

## “Walls are put up when curiosity ends”: Transformative Education in the Canadian Carceral Context

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**Abstract:** *Prison education is often cited as the only redeeming experience in an otherwise cruel environment. While educational programs are found in prisons across Canada, they are often guided by philosophies of punishment, risk, and security rather than more transformative frameworks. In addition to prison staff and management who struggle to find value in education for education’s sake, the physical spaces in which learning takes place in prison also interfere with efforts at promoting agency and autonomy amongst incarcerated students. In this paper, we conceptualize the prison classroom as a performative space and demonstrate ways in which prison classrooms can become critical public spheres. We review theoretical literature on performative space, specifically in relation to prison education classrooms. We then examine the dynamics of: (1) navigating institutional policies and practices when teaching inside carceral spaces; and (2) the constraints that structure the carceral classroom. Finally, we take up the program Walls to Bridges as a case study example to demonstrate these findings and the transformative power of prison education.*

**Keywords:** *prison education, performative space, transformative education, Walls to Bridges*

In this paper, we conceptualize the prison classroom as a performative space where students and volunteer educators engage collectively and collaboratively in transformative learning processes. We build upon Wright and Gehring’s (2008a, 2008b) notion that some prison education initiatives facilitate the generation of a ‘sphere of civility’ – where students can discuss the ethics of human caging as well as other socio-politico-cultural issues – within an otherwise demonstrably oppressive environment. After introducing key contributions to the literature on prison education in North America, we summarize theoretical work on the notion of performative space, specifically in relation to prison education classrooms. Then, after outlining our multi-pronged methodological approach, we move to discuss the two main themes that structure our findings, which examine the dynamics of: (1) navigating institutional policies and practices when teaching inside carceral spaces; and (2) the constraints that structure the carceral classroom. Finally, based upon the second author’s experiences teaching university courses in carceral settings, we take up the Canadian prison education program Walls to Bridges (W2B) as a case study example to further demonstrate these findings and the transformative power of prison educational opportunities in action.

Incarcerated people frequently cite “voluntary participation in education programs... as the only positive experience one may encounter while incarcerated” (Piché, 2008, p. 4). Notably, the *Journal of Prisoners on Prisons* has made a significant effort to document experiences of prison education and has dedicated four special issues<sup>1</sup> to this discussion. Incarcerated contributors to these issues have described their educational opportunities inside as: “freedom



inward bound” (Carter, 2008, p. 62); “my sanctuary” (Taylor, 2004, p. 128); “almost like being somewhere in the free world” (Terry, 2004, p. 23); and “very transformative; it gave me hope and it served as a great filler of idle time, which prison has in abundance” (Bonano, 2016, p. 13). That said, prison education is subject to the ever-changing socio-political climate and broader economy, which means that it is always at risk of either forfeiture or carceral appropriation (Duguid, 2000a). This appropriation, co-optation, or “absorption” (Baldry, Carlton, & Cunneen, 2015, p. 174) of education by the correctional powers that be has also occurred with Indigenous healing and restorative justice programs. In taking up these programs, prison officials can make claims to progressive practice as they proceed to dismantle and re-form the original programs (and their underlying philosophies) into something that fits with the “dominant structure” of security, management, and control (Pollack 2019, p. 3).

As Thomas (1995) claimed, “prison education cannot be fully implemented without a dramatic transformation of the philosophy of punishment in North America” (p. 39). When punishment is prioritized over transformative mechanisms that promote personal growth and development by way of addressing structural and institutional violence and inequality through radical social change (Daly, 2002; Evans, 2016), typically in the name of managing risk and ensuring security, it becomes obvious that carceral institutions do little by way of rehabilitation, restoration, or transformation. This also highlights the spectacular irony behind the name ‘corrections.’ Subsequently, it is crucial to remember that prison education programs not only provide prisoners with the “chance to learn to read, write, work with numbers, and converse with a reasonable degree of assurance” (Collins, 1995, p. 50), they “can provide a means for greater access to the levers of power and control in society and possibly acquiring a new language, a new set of skills, and thereby a new identity” (Duguid, 2000a, p. 54-55).

For incarcerated people, the opportunity to shed their identity as ‘offender’ or ‘inmate’ can aid in a transformation process that will help them to “remake their shattered lives” (Richards et al., 2008, p. 58) once they return to the community. We suggest that this occurs by way of the differential approach to teaching and learning that is often taken up in carceral classrooms. First, we must consider the physical space of the learning environment. To facilitate learning, classrooms should make students feel safe and at ease, which can be particularly difficult in prison. Knowles (1996) contends that this occurs by ensuring that the “psychological climate [is] one which causes adults to feel accepted, respected, and supported ... in which there is freedom of expression without fear of punishment or ridicule” (p. 86). For vulnerable students, such as those who are incarcerated, the transformative potential of collaborative teaching and learning works best in “informal, comfortable, flexible, nonthreatening settings” (Knowles, 1984, p. 52).

