

# A Bridge from Behind Bars: A Look at Prison Literacy Programs<sup>1</sup>

Dominique T. Chlup, Texas A&M University, USA  
Irene C. Baird, Pennsylvania State University, USA

***Abstract:*** *The purpose of this paper is to illustrate—using four U.S. based case examples—how writing and literacy education practices are connected to prisoner self-reflection, knowledge development, and re-visioning of prisoner lives. While we explore prisons as sites for literacy education, we also complicate the picture by acknowledging that education for prisoners needs to go beyond adult basic education and literacy.*

## Introduction

In this paper, we, as co-authors, who together have a combined twenty-nine years of practice and deep interest in prison adult education, offer a bridge from “behind bars” to the outside. Drawing from the literature, we use U.S. based case examples to provide illustrations of literacy education programs established in adult correctional facilities. The aim of the paper is to demonstrate how a select sampling adult literacy education programs are serving as spaces for inmates to critically reflect on their knowledge and creating new opportunities and new visions for their lives. Using critical pedagogical theory (Freire, 1970; Shor, 1992; Kincheloe, 2004) to guide our exploration, we explore how prison literacy efforts can result in an examination of “Habits of thought, reading, writing, and speaking which go beneath surface meaning...to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action” (Shor, 1992, p. 129).

In our investigation of the literature, we found that while adult prison classrooms serve frequently as sites for literacy education, the picture is more complicated when it is acknowledged that training and development in the basic skills of print literacy should only be a first stop for inmates on a long path of adult educational opportunities. It is central to our thesis that correctional education literacy programs are both productive and tenuous. It is our contention that these programs need a bit of “troubling.” If we are to improve the ways we work *with* and *for* inmates, these programs need to be explored both for their contributions and critically examined.

## Theoretical Framework: Critical Pedagogies as a Guiding Framework

Using the framework of critical pedagogies, we frame literacy programs that work *with* and *for* prisoners as “pockets of hope” (de los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002). We are borrowing this term from de los Reyes and Gozemba who in their book entitled *Pockets of hope: How Students and Teachers Change the World*, “celebrate liberatory teachers and their emancipatory pedagogies that engage students in what Freire and Macedo (1987) call ‘reading the word and the world’ ” (p. 2). We found that even if corrections educators and their students do not claim the terms “emancipatory pedagogies” or “liberatory,” by the very act of providing education in a

---

<sup>1</sup> Sections of this paper appear as a book chapter in Alfred, M. V. (Ed.). (2010). *Learning for economic self sufficiency: Constructing pedagogies of hope among low-income, low-iterate adults*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

culture of corrections and by extension culture of confinement, they are positioning themselves as agents and advocates of literacy. According to Kincheloe (2004), “proponents of critical pedagogy understand that every dimension of schooling and every form of educational practice are contested spaces” (p. 2). Teaching a critical pedagogy involves more than adopting a few techniques and knowledge. It involves understanding the very political nature of education and recognizing how forces of culture, race, class, and gender shape all elements of the pedagogical act (Kincheloe). We also use a critical educational framework to reflect on the more common prison adult literacy work we encountered in the literature—literacy programming that focuses mainly on passing the General Educational Development (GED) test. If prison programs are to move forward helping inmates to become self-reliant and self-sufficient upon their release, then the structural, societal, and institutional policies designed to retain the current power structures of prisons need to be critically examined and reexamined again over time.

In 1966, a UNESCO report argued, “Literacy programs should preferably be linked with economic priorities. [They] must impart not only reading and writing, but also professional and technical knowledge, thereby leading to a fuller participation of adults in economic life” (p. 97 quoted in Macedo, 2006, p. 18). Giroux’s (1983) approach to critical pedagogies cautions that reducing the teaching of literacy to a capital function of economic self-sufficiency, loses the notions of critical thinking, culture, and power. Given current neoliberal policies that result in crime control policies that favor mass incarceration, focusing solely on the pragmatics of capital and economics results in what Freire (1985) termed the *anesthetization of students’ critical abilities* in order to “domesticate social order for its self-preservation” (p. 116). Education for prisoners has to be more than functional literacy.

## **Methodology**

The methodological approach used for the collection of the data was a thorough review of literature. Commenting on the review of literature as a research methodological approach, Neuman (2003) explains, “A literature review is based on the assumption that knowledge accumulates and that people learn from and build on what others have done” (p. 96). While we explored literature across the disciplines of adult education, corrections, and criminal justice, for the scope of this paper, we focused on the intersections among incarcerated individuals, prison adult literacy education, prison training, and employment programming. It is this literature that we identified, categorized, and reviewed. Using single and combined key words such as “adult education programs for prisoners,” “corrections education,” “prison literacy,” “inmates and literacy,” “vocational training of prisoners” “prison work industries,” “employment and prisoners,” among others, searches for relevant literature were conducted. Among the academic databases accessed were electronic catalogs at a university library (LibCat), Google Scholar, Proquest Research Library Plus, Academic Search Premiere, EBSCO host, Ovid, Wilson, ERIC, and other Internet sites including the Bureau of Justice Statistics to investigate how the scholarly literature, written over the past fifteen years, frames adult literacy programming made available for inmates.

