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"Only Connect": The Growth of Relationship when Prisoners and College Students Study Together

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INTRODUCTION

On a brisk autumn night a few years ago, nineteen students and two professors met in a fluorescent-lit concrete block classroom deep within a maximum-security state prison in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. After a solid year of preparation, and the shuffling of mountains of paper back and forth between two large, slow bureaucracies, these eleven incarcerated students and eight outside students had come together for an opportunity to study the injustices of the prison system and the hard lessons of inequality in public education. The students looked forward to the class with nervous anticipation, and as the semester sped by, those involved in the project recognized that they had taken part in something extraordinary.

The professors had spent many months in collaboration, selecting study materials that we hoped would provide a foundation for the development of critical consciousness and activism. We had committed to the use of pedagogical methods that fostered the growth of relationship and community. The students, both those in the outside world and those behind bars, brought the best of intentions to the classroom. Yet what happened there was very different from what we expected. Along the way, we used autoethnographic methods to gather and analyze data from the project, documenting and cross-checking what we were experiencing in ways other educators might benefit from. Those interpretations are presented here so that we, and others, may learn from the confounding of our expectations.

Prison education is a highly visible contemporary issue. Media attention has been plentiful in recent years, including a four-part documentary series by filmmaker Ken Burns on PBS; other films on networks and streaming services; and articles in national publications. Elected officials have been taking a closer look as well: under the Obama administration in 2015, the US Department of Education initiated the Second Chance Pell pilot program to explore how

universities, community colleges and workforce training programs could serve a small sample of incarcerated people. The program has been extended twice, though falling short of full restoration of the federal grant program. Meanwhile, articles about prison teaching have proliferated in academic journals, many detailing uplifting experiences, with descriptions that feel more self-congratulatory than instructive about the phenomenon of prison education. The author of this article reaches for something different: a candid exploration of the relational and pedagogical issues that we prepared for, and those we did not anticipate, when we brought two diverse communities of learners together for a college class in prison.

THE MANY GOALS OF PRISON EDUCATION, AND THE SPACE BETWEEN

Educational programming in U.S. prisons was embedded in the penitentiary model in the late 18th century as a movement for reform in punishment practices (Flanagan et al., 1994). Facilitated through liberal religious groups, most centrally the Quakers, religious education was combined with basic literacy and solitary reflection to serve as the core of prison rehabilitation, and remained so until the late 19th century. From the 1890s to the 1920s, prison education focused on work (Zoukis, 2014), coinciding with the first wave of racialized incarceration and the use of prisons to reproduce slave labor. Not until the 1930s did correctional education lead to the institutionalization of formal academic and vocational educational programming. In 1953 post-secondary education became available to incarcerated students, but only in a few facilities, and with no opportunities to earn degrees (Zoukis, 2014).

The passage of Title IV of the Higher Education Act of 1965 provided access to federal funding for low-income students in the form of Pell Grants, and prisoners began to access college for the first time through on-site AA degree programs, offered largely through the community college system. Access to both vocational and academic programming proliferated, expanding after the 1971 Attica insurrection and the temporary shift toward recognizing the rights of prisoners. This came to an abrupt halt in 1994 when President Clinton signed the Omnibus Crime Bill, which diverted massive funding into the War on Drugs, increased prison sentences, militarized police, and slashed Pell Grant funding for incarcerated students. Almost overnight, approximately 350 college programs that had relied on Pell Grant funding collapsed, leaving only a handful remaining.

For more than 25 years, an organized movement of incarcerated students, academics, advocates, funders and legislators has worked slowly to rebuild access to higher education on the inside. There has been some renewed investment in prison college programming (though minimal and uneven), most notably the 2015 Second Chance Pell Grant Act, which restored Pell Grant funding to incarcerated students in a five-state pilot program (extended twice). In this post-Pell context, scholars have presented data showing that higher education in prison significantly lowers rates of recidivism (Adams et al., 1994, Fine et al., 2001, Steurer, 2001) and saves taxpayer dollars by enabling returning citizens to contribute productively to their communities upon release. (For example, people who earn a BA degree in prison have only a 5.6 percent chance of recidivating [Zoukis 2010]). Other documented benefits of prison college programming have included offsetting stigma; transmitting skills useful for a more meaningful life inside; mentoring opportunities; role-modeling for children and younger people in prison communities; and as a way

to stay sane in a brutal and dehumanizing environment (Fine et al 2001; Novek 2013; Zoukis 2010).

