

Transformative Praxis With Incarcerated Women: Collaboration, Leadership, and Voice

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Abstract

The ever-widening net of racialized and colonial carceral spaces and neoliberal strategies of control of poor and marginalized communities means that social workers are often in positions of complicity with or resistance to (or both) the norms and practices of the carceral state. Feminist praxis can both challenge and inadvertently sustain the prison industrial complex and its harms. Approaches that even tacitly accept some of the basic premises and discourses of correctional frameworks risk being co-opted and transmuted into racialized and colonial control practices. In this article, I use the example of Walls to Bridges Canada, a social justice iteration of the U.S.-based Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, to illustrate the power and significance of feminist praxis that privileges the epistemic vantage point of those who are incarcerated. This article will examine how collaborative work with criminalized and incarcerated women (in classrooms, research studies, and community work) moves beyond “giving voice,” to promoting leadership by those with lived experience and shared collaborative knowledge production.

Keywords

feminist praxis, intersectionality, prison education, research categories, social work/social welfare history and philosophy, women in prison

Social work scholars have challenged social work education to engage more fully with the impact of the prison industrial complex (PIC) including integrating the content into social work education and developing a more robust anti-oppression framework, one that includes incarceration as a social justice issue (Chandler, 2018; Kim, 2012; Willison & O’Brien, 2017). The ever-widening net of racialized and colonial carceral spaces and neoliberal strategies of control of poor and marginalized communities means that social workers are often in positions of complicity with or resistance to (or both) the norms and practices of the carceral state. Feminist praxis can both challenge and

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inadvertently sustain the PIC and its harms. This article engages with the abolitionist perspective that challenges to the PIC must draw explicit connections with the colonial, capitalist, gendered, and racialized forces that underpin it. It is therefore important that a feminist praxis be intersectional—providing a critical analysis of the complex array of capitalist, racist, colonial, *and* patriarchal structures that produce the PIC and shape the experiences of criminalized and incarcerated women.

This article focuses upon the contradictions and tensions of feminist praxis with/in carceral spaces. Prisons are racialized, classed, and gendered spaces, reinforced and amplified by correctional practices that individualize, pathologize, punish, and control. Indigenous and black populations are dramatically overrepresented in Canadian prisons (Zinger, 2018) with Indigenous women being the fastest growing prison population in Canada. Approaches that even tacitly accept some of the basic premises and discourses of correctional frameworks risk being co-opted and transmuted into racialized and colonial control practices. The Canadian context provides an instructive illustration of this; in the early 1990s, feminist reformers and activists partnered with the correctional system to reform the women's correctional system (Hannah-Moffat & Shaw, 2000). Feminist "gender responsive" discourses were co-opted by correctional policy, resulting in "same wine in new bottles" (Gelsthorpe & Morris, 1990).

I use the example of Walls to Bridges (W2B) Canada, a social justice iteration of the U.S.-based Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program, to illustrate the power and significance of feminist praxis that privileges the epistemic vantage point of those who are incarcerated. In addition to teaching classes in correctional facilities with "inside" (incarcerated) and "outside" (campus-enrolled) students, the steering committee for W2B is comprised of incarcerated women who are also employed as teaching assistants, workshop facilitators, instructor trainers, and research assistants. This article will examine how solidarity work with criminalized and incarcerated women (in classrooms, research studies, and community work) moves beyond giving voice, to promoting collaborative knowledge production and leadership by those with lived experience.

