



Research Articles

Critical Points of Resistance: Preparing Adult Educators to Educate Inside the U.S. Prison System

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The purpose of this article is to present a case study that demonstrates the application of innovative teaching methods used in a University classroom setting with adult educators who were preparing to teach inside the U.S. prison and jail system. While there is a body of literature that discusses the nature of adult education in the prison classroom, data-based research that specifically highlights the critically overlooked issue of how we prepare adult educators to teach on the “inside” is lacking. Descriptions of the innovative, critical, social justice teaching methods used with the students are shared along with an exploration of the course readings assigned, questions examined, and assignments given. This article will be an example of engaging alternatives and reformulating the conceptualization of how to approach preparing adult educators to teach behind bars by discovering and creating new possibilities for the role of adult education in prison.

Keywords: Prison/Prisoner Education, Adult Educators, U.S. Prison System, Prison Industrial Complex, Social Justice Pedagogy

I am barely 22 years old. I have entered a world where there are no doorknobs. I realize quickly I have no control over how I will move through this environment. With a hesitant step, I move into the space in between the dull, white, metal doors. The door behind me closes with a loud clank. The one in front of me—the one that will take me into the education wing of the jail—remains closed. As I stand there, waiting for the second door to open, it takes a few seconds too long. I feel panic rise in my chest. The space is too small, too constricting. I instinctively cover my heart with my hand. With a frightening buzz, the second door opens. I step forward. Nothing has prepared me for the teaching I am expected to do tonight—my first night teaching women inmates at the Westchester County Jail in Valhalla, New York.

At the jail, I learned that teaching was hard work; the kind of work that required my entire body and often left me feeling raw and unhinged in the days that followed. I also had a very real lesson in just how naïve I had truly been and how unprepared I was for the task of teaching inside the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC).

Fast forward several years to a world that shares much and almost nothing with the jail. I have been given the chance to work with adult educators, enrolled in a graduate-level University course, who have expressed an interest in becoming educators in prisons, jails, detention centers, re-entry programs, and community-based programs. Most have never stepped inside a prison before; only one or two have direct experience working with prisoners. My hands tremble as I needlessly shuffle paper. I hope the students do not notice, and I silently request their forgiveness, as I will be asking them to question not only their assumptions about prisons and prisoners but their beliefs in the power of education and teaching—the vocation that most of them can recall explicitly where they were the moment they received the “calling” to enter the profession.

The purpose of this article is to present a case study that demonstrates the application of innovative social justice teaching methods used with adult educators enrolled in a graduate-level University course who were preparing to teach inside the U.S. prison and jail system. While there is a body of literature that discusses the nature of adult education in the prison classroom (Martin, 1976; MacLean, 1992; Gehring, 1995; Davidson, 2000; Contardo & Erisman, 2005), there is a lack of data-based research that specifically highlights the critically overlooked issue of how do we develop adult educators for the task of teaching on the “inside”? This article explores the question: “How do we prepare adult educators to teach inside the prison-industrial complex (PIC), especially if the possibility of prison education as social justice pedagogy is our concern?” In the vein of social justice and diversity issues, social justice pedagogy asks students to question their values and assumptions about the role of adult education and to think about how we are all colluders contributing to mass incarceration and the burgeoning U.S. prison system. This approach highlights and interrogates the dynamics of privilege and disadvantages stemming from forms of systemic oppression—racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, transgender oppression, religious oppression, ableism, adultism, or ageism.

Using the case of adult educators enrolled in a graduate-level University course designed to prepare them to teach inside the U.S. prison and jail system, this article explores the frameworks and array of views the adult learners developed in order to understand and make apparent a multiplicity of points of critical resistance. The adult learning experience was framed with the question, “How can we challenge the conceptualizations of prison and prisoners while working within a ‘site of coercion’?” (Chevigny, 1999 Davidson, 1995). It is in this way that the adult learners in this case study began to explore both how we as adult educators contribute to the problem of mass incarceration and how adult education can potentially be a part of the solution.

The adult learners began to recognize the tenacity of their stereotypes and to acknowledge the emotional attachments that come with entrenched modes of thinking (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). They began to recognize that they could engage in a process of unlearning prejudices, stereotypes, biases, and discriminations. This involved inhabiting the domains of complex thinking, self-reflection, and the ability to take on multiple and divergent perspectives—moving

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from a preference for clear certainties to an acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty (Perry, 1970; Perry, 1981; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). As such, this article engages with the challenges we face as adult educators working within and against the prison-industrial complex.

