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*Dialogue for researchers and practitioners*

*Artwork by an Irish prisoner*

## Editor's Welcome to the Inaugural Issue of the *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*

ARVE ASBJØRNSEN

Lead Editor

University of Bergen, Norway

Dear reader:

It is with great pride we present this first issue of *Journal of Prison Education and Reentry*. This marks the end of an extensive period of preparations, following the recognition of a need for an independent, open access, and widely available platform for exchange of research and brilliant ideas for best practice in prison education and reentry. We greet the birth of the journal with expectations of a long and prosperous life.

It is also with pride that we present this first issue of the journal on the anniversary of the Council of Europe's adoption of the recommendations concerning prison education. This is our ultimate support for the International Day of Prison Education.

Much of what happens in prison is out of the public's view. Global social and economic events—such as massive refugee movements and the collapse of financial markets—have profound impacts on the world inside prisons. It is hard to sort out the effects these have on prison education and reentry policies and programs. Frequently, educators in prisons work in challenging situations, often having few colleagues with whom to share their experiences and who can offer support. The call for proof beyond doubt that “it works” is louder than ever, and the search for “evidence based practice” is permeating prison education. Therefore, it is necessary for researchers and practitioners to share their knowledge and experience, and to collaborate in the quest for establishing the criteria that will define “best practice”. However, it is also necessary at times to critique the standards movement itself, especially when the complexities of the systems we work within and research have conflicting purposes and missions. We sincerely hope JPER can yield a small, but significant, contribution to this work and dialogue.

JPER accepts different categories of submissions. For the Research Section, we accept submissions of original research, and all submissions are subjected to a rigorous peer review process before a final decision of publication is met. For the Practitioner Section, the submissions are assessed by the Section Editor and her assistant, in addition to the Lead Editor. For the Features Section, all submissions are assessed by the Lead Editor.

In this first issue of JPER, we present four original research contributions, in addition to some very important and readable discussions of practice in prison education. The first research article, written by Kariane Westheim and Terje Manger, presents results from an interview study among prisoners originating in Iraq, but incarcerated in Norway. Analyses of educational needs and approval of qualifications among prisoners who have been educated in a different educational system is a great challenge. The paper offers insights into the education of Iraqi prisoners in Norway, but also presents a methodological approach to assessment of educational needs in atypical subsamples of learners. The second paper, written by Cormac Behan, similarly presents results of an interview study among prisoners, but his study applies a more open-ended approach, and starts by examining the motives for taking up education and continues to explore the functions of education from the perspectives of prisoners in Ireland. His conclusions are very much worth considering: prison education needs to distinguish itself from rehabilitation programmes and stand on the integrity of its profession, based on principles of pedagogy, rather than be lured into the evaluative and correctional milieu of modern penalty. We are also proud to present the first part of a two-part paper by Randall Wright, where he is using normalization theory to discuss various forces that shape prison-student identities. ‘Performative spaces’ and ‘identity closure’ are used to explore the identity work that occurs in schools and elsewhere in prisons, and how this helps to explain how education can facilitate reentry. Finally, Susan Hopkins invites a discussion on the teaching of incarcerated tertiary students in the digital age and some of the dilemmas of higher education in prisons.

For the Practitioners Section, we have received a substantial number of submissions that are worth your time to read.

We have themed the first issue around several papers describing aspects of establishing college programs in prisons along with an introduction by our Editor for practitioners' papers, Anne Costelloe. We have “Fluorescent Glow” by Micol Hutchinson, who tells her story of teaching English as a second language in a

city jail. We bring you Part 1 of “Otisville Diaries” by Baz Dreisinger and her colleagues, in “Prisons, Pipelines, and Pedagogy”. Part 2 will be published later this year. In addition, we bring you the insiders’ perspectives on participation in a collaborative college program at Richmond City Jail (“Sanctuary in the Richmond City Jail” by Croft, Flynn, Irving and Yang). Finally we have also included in this issue a similar story, but *formed by the education of college teachers* to work in prisons and with the incarcerated students (“Waking up in prison: Critical discussions between typical college students and their incarcerated peers” by Tabitha Dell’Angelo).

Hutchinson’s article also includes a link to a video presentation of a particular student of hers that you probably will find of interest. Presentations like this indicate the wonderful possibilities of online publishing: attachment of a wealth of additional material, and also the possibility to link to all the vast information available on the internet. However, with great opportunities, there is also great responsibility. It is a huge challenge to also make sure that what is shared is open for sharing. Perhaps this publication will inspire others to also think “outside the box” when conveying stories of good practice?

The journal is published as open access, which means everyone with access to the internet is able to read and download all content of the journal. It can also be shared without limitations as long as the source is clearly stated. Everything is published according to the Creative Commons 4.0, share alike, which includes the right to use and reuse the material for non-commercial use. The ownership is not taken over by JPER, but remains with the author, which also grants the author all rights to use of the publications, including posting in repositories, sharing on the internet, or printing as many copies as he or she likes to share with colleagues, friends or family, or to also use in an anthology. We publish JPER using the Open Journal System (OJS) developed by the Public Knowledge Project (PKP). Both CC and OJS are developed in the same spirit as has motivated this journal: free access to knowledge, independent of location, status, or economy. The archives of JPER are generously hosted by the University

Library of the University of Bergen through their repository, the Bergen Open Research Archives (BORA), which will assure the availability of all published material for the future.

We hope you find something inspiring, something challenging, and maybe also something so annoying that you hit your keyboard and write us. You will also find us on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/#!/JournalofPrisonEducationandReentry>) and on Twitter (@JPERatBORA), additional and excellent places to share thoughts and comments on the content of the journal.

To conclude this column, I would like to thank my friends and colleagues, Anne Costelloe and Bill Muth, who accepted the challenges of serving as section editors, for their extensive work and energy in getting this journal published. We have received fantastic support from the University Library of the University of Bergen, in particular from Tarje Lavik and Ingrid Cutler, who are doing a wonderful job with the Bergen Open Research Archives where this journal has its home. Also, I am immensely grateful to Virginia Commonwealth University for generously allocating doctoral student positions to the Journal. In particular, I wish to recognize Laura Gogia and Ginger Walker for their efforts in keeping the work on track and taking care of all the administrative challenges and technicalities of setting up the journal, and to Michael Scott for doing a fantastic job with the adaptation of the platform and taking care of templates and lay-out issues. We are grateful for all discussion within the extended Executive Board – Thom Gehring, Carolyn Eggleston, Terje Manger and Cormac Behan—who have offered wonderful insightful and innovative discussions through the whole work process. The quality standards required for research publication could not have been assured without the hard work of our Editorial Review Board members (for a list of reviewer names, see <https://jper.uib.no/jper/about/editorialTeam>). Finally, a warm thank you to the president of the EPEA, both the present president, Lena Broo, and the former president Anita Wilson, for giving us opportunities to meet and discuss the journal and other matters of importance during the EPEA conferences.

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## European Prison Education Association

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13<sup>th</sup> of October 2014

The European Prison Education Association (EPEA) is delighted to welcome the launch of the Journal of Prison Education and Reentry, JPER, which we believe will become a valuable resource for our members. Through our association with the journal, members will have ready access to information, research findings, initiatives and developments which are of direct relevance to their professional lives and interests. The journal will serve as a useful guide and source of information to help advance the practice of prison education and re-entry and bridge the gap between research and practice.

On behalf of the EPEA, I would like to congratulate the editors and all those responsible for bringing this germ of an idea to fruition; an idea that was initially fostered and developed during the EPEA's international conferences. I wish JPER every success.

The EPEA is also grateful to JPER for their choice of this particular date to release the new journal. On the 13th of October 1989, the Council of Europe adopted a set of recommendations outlining the needs and responsibilities concerning the education of imprisoned persons in Europe. These recommendations stipulate that all imprisoned persons should be offered the opportunity to engage in educational activities and that these activities should serve to develop the whole person, be conducive to effective reintegration, and encourage a reduction in recidivism. The recommendations form the basis of the objectives of the EPEA, and have been ratified in the educational policies of a number of European countries. Still, we have a long way to go to ensure that the recommendations are sufficiently implemented across Europe and internationally. In celebration of the 25th anniversary of these recommendations, and to increase the focus on this important work, the EPEA advocates the establishing of an International Day of Education in Prison, to be observed annually on the 13th of October. Please go to <http://chn.ge/1md8n62> to show your support.

Lena Broo,  
Chairperson of the EPEA

FEATURE - VIGNETTE

## The Spirit of Englishwoman Mary Carpenter's *Our Convicts*

THOM GEHRING

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In 1864 Mary Carpenter wrote a classic volume on prison reform and prison education, *Our Convicts* (see the 1969 reprint by Patterson Smith). The central sentiment of Carpenter's book is that they are indeed our convicts; we have to either live with them in our neighborhoods or establish programs capable of improving their lives to improve communities. All this seemed to suddenly dawn on the English after their policy of exiling felons utterly failed. Only "one British colony [in Australia] will now admit on its soil our criminal outcasts. Until lately, we shipped them without remorse or subsequent inquiry. The harsh Colonial Governor, to whose custody they were consigned, kept them in order by the manacle and the triangle [on which convicts were flogged], the armed sentry and the...bloodhound..." (Carpenter, in Hill, [1975/1857], *Suggestions for the Repression of Crime*. Montclair, NJ: Patterson Smith, p. 505). In the midst of this mid 19th century crisis, Carpenter asked, repeatedly, in the same book, "What are we to do with our criminals?" (p. 464), or alternatively, "We do not know what to do

with our convicts, and therefore we are releasing them prematurely from gaol [jail]" (p. 507)...[again]"On every side the question is asked what is to be done with our criminals?" (p. 508)...yet again, "Our most distressing problem—"What shall we do with our criminals?" (p. 617); "[and even another time]...the alarming question—What to do with our felons?" (p. 638). Prison educators might take a "heads up" from this episode. The crisis led to a brief period of prison reform, followed by a return to the previous, harsh conditions. They returned when the English determined that they could confine prisoners in old ships chained to the docks, instead of being transported to Australia. Eventually the publics in nations where similarly harsh conditions exist now will realize the failure of the "out of sight, out of mind" policy toward criminals. Then communities in those nations will have no choice except to face the issue of "What to do with our convicts" head on, just as the English had to face it back then. The repeated failures of many institutional systems cannot be ignored forever.

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FEATURE - BOOK REVIEW

## Crowley, Michael, *Behind the Lines: Creative Writing with Offenders and People at Risk*, 2012, Waterside Press, UK.

Reviewed by JUNE EDWARDS

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Drawing on over 15 years experience working in youth justice, author Michael Crowley's *Behind the Lines* is an exploration of how creative writing can be a useful educational and rehabilitative tool in a prison setting.

Initially a youth offender officer, Crowley's own life was transformed somewhat through creative writing, and thus he is convinced of the power of the pen. For the last five years he has been a writer in residence in a UK prison, an institution which he does not name. He is also the author of the play, *The Man They Couldn't Hang*, the story of John 'Babbacombe' Lee, a prisoner who was reprieved by the Home Secretary in 1885, when the gallows trap door failed to open. Crowley's debut collection of poetry 'Close to Home' deals with displaced childhood.

Aimed at educational and care professionals working within a prison setting, *Behind the Lines* outlines ways in which creative writing can be used to encourage offenders to address their own lives and crimes through creative writing.

That Crowley is passionate about his work with offenders and the power of creative writing as a tool of change is unquestionable. His book raises some very interesting issues relating to offenders and the society that has shaped their paths. However, *Behind the Lines* lacks focus to some extent, and the scope of what the author is trying to achieve may be too wide. On one level, it is a handbook '...for everyone concerned about the negative effects of poor levels of literacy amongst those in prison or at risk of imprisonment...', while on another level it reads like a personal reflection/social commentary on working with offenders, all of which is interspersed with samples of writing from young offenders and exercises to work with one's client group.

As a handbook for prison education and care staff, this text would benefit from a better balance between practical creative writing tips and the personal meanderings of the author, whose tone can sometimes stray

onto 'the high moral ground'. He frequently informs the reader of his students' gratitude to 'Mr Crowley,' leaving one with the uneasy sense that he is on a 'crusade' to save young offenders through the medium of creative writing, a task which may be somewhat ambitious (p.226).

As a source of therapy, creative writing is widely acknowledged as a very useful tool, and one that gives the writer a voice that may not be heard in their everyday life. Crowley firmly believes in the value of giving voice to his students through creative writing, and seems to have successfully worked with many young offenders. He suggests that creative writing should be more central to the rehabilitative process, but his approach raises some difficult issues.

To be interested in a prisoner's writing without any regard to how the process might change their thinking and behaviour to me seems pointless. This has meant discussing crimes, grave crimes in detail; writing and rewriting about them; the planning and motivation; the commission of the offence; the aftermath on all concerned; their meaning. It is remarkable how little opportunity or requirement there is upon prisoners to discuss the significance of what they have done, particularly in a YOI (Crowley, p.29).

To suggest that an educational professional working with offenders of any age should request their student to discuss their crime in detail seems both naive and most un-safe, not to mention displaying a lack of professional conduct. Creative writing teachers may be equipped to deal with the process and techniques of writing and self-expression, but they are not trained to deal with the psychological aspects of revisiting a crime with their student, who may be a very vulnerable individual. This could be incredibly traumatic for the student, and puts the education or other 'care' staff in a very difficult position. There are also issues of confidentiality and the matter of where such discussion

should take place, either in a group session or one-to-one? What might be the impact on the student when the class has finished and they return to their cell after they have re-lived some traumatic life-changing event?

As part of a programme in Restorative Justice or addiction counselling, *Behind the Lines* may work well as it encourages offenders to reflect and write about the impact of their crime on their victims, sometimes from their victims' point of view. Writing 'the self' is no doubt cathartic but as a reader and potential user of this text, I felt there was perhaps too much emphasis on the rehabilitative process of creative writing. As an education worker, I would question and feel uneasy with the role of bringing about a type of moral transformation in the students we work with.

Crowley is correct in the sense that creative writing cannot be completely separated from one's own experiences, and participants in a creative writing class should be encouraged to write about their own lives, but not purely about their criminal/dysfunctional life events. It is surely important to believe that nobody has a single story to their life.

In terms of usability, *Behind the Lines* offers some excellent suggestions for writing tasks that would indeed encourage creative expression, such as the Emotion into Memoir exercise (p.66), which challenges the participant to write about the seven different emotions. Other exercises that encourage the participant to write to themselves at a point in their past and in their future would work really well with learners of different levels, as would the tips on creating characters.

With regard to learners with literacy issues, Crowley admits 'that difficulties with literacy and a weak reading culture are substantial barriers to the work....' (p.31). He adds that this type of creative writ-

ing needs to be 'fuelled by reading, as well as reflection upon what has been read.' Given that literacy is an issue for the majority of men and women in a prison community, many of the exercises would be more suitable for use with more advanced students. Asking students to write about an event in their life in a fairytale genre, or requesting them to consider the commission of a crime and write the internal dialogue as they work through what they are about to do, requires a relatively high level of understanding and command of language.

Crowley raises some interesting points about how the introduction of TVs with multi channels in individual cells has dramatically reduced use of the prison library, and how this further compounds the problems of cultural impoverishment. However this is a problem within the non-criminal general population also.

Crowley is clearly passionate about creative writing as a journey to a better self, and he makes a very important point in claiming that 'To lack the means to express yourself is to be imprisoned wherever you are.' He is sensitive to the needs of the young offenders he is working with and is keenly aware of the social inequalities that have shaped the lives of the people with whom he works.

Having been asked to review *Behind the Lines* from the perspective of a prison English teacher, and one who is far less experienced than Mr Crowley, I feel it is a useful resource to 'dip into', and could be used as a basis for encouraging creative writing with learners. I would have some reservations about some of the exercises that delve into the student's criminal life, mainly as I would feel unqualified for such a task. As a text I feel that a good editor could bring a sharper focus to *Behind the Lines*.

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REFEREED ARTICLE

# Iraqi Prisoners in Norway: Educational Background, Participation, Preferences and Barriers to Education

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## Abstract

*The article aimed to develop knowledge of the educational background, participation and preferences of Iraqi prisoners in Norwegian prisons and obstacles to participating in education. The study is based on interviews with 17 prisoners in three prisons. An important finding is that war and political unrest appear to have been significant causes for respondents to leaving education at various stages. As a result only half of them have as much as one final exam and only three respondents have a certificate of education. Even if the respondents want an education while in prison, and although education is offered in all prisons, there is a lack of information about educational opportunities in an understandable language and long waiting time for a place at school. An implication of the study is that the criminal administration system and the educational authorities must take into account the multicultural reality by facilitating education and training offers accordingly.*

**Keywords:** *Iraqi prisoners; adult education; educational barriers; future plans; Norway.*

## Introduction

The study underpinning this article is aimed to develop knowledge of the educational background, participation and preferences of Iraqi prisoners in Norwegian prisons and what they perceive as barriers to their education in prison. The study is based on data from one of five Nordic qualitative studies following up several large quantitative national Norwegian and Nordic studies carried out in 2004, 2006, 2008 and 2009. The quantitative studies show that many ethnic minority prisoners lack sufficient education for various reasons, among others due to insecure backgrounds from their home countries. In the Norwegian survey in May 2009, it emerged that 10 percent of all prisoners had not completed any education and that foreigners were overrepresented. A lack of education represents a major challenge for Prison and Probation Services and the training offered by this service with regards to designing the educational opportunities to individual prisoners. Research-based knowledge is important in the forming of good, structured and adapted educational offers that meet the target group's needs.

Studies show that the proportion of foreign citizens in Norwegian prisons doubled from 2006 to 2009 (Eikeland, Manger, & Asbjørnsen, 2010) and constitutes about 30 percent of the prison population (The Norwegian Correctional Services, 2014). The prisoners speak different languages and have different social, cultural and economic backgrounds, even when some of them come from the same country. Iraqi prisoners were selected as a target group for the current study because they constitute one of the largest groups of foreign prisoners in Norway, and also because they represent a group whose education has been seen in a

context of war and suffering. Research shows that the educational system is among the hardest hit in war and conflict, and that it is used systematically by authorities and power groups to gain control over, indoctrinate or assimilate all or parts of the population (Bush & Saltarelli, 2000; Hanemann, 2005; Machel, 2001). It is therefore probable that the prisoners from Iraq are affected in different ways by such events. We will therefore seek to examine how this context of war, conflict and suppression has influenced their school background and individual courses of education to different degrees. For the prison staff and teachers in prison it is important to know more about the consequences for future learning of interrupted schooling and flight from war. Most of these consequences will be negative but may also include a competence among the individual prisoners that teachers should not oversee. Also, prisoners' memories from war, fear and lack of concentration will influence present learning and have consequences for the student-teacher interactions and activities in the classroom.

## *Legal and humanistic reasons for offering education in prison*

Prisoners have the same rights, as other citizens, to education and training. These rights are regulated by international conventions and recommendations, and this also applies to foreign citizens in Norwegian and other Nordic prisons. The Nordic countries have incorporated the European Human Rights Convention into their legislation. It is stated in the first protocol, article 2: "Nobody will be denied the right to education" (cf. Høstmælingen, 2004, p. 313). In Norway this implies that prisoners are entitled to seven years of mandatory





primary school, three years of mandatory lower secondary school, and three years of non-mandatory upper secondary school, which has three branches (general, mercantile, and vocational).

Although the right to education is non-negotiable, in Norway there is a dispute over the ethnic minority prisoners' rights. Who has full rights to education, and who can only partially benefit from the education services? Eikeland, Manger, Grønning, Westrheim, & Asbjørnsen (2014) conclude that given a common interpretation of education law in Norway, international conventions and recommendations and basic legal and humanistic principles, prisoners are entitled access to education in the same manner as other citizens and residents, independent of their nationality and a possible deportation decision. According to the Norwegian Directorate of Immigration (UDI) 1,700 people were expelled for violation of the Immigration Act in 2011. Many were expelled because they gave incorrect information in their applications or because they had stayed in Norway without a permit. Iraqis, Somalis, Serbs and Afghans were the nationalities most commonly expelled. As a main rule the decision implies that the foreign national is registered in the Schengen Information System (SIS) and that he or she will be prohibited from entering the Schengen-area for a given period of time (Norwegian Directorate of Immigration Annual Report, 2011).

As well as the legal reasons for education and training in prison, there are humanistic reasons. All members of every society should receive education because of its own intrinsic value. It develops the whole personality, provides experience of mastering skills and protects a person's dignity. A person's opportunity to receive an education is a litmus test of how democratic a society is. There is a serious threat to democracy inherent in the exclusion of individual groups within society from the educational system and in their marginalisation or prevention from participating in education and training. A sustainable democracy is conditional on knowledge and participation (Westrheim, 2012). In order to achieve this, everybody must participate on the basis of their circumstances, including those who are serving a prison sentence. The humanistic justification for prisoners' entitlement to education was well summarized by Kevin Warner, former coordinator of prison education in Ireland, in his contribution to the eighth conference for European directors and coordinators for prison education in Lucerne, Switzerland, in 2010:

The importance of thinking of clients in prison as they are: people with faults like the rest of us, but also with richness of personality and undeveloped potential (in other words, as "whole persons" rather than just as "offenders").

The humanistic ideal has governed our legislation and international conventions and recommendations. The humanistic and legal grounds for education are often downplayed when compared with the more obvious justification, which is that education may reduce return to criminality, or recidivism, and facilitate adjustment to the workplace. Of course the latter reasons are im-

portant and a range of studies (e.g., Davis, Bozick, Steele, Saunders, & Miles, 2013) show that education has a significant and positive effect on recidivism. If however, in the worst-case scenario, it emerged that the effects of education on recidivism were slight, the humanistic argument still maintains that education and training in prison is a right in every society.

### ***Prisoners' educational background, participation, preferences and barriers against education***

Several studies show that the educational background of prisoners tend to be very poor (e.g., Hetland, Eikeland, Manger, Diseth, and Asbjørnsen, 2007; Tewksbury and Stengel, 2006), but they also show that prisoners want to participate in education during incarceration and that a majority prefer vocational education or courses (Eikeland, Manger, & Asbjørnsen, 2009). The need for education also has to be seen in the context of whether prisoners themselves experience barriers and obstacles in starting an education in prison. In Norway more than half of the prisoners with Norwegian citizenship participate in education, but more than four out of five wish to participate while incarcerated. Among barriers to start an education is the short sentence time, lack of information about education, preference for work during incarceration, or that the education they are interested in is not offered in the prison (Eikeland, Manger, & Asbjørnsen, 2013).

In recent years there has been a significant increase in immigration to Norway, especially immigration for work (Henriksen, Ostby, & Ellingsen, 2010). On January 27, 2011 the prison population in Norway included 31.6 percent foreign nationals from 99 countries. At the time the largest groups were from Poland (131), Lithuania (111), Nigeria (80), Iraq (73), Romania (56), and Somalia (52) (Ministry of Justice and the Police<sup>1</sup>, 2011). Findings from five national surveys in the Nordic prisons clearly show that ethnic minority prisoners, independent of background and nationality, are motivated for education and training. However the main obstacle appears to be a lack of information or inadequate information in their mother tongue (Eikeland, Manger, & Asbjørnsen, 2009). A recent study (Eikeland, Manger, Grønning, Westrheim, & Asbjørnsen, 2014) shows that only 35 percent, 26 percent, and 38 percent of prisoners in Norway from Lithuania, Poland and Nigeria respectively, participate in prison education. However between 75 and 93 percent of the prisoners from the three countries want to participate and most often want to attend non-vocational courses, such as language or computer courses. Contrary to the Norwegian prisoners, their main reason for not participating is that they are waiting for a place in school or on a course. Nevertheless, lack of information about education is also seen as a major problem. When the prisoners from these three countries are released about 80 percent of them want to get a job or continue in their previous job.

Of the 547,000 immigrants in Norway, 21,000 are from Iraq and of those 6,400 are Norwegian-born people, with parents who emigrated from Iraq. Most re-

spondents in this group are Iraqi-born and have attended school in Iraq. A smaller number have grown up in Norway and attended school in Norway. Young people with parents from Iraq are almost completely unrepresented in higher education in Norway (Støren, 2006, reproduced in NOU 2011:14, p. 172). To understand the particular background of ethnic minority prisoners from Iraq, it has been important to look at contextual circumstances, such as the educational system, political and economic circumstances. The Iraqi educational system is briefly described below.

### ***The educational system in Iraq***

The educational system in Iraq was influenced by Western educational systems over many years. Even today it does not have an identity rooted in the cultural, religious and linguistic minorities in the area. In general, Arabic is the official educational language. An exception is the Kurdish autonomous region in the north, where the educational language is mainly Kurdish-Sorani. The Kurdish language has been fractured into different dialects, alphabets and statuses and gained official status in Iraq after the US-led invasion in 2003 (Sheyholislami, 2010).

As in many other countries around the world, higher education was reserved for the sons of the elite, while girls and women had little or no access to schooling or higher education. Paradoxically enough, this changed when the Ba'ath party seized power in 1968, with Saddam Hussein in charge. Despite Saddam Hussein's atrocities, the educational system flourished in the beginning of the regime, in a country where nearly 90 percent of the population were illiterate (Ranjan & Jain, 2009). There were also measures to get women into education (Issa & Jamil, 2010).

In the period from 1970 to around 1990, the educational system in Iraq was considered to be one of the best in the Middle East with regard to access, competence, quality and gender equality. According to World Education Services (WES, 2004) what was achieved in the period between 1970 and the end of the 1980s was destroyed as a result of the regime, cutting funding and becoming increasingly oppressive, controlling and brutal.

In the years following the US invasion in 2003 and as a result of destructive acts of war and political indecision, around 80 percent of all educational institutions were destroyed (Issa & Jamil, 2010; Ranjan & Jain, 2009). This led to a renewed increase in illiteracy (UNESCO, 2003). The improvements that have been carried out since the invasion in 2003 have primarily benefited Baghdad and the Kurdish autonomous region in the North. It must be emphasised that improvements have been implemented in Iraq since 2007, but there are still huge challenges in all sectors, including education.

### ***Research problems***

The purpose of this study was to gain knowledge about Iraqi prisoners' educational background, preferences and needs for education. With this background

the following research question was posed: What are the educational backgrounds of Iraqi prisoners in Norwegian prisons, and what preferences and needs do they have? As part of the main question we were also interested in how political and war-ridden circumstances influence the respondents' education in the home country and what are the consequences for education in prison? Likewise, we sought knowledge about factors that the prisoners consider to be barriers for starting an education in prison.

### ***Methodical Approaches***

It is often presumed that prison is a problematic place to conduct research (Waldram, 2009; Liebling 1999). Researchers have, over many years, considered and written of the challenges that can arise in this field of study. Several researchers describe the complexity of conducting field work in prison and the problems and dilemmas that may occur when the researcher carries out qualitative interviews with prisoners (cf. Achermann, 2009; Bosworth, Campel, Demby, Ferranti, & Santos, 2005; Liebling, 1999; Lowman & Palys, 2001; Newman, 1958; Quina et al., 2007; Schlosser, 2008; Waldram, 1998, 2009). What we experienced though were encounters with highly motivated prisoners who willingly shared their views, experiences and stories about their background, educational history, their life in prison and future perceptions. Many respondents would probably have wished to spend more time with us, not only because the interview was a welcome relaxation from their daily routine in prison, but also because they finally had the chance to talk about themselves.

### ***The respondents***

The study referred to in this article is based on 17 qualitative interviews with male prisoners from Iraq, and was carried out in three Norwegian prisons in the period from February to April 2011. The youngest respondent was born in 1990, the oldest in 1963. Six were under 25; six were aged from 26 to 39; and five were over 40. All respondents were born in Iraq to parents also born in Iraq. They come from different cultural, linguistic and social backgrounds and most of them (12) are from the northern autonomous region of federal Iraq – the Kurdistan Region. Four respondents are from other parts of Iraq, and their mother tongue is Arabic. One of 17 belongs to another ethnic group that makes up about 3 percent of the population. Nine of the interviewees came to Norway alone and had no family in Norway prior to their arrival. Some had spent time in other European countries before coming to Norway. Four arrived with other family members, and two of them had attended school in Norway: one completed lower secondary school, while the other completed upper secondary school. Five respondents have established their own families with their own children in Norway or been reunited with their wives or children from Iraq.

Geographically, the prisons are divided between three places in eastern Norway and have varying degrees of security, from open to secure units. According to the

Ministry of Justice and Police (2011) a total of 73 Iraqi citizens were incarcerated in Norwegian prisons at the time, and little was known about this particular group of prisoners. From the interviews it emerged that the length of the sentences they received varied from a couple of months to many years. At the outset we planned to interview prisoners of both genders. However this was not possible since there were no women of Iraqi background in the three prisons where the interviews were conducted. Statistics from Norway show that the prison population in total consists of only 5-6 percent women (Eikeland, Manger & Diseth, 2006; Eikeland, Manger, & Asbjørnsen, 2009, Eikeland et al., 2010).

### ***The interview guide***

The first part of the interview guide contained structured questions (items) ordered according to topic. Questions were asked about the prisoners' educational background and work, educational preferences, teaching language and educational barriers. The questions were asked by the interviewer, and the answers were noted by her. The respondents were free to answer the open-ended question based on their own background and context.

The second part of the interview guide contained structured questions and was a follow-up of the open questions connected to language and social and cultural capital. The structured questions and the respondents' alternative answers were either noted by the interviewer or by the respondent – all according to the prisoner's preferences and ability. Even though these questions were structured, it was important to note the respondent's thoughts and stories relating to these questions if he was willing to reveal them. The researcher was open to the fact that the respondent could supplement or expand the questions with information that was important for them to share with the researcher.

### ***The interviews***

As mentioned above, data was gathered through structured and semi-structured interviews. Some interviews developed into what can be termed in-depth interviews. The individual respondent was selected in advance according to determined sampling (Silverman, 2001). Otherwise, the respondents consisted of those prisoners that agreed to participate.

In two prisons the interviews took place in the visitor's room, and in the third prison (open prison), we used a classroom. Besides the respondent, there were three persons present in the first and largest prison: the researcher (female) who conducted the interview, the interpreter (male) who was a teacher by profession and spoke Arabic and Kurdish fluently, in addition to English and Norwegian. Much has been said about the role of the interpreter in interview settings, but the impression was that the presence of the interpreter did not bias the results of the study in any way. On the contrary the interpreter was appreciated among the respondents who were sceptical to the use of an interpreter prior to the interviews (this is also mentioned in the next section).

The third person present (female) holds a Master in Education, and was engaged as research assistant in this particular project. She recorded and transcribed the interviews. In the second and third prison only the researcher (interviewer) and the interpreter were present. The researcher recorded the interviews which were later transcribed by the research assistant. The prison staffs accompanied the respondents to and from the interviews but were not present in the interview room at any time. The interviews also took place out of sight and sound of the other prisoners.

The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours and proceeded without any particular problems. In one case we were presented with an ethnic minority prisoner who willingly told us about his educational background. When it emerged that he was not from Iraq and was therefore transported back to his cell, he expressed disappointment that he could not continue the conversation. This can be regarded as confirmation that prisoners experienced the conversation with the researcher as positive and that educational issues were something they had never previously discussed in prison. As well as answering the questions in the interview guide, the prisoners also brought up topics and ideas that preoccupied them. Some had very emotional reactions to a number of topics, for example becoming tearful when talking about a much loved teacher. Nevertheless, they all appeared to be in control of the situation. During the interviews the interviewer asked some extra questions in order to encourage the respondent to narrate their "story". Nearly all respondents took the challenge and invited the interviewer to share with them their memories of schooling and of how their educational development progressed in a country heavily ridden by war. This unexpected dialogue created a form of closeness between the interviewer and prisoner which in line with Schlosser (2008), could be termed "identity moment"; a situation specific, contextual, life-changing phenomena of moments which can be experienced only when respondent and interviewer are in dialogue with each other. So perhaps, according to Liebling (1999), the most interesting data occur when researcher and the prisoner dare to exceed their roles.

### ***Ethical challenges and approval***

A particular ethical challenge relates to the use of interpreter, as is the case in this study. People who come from areas dominated by war or political conflict, will in some cases, according to the circumstances, be sceptical of or suspicious towards a third person from the same country, unless that person is selected by the respondent himself. In this study we discussed this matter with the interpreter in advance. The interpreter's task was to translate the interview guide, the information documents and the declaration of consent into the languages which we assumed were the mother tongues of at least some of the respondents. The interpreter was experienced and had a professional background in pedagogy, so the topics of the interview guide were not unfamiliar to him. In this study the researcher also had previous experience of using an interpreter in challeng-

ing conversations.

The study showed that those respondents who chose not to use an interpreter at first, still asked the interpreter about questions that either were difficult to understand or which required a more nuanced answer. Language is a strong bearer of identity, and therefore it was important for us to give the respondents the opportunity to express themselves in the language they felt comfortable with and with which they identified. This is also about showing respect for respondents.

Prior to the gathering of data, the project was reported to and approved by the Privacy Ombudsman for Research, the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD). The study also required permission from the Ministry of Justice and Police and the Ministry of Education and Research. We did not incur any obstacles on this occasion. Prisons in Norway have adopted the so-called *import model* (Christie, 1970) for delivery of services to the prisoners. From this it follows that the normal school system will supply educational services in prison. The County Governor of Hordaland, Department of Education, is the organization in charge of Norwegian prison education, serving the Ministry of Education. Representatives of the Governor made the first contact with the prisons. When contact was first established, the project manager at the University of Bergen made appointments with each of the three prisons, where we were well received by the prison and school management.

### **Analyses**

All interviews were transcribed in Norwegian, in the way the respondents' statements were formulated through the interpreter. We used the qualitative analytical programme NVivo9 to analyse the data. NVivo9 is a computer programme that automates many tasks that qualitative researchers usually do manually; such as classification, sorting, analysis and visualisation of text based data. This makes the scope of the data easier to follow and improves reliability of the analyses and the interpretation process.