## Findings

While much of the adult education programming for prisoners focuses on literacy learning for the sake of economic mobility, we found case examples representing “pockets of hope” that place literacy and workplace skills as components in the equation for prison education while recognizing they are only a part of the answer. We offer four of those cases below.

### *Pocket of Hope 1:*

*Service learning: Becoming literate.* Temple University’s Professor Lori Pompa’s “The Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program Exploring Issues of Crime and Justice Behind the Walls” takes a unique approach to literacy. She aims to make her “outside” college students literate about prisons while simultaneously making her “inside” inmate-students learn to read their lives in relation to the context of the criminal justice system. Both sets of students meet together weekly for two and a half hours inside the prison. The course, while designed as a service learning course, aims to do more for both sets of students. “The course is arranged in such a way that we all teach and we all learn together, in a true partnership. The service, therefore, is less a question of ‘doing for’ than ‘being with,’ a mutual exchange” (Pompa, 2004, p. 27). Both sets of students, write a series of reflection papers and a final paper, and read five to six criminal justice texts. Throughout the class, Pompa asks her students to reflect upon, “What prisons are for; why people get involved in crime; the myths and realities of prison life; victims and victimization; and the distinction between punishment and rehabilitation” (Pompa, 2004, p. 26). Asking both sets of students—those incarcerated and those not—to reflect critically on their knowledge of crime, criminals, and punishment allows them to situate their reflection within their own experience while also holding open the door for them to dismantle long held stereotypes and misperceptions of prisoners and prison life.

Pompa (2004) believes there is a liberating quality to becoming literate. She warns that too often we are unaware of what keeps us imprisoned. She explains, “The inability to read—whether the writing in a book or ‘the writing on the wall,’ or even the writing on our own hearts—can keep anyone of us trapped in a narrow, limited world” (p. 31). Through discovering this level of personal literacy, student inmates gain “the power to turn things inside-out and upside down” (Pompa, 2004, p. 33). In this way, inmates and the college students are given the skills to take action and make change. This is, indeed, a “pocket of hope,” an example of teachers and students using literacy to change their worlds together.

### *Pocket of Hope 2:*

*An alternative learning model: A case example from Pennsylvania.* We want to focus now on the program of Irene Baird, one of the co-authors of this paper. In doing so, we offer here one of our own examples of a “pocket of hope.” Baird’s “academic” entrance into the culture of corrections happened through an evolutionary process. She spent years facilitating discussion groups for women, using books as the medium for developing positive identity formation and empowerment at a time when women’s issues began to be highlighted. In 1992, she received a Pennsylvania Humanities Council grant to pilot a project with homeless women at the local YWCA. A group of the women agreed to participate in the 8-week study which was designed to assess the efficacy of a book-oriented program as a process for exploring and addressing the crises in their lives. A non-threatening model, the process involved reading, reflection and discussion of the parable-like nature of the words of authors of similar race, class and

experience. A creative expression component affirmed the insights from the book discussion and reflection. These newly-acquired voices subsequently appeared in booklet format which contributed to the participants' identity and esteem formation and empowerment. It was a Freirean-based exercise in that the participants' "object" status evolved into that of "subject" as they were learning to acknowledge, accept and confront their issues in order to take charge of their lives.

Its success generated a larger grant which led to the creation, in 1994, of a program for incarcerated women. At that time, basic education was one of the few programs available to them. The cognitive-based, humanities-oriented model, validated at the YWCA project, seemed paradoxical given the issues the inmates were facing until it became apparent that exploring their crises and searching for resolution served an unmet need. The program provided annually 4 ten-week sessions to participants, regardless of academic background. Those who could not read could listen and discuss. Those whose writing skills were negligible could tell their stories to a facilitator who would write the story; the typed version served a dual purpose in strengthening basic skills while sharing a story. In addition, the Latinas could write their story in Spanish and have it translated into English. The efficacy of this process was evident in the experience of a young inmate with marginal literacy skills. After listening to Maya Angelou's personal story of having been raped as a child and choosing to remain mute for several years, the inmate chose to break her silence by dictating a violent rape experience, committed by a group of males. She learned to read the typed copy to her counselor and the healing began.

