through Simon Fraser University's (SFU) Prison Education Program (PEP). I was performing stronger than I ever did in the primary/secondary or banking education system. Over time, I was eventually able to reject the labels of my childhood and started to accept that I was more than capable. This afforded me the freedom to continue to learn and I continued to do so with greater ease. Although it was not perceptible to me at the time, this contributed to changing my self-concept. In actuality, I never recognized that my problem was low self-esteem. I concentrated solely on learning and getting good grades without considering that there was a psychological benefit because healing from the past was also taking place at a subconscious level. My good grades were belying the things that had been drilled into me as a child and the culture I had been immersed into. This transformational process occurred without Dalmas telling me how to do the assignments.

I enjoyed my new found abilities so much that I would argue vigorously with my *Philosophy 101: Critical Thinking* instructor, Dr. Anthony Marcus, about *modus ponens*<sup>1</sup> – a philosophical argument based on an absolutist

premise that when a red horse is red, a blue horse is blue. I received an A- in the course. When I received an A+ on a short story in *English 101* and an overall A for the semester, my doubt set in again. I began to think about the famous Stanford Prison Experiment where psychology professor Philip Zimbardo designed a mock prison on campus, assigning half of the volunteer college students to act as prisoners and half to act as prison guards. The experiment quickly spun out of control and was shut down. The student guards were abusing their power and the student prisoners were so psychologically affected that they started to believe that they were actually in prison. When I next sat with Dr. Marcus he asked me what my concern was. I responded smugly that I believed I had uncovered the truth, “You people from SFU are conducting a social experiment – you take a bunch of loser prisoners and give them high marks on their papers to study how those prisoners respond to being told they are smart”. “No”, he responded, “That is not what is going on here. The marks I give you are the same marks I would give any of my students on campus who complete assignments of this quality. I teach the exact same curriculum and I award the same work with the same grades”. “Get outa town!”, I blurted. “We’re your guinea pigs like those university students in the Stanford Experiment”. “No”, he said again. “I don’t think you yourself even realize all the things you did in this short story of yours. You used writing techniques I have not even taught you yet. In all seriousness, this short story is almost perfect, save for a couple minor typos”.

I left that discussion unconvinced. I had never gotten better than a C+ in grade school, and that only happened once or twice. For the most part, I barely passed. I decided to get a second opinion. I entered my short story in the Creative Writing category of the Prison Arts Foundation’s annual competition. I won first place and was awarded a certificate and \$250, a complimentary copy of the issue, and a \$50 honorarium. Dr. Murphy was not lying. I was not a guinea pig in a social-science experiment. “What is going on here?”, I wondered. As it turns out, the people I was to obey and revere as a child, the people I relied on for protection and truth about the world, had failed tragically. Although I cannot do anything to undo the course of events that led to my senseless violence against innocent people, problem-posing education in prison gave me an opportunity to grow and learn, as well as safely face the world and life’s challenges if ever given a second chance.



The banking system of education is an oppressive system that reduces students to nothing more than objects that exist to receive the information decided upon by the teacher/oppressor. The problem-posing system of education on the other hand is a liberating system that raises the students to the level of co-participants in the learning process and affords them the autonomy to decide for themselves how to view the knowledge shared. Students think for themselves as opposed to being told what to think.

Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new teacher-student with students-teachers emerges. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself taught in a dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught also teach (Freire, 1971, p. 80).

This transformation reveals another benefit to employing the problem-posing education system within the prison – the prisoner-student also ceases to exist. The prisoner-student-teachers are able to analyze and articulate their own circumstances, providing valuable insight through their life-experiences and the processes that led to their criminalization. Personal insights, introspective observations, and a forum to grow, learn and think for themselves are unobtainable through a banking system of education (or correctional therapeutic intervention).

No new knowledge comes out of telling prisoners who they are, what disorders they have (narcissistic personality or anti-social personality disorder, etc.), or what their predicted actuarial risk of recidivism is. Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings and consciousness as intent upon the world. They must abandon the educational goal of deposit-making and replace it with the posing of the problems of human beings in their relation to the world (Freire, 1971, p. 79).

Two decades ago, one of the SFU-PEP professors, Dr. Stephen Duguid (1996) co-authored a paper on the benefits of prison education. The research demonstrated that the recidivism of prisoners who upgrade with post-secondary education after coming to prison is greatly reduced from those who do not upgrade. The paper argued that only about two percent of prisoners who upgrade with post-secondary education after coming to prison eventually recidivate. In the face of such evidence, one wonders why post-secondary education in Canada's prisons is not widespread today.

## CONCLUSION

Today, I can see a significant difference between how I was before coming to prison and how I am today. My self-concept has transformed. I am more willing to take on new challenges and explore uncharted waters. Looking back at my educational and vocational training, I cannot pinpoint when my self-image changed, but it did. The banking system of education employed by facilitators of so-called rehabilitative correctional programs or “therapeutic interventions” could never achieve or accomplish what the problem-posing system of the SFU PEP did. Despite its success, the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC) discontinued the SFU PEP program due to public complaints about prisoners being afforded a post-secondary education when the public is not. This argument misses the point. It costs on average \$115,310 to incarcerate someone in a federal prison in Canada for a year. If we are making an economic argument about prisoner education, then education is key to reducing costs. If prisoners can improve themselves and expand their world-view through education, they are less likely to reoffend upon release. According to the Corrections and Conditional Release Act (CCRA), CSC is tasked with preparing its prisoners for eventual release through program initiatives, and yet they folded to the public optics of “helping prisoners better themselves on the tax-payer’s dime”. Our choice as a society is between releasing people from prison without offering them opportunities to improve their chances at successful reintegration or investing in those opportunities that have been shown to work.

A problem-solving system of education not only helps to decrease recidivism, it also saves money. It not only saves on housing costs, but on policing costs, along with the judiciary resources that are required to investigate and prosecute recidivists that could have otherwise been productive members of society. This also demonstrates the importance of universal education in changing the course of an otherwise poorly developed worldview, which can lead to non-productivity at best and criminality at worst. In providing otherwise unskilled people with the tools they need to attain pro-social self-sufficiency, prison education can perhaps even contribute to creating a better world.

In closing, I want to give a shout out to Dr. Anthony Marcus, wherever he may be. “A red horse is only red and a blue horse is only blue if we are not all colour-blind”. In other words, if we believe in the legislative mandate of

the CSC, and if we are smart, then we should insist on forms of intervention that have been proven to work towards meeting that mandate. Post-secondary education has proven itself to contribute to significant change in the lives of prisoners, so it only makes sense to provide prisoners the opportunity to continue their education after completing their high-school equivalencies. We have to decide as a society whether we want prisoners to be better prepared for their release by way of programs that have proven to reduce the risk victimization of future crime or if prisoners should simply be warehoused and denied opportunities to learn, grow, and change.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Modus ponens (noun): The rule of logic which states that if a conditional statement (if p then q) is accepted, and the antecedent) holds, then the consequent (q) may be inferred – origin Latin, literally “mood that affirms” (Oxford Dictionary of English, Third Edition).

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# **Social Justice Praxis within the Walls to Bridges Program: Pedagogy of Oppressed Federally Sentenced Women**

*Rachel Fayter*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Based on my personal experiences with the Walls to Bridges (W2B) program (formerly Inside-Out Canada), I have found a renewed value and meaning in education while incarcerated and I argue that the W2B program is an example of social justice praxis. Furthermore, my involvement with the W2B program has transformed my carceral experience from one that is oppressive to feeling empowered and valued as a person. Additionally, I have been able to maintain an ongoing and meaningful connection with the community through my involvement with the program.

I begin this paper by providing a brief overview of W2B, including my experience with the program. Next, I connect literature concerning three distinct forms of oppression; namely, dehumanization/objectification, disempowerment and self-depreciation, as well as the importance of social intervention to personal experience. Thirdly, I integrate relevant literature with reflections on my own experiences to highlight W2B's commitment to three key themes: transformational education, social justice, and maintaining a sense of community and connection. Finally, I briefly outline several key barriers to education in prison to illustrate some of the challenges and limitations of the W2B program.

## **BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE WALLS TO BRIDGES PROGRAM**

The W2B program began in Canada in 2009, stemming from the U.S. based Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program. However, there are important and interesting differences between Inside-Out and W2B. As an instructor, trainer and steering committee member, Dr. Simone Davis brought Inside-Out to Canada in 2009. A partnership was developed between Peter Stuart, a correctional educator and guidance counsellor at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) and Dr. Shoshana Pollack of the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University (WLU), who has worked with criminalized women in Canada for over 25 years. Shoshana took the U.S. Inside-Out training during the summer of 2011 and with the support of

Peter Stuart and each of their respective institutions, was able to offer a course at GVI that fall.

Walls to Bridges courses connect campus-enrolled and incarcerated or criminalized students in the community together as classmates, using an egalitarian circle pedagogy that emphasizes respectful dialogue, experiential learning, and shared inquiry. In a “circle of trust” we speak our own truth, while listening receptively to the truth of others, using simple personal testimony without affirming or negating other speakers (Palmer, 2004). The Canadian W2B approach utilizes Friirian principles, Indigenous pedagogy, decolonizing and intersectional analysis, and critical, feminist, anti-racist practices. W2B facilitators and students develop shared learning opportunities that disrupt hierarchies, challenge assumptions, and create deep connections (W2B Training Manual, 2016).

The first Inside-Out course at GVI was offered by WLU with ten “outside” social work students and seven “inside” students. The class met weekly at GVI for one semester to explore issues in a course entitled “Diversity, Marginalization, and Oppression”. The student alumni from this first class became the founding members of the Walls to Bridges Collective (W2BC). This group has met twice monthly at GVI since its inception. In 2014, a Toronto chapter of the W2BC formed to allow people getting out of prison to stay connected to the work of W2B while living in the community. Both groups welcome new alumni and collaborate and support each other to deliver facilitator training, public education workshops and forums, and to implement participatory action research projects (W2B Training Manual, 2016).

I enrolled in my first W2B course in September 2014, taking “Diversity, Marginalization, and Oppression” with Dr. Shoshana Pollack. Upon completing the course, I immediately applied to become a member of the collective. In September 2015, I participated in my second W2B class entitled “Equity in Education” with Dr. Jasmin Zine. As an active member of the collective, I have assisted with the planning, implementation and facilitation of two five-day instructor training sessions during the summers of 2015 and 2016. We also facilitated a Decent Work Forum at GVI in April 2016 in which approximately 120 participants, including about 40 community members, engaged in critical dialogue to discuss solutions concerning employment issues confronted by criminalized women. The background context of W2B provides a general basis for the program’s values, goals and overall pedagogical approach.

## OPPRESSION WITHIN THE INSTITUTION AND EMPOWERING SOLUTIONS

In this section, I reflect upon the dehumanizing aspects of oppression to which I am subject inside. Secondly, I consider how interventions stemming from the interests of the oppressors maintain the hierarchical and repressive status quo. Thirdly, I briefly examine the necessity of engaging in a dialogue with the oppressed that respects human rights while recognizing social privilege in order to engage in critical and humane interventions.

In my first W2B course we read a chapter from Paulo Freire's (2003) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and spent time unpacking the concepts within a small group. Freire's discussion of oppressive acts as dehumanizing stood out and pushed me to reflect on my personal experiences of incarceration within the Canadian legal system. Although I had read Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* several times in the past, through the W2B, I developed new insights and understood his analysis of oppression from the perspective of the oppressed for the first time. Freire outlines several dehumanizing aspects of oppression that revealed the overwhelming power of Correctional Service Canada (CSC) and demonstrated the degrading aspects of incarceration for me. It was extremely unsettling to identify so clearly with Freire's description of oppressed people and to reflect on the power of the oppressor.

Freire (2003, pp. 56-57) asserts that "an act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human". From my perspective, the entire experience of incarceration prevents people from being more fully human. We are forced through a confusing and unjust system in which verdicts are influenced by money, power, and various lawyers' interpretations of the law. Everything we know and love is taken from us; we are separated from our families, friends, and communities; we are herded like cattle, numbered and counted like economic products, and locked up like wild animals. Furthermore, Freire (2003, p. 60) explains how "the oppressed, as objects, as things, have no purposes except those their oppressors prescribe for them". Everything we say and do is recorded by our handlers, and used to classify and place us. We are seen as 'inmates' (rather than citizens), known primarily by our Fingerprint Section (FPS) number and do what those in power believe is best for us. We have no voice, no choice and no identity outside that of "criminal". Correctional officials tell us when to eat, sleep, go outside and take our medicine. They control who we can call, visit with and write to.

Access to proper and timely health, medical, and dental care is challenging and inconsistent. Completion of a high school education is forced, while post-secondary education is difficult to access, and institutional jobs are assigned based on the decision of the security personnel, rather than the supervising staff or the qualifications of the person.

Another dehumanizing consequence of incarceration that illustrates its' oppressive nature is self-depreciation. According to Freire (2003, p. 63), "self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, derived from their internalization of the oppressors' opinion". I have been labelled an 'addict', 'drug dealer', 'criminal', 'inmate' and 'convict', and a 'danger to the community' by guards, parole officers, and others within the criminal justice and correctional system. Many people I know have been called much worse. Eventually, we begin to view ourselves through this lens. CSC discourse claims that corrections can empower women in prison. However, for me, the W2B class is the single most humanizing and empowering aspect of my incarceration, replacing these negative labels and stereotypes with positive ones.

In a recent study on the impacts of the W2B program at Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI), researchers found that one of the key outcomes of taking a W2B course was the interpersonal relationships made between two groups of students who are normally unlikely to meet one another (Pollack, 2016). The relational connections and educational approach of W2B were identified as central to the process of becoming aware of and eliminating stereotypes that could prevent authentic connections between inside and outside students. As I re-read Freire (2003), incorporating my newfound perspectives and insights, I felt angry, frustrated and powerless. As a federal prisoner, I have encountered oppression more significantly than any other time in my life.

Social interventions are necessary for oppressed and marginalized groups who experience social injustice, inequality, and lack access to various needed resources – all characteristics of incarcerated people. However, according to Freire (2003), any form of education or intervention for the oppressed should be developed in partnership with the oppressed group, stemming from their needs and interests. The implementation of a liberating education that starts from the interests and perceptions of those in power is shrouded in the false generosity of paternalism; it maintains and embodies oppression and is an instrument of dehumanization (Freire, 2003). The W2B program is

conducted in full partnership with both inside and outside alumni, including collective members who were previously incarcerated. Everyone involved in the W2B collective, which oversees the educational program, has a voice and is able to contribute to virtually every aspect of the program.

Choules (2007) identifies several long-term negative social consequences for people who are seen as the “objects” of charitable action or intervention, including loss of dignity and powerlessness. In this framing, those with power take up the benevolent and potentially condescending role of protector, while the oppressed group is constituted as in need of protection, yet lacking the capacity to take care of themselves. The objects of charity are expected to respond with gratitude and often become dependent on the charitable actions. Choules (2007) further argues that a charitable approach tends to be patronizing and paternalistic, and rarely remedies the underlying needs of oppressed people.

As I read these arguments from Freire (2003) and Choules (2007), I immediately thought of my experience within the correctional system. As a federally sentenced woman, I am required to take a minimum of three programs that CSC deems necessary for my rehabilitation and successful reintegration into the community. There are certainly some beneficial aspects to these programs, such as encouraging women to examine harmful thoughts and actions that lead to criminal behaviour. That said, my experience within these CSC programs is diametrically opposed to my experiences with the W2B program. Much of the CSC course content focuses on pointing out our individual deficiencies, which are positioned as the reasons why we committed a crime and teaches us how to become “pro-social” people. For example, CSC defines a risk factor as an *individual* characteristic that leads one to engage in problematic or criminal behaviour. With the intent of encouraging “accountability”, social, economic, familial and environmental factors are disregarded in correctional conceptualizations of risk. Thus, the underlying structural oppressions – which form the basis of our needs – are ignored. We are told that there is never an excuse for committing a crime. If we attempt to explain our actions and the reasons for them, we are told that we are engaging in “techniques of neutralization”, which Sykes and Matza (1957) describe as the discursive methods through which individuals justify their delinquent or illegal actions. CSC program facilitators inform us that we always have a choice, even if that choice means starving, being homeless or dying. We are told these choices are always preferable to committing a



crime. As I reflect on the social justice readings and my experience within CSC programs, I continue to feel angry, frustrated, and powerless. These programs do not explore issues of marginalization, diversity, oppression or inequality – and they were not developed or evaluated with input from their intended beneficiaries.

The current prison system in Canada is like a revolving door for people living in poverty and those who are struggling with addiction or mental health issues; this is particularly the case for individuals from racialized and Indigenous communities. Prisoners receive clothing, food and shelter while all the external social problems are overlooked. Rather than working on eliminating poverty, homelessness, inequality and social disparity in Canada, the federal government spends more money on walls, fences, and guards for our prisons. In fact, according to CSC, critiquing unjust social policies is a specific technique of neutralization that they describe as “blaming the system” (WOMIP Training Manual, 2014). The mandatory correctional programs do not examine structural oppressions, focusing exclusively on encouraging prisoners to embrace personal responsibility for their marginalization. As a result, the criminal justice system maintains the status quo and dissuades the oppressed from critiquing the system so as to prevent the oppressors from losing their power. Those in power are concerned with ensuring “the people continue in a state of submersion, impotent in the face of oppressive reality” (Freire, 2003, p. 52). This is also consistent with Freire’s assertion that the oppressed lack confidence in themselves; believing in the invulnerability and power of the oppressor. By asserting their power, focusing on our individual deficits, and offering paternalistic charity, CSC breeds complacency in federally sentenced women. Women in prison often give up their personal and legal rights and freedoms, simply because many of us do not believe we can win against the system. We are threatened with segregation, losing our jobs, a higher security classification, no parole, no visits home, and other serious consequences; so we are scared to fight back. Despite these barriers, there is hope for change; it is possible to resist and even overcome oppression.