## **Results**

### **Educational background**

The oldest respondents went to school in Iraq between 1970 and 1980 and generally have spent more time in education than those who were born later. The youngest members went to school after the heyday of the educational sector, and they left Iraq before the reconstruction of a new educational system started. With the exception of one respondent, they were all six years old when they started school in Iraq. The school year lasted eight months, and the normal school week was six days with Fridays off. Some respondents say that in addition to attending public school, they received education at the Koran school (madras) in the mosque in the afternoons. To the question of whether school was compulsory, answers varied. Some claimed that schooling was compulsory while others said the family decided whether the children should attend school or not. In many schools it was the practice that

those who did not turn up to school were punished by being forced into military service by the Ba'ath party, which kept a close eye on the school system.

The respondents attended school from between 1 and 15 years. Two have formal education beyond upper secondary level: one is a trained practical nurse; another completed the military academy in Iraq. Only one of the respondents had completed secondary education in Norway, but he had only three years of schooling behind him before he started secondary education. There is, however, great uncertainty associated with these figures, and many of the respondents seem unsure about the exact number of years they have attended school in Iraq. Several of them have had large gaps in their schooling. For example, one respondent had an interrupted school education but then spent two years at a maritime college in another country before coming to Norway. Some may have had only a few months active schooling but still declare it as one year. The figures we used depended on whether we looked at the number of years the respondent had actually attended school or the highest completed level of education. Even when seven interviewees declared that they have sat a final exam, only three of them have a certificate or other documentation of completed education in Iraq. When asked if they had a certificate, the respondent either replied "no", that they did not complete school or education, or that they sat exams but the certificate is missing. Most still emphasise that they want documentation of the education or training they are receiving in prison because it will help them when they are going to apply for work. For a couple of the respondents, it is the certificate itself that is the main purpose of the education.

While well-educated Iraqis tend to seek asylum in the UK and other European countries, those with lower educational background seem to choose Norway and other Scandinavian countries, as many believe that the Norwegian welfare system will provide better welfare conditions regardless of social, cultural, economic or educational background. Many of them come from the urban districts of Northern Iraq (Valenta, 2008).

What we can assume from these findings is that prisoners from Iraq lack formal documentation of completed schooling and education in the form of a certificate or other documentation. This makes it difficult for those who are responsible for adapting the curriculum and the courses to the needs of the individual prisoner.

### **Education in a country interrupted by war**

Something that emerges in several interviews, especially with the older respondents, is the negative influence the authorities had on the education system. A great deal of the education was aimed at indoctrinating the pupils and securing their loyalty: "...we received a lot of education in Saddam's ideas". There were stories of young people who, for different reasons, had their schooling and educations interrupted and were forced into military service. Others dropped out of school and studies to join resistance movements in the mountains.

In addition to the more structured questions, we encouraged the respondents to tell us something about

their time at school in Iraq. It emerged that positive and happy memories were associated with the breaks and the time spent with friends: "We had a lot of fun, with both friends and teachers." When we asked the respondents about negative experiences during their time at school, many tell us about physical abuse by the teachers; being hit and kicked if they could not answer questions or when they had not done their homework.

I had a ring on my finger. Once my teacher hit me it broke. I hated school after that. The school teachers are good at finding different ways of hitting us.

Some said that one of the reasons they took care with their school work and homework was to avoid being hit by the teacher:

We had a mathematics teacher who died. He hit us more than normal. He didn't hit us on the hands, but he took our shoes off and hit us on the feet. I learned maths because he hit us. I studied maths a lot because I didn't want to be hit.

War and political conflict make up the framework around all the respondents' stories about schooling. To many it has meant fear, an insecure financial situation, moving, interrupted schooling and great difficulties with concentration. The consequences the war had for the individual vary, but none are unaffected: "There is nobody from Iraq who doesn't have sad memories." Many tell us that the war was a feature of the school days and they often had to hide in basements for protection. Bombing took place at different times of day because "the war did not keep regular hours":

When the planes arrived from Iran everybody had to run. There was a big hole dug under the ground and we crept into the hole and hid. At that time there were only problems and I was always afraid.

Flight seems to be a central feature of the respondents' stories. They told us about interrupted schooling because their families have had to flee, either internally in their own country or to other countries: "It was a war situation. We were almost always on the run, from one place to the next. The city was bombed and the teachers were afraid to come to school". With the exception of the two respondents who received most of their education in Norway, none of them say they quit school because it was boring or that they didn't like going to school. The reason for interrupted schooling seems to have been growing up in a country at war, and where war for different reasons made it difficult to complete one's education or maintain a normal progression of the school trajectory. Given the highly unpredictable life and educational situation, some fled from Iraq without resuming their schooling in the country they came to.

The interrupted, and for some respondents, traumatic educational background often makes it difficult to start, resume or fulfil educational activities in prison. But most worrying though is the lack of educational opportunities in prison which we will see from the following section.

### ***Educational activities in prison***

In this part we take a closer look at the ongoing formal educational activities in which respondents partici-

pate, or expect to start while serving their sentence. Seven respondents have taken courses during their sentence or are taking courses arranged by the prison education service, such as Norwegian, English and the Computer Driving Licence. Furthermore, two respondents have started vocational training such as carpenter and chef courses. To complete a course of education to the level of certificate of apprenticeship they need an apprenticeship which might be a difficult to secure. For the respondent who is training to be a chef, the road to an apprenticeship depends on the court cases awaiting him and the prison in which he will serve his sentence. Those who take courses or vocational education are generally positively disposed towards their training, but many point out that it would be better to have more hours per week devoted to the courses they are taking. The hours studied are often not enough to reach a quality education. There are also too few offers for prisoners, and it would be beneficial if the educational offers available were more extensive. Educational possibilities for the prisoners depend to a great extent on the offers given in the particular prison they serve their sentence. A prisoner can only become a carpenter if this is an educational offering in that particular prison. There is variation regarding which and how many educational activities the prisoners take part in. It ranges from taking a vocational education course, such as carpentry, to not participating in any form of organised education or training. Most respondents complain about the lack of information and long waiting lists for a place at school, but nevertheless most of them take part in some activity or another. If they did not get a place on a course or education programme in prison, they talked about activities they are involved in on their own. This could be reading (technical literature, poems, history, religion, and entertainment), writing (poems, songs, and stories), drawing or other activities they engage in to pass the time. Some prisoners mentioned books they had obtained from the library or borrowed from others. Some also say they borrow books to learn Norwegian or children's books that are easier to understand.

Lack of courses and long waiting lists may be frustrating but, as we have seen, it also stimulates creativity and individual initiatives.

### ***Educational preferences***

In the following section we present the respondents' *educational preferences in prison*. The majority of the respondents want to get an education or receive training in prison. Many say that the main aim in terms of education is to get a master's degree, or become a doctor or teacher, but that these dreams are difficult to fulfil. The respondents primarily want two kinds of courses, computer driving licence and language courses in Norwegian and English. In addition there are some who want vocational training, to obtain jobs such as chef, hairdresser or car mechanic. The preferred vocational education and training is not possible to achieve in all prisons, so the prisoners are dependent on moving to a prison that offers such courses.

Most respondents say that improving their Norwegian language will make them more independent in Norway: "One can make enquiries for oneself without being dependent on others". Several of the respondents have had deportation orders imposed on them, but despite this, they envisage that they will return to Norway and have to learn Norwegian. However, one of them said that English will be more useful if he is going to be deported, because English can be used in many countries. One of the respondents, who had tried hard to get a place on a Norwegian course and finally had been told he had a place, is still waiting for an answer from the prison to see if he can accept the offer from the local authority:

I have some problems here in the prison, but I don't know if that is the reason I can't get an answer. I applied for a Norwegian course. I phoned the municipal authorities and they said it was free. Then I spoke to the prison about getting the time to go to school and learn Norwegian. I have not had an answer yet.

The reason given for learning Norwegian, English and computer skills is that it will make them better able to manage in Norwegian society. Should they be deported from Norway, they feel they have a better chance on the employment market in Iraq if they have digital skills and speak English as well. Generally it will help them in their job search if they also have a certificate or course diploma.

Several respondents, waiting for a place in school or a course, have tried to learn languages on their own, either alone in their cell or by talking to other prisoners. Two respondents say that they have obtained textbooks and that they are working regularly on their own: "I have to learn Norwegian; everybody likes speaking Norwegian, so I've been learning the language. I have bought 'Ny i Norge' and I've been self-studying." ("Ny i Norge", or New in Norway, was published in the early 1990s and is one of the first introductory books for foreigners to the Norwegian language.)

Another says he reads children's books to learn more Norwegian, and he is working with "Word" on the computer and uses a dictionary. When asked whether he can get access to CD-ROM where he can listen and watch pictures, he says this is not available in the prison and he would have to get it himself. The prisoners are generally unsure of what is available in terms of teaching aids in prison and what they are entitled to, details that seem to unnecessarily impede studying on their own.

### **Future outlooks**

It is clear that topics relating to the future, such as job plans, are difficult for the respondents to talk about because they consider them as unrealistic dreams: "I want many things, but since they are only dreams, I can't say them out loud." The time in prison complicates the future planning and it is difficult to imagine an existence outside the walls. Uncertainty about whether they will be allowed to stay in Norway or be deported makes it problematic to think about the future:

I believe that when you are in prison you don't think about the future. When I get out I can think about the future, but I still don't know if they are going to send me back or if I am staying here.

What am I thinking? I have no thoughts. I can't say anything because I don't want to think about anything. I have no power over anything, right?

They rather prefer to think about the future when they have finished their sentence: "If I go back, I will do my thinking there, I can't think about that future now." Some people think it can be difficult to get work after spending time in prison and feel that nobody needs them: "I don't know what my future will bring; I don't know what will happen to me, I'm just sitting here thinking that after four years they don't need me." Others say that the world outside the walls has changed a lot during the time they have been inside and they think it is difficult to plan or envisage a future they are not in control over.

All respondents want to work when they are released. The need to look after themselves, their girlfriends, wives and children is an important motivational factor to get work. The gap between previous work experience in Iraq and Norway and the work they want in the future is not that great. Most prisoners want to continue with the same type of job they had previously: "If I return I want to do the same type of work I had before – construction work".

Five respondents have definite plans for what they will do after release. Of these, four have partially begun, are nearly ready or have completed their professional education as carpenters, welders, nurses and seamen. These have a strong preference for finding work corresponding to their education.

The respondents who do not have education see different job possibilities, but preferably connected to previous work experience in the area of car mechanics, restaurants and other service industries. Insufficient information and a lack of knowledge about the labour market and work opportunities within different branches in Norway, makes it difficult to plan what work they would like: "I want to be very involved with computers, but I don't know what job will be suited to that". Some consider that it won't be difficult to get a job after serving their sentence because they "know somebody" who can help them. They feel that family and friends are important resources in the search for future work. Only one of the respondents says that he will go through a recruitment agency to look for a job. Otherwise some individual prison officers and the social welfare office are helpful in contacting employers when the prisoners have served their sentence. The respondents who, due to deportation decisions or for other reasons, envisage their future in Iraq, say that they will get work in relatives' businesses there: "I have a father, mother and brothers who will help me".

Even if some respondents are currently taking an education in prison or follow courses and training, it is clear that many regard education and training more as a dream than a realistic possibility. Even if some have thoughts about what they would want if their situation

had been different, they are also sufficiently focused on reality to understand that this would probably not be possible.

Given the structural framework in the prison and the fact that a large number of them have been away from school for a long time, many of the respondents do not have great hopes of realising their educational preferences.

### ***Obstacles to participating in educational activities***

The majority of the respondents felt they received little or no information about the prison education services or educational activities in prison. We know that a brochure about educational opportunities for prisoners is distributed to prisoners, but for different reasons, such information is often completely lost. Information about educational opportunities is available in Norwegian and English. It is therefore quite likely that some foreign prisoners do not understand the information they receive.

Even if the respondents want an education while in prison they say there is a long waiting list, a lack of course places, that they get started late and that complaints and requests do not get through. "I filled out an application for a school place but they said there were no places available. Instead I got a job." Another prisoner says: "I applied for a Norwegian course but after six months there is still no answer."

Many say that they have already "ticked the box on the form", but have been told to wait without receiving any information about what is happening with their application in the meantime. Common to all the respondents is that they do not know why or for how long they must wait for an answer. They have waited from a few months to a year and they do not feel they have any influence on the situation. One respondent asked the prison officers and the educational staff several times when he could expect to get a place on the course but was told they didn't know, or "that's the way it is in prison". Another respondent was told that prisoners were not entitled to education when it had been decided to deport them. "The last message I received was that prisoners with expulsion decisions have no right to education or to attend courses."

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Through our conversations with prisoners during this

study, it is clear that some are in need of psychological counselling services. However, none of them told us that they are getting help with processing thoughts and experiences in prison or that anyone has looked at their background related to previous education and work experience.

### **Discussion**

Iraqi prisoners constitute one of the largest groups of foreign prisoners in Norway. In the study 17 of them were interviewed about their educational background, educational wishes and barriers against starting an education while incarcerated. In the following section some of their past and future educational challenges will be discussed.

### ***Educational background as interrupted by war***

Iraq as a state has been characterised by war and political unrest for several decades; this has affected the infrastructure and the society as such in negative ways, not least the educational system. According to Hanemann (2005), war and political conflict have destructive effects on education and literacy, both in terms of the suffering endured and psychological effects on pupils and teachers. An important finding in this study, although hardly a surprising one, is that war and political unrest appear to have been significant causes for respondents leaving education at various stages. As a result only half of the respondents have completed just one final exam, and only three respondents have a certificate of education. In contrast, only seven percent of prisoners with Norwegian citizenship have not completed any education (Eikeland et al., 2013).

One consequence of war-related traumatic situations is that many have problems with concentrating on learning activities. It is a fair assumption that as pupils they have had a difficult basis for learning and education. According to our knowledge there is currently no tool in use to map foreign prisoners' competencies, strengths and weaknesses with regard to education that can facilitate adapted educational activities. This clearly shows that before a minority prisoner is enrolled in prison education, the school administration or the teacher should conduct a first meeting with an intention to map the prisoner's education history, wishes and reported needs. This presupposes that educational staffs have gained knowledge about the prisoner's country of origin, the political, socio-cultural and educational system there. If the first meeting is held in an atmosphere of confidence there is a fair chance that the prisoner will provide the necessary information so as to enable the staff to adapt the educational programme to the particular prisoner's wishes and needs.

Many prisoners report knowledge or possess competence regarding issues that the prison might oversee. One such circumstance that was highlighted during the interviews is foreign language. The majority of the respondents say that they speak one or more foreign languages. However, it is not clear whether they can read or write these languages or if they only communicate verbally. Nevertheless, this indicates that the prisoner

has the ability to learn a language, a factor that can also be used as a motivation when they start to learn the Norwegian language. Also Linderborg (2012) showed in his qualitative study of Russian prisoners in Finland that many of them were highly competent and had formal education equivalent to the normal population. Again, this indicates the necessity of having knowledge about the prisoner's background and his wishes for education in prison.

In Iraq every child who was enrolled in school started their education in Arabic which was the official language also in school at the time. For many pupils with a different mother tongue, education in a foreign language resulted in a major setback. The majority of the respondents in this study spoke Kurdish, which meant that they had their first educational learning experiences in a language forced upon them by an authority that they regarded as the enemy. As language and identity are closely connected, the motivation and ability for learning in a foreign language were low for many of the respondents. Some dropped out either because it was difficult to understand what was going on in class or as a form of resistance. After 2003 Kurdish and other minority languages, in addition to Arabic, have become the main languages of instruction in schools in North Iraq.

Competence in Norwegian is a precondition for following and completing education in prison. However, in general the respondents' ability to function in Norwegian is poor. It appears that they understand, read and write more Norwegian in relation to close personal relations and social contexts. Almost without exception the respondents can see advantages of learning Norwegian. Some of them have borrowed teaching material for Norwegian language courses (*Ny i Norge*) or children's books. Some respondents have already completed Norwegian courses, while many say they have registered for such courses without being offered a place. Due to their low level of competence in Norwegian, many prisoners will require Norwegian training, both in order to benefit from the education and training services and also to be able to communicate with other prisoners and prison personnel. The prisoners' Norwegian language skills should be assessed immediately on arrival so that they can be given an offer of Norwegian courses adapted to their levels and abilities, and even literacy courses if deemed necessary. It is of considerable concern to experience how many prisoners have problems with reading and understanding letters from public offices. If they are going to stay in Norway it is crucial that they are able to understand what public offices try to communicate to them. Gustavsson (2012) also shows in her study of Serbian prisoners in Sweden that Swedish courses increased their possibilities for understanding information provided and its contexts.

One may assume that at least some of the respondents have such poor literacy skills, perhaps also in their mother tongue, that they can be categorised as functionally illiterate. That means that they can read and write enough to manage everyday life, but do not have the literacy skills to take control of their life situation.

UNESCO (2003) has concluded that six to eight years of schooling is a minimum in order to function in modern society. Many respondents do not have these many years. If this group of prisoners develop knowledge and skills in Norwegian, both spoken and written, it will increase the chances of employment for those who are going to stay in Norway.

### **Educational preferences and needs**

The respondents in this study expressed many wishes, or rather dreams about education, both in Iraq and Norway. One significant motivational factor for the desire for education, training or work is the possibility of being able to take care of family and children in the future. Their preferences for training or education appear to be highly correlated to their past work experience. Some of the respondents have started or would like a vocational education, such as mechanic, chef, hairdresser, or other occupations. Minority prisoners, who are "sure" to be deported, want courses in English and vocational training because it will benefit them when they return to Iraq.

As a result of a poor educational background, many of the respondents think they will need support during their education and training in prison. This is especially the case with respect to the general school disciplines. Looking at the general level of education among the group of respondents, it is likely that many of them will have need for extensive help if they are going to have a real chance of taking and completing education and training during their sentence, or find work after they have served their sentence. NAFO (2009) has developed an action leaflet for training of prisoners with minority languages within the criminal administration system. The measures appear to meet some of the needs expressed by the respondents in this study. For example, NAFO emphasises the importance of a thorough study of the prisoners' language skills and total qualifications, crucial for being able to adapt the teaching and training for this group of students.

In order to take an active part in Norwegian Society, most people need basic digital competence. Thus the prison authorities must prepare a strategy for how ICT can be developed and implemented in education and training in prison. This is also a challenge for democracy. The Report to the Parliament (Storting) no. 37 (2007-2008) from the Norwegian Ministry of Justice and Police (2008) states:

The Ministry aims to establish internet for prisoners in all prisons. Internet will enable better availability of learning opportunities and increase the possibilities of taking higher education at technical college and university level. As well as being important for teaching and learning, internet is a social benefit that breaks down the barriers between prisoners and the wider society. Ethnic minority prisoners can have the opportunity to read the newspapers from their own country in their own language. Access to internet is a necessary service if the principle of normality is to be followed (p. 112).

Previous surveys of prisoners, in Norway and in the



Nordic countries (e.g., Eikeland et al., 2009), show that there is insufficient access to ICT equipment in prisons. This creates problems and obstructs education and educational progression. Most respondents in this study express the same meaning. They are frustrated because they don't have, or only have limited access to the internet and ICT based tools in prison. Many also want CD-ROM with educational content so they can teach themselves. But because this appears to be difficult in prison, they borrow educational material, which to some extent appears to be obsolete.

### ***Barriers against education in prison***

As an additional element of the discussion we will highlight some of the structural barriers that the respondents consider significant obstacles to starting and completing education in prison.

If the prisoner manages to find out what education and training opportunities he has, it appears that the waiting time is inappropriately long before they are offered a place at school. The waiting period according to some informants lasted almost a year. This is in agreement with findings by Ravneberg (2003), who says there is no uniform practice for how the prison authorities inform the prisoners of their educational and training opportunities, but that this varies from prison to prison. It also emerged that there could be a long period from the prisoners starting their sentence to commencing education, work or future planning. A common experience in the present study and in the four other groups of foreign prisoners that were interviewed in the Nordic studies of ethnic minorities in prisons in Denmark, Finland, Iceland and Sweden, is that the prisoners are not given a reason for the long waiting time (Gustavsson, 2012; Linderborg, 2012; Kristmundsson, 2012; Thomsen & Seidenfaden, 2012). This creates unrest and suspicion that the waiting time is deliberately prolonged by the prison. It is not clear to the researchers what the real reason for the waiting time is. Are there not enough places on the individual courses? If this is due to inertia in the system, then where are the bottlenecks? Contrary to the foreign prisoners in both this study and the study of prisoners from Lithuania, Poland and Nigeria in Norwegian prisons (Eikeland et al., 2014) only 13 percent of the Norwegian prisoners, who do not participate in education, say that the reason is that they are waiting for a school place (Manger, Eikeland, Buanes Roth, & Asbjørnsen, 2013). In both these studies about 20 percent of those who have not started an education prefer work and not education.

Interrupted education or training, as a result of being moved to other sections or prisons, is one example that the respondents point to. Another barrier that is mentioned is that information leaflets about education and training opportunities in prison are only available in English and Norwegian. In a new study (Thorsrud, 2012) on women in Norwegian prisons, it is claimed that the criminal administration system faces great challenges in relation to communicating with and providing information to prisoners with minority languages<sup>2</sup>. It emerged that prisoners who do not speak

Norwegian miss out on important information due to language problems. This leads to frustration and poses a risk that the interests of the prisoners are not taken care of. Findings from the five national surveys in the Nordic countries show clearly that the biggest obstacle for starting an education in prison appears to be a lack of information or inadequate information in their mother tongue (Eikeland et al, 2009). Also in the current study it emerged clearly that different practices regarding information, interpreting and written material cause problems for the respondents. The Educational Act recognizes the right of basic schooling for all, and all teenagers and adults who have completed compulsory school have a right to three to five years of upper secondary education. Adults also have the right to "second chance" or supplementary basic education and/or special education. As of today education is provided in all Norwegian prisons (Eikeland et al., 2014). Ethnic minority prisoners in Norwegian prisons have rights relating to education and of course other measures. However, it turns out they often do not know what rights they have. The rights are often not clearly stated and are practiced differently in prisons and in the criminal administration system. With respect to the right to information and interpreter services in their own language, it appears that this is provided only to a very limited extent. The flow of information from the prison to the foreign prisoner often appears arbitrary. If this is due to a lack of an information strategy, arbitrariness, indifference, discrimination or perceived language barriers on the part of the prison, we do not have any basis for commenting on, but statements by the respondents in the Norwegian material speak clearly. Information about the education and training services in prisons does not reach the prisoners to an adequate degree, and if it does, it is often in a language the ethnic minority prisoners do not understand. A prisoner must be able to express himself in the language he knows best, or understands. If this is not possible the communication must be done via an interpreter. Not only is it important that ethnic minority prisoners receive and understand important information, it is also important that they receive help with searching for the information they require. According to Skutnabb-Kangas and Philipson (1994), it should be a given that education and information are presented in the mother tongue.

A finding that is cause for concern is the fact that a large part of the information that is disseminated to the prisoners does not come from the staff of the prison or from teachers, but from other prisoners – usually from the same country. Associated with this practice there are legal, security-related and ethical problems. Neither does it guarantee that the information that is communicated is correct. On the contrary, it can be misunderstood, misinterpreted and incomplete. This could have consequences for whether the prisoner chooses to take part in educational activities in prison, and for what he chooses. Lack of information also deprives the prisoner of the opportunity to make a qualified choice as to educational activity. It does occur that the prisoners do not know they can take part in education in prison or what

they can choose – such as the respondent who has a strong wish to resume previously interrupted studies, but says he didn't know there was such a possibility in the prison.

Decisions made by the prison, such as rejecting applications for permits, are written in Norwegian, while they should be written in the mother tongue of the prisoner or in English. This does not necessarily require a lot of resources and will protect the prisoner's legal rights in a much better way. There are many ethnic minority prisoners who do not master these languages or who could not read such information, even if it were available in their mother tongue. If the prison wants to reach the ethnic minority prisoners with information, it must be translated to the different languages of the prisoners. They must also be offered interpreter services or help to read the contents. Poor information about educational opportunities in prison results in insecurity about what the prison education actually has to offer. When such information is also presented in a language the prisoner neither speaks nor understands, then he is prevented from being able to take in the information and think about what offers are suitable for him or her. It becomes almost impossible to plan a course of education or training. It is also an infringement of their basic and legal rights to education and training. This is ethically difficult and unprofessional. It also creates the risk of a prisoner, acting as interpreter for another, gaining access to information that creates an imbalance of power between the parties. This can create unnecessary conflict between prisoners.

As we understand from the respondents, it is difficult to gain access to interpreter services in prison. Instead, other prisoners with the same language are used as interpreters. Another very unfortunate issue is the long waiting time to get a place in a Norwegian language course and other educational and training services in prison. The Iraqi prisoners in this study also experienced difficulties with making enquiries and were sometimes met with irrelevant and negative responses. Those with deportation decisions against them also feel that this is used against them with regard to education. According to Skarðhamar (2006), individual resources, such as education and participation in the job market, are important for facilitating individual development. Skarðhamar claims there is little doubt that some immigrant groups generally are more exposed to certain factors associated with crime. At the same time the tendency in his material shows that if education and training are facilitated, many of these groups will do well in Norway. One important premise is that the time during their sentence is used to prepare the prisoner for the time after release. In this context that means giving the prisoner a place on a Norwegian language course and that their educational or training preferences are realised as far as possible. With the necessary support most can manage to qualify according to their abilities.

During their time in prison the prisoners have a need to communicate with staff, as well as with other prisoners. If they commence an education in prison, they must have sufficient language skills to understand what

they are reading and to be able to solve problems. The problem seems to be that it is difficult to get entrance to the language courses. If the prisoner has a deportation order against him, it appears somewhat arbitrary what educational activities they are entitled to and whether they manage to get a place in education and training at all. It is a problem when such ambiguity creates less favourable conditions for education and training for certain groups of prisoners.

### Conclusion

Norwegian prisons today are multicultural, but the educational services are still organised as if the prisons are monocultural. The criminal administration system and the educational authorities in Norway must take into account the multicultural reality by facilitating education and training offers accordingly. This does not just apply to language courses; it must apply to all subjects and courses that the prison offers. The respondents follow the courses the actual prison offers and that largely means activities covered by the staff's professional competence, unless ICT-based teaching is offered. It goes without saying that if the staff's professional competence determines what is offered, this can be too limited in relation to the diverse requirements of the prisoners. The 17 respondents in this study come from Iraq, though the majority come from the autonomous Kurdish region in Northern Iraq. Their early childhood and educational history were disrupted by internal war, suppression and political conflict, followed by invasion by external powers in 2003. Even if they share some common experiences, the respondents in the study have different backgrounds, education and work experience and thus different preferences for education in prison or after their release. The majority of the respondents believe they need more education to do well in the job market, even if they also consider their chances small because they have a criminal sentence behind them. They want more educational options and shorter waiting time to get access to the various educational activities. However it seems that the practical organisation of the educational activities, like the lack of access to a student advisor or counsellor, prevents participation and completion.

Today, every prison in Norway has a highly diverse population, which must be taken into account when educational activities are being organized. Although there are educational programmes in all Norwegian prisons, there is no current coordinated plan for education and training for minority prisoners, which creates more disruption, interruption, and loss of motivation. One serious concern related to this is the lack of information in the prisoners' mother tongue in addition to the use of fellow prisoners as translators and interpreters. In a larger way, the prison and probation services and the educational authorities must make regular surveys of prison populations, identify needs, and see to it that the educational activities offered are kept in line with these needs. Especially, it is important to analyse the educational needs of prisoners who belong to subgroups that are culturally distant from the dominant

culture. The criminal administration system and the school have to gain knowledge about their previous educational background and put it in context. It is a matter of concern that so many of the ethnic minority prisoners have a need for elementary education which is a necessity for having a real possibility for further education, work and social interaction when returning to society. The correctional service, teachers in prison and prison staff can make a significant difference to the foreign prisoner's motivation for education and training but they must have competence in multicultural education. Our study indicates that so far the prison education is not able to meet the major challenges the prisons are facing when it comes to diversity. According to the Education Act students in upper secondary school are entitled to adapted education. Despite this, students in prison and in particular ethnic minority students, seldom benefit from this. Most teachers in Norway are not prepared to face the educational challenges in diverse class rooms. One important policy implication is that future and present prison teachers should be given education, training and support to deal with the great diversity in the prisoners' educational background, ethnic belonging, language, religion and culture.

If there is to be any hope for this group of ethnic minority prisoners from Iraq getting the education they are entitled to under Norwegian law, international conventions and the legal principle of equality for individuals in equivalent situations (e.g., Norwegian and foreign prisoners in the same prison), the prison and schools have to acknowledge and relate to the multicultural reality they are part of and adapt the educational services accordingly. The prison is a closed institution, but it is also part of the society to which the prisoners are returning.

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<sup>1</sup>1 January, 2012 the name was changed to Ministry of Justice and Public Security.

<sup>2</sup>The term *minority language* is used about children, young people and adults with a different mother tongue than the majority language. In most contexts in the report the term used is *ethnic minority prisoners*.

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REFEREED ARTICLE

# Learning to Escape: Prison Education, Rehabilitation and the Potential for Transformation

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## Abstract

*This article examines motivations behind participation in education based on interviews with Irish prisoners. It begins by considering the relationship between education and rehabilitation, especially the latter's re-emergence in a more authoritarian form. Drawing on results from the research, this article argues that the educational approach, culture and atmosphere are particularly important in creating a learning environment in prison. It makes the case that educational spaces which allow students to voluntarily engage in different types of learning, at their own pace, at a time of their choosing, can be effective in encouraging prisoners to engage in critical reflection and subsequently, to move away from criminal activity. It locates education in prison within a wider context and concludes that while prison education can work with, it needs to distinguish itself from, state-sponsored rehabilitation programmes and stand on the integrity of its profession, based on principles of pedagogy rather than be lured into the evaluative and correctional milieu of modern penalty.*

**Keywords:** Prison education; transformation; rehabilitation; Ireland.

## Introduction

Education within prison is as old as the institution itself. Much debate has been generated about the emergence of the modern prison and its desire to punish, control and discipline (Foucault, 1977; Ignatieff, 1978; Morris and Rothman, 1998), but at its inception there seemed to be some convergence in the objectives of the modern prison and pedagogy: personal change and transformation of the individual, essentially a form of what is loosely termed today as "rehabilitation". Prison education historians Gehring and Eggleston (2007) suggest that the "transformation of prisons into schools is an historic theme in prison reform" dating back over two hundred years to the beginning of the modern prison, which began as an "expression of Western civilisation's humanistic dream". They conclude that "correctional education and prison reform share the same goals: to reform prisons and prisoners" (p.2).

While today's prison educators are likely to support penal reform in its widest sense, the objective of this article is to examine if there is potential for personal reform and transformation in the contemporary prison. The first part examines the concept of rehabilitation, as it has been downgraded and latterly re-emerged. Utilising Rotman's (1986) typology of "authoritarian" and "anthropocentric" models of rehabilitation, it argues that the latter (although not in widespread use) has much in common with the objectives of prison education, based on an adult education approach which encourages critical thinking, reflection and personal

awareness. The second section considers findings from interviews with prisoners about their motivation behind, and experiences of, education. Drawing on these results, it concludes with an argument in favour of prison education distinguishing itself from the disciplinary objectives of the prison and correctional goals of authoritarian rehabilitative programmes, and maintaining educational integrity in an era of performance indicators when many seek to define its utility on the basis of non-pedagogical objectives.

## Rehabilitation and Education

Rehabilitation has gone through many manifestations over the centuries, including penitentiary, therapeutic, social learning and rights orientated models (Rotman, 1990). Since the fallout from the publication of Martinson's *What Works?* (1974), rehabilitation has declined and is no longer the overarching objective of the prison system (Garland, 2001). However rehabilitation has evolved and survived, and to gain acceptance in the late-modern era, there has been a blurring of punitive and rehabilitative discourses, with its reinvention "as punishment" (Robinson, 2008, p.438; emphasis in original). Contemporary rehabilitation practice has moved from viewing the objective as successful reintegration after incarceration to managing risk and social control in the interests of the general public (Crewe, 2012). Political parties that pride themselves on strong law and order policies have proudly embraced a "rehabilitation revolution," not with the avowed objec-



tive of reintegration, but based on ideas around reducing cost, lowering crime and increasing public confidence in the penal system (Grayling, 2012). On the ascendancy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a form of “authoritarian” rehabilitation that seeks to mould the prisoner into a pre-determined pattern of thought to ensure conformity (Rotman, 1990).

Contemporary approaches to rehabilitation include the Good Lives model (Ward & Maruna, 2007), Enhanced Thinking Skills (Ministry of Justice, 2010) and Reasoning and Rehabilitation (R&R) (Ross, Fabiano & Crystal, 1988; Ministry of Justice, 2010). While many Offender Behaviour Programmes (OBP) have been criticised as seeking to revive the treatment model of rehabilitation (for a discussion, see Robinson and Crow, 2008, pp.119-123), Rotman (1986) distinguishes between “anthropocentric” and “authoritarian” models of rehabilitation. The latter is “a subtle version of the outdated model of corrections.” This form of rehabilitation has been “downgraded to a mere instrument of institutional discipline and tends to resort to brainwashing methods” (p.1026). However, the former paradigm which is a “liberty-centred notion of rehabilitation” that is “clearly detached from the disciplinary goals of the institution” (Rotman, 1986, p.1038), has much in common with an adult education approach, as advocated in Irish prison education (Costelloe & Warner, 2008; Irish Prison Service, 2011). Both seek to respect the independence of the individual, recognise them as agents in the process of change, understand the social and cultural factors of deviance, are cognizant of the impact of incarceration, and do not seek conformity to a prescribed pattern of thought or behaviour (Council of Europe, 1990; Rotman, 1990). They do not over-emphasise or pathologize individual activity but seek to understand actions in wider social, political and economic contexts.