Second, the very notion of transformative education, especially that which is grounded in a collaborative teaching and learning pedagogical style, stands in stark contrast to the traditional western approach to education that creates a hierarchy between teachers and students and that relies on a ‘banking deposit’ method that is akin to a one-way transmission of information (hooks, 2014; Kilty et al., 2020; Freire, 2008). Truly transformative learning instead requires and relies upon a process whereby both students and teachers engage in critical self-reflection (Cranton & Wright, 2008; Fayter, 2016; Follett & Rodger, 2013; Pollack, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). In fact, when teachers act as facilitators (Pollack, 2014, 2016a, 2016b) or learning companions (Cranton & Wright, 2008), rather than as experts with all the answers, it results in a more open, inclusive, and trusting collaborative partnership that inevitably shifts the power dynamics that structure traditional classroom settings and works to foster a more engaged pedagogical practice conducive to transformative learning (Kilty & Lehalle, 2018; Kilty et al., 2020). The transformative aspect of this process increases the agency, autonomy, and independence of the students and thus may also contribute to a shifting sense of identity for incarcerated students (Taylor et al. 2007, p.8). As Nagelsen (2008) writes:

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

Support for this kind of transformative process in prison requires educators who understand prisons as “racialized, classed, and gendered spaces, reinforced and amplified by correctional practices that individualize, pathologize, punish, and control” (Pollack, 2019, p. 2). This critical and comprehensive understanding of carceral institutions is unlikely to be supported by employees of the state (e.g. correctional offices, program officers, educational officers), although it is common amongst educators and volunteers who aim to facilitate a connection between the inside and the outside and who tend to think more critically about the power relations that structure the hierarchies of the prison environment (Freire, 2008; Kilty & Lehalle, 2018). The role and impact of prison volunteers is well documented in criminological literature (Celinska, 2008; Duwe & Johnson, 2016; Graves, 2004; Tomczak, 2017; Tomczak & Albertson, 2016) and emerging literature on the criminal justice voluntary sector further highlights the changes that non-state actors can bring to carceral systems (Tomczak & Buck, 2019). In Canada, for example, the John Howard Society of Canada (JHSC) and the British Columbia Civil Liberties Association (BCCLA) collaborated on a successful court challenge to call for an end to indefinite solitary confinement in prisons across the country (BCCLA, 2018). Although the federal government continues to appeal the decision (Macnab, 2019), this case shed light on a problematic and harmful practice within Canadian prisons. So, while it is important to pay attention to the net-widening function of the voluntary sector (Cohen, 1985), a more nuanced conversation about volunteers in the criminal justice field points to important moments of advocacy, transformation, and other live-saving work within what are otherwise punitive and hopeless spaces (Tomczak & Thompson, 2017; McAleese, 2019).

In Canada, there are several volunteer-run education and literacy programs that operate in prisons and jails across the country. For example, *Book Clubs for Inmates* (BCFI) facilitates “book clubs for men and women incarcerated in minimum-, medium-, and maximum-security facilities” with the goal of “[encouraging] positive change through the power of literature” (BCFI, 2020). The founder of BCFI, Carol Finlay, describes prison as a place of “darkness” that cuts people off from their communities and offers very little in terms of “meaningful” programs or reintegration supports (CBC Radio, 2016). Reflecting upon the conditions of confinement in Canada’s federal prisons, Finlay (2016) links Canada’s ongoing reliance on punishment and incarceration to its history of colonization:

Our prisons are a continuation of the harm done to Indigenous peoples through residential schools... Incarcerating Indigenous women, especially those who are far from their people and cut off from their culture, is a repetition of what happened in the schools... When you enter a women’s prison, you can feel despair, hopelessness and depression. It’s both palpable and horrifying. (paras. 3-6)

Volunteers like Finlay, and university students and educators who are similarly critical of carceral state power and who publicly identify the harms perpetuated by prisons, are an invaluable support for prisoners whose voices, stories, and experiences are often lost in mainstream narratives about crime and punishment. While this paper specifically examines the Canadian Walls to Bridges program, there are other noteworthy adult prison education initiatives operating around the world. For example, in the U.S. there are a variety of initiatives including the Inside-Out Prison Exchange program (Davis & Roswell, 2013), Boudin’s (1993) account of Freirean participatory literacy education programs in Bedford Hills New York, and the Voices from American Prisons project (Stern, 2014); in Britain there are the Inside-Outside and Learning Together projects (Armstrong & Ludlow, 2016); and there are several different programs operating in Ireland (Behan, 2014; O’Donnell & Cummins, 2014), including the

Mothers Project (O'Malley & Devaney, 2014) – all of which serve to foster performative spaces behind prison walls.

### **The Performative Space of Prison Education Classrooms**

While a classroom in the community is typically a space conducive to learning and engaging in dialogue and debate, a prison classroom is not necessarily comprised of the elements required to encourage active participation or sustained enthusiasm for learning. To foster that kind of excitement to learn, prison educators need to create a 'performative space.' As Wright and Gehring contend, "it is difficult to imagine an active citizenry if persons are imbued with a sense of worthlessness, despair and are hungry for identity" (2008b, p. 333). By creating a performative space inside prison, we suggest that this generalized sense of hopelessness can be transformed into an opportunity for positive engagement, collaboration, and transformation.

