



*Research Articles*

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## **Prisons, Pedagogy, and Possibilities: An Application of Freire and hooks' Educational Philosophies**

**Lindsay D. Scott**

University of New Mexico

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This paper calls attention to educational opportunities inside of correctional facilities. Literature correlates a direct relationship between education and reduced recidivism (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016b; Esperian, 2010; Rand Corp., 2014). Using Freire and hooks' educational philosophies I discuss how I engaged critical pedagogy while teaching incarcerated juvenile offenders. I found that the youth I worked with were eager for an educational experience that allowed them to critically engage with our social world and analyze their lived experiences. Teaching in this controlled environment was challenging. My autonomy was encroached upon, which offered me a unique insight into the daily lives of the inmates. Through dialogical interactions, my perceptions and assumptions about incarcerated youth were confronted and changed. A radical and transformative pedagogy created a space where the notion of freedom could be negotiated.

*Keywords:* incarceration, education, pedagogy, Freire, hooks

“Transformation of the world implies a dialectic between the two actions: denouncing the process of dehumanization and announcing the dream of a new society” (Freire, 1998, p. 74).

“To be truly visionary we have to root our imagination in our concrete reality while simultaneously imagining possibilities beyond that reality” (hooks, 2000, p. 110).

**E**ach new semester I am faced with numerous pedagogical decisions. As I strive to create deeper connections with my students, I reflect on previous pedagogical decisions. Taking into account past successes and/or failures, I struggle to decide how I will

perform my role of “teacher”. If I was too flexible, was I taken advantage of? If I was too approachable, were boundaries crossed? If I was unforgiving, did students feel defeated? Some might say that I am too concerned with my role as a teacher, but I disagree. The interactions that students have with teachers, play a powerful role in shaping their educational experience. I am reminded of Freire’s (1998) comment about the influence that a teacher has on students:

Whether the teacher is authoritarian, undisciplined, competent, incompetent, serious, irresponsible, involved, a lover of people, and of life, cold, angry with the world, bureaucratic, excessively rational, or whatever else, he/she will not pass through the classroom without leaving his or her mark on the students. (p. 64)

My commitment to leaving a positive mark on my students is guided by the realization that I am working with dreams, possibilities, and hopes. Not only my students’, but their families, communities, and mine as well. Moreover, when we engage with students on a humanistic level it reveals an intimate depth of the human spirit. This is a task that I do not take lightly.

The needs and demands of our students are diverse and reflect the community we are teaching in. I have taught in a variety of contexts: large metropolitan universities, a small university, community colleges, a juvenile correction facility in the United States, and federal prisons in Uganda. Although there are differences in each of these communities, my commitment to critical pedagogy remains consistent. By critical pedagogy, I refer to hooks (1994) radical pedagogy that adopts a feminist framework and transgresses educational boundaries, and Freire’s (1998) theory of education as the practice of freedom. The approach taken by these educational philosophers has shaped my teaching, my interactions with students, and my worldview. In this essay, I shift my focus to the corrections classroom and draw from my experience as a correctional facility educator in the United States. First, I will provide a brief overview of the U.S. prison industrial complex and education in U.S. correctional facilities. Second, I will outline Freire and hooks’ educational philosophies. Third, I will describe how their theories have informed my prison pedagogy. Finally, I will discuss the pedagogical implications of teaching a population that has been rendered invisible and socially disposable.

### **Prison industrial complex**

**T**he U.S. prison industrial complex (PIC) is a growing concern nationally and internationally. do Valle, Huang and Spira (2006) explain the PIC as, “the result of a burgeoning set of relationships between private corporations, public institutions and individuals that benefit from a common investment in a culture of fear and exploitation and in the growth of the punishment industry” (p. 130). Our corrections population has skyrocketed since the early 1980s when the War on Drugs campaign was launched (Alexander, 2010). In 2015, approximately 6.7 million people were under the control of corrections (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016a). Of that, approximately 54,000 were juvenile offenders (OJJDP, 2015). The U.S. incarcerates more people than any other country, and the rates for juveniles are more than three times the highest rates in other developed nations (The Sentencing Project, 2013; Rand Corp., 2013).

