Schooling in a "Total Institution": Critical Perspectives on Prison Education

Edited by Howard S. Davidson
Westport CT: Bergin & Garvey (1995), 229 pp.
Reviewed by Jon Marc Taylor

"The aim of this book," writes contributor and editor Howard Davidson, "is to advance the conventional discourse on prison education with the development of critical perspectives" (3). The book accomplishes this with multifarious aplomb. In thirteen chapters, an appropriate sum given the nature of the enveloping negative environment chronicled, the reader is introduced to a plethora of voices from multiple North American prison systems, varying decades of experience, insights from and for both genders, and perspectives ranging from the outsiders teaching within, to the insiders educating their fellows trapped within. The spirit of Paulo Freire, as poignantly set forth in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* and other liberation theologists permeate the submissions. No collection of education stories better captures the dynamics, heartaches, maddening frustrations, and most of the potentialities of education in the penal setting than the compilation in *Schooling in the "Total Institution"*.

Davidson clearly sets forth the purpose of the book in the opening chapter, "Possibilities for a Critical Pedagogy in a 'Total Institution,'" by outlining how the prevalent theories of functionalism, the opportunities model, cognitive development, as well as neoliberal perspectives on deviance, all come up wanting in accounting for the empowerment that higher-level thinking skills imbue in the prisoner-student. The difference, Davidson postulates, between liberal and critical pedagogies is that where the former fails to connect the individuals' alienation to their dehumanization within the social construct, the latter leads to their realization, and preaches that collective constructive action can create "alternative futures." Davidson, and the rest of the contributors, by varying examples, repeat this underlying theme: empowerment through prisoner education is transformative, effectively changing the student from victim of structural/economic circumstance and self-destructive ignorant compliance, to active rational-thinking citizen. It is the culmination of not simply liberal pedagogy, but it takes the step beyond to political education; in short, to "critical consciousness."

Prisoner education is "half-sham," and students are able to grow and graduate in spite of, rather than because of, support from the controlling state apparatus. This is the central point of Chapter Two by Jim Thomas, "The Ironies of

Prison Education," and a theme touched upon repeatedly throughout the essays. Not just the structural to uniquely obtuse impediments to delivering prison education are detailed, but more importantly, the methods that failed to circumvent these restrictions. The point highlighted in this chapter is one of even larger consideration beyond the classroom itself. "Prison education cannot be fully implemented," Thomas concludes, "without a dramatic transformation of the philosophy of punishment in North America" (39). Indeed, after more than two decades of my own existence in the crucible of the modern American penitentiary, most of that tenure advancing through the ranks of post-secondary education, this is a fundamental conclusion with which I experientially concur.

The contributors, in each of their informative voices, continue to educate the reader to the "bad parent" behavior of current correctional practice, as reported in Gay Bell's and Therasa Glaremin's Chapter Three. Continuing with the critical analysis of how various models (medical, opportunities, and cognitive deficiency) provide a rationale from which teaching literacy to prisoners is legitimized, Michael Collins, in Chapter Four, comments that "a functionalist orientation to literacy permits alternatives if only because the correctional ethos really masks a widespread indifference about the welfare of prisoners" (61). This is a point I also have observed: the stark dichotomy between state correctional educators parroting Adult Basic Education and General Education Equivalency curriculums, and contracted (usually) higher education teachers employing more student-centered, critical thinking pedagogies.

In Peter Linebaugh's Chapter Five contribution, "Freeing Birds, Erasing Images, Burning Lamps: How I Learned to Teach in Prison," we learn from a social historian the pivotal reason why criminologists, ironically more than all others, should teach in the penal setting. Entering the wilds of Borneo, the scientist learns from the natives, in contradiction to the pervasive popular propaganda, that prisoners are not that different than traditional students, or from the sons and daughters of those outside the walls and wire of the artificial social construct of the penitentiary. Linbaugh writes:

> Whenever I entered prison and the gates clanged shut behind me and after I entered the society of the prisoners, I felt welcomed and every effort was always made to make me feel at home ... Of course, I felt fear, but that fear left when I left the guards. The guards live in fear; it is a part of their working conditions. The second feeling I had was

> this. Although this was home to a mass of uniformed people whose individualities in clothing, grooming, behavior, and body language were severely curtailed, I had never been so struck by individualities as I was struck by them in prison. For good or evil, the inside shone out. (70)

This becomes a countervailing insight that the scholars of crime should be the first to imbue in their teachings—not the last of the academies, as has morosely been the case in the increasingly socially irrelevant field of criminal justice studies.