In determining the kinds of education models best suited to incarcerated students, some educators have rejected vocational and traditional liberal arts pedagogies in favor of participatory popular education models (Flores, 2012; Gaskew, 2015; Novek, 2017; Pompa, 2013; Scott, 2013). One of the best-known and oldest initiatives of this kind has been the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, founded by Lori Pompa at Temple University. This program, operating for more than 20 years, has linked universities with correctional facilities and created opportunities for tens of thousands of incarcerated and non-incarcerated students to study together in the U.S. and worldwide. Pompa (2013), Allred (2009), Lanterman (2018) and others emphasize the transformative effect of the program's design, which foregrounds face-to-face communication and relational engagement. The dialogic approach encourages development of a social justice orientation that supports personal growth and enables students of both types to see themselves as "change agents."

The class taught by the author of this essay and her colleague stands somewhere between the traditional and participatory models described above. It encouraged students to engage in the process of consciousness raising in the Freirean sense, and to engage with the humanity of people they considered profoundly "other," learning to see them as "people like us" (Novek, 2013). Yet the main research question I set out to answer here was: Can a class that enables civilian college students and incarcerated learners to study together for a semester motivate a deep commitment to work for social justice?

METHODOLOGY

The methodologies that shaped our work included autoethnography, ethnographic experimental collaboration, and participatory action research. In this section I will also situate the two professors as researchers and as participants in the project.

Harter and Bochner (2009) say the methodology of ethnography reflects that "Meaning does not reside in the mind or words of any single participant, but rather emerges in the interfaces between stories, people, and contexts" (p. 142). To investigate the experiences and meanings in this intervention, I relied on autoethnography, defined by Ellis and Bochner (2000) as "an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (p.741). Rather than presuming to explain a "way things really are," autoethnography presents the interactions and experiences of the researcher as "social constructions, selected, built, and embellished by social actors (individuals) from among the situations, stimuli and events of their experience" (Lincoln & Guba, 2003, p. 227).

In the field of education, Savage (2003) argues, ethnographic work can empower individuals and communities alike by increasing "awareness of the contradictions and distortions of our present unjust arrangements, because such knowledge can also direct attention to powerful possibilities for social transformation that are equally present" (p. 336). Such work has enabled socially engaged educational researchers to recognize that pre-structured educational approaches are

largely ineffective with hard-to-reach vulnerable populations such as incarcerated learners. Thus, Poveda et al. (2021) argue that research should incorporate the voices of those impacted by proposed educational interventions, offering the concept of ethnographic experimental collaboration as a remedy.

As described by Poveda et al. (2021), ethnographic experimental collaboration approaches "research design" as an open-ended, performative process where researchers and participants co-construct an inquiry "in which research goals, procedures and data emerge as the result of the joint efforts of all social actors involved" (p. 1477). In the prison class we designed, the professors sought to reconfigure an educational intervention as "a shared social space in which participants frame and reframe the objectives of the social/educational intervention and may have room to negotiate the procedures through which these objectives are achieved" (p. 1477).

This collaborative approach to pedagogy is similar to the explanation of project-based participatory action research offered by Stoecker (2013). Unlike traditional methods, participatory action research allows researchers to collaborate with communities to design and implement interventions that meet participants' needs (p. 32). In addition, Stoecker asserts, this research is cyclical: phases of diagnosis, prescription, implementation and evaluation influence one another. This was our experience as well.

The data for this essay are derived from informal field notes; lengthy conversations between the professors on van trips to the prison, in our offices and elsewhere; discussions with both groups of students before, during, and after the semester; and texts (in the form of essays, papers, and other artifacts) authored by both free and incarcerated students in the class. I analyzed the data through two-step coding, both open and axial (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). I used open coding when first identifying categories of behavior drawn from observations and interactions with both groups of students, custodial officers, and prison staffers. When follow-up analyses pointed to a range of relationships we had not anticipated, I used axial coding to identify other dimensions of interest and revisited the original conceptions for further conceptualization.