I assert that one way of battling oppression within the Canadian prison system is through strong, collaborative educational programs, such as W2B, that are transformative for the students involved and built on a foundation of social justice. The W2B class format and overall program structure is based on key principles from Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire

(2003) explains that this pedagogy requires the involvement of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation, who recognize themselves as oppressed. Consciousness-raising or a dialogue with people facing oppression is necessary for change. The oppressed must be subjects in their struggle, not objects. The W2B program allows inside students to have this dialogue in a safe space, free of CSC staff, in solidarity with people who might actually hear us. According to Freire (2003, p. 68), “the only effective instrument is a humanizing pedagogy in which the revolutionary leadership establishes a permanent relationship of dialogue with the oppressed”. Additionally, respecting human rights can potentially lead to radical social change. Choules (2007) argues that social injustice could be eliminated if human rights were completely embraced. However, she also cautions us to recognize the impact of social privilege. Those who occupy positions of power must be challenged for their role in perpetuating social injustice by maintaining their power and privilege. This is the value of a W2B classroom; it actively seeks to level the playing field by using circle pedagogy to reduce traditional academic, social and economic hierarchies. Considering consciousness-raising as social intervention helped to mitigate my feelings of anger and powerlessness, and filled me with hope to change our archaic and oppressive prison system.

### **COLLABORATIVE LEARNING: TRANSFORMATION, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS**

I believe that my participation in the W2B program is an exercise in social justice praxis. The program is committed to transformative education, social justice and maintaining a sense of community. In what follows, I use liberatory, critical, and transformative pedagogical literature to reflect on my experiences within the W2B classroom and collective to illustrate this point. Furthermore, I demonstrate how W2B’s pedagogical approach and experiential learning activities are directly linked to meeting and maintaining certain human rights.

#### **Transformative Qualities of W2B**

Education alone can be transformative and liberating for people in prison, where loneliness and degradation are common in an atmosphere permeated

by contention and distrust (Perry, 2013). Gaining an education provides prisoners with a sense of hope, purpose, and strength while giving them the knowledge and skills to succeed in the community. This in turn enables opportunities for further education and career aspirations once released. The pedagogical model that both W2B and the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program pursue goes one step further in transforming traditional Western approaches to education, thus having the potential to transform the prison, university and overall community. W2B and Inside-Out pedagogies both do away with the one-way transmission of information that typically characterizes learning environments and, as a result, eliminate hierarchy where students also become teachers. This model requires all students to be active participants, rather than passive recipients of information. By being active in one's education, the student is more likely to become invested (Turenne, 2013). These pedagogical practices analyze and reject structures of oppression, injustice, and inequality while empowering the voices of those who are commonly silenced and marginalized (Perry, 2013). This innovative course format allows students to traverse boundaries between the university and prison, boundaries that have been created and enforced by a culture of law and order. Crossing boundaries is the engine of transformation (Bumiller, 2013).

Based on interviews with students who took a one-semester W2B course, Pollack (2016) found transformative impacts on the students' sense of self as a result of their participation in the program. Students spoke about the positive impacts on their self-esteem, sense of belonging, family relationships, personal agency, attitudes and behaviour. From my own experience with the program, I felt an increase in my self-esteem: I felt like I belonged, was valued and was heard for the first time since my incarceration. For me, involvement in the classroom offers a break from typical prison life. When participating in the class and collective, I feel like an intelligent, valuable and thoughtful individual who is able to express herself freely, without fear of repercussion. I am appreciated for my opinion, my voice is heard and I am a valued subject in the class. Freely choosing to participate in the program, I have an identity outside of the labels prescribed to me by CSC.

According to Allred and colleagues (2013), feelings of transformation and confidence contribute to one's capacity to handle life's opportunities and challenges. In a W2B course, transformation stems from the relational learning experience, which shifts the focus from the potential for individual

change to a collaborative understanding of more complex social issues that are constructed through respectful and sustained engagements with the professor and fellow classmates (Allred et al., 2013).

The W2B program includes people from diverse cultural, racial and social backgrounds with very different life experiences. By learning to transcend these differences we learn that people are fundamentally alike. Dynamics regarding race, gender, class, age, sexuality, and other differences within the classroom are not ignored, but are instead worked through in a collective and authentic manner (Turenne, 2013). Honouring one another's identities requires trust and openness as students bring their personal truths into the circle conversation. Students identify circle pedagogy and learning from each other's diverse life experiences as leading to personal growth that extends beyond the classroom context (Pollack, 2016). This pedagogical model provides concrete evidence that through individual and collective effort we can transform society into a safer and more egalitarian place to live (Perry, 2013).

The classroom is structured with all of the "inside" and "outside" students, the teaching assistant and professor sitting in a circle formation, so that no one person is perceived as having more power or knowledge than another. This circle format also allows for every person in the room to have an opportunity to speak from their own experience and truth. No single perspective is seen as more accurate or valuable than another (Palmer, 2004). The circle allows everyone to have a voice and gives the space and time for each person to share their story or perspective. This is especially important for marginalized people who may rarely have had the opportunity to be heard. Pollack (2016) explains how the concept of "finding a voice" was a repetitive theme throughout the interviews she conducted with W2B students. Interview participants noted that the ability to be oneself in the classroom and to discuss one's lived experiences with their peers using the analytical framework of the course was transformative.

This exercise of sharing our stories and being heard is directly linked to Freire's (2003) calls for consciousness-raising and generating a dialogue with the oppressed. The circle format is both effective and humanizing, which Freire states are essential aspects for progressive social change. Similarly, Choules (2007) claims that respecting and embracing human rights can potentially lead to radical social transformation. The circle format does not allow for debating any students' perspective truth or censoring

one's opinion. Instead, we are encouraged to voice our thoughts and beliefs, while listening receptively and respectfully to one another. Therefore, one of our fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (CCRF, 1982) is being exercised: our “*freedom of thought, belief opinion and expression*” (article 2B). Similarly, in Choules' (2007) critique of charity, she argues that those in power are the furthest from the reality of those with need. The circle format allows oppressed federally sentenced women to share and express their material experiences with each other. This simple activity within the class is our only opportunity to speak openly and freely about our beliefs and experiences while incarcerated.

### **Commitment to Social Justice and Human Rights**

In one W2B course, we read articles related to social justice and the class participated in an activity where four pieces of chart paper were posted around the room. We were invited to envision a utopian society that is built on social justice principles within four areas: education, employment, social and mental health services, and the criminal justice system. We had an opportunity to move freely around the room writing our uncensored ideas under the relevant headings on the chart paper. Afterwards, these documents were shared and discussed as a class. I have participated in similar visioning activities before, but I found this particular exercise to be especially empowering. I felt engaged, excited, and invigorated with hope because despite being oppressed within the prison system, my voice was being respected and heard.

Based on my description of the chart exercise, it is clear that this activity aligns with the CCRF (1982). The United Nations (UN) Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), Article 26 also outlines the right to education and is especially relevant to my learning experiences facilitated via the circle format and the chart exercise. According to the UN Human Rights treaty, education should be “directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups ... for the maintenance of peace”. Sharing our stories and truly listening to one another without judgement, while working together as a class to envision a socially just society are both examples of an education based on key human rights principles.

A central aspect of Freire's (2003) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* concerns the oppressed person's consciousness, specifically their view of the world and

their ethics. Beginning a dialogue with the oppressed person or group can help to challenge the oppressed consciousness in order to engage them in the fight for liberation. According to bell hooks (1994), engaging in dialogue is one of the easiest ways we can begin as teachers, students and critical thinkers to cross boundaries. W2B courses offer unique opportunities for dialogue and leadership development among diverse students. Such opportunities facilitate a paradigm shift in thinking about crime and social justice, potentially leading to social change (Bumiller, 2013). Respectful dialogue leads to understanding others; W2B courses facilitate this through small group work and projects, which transforms into action as students learn to work across differences, to agree and disagree without resentment, and to collaborate more effectively. These skills can ripple out to the larger community, potentially reducing stereotypes and discrimination. Ideally, this can alter society's perceptions of, and response to, various inequalities and harmful ideological practices (Turenne, 2013).

Social justice is promoted within the W2B classroom as power relations are overcome when made transparent (Carines, 2013). Outside students can glimpse into the lived realities of the inside students, while inside students interact with academic material in unique and interesting ways, and have discussions on social justice issues with engaged community members. Outside students often experience a radical change in the way they view incarcerated individuals as they learn to challenge dominant stereotypes about criminalized people (Perry, 2013). W2B course content and the process of creating a community cultivate a sense of personal accountability and commitment from both inside and outside students to challenge social inequalities (Pollack, 2016).

The W2B collective of alumni from the program is an example of how community-based learning can evolve into a deeper, long-term commitment to collaborate on social justice issues. There are currently eight Inside-Out "think-tanks" in the United States and two W2B circles or collectives in Canada (Pompa, 2013). Outside student alumni often join the collective so they can maintain their connection to W2B. Collective projects related to social justice can help to intensify civic engagement and promote interest in these issues amongst the general public through workshops and events. The Inside-Out think-tanks and W2B collectives encourage the pursuit of higher education among inside students, while facilitating the development of personal agency and social activism, and empowering members to create change. Many members and program alumni have taken leadership roles in

diverse social justice initiatives (Perry, 2013). As an inside student, I have experienced a renewed sense of hope in my ability to complete my graduate studies and contribute to social action. I plan on using this oppressive experience to advocate for prisoners' rights in the future.

### **Maintaining a Sense of Community and Connection**

As students transform their relationships with and work together in the pursuit of social justice, a sense of community develops. Pollack (2016) reported that students often used the word "community" to refer to a sense of accountability, interconnectedness and shared purpose that they believed developed through class interactions. Utilizing circle pedagogy builds a sense of community (Palmer, 2004), while small group work and projects also assists in fostering community. As students work together towards a common goal they must compromise, and be patient and empathetic (Turenne, 2013). In contrast to the feelings of alienation and loneliness that prisoners often experience, W2B students recognize each other as fully human and develop skills to connect with others, which can help to combat emotional isolation. In effect, the program structure aims to build relationships and a greater sense of humanity amongst students (Harris, 2013).

## **BARRIERS TO SECURING AN EDUCATION WHILE IN PRISON**

While there are many benefits that flow from the W2B program structure, it is also important to contextualize the barriers and challenges that make it difficult and impossible for some to secure an education while incarcerated. The barriers to education that exist in prison are physical, institutional, relational and psychological in nature. The following is meant to provide a brief snapshot of some of the main challenges faced by women accessing education programs in prison.

### **Physical Barriers**

#### *Limited Access to Computers*

Incarcerated students do not have access to computers in their living unit. Students can access classroom computers only during those hours when movement throughout the institution is permitted and when the classrooms

are not in use. During evenings and weekends, she must rely on the guards to open the room. There is no Internet access, which restricts our ability to conduct research, obtain articles and books, or complete college or university correspondence courses, since most are only available online.

### *Lockdowns*

Management will lockdown the institution for various “security” reasons, forcing people in custody to remain in their living units, cancelling all programs and not allowing outside visitors into the prison. These lockdowns can last anywhere from a matter of hours to days or even weeks. A lockdown can result in missed classes and W2B collective meetings, which we are often unable to make-up. During lockdowns, incarcerated students cannot access computers and cannot speak to other inside students or teaching assistants.

## **Institutional Barriers**

### *Lack of Resources*

The computers that are available to incarcerated students have outdated hardware and software. The prison library is relatively small with very limited hours and minimal academic materials. The focus of CSC’s education policies is with the completion of high school, therefore post-secondary education is given second priority.

### *Financial*

Fortunately, W2B courses and the required course materials are offered free of charge to inside students. It is extremely difficult to pursue additional post-secondary programs since people in custody have virtually no income and cannot access a scholarship that is available to students in the community, not to mention the fact that there are a very limited number of bursaries available.

## **Relational Barriers**

### *Interpersonal Conflict*

Due to the location and nature of the W2B course, conflict can enter the classroom more easily than in a traditional setting, preventing or damaging



group cohesiveness, if not mediated by the facilitator. Unlike taking classes on a college campus, in prison we are locked in a very small, restricted, oppressive community in which solidarity is punished and frowned upon.

### *Power Imbalances*

Although differences in power are present everywhere in society, and clearly within the university setting, yet they are especially salient in the prison context. As prisoners, we are constantly oppressed and discriminated against. Our voice, choices and actions are consistently monitored, judged, and restricted. It is extremely challenging to succeed in this environment. Many women find it difficult to participate in class and express their views on paper because prison is not a safe environment in which to speak out.

## **Psychological Impacts**

### *High Stress Environment*

It is not easy to focus on academic work in the oppressive, stressful environment of a prison. Along with being separated from our friends and family, communities, and nature, we experience constant instability. The policies and procedures of the prison are enforced inconsistently depending on the guards' mood, who is working, or which prisoner is being targeted. There are frequent house and room searches in which items can be seized, misplaced, or destroyed. We also lack privacy and often do not have a quiet place to work.

These barriers, along with the oppressive environment, cause many prisoners to feel powerless, unmotivated, and hopeless at times. Simply reading course materials or completing a written assignment requires an inside student to surmount obstacles that outside students may not imagine exist. Additionally, we face some of the same barriers that outside students' experience, such as personal/family issues, health problems, or mental health issues, yet we do not have the same access to social and practical supports.

## **CONCLUSION**

Education can facilitate the process of empowerment for many individuals. For marginalized people within an oppressive institution, education has the

potential to change lives. Specifically, the W2B program is an example of social justice praxis because it has the ability to facilitate transformation at the individual, relational and community levels for people experiencing oppression. The program's circle pedagogical approach alters traditional Western models of education by disrupting hierarchies, utilizing experiential learning approaches, integrating one's whole self into the learning experience and encouraging marginalized people to have a voice. Furthermore, the W2B program fosters a commitment to social justice and builds a sense of community among participants, while creating and maintaining community connections for incarcerated students. Although there are many barriers to education in prison, based on my personal experience, I argue that the W2B pedagogy and the meaningful relationships it facilitates are an effective way to overcome these barriers, transform people's lives, and empower women. These positive impacts can ripple out from the classroom, to the prison and, finally, the wider community.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Rachel Fayter* is a 35-year-old single woman currently incarcerated at Grand Valley Institution in Kitchener, Ontario. She has been actively involved in the Walls to Bridges program as a student and collective member since September 2014. Rachel was born in Toronto and moved around often with her parents as a child. She attended Wilfrid Laurier University for over ten years, earning her BA in Psychology in 2004 and her MA in Community Psychology in 2006. She completed most of her coursework for a PhD in Community Psychology prior to her incarceration. Rachel has done extensive work in both community and research settings with troubled children and youth, and homeless adults grappling with mental health issues. Following her release, she hopes to complete her PhD in the same or a related field, as well as continue her work with social activism and community engagement, focusing on advocating for prisoner rights.

# Attempting to Secure a University Education while in Prison

*Petey*

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## INTRODUCTION

“At least I’ll get a free education when I go to prison”, I thought. I was so very wrong. On my own dime and in three different prisons and penitentiaries – youth, adult provincial, and adult federal – it took me four years to complete 80 percent of the credits required for one academic year of university education in Canada. At that rate, I would need twenty years to complete a four-year Bachelor of Arts.

I received a ten-year youth sentence. While I will refrain from providing details unrelated to the topic of education, I would like to say that if I could turn back time and not commit my crime, I would. Because I cannot do that, I focus on my present so that I can create a positive future for myself and my loved ones. Despite our crimes, all prisoners deserve an education.

Given that my foreseeable future would be spent behind bars after receiving a ten-year youth sentence, I set my sights on obtaining an education so that I could have a future upon my release. A university degree would assist me with supporting my younger brother – six years old at the time of my arrest – when we could have contact again. My brother, now nineteen, lives with me and I am one year away from graduating from law school. By dedicating my career to social justice, law and fighting for marginalized peoples’ rights, I am going to take this system *down*. In this critical reflection, I describe my educational experiences across three different levels of incarceration in Canada – juvenile detention, adult provincial, and adult federal.

## JUVENILE DETENTION

The easiest type of government-approved education I completed while incarcerated was high school. I was in a juvenile detention centre that held anywhere between 60 to 120 youth prisoners and they had a school built into the prison. Within the school complex, there was a gym, a weight room, a cafeteria where we could also cook, a library, several classrooms and offices for the school administration. Classes were co-ed and typically had fewer than five prisoner-students, boys and girls between the ages of 12 to 19. We had supervised Internet and computer access during regular school hours.

The best room in the school was the cafeteria, which is where I met Lyn, my Prime Teacher, who was also the nutrition and sewing teacher. Lyn looked like the grandmother you wish you had, to whom you could tell anything, *anything*, and it would not surprise her. Lyn had seen it all and worked with all types of difficult children. She treated each student the way they treated her, rather than a prejudgment based on their crime. This made her classroom the only one that felt normal in.

I completed high school while in juvie (juvenile detention) and volunteered as a teacher's assistant (TA) in the cafeteria and sewing room. I often cooked with teenagers who had severe mental impairments, which was extremely rewarding and simultaneously heart crushing. One boy, Aaron, was an eighteen-year-old with the mental age of a five-year-old. He could do anything, even bake rainbows into his cookies, if he worked with me, only to be restrained and thrown into segregation a few hours later for acting like a five-year-old that had a tantrum because he did not want to go to his room.