A performative space may be described as one that is built upon mutual expressions of respect, reciprocity, inclusivity, and trust (Deutsch, 2004). Only when these fundamental features are present, will the building blocks for social justice praxis emerge (Fayter, 2016). For prison education programs, this requires developing a meaningful space where prisoners are treated as human beings, not as dangerous 'Others' who must be managed and controlled by guards, and where their master identity becomes that of 'student' rather than 'offender' or 'inmate.' Critical scholars contend that this occurs by way of building connections and human relationships (Fayter, 2016; Kilty & Lehalle, 2018; Kilty et al., 2020; Pollack, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Speaking to how educational opportunities create an opening for identity transformation in the oppressive carceral environment, Charles Huckelbury (2004) described his experience in the following way:

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

There are three key elements that enable the creation of a performative educational space, namely: civility, ethical conversations, and democracy. Civility is described as "a manner of communicating with others that is respectful, empathetic, and reciprocal" (Wright & Gehring, 2008b, p. 322); notably, this understanding of civility is central to the W2B training and philosophy (Davis & Roswell, 2013; Fayter, 2016; Kilty & Lehalle, 2018; Kilty et al., 2020; Pollack, 2014, 2016a, 2016b). Relatedly, ethical conversations stress that "individuals are recognized as subjects who share a common humanity" (Wright & Gehring, 2008a, p. 250), which is demonstrably opposed to the carceral logic that maintains a hierarchical divide between correctional staff and prisoners (Ricciardelli, 2014). To reorient our understanding of prisoners as people with whom we share a common humanity, challenges the culturally entrenched identity politics that constitute criminalized people as always-already 'offenders', an identity category that dehumanizes incarcerated people. In this sense, by engaging in difficult ethical conversations, volunteers and educators act as mediators between the performative space of the classroom and the carceral logic and day-to-day correctional practices that structure prison spaces.

Ethical conversations allow prisoners to, at least for the duration of the class, step outside of the controlling and manipulative prison environment and to participate in a "dialogic sphere of civility" (Wright & Gehring, 2008b, p. 323) that promotes inclusivity and acceptance. W2B in particular, is premised on the notion that participants – "inside" incarcerated students, "outside" university-based students, and professor-facilitators – learn from one another (Davis & Roswell, 2013; Kilty & Lehalle, 2018; Kilty et al., 2020; Pollack, 2014, 2016a, 2016b).

Finally, democracy is used as a model of educational intervention within the performative space of the carceral classroom. When mutual respect and trust are combined with dialogue and active listening "classrooms, schools and interactions between school personnel and prison staff can provide opportunities for nascent forms of democracy to appear" (Wright

& Gehring, 2008a, p. 250). Given that “with few notable exceptions, prison cultures are antithetical to democracy” (Wright & Gehring, 2008a, p. 249), actively participating in classroom discussion and embracing the responsibility that teaching and learning are a shared enterprise (Kilty & Lehalle, 2018) help to develop a democratic learning community (Davis & Roswell, 2013; Eggleston & Gehring, 2000).

As civil spheres, schools can be restorative and transformative because they counter the stripping away of identities and distorted forms of interaction in prisons. When ethical conversations appear, the potential for critical thought and democratic participation is likely to follow, if not in prison, then perhaps on the outside. (Wright & Gehring, 2008b, p. 335)

The performative space of the carceral classroom, or school enclave within the prison, is a place where education can function according to its own philosophies and principles (e.g., respect, trust, and empowerment) rather than according to the predominant carceral logic of security and punishment that guides institutional policies and practices. Notably, the personal and intellectual safety of a performative educational space in prison is amplified when teachers are not employed by the institution and instead teach classes as a result of a partnership between the prison and either a community-based organization or a college or university. Having some distance in these institutional arrangements creates a degree of confidentiality that allows the classroom to remain autonomous and somewhat removed from the governing correctional regime. In addition to developing social capital through education, the sphere of civility that is created in the classroom by nurturing relationships of trust and fostering a stronger sense of autonomy amongst prisoners helps to prepare them for a meaningful life after prison (Davis & Roswell, 2013; Duguid, 2000b; Shantz et al., 2009; Strimelle & Frigon, 2011). This discussion of the benefits of creating performative spaces in punitive places is not meant to naively ignore “[t]he ever-widening net of racialized and colonial carceral spaces and neoliberal strategies of control of poor and marginalized communities” (Pollack, 2019, p. 1), but rather to encourage ongoing engagement with a deployment of feminist, anti-oppressive, and transformative practices both inside and outside of prison walls.

### **Method**

This paper embraces a multi-pronged methodological approach that combines research conducted as part of the first author’s graduate work and the second author’s experiences teaching university courses inside a Canadian detention centre. We begin by mobilizing the findings generated from analyzing five semi-structured, in person qualitative interviews, four of which were conducted with community-based educators working with criminalized and formerly incarcerated students. The fifth interview was conducted with a prison official from the Correctional Service of Canada at National Headquarters in Ottawa. Our thematic analysis (Ezzy, 2002) of the interview transcripts involved a series of coding and meaning-making steps. We began by reading and discussing the transcripts to ensure we had a common understanding of the details. Second, we generated preliminary codes to describe the transcript content. Third, we worked to combine the codes that overlapped or were too similar and to cut any extraneous codes so as to identify the most prominent themes. Fourth, we reviewed the transcripts again to ensure the themes accurately reflected interview content and searched for discrepant examples for each theme, finding none. Fifth, we established the nature and scope of each theme and selected quotes that illustrated them.