Each section is framed with a “critical point of resistance,” which for the scope of this article is defined as challenges to assumptions and contradictions to stereotypic attitudes. These critical points of resistance, like the opening vignette, are based on my first hand account teaching for the first time inside a women’s jail. It is these three points of critical resistance that frame this article and are identified as a part of the case study: (1) schooling as surveillance, (2) coerced education, and (3) education is neither neutral nor a panacea. Descriptions of the innovative teaching methods used with the students are shared, along with an exploration of the course readings assigned, questions examined, and assignments given. In the vein of critical reflection, both what worked and what did not work is explored. This article will be an example of engaging alternatives and reformulating the conceptualization of how to approach preparing adult educators to teach behind bars by discovering and creating new possibilities for the role of adult education in prison.

Taking a case study approach (Merriam, 1998), the article highlights firsthand encounters with the point of resistance within the prison system. The research process for the study was a single case study of a classroom of ten students enrolled in a graduate level course at a private University. The case reflected secondary data analysis whereby observation data in the form of teacher field notes and classroom documents were analyzed.

Data collection and analysis proceeded via the following steps. First, observation methods (Gans, 1982; Goetz & LeCompte, 1984; Merriam, 1998) were used to observe the following elements: *Activities and interactions* (e.g., What was going on? How did people interact with one another and the classroom activities?), *Conversation* (e.g., What was the content of the conversations? Who spoke to whom? Who listened? What was the role of silence?), *Subtle factors* (e.g., planned versus unplanned activities, what happened and what didn’t happen, nonverbal communication, connotative and figurative meanings of words), *Researcher participant’s own behavior* (e.g., What thoughts did the researcher have regarding what was going on? How was the researcher’s role affecting the classroom interactions?). These field notes were recorded in the form of a teacher observation journal. The observation notes included *praxis*—reflection coupled with action—what I observed, reflected upon, and then how I transformed it into action (Freire, 1970).

Documents from the course (syllabus, assignments, assigned course readings, first-hand vignettes, personal correspondence) along with the observation data were analyzed using a descriptive case study approach to provide all three elements of a case study report: particular description, general description, and interpretive commentary (Erickson, 1986). These three components were the units in the process of data analysis. At this point, given the researcher’s salient experience in analyzing and interpreting data, the following points of critical resistance

were decided upon: (1) schooling as surveillance, (2) coerced education, and (3) education is neither neutral nor a panacea.

Special attention was given to this case study's trustworthiness. Triangulation of data occurred across all levels of observations, recorded field notes, and collected documents. Since there is minimal research regarding courses designed to prepare adult educators how to teach inside U.S. carceral institutions, this study may provide valuable information regarding what works and does not work. However, given the single case study approach, findings are not presented as generalizable. Rather, the hope is that the findings might be transferable across similar contexts, and similar points of resistance may be identified.

In the following sections, the discoveries from this case study are presented.

Critical Point of Resistance #1: Schooling as Surveillance

The correctional officer (CO) is standing too close to my table. It's making me more nervous than usual and the women have noticed as my voice cracks. After he moves away, a student-inmate volunteers, "He's watching us. Looking to make trouble." I notice the subtle wording, not looking for trouble but looking to make it. My student explains, "We are the ones they don't know what to do with." I don't say anything, but my facial expression poses a question. She continues, "The education classes are scheduled during the visiting hours. This is their way to watch those of us who aren't in with the visitors." I glance in the direction of the CO and realize this isn't about educational opportunities it's about surveillance and controlling these women's time.

The adult learners enrolled in my University course are surprised that we begin the course by reading histories of prison education (Gehring, 1995a; Gehring, 1995b; Gehring & Muth, 1986; Justice, 2000; Fitzpatrick, 1990; Freedman, 1996). Given the transitory nature of an academic semester and sensing that they do not have much time with me, they do not want to dwell on the "history." After all, these are adult educators that have enrolled in the course for practical, immediately-applicable tools to use with an incarcerated population. Many of them spent years teaching in a K-12 classroom. Some are working on their Master's degrees, others on their doctorates. One is applying for a grant to work with prisoners. Another is a photographer from South America on a Fulbright, who teaches photography courses to both the correctional officers and the prisoners back in his homeland, and a few are planning to work with the University's service learning program by mentoring inmates working on their college degrees. Most of the learners are wondering how studying the history of prison education will help them to meet their learning goals.

Yet, it is only through studying the history that students learn the harsh reality that in the first hundred years of the penitentiary hard labor and corporal punishment were the primary means of managing prisoners' time. When prison industries were banned or restricted by legislation, between 1888 and the 1930s, it was schooling that became one of the substitutes for prison labor as a way to keep prisoners occupied and engaged in a seemingly useful activity (Davidson,

1995). Schooling became yet another form of control, an alternative means of surveillance (MacLean, 1992).