This theme of "breaking through the myths" is continued by one of the rare criminologists who venture into the statesvilles to educate prisoners as well as himself. In Chapter Six, "Teaching 'Criminology' to 'Criminals'," Edward Sbarbaro makes one of many observations that made me smile in forlorn recognition of the ironies of prison education, when he notes that it would be more difficult to bring doughnuts into the prison, than it would the infinitely more dangerous Marxist ideas of the counter-political revolution to western economic theory. Educational development within the world of the prison becomes a "dialectical process," as noted in Dante Germanotta's fascinating Chapter Seven. He offers miniature educational case studies of Malcolm X and Richard Cepulonis that vividly demonstrate the transformative power of education within the misanthropic repression of the state penal apparatus. Germanotta chronicles the persistent dilemmas for the educator and illuminates the structural limitations imposed on students, compelling the "development of strategies in both teaching and learning that bring unique challenges to the formal educational enterprise" (119).

Schooling in a "Total Institution" continues to offer vignettes into unique educational practices with the story in Chapter Eight of INSIGHT, INC., predominantly a financially self-sufficient B.A. program offered through the University of Minnesota. In this story, Robert Weiss makes the tellingly ironic observation that too much success by rehabilitative programming (i.e., when prisoners become apostles of the dominant culture ideology and mores) is viewed as an insubordination of sorts by the functionaries of the very system that is tasked with "rehabilitating" them in the first place. Perhaps only convicts can fathom the logic in that "correctional" obstinacy. In Chapter Nine, Edward Sbarbaro, the only double contributor, briefly reviews the history of education in jail and penal settings in the cause of political activism (IWW, Black Power

Movement, and intifada), and notes the "accidental praxis" that occurred in the zeitgeist shift from the rehabilitative to just-deserts model that conversely gave prison college programs more independence from penal control. Sbarbaro observes there is a largely unexplored "history of political education in prison that has been an effective mechanism in the struggle for social justice" (145).

In his "Communitarian Critique" in Chapter Ten, Peter Cordella delves into the comparison between atomistic and communitarian societies, and how the sensate versus ideational cultures they represent are affected by the educational process. It is Cordella's analysis that the evolving process imparted by higher education to "the ideational transformation of prisoner-students demonstrates the potential for critical pedagogy in prison education" (154). Moreover, it is this next level that elevates the person from one of lockstep, blind consumer of self-centeredness to one of community inclusive consciousness that frees the person from the blinders of atomization. This chapter is a hard read that deserves multiple readings and meditation to comprehend fully.

Juan Rivera's Chapter Eleven, "A Nontraditional Approach to Social and Criminal Justice," moves beyond the outside teacher venturing in to educate the unwashed masses to those who "don't need no stinkin' ba-hd-jezzes" (my paean to the classic bandit line from *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre*) educating them: the essential culmination of empowerment and fulfillment of Freire's pedagogical philosophy. Or, using the philosophical explanations provided by Cordella, these imprisoned men are moving beyond the atomized to communitarian perspective. Rivera describes the communitarian program utilizing a nontraditional approach, solely organized by and for prisoners and their transformation to caring, involved citizens. His essay outlines the program design and its history, description of the classes (three types with unique perspectives: Afrocentric, Latinocentric, Liberation Theology), a sample curriculum, and a five-step reconciliation phase (recognition, responsibility, reconstruction, reconciliation, and redemption). This is followed by a discussion of opposition from the administration and some prisoners who believe prisoners cannot learn anything of value from another con (i.e., "green syndrome"). The issue of the interplay of racism is also addressed. Rivera explains "the aim of the program is to help prisoners to embrace a new vision of themselves, to transform their criminal attitudes into socially and politically conscious ones, and to return them to their communities equipped to rebuild them" (169). Truly noble goals that are hard to object to, but goals that those with correctional

programming experience know all too well are rare and fraught with longevity uncertainty.