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The impact of incarceration can only be partially understood statistically. For the one in 35 adults under some form of correctional supervision, the effects of incarceration extends beyond the scope of physical detainment, to disenfranchisement from society (Alexander, 2010; U.S. Department of Justice, 2014b). Further, these numbers render invisible the disproportionate impact that corrections has on minority communities. Yet, mass incarceration in the U.S. has not had a significant impact to the overall crime rate. This discrepancy has made the U.S. a model for what *not* to do (Alexander, 2010; Mallory, 2006). For example, Stern (2002) offers the following comments about U.S. policies, “...look at the experience of the United States to see that relying solely on incarceration is a ‘dead end’ street. The American incarceration rate is one of the highest in the world, but it has not made the United States a safer place to live” (p. 282). Clearly our approach to crime and punishment needs to be reconsidered. However, our current political climate is taking a get-tough approach on crime, which does not offer a holistic approach to understanding crime and punishment. . Until a structural shift is made, activists, educators, organizers, and communities will need to take collective and creative action to enact change.

### **Education on the “inside”**

Access to educational services in correctional facilities is critical for successful reentry into the community, and it is linked to reduced recidivism rates (Esperian, 2010; RAND, 2014; Taylor, 1992; U.S. DOJ, 2016b). In late 2016, the U.S. Department of Justice recognized the need to increase educational opportunities for people under the control of corrections, by citing that “inmates who participate in correctional education programs have 43 percent lower odds of returning to prison than those who do not, and that every dollar spent on prison education saves four to five dollars on the cost of re-incarceration” (2016b, para 5). It is encouraging that the need for education is recognized, however, data on who actually has access is difficult to ascertain. Over a decade ago, the U.S. Department of Justice reported that nine in 10 state prisons provided educational programs for their inmates (DOJ, 2003), but more recent numbers could not be identified. At the same time, educational, vocational, literacy, and job training programs are often vulnerable during budget cuts. Because access is transient (except for juveniles, which is mandated), The Second Chance Act of 2007 strengthened the government’s commitment to educational programs for incarcerated adults and youths. The Act, which calls for a grant “to provide offenders in prisons, jails, or juvenile facilities with educational, literacy, vocational, and job placement services to facilitate re-entry into the community” (Second Chance Act 2007). The Act helps to redirect the meaning of punishment to an understanding that is more humanizing and rehabilitative.

Many studies identify that education has an impact on recidivism. In the most comprehensive study to date, Rand Corp. (2014) shows that “correctional education for incarcerated adults reduces the risk of post release reincarceration (by 13 percentage points) and does so cost-effectively (a savings of five dollars on reincarceration costs for every dollar spent on

correctional education)” (p. iii). Esperian (2010) provides additional support for the effectiveness of education on the “inside”. The study cites the National Correctional Association (2009) report finding that persons who earn an associate’s degree are 70% less likely to reoffend; those earning a GED are 25% less likely to reoffend; and those earning a vocational certificate are nearly 15% less likely to reoffend than those who do not complete these programs (as cited in Esperian, 2010). Additionally, educational opportunities give inmates a place to productively channel their energy. After all, at some point many people under the control of corrections will be released back into our communities, and education will increase the likelihood that they will make a positive contribution.