This is our first critical point of resistance—resisting the belief that educational programming in prisons is any less oppressive than any part of the PIC. For many students, it is the first time that they come to realize it is a naïve view of history to believe that prison schools were founded solely as a benefit to prisoners. Using a social justice education framework, they learn to question this history and leave with an understanding that the history of prison education is a complicated and nuanced one with paradoxical elements of both good and bad. It is a system of oppression that directly disadvantages, while it is also paradoxically privileging. Ultimately, this will lead us to discuss the fact that prison education is as much about “power in practice” as any part of the PIC (Cervero & Wilson, 2001).

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Through discussion and reflection, the adult educators enrolled in the course begin to pose social justice questions about power, knowledge, oppression, the dynamics of privilege and disadvantages rooted in racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and other forms of systematic oppression: “Who benefits from the programs, practices, and policies of prison education? Who should benefit? Whose knowledge and ways of knowing are considered legitimate? How is power constituted? How do we think about and change it? What is the relationship between this ‘inner world’ of education and the larger society? What other forms of systemic oppression are operating? How do the intersections of racism, classism, sexism, heterosexism, and other forms of oppression inform the prison education experience? And again, who benefits? Who should benefit?” While the questions may not be new, what is new and different is the way the students begin to understand and act in the face of seeing prison education as a site of struggle for knowledge and power. By exploring contemporary inequality, social hierarchy, and systemic oppression, they are able to pay attention to how social groups, who are pushed far from the center to the margins, are able to reshape their situations in equitable and empowering ways.

Students read Howard S. Davidson’s *Schooling in a ‘Total Institution:’ Critical Perspectives on Prison Education* and learned the ways prisoners explained how “they are empowered by the opportunities to make problematic their experience of alienation within the context of larger social problems of society” (Sbarbaro, 1995, p. 99). While the domestication and direct harsh control of prisoners may negate and restrict prisoner-initiated change, “the transformations in their consciousness and the desire to facilitate change demonstrate that ‘sooner or later...formerly passive students turn against their domestications and the attempt to domesticate reality’ ” (Freire, 1970, p. 61).

By examining prisons as a site of knowledge and power, in this way, the adult educators enrolled in the course were able to call attention to and grapple with the ways in which the overarching social system maintains and reproduces inequities in a system of oppression that plays out in the prison industrial complex. This allows for a re-examination of how social identities are contrived and systemically oppressed based on inequality and social hierarchy. The statistics painting a

portrait of the prison industrial complex along with and description of how compulsion is used in the PIC will be examined in the following section of the article.

Critical Point of Resistance #2: Coerced Education

I hear the explanation from another student-inmate first—“She’s here because they told her she better be...it will look good to the judge at her sentencing. She’d rather be in the visiting room with her son.” I try not to look directly at my student, the one sitting off to the left of the circle who has not spoken more than a cursory “hello” to me in the past two weeks. I phrase my response more like a question than a statement, “She feels compelled to do this? This isn’t her choice?” This was another choice made for her. This is my introduction to coerced education.

By the second week of the course with my University students, we move into exploring “Doing Time as a Rite of Passage?” I pose it as a question while simultaneously sharing the staggering statistics, all of which point to the systemic forms of social oppression at play in the prison industrial complex, including the fact that there are more black men in prison than in college (Ziedenberg & Schiraldi, 2002). Several descriptive statistics and facts are explored. For instance, the fact that there are more prisoners who self-identify as African-American under correctional supervision than there were in slavery in the U.S. in 1850. The fact that approximately 30 percent of the total population in our federal, state, and local prisons are illegal immigrants. The fact that the incarceration rate for African-American men is more than six times higher than for white men. The fact that more than 37 percent of African-American men aged 20-24 with less than a high school degree are incarcerated. The incredible fact that 41 percent of all young people in the U.S. by the time they reach their twenty-third birthday will have been arrested. The alarming fact that it costs more than 60 billion dollars a year to incarcerate the 12 million people who flow through the local jail and prison system each year in the U.S. (Synder, 2014).

This allows us to examine the “ironies of prison education” (Thomas, 1995, p. 25). We discuss how prisoners are compelled to attend school, forced to participate and mandated to classrooms, specifically Adult Basic Education (ABE) and General Educational Development (GED) classes, for specified periods if they are designated “functionally illiterate.” Prisoners are denied parole hearings or prevented in participating in alternative forms of “treatment” until they comply (Davidson, 1995, p. xiii). What appears to be a commitment to prisoner education is in fact coerced education. Meanwhile, as a result of this emphasis on basic skills, postsecondary education behind bars remains available to far fewer (Contardo & Erisman, 2005).