To strengthen the credibility and believability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) of the findings generated from the interview data, we marshaled the second author’s experiences teaching four Walls to Bridges courses over a two-year period inside a maximum-security provincial detention centre<sup>2</sup> in Canada. We mobilized her weekly after-class fieldnotes to provide concrete examples of the main findings as they occurred in real-time. By using complimentary qualitative research methods, we were able to layer the stories and experiences of our participants with

those shared through other sources, including Kilty's fieldnotes and those penned by incarcerated students as they are documented in the *Journal for Prisoners on Prisons*. This process enabled us "to see the same themes repeated time and again" (McAleese & Kilty, 2019, p. 836) and to build a "through" narrative (Crépault & Kilty, 2017; Feldman et al., 2004) that enhances our understanding of prison education experiences.

In bringing together the findings from the interview-based research and the experiential knowledge gleaned from teaching and learning in a carceral environment, we uncovered two main themes that speak to concerns surrounding prison education in Canada: (1) carceral logic structures educational programming for criminalized people and forces educators to find ways to navigate institutional policies and practices when teaching inside carceral spaces; and (2) the institutional barriers and constraints that commonly interfere with prison education programs and shape the carceral classroom experience for both students and instructors. While these findings importantly point to the struggles associated with fostering performative spaces behind prison walls, we also wanted this article to provide a message of hope for prison education scholars and practitioners who strive to break down these barriers and constraints. Therefore, after discussing the two main themes that were identified in the interview data, we take up the W2B program as a case study to exemplify how prison education can be conducive to fostering transformative change for both the inside and outside students.

### **Navigating Carceral Logics and Institutional Policies and Practices**

*Entry into the prison milieu transforms the fundamental character of education. Its basic premises and values are undermined by the coercive environment in which it operates.* (Jones, 1992, p. 17)

The ability to make good things happen in harmful spaces is a struggle for individuals tasked with offering programs and supports (educational or otherwise) in prisons. While "[p]rison services have...made various claims to rehabilitative ideals" (Duguid, 2000b, p. 80), punishment, discipline, security, management, and control remain top priorities for prison officials (Farabee, 2005; Vacca, 2004; Wilson, 2000). This tension between punishment and transformation becomes quite visible when we look at prison education programs, as there is a fundamental philosophical difference between education and incarceration. In fact, the practice of using education as a form of prison population management, rather than as an opportunity to help incarcerated individuals learn and flourish, is frequently noted in the literature (Bayliss, 2003; Brazzell, 2009; Collins, 1995; Eggleston and Gehring, 2000; Farabee, 2005; Owers, 2007). For example, mandatory GED programs are described by some as "intellectual pabulum" and "rudimentary" (Huckelbury, 2004, p. 39) meant only to keep prisoners busy. Researchers and prisoners emphasize that the focus on security and control detracts from the positive change that may be influenced by a well-tailored education program with stimulating curriculum. Essentially, "the goals of prison security and the ideal of academic freedom often conflict" (Thomas, 1995, p. 32); as a result, practitioners, volunteers, educators, students, and prisoners are constantly reminded that prisons are "first and foremost, institutions of control and security, not classrooms or schools" (Brazzell et al., 2009, p. 24). For example, Duguid (2000a, 2000b) found that Canadian prison education programs began to dwindle at the end of the 1990s when correctional administrators began to demand evidence that they reduce recidivism. Similarly, depending on the institution, some correctional administrators have tried to review and veto W2B course content, which threatens the integrity of the program.

The carceral logics and institutional policies and practices that impede educational programming are so potent that educators who work in the community are well-aware of their impact. One community-based teacher reported that her formerly incarcerated students claimed, "the prisons keep introducing the idea of adult education in prison and then they take it away, and then they put it back in and then they take it away." Other participants echoed this concern about educational opportunities being taken away as punishment. The inconsistent availability

of education in prison is a troublesome start, and, as others have noted, even when educational options are available to prisoners the quality of the programming is often quite low: “Even the clients that I work with now say that it was good to be able to do school inside but they couldn’t get what they’d done inside transferred or recognized outside of the institutions.” The lack of dedication to maintaining a consistent, successful, and credible adult education curriculum can be explained by the fact that it is difficult to offer education (of any kind and quality) in an environment that is resistant to its purpose – to help people learn, change, and be empowered. As incarcerated student Charles Huckelbury (2004) wrote:

Educational opportunities [in prison] are therefore little more than another means to control behaviour, a management tool by which prison staff achieves results by threatening to remove the only redeeming program available. (p. 37)

If education is seen as “an opportunity to increase the surveillance of prisoners” (Jones, 1992, p. 6) then educational program policies and practices will stem from this logic. Our interview with the prison official revealed that opportunities for active and meaningful participation in a classroom space decrease as security levels increase. For instance, in a medium security facility you might see up to fifteen students together in a classroom, but in a maximum-security facility “you will not find fifteen guys sitting and learning in the same classroom, because the higher you go in security levels some other aspects are considered” that limit participation – such as participation in correctionally mandated programs that are meant to address the individual’s criminogenic risks and needs (Bérard, Vacheret, & Lemire, 2013). Typically, this means that in higher security prisons students are relegated to participating in self-directed learning or correspondence programs. The situation is even more severe for prisoners held in solitary confinement. While the prison official mentioned that “[a] teacher will go from the school to segregation and meet face-to-face with the [prisoner],” it is likely that solitary confinement, and other disciplinary measures, only further inhibit the learning process (Steffler, 2008, p. 30). In these high security situations, there is no space for education – and certainly not the kind of education that allows for meaningful engagement, dialogue, inclusivity, and transformation (Collins, 2008; Deutsch, 2004; Salah-El, 1992).