While it is encouraging that educational access is receiving support, it is important consider the quality and responsiveness of correctional education. As one might imagine, there are few teachers with their heart set on teaching inside of a facility. Moreover, the challenges faced by teachers on the “inside” (lack of supplies, outdated textbooks, broken/damaged/nonexistent equipment, mental health and behavioral concerns, heterogeneous group of learners, limited autonomy, security concerns, etc.) make the job even more difficult. Because of the nature of correctional research, it is difficult to obtain data that can advance claims about the quality of education that inmates receive. Further, many in corrections might feel fortunate to have any educational opportunities and be reluctant to complain for fear they might lose the services that are available. Young, Phillips, and Nasir (2010) interviewed forty incarcerated youths about their educational experience at a facility and the results provided mixed findings. First, the students reported positive student-teacher relationships. Second, the students were concerned that the academic rigor inside the facility was not consistent with the education their counterparts in public schools received. Third, there was an emphasis on safety and control, which can inhibit the learning process (guards in rooms, counting of pencils, and individual tutoring instead of group learning). Fourth, the characterization of students as criminals serve as a constant reminder that they are delinquents and criminals, not students. The experiences documented in this study mirror my observations teaching inside of a youth correctional facility.

### **A pedagogy of freedom for those with limited freedom**

**E**ducational philosophers Paulo Freire and bell hooks offer educators a radical approach for teaching students who have been historically marginalized and oppressed. The U.S. prison population represents some of the most disenfranchised voices in our communities. According to the U.S. Department of Justice (2014a), “On December 31, 2013, about 37% of imprisoned males were black, 32% were white, and 22% were Hispanic. Among females in state or federal prison, 49% were white, compared to 22% who were black and 17% who were Hispanic” (p. 3). When compared to the total population, the racial demographics of inmates reveal a disproportionate number of minorities under the control of corrections. Concerning males, almost 3% of black males of all ages were imprisoned in 2013, compared to 1% of Hispanic males, and 0.5% of white males. Black females in the age category 18-19 were nearly 5 times more likely to be imprisoned than white females (DOJ, 2003). This captures the importance of understanding the entire picture, not just relying on the total number of those incarcerated. Although there are no statistics available concerning class, the Department of Justice documents educational and literacy levels, which can provide an indication of class. For

example, post-secondary rates among the general population are 48% and only 13% for those incarcerated (DOJ, 2013). To respond to these statistics by claiming that black and brown bodies simply commit more crimes is deterministic and discounts a larger sociopolitical issue.

The mass incarceration of members of minority communities serves as a technique to further marginalize and oppress these communities, making it difficult to move beyond being socially expelled through confinement. While it is easy to become discouraged by the task at hand, how can education be used as a form of liberation? How can we engage in a pedagogy of freedom for those with limited freedom? To answer these questions, we first must take a look at the educational philosophies of Paulo Freire and bell hooks.

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### **Paulo Freire**

Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire dedicated his life to the emancipation of the oppressed. Born in 1921 in Recife, Brazil, he knew firsthand the struggles that the poor, illiterate, and marginalized experienced. Shaull (1994) established that Paulo's advocacy for others started at a young age. At the age of eleven, he knew the pain associated with growing up hungry and vowed to fight hunger so that no child would ever have to go through what he went through. As he continued to work with his community, Paulo took note of the experiences of the oppressed people, not only in Brazil, but all over Latin America. He identified a "culture of silence", which Shaull (1994) elaborates:

Paulo came to realize that their ignorance and lethargy were the direct product of the whole situation of economic, social, and political domination- and of the paternalism- of which they were victims. Rather than being encouraged and equipped to know and respond to the concrete realities of their world, they were kept "submerged" in a situation in which such critical awareness and response were practically impossible. (p. 12)

The culture of silence is critical to maintain status hierarchies, domination, and control particular bodies. What is not well articulated in the literature about the culture of silence is the extent to which people play role in creating and/or maintaining their submerged status and what forms of resistance are enacted. Freire's notion of the culture of silence speaks to contextual factors that operate throughout the world to insure that positions of power are maintained to serve the dominant voices.