In their first critical reflection paper, students in my course explored the characteristics of prison pedagogy. I presented them with the stem question, “Effective teaching requires more than preparing content, lectures, and assignments—what else does prison pedagogical practice entail?” Students used the readings and class discussion to reflect critically on how instructors must mediate the tensions inherent in prison life. Since many of my students had direct experience teaching in the K-12 public school system, they were able to connect with the fact that “Instructors are not simply instructors; they participate in a game of status and control between staff and prisoners” (Thomas, 1995, p. 30). It is a “game” they have had to play in their

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own lived teaching experiences. In fact, for many of them, it is easy to make the jump from seeing the politics and ethics at play in their own classrooms to how these play out in a prison classroom.

When focused on the personal experience, students are able to explore across the social justice education dynamics of how social difference, identity, or location advocates for cross-cutting aspects of awareness that the disadvantages and inequities experienced across disadvantaged groups (incarcerated or not) warrants attention and a remedy. In the next section, education, which is often touted as the remedy, will be explored.

Critical point of resistance #3: Education is neither neutral nor a panacea

My time teaching at Valhalla Jail is coming to an end. I have spent the last several weeks reading critical perspectives on prison education. Prison educator Jim Thomas' words haunt me as I prepare for my last class with the women inmates. Thomas, at a prison college graduation ceremony, suppressed his desire to tell a proud father, "Prison education is half-sham, and your son was able to learn and graduate in spite of, rather than because of, the state's commitment to the college program" (Thomas, 1995, p. 25). This conflict is one that will take up residence inside of me for years to come. While advocating for education inside prisons, especially prisoner run programs, I am frustrated and fear that even the most innovative of programs will ultimately fail in the face of current ideology. I have learned that education is not a neutral endeavor and certainly not the panacea I once held it to be.

In the second half of the University-level course, my adult learners read firsthand accounts written by prison teachers—Judith Tannenbaum's (2000) *Disguised as a Poem: My Years Teaching Poetry at San Quentin*, Jean Trounstine's (2001) *Shakespeare behind Bars: The Power of Drama in a Women's Prison*, Robert Ellis Gordon & the inmates of the Washington Corrections System's (2000) *The Funhouse Mirror: Reflections on Prison*—and watched the film *The Last Graduation* (1997).

Students are often shocked at the honesty of these portrayals and drawn to the metaphors each teacher possesses of her or his time spent teaching on the "inside." For instance, they are particularly engaged by Robert Ellis Gordon's claim that "prisons are simply mirrors of what we don't want to see, the funhouse mirrors of American souls" (p. xii). Students connect with prisoner Paul St. John's telling phrase "behind the mirror's face" (p. 119). In it, they recognize the complex humanity of prisoners, and for some of my students, an aspiration evolves to dissolve the silver in the mirror and leave them standing face-to-face with the absurdities of the prison industrial complex (Chevigny, 1999).

In the context of course discussion, the learners open themselves up to the possibility of education not being a neutral technology. They challenge one another's prevailing assumption that prison education is a panacea that prisoners experience in order to get jobs and thereby avoid

criminal activity (Davidson, 1995). Collectively, students engage in the process of considering possibilities for critique and critical pedagogy as they consider how power is enacted in the carceral classroom. They recognize how “Being attentive to how power moves in the classroom can be instructive in moving forward discussions of how power moves throughout society” (Jackson & Meiners, 2010, p. 30). They see how racism, classism, heterosexism, sexism, and other forms of systemic oppression operate behind bars.

Yet, our successes were coupled with failures. In the last few class sessions, students presented educational programs that they designed and developed for student-inmates. This final assignment was a struggle for not only my students but for me. Throughout the presentations and ensuing discussions, we seemed to contradict ourselves, and I, in particular tried to avoid the trap of cynicism when grappling with the questions of “So what?” and “Why does education matter?” Despite our prior conversations, my students, as adult educators with a strong belief in the power of adult education, often fell into the default mode of espousing education as “neutral” and as the “panacea” for all that is wrong with the system. I reminded them that education, in any form, is not neutral and cannot be detached from the context in which it takes place. After all is this not what we have been grappling with all semester? Yet, students felt comforted by the notion that education was a means to lift prisoners out of the life circumstances that landed them in prison.

In hindsight, I had not prepared them well enough in program planning within the PIC. This is not an emphasis of the course, and it showed in their final assignments. I learned it would have been wiser to offer a series of alternative final assignments. Ideas I have considered since include everything from a learning journal where students explored how their learning progressed over the course of the semester to experiential learning projects where students spent time observing and participating in “real life” prison education programs.