This report illuminates the design of the class, the dynamism of the students' first encounters, the challenges presented by institutional norms, the students' struggles to present and represent what they were learning, and the meanings they took away from their experiences. I found the salience of these findings to be less about the explication of the specific categories of behavior and more about our overall interpretations of them as activist educators. These are offered below in an accessible narrative style, supported by representative comments from student interactions and writings, as well as thick description from the researcher's notes.

UNPACKING THE EXCHANGE – FINDINGS

Designing the Class and Seeking Community

The professors came to be prison educators through the traditions of social justice activism and critical pedagogy, grounded in the assumption that social change requires people to have a sense of how their personal troubles are also public issues (Mills, 1959). Both of us

were White, middle-class women employed as college professors at a mid-Atlantic private university. One had an extensive background in prison teaching and had organized prison education programs in other states; the other had been a nonviolence activist in prisons for 15 years and had served as a prison volunteer for more than a decade.

There were two distinct groups of students: a group of eleven predominantly African American incarcerated men, ranging in age from their late 30s to their mid 50s, and a group of seven women and one man from the university, predominantly White, and all in their young 20s. Because the two sets of students possessed widely diverse levels of educational preparation, we worked to design a pedagogy that enabled the two groups to work together as equals, esteeming the practical knowledge some students brought as well as the academic proficiency of others.

Participatory communicative strategies were used to engage the relational dynamics of the class in formal and informal learning projects. Students were organized into small teams, each comprised of two outside students and two or three inside students. Each session began with a circular check-in, giving each student a chance to address the class briefly. The professors made brief presentations as well. Then the small groups caucused about the week's readings and assignments, with a different team responsible for leading the analysis each week. Finally, the team members collaborated in choosing the roles each would take on in their research and writing assignments for the coming week.

The course pedagogy was grounded in the belief that learning is born in the relationship between teachers and students, and between the students themselves. Like the Inside-Out program, we rejected the notion that professors are the assumed experts in the room. Once we gathered resources to support a broad menu of criminal justice reform issues, the students themselves made decisions about what they wanted to study most and what information they wanted to present to the community. They decided to offer a public forum about the school-to-prison pipeline, the dynamic that squeezes underprivileged young people out of schools and funnels them into the criminal justice system. The content they studied was both related to the inside students' lived experiences and connected to the larger project of promoting a just and democratic society.

Despite elements of student-centered design, the format, schedule, assignments, and grading practices followed conventional university models of evaluation and left traditional teacher-student power relations intact. We also demanded some advance preparation of the civilian students. To correct the misconceptions and stereotypes they held and provide perspective on types of race- and class-based oppression they had not faced personally, we required the outside students to take a preparatory class offering a critical race feminist perspective on mass incarceration, where the traditional pedagogical style of faculty as expert was largely intact. More troubling, the outside students in the prison course earned college credit to participate, but the inside students did not. (This would change in later classes but haunted us in the pilot stage).

It is rare that the humanities and social sciences teach us explicitly how to communicate and connect with other human beings in decency and compassion. The class was designed to bridge that gap, relying on connection as a major element of learning. As we would come to understand, the relational engagement fostered by the course was indeed transformative, and yet it also proved to be the most confounding element of the experience.

The Dynamism of First Encounters

The prison in which the class took place was a looming brick and stone building, with some wings dating back to the 19th century and others constructed in the 1970s. Some residential wings were comprised of cells stacked four rows high, with the din of clanging iron gates and yelling providing a soundtrack to the cramped and unhygienic quarters. On other wings, frustrated fists pounded at the glass and steel doors of isolation cells. In contrast, the education classes were held in a brightly lit, quiet wing of classrooms that presented the incarcerated men with a rare opportunity to engage socially and intellectually.

Moving into such a communicatively charged space brought unpredictable dynamics of interaction. For the outside students, this represented a recognizable structure in a vastly unfamiliar environment. For the inside students, it meant close proximity to new faces in uncharted pedagogical and social terrain. Since most of the prisoners had been locked up for decades, they were well-acquainted with the prison's rigid social hierarchies, but the introduction of the outside students brought a chaotic energy to the sterile surroundings.