A contextual factor that is a primary concern for Freire is the education system. He offers critiques of the education system such as: the positioning students as objects and empty vessels, using theory that is irrelevant to the lived experiences of the students, the lack of reflection, and the programming of conformity (Freire, 1994; Freire, 1998). Freire echoes Gramsci's claim that the educational system is an instrument used to maintain the status of dominant groups. Gramsci

argues that the hidden curriculum of schools prevents working-class students from accessing a humanistic education (as cited in Giroux, 1988). A hidden curriculum refers to the intended motives of education, which are not explicitly revealed to students. For example, a school might teach skills that will make skilled factory laborers, while ignoring the skills needed to insure that students are prepared as critical thinkers who are equipped to respond to their concrete realities. The hidden curriculum attempts to create a space where students either remain ignorant of their situations and/or become complacent. At the same time they are being prepared to enter a workforce that will require that they conform to the system that will maintain their working-class status and serve the needs of a dominant class.

Freire's critique of the education system developed into his philosophy of education. Summarized by Aronowitz (1998), Freire's educational philosophy is guided by two principles. First, a distinction is made between the teacher as an expert and the learner as an empty vessel (as cited in Freire, 1998). Freire supports this idea, by asserting that education takes place when there are two learners who participate in an ongoing dialogue. This requires that we reimagine what the classroom experience looks like. The second principle asks that we acknowledge that all learners are social actors and should engage in a continual process of critical self-reflection. Freire's philosophy seeks to create a new social order by connecting theory and praxis (Shaull, 1994). It is by way of education that this new social order can be created. This change is fueled by a pedagogy that connects theory and praxis. Theory can be understood as discourse that informs our actions. Whereas, praxis is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1994, p. 33). In a Freirean classroom theory and practice come together to create a transformative learning experience for the teacher and the students.

Within these principles, Freire proposes three elements: dialogical encounters, conscientização and a problem-posing education. Although Freire does not identify a starting point for his critical pedagogy, dialogue is a natural point of departure. It is through our interaction with others that we expand our worldview and begin to recognize our position in the social world. Dialogue is necessary to be transformed and become fully human. According to Freire (1994), "Dialogue is the encounter between men, mediated by the world, in order to name the world" (p. 69). Using dialogue in the classroom is necessary for educators and learners to co-create a learning environment that supports conscientização and a problem-posing education.

Freire (1994) explains that conscientização or a critical consciousness, "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 17). Developing conscientização is how we come to recognize our lived conditions, which can lead to praxis. Freire cautions that conscientização is not a panacea, rather a starting point to develop our awareness of the human condition (Freire, 1998). Developing this critical consciousness can be made possible through problem-posing education. Freire introduces this pedagogical practice as an alternative to the "banking model" of education. In this type of a classroom, the students are valued as critical co-investigators in dialogue with the teacher. Further, when students are able to investigate problems relating to themselves in the world they feel challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge (Freire, 1994). The goal of problem-posing education is for students and teachers to evaluate how they exist in the world and to act consciously to transform their realities.

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This review of Paulo Freire’s educational philosophy is by no means exhaustive. I attempted to capture the elements of his philosophy that have informed my prison pedagogy. I explained the culture of silence and how the education system is used to maintain the status quo. I also discussed two principles of Freire’s educational philosophy, which are: troubling the dichotomy between teacher and student and recognizing people as social actors with the ability to influence the world. Finally, I briefly explored dialogical encounters, conscientização, and a problem-posing education. These Freirean elements inform the framework for my approach to teaching on the “inside.” Next, I give attention to bell hooks and her philosophy of education as the practice of freedom.

### **bell hooks**

Born in Kentucky in 1952, hooks was painfully aware of how her race, gender and class positioned her in society. Drawing on her experiences growing up, hooks developed into an influential feminist theorist and pedagogue. Her writing focuses on issues experienced at the intersections of race, class, gender, sexuality. Further, hooks critiques what she identifies as a “white-supremacist-capitalist-patriarchy” and how it shapes social structures. As a feminist activist scholar teacher, hooks (1994) *Teaching to Transgress* serves as my guidebook. In this condensed review of her educational philosophy, I will briefly discuss what it means to transgress, engaged pedagogy, authority of experience, the body in teaching, and social identities in the classroom.