It is hard to foster a performative space in a place that prioritizes punishment over all else. According to the prison official interviewed by the first author, education will often be secondary to institutional “correctional” programs that are supposed to address other risks and needs<sup>3</sup>:

...an offender may have educational needs but at the same time have other needs like substance abuse programs to do or sex offender programs to do, so the case manager or the parole officer will have the task to see which one should come first, to prioritize. So, education may fall second.

This correctional official not only acknowledged that the prison environment devalues education as less transformative and rehabilitative in comparison to programs designed and run by corrections, but also that a governing logic that prioritizes punishment negatively impacts motivation amongst prisoners. Community-based teachers recognized this as well and highlighted this as a reason why many individuals wait until they are released before pursuing their educational goals:

I don’t know if every person in the institution, even though they [would] like to do education, if they would be able to or if they would be more inclined to, or if they want to because they are in prison. It’s not the happiest place, so they might be in a better mindset when they are in the community.

In the community, teachers emphasized “[working] with the students to make sure that they are successful” and helping people remove the different barriers they faced to securing education. In prison, on the other hand, the barriers to education increase and become more difficult to overcome or tear down. Even when education is made available to prisoners, there are addi-

tional barriers and constraints within and around the classroom space that make learning very difficult.

### **Constraints in the Carceral Classroom**

*Education is an activity best pursued in an environment unconstrained by coercion, threats, and impositions on access to intellectual resources and ideas.*  
(Thomas, 1995, p. 26)

There are many environmental obstacles and constraints that impact access to and the quality of prison education. For example, Richards (2004) writes about the lack of access to textbooks inside prisons:

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

Furthermore, Collins (2008) laments the lack of access to new technology, specifically computers and the Internet, that renders prisoners 'computer illiterate' and therefore entirely ill-prepared for the digital world that exists outside of prison walls and that awaits them upon their release:

I have seen the introduction and then removal of computers from prisoners' allowable cell effects. It is reasonable to recognize that long-term prisoners' will be computer illiterate in society's computer age. (p. 75)

The dearth of educational resources inside the prison classroom is a result of risk-averse policies and operational budgets that prioritize security and management resources over programs and supports (Davidson, 1995; Deutsch, 2004; Graves, 2004). As a result of these material constraints, "educators are in constant danger of having their programs eliminated" (Davidson, 1995, p.10; Duguid, 2000b) and this exacerbates an already strained relationship between teachers and staff, who are often pitted against each other for resources (Jones, 1992; Richards, 2004; Steffler, 2008).

Even when classrooms and resources are acquired by educators, it remains challenging to create and maintain a performative and transformative learning space inside prison. As Wright and Gehring (2008a, p. 245) note: "the harsh reality of brittle interactions between keepers and kept echoes the stark, oppressive physical reality of steel and concrete." In other words, the darkness ingrained within the prison walls often seeps into the prison classroom, reminding everyone inside that this is a place for punishment, not for learning. The presence of guards in and around the classroom is a common example of this (Bayliss, 2003; Vacca, 2004). The prison official interviewed described the carceral classroom as follows:

...there's the teacher, there's the students...and probably there are many cameras in the corridor, and there should be some officers somewhere near the area. The teacher has the panic device...so in terms of seconds if he just pushes his red button then [the guards are] going to be there.

While he justified the need for these security measures, he also acknowledged their impact on the learning environment and indicated the importance of trying to limit the visibility of guards from inside the classroom:

But for it to be not really intimidating to the students, the guards should not be in the classroom or into the windows. So, they are nearby. The teacher has the system of communicating with them if there is an issue. When the security or discipline is compromised, the teachers still have the authority to send back the offender to his cell...the discipline, the security of the learning environment is very well respected in the classroom.

Aside from the hovering nature of prison security there is also the constant reminder that the



bodies inside the classroom are those of prisoners first, not students. As Collins (2008, p. 93) writes: “[The guards] call us “offenders” as if this is all we are and all we ever will be.” In fact, the success of the W2B program is rooted in the ability to build trusting relationships between participants, who address one another on a first name basis.

The idea of what constitutes a safe learning space is interpreted very differently by those working on the inside than it is by those working on the outside. After speaking with community-based teachers who work with criminalized people, this distinction became even more obvious. Conflicts in community-based classrooms are more likely to be dealt with in a non-punitive manner. If there is a disagreement between students or between a student and the teacher, both parties are given the chance to express their concerns without fear of punishment because relationships are grounded in trust and respect (Terry, 2006). By challenging the hierarchical and punitive structure of carceral environments, the performative space of the prison classroom helps to ensure that students come to the space knowing that they will be supported in achieving their learning goals without judgment:

There’s just a non-judgmental atmosphere that makes students feel more comfortable here than they would feel somewhere else.

...we offer education in a supportive, safe environment.