Based on the selection of books, the program's flexibility lends itself to explore a variety of themes such as esteem, identity, parenting, incarceration and relationships. In the discussion and writing, however, stories such as the one above predominated. As a result, in 1999, a program based on the same format as the women's began for the males; the only addition to the men's books was the inclusion of the women's writing about their abuse. While book-based classroom discussion and transmission style teaching have their place in the adult literacy education classroom, both the incarcerated females and males indicated a preference for "hands on" learning, "tell me or show me a few times, and I'll learn to do it." This is consistent with Baird's (1994a; 1994b) research with single welfare mothers on how they learn how to make a successful transition from welfare to work. They rejected book learning, which they classified as boring school book learning, but they accepted manuals designed to teach practical skills. As one woman said, "Just by following the manual and some directions from my boyfriend, I learned to change the transmission in my car!" Such messages reject regimented school practices that do not consider or value alternative learning styles and abilities. The inmates also reject theories about the purported reason for their incarceration. Again, theorizing is perceived as a useless academic exercise that fails to understand that this is learned behavior. When only one kind of learning is emphasized, a learner is lost and the desire for education is suppressed.

Superimposed or complementary to the literacy preparation is the process that engages the inmate in taking the reflective inward journey—a practical, non-threatening first step toward self-awareness, self-acceptance, and ultimately, self-empowerment. The prevailing societal attitude seems to be that, for survival, inmates must learn basic skills for successful reentry into the community. However, even the earliest proponents of education for prisoners (Hill, 1924) argued that should not be the overriding factor; that there should be a higher purpose. This falls into a complementary kind of learning, the cognitive-based, Freirean-orientation that emboldens the "objects" to evolve into "subjects," who, as a result, are ready to successfully acquire the

skills as they take control of their lives. In the next section, we describe re-entry programming designed to help inmates take control as they reenter society.

*Pocket of Hope 3:*

*Re-entry programs.* Recognizing that 97% of prisoners will re-enter our communities (Re-entry Council, 2003), it is interesting to note that most employment-focused educational programs do not begin until just weeks prior to an inmate's release. Two such programs are the Offender Re-entry Program (ORP) in Suffolk County, Massachusetts and the Texas Project RIO (Reintegration of Offenders). The ORP offers soon-to-be-released inmates an intensive 6-hour-a-day course of study over a six-week period provided by Bunker Hill Community College. Inmates receive job assistance at a one-stop career center. Upon re-entry, the inmates continue to receive support from mentors from the faith-based Ella J. Baker House and case work management provided by Community Resources for Justice. They may receive support for six months or longer if they so choose. Similarly, Texas' Project RIO provides incarcerated prisoners with a variety of resources, the goal of which is to match released prisoners with jobs. These services include a week-long job search workshop, job-placement assistance before and after they are released.

While we applaud the efforts of these programs, a program of one week or even six weeks is simply too short a period of time to raise one's educational attainment level or job skills to the level required in a demanding labor market. If inmates are to succeed in the re-entry process, then education, job training, career development, and useful work experience must take place over the entire period of incarceration, not simply in the last few days or weeks. Better programming would include employee match programs, where corrections institutions work specifically with employers who offer well-paying jobs with benefits and career advancement opportunities to give inmates skills that will be used in jobs lined up and waiting for them once they are released. We would also encourage former inmates to turn around and offer assistance to the men and women coming behind them. Inmates helping inmates is a real possibility and offers incredible potential for everyone involved. Below we describe how Jimmy Santiago Baca, a former inmate himself, is attempting to make a difference in the lives of inmates.

*Pocket of Hope 4:*

*Inmates helping inmates.* Jimmy Santiago Baca's New Mexico prison literacy project, Cedar Tree, Inc., attempts to make books, reading, and writing very real and necessary components of inmates' lives. Baca is an award-winning poet and author who learned to read and write while incarcerated in the Arizona prison system on drug charges from 1973-1978. He began Cedar Tree, Inc. in 2004 to support his vision of giving the opportunity to all incarcerated people to become educated. The goal of the project is to provide inmates throughout the term of their incarceration with the tools they need to enrich and elevate their spirit so they may attain goals that are grounded, responsible, and contributory. The motto of the non-profit organization is "creating a new life through writing." As an adult with low literacy skills, Baca can bear witness to the power of writing and literature. He believes that by providing workshops to people in prisons, detention centers, schools for at-risk youth, his organization helps individuals "gain self-knowledge and instill self-reliance as they explore issues such as race, culture, addiction, community, and responsibility" (**Cedar** Tree, Inc., 2009). Cedar Tree, Inc., as an organization, goes beyond just assisting inmates and adjudicated youth while they are behind bars. The organization employs ex-offenders as interns to assist with the production of documentaries and

the development of curricula for incarcerated populations. Self-reliance in this way becomes not just a theoretical component but a lived component for the men and women who come into contact with Cedar Tree, Inc.