The term transgress is essential to hooks’ pedagogical practice. By transgressing, hooks is calling for a pedagogy that transforms, reshapes, blurs, redefines, and/or moves against or beyond the boundaries. Transgressing is crucial as hooks (1994) points out because, “More than ever before in the recent history of this nation, educators are compelled to confront the biases that have shaped teaching practices in our society and to create new ways of knowing, different strategies for the sharing of knowledge” (p. 12). This call to action demands that educators transgress. hooks critiques the assembly-line approach that treats students as objects and the teacher as the voice of authority. She urges educators to renew and rejuvenate their practices to respond to the diverse lived experiences of the students in the classroom. This territory calls for an emotional intellect that can transform education into the practice of freedom, while simultaneously rejecting an education that reinforces dominant ideologies.

Teaching to transgress means that an educator must embody an engaged pedagogy. To be engaged requires that we move beyond delivering information and into a space of intellectual and spiritual intimacy. hooks (1994) explicates, “To teach in a manner that respects and cares for the souls of our students is essential if we are to provide the necessary conditions where learning can most deeply and intimately begin” (p. 13). In an engaged classroom, the teacher is a healer, concerned with the union of the mind, body, spirit. Moreover, students become active participants in developing this holistic education. As collaborators, teachers and students create a

community where all participants are asked to share their experiences. In this space, the teacher embarks on this journey of growth with the students. Speaking about this practice, hooks clarifies, “I do not expect students to take any risks that I would not take, to share in any way that I would not share” (1994, p. 21). An engaged pedagogy is not without its challenges. First, students have been trained to be students in a more traditional way, which expects them to be passive in the classroom. Second, this requires a high level of emotional capacity on behalf of the educator. These challenges, coupled with resistance from students, makes it enticing to revert to a more traditional mode of classroom instruction.

A central element of a feminist classroom is voice. Voice can be used to create a communal awareness of the lived experiences of those in the class, or it can be used to silence others. hooks (1994) refers to the “authority of experience” as a way that people use voice to silence others. Speaking from an essentialist standpoint, the authority of experience is a way for people to assert what they know, while rendering other experiences inferior. For example, the politics of race and gender have afforded many white male students the authority of experience, insofar as, their ideas and experiences should be the central focus of the classroom discussion (hooks, 1994). This essentialist standpoint is not only enacted by members of dominant groups. While at the same time, it occurs on other levels as well. Systemically, the authority of experience is employed when curriculum universalizes particular epistemologies and ontologies. As educators, our pedagogy influences how the authority of experience surfaces in our classroom. A basic tenant of hooks’ educational philosophy is that the classroom is a community, where the experiential knowledge of each student is used to enhance the learning experience. In this space, particular voices are not privileged, which reduces the possibility that essentialism will be used to silence others. hooks (1994) complicates our understanding of the authority of experience by challenging the notion that is always detrimental in the classroom. She proposes that because our ways of knowing are rooted in experience, we have the authority to speak about our experiences. When surfaced authentically, hooks calls this the “passion of experience” or the “passion of remembrance” (p. 90). In other words, our particular standpoints give us the authority to speak about our lived experiences. In a feminist classroom, lived experiences matter and become units of analysis.

Recognizing the presence of physical bodies in the classroom is a theme that occurs throughout hooks’ philosophy of education. Critical pedagogy pays attention to how students can become invisible in the classroom, however, the erasure of the teacher is not addressed. Failure to recognize the teacher’s body in the classroom discounts the connection between mind and body. A teacher hiding behind the podium is one way that the body becomes erased. This also creates an additional wall in the classroom that creates a boundary between the students and the instructor. Another way is when the educator is not active in sharing their accounts of the world and experiences within it and how that shapes their pedagogical practices. The erasure of the body is a starting point for objectifying the instructor as the voice of authority in the classroom. hooks (1994) adds, “The erasure of the body encourages us to think that we are listening to neutral, objective facts, facts that are not particular to who is sharing the information” (p. 139). When the body and where it is located within the social hierarchy is acknowledged the absence of neutrality is revealed.