We get positive feedback all the time from students, which is amazing. They just feel very safe, they feel like they are in an environment where they can actually learn, they enjoy that there’s people who are patient with them.

These participant quotes demonstrate that to foster a performative space there are certain elements of the prison environment that must be abandoned. Notably, learning and transformation can only occur in a space where prisoners are free to be students first.

Thus far, we have outlined some of the challenges that make transformative prison education exceptionally difficult to achieve. And while it is important to recount and confirm the harm caused by punishment and incarceration, there are also examples of moments of transformation that manage to manifest as a result of persistent efforts from community-based educators. The following section highlights one such effort, the Walls to Bridges program, which we use as a case study to further demonstrate the findings and the transformative power of prison educational opportunities in action.

### **Case Study: Walls to Bridges**

*Education acts as a buffer against the nihilistic threat [of incarceration].*

(Wright & Gehring, 2008b, p. 335)

The Walls to Bridges (W2B) prison education program is a decidedly transformative initiative that aims to create pathways into post-secondary education for incarcerated men and women while sensitizing university-based students to the materiality of incarceration. In this sense, it can help to promote security, inclusion, and the creation of ties to and bonds between carceral institutions and the broader community (Kilty et al., 2020). In 2011, W2B was adapted for the Canadian prison environment and experience by Shoshana Pollack and Simone Weil Davis, who were trained as facilitators for the American Inside-Out (I-O) Prison Exchange program, which grew from a single course taught by Lori Pompa at Temple University in Philadelphia in 1997. Both programs see post-secondary educators teaching courses inside carceral institutions and engage experiential teaching and learning (Butin, 2013). Classes are made up of both “outside” university-enrolled students and “inside” incarcerated students, who learn from one another by examining social issues through the “prism of prison.” As aforementioned, the approach is grounded in dialogue, reciprocity, and collaborative teaching and learning (Davis & Roswell, 2013).

The first W2B course was offered at the Grand Valley Institution for Women, a federal prison in Kitchener, Ontario. Given that Indigenous peoples in Canada are disproportionately

represented amongst carceral populations in Canada (Balfour & Comack, 2014) and in the spirit of reconciliation, one key difference between the I-O and W2B programs is that W2B invites Indigenous Elders to facilitate a session as part of the instructor certification training and incorporates Indigenous circle pedagogy into its general pedagogical practice (discussed in greater detail below). Another key difference is that W2B ‘inside’ students are granted university credits for successfully completing a course, where for I-O courses, credit-granting varies from site to site (Pollack, 2014). W2B courses are grounded by an anti-oppression and intersectional feminist lens and strive for connection, non-judgmental openness, and critical thinking; notably, the broader W2B initiative engages in advocacy and public education concerning issues of criminalization, education, and social justice (Pollack, 2016).

Accepting that education “enables [prisoner] students to make room for themselves” (Wright, 2001, p. 87) we can conceptualize W2B classrooms as generating a ‘sphere of civility’ inside oppressive carceral environments. For W2B courses this is largely facilitated by way of circle pedagogy, which is a decolonizing practice that emphasizes respectful and inclusive dialogue, experiential learning, and shared inquiry. Similar to Freirian pedagogical principles, Indigenous circle pedagogy destabilizes the traditional western approach to teaching that is based on a hierarchy and power imbalance between the teacher and students. As an alternative approach, circle pedagogy requires that all class participants, including the course facilitators, sit in a circle formation, speak their own truth, use personal testimony that does not affirm or negate other speakers, and practice respectful listening (Graveline, 1998; Palmer, 2004). Circle pedagogy involves deliberate and reflexive communication, with each participant taking a turn to speak and actively listen so as to contribute authentic responses to the dialogue when it is their turn. The circle symbolizes interconnectedness, equality amongst diverse participants, and joint responsibility for the conversation – which situates everyone, facilitators included, as student learners (Pollack, 2014). Not only does this reflect the civility, ethical conversations and democratic approach to teaching and learning that Wright and Gehring (2008a, 2008b) contend are required to effectively generate a performative classroom space in prison, circle pedagogy also recognizes and values voice and thus the subjugated knowledges of those who rarely have the opportunity to speak and be heard. Initially, the circle format can be quite destabilizing for those who have spent years teaching in traditional university lecture and seminar style classrooms.

Each week I feel nervous that I am not prepared enough for class. How can a short one-page class agenda outline occupy nearly three hours? I’m used to taking in fifteen pages of lecture notes for a three-hour class. Yet, I consistently find myself rushing to try to attend to the items on my agenda because time seems to fly by in this class at a speed that I am unaccustomed to. I know I am supposed to “trust the process” but faith in a process that is foreign to my regular classroom habitus is somewhat overwhelming. (Kilty, Winter 2018 class fieldnotes)

As active participants in their educational development, rather than passive recipients of information, W2B students become more invested in the learning process (Turenne, 2013), which is especially important for overcoming structures of oppression, injustice, and inequality that can disempower marginalized students and prevent them from participating, as is common in traditional academic settings (Perry, 2013). The situatedness of the circle format encourages the group to understand diverse perspectives on the same issue; for marginalized people who are rarely ‘heard’, this promotes the development of a critical consciousness or “conscientization” by encouraging participants to examine perceived social and political contradictions and differences in their experiences and perspectives (Freire, 2008).

