



Dialogues in Social Justice:

An Adult Education Journal

From the Editors

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The deleterious consequences of mass incarceration—the punitive binge beginning in the 1970s in the United States that led to the country having 25% of the total number of prisoners in the entire world despite having only 5% of the worldwide population-- have been well documented. While the height of mass incarceration was reached in 2008, still, as of 2021, approximately 5.5 million people were still under adult correctional supervision, and one in five Americans had a criminal record. This meant that in the U.S., 1 out of every 48 adults were, in either prison, jail, on parole or probation. Because 95% of individuals caught in the carceral apparatus come home, 600,000 people reenter from state and federal prison every year, with an additional 9 million coming home from jails (ASPE, 2023).

Education is implicated in the societal problems and inequities that have partially undergirded crime commission and subsequent rates of incarceration in the United States: among incarcerated people in state prison, 40% do not have a high school degree or its equivalent, compared to only 18% of their counterparts in the general U.S. population. Systems of incarceration have done little to remedy those inequities: only 58% of those in state prisons complete an education program during their time behind bars, and only 9% complete a college prison program (Vera, 2019). And upon reentry, individuals attempting to take advantage of educational opportunities in college and elsewhere face numerous administrative, financial, practical, and psychological barriers to access (MacKillop, 2017).

Yet, education also has, in a multiplicity of iterations, demonstrated its transformative potential for the incarcerated and formerly incarcerated, and its ability advance the goals of social justice while furthering other commonly agreed upon societal goals. The passage of the December 2020 federal legislation that restores Pell Grants for students incarcerated in federal or state penal institutions now joins the First Step Act of 2018 as evidence of a growing consensus around the value of prison reentry education initiatives. It has placed these initiatives, and their increased reliance upon skilled community providers, into the national spotlight. At the same time, new dynamics as well as questions concerning these collaborative efforts arise. Whether developed as cost-effective projects

geared to enhance public safety through the reduction of recidivism, or to reverse long existing racial disparities and the devastating impact of mass incarceration in the United States, pre and post release reentry education is a hot button topic within the criminal justice, academic and human services arenas.

We were motivated as editors through our experience and engagement with research and initiatives related to reentry education (such as John Chaney's obtainment of a 2023 US Department of Justice Second Chance Act: Improving Reentry Education and Employment Outcomes grant to create an Accelerated College Transition (ACT) Program at City University of New York's LaGuardia Community College) to bring together this issue of *Dialogues in Social Justice*. We recognized the need for a special issue to create a timely forum of discussion to explore the pedagogical and programmatic issues, engagement strategies, administrative obstacles, and long-term goals offered by governmental and nonprofit sectors that address one of the most complex criminal and social justice issues of our time.

While much scholarly attention on adult education for the justice-impacted has focused on prison-to-college programs and other 'traditional' educational initiatives in prison, for this issue we wanted to focus on programs that are sometimes forgotten when listing topics falling into the "adult education" designation. Nevertheless, these initiatives have an educative function and in particular, adult education that happens both inside and outside of prison or jail for adults reentering society. These include technical, financial, career, postsecondary, leadership, empowerment, parenting, emotional regulation, and life-skills education programs.

This special issue, therefore, takes a deep dive into these topics to identify, explore and analyze 'reentry education' in its manifold forms, with contributions from academicians, but also educators, program leaders, and the justice impacted, from across the United States. With a combination of peer-reviewed scholarly research and personal reflections, it probes many of the underlying complexities and challenges of prisoner reintegration from a broadly educational standpoint, factors that impact the effectiveness in meeting desired outcomes, and the overall integrity of some of these highly diversified local and national projects.

Among the scholarly contributions, those contained in this issue provide comparative, historical, empirical, and legal inquiries. Gregory Bruno's "Hätä Keinon Keksii: Consulting the Nordic Model of "Penal Exceptionalism" for a Praxis-Oriented Approach to Higher Education in Prison" provides an international context, giving an overview of one of the most progressive countries in the world— Finland's-- models, and through that, offering lessons on what the U.S. can glean for its own incarcerated population. Bonnie Ernst's "Reentry Education in Women's Prisons: A History of Activism and Reform," centers incarcerated women in the 20th century U.S. as key agents in fighting themselves for educational and vocational opportunities through a range of tactics, from lawsuits to protests, within a sociohistorical period of feminism and prison activism. Amanda Pompoco drills down in her "Examining the Black Box of Prison Education Programs" on characteristics of effectiveness through an empirical study of

instructional strategies and classroom practices among varied programs in 28 institutions across one state.

Among those who provided rich personal reflections on reentry and education are David Garlock, a returning citizen, who has been featured in the film *Just Mercy* and spoken for TedX. Garlock describes how the Equal Justice Initiative's (EJI) Post Release Education Program (PREP) filled in the massive gaps that the Alabama Department of Corrections didn't fill for him while incarcerated, and how he is using his experience to educate college students. Diane Good-Collins, Director of Metropolitan Community College 180 Re-entry Assistance Program, likewise foregrounds her discussion of directing the largest campus re-entry center in the United States, in Metropolitan Community College, Nebraska, in her own direct experience of reentry education. Coming from the non-profit space, Danielle Donaphin, Director of Programs for New Hour for Women and Children, describes the best practices, challenges, and successes she's been participant in through her work helping currently and formerly incarcerated women. And Alex Tabor integrates his experience as an educator in a variety of settings, including correctional education, with scholarship on adult correctional education programming.

It is our hope that this issue stimulates those who research, write, and teach in adult education, criminal justice, and social justice disciplines, to take prisoner education and reentry education as objects of study. But we also hope for those who have direct experience of providing instruction, developing curriculum and programs, and those who have been at the receiving end of this education, to be active participants in the conversation about what is needed for those coming home from prison to be fully and meaningfully incorporated into their communities.

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