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Confronting the social construction of social positions and material conditions connected to those identities is fundamental to education as the practice of freedom. Students and teachers bring a variety of experiences and assumptions about the world, much of it is shaped by their social identities. We are doing a disservice to our students if we pretend that the classroom is a place that positions everyone equally. In a “post racial America,” we are reluctant to broach the subject of race in our classrooms because we fear making people uncomfortable, or even worse losing control of the conversation. hooks contends that the classroom is precisely the place to have those conversations. Class is also rarely talked about, even though it has a significant influence on people’s material reality, values, attitudes, social relations, and behaviors (hooks, 1994). For instance, the classroom itself is a place where bourgeois values are enacted. Students are expected to be silent and obedient, which hooks (1994) points out can, “create a barrier, blocking the possibility of confrontation and conflict, warding off dissent” (p. 178). Classroom behaviors that are associated with lower classes include: loudness, anger, emotional outbursts, and laughter. These behaviors are viewed as disruptive and often met with shame or punishment. Educators must be cognizant of how the classroom climate might be reinforcing classist behaviors and neutralizing how class impacts our experiences. By laying the ground work for critical pedagogy transform the learning space into a social laboratory where issues related to social identities can be discussed and analyzed.

### **My Pedagogy**

**I**n the state of California, most institutes of higher education have a correctional facility within thirty miles. The academy is often critiqued as being insular and having difficulty connecting with the community. Presented with the opportunity to teach and mentor incarcerated youth, I wondered if I was the best choice for the job. After all, I had no direct or indirect experience with the prison industrial complex. As a white female with class privilege, I was concerned with how I would position my body in this space and how I would relate to my students. I was motivated to pursue this project because of my commitment to education and its potential to create spaces for social justice.

As a student of Freire and hooks’ philosophy of education, I turned to their scholarship for answers. From Freire, I was reminded that education has the potential to liberate, to create spaces for dialogical interaction, and that without education people would remain submerged in a culture of silence. hooks stressed that the body, race, and class matters in our classrooms. Although it would be easy for me to ignore the different social positions, they can be used to tackle tough questions about the mass incarceration of youth in the United States. A common theme for both philosophers is that I must work *with*, not *for* or *on* students. With these principles in mind, I moved forward with the project.

As the project took shape, university administrators and I decided that the project would best serve the community as a service-learning course for undergraduate students. By connecting university students with incarcerated youth, the benefit was twofold. First, the youth were

provided with educational opportunities while interacting with people their age. Second, the university students were taught to examine the PIC by looking beyond presenting issues and into contextual factors such as poverty, access to education, and cycles of violence and crime. As the facilitator of the course, it was my responsibility to develop a curriculum that would be responsive to the needs to the youth on the “inside” and the youth on the “outside.” Prior to meeting the youth, I met with our community partner, who was intimately familiar with the youth and their educational needs. By conducting a needs assessment with her, I was able to develop a course that would meet the learning objectives identified by the university, while at the same time be flexible to the variety of educational needs that we would encounter when entering the facility.