Some of the prisoners wrote later that they had wrestled with anxiety prior to this first class meeting. One wrote, "I'll be 37 years old in a few weeks and have been in some dangerous situations with volatile people who mean each other no good, and I entered those situations with less nerves." Another said he had looked around at the first class meeting and felt stunned by the youth of the outside students. "One personal realization I experienced was how quickly I am aging," he wrote. "Until that night, I had barely noticed. But looking around at the [outside] students, it struck me that they were all young enough to be my offspring."

The outside students were equally thrown off balance by the encounter. One wrote, "Being actually present in a prison gave me chills, but being able to meet the inmates calmed my nerves." Another found herself emotionally supercharged. "Leaving the prison after our first class left me with a stack of emotions that seemed hard to grasp and organize in my mind," she wrote. "What I could comprehend was what sat on the top of that stack – pure glee."

The emotional energy manifesting in the classroom early was a response, in part, to the pains of imprisonment. In addition to losing their freedom, incarcerated men and women often experience the loss of their connections to family, friends, and others. As a consequence of their punishment, those who serve lengthy sentences may never again experience sexual expression, embrace a lover, or, in some places, even engage in a friendly touch. These dictates may have a protective element, since both male and female prisoners are vulnerable to coercive sex and emotional exploitation, whether by other prisoners, corrections officers, civilian staff, or volunteers; but such policies also isolate prisoners and compound their loneliness. Corrections officials tend to classify any efforts toward sociability as security threats; annual staff and volunteer training sessions repeatedly warn against "undue familiarity" and include harrowing tales of inmates' ability to successfully manipulate the kindness of civilians. Staffers are advised to avoid perfume or body-hugging clothing and to steer clear of casual conversation about even the most mundane personal topics.

The vitality of the first encounters between the two groups encouraged us to look forward to a highly collaborative effort that would support the equal participation of students with varying

levels of educational preparation and motivate their engagement with social justice. It did not prepare us for the challenges so much energy would raise.

The Pressures of Institutional Norms

Because the presence of the outside college students upset the prison's usual routines, the young people got more exposure to custodial pressure than they had bargained for. Like all prison volunteers, the students were expected to receive volunteer training, but the facility postponed their session until after the class had already met several times and the outside students had begun to regard the inside students as their friends and colleagues. The training, when it finally took place, sought to disrupt that dynamic. Three corrections officers staged a nearly three-hour orientation with the central message, as one outside student wrote, "that we are young and dumb and the inside students are manipulating sexual deviants." The officers exposed the students to uncomfortable mock demonstrations of intimidation and borderline sexual harassment to replicate what they framed as the inevitable sexual advances or manipulative behaviors that were likely to come from the men inside.

Though put off by the exaggerated performances of the training officers, the professors appreciated the need for both groups of students to conduct themselves professionally. In the full-semester preparatory class, the outside students had studied accounts of the hyper-masculinist values and assumptions of the carceral world. The inside students, who were older and had been incarcerated for many years, were members of a weekly learning circle led by one of the professors, and they prepared for the combined class with weeks of discussions. It seemed that both groups of students understood that their conduct would need to follow the institution's strictest norms.

Yet when brought together, neither group seemed able to fully respect the boundaries imposed by the circumstances. The sole male outside student, a fan of rap music, treated the prisoners as living embodiments of the gritty urban aesthetic of hip hop music; though forbidden to touch, he gave them back-slapping "bro hugs" each week until corrections officers intervened. Though the young women were repeatedly asked to refrain from wearing tight or ripped jeans or low-cut blouses to class, they continued to do so. And some inside students toggled between a fatherly impulse to protect the young people and a deep hunger for attention. Though warned not to make contact outside of the class, at least one prisoner sought the email addresses of the outside students. He gave them the URL of his Facebook page, maintained by a relative, that showed him as a muscular, shirtless man in a defiant, come-hither pose. Other prisoners created poems and sketches or crafted contraband paper flowers for the outside students. And despite admonitions to refrain from personal talk, most shared deeply intimate stories of their lives in unsupervised moments.