Social Work Education and Practice With/in the PIC

While the situation of mass incarceration is particularly dire in the United States (Willison & O'Brien, 2017) and disproportionately impacts African American women (Richie, 2012), other countries such as Canada and Australia have also seen dramatic increases in the numbers of women being incarcerated, particularly those who are Black and/or Indigenous (Baldry, Carlton, & Cunn-
een, 2015; Maynard, 2017; Zinger, 2018). Social workers in a variety of sites work with people who have been criminalized and/or imprisoned. The network of transcerceral processes extends widely and disparately into the community, circumscribing the experiences of marginalized people both before, during, and after imprisonment (Allspach, 2010; Maidment, 2006; Palacias, 2016; Rose, 2000). Palacias (2016) states:

... the intrusive reach of punitive carceral controls into the everyday lives and onto the marked bodies of perpetually criminalized Indigenous women and Black women are transcerceral—forming beyond the walls of prisons—and therefore constitute what I and other race-radical feminist activist-scholars call a transcerceral continuum. The transcerceral continuum manifests itself primarily in the guise of localized mental health agencies, welfare and child protective services, and professionalized social services, as well as in individualizing, pathologizing, and self-responsibilizing educational and therapeutic projects. (p. 144)

Social workers are often positioned at the nexus of both care and control. It is important that social work education adopt a critical perspective on both the PIC and the therapeutic and treatment approaches embedded within, in order to foster reflection about the ways in which, as a profession,

we may be complicit in propagating oppressive ideologies and practices. The situation within prisons is particularly acute, with the correctional mandate of punishment, control and security and the deficit-based discourses about the people locked within them. Feminist praxis (and anti-oppressive social work approaches such as decolonizing and anti-racist) within and/or against the PIC must be vigilant to risks of co-optation when working in carceral and transcarceral spaces. Integral to this reflexive stance is a recognition of the ways in which structural racism, sexism, colonialism, and classism produce the bodies to incarcerate. Further, working in solidarity with abolitionist and decarceration movements that challenge the taken-for-grantedness of carceral processes can expand social justice frameworks commonly used in social work education—decolonizing, queer, feminist, and anti-racist approaches—to examine the complex web of carceral spaces within and outside of penal institutions.

Co-Optation of Gender-Responsive Approaches to Prison Programming

This article is informed by 28 years working with and alongside incarcerated women. As a young social worker, I worked at the Kingston Prison for Women in Kingston, Ontario, Canada, providing individual and group trauma counseling services. This early exposure to imprisonment and the women locked up behind the limestone walls and razor wire exposed me to the impact of structural oppression on the outside and the violence of the carceral system. From this work, I saw that the colonial, racist, classist, and sexist structures on the outside were imprisoning practices that constrained and restrained women's choices and chances; the dynamics of the carceral state begins well before a woman finds herself literally behind bars, particularly for those subjected to colonial arms of the state. During the 1990s, the Canadian federal women's prison system went through a reformative phase, closing the one federal penitentiary for women in the country and opening up five others in various geographical locations from the East to the West coast of Canada (Hannah-Moffat & Shaw, 2000). The policy document guiding these reforms utilized Indigenous discourses about healing and culturally appropriate prison programming and feminist discourses about trauma, empowerment, and women-centered prison programming (Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990). As a clinical social worker in the federal women's prison, I was involved in some of these discussions, including helping to train correctional officers in women-centered trauma-informed counseling. I was hopeful that there would be change. However, as I and many other feminist Canadian scholars have pointed out, the strength of correctional paradigms eclipsed the transformative potential of feminist and Indigenous informed approaches (Hannah-Moffat & Shaw, 2000). Drawing upon Mathiesen (1974), Baldry, Carlton, and Cunneen (2015) describe this as "absorption"—when an idea or strategy is co-opted by a dominant structure or institution in ways that sustain its legitimacy, norms, and practices but make it look as though something significant has changed (p. 174).

After the implementation of the "women-centered prisons," I conducted a research study with women who had been incarcerated under the new reformed regime. I interviewed 86 women across the country and asked them about their experiences. While findings from this study can be found elsewhere (Pollack, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2012), below I highlight one particular finding as it directly relates to the insidiousness of the cooptation of progressive agendas by repressive regimes.