As the only graduating student, there was no graduation ceremony with the cap and gown for me. I received a round of applause at the end of the year education assembly, which was far from the prom and "best years of our lives" speech and ceremony I anticipated as a little girl. On a positive note, I received a \$1,000 scholarship for academic merit and for writing a compelling essay. I did not know it at the time, but that would be the only external funding I would receive for my education during my entire imprisonment.

I was the first to begin university in the youth prison. I started a double major Bachelor of Arts degree in French Studies and Psychology from Athabasca University, while volunteering as a TA. Each course was approximately \$700 and I would have to take ten courses a year for four years to earn the degree. I had a couple of thousand in savings from a summer job that I was going to use to begin my courses. I began with statistics. I was permitted supervised Internet access to complete my coursework during class hours, and to interact with the other high school students in a socializing and mentoring capacity. To everyone's dismay and after exhausting all appeals I knew of at the time, I was transferred to Vanier Centre for Women (adult provincial facility) after one month into my first Athabasca course, because I had turned twenty. I was assured that because I aged out of the youth system and my sentence was not converted to an adult sentence, my access to education would be the same or *greater* in the adult provincial system than it was while in juvie.

My final assessment is that I *could* complete a university degree in the youth system, provided that I had the money necessary to pay for each course individually. However, being motivated to stay on track became increasingly difficult over time because I was not bound by the high school deadlines and was prone to depression – not to mention the structural difficulties I experienced when trying to take university courses.

### **ADULT PROVINCIAL: VANIER CENTRE FOR WOMEN**

Vanier Centre for Women offered a very different educational experience. Like my experience in the youth system, I was also the first woman to work on a university course while in Vanier. I was not permitted access to a computer and there was most certainly no access to the Internet; I was provided with a tiny pencil (about the length of a thumb), a six-inch floppy ruler, and a scientific calculator only after I appealed to the Ombudperson's office and the Office of the Advocate for Children and Youth, who intervened on my behalf. I would sharpen my tiny pencil on the cement in the cells because a real pencil sharpener was considered a contraband weapon.

The cell searches were the most discouraging and happened two to three times per week. I was double bunked in a cell designed for one and had my mattress on the floor, beside the toilet. My cellmate, May, was deaf, and I used to pretend not to hear her loud farts, which helped her relax a little bit when we were stuck in our cell for days on end under lockdown. I found it hard enough to be in Vanier *with* my hearing and cannot even begin to imagine the difficulties May experienced in this forgotten hellhole.

Course material was simply a stack of loose paper because that was the only form of education material allowed – I was not permitted staples, binders, duo-tangs or folders, audio tapes, videos, CDs, or DVDs. Yet, prison guards felt the need to repeatedly throw my course material across the cell, which had the same effect as shaking out a book with no spine so the pages would fly around in a beautiful mess.

Athabasca courses include remote access to tutors and professors. However, I could not take advantage of these because the tutors do not accept collect calls. I was completely on my own in terms of learning the material and could not turn to anyone for help because most of the women I met in Vanier never completed high school. I did not see prisoners completing

their high school education, or any education, while at Vanier, nor were they provided with any opportunities to do so.

There were numerous prison practices that were out of my control that created delays in my educational progress; these delays were so excessive that my course expired before I could complete it. These delays were purely the fault of the prison and the government ministries responsible for my transfer. For example, I had to submit my assignments using snail mail, because I was not permitted to scan and e-mail them. My address change was not communicated with Athabasca despite the fact that I was informed that it was, which caused my evaluated work to be mailed to the wrong prison. Mailing larger documents out of the prison and receiving evaluated assignments in return was an administrative hassle, adding months to what should have required days. I was livid enough that I successfully convinced the Ministry of Children and Youth Services to pay for two extensions so that I could complete my exam. My probation officer assured me that I would be able to continue my courses in a similar capacity as in the youth prison. This was a blatant lie and completely at odds with what the youth system ought to stand for. My probation officer knew to expect another call from the Ombudperson's office if this was not resolved quickly, and therefore processed funding for the extensions. An adult had to supervise my exam, but for some bizarre reason, no one could be approved to do so. Eventually, a Child and Youth Worker (youth prison guard) came from the juvenile detention centre to visit with me so that I could write the exam.

Near the end of four grueling and unnecessary months in Vanier, I was double bunked with a violent and horrendously gassy 50-year-old woman named Heather. Heather struggled with lifelong mental illness, and while she was extremely caring, she was also easily angered and unpredictable. Again, I slept on the mattress on the floor by the toilet, which was significantly worse in this cell. Sometimes the guards would open our door hatch out of pity because of the smell; it is normally used for meal trays and to handcuff prisoners before the cell door is opened.

My final assessment is that I *could not* complete a degree in Vanier. I struggled and fought the prison administration for four months to finish one course that did not require me to conduct external research. The lack of access to research tools and tutors, combined with the frequent and destructive cell searches is enough to turn most students off of learning, even if they did magically acquire the money to fund their courses. Yet,

we are told that improving ourselves through education is one of our best chances of successfully reintegrating post-incarceration.

### **ADULT FEDERAL: GRAND VALLEY INSTITUTION FOR WOMEN**

I was transferred to Grand Valley Institution for Women (GVI) two weeks after the Ashley Smith murder, because I still had several years left of my sentence. Administratively, the person who authorized my initial transfer to the adult system could only authorize a transfer to the provincial system. The onus was on me, a youth, to request a hearing in front of a judge for a transfer to the federal system, where conditions are expected to be better. The *Youth Criminal Justice Act* (2003) had recently been overhauled and I was like a live action kink they were trying to work out.

Upon arrival at GVI, I was illegally placed in maximum-security for five months, which resulted in a small now-settled lawsuit, but which also held back my educational progress. I had no access to a computer or Internet, but could use pens, along with other common writing and learning tools. I spent more time, however, challenging my security classification and conditions of confinement than working on my course. I felt very alone in GVI, became anaemic from the lack of adequately nutritious food, and let myself wallow and lose focus during those first months.

Like all federal prisons in Canada, GVI is only required to provide prisoners with up to a grade 12 level of education. Prisoners who have not graduated from high school are enrolled in school as their prison employment, though the actual school was too small and bare to resemble anything of the sort. Post-secondary education, on the other hand, is not a component of prison-mandated programming and is thus not approved as a prison job. I was expected to work during business hours and study on my own time. My daytime prison job was being the janitor in the maximum-security wing and then I spent my evenings doing coursework.

When I was finally released from maximum-security and housed in the general population, I was hired to work as a tutor at the elementary school level. This is where I met Heather again. She was enrolled as a student in the elementary class, because her mental illness prevented her from studying at a higher level. It was my job to teach Heather fractions. Heather tried and tried, but could not understand how to do fractions or why she would



ever need them. Instead of reacting in anger, as was common with Heather, she sat still and cried silently. After seeing this woman behave violently towards other prisoners, I was reduced to tears and ended up quitting that job because Heather was so broken by the fact that she could not understand fractions. I, on the other hand, was broken by the knowledge that Heather was eternally doomed to have her “prison job” as a student in an elementary class from which she would and could never graduate.

Prison jobs are modern slave labour and “wages” have not been updated since the 1980’s, so they are negligently and criminally out of date. At my highest, I earned \$6.90 per weekday of work, minus several deduction fees, such as \$20/month for cable, even if there is no 13-inch TV in one’s cell. Women used their earnings to purchase stamps and envelopes to contact family, food to supplement the inadequate amount provided, and sanitary pads and tampons to supplement the limited and insufficient quantities we received. Anything left over usually went to phone calls with children and family at \$0.12/minute for local calls, and significantly more for long distance. With five regional federal prisons for women in Canada, the overwhelming majority of phone calls are long distance. I did not have money left over to enroll in university courses.

The teacher in charge of the high school department was an angel in disguise who I will call “the Rock”. He explained early on that he was only mandated to work with the high school students and to facilitate high school courses. In spite of this, he helped me sign up for university courses and let me call tutors from his office as long as I was discreet. The Rock only helped me because he wanted to, risking being reprimanded if other prison authorities caught him helping me with my university courses.

I completed a few French and Spanish courses while in GVI, which presented their own challenges. I could access a CD player, which enabled me to speak along with the instructor to improve my pronunciation. The Spanish course also required that I access more antiquated technology, such as a VHS player in order to follow a specially designed soap opera. Thankfully, the prison did have a television/VCR trolley, reminiscent of my childhood education. After enough complaining, I was able to book the TV to use during a specific time in one of the rooms that prisoners could use for meetings with a volunteer. It was basically a small room with a couch where guards could look in, so it was not considered a security risk to let me watch a few episodes of *Destinos*. I learned more Spanish from our House Cook,

Keyla, who was stopped at the Canadian border with drugs. I learned very quickly that, if another woman is driving me crazy, *Ella stressa mi cabeza!*

My French and Spanish exams had an oral component. I could not call the professors collect to complete the exam and the Rock could not set aside that much time on his office phone. I was given use of the telephone meant for prisoners' first 15-minute phone call when they arrive at GVI. At the end of a long hallway, there was a set of heavy metal double doors that loudly buzzed open with an alarm sound and clanged shut every few minutes. Those doors separated the visiting area from the general population of the prison. Within arm's length of this door was a small, bulletproof window. The window had a hole, through which the guards passed the phone receiver attached to a fairly short, curly phone cord. I had a chair, and balanced my French notes on my knee as I struggled to hear the professor through the buzzing and slamming doors, and the regular activity in the hallway. I am amazed that the professor could hear me at all. It was awful.

One time, after ample complaining, I succeeded in using one of the boardrooms that are normally reserved for meetings with parole officers to write a Spanish exam. I had a table, a fancy chair on wheels and no background noise. It was wonderful.

My final assessment of my experience in GVI was that, *theoretically*, I could complete certain courses, but a full degree would be unlikely. There is simply not enough access to research tools, and nothing in the way of motivation or financial resources. It is simply too hard to keep going for the length of time it would require to complete a degree. I would have run out of money fairly quickly had I not encountered the obstacles that delayed my education while in prison: time delays due to snail mail and having to work a different job in the prison during business hours; telephone communication difficulties; the lack of a tutor to assist me with scheduling and understanding the material; and demotivation due to my confinement and the slow progress I was making in school. Any successes that I had were after blatant opposition from, and fully despite, the prison system.

I will end with a warm and happy memory about education and prison, courtesy of the Rock. Because more prisoners graduated from high school while in GVI than they did in juvie, I was able to attend a small graduation ceremony in the GVI gymnasium. Five women graduated. They had the caps, robes, flowers and their diplomas. They each walked up, collected their diploma and flowers, had a standing ovation, and had a graduation

photo taken. The Rock knew I did not have a ceremony while in juvie, so after the official graduations, when everyone was mingling, the Rock had me borrow a woman's gown and hat, flowers, and diploma (her name was not visible) to pose for a photo. One of the guards thought I was stealing the gown and was coming over to throw me in the hole before the Rock explained why this was a good thing. Not only did I avoid the hole while breaking prison rules in an unorthodox manner, I finally felt like I graduated.

### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

*Petey* is a young woman with a passion for human rights. She is currently in law school, using her experience within the correctional system to advocate for herself and others, and is dedicating her legal career to Criminal Defence, Indigenous law, and Charter law. *Petey* is a distinctive example of a person who has seen the inside and survived to flourish on the outside. She is using her second chance to improve her community and country. You can contact her at [petey@live.ca](mailto:petey@live.ca).

## **Manufacturing Revolutionaries, Suppressing Dissent**

*Kevin D. Sawyer*

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Reading furnishes the mind only with materials of knowledge; it is thinking that makes what we read ours.

– John Locke (English Philosopher, 1632-1704 A.D.)

State censorship, dubious surveillance, gang validation, and being considered a terrorist are some of the challenges prisoners face every day inside the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR) and elsewhere. Anyone of these accusations could result in a prisoner being placed in a super-max control unit indefinitely or under the scrutiny of the Central California Intelligence Center (CCIC), federal agencies, or foreign governments.

I know this firsthand because I barely slipped through the California state prison system's branding apparatus at San Quentin State Prison. Had I not managed to extricate myself, there was a strong possibility that I would have ended up in solitary confinement; a secure housing unit (SHU) in California. A SHU is a torturous dungeon constructed to maximize sensory deprivation. These are places designed to prevent the proliferation of political-left erudition in prisoners considered "revolutionary". I surmise that most people in the United States and in California specifically, do not know that "solitary is used to break people down, to remind them they have no power over their own lives, and to keep them from fighting back against their inhuman prison experience" (Rojo, 2014).

Questionable suspicions about state prisoners run rampant in the CDCR. This is because the 21<sup>st</sup> century "thought police" often define some prisoners' choice of reading material as "dangerous" and "revolutionary", believing it to be subversive. And it does not end with a prisoner becoming a suspect or a person of interest because of what they read. Prisoners who become jailhouse lawyers are systematically silenced for their litigious research, writing, filing of prisoner appeals, and legal briefs in court to challenge the conditions of their confinement and mistreatment at the hands of prison guards.

Although I have no direct evidence of my name or other personal information being passed on to other agencies or governments in reports containing erroneous and misleading information, at some point during my incarceration I was suspected of "subversive" behaviour. In the CDCR a "confidential" section may be created and added to a prisoner's central

file; generally, we are allowed to view the entire file, except what is labelled confidential.

My arrival at San Quentin State Prison from Folsom State Prison in the fall of 2011 as a result of California's Realignment (AB 109) scheme to reduce overcrowding in its prisons nearly elevated my status as a relatively unknown, common prisoner to that of a Black Guerilla Family (BGF) prison gang member or associate. A guard who seized my writings, notes, quotes and other research material upon my transfer to San Quentin wrote on a receipt left in my property that the confiscated materials were "revolutionary". Among the items he was describing were my intellectual property that consisted of my body of writings done over fifteen-plus years of imprisonment in several institutions. Legally, my writings are defined as an "Inmate Manuscript".<sup>1</sup> This same guard, who worked in the prison's Investigative Services Unit (ISU), which also doubles as the Institution Gang Investigators (IGI), said my unpublished political writings were indicative of "membership" in the BGF. A Lieutenant in the ISU/IGI later informed me that I would receive two "validation" points as a result. The validation process is arbitrary and has no judicial oversight, but can result in isolation.

If California prison officials deem a prisoner a member or associate of a prison gang he may be subject to placement in a SHU indefinitely. At that point it can take years, if any relief from this form of isolation is realized. Similar to how our national government labels Arabs "terrorists" or "enemy combatants" and ships them to Guantanamo Bay, the state government does the same by tagging prisoners as "gang members" and sending them to Pelican Bay (State Prison). Problematically, this is all legal.

This bureaucratic process outlines how a guerilla, terrorist, revolutionary, and the like are manufactured in the Golden State. Since my arrest, conviction, and sentence of 48 years and four months to life was imposed nearly 20 years ago, I have been reading the works of James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Edgar Allan Poe, Charles Dickens, Zora Neal Hurston, Angela Davis, Fidel Castro, Albert Calms, Frantz Flinn, Mao Tse-tung, Niccolo Machiavelli, Che Guevara, Marcus Garvey, Noam Chomsky, Malcolm X, George Jackson, Huey Newton, W.E.B. DuBois, Nietzsche, Socrates, Plato, Adolf Hitler, Sun Tau, Carl von Clausewitz, Mumia Abu-Jamal, Franz Kafka, and many more. I have amassed eclectic knowledge from the assortment of books that I have read, which to date total more

than 355 titles and this does not include the many short stories, magazines, and daily newspapers that I read. During periods of long, inescapable lockdowns in the various prisons where I have done time in the last two decades, reading became a natural pastime. Writing soon followed.

An ISI/IGI guard once told me that San Quentin has George Jackson's property and they still examine the contents. He also noted, "Every book that George Jackson has read [I've] also read". An African American's offensive reading choices and writings, as I quickly discovered, increases their profile in prison and the size of the target placed on their back, nominating them for confinement in a SHU. Indeed, this is an expanded form of racial profiling. Instead of it taking place on the other side of the prison gate, California prison officials cultivate the practice in its penal colonies with a more sinister machination in mind. It is an extension of the tactic employed by law enforcement agencies in urban areas. We "have been finely targeted, first by class, second by that disguised brand of racism called race, and third by place. This cumulative targeting has led to the *hyperincarceration* of one particular category, *lower-class African American men trapped in the crumbling ghetto*, while leaving the rest of society – including, most remarkably, middle- and upper-class African Americans – practically untouched" (Wacquant, 2015).

In response to the comment made about my reading choices, I said to the guard that I have also read Adolf Hitler's book *Mein Kampf* and have at least ten pages of handwritten notes taken from it. I then asked why he was not concerned with my affiliation with the Aryan Brotherhood prison gang. He appeared impervious to my comment. Needless to say, this issue concerning my choice of reading material and personal writing was, and always will be, about race. What else could it be? If I were white, my Hitler notes could be construed as "indicative" of membership in the Aryan Brotherhood, the American Nazi Party, Skin Heads or some other more ominous group. I suppose it is worth mentioning that I recently completed reading *The Turner Diaries* by William Pierce, a fictional story about the violent overthrow of the United States by white supremacists. According to the FBI, *The Turner Diaries* was used by Timothy McVeigh as "the blueprint" for the bombing of the Alfred Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City in April 1995. Does my reading it somehow imply that I wish to embark on a vocation in demolishing buildings? I think not. Such a thought is absurd. A lieutenant

of the ISU/IGI, after examining my confiscated property, said to me, “I see you’ve been reading *Guerilla Warfare*” by Che Guevara. Does this somehow also make me a socialist or a communist?