An adult education framework promotes, among other elements, transformative learning. It begins with critical thinking, which is not an abstract, rarefied academic process but an activity embedded in the contexts of adults’ everyday lives (Brookfield, 1987, p.228). Mezirow (1996) suggested that critical reflection is essential for transformative learning. It may be achieved by (a) extending or refining our terms of reference on issues in society; (b) learning new ones; or (c) transforming our existing frames of reference. It requires changing the context of a problem, or the way we analyze an issue, event or text. This would seem to concur with the anthropocentric model of rehabilitation, which assumes that “significant change can only result from the individual’s own insight and uses dialogue to encourage the process of self-discovery.” This approach does not “rely on idealistic preaching” but “seeks to awaken in inmates a deep awareness of their relationships with the rest of society, resulting in a genuine sense of social responsibility” (Rotman, 1986, p.1026).

Within many prison systems, education is advocated as one of the key elements in the process of change and transformation (Wright, 2008). Education in prison is

considerably wider than traditional classroom activities and while a schoolroom may provide the space where formal learning takes place, as in all educational processes, the significance of the activity may be realised at other times and in different situations. This article, based on interviews with prisoners in Ireland, builds on studies conducted with prisoners in other jurisdictions (see Davidson, 1995; Duguid, 2000; Hughes, 2009; MacGuinness, 2000; Reuss, 1999; Wilson, 2007). It considers whether the potential for personal change and transformation in penal environments is possible through an adult educational approach that distinguishes itself from the disciplinary goals of the institution and the correctional objectives of authoritarian rehabilitation.

Some studies have been undertaken in Ireland that will be hopefully disseminated widely (Carrigan, 2012; Cleere, 2013; Wallington, 2014) but little has been published so far about the motivations for students’ participation in education (for higher education, see Costelloe, 2003 and O’Donnell, 2013). Research in other jurisdictions found that students participated in education to develop a new sense of self and mould new identities (Hughes, 2009; Reuss, 1999). MacGuinness (2000) identified 19 different reasons why individuals participated in education. Wilson (2007) discovered that student participation had less to do with formal learning and more to do with the maintenance of their outside social identity. Reuss (1999) found that it was possible for a new self to emerge in the prison environment, and that “the potential exists for personal development and possibly a change in offending behaviour” (p.117). The example of Malcolm X is often used to show prison education as “a dramatic example of prisoners’ ability to turn their incarceration into a transformative experience” (Davis, 2003, p.56). In some institutions, educational activities encouraged civic activity and responsibility among prisoners (Behan, 2008); in others, it fostered a more democratic ethos within the prison regime (Duguid, 2000; Eggleston & Gehring, 2000). The next section examines the motivations for participation in education among a group of Irish prisoners.

### **Motivations for Participation in Educational Programmes**

This section is primarily based on data from a wider research project examining prisoners’ civic engagement. There were 50 interviewees in one institution in Dublin, Ireland. The prison is for adult males over 18 years of age. There were approximately 150 prisoners in the institution at the time of the research and of the 50 interviewees, 46 gave their permission to be taped-recorded. The interviews were semi-structured and they took place in the prison school. After establishing from a range of options the educational level of interviewees (and whether this was achieved inside or outside the prison), open-ended questions gave respondents the opportunity to explain their motivation/s for attending the school or their reason for not doing so. It was not possible to access prison records to select prisoners randomly, so potential interviewees were approached in

the school, workshops, shop queues and recreation areas. While the objective was to offer all prisoners the opportunity to participate in this study, over 90 per cent of the prison population were discussed with, provided a reason or rationale for the study and asked to partake in the interviews. Participation was voluntary and no inducements were offered.

A briefing session was undertaken with potential participants beforehand and informed consent was obtained, in writing, from all interviewees. Conscious of making sure consent was informed, especially among those with learning difficulties, the literacy teachers were conferred with about the possibility of their attending the discussion of the consent form if requested by the interviewee. This was to ensure informed consent for those who may have had difficulty understanding the form and the wider research process. This was taken up on one occasion. I was aware that the participant had learning difficulties and was careful not to undermine his integrity. In this instance, his literacy teacher sat in during the explanation of the project and guidelines for the research, and signing of the consent form.

The prison has a very active school and it is central to the programmes and activities available to prisoners. Students are not mandated to attend school. They do so voluntarily. The vast majority of interviewees ( $n=45$ ) were attending school and four others had done so in the past. The age of the respondents ranged from 22 to 75 years. The majority of interviewees for this study were serving long sentences. Nearly 20 per cent ( $n=9$ ) were serving a sentence of over 10 years and 40 per cent ( $n=20$ ) were serving life sentences. A recent review of prison education for the European Commission (GHK, 2012) found that "prisoners are more likely to participate (or be facilitated to participate) in education and training if they are young, serving a long sentence, or based in a large prison" (p.66). Given the length of sentences and the centrality of the school in the daily life of the prison, it is perhaps understandable that so many interviewees were participating in education. All names used are pseudonyms.

While undertaking this research I was on a sabbatical from a teaching position in prison. In recognition of how my previous position may have impacted on the research, it made overcoming the "gatekeepers" (which in prison can be many and frustrating) an easier process. In response to "whose side are we on?" (Becker, 1966), I was undoubtedly empathetic to the endeavours of prisoners as they engaged in education. Nevertheless, that should not necessarily skew the outcome as it is virtually impossible to undertake research "that is uncontaminated by personal and political sympathies" (Becker, 1966, p.239). No matter how we try to achieve neutrality, the researcher can never be totally silent or objective because "research in any human environment without subjective feeling is almost impossible" (Liebling, 1999, p.149). As to whether interviewees hesitated in their answers because of my previous position, I knew only some students, and those I did, I would not have had any contact with for at least two

years. As the following section shows, the answers were varied and did not necessarily reflect what they perceived I wanted to hear.

Prison education in Ireland is based on two major influences: Council of Europe policy and the "principles of adult and community education," offering a broad flexible programme. The objectives are varied and include helping people "cope with their sentence, achieve personal development, prepare for life after release and establish the appetite and capacity for lifelong learning" (Irish Prison Service, 2011, p.22). Following Council of Europe (1990, p.4) policy on education in prison, it strives to "develop the whole person bearing in mind his or her social, economic and cultural context" which recognizes the marginalization and alienation that many prisoners endure both inside and outside the institution. Educational provision is provided through a partnership with a number of outside agencies, primarily City and County Educational and Training Boards (local education authorities).

Adults engage in education for a variety of reasons. Some do it to acquire knowledge and learn a skill. Others embrace the opportunity of a second chance education or to continue lifelong learning. A number get involved to pass the time, take their mind off other issues, or in the hope of personal or even political transformation (Thompson, 1996). The interviews revealed that the reasons many prisoners participate in education mirror somewhat the range of motivations of adults outside. However, there are aspects unique to their location: loneliness, isolation, boredom and attempts to create an alternative routine to the one set out by the institution. Some sought to maintain their pre-prison individuality and others wished to use their time to develop a new identity.

The reason/s for participation in education was, for many, multi-layered. The interviewees tended to identify a primary purpose for their participation but also listed a number of other reasons. While not being mutually exclusive, four categories were distinguished according to their main reason for participation. The largest group (19 respondents) wanted to pursue a second chance education and up-skill to prepare for employment on release. The next group of 13 interviewees wished to escape the monotony and boredom of the prison regime; seven used education to pass the time and six students saw education predominantly as a space for critical thinking and personal transformation. These motivations are remarkably similar to the categories MacGuinness (2000) found in the responses as to why prisoners began education in prison – to catch up on academic qualifications, keep occupied, improve employment prospects, to survive prison and manage their time inside (p.91). Overall, while various motivations were identified for participating in education in this study, as time went on, perspectives on education developed. For some it was no longer just to pass time, but to prepare for release; for others, they saw the opportunity for personal transformation. The latter motivation was particularly prevalent among those who had been in and out of prison, or spent a longer time in



prison and seemed more deeply enmeshed in the change process. It could also indicate that they had little option but to adopt an alternative lifestyle and no doubt, the length of time they spent in the institution impacted on their outlook and perspectives.

### ***Preparing for release***

The largest number of respondents attended school to gain skills or acquire knowledge they had missed out on before incarceration. They hoped to prepare for a productive life after prison. It is understandable that this motivated such a large number, as prison populations tend to have low levels of traditional educational attainment. Many have had negative experiences of education and despite internalising this negativity - having judged themselves by the system's evaluative process - there was a remarkably high take-up of education. This mirrors the participation rate in prison education in other jurisdictions (see Duguid, 2000; Wilson & Reuss, 2000).

This group wanted to use their time in prison constructively. Most had left school early, not taken any examinations and wished to engage in what is usually termed adult basic education. They were aware that their lack of education, including qualifications, impacted on their life before incarceration and would limit their opportunities afterwards. They had either been unemployed, under-employed or in low-skilled manual positions prior to incarceration. George was over five years into his life sentence and was representative of this group. Prior to imprisonment, he had completed three years of secondary school and attended school in prison because "I want to improve my writing in English. I want to learn how to work the basics of computers." Oscar was serving life. His motivation was simple: "to get educated. Just want to get educated." Gavin was in the early stages of a life sentence and had been in a blue-collar, low-skilled position prior to imprisonment. He was clear about his reason for participation in education. "I want to equip myself as much as I can, to get ready to go home, back into the workplace. Also it gives me a purpose and it helps the time to pass. And in that order."

This group primarily used their time in prison for utilitarian reasons. They reflected one of the more traditional motivations for adults participating in education outside the institution, to up-skill and prepare for employment opportunities. It also followed a particular understanding of "offender learning" which seeks to "place a much greater emphasis on developing the vocational skills that offenders need to find and keep jobs" on release (Ministry of Justice, 2011, p.7). Deciding to use their time in prison pursuing education was a positive decision. As it was a voluntary activity and would not necessarily impact on the length of their sentence, it indicated they retained a sense of agency and showed that they could still make some choices on how to spend their time in a rule-bound and coercive environment.

### ***Killing time***

The next two groups have similarities in their use of education, primarily, as a coping strategy. Perhaps unconsciously, it was a way of limiting the damage the institution was doing to them. Interviewees were explicit that their time in prison was to be endured, and to take their mind off the place, they took part in education. Prior to incarceration, they had different levels of education and did not necessarily attend school to gain skills and/or increase knowledge. Daniel was coming towards the end of his seven year sentence and his response was characteristic of this group. Echoing one of the objectives of the Irish prison education service which include helping students cope with their sentence, he asked: "Truthfully?" when questioned about his motivation behind participation in education. "To kill the time. That would be the first reason. To better myself and become more informed. To get an opportunity to indulge in hobbies". Admitting that "you haven't too many options in here," it was for Enda, who was serving over six years, "a change. It passes the time."

Isaac was nearly half way through a six year sentence. He had left school at 14 and admitted that he needed to work on his literacy skills. He attended school "because there is nothing else to do. Because if I don't, I get bored, just sitting around all the week. So I go up to the school every Wednesday and it passes an hour and a half in. Just to get out of the workshop, to pass the time in." Callum had only recently begun a two-year sentence (although he had been in prison before). He hoped to study for an undergraduate degree. "I am a natural student. It greatly passes the time for me in prison. It makes it more short if you are studying."

### ***Escaping from the prison***

Inter-linked with the motivation of the previous group, many of the students in this cohort used the opportunity of education to try to break away from the prison routine. They identified involvement in school as part of the process of adaptation to their new surrounding and as a coping strategy. Archie was less than a year into his four year sentence. He had a variety of reasons for attending school. "The reason why I go to school is just to get out of the workshop. Rather than work down there, I come up here [to school]." But he also "enjoyed it up here anyway because it's a way of escaping from the prison too. And the time I spend in the education programme doesn't feel like prison to me."

Hugh was coming towards the end of a sentence of over 15 years and perhaps mindful that it was a teacher (although not teaching in prison at the time) undertaking this research, seemed somewhat embarrassed about expressing the sentiment echoed by many other prisoners about why they got involved in education. He simply wanted to escape the daily drudge of the regime. He had completed two years of a science degree before prison but had to leave due to family circumstances. While he now had "opportunities to do courses in the prison," he set out his motivation for attending school:

"I suppose because...I had a good level of education, right, I suppose, I do come over to learn. How do I put this without sounding...Sometimes I come over as a distraction from the prison." Luke, with nearly a third of his nine-year sentence complete, was studying a wide range of subjects including English, Drama, and Arts and Crafts. "Honestly?" he asked when questioned why he attended school: "it was just to get out of the prison, originally. And because you are treated with more dignity and respect." However, he conceded that he was now moving towards a more considered approach to education. "As I got older and a little wiser, I realised the benefits of it. I think it is one of the most priceless gifts that you could have – education."

While educators within prison attempted to generate a different culture within education departments (see Behan, 2007; Costelloe & Warner, 2008), there is a key distinguishing element of the "pedagogical relation: creating an atmosphere" (O'Donnell, 2013, p.278; see also MacGuinness, 2000 and Smith, 2013). William was one third through his 15 year sentence and seemed to identify with this. He wanted to "get away from prison. You are away from prison, you know. To get out of your cell, the workshops. For an education, to stop you from sinking. It's nice to be with teachers as well, from the outside. To get a bit of trust, you don't get a lot of that."

Similar reasons were given to MacGuinness (2000) who reported that students preferred the atmosphere in the school than the prison wing or workshop, with one respondent pointing out that the six months he spent in the workshop was "tedious" (p.101). Crewe (2012) in his research in Wellingborough prison found that within the education department, "many prisoners found sanctuary from the stresses of life on the wings and from the normal terms on which staff-prisoner relations were founded." Prisoners often commented to him that the education block was "one of the few zones within the institution that didn't 'feel like a prison'" (p.119).

Students felt there was a different ethos in the school. The employment of non-prison staff is possibly the feature that distinguished the educational space from the penal environment most acutely. As teachers are employed by local education authorities, they bring pedagogical principles to their practice. Teachers who come into daily contact with prisoners tend to protect their independence within the system. The use of non-prison staff contributes to the creation of a different atmosphere and culture in the school. Prison teachers lack the disciplinary rationale of prison officers or the correctional goals of programme staff. They were considered differently by prisoners to others who worked in the institution. This allowed for a more informal environment in the school. Students appreciated being called by their first name and addressing teaching staff in a similar manner. This made it easier to create a space for co-operative endeavours, based on prisoners as students rather than students as prisoners. This group of students identified the school a place apart from the prison, based on a different ethos and atmosphere.

These two groups used education as one of the "removal activities," which "mercifully kill" time in contrast to the "ordinary activities" which in prisons "can be said to torture time" (Goffman, 1961, pp.67-8). Prison schools may be a place where the individual can get lost, a temporary blotting out of all sense of the environment in which they live, a little island of "vivid, enrapturing activity" in the "kind of dead sea" of the institution (Goffman, 1961, p.68). While the regime-focussed and rule-bound late-modern prison may seem to work against the basic tenets of education and change, these findings suggest that prisoners retained some sense of agency as they utilised the facilities to overcome the structural constraints of the regime and voluntarily engage in a practice associated with freedom. They felt that while they were in school, they were outside the norms of the disciplinary objectives that influence their daily life in prison. While some prison schools are physically located in different buildings to the rest of the prison, students believed the ethos and atmosphere was detached from the prison because of the space it offered to express their individuality in a non-threatening, trusting, and even potentially, a non-penal oasis.

### **Transformation**

The final group had either spent numerous periods in and out of prison, or were serving a long prison sentence. They came from a mix of educational backgrounds. They tended to be older and began to appreciate how education could help them to move away from a life of crime. However, few initially came to school with this in mind. Ryan, serving seven years, believed there was "no harm in a person getting professional educational tuition. If it wasn't there [in school], I would probably still be studying, but probably in the prison cell." But there was a deeper motivation:

I think when a person comes to prison there is a long time to reflect on their past, present and future. When a person ends up in prison, irrespective of the length of time, there is something wrong in that person's life, prison gives a person an opportunity to change and I think education is a main factor in a person changing.

Samuel had just begun a life sentence and this had forced him to re-assess his life. When interviewed he was in a contemplative mood, questioning his life before prison. He was in the first year of a social science degree with the Open University. While he was "interested in issues, social issues, environmental issues," he felt that "lack of education would have been a factor that led me to prison." For him education made "prison life more bearable, a lot more bearable." However, perhaps more significantly, it was part of a process of change, and of "making good" (Maruna, 2001). It was an "opportunity, one of the few ways I can make amends to society, to my victim. It is one of the few ways to make amends, some form of amends."

Martin had been in and out of prison since his teens and had initially begun school to get away from the prison regime and routine. He explained how he began

encountering words such as restorative justice, rehabilitation and punishment, not having understood or considered their meaning before taking a course in criminology. Admitting that he was perhaps biased, he acknowledged that "at first I could not identify with my victims because I always considered myself to be a victim." He believed that "after being a part of the prison system for over the last 20 years of my life, jail was never a deterrent for me" and came to realise that "in prison...there was very little rehabilitation." After a period of reflection:

I decided to go to school initially to remove myself away from the landing which I found to be very boring and mundane, the majority of my day was being spent hanging around, sitting in other people's cells, drinking tea and talking about stuff that really did not interest me...I wanted to change by means of taking a personal reflection of my life and what I needed to do to change. Education was a major factor in that process as well as doing some other self-help, going to the gym, finding spiritual guidance and very little else, because my choices were very limited.

Harold had been in prison a number of times previously and later went on to a period of further study. Initially he did not associate education with a move away from criminal activity. He was deeply cynical of all those who worked within the prison system: officers, programme staff and, initially, teachers. They were all part of the coercive system. While unwilling to participate in any of the rehabilitative programmes on offer, it was only after a period of time in school that he began to change his mind.

Having started classes I found the school staff to be very encouraging which was new to me as I had never been encouraged to do anything positive before...With the exception of those I engaged in committing crimes with throughout my life, it was the first time anyone recognised any potential in me, and I began to enjoy attending classes and engaging in discussions with the teachers and other prisoners. And although I agreed to consider attending college on my release, I, in reality still had no intention of ceasing committing crime. It did however leave an impression on me. One of the teachers in the school gave me an article which was written by a prominent criminologist, which sparked my interest in the subject, and changed my view of academics which I had previously viewed in the same light I had viewed the prison service. As a result of my up bringing I had a very clannish mentality and I held this view of anyone who didn't come from a similar background to myself, treating them with a deep suspicion.

Harold and this group of students were perhaps further on their way towards personal change. While initially not setting out on a journey of transformation, education was an integral (although not the only), part of that process. This group of students indicated an interest in and concern for the world around them, partly inspired by their participation in education. In

common with all other groups they were co-operating with each other in a positive engagement, based on a productive collaboration indicating that these students were developing social and human capital. As they participated in educational programmes voluntarily, they developed at their own pace, on their own terms, not on a pre-determined structured framework set out by courts, state or in some rehabilitative programmes.

### *Agency and Change*

Imprisonment is generally about limiting autonomy and responsibility, two key ingredients in a successful pedagogical process. Nevertheless, this study indicates that students retained some agency, firstly by deciding to attend school voluntarily - even if it was for some simply to make their time in the institution more bearable - and secondly by participating in an environment based on a different culture than that which tends to pervade within the prison. Several students used their time in prison to reflect on their past activities, the hurt they have caused to others, hoping for a different future, away from a life of crime. Wilson (2007) found that some students "counter the effects of incarceration by incorporating and/or modifying aspects of their outside world into the prison setting" (p.199). In this study, Gavin was involved in the Listener Scheme (the prison equivalent to the Samaritans); Ryan had participated in charitable fun runs and others were involved in the various fund-raising activities in the prison. Some students began to adopt a different self; others re-asserted somewhat their identity prior to incarceration.

For some students, participation in education was part of a transformative learning process which is consciously or sub-consciously:

becoming aware through critical reflection of the frame of reference in which one thinks, feels, and acts. It involves becoming aware of its genesis in one's individual history and/or culture, the search for a new more developed frame, and acting on the basis of the new frame of reference (Fleming, 2002, pp. 3-4).

The process of transforming frames of reference begins with critical reflection. This was certainly the case for Martin, Harold and others in this group. Engaging in transformative learning encourages not just desistance from criminal activity, which is the underlying objective of many contemporary rehabilitative programmes, but locating laws in wider contexts, understanding the social construction of criminality, and considering issues around punishment, class and economic (in)justice. Such an approach challenges the imprisoned to become reflective agents for change outlined in Rotman's (1986) "anthropocentric" rehabilitation model, rather than complying with the demands of correctional agendas or the "authoritarian" rehabilitative programmes. It also encourages agency and recognizes that authentic transformation cannot occur without an individual's voluntary participation.

While the initial motivation to engage in education among several respondents might seem to be somewhat limited, nevertheless attending school is not a goal in

itself; it is the initial step on an educational journey, which is without a doubt a process, and may or may not end on completion of their sentence. Richards and Jones (2004), both former prisoners and proponents of convict criminology, believe that when an individual is committed to prison, s/he descends, however, "if he or she can muster the intellectual or spiritual desire to remake him or herself, he or she ascends from the shadows to re-join the world." However, this is not an easy process as they argue, to "transcend the prison experience, a person must honestly understand who he or she is and who he or she wants to be, and do the work to accomplish that change" (p.227). For some students education is part of the process of/ or towards ascent. It gives them an opportunity to participate in an environment based on a different culture than that which pervades in many prisons. Those who were engaging in education for more utilitarian purposes were choosing a productive activity within a limited structural context. This indicated that many retained their agency, which allowed them to assert some autonomy, even within the rather restrictive rule-bound and regime-focussed institution. This study suggests that education helped students cope with their sentence, adapt to prison life, learn new skills, and for some students, potentially it was part of a process towards personal transformation.

### **Prison Pedagogy and Penal Policy**

The testimonies from interviewees indicate the diverse motivations for student participation in education within prison. They also reveal that there is a complex dynamic not just in meeting the needs of the learner group, but also creating a learning environment in a coercive environment. In analysing the challenge of creating the space for a transformative learning experience, Paul Kirk, Education Manager at Guys Marsh Prison in England, described the essence of this undertaking:

I believe that prisoners - especially those on longer sentences - are asked to undergo the most difficult of all human processes, the process of change, often in a deeply unsupportive environment. Prisoners, usually via their sentence plans, are made to ask themselves the great existential questions that most of us only encounter in moments of great stress and turmoil - who am I, where am I going, what's the point of my existence, what's wrong with the way I live, what do I need to change, what's the point of it all? These are questions that no doubt anybody sent to jail asks themselves at some stage and in many cases they are questions that may well need to be addressed by people living destructive and self-destructive lives. But they are not easy and they demand a level of self-awareness that evades many people in the general population. (Kirk, 2012)

The sites of all education can be ambiguous, but there are some challenges unique to the provision of education in prison. Education is not a neutral technology that can be separated from the context in which it takes place. The prison environment is "often bleak and anti-

thetical to the educational mission" (Gehring & Eggleston 2006, p.xii) and the potential to create the space for learning is influenced, by among other factors, the nature of prison itself, the conditions of confinement and institutional dynamics. Other considerations include the educational level of the learner group, increasing managerialism, attempts to re-define education with the ascendancy of cognitive skills-based courses and "offender learning" programmes and the challenge of finding an appropriate means of measuring outcomes and evaluating change inside.

The rigidity of the daily routine is central to imprisonment. Robert McCleery (1961, p.154) pointed out that "the heart of custodial controls in traditional prisons lies in the daily regimentation, routine and rituals of domination which bend the subjects into a customary posture of silent awe and unthinking acceptance." While the extent to which prisoners are bent into compliance may be exaggerated, the general point about the corrosive effect of routine is well made. Critical thinking can only develop when we accept that the process will be uncomfortable, ambiguous, tentative, uncertain and evolving (Brookfield, 1987). However, prisons have a tendency to create regimes where prisoners can "find the maintenance of behavioural boundaries satisfying, because it implies exemption from difficult choices and personal responsibility for one's plight" (Mathiesen, 1996, p.371). Ironically, the lack of responsibility provides safety in the comfort zone. There is little opportunity for ambiguity, uncertainty or feelings of insecurity in such a stifling routine. The process of transforming frames of reference begins with critical reflection, with assessing one's own assumptions and presuppositions. To engage in critical reflection usually leaves one uncomfortable and challenged (Mezirow, 1996). It seems that traditional prison regimes create an environment that must work against this. Regime and routine can undermine the potential to put students in an uncomfortable place where they have the space and support that Kirk suggest is needed for the process of change and transformation.

While institutions certainly have an impact on prisoners (Sykes, 1958; Goffman, 1961), individuals also bring in attributes (Irwin & Cressy, 1962) to the prison. Mindful of the structural context, prison educators should also be careful of expecting too much from prison and must be especially cognizant of the student group. "Prisoners are people who have been failed," with many having a "long history of failure at home, at school, at work," argued the first official report into the penal system in Ireland. Therefore, it concluded, it is "unrealistic to expect that prison can achieve what better-placed institutions in society have failed to do. Neither are prisons like laundries where what is wrong, personally and socially can be washed away" (Whitaker, 1985, p. 91).

Incarcerated populations throughout the world are overwhelmingly young, male and from poor socio-economic backgrounds. Ireland is no different as the "prison population is characterised by multiple forms of socio-economic disadvantage," and communities

with the greatest indices of deprivation bearing the “greatest burden of imprisonment” (Rogan, 2013, p. 98). These communities are rife with unemployment, low wage jobs, drugs, crime and marginalisation, with high levels of poverty and low levels of traditional educational attainment. The latest research on literacy levels among Irish prisoners indicates that nearly 53 per cent were in the level one or pre-level one category (highest is 5) and that the average literacy level of the prison population was much lower than the general population (Morgan & Kett, 2003, pp.35-36). Similar levels of educational disadvantage have been found among prisoners in other jurisdictions (for the United Kingdom, see Prison Reform Trust, 2013 and for the United States, Muth, 2005). An analysis of punishment, social deprivation and the geography of reintegration in Ireland found that one per cent of electoral districts accounted for nearly 24 per cent of prisoners, but less than five per cent of the population. It concluded that in general, “prisoners were at least three times as likely to come from the most, as compared to the least, deprived areas” (O’Donnell *et al.* 2007, p.2). The lived experience of prisoners, both prior to and during their incarceration is a key element to understanding the dynamics of educational development and particularly important in meeting the needs of the learner group.

### **Redefining education**

In an effort to make prison education more politically acceptable, attempts have been made to redefine it into psycho-educational or psycho-social programmes (O’Donnell, 2013; Smith, 2013), cognitive courses to deal with “offending behaviour” as happened with the demise of the humanities programmes in Canada (Duguid, 2000). Educational programmes “are increasingly colonised” or being replaced by courses in life skills, communication skills, anger management, etc. (O’Donnell, 2013, p.271), with one teacher reporting how, in order to continue teaching philosophy in an English prison, he was forced to call it Advanced Thinking Skills on the forms for educational managers (Smith, 2013, p.71). Reframing education as treatment reduces the individual to a patient, a subject, somebody that something is done *to*, rather than *with*.

Participation in “offence-focused” programmes as part of the authoritarian rehabilitation process identified by Rotman which are ordered by the courts or essential for early release can give the appearance of change through conformity, rather than an authentic personal transformation. Some of these programmes, especially those run by the prison, have been criticised as attempts by the state to “responsibilize,” “redeem,” or “normalise” the socially excluded (Ryan & Sim, 2007, p.697). According to Costelloe and Warner (2008) these programmes are based on “a limited and negative approach” which follows the “discredited medical model of imprisonment.” It begins with an ethos that “views the prisoner primarily as something broken in need of fixing or as an object in need of treatment” (p.137). Many offending behavior programmes within contemporary rehabilitation models concentrate

more on “themes of personal responsibility, choice and recognition of the moral implication of these choices” (Robinson and Crow, 2009, p.121) to the detriment of the social context of criminality and punishment.

For long term prisoners, especially lifers, participation in these courses are generally mandatory, and the process of achieving freedom early has become more complicated, even perplexing, leading to those with “psychological power” (Crewe, 2012) wielding enormous influence. While there are “serious questions of justice to be asked about relating the length of time a person spends in prison to the degree to which he or she co-operates with or is involved in such activities” (Coyle, 2008, p.230), programmes that are mandated by courts, prison system or parole board and deemed necessary for release can be particularly problematic. Similar to the experiences relayed to Crewe (2012) and Maruna (2011) many interviewees in this study had an aversion to courses provided by the prison, especially psychological and offender-behaviour programmes. None of those interviewed saw education as a part of a process of “rehabilitation” or even used the word (except for Martin who began to appreciate the meaning of the concept in a criminology class). They seemed to have no investment in the concept, considering it rather as a professionalised process, where they follow frameworks set out by the prison system, which immediately made them wary. Interviewees distinguished school activities from prison programmes and were eager to stress that it was a place for them, not for the prison. Prison education organised and run by outside educational bodies allows for greater flexibility than the regime determined routines that are usually associated with incarceration or prescribed outcomes of many rehabilitative programmes.

Nevertheless, despite their limitations, dismissing all courses provided by, or within, prison means that some prisoners will miss out on an opportunity to participate in activities that address issues such as addiction that have blighted their lives and led to criminal activity. If students voluntarily participate in prison programmes, this can be an important step before they consider other questions that may need addressing in their life. Some courses not only deal with the issues that led to their “offending” behaviour as desired by the state but help them face up to their transgression of the rights of others. The effect may be far more liberating for both the individual and society than the intention. While Reuss (1999) rightly stresses that there is still an underlying concern that such courses may be helping the prison rather than the prisoner, she argues, “there is perhaps a need to synthesise the ‘best’ elements of these courses with the ‘best’ of traditional education” (p.123).

### **Measuring outcomes and calculating change**

Prison pedagogy, similar to other areas of education, finds itself in the murky business of measurement and evaluation. Reuss (1999) was asked when conducting her research: “‘How can you show it?’ or ‘How do you know they’ve changed?’” (p.114). Perhaps we could

begin by recognising that pedagogy is not a science, rather an art. What works for some may not for others. And what works at one point in a sentence may not be appropriate during a different phase. If we are to attempt to measure the effectiveness of transformative education - which is practically impossible - it is more beneficial to examine process rather than outcome. In this endeavour, process can become the outcome. An awareness of students' motivations behind participation in education outlined in this research indicates that traditional methods of assessment usually associated with utilitarian objectives are unsuited to students in prison. An analysis of prison education could utilise criteria in areas such as problem solving, listening and communication, critical reasoning, teamwork, application to tasks, activities which usually indicate that an individual is developing social and human capital. These are not easily measurable, rarely linear, take time and effort, and cannot be reduced to formulae and inappropriate methods of determining success or failure of human beings with complex histories and multifarious issues.

Adult education is more than just the accumulation of knowledge or the acquisition of skills; it seeks to locate learning in a wider social context. As most of those interviewed for this study were not overly-concerned with achieving grades in examinations, this allows for more flexibility and creativity than is usually associated with traditional education approaches and outcomes. Thomas (1983, p.231) found that education in prison "both subverts, yet stimulates teaching strategies" which are open to educators to develop. As happens in Irish prison education, a wide curriculum and a range of activities allow individuals to work to their strengths. This could mirror somewhat the "strengths-based practices" involved in the desistance process, which assess the positive contribution, rather than the deficits, of individuals and "provide opportunities...to develop pro-social self-concepts and identity" (Burnett & Maruna, 2006, p.84).

While there are debates over the most appropriate method of evaluation, educationalists should be careful about getting drawn into using the recidivist rate as one of the indices of change. If education uses the recidivist rate to judge progress (Esperian, 2010), this is a rather crude and unsuitable method of measuring outcomes or characterizing change. Evaluating the impact of both rehabilitative programmes and educational courses on desistance from crime is a near impossible task. Data on participation in both Reasoning and Rehabilitation courses and prison education indicate lower levels of recidivism, and graduates of these courses were found to have higher levels of personal stability, evidence of social change and greater rates of employment in comparison to others who do not participate (Duguid, 2000; Esperian, 2010; Haulard, 2001; Ministry of Justice, 2010). However, results from both rehabilitation and educational programmes must be interpreted cautiously as those who have voluntarily signed up to these activities already indicate a desire to change and the impact of participation on their perspectives and future activities is difficult to measure.

Change does not occur in a vacuum. Motivation to change and attempts to create a better life are not always simply down to the individual's desire for transformation. Burnett and Maruna (2004) found prior to their release, 80% of persistent offenders said they wanted to "go straight," but only 25% believed they would definitely be able to do so (p.395). Building human and social capital supports and reinforces efforts to move away from a life of crime, but many prisoners and ex-prisoners have "low social capital and have to work hard to achieve a successful conventional life" (Healy, 2010, p.180). Developing social and human capital can be a challenge in any environment, especially in a prison. Nevertheless, individuals cannot be separated from the context in which they are located, nor their social, economic and educational background.

There are many reasons why an individual decides not to commit a crime. For those who participate in education, this has been a significant factor in their desistance (Wallington, 2014). Nevertheless, while governments and prison systems may be concerned with determining effectiveness of education in terms of recidivism, crime reduction and value for money (Ministry of Justice, 2011), it is inappropriate to judge success or otherwise by a methodology unsuited to the complex development of human change. Education is a much more sophisticated process. It has similarities with why, how and when people desist from crime which "resides somewhere in the interfaces between developing personal maturity, changing social bonds associated with certain life transitions, and the individual subjective narrative constructions which offenders build around these key events and changes" (McNeill, 2006, p.47). Accordingly, "It is not just the events and changes that matter; it is what these events and changes *mean* to the people involved" (McNeill, 2006, p.47).