Several weeks into the session, a high-ranking custodial officer marched into the classroom one evening before the prisoners arrived to address the outside students. The practice of sitting in a circle of chairs, used to facilitate group dialogue, would have to stop immediately, he said. "When I looked at the security tapes for this class I nearly had a heart attack," he said. "Everybody sitting all together. This is a maximum-security prison and you are in here with criminals, with murderers. Please, take this seriously." From then on, the students were parked at tables, with the prisoners all on one side, their backs to the cameras and their hands visible. Three uniformed corrections

officers were stationed inside the room, their smirking presence an intimidating force in every class. The inside students, who faced custodial intrusions every minute of their waking lives, took these developments in stride, but the outside students experienced them as personal insults and were outraged.

The professors found this indignation a frustrating example of privileged expectations. Despite encouragement to engage in a structural analysis of these institutional responses, the outside students experienced them only as an interruption of their own opportunities for free interaction. One professor wrote, "We [had] prepared the outside students explicitly for the certainty that there would be incidents like this. We talked at length about the social, psychological, and political forces that might generate such patterns inside prisons. What troubled me the most was the inability for some outside students to link what was happening to them personally with the larger patterns of institutional control and violence."

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The phenomenon continued throughout the semester. The outside students professed empathy for the struggles of their incarcerated peers. Yet when the prison's surveillance and intimidation were directed at them, they seemed unable to connect these events to the broader social context in which they occurred. The outside students were "sympathetic to the position that the current criminal justice system is broken, is organized unfairly by race and class, and sets up conditions of inhumanity," one professor wrote, but they clung to their own privilege, demanding to be treated as exempt from the prison's institutional norms. At such times, the outside students demonstrated less of their humanity, and more of their expectations of special treatment, than we had hoped.

Presentation and Representation

Entitlements of race and class also emerged in the culminating presentation made by the outside students at the university. As the two groups studied together, they planned to combine their understandings into a written report, which the outside students would present on campus and represent the otherwise-suppressed voices of the inside students, as far as they were able. But as the students struggled to collaborate, their life experiences were so dissimilar that it seemed they were speaking and writing in different languages.

Some of the inside students had grown up in abject poverty, had served extended periods in solitary confinement, or had suffered other drastic life events; their hair-raising tales made them heroic figures in the eyes of the outside students. Several had become excellent jailhouse lawyers over time, well-versed in the details of criminal law. Others were skilled writers, with the persuasive abilities of professional authors, or skillful orators, able to speak cogently and convincingly. They began to commit long hours to drafts of the report and invited friends and family members to attend the public presentation – though they knew that these actions likely would not lead to any material improvements for them.

In contrast, the young middle-class outside students had only limited understanding of the lived conditions or politics of the situation in which the inside students dwelt. While they received the prisoners' narratives with empathy and enthusiasm, their overall work ethic in sense-making about these experiences seemed lackluster and passive. Between class meetings, most exerted little energy to read the writings of the inside students or the scholarly works meant to inform the public presentation. Overall, one of the professors observed, there was "a considerable imbalance between the time and attention the inside and outside students gave in between meeting periods to get to understand and connect with their peers, with the inside students devoting more effort."

Perhaps not surprisingly, the first drafts of the collaboratively produced report represented the class dynamics in a polemical and simplistic tone of outrage. Titled "Reversing the Flow - Why we need to make prisons more like schools, and schools less like prisons," the report foregrounded the struggles of the prisoners in the class. While it made brief note of the racial injustices in the criminal justice system overall and zero-tolerance policies in public education, it devoted the lion's share of its considerable energy to attacking the conditions at this particular prison, in blunt emotional rhetoric that offered little historical or sociological perspective. Although some of the more analytical writers in the class were among the incarcerated students, they deferred to the outside students in the writing of the report, and the tone of the collaborative work suffered from the younger group's lack of deeper understanding.

This led to a delicate situation. As the report neared completion, the professors learned that high-ranking staff members of the Department of Corrections would be attending the presentation. Faced with an opportunity to persuade state officials of the value of higher education in prison, the professors feared that the accusatory tone of the report would have negative consequences for the project and also for the inside students. In a distinctly hierarchical move, we told the students to emphasize the systemic problems they had studied and tone down the aggressive critiques of this specific prison lest they threaten the fragile relationship between the university and the Department of Corrections.