Some time ago I ceased with my legal “practice” after receiving my paralegal diploma. Some of the litigation I was doing at Folsom prison was the impetus for the institution’s administration placing me on a bus headed to San Quentin Realignment for filing a prisoner appeal. However, since the San Quentin prison administration and the CDCR had violated my Constitutional rights and the U.S. Copyright Act, and due to the fact that the administrative appeal process did not produce favourable results (i.e. to have all of my property returned to me), I was left with no other choice than to file a civil rights complaint to seek declaratory and injunctive relief from state-sanctioned repression.<sup>2</sup> In his book *Jailhouse Lawyers*, Mumia Abu-Jamal (2009) describes how a study done in the 1990s revealed that the largest percentages of prisoners who find themselves in administrative segregation (Ad-Seg or “the hole”) are prison litigators. According to the study, Blacks, the mentally ill, and gangs are ranked next in order among other groups identified. I, unfortunately, now find myself in the first two groups at the top of the heap.

My education precedes my arrival to prison where I was sent for “punishment” that I refuse to accept. I also am not here for rehabilitation, which in the context of punishment is as dichotomous as Janus, the god of gates and doorways in Roman mythology that has two faces looking in opposite directions. Rehabilitation, as the name implies in California’s penal colonies, is a misnomer. The law is unambiguous. As a defendant-turned-prisoner convicted of a felony in California I was sentenced pursuant to Penal Code Section 1170(a) (1) which promulgates, in part: “The Legislature finds and declares that the purpose of imprisonment for crime is punishment”. My understanding of this salient point makes me a management problem because I will not allow the state to punish me or “educate” me through what Paulo Freire (1970, p. 76) describes as “the banking notion of consciousness” in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Up to this point, the state has been unsuccessful in its attempts to make “deposits of information” in my head. I have my own knowledge and truths that cause me to reject what the state says I should believe. Freire (1970, p. 166) outlines the intentions of state agents meting out oppression through its one-size-fits-all

education: “The educated individual is the adapted person, because she or he is better “fit” for the world. Translated into practice, this concept is well suited to the purposes of the oppressors, whose tranquility rests on how well people fit the world the oppressors have created, and how little they question it... this ready-to-wear approach serves to obviate thinking”.

My thoughts cannot be supplanted with the state’s, which some may interpret as my inability to be controlled or to “adjust”. This is due in large part to the fact that I did not discover my talents in prison; I brought them here. Therefore, the state attempted to stifle my creativity because of the books I read and for the nature of what it deems as my “revolutionary” prose. It is a common practice when the banking education fails or is rejected outright. What comes next is a progression of control mechanisms instituted to repress freedom of thought. I can relate to where Freire (1970, p. 167) says, “Oppression – overwhelming control – is necrophilic; it is nourished by love of death, not life. The banking concept of education, which serves the interests of oppression, is also necrophilic. Based on a mechanistic, static, naturalistic, spatialized view of consciousness it transforms students into receiving objects. It attempts to control thinking and action, leads women and men to adjust to the world, and inhibits their creative power”, which takes one’s state-imposed civil death to another descending level, leading to erroneous profiling and recordkeeping in state databases.

“California prison authorities are reporting on inmates to the FBI for possessing political, religious, and other literature they deem radical” (Bluemel, 2012). The public should be alarmed about this form of “innocuous” data-mining in carceral environments because what it allows to take place inside the laboratories of U.S. prisons is often a precursor to what will be consummated against them in the future. Suspect prisoners’ personal information is often placed in national counter-terrorism databases. If this is not Orwellian in practice then what qualifies as such? The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) said it has warned for years about suspicious activity reports (SARs) made by the government made against private citizens. In a 2013 statement, the ACLU said SARs are filed to include many activities that are not only lawful, but are protected under our First Amendment rights (Harumi, 2013). After the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon on 11 September 2001, President George W. Bush pushed for the *PATRIOT Act*, 2001 and later attempted to collect from



public libraries lists of the books their patron's checked out. The threat of such government intrusion into the personal affairs of its citizens' reading is concern enough and might cause many to practice self-censorship.

Prisoners and former prisoners know very well what lengths prison officials will go to in order to suppress free speech. Wilbert Rideau, a former death-row prisoner, former Editor-in-Chief of *The Angolite*, and author of *In the Place of Justice* (2010) has said, "As long as prison has been here, they've always insisted on the power of censorship" (Losowsky, 2013). All it takes is for one guard who is unlearned and unlettered, holding only the indoctrination of correctional academy training, to cry foul about a book. The state's built-in Constitution violation machinery, obstruction of justice apparatus and mob of agents of repression take control from that point. "A security threat" is the language used in "the arbitrary censorship faced every day by America's prisoners at the hands of over-zealous officials" (Losowsky, 2013). The simplicity of a government threat is cause for many law-abiding citizens to curtail their reading, even if they are not violating the law. "The point is obvious. There is more than one way to burn a book. And the world is full of people running about with lit matches" (Bradbury, 1967, p. 176). In my world those people are prison guards, so-called gang "experts" who say reading certain books, writing as I do, and collecting source material to continue writing, are "indicative of the Black Guerilla Family prison gang".<sup>3</sup>

Prisoners' writings have been monitored for some time, beginning with outgoing mail the surveillance then extends to essays, poetry and journalistic endeavours. If California prison officials do not like a prisoner's "revolutionary" ideology and thoughts memorialized in print, they will concoct a myriad of excuses to deem them a "safety" concern. Moreover, if a prisoner is prolific with his prose he may find himself placed in isolation indefinitely under "the security of the institution" panacea.<sup>4</sup>

Understandably, many U.S. law enforcement agencies have complicated jobs that require legitimate investigative measures and tools when it comes to fighting terrorism and real crime. In the 1990s, the Federal Bureau of Investigation tracked down and convicted Ted Kaczynski, after publishing his Unabomber manifesto, "a rambling thirty-five-thousand-word declaration of the perpetrator's philosophy" (Hitt, 2012). Retired FBI agent James Fitzgerald formalized the use of "forensic linguistics"

and later created the Communicated Threat Assessment Database (CTAD), “the most comprehensive collection of linguistic patterns in written threats, containing some 4,000 ‘criminally oriented communications and more than a million words’” (Hitt, 2012). In the 1980s, before Kaczynski, linguist Robert Leonard used a special technique to identify “highly idiosyncratic features” of writings that led to the conviction of Jarvis Masters for the murder of a California prison guard (Hitt, 2012).

The United States’ post-9/11 era and its so-called war on terrorism inside the CDCR’s monolithic cameral environment has propagated a new form of authoritarian-state paranoia, cultivating equivocal concerns with what it refers to as “inmate radicalization”. Fueled by legislation such as the passage of the *Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act* (2007), amended the *Homeland Security Act* (2002) to “examine and report upon the facts and causes of violent radicalization, homegrown terrorism and ideologically based violence in the United States”,<sup>5</sup> the CDCR subjectively uses the aegis of such laws to target minorities for placement in its control units. Purportedly passed to examine an “extremist belief system for the purpose of facilitating ideologically based violence to advance political, religious, or social change”<sup>6</sup> in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, these laws are not only used to ferret out terrorists, but are also insidiously utilized to further CDCR agendas in its 34 prisons. Author of the VRHTPA, then Representative Jane Harman (D-CA) said, “Our plan must to intervene before a person crosses that line separating radical views from violent behavior”.<sup>7</sup>

California prison authorities are not attempting to “intervene” before a prisoner crosses any line. The practice of targeting prisoners who have not violated any law is two-fold. First, the CDCR has increased in its enormity over the past three decades (Gilmour, 2007), so much so that it is too big to sustain. There are so many people in the state’s overcrowded penal colonies that prison administrators are scrambling to justify their existence and multi-billion-dollar annual budget. This justification is camouflaged in the old and new mantras, the “toughest beat” and “public safety”. But it is only tough, however, when state prison guards resort to provoking prisoners in attempts to incite them and then suppress, which in turn justifies their existence. In nearly all levels of California’s state prisons the staff creates an environment that agitates the prison population and produces violent results.

Second, the CDCR does not deal with so-called terrorists in the Guantanamo Bay sense of the word. It receives largely unsophisticated men, women, and children convicted of “domestic” street crimes. Prison officials are not likely to find prisoners, particularly those in prison or street gangs, congregating to discuss the finer points on how to build bombs because these individuals do not exist in the aggregate. Instead, the CDCR used a peculiar method to interpret radical prisoner behaviour. For example, in 2007 prisoner Michael Hawkins was at Folsom State Prison when a guard searched his cell and confiscated a photocopy of the book *Blood in My Eye* written by George Jackson, an article “History is a Weapon!” by Watani Tyehirba, and a *California Prison Focus* newspaper (Hudson, 2012). The CDCR claimed the book was seized for “security” reasons. Hawkins later sued, claiming violation of his 14th Amendment right to due process and equal protection. In *Hawkins v. Russell*, U.S District Court Judge Carolyn K. Delaney said, “Even if plaintiff did nothing more than possess multiple items that, in total, suggest a keen interest in Jackson... this was enough to implicate legitimate security concerns”.<sup>8</sup> I take this to mean that some courts are still adhering to the outmoded doctrine of Chief Justice Taney who wrote, “A black man has no rights that a white man is bound to respect”.<sup>9</sup> The Hawkins case is only one example of how “prison officials used [this item] in determining whether they could validate that [he] was affiliated with or a member” of the BGF (Hudson, 2012). CDCR guards often claim that George Jackson’s books are not allowed in the prison system. Yet, in 2011 one federal district court found no such evidence of any ban on Jackson’s book within the CDCR (Hudson, 2012).

In June 2012, CCIC received a SAR entitled “Inmate Radicalization at CDCR”. The SAR said in part: “On June 26, 2012, a cell search was conducted on inmate [redacted]. A search of the cell found a copy of the book titled *Blood in My Eye* by George L. Jackson. This book is considered contraband and will be written up as a point toward validation”.<sup>10</sup> Also in 2012, a CDCR guard at Pelican Bay State Prison confiscated prisoner James Crawford’s outgoing mail because he described himself as a “New Afrikan Nationalist Revolutionary Man”. The state contended that “New Afrikan” was gang ideology that promoted gang activity. Crawford denied these allegations and filed a petition in court (Egelko, 2012). Crawford said

there are many, like himself, who have been placed in solitary confinement “because of political beliefs in a New Afrikan Nationalist Revolutionary Man” (Egelko, 2012). The First District Court of Appeal in San Francisco ruled 3-0 in Crawford’s favour, stating even gang members “retain rights of expression and those rights cannot be taken away by a governmental agency simply speculating” about security risk.<sup>11</sup>

In 2010, another incident involved a SAR received by the CDCR. A CDCR guard reported that he conducted a search of two prisoners’ cell. “Both inmates are Muslims who appear to have Radical Islamic views. Both prisoners have since been placed in our Administrative Segregation”.<sup>12</sup> In such a desolate place filled with injustice such as in the CDCR’s prison system, where lockdowns and isolation are the order of the day, reading and writing are all many prisoners have to do in effort to stay productive, outside of exercising in their cell. This is due in large part to the fact that there are only so many push-ups a man can do in a day. Therefore, reading and writing are essential to a prisoner’s cerebral existence. “Dostoevsky was made by being sent to Siberia. Writers are forged in injustice as a sword is forged” (Hemingway, 1954, p. 71).

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution affords U.S. citizens the right to read as they please, write, express unpopular political views, and practice their religion, yet these forms of self-expression are all causes for the CDCR to “validate” a prisoner, while “Gang evidence comes in countless forms. Possession of Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, Robert Greene’s *The 48 Laws of Power* or Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War* has been invoked as evidence” (Bauer, 2012). Being associated with a prison gang – even if you have not done anything illegal – carries a much heavier penalty than, say, stabbing someone. Association could land you in solitary for decades. California officials frequently cite possession of Black literature, left-wing materials and writing about prisoner rights as evidence of gang affiliation.

Repression in California’s state prisons takes place in many ways. For me, it was through the attempted suppression of my choice of books to read and the effort made to forestall my writing, and perhaps the publication of my unpublished essays and poems. Because I have read books written by George Jackson (*Soledad Brother* and *Blood In My Eye*), and my writings about politics, society, prison, education, war, racism, and the like seem to mirror Jackson’s sentiments and writings, I was deemed a potential threat

to prison security. In other words, I think for myself and have formed certain beliefs that are consistent with many African American men who are imprisoned by the politics of the day.

If one is well-read in prison, he or she will arrive at similar conclusions about the state of affairs regarding United States foreign policy, national and state political issues, and prison. When certain ideas are voiced or written with any hint or tone of dissent for what is happening at the hands of the status quo and its power structure, the voice is invariably silenced through intellectual castration and other effective means. In 2012, Daniel Vasquez, a former warden of San Quentin State Prison in the 1980s, told *Mother Jones* magazine, “it is ‘very common’ for African American prisoners who display leadership qualities or radical political views to end up in the SHU” (Bauer, 2012). There they remain locked down 365 days of the year, 23 hours a day, for an indeterminate amount of time.

It is important to note that California’s penal colonies, like most institutions within the United States, are not operated or managed by the same racial minorities that are warehoused in them. Rather, many are run by a white power structure with leanings toward heavy-handed punitive measures to deal with crime inside and outside of prison; whether the criminalized activity is real or imagined seemingly makes little difference. The CDCR, like the national government, has in place its own secret surveillance program in operation, and it utilizes a race-based approach to criminalize Black (African) history and culture, consigning our activities as gang related and designating our writings as “gang indicia”. This is one of many ways crime is ascribed to Blacks on both sides of the prison gate.

Whites’ associations of crime with people of color have helped to make the criminal justice system more punitive toward people of all races, and especially toward racial minorities, through several mechanisms: First, the public’s racial perceptions of crime have gone hand-in-hand with its support for punitive crime policy, to which elected officials, prosecutors, and judges have been responsive. Second, these perceptions directly influence the work of criminal justice practitioners and policymakers, who are not immune to these widely held biases. (The Sentencing Project, 2014).

Blacks and Hispanics make up the majority of the prison population in California. They are also the primary targets for those placed in SHUs. Prison officials categorize our history and culture as gang activity, while simultaneously promoting white supremacy by encouraging us to read European history, art, philosophy, and religion – dismissing people of colour as irrelevant. This boils down to race and racial superiority, and it was the underlying issue in my situation. Race and racism are deciding factors for who is targeted for placement in the prison industrial complex’s control units, and it is done over and over again with impunity. As Angela Davis (2003, p. 30) states:

Proof that crime continues to be imputed to color resides in the many evocations of “racial profiling” in our time. That it is possible to be targeted by the police for no other reason than the color of one’s skin is not mere speculation. Police departments in major urban areas have admitted the existence of formal procedures designed to maximize the numbers of African-Americans and Latinos arrested – even in the absence of probable cause.

Racism and imprisonment demonstrate how American society deals with well-engineered inequalities. The creation of race and the formal uses of racism are at the heart of how the California prison system operates. For example, during my years of incarceration within the CDCR, I have been subjected to countless race-based lockdowns. During this time, if Blood gang members were involved in an incident, all Blacks were systematically locked down. If the CRIPs did something, all Blacks were subsequently locked down. And if Kumi or any other organization considered a Black “disruptive group” or gang did something wrong, all Blacks were locked down.

Race is not a natural category; it is a thing that humans created to classify each other based on physical appearance and other characteristics. Although race is a manmade category it has very real and far-reaching consequences when one is not of the “right” (white) group, especially in the United States, and particularly in prison. “Black Lives Matter” in prison and on the outside.

As previously mentioned, a more insidious consequence of being labelled a gang member or a terrorist is the passing of the VRHTPA. We are now at the apex of government paranoia – hyper-sense of the McCarthyism era

revisited in the new millennium. There is a new boogeyman – “that guy”. We all know who he is. “If you see something, say something”. That guy, like me, is the one who was sent to prison, picked up the “wrong” books and educated himself far beyond what was offered in public institutions. He learned too many truths. He cannot be silenced. He turns every prison into his personal university and every prison cell into a classroom for his own erudition. We know very well who “that guy” is because we have seen him throughout history: Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Booker T. Washington, George Jackson, Eldridge Cleaver, Huey Newton, Stanley Tookie Williams, Mumia Abu-Jamal, and Martin Luther King Jr. – all Black men who were fettered and shackled. Yet, all contributed in sonic measure to social change in the very society that still attempts to banish many of their works and blot out of our memory their entire existence. In the contemporary, there are equal counterparts of women doing this work – like Angela Y. Davis, Assata Shakur, Ramona Africa and the like. Some call them arrogant, dangerous, revolutionaries and leftists exhibiting insurrectionary behaviour. They are not like the others who capitulate to the constant demand to shut up, as they have minds of their own and the mental fortitude to express themselves through voice and *Zeitgeist*.

The attempt to silence me is a caveat to others who are not as similarly situated. It stands as a testament to how a Guerilla, Revolutionary, Terrorist, Enemy Combatant, Insurgent and Criminal are manufactured inside the CDCR. If confinement in a carceral environment is not bad enough, followed by a lifetime of disenfranchisement, the CDCR’s reckless act of branding prisoners in its custody only serves to further the subtle and overt forms of state oppression. “These institutional tentacles, and the routine practices of profiling, surveillance, and enclosure at a distance that they permit, severely curtail the life chances of former convicts and their families by stretching the effects of judicial stigma on the labor, housing, and marital markets as well as into daily life” (Wacquant, 2015).