The women-centered correctional reforms drew on feminist relational psychology which when applied to abused women who used force against their abuser, constructed them as being at risk of being violent when they are in relationships (Pollack, 2012). Correctional frameworks are founded upon ideas about a prisoner's risk—how to assess, manage, and reduce it. Within the correctional risk paradigm, women's responses to victimization are not seen as coping strategies but rather as factors needing to be changed in order to reduce their riskiness (Turnbull & Hannah Moffat, 2009). Although feminist relational psychology influences how correctional discourse frames abused

women, select ideas from the theory are interjected into the risk framework, resulting in programming and approaches that blame women's low self-esteem and inability to maintain healthy relationships as the criminogenic factors causing them to be a risk to public safety (Hannah-Moffat, 2010; Pollack, 2007).

The conflation of women's victimization with risk has both discursive and material effects for criminalized women, including increased monitoring of intimate relationships while on parole (Pollack, 2007). Further, violent men are not considered a risk to women's safety, nor are inadequate social assistance rates or systemic racism in the labor market, factors that may also contribute to the criminalization of women (Pollack, 2009a). Moreover, criminalized women are rewarded for reproducing psychologized victimization narratives about why they have offended in order to provide evidence of a reformed self, no longer incapable of managing the risk they pose to society (Hannah-Moffat, 2010). In addition, gender-responsive discourses reinscribe decontextualized understandings of violence against women, reify the normalcy and utility of imprisonment itself (O'Brien & Ortega, 2015), and detract from efforts to infuse preventative supports within the community (e.g., fair wages, decent employment, adequate housing, treatment for trauma and substance misuse). Consequently, the logics and intersections of capitalism, white supremacy and patriarchy and the overincarceration of racialized, Indigenous and poor people are left unquestioned and thus unchanged.

The 1980s and 1990s saw the emergence of feminist scholarship examining the needs and experiences of criminalized and imprisoned women. Focusing largely upon how women become imprisoned, the "pathways" literature took a feminist standpoint perspective and utilized qualitative research methodologies to highlight their gendered, classed, and racialized experiences (Balfour & Comack, 2014). Literature on women's postprison experiences also emerged in criminology and social work, highlighting the obstacles faced by women after their release (Maidment, 2006; O'Brien, 2001; Pollack, 2009a). Further, critical scholars of punishment and penalty have exposed the interrelationship between capitalism, colonialism, racism, and patriarchy in constructing "criminal" bodies, which feed and sustain an ever-widening web of carceral processes (Davis, 2003; Gilmore, 2007; Monture-Agnus, 1999; Richie, 2012; Sudbury, 2005).

The gender violence literature focusing upon male abuse of women has been slow to take on the PIC as a site that perpetuates patriarchal, colonial, racist, and classist violence. Without an analysis of penal state violence, feminist theory and praxis may essentialize white women's experiences as the prototype for gendered oppression, thereby ignoring and sustaining white supremacy, colonial erasures, and classism. Furthermore, advocating for arrest, prosecution, and imprisonment as solutions to gender violence helps sustain and perpetuate the PIC, which disproportionately incarcerates Indigenous and racialized men (Kim, 2018; Palacias, 2016; Richie, 2012).

What is now often referred to as carceral feminism because of its calls for criminal justice solutions to violence against girls and women is applicable to the history of Canadian reforms of federal women's prisons. Feminist and Indigenous activists involved in the consultation process for the Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women during the late 1980s mobilized discourses of healing and empowerment to suggest prison reforms, positioning the correctional system as a site in which women might receive support and counselling. Prisons are inherently violent; indeed their primary purpose is the infliction of pain and exclusion (Brown, 2009). Arguments for gender responsiveness in prison programming make scant mention of the violations and violence of imprisonment and paradoxically implicitly assume that prisons can be spaces of trust and healing. Through collaboration with the correctional system, progressive anti-violence and de-colonial social moments were depoliticized and used as tools to strengthen the PIC (Hannah-Moffat & Shaw, 2000). Similar critiques have been levied at gender-responsive prison reforms in Australia (Russell & Carleton, 2013) and the United States (Shaylor, 2009).