Education can and should mean different things to different people. As the interviewees in this study indicated, it can mean different things to the same people at various points in their educational journey and life course. Analysed in this framework, education can play an important role in encouraging an individual to move away from a life of crime, not just to desist from breaking the law, but developing social and human capital essential to achieve this, and contributing to their community after they have served their time. Linking education to measurements around recidivism and rehabilitation can corrode the integrity of education, especially as educational programmes in prison settings "often operate within shifting policy environments and are themselves frequently the subject of contest and controversy" (Higgins, 2004, p.246). If prison education is not to follow changing penal ideologies, or get embroiled in "authoritarian" rehabilitation agendas, it must, define its own objectives based on educational principles and be cautious about adopting or adapting to the vagrancies of changing penal policy if these are inimical to the objectives of pedagogy.

### Conclusion

A more comprehensive consideration of the potential

for transformation and change within prison is enhanced by understanding the motivations behind student participation in education. This article has set out some of these which include learning new skills, adapting to the prison, using it as an opportunity to escape the monotony of the routine and regime and for some, using their time in prison for personal change and transformation. While a number of interviewees were acutely conscious of the importance of education in the process of change and transformation, even the students who utilised education to develop skills and prepare for release indicated that they retained a sense of agency within the structural constraints of a coercive institution. Therefore, prison education should continue to consider how to help students cope with their sentence, limit the damage that the institution does to them and reflect on how to build on students' strengths. It could also explore how to develop the rather ambiguous and complicated process of building human and social capital. These are not the instrumentalist indices of change that underpin authoritarian rehabilitation or more traditional educational measurements, but may be more authentic indicators of change and transformation.

While this article has argued that mandated authoritarian rehabilitative programmes are problematic when determining change and authentic transformation, it recognises the potential for these programmes to effect change in learners' sense of agency. Recognising that mandated rehabilitative programmes can lead to the appearance of, rather than real change, there may be positive elements within rehabilitative programmes that recognise and try to heal the damage that criminal activities have done to prisoners themselves and their fellow citizens. However, education, while potentially finding an accommodation with rehabilitation programmes, should continue to distinguish itself from these programmes. Prison education operating in an era of authoritarian rehabilitation could mirror adult education models in the community which works best outside of the mainstream, sometimes even against the dominant discourse, on the margins. Even though it may be funded by the state, adult education has worked as a more transformative experience when it has maintained a distance from the state. Much of the best adult education in civil society creates space for dialogue to deliberate on where individuals find themselves, the type of world they wish to create, and discuss the mechanisms to build a fairer society (Fleming, 2007).

Despite the idealism of early reformers such as Elizabeth Fry, there have always been challenges of trying to create space for change in coercive environments (Gehring & Rennie, 2008, pp.67-8). It is worth remembering that the past was no means a utopian place. Even in the halcyon days of penal welfarism, when it held such great potential, "the prison did not much rehabilitate" (Wacquant, 2001, p 124). The present is perhaps less dystopian than we are sometimes led to believe. The study of penal history indicates that rarely were there simple, clear and neat boundaries between penal eras (Loader & Sparks, 2012). Amid the straitjacket of

penal periods, there were always ideas and trends that challenged the dominant discourse. Perhaps in the present, when authoritarian rehabilitation is in the ascendancy, prison education is one of those developments. This study indicates that even in the contemporary prison the potential for transformation and change remains.

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REFEREED ARTICLE

## Identities, Education and Reentry (Part One of Two): Identities and Performative Spaces

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### Abstract

*This is part one of a two-part interdisciplinary paper that examines the various forces (discourses and institutional processes) that shape prisoner-student identities. Discourses of officers from a correctional website serve as a limited, single case study of discourses that ascribe dehumanized, stigmatized identities to “the prisoner.” Two critical concepts, performative spaces and identity enclosures, are purposed as potential critical, emancipatory terms to explore the prisoner-student identity work that occurs in schools and elsewhere in prison. This paper is guided by the effort to assist teachers to act as transformative intellectuals in prisons and closed-custody settings by becoming more aware of the multilayered contexts—the politics of location—that undergird their work. Seeing the “bigger picture” has implications for how and what educators teach in prison settings and, perhaps, why education works to facilitate reentry. This paper is grounded in normalization theory. Normalization theorists believe prisons can facilitate reentry when they mirror important dimensions of outside life. The performance of multiple, contextualized identities, considered here and examined in more detail in a forthcoming article, serves as an example of how educators mirror “normal” life by facilitating the performance of different roles for prisoners on the inside.*

**Keywords:** *Discourse; identity enclosure; institutionalization; performative spaces; prisonization; labeling theory; education; stigma; politics of location; transformative intellectual.*

### Introduction

This is part one of a two-part essay that explores the particular identities of prisoners/students along with their subject positions of identification and (dis)identification within the specific institutional settings of the prison. The concept of performative spaces, adopted from Goffman’s (1959) work on identity as performance, is introduced in this paper; it is a concept that supports the fluidity of positions that prisoner-students occupy. Ideally, a performative space is a social and physical space where persons experience freedom to present or perform new identities and/or creatively reshape old ones. It is shaped by an emancipatory interest that alerts educators to the multiple constructions of identity, and implicitly, to the transformative possibilities for prisoners-as-students in everyday interactions, pedagogy and curriculum. The concept of identity enclosures conversely alerts educators to consider how, when, where and why prisons generally do not work when they attempt to transform criminal identities without recognition of the whole person.

In part two of this paper (forthcoming), I shall explore how educators intuitively and consciously resist identity enclosures. They create social spaces for prisoners to approximate normal, multiple identities typical of everyday life on the outside. I shall provide examples of ways educators like Jan Walker (2004) provide the social spaces for prisoners to assume multiple identities or roles, such as “son, father, brother, uncle, hus-

band or partner, lover, employee” (p.301).

In this essay I am most concerned with social rather than “felt” identity formation. In other words, I do not offer much by way of the prisoner’s “deeper” sense of self as a result of the institutional processes to which the prisoner is subjected. This is consistent with Goffman’s (1963/1986) work on stigma where he writes:

In this essay an attempt has been made to distinguish between social and personal identity. Both types of identity can be better understood by bracketing them together and contrasting them with what Erikson and others have called ‘ego’ or ‘felt’ identity, namely, the subjective sense of his own situation and his own continuity and character than an individual comes to obtain as a result of his various social experiences. (p. 105)

It is the plasticity or fluidity of identity that is underscored in the essay, which is also influenced by communication theorists like Adler, Rodman and Hutchinson (2012) who conflate roles and identities and thereby keep to the socially constructed “surface” of things. (p. 83) Nevertheless, there are suggestions that social identity impacts the felt identity.

Even Goffman (1963/1986) however, does not ignore some of the internal effects of negative interactions with the stigmatized who, “lacking the salutary feedback of daily social intercourse with others, the self-isolate can become suspicious, depressed, hostile, anxious, and bewildered” (p. 13). We know from our own



experience how a failed bid for identity or a failed performance of a role can have devastating consequences on one's identity and self-concept. As I argue in this essay, the imposition of a negative stigmatized role damages the felt identities of prisoners. As one prisoner notes: the "problem with prisons comes down to no recognition of your being" (cited in Rhodes, 2004, p.175). One may lose face due to a faulty performance which then influences future performances, roles, expectations—narrowing possibilities. In academia, the educator who stumbles walking into the classroom, who blanks on a lecture or whose voice cracks unexpectedly, experiences the performance as a personal tragedy. From the research we are aware, too, that when educators label and lower expectations of students (stigmatize them), students perform accordingly (Jussium, 1989).

In the forthcoming second part of this essay, I draw upon the literature related to the concept of possible selves as a concept more closely related to the felt identity of persons. Possible selves "refers to the future-oriented components of the self-concept" (Rossiter, 2007, p. 5). This term is much narrower than the ecological term *performative spaces*, where many more situational factors impacting identity formation are considered as elements of the politics of location.

### **Prison Education and The Politics of Location**

Teaching in prisons and traditional schools is alienating, isolating and exhausting work. As a result, "teachers labor in the public schools under organizational constraints and ideological conditions that leave them little time for collective work and critical pursuits." They work in "cellular structures and have few opportunities to teach with others." They "have little say of the selection, organization, and distribution of teaching materials" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 43). Little wonder, then, that teachers forget that schooling is a social and political activity occurring in "a central terrain where power and politics operate out of a dialectical relationship between individuals and groups, who function within specific historical conditions and structural constraints as well as within cultural forms and ideologies that are the basis for contradictions and struggles" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1985, p. 36). In prisons, these contradictions and struggles seem more evident because schooling is situated in a field where students are also prisoners burdened by stigma manufactured in total institutions designed to hold them against their will.

Stephen Duguid (1998), a Canadian prison educator, points out how: "One can at times talk about education abstracted from society, politics and even from schools, or at least pretend to, but in the field of prison education the context is pervasive" (p. 18). It is quite a challenge to unpack the complex, multi-layered prison school terrain but Gee (2000-2001) believes that one way to examine how schools work is to focus on student identity formation. With identity construction as the focus, researchers can unveil discourses, illuminate the dynamics of power, and reflect on pedagogy, cur-

riculum and evaluation.

Gee's work on identity can be expanded with input from critical pedagogy and feminist epistemology. According to Giroux (1994), a critical pedagogy should undertake an analysis of the ". . . the specific institutional setting in which the educational activity takes place;" and the "self-reflexivity regarding the particular identities of the educators and students who collectively undertake this activity" (p.30). The knowledge produced by this analysis is tentative, partial; "it is always already contestable and by definition is not the knowledge of the other as the other would know herself or himself" (Giroux, 1994, p. 301). This paper only offers a glimpse then, at the knowledge and experience of the prisoner in prisons. But perhaps it is a start.

Feminist epistemology similarly supports a partial knowledge based on one's social, physical, and cultural locations. Identity formation and analysis is central to developing a politics of location. Identities are shaped in myriad of ways. Identity positions involve:

. . . positionings in time and space which have specific effects and consequences, or 'politics,' that need to be analyzed and historicized. Structurally, a location is marked by parameters of social inequality such as gender, 'race', class, religion, sexuality and geopolitical location and their attending subject positions of identification and dis-identification, material conditions, privileges and feelings as well as 'conceptual resources . . . to represent and interpret these relations.'" (Lorenz-Myer, 2014, p. 2-3)

Rather than setting aside the differences between traditional and prison education programs, this paper explores the tensions—especially the positionings—that emerge in this unique setting. The most obvious tension in prison education resides in the fact that students are also prisoners; this other identity coexists with and in some cases colonizes their student identity. To deny the student's "prisoner" identity is to abstract from prison education a defining context and to render education less pertinent to prisoners. Educators must be attuned to this fact if their pedagogical and curricular efforts in the prison house are to support authentic and relevant forms of teaching grounded in the experiences of the student as Muth (2008a; 2008b) suggests. If educators hope to address the emotional needs of their students (Mageehon, 2006), or if they want to fashion positive school cultures in niches (Seymour, 1977/1992,), they must appreciate the deep and damaging existential effects of prisons on students.

Moreover, it is important for educators to understand the consequences of their educative efforts. With identity as a lens, we might shed some light on "what works" (Martinson, 1974) in education to reduce recidivism rates and facilitate reentry, a prevalent theme in the program literature (Chappell, 2004; Clements, 2004; Duguid, 1992; Duguid, 2000; Fabiano, 1991; Harer, 1995; Owens 2009; Seashore, Haberfield, Irwin & Baker, 1975; Spangenberg (2004) Steurer, Smith & Tracy, 2001; Tewksbury & Stengel, 2006; Vacca, 2004). This paper subscribes to many of the tenets of normalization theory, which states that prisons have a

better chance to rehabilitate prisoners if their experiences inside prison approximate those on the outside. Perhaps education programs facilitate reentry and lower recidivism rates because prisoners experience spaces in schools to perform multiple identities similar to those “normal” interactions on the street. Of course, educators must be vigilant regarding unintended alliances with the correctional system; they should not hollow out education (Costelloe & Warner, 2008) so it becomes a form of treatment, indoctrination or behavioral control or as Marsh (1982) notes, a partner, patsy or panacea for corrections. The prisoner’s perspective of educative programs is essential to their success. Educators must simultaneously resist assimilation by the correctional system because prisoners “will dismiss the program as yet another social therapy exercise.” On the other hand, if educators believe that all they need to do is “just teach,” they will find themselves too distant from the “social reality of the prison and prisoner and fail to provide sufficient support for the development of a cohesive, identifiable scholastic community of prisoners” (Knights, 1982, cited in Duguid, 1998, p.29). Behan (2006), for example, would have adult educators create spaces in which adults can discuss the “type of society we live in and kind of world we wish to create” (p. 6). Ignoring the social reality of prison and prisoner means that teachers will narrow their educational practices so that schooling resembles traditional forms of teaching which has not been successful for many prisoner-students in the past.

There are good moral reasons to be concerned about the effects of education on prisoners. One humanist task of prison educators is to reduce the suffering caused by prisons because they damage prisoners (Behan, 2008), their families and communities (Petersilia, 2001) in the carceral diaspora. Educators have to be wide-awake (Greene, 1978/2013) to the moral and social consequences of their pedagogy; their decisions must be grounded in what is best for the prisoner, the community, (and yes, the good order of the institution). Without a heightened awareness of the moral imperatives of their work, prison educators are

likely to drift, to act upon impulses of expediency.

They are unlikely to identify situations as moral ones or to set themselves to assessing their demands.

In such cases, it is meaningless to talk of obligations; it may be futile to speak of consequential choice. (Greene, 1978/2013, p. 206)

Again, it is important for educators to explore their own standpoints to better understand applications of their implicit philosophies of prison education. For this author, this mindfulness begins with the recognition that most of this paper is written from the perspective of a white male teacher, counselor and administrator of educational programs in adult male facilities. Readers must keep this perspective in mind as they consider my comments.

### **Goffman: Identity Formation and the Dramaturgical Model**

Goffman (1959) transformed the perspective on iden-

tity formation when he likened it to a theatrical “performance.” The term directs our attention in interactions to “. . . the verbal and the visual, words and bodies, stasis and movement, objects and space, scripts and improvisation, intention and compulsion” (Barker, 2008, p. 107). Unlike monadic (self-contained) theories of the self which consists of predetermined skills, traits and behaviors, the self is fluid, under construction, negotiated in communication with others. As communication scholars know: “Virtually all conversations provide an arena in which communicators construct their identity” (Adler, Rodman, & Hutchinson, 2012, p. 84.).

In what appears to be a light-handed way, Goffman echoed Shakespeare’s famous line in *Hamlet*: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances; And one man in his time plays many parts.” His works have endured because his understanding of the interactional processes in social life have a succinct analytic value researchers continue to explore today. In Goffman’s model of identity-as-performance, actors wear costumes and “ornaments” (such as jewelry and tattoos) that signal to others how they are to be treated (casually or with deference, male or female). Actors perform (adequately or not), in different settings such as classrooms, boardrooms, and at social gatherings, in front of various audiences like spouses, party-goers and colleagues—according to various scripts that have been worked out in advance but which are still open to novelty and improvisation. These performances are not superficial, as we know from our own experience. A failed performance (forgetting wedding vows, making errors in front of students) may lead to a loss of face and even shattered sense of self. In contrast to monadic theories of the self, this model is ecological because it considers the politics of location as instrumental to the positioning of the sense.

In the highly differentiated physical spaces of prisons, the setting is very restrictive; there is not much of a back stage or region for prisoners to be someone else at least for a moment, or to rehearse, “to prepare a face to meet the faces that they will meet” (as T.S. Eliot would have it). Total institutions, by definition, are places where all activities occur under one roof. Normal identity work outside prisons occurs in many different contexts permitting persons to prepare themselves for multiple roles fitting to various occasions. “In the course of a single day, most people play a variety of roles and assume multiple identities: respectful student, joking friend, friendly neighbor, and helpful worker, to suggest just a few. We even play a variety of roles with the same person” (Adler, Rodman, & Hutchinson, 2012, p. 83).

The prison as social and physical setting offers prisoners few resources to perform multiple identities necessary for life on the street. They must perform before a distrustful and dangerous audience, in unmanageable, sterile and Spartan settings. The accoutrements of alternate identity formation are lacking in the prisons’ homogenized environment. In everyday life, settings (offices, apartments, rooms, street numbers) and props

(lamps, chairs, color, texture) convey to others who we are (or want to be). The depersonalized, antiseptic environment with few resources is “unmanageable,” so to speak. Prison paraphernalia, concertina wire, cameras, movement passes remind and define inhabitants as prisoners, objects of surveillance, differentiation, and incapacitation, precipitating the psychological phenomena of institutionalization. In the high-surveillance, front-stage regions of the prison, an intense management of prescribed identities is the norm, especially due to intense pressure from the prisoner subculture, a phenomena described as prisonization.

Prisons are not much of a stage for impromptu roles and novel performances. The identity stripping process and public degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1956) at intake leave prisoners with few resources to perform different identities. One prisoner describes the damaging effects of the intake process and its narrowing effects on his identity: “The way we are treated when we enter prison amplifies society’s rejection. We are stripped of our personal belongings, given a number, examined, inspected, weighted, and documented” (cited in Meussling, 1984, p. 114). Another prisoner writes:

You’re an ordinary man—but something might happen tomorrow and you’d be in an institution. Would that change you into a bad person? You’d still be the same—but after you’ve had several years of everybody reminding you of what you’d done and treating you like dirt under their feet you wouldn’t be the same. (Sifakis, 2003, p. 191)

The “problem with prisons” another prisoner writes, “comes down to no recognition of your being” (cited in Rhodes, 2004, p.175). The purest form (or ideal type) of the prisoners’ lack of recognition is solitary confinement. As a metaphorical enclosure of identity, solitary is an asocial and destructive psychological space. It is truly a deprivation of others who affirm the prisoner’s presence. Human beings are social animals; to rob them of social contact is to take away their humanness, as we know from studies of “feral” children. There is too, the question of physical enclosure and its effects on identity. Prisoners have little to nothing (props, settings, costume), in their cell to manage. In theatrical terms, solitary is a soliloquy that confronts prisoners with the existential question: “To be or not to be?”

### Performative Spaces

Ideally a performative space is a social and physical space where persons experience freedom to present or perform new identities and/or creatively reshape old ones. It is a space where identities are (relatively) fluid, at play, negotiable, unstable. It is an interactive social and physical space where identities are relatively unissued, problematic—requiring negotiation—rather than stereotyped or taken-for-granted. Performative spaces are likely to appear physical and cultural spaces, like borderland cities between nations, where identities and norms, cultures, practices, geographies and knowledges express the “in-betweenness” of experience. The prison visiting room is a liminal social and physical space of “in-betweenness” where prisoners experience some dis-

tance from their institutional identities (a process of identity fission), to temporarily perform as fathers, mothers or brothers. Often prisoners doing short time (between incarceration and release), “act” differently, and become model prisoners. They try to avoid illicit activities that might postpone release dates. Recently arrived prisoners (or “fish”) experience liminal tensions between their previous street identity and their novel prison identities narrowed by prison hierarchies of class, race, gender, norms, cultures and emotional climates in a process of identity fusion. Parole centers and day reporting centers are also liminal temporal sites where trajectories of past and present identities intersect.

Educators, intuitively at least, appreciate how ceremonies provide opportunities for everyone to construct new identities. Prisoners/students attending a graduation ceremony (that distinguishes the past from the present and future), enjoy the performative space that comes from being recognized as more than just a prisoner. They are offered a temporary setting (a stage or more often, the front of a classroom), and awarded legitimating documents such as diplomas and certificates. Their new identities are lauded in testimonials by teachers and students. The families’ presence at the ceremony magnifies the performative space, contributing to the definition of the situation as a normal activity affiliated with the outside; the ceremony shrouds the graduate in identities such as father, son, daughter, mother (another example of identity fusion), at least temporarily.

While identities are shaped by space and time, dialogue is the home for identity formation. “Virtually all conversations provide an arena in which communicators construct their identity” (Adler, Rodman, & Hutchinson, 2012, p.84.). While all conversations consist of identity work, some conversations highlight identities so that “identity conversations” occur. Identity work is a collaborative activity: “Identity-related communication is a kind of process theater in which we collaborate with other actors to improvise scenes in which our characters mesh” (Adler, Rodman, & Hutchinson, 2012, p. 83). Conversations with others about identity are potentially positive transformative activities that shape self-concept and lead persons “to create self-fulfilling prophecies that determine how we behave and how others respond to us” (Adler & Rodman, 2009, p.63).

Educators intuitively and consciously resist identity enclosures; they create spaces for prisoners to approximate normal, multiple identities found in everyday life on the outside. In part two of this paper (forthcoming) I will provide examples to support this argument. For the moment, I hope the single example of Jan Walker (2004), a seasoned correctional educator, will suffice. She challenges the prisoners in her class to break the confines of their narrow identities as prisoners and consider other possible (subject) positions. She describes the first few days of her program in social responsibility at McNeil Island:

We started Monday morning with a session on roles,

rules and individual responsibility. Someone always said: "Roles? We're inmates, that our role." Generally they said 'fucking inmates,' and 'fucking role,' to which I'd raise my eyebrow before saying: 'And students,' thus provoking the first argument of the day. Not all of them saw themselves as students, even though they'd signed a Pierce College registration form and wanted the promised certificate of completion and course credits from the program. We built a list from there. Son, father, brother, uncle, husband or partner, lover, employee—the list went on (p. 30).

Normalization theorists believe that prisons facilitate reentry when prisoners can be in touch with "normal" interactions and lifestyles in the community (Harer, 1975) so there is some evidence here to support how education programs engage prisoner/students in the reidentification process associated with normal identities and behaviors. The transformative nature of Walker's comment becomes clearer when contrasted with the deleterious effects of institutionalization and prisonization on prisoner's identities examined in the next section.

### **Institutionalization and Prisonization as Enclosures**

From time to time educators say that their students are not motivated. There is little doubt that sometimes they are not. However, some of the problem lies not in their character but because prisons rob prisoner-students of agency - a belief that they can take control of their lives. At intake, the prisoners' civic identities are stripped away to better manage prisoners as anonymous and interchangeable parts in the prison machinery (Goffman, 1970). Institutional talk—like "count", "lock-up" and "feeding" time are part of the process where prisoners are transformed from subjects into objects of the institutional machinery. The surveillance apparatus establishes I-It relations between keeper and kept. The prisoner's dossier furthers the objectifying process and narrows identity to criminogenic factors. The prisoner's biography "becomes an object for intense study" (Goffman, 1970, p. 62) for the purpose of intervention and control. Prisoners-students internalize these debilitating systems of the self, undergoing institutionalization, a psychological syndrome

. . . characterized by apathy, lethargy, passivity, and the muting of self-initiative, compliance and submissiveness, dependence on institutional structure and contingencies, social withdrawal and isolation, an internalization of the norms of institutional culture, and a diminished sense of self-worth and personal value. (Johnson & Rhodes, 2007, p. 226)

Prisonization, like institutionalization, can be understood as a social process that narrows opportunities to perform differently. The term refers to the "mindset among convicts that they must defend themselves to the death or face becoming a victim. It is clearly a code of conduct that is verbalized one way or another among many prison inmates" (Sifakis, 2003, p.199). It describes how prisoners adapt to life in prisons and adopt a prison identity "by forming their own informal com-

munities, networks of power, and cultural identifications" (O'Brien, 1998, p.185).

The prisonization perspective reminds us that there is no "backstage" for prisoners to be out of character and no reprieve from the prisoner subculture with its dynamics of threat and self-defense. The private becomes public in the most inhospitable ways. Seasoned prisoners, unlike newcomers, are "toilet trained" to use a "leg in, leg out" as a life-saving technique:

An inmate must be alert for an attack at all times. Killers know that the best time to catch an inmate off guard is when he or she is sitting on the toilet in his or her cell. . . . The most important survival tack is for an inmate to sit on the toilet with one leg completely free of clothes. Thus, he or she at least can jump up and defend him or herself. If, however, both legs are in clothes, the inmate will trip when it is a surprise attack and, helpless on the floor, make an even easier target for a deadly knife onslaught. (Sifakis, 2003, p.260)

Newly-arrived prisoners, immediately entangled in the dynamics of prisonization, waste little time fashioning a prison identity (Carceral, 2004) to fit into the prisoner culture. In their bids for collective approval from other inmates, prisoners "appropriate, distort and recast the values of the prison and disciplinary society" (O'Brien, 1998, p.185) adopting coded vocabularies, acquiring tattoos, and participating in social networks based on homosexual relations. To be a member of this oppositional culture, prisoners are expected to participate in internal social movements like riots and strikes, to resist cell extractions and to offer other prisoners at least a "show" of resistance to the system.

Prisonization is supported by the deprivations common in prisons. Membership in the prisoner collective includes systematically distorted interactions with other prisoners along lines of respect, power, bravado, and physical force (O'Brien 1998, p.184). These interactions are the "natural" outcome of the few resources described such as the loss of liberty, goods and services, heterosexual relationships, autonomy, and personal security (Skyles, 1958/1970). Prisonization and deprivation have equal effects on identity because these cultural factors offer prisoners few institutional resources to perform different and nuanced identities. Even shows of resistance and attempts at opposition reproduce the dominant institutional discourse and its construction of prisoner identities:

. . . the prisoner vigorously takes up, argues, uses and contests the issues and forces bearing down on him, protesting against the assumption he is a gang member, comparing himself to 'worse' inmates, describing how his own behavior has differed depending on context, making careful distinctions among correctional workers, and writing a letter of protest to the superintendent. He responds to the fact that classification is both a set of rules that governs the sorting of inmates and a space of negotiation in which a variety of assumptions about learning and behavior are in play. . . . Issues of self-defense, rules about gang affiliation, efforts to avoid damaging

jackets, and punishment are all on the table. On the table also is psychiatry, for whatever its diagnostic categories may mean outside prison, inside they provide an additional way to make sense of how the prisoner 'carries himself'. (Rhodes, 2004, pp. 138-9)

There is little doubt, then, that prisoners as students are far from being "blank slates" that we can rewrite with traditional education. They are complex, nuanced human beings, their identities striated by institutional practices, grated by policies and shaped by the material of confinement. In the next section I consider in more detail how identities are enclosed by institutional discourses that circumscribe prisoner performances by citing examples from a correctional website. Though I present a few examples, these limited case studies typify these officers's particular acerbic attitude towards prisoners and its negative effects on their identity as persons. The section illustrates how stigma is produced and circulated by some officers and other prison staff and it suggests one reason why prisons do not work.

#### **Data: Officer Discourses as Enclosures**

Discourse theory adopts a deterministic view of sign systems and language so that the distinction between signifier and signified is blurred. Sign systems (broadly defined) are not only "groups of signs referring to content or representation, but as practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Cannella, 1999, p. 38). Discourses produce "truths" about reality. They provide frameworks that construct identities, so that one is "recognized as a certain kind of person" (Gee, 2000-2001, p.99) and not someone else.

What gives these [discursive] formations their structuring quality are the particular conditions which made and still made them possible. These 'rules of formation of a discursive formation' include, so far as the objects they allow to be addressed are concerned, each of the following: the social or institutional contexts they allow to be addressed are concerned, often as the loci or sources of concern of some kind; the social identities of those who have or gain authority to pronounce on such problems and their causes; and the 'grids of specification', the intellectual templates so to speak, which are used to separate off the particular objects of concern from the many others with which each is intertwined with reality (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 182).

The officers, supported by the institutional apparatus, have the power to determine the "kind of person" a prisoner is and is not, through discourses that establish, reflect or perpetuate power differences between actors. Samples of officer discourses from a correctional website (Corrections ezine) are provided to illustrate how prisoner identities can be narrowed and enclosed. Prisons produce stigma in discourses that reduce persons "from a complex whole, to a single, tainted and discounted trait upon which all social interaction with the person will be based" (Edgar & Sedwick, 1999, p.181). We "... believe that someone with a stigma is not quite human" (Goffman, 1963/1986, p.5).

In defense of the correctional officer, I want to be

clear that I am not trying to villainize them because I have always appreciated their support in the many prisons I taught and consulted. I would not like to go into a prison where the officers did not take their jobs seriously. My interest in the officer blogs is to examine how discourses are produced and shared: The officer's views are not simply their own, but are those immersed in the circulating discourse. I empathize with officers, whose job I could not and would not do. I also do not mean to romanticize prisoners, for after all, they had committed some heinous crimes against innocent people. I am interested in the positionings that occur in prisons and how they situate educational programs. I recognize there are many occupational hazards associated with being a correctional officer. Due to their location in the prison apparatus, officers must ultimately be concerned with control. The construction of prisoner types, the reduction of prisoners to their (universally shared) depraved, predacious natures, the reliance on the dossier, and the need to simply do their job of protection, surveillance and incapacitation, while remaining safe, create highly stressful situations. As a result, empathy and compassion towards prisoners from officers that might lead to transformative dialogues are absent as officers, out of necessity, lock up emotions to do their job (Tracey, 2005). As I illustrate in a moment, prisoners have their own narrow views of the officers, trapped as they are in their own discourses.

The blogs by prison staff on one correctional website establish multiple, negative identities for prisoners that can be lumped under the general theme that they are, as stigma theory suggests, not quite human. The animal-like nature of prisoners is established in pictures and texts on the site. One article includes pictures of a lion tamer (presumably an officer), wielding a whip, trying to subdue one of the four lions (the prisoners) in a cage. This article is written by one of the most frequent contributors to the correctional website, Carl Toersbijns, described as someone who has "worked in corrections for over 25 yrs, and held positions of a Correctional Officer I, II, III [Captain], the Chief of Security, the Program Director of the Mental Health Treatment Center, and both the Associate Warden and Deputy Warden of Administration & Operations."

Discourses "separate particular objects of concern from others" in reality (Scott & Marshall, 2009, p. 182). In Toersbijns' article, the object of concern that is highlighted is the prisoner's identity. His effort exemplifies the dividing practices of a discourse. It separates the prisoner from "the community." His discourse makes strong truth claims—disparaging the media and fictional versions of the criminal—to position the author and other officers as those who have the right to make pronouncements about others. Discourses identify sources of concern that require resolution; in this case the text is a petition to the correctional audience to grant more power and authority to officers to impose greater institutional order. With an apology to readers, I quote his article titled "Predacious Environments" at length. (Grammatical and spelling errors are in the original text.)

Prisons have spawned many different types of predacious species from within. Many of our incarcerated prisoners are eventually released and learn to wander among those in the communities while mankind has no idea what has happened to them while they were incarcerated within the predacious environments that exist inside penitentiaries. Society should disregard television, movie and other sources as they are likely to be folklore created falsehoods and fictions that are filled with numerous contradictions and lies. Such are the conditions that exist within the walls of concrete and steel and where sunlight has to struggle around so much darkness. Two species are never exactly the same. Each have their own unique qualities and predatory behaviors. Officers are aware that what works for one may not work for another. Some are more venomous than others and although some don't appear to use venom to subdue their prey, it does not mean they aren't capable of inflicting the kind of pain and harm as those that openly display their powers. There are many patterns of behaviors that must be taken into consideration. These range from mastering the art of mental manipulation to pure physical bullying at times by blunt force and other times by coercive persuasion. Regardless of will or mind, they all fall victim to predacious behaviors and become predatory themselves. Most follow their prey from the shadows anticipating an opportunity to strike or advance their purpose another step closer to the ultimate kill or objective. Their patterns are indicative of the subtle movements that can strike silently and swiftly like a Cobra or crush you like the jaws of a Great White pummeling you to your demise. Either way, you will experience excruciating pain if not death. Time has revealed the different methods of assassinations used inside the prisons. Mankind has not yet fully understood the impact or the dangers as they have willfully ignored the warnings on the walls for decades. Neglect of funding and staffing has exasperated the situation. Politicians have long ignored the status quo that is creating a toxic and harsh condition inside the penitentiaries and seek no oversight or accountability. Since filling up these prisons with violent men or women, individuals must adapt and survive by breaking away from society's rules. The way we think mankind ought to behave while incarcerated has been altered by the venoms around them. Metaphorically chained to the walls for their crimes committed and **castaways they are no longer considered humans** [emphasis mine] but rather, predacious creatures that prey on others to survive. Perhaps the most ultimate paradox is how these monsters are created and when released walk among the most common members of our families and society. Expecting rehabilitation they are thrown in with the worst of the worst to become not only more criminal in their minds and intent but predatory enough to engage in new behaviors not sought before they were imprisoned. Such is the world where only the strong survive and reap the

goods that are available within the walls and make a living off others selling drugs, bartering goods or getting high or stoned. It is no wonder that gangs are prospering off the basic needs of others. It has become a capitalistic venture of supply and demand. Correctional officers have learned how to understand this complex evolution and revolution of these incarcerated persons. They have increased their knowledge how to deal with these kinds of predators although violence against them has increased dramatically and their behaviors have been bizarre to say the least. Officers can offer insights but are often kept quiet due to the code of silence. Needless to say this fosters more myths and folklores as the truth is rarely told and the questions never asked. It's time to open up the box and reveal just how bad our prisons have become in the last twenty years and how this complex situation can be redeemed and in contrast to any romantic notions of the prisoner as rebel that the public might have (and some educators share) altered back to restore human dignity and an enigma kind of lawful order (12/23/2013, n.p).

#### “Us vs. Them”

Discourses serve many functions. They are particularly powerful when they parse, for example, the sane from the mad, males from female, and normal (or acceptable behavior), from abnormal behavior. Identities for both prisoners and officers are enclosed and stabilized by institutional scripts or discourses that leave little room for meaningful dialogic encounters where reciprocal and transformative influences occur (Goffman, 1959), or for the “kind of process theater” to collaborate “with other actors to improvise scenes in which our characters mesh” (Adler & Rodman, 2012, p. 83).