A spokesperson for the CDCR said prison officials do not single out prisoners or place them in solitary confinement because of what they read. Rather, it is for “their behavior as validated gang members or for committing major new crimes while in prison”. He further stated that prisoner beliefs do not generate SARs (Bluemel, 2012). However, in 2011 and again in 2013, tens of thousands of prisoners participated in statewide hunger strikes in

an effort to bring attention to the immoderate use of solitary confinement and the gang validation policy in California state prisons (Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity, 2014). Following the prisoner-led hunger strikes, mounting pressure compelled the CDCR to change regulations regarding the validation process. The changes, however, came after many prisoners had served decades in solitary confinement and the changes are not yet fully implemented.

In January 2014, the CDCR filed a Notice of Change to Regulations (NCR) to amend and adopt some 37 sections and subsections to prison rules regulating prisoner behaviour “to combat gangs... with the greatest propensity for violence”. The language in the NCR now identifies prison gangs, street gangs and disruptive groups as Security Threat Groups (STG).<sup>13</sup> The recent changes to CDCR regulations affect the validation process of prison gang members who are not supposed to automatically be placed in the SHU based solely upon their validation to a gang or “security threat group” unless there is a nexus to confirmed gang activity. The changes lend some credence to what the CDCR’s spokesperson said. “This policy includes an enhanced intelligence-based identification system needed to identify members, associates and suspects who are believed to present a clear threat to the safety of staff, offenders and the security of the institutions”.<sup>14</sup> “Instead of capitulating to progressive social forces and ending torture in SI-F6I units, the state has closed ranks and seeks to redefine the nature of the conflict itself by redefining the language in its policy governing STG validation and torture unit confinement” (Prisoner Hunger Strike Solidarity, 2014). Compounding the problem of covert surveillance of prisoners, the collection of personal information on prisoners resulting from SARs will sometimes be placed in the FBI’s eGuardian, a national counter-terrorism database. This data could be shared with more than 18,000 United States law enforcement agencies and foreign governments (Bluemel, 2012).

Faced with the absurd, it seemed rather superfluous that I had to file suit to recover my copyright-protected writings, notes, quotes and research that were not returned to me after exhausting all administrative remedies in my appeals, which in the CDCR is nothing more than a perfunctory exercise in futility. Perhaps the federal courts will rule differently on my civil rights complaint.<sup>15</sup>

The saga continues in the Golden State. In the interim, the CDCR has filed NCR 14-05 to update its Centralized List of Disapproved Publications in the prison system.<sup>16</sup> The CDCR’s Initial Statement of Reasons for the proposed



change to regulations attempts to prohibit incoming publications to prisoners that “indicate an association with groups that are oppositional to authority and society”.<sup>17</sup> What I find interesting is that my latest revision (revised 06/01 /2015) of the CDCR’s disapproved publications (15 CCR § 3134.1), which is 14 pages long, does not list one book written by George Jackson. This takes a portion of this subject matter regarding censorship full circle. During the public comment period, in response to NCR 14-05, attorney Leila Knox with the law firm Bryan Cave, LLP sent an e-mail to the CDCR Regulation and Policy Management Branch (RPMB) “On behalf of the San Francisco Bay View National Black Newspaper”. Knox wrote, “The Proposed Regulations include ostensibly minor revisions that could be used to work a fundamental change that would severely burden the First Amendment rights of both inmates in CDCR facilities and innocent third parties who wish to communicate with them” (San Francisco Bay View National Black Newspaper, 2014).

An example of a banned publication would be anything the CDCR deems “recruitment material for a Security Threat Group”.<sup>18</sup> Simply stated, these new regulations would define many books currently in the possession of prisoners’ contraband. Readers should understand that the name George Jackson calls to mind hate and trepidation within the CDCR. “His very name represents resistance – the epitome of our Black manhood – and this explains in part why the CDCR has spent the last 44 years attempting to censor the name George L. Jackson from within its prisons” (Shakur, 2016). Citing the fact that courts have relied on the First and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment rights of publishers “to communicate with inmates” on numerous occasions, Knox pointed to the United States Supreme Court’s 1974 ruling in *Procunier v. Martinez*,<sup>19</sup> which states in part: “Whatever the status of a prisoner’s claim to uncensored correspondence with an outsider, it is plain that the latter’s interest is grounded in the First Amendment’s guarantee of freedom of speech”.

Because prisoners in California do not have direct access to e-mail or the Internet, I mailed my comments to the CDCR’s RPMB regarding NCR 14-05. While I did not go into the same degree of depth on the matter as Knox did, I certainly share her sentiments. I agree in particular with Knox’s assessment of how the CDCR previously used prisoners’ choice of reading material to validate them as members or associates of prison gangs. This included possession of anything written by prisoner and political activist George Jackson. It is plausible that prisoners designated as STG members, through other changes in regulations, may be disciplined for possessing the

“wrong” books. It never ends, but to be fair, I have to be objective in my own assessment of changes to regulations. Such biases and prejudice on my part would make me just as thoughtless as the individuals I criticize.

I am a college graduate. I read and write. So what? I read long before my confinement. I am also a musician who has been playing guitar more than thirty years and studying piano for the past four. I have always been gainfully employed in a professional career outside of prison. While in prison I have taken several undergraduate college courses. I have become a certified electrician. Following those accomplishments, I paid for and earned a paralegal diploma. I am a published author of prose, poetry and have contributed written material as a professional journalist. None of that connotes gang activity. San Quentin prison officials, however, have attempted to dismiss my achievements and me as nothing more than part of a defunct prison gang that by all accounts has been eradicated in the CDCR’s mainline prisoner population long before my arrival. The system’s machine was going to *make* me a Guerilla whether I wanted to be one or not. This same machine is still in operation devouring the lives of women and men who have not violated any rules inside of prison.

Today, I am well. *Mens sacra in corpore sano* (Latin for sound mind in a healthy body). I hope that in the future readers do not see my writings originating from a security-housing unit because of the appendage “Guerilla” or “Revolutionary” given to me by the state. Regardless, I press on to move ahead, always remembering what the state (CDCR) would sooner prefer us to forget:

Settle your quarrels, come together, understand the reality of our situation, understand that fascism is already here, that people are dying who could be saved, that generations more will die or live poor butchered half-lives if you fail to act. Do what must be done, discover your humanity and your love in revolution. Pass on the torch. Join us, give up your life for the people. (Jackson, 1970, p. xxv).

All power to We, The People... who are still citizens of this Republic held as political prisoners until such time when the tough-on-crime pendulum swings in the other direction and the law changes, because “We are one of the few countries that doesn’t treat its prisoners as if they are citizens” (U.S. District Court Judge Thelton Henderson, 2015).<sup>20</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> California Code of Regulations, Title 15, §§ 3000 and 3151.
- <sup>2</sup> Sawyer v. Chappell, et al., U.S. District Court, Northern District of California, Case No. CV 15-00220 JD.
- <sup>3</sup> Exhibit B to CDCR 602 Inmate/Parolee Appeal (Log No. CSQ-3-12-00700).
- <sup>4</sup> California Code of Regulations, Title 15, Division 3. Section 3270.
- <sup>5</sup> H.R. 1955 Violent Radicalization and Homegrown Terrorism Prevention Act of 2007 (Official Summary).
- <sup>6</sup> Idem.
- <sup>7</sup> Idem.
- <sup>8</sup> Hawkins v. Russell (E.Dist.Cal.2011) 2011 WL 1299939.
- <sup>9</sup> Dred Scott v. Sanford 19 U.S.393, 407; 15 L.Ed. 691 (1857).
- <sup>10</sup> Suspicious Activity Reports Received by the Central California Intelligence Center, June 2010 – June 2012.
- <sup>11</sup> In re James Crawford (Court of Appeal, First District, California) A131276, June 13, 2012.
- <sup>12</sup> Suspicious Activity Reports Received by the Central California Intelligence Center, June 2010 – June 2012.
- <sup>13</sup> CDCR Notice of Change to Regulations (NCR 14-02).
- <sup>14</sup> Idem.
- <sup>15</sup> Sawyer v. Chappell, et al., U.S. District Court, Northern District of California, Case No. CV 15-00220-JD.
- <sup>16</sup> CDCR Notice of Change to Regulations 14-05 to California Code of Regulations, Title 15, Division 3 §§ 3006, 3134 and 3135.
- <sup>17</sup> CDCR Notice of Change to Regulations 14-05 to California Code of Regulations, Initial Statement of Reasons.
- <sup>18</sup> NCR 14-05 (ISOR).
- <sup>19</sup> Procunier v. Martinez 416 U.S. 396 (1974).
- <sup>20</sup> After the first draft of this essay was completed, the *Associated Press* reported on 1 September 2015 that California agreed to end its practice of housing prisoner in security housing units who have been validated as prison gang members. The agreement is part of the settlement in the case *Todd Ashker, et al. v. Governor of the State of et al.* (Case No. C 09-5796 CW) filed in the United States District Court for the Northern District of California. Time will tell if such words will materialize in practice.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Kevin D. Sawyer* is an African American native of San Francisco, California, born in 1963. He has written numerous unpublished short stories, memoirs, essays, poems and journals that chronicle his jail experience. Some of his work has appeared in *The Oakland Post*, *California Prison FOCUS*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *The Life of the Law* (blog), *San Francisco Bay View*, *The Pioneer* (California State University, East Bay), *Brothers in Pen* anthologies, *Iron City Magazine*, *580 Split* and limited editions of poetry published by the William James Association.

# **Incarcerated Scholars, Qualitative Inquiry, and Subjugated Knowledge: The Value of Incarcerated and Post-Incarcerated Scholars in the Age of Mass Incarceration<sup>1</sup>**

*Michelle Jones*

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The intellectual work of incarcerated scholars is often discounted and devalued. There is insight, however, to be gained from looking at the world from our perspective; the perspective of the marginalized who are captive in a secretive and closed world. Much like the value of subaltern theory on narratives of European imperial conquest (e.g. Said, 1995), incarcerated scholars offer valuable and unique counter-discourses to the dominant crime-and-punishment narratives of mass incarceration. Yet opportunities for the (post)incarcerated to explore these counter-discourses are often blocked by private and public universities. Criminalization inhibits would-be scholars into the forays of academia, particularly at the graduate level. A research project conducted inside a maximum-security prison demonstrates how academia errs in this regard.

Over the past four years, incarcerated scholars engaged in the History Project at the Indiana Women’s Prison (IWP) in Indianapolis rewrote the history of that prison. The goal of the IWP History Project – in addition to writing prison history – is to improve us as scholars and problem-solvers by thinking critically about our environment and the origins of the institutions in which we currently experience imprisonment. We are challenging ourselves to be more – more than the objects of critique that non-incarcerated people see when they denounce “criminals” as disposable and unworthy, and more than our own inimical self-definitions and perceived inadequacies.

The IWP History Project is also about making a viable contribution to the body of scholarly knowledge about prison life. Our goal is to tell a more complete history of the prison we live in, while retaining the contradictions and complexities that animate prison life. What we have learned is that in the quest for homogeneity, the history of a place, a time, and a people can get flattened in the manufacturing of history, where the voice of the subaltern is lost. We want to find those voices because they belong to us. In many ways, they are our voices.

Created by Dr. Kelsey Kauffman, the IWP History Project grew out of the Incarcerated Scholars Program. Facilitated by retired and volunteer faculty, the program filled the gap when the Indiana legislature cancelled funding for all higher education in prisons in 2012. These amazing teachers

provided the raw materials (books, paper, pens, etc.) and, most importantly, created an atmosphere in which students – including Anastazia Schmid, Kim Baldwin, Leslie Hauk, Lori Record, Lori Fussner, and me, to name just a few – could traverse an intellectual landscape. In doing so, we shifted from being students to scholars. Critical to our project was our reading, assimilation, and synthesizing of primary and secondary source data. We obtained original materials for our research from the Indianapolis Public Library, the Indiana State Archives, and IWP itself, including detailed prisoner demographic data from nineteenth century prison registries, which we digitized for posterity. Once we had command of a topic, we could speak from a place of knowing. At that point, we became more than students.

The IWP History Project commenced in the summer of 2013 with a team composed of undergraduate and graduate students who collaborated to research the first decade of our prison's existence. Consider the challenges of the incarcerated historian. We do not have access to the Internet. Our library is miniscule and primarily stocked with romance novels. Interlibrary loans take months if the requests work at all. And, of course, we cannot search the archives or other repositories ourselves. These were some of the challenges we faced in researching the Quaker women of the prison reform movement who founded this institution. It was even harder to learn about the incarcerated women and girls left in their charge. To overcome these challenges, we filtered our research requests through others. As our research progressed and themes developed, following up on leads took weeks and sometimes months. Some students received more information than others, and sometimes the research materials provided were not particularly useful. As I discuss below, expediting our research required learning how to ask pointed questions and developing an understanding of the broader implications of a single topic. The delays and limited resources did not reduce the quality of our work or our enthusiasm for the research project.

For the most part, historians consider IWP to be the first women's prison in the United States and the Quaker women who founded it are constructed as heroes of the progressive era. After reviewing and discussing the existing historical and contemporary accounts (retrieved for us by non-incarcerated teachers, librarians and friends), we also initially believed we were writing a "feel-good" story about two Quaker women banding together with other Quakers and state officials to create a safe and rehabilitative environment for women in need. After all, Rhoda Coffin and Sarah Smith, the founders of

the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls which opened in 1873 and is now the Indiana Women's Prison, are credited with creating the first separate state prison for women in the United States. Devout Quakers and prison reformers, Smith and Coffin were at the forefront of a prison reform movement to save "fallen" women and "wayward" girls from the clutches of "designing" men – the prison warden and guards – at the co-ed Indiana State Prison-South, known as "Jeffersonville" (Freedman, 1981, p. 16; Banka, 1871, pp. 179-180; "The Prison at Jeffersonville", 1869). The terms "fallen" and "wayward" were used to describe women who had engaged in prostitution and/or had a criminal conviction (Freedman, 1981, p. 14). Such women were ascribed a tainted status and therefore had "fallen" from the ranks of true virtuous womanhood.

For Smith and Coffin and the state of Indiana, the "debaucheries" perpetrated upon the women in Jeffersonville represented a blight upon womanhood that besmirched Indiana's good name. As a result, these women were seen as especially in need of reform (Freedman, 1981, p. 42; 60-62; Rafter, 1990, pp. 30-33; *Sixth Report of the Board of Managers of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls*, 1878). Coffin and Smith were at the forefront of several "reforming" institutions founded for women at the close of the Civil War.<sup>2</sup> The initial framework for the idea that deviant women were "out of place" in terms of social and cultural norms, and could only be helped, redeemed or "reformed" by incarceration was pervasive, popular, and widely accepted.

As we began to understand the gist of the existing scholarly work on Coffin, Smith and the Reformatory's creation, questions began to form in our minds. Our experiences as incarcerated scholars have left us with a profound contextual awareness of power imbalances. Our insight began to provoke subtle questions in our minds regarding prevailing and dominant historical narratives. A component of this included our personal knowledge and experiences of the destabilizing effects of unfettered power over incarcerated people. Also, while not much is written about the incarcerated women and girls in the Indiana Reformatory, the subjugated knowledge of the incarcerated women was a primary focus of our research; through it, we aimed to provide a counter-narrative. Where, we wondered, were the women's stories? Ultimately, our perspective as incarcerated women allowed us to ask questions that exposed the meta-narrative of the women's "benevolent" prison reform movement as incomplete and simplistic.



Our first challenge to the standard story of the prison's founding came early and unexpectedly. As I combed through the registry of the *Penal Records of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls*, I discovered an odd pattern. Not one woman convicted of a sex offence (including prostitution) was incarcerated at the Reformatory. Tracking the makeup of the women's prison population made us suspicious. How could the Reformatory not incarcerate the very women who Coffin and Smith claimed so desperately needed a separate facility? We pressed our outside researchers to look again. Eventually, we discovered that a Magdalene Laundry run by the Sisters of the Good Shepherd had opened in Indianapolis a few months before IWP and housed women convicted of sex offences ("Sisters to Close Home for Girls", 1967). Reformatory staff and the Sisters of the Good Shepherd in Indianapolis had agreed that the Reformatory would get the murderers and thieves, while the Sisters got the prostitutes.

Magdalene Laundries, led by Catholic nuns, were workhouses where women were committed by family, priests, or the courts and had to perform the arduous physical labour of washing clothing. The work was punitive, but also metaphorical in that it was a means for women to turn from their "sins" and "wash" them away. Magdalene Laundries are commonly associated with Ireland, but as we discovered, they flourished in the United States as well. Magdalene Laundries – and not the Indiana Women's Prison – were the first prisons for women in the United States and by far the most important during the nineteenth century (Jones and Record, 2014). Indeed, by 1900, there were 39 of these private Catholic prisons for women in the United States and only three state prisons, including IWP (United States Bureau of the Census, 1904). Their existence flies in the face of the narrative of primacy that the Reformatory and its leaders claimed for themselves.

Another discovery came from a fellow scholar at IWP, Anastazia Schmid, who had herself received inadequate and indifferent mental health care by county jail staff. In her research on mental and physical health care provided to the women and girls at the Reformatory, Anastazia discovered that the man elected president of the American Medical Association (AMA) in 1876, the renowned Dr. Theophilus Parvin, was providing medical care to the women and girls at the prison during its first decade (*Second Report of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls*, 1874). Given how inadequate medical care is in prison today, it seemed exceptional for a person occupying a post as prestigious as President of the AMA to

have worked at a prison. Anastazia discovered that Dr. Parvin used his position at the prison to conduct experiments and surgeries on the women – often without their full knowledge or consent (“The Reformatory”, 1881; Schmid, 2016). Three years after he resigned from the Reformatory, Dr. Parvin published an explicitly illustrated obstetrics and gynecology text based on what he learned from operating on the women in the Reformatory (see Parvin, 1887). With nearly ten years of unfettered access to 125 women and girls a day, he used their bodies to further his field and career (Parvin, 1875).<sup>3</sup> This information was present in the history, but hidden; it took our perspective as incarcerated women to reveal its problematic nature. This is the value of subjugated knowledge.