The issue of complicity and reliance upon harmful and violent state practices is endemic to much of our work with and against the PIC and lies underneath the turn toward transformative justice as a community-based alternative to responding to interpersonal harm (Kim, 2018). In *The Culture of Punishment*, Brown (2009) uses the notion of “penal spectator” to refer to the individual and institutional means of looking at other people’s pain from a distance and perpetuating the ideologies and practices of punishment in the process. Even those who are themselves incarcerated are not, of course, immune to the adoption of correctional rhetoric and ideology and, in fact, there are many good reasons not to resist or challenge it. Tiina Eldridge, a social worker who served a lengthy prison sentence in Canada, draws upon Brown’s (2009) concept of the penal spectator to analyze how she internalized and reproduced gender-responsive correctional discourse and the rehabilitative promise of imprisonment. Eldridge writes:

... as an incarcerated woman, I became a penal spectator of my own life. I regurgitated my story over and over and molded my life to fit the shape of the correctional discourse to explain how I was broken and a risk to society but how—by accessing prison programs and education—I was being “fixed” and it would soon be safe to return me to society. (Pollack & Eldridge, 2015, p. 135)

In this framing, prison is positioned as the hero of the story, rescuing the damaged woman who made poor choices, rendering her less risky. The risk apparatus of correctional frameworks is virtually impenetrable and intimately tied to the “necessity for therapeutic intervention(s), a form of governance profoundly shaped and influenced by the ‘psy-complex’ (psychology, psychiatry, and social work disciplines)” (Whalley & Hackett, 2017, p. 466). Feminist praxis with/in the carceral or transcarceral systems must provide creative challenges to the ways in which risk is a racialized, colonial, and gendered construct often operating through social work and other psy-professions.

Feminist Praxis and Abolitionism

Carceral feminism has recently been challenged for its complicity with a system that perpetuates the criminalization of Indigenous and racialized peoples by turning to the criminal justice arm of the state as a response to gender-based violence (Kim, 2018; Palacias, 2016). Kim (2018) states that the critique is fundamentally about the depoliticization of the feminist movement and the rise of neoliberal ideology and practices that have amped up criminalization processes while simultaneously diluting the social welfare state (p. 222). Scholars and activists have instead advocated for an intersectional analysis (linking racist, classist, colonial, and gendered oppressive structures) of gender violence that is aligned with abolitionist principles and grounded in strategies for disrupting oppressive socioeconomic and political structures (Carlton, 2018; Kim, 2018).

Calls for prison reforms are often in tension with abolitionist goals of ending the use of prisons and dismantling the socioeconomic inequalities that sustain the PIC. The risk of reforms include directing further resources into prisons and jails and strengthening the legitimacy and power of carceral systems (Kim, 2018; Palacias, 2016). However, Carlton (2018) suggests that this binary might be too simplistic; that feminist abolitionist movements may strategically employ reformist discourses toward larger abolitionist aims. However, in order for this strategy to be consistent with abolitionist principles, “the critiques and the actions they inform must be leveled beyond the prison as a site of struggle for change” (Carlton, 2018, p. 288). Palacias (2016) argues that abolitionist work from a race-radical and Indigenous perspective sees the PIC as white settler state violence and, drawing upon Gilmore’s (2007) work, states that the PIC is a set of relationships, not just a physical razor wired building (Palacias, 2016, p. 147).

Working in solidarity with incarcerated women means taking seriously the *relational*, specifically how class-based, racialized, colonial, and gendered power operates to sustain the PIC and are

embedded within relationships between incarcerated and nonincarcerated people. Scholars, researchers, social workers, and/or allies doing anti-prison work are deeply embedded in institutional dynamics (including those of educational institutions) that reflect white supremacist colonial norms, practices, and epistemologies. Feminist praxis with/in women's prisons is therefore fraught with contradictions and tensions; how can we show solidarity with women inside while also working on the inside?

