

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## ENDNOTES

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

## REFERENCES

- Foucault, Michel (2003) *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège De France, 1975-76* (trans. David Macey), New York: Picador.
- Freire, Paulo (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Bloomsbury Press.
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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