Both officers and prisoners are burdened by a “social identity” that limits their performances of self to “membership of and identification with social categories, e.g. race, gender, religion, occupation, and which are made salient in contexts where those social categories assume importance” (Jary & Jary, 1995, p. 609). Both officer and prisoner cultures “place a high value on group cohesion among themselves, while at the same time, viewing the ‘other’ as an opponent or rival” (Carceral, 2004, p. 123). These cultures are undergirded by social norms of in-group solidarity “versus all outside groups” (Carceral, 2004, p. 123.) The officer culture for example, is grounded in norms such as “never make a fellow officer look bad in front of inmates; always support an officer in a dispute with an inmate; always support officer sanctions against inmates. . . maintain officer solidarity versus all outside groups. . .” (p. 123). These social norms deny meaningful interactions where alternate identities are considered.

In their adherence to cultural norms of their in-group, prisoners and officers build identities that are defined, in part, by the difference from the other so that each “. . . grouping tends to conceive of the other in terms of narrow hostile stereotypes, staff often seeing inmates as



bitter, secretive, and untrustworthy, while inmates often see staff as condescending, highhanded, and mean. Staff tends to feel superior and righteous; inmates tend, in some ways at least, to feel inferior, weak, blameworthy and guilty" (Goffman, 1961/1970, p. 7).

The keepers and the kept are at constant war with one another, so it is unlikely there is much performative space for either group to (re)negotiate identities. Both groups learn to keep their social distance or feelings of "aloofness and unapproachability" towards others in socially stratified institutions and societies (Jary & Jary, 1995, p. 608). Prisoners dehumanize officers and make them into objects of fury and contempt (Dube, 2002), while officers position prisoners within discourses and practices that dehumanize and stereotype. Both prisoners and officers are trapped in a cynical interactional game with roles encumbered by the institutional dynamic of power, surveillance and control so that trust is very scarce. When prisoners attempt to break out of stereotyped roles, officers respond with wariness and skepticism, viewing their efforts as further evidence that prisoners are manipulative, strategic game-players (Allen & Bosta, 2002). Officers are quick to remind educators that their "students" "real" behavior is evident in the cell blocks; in schools, teachers just are duped by prisoners.

Bedore's (9/23/2013) blog: "Us vs. Them & Surviving Violent Encounters," offers evidence of the limits of interactions between officers and prisoners. A controversial topic must first be examined. It is what has been termed the "Us versus Them" perception toward staff and inmates. It is a question that often times comes up in recruitment interviews more or less to determine a candidate's ability to be impartial and non judgmental toward the evils some offenders might have done to society that resulted in their incarceration. 'Uh I don't think there is any difference between us and them', is what the interviewer is basically looking for in order for the candidate to get favorable results in the job interview. That's fine I guess for demonstrating the ability to become a professional minded correctional officer in a job interview, but that's where this socially accepted naivety must take a sharp impasse in the learning curve of prison survival. Once you find yourself working, things require an adjustment in order for officers to survive. The context of us versus them must seriously take on some reconsideration."

Most of us can hardly imagine the difficulties that prisoners (and indeed officers), encounter when trying to perform different identities. It goes without saying that that prisons are low-trust environments and officers unreceptive "audiences"—stingy with their applause for just about everyone who sets foot in prison. The scripts of keeper and kept have been well rehearsed over the years, so performances are stale and brittle. Prisoners are typecast, their identities spoiled in advance, the course of the interaction limited and prescribed, so that few opportunities exist for the prisoner to present, proclaim or reclaim different identities.

Fluid negotiations and presentations of self are restricted, circumscribed conceptually, bureaucratically and interactively.

### Concluding Remarks: Identities, Education and Reentry

Successful or unsuccessful performances are collaborative activities between actors and audiences. Successful performances occur when audiences understand, appreciate and accept the performance as credible. Unsuccessful performances occur when actors present identities that are novel, inappropriate or improbable for the person, audience, and/or setting, or for roles that are incompatible for the well-known scripts associated with the occasion (Goffman, 1959). Someone trying to perform stand-up comedy at a funeral is a good example of audiences and roles that do not mesh (and how the absurd creeps into everyday life). Enclosed by institutional discourses, prisoners and officers have few opportunities to negotiate novel, alternate identities in interactions.

The critical concept of performative spaces needs further application to appreciate how educators are transforming prisoner identities into prosocial ones, and/or how this identity work facilitates entry. Some applied research would be useful to describe in more detail the identity conversations between teachers and students: How, when, where do they occur? How often, with what effects? Who initiates the conversation, and who terminates the sequence—for what reason? Other pedagogical questions arise once we focus on identity-formation in prison schools. Questions such as how does prison education pedagogy position educators and students so that some identities are circumscribed or enclosed, while others flourish? Is the teacher a sage on stage, or a facilitator who empowers students by sharing responsibility for learning? What evaluation schema are employed in the classroom and how do these determinations of important "knowledge to be known," contribute to the recognition, or not, of students—of their cultural identities, heritage and their contributions to western culture? Do the content, method and evaluative schema reflect the "in-betweenness" (Wilson, 2005) of the prisoner who is also a student, of the prison school on the border of the prison . . . and so on?

The link between education and lower recidivism rates may have something to do with the fact that teachers intuitively and decisively resist the narrowing effects of prison on prisoner identities. They challenge the dehumanizing effects of stigma embedded in prison discourses and practices, evident in the officer's discourses; for example, since after all, most believe that prisoners are people too (Warner, 1998; Scudder, 1952/1968). In part two of this paper, I explore the identity work of teachers in more detail, as they offer up various identities to students for negotiation. I consider in more detail the issue of prisoner reentry, drawing upon the criminological literature and its relationship to the concept of possible selves. I argue that educators play the critical function of the boundary spanner

(Pettus, 2006), and thus facilitate prisoner reentry. I also argue that prison school borderland cultures between officers and prisoners facilitate the practice of multiple identities.

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REFEREED ARTICLE

# A Prisoners' Island: Teaching Australian Incarcerated Students in the Digital Age

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## Abstract

*While incarcerated students have always faced many obstacles to full and effective participation in university study, the global shift toward paperless e-learning environments has created new challenges for prisoners without direct internet access. Based on prison focus groups with Australian incarcerated students and direct participant observation while tutoring tertiary students within four Queensland correctional centres, this paper explores the obstacles and constraints faced by incarcerated students in light of the increasing digitisation of materials and methods in higher education. This paper also reviews the outcomes, limitations and challenges of recent Australian projects trialling new internet-independent technologies developed to improve access for incarcerated tertiary students. This paper argues that technology-centred approaches alone will not adequately address the challenges of access for incarcerated students unless such interventions are also informed by an understanding of the sociocultural nature of learning and teaching within correctional centres.*

**Keywords:** *Incarcerated students; tertiary preparation; distance learning; digital inclusion.*

## Introduction: Doing Time Disconnected

Higher education in Australia has seen a radical shift over the past ten years toward digital, online teaching and learning management systems. Moreover, in recent years Australian universities have moved from technology-enhanced delivery to technology-centred delivery models, not only to promote economic efficiencies but supposedly to promote a more open, flexible and accessible learning environment. The University of Southern Queensland (USQ), which has a long history in the provision of distance education for incarcerated students, has set a deadline of early 2015 to transfer all learning objects to paperless, digital and online only delivery. This digital shift away from the traditional and expensive practice of posting printed course materials has, however, produced some unintended effects for economically and geographically disadvantaged students. The majority of incarcerated students in Australia still have no direct access to the internet and they remain, perhaps, the most marginalised and under-represented group in Australian tertiary education (Huijser, Bedford & Bull, 2008). While they often succeed in tertiary study, despite considerable constraints and typically low levels of secondary school attainment, prisoners remain the disconnected, invisible and silent members of the much valorized online student communities of contemporary higher education. Despite concerted attempts by Australian governments to address equity and access issues in Australian higher education over the past decade, including the national equity policy framework, little progress has been made

for incarcerated students who are also typically from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

As Australian and international research has suggested, criminal 'justice' reproduces an inherent class bias and prisons are overwhelmingly populated by the poor, the marginalised, the unemployed, the uneducated and the inheritors of extreme socioeconomic disadvantage (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Reiman & Leighton, 2010; White & Perrone, 1997; White & Graham, 2010; Vinson, 2004; Vinson, 2007). In some cases the digitisation of tertiary education has inadvertently exacerbated the social and cultural isolation of incarcerated students. Moreover, while both public and private Australian prisons support education in principle as a pathway to self directed rehabilitation, in practice the overriding emphasis on security and community safety prevents inmates from accessing the internet, social media and email. Access to computer hardware and storage media is also problematic, especially for 'protection' prisoners in very high security environments. Against a wider political backdrop of economic rationalist imperatives of doing more with less and utilitarian, instrumental priorities of building basic skills, some incarcerated tertiary students may not be permitted to study full time and those who do study must rely on increasingly over worked Education Officers to access information on their behalf (Huijser, Bedford & Bull, 2008; White & Perrone, 1997). As White and Perrone (1997, pp. 213-214) suggest, while Australian corrective services generally support progressive programs in principle, on the ground they tend



to run into the uncomfortable realities of cost cutting, lack of staff and security issues. Moreover, while access to technology mediated learning varies greatly across the nation's six states, two territories and one hundred correctional centres, Australian incarcerated tertiary students as a group are routinely denied even the minimum standards of communication promised by the open and inclusive Digital University.

This paper aims to bring these complexities and contradictions to light with a particular focus on projects initiated by the University of Southern Queensland trialling internet alternatives and digital resources in Queensland correctional centres. Teaching incarcerated tertiary students in particular unearths underlying tensions in contemporary higher education and challenges traditional assumptions about digital and social inclusion, participation and access.

### **Whose Rehabilitation: Methodology and Theories**

This paper is based on the researchers' direct experiences of tutoring incarcerated University of Southern Queensland (USQ) Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) students inside Australian prisons over a two year period while trialling new mobile e-learning technologies and digital resources such as handheld eBook readers (eReaders) and Stand Alone Moodle (SAM) internet simulations loaded with USQ TPP course content and readings. In order to make sense of the layers of social, cultural and political complexities and contradictions surrounding contemporary Australian prison education, qualitative research methods were selected. The study involved 74 incarcerated participants studying a tertiary preparation or bridging program within five prisons in Queensland, Australia. Data sources for this study were five sixty minute audio taped focus group interviews with incarcerated students enrolled in the University of Southern Queensland's Tertiary Preparation Program and regular fortnightly field notes from direct participant observation while visiting and teaching USQ TPP students face to face in four of the five targeted Queensland correctional centres. Tertiary Preparation Program students were also encouraged to keep a regular study journal for the purpose of reflecting on their study experiences including their goal setting, time management and obstacles and constraints they encountered while completing the program. Rights to withdraw without penalty, confidentiality and anonymity were provided to all participants and permission was sought to record the focus group discussions, which addressed the students' experiences of tertiary education generally and use of trial learning technologies in particular.

This data was interpreted in the light of sociocultural theories of learning as it soon became evident emerging problems and project pitfalls were related not just to the level of technical competence of users and technological issues with failing eReader devices, but rather were intertwined with the social, cultural and affective climate of Australian correctional centres. Sociocultural theories recognise that social interaction is fundamental

to effective teaching and learning (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985; Northedge, 2003) even and especially in the context of electronic learning environments (Warschauer, 1998; Hung & Yuen, 2010). Hence quality policies, projects and programs must cultivate critical awareness of contextual factors and the influence of sociocultural variables on teaching and learning (Warschauer, 1998; Hung & Yuen, 2010). Moreover, the actual use of technologies in any education context will inevitably be constrained by sociocultural factors such as the culture of the institution, the beliefs and attitude of staff and the overriding role of the institution (or prison) in social reproduction and control (Warschauer, 1998). Similarly, whereas more instrumental, technocratic and traditional approaches to prison education assume it is the individual prisoner/student that must be rehabilitated, a sociocultural approach suggests it may be the wider social and cultural environment that is in need of reform. Following Luke (2003) and his application of Freire's (1970) insights into how systems of representation reflect economic and social power, this paper suggests prison education is also a necessarily political matter. As a result, pedagogical and technological interventions and 'solutions' must not only use contextual and sociocultural data and analysis, but recognise the speaking positions of marginalised groups who are, in their own way, 'talking back against power' (Luke 2003, p. 133).

As both academic researchers and active participants in the teaching and learning process with incarcerated students, we quickly learned that if we wanted to facilitate authentic digital inclusion we would need to do more than distribute mobile learning devices and provide training in ICT skills. We would need to listen to the stories students wanted to tell, allow incarcerated students a voice for relaying their experiences and reflect on the common themes that emerged about the unique problems incarcerated students deal with on a daily basis - problems that define and delimit the most innovative and well intentioned of technological interventions. Following the insights of critical pedagogies (Luke 2003; Freire 1970), we believe it is important to give voice to students and recognise the themes and issues the students themselves have identified as important. This is especially critical for incarcerated students who are unavoidably absent from online discussion forums and surveys and remain the silent and invisible 'other' in much mainstream education research. In the main, the incarcerated students in our study were highly motivated to be heard and to educate us about the conditions under which they study. Overall they proved articulate and insightful observers of their own learning experiences and environment. The issues that rose to the surface of focus group discussions and of everyday teaching and learning were not technocratic concerns or rationalizations but rather very human questions of identity, personal history, subjective experiences, social connectivity and being 'seen' as a 'person'. Hence this paper is not about technology *per se* or even access to technology alone, but rather re-

views the limitations of new learning technologies in the social, cultural, political and invariably human environment of the prison.

### **Project Background: Incarcerated Students and Internet Alternatives**

In order to address the increasing diversity of student cohorts and the needs of isolated and incarcerated students in particular, the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) has recently developed internet-independent digital learning technologies that allow students to access a modified version of the university's electronic learning management system without accessing the internet. The University of Southern Queensland's Australian Digital Futures Institute (ADFI) and USQ's Open Access College (OAC) are working in partnerships with Queensland Corrective Services (QCS) and Serco Asia Pacific, operators of Southern Queensland Correctional Centre (SQCC), in the ongoing development and deployment of new mobile learning technologies, trialling handheld eBook readers (or eReaders) and Stand Alone Moodle (SAM) internet simulations to improve access and develop digital literacy skills for incarcerated students. In 2013 USQ course materials including study books and course readings were loaded onto 47 eBook readers distributed to five Queensland Correctional Centres and a version of the 'Study Desk' (USQ's online learning management system) was installed on the SQCC education server each semester across 2012/2013/2014. The course selected for use during the ongoing trial of these e-learning technologies in prisons was TPP7120 *Studying to Succeed* from the University of Southern Queensland's Open Access College Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP).

### **Project Background: The Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP)**

The USQ OAC Tertiary Preparation Program (TPP) specifically targets low socioeconomic status groups disadvantaged by both social and economic positioning and by the Australian tertiary entrance system of competitive ranking. The TPP is essentially a second chance program founded in the belief that tertiary entrance scores do not necessarily measure merit or potential and tertiary preparedness can be provided through bridging programs and alternative pathways. Successful completion of the TPP provides guaranteed entry to USQ undergraduate programs and to many other programs offered by Australian universities. For incarcerated students in particular, who are typically early school leavers with poor levels of formal education, the tertiary preparation program is not merely an alternative pathway to a degree but also an opportunity to chart a new life course:

I never passed year 8 so I want to use my time wisely in jail. And get better qualified when I get out. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

I went off the rails a bit when I lost my job and then lost my Mrs. It all went downhill. I was drinking too much and trashed the local cop car. I got pinched

and then I got parole. I was working but once they found out I was on parole they sacked me. I've been for a few interviews but there's no job once you say you're on parole. It's more about money than anything else. It all comes down to money at the end of it. When I finish the TPP I'm going to study Business. I want to run my own business and my own life and be my own boss this time. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

At night I can't study because I have really heavy medication but I usually study in the afternoon. I've got my own cell. It's quiet and when I can sit down and concentrate on what I'm doing I quite enjoy it. I found it as an opportunity to redeem myself with my education. I really enjoy learning again. (incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013)

I find that keeping myself busy and my mind active helps me to keep myself focused on my future. I find studying is giving me the necessary skills to overcome this problem by boosting my self-esteem and by giving me my self-worth but while in solitary confinement I had no access to my study materials and have fallen behind. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2012)

The pedagogical framework of the TPP supports the development of the individual as a self-managing student who takes responsibility for his or her own learning, sets and achieves personal life goals and develops a coherent life plan (Huijser, Bedford & Bull, 2008). The program, which includes a careers development component, aims to develop not only essential academic skills but also the social and cultural capital, self-esteem, confidence and motivation, necessary for tertiary study success. Partly as a result, the TPP bridging program has had considerable success in attracting incarcerated students and enrolls in excess of 200 inmates each year across 56 correctional centres throughout Australia. There are also currently over 100 incarcerated distance education students enrolled in degree level study (principally in Business, Engineering, Arts and Human Services) at USQ, with the majority gaining direct access to their undergraduate program through completion of the TPP pathway. Prison enrolment numbers in the USQ TPP continue to grow, especially in New South Wales and Victoria. Since 1989 the Tertiary Preparation Program has been offered as a print-based course for incarcerated students who are provided with hard copies of all study materials free of charge. Unfortunately, however, many of the tertiary undergraduate courses they wish to enter upon successful completion of the TPP program are now almost entirely online and cannot be completed without access to the Internet. Against this backdrop of increasing digitisation of tertiary programs, prison education runs the risk of being once again relegated to isolationism and disconnection.

### **A Prisoners' Island: The Cost of Isolationism**

There is a long-standing colloquialism that encapsulates the sociocultural perspective on life and learning: 'No man is an island.' In other words, all men and

women are determined or at least shaped by social interaction, sociocultural variables and their social and cultural environment. Certainly, in this contemporary digital age of time-space compression delivered by new communication technologies, most of the developed world's population has never been so well connected in a multiplicity of ways. As Castells (2004) has pointed out, we are living in the twenty-first century 'Network society' whose power relations work on a binary logic of inclusion and exclusion. It follows, the powerless underclass in such an environment are invariably marked and profoundly affected by isolation, exclusion and disconnection; a truly cohesive and inclusive society must facilitate connectivity, cooperation and engagement through virtual networks for the most marginalised communities, including the incarcerated.

Australia, settled as a British prison island in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, has new national identities today shaped by the global flow of information and culture and new forms of social organisation built on the accumulation of contacts and capital through digital networks. The Australian prison, however, is still a metaphorical 'island' in the sense that the incarcerated are currently cut off from the fast paced mediated network of information and social exchange accessed by the rest of the population. Currently there are 30,775 prisoners held in Australian correctional centres, (with incarceration rates on the rise, especially for women and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples) and the vast majority come from backgrounds of low family income, lack of post-school qualifications, limited education, and limited computer use/internet access (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2013; Vinson, 2007; Vinson, 2004; White & Perrone, 1997; White & Graham, 2010). As Huijser, Bedford and Bull (2008) have pointed out, most prisoners in Australia enter the prison with a low level of social capital relevant to the rest of the population and this social marginalisation is exacerbated by the period of ICT disconnection during incarceration, which for most prisoners is at least two years. Moreover, this social and cultural isolation in turn increases the likelihood of further alienation, unemployment, poverty and recidivism or reoffending (Huijser, Bedford & Bull, 2008; Reiman & Leighton, 2010). While incarcerated, offenders are literally and metaphorically 'disconnected' from the digital society and economy and subsequently are not adequately prepared for productive and engaged digital citizenship upon their release.

The incarcerated USQ TPP students who participated in this e-learning trial were acutely aware that it is part of their punishment to be cut off, without access to 'smart' phones, tablets or other internet enabled mobile devices, from the networked online and instant communication of the contemporary, digital or (post)modern world. Indeed their sense that the social and cultural world was moving on without them was one of the most frequently mentioned 'pains' of their imprisonment. In our 'enlightened' networked digital age, this enforced social and cultural isolation is perhaps the most severe and debilitating of punishments:

It's so hard to plan ahead in here. At home you can just jump on the net and you're there. Its information I crave in here. (incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013)

Do you know what the first thing I'm going to do when I get out of here? Check my email and face book! (incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013)

I like getting on the computer and searching when I do research. In here I found the information limited in books. It would be a lot easier to study if I had the internet to search. It gives you a lot more information. There's only a limited number of computers and its hard trying to get access to computers. It really is an access issue - access to information and access to help. When I did TPP last time outside I was working as a carpenter and I did it at night. I used to email somebody if I got stuck. You could email the tutors and there was the online forum where students could chat to each other. It's a lot more difficult to study inside, trying to find time when you can study and getting motivated in that time. It's more difficult to stay motivated here than outside. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

As higher education researchers (Watts, 2010; Pike & Adams, 2012; MacGuinness, 2000) in the UK have pointed out, education is often a 'lifeline' or survival strategy which enables student-inmates to cope with the 'pains,' or subjective experiences of imprisonment. In prison, education does much more than improve employability; it is a valuable tool to deal with time, isolation, psychological instability and the loss of personal autonomy (MacGuinness, 2000; Watts, 2010; Pike & Adams, 2012). In this study, USQ TPP incarcerated students frequently disclosed the emotional hurdles and experiences of depression, detachment, victimisation and apathy that had, at times, derailed their study schedules:

The mental aspect. The loss. You think about how it's going to impact your life. You try to stay positive. But you wake up and you're still here. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2014).

Prison is a waste of time. With education at least you can say you've done something with your time. But there's no real reform or reprogramming. You're just locked away. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2014)

In the artificial, closed or 'total' institution of the prison, inmates lose the capacity to manage their own space and time subject to the institutional operational priorities of security, regulation and control through isolation (Goffman, 1990; Wilson & Reuss, 2000; Reuss, 2000; Watts, 2010; Pike & Adams, 2012). This dehumanising process is at odds both with education programs such as the TPP which aim to develop the student's autonomy, self-management and self-determination and with the modern correctional system's own aims of facilitating self-development and rehabilitation. International research suggests more complete rehabilitation, which moves subjects from passive prisoners to active empowered agents, may require providing prisoners with more responsibility,

choices and a limited degree of internet access for employment services and e-learning (Axelsson, 2013; Pike & Adams, 2012). In the United Kingdom, internally networked 'closed internet' learning management systems have been recently trialled to simulate a 'virtual campus' for incarcerated students in targeted correctional centres. These UK trials have been criticised, however, by Open University academics as mostly inadequate and unsatisfactory alternatives to authentic networked learning and communication (Pike & Adams, 2012; Pike cited in Pike & Adams, 2012; Seale cited in Pike & Adams, 2012). As Pike (cited in Pike & Adams, 2012) and Pike & Adams (2012) have pointed out, if technology in prisons is to be used more for reform rather than control, true learning networks or learning communities of like minded individuals, even small informal study groups, need to be further encouraged and supported. This may be because, as previously discussed, learning is always a social process and knowledge itself 'arises out of a process of discursing, situated within communities' (Northedge, 2003, p. 19).

Our Australian experience with internet simulations also suggests learning technology cannot just be engineered and inserted into the correctional centre, or 'bolted on' to the unreconstructed prison, and expected to work effectively and efficiently. Technology cannot replace social interaction; it can only support it. Moreover, the mere presence of innovative, mobile and digital learning technologies cannot improve access if the people on the ground and their social-political and cultural-discursive practices are unwilling or unable to support it. The prison 'voices' documented in this paper are an attempt to chart what is working and what is not working in incarcerated digital learning in Australia, from the student's perspective, and to 'flesh out' these issues in the process. Acknowledging and understanding the social-political and cultural-discursive barriers faced by incarcerated adult distance education students is critically important to the long term success of such e-learning initiatives.

### **Learning Offline and Behind Bars**

While key stakeholders have invested in the exciting potentialities of new learning technologies, security constraints, cultural constraints and a lack of staff and funding mean incarcerated students still do not have equitable access to learning resources. Our research with incarcerated USQ TPP students parallels the observations of practitioners and researchers in the United States and the United Kingdom who have documented the formidable obstacles faced by incarcerated postsecondary students (Watts, 2010; Pike & Adams, 2012; Meyer, Fredericks, Borden, & Richardson, 2010; Wilson & Reuss, 2000; Reuss, 2000). As Watts (2010, p. 60) observes, prisons are often stressful, noisy, disorientating and depressing places not conducive to studying, concentration and motivation. Similarly, Pike & Adams (2012, p. 389) refer to the 'desolate landscape' of the 'working' English prison, where students on a strict working schedule are often unable to find adequate study time, space or technology during the day

and may only study in the evenings in their cells.

The European Prison Rules based on the United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners stipulate that prisoners who take part in education during working hours shall be remunerated as if they had been working and thereby suffer no financial loss for attending education instead of work. Most Australian states, however, are following the Anglo-American model of increasing privatisation and funding cuts to the public sector, which means in effect, tertiary education may be sidelined by industry work, and training for industry. Moreover, in some prisons and some states this means incarcerated university students receive less pay than prisoners who work in industry, if they have the opportunity to undertake tertiary study at all. The lower priority given to tertiary study is evident in the (lack of) time, space and technology allocated to incarcerated university students.

In our Australian focus group discussions, incarcerated USQ TPP students consistently complained of a lack of access to quiet spaces, education staff, education facilities and electronic resources and (a perceived) lack of cooperation from custodial correctional staff. Contrary to the popular misconception that prisoners have unlimited time on their hands, almost all incarcerated USQ TPP participants identified a lack of quality study time as a significant constraint due to their assigned employment hours, tightly structured timetables and frequent lock downs, disruptions and dislocation. In the words USQ TPP incarcerated students:

It is not possible to know the constraints we face every day while in custody. I would face things like lockdowns, cell searches, head counts, and various other things every day. I felt constant pressure trying to meet my due dates and study schedule. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013).

The resources are not available and because there's smaller numbers in protection there's no help from other students. I wasn't able to connect. There's only one computer – it's the dinosaur age in here! (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

Unfortunately, I have no computer, no lecturer, no tutor... I can do so much better. (incarcerated USQ TPP Student, 2012).

There are situations that occur in here that result in the facility being locked down. This can extend from a few hours to weeks...the USQ tutors are not permitted into the centre. There is no access to the centre's education officer and no access to the postal system. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

There is a subculture in prisons where you get shunned or pushed aside for studying and being an academic – people don't want to talk to you. There are groups and groups within groups. You can't present yourself as being a step-up from anyone else. They won't always let a tutor in anyway, especially in Secure. The anti-academic culture is very strong in Secure. (incarcerated USQ student and peer tutor 2013).

I'm sharing a cell so there's not much room to study. The atmosphere makes it hard to study. We are dou-



bled up and they have the TV on when I'm trying to study. (incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013).

Against such a backdrop there are limits to how effective new communication and e-learning technologies alone can be in terms of improving learning outcomes for incarcerated students. Despite decades of reform and policies and strategies supporting education for the incarcerated, the 21<sup>st</sup> century prison is not necessarily a fair or efficient learning environment. Moreover there is a growing gap between how the twenty first century prison is represented and the reality experienced by the students inside.

### **Reality Checks: Hard Lessons for Incarcerated E-Learning**

In order to facilitate the development of digital citizenship and digital literacy skills for incarcerated students and to support the transition to digitised course materials, over 2013 47 eBook readers were distributed to USQ TPP students across five Queensland correctional centres. Concurrently, the eBook readers project manager (and lead author of this paper) visited four of the five targeted correctional centres on a regular rotation to deliver tutorial support to USQ TPP students, provide training on the eBook readers and to gain a better understanding of USQ TPP incarcerated students and the challenges they face. During this trial a number of problems were identified with the eBook readers that impacted on the students' engagement with this particular form of mobile learning technology.

While the light and mobile handheld digital eReader could, theoretically, allow the student to study anywhere, anytime, the majority of incarcerated students in this trial preferred their old heavy hard copy texts and still preferred holding a printed book in their hands to read it. Active and focused reading for scholarly purposes (as opposed to the recreational reading the BeBook Pure e-readers were originally designed for) requires highlighting or making notes on the text. The BeBook Pure handheld digital device, selected in the main because it conformed to stringent Queensland Corrective Services security requirements, did not provide these functions and could not replicate all the aspects of traditional study with printed text books. The TPP7120 course also requires moving back and forth across multiple pages and multiple study books. The digital eReaders frustrated this necessary process as the user cannot minimise a window to move quickly and seamlessly between documents. Not being able to take notes and eReaders freezing or being too slow to move pages were the most common practical impediments identified by incarcerated students in the trial. A number of the students complained that they would have preferred personal lap top computers loaded with their course content; however, incarcerated TPP students were not permitted personal lap top computers by the prison(s) at the time of the trial. Unlike computers, the eReaders are not backlit. Although under normal circumstances this is an advantage as it allows for long periods of reading without eye strain, in the environment of the prison, when students wanted to read after

'lights out' this was viewed as another limitation of the device. When compared to personal computers, 'smart' phones and other mobile devices, the eReaders, once loaded with large TPP course content files and other learning objects, were relatively slow to load, which the incarcerated participants found frustrating. While students on the 'outside' have the option of printing out electronic documents (usually at their own expense), incarcerated students reported that they either did not have access to a printer or that could only print a limited number of pages through a request to their education officers. The lesson learned in this trial suggests that technology which may serve its purpose in one educational context will not necessarily function effectively in the unique prison environment. Moreover, postsecondary educators must be sensitive to the particular limitations of this alien and alienating prison environment to adequately address the increasing diversity of student cohorts. By giving voice to the prisoners who participated in our e-learning trial, it is hoped this paper will contribute to this ongoing endeavour.

On a practical level, the Australian USQ eReader trial confirmed that incarcerated students require 'online' personal computers rather than handheld digital readers. As Australian prisoners have no access to online computers and this is unlikely to change in the near future, a portable version of USQ's LMS Moodle was deployed to replicate USQ's online learning environment for incarcerated students enrolled in the Tertiary Preparation Program. At SQCC, a privately operated Queensland prison, students were invited to trial the USQ Stand Alone Moodle (SAM) internet simulation loaded onto desk top computers available in a computer room of the prison's education block. In this instance problems and contradictions apparently arose in terms of students' access to the computer room:

I spent a couple of hours on the Moodle every week. I enjoyed working with the Moodle. The Moodle was almost like being on the internet. Unfortunately not everything was loaded onto the Moodle, there are still a lot of readings missing. It was frustrating at times too when we were denied access to the computers. (incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013).

The problem you have in jail is getting access to the room. We're only allowed to use the computer room four hours a week...and you have to type your assignment in that time too. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

Some people give up if it's too frustrating. In here we have to use our own initiative or persistence to keep going. Officers won't let you out the gate if you're not on the list so sometimes I have to risk a breach to get to the computers lab or to the education officer if there is a problem. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

Even when provided with regular training and support to develop their digital literacy skills, some incarcerated participants regularly resisted both the handheld digital eReaders and the SAM computers, consistently expressing preference for printed hard copy text:

I would rather use the hard copy. I don't even like

using the computer to do my assignments. I'd rather write by hand. I work better at night anyway. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

I have been incarcerated for a substantial period of my life. There is almost no technology in correctional centres, so the eReader was as foreign to me as the outback is to an Eskimo. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

I don't use the computer much because I don't have a lap top and I prefer to work alone in my cell. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2012)

I don't really use the computer that much. If I had a laptop I'd use it. I'd use it in me cell...I'm not comfortable sitting around people all the time. We don't get very much privacy in here. When you've been in jail all your life and you've got another twenty years to go you're more comfortable in your cell. It's funny because you're locked away from everybody but you just want to lock yourself away. I prefer to do everything by hand - unless they gave me a lap top. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2012)

In the everyday life of a prison, 'movement' is a big issue and frequent disruptions where students can be moved without warning or confined to their cells mean that prisoners classified as 'students' will not always have reliable access to education staff and education facilities. While it is to be expected that operational goals of security and order will be the greatest priority on the part of prison administrators, from the perspective of the students themselves there is still currently not enough time, space or access to the right technology to provide fair and equitable higher education for incarcerated students. Higher level learning in particular requires not just IT skills, but student-centred, holistic learning environments wherein students have some level of control, consistency and predictability over their study schedule and learning experiences. As Pratt (1993) and Knowles (cited in Pratt 1993) have pointed out, self-direction and the self-concept of the learner are vitally important concepts in andragogy. Moreover, as researchers and practitioners in this relatively uncharted environment we need to be sensitive to the identity investments and subjective experiences of incarcerated students, recognise the role of emotions such as fear, apathy, detachment and depression in this trial and respect that some incarcerated students may prefer to work alone in the relative privacy and security of their cells. Hence the problems faced by incarcerated students as complex social beings coping with a relatively hostile social and cultural environment mean prisoners may not respond to learning technology in the same ways as other tertiary students. Clearly 'access', in this environment, does not always mean use.