Collaborative Relationships and the Epistemology of Lived Experience

As a researcher and scholar, I have examined the ways in which scholarly and correctional discourses obscure social context and promulgate the subjectivity of women in prison as cognitively deficient, "difficult to manage" and mentally unstable (Pollack, 2004, 2007, 2009a, 2009b, 2012). This framework is reproduced in most academic scholarship and at conferences about women in prison; even when framed in feminist terms, the relentless repetition of statistics about mental health, addictions, poverty, education, single motherhood, and similar markers of social exclusion can result in paternalized constructions of criminalized women's subjectivity. Furthermore, the deficit-based constructions push to the background the relationship between the colonial, capitalistic, patriarchal, and racist structures related to the criminalization and incarceration of women. In efforts to combat this tendency, criminalized women are occasionally invited to academic conferences to share their experiences, to provide a forum for their perspectives to be heard. However, the hegemonic narrative of criminalized women is so entrenched that these stories often take the predictable shape of a reformation narrative thus rendering alternative ways of constructing self and experience as unthinkable and thus unspeakable (Pollack & Eldridge, 2015). While the well-intentioned turn to involving those with lived experience in conferences and workshops emerged from an inclusionary agenda, personal narratives are often depoliticized, creating what Costa et al. (2012) refer to as "patient porn," signaling how lived experience can be exploited to promote and validate a particular service provision method or program (p. 86).

Hernández-Castillo's (2015) approach to narrative and voice in her work with incarcerated women in Mexico seeks to create spaces in which incarcerated women themselves can reflect upon and critique (both in the group and in the publication of their writing) the colonial, racist, classist, and patriarchal structures both inside and outside the prison. She writes "[M]any of us who have chosen, using various strategies, to act as bridges between the incarcerated population and outside society, share a rejection of penitentiary structural violence as a means to solve social problems" (Hernández-Castillo, 2015, p. 157). The participants in her writing project challenge the inequitable processes that deny justice to marginalized women and through publications of their life history writing, expose their critique to a wider audience beyond the walls. Similarly, the W2B program acknowledges and works with the contradictions involved in working inside the "belly of the beast" while simultaneously creating relationships, values, critical analysis, and actions that undermine and challenge many of the premises and processes of the carceral state.

The W2B Educational Program

Inspired by the U.S. Prison Exchange Program, W2B Canada is a university-based program that brings together incarcerated students and campus-enrolled students to study for semester long for-credit courses. All incarcerated or "inside" students receive a university credit for successfully completing a W2B class. The teaching model is one that attempts to challenge conventional hierarchies of knowing. Students and instructors in W2B classes are considered both teachers and learners who have intellectual, experiential, and emotional knowledge important for the exploration

of course content. The program began in 2011, after I established a partnership between the university at which I work and a federal women's prison.

Similar to the Inside-Out Prison Exchange Program in the United States, the instructor of a W2B class is considered a facilitator of the learning process (Pompa, 2013)—she or he does not lecture but through a variety of teaching techniques holds the space in which students can explore complex and challenging ideas from a variety of perspectives, lived experiences, and contexts. The Canadian W2B program has been influenced by Indigenous Elders and Indigenous scholars such as Dr. Priscilla Settee, Larry Morrison, Gayle Cyr, and Dr. Kathy Absolon, all of whom participated in circles with W2B collective members and provided teachings on Indigenous ways of knowing. The use of learning circles, in which participants take turns speaking while others reflectively listen, is integral to Indigenous ways of learning and healing (Hart, 2002). Participants are encouraged to listen openly and reflectively to the perspectives of others and to their own inner dialogue. In W2B classes, this fosters a classroom climate that values different perspectives and supports an understanding of self as situated within the contexts of gender, race, class, culture, sexual orientation, and additional forms of othering. Such an approach is particularly well suited for working with students who may be living in very different contexts, such as those who are incarcerated and those who are not. Incarcerated students often enter into W2B classes feeling concerned that the university or “outside” students will look down on them, judge them as stupid or as ill-equipped for university-level studies (Pollack, 2016). A pedagogy that explicitly values all sorts of knowledge, including lived experience and emotions, creates an inclusive learning environment. In a book chapter about her experience of taking a W2B course while incarcerated, Denise Edwards writes:

For the people who shared my weekly sacred circle, their gayness, queerness, dis'ability-ness, trans-ness, the sheer *otherness* of it all was reason to come to the conclusion that we were all a part of a mysterious whole and without us, well, we all might as well blend into the bland, grey canvas that dictated the Canadian horizon from September to April . . . there was an honesty about us. Our differences yet our sameness rendered us naked. The kind of stripping away that came with vulnerability, except there was no one to judge our rawness. For the duration of our studies, we *reclaimed our whole selves*. (Pollack & Edwards, 2018, pp. 325–327)

W2B has also been influenced by Parker Palmer, a Quaker and educator. In *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life*, Palmer (2014) outlines principles and guidelines for creating a community—a “circle of trust”—that fosters a space in which authenticity is encouraged and valued. W2B does this by explicitly valuing emotions, spirit, body, and mind as legitimate forms of knowledge and by creating in-class activities that foster reflective listening, rather than debating or competing for the right answer.

Collaborative Work With Incarcerated Women: The W2B Collective

The W2B collective began in 2012, as an outgrowth of the first W2B course that I offered at a federal women's prison in Canada. Comprised of alumni of W2B classes, approximately seven of whom are incarcerated, the collective meets biweekly at the prison. The W2B collective functions as a steering committee for W2B classes and as the Canadian W2B Instructor Training Centre. All educators interested in teaching W2B classes must complete a 5-day training and the collective members are the primary facilitators of this training. The W2B collective is therefore the heart and soul of W2B, without whom there would be no program. To date, 106 instructors from Canada and Europe have been trained in the W2B teaching model, leading to the expansion of W2B education to ten Canadian correctional facilities and universities. Guiding the work of the collective is a commitment to collaborative discussion, decision-making, and sharing of work. Our work together involves forging

connections and commitments between incarcerated and nonincarcerated folks; working toward transforming access to education, institutions, and how we relate to one another. The W2B Collective is guided by the following values and principles:

1. building bridges and solidarity with those who are incarcerated and/or criminalized and those who are not;
2. fostering integrative learning, involving the whole self: mind, spirit, body, and emotions;
3. valuing the wisdom that comes from lived experience, as well as other sources of learning and knowledge; and
4. aiming to create collaborative spaces where critical analysis, dialogue, and self-reflection can open up new insights and dismantle preconceptions.

Incarcerated Women in Leadership Positions: Teaching Assistants and Instructor Training Center

An important component of activism on behalf of formerly incarcerated people is to train members for leadership roles in the movement. (López-Garza, 2016, p. 87)

The privileging of lived experience of imprisonment forms the backdrop of the work and priorities of W2B. Outside members (mostly social work alumni of W2B classes) and inside members come together biweekly on a volunteer basis. However, in recognition of the enormous amount of work and expertise required to sustain and grow the program, W2B is committed to providing financial compensation for the work of the collective members. For example, the collective developed an educational support program to allow incarcerated students who have taken at least one W2B course to assist professors teaching at the prison. Because the W2B pedagogy is experiential, dialogical, and incorporates circle learning and a variety of group building and theater-type activities, incarcerated students provide a great resource to assist the professor in working from the model. W2B pays market wages to the incarcerated students for this work. Integral to our mandate and processes are providing opportunities for mentoring and skill building as training and workshop facilitators; in this spirit, collective members have started a mentorship program that allows inside collective members to shadow the inside teaching assistant, so that she can build confidence and skills to enable her to later offer teaching support on her own.

One of the other key responsibilities of collective members is offering an annual W2B 5-day instructor training to professors. The collective collaboratively designs and facilitates this training; all who participate are compensated for their time. Educators from across Canada and Europe spend 4 days at the prison, learning and experiencing the W2B pedagogical model and exploring issues of criminalization and imprisonment.