Yet another example of the value of subjugated knowledge concerns the finances of the institution. One of the goals of the Reformatory was to become self-sufficient. In addition to selling handwork (gardening and farming) and handicraft (cane chairs, socks, etc.), and operating a laundry, the facility practiced a form of labour exploitation with a euphemistic name:

The Board has adopted the Ticket of Leave system for the government of the Reformatory Department. When, in the opinion of the Superintendent, it becomes proper for a girl to be allowed an opportunity to again make her way in the world, the Board grants her a discharge conditional upon her good behavior. She, thus, remains a ward of the institution, without expense to it, and may be returned at any time upon her giving evidence of a want of reformation, or a lapse from good behavior, without a new commitment. (*Third Report of the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls*, 1875, p. 13).

Girls chosen for “ticket of leave” were the most trusted and indoctrinated in the ideals of the “cult of domesticity” (discussed below). They would leave the Reformatory on an early form of probation, and be sent to labour in the homes of friends and associates of the Reformatory staff in this domestic service enterprise. Used to reduce the institution’s population – and, therefore, the cost of operation – this convict lease “ticket of leave” system represented a way for the prison officials to profit from incarcerated labour. While looking like a method to re/integrate women into the workforce, it operated as a method to keep young girls tethered to the prison as “a ward of the institution without expense to it” (ibid). This means that young girls

laboured in these homes for their keep (i.e. food, meager clothing and a bed), removing the cost of care from the prison. Yet as far as we can tell, the prison still charged the county-of-conviction for their incarceration.

When our research inquiries led to archival and unpublished sources, we discovered significant incidents of physical, sexual, and gendered violence. For example, an 1881 legislative investigation charged Sarah Smith and other employees with gross physical abuse, as well as general mistreatment of the women and girls. There were allegations that Smith and staff had beaten women and girls and “ducked” them in cold water (a nineteenth century version of waterboarding), hosed them down, denied them access to water closets, and knocked their heads against walls, often while stripped naked.<sup>4</sup> The scholarly inattention to this investigation may have to do with the fact that none of the Reformatory staff received any sanctions and no arrests were made. Our positions as incarcerated scholars, however, pushed us to examine the power relationships at work that brought about Smith and Coffin’s exoneration. We discovered that both women were tremendous political operators. They were connected politically and personally to legislators and governors (Freedman, 1981, p. 62; Rafter, 1990, p. 31.). They and their husbands were integral to a network of Indiana powerbrokers that resulted in the foundation of no fewer than six state and community agencies: the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls, the Indiana House of Refuge, the Indianapolis Home for Friendless Women, the Richmond Home for Friendless Women, the Indianapolis Colored Asylum, and the Richmond Temperance Organization. Indeed, Coffin and Smith were deputized sheriffs and Smith was named “City Missionary” (Johnson, 1910, pp. 145-146). They were a part of the very fabric of the political infrastructure that governed the state of Indiana.

The nature of our research, coupled with our prison experience was integral to synthesizing the context of the 1881 investigation. We know of and/or have personally experienced corruption and sexual, gendered, and psychological violence in prison with no recourse or accountability for prison officials. By peeling back the layers of narrative sediment that have accumulated around these “benevolent” reformers, other understandings inevitably surfaced. How does an austere, nineteenth century Quaker woman rise to the heights of political influence and power? How did full control of a state institution accrue entirely to two women? Whom did they have to become? What were the stakes and what were they willing to do

to achieve their goals? Contemplating these qualitative questions led us to theorize about the nature of sexual and gendered violence in prison, and the utility of the “cult of domesticity” as a tool of racial and cultural violence.

The “cult of domesticity” is a term historians have used for the normative gender conventions prevailing among the nineteenth century elite and middle-class. Scholars have analyzed the ways in which this ideology of separate spheres, restricting women to domestic and helping roles, inflicted constricting expectations on women of all social positions, with the most brutal restrictions landing on working-class white women and women of colour of all social positions (Hall, 1983; McClinktock, 1995; Welter, 1966; Yee, 1992 [see especially chapter 2, “Black Women and the Cult of True Womanhood”]).

The cult of domesticity was a critical factor in the power relationships between benevolent reformers, such as Smith and Coffin, and the women in their charge. It set impossible expectations and then punished women who failed to live up to them, excusing and exacerbating the infliction of sexual and gendered violence upon incarcerated women and girls in the nineteenth century. Incarcerated white women and girls who had “fallen” due to conviction for a crime, whether committed or not, were banished from the ranks of Victorian white respectability, accused of contributing to the degeneration of the white race and affixed with a taint, the nineteenth century version of a stigma still visited upon the incarcerated (Smith, 2005).

The women confined at the Indiana Reformatory in the 1870s and 1880s were mostly white, a designation that included English, French, Irish, Canadian, German, “American”, and “American Race Unknown”. According to the 1873-1884 registries of prisoners admitted to IWP, 71 percent of women fell into this category, while 29 percent were designated as “coloured” or “black”, a category that was also interestingly partitioned (Indiana Women’s Prison, Penal Record, 1873-1884). As the percent of Blacks in the Indiana population at the time was less 2 percent (Gibson and Jung, 2002), it was clear that then, as now, women of colour were vastly more likely to fall subject to criminalization, stigmatization and punishment (Haley, 2016; Manion, 2015). While women of colour faced more violence, sexual or otherwise, and their experiences were surely qualitatively different than those of white women, our research reveals that white women who fell into the stigmatized intersections of class and criminal status also experienced physical and sexual violence in many of the same ways as women of colour.

Outside of the few women and girls of colour in the Reformatory, the staff sought to manage the “white criminal class” and stave off what they saw as the degeneration of the race at their hands. Those who displayed behaviour considered rude or violent, and/or who engaged in masturbation, faced physical abuse and the criminalization of their sexuality. Their punishments were harsh. The women and girls who deviated from social norms and violated the moral imperatives of the “cult of domesticity” were subject to tremendous violence in the name of reformation.

Our ability as incarcerated scholars to ask critical questions and excavate subjugated knowledge is nurtured by the process of qualitative inquiry. We were not confined to the quantitative measure that criminologists have critiqued as profoundly limiting what is possible to know about crime and punishment (Fan, 2007; Muhammad, 2011; Young, 2011). As opposed to statistical measurement, qualitative inquiry focuses on lived experiences and the complexity of people’s lives. It cares about the ephemeral processes of human endeavours. This idiosyncratically-defined and applied method recognizes subjugated knowledge may be delicate, fragmented and require reconstruction using various sources. Qualitative inquiry requires a willingness to wrestle with the pieces and parcels of knowledge in order to complete a different historical picture of the dominant narratives.

Most important, qualitative inquiry as a method allows for the excavation of subjugated knowledge. Incarcerated scholars who intimately understand and experience marginalization, secrecy, and subjection are also better able to comprehend the systematic subjugation of others. Our experiences unearth human stories and the structures and formations at work that created their subjugated experiences. Qualitative inquiry supports intellectual inquiries such as genealogies and critical histories of the present (Foucault, 1979; Visker, 1995). Genealogy as practice, “is, then, a sort of attempt to de-subjugate historical knowledge, to set them free, or in other words to enable them to oppose and struggle against the coercion of a unitary, formal, and scientific theoretical discourse” (Foucault, 2003, p. 10). Genealogies can throw into question current institutionalized narratives such as the perspective that “nineteenth century Indiana women reformers were wholly selfless and benevolent”. With genealogy, we can expose the imperialist patriarchal underbelly of racial and cultural formations such as the “cult of domesticity”. Research then becomes a viable collection

of information that can reveal problematic institutionalized practices and ideologies that plague the carceral state today.

In resurrecting subjugated knowledge, you must first understand how any narrative is always incomplete. Michel Foucault (2003, pp. 6-12) suggested that subjugated knowledge is hidden *within* the dominant historical narratives and has to be de-subjugated, excavated, and justified, because they are disqualified. In our particular case, as incarcerated scholars in the IWP History Project, we were working with two levels of disqualification. One is the disqualification that comes with our incarcerated status as researchers and writers who are low on the scale of the academic hierarchy. The second is the disqualification of the opinions of our historical subjects, incarcerated people, whose low-ranking knowledge we excavated.

What is at stake in this double disqualification? Why does it survive even today, long after the “cult of domesticity” has altered its formal role? At stake is failing to recognize that knowledge continues to be subjugated in ongoing struggles over what knowledge is and which versions of whose stories will achieve the status of audible, believable, and dominant. At stake is the loss of our collective stories and experiences that cause us – as incarcerated scholars, but also you as reader – to examine our beliefs and ourselves. At stake is the loss of our common humanity, our interconnectedness with one another. At stake is the perpetuation of penal policies that assault the personhood of the incarcerated. People in prison are under constant surveillance, examined, abused and even experimented upon – the effects of which often last well past incarceration.

If historically, incarcerated subjects are not considered people in the same way as the non-incarcerated, then the impetus behind “crime-and-punishment” practices and procedures do not have to consider their voice, living conditions, states of mind or future, while keeping the body captive. What follows is the devaluation of all incarcerated persons through time. We witness this devaluation in the case of the dominant narrative of Indiana’s “benevolent” prison reformers in the nineteenth century and the women and girls in their charge, but thanks to qualitative inquiry we have been able to ask, how is it flawed? What and who is disqualified through this telling? Only through qualitative inquiry do we gain the ability to ask these questions and reap the benefits of such insights.

The injustice we notice in the historical record also extends to the formal space of the university. Just as the “fallen” women and “wayward” girls

had to contend with a power structure that inscribed “criminal” inescapably upon them, the incarcerated and post-incarcerated scholar today has to contend with university exclusion and disqualification. It is easy to devalue the scholarly work of incarcerated men and women simply because they are incarcerated. It is easy to discount our epistemological standpoint and to fail to see it as valuable assets. Public and private institutions often deny post-incarcerated people’s access because their policies are shaped by the prevailing winds of tough-on-crime attitudes. Academia is often complicit in racial criminalization and carceral gatekeeping of all types.

Exclusionary practices destroy our opportunities. Why do I say that? Studies have shown that approximately half of the newly-released are re-incarcerated (recidivate) within three years (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2014) and that education more effectively prevents this than any other practice (Westervelt, 2015). Yet, universities can and do engage in exclusionary practices. A prominent public university in Indiana, for example, first required a potential graduate student to be out for one year and off of parole before even applying. The university then required him to have his application vetted by an “Exceptional Application Committee”, which included undergraduates as members. The committee decided that they would not allow the university to *consider* his application. So this inadvertently forced a post-incarcerated applicant to wait a full year before applying for admission and then denied him even the process of application. In instances such as this, the newly released are locked out of opportunities at the most critical time in the re-entry process. The public university adds, then, to the collateral consequences of incarceration. Ironically, these are the same institutions willing to educate people while they are in prison, sometimes benefiting from federal and/or state monies to do so.

One theoretical justification of these practices could be the need for campus safety. Yet is there any evidence to suggest that post-incarcerated individuals pose a risk or threaten campus safety and security? The university’s exclusionary practice invents and articulates a “truth” that enables administrators to disqualify post-incarcerated people from campus life. Those who would silence incarcerated and post-incarcerated scholars, who unearth subjugated knowledge or use their own subjection to reinterpret the present, may be perceived as threatening to those who use knowledge (history) to control the dominant narratives. For is it not academia, ensconced safely within the hallowed university, that contributes to the production of dominant narratives?

There are scholars subject to mass incarceration who are available to interpret the lived experience of incarceration and synthesize its individual impact and societal consequences to academia and the world. Our expertise can contribute to the academy in history, cultural anthropology, psychology, art, literature, and so much more.

The question is not whether universities should pursue and actively include the (post)incarcerated in their schools or what role probation and parole should play. Rather, we should ask instead, what barriers and structures allow universities to block the (post)incarcerated from degree opportunities, and how can we remove those barriers to allow universities to pursue and actively, even affirmatively, include such scholars?

Critical qualitative inquiry of subjugated knowledge can transform the university and the historians that write it. It opens a door. It can also inform understandings of history and the lens through which we translate and understand race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and gender. To exclude our rich perspectives severely limits knowledge and critique.

What we have found at the Indiana Women's Prison is that we can develop would-be graduate students. We have demonstrated our ability to speak and write in academia, and present our findings at national conferences and even present public policy alternatives to lawmakers. We have demonstrated our ability to make real change and we are not anomalies. Universities need to demystify their exclusivity, especially for graduate education, regardless of political trends. There is a hypocrisy of spirit in the liberal democratic academy wherein university elites protect themselves and schools from the tainted "criminal". A preferential admission option for post-incarcerated scholars would more aptly coincide with universities' commitments to provide students with a liberal education.

Critical qualitative inquiry challenges historians to search behind, underneath and within the ready archive for subjugated knowledge, and to be willing to de-subjugate and embrace the re-interpretation or transformation of the historical record. Hidden within the archive are a multitude of subjugated knowledges that could well benefit from the excavation and re-interpretation from the incarcerated and post-incarcerated scholars' perspective. Prison history is world history and in the age of mass incarceration, deserves a thorough examination by scholars whose research can be informed by their own qualitative experience.



## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Special thanks to Dr. Micol Seigel. Her instruction and honest critique throughout the writing of this paper were central to the development of ideas discussed here.
- <sup>2</sup> Indianapolis Home for Friendless Women (1867); Richmond Home for Friendless Women (1868); Home of the Good Shepherd (1873) and the Indiana Reformatory Institution for Women and Girls (1873).
- <sup>3</sup> For example, we were able to identify three women who Parvin discusses in an 1875 medical journal article who were incarcerated in the Reformatory and had been treated (experimented on) by Parvin (1875).
- <sup>4</sup> For contemporary accounts, see “The Reformatory”, *The Indianapolis Journal* – January 25, 1881; “Another Andersonville: Investigation of the Indiana Female Reformatory”, *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune* – January 28, 1881; “The Ducking Tub”, *The People* – January 29, 1881; “Christian Punishment”, *The People* – February 5, 1881; “The Reformatory: An Investigation of Charges of Cruelty Commences by the Legislative Committee”, *The Indianapolis Journal* – January 25, 1881.

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# RESPONSE

## Looking Back on Learning Inside the Walls: A Review of Previous JPP Special Issues on Prison Education *Samantha McAleese*

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As a prisoner I cannot stress enough how important education is.

– Bonafanti, 1992, p. 43

I enrolled in school because I wanted – needed – to do something constructive with my time. I wanted to make sure that I would avail myself of any opportunities in these gulags, these treacherous human warehouses.

– Collins, 2008, pp. 78-79

## INTRODUCTION

Thirty-five years ago, education inside Canadian prisons was “characterized by a general lack of interest in genuine educational achievement, by inadequate standards of teacher selection and training... a lack of discipline and structure, and by a complete lack of educational research” (Cosman, 1981, p. 40). Still today, prison education programs remain unable to flourish under the shadow of contemporary correctional philosophies that focus on punishment and isolation, medical and psychiatric treatment, and the rigid management of people deemed dangerous or risky by the penal system. Despite the poor quality of learning opportunities offered to prisoners, those educational programs that do exist are well attended. In fact, “many prisoners have cited voluntary participation in education programs... as the only positive experience one may encounter while incarcerated” (Piché, 2008, p. 4).

The ability to learn and to grow intellectually within the prison environment is not an easy task and many prisoners have shared their struggles and successes with this endeavour in three previous special issues of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons*<sup>1</sup> (*JPP*) that were dedicated to examining educational efforts and experiences in carceral environments. In this paper, I document the main themes presented in these previous journal submissions in order to reflect on the experience and nature of prison education. Previous contributors to the *JPP* have effectively highlighted both the positive and negative aspects that shape the experience of seeking

and attaining education in prison. I examine the first-hand testimonials of journal authors as they discuss the effects of control efforts on the classroom experience, their motivation to learn, the lack of resources and support, the benefits of prison education, and the role of education in the broader reintegration project.

In addition to the three special issues of the *JPP*, much has been written about the advent of learning in prisons by criminologists and those studying in the field of adult education. Most authors agree that prison is not the ideal environment for educational activities as “the goals of prison security and the ideal of academic freedom often conflict” (Thomas, 1995, p. 32). The idea of using educational programming as a form of prison management is frequently noted in the literature (Bayliss, 2003; Brazzell et al., 2009; Collins, 1995; Farabee, 2005; Owers, 2007), and is seen as the reason why education is unable to reach its full potential as a successful rehabilitation and reintegration strategy. There seems to be little emphasis placed on the importance of education for education’s sake inside prison walls; instead, the focus is on demonstrating measurable (quantitative) outcomes (i.e. program completion rates and recidivism rates) that can be used to validate the effectiveness of the carceral institution.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the institutional barriers that prevent many prisoners from accessing quality educational materials, there are certain spaces within the prison where learning does happen. Such *performative spaces*<sup>3</sup> are created by the people within them – both teachers and prisoners – who foster a “sphere of civility where ethical forms of communication such as respect, politeness, reciprocity, and inclusiveness in teacher-student dialogue [are present]” (Wright and Gehring, 2008, p. 244). In these spaces prisoners are treated as human beings, they can identify as “students” rather than as “offenders”, and they are provided with the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with others in the classroom.