Despite the high stakes public event we were convening, some outside students met the request with tears and resentment before complying. The inside students were glad to have their concerns shared with an outside audience that included policy-makers, but some were disappointed in the first draft as well. Others felt the professors had undermined the participatory nature of the class with our rejection of the first draft – and so we had.

The presentation attracted a crowd of about 150 people that included the university president, the Commissioner of the Department of Corrections, other DOC administrators, parole officers, journalists, university students, faculty, family members of the incarcerated students, and activists. Representing the work they had done in partnership with the inside students, the outside students spoke about the disparate discipline aimed at elementary school students of color, noting how early suspensions and expulsions lead to permanent distancing from public education. They mentioned the inside students' anxieties about returning to civilian life lacking educational or professional preparation. "We overcame all of the nervousness and the stress we felt going into our presentation," one wrote. "We took the time to really produce our best work and I think that showed."

In the discussion period at the end, DOC representatives avowed their support for higher education in prison, despite having thrown up many roadblocks to this program. Activists challenged the corrections officials to make reforms in a variety of areas. Family members thanked the students with tears in their eyes. An outside student wrote, "I have never felt this content, this proud in my life prior to this." Another reflected, "It meant a lot to me personally to know that our incarcerated classmates felt like their voices were finally being heard."

Looking back, one prisoner praised the outside students for their wide-eyed passion and advocacy. "It takes a great deal of courage to step up and give a voice to those who have no voice, especially with such an unpopular group on such an unpopular subject," he wrote. A more critical prisoner dismissed the report as a naïve exercise in "preaching to the choir." He deemed it "a feel-good exercise" that would only appeal to like-minded advocates.

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The students had chosen as their goal a collaborative effort to educate the public about the harms of the school-to-prison pipeline. But here the divergent skill levels and life experiences of the two groups became stumbling blocks. The inside students appreciated the opportunity to have their voices heard by an outside audience, but the outside students' efforts to represent those concerns in a public setting fell short. The professors' decision to demand a rewrite created significant pressure on the groups and exposed the power differentials baked into our participatory pedagogical design.

Students Making Meaning

Once the public presentation ended and the students shared congratulations, whatever the energy they had expended on the class began to dissipate. Studying the causes and outcomes of the school-to-prison pipeline allowed the inside students to see their own life experiences affirmed by the empirical observations of scholars. But the scholarly information the two groups studied did not resonate as powerfully as their social interactions with each other and the sense of connection they experienced. Once the semester ended, this fragile learning community would disperse forever, as no face-to-face, phone or email contact between the two groups would be permitted. The last class meeting was fraught as the students prepared to make their goodbyes.

Most of the incarcerated students had experienced the detrimental effects of the public education system's reliance on punishment personally, and they found the subject matter of the class deeply inspirational. But with their deeply held fatalistic views of society and inequality, they did not express any sense of themselves as change agents or envision themselves working to change outcomes for anyone else. Although they expressed avuncular care for the individuals on their study teams, they did not recognize that they could direct such care toward their communities.

Still, for some, the participatory design of the class invited new energy and new possibilities. One of the incarcerated men observed, "I cannot ever recall having this much fun while having to study

and learn school curriculum. I had never found myself in life looking forward to doing schoolwork before..” Another also relished the dialogic design of the program: “Sipping from so much knowledge was intoxicating, but the actual lure for me was in the way the drinks were being poured ... The collective efforts. The willful meeting of the minds. Acceptance and tolerance. Agreements and disagreements. Give and take. Sacrifice.”

For at least one incarcerated student, however, the end of the class brought only relief: “From the beginning, I questioned my ability to connect with the younger students or offer any valuable insight,” he wrote. “And when it came to the inside students, I found that I had little to no appreciation for their input or what they had to contribute.” He disliked the popular education approach the professors had used in the class, and said he would not have taken the class if he had known of its interactive design in advance.

Any sense of empowerment the outside students described related mainly to the completion of their coursework. They congratulated themselves for their public performance of “Reversing the Flow,” even though more than a few of them had not completed the readings or supported their groups with much energy. Several pointed to their busy schedules as an excuse. The individual stories of the prisoners had always seemed more compelling to them than the conditions of systemic oppression they were studying. A few aspired to attend law school or become social workers, but they didn’t connect these dreams directly to ongoing efforts to improve the living conditions or life chances of imprisoned people.