Finally, circle pedagogy encourages holistic learning where, in alignment with the Indigenous medicine wheel, participants incorporate their physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual “selves” into classroom dialogue (Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; Pollack, 2016). The

collaborative nature of knowledge production in this format not only shifts power imbalances between inside and outside students and the facilitator, it values, humanizes and respects the voices of all circle members – which is often life-affirming for incarcerated people (Fayter, 2016; Freitas et al., 2014; Pollack, 2016).

Today's class was especially moving. One of the inside students who has otherwise remained quiet – always seeming to be assessing his whereabouts, the sincerity of the outside students and professor, and how he would be judged for expressing himself in the circle – finally spoke in a detailed and engaged way. He shared his deep concerns about his life inside and potential life beyond prison. He said that he finally believed that what he shared – including his deep fears of being deported, shunned by his family and harmed in his homeland for being gay – would be valued. He said that for the first time in a long time he felt safe to discuss these issues with others. It was the clearest example so far in this class as to how the circle format helps participants reclaim their voice. (Kilty, Winter 2019 class fieldnotes)

It is for this reason that W2B classes can be so transformative for participants. By caring about one another as 'whole people' the learning process involves not only sharing and receiving information, but contributing to one another's intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth (Graveline, 1998; Palmer, 2004). In this way, circle pedagogy aids in the creation of a sphere of civility in an otherwise oppressive environment that functions as a critical public sphere for discussing complex social issues (Wright & Gehring, 2008). For example, Kilty's inside students have referred to this transformative process as "humanity Tuesday's" (because the course was held on Tuesday afternoons) (Kilty & Lehalle, 2018), a "surreal departure from the dregs of life in prison" (Kilty, Winter 2019 class fieldnotes), "the first time I've really connected with anyone in here and it's been two years" (Kilty, Fall 2019 class fieldnotes), and as "the only time I feel human in here" (Kilty, Fall 2019 class fieldnotes).

Central to building W2B's transformative potential is the fact that the professor-facilitator is not an employee of the institution. As the following exchange exemplifies, this separation of power is one of the key reasons that W2B students feel safe to participate in this educational opportunity:

Inside Student: I just want to know if what we say in here is going to be reported to the COs? Do you talk to them about us or what we say?

Kilty: No, I don't work for corrections. This is a university class and I'm here to facilitate learning about the different issues we will be studying. I would only speak to an institutional authority if you told me you were going to hurt yourself or someone else.

Inside Student: So, it's like the Vegas rule.

Kilty: Yes, what is said in circle, stays in circle. (Kilty, Winter 2019 class fieldnotes)

Institutional staff do not sit in to observe or participate in W2B classes so there is a degree of autonomy in this educational initiative, which is important for developing the kind of trust that is needed to engage in open critical discussions about social issues. Especially for the inside students, there is safety in knowing that there is a degree of confidentiality regarding what is said in circle, again signaling how institutional hierarchies and power structures create feelings of a loss of democracy and civility amongst incarcerated people, which in turn reiterates the importance for community-based organizations, colleges, and universities to have access to engage in educational opportunities in carceral settings.

This is not to say that W2B is free from the difficulties noted above in terms of navigating correctional policies and practices or the constraints that typically structure the carceral

classroom. In fact, it took over two years of negotiation to reach a legal agreement between the second author's university and the carceral institution where she teaches, and the first course was treated as a pilot that there was no obligation to repeat. While the benefits of offering a program like W2B are obvious, it remains a difficult course to orchestrate inside an institution steeped in punishment and oppression.

Navigating institutional policies and protocols can also come to bear directly upon the class experience, such as when Kilty had to speak with a key staff member about their presence in the classroom. In this instance, the staff member entered the room before class had ended and witnessed the closing circle on two occasions, which completely altered the mood and inhibited the expressiveness of the students who became demonstrably quieter and less open in their dialogue (Kilty & Lehalle, 2018). Thankfully, this staff member was receptive to the concerns raised by the professor and was respectful enough to avoid entering the class in future weeks.

There are also ongoing weekly negotiations with correctional staff as you enter and pass through security and with the staff that manages the wing of the prison in which the inside students are housed. While administrative staff might approve of and support the initiative, frontline correctional staff are not always similarly supportive. Kilty has heard snide remarks from correctional officers regarding the "free education that the inmates are getting, when [they] still have student loan debt," (Winter 2018 class fieldnotes) and inside students have reported that guards sometimes refer to the course as "walls to bitches" (Winter 2019 class fieldnotes). Depending on what has occurred in the institution or who is working that day, classes can be seriously delayed – by 15, 30, and even 60 minutes. These examples speak to the psychological climate of incarceration. The loud disruptive sounds and lack of privacy in conjunction with the at times antagonistic relationship with staff members (including taunting from guards), cell searches, and destruction of course materials contribute to making the process of teaching and learning in prison exceptionally difficult – an ongoing negotiation in a problematic environment.

