

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REFERENCES

- Freire, Paulo (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.
- Rusche, Georg and Otto Kirchheimer (2003) *Punishment and Social Structure*, New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.