Each week we entered the facility with a general topic and it was made more specific based on the interests of the youth and the knowledge of the university student. Our class was allowed approximately two hours per week to work with the youth. The arrangement of the class was one university student with two-three youths for about 1 hour, and as the instructor I would introduce the topic, provide a mini lesson, and then lead a debriefing at the end. The small education circles allowed for the teaching to be responsive and flexible. For example, on our first day in the facility, a student-teacher had to quickly create another lesson plan when she learned that the youth she was working with was not comfortable reading. As the semester developed, we continued to change our lesson plans to meet the needs of the youth. When we learned that they were concerned about their communication skills during parole hearings, we developed lessons that helped strengthen their public speaking skills and created role plays for them to practice those skills. We discovered that schools were not merely instructional sites, but cultural and political sites as well. Giroux (1983) explains, “schools represent arenas of contestation and struggle among differently empowered cultural and economic groups” (p. 74). In the corrections classroom we resisted the urge to reinforce dominant educational practices or epistemologies. However, critical reflexivity revealed times when this occurred. For instance, one semester we focused on public speaking. Failing to account for the youths’ inability to access information, it was difficult for some to write speeches that they felt confident about. I took for granted that while I can easily retrieve information online they had to use encyclopedias that were in limited supply and outdated. This assigned later developed into a broader understanding public expression, whereas they could deliver a formal speech, spoken word, song, or other types of performances. It was in these moments that we were able to work with students to uncover their needs and create a space where dialogical interaction could emerge. This is when I witnessed education as the practice of freedom.

### **Pedagogical implications**

**T**eaching inside of a maximum security youth correctional facility provided challenges and opportunities. In this section I will discuss the outcomes of teaching in this environment. First, I will address the lack of autonomy that I had in this controlled environment. Second, I will outline how I managed my perceptions and assumptions about juvenile offenders.

**Controlled Environment.** As a university instructor I am afforded significant agency over how and what content I teach. Outside of determining when my class meets and the learning objectives, I am the primary decision-maker. I select a textbook and readings that support my approach to teaching the topic, I design a syllabus that includes a schedule and workload that I determine to be reasonable, and I create assignments that I feel best support the course material. Inside of the classroom, I determine whether the class starts and ends on time, what will be discussed, and who holds the floor at any given time. In other words, I have a power over the pedagogical process. As a critical pedagogue, I am sensitive this and consciously try to share the responsibility with my students.

Teaching inside of the correctional facility, I was aware that I did not have full agency over pedagogical decisions and that my actions were under constant surveillance. The hyper controlled environment was an active reminder that I was a guest, and my ability to enter into the facility could be revoked at any time and without prior notification. Before I could begin teaching, I underwent a thorough background check and State mandated training. This protocol positioned me as someone potentially dangerous and unfit to teach in this environment. As I navigated the perpetual red tape, I reminded myself that this was a temporary inconvenience for me, but a daily reality for the youth that called the facility their home.

Once I was approved for entry, I had to submit the course agenda and objectives. This had to be approved by an official before a start date could be given. I was mindful that I needed to balance their need for transparency and my desire to be responsive to the needs that I would encounter in the classroom. A critical pedagogue negotiates the learning space with the learners; using Freire's elements of dialogical encounters, conscientização and a problem-posing education to nurture the environment. This is difficult to fully enact when limitations and restrictions are placed on the educational space. With careful planning, I was able to create an agenda and objectives that were explicit enough to meet the facility's needs, yet allowed movement as the semester developed. For example, creative writing could be poetry, drawing, music, and a variety of other performances.

In addition to control over the content of my teaching, my body was also policed. I was not allowed to wear an underwire bra, jeans, or anything that showed skin below my neck. I was also told to limit my use of jewelry and to wear shoes that would allow me to safely leave the facility if there was an urgent need. I was only allowed to carry in sheets of paper (which were to be free of paperclips and staples, and were carefully reviewed for content), my photo identification, and a pen or pencil. These items were checked upon my exit to insure that I did not leave anything behind or provide an inmate with any material. In this environment the bodies are heavily policed. No one moves without permission from a guard, which did not always match the start and end time of my class. Students systematically filed in and were dismissed in the same way. We started and ended when the facility said we could, regardless of how much time we had been in session. Determining the amount of time we had each week was unpredictable, but I remained focused on the intervention rather than becoming frustrated with the obstacles that we faced. Teaching under these circumstances was not ideal, but we had to work within the system, negotiating was not an option. It was difficult for my pedagogy and body to be surveilled. However, I only confronted this for a couple of hours per week, whereas the youth navigated this on a daily basis.