There are also the common concerns regarding the lack of resources for students in prison, including lack of access to computers, the Internet, books, and other library resources which prevents them from fully participating in the research aspect of post-secondary education. In more oppressive institutional environments, including where Kilty teaches – even pens, erasers, and binders for the students' loose-leaf papers are prohibited. These students are only permitted to use small golf pencils, which has led to the creative response of using the rubber soles of their sneakers as erasers. Moreover, the physical space of carceral settings is unmistakably constraining to educational advancement; prisons are loud, deny privacy to individuals, and face constant interruptions due to cell counts, rounds, mealtimes, cell searches, and lockdowns. Given the overcrowding that is common to the modern prison, it is a particularly difficult environment in which to try to do the readings and written assignments that are required for course success. For example, Kilty's students do not have desks to sit at to do their course work and must contend with the barest of conditions that structure their daily lives. Prison cells can be variably dark or over bright at odd hours, there is poor air circulation and there are routine temperature fluctuations that lead to feeling cold or hot that can make concentration difficult. Despite these difficulties and compared to the monotony, inhumanity, and agonism of prison life, W2B creates the opportunity to develop respectful, stimulating, and highly meaningful relationships that ground the teaching and learning process.

### **Conclusion**

Incarcerated students have long reported that prison education programs provide light in a dark space (Finlay, 2016; Terry, 2004) and are "the only positives in an ocean of negativity" (Day, 2008, p. 38). It is unsurprising, then, that "the popularity of prison education amongst prisoners [is] a popularity which is unequalled when compared to other prison programs" (Da-

vidson, 1992, p.1). Where most correctional programs are often critiqued for failing to address prisoners' needs (Pollack, 2014; Shantz et al., 2009), educational opportunities are regularly described as breaking the monotony of prison life and as being "stimulating, nurturing, and life enhancing" (Terry, 2004, pp.22-23). Expressions like these indicate that the prison classroom is considered a safe space in an otherwise oppressive environment. The sphere of civility that is created in the classroom is a microcosm that is less threatening than the atmosphere of punishment and control that structures prison life, and serves to encourage positive – even transformative – change by helping to foster a student identity and passing time constructively (Collins, 2008).

To create a performative space in a carceral environment, there are certain characteristic elements of the prison that must be abandoned because learning only occurs in a space where respect is mutual and free of coercion or threat (Davidson, 1992; Palmer, 2004; Pollack, 2014, 2016a). As incarcerated students repeatedly attest, education programs in prison remind prisoners of their humanity and of their potential (Bonanfanti, 1992; Fayter, 2016; Kilty & Lehalle, 2018; Kilty et al., 2020). We must be careful, however, not to create a false sense of comfort that bolsters carceral power, which is antithetical to the central principles that enable the creation of a performative educational space in the prison context – namely, civility, ethical conversations, and democracy (Wright and Gehring, 2008a, 2008b). For while they may nurture "intellectual freedom in an otherwise coercive environment" (Davidson, 1992, p. 2), prison education programs remain hindered by the constraints of the carceral classroom and punitive surveillance, risk, and management logics that structure and govern prison life.

While it is perhaps easier to think of the lack of human and material resources that prison educators and incarcerated students regularly face (e.g., limited or no access to computers, the Internet, books, and other academic reading material; poor conditions in which to read and complete assignments; and limited contact with teachers), this collaborative research project also revealed how the carceral focus on security as the primary governance and management logic challenges the freedom that comes with learning initiatives inside. Despite the motivation that prisoners report regarding educational opportunities and teachers' efforts to guide them in the achievement of their goals, there is little time, space, or support for fostering the interpersonal trust and mutual respect (central formative aspects of adult education) required to thrive in carceral environments. It is not enough for a prisoner to experience civility, ethical conversations, and democracy in only one space for a limited amount of time each day or each week. The sphere of civility that the performative classroom space generates does not cancel out the dangers and degradations that characterize normative prison life. Instead, it can create a bifurcated carceral experience where one can never be completely free of the punitive fundamental nature of life in prison:

So, to those of you who teach us, and to my brothers and sisters in cages, keep thinking, keep learning and growing, keep the fire burning for those following. And never forget to watch your back (Huckelbury, 2004, p. 44).

We suggest that performative spaces must extend beyond the confines of the carceral classroom for them to have a stronger transformative influence. The Walls to Bridges program reflects this sentiment with its central aims of building bridges between the carceral and broader social communities and learning about socio-political and cultural issues through the 'prism of the prison' (Pollack, 2014, 2016a). Given the negative relationships that often exist between prisoners and prison staff members that can make transformative learning a difficult task to undertake, educational (and we would argue all) programs would benefit from being run in the community and by teachers who do not work for corrections. Not only would this shift help prisoners to shed that identity as their master status in lieu of a positive and transformative identity as a student or learner, it would help them connect with and feel invested in the communities to which they will one day return.

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### Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The four special issues of *The Journal for Prisoners on Prisons* that focus specifically on prison education are: 1992 Volume 4 (1), 2004 Volume 13 (1), 2008 Volume 17(1), and 2016 Volume 25(2).

<sup>2</sup> As part of the memorandum of understanding between the provincial government and the university, we are legally prohibited from identifying the name or location of the detention centre.

<sup>3</sup> The CSC requires that federally sentenced prisoners in Canada “participate in an education program” with the goal of providing “basic literacy, academic and personal development skills” (Retrieved Mar. 5, 2020: <https://www.csc-scc.gc.ca/correctional-process/002001-2002-eng.shtml>). There are no mandated educational opportunities in provincial carceral institutions in Canada.

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