Formerly Incarcerated Women in Leadership Positions: Public Education and Advocacy in the Community

W2B also has an active alumni group comprised of women who were collective members inside the prison and now have formed a community-based collective. In addition to helping with the annual instructor training, this group is a sought after team of facilitators for W2B style workshops on gender, race, crime, and punishment. Women's postprison experiences are circumscribed by a variety of transcarceral structures and processes shaped by surveillance and neoliberal ideologies and processes, including cuts in social services and corresponding increases in punitive and penal

measures, and difficulties finding employment due to stigma of having a criminal record (Allspach, 2010; Maidment, 2006; Palacias, 2016; Pollack, 2009a). The W2B community-based collective has presented at academic conferences in both Canada and Europe, in university classrooms and community panels. They have participated in a television documentary and have received radio and print media coverage. The women have years of facilitation skills and training developed in W2B classes and workshop design and delivery both on the inside and the outside. The community-based collective has a well-developed protocol for designing and facilitating these workshops, which often involves hours of collaborative work. In accordance with the W2B principle that the skills, training, and wisdom of those with lived experience of the prison system should be fairly and financially compensated, they are remunerated either by the organization or institution that invites them or by the national W2B office. In her research with formerly incarcerated women activists in the United States, López-Garza (2016) reminds us that creating social change takes:

... considerable amount of time and a long-term commitment, which is a difficult avenue to take when one is unemployed or working at a low income, dead-end job or when one is fighting the courts for custody of one's children and encountering the many institutional barriers to reentry. (p. 90)

While the support and opportunities offered by W2B are far from adequate, with the leadership and dedication of formerly incarcerated community-based collective members W2B has been able to provide some opportunities for paid employment, skill building, and social connections.

Knowledge Producers: Collaborative Research and Scholarship With Incarcerated Women

We have no voice, no choice, and no identity outside that of “criminal.” (Fayter, 2016, p. 58)

Participatory Action Research (PAR): Evaluation of W2B Classes

After several years of offering W2B classes at the federal women's prison, the W2B collective members decided it was important to conduct some research on the impact of the program on students. Building upon PAR principles, I provided training in research design, interview skills, and data analysis to collective members. We collectively designed a qualitative interview guide and a fairly complicated interviewing strategy,¹ and 37 inside and outside students were interviewed by collective members (see Pollack, 2014, 2016; Pollack and Eldridge, 2015, for further details of our methodology, data analysis, and findings). Both currently and formerly incarcerated women were active in data analysis. Inside the prison, we collectively worked with themes from the interview transcripts that I had compiled, developing categories and analyses that informed how the results were later presented. On the outside, community-based collective members received electronic copies of transcripts to co-code with me; developing themes and analyses in the margins about which we had intertextual conversations, noting our similar and different ways of interpreting the interview data. Such a research approach is not only participatory but acknowledges that data analysis is not a neutral objective process but, rather, emerges from people's own perspectives, lived experiences and preferred analytic frameworks. Further, as Tiina Eldridge points out, conducting research and producing academic scholarship positions criminalized women as legitimate knowers, a poignant contrast to the incarceration experience:

I have not been used to having my opinions and ideas validated—in fact I learned the opposite in prison; when I said my true thoughts and feelings I usually experienced backlash and was therefore trained to

only say what I thought they wanted me to say. So it was quite an empowering feeling to realize that I did contribute to the creation of academic scholarship. (Pollack & Eldridge, 2015, p. 40)

Incarcerated Women's Scholarship: Impact of Taking W2B Classes

An unanticipated outcome of W2B classes is that a number of students were motivated to publish peer-reviewed articles and book chapters on their experiences. Academic colleagues committed to providing opportunities for incarcerated people to contribute to scholarship has resulted in a growing body of literature on the Canadian W2B program written from the perspective of students, *seven* of whom are or were incarcerated. Much of the writing by alumna examines the power of collaborative learning, circle pedagogy and developing meaningful relationships within and across the prison walls. Here, however, I want to highlight a central theme identified across the work by incarcerated students; the idea of *reclaiming self and voice*. In a chapter written by Freitas, McAuley, & Kish (2014), Nyki Kish, who took her first W2B class while incarcerated in a maximum security unit, writes of the W2B classroom as a liberating space:

I began to find something I had lost in the trauma of experiencing the penal system: my voice. Even the simplest activities that occur within the [Walls to Bridges] setting, such as reading aloud, listening and being listened to within a group of people, and being encouraged to disagree and challenge ideas, counteracted the negative impacts of imprisonment in max. Being allowed to be this way during classes reminded me of the self I developed before my imprisonment and class after class, slowly but surely, I regained confidence, vitality, and drive that I was not aware I had lost. I finished my first [Walls to Bridges] class feeling like I had found liberation from within prison walls. (p. 308)

Frerich and Murphy-Nugen's (2019) research on imprisoned women's experience of postsecondary education in the United States found attending classes to be a humanizing experience that enhanced women's sense of self-efficacy and connection to others. Similarly, Fayter (2016) writes of her experience as a student in W2B classes as helping to counteract the dehumanizing effects of correctional labeling:

I have been labelled an "addict," "drug dealer," "criminal," "inmate" and "convict", and a "danger to the community" by guards, parole officers, and others within the criminal justice and correctional system. Many people I know have been called much worse. Eventually, we begin to view ourselves through this lens. [Prison] discourse claims that corrections can empower women in prison. However, for me, the W2B class is the single most humanizing and empowering aspect of my incarceration, replacing these negative labels and stereotypes with positive ones. (p. 59)

In addition to disseminating scholarship about W2B, publishing opportunities help build academic skills and experience for formerly incarcerated women who continue higher education upon release.

Conclusion: Dancing on the Edge

The W2B program has made significant gains in providing access to education to prisoners, developing an innovative model of education for both campus-enrolled and incarcerated students and providing skill building and employment opportunities for women released from prison. W2B has been recognized by the Correctional Investigator of Canada (Zinger, 2018) and by the Senate of Canada as a best practice to be replicated in all federal prisons (The Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights Canada, 2019). As a result of this success, W2B must continue to grapple with the

question of co-optation and the reality that while challenging some of the norms and practices of imprisonment, W2B is also helping to sustain it. In addressing the question of being vigilant of co-optation, Paul Kivel suggests (as cited in Whalley & Hackett, 2017, p. 141) we ask ourselves “to whom are we accountable?” The answer is multilayered for W2B. W2B is primarily accountable to the prison-based collective—the steering committee of incarcerated women—and to the other students incarcerated there. However, this is a multi-institutional partnership—a collaboration between an educational and a correctional institution—not an activist or abolitionist group, and thus we are also accountable to university regulations and prison rules, as well as to our external funders.² Although a challenging dance, the inside alumni in the W2B collective play a central role in determining the risks and benefits and in protecting the inviolability of our classes (along with principles of academic freedom sanctioned by the university), the instructor training and our autonomy over program decisions.

Ensuring that imprisoned and formerly incarcerated women remain the heart of the program and in leadership and consultative positions helps to safeguard against compromising the values and principles of W2B to those of the correctional facility and of pushing back against academic predispositions (mine included!) to prioritize academic knowledge and career-enhancing protocols and priorities. In addition to providing access to education for imprisoned people, the W2B mandate is *relational*; building bridges between individuals and communities who are normally not permitted to interact and to engage together in critical analysis about the ways in which gender, colonialism, racism, and (heter)sexism are interrelated factors sustaining the carceral state by providing the bodies who are locked behind the walls. In addition to a strong theoretical foundation, a feminist intersectional praxis that supports abolitionist goals and/or transformative justice aims, should build relationships with incarcerated women, those who are most effected by the PIC. To do so means committing to a reflexive feminist praxis that tends to power and privilege and widens the circle of expertise and voice.

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Notes

1. I was not involved in interviewing research participants as the collective rightly felt this would be a conflict of interest since I was both a facilitator of Walls to Bridges (W2B) classes and a director of the program. Therefore, both inside and outside alumni did the interviews which involved asking outside alumni to come to the prison to be interviewed, inside collective members interviewing each other in the prison, and formerly incarcerated women interviewing alumni in the community.
2. W2B is funded by individuals and various foundations.

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