“It was hard for me to hear these men tell their stories and then leave, knowing they couldn’t. I think that was the biggest thing that I struggled with – I could leave.”

Nonetheless, the outside students maintained that studying with their incarcerated classmates had changed their lives. When one prisoner shared that corrections officials had refused him permission to attend his child’s funeral, or when another described what solitary confinement was like, the outside students felt the human impact of the prison’s oppressive nature viscerally, to the point where it affected their interactions with friends and family. One wrote of how her friends and family could not understand her experience: “I have lost count of how many times I have cried after the prison class, I have lost count of how many times people have told me to shut up about my class, I have lost count of how many arguments I have gotten into for this.” Another wrote of her newly embodied awareness of what incarceration meant: “It was hard for me to hear these men tell their stories and then leave, knowing they couldn’t. I think that was the biggest thing that I struggled with – I could leave.”

Ultimately, as expressed in their writings and in discussions with the professors, we did not see either group of students expressing the desire or readiness to address the systemic inequalities they had studied beyond the assignments directed to them during the semester.

CONCLUSIONS

As educators, we had hoped the class would encourage our students to think critically about the injustices of mass incarceration. We wanted to give both groups a chance to experience the affirmation of their own humanity and that of others. But we had also wanted the students to go beyond mere thinking and feeling. The research question had asked whether a class of this type could actually inspire a commitment to working for social justice.

Due to the persistence of structural racism and classism, it is not unusual for students to have little experience engaging with others from different racial and class communities, and studying with others who varied widely by race, class, age and gender was a new experience for most – further complicated by the fact that some students were free and some were not. Together, the students enjoyed a rare opportunity to listen, to connect, to embody human relationship. Too often, these important connections are absent from many university classrooms, as well as carceral spaces where people exist in a constant state of fear and suspicion.

The outside college students had been able to behold first-hand the damage done when young people are funneled out of public schools and into the criminal justice system. They had experienced the prison's arbitrary and routine brutality, the lack of investment in rehabilitation, the obsession with security – and also thwarting of basic human desires for kindness, respect, and dignity. Free to speak their minds in college settings, they resented the strict surveillance of custody personnel in the classroom, and recognized how much they had taken their right to free expression for granted. And they celebrated how the inside students managed to maintain their humanity under the most extreme conditions.

The inside students demonstrated that people who had been condemned to social death could still share respect and affection. They embraced the opportunity to voice longtime frustrations and sufferings to a supportive audience; most could not recall having had this kind of affirmation before. Beset by insecurity early in the semester, they came to realize that the young outsiders were not smarter than they were, and even lacked the skills and motivation they themselves possessed. But the men appreciated that their classmates cared about their fate, and that college students and scholars around the nation were studying mass incarceration in order to bring about reform or abolition.

Overwhelmingly, the dominant theme we observed in the class was the profound influence of interpersonal connection among the students. Normally, a 14-week college class does not allow for the growth of deep and meaningful affiliations between participants. But these students described genuine moments of meaningful rapport grounded in their sense-making of the course materials and the ideas they contained. Although we did not find proof of the students' commitment to action for social justice, we believe that conditions were ripe for it.

The most significant limitation of the study is the sui generis nature of the particular prison where the class was taught. While correctional facilities possess many similarities, each has its own administrative and custodial culture, so our experiences as educators and those of our students could not be generalizable. Also, the methodologies we used were experimental and did not

support causal conclusions. Finally, the life experiences and cultural expectations we brought with us as middle-class White social justice educators may have contributed to design and analysis bias.

In many ways, the class may be seen as a unicorn – unique in the circumstances that led to its existence, and unlikely to be replicated in other contexts. Still, as we continue to support exchanges between incarcerated and free people that lift the stigma of incarceration and build solidarity among these communities, such reports make a definitive case for the importance of higher education behind bars. I hope these insights have value for educators, activists, incarcerated men and women, their families, policy makers, and the general public, in demonstrating the important role that relationships can play in prison education.

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The phrase "Only Connect" is attributed to the author E.M. Forster, from his 1910 novel, *Howard's End*. It is understood as a supplication for people to unite the opposing elements within themselves, as well as a call for us to put the greatest amount of energy into personal relationships.

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