**Perceptions and Assumptions.** When people learn that I teach inside of correctional facilities, I am often met with curious questions and concern for my wellbeing. Much of what people know about corrections is the result of, “the media industry’s production of images and representations that create a culture of fear and insecurity among the people who then elect politicians on a platform of ‘tough on crime’ rhetoric and policies” (do Valle, Huang, Spira, 2006, p.133). Most people that inquire about my teaching are operating with the logic that everyone under the control of corrections is a dangerous person that should be avoided. The perception that criminalized people are dangerous and pose a threat to anyone that they come in contact with, creates an “us versus them” mentality and justifies their dehumanization. As a means to justify this othering, many cite that we should limit an inmate’s access to education, healthcare, and quality food. To assume that these are luxuries and that prisoners have it easy is a mistake. Describing their experiences teaching in corrections, Hartnett, Wood, and McCann (2011) state, “...prisons are places of poverty, racism, physical and mental illness, perpetual frustration, and sexual deprivation and depravity- when you go to the prison, you encounter a world of pain” (p. 338). Encountering this world of pain was something that I was not prepared for.

*I became painfully aware that education is not a panacea. Although it can help address social issues, we must change the social structures that create and maintain inequity, exclusion, and injustice.*

As I designed the course, I anticipated that I would be met with apathy and disrespect. On the contrary, the youth were eager to learn and willing to put in the hard work necessary to be successful in the course. I would bring in current events related to politics and social justice, which would then be used to spark conversations about how positions within the social hierarchy impact ones relationship with education, policy, law, healthcare, justice, and employment opportunities. Each week we asked the group to generate topics for the follow week. These topics reflected their immediate concerns and interests and create rich discussions. The youth asked critical questions that demonstrated critical thinking skills and active participation in reflecting on and analyzing the social world. The discussions were fueled by examples that spoke to their “truths” and their material realities. Many of the youth actively worked with the tension that education was essential to change their lives, but at the same time the stereotypes, their criminal records, the lack of support, and environments they would encounter upon their release would make it difficult to pursue an education or vocational training program. I walked away from each session motivated by their commitment to move through the dim reality that would await them. It is not surprising that I was never disrespected. After all, their motto was that to get respect, you have to give respect. My pedagogy valued their experiences and helped to activated voice in an institution that is deadened with silence.

### Closing thoughts

**T**he corrections classroom is a space where the unfinishedness of our being surfaces. Freire (1998) asserts that “unfinishedness is essential to our human condition” (p. 52). When we meet each other, across differences and through dialogical interactions, we

develop an awareness of this unfinishedness. As we engaged in teaching each other, our worldviews were uncomfortably expanding and we discovered our unfinishedness. The capacity to engage on an intellectual, emotional, and spiritual level allowed us to critique the social and economic order, which offers the possibility to begin to change it. In the corrections classroom, the students have limited ability to address their current lived conditions. The information they are exposed to is filtered, they have few options to communicate with the outside world and speaking up comes with consequence. For these students, education *was* their practice of freedom. For a few hours per week their minds were free to engage about topics important to their experiences.

As an educator in that environment, it made me question the nature of freedom and the meaning of education. I observed the juxtaposing of my freedom being encroached upon, while my students experienced an education that temporarily allowed them to forget their realities and wrestle with their lack of freedom. As I observed the importance of education, I became painfully aware that education is not a panacea. Although it can help address social issues, we must change the social structures that create and maintain inequity, exclusion, and injustice. This serves as a call to action for educators to move beyond current conceptions of the classroom and broaden their scope of teaching. The juvenile offenders that I worked with were eager for a critical education that gave them the space to wrestle with issues that matter in their lives. My commitment to employing Freire and hooks' educational philosophies created an environment where a pedagogy of freedom could be realized.

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**Lindsay D. Scott** is a PhD candidate in Communication at the University of New Mexico. Her research interests include intercultural communication, critical pedagogy, conflict transformation and peacebuilding, and social justice.