## **Conclusion**

### *Unlocking the Cell: Moving beyond Basic Literacy Education*

In the preceding sections, we detailed prison education programs that offer inmates a space for enhancing not only literacy and work skills but as a way of promoting change through reflection in prisoners' lives. In our concluding section, we trouble the waters by reminding educators that education for prisoners needs to go beyond adult basic education and literacy. We argue for multi-layered education that takes into account all of the barriers that prisoners face.

While prison literacy efforts are to be applauded, the time has come to move beyond basic literacy education for inmates. As Baird (2001) noted nearly a decade ago:

...literacy classes are now being offered; however, they do not go far enough in terms of addressing inmates' problems. Even though these classes stress basic reading and writing skills, these skills are approached in a technical [mechanical] 'school book learning' way. Given that these women's [and men's] lives and the reality of their imprisonment are interconnected with who they are in terms of their race, class and gender, it is imperative that adult education classes reflect that reality." (p. 177)

Similarly, O'Connor (2004) has reflected on varying literacy work to encourage moving beyond passing the GED test to educational programs that encourage self expression and self-development. If we are to move forward helping inmates to become self-reliant and self-sufficient upon their release, then we need to embrace, support, and encourage more programs to become "pockets of hope." Freire articulated the pedagogy of hope as something that "teaches us that the significance of dreaming, of imagining what could be as opposed to remaining paralyzed in what is. Dreaming keeps these pockets of hope energized and focused. Hope keeps them from despair" (as cited in de Los Reyes & Gozemba, 2002, p. xii). If we are to embrace a pedagogy of hope, we need to engage in the ongoing practice of critical education and continue to have the courage as intellectuals and academics to use our resources to address the pressing social issues of the time. The education of prisoners is one of these pressing issues. We need to continue to consider the complexity of the issue as the plight of prisoners cannot be summed up in a single paper or statement. The structural, societal, and institutional policies all need to be examined and reexamined if we are to make advancements in unlocking the cell. Author Iyanla Vanzant wrote (1998) that there are many kinds of jails. She stresses we are all doing some kind of time, and it is our responsibility to unlock the personal cell. Under the umbrella of Education of Prisoners, increasing educational opportunities and caring adult educators is the recognition that education does unlock the cell.

## References

- Baird, I. C. (1994a). The humanities for homeless women: A paradox in learning. *Adult Learning*, 5(3), 13, 15.
- Baird, I. C. (1994b). *Learning to earn 'the right way': Single welfare mothers in mandated education*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Pennsylvania State University.
- Baird, I. C. (2001). Education, incarceration and the marginalization of women. In V. Sheared & P. Sissel (Eds.), *Making space: Merging theory and practice in adult education* (pp.168-181). Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Cedar Tree, Inc. Goals. (2009). Retrieved January 25, 2009, from <http://www.jimmysantiagobaca.com/projects.html>.
- De Los Reyes, E. and Gozemba, P. A. (2002). *Pockets of hope: How students and teachers change the world*. Westport, CT: Bergin & Garvey.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum. Freire, P. (1985). *The politics of education*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Freire, P., & Macedo, D. (1987). *Literacy: Reading the word and the world*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey.
- Giroux, H. A. (1983). *Theory and resistance in education: A pedagogy for the opposition*. South Hadley, Mass.: Bergin and Garvey.
- Hill, A. C. (1924). *Schools for adults in prisons, 1923*. Washington, DC: Department of the Interior Bureau of Education.
- Kincheloe, J. L. (2004). *Critical pedagogy primer*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Macedo, D. (2006). *Literacies of power: What Americans are not allowed to know*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Neuman, W. L. (2003). The literature review and ethical concerns. *Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches, 5<sup>th</sup> edition*. Boston: Pearson Education.
- O'Connor, P. E. (2004). Afterword: Rewriting the story of prison literacies. *Reflections*, 4(1), 199-208.
- Pompa, L. (2004). Disturbing where we are comfortable: Notes from behind the walls. *Reflections* 4(1), 24-34.
- Re-Entry Policy Council. (2003). *Charting the safe and successful return of prisoners to the community. Report of the Re-Entry Policy Council*. Retrieved March 6, 2010 from <http://www.reentrypolicy.org>
- Shor, I. (1992). *Empowering education: Critical teaching for social change*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.
- UNESCO. (1966). *An Asian model of educational development*. Paris: UNESCO.
- Vanzant, I. (1998). *Yesterday, I cried*. New York: Simon & Schuster.