## METHODOLOGY AND MOTIVATION

The content presented in this article is the result of a qualitative content analysis conducted as part of a larger project on prison education (see McAleese, 2012). The data set included all *JPP* content on education, five semi-structured interviews with practitioners in adult and correctional education and secondary data/research, policies, and directives related

to education produced by the Correctional Service of Canada (CSC). In order to conduct a thematic analysis of the corpus of data (Ezzy, 2002), I performed three levels of coding (Noaks and Wincup, 2004).<sup>4</sup>

For this article, I focus on the analytic findings generated from analysing the *JPP* content on education. A total of twenty-five *JPP* articles were reviewed for this research project. Sixteen of the contributors identified as current or former prisoners, three as academics, one as a practitioner (teacher), and four as a combination of these roles. Beyond these broad labels, the authors also described themselves as activists, advocates, writers, artists and parents. Despite these variations in roles and experiences, most contributions to the *JPP* reflected similar concerns around prison education (discussed below), while also highlighting the resilience and determination of prisoner-students.

The motivation for this research project stemmed from my experience working in an adult literacy program in the community. As I began this work during the final year of my undergraduate degree, I felt very excited that I would finally get to put years of criminological knowledge to good use, but I did not expect to be placed in a role where I would be teaching adult men how to read and write after they had spent several years in a federal prison. After my nervousness subsided, I quickly realized that education is a form of intervention that was unaddressed throughout my criminological training. Witnessing so many adults leaving the correctional system without much more than a Grade 8 level education was a red flag as to the state of education inside our prisons, which subsequently sparked my interest in exploring how people spend their time while incarcerated, whether or not they spend some of this time in a classroom, and their educational experiences while inside.

## **CONTROL IN THE CLASSROOM**

The mandate of prison schools conflicts with the mandate of security and the will of the public... Schooling and security clash, and the weaknesses and failures of prison education are the dire results.

– Davidson, 1992, p. 2

The polarization between security and education is a theme that appears repeatedly throughout the *JPP* content on prison education. Jones (1992,

p. 17) indicates that while there are educational programs offered inside, it is not the same as what we see in the community. He states, “entry into the prison milieu transforms the fundamental character of education. Its basic premises and values are undermined by the coercive environment in which it operates” (ibid). The fundamental philosophical differences between education and punishment create a tenuous environment that is not conducive to learning or transformation. Deutsch (2004, p. 104) echoes this when he writes, “on the whole, traditional education in a correctional institution is an enormous challenge. The trouble is that so many of the problems the school faces are inherent to the realities of prison life in and of itself”. Despite efforts by teachers and facilitators who wish to encourage active participation in the learning process, the overpowering culture of the prison seeps into the classroom and distorts good intentions. As Huckelbury (2004, p. 37) notes:

In prison schools, as in prison in general, there is no flexibility; the rule is the rule is the rule. Educational opportunities are therefore little more than another means to control behaviour, a management tool by which prison staff achieves results by threatening to remove the only redeeming program available.

Without granting the ability for adults to make their own decisions about whether or not to participate in an educational program, prison schools run the risk of becoming yet another form of punishment and promoting the same level of monotony as other aspects of prison life. Moreover, while education is promoted as a beneficial opportunity, it also serves the guards and wardens who are concerned with keeping tabs on prisoners and managing their movements throughout the institution (Jones, 1992). As Salah-El (1992, p. 46) wrote:

The major program in prison is to program the prisoner. The key to success is to contain and maintain prisoners, not to educate us. In short, this sort of policy actually translates into the continual development of the underdevelopment of prisoners.

Overall, previous contributors to the *JPP* emphasized that the prison’s priority focus on security interferes with the creation of meaningful

educational experiences and also often affects the motivation required to participate in educational programs.

### **MOTIVATION TO LEARN**

Amongst prisoners, low motivation to participate in educational programming is often derived from anxiety about re-entering the classroom where they often struggled while growing up.

They feared being laughed at by other prisoners, many of whom are neighbourhood friends, we understood their reasons and feelings. In prison, image can be survival. (Graves, 2004, p. 93).

I had always been in trouble at school; that left me with a clear dislike of the school atmosphere. (Collins, 2008, p. 78).

Unfortunately, prisoners are often assumed to be unmotivated and lazy simply because they are prisoners. However, Deutsche (2004, p. 104) reminds us that whether you are in a school inside or outside prison walls “there are some students in class who are highly motivated to learn and others who do not care about learning at all. The difference is that in a prison setting there are already in place mitigating factors that work against attempts to motivate students to learn”.

Inside the prison, too much time is spent making education unachievable, which only serves to lower motivation levels. The late Peter Collins (2008) wrote specifically about the ways in which the Correctional Service of Canada prevents the advent of educational achievement within their institutions. It is worth quoting from this particular article at length:

I have observed that CSC wields mandatory minimum education levels as a tool to punish prisoners and as a method to artificially raise people’s security levels... Without any rational explanation, CSC has reduced educational opportunities for those prisoners who desire it and to add insult to injury, it forces remedial educational processes on those imprisoned adults who do not wish it. This creates the misleading impression that CSC is promoting and facilitating education. (Collins, 2008, p. 78).



CSC creates an oppressive atmosphere in the school with disgruntled prisoners who interpret prison schooling as a forced punishment, and then ensuing resistance to education is purposely cultivated by the organization. (ibid, p. 82).

Many other contributors to the *JPP* have similarly noted that offering good quality education is difficult and at times impossible because the prison is such an oppressive and dehumanizing environment.

Following Collins, it appears as though education inside prison is either forced upon the prisoner or it is taken away as a punishment. While the CSC promotes itself as an agency responsible for promoting positive change and encouraging rehabilitation, *JPP* contributors identify an underlying organizational agenda of prison agencies, whether in Canada or elsewhere, that detracts from their mission statements.

Prisons warehouse men and women that desperately need higher education to remake their shattered lives. (Richards et al., 2008, p. 58).

There are just so many ways in which CSC conduct underlines the contradictions and failures of meaningful education in the prison system. (Collins, 2008, p. 71).

The Work Board at the time, even though they were pushing to get you your ABE, they needed people to work in the institution in laborious positions... They put me in the kitchen apart from the fact that I wanted to go to school. They said that I wasn't going to need my education when I got out. (Bell and Glaremin, 1992, p. 36).

In some situations, prisoners are told that they can do education on their own time through correspondence, but as Dey (2008, p. 40) explains:

Prison is a tough place...a few semesters of correspondence is not enough to meet all the needs of some prisoners. Many are unable to take full advantage of a rare opportunity, indicative of how difficult it is to foster change in a correctional setting.

Overall, the prison is a less than ideal environment to ignite the passion for learning, and even when prisoners are motivated to participate in educational upgrading the resources and support within the institution are often lacking.

## RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

Budget cuts and changes in the tide of bureaucratic or public opinion always threaten the existence of prison educational programming.

– Graves, 2004, p. 94

For those prisoners who are motivated to upgrade their educational credentials during their prison sentence, the type of educational training they do receive is often weak due to lack of resources and access to proper educational supports. Writing about the American experience, Huckelbury (2004, p. 39) notes that while the statistics regarding GED completion might look impressive, students are often pushed through the basic education courses to maintain the reputation of the institution.

In those secondary classes or GED preparation programs inside prison, they are often fed a diet of intellectual pabulum and passed along from grade to grade to pad the numbers... The students emerge convinced that they are doing well in complex tasks when their skills are rudimentary at best.

Collins (2008, p. 76) speaks to the same phenomenon in Canada:

As time went by, I noticed that the guys I was working with who could not put a sentence together – verbal or written – were being passed by the Millhaven prison school at Grade 9 and 10 levels. This was clearly a statistical scam perpetrated by the school for some kind of funding manipulation.

There are also accounts from prisoners stating that the courses they took while inside are not fully accredited on the outside (Jones, 1992) and that education is something correctional administrators expect them to do

on their own time once all other requirements of the correctional plan are met (Bell and Glaremin, 1992). This approach constitutes education as an *add-on*, rather than a key component of reformation efforts. As a result, it is unsurprising that many *JPP* contributors shared concerns about the limited courses available in prison (Richards, 2004), as well as the improper placement of learners into the appropriate curriculum level.

Students at the most basic level of education are almost always correctly placed in the proper class, but it is not unusual to find students with a higher skill level in there with them. In that situation the material being presented can be too hard for some and too easy for others. In both of these cases the educational process is then inhibited because some students are bored and others are overwhelmed by the lessons being taught. This is not to say the same phenomena does not occur in all educational systems, but a prison environment is already a place that is not particularly conducive to the learning process. (Deutsch, 2004, p. 103-104).

Deutsch (2004, p. 102) also specifically identifies the lack of support for adult learners with special needs or learning disabilities inside the prison:

There are no classes for special education; even students with significant learning disabilities find themselves being “mainstreamed” into regular classes which may present great obstacles to their ability to absorb the lesson being taught.

Resources for prisoner education become even more difficult to access when a prisoner seeks to move on to other opportunities for higher learning.

In the penitentiary you do not have access to university or public libraries, so you have to beg friends to mail books in, or work through the shoddy paperback collection of worn out copies in the library. (Richards, 2004, p. 63).

The first person narratives of educational experiences in prison suggest that prison-teachers do their best to work with what they have, although many may struggle to maintain a guise of optimism given all of the hardships that come with teaching in this environment.

These are people who firmly believe in the importance and value of education. Their sense of concern and their commitment to helping these men stimulates the learning process, in part because the men are very appreciative of the fact that these outside people are there strictly to help them. (Deutsch, 2004, p. 105).

The teachers who came into the prison were influential in ways beyond being educators...unlike almost everybody else who works in the criminal justice system, they treated us like human beings. (Terry, 2004, p. 23).

These narratives suggest that prison educators embody the stated goal of corrections, which is to provide the type of support that will have a lasting positive and rehabilitative impact on individuals as they re-enter the community. Due to this more compassionate approach, there is very little support for teaching staff from prison officers (Jones, 1992, p. 16; Richards, 2004, p. 65; Steffler, 2008, p. 30), and despite everyone's best efforts it still seems as though "anyone associated with higher learning in the prisons whether as a prisoner/student or faculty member has experienced the hostility and resentment of lower-level personnel" (Jones, 1992, p.16). Lynes (1992, p. 53) confirms this stating, "the relationship between educators and correctional authorities has always been contentious". This arrangement suggests a very one-sided relationship, wherein teachers make efforts to be accommodating and understanding, while correctional officers are harsh and condescending.

While this antagonistic and complicated working relationship between teachers and guards makes it difficult to facilitate positive learning opportunities in prison, *JPP* contributors attest that there are a number of important benefits of prison education.

## **THE BENEFITS OF PRISON EDUCATION**

My exposure to that educational environment and all I was learning, amidst the monotony of the prison experience, was stimulating, nurturing, and life enhancing. Instead of hanging out in the furniture factory or the yard thinking about how to hustle another high, I found myself in classrooms with the minority of other convicts interested in learning; in my cell reading, studying and writing. (Terry, 2004, pp. 22-23).

I had never placed education at the top of my to-do list. I was content to function at a basic level, thinking only when I was forced to do so. But prison makes us hungry, if for no other reason than to counter the mind-numbing routine of doing time. (Huckelbury, 2004, p. 32).

Despite an abundance of anecdotes across previous editions of the *JPP* that point to the prison's attempt to inhibit meaningful education, there is also plenty of evidence to show that education was an overall positive experience for individuals serving time. Davidson (1992 p. 1) was the first to highlight this in the journal: "the popularity of prison education among prisoners [is] a popularity which is unequalled when compared to other prison programs". He also described education as "a little bit of intellectual freedom in an otherwise coercive environment" (ibid, p. 2). Statements like this indicate that the classroom is considered a relatively safe space within the prison. The atmosphere in the classroom is a microcosm that is less threatening than many other spaces within the institution given the broader atmosphere of punishment and control that structures prison life. When a long-term prisoner is able to express that he is "relieved to have something positive to report to his family" (Dey, 2008, p. 36), it is clear that the classroom serves an important stabilizing function in the lives of many prisoners.

Activities that take place in the classroom have the capability of being individually tailored to each prisoner, unlike other program materials that are offered via standardized one-size fits all modules. Writing exercises are a prime example of this.

Writing by prisoners becomes in large measure the only available vehicle to counter the stultifying existence they encounter daily. Education, and writing in particular, opens the doors to a closed world, by providing prisoners with voices that have previously been silenced. (Nagelsen, 2008, p. 107).

By having this opportunity to express individuality in an institution that treats everyone the same, prisoners begin to realize that they do have a voice and that they can use their time behind bars productively.

This course made me realize that being an [offender] doesn't mean that you can't succeed. (Richards et al., 2008, p. 54).

They can succeed through hard work and dedication. I've seen some of my classmates who were, frankly, knuckleheads, completely turn lives around because of this program. (Dey, 2008, p. 36).

When I got my certificate I was really proud, and then I decided that I wanted to move on. (Bell and Glaremin, 1992, p. 36).

Indeed, for many prisoners learning in the classroom is equated with freedom.

For me education was becoming 'freedom inward bound'. (Carter, 2008, p. 62).

The classroom has become for me, as it has for many others, my sanctuary (Taylor, 2004b, p. 128).

While in those classrooms it was almost like being somewhere in the free world. In the presence of these teachers we were not degraded for simply existing. (Terry, 2004, p. 23).

The classroom also provides an escape from negative interactions with prisoners who are not as concerned with engaging in educational or rehabilitative programs while inside. Examples of this include prisoners who use drugs, who remain active in various gangs, or who continue to use violence. Going to school also gives prisoners a break from the guards who show them little respect despite the efforts they may make to stay out of trouble.

[The teacher] treated us with decency, respect, and obvious compassion. And he did so every single time he came. (Terry, 2004, p. 23).

I loved the books and lectures, but more than that, I looked forward to the dialogue with professors; real people who treated me like, well, like a real student. (Huckelbury, 2004, p. 32).

The level of mutual respect that exists between tutor and student is probably higher than one would find in most other situations. (Deutsch, 2004, p. 106).

Regrettably, this feeling or experience of freedom is often short lived in prison. The door to the classroom is not strong enough to keep out the effects of punishment that find their way into every aspect of the institution. Security is still a primary concern in the prison school and disciplinary strategies are invoked should prisoners or teachers be seen as potentially threatening security in some way (Huckelbury, 2004, p. 37). Aside from the hovering nature of prison security there is also the constant reminder that the bodies inside the classroom are first and foremost prisoner-bodies, rather than student-bodies. Disruptions in classroom time for counts and lockdowns are frequent and pernicious, acting as constant reminders of the students' core identity as prisoners in this environment. As one prisoner writes: "[The guards] call us "offenders" as if this is all we are and all we ever will be" (Collins, 2008, p. 73).

## EDUCATION AND REINTEGRATION

All available evidence demonstrates that educational upgrading, even in prison, results in increased self-esteem, critical thinking and self-discipline. These personal gains combine to reduce the likelihood of a released prisoner coming back in conflict with the law.

– Collins, 2008, p. 78

In my view, education is the key to a successful life out on the street.

– Harris, 2004, p. 59

Prisoners who participate in educational upgrading while inside do reduce their chance of re-arrest once back in the community (Richards et al., 2008). Prisoners also recognize that by participating in education they will be able to successfully complete other programs mandated by their correctional plan with greater ease, some of which will eventually help them to cope on the outside (Rafferty, 2004, p. 51). There were also several suggestions from prisoners throughout *JPP* content as to why they believe education is such a successful rehabilitation tool to include in a correctional strategy. Collins (2008, p. 78) suggests that a prisoner who engages in learning while inside will be more successful on the outside "because the "educated" person is more able to effectively look for and secure employment, and [in] general is more likely to feel socially viable and useful to others, perhaps developing

a sense of purpose”. Harris (2004, p. 58) echoes this thought by pointing out that “educated individuals are much more likely to use their minds than their fists” and we see the same justification again in Taylor’s (2004a, p. 76) article when he notes that “regardless of the date you walk out of the prison... further education will improve confidence and self-esteem, and improve how you feel about and treat others”. This sentiment is what makes education so attractive to the prisoners who are looking to escape the constant reminders of their past and who are looking for new tools they can use to ignite change in their future.

Beyond building self-confidence within the adult learner, there were many indications across the corpus of data that education actually serves to ignite transformation in and empowerment of the prisoners who participate in higher education programs while behind bars. Huckelbury (2004, p. 42) wrote that it was “because of higher education, [that he] took another giant step on the road to becoming a better person”. Once again, this helps to promote the idea that education is very important to the rehabilitation and reintegration process. The time that the prisoner spends in the classroom learning can open their minds and help them to see the effects of their previous actions in a different light. In a subtle way, education can help to instill a sense of community within the learner and this alone will influence decision-making upon release.

The classes I would take during that period provided me with the windows into worlds I never knew existed...And as the classes came and went, the views I had about the world and myself continually changed. (Terry, 2004, p. 22).

Higher education imparts the abilities to analyze, reason, and think for yourself in any situation. As a powerfully liberating tool, it can never be taken away; it can only be ceded by your choice not to utilize those skills. (Taylor, 2004a, p. 76).