Discussion & conclusion

This case study proposed to engage with the following question: “How do we prepare adult educators to teach inside the prison-industrial complex (PIC)?” While research explores the case of prison and prisoner education, few studies have considered the case of how do we develop adult educators for the task of teaching inside the prison industrial complex, especially if the possibility of prison education as social justice pedagogy is our concern? As a result, this write up of the research was less concerned with a traditional sharing of the academic findings of a research study and more interested in demonstrating the application of innovative social justice teaching methods used with adult educators enrolled in a graduate-level University course, a course designed and developed to prepare them to teach inside the U.S. prison and jail system.

Overall, the case study's findings are important because the national portrait of who occupies the U.S. prison and jail system shows continuing inequities based on race, ethnicity, class, income, especially for low socio-economic people of color. Adult education programs behind prison bars are often the most officially preferred programs (Jones, 1992; Lynes, 1992). Yet, this study's identification of three critical points of resistance: (1) schooling as surveillance, (2) coerced education, and (3) education is neither neutral nor a panacea support Davidson's (2000) findings of "adult education [as] a form of control within the penal context" (p. 393). These results further support those of Collins (1988), which showed that prison schools are cases of power relations in operation that work to thwart genuine participatory democratic action. Furthermore, each of the critical points of resistance identified support Thomas' (1995) finding that prisons are not designed "for delivering adequate, high-quality educational programs because too many obstacles subvert the learning process" (p. 27). Furthermore, this research corroborates the concerns of Hartnett (2011) that sometimes even the best-intentioned scholarship can attempt to address social justice issues while marginalizing the voices of the very people it is working with and for. Prison and prisoner education programs in this way need alternatives and opportunities to practice resistance if there is to be the hope of a transformational, democraticized, emancipatory curriculum.

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Therefore, I wish to end this piece by considering the question, "How does thinking about prison and prisoner education in this way *inform social justice in adult education*?" I am not sure I have a clear answer to this question as I acknowledge that as a classroom teacher/facilitator I may feel a responsibility to challenge assumptions and contradict stereotypic attitudes that I encourage my students to pay attention to how inequality, social hierarchy, and systemic oppression plays out in the prison industrial complex and to recognize how we are all colluders in the system. But ultimately, the decision to explore and shed any racist, sexist, classist, heterosexist, or other socially oppressive beliefs belongs to my students, not me (Jackson, 2001). I am not asking my students to embrace a particular ideology when it comes to prison education. Instead, I am asking them to engage in critical reflection and social justice pedagogy—to question their values and assumptions about the role of education and to think about how we are all colluders contributing to mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex. As they develop an understanding of the role schooling has played in the field of corrections, I offer them the opportunity to dissect and understand their own privilege when working with inmates, such as their freedom to come and go, their racial or class privilege, their levels of educational attainment. I want them to think creatively, critically, and reflectively about what it means to teach on the "inside." In the process, I want them to examine the complex world of prison education—the jarring, harsh, compelling, oppressive, yet sometimes transformative experience of prison education.

Mark Twain (1935) once wrote, "Education consists mainly in what we have unlearned" (p. 139). I wished for the adult educators enrolled in the course to recognize the tenacity of their

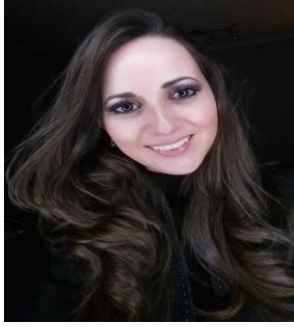
stereotypes and to acknowledge the emotional attachments that come with entrenched modes of thinking (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007). Yet, I also desire for them to recognize that they can engage in a process of unlearning prejudices, stereotypes, biases, or discriminations. This involves inhabiting the domains of complex thinking, self-reflection, and the ability to take on multiple and divergent perspectives—moving from a preference for clear certainties to an acceptance of ambiguity and uncertainty (Perry 1970; 1981; Belenky et al., 1986). It is in this way they can begin to explore both how we all contribute to the problem and how we can potentially be a part of the solution.

I have written elsewhere how when it comes to teaching on the inside “It is us who must move from teacher to learner to learned individual. There is much educating of closed hearts still to be done” (Chlup, 2009, p. 34; Alfred & Chlup, 2009, p. 248). It is my hope that the course provided the context in which the adult educators who chose to enroll in it began the critical and radical work to grapple with the opening of their own hearts, thereby, creating a space for new possibilities and new practices for implementing social justice adult learning behind bars.

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