### **The Human Element: Making a Connection**

Despite their common frustrations with the new digital learning technologies, the one element of the Australian USQ TPP trial almost all participants seemed positive about was receiving regular visits from university lecturers and tutors. Even and especially when things were going wrong with the technology, partici-

pants appreciated the embodied presence of the university teacher to encourage, coach and confirm their own experience as a university student. After all, the good teacher does what the computer cannot, which is recognise them as people (whole, complex social beings) and provide an element of empathetic humanity and social connectivity in a relatively inhospitable and isolated learning environment. As Pratt (1993) and Knowles (cited in Pratt 1993) have suggested, effective andragogical approaches require an element of relationship building and establishing a climate of mutual respect, trust, collaboration and humane treatment. It is the responsibility of the adult educator to provide a social learning environment, not just content and technologies in isolation, and this is especially important for incarcerated students who often have complex needs and multiple disadvantages. Certainly the incarcerated USQ TPP participants valued and appreciated face-to-face time with 'real' lecturers and tutors over and above digital simulations:

Having university lecturers visit prisons is a great way to combat the isolation incarcerated students feel while studying. I noticed the visits also helped to keep a few student motivated and continue with their studies instead of dropping out of the course. (incarcerated USQ TPP student and peer tutor, 2013)

The information we receive from the tutor face to face is the difference in pass or fail, understanding or having no clue...The help from the USQ tutors was the most vital aspect of my study. I guess I learn better when somebody shows me. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

The biggest thing that helps is having the uni lecturer come in for a visit, so you get to see who is marking your paper and that they are a real person. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013)

I left school at 13. I need face to face help with the course. Last semester the tutor couldn't get in. Like most people I need help from a person especially with the advanced maths. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2014)

Regular teaching visits also enabled the researchers in this study to move beyond the 'academic tourist' (Reuss, 2000) position of prison focus group facilitator to the (imagined) more trustworthy position of academic coach. In turn, this enabled us to draw a deeper and more sensitive appreciation of the specialised needs, experiences and perspectives of incarcerated tertiary students. Incarcerated students in particular seem to have an acute need to know the 'real person' and be known as a 'real person', that is, a person with multiple identities, life stories and potentialities. As Reuss (2000) warns, it is a mistake to imagine one can swoop in and 'rehabilitate' through expert technocratic training when effective prison projects require building trust, empathy, tact and diplomacy. Putting the right technology in place is only part of the solution, the real issue is what the student *is*, or aspires to be:

It's not just about telling prisoners about what university courses are available. It's about making them

believe it's actually possible. I never thought I could do a university course. I thought uni was only for smart people and rich people. (incarcerated USQ student, 2013)

Like many other non traditional and low socioeconomic status students, incarcerated students face barriers to higher education participation which include both financial and social and cultural factors such as a lack of confidence and self-belief. Thus far, however, Australian correctional education has tended to focus mostly on providing basic skills rather than raising the aspirations of prisoners, like any other marginalised and underrepresented group, toward higher education participation. Australian prisoners may be underrepresented in higher education because on a cultural-discursive level they frequently regard it as beyond their reach and on a material-economic level it is not adequately supported with resources on the ground. Moreover on a social-political level it appears some Australian prisoners are actively discouraged from undertaking university study to be channelled toward industry and vocational training (in the name of employability) due to ascendant economic, utilitarian and neoliberal values. These implicit priorities and 'practice architectures' (Kemmis, McTaggart & Nixon, 2014) of the contemporary prison are reflected in the management of movement, time and space:

Prison is an environment where it is especially difficult to remain focused. This constraint is made up of a number of factors such as it being noisy, regimented and there being a lack of a supportive peer group...a greater emphasis is placed on employment, than on education. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2012).

I find it hard to find time to do TPP study with balancing work and the other courses we have to do in here. (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2012).

In industry you have the one session from 9am to 11.45am - then lunch, then the second session from 1.00pm to 3.45pm - same thing day in, day out. Metal shop or wood shop is pretty much the only choice. Usually only a long term person might get to learn new skills. (USQ TPP incarcerated student, 2014)

They won't let me off work and I am trying to do year ten at the same time, it doesn't leave much time for TPP (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2012).

The officers say to me, 'I had to study and work at the same time so you should too.' (incarcerated USQ TPP student, 2013).

They won't schedule me as a full time student. I wrote a letter about it. But they say in the real world you have to work and study at the same time so I should have to do that in here too. What they don't understand is that in the real world you get access to computers and the internet 24/7. You don't get locked down at 6.30pm and unlocked at 7.30am for work. I am on meds [sedative medication] at night so I can't study at night. And up in the unit it's really hard to study with people being loud and knocking on the door. You never get time to your-

self. Its better in the computer lab but I have to fill out forms and give 48 hours notice to get near the computers. I told them I want more study time. working here is not going to help me learn new skills. Just making fences - I already know how to weld and do all that. I'm a qualified mechanic and I worked in the mines doing everything for two years. But they said it would teach me punctuality. I would rather study so when I get out I can have a degree. (incarcerated USQ TPP student 2013)

### Student or Offender?

The status or label of 'student' is particularly meaningful within prisons not only because it determines the inmate's schedule, allocation of time and relation to industry but also because it legitimates the inmate's construction of a new identity and life course (see Pike & Adams 2012, p. 370; Watts 2010, p. 62). The identity of student becomes a marker the individual uses to distance himself (or herself) from the culture of the prison (see Pike & Adams 2012, p. 370; Watts 2010, p. 62). As sociologists such as George Herbert Mead (1934) and Erving Goffman (1959) would point out, identities are not made in isolation - our sense of self is made through conversation with others in social interactions.

The USQ TPP staff teaching visits were especially important for the prisoners in part because it provided them with a fresh audience for their renewed identity and fledgling performance of 'university student' as well as an expert (and, in their eyes, relatively unbiased) other to legitimate that role. As Goffman (1959) would suggest, the power of this self-presentation and performance of selfhood lies in its social interactivity. The role of student requires the presence of the teacher, in some form, to interact with. The primacy of personal identity and social interaction is one of the unintended effects and learning outcomes of this e-learning in prisons *per se* but from the teaching and learning around it. While higher learning is a point of access for reflecting upon identity for many students, incarcerated students in particular seem to have a heightened awareness and appreciation of education as a source of (reinvented) personal identity, purpose and transformation (see MacGuinness, 2000; Wilson & Reuss, 2000). This may be because by the time they enter the correctional centre their self narratives as 'delinquents', 'criminals' or 'offenders' have been shaped by the labelling processes of institutions, essentially turning them into objects rather than recognising them as subjects (Reuss, 2000).

In order for students to negotiate an alternative pro-social relationship to these major social institutions they need more than vocational training and basic skills; they need time and (both literal and metaphorical) space for self determination, social connectivity and holistic personal development (Wilson & Reuss, 2000; Watts, 2010; Pike & Adams, 2012). As Pike & Adams (2012, p. 374) have suggested, correctional services need to take the self-identities of prisoners very seriously and support the 'student identity' which

may provide purpose and meaning in the short term and facilitate successful resettlement in the longer term. Identity change must be part of the rehabilitative project because, as Reuss (2000) explains, truly transformative prison education must address the personal and life history of the prisoner. As Watts (2010, p. 62) has suggested, fostering this student identity is part of the teacher's responsibility and especially necessary in a prison where individuals are working to reform themselves and plan better lives. Moreover, as Reuss (2000) and Wilson & Reuss (2000) have argued, truly transformative prison education must move beyond the utilitarian human capital model, with its focus on building skills for employability, to recognise both the inherent personal value of the learning process and the social value of education for empowerment. As the group most frequently disadvantaged by the intersection of class, race and social and cultural backgrounds, incarcerated students may be the forgotten and invisible 'equity' group of higher education, and the 'minority' group most in need of raised aspirations, personal development and enabling education.

### Conclusions

Current Australian prison policy effectively exacerbates the social exclusion of the most marginalized groups in Australian society. Despite ongoing attempts to develop and trial modified digital technologies, the majority of prisoners in Australia still have no direct access to the internet and this digital, social and cultural disconnection undermines rehabilitation in a digital age. Policymakers must prioritise digital literacy and not just in limited terms of basic skills but in the context of participation in digital networks. One of the key findings of our research is that it is not the technology itself that matters, or even the content it carries, but rather it is contact or connectivity which incarcerated students want and need most. It is people and making connections with people which will drive the network society, both inside and outside the prison gates. Certainly our incarcerated students are requesting not just more access to technology but more access to interpersonal support and social exchange in a collaborative and humane learning environment. Over the past twenty years policy developments in Australian states have furthered an economic rationalist agenda which leads to staff and funding cutbacks. However, real rehabilitation requires funding for education officers and visiting academics to teach the 'whole' person and support them through the very human process of learning. It follows policymakers must value and recognize education's worth not only in economic terms of employability but in humanistic terms of personal and social transformation and integration.

Ironically, it is the human element of this trial with modified learning technologies that is potentially the most powerful. Although regular university staff visits to correctional centres may not be economically viable in the long term or on a larger scale, the incarcerated participants in this study frequently attributed their study success not to improved access to technology but

to improved access to and interaction with university teachers, peer mentors and other students in a consistent connected learning community. Thus far, increasing digitization through eReaders and intranets has not been entirely successful in facilitating independent self-managing learners; rather, incarcerated students are still seeking more support from the university in terms of access to staff and in terms of access to resources such as printed textbooks and lap top computers. When faced with the complex sociocultural environment of the prison and the complex psychosocial problems of incarcerated students, the solution therefore needs to be broad and sociological in orientation, looking beyond the narrow focus on new technology inserted into a new setting. Improving higher education for this specialised group will necessitate technological innovation; however it may also necessitate more face-to-face support and a renewed appreciation of the influence of social contexts and social connectivity in enabling education for marginalised and disconnected students.

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## Foreword to the Practitioner Papers

ANNE COSTELLOE

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This first issue of the Practitioner Section of the journal is themed around a set of articles on prison-based college programmes. Collectively, they detail the experiences and reflections of a number of tutors teaching college programmes in prisons, and include also the perceptions of their students, both imprisoned and not. There are many reasons why we have devoted our first issue to this particular focus (not least due to the increasing numbers of prisoners with advance educational needs far beyond that of basic education). Newcomers to prison education do so with a fresh eye, and can identify aspects of practice and provision that those of us more 'resident' or long-term practitioners no longer notice or perhaps consider in any great depth. Being reminded of what it was like for the first time is refreshing and prompts us all to look again at our prac-

tices and rationales. Perhaps more importantly, because of their college background these tutors 'get education', and understand that the education provided in our prisons must be equal to that of the wider community. Like the resident practitioner, they come to know that in essence it is merely the context that is different, and appropriate and well-considered education, no matter where it takes place or who is involved, has the power to transform lives. The voices of the learners coming through these papers attest to this. Accordingly, the articles presented here remind us once again of how powerful and fulfilling prison education can be – for everyone involved.

I hope you enjoy reading them.

PRACTITIONER PAPER

## Fluorescent Glow

MICOL HUTCHISON

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### Abstract

*This narrative describes aspects of my semester teaching English as a Second Language in the city jail. I had expected to be able to draw grand conclusions about incarceration, inmates and policy, but instead I discovered that the inmates sitting in front of me were, above all else, simply students. The article also includes a digital story about the experience. The narrative is intended for those with interest in jail or prison education.*

**Keywords:** *English as a Second Language; jail education; prison education; incarceration.*

There were days when my English as a Second Language class was easy to teach, when the students all seemed interested and engaged; and then there were the days when no one had any energy or questions, when the students were irritated with each other and with me. Sometimes I left the class with the sense that everyone had learned something; other times, I was pretty sure it had been a waste of an afternoon for all of us.

Even on those bad days, though, there were good moments. Manuel, for instance, always had a mental list of questions that started spilling out as he was still walking in the door. There was Saul, who was so quiet that I wasn't sure he understood anything, until one day he shyly asked me to read a poem he had written. He sat across the room from Eddie, who seemed unwilling to learn anything unless he could add it to his in-class stand-up comedy routine. There was also Franklin, who absorbed any information I gave him, and was the only student who wanted linguistic theory rather than basic conversational skills. And while there were some students who only came once or twice, I also had a large group of students who came to every class and always thanked me (referring to me as either "Teacher" or "Professor Micol") on their way out the door.

That was the semester that I began teaching a multi-level ESL class at the city jail. I've tried writing about this experience before, but the results always felt either self-aggrandizing or oversimplified. My attempts to articulate an overarching lesson or profound personal discovery failed each time. I think that may be because when I was offered the jail assignment, I had too little context and life experience to really understand the environment or its implications. In truth, I took the job primarily for its potential as either a good deed or an interesting adventure, and secondarily because every class I got helped pay off student loans.

The years since my jail assignment have brought a gradual understanding - an understanding of what I experienced, who my students were, and why my time in the jail was significant. I've also realized that these

elements are much more important and meaningful than any grand lesson I could try to formulate.

I had only been teaching for a few years when I took this job, and until that time, I had found teaching to be exhilarating. Even when my teaching wasn't as smooth as I thought it should be, the classroom dynamic buoyed me, and I would end class feeling good. But at the jail, no matter how successful a lesson was, I was invariably exhausted at the end of the day. A fairly new teacher, I blamed myself for not being adequately prepared or for treating my students differently than I had previous groups. More realistically, it was the bright lights, the persistent low-level buzz, the watchful eyes, and the ubiquitous tension that left me mentally and physically tired.

Those who work full-time in jails and prisons must find ways to combat this powerful force. I'm not sure how those who live behind bars find the strength to fight lethargy and apathy, or to focus through the tension. As a young teacher, I wasn't thinking about anything outside of my Plexiglas-enclosed classroom. Now, I think of how the environment outside of school can affect learning; in education, we are concerned that students get a full night of sleep and a healthy breakfast - for an inmate, these might be the least of the situational detriments to learning.

My naivety highlights how little experience I had had with jails or prisons. This was long before all the *CSIs* made "forensic science" a household term, before *Orange is the New Black* brought intrigue and indignation to Netflix-subscribers everywhere, and thus I didn't even have glamorized or gritty preconceived ideas of incarceration. When I first walked into the jail - in my early 20's, white and middle-class - my knowledge of the legal system was nearly non-existent. Though I knew people who had been in jail, it had always been brief, and either for youthful foolishness or respectable political protest. My students definitely did not fall into the latter category, and though they may have fit in the former category, their time in jail was rarely brief.



In the years since, popular culture and louder voices for social justice have brought prison life a little closer, even for those who remain personally untouched. My life experience – even serving on jury duty – has triggered a greater awareness. Most impactful for me, I've met many students at my university who went through the legal system, and many more whose brothers, sisters, and parents have been incarcerated. I have seen how families split up, college plans disintegrate, and financial stresses mount. My ESL class likely had all of these misfortunes represented, and no doubt more: the majority of the students were undocumented immigrants.

When I tried to find the lesson in my jail teaching experience before, I was stymied by one big factor, the thing that took me the longest to understand: my sympathy had always been mitigated by the knowledge that most of my students were in jail because they had committed a crime. And I was comfortable with the fact that a crime brings with it punishment. As a consequence, I saw my students' time in this stressful environment as unpleasant but not entirely unfair.

What I didn't see then was the imbalance that privilege confers: how my brother's arrest for shoplifting resulted in nothing more than a humiliating call to my parents; how the charge of marijuana possession became a few hours of community service for my best friend; how my own teenage street sign theft was immature but amusing, the reprimand by the police initially anxiety-provoking but later just laughter-inducing. Had we not been middle class, had we not been driving our parents' cars, had we not known how to articulate embarrassment and regret at the right time, we might have been hit with jail time and felony convictions rather than slapped on our predominantly white wrists.

I thought my students were different from me, and they were. But not so much because of the crimes they committed as because of their circumstances, the background that perhaps drove them to the crimes, but more likely translated those crimes into jail time. It's unlikely that I could have been the student in the jail class - not because I was more law-abiding than they, but because I was far luckier.

Since my time in the jail classroom, I have come to

understand on a personal level how much of a role race and class can play in the legal system. I am aware of the school-to-prison pipeline and the prison-industrial complex. Being born lower-class or black does not relegate an individual to a life behind bars, nor does being Latino guarantee a lack of access to a decent education, but I know now how early and easily these paths can appear.

But when I was standing in front of my class at the city jail, I thought of none of this. Even as a politically aware young adult, I knew little of it.

In my earlier writing about my class at the jail, I had wanted to espouse public policy, issue ethical mandates, draw conclusions about political legislation. I knew there was significance in what I saw and felt at the jail. But in reality, I experienced a class – one that was really frustrating at times, and wonderfully satisfying at others. Some of the students were intensely motivated, while others were there because it was less boring than sitting in the common room. There were smart students and slower ones. It was a class with Manuel and Saul and Eddie and Franklin. In these ways, it was a class just like the ones I teach year after year at the university. It may have taken place under fluorescent lights and a watch tower, with inadequate desks and only a handful of pencils, but ultimately, it was a class of individuals, all of whom could learn, many of whom had had limited opportunities, and all of whom – I now say with confidence – deserved the chance.

My time in the jail did not qualify me to espouse, issue, or draw the conclusions I had thought I should, but it turned a group of 30 inmates into my students, and those students eventually, slowly, opened my eyes.

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In addition to Manuel, Saul, Eddie, and Franklin, there was Carlos. Here is my story about him: Click on the link below.

<http://youtu.be/eBxmQIXfgRU>

*Please note: All images used in this video are from the Creative Commons of Flickr.*

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PRACTITIONER PAPER

## Prisons, Pipelines and Pedagogy: Diary of the Birth of a Behind-Bars College Program

BAZ DREISINGER

*with Krystlelynn Caraballo, Marcus Chandler, Craig Coston, Rowland Davis,  
Patrick Gallimore, Lenecia Lewis-Kirkwood, Devon Simmons, Theron Smith, Robert Taitt,  
Matthew Wilson and Lamumba Woods*

John Jay College of Criminal Justice, City University of New York, USA

*It is the obligation of our Nation to provide and permit and assist every child born in these borders to receive all the education that he can take. —President Johnson, Higher Education Act of 1965*

*A Black man in his thirties is twice as likely to experience prison as to earn a college degree. —Western, Schiraldi & Ziedenberg*

### August 10, 2011

Last-minute teaching crisis of a peculiar variety: What to do about the slice of metal in our textbook? Spiral binders are fine in college, but not in prison. My college is in a prison—where books can be, literally, weapons.

I sit with a friend and unbound all of the textbooks. I put rubber bands around each, and all semester long my incarcerated students refer to the *John Jay College Writing Handbook*—source of many a grammatical woe—as, simply, “the spineless book.”

Crisis averted. More follow, though, well before the first day of class and the official launch of John Jay College of Criminal Justice’s Prison-to-College Pipeline program (P2CP). Would the Deputy Superintendent really read *The Color of Water* in time to approve it for use on my syllabus? Without a Xerox machine or computer, and with plenty of forthcoming essay drafts, would I end up producing a classroom of Bartlebys, writing and rewriting by labor of hand? Would phone-in office hours from the prison counselor’s office suffice?

*I saw the flyer up telling us—incarcerated men—that we could sign up for college. I looked at it and was like, “Nah. Not right now. I still got time.” But it kept calling me. I saw it everyday, and I kept reading it. So I decided to go to the meeting and hear how the program was run. I got an interview. And the rest is history. —Robert Taitt, inside student*

*In April of 2011, I went to my first parole board, and I was denied release, and ordered held for 24 months. About one month later flyers were posted up*

*in the dorms offering John Jay college courses. At that time two things went through my mind. The first thing was that I should take this time to do something beneficial with my life. And the second thing, slight doubt within myself. I did not think that I was going to get accepted, or even pass the test for that matter. Yet I still felt that it could not hurt to try. —Marcus Chandler, inside student*

*After being denied parole for the fourth time, I guess what could be considered my life’s work came to a screeching halt. Once again, the ex-factor had reared its ugly head. Frustrated with my inability to pursue life beyond captivity, I made a pact with my self to pursue tangible goals, despite my obstacles and setbacks. My options were limited.*

*For once in my life, things found a way of working themselves out. I signed up for the Prison-to-College Pipeline, posted one week after the “ex-factor” occurred. —Lamumba Woods, inside student*

### August 14, 2011

It’s a sweltering day; Marcus wears it all over. He and his Timbs stride with grave purpose to our interview desk, wiping the sweat off his creased brow. He’s come right from work—gardening—and he strikes me, simply, as a hard-working dad who carries the weight of family on sturdy shoulders. He wants to go to college because, tautologically, it will make him a college student: an identity label far preferable to the one he wears everyday, inside. His dream dinner companion: Martin Luther King.

*On the day that I was called for my John Jay interview, I was cutting grass for approximately three hours in 90-degree weather. When I came to the interview, I had on sweaty, grass-stained clothes. When the interview was being conducted, I was out of breath and tired but still as patient and humble as I could be. While going through the process of answering questions, the experience was exhilarating, mainly because this was a challenge that I doubted myself about and avoided like the plague. And now*



*here I was, face to face with this wonderful opportunity. After being denied at the parole board, John Jay gave me something to look forward to, inside and out of prison. —Marcus Chandler, inside student*

Onto the next one. And the next one, assembly-line style. Some 35 men interviewed, all day long, for 14 slots. The refrains are many. *I want to do college because my daughter is starting school, too, and we made a pact. I couldn't really read or write before I got here but now I'm going to be a college student. I want more than a job—I want a career. I want anything that's more than this. I just want to be a college student.* Hours in, I become eager to eschew what I dub “soapbox syndrome”: after years of lockup, living inside the vacuum of a world that is prison, one doesn't dialogue—one lectures. Talking at people instead of with them: a kind of armed communication that jives with incarceration.

Robert plans to open a sports lounge and study business management; he wants to read *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* but is afraid to do so while in prison because it'll awaken thoughts he isn't equipped to deal with in here. Rowland also mentions business management, then drops references to Plato and Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow*, a new book that's already gospel to the men inside. Theron is interested in the sociology of religion; he applied and was accepted to John Jay College 24 years ago, but then life took an unexpected turn southward—er, in the context of New York State, northward. Tony hopes to work with troubled youth, setting an example for them. His dream dinner companion? President Obama. “Reticent, thoughtful,” I write in my increasingly nonsensical admissions notes. How much, after all, can be gauged from one essay and a 10-minute interview? Admissions can be arbitrary.

*After being in prison for over 17 years and sitting in the presence of interviewees, I did not feel like an offender. I felt like I was participating in a new opportunity at life without being judged by my past. The piercing glance of Professor Dreisinger made me feel like a shy preschooler. My shyness wasn't the result of my natural mild character alone, but also how humbled I was due to the level of respect she addressed me with. —Craig Coston, inside student*

*I of course was nervous...but to be able to sit and talk academics and life in general with these two individuals and not what society labels me, made all the difference in the world. —Theron Smith, inside student*

*Like all of the applicants, I wanted to be accepted; however, to be considered showed me that I am qualified to be a college student regardless of my circumstances, and since has left me with a feeling of self-worth. Honestly the events leading up to the interview were more nerve-wracking for me because of the waiting process. Prior to the CUNY entrance exam, I hadn't taken a standardized test since ac-*

*quiring my GED [high-school equivalency diploma] back in 2000. As a result, I was feeling a little insecure about myself academically. However, my competitiveness would not allow me to back down from this challenge. It was actually while in the midst of taking the CUNY entrance exam that I had an epiph any. I asked myself, “what do you have to lose?” Then I said to myself, “regardless of the outcome, I won't let passing or failing this test define me.” After that moment of clarity, I stopped worrying about my penmanship, the perfect punctuation and grammar, and just did the best I could. I had been waiting over 12 years to be able to attain some form of higher education, yet I didn't let that prohibit me from continuously educating myself in the past—and I couldn't let that change.*

*On the day of the interview, I was undecided as to how I would get dressed. I didn't want to be viewed as a prisoner, but rather as a potential student. That's when I made the decision to throw on a colored shirt instead of my State-issued greens. When I entered the room Professor Dreisinger and the other professor had these big vibrant smiles, which calmed my nerves. Then Professor Dreisinger caught me off guard by calling me “Mr. Salutatorian.” I remembered I had mentioned that accomplishment in my letter, which was right on her desk. After the interview she thanked me for my time and apologized for having me wait so long. I told her she didn't have to apologize because I had been waiting for this opportunity for over 12 years. Once I left the room my intuition told me that I'd see this woman again in the near future. —Devon Simmons, inside student*

### **August 21, 2011**

Bartlebys be gone: no computers, but thanks to a last-minute donation we have typewriters for the men to patter-patter away on. Yes, typewriters—complete with old-school ribbons. They had to be ordered from a special prison supply company and won't arrive until the end of September. They're clear plastic, so the guys can't hide anything in there. And at \$345 a pop, it's a small taste of the prison industrial complex.

*The goal of the Prison to College Pipeline (P2CP) is to increase the number of incarcerated and formerly incarcerated people who go to college and succeed there. In a broader sense, the initiative tests a model for the vital role that public universities might play in using higher education to promote successful prisoner reentry and, by extension, generate safer and more robust communities. The initiative addresses a question posed by John Jay College's President, Jeremy Travis, “If over 700,000 people are leaving our prisons, how should the nation's educational institutions be organized to help them make a successful transition to free society?” Elements of the pilot include:*

**Academic Coursework**—Credit-bearing classes taught in the prison by John Jay faculty.

**Workshop Series**—Bi-weekly sessions on “Success in College and Life.”

**Learning Exchanges**—Monthly seminars taught by different CUNY professors bring “outside” John Jay students into the prison for college classes with “inside” students.

**Reentry Planning**—A community partner, the Osborne Association, conducts social service needs assessments and case plans for men. These plans address the range of individual needs: parole appearances, residence upon release, subsistence, treatment, family concerns and compliance with criminal justice conditions.

**College Placement**—Also in preparation for release another partner, the College Initiative, meets with DOCCS students to help them choose the appropriate CUNY college and apply for financial aid. CI also matches students to mentors.

**Film Series**—To bolster the intellectual and cultural life of the prison’s broader population, the P2CP launched an annual film series, open to all interested men at the prison. Directors accompany their films and engage in a Q&A after the screening.

—P2CP Program One-Sheet

### August 30, 2011

I nearly cry when I enter the classroom. Miraculously, 14 incarcerated students have materialized. Arthur Kill Correctional Facility, the Staten Island prison we were initially meant to be working in, had been dramatically shut down weeks before our launch. It was Governor Cuomo’s doing; he’d vowed to close some of the prisons his father had been responsible for opening back in the 80s, during the “war on drugs era”—back when prisons made money and provided jobs, as opposed to drained states’ economies, as they do today. Never mind that Arthur Kill—despite its unfortunately-appropriate name—was one of New York’s only geographically humane prisons, as it’s located in New York City and thus accessible to the incarcerated men’s families. The NIMBY choir demanded all barbed wire banished to up-north territory, and so it went; Cuomo could look progressive and home-owners feted. We, on the other hand, wept—bereft of a prison to teach in. Until, that is, we moved to Otisville, some 2 hours upstate. I was asked to make a list of my selected students, who, assuming eligibility—physically fit enough to walk the miles-long hike from dorm to programs; no enemies or gang affiliations there—would be transferred to Otisville to become college students. As I frantically made and remade my list, the Dep. morbidly joked that I must feel like Oscar Shindler.

The men were shipped off. One lone student, Stephen, remains at Arthur Kill, and will hopefully make it to Otisville in time to begin class; the Dep. has assured me that “classification and movement is on the case.” Getting the men’s GEDs and diplomas proves the next tiresome task. No document belonging to an unfree man is easy to put hands on. Somehow, though, the documents had made their way and the bodies had arrived: I have a class.

*During orientation, Professor Dreisinger explained*

*that we as a group had earned the right to be here. Her words had an enormous effect on us: We earned the right to be here. Being the very first class put a lot of pressure on us to excel and be ambassadors of the program. The excitement level among my class mates was incredibly high, and starting class in September was the only thing I wanted to do.*  
—Rowland Davis, inside student

### September 7, 2011

First day of class. Dramatic flooding on the highway turns a two-hour drive into three. I’m fingerprinted with heavy-duty ink that demands turpentine for removal. Janet, the volunteer services coordinator, tells me I’m now an official Department of Corrections volunteer, which means she’ll get the call immediately if I’m ever arrested. I am accounted for, stamped, photographed, fingerprinted, officialized, TB-tested.

“Civilian pickup at 17,” comes the call for my ride to the classroom. In class I set the seats up in a circle. 10 men: Three students already have credits for this course from their previous college-student incarnations, and no Stephen—he still hasn’t been cleared for transfer. I envision him as the lone prisoner in a ghost of a yard at Arthur Kill. We go over the syllabus for English 101, which I’ve themed “Reading and Writing, Race and Identity.” They’re overwhelmed, they tell me, by all the upcoming assignments. I tell them that’s how any student, looking at the semester ahead, is liable to feel.

We delve into the mammoth subject at hand: what’s “race”? Jason says he’s not “Hispanic” in the way everyone expects him to be. We read an excerpt from Richard Rodriguez’s autobiographical polemic *Hunger for Memory*, in which he talks about tokenism and higher education leaving him in no-man’s land: alienated from the Mexican world he grew up in, ever an “Other” in whitebread academic circles. They get it immediately. William asks if I read the rest of the book.

“Yes. Why?”

“Does he have kids?” William persists.

“Why?”

“Does he teach them Spanish?”

“Why do you ask?” I press him. “Does he have to?”

“Of course. He’s Spanish. That’s just *what he is*,” William states. Kenneth mutters something about Rodriguez being a brown Uncle Tom. “He’s really a sell-out?” I ask. “Is he under obligation to be what he was born into?” The guys grapple with this. I’m surprised: If anyone should be invested in the right to construct yourself, as opposed to letting someone else construct you, it’s these guys. But notions of culture and loyalty run deep.

My invented term of the fabulous-teaching day: “Pleasing-the-Provider Syndrome.” It’s one reason professors rave about teaching in prison. Unlike outside students, who need to be reminded of why they should care about whatever it is we are droning on about in those hallowed halls of academe, incarcerated students drink it in and the whole thing pleases us immensely. Yes, they do so first and foremost because they’re hungry for knowledge. But they also aim to please—

because prison has a way of reducing men to *young men* longing for something simple: a pat on the back and a “nice work.”

*Journeys to prison involve long drives through “rolling farmland or forest,” during which you are “immediately aware that you are ‘on your own,’ far from what you usually know as civilization, relying on your own devices. You feel insignificant and powerless in the face of an imposing structure of masonry and organization.” Upon arrival, you pass through “entrance rituals,” through which you are “taken into the control of the institution. You become aware that you enter at the will and pleasure of the institution...entering the prison takes on the ritualistic qualities of what Foucault called a ceremony of power, wherein you are, first, separated from the traditional props and supports of your ‘normal’ life and, second, wherein those props and supports are replaced by different structures and supports...the ritualized entrance to the prison by you as an employee sets forth the role that you will occupy. The twin feelings of isolation and loss of control.” -Werner*

#### September 14, 2011

I take public transport to prison. Unsure as to whether the Coach Bus service to Middletown, New York, really exists—ever the provincial New Yorker, I’m unsure whether Middletown, New York, even exists—I arrive inordinately early. The bus drivers, mainly of color, milling about in their green uniforms give me whiffs of Otisville. All institutional uniforms—sanitation workers, postmen, UPS workers—have a way of evoking prison. Are they like prison, though, or is prison like them?

The bus does exist. I fall asleep on it and awake to the smell of green hills and country. I emerge, though, in a setting far less Rockwell-esque. Middletown looks like one of many upstate towns that NYC-money forgot: bombed-out houses, depressingly deserted streets, an economic lifeline that lives behind barbed wire. In these towns crime runs deep; Newburgh, some twenty minutes away, has one of the highest murder rates in the country.

With an hour to kill I eat breakfast at the Coney Island Diner. It’s a cliché scene from a bad movie: big-city girl walks into saloon and all the locals spin right around with glares, knowing she’s not from here. I order an egg-white omelet; the waitress asks if I want fries with it. The woman next to me douses her pancakes in syrup and curiously scans the cover of my *New Yorker* magazine.

I take a taxi from the diner to the prison. As we pull up to the gates, my driver mutters something about it being “very bad.” What, I ask?

“Very bad place. All bad. Bad people.” I think he’s saying “all black people,” so I sigh and agree, shaking my head and adding something about the racism of the system.

“Bad, evil people,” he keeps muttering, as I realize what he’s actually said.

“No, not really,” comes my intervention, landing on deaf ears.

In prison, a new guard processes me at 17. He’s just transferred from Mid-Orange Correctional Facility, also shut down in Cuomo’s prison-closing dramatics. As he sunnily stamps my hand, he says he’s real glad to still have a job, considering all the shufflings and closings. His colleague, meanwhile, commutes all the way from the city every day—he used to be at Arthur Kill.

In the classroom we talk personal essays. Theron writes about the mostly white, gifted school he went to in Queens. William also went to a private school in the Dominican Republic. The guys show up soapbox-ready, with pages of notes and particular page numbers to reference. Kenneth and William—the biggest and smallest guys in the class, respectively—go head-to-head about the racial dramatics they’re starting to formulate for their personal essays; at issue are tensions between African-Americans and Dominicans. The discussion gets heated. Was choosing to focus on race, given the prison context, a risky idea?

“Civilian pickup at 17,” comes the call.

#### September 21, 2011

The horses are out in full force today. Otisville is the only prison in New York—and one of the only ones in the country—where Corrections Officers still ride horseback. It’s fitting; the place looks like a rambling plantation. A former TB sanatorium, Otisville has all the makings of a summer retreat: rolling green hills, crisp upstate air, picture-perfect vistas—all deemed, by early 20<sup>th</sup>-century doctors, ideal for restoring one’s good health.

“Inmate Cowden,” I’m told by the educational supervisor, won’t make it; he’ll have to start next semester.

I show up with their personal essay drafts edited; the prison officials had collected, scanned and emailed them over to me so I could do so. I’m pleased with the process I’d devised and ask the guys if went smoothly on their end. Pause.

“It’s aight, professor. But we didn’t like how it went down.”

“Why?”

“Because we had to give them to—ya know. That’s some personal stuff in those essays.”

I cringe. I promise them that the COs and counselors didn’t read the personal essays—they just scanned them electronically, really—but I’m beating myself up: Unknowingly I’d violated a teacher-student bond.

Our debate about *The Color of Water* is, as ever, heated. Because it’s about race and because it’s in prison, all conversation seems intensified, magnified. Kenneth can’t stand the book’s racially ambiguous protagonist, Ruth McBride Jordan, born Jewish but self-identified as African-American. He thinks she’s a cultural sell-out and should have told her children “what they really were.” William disagrees. Kenneth mutters something about William and snitching. Kenneth: What’s your name again? Where’s that name tag? I cringe again, and try to smooth it out.

“You guys are tripping! It’s not that deep. Chill.”

“Don’t worry, professor,” comes the chorus. “We have thick skin. This is just how we mess with each other.”

On the way out I make small talk with Officer R, the CO on our classroom duty. She’s in her early 40s, affable and pretty. She’s the mother of a toddler and grew up in this area.

Home, I wash my hands to get the smell of institutional soap off them. Eau de Otisville always seems to linger on my clothes and hair. I read their essays. Kenneth’s is all about Dominican discrimination against black people. He writes of being locked up for the same crime his father committed.