One of the most important arguments to emerge from these special issues of the *JPP* is the idea that there should be a stronger effort to change public opinion about offering educational opportunities to prisoners. Correctional policies and practices may be influenced by public opinions (or emotions); therefore, in order for prison education to gain momentum and popularity,



there must be a stronger campaign to secure public support for increased educational resources. Given the personal testaments supporting the transformative potential of education programs, it is clearly “in society’s best interest criminologically, economically, and socially to provide and even encourage prisoners to complete as much education as possible” (Taylor, 2008, p. 21). The general population is often quick to judge prisoners’ motives and intentions, which can make something as simple as pursuing a Grade 12 education seem like a potential waste of the tax dollars of hard working citizens. Several *JPP* contributors recognized this as a large barrier to promoting educational programming inside prison and they subsequently provided a discourse for action amongst prisoners and educators.

We must be adamant in showing to people in society the importance of mandating prisons to provide all prisoners with a decent education, tangible job opportunities, and hope for the future. (Salah-El, 1992, pp. 47-48).

Only through progressive and radical changes in educational opportunities in prison can we ever hope to live in a world free of crime and violence, where individuals love their neighbours as they love themselves. (Harris, 2004, p. 57).

If the education is there, if prisoners are motivated, if their efforts are supported, prisoners will take advantage of these opportunities. Prisoners will change, even in spite of our past or immediate perceptions. We can learn to become more humane, socially conscious citizens that strike to complement and cooperate with the larger community, rather than to continue to prey upon it and ultimately upon ourselves. (Taylor, 2004b, p. 129).

The lack of public support to pay for prison education threatens the quality of programming that prisoners are provided with behind bars, despite the fact that “there are very few prisoners who are not capable of becoming productive members of society” (Harris, 2004, p. 59). So much effort goes into separating prisoners from the rest of society, yet what we need to realize is that “the more education prisoners acquire while inside, the safer, more stable and richer our communities will be” (Taylor, 2008,

p. 21). Education plays such an important role in “strengthening the bond between individuals in prison and society” (Beck et al., 2008, p. 91), and it is publications like the *JPP*, conversations with adult educators, and research that brings together criminological knowledge and educational philosophies that bring attention to the importance of learning behind bars, which may help to change how education is structured and implemented in the prison setting.

## CONCLUSION

So, to those of you who teach us, and to my brothers and sisters in cages, keep thinking, keep learning and growing, keep the fire burning for those following. And never forget to watch your back.

– Huckelbury, 2004, p. 44

Malcolm Knowles (1984, p. 27), one of the first to theorize about the practice of adult education and the nature of adult learners, once wrote, “the adult learner has indeed been a neglected species”. Adult learners in prison are even more neglected, but are at the same time resilient as they work hard to create safe spaces for learning inside. There are educational opportunities happening inside prisons, but they typically lack in key resources. The focus on security and management continues to challenge the freedom that comes with learning, and while prisoners demonstrate the motivation to participate in educational efforts and teachers work to guide them toward the achievement of their goals, a lack of public support and political will threaten the ability for adult education to thrive in this environment.

While each of the themes presented in this article appear consistently throughout the three previous special issues of the *JPP* on prison education, comments on the lack of financial resources and institutional support for educational upgrading are more prominent within the 2004 and 2008 publications. In 1992, the publication date of the first special issue, prisoners in the United States still had access to Pell Grants.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, “during the tough-on-crime era of the Clinton Administration... the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 withdrew Pell Grant eligibility from people in prison” (Smith, 2016, para.2). This loss of political, public, and financial support for prison education continues to impact access to post-secondary training inside American prisons (Steffler, 2008) and similar

sentiments, limit educational opportunities available to those incarcerated in Canadian prisons (Collins, 2008). A recent article in the *New Yorker* indicates a return of the prisoner Pell Grant program under the Obama Administration (Smith, 2016), and north of the border we are hopeful for significant changes to rehabilitation and reintegration supports under the new, Liberal, Government of Canada led by Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

The three previous special issues of the *JPP* on prison education provide excellent insight into the benefits and difficulties associated with learning on the inside. That the *JPP* continues to document the educational and learning experiences of men and women in prison is notable; these first-hand ethnographic narratives provide much support for expanding prison educational efforts and illustrate the importance of chronicling how they evolve over time.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Volume 4(1) in 1992, Volume 13 in 2004 and Volume 17(1) in 2008.
- <sup>2</sup> For example, evaluations are often conducted in order to assess the relationship between the completion of a GED program and recidivism rates (see CSC, 2009).
- <sup>3</sup> Performative space is a concept developed by Randall Wright and Thom Gehring (2008) to explain a space within the prison that is favourable to practices and philosophies of adult education and democracy.
- <sup>4</sup> A three stage coding process allows the researcher to engage in a process of “constant comparison” (Ezzy, 2002, p. 90) in order to extract patterns from the data. Open coding involves the creation of broad categories, axial coding allows for the development of a more comprehensive conceptual framework, and selective coding results in core categories which form the basis for discussions, conclusions, recommendations, and action (Noaks and Wincup, 2004).
- <sup>5</sup> A Pell Grant is a type of subsidy or financial aid provided by the federal government in the United States to individuals who require assistance in paying for post-secondary education (Mallory, 2015).

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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As Samantha McAleese valuably details, this is the fourth special issue of the *Journal of Prisoners on Prison* (JPP) dedicated to examining prison education since 1992 with the publication of Volume 4(1). The contributors to this 2016 issue take the conversation, as it continues deeper into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with so much left to do, in compelling new directions.

Present here are new and insightful treatments of some of the same devastating critiques and illuminations of the inherent contradictions in carceral education that have been discussed in the *JPP* over the last 25 years, and that, alas, still urgently need addressing. So we read about the grim lack of educational equity still faced by people in or emerging from prison and jail. Rachel Fayter, Kevin Sawyer, Percy Levy and Christopher Shea are amongst those whose articles consider “barriers to education”, that familiar phrase, as the cruelly material lived manifestations that they are – physical and temporal barriers, funding barriers, a complete absence or lack of computer time, Internet and book access, a lack of affordable correspondence courses or time with actual three-dimensional teachers. Other barriers also include censorship, retaliation against imprisoned educators and intellectuals, soul-crushing presumptions of ineducability (as when a prison librarian assures Ismael Bonano that he should set his sights on a Home Depot job and not college), racially loaded practices and policies that impact who winds up accessing prison education and who sees themselves reflected in the teaching staff, psychological stressors, power imbalances, and a whole array of punitive responses to books, ideas and practices that are deemed radicalizing by institutional authorities.

The articles record – and themselves instantiate – the innovation, passion and determination that fuel efforts to improve access, both on the individual level (e.g. Petey’s piece, “Attempting to Secure a University Education while in Prison”) and the collective level (e.g. the manifesto by men who are incarcerated, “A Doorway Out of Darkness: Education to Heal”). In many cases, indefensibly long sentences set the conditions for very long educational journeys, long enough to militate multi-chapter stories that often mean taking every correctional program and educational opportunity offered (both cookie-cutter and truly impactful); building personal booklists; formal and informal peer-led teaching and learning; correspondence courses; and if possible, university-sponsored prison education programs such as the Education Justice Project, University Beyond Bars, Walls to Bridges or

Hudson Link. In different registers and with different reads on the *nature* of its gains, the authors here (who are also students, scholars, educators and/or activists), catalogue the multi-faceted transformative impacts of education, made particularly precious against the stark backdrop of a dehumanizing system described by Shebuel Bel as “psychological warfare”, a day-in-day-out context that contradicts education’s founding principles.

I would like to highlight that the articles in this issue also redefine what “education” is, refusing to celebrate it as an uncomplicated instrument of self-betterment and social mobility for those ready to correct their ways. The current institutional framework of higher education, as much as criminal justice, is under investigation here. First, the writers *insist that the notion of education be extended* beyond what happens in a GED, postsecondary classroom or correspondence course. Education redefined includes “self-directed” reading and writing, and the tradition of imprisoned radical intellectuals, in which Kevin D. Sawyer rightfully places himself. It includes what people learn through experience, be it in community, on the streets (as with Jermaine Archer’s stint in “Gladiator School”), and/or in the institutional frameworks that all these authors are navigating, as well as through participation in meaningful programs and prisoner-run projects that do not come replete with an academic or correctional stamps of approval (see Chad Walton and Wilfredo Laracuente in this issue). Redemptive conventions governing prison narratives would have it that prison is the laboratory beaker within which all the transmutation and remaking of the errant (wo)man [*sic*] unfolds. By contrast, Kevin D. Sawyer writes, “I did not discover my talents in prison. I brought them here” (p. 84).

Unlearning is integral to learning. Indoctrination can be unseated and undone by inquiry, be it into the concepts that structure the discourse of blame, the racist and colonial histories and formulations that have shaped institutions, or the psychology that makes possible both personal and systemic stigmatizations. As Rachel Fayer makes clear, true change – which we all need – requires that the unlearning include, too, the work of overcoming conventional classroom hierarchies; these can be as insistent and insidious as other institutional forms of dominance.

The issue also illustrates that “student”, despite being so much more generous a label than “inmate”, is nonetheless an inadequate and partial identifier. Writers like Chad Walton have experience as teachers, themselves, and they speak with expertise, not just as “prisoners writing on prison”, not



just as authors and analysts, but as educators. Contributors mention the role of deeper, long-term commitments to collaborate on social justice issues beyond the semester's end (Rachel Fayter describes Inside-Out think tanks and the Walls to Bridges Collective, for instance). And we hear, notably from Michelle Jones of the IWP History Project, about the importance of her ongoing experience as an incarcerated scholar and researcher, even in the face of many obstacles and access issues.

But perhaps especially defining this issue, its contributors consistently pose and develop *questions about differing pedagogies*, their varying purposes and outcomes. Aptly, the most oft-quoted text in the articles as a whole is Paolo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. And the lessons offered about education? Michael Fiorini, Shebuel Bel and Jermaine Archer all celebrate the role that it plays in self-fashioning, its contributions toward viable futures, and the efficacy and vision that education strengthens and hones; these are familiar if vibrantly expressed perceived benefits. Many of the contributing authors here spell out in compelling fashion an alternative read on what education needs to become.

Wilfredo Laracuate reminds us that education has a role beyond the instrumental (particularly relevant in an era when education's social mobility guarantees are shakier than ever before) and that the most significant learning is holistic, inviting, and requiring the whole self. Critical thinking, as evidenced by Ismael Bonano and Christopher Shea, is what allows for institutional critique and the ability to open up beyond institutional power constructs (or to reject them out of hand). Incarcerated students occupy standpoints that locate them as particularly acute "critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher" in the "problem-posing" classroom (Villebrun).<sup>1</sup> And Percy Levy, Rachel Fayter and Jermaine Archer are among those who show how educational relationships can be conducted mindfully and courageously, so that they can "foster" rather than "wither" the autonomy of all participants (Nedelsky, 2012, p. 10).

This journal makes achingly clear to readers on both sides of the wall that the denial of educational engagement to people in and formerly in prison hurts intellectual inquiry itself. Like *JPP* writers more generally, the authors collected in this issue remind readers that for profound, evolutionary learning or analysis to occur, those who have been cordoned off from the (imaginary) public sphere need to be involved in the conversation. There is no proper understanding of power, oppression, and the pathways to

liberation without the perspective and contributions of people in prison. For instance, the probing historical research conducted at the Indiana Women's Prison History Project manifests the power of mobilized "subjugated knowledge", a term coined by Foucault (2003) and deepened by Michelle Jones, as she spells out how the criminalized perspective sharpened the analytic questions that guided the research.

Also, we cannot confront or re-envision society without changing the form that the relationships between us take. It is not *intended* that people in and out of prison learn with, from, alongside, or in solidarity with each other. This includes the access issues that continue to confront people after they leave prison, which Michelle Jones treats from the perspective of an individual pursuing graduate studies. It is past time to shift toward non-exclusionary policies in all educational settings, to explicitly fling open the door to people who have faced criminalization, to commit to anti-racist, feminist-informed, and decolonizing practices. It is past time to discover what education looks like – and what imaginative capacity emerges – when we pay attention to the *relationships* that are part of educational encounter, respecting multiple wisdoms, examining our own assumptions and actions, and engaging in a new kind of listening.

What are these prisons? What are the forces that criminalize? When we build bridges, the very walls that have separated us may provide the raw material as we pick those building blocks up and hold them in our hands for shared study, scrutiny, and exchange.

*But let me turn the floor over to the collective writers of "A Doorway Out of Darkness: Education to Heal", whose manifesto points toward change.*

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Vincent Charles Villebrun quotes Freire (1970), pages 80-81.

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# PRISONERS' STRUGGLES

## **A Doorway Out of Darkness:**

### **Education to Heal**

#### *A Manifesto by Men Who Are Incarcerated*

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Let us succeed and prosper. Brothers and sisters, let's strive to improve our lives. We deserve to be educated; we have rights.

We are the "jailbirds" and "hoodlums" of the popular media: outcasts, losers, dead beats, lifers, misfits.

Perceived as waste to be rounded up, warehoused, locked away in overcrowded gyms and chapels,  
We are regularly excluded from the decisions that affect our lives.

We are human; we are one: mind, body, and spirit.  
We have beliefs, smarts, strength, equality.  
We have insights, opinions, talents, interests.  
We are artists, writers, thinkers, workers, students, mentors;  
We are sons, fathers, mooshums, brothers, friends, and community members.

We are given little to no chance of rehabilitation  
As our government cuts funding to our programs  
We are called dumb, unwilling, unable, hopeless, and undeserving.

But we are willing  
We are capable  
And we have the right to be heard.

Our experience of education has often been traumatic, confusing, ostracizing, and disabling:  
The history we were taught was not our own,  
There were few supports for our needs,  
We felt like we did not belong.

But we have a right to education<sup>1</sup> that is motivational, empowering, strengthening, and inspirational  
Independent, challenging, flexible, and focused

A welcoming, non-discriminating environment  
Holistic, non-linear, and open to many teaching methods.

Education is a journey that takes dedication:  
A tool for understanding, an adventure,  
A source of pride  
And a way to understand ourselves, our situation, and our rights.

WE have the capacity to

- educate and be educated
- design and deliver our own educational programs
- meet with, support, motivate, and mentor each other
- empower ourselves and others

WE need to

- be respected for what we know and what we want to know
- have opportunities for expression, connection, and communication
- have access to resources, space, educational technologies, libraries, and teachers<sup>2</sup>
- have access to a variety of educational opportunities: Indigenous languages, humanities and social sciences, creative arts, law and human rights, politics and voter rights, trades, food safety, life skills, public speaking, interview skills, budgeting, mental and physical health awareness (H.I.V./AIDS and Hep C), and A.A. and N.A.

OUR educational programs must

- focus on what we need, not on what others think we need
- focus on our Indigenous history, culture, and knowledge, from our perspective
- recognize all aspects of an individual: physical,<sup>3</sup> mental, emotional, and spiritual
- address a range of needs: social, occupational, academic, physical, and rehabilitative
- include LGBTQ perspectives and awareness
- be available to all prisoners: sentenced and remanded<sup>4</sup>
- provide access to information about the justice system and the courts

- provide knowledge of the supports and programs available upon release

WE stand in *solidarity* with our brothers and sisters who are incarcerated in this and other countries who often suffer great abuses of their human rights. We demand that our governments take action in our countries, but also at the international level, so that our health and human rights, including the right to education, are respected, protected and promoted, and we are involved in all decisions that affect our lives.

We are part of the *solution*, not part of the problem!

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> As affirmed by the United Nations, education is a basic human need and a human right (1), and “the right to basic education in prisons has been shown to be a prerequisite for achieving the internationally agreed goal of ensuring a basic level of education for all” (i). For the United Nations/UNESCO full report, see Basic Education in Prisons (1995) at <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0011/001116/111660eo.pdf>.
- <sup>2</sup> Currently there is one teacher therapist at the Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre (SCC) for over 400 men.
- <sup>3</sup> Due to overcrowding, the men at SCC do not have access to the gym, which is being used as an overflow dorm. The main classroom is also used for overflow.
- <sup>4</sup> Prisoners on remand are awaiting trial or sentencing and are not eligible for any of the core correctional programs. If men on remand are released with “time served”, they will not have had access to any programming while inside.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

This manifesto was written by men incarcerated at the Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre as part of the Inspired Minds: All Nations Creative Writing program, a partnership between SCC and the University of Saskatchewan. It is based on and borrows language from a similar manifesto, “Nothing About Us Without Us: A Manifesto by People Who Use Illegal Drugs” (see [http://www.aidsalliance.org/assets/000/000/377/310-2.-Nothing-about-us-without-us-Manifesto-\(English\)\\_original.pdf?1405520241](http://www.aidsalliance.org/assets/000/000/377/310-2.-Nothing-about-us-without-us-Manifesto-(English)_original.pdf?1405520241)), which encourages the free use, adaptation, and dissemination of its contents. The manifesto was originally published on June 2015 as part of the Land, Peoples, Justice initiative (see

<http://landpeoplesjustice.usask.ca/index.php>). Participants in this project expressed their hope that people who are incarcerated around the world will either adopt this manifesto or use it as the basis for creating their own manifesto. Reproduction of the manifesto is encouraged, as is adaptation of its contents. For further information, contact the Inspired Minds program via Dr. Nancy Van Styvendale at the University of Saskatchewan via email at [n.vanstyvendale@usask.ca](mailto:n.vanstyvendale@usask.ca) or by mail at the following address:

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## COVER ART

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Front Cover: “Untitled”  
2015, painting  
Anonymous

The artist, who wishes to remain anonymous, was a participant in the Inspired Minds: All Nations Creative Writing program at the Saskatoon Provincial Correctional Centre in June 2015. That is the date when the painting was created, specifically for the Manifesto. The image has jagged borders because the piece was painted on the back of a chocolate bar box.