In Chapter Twelve, Karlene Faith crosses the continent, extending back more than two decades to another cultural time to "The Santa Cruz Women's Prison Project, 1972–1976." This is a fascinating story of the building, transcendence, and extinction of a briefly-lived opportunity that captures all the essence of the best of post-secondary correctional education. "[W]e engaged in 'education as the practice of freedom, as opposed to education as the practice of domination' .... [W]e could do no better for ourselves than to support their reclamation of their lives" (190). Amen. One of the most helpful observations Faith makes in analyzing the failure of the program's survival is that perhaps the teachers erred in not setting up separate courses for the guards, or encouraging the women to open up certain classes to mixed (prisoner/staff) enrollment. This action would have co-opted the multi-faceted support for the ongoing operation of the program, and political influence with the administration of the prison and bureaucracy of the department as well. (During one semester, in two classes, a mixed student body was enrolled in the Indiana State Reformatory / Ball State University program, and functioned surprisingly well to everyone's enlightenment.) The Santa Cruz story reverberates twenty-five years later with the continued tremulous survival of current volunteer staffed and donated administrative support (i.e., free of tax-funded allocations such as Pell or TAP grants) for higher education opportunities. For example, the survival of the Bedford Hills Correctional Facility / Marymount Manhattan College Program (BHCF/MMCP) in New York remains a very real concern. While history is informative, it is not destiny. One of the significant differences between the Santa Cruz and Bedford Hills programs is that from its creation, the BCHF/MMCP has had the active involvement and substantial support of the prison's superintendent, whereas the Santa Cruz program was in perpetual conflict with the prison's administration. What troubles both programs, however, is the acknowledged problem of volunteer exhaustion. For purposes of comparing past and present programs, much can be learned from Faith's contribution.

My personal favorite is the final chapter, "Jailhouse Lawyers Educating Fellow Prisoners" by Julian Stone, most likely because I identify with the author's experiences. Recrossing the country back to Walpole in New England, the story is period contemporary with the Santa Cruz program. Stone self-discovers and describes all the facets of successful program delivery in the

misanthropic prison milieu: the design of administrative interference protection (in the liberalization aftermath of Attica), needs survey, curriculum development, student evaluations, and continuous course modification. There is a classic self-conscious evaluation of the evolution from lecturer to teacher to instructor as coach that is one of the most succinct and heartening descriptions of praxis I have read. Coming from individuals society traditionally considers malevolent incompetents, the story of prisoner as successful, caring teacher is that much more illuminating. Julian even describes the humorous incident of how he "arranged" the clandestine printing of course completion certificates, had the superintendent co-sign them, and then distribute them at the graduation ceremony.

As much as these chapters are individually stimulating, sharing important stories from the gulag of North American corrections, stories that in my experience are rarely shared, much less so many bound by one spine, the most troubling aspect of *Schooling in a "Total Institution"* is the collective age of these stories. Unfortunately, many of the chapters have vague or no references as to when the experiences took place. I take exception to this because, as exampled in many of the chapters, correctional programs have relatively short lifetimes. Not only do administrative policies change and funding sources evaporate, philosophical correctional practices shift as well, which in turn can result in wholesale program extinctions.

As a specific example, the highly innovative and independent INSIGHT, INC. program in Minnesota, reported in Chapter Eight, ceased to function several years ago. If I had not known this, inspired by this submission, I would have commenced follow-up research into what was truly an interesting program. In more general consideration, the juggernaut of Reaganomics pushed the tidal wave of the Just(ice) Deserts criminal justice policy, cresting against the fragile ivy towers of post-secondary correctional education with the elimination of prisoner Pell Grant eligibility and the subsequent closing of the majority of prison college programs in the United States by the mid-1990s. The unanswered, and largely indiscernible aspect of this book, is how current are the experiences described? More to the point, how many of the programs are still viable?

That said, in wider focus, the freshness of the programs described becomes largely irrelevant. The greatest value of this book is in its sense of hope. The hope that educational programming can and does work in so many places, in so many ways, by so many good people—both inside and outside of the walls—

against such philosophical, bureaucratic, and personal odds. All of us need encouragement from time to time. A pat of the back, a word of praise, even official recognition of a job well done is all-too-very rare in the penitentiary. Isolation from the world beyond affects both the prisoners and, to a lesser extent, the employees. The day-in and day-out drudgery of prison grinds on everyone, and the struggle to provide and keep alive the few positive programs becomes so wearying. To read about others sharing similar circumstances, even if eventually failing to maintain their offerings, becomes comforting: to realize one is not alone, to be encourage by the successes, and to learn from the mistakes.

By this collection, Howard Davidson achieves what he sets out to do. The ultimate course of education is to pass the torch from teachers directing students, to students becoming self-educating, self-questioning, and searching about the world around them. This book repeatedly demonstrates the invigorating power of critical pedagogy and the articulation of teachers and prisoner-students as "eternal protestors." Herein lies, by the intelligent riot, the hope for any transformative success in the morass of the prison-industrial complex.

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