### October 5, 2011

Best class yet. We edit essays as a group, painstakingly; everyone is receptive and on point. Except, that is, for Edward, whose essay was one long unpunctuated paragraph devoid of personal narrative. He’s ever anxious: to reveal too much, say too much, even look me in the eye. They like the *New Yorker* profile I’d given them about the one-time car theft, but they love the Junot Diaz story, “Negocios,” about an acutely failed man: a Dominican who leaves his family behind, only to start a new family in America. We run out of class time so the discussion will have to wait until next week, but the guys sling opinions as they set off for the hike back to dorms.

“Ramon is my man!” declares Kenneth.

“Nah, he ain’t no good!” rebuts Rowland.

“This class is interesting,” says William.

I stop by the library to see what might be of use to their upcoming research paper assignment. There is no librarian, thanks to budget cuts. There is a Cornel West title or two, a minuscule African-American section—and an outsized “fantasy” section.

1844: *Eastern Penitentiary in Pennsylvania hires a teacher and opens a library.*

1847: *New York state permits the hiring of two teachers per prison.*

1861: *In the Detroit House of Corrections, religious covert Zebulon Brockway launches educational and industrial programs and permits inmates to earn wages.*

1870: *The National Prison Association calls for universal education in prisons.*

1876: *Brockway relocates to a correctional facility in Elmira, New York, where he pioneers academic advancements: 28 classrooms, a vocational section for 36 trades, a 600-seat lecture hall, a Sunday lecture series, an inmate newspaper and courses in psychology, political economy and the sciences. Completion of English literature becomes a requirement for parole. The public baulks, dubbing Elmira a “palace prison.”*

1910: *At the International Prison Congress, Zebulon Brockway states that prison is not about punishment “but, instead, education by practice—education of the whole man, his capacity, his habits and tastes, by a rational procedure whose central motive and law of development are found in the industrial economies.”*

1949: *The Correctional Educational Association is*

*born.*

1970: *100 years after the American Correctional Association Congress endorses education within prison, sections 136 and 137 of the Corrections Law in the State of New York require the New York State Department of Correctional Services to “provide each inmate with a program of education which seems most likely to further the process of socialization and rehabilitation.”*

1971: *The Attica Rebellion leaves 43 dead. Among the demands of the rebels: more education.*

1994: *Some 350 college-in-prison programs exist across America—but New York State, for the first time, spends more on prisons than universities.*

1994: *President Clinton signs an omnibus crime bill making incarcerated students ineligible for financial aid, despite the fact prisoners received less than 1 percent of the total \$6 billion spent on such aid that year.*

1997: *Seven college-in-prison programs remain in America.*

### October 12, 2011

I drop off my mobile library at the Superintendent’s office for clearance: a load of books about the history of racial classifications, for the guys to use in their research papers.

Making my way through security I put on my extra-friendly face. I am ever aware of how I am seen: liberal city-girl do-gooder. Shoes off through the metal detector. Smiles.

“You doing this again next semester?” asks CO with metal wand.

I tell him yes, though we’re trying to expand the program and a different professor will start in January. But yep, the program will stick around.

“Good,” he says. I’m surprised.

“Why? It’s more work for you guys, with us coming and going.”

“We want these guys to be busy doing good things—less trouble for us.” I tell him I’m glad he feels that way.

“A lot of these guys are scumbags but there are some good ones,” he declares. “And you’re college, not GED, so you got the good ones.” He asks about money; I explain that we pay the inmates’ tuition.

“A lot of people feel like, ‘why should they get a free ride?’” he says, flatly. I tell him I understand where they’re coming from.

“But CUNY tuition is very affordable, especially with liberal financial aid,” I add, also saying something about incarcerated people not being eligible for that, since 1994. He seems mildly interested.

I wait on my escort to class. I’m early. The CO who always arranges my escort—which I don’t really need but am required to have—looks up at me, with what I interpret as a scowl, from her Campbell’s soup can. I smile at her and try to make small talk about my ride up from the city. She gives me the once-over a few times over.

At the classroom building, Officer R—funny to still not know her first name; prison is last-name territory—is in a good mood. She compliments my jacket. She

tells me that the library is still closed, for two more weeks. Then a librarian will come in but he'll only be around for two months, for some bureaucratic reason I don't comprehend.

Class begins with a collective moan about the typewriters, which are all but useless to anyone except those comfortable with outdated technology. Kenneth says he has blisters from writing by hand; I jokingly tell him it's only right—education is labor. They hand in their papers. Raheem's is in a plastic sleeve ("I didn't want to mess it up") and Marcus's comes in an Otisville Correctional Facility envelope. Most of them, tellingly, have put their DIN numbers on the right-hand corner, alongside their names.

We delve into Junot Diaz's story. Surprisingly, ever-silent Edward volunteers to read his journal entry aloud. It's a pointed critique of Ramon. Raheem agrees: Ramon's a hustler. He hustles everyone—wife, kids, new wife in America. Kenneth jumps in with his journal entry, a defense of Ramon: "I, like Ramon, abandoned my family. I sold drugs, I hustled, I robbed people. But I can correct myself, like he did—in the end Ramon sent for his family. He tried to come correct."

I ask if the rest of the class has any empathy for Ramon. Rasheen: Hell, nah. Kenneth: So how can you expect anyone to have empathy for us? Rasheen: I don't!

William: I knew how this story was going to end after I read five pages. I know a million stories from DR just like this. He uses a Spanish term to describe what Ramon is, a term neither he nor James can translate—call it "good-for-nothing." Ramon is selfish and irresponsible. Rowland: But I get why Ramon didn't write his family back home; it's like us here not writing home—sometimes it's like there's nothing new there, so why should I bother? Me: Why else wouldn't he write home, from a psychological perspective? Class, in unison: Because he's ashamed. Ramon's family is a reminder of his failure. Instead of having to face that, better to simply block it out. Why be around someone who's a reminder of the ways in which you've screwed up, grandly? They nod; they get this. Me: How does the narrator feel about him? James: the story reserves judgment—like James McBride does in his book. Ramon is like Ruth McBride Jordan: how we judge that character is a literary Rorschach test, revealing more about us than them.

As class ends, Robert asks about next semester; I tell him they'll be taking Anthropology 101, and I'll be teaching English 201 next fall. A few say they'll be outta here by then. Me: Good—you'll take it at CUNY. Theron: Yes, I'll be back at 59 street and 10<sup>th</sup> avenue, like I was 20 years ago.

I always make a point of saying, "When you're home and in CUNY," because I want to program it into their heads. Speak and it shall be so: you *will* come home, and you *will* attend college when you do.

*I love to write. I truly thought I did a good job, and I did, but Professor Dreisinger gave me a wake-up call. I still had a lot to learn. All the RED marks and the revisions she suggested frustrated me. But I did*

*what needed to be done. —Theron Smith, inside student*

### October 19, 2011

Returning papers, their narrative essays, is a cruel task. They want As, but I'm maintaining usual standards and high expectations. The disappointment is palpable, and my assurance that they'll be doing revisions and thus these aren't their final grades alleviates nothing. They wrote rich narratives about their first experiences of race: Marcus on the white man in the living room who turned out to be his grandfather; Anthony on his Puerto Rican best friend, Cocco; Robert on the Indian Guyanese girl who wouldn't date him because he's black; Theron on being bussed into a better school; James's sage conclusion: "I am neither black nor white. I am not Hispanic nor Latino. I am Boricua, and on a census I will write Boricua on the line that states "other." I will not be identified with the slave titles of Hispanic or Latino, and I will not identify myself with a race that will not recognize me as part of their own."

Things lively up during our discussion of today's readings, which include an essay by Eric Liu about being what he calls a "banana": Asian on the outside, white on the inside. James compares him to Richard Rodriguez, the class's favorite punching bag: Mister Racially Confused. James reads a personal journal entry about how people expect him to be a certain way because he's Puerto Rican. William plays the essentialist again: Liu is "sad" because he's "really" Chinese and can't pretend to be white. I press on: Is he "really" Chinese? Isn't life a tad lame if we're simply born into something, sans identity wiggle room? I point to Liu's list of so-called "white" characteristics. If Liu has those characteristics, isn't he, then, part white? William: there's no such thing as "white culture." Kenneth: it doesn't matter anyway because the world pegs you, and your own version of who you are is beside the point.

The guys are coming alive. William, 25, is the quiet, hyper-observant one who can be counted on to jump in with key questions at the height of the discussion. Theron, 41, is the nodding scholar, liable to drop a name or book title at a fitting moment. Raheem, 26, is the hip-hop jokester, thoughtful and studied, wearer of an expression that toes the line between smile and smirk. Kenneth is an incredible hulk with a sensitive streak. Juan, 35, is the gifted student with the face of a child, calm and kind. Edward, 29: Is he with us? I can never tell. Marcus, 30, is the family man ever eager to come correct. Tony, 33, is ever laughing and likeable. Rowland, 38, is my reliable right arm—knows the ins and outs of how to make things happen when bureaucracy stiffens us. I'm curious to see how they'll interact with the outside students, to be bussed into prison for our first learning exchange later this week.

*I am interested in taking such a class because I believe that it would be a great working experience. I believe that everyone should have an equal opportunity and that we would all be able to learn from each other.*

*I would be interested because I believe that it can help inmates at a second chance for a career after incarceration.*

*I would be interested because I believe that it can help inmates at a second chance for a career after incarceration.*

*Not interested because it is a safety hazard for John Jay students. Although this program may be beneficial to inmates, John Jay students should come first.*

*I just hope this program doesn't devalue John Jay as an institution. I'm not sure where I stand on allowing inmates to attain a degree with the same name that will appear on my degree.*

*I don't know how civilized the inmates are. They are put in there for a reason why are we going to go sit with them . . . They aren't meant to be with us. -Student responses to a survey taken in January, 2011, about the possibility of taking a class inside a prison*

### **October 21, 2011**

Driving a cohort of CUNY students upstate is as close as I've come to a class trip in a long, long time. To these hardened city dwellers, a sleepy suburban town like Otisville might as well be Arkansas. They "ooh" and "ahh" at wood-paneled houses on country roads, garnished with American flags.

*I guess I did not expect them to be so intellectual. Their use of words when expressing their positions were exceptional. The manner in which they communicated and address the issues during our discussions was well presented. Throughout the discussions I kept asking myself, "How did these guys end up in this place?" ... I don't know what they did to be locked up but it would be good for society to help them this time...I cannot explain it but when it was time to leave and I walked out that room, something in me felt very different. There was a mixture of excitement, a newfound understanding, and inspiration. -Patrick Gallimore, outside student, in an email right after the first learning exchange*

### **October 24, 2011**

First day of office hours, prison style. Theron, William and Tony show up in their counselor's office to speak with me by phone, one by one. Hardly ideal circumstances: They don't have privacy. Yet another teaching-in-a-panopticon moment.

They rave about the learning exchange: It made them feel like so-called normal college students; the outside students were smart and friendly; they can't wait for the next one.

### **October 26, 2011**

They haven't stopped raving about the learning ex-

change, so I ask them to write in their journals about it. Their words:

William: The feelings are excitement and happiness. Mentally it removes me from jail, prison or whatever you may want to call it...I was impressed by the students. I can see that they apply themselves and know how to express their ideas. Something I can learn as I struggle to accurately express myself.

Marcus: I wouldn't say that I felt dumb, but I felt kind of strange because I didn't participate as much as I should have.

Kenneth: I need more of that, or should I say the college settings. I've never experienced anything like that before in my life. It was truly remarkable. Never in my life did I believe that college was fun. John Jay did me a big favor in selecting me for this program. The students—wow! Fun to learn with. I can't wait to get out and go to John Jay College.

James: One thing that stuck out to me is the way the other set of students were able to word what was needed to be said.

Tony: I cannot describe my feelings about Friday's class. I've never been in such a setting. The intellect in the room was exuberant. I walked away from this class with an overwhelming thirst for knowledge. While hearing such an exchange of ideas, I realized I've finally made the right decision.

Raheem: It's been a while since I was put in a classroom setting with people I didn't know. So in the beginning of class it felt a little intimidating. I didn't want to say anything stupid, so I held my participation to a minimum. That's the only thing I regretted after class.

I'm struck by the irony: each set of students felt intellectually intimidated by the other. It's not only about intellect—it's about voice and expression. The guys inside have profound anxiety around this issue, probably because they exist in a space of total voicelessness: Life behind bars. I think of William's remark, during our office hours chat, about wanting to express himself better. When it comes to voice, college and prison are ultimately profoundly at odds. The former is about cultivating expression; the latter, suppressing it.

Grammar boot camp produces lots of laughter and camaraderie. I make another attempt to assuage anxieties about final grades; they don't want to hear it. The level of investment here is triple what I'm used to, and I fear backfire: Disappointment can be motivation's greatest foe.

"Can I ask you something?" comes the question from the CO on my way out.

"Not to sound stupid, but—" he continues. I dread what's coming next; this particular CO has never exuded much warmth, and I suspect I'm about to endure something along the lines of, "Are you really a professor? How old are you?" Wrong.

"My daughter is in college in Pennsylvania and she is studying to be a teacher. What do you need to be a professor?" We have a nice chat about her options. I think about the fact that our educational presence at Otisville isn't just providing a service to the inmates; prisons can be educational dead zones for all parties. Some irra-

tional us-versus-them voice within me, though, gets pangs of guilt about being buddy-buddy with COs. Especially following class, after I've bonded with the men in our little educational cocoon.

#### November 2, 2011

One of the COs tell me he doesn't like even visiting New York City, even though he grew up in Brooklyn, because there are too many bars on the windows and locks on the doors. He moved from Brooklyn to prison country over 20 years ago.

"I've worked behind bars for over 25 years. Don't want to live behind bars, too," he says. Robert immediately comes to mind; they're both from the same Caribbean island and Brooklyn—and now on very opposite sides of the fence. I ask him if he runs into former inmates when he visits his old neighborhood.

"All the time. I see them in the Caribbean, too—the ones who've been deported."

Class is spent on peer reviews of their research paper outlines. On the way out I enjoy a chat with Officer R about her wanting to go back to school, maybe after she retires in eight years, when her son reaches the double digits. I tell her I'll bring up some John Jay materials for her. She's pleased.

#### November 9, 2011

Sick! Have never felt so guilty for missing a class.

I grade papers from my sickbed, though. It takes me on a manic-depressive ride: The good ones prompt bouts of ecstasy, but the grammatically challenged ones make me want to throw up my hands in frustrated disappointment. I notice the same errors again and again—and they're the same ones that plague my non-incarcerated students: sentence fragments, comma splices, subject-verb agreement issues. It's a reminder that what surprises me most about this semester is how few the differences are between these students and my non-incarcerated ones. Ultimately, and between sneezes, I ride a high: They've just written their first college research papers, with limited resources and no experience. And James got an A!

I skim their journals. Rowland's entry on fear sends chills down my spine: "Each officer on either side of me jabbed the ends of their axe handles into my ribs and dared me to come off the wall. What happened next left me in utter shock. I was told by the first CO that I was no longer in the city jail and they play by a different set of rules. 'We will kill you if you get out of hand with our officers and female staff. As far as we are concerned, you and the rest of your monkeys can kill each other.'" What comment can I possibly write in the margins of *that* entry?

#### November 16, 2011

You're a Jewish prisoner in a concentration camp. A Nazi guard, on his death bed, asks you for forgiveness. What do you do?

This is the premise of our reading for the day, themed around race and forgiveness: Simon Wiesenthal's *The Sunflower*. Our edition includes Wiesenthal's narrative

along with a host of responses to the query he poses, by everyone from religious leaders to academic scholars.

The discussion is surprisingly slow going at first. James makes a nuanced comment about theme of neutrality in the text: When it comes to God, nations, people—you simply can't be neutral. Kenneth picks out a profound passage about God being on leave in the camps. The class nods. I'm floored: the men deeply identify with Simon, the prisoner. Raheem reads from his journal: "I wouldn't have given the Nazi soldier the satisfaction of knowing I forgave him. Walking away from him without a response would have been my only response." Theron: "I would have told Karl that as long as his comrades allow him to breathe, forgiveness is not an option...He was part of a collective ideology that murdered millions...As with slavery, I cannot forgive what was done." James: Forgiveness is about your healing process, not the other person's, but Karl's apology is not sincere. It's criminal thinking—quick and easy.

"Wait, wait, wait," booms Kenneth. Conversational intensity suddenly ramped up forty notches.

"You've committed a crime," says Kenneth to James.

"Yes."

"Do you want your victim to forgive you?"

"My victim is no longer here. But I will be out soon."

And, James continues, "I expect that they will have to see me, and it'll be a reminder every time."

"My victim's mother said she forgives me, at my trial," says Theron.

"But still"—I interject—"you just read that you are vehemently against forgiveness."

"Right," says Theron flatly.

Kenneth reads a stunningly sensitive journal entry about the dangers of too much forgiving and too much unforgiving. It's so moving that James declare it changed his mind. Robert reads his entry, arguing that there's no such thing as forgiving but not forgetting, "because do you really forgive if you remember what they've done to you? If you forget then the idea of forgiveness is more real." He reads on: "The moral dilemma Wiesenthal presents is a great reminder to the human spirit. It pushes you to really think about the lives that you have hurt in the course of your life. The victim's family in my case will never—he crossed this out—*probably never* forgive me. I empathize with them. But I would still ask the age old question, 'Would you ever forgive me?'" Me: Although maybe "forgive-but-don't-forget" means forgetting the anger, not the event? James: But you'll be reminded of that anger every time you think of the event. Raheem, with that ever-ironic smile: Forgiveness is simple—forswearing revenge. That's it. William, quiet but keenly observing until now, pipes in with his journal entry. Ever the eagle-eyed naysayer, he's managed to find a host of nuances in the text suggesting Karl the Nazi isn't really that bad of a guy. The class pounces on him; he seems pleased with his contrariness. After class, he slides over to me.

"Professor, are you Jewish?" I say no, which is partly true; being born into a religion doesn't mean you *are* it.



"I hope I didn't offend you." It would take a lot to offend me, I reassure him.

I'm walked out by a CO who's new to me. He has rich blue eyes and a baby face. "I've been here for 12 years," he says.

"Really?" I'm genuinely surprised. "You don't look old enough to have worked here 12 years."

"I started at 21," he explains. We climb the hill. "I got straightened out in prison. I got in lots of trouble as a kid and ended up with a GED. My family members work in corrections so it made sense. We all work inside. But now I want something more."

"College?" I ask.

"I can't afford it."

I run down the list of why he can.

"Yeah, I'd like that. I read philosophy books on the job. Joseph Campbell, Aldous Huxley. But there's only so much I can learn on my own, you know?" I tell him I'll bring some information for him next week. I'm starting to feel like the Ambassador of Higher Education.

### November 23, 2011

The vibe is off in the classroom. It's the grades again. We have higher expectations of ourselves than you do, they tell me. We want As. Kenneth scowls at me. Rowland arrives an hour late. Marcus comes in late, too, with an eye that looks sucker punched. I say nothing about it but ten minutes after Marcus arrives, Tony tells him to leave the eye alone—stop playing with it. Marcus says they didn't do anything for him at the infirmary; can I ask the CO to take him back there? I send him off with the blue-eyed CO, who's outside reading *Brave New World*. Amazing how the bad energy of one student can overpower the good energy of all the others. James, after all, is at his peak—seeing himself as a scholar and thus carrying himself with newfound gravitas.

We're back on Richard Rodriguez, discussing the transcript of an interview he did. The guys think he's "funny." Raheem: He doesn't mean the shit he says—he just want to piss people off. Is that bad, I ask? Not necessarily, says Raheem. We discuss Rodriguez's claim that he is not a "real minority" because he is not poor. Theron seconds that motion, but Robert points out that it all comes down to definitions: What's a minority? Yes, I say, and what's "real"? We read the section in which Rodriguez claims to be more Chinese than Mexican. They snicker.

"But wait," I press them. "Are we back at, 'You are what you're born into?'" No way, says Theron; it's like Ruth McBride Jordan—invent yourself. Juan: It doesn't matter where you happen to be born. Shakira, for instance, is Colombian because of culture, not accident of birth.

"Why doesn't Rodriguez give back to his community instead of running his mouth?" says William. Robert: But what's "his community"? Exactly, I exclaim. And is he obligated to give back? How? William: education. Me: But aren't his books an offering of education?

We have fun with Noel Ignatiev's piece on the aboli-

tion of whiteness, in which he states that "treason to whiteness is loyalty to humanity." How can we create a world of so-called reverse Oreos, I ask. How can white people start acting in un-white ways? They fast recognize that this leads us down all sorts of funky paths about what "white" means. Theron reads from his journal: Whiteness "is so deeply ingrained in the consciousness of white people that some think it is just the color that is white and are oblivious of how deep it is interwoven into the psyche of this nation." Tony proposes an example of violating the rules of whiteness: objecting to a publicly uttered racist joke.

"That's not un-white—it's anti-racist," says Raheem. "Is that what he means by 'un-white'?" William insists that it doesn't matter because racism will disappear in 20 years, anyway—it's already disappearing. Class eruption on William again. He turns to me.

"But professor, what do you think will eliminate racism?"

"Nothing," I say. "Maybe education—a big part of why I became a professor."

"Nah," says James. There will always be something to divide us up and discriminate. "It's like this new book, *The New Jim Crow*. We, the formerly incarcerated—we're the new black." Collective class nod.

### December 7, 2011

I notice a sign that's appeared in the classroom: "Thinking for a change: Our thinking controls our behaviour. By taking charge of our thinking, we can take control of our lives." Prisons are meccas of self-help slogans, most of them concerning control over lives and actions. It's all something of a tease, masking the fact that actually, the men inside have very little control, not now and not when they were on the streets. Given the legacy of institutional racism, true agency of the pick-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps variety is an illusion. But don't tell that to the slogans.

Second-to-last class is all about revisions. They work individually and meet one-on-one with me. Theron delves right into the typewriter like an old pro. This is life or death for us, he reminds me.

"When you write those comments on our papers, it cuts deep. I was accepted to John Jay 20 years ago and then I took the wrong path. Doing this right is deep." Robert is cool and easy as he slices and dices his written word. Edward tap-taps away with focus. William approaches me with a list of questions about his paper edit.

"I cried, Baz," he declares, staring at me intently. I'm incredulous.

"Over a B? Do you know how many students would do anything to earn a B from me?"

"It's not good enough."

"Stay positive. You're coming home soon. You'll be at John Jay soon."

"So you say."

"Would I sell you a raw deal?" He shrugs; we return to revisions. He seems determined to prove that my suggestions aren't good ones, and tells me he'll follow my advice—"but only because it'll get me a better

grade." Edward has a lone question: will I really get these credits on the street? Of course, I tell him. These guys have been sold so many raw deals, they think I couldn't possibly be peddling the real deal.

"Kenneth, you're up." I signal to his scowl.

"No, thanks. I'm good." He looks like a sullen child. What happened to smiling, puffed-chest Kenneth?

"It's not optional," I tell him.

He advances toward me with a heavy gait. What's with the vibe? Kenneth: Nothing—all good. I am just going to hand it in as is. I press him; he blurts out something about being tired of all my criticisms. I don't like how you're trying to change me, change my voice, he says. But it's like a job, I press on. You dress a certain way at work and another way on the street. Is that changing who you are? No, he admits. I sense him softening.

"But you say it's unclear—my writing. I went through the whole spineless book, did all those exercises, and I don't think I can write clearly. I don't. That's it—that's the deal."

You can, I insist; we can go through each sentence with a fine-tooth comb and work through it. But, in a form of protest, he didn't even bring his paper with him today. I'm just a better debater than writer, he insists. So am I, I tell him. But you can be a good writer, too—whatever profession you go for, you need it, and *blah blah blah*; it's the requisite "writing-well-is-always-important" speech and it's one big cliché to my ears, but I still deliver it with zest.

"It's painful, those comments," Kenneth sighs.

"I know," I tell him. Writing is pain. Those articles I gave the class, the ones I wrote, had my blood, sweat and tears all over them. But you are talented and it's up to you. Your choice. He nods.

I ponder high expectations and overinvestment. What a curse they can be: With hopes so high, that plummet back to reality has the potential to produce a powerful thud. The men I see revising today aren't the proud, hopeful men they were on the first day of school. Am I killing hope? How can I balance being tough with generating confidence? The educational honeymoon period ended with that first set of grades. I experience this to some degree with all college students, but here it's larger-than-life. For these men, a whole sense of self is wrapped up in that letter. It'd better be an A.

I head out with Officer Blue-Eyes. What were you reading today, I ask.

"Oh, just fun reading."

"Trashy novel?"

"*Great Expectations*."

### **December 9, 2011**

Dramatically different learning exchange. Everyone is more comfortable; the outside students are rambunctious as they're cleared, feeling at home in the barbed wire. I have to tell them to pipe down and act professional.

The instructor du jour, Professor Kimora, is a prison regular, involved in teaching programs all over the state and at Rikers. She's part minister, part professor, part

counselor, part motivational speaker. In the middle of class, an outside student has a seizure. I have a near panic attack, but Robert and Theron spring into action, holding him up, giving him water and calming him down. It's a stunning irony: Just as they're in there taking a class about the rules of being human and the meaning of "self-actualized," these men are living it. I'm moved to tears as the student returns, shaken but perfectly fine, to class.

Best part of the day: Kenneth strides in bearing a smile and a brilliantly revised essay. I tell him to never, ever let me hear him say he's not a good writer again.

"You serious?" he asks. "I did a good job?"

"Have I ever minced words, Kenneth?" he laughs. Rowland, too, brings me excellent work, and so does Marcus.

But back to the learning exchange. The drama continues as the discussion turns personal.

*When I think about arriving at Otisville Correctional Facility I think, quite clearly, of all the ways I had been told to feel. Slightly wary, advised my family. Altruistic, advised my friends. Highly suspicious, advised American society at large. But after passing our proofs of identification up through the driver's side window (the first round of what became a very intense of separation between us and them), some where between waiting to sign in and checking to make sure I left my lip balm in the car, an unexpected emotion began to creep over me: an angry sort of impatience. An acute frustration resulting from the protocols and procedures that took over the morning. All of those tiny, seemingly endless steps we had to move through. And even as these steps became routine over many trips, I began to harbor a mild resentment, recognizing these procedures as control mechanisms, less-than-subtle attempts at division, a perpetual reminder of resident and nonresident status.*

*It must have been because of this constant reminder of our place in the system that, during class, we did our best to ignore the obvious. We talked around the elephant in the room, carefully avoiding terms that established one another as outsiders or insiders. In our effort to overcompensate for a perceived lack of freedom, or apologize for the imposition of rules, we only managed to increase the divide. The questions we wanted to ask seemed somehow off limits, placed into an imaginary box where no one dared intrude. Except Dr. Kimora during that third learning exchange.*

*Dr. Kimora refused to step around the obvious as she forced us to look at each other without reserved smiles and polite nods. Dr. Kimora, who in the last session of the first semester began her explanation of the assignment with "for those of you in this room who live here." Dr. Kimora, whose lesson on self-reflection and a discussion of what makes your character allowed us to speak about our differences in our own terms. Acknowledging that while, yes, we*

had all found ourselves in this classroom at Otisville through widely variant circumstances, the traits that made us different as people had little to do with the superficial constraints of the system we were forced to operate in. Only after bringing our most obvious differences to the forefront were we allowed to move past them. From day one I had been told how to feel about people I had yet to meet. The entire structure of the system creates a separation between the insiders and the outsiders. It was truly a grand hurdle to move past this heavily imposed distinction and interact as students, scholars and nothing more. Dr. Kimora's candidness finally allowed us that luxury.  
-Lenecia Lewis-Kirkwood, outside student

### December 14, 2011

Last days of class are always bittersweet: Culminations are a joy, but goodbyes aren't. I take the bus to prison. It's Christmas season, so the bus today is making an extra stop at Woodbury Commons, a major shopping outlet not far from the prison. It's thus packed with Visa-bearing people on a mission quite different from mine.

In the classroom, Raheem and Kenneth are chatting about how many classes it's reasonable to take per semester—three? It's a natural segue into our topic for the day: race and the function of higher education. I'd given them excerpts from Paolo Frere's classic *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. I break down Frere's talk of "internalization," the idea that one of the tactics of oppression involves a kind of brainwashing: The oppressed are made to believe they deserve to be oppressed because they're fundamentally inferior to their oppressors. The guys get this, viscerally; they know what it is to be told they're no good, again and again. We turn to another article, about whether a student studying to be a state trooper should have to take a literature class. Marcus: You never know when English is gonna be useful. Define "useful," I say. After all, what does a 99-cent storeowner need English 101 for?

"You never know, someone you're trying to sell to might like philosophy," says Raheem. "So I can drop a name or two, or mention Richard Rodriguez, and make a sale. So "useful" means making money, I ask?"

"No, also it's good to know on its own. For real," declares Raheem. Theron: There's nothing not worth knowing about. Me: I agree. And that's what I tell my students.

"I'm gonna remember this conversation when I'm out, and having to take a bad class at John Jay," Robert laughs.

Moment of reckoning: sitting one-on-one with them and returning their writing portfolios, with final grades. Rowland is thrilled with his B. I ask Robert what he thinks he got.

"B," he says. "I've always been the student who did OK—I never wanted to be noticed, just enough to get by but not to stand out." I hand him his grade, an A-. "Time to rethink your identity as a student."

Tony expects a B- but gets a B+. He quietly thanks me for pushing him.

"I think other people believe in me more than I believe in myself," he says. "So thanks for believing in me. Even the journals—I compare old entries to newer ones and I really improved. I felt relaxed, like I can just write."

William is notably terrified. His superb A- pains him, but he accepts it. Theron, to his A-: "Just means I still got a higher ceiling." James's A is a given; I tell him to consider becoming a professor.

"I'm too old," he laughs. I'm rushed and have to make my exit; there is no wiggle time in prison. I leave thinking of all the things I didn't say: How much the semester meant to me, how proud I am, how I've never given so many high grades—so much so that when I submitted them online, I almost felt guilty: More than half the class earned A-'s. Truly earned them.

I take that last-day-of-the-semester ride out of those gates. In the Middletown bus station I'm greeted with a "hey, sweetie" by a man who resembles the rocker Kid Rock, with fewer teeth. A woman with a hefty smoker-voice buzzes in my ear. She's on her way to Monticello, and she's reminiscing about the days when Middletown was called Middletown for a reason: There was real industry upstate, and things were bustling. "Things ain't what they used to be," she says with a sigh. I reveal what I'm doing up there, explaining who my students are.

"You call them students. They're inmates," she says, puffing on her cigarette.

"No, they're students."

The bus ride home is surreal. It's storming so it takes almost three hours, but I don't mind because it allows me to unpack this final day. I miss my students. I worry about them being OK for the next six weeks, during winter break; I assure them that the counselor and the Dep. can reach me if anything happens. I have flashes of their expressions as they received their grades—the letter ultimately aimed at replacing their Scarlet-A DIN numbers. There is no effort nobler than that of a person who has erred gravely but labors, steadily, to come correct. Being part of that divine laboring is what motivated me to start this program, and stay with it.

*NB: Some names have been changed for the purposes of privacy*

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PRACTITIONER PAPER

## Sanctuary in the Richmond City Jail

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### Abstract

*The following article is a collaboration among four individuals about unique programs run through “The Sanctuary” at the Richmond City Jail in Virginia, US. The Richmond City Jail is one of few jails in the US to offer programs to inmates who serve only short sentences as compared to prisons where the incarcerated serve much longer. In addition to this anomaly, students from outside of the jail come inside to take college classes with the inmates. Programs include literature classes, yoga, religious studies, creative writing, and more. The article explores the impact of The Sanctuary on the spirit, confidence, and perceptions of self-worth among inmates as compared to incarceration without such programs. Practitioners may use the programs detailed as a model for other institutions and evidence of the success of community building and education inside jails and prisons.*

**Keywords:** Jail education; community building; incarceration.

### Preface

Within the cinder-block walls plastered with black and white computer printouts of Rosa Parks, Ghandi, Huey Newton, and other freedom fighters, photos that are now peeling from summer after sticky Virginia summer without air conditioning, we sit and read in community – in the Sanctuary. The four of us, among others, seek to create meaningful responses to and dialogue around literature as well as create our own art. This article is the result of such collaboration, a collective project among us four: a post-master's graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University and three residents of the Richmond City Jail. Although three of us are incarcerated at the time we write this, all of us have been locked up and experienced the criminal “justice” system first-hand, behind the bars. Given this, we use the first-person plural. Though our individual experiences may be slightly different, the four of us speak in solidarity.

The Richmond City Jail (RCJ), an aging building from the 1960s, is unique in many respects aside from its dilapidated appearance. This includes a number of programs for inmates, unusual for a jail as compared to a prison. Jail is a transient place. People serve short sentences, get bailed out, or transferred to different institutions. Consequently, few jails in the US offer extensive programs to their inmates who, relative to prisoners, are there for only a short stay. Only because of our gracious Sheriff C.T. Woody, JR, do these programs exist. However, the irony is that people who are soon to be released may be in the greatest need of programs to offer strategies, skills, and ideas about how not to return to jail.

Although, as we write this article, the finishing touches are being carried out at the “new jail,” which promises better amenities such as air conditioning and

fewer dripping pipes, we wonder if our programs will make the leap from our decrepit two-story brick building to the new six-story concrete structure. It looms over us with narrow windows reminiscent of castle arrowslits, but they serve not to keep intruders out as much as to keep the incarcerated in. What looks like shark fins jut up from around the perimeter of the roof; its shadow circles us.

We write this as a tribute to the programs we believe are important and hope will continue in the new space. We hope this article does not become an historical account of what was but a testament encouraging the expansion of the existing programs at RCJ and a model for other sites of incarceration.

The room where we convene lacks the technology and size of a typical school classroom. There are no LCD projectors, smart boards, or even climate control. Once a mattress storage room, it is long and skinny, made even more narrow as it is lined by desks and bookcases, for it is even too small to have a row of desks: they must be turned sideways and pushed against the wall. We sit in a circle, or the best we can make of one, but it looks more like an oblong ellipse. Your nearest neighbors are six inches to either side and you sit facing one another about three feet apart. This closeness may take some getting used to, but it reinforces the spirit of community.

Despite the less than amenable physical conditions, we make learning happen. The room is the only respite from jail life and is referred to as The Sanctuary. We believe any space can be made a safe, caring learning environment with the dedication and participation of those within it.

The space is unique, not just for the appearance of our classroom - our Sanctuary - but for what happens in it. We read, discuss, and learn together and from each



other. There is no hierarchy here. A “teacher” facilitates the class, but it is the community built here that motivates and teaches. The austere conditions, although the result of a deprivation of resources rather than parity, also facilitate the deep learning in this environment. There are no distractions of cell phones, Facebook, or the like. It does not matter whether you have a college degree, GED, or no secondary education at all (and we have all three in the same room). Instead of worrying about differences, we are able to focus on building a community that lifts up everyone.

### General Population

When the three of us who are currently incarcerated at the Richmond City Jail\* first arrived, we were placed in general population, or “gen pop.” There was much chaos. People argued incessantly, stole from each other constantly, and fought regularly. Fights were so common, it was abnormal not to see at least one attack daily. We consider ourselves compassionate individuals by nature, but here we could not be kind for it would be considered weakness and you'd end up on the wrong side of a punch. Here, there were only two options: put on a mask and hide who you are or become a victim yourself. It was seriously dehumanizing.

It felt hopeless, and many of us considered stooping to the level of those around us because hey, if you can't beat em' then join em.' We felt defeated, because facing felony drug charges, we knew no one wants to hire a felon, so why not try to figure out how to not get caught next time and be the best criminals we can be? This is what the chaos of general population does to a person; it's how it makes a person think. It is hell.

### Sanctuary

Fortunately, we escaped general population by entering recovery programs that allowed us to attend the one place in the jail where we can be creative, be ourselves, be human: The Sanctuary. This is the only place in the chaotic confinement where there is a sense of calm. It is not hyperbole to call it The Sanctuary. It is not just a “school” where we take classes, earn certifications, and learn together; it is much, much more.

In a typical school setting the teacher instructs and the students follow the lead, but here in The Sanctuary, we all learn from each other, sharing our creative minds through stories, poetry, music, dance, religion, art, and politic. Many of us are from the inner-city and have never been exposed to some of the things we come in contact with here: yoga, a music studio with industry standard equipment, interpretive dance, literature, and college classes.

Some of us had not been in a classroom for decades and even more intimidating was the prospect of taking classes alongside college students through the Open Minds Program which brings university students from the outside to take classes with us on the inside. Further anxiety provoking was the fact that it had been nearly a year since some of us had seen or interacted with anyone that wasn't an inmate, deputy, lawyer or judge. It was nerve racking, fearing the students would judge us,

look down on us, and see us the way we saw ourselves at the time - a caged animal with no feeling or soul.

However, what we found were students who were compassionate, understanding, accepting and not so different than us. The most powerful change happened when we realized that their compassion and acceptance of our situation allowed us to be more compassionate and accepting of ourselves; and then a huge weight was lifted. We became infused with feelings of self-worth and comfort, knowing that despite our criminal charges and incarceration, we were still sentient people that others cared about, and we had a voice that others wanted to hear.

This was what we feel saved many of us and our sanity throughout our incarceration; the students' compassion for us was contagious, causing us to care about ourselves again. Learning with the students strengthened our confidence to leave these walls and continue our education on the outside. This has been perhaps the most valuable part of our Richmond City Jail experience in the Sanctuary: confidence, self-worth, and hope.

Through college classes offered by Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Union University, and the University of Richmond, we have read poets such as William Shakespeare, Emily Dickinson, Etheridge Knight, Amiri Baraka, Edger Allen Poe, and many more. We've read works from Ghazzali, a Sufi scholar. We studied the works of Houston Smith, a religious writer. In taking these courses, we've uncovered knowledge we thought we had forgotten over the years.

Many of us learned a new skill with respect to reading literature. One of the teachers taught us how you can compare anything you read to another piece of literature. This skill can be used in everyday life. Comparing newspaper articles to excerpts from books we're reading allows us to delve more deeply into the text and gain a richer understanding. Also, many of us have applied this strategy to our religious studies, comparing scriptures in order to better understand them. The limits to this strategy are endless.

In addition to learning academic content, we collaborate with each other to write, revise, and share our original poetry, music, and other art forms. The Sanctuary has allowed us to unlock our creativity and awaken parts of ourselves that had been latent. We've discovered we have amazingly talented singers, songwriters, poets, dancers, writers, storytellers, and composers who we never knew were sleeping in a bunk just a few feet away.

### Realizing What Matters

During our incarceration at Richmond City Jail, we have come to realize some truths: no matter our backgrounds, we as people and especially as inmates, come to recognize what is truly important in life and appreciate the simple things. As the old saying goes, “You don't know what you've got until it's gone.”

For instance, without any control of your meals – when you eat them or what they include - things as humble as a bowl of cereal become significant. Usu-

ally, you cannot get cereal (especially name brand!) in the jail, but once a year during the holiday season, the jail makes this and other exclusive items available for purchase by friends and family for residents. Residents cannot buy these items directly from the commissary. Someone on the outside has to order and purchase these holiday packs for residents from a special catalog. For one of us, his family sent such a care package. While many people on the outside were opening gifts of new computers, iPods, and other expensive items, he was jumping for joy over Fruit Loops! The cereal was important not only because it was unavailable 364 days of the year, but because his family sent it to show their love even though they could not be there in person; this was his first holiday away from them.

This anecdote underscores how the austerity of jail life can allow us to focus more on ourselves and what's truly important: relationships with other people. The Sanctuary, a truly unique place, has taught us this. Don't get us wrong, it's still a jail and we wish never to return. But we feel The Sanctuary has been the best thing to happen to us in a long time, life changing and life saving. It's ironic how a little room inside the Richmond City Jail has helped open our eyes to the world and is making us more responsible citizens.

### **Moving Forward**

Jail is supposed to be a punishment for the bad choices people have made in society. Incarceration is designed to be difficult; that's why it's called *hard* time. The goal? To make people never want to return. However, just confining people to miserable conditions doesn't seem to be working if we consider the high recidivism rates in the United States.

In contrast, the various programs offered through The Sanctuary have been essential tools in keeping us sane and motivating us to become better and more productive citizens as opposed to more slick criminals. It was The Sanctuary and the people within it that changed our views and gave us new perspectives on our life situations. We graduated from feeling like a pariah to feeling like an empowered student with opportunities and a future. The success we found in The Sanctuary gives us hope that we can carry that success with us when we're released. This is where healing begins.

The Sanctuary has allowed us to come to terms with our incarceration and use it to better ourselves instead of engaging in more self-destructive behavior. It's offered us opportunities within these walls that many of us were never given on the outside such as writing this article; it gives us confidence that we have a voice, that it is valuable, and that we want to use it.

*\*Author's note: At the time of publication, two of the three co-authors have been released.*

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PRACTITIONER PAPER

# Waking Up in Prison: Critical Discussions Between Typical College Students and Their Incarcerated Peers

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## Abstract

*This article describes a typical college course that was taught in a youth correctional facility. The course combined traditional college students and inmates from the prison. Over the course of 15 weeks both groups grew to understand one another and themselves. The article seeks to illustrate the realities related both to fear and success in such an undertaking. This collaborative model between colleges and correctional facilities has promise as a model for prison education.*

**Keywords:** Prison education, qualitative analysis, narrative.

*The single story creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story. -Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie*

## Introduction

I have been teaching at a small liberal arts college in the United States for seven years. My students are preparing to become teachers and they fit the dominant mold of pre-service teachers – they are largely female, white, middle class, Christian, heterosexual, non-disabled, and their own schooling experiences have been very monocultural. My specific program focus is preparing teachers to work in under resourced schools. That focus has attracted a small population of students to my program who do not fit the mold previously described. Therefore, the students in my courses are often more diverse than the general student population at the college. A few semesters ago I had the opportunity to teach one of these classes in a youth correctional facility. Each week 15 students from my college and I would drive to this prison and hold class with 15 inmates. We read the same material and did similar assignments to the on-campus class.

This paper will discuss how the group dynamics supported growth for both the inmates and the typical college students. I expected resistance from both groups. Martinson's (1974) skepticism that rehabilitation is possible with the inmates was one reality. The typical college students were largely coming from very monocultural, middle class backgrounds, and expecting them to make big strides in their ideas about the inmates was also unlikely. In this essay, I will discuss what I learned about listening and responding to resistance around issues of privilege in the process of teaching this course and how that has translated into all of my typical on campus classes.

I was teaching a course called Introduction to Urban Education. In that course we study policies that impact schools, children, and families as well as spending a substantial amount of time engaged in critical self-reflection. It is important for all of my students, no matter their cultural background, to think deeply about why they are choosing to teach in schools where the children struggle everyday with the implicit and explicit messages that they are less valued than their peers at schools in the neighboring town. These messages arrive at every level. The schools and classrooms are often working with very limited resources, the teachers are under a great deal of pressure to increase test scores, the surrounding neighborhoods are sometimes too unsafe to allow children to play outside, and children need only to watch any television show to see that their school experience is different from many others. As my students prepare to teach "other people's children" it is imperative that they explore their own cultural identity and motivation for choosing this path in education.

About half-way through the semester one of my students told me about another program on campus – a prison outreach and education program. She was excited and said that I should volunteer to teach at the prison. My immediate reaction was positive, but not because I was excited about teaching in prison but rather because my student suggested it to me. I mention this fact because I recognize that even though I teach this course and try to facilitate self-discovery in my students, I am also acutely aware of how much I also need to constantly engage in critical self-reflection. In that moment my focus was on me, the idea that my student liked me, thought I had something to offer, associated me with the kind of person who would teach in a prison. The semester ended and I did not pursue this idea any further.

A year later I was still thinking about how I could be





helpful in a prison. I just was not sure. Finally, I decided to meet with the person who directs the prison education program to find out exactly what they did and determine if there was a place for me. After the meeting it was decided that I would take my Introduction to Urban Education course into the prison. The typical college students would have to apply for 15 spots. I left that meeting and immediately started thinking about the course. Unfortunately, it really never occurred to me that I would have to change the course to meet the needs of the inmates. Instead, I was more concerned with logistics. They needed books, materials, etc. Over the next few months there were emails and phone calls. I wanted enough books for all of the inmates and I wanted them to have the first book in advance so they could read it before the first class. For my part, I made copies of articles that would be important in the course and placed them into folders for each inmate that included the syllabus and explanations of assignments.

### We're in

We were lucky enough to have transportation arranged for us. My students would all meet a van each week that would take them to the prison. The college students purchased big blue t-shirts that said "Prison Outreach". They were instructed to have their identification. Without identification they could be turned away. The van had just enough room for the students so I drove my own car and met them there.

A long tree lined road lead to a huge 1930s style building – the architecture seemed to say that this was not always a prison. Hollers and catcalls from various windows greeted us as we approached the door. Through one arched doorway and a small vestibule there was a metal detector to both walk through and a belt through which you put your belongings. The correctional officer assisting us through the security checkpoint greeted us, gave us instructions on getting through the metal detector, and patiently restated instructions for the college students who were too stunned by their arrival at a prison to respond when he asked for identification cards. The metal detector beeped when I went through. A few of my students let out nervous giggles. I immediately knew why it went off and braced myself for the embarrassing moment that was about to ensue. It was my underwire bra. I had been through this during a prior visit but forgot to wear a sports bra today. I had to go back through three times. First, cupping my breasts to try to block the wire from being detected. Then, cupping my breasts and walking through at a snail's pace. Finally, cupping breasts, snail's pace and sideways was the magic combination. I would not forget to wear a sports bra again.

Another correctional officer needed to sign us all in. He was 10 feet away, behind a glass wall, staring at us ominously. Our identification was collected by the officer who worked the metal detector and handed to the burly man behind the glass. He scowled and cursed our group, audibly. The students looked terrified to be in the prison, to be greeted with clear disdain. I was also

nervous but I tried to stay light hearted and smile in response to his query, "How many fucking people did you bring with you?" I even tried to joke with the correctional officer to which he responded, "This is a fucking joke;" still I was not sure he actually *got* my joke. In a journal entry, one student wrote, "I was walking behind you, watching you walk briskly, wondering what you were thinking. You were about to be the bridge between felons and suburban college kids. That was a 'wow' moment for me" (Liz, 9/15).

What Liz and the other students didn't know is that I had no idea what to expect. For as much as I planned, there was still inconsistent communication between the prison and me ahead of time. When I toured the prison a few weeks back, the superintendent and I walked up a flight of stairs and I noticed we were also following a trail of blood. He wanted to show me something that was behind a door but when he looked through the glass he said it was not a good time and we left. On the way out he showed me "where the guys feed;" he was referring to the cafeteria. I wasn't exactly sure what I had gotten myself into.

### Class begins

I arrived with 15 typical college students and expected 15 incarcerated students. When I arrived I had a folder waiting for me from the social worker. There were 19 inmate names on it. I took a deep breath. "A few more students would not normally phase me, this shouldn't be a problem," I thought. Still, it felt like a problem. After we were all signed in, a 30-minute process, we walked through a series of heavy gated doors to the *Education Wing*. As we turned left, into the Education Wing, the mood of the facility changed a little. The correctional officer stationed at the entrance was all smiles, and welcomed us in. There were inmates there already who were working. They asked if I needed anything for my class, helped me find my books, and offered to move desks for us. I asked them if I would see them each week and they said that this was their job and their shift and they would be there each week. I introduced myself and asked for their names. "Ok, this is going to be OK," I thought.

My 15 students and I filed into the classroom and we arranged all of the chairs in a big semi-circle. We were waiting for the inmates. I told the college students to leave desks open between them so the inmates would have to sit among them and not segregate themselves. I considered writing my name on the board but then decided that was dumb. It seemed like it was taking a long time for the inmates to arrive and I did not know what to do. Do I start teaching without them? I finally decided to just make small talk with the students who were there. It felt like the worst first date ever.

Finally, a line of guys in khaki pants and tops started coming in. As each one entered I smiled, introduced myself and asked for their name so I could check them from my attendance. It took me a minute to realize they were giving me last names. Many of them mumbled and I had to ask them to repeat their name several times. One student told me his name, "Fred;" I said

"Fred?" He repeated, "Redge." "Oh, Redge?" I said. Finally, looking annoyed, he pointed to a tattoo on his neck that clearly said, "Red" as he slowly said, "Reeed." I could feel my armpits sweating. "I'm so sorry," I said. "Red, of course, Red, welcome Red."

Once everyone was checked in and we decided that some incarcerated students just would not be coming, we got started. We would do an ice breaker just like this was a regular class on campus. I had the students stand up and form two circles, an inner and an outer. Each person would face someone else and we would do a speed dating exercise. I would call out a question and each person had a minute to introduce themselves to their partner and answer the question. Nervous giggles erupted from both the college students and the inmates. Here we go – Tell your partner about the best teacher you've ever had, Tell your partner about the worst teacher you've ever had, Tell your partner what you would do if you hit the lottery...

In response to that activity, one student wrote in her journal,

*One of the ice breaker questions asked, "What was your favorite/worse teacher?" Right off the bat, James responded that he remembered his favorite teacher and it was his 7th grade music teacher. I assumed that he liked music and asked him if he played an instrument. He said he didn't do very well in the class but he liked her because the teacher fed him. WOW! My heart broke when I heard that. It made me realize how blessed I am just to have food in my fridge. (Tina, typical student, weekly journal)*

The reality of children from low resource homes going to school hungry was something we had discussed in the classes on campus leading up to our time at the prison. Additionally, the traditional college students had watched a lecture with Jeffrey Andrade-Duncan where he talked about this very scenario. Yet, it wasn't until she came face to face with someone who had lived it that it made an impact.

On my way home after that first class I was sure I had made a mistake. I replayed the night and decided there was no way I could do this well. It would be impossible to make this a valuable learning experience for both the typical college students and the incarcerated students. I spent a lot of the ride home trying to figure out how to get out of this obligation. I even thought it would be good if I got in a car accident. If I got hurt or my car was totaled I would have a convenient excuse for why I could not continue. I spent the next few days consumed with thinking about how to balance this course so it was good for everyone. Finally I decided that the typical college students were more interested in being in the prison than learning the course content. I had to let go of the way this class was done on campus. I decided to cut the readings down to the pieces I thought would be most interesting to the inmates; we would still have our speaker and use videos. We would do more in-class writing assignments. And, the biggest decision was to put all of the students in small groups in order to encourage discussion and interaction among the students. To that end, I created "safe houses" in the classroom.

These were small groups of students who would stay together for the entire semester. Pratt (1991) writes about the use of safe houses as "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power." Our new groups consisted of about half typical college students and half incarcerated students. Most of the students expressed reservations about this new arrangement.

Cassie [a typical college student] wrote, *When we broke up into small groups early in the semester and learned that these groups would be permanent...I was intimidated by the thought that I could be working with the same group every week.* (Cassie, typical student, weekly journal)

One of her group mates reflected,

*My fear when I entered the class is when I saw all the [college] students. I didn't know they was going to be there. I thought I was in the wrong class. I was afraid to talk in a group and as a class but as the class went on I learned how to communicate with others and discuss and argue about different topics.* (Chris, incarcerated student, final reflection)

The group members had very different backgrounds and there were power dynamics at play but the students perceived these power dynamics very differently. Cassie's feelings of intimidation about working with the same group every week were context specific. I asked her if she would have felt the same way if this were a traditional on campus class without the inmates. She hesitated and then said that her feeling of intimidation stemmed from the idea of "being forced" to be with the same inmates each week. She said she felt "intimidated" and "fearful," a feeling that she does not associate with being in a group with typical college students. Cassie felt that the inmates had the power in the group.

On the other hand, Chris and some of the other inmates spoke freely about feeling that they were powerless. They were locked up and being watched by correctional officers right outside the door. Chris wrote about feeling "intimidated," the same word Cassie used. Another inmate wrote,

*I just wanna thank the [college] students for letting me show them who I am and not what my clothes or situation betrays me as.* (Jay, inmate student, final reflection)

I am sure he meant to write "portray" but somehow I felt that writing "betray" might be closer to the reality of what typically happens. Jay's statement also suggests that he may have felt intimidated by the college students and fearful that they would pre-judge him and not give him a chance because he was incarcerated.

### Shifts in perspective

As I planned the course I imagined that the inmate students would have big "aha" moments where they realized the injustices of the public education system in under privileged areas. I imagined that the course content, learning about the social and political realities of public schools, was going to be a great motivator. In

fact, there were a few of those moments. One of my favorites was following our viewing of parts of *Waiting for Superman*. We had a heated discussion about tenure. It turned out that none of my students, not even the Education majors, really understood what tenure was before this film. Many of the students from both groups were anxious to talk about the film. Most of the students were feeling that tenure for teachers was not good. Finally, one of the inmate students slapped his hand down on the desk and said,

*If these teachers can't get fired for nothing then why don't they do everything they think is right for the kids? Why do they keep doing the dumb programs that they don't think are even right? If they don't get fired for doing bad things then why are they scared to do right by the kids?* (Will, incarcerated student, class discussion)

Will's statement changed the whole mood of the class. His ability to challenge the group with a reasoned response opened the door to even more open dialogue. All of the students seemed more open to voicing their opinions after that night. After class that night I wrote,

*We had a breakthrough tonight. I was feeling great that everyone was talking about teacher tenure and agreeing with one another. Or at least it seemed like everyone agreed. I didn't notice that not everyone was participating. I was just happy there was participation. Then Will, out of nowhere, challenged everyone, even me. He said teachers should use the protections they get from tenure to teach the way they want to teach and to ignore instructional mandates if they think they are bad for their students. This was a brilliant statement. I think some of my Education students wished they would have said it.* (instructor journal)

Over the next couple of weeks the discussions in the small groups and in the larger class debriefings were more animated. Everyone seemed to feel more open to sharing ideas. In the final reflections I asked students to discuss how they dealt with disagreements in their groups. Raf shared,

*In terms of working with disagreements or conflicts most of them [college students] are very open minded some are just very hard headed.* (Rafeal, incarcerated student, final reflection)

I really appreciated this comment because just a few weeks earlier Raf seemed to defer to the college students and accept all of their answers. He almost never offered an opinion that differed. In that same reflection he wrote,

*I remember when I first got here...I felt kind of lost, awkward because I've been locked up for a little minute and all the people I really talked to was inmates and officers, so the group kind of show me, remind me what it was like to communicate with regular people. The [small] group we made and the large group discussions contributed to this learning.* (Raf, inmate student, final reflection).

Another example of how the context changed the learning dynamics in this course was around the idea of meritocracy. My typical college students knew that

they *should* say that meritocracy was a myth. In regular on-campus classes this did not come easy to them. We might be discussing a situation where working hard clearly did not open doors, and they would defend the idea of meritocracy. They knew on one level what the right answer was or at least what they thought I wanted to hear. But, because they didn't own it, they didn't really believe it, so they continued defending the idea. In the prison this was very different. The inmates would often defend the idea of meritocracy and seemed to truly believe it to be true. For instance, one of the more popular articles we read was called, "Prison as a Member of the Family" (LeBlanc, 2003). In this article we learn about two young teenagers who fall in love, have children, commit crimes, go to prison, and struggle with challenges related to relationships between loved ones, friends, and family. The story is compelling and complicated and all of the students in my class loved reading it and talking about it. Long after we read it they were still bringing it up and making connections to the situations and people in the article. In one of the class discussions related to this article one of the typical college students asked the inmates in the large group setting, "Why did you choose to go this route that would get you locked up? You all talk about how education is important but that is not how you acted. I am studying to be a teacher. What can you tell me, what can I do to help kids like you not wind up in jail?" Almost immediately one of the inmates spoke up, "Teachers can't do nothin'. I know for me, it was all me. I didn't want to be in school and there wasn't nothin' teachers could have done. It's not the teachers fault if kids don't wanna learn."

Many of the inmates agreed, it was their fault and nothing that anyone could have done. But what happened next both made me proud and broke my heart. A few of the typical students, lead by the girl who asked the question in the first place, started challenging the idea that "there wasn't nothin' teachers could have done". The conversation moved to the responsibility of adults to help children make good decisions, the impact of stress and poverty on decision-making, and the lack of options in many under resourced areas. That evening I wrote,

*It was great seeing one of the college students ask a hard question and spur a great discussion. And, I was so happy when she challenged the notion that [Sean] was completely responsible for his failures in school. At first, I was so proud to hear my college students talk about societal inequities and the failures of the public school system. And then, I realized that the inmate students had stopped speaking. They were silent. All of a sudden I wondered if some of them had just realized how they had been cheated. Was this silence just because they lost track of the discussion or it was over their heads. Or, was it because they just now realized that they never had a chance, that they deserved a degree of protection and support and they did not get it? I saw their faces, still, silent, and felt really sad.* (instructor journal).

It seemed that when the typical college students sat side by side with and built relationships with people who had clearly experienced oppression they were able to see more clearly. For the inmates, they often expressed that this was the first time they had open dialogue about issues related to race, power, and privilege and that it challenged their notions of whiteness, college, college students, and their own future.

In her final reflection Liz, the student who asked the question, wrote, "...none of us were familiar with one another yet we all had such strong and different opinions and were not afraid to share them. Ultimately, everyone in the group had a different answer to the question and we varied in philosophy and reasoning through most of the conversation. The best part of the conversation was that in the end, everyone tweaked their reasoning at least a little bit because of someone that someone else in the group said. This became a habit that would continue week to week, where after discussing something, we would change each other's minds or at least make the other see a different side of a situation."

Other perspective shifts came from typical college students who expected to come to the course and have their beliefs verified. Instead, many of them recognized the mismatch between what they had believed and what they actually experienced. One of these students reflected in his very last paper,

*I learned from this whole experience that I cannot really judge anyone the way I have been. The guys in the class were just regular guys that have made a mistake. I realize that some of them have made more than one mistake and are not really good guys, but they are just regular people. The media paints them as savages and animals and literature does not help with this image. Criminology texts do even worse by portraying them as numbers and percentages and statistics. Even though some of them have lost their right to be considered a trusted citizen, in the media they almost seem to lose their right to be people. I understand that if you commit too many heinous offenses, you should be labeled a monster and put away, but these guys do not seem like monsters, at least inside the classroom. (Jon, Final Reflection)*

Jon's reflection shows his struggle. He seems to be trying to reconcile these men he has gotten to know with what he has been taught. He seems to be holding on to his beliefs to some degree – "I understand that if you commit too many heinous offenses, you should be labeled a monster..." and at the same time questioning whether these characterizations are accurate – "...these guys don't seem like monsters..." For Jon and the other students who plan to work in the criminal justice system these are important ideas for which to struggle.

During the very last class we took some time to talk about the class itself and acknowledge one another in a positive way. I asked each of the typical college students to jot down something positive to share about their group members. This was not required but many of them did it. On that last day, I thanked everyone for their presence and participation, acknowledged our

class members who had been transferred to other facilities, and asked for them to share something they liked about the class or to acknowledge a classmate. The typical college students were prepared with things to say and they jumped right in. The inmate students were not prepared but they also spoke up, thanked specific group members and talked about what they learned in class. One particularly poignant moment came after Liz read a prepared statement acknowledging one of her inmate group members. Her voice shook as she told him that she was proud of his work and impressed with the way he spoke about his son. In about three minutes with a shaky voice and no eye contact she prompted a few tears across the classroom. The student to whom she was speaking looked at me and said, "I know I can get in trouble for this but I don't care, I am giving her a hug." He got up and gave her a hug, the class giggled and we moved on. The biggest surprise for me was that almost every single inmate student talked about how they valued what they learned about communication. Until that moment I thought the course content really mattered. I still think it mattered a little bit. But mostly, it was just something to talk about, something to have real conversations about. And, it seemed the value for the inmate students was just that. In his final reflection, Will wrote,

*While in this class I have learned how to communicate with others without getting upset when someone does not share the same views. Before I would get upset and shut down. But now I give my opinion and listen to the other person's opinion. So with this new communication skill I could use to help me find and keep a job. I could also use this skill in a lot of things when the day I go home. (Will, inmate student, final reflection)*

This sentiment was echoed again and again during that final discussion and in every one of the final reflections that was turned in by the inmate students. A good friend of mine likes to share a story from a 1980s play called *The Search for Intelligent Life in the Universe*. In that play, aliens come to Earth and find a bag lady who teaches them all about Earth and being human. She shows them Andy Warhol's Campbell's Soup painting and a can of Campbell's soup and tells them which is "soup" and which is "art". Later in the play she takes them to a Broadway play. She notices that the aliens are watching the audience and not the action on the stage and she tries to get them to switch their attention to the stage. They tell her that the action on stage is the "soup" and the audience reaction is the "art". Recently when I was telling my friend about my experiences in the prison and he brought this up again. He said the course content was the "soup," but what happened in class was the "art".

### **What's happening?**

This paper is meant to serve as a counter narrative to the stories that are often heard and believed about incarcerated youth of color. This piece is a story aimed at giving voice to a group of men who have been silenced through incarceration. This is also a narrative that sug-

gests that having groups from disparate backgrounds work together in a meaningful way can support perspective change for both groups.

This narrative also recognizes that oppression is multidimensional and that oppression is not a result of racial bias alone. In this case, we look closely at the intersection between the individual and school, the individual and society, and individuals from disparate cultural backgrounds (gender, religion, education, socioeconomic status, etc.) and how they relate to one another. Last, critical race theory challenges us to examine how power and privilege mediate the differential experiences of our participants. Leading with a social justice orientation, the classroom experiences described here demonstrate what happens when you teach about racism and white privilege explicitly, provide opportunities for students to have a true voice and become advocates for themselves, and integrate authentic learning opportunities to meet objectives.

As an institution supporting the transition of our students between adolescence and adulthood, we would be remiss to ignore the developmental implications of these issues. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1988, 1989) provides a structure for which to consider the relationships between a developing person and his immediate environment (i.e. school, family) and institutional patterns of culture. At the microsystem level traditional college students are experiencing stress with school and the students from the prison are experiencing a myriad of stressors (i.e. low expectations, preparation gaps, social isolation). Both groups of students may be experiencing other stressors as well (i.e. family, financial, emotional). We know that financial difficulties, in particular, inhibit success across all demographic groups. These competing demands are often at odds with one another at the precise times when students are in need of support. At the macro system, the culture of the prison education system is not welcoming to either the traditional or inmate students. While these students may see the experience through very different lenses, they all see something less than optimal. Also, the prison education attempts to function from an Essentialist point of view – stressing the core skills needed in literacy and math. However, in practice, the educational opportunities for the inmates often do not even support learning the basics. The inmates who have participated in the prison education systems up until this point have seen sparse, teacher-centered classrooms, where there are few opportunities for individualized instruction or remediation. These programs do not offer the best match of modality and content for all students. What we teach and how we teach it sends a message about our institutional pattern of culture and feeds into the hidden curriculum that is a key variable in the macro system.

Critical race theory helps to frame how race mediates the experiences for all of the students in the class. In particular, the principle of *interest convergence* is relevant in this work. *Interest convergence* is a term that was first introduced by Derrick Bell (1980). He posited that when de jure segregation was abolished in the

United States with the Brown v BOE case it was not because of a moral imperative but rather the result of the convergence of interests of both the Black Civil Rights movement and the interests of elite Whites. Both the prison system and the college supported the course described in this study. The interests of the college in providing an opportunity to visit a prison and engage with “the other” converged with the interest of the prison to provide meaningful education experiences for some of the inmates.

While the typical college students would have examined issues of race and privilege in an on campus class, discussing these same issues with classmates who have a much different lived experience changes the dynamic. For instance, when this course is taught on campus with only typical college students, we spend a lot of time discussing the neo-liberal push to ignore or transcend race and ethnicity (colorblindness). Typical college students often arrive with a restrictive view of equality. In a restrictive view the belief is that we all have the same opportunities and whether or not we take advantage of them has nothing to do with race or ethnicity. I hope to help students embrace a more expansive view, of equity more than equality. In the course where inmates and typical students studied together, White students thought twice about blaming any individual for their current circumstance. At first, this hesitation came from fear of being labeled a racist. As relationships developed, the hesitation arose because of the realization that if he and the person sitting next to him had been switched at birth, born just ten miles away from where they were actually born, both lives could be very different. It became clear to them very quickly that no matter the intention of the public school system, the outcomes were not good for many children. That reality, one that sees the importance of outcomes, is the expansive view that is needed.

Incorporating social justice pedagogy into the classroom benefits all learners as it effectively prepares students for the complex society that we live in. While there are many examples of teachers embracing social justice pedagogy (Nieto, 2000), there are still challenges to teaching social justice particularly to students who are white and middle class. One challenge is the lack of a cohesive definition of what social justice means and what it looks like in the classroom (Dover, 2009). Students who are white middle class often lack knowledge about and display resistance to social justice issues (Sleeter, 2001). This dissonance is often due to the fact that many white students have a deficit of their own, having attended mainly mono-cultural schools (Fuller, 1992) where a social justice orientation was not evident. Having the lived experience of being oppressed did not always result in a true understanding of that experience or of social justice more broadly.

### What now?

As a teacher educator I have changed my perspective on how to support critical reflection and authentic learning. Many of my typical college students seem very committed to teaching in the most under-

resourced schools. The children served in those schools come with a myriad of challenges that need attention if they are to be successful. First and foremost I have come to believe, now more than ever, that opportunities for open and honest dialogue and relationship building are essential between people from disparate backgrounds. It is too easy to “talk the talk” when you never have to “walk the walk” and it was not until I saw the difference between my on campus class and my prison class that I saw this difference so clearly. Schools of Education must provide opportunities beyond field-work where future teachers go in to practice teaching. Future teachers need to be integrated into the community where they work. Opportunities to get to know parents, children, and other community members are essential.

Also, the current model for many education programs in prisons is not working (Farabee, 2005). On most days a prison classroom will have several students working on completely different tasks and one teacher trying to help each inmate. The students from my class shared that there were times when they got stuck on a problem or with their writing and sat with nothing to do for 20 minutes or more while they waited for the teacher to make their way back to them. They felt that the day classes were a waste of time and were not preparing them for life outside of prison or a General Equivalency Diploma [GED]<sup>1</sup>. To be sure, teachers in the prison system have a difficult task. In my class I had students who wrote at a college level and others who could barely string a sentence together. Differentiating for a range of students like that is no easy task. However, prison education might benefit from expanding past the basics of math and reading and making an explicit effort at improving students' ability to communicate, not just in writing but also interpersonally.

In 1995, Hart and Risley conducted a study where they looked at exposure to language and vocabulary between three types of families – professional, working-class, and families on welfare. Their analysis showed that in a 100-hour week, the average 4 year old in a family on welfare might have “13 million fewer words of cumulative experience than the child in a working-class family.” And among those words children from lower socio-economic status households hear far fewer encouraging words and far more prohibitions or discouragements. We know that many of our incarcerated youth are coming from low resourced households and neighborhoods. They may not have gotten the support at home that would foster adaptive communication skills. Connell and Prinz (2002) wrote about how high quality relationships with caregivers are essential for

school readiness and social skill development in young children. Given the possibility that incarcerated youth did not experience high quality interactions, exposure to rich and varied vocabulary, and encouragements that outweighed discouragements, prison systems might consider remediation in these areas essential. Considering their positive impact on school readiness in young children, I cannot help but wonder if practicing adaptive social skills as an adult can support relationship readiness and job readiness in a similar way.

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<sup>1</sup>The General Equivalency Diploma [GED] is a high school equivalency test that assesses knowledge in Science, Social Studies, Math, and Language Arts. The GED is intended to help